

CASE STUDY 1: FUTURES CHILDREN'S CENTRE

This case study is drawn from the **Impact of COVID-19 on Privately Run Residential Care Institutions Study**. The study undertook interviews with directors and principal donors of residential care institutions across 6 countries to better understand the impact COVID-19 was having on their operations. This case study is a summary of the account given by one participant. It has been anonymized for privacy reasons, however all other details are factual.

Background

Futures Children's Centre was established as a privately run and government registered children's institution in 2011. It was founded by an expatriate woman Marie who also set up an international development project under the auspices of a large charitable organisation in her own country. This allowed her to raise funds in her home country to support the operating costs of the centre. As an accredited charity, the auspicing organisation provided Marie with accountability and governance oversight and aided her to recruit volunteers through their volunteer sending arm.

Marie had a background in education and commenced involvement in residential care institutions after first witnessing 'the huge amount of orphaned and street children' whilst on a holiday. Marie returned to volunteer in several children's homes in the region before opening her own. Prior to the pandemic, Future's Children's Centre was providing long-term care to 12 children who the founder asserted had been abandoned by their families.

Marie originally took on the role of the director of the children's centre, however after changes were introduced that required children's centres to be nationally run, Marie appointed a national director and transitioned into a fundraising role. As the sole fundraiser Marie was responsible for raising 100% of the operating costs of the children's centre. She did this through speaking engagements, fundraising events, setting up a child sponsorship program, contributing her own funds, setting up a social enterprise tourism business and farm in the country where the institution was running

and through recruiting groups of international volunteers who would donate funds, goods, and two weeks of their time to working on projects at the children's centre.

Volunteers were involved in a range of activities including construction, maintenance, activities with the children, teaching and training staff and children and taking children on outings. Tourists from different countries also visited the children's centre whilst on holidays and made donations as did wealthy locals travelling from the major urban centres. Despite the wide range of activities volunteers and visitors would get involved in, the primary benefit of volunteers/visitors was the role they played in fundraising. Volunteers would return to their home countries and promote the work of Futures Children's Centre, often holding fundraisers and/or recruiting new volunteers. The word-of-mouth power of former volunteers proved to be one of the organisation's most successful means of fundraising, with income from volunteers making up 40-50% of the organisation's annual income.

Whilst Future's Children's Centre did not actively promote or support family connection or reintegration, they had a social worker on staff who, per government regulations, had to periodically assess children for reintegration and provide reports to the child welfare department. Under regulations introduced in recent years all decisions about children's entry or exit from care were now made by a government gatekeeping body and not by Futures Children's Centre staff or management.

Situation during COVID-19 lockdowns

In March 2020, the government imposed a lockdown in the country where Futures Children's Centre was located. International borders were closed, domestic travel, even within communities was severely restricted and mask wearing became mandatory in all public spaces. Staff of the Children's Centre were no longer able to travel between the centre and their own homes, meaning that only staff who agreed to remain on site indefinitely could continue to work. Income generated from the farm was immediately affected as staff could no longer travel to deliver produce to regular customers. Overseas donations also dried up as donors and child sponsors lost their jobs and cut back their spending accordingly. Donations from events dried up overnight as restrictions in Marie's home country meant large scale social gatherings could not continue. Volunteering and voluntourism immediately ceased and several upcoming trips had to be cancelled. As a result of the loss of income from all streams and the restrictions on travel, 9 staff at Futures Children's Centre were laid off, most of whom worked on the farm, or in community facing roles. The social worker responsible for child and family assessments was also stood down during this period. Only 5 staff remained, most of whom were in caregiving roles. They self-isolated at the centre with the remaining children and worked for 6 months on end without days off or opportunities to see their own families and at 50% of their normal salary due to significant funding cuts. Marie, who had recently retired to focus full time on fundraising went back to work

and used her own salary to try to supplement the loss of income.

The government, who had introduced gatekeeping mechanisms a couple of years prior as part of care reform efforts, issued a directive for children's homes to return children who came from nearby communities back to their families for the duration of the lockdown. 6 out of the 12 children who lived at Futures Children's Centre were returned to live with their families. Despite living close to the centre, children had not been allowed to keep contact with their families and were therefore sent back to live with relatives they had no enduring relationships with. This was a reported as a source of stress for children who were rapidly reunified. Futures Children's Centre provided finance to children whilst living with their families, however due to the levels of poverty experienced by families, Marie questioned how much of this support would go towards the children's care. Children were remotely monitored with weekly calls made to check up on the children's wellbeing. Children were reported to be doing fine both emotionally and physically, however Marie was concerned about the amount of weight some of the children seemed to have lost when they returned to the centre to resume school. One child was returned before school resumed due to contracting malaria and requiring treatment their family could not afford.

Key COVID-19 Impacts

Of greatest concern to Marie were the financial impacts of COVID-19 that stemmed from the inability to recruit and send teams of volunteers and the inability to continue with speaking and fundraising events. This affected Marie's direct fundraising activities as well as those typically conducted by former volunteers. Bans on travel also affected Marie's ability to support the director and staff in a management and governance capacity as that was typically done in the context of overseas visits and with teams.

Marie did not see the rapid reunification of children by government as a positive measure and did not have confidence that families would provide adequate care to the children. She was highly dismissive and distrusting of families and expressed fear, albeit unevidenced, that some children had been abused or married off as minors whilst at home. Whilst it is the role of government social workers to assess children and decide which ones will return to the institutions and which ones will remain with their families, Marie hopes all the children will return to Futures Children's Centre. In principle she recognises that families are the

best place for children however, her overriding perspective was that extended families would not look out for the children's interests and that donors would not be interested in supporting children who remained with families. She purports donor disinterest in supporting children in their families to their perspectives of 'how things work in Africa' which had been shaped by their volunteering experience. Marie also believed that families would want to return children to the centre as it was their only means of ensuring the children could access private education.

For children who remained at the centre throughout COVID-19 lockdowns, Marie noted that whilst they had missed their school friends and had not had a chance to go beyond the walls of the centre, the lockdown had afforded them greater opportunities to develop life skills, such as cooking and cleaning and vocational skills on the farm. This was compared to 'sitting outside mud huts' which is what Marie believed would have been the experience of children who returned to their communities.

Reflections and plans for the future

Marie noted that COVID had caused her to spend much time reflecting on certain aspects of Futures Children's Centre operations, and to 'think outside of the box' when it came to their funding model. Whilst Marie believed they fared better than many children's homes due to having mixed income streams in place pre-covid, including from the farm and tourism businesses, Marie had still been heavily impacted. Her plan was to start new social enterprise activities in her home country and reduce the organisation's reliance on fundraising events. Marie also intends to resume with sending teams of volunteers as soon as borders re-open. She firmly believes people need to directly experience the project to commit to fundraising for it and therefore volunteering is indispensable to the fundraising strategy.

In terms of programs and activities, Marie has decided to maintain the organisation's current programs, however, has put any plans to expand on hold. This includes suspending plans to expand the residential care facility, build new infrastructure and launch new community-based prevent programs targeting at risk youth and young women.

When it comes to Future Children's Centre's model of care, Marie has no plans to make any significant changes and believes the family-like model employed had proven effective throughout COVID-19. Reflecting on whether Futures Children's Centre could support children to remain with their families in the community, Marie raised the logistical challenges of delivering food to the children's villages, some of which were quite a distance from the centre, and ultimately concluded that efforts to support children in their families do not work and would not be something she could see herself doing. Marie acknowledged that children who did remain with their families permanently after COVID-19 restrictions lifted would therefore have to sever their relationship with the organisation as no further support would be provided. At the end of the day Marie had no confidence that funds directed towards families would be used for the child's care and education, especially given the situation of poverty families found themselves in. There was no consideration of employing a family strengthening approach to address this issue.