

# CASE STUDY 3: GRACE ORPHANAGE

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

Grace orphanage is a large institution housing over 100 children and is one of the longest standing and well-known orphanages in the country. It was founded in 1993 by a foreign missionary who initially volunteered in a state-run institution. It was originally established to provide care for infants and children who were HIV+. The foreign founder remained in country and held the roles of director and primary fundraiser for around 25 years. Recently, Thiri was appointed as the national director as part of a succession plan. Whilst day to day managerial responsibilities have been fully transferred to Thiri, fundraising remains dependent on the founder's prominent profile and relationships with media and amongst donor communities. 90% of the orphanage's funding came from overseas donations from a range of countries. A small percentage of funding came from local sources including from long-term expats. Due to its high profile, the orphanage was also successful in securing in-kind support from a range of large local businesses.

Key to the organisation's fundraising strategy was facilitating volunteers and visitors. Grace Orphanage welcomed over 100 visitors and volunteers from various countries every year who came as a part of short-term mission teams, as individual volunteers or visited whilst on holidays in

the country. Visitors and volunteers would typically return to their home country and raise funds as well as recruit new visitors and volunteers. Many visitors and volunteers became long-term donors, and some would even return to visit the orphanage every year. Volunteers normally connected with the orphanage via Facebook, their website or through existing relationships with the founder. Local volunteers/visitors were also welcomed, with some connecting to the orphanage through their local church. Volunteers were involved in a range of activities including caregiving, especially with the infant children, teaching English, dance and other activities and maintenance and construction works. Local visitors/volunteers would often help organise special events around holidays or festivals or for birthday celebrations.

Whilst Grace Orphanage did not have a formal reintegration program in place prior to COVID, in recent years the organisation had become more open to children returning to their families. This had only occurred for a small number of children of older children and who requested to return to families. In these cases, social workers did a family assessment to ensure reintegration would be safe, however family strengthening, and post reintegration support services were not offered by the organisation.

# Situation during COVID-19 lockdowns

When COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, the government acted swiftly to close the borders, restrict internal travel, and instituted a range of public health measures, including a requirement to social distance, wear masks in public, increase hygiene measures and stay at home orders. Schools were closed for a several months and children had to transition to online learning.

In line with stay-at-home orders and restrictions on movement, children in Grace Orphanage had to remain on-site at orphanage and were not allowed to go out or interact with other members of the community. Caregiving staff also had to self-isolate with the children, resulting in caregivers working for several months without days off or opportunities to go back to their own homes or visit their families. Grace Orphanage had a computer room onsite, which made the transition to online learning easier, however it was still a logistical challenge given the high number of children in care. Other staff, including the director Thiri, who were not involved in the day-to-day care of the children had to work remotely and stay at home.

To manage the logistics of caring for a large number of children during lockdown, and to create smaller 'social isolation bubbles' within the orphanage, children were split into 5 groups based on age and gender. This helped with managing care, education, and other activities.

Due to border closures, visiting and volunteering ceased, however 2 longer-term volunteers who were stranded in-country and unable to return home continued to engage the children in crafts and other activities throughout the lockdown. The loss of volunteers, teams and visitors caused a decline in donations. Due to fears of transmission the director was also initially cautious about allowing local visitors or volunteers on-site and of accepting donations of goods. Local visitors were encouraged to make monetary donations until the initial 3-month lockdown period ended. After this period when restrictions were lifted by the government, Grace Orphanage opened to local visitors and volunteers and in fact significantly increased engagement with local visitors in lieu of international ones.

# Impacts of COVID-19

One of the biggest impacts of COVID-19 felt by Grace Orphanage was financial. By the end of 2020, the organisation had experienced a 40% drop in income. This was the joint impact of the financial pressures being experienced by donors, the principal fundraiser's inability to travel overseas to raise funds and the loss of visitors and volunteers. Whilst volunteers and visitors often engaged in caregiving, particularly for younger children, volunteers were not essential to the core functioning of the orphanage and no impact on caregiving was reported throughout COVID-19.

To manage the reduced budget, 7 staff who worked in community facing roles were retrenched, children's allowances were cut, non-essential spending was cut, and tighter budgeting and financial measures were put in place. Plans for other community programs were also put on hold. Local staff who previously had played no role in fundraising began promoting and advocating for Grace Orphanage in the community and with local businesses, which resulted in an increase in local support and in-kind donations.

The closure of schools and requirement for children to remain inside the orphanage was a cause of boredom and stress for many children. Children were also concerned about the financial situation of the organisation and were worried a reduction in funds would affect their care or education. A small number of children, who were particularly affected by COVID-19 stressors requested to return home to their families instead of staying at the orphanage. This was arranged for 4 older children.

Staff also reported feeling stressed and afraid throughout COVID-19, particular during the first lockdown period. They were initially most concerned about prevent transmission within the orphanage and managing that risk for any staff who had to go out into the community or interact with people from outside of the orphanage. For caregiving staff, the combination of school closures, stay at home orders and the considerable number of children in care created a situation of significant stress for caregiving staff. Despite management's efforts to support staff and manage their stress levels, Thiri recognised that this did eventually have an impact on the children and result in tension between children and caregiving staff.

Whilst most of the impacts reported were negative, Thiri also reported that there were positives in terms of how the staff came together and supported each other throughout a challenging time. COVID-19 struck at a time when the organisation was undergoing a succession transition and the challenges of COVID-19 caused staff to rise up and take more ownership of the orphanage and advocate more strongly for the organisation. This resulted in innovative ideas in terms of local engagement and fundraising strategies coming to the forefront, which are likely to influence how the organisations positions itself in the future.

# Reflections and plans for the future

Reflecting on the experience throughout COVID-19 Thiri had identified several aspects of the organisation's operations that could be adapted in the future.

With respect to financial stability, Thiri believed the current dependence on foreign funding was unsustainable and new fundraising strategies would need to be employed. This was not only in light of COVID but also due to the succession plan that was being outworked and related transfer of fundraising responsibilities to the national team who did not have the same strength of relationships with the overseas donor communities as the founder. As such Thiri was considering a suite of measures to bring the organisation back to a place of financial stability including reducing the number of children in care, tapping into the local

volunteering and civic engagement sectors to reduce the running costs of the orphanage, and increasing domestic fundraising efforts.

Thiri was also considering changes to the model of care, including transitioning to provide family strengthening services in partnership with local churches, government agencies and other NGOs. Thiri came into the organisation with an existing awareness of the harms of institutional care and value of family-based care and family strengthening. Therefore, whilst she articulated transition as a long-term goal she held for the organisation, and one that was supported by most of the national team, she believed it would take some time to secure buy-in from all the key decision-makers, including the founder, before such a change could be implemented.