

CASE STUDY 2: LU LU'S CHILDREN'S HOME

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

Lu Lu's Children's Home was established in 2006 to support orphaned and vulnerable children in a low-middle income country. At its height, the children's home provided long-term institutional care for 20 school aged children. It was set up with a strong focus on supporting poor children to access education. Ling, who was a national and her expatriate husband Kane, founded the children's home along with several other programs including a foreign language school and sports sponsorship program. They also established a charity in Kane's home country, where they resided, to raise funds for the children's home and sports sponsorship program. Kane remotely managed many aspects of the children's home under this overseas charity, including the budgeting and finance for Lu Lu's Children's Home. He acted as the principal fundraiser liaising with individual donors and sponsors. Ling and Kane appointed a national director who was responsible for the day-to-day operations of the home. Another expatriate from Kane's home country was based in the same city as the children's home and was responsible for receiving and disbursing funds to Lu Lu's Children's Home on a monthly basis.

The overseas charity was also responsible for recruiting volunteers, who would spend between 7-9mths teaching at the foreign language school and also volunteering at the children's home. Voluntourists were also recruited who paid fees to visit the children's home whilst on holidays or in-country participating in sporting and cultural

events. Visitors and volunteers would conduct activities with the children, support them with their studies and help plant trees and vegetables in the centre's garden. As well as paying fees, voluntourists typically donated materials to the children's homes during their visit. Longer-term volunteers also helped with writing biannual child sponsor reports and with other basic administrative tasks. On average the children's home would accept around 100 visitors and volunteers per year, with visitors typically coming in groups of 10.

All of the children in care went to a local school as well as studied at the foreign language school. They also studied dance and English on site so that they could engage with visitors and perform traditional dances for visitors and volunteers that came to the centre. Most if not all of the children had family and would visit their family several times a year during major festival times. In accordance with government directives and the national care reform strategy, Lu Lu's Children's Home had a reintegration program in place and was in the process of progressively reintegrating children back into their families. Five children had already been reintegrated pre COVID and were being monitored and receiving support in their families according to their needs. Children whose families lived in proximity were also able to continue studying at the foreign language school post-reintegration.

Situation during COVID-19 lockdowns

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the government imposing lockdowns and restrictions in the country where Lu Lu's Children's home was located. Borders closed resulting in a rapid cessation of volunteers and visitors. The expatriate person responsible for disbursing the monthly budget also returned to his home country. Child sponsorships levels decreased dramatically within a few months as individual donors were affected by job losses and decreased incomes. These factors led to a 50-60% reduction in the monthly budget with a risk of further cuts or a complete cessation of funding should the situation deteriorate further. To manage the reduced funds, the director cut back on all non-essential expenditure, including on-site dance and English language classes. Staff and food costs were also reduced.

During the height of the pandemic, all schools were closed for a period of time and the older children at Lu Lu's Children's Home transitioned to online learning. Two iPad were provided by the donor to support children's online learning. No government organised online learning was arranged for primary school aged students. Staff tried to encourage and support all students to continue studying and reading in some capacity. Some staff were able to take on the role of teaching the foreign languages.

Throughout the lockdown period, children's

movement was highly restricted, and they were required to operate as a social bubble and isolate together with staff inside the home. This meant they were unable to engage in normal community activities, meet with friends or visit their families during holiday periods. These factors had a negative impact on the children's wellbeing.

Despite these negatives, the director did note that the improved hygiene measures implemented throughout COVID and social isolation had reduced instances of sickness amongst the children. This was a 'small positive' but paled in significance to the detrimental impacts of COVID-19 in the director's view.

Two children were reintegrated during the COVID-19 period; however, this was a part of the organisation's normal reintegration program and was not triggered by the pandemic. Children received support packages at the time of reintegration, and some received ongoing support from a third-party organisation providing technical support. The children continued to be monitored remotely and through biannual family visits conducted by social workers.

Key COVID-19 Impacts

The drop in funding was a source of considerable concern and stress for the director and staff and also cause worry amongst the children. The director was entirely reliant on the overseas charity and on voluntourists for income and material support and felt quite powerless to find other sources of funding.

The director felt that COVID had had an overwhelmingly negative impact on the children, in particular on their education and emotional and psychological wellbeing. Online learning was not of a sufficient standard and was only accessible to older children. Senior students struggled as learning was being delivered over social media apps primarily designed for messaging and staff were too unfamiliar with the materials and

concepts being taught to offer much support. The director noted a dramatic drop in the quality of education for all children as a result.

The requirement for children to self-isolate inside the children's home had also been a cause of detriment. Children's ability to understand why restrictions were necessary differed by age groups and some children responded with anger and frustration towards staff. The inability to visit their families was a particular hardship for the children, which the director tried to mitigate by increasing regular phone contact between children and their families. Despite his best efforts, the director noted that many children showed signs of being stressed, depressed, and withdrawn as a result of the isolation.

Reflections and plans for the future

Feeling quite powerless to change their current circumstances, and with the main decision-making power resting with the overseas donor and founder, the director had not reflected on changes or adaptations he could make to the centre's operations during COVID or beyond. Instead, the director had thought through how to respond to the worst-case scenario and put in place contingency plans should the funding from the overseas charity completely dry up. In the event funding ceased, the director had decided he would close the children's home and transfer all remaining children to the state-run orphanage in his city. The director had already made contact

with the head of children's services in his city towards this end.

The director was clearly hoping the pandemic would come to a swift end and was anxious to resume activities that would position them to begin to receive volunteers and visitors as soon as borders opened. He was particularly anxious to see English and dance classes resume out of worry the children would regress in their dance and English skills and this would compromise their ability to engage with visitors and volunteers when they returned.