

Put Children First

Recommendations to
End Orphanage Volunteering
and the Institutionalisation
of Children



INTRODUCTION

The Global Problem of the Institutionalisation of Children

An estimated 5.4 million children live in institutions worldwide.(1) More than 80% of these children have at least one living parent yet continue to be separated from their families and segregated from the broader community.(2) Poverty and lack of access to health and education are key drivers of this institutionalisation together with social marginalisation and discrimination.(3) Children with disabilities are at increased risk of being institutionalised primarily due to the lack of family support services and inclusive education.(4) Children from a minority, ethnic or migrant background are also at specific risk.(5)

Although overwhelmingly well-intentioned, orphanage volunteering is also a key driver of this institutionalisation. Orphanages are being created to meet the demand from well-meaning tourists, volunteers, and donors, fuelling the trafficking of children and perpetuating what is now termed an 'orphanage industry'.(6)

Institutional care is harmful to children – detrimental to their health, development and emotional wellbeing and puts them at increased risk of abuse, violence, and exploitation. Institutions separate children from their families, communities, and cultures.(7)

Orphanage volunteering also contributes to the harmful effects of institutions. The general transient nature of volunteering can intensify children's feelings of abandonment and loss and most volunteers do not have the required skills to meet the needs of very vulnerable children already traumatised by the separation from their families. Volunteering in orphanages also presents key child protection concerns as most institutions are not state regulated and do not have adequate safeguarding systems, exposing children to significant risks of abuse.(8)

'Love, one on one care and attention, a sense of belonging and identity, trusting relationships and being a part of community are needed by all children and only a family can provide this'

Peter K. Muthui, Care Leaver & Director of Child in Family Focus, Kenya



WATCH: [Children Belong in Families - YouTube](#)

At least

5.4m

*children live in institutions
worldwide*

Over

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THE GLOBAL CARE REFORM MOVEMENT

There is now a global movement to stop orphanage volunteering and to move away from institutional systems towards family and community-based care.⁽⁹⁾ The UN has recognised the harm of institutions and orphanage volunteering and is calling for an end to both, ⁽¹⁰⁾ as are care experts with lived experience. Governments and child protection specialists are working to better support families to prevent separation and to enable reunification. When the needs and best interests of the child call for alternative care, family-based options including kinship and foster care are being promoted.

To support this growing global care reform movement, Comhlámh and the End Orphanage Volunteering Working Group are proposing the below 4 key recommendations for policy change so that more children can grow up with their families, where their needs and rights are best met and where they can thrive.

Recommendation 1

Irish Aid should introduce a dedicated funding stream for care reform strategies, including family and community-based support programmes.

Recommendation 2

The Department of Foreign Affairs should introduce foreign travel advice warning of the harm caused by orphanage volunteering (including the risk of incentivising trafficking) and encouraging people not to visit or volunteer.

Recommendation 3

Irish Aid should recognise the harm of orphanage volunteering and introduce funding criteria that no programmes or activities that involve the sending of volunteers to orphanages will be supported.

Recommendation 4

The Departments of Education, and Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, should develop child-safe guidelines for trips overseas, including guidance not to visit or volunteer in orphanages.



These recommendations are endorsed by:



If you are an organisation, group, university, school, or other body and would like to endorse this campaign by lending your logo please contact Sandra in Comhlámh: sandra@comhlamh.org

RECOMMENDATION 1

Irish Aid should introduce a dedicated funding stream for care reform strategies, including family and community-based support programmes.

Institutional care is harmful to children

Research has shown that growing up in an institution is detrimental to a child's wellbeing and associated with significant delays in brain growth and physical and cognitive development. Orphanage care is also associated with socioemotional difficulties, including attachment disorders and mental health issues in childhood and later life. (11) Children need stable bonds with primary caregivers to develop and thrive. Institutions, which generally have a low staff to child ratio and a constant turnover of workers, deny children the opportunity to develop these close connections, impacting their ability to develop secure attachments and to establish healthy relationships during childhood and adulthood. Institutions also deny children access to their extended families and the safety networks needed to sustain them through their later life. (12)

Orphanages regularly feature maltreatment and neglect (13) and put children at increased risk of abuse, violence, and exploitation, (14) with children with disabilities at specific risk. (15) The links between trafficking and orphanages are increasingly recognised, with evidence of children being both recruited to populate orphanages and targeted by traffickers on leaving care. (16)

Pastor Ruth Kahawa, Founder of Smile Africa, talks of how she gradually learnt that the orphanage care she thought was in the best interests of the child was in fact damaging, and how the organisation changed instead to work to prevent children going into institutional care and to support family reintegration.



WATCH: Ruth Kahawa,
Founder of Smile Africa

Institutional care harms a child's future life chances

Many children who grow up in orphanages typically leave with lower levels of educational attainment than their peers, experience stigma and discrimination during and after their time in care and often struggle to transition back into community life, having had little opportunity to learn

the necessary social and life skills and support network. (17) Insecure attachment to adult caregivers during childhood can lead to behavioural difficulties and mental health issues including depression and anxiety in later life.(18) Young adults raised in institutions are 40 times more likely to have a criminal record and 500 times more likely than their peers to commit suicide. (19)

In Ireland, we have moved from large scale residential institutions to working to prevent family separation and providing foster and kinship care when in the best interests of the child. (20) Overseas governments and NGOs are working to reform their care and child protection systems and Irish NGOs are endeavouring to support them but need funding to further this work, particularly in the context of Covid-19. They require funding to advocate for deinstitutionalisation and to work with national and local governments; to resource the development of community services and family support programmes; and to engage with orphanages to safely transition to community-based care. As the Covid-19 pandemic results in increasing numbers of children losing their primary caregivers, there is an urgent need to respond to their needs in overseas programming to prevent further institutionalisation. (21)

Chernobyl Children International

is an Irish NGO supporting children in institutions across Belarus to regain their right to a family life and to end the institutionalisation of children in conjunction with Belarusian authorities. CCI's programmes include it's "Homes of Hope" which removes children from bleak, custodial state orphanages to place them in loving homes; and it's 'Independent Living Programme' which provides housing, life skills and vocational training for teenagers who have spent most of their young lives in the Vesnova Children's Mental Asylum.

The Case for Care Reform

Children have the right to grow up in a family environment:

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms every child's right, including a child with a disability, to live with their parents and to grow up in their community and culture. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities upholds the rights of children with a disability to live and fully participate within their own community. The UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children give primacy to support efforts to keep children in, or return them to, the care of the family. In situations where this is not in the best interests of the children, the UN Guidelines provide a range of options including kinship and foster care; and state that residential care should be the last, and only temporary, option.

Institutional care is costly:

Research by Lumos has shown that institutional care is on average 6 to 10 times more expensive than supporting families or family-based alternative care. Donors can play a key role in ending institutionalisation and many organisations and state bodies have moved away from funding orphanages. Lumos calls for all donors to 'ensure that all development and humanitarian investments, together with research and data development, include children in (or at risk of being in) an institution. Prioritise inclusion and deinstitutionalisation in strategies, funding criteria and plans across all sectors. Scrutinise proposals and review existing agreements to ensure that funds are not contributing to the institutionalisation of children'. (p.34)

A growing global care reform movement:

International child protection specialists, including UNICEF and Save the Children are working to support governments to transition away from residential care and to support families and the development of inclusive and accessible services, including health and education. The EU's Structural and Investment Funds are now employed to support care reform within European member states. The new EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child calls for member states to 'promote national strategies and programmes to speed up de-institutionalisation and the transition towards quality, family and community-based care'.

Phasing out institutional care is a goal within our reach:

Lumos's report 'In our Lifetime' estimates that 'with concerted effort and the right investments, the institutionalisation of children could end globally by 2050'.



WATCH: Tearfund's [Beyond Institutional Care: Rethinking How We Care for Vulnerable Children](#) conference which explores the why and the how of phasing out institutional care.

RECOMMENDATION 2

The Department of Foreign Affairs should introduce foreign travel advice warning of the harm caused by orphanage volunteering (including the risk of incentivising trafficking) and encouraging people not to visit or volunteer.

The Harmful Impacts of Orphanage Volunteering

Many people with the best of intentions have volunteered in an orphanage or visited and donated during their travel overseas. However, there is now strong evidence that orphanage volunteering and voluntourism is harmful and for several reasons. In general, volunteers lack the expertise to work with children, let alone vulnerable children who often have a range of complex needs and have been deeply affected by the separation from their families. Orphanage volunteering contributes to the level of neglectful and fragmented care that is often the case in institutions and to feelings of abandonment, overall emotional distress, and attachment disorders whereby the child and adult of later years struggles to develop healthy, trusting relationships.⁽²²⁾ Volunteering with children in orphanages normalises access to vulnerable children, access which can be utilised by those seeking to sexually abuse and exploit. Many orphanages are not state-regulated and lack the appropriate child protection systems to recognise and respond appropriately to risks of abuse. ⁽²³⁾

Orphanage volunteering is also creating a demand for orphanages as institutions are being set up to meet the demand for volunteering experiences (24) and children are being actively recruited by traffickers to populate profit-making institutions. (25)

There is a need for greater public awareness on the harms of orphanage volunteering and voluntourism, on the significant risks to children's welfare and wellbeing and the links to exploitation and trafficking. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Irish Aid's website advice sections on travel and responsible volunteering and the TravelWise App are key points for information for both the public and potential volunteers and therefore an essential source for information on the issue of orphanage volunteering. The [UK](#), [Netherlands](#), [Australia](#) and the [US Embassy in Nepal](#) have all introduced travel advice warning of the negatives consequences of orphanage voluntourism and volunteering. Comhlámh and the 'End Orphanage Volunteering' Working Group are striving to bring greater public awareness of the harm of orphanage volunteering. Government sanctioned public messaging would work to greatly strengthen these efforts and to extend the reach of core messaging to other sectors which facilitate orphanage volunteering, including sporting bodies, faith-based organisations, and the school sector; and to individuals who travel and volunteer or visit orphanages independently.

Ruth Wacuka (Kenya Society of Care Leavers) and Stephen Ucembe (Regional Advocacy Manager of Hope and Homes) both global advocates for children's rights, grew up in orphanages despite having parents. Ruth and Stephen share what it was like to grow up in an institution and their work to end orphanage tourism and institutionalisation. They call for the diverting of funding away from orphanages to support family-focused and community-based projects.



LISTEN: [Good Intentions Aren't Enough: Ending Orphanage Tourism](#) | Listen Notes

A faded, grayscale photograph of three young boys. The boy in the foreground is smiling broadly, showing his teeth. The boy in the middle is looking towards the camera with a neutral expression. The boy in the background is partially obscured and looking slightly to the side.

The Links Between Orphanage Trafficking and Orphanage Volunteering

Orphanage trafficking involves the active recruitment of children into institutions for the purpose of financial and other forms of exploitation. Research by Lumos has found that some so-called ‘orphanages’ in countries such as Haiti, Cambodia, Nepal and Uganda are set up as profit-making operations to extract funding from volunteers and donors.

Orphanage volunteering and foreign donor interest feed this lucrative ‘orphanage industry’. The US State Department’s 2018 Trafficking of Person’s Report highlights that ‘the profits made through volunteer-paid program fees or donations to orphanages from tourists incentivize nefarious orphanage owners to increase revenue by expanding child recruitment operations in order to open more facilities’. The report details the phenomenon of ‘Child Finders’ who target communities affected by poverty, discrimination, war and natural disaster with promises of education, health services, food and safety but instead coerce the children to fundraise through performances and/or interaction with donors, with many kept in ill-health to extract further donations.

Children are being recruited and trafficked into orphanages for the purposes of financial and other forms of exploitation. They are also routinely targeted by traffickers during their time in, and on leaving, an institution. A recent report by Lumos explores the links between institutional care and child trafficking in Europe.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Irish Aid should recognise the harm of orphanage volunteering and introduce funding criteria that no programmes or activities that involve the sending of volunteers to orphanages will be supported.

Global Movement to End Orphanage Volunteering

At the centre of the growing movement to end orphanage volunteering is the voice of those who grew up in orphanages. The Better Care Network's [The Love You Give campaign](#) features care experts with lived experience who are leaders in the global effort to transform the way we care. Key child protection actors including [UNICEF](#) and [Save the Children](#) have consistently called for volunteers not to support an industry which works to separate families and exploits children. More recently the [Lancet Group Commission on the Institutionalisation and Deinstitutionalisation of Children](#) reported on the level of risks that volunteering in institutions pose to children and called for volunteers to redirect their efforts.

Our national standard on responsible volunteering, [Comhlámh's Code of Good Practice for Volunteer Sending Agencies](#), commits all relevant organisations to end orphanage volunteering and to either responsibly divest from orphanages or to actively engage and support their overseas partner in care reform processes and strategies. The [Forum's Global Standard for Volunteering for Development](#) also commits member organisations to child safe volunteering and prohibits them from allowing volunteers to work with or within orphanages or other residential facilities for children.

Many people wish to support children at risk, including children in the Global South. However, we wouldn't permit large scale access of unskilled short-term volunteers to vulnerable children on this island. We need to apply the same standards universally and work to protect and ensure the welfare of all children.

Why care experts with lived experience are calling for the end to orphanage volunteering

Sinet Chan, Ambassador for [Cambodian Children's Trust](#), talks about the neglect and abuse that she and her brother experienced growing up in an orphanage; and how orphanage volunteering contributed to the feelings of abandonment and the exploitation she suffered.



WATCH: [Ending Orphanage Volunteering: Why care experts with lived experience are calling for change.](#) - [YouTube](#)

She calls on volunteers to be

'a white ally instead of a white saviour....' [to] acknowledge the harm of white saviourism and use their white privilege to actively deconstruct system of inequality and oppression'. Sinet defines a white ally as someone who 'believes in resourcing, empowering and giving platform to people like me so we can shape our own future'



Many volunteer sending organisations and voluntourism agencies have recognised the harm caused and have subsequently stopped sending volunteers and organising trips to orphanages. Transforming the way we care for children – moving from institutional systems towards family and community-based care – depends on this divestment as orphanage volunteering is a key driver of institutionalisation.



WATCH: [Tearfund Ireland's conference on why and how we divest from orphanage volunteering: Beyond Institutional Care: Rethinking How We Care for Vulnerable Children.](#)

Overseas development aid should not be used to support residential care institutions but should focus on family preservation and community-based services to ensure that children can grow up in their own families. Irish NGOs which support residential care institutions should transition away from orphanages responsibly through planned strategies which work to protect all children. Investment in institutions detracts funds from care reform processes and the development of family and community-based care and services. (26)

Maintain Hope

Maintain Hope is an Irish non-profit, community based direct aid organisation which partners with organisations in Kenya and tries to respond to the needs of local communities which are identified after consultation and discussion. Maintain Hope used to send volunteers to support an orphanage. They now partner with a Kenyan NGO, Rays of Hope, to support children to reintegrate back into the family home, providing resources for their education and health care.

RECOMMENDATION 4

The Departments of Education, and Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, should develop child-safe guidelines for trips overseas, including guidance not to visit or volunteer in orphanages.

Participating in a school or youth trip abroad is a great way for young adults to learn more about themselves and the world they live in. They are an opportunity to develop confidence, to become more socially aware and gain new skills, as well as an opportunity to gain further understanding of global issues. However, an aspect of these trips abroad often includes a visit or volunteering experience to an orphanage that the school sponsors or supports. These trips contribute to the regular flow of volunteers, visitors and donations to institutional systems which work to separate children from their families, harms a child's development and exposes them to increased risk of abuse and exploitation. They also contribute to the growing global orphanage industry, dependent on the recruitment and trafficking of children into institutions. We need to be child safe and ensure school and youth trips don't help perpetuate systems which separate children from their families and expose them to further risks.



WATCH: [ChildSafe Movement - Don't Create More Orphans - YouTube.](#)

Increasingly schools and universities are taking a stand and pledging not to visit or volunteer in an orphanage and to redirect resources into alternatives that support families and communities.

The Department of Education should include key messages and guidelines for child safe trips overseas, including calling on schools not to support and organise trips to orphanages, in a revision of transition year school guidelines. (27) Tearfund Ireland has developed a development education toolkit to help schools and youth groups explore these issues with young people in creative and interactive ways. It is free to download at www.tearfund.ie/get-involved/resource-hub/development-education/alternativecare/

[#HelpingNotHelping](#)

Lumos in conjunction with the London School of Economics are calling on the education sector to combat orphanage tourism, recognising that it can be harmful to children's development and emotional wellbeing.

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This document has been prepared by Comhlámh and members of the End Orphanage Volunteering Working Group.

This publication was funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFA). The ideas, opinions and comments therein are entirely the responsibility of its author(s) and do not necessarily represent or reflect DFA policy.



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