



Khmeng Onka: Care Leaver Network Cambodia

Statement of Support for the Transition of Residential Care Services

About Khmeng Onka

Khmeng Onka Cambodia Care Leaver Network was established in 2020. The Care Leaver Network offers a safe environment for care leavers to share their stories and discuss issues of discrimination and challenges they faced when they were separated from their families, and to promote better guidelines to prepare and support young people transitioning out of care. The network ensures care leavers know their rights, have a voice, and receive training and skills to help them develop and prosper, building their resilience and self-reliance.

Situation of residential care in Cambodia

Residential care expanded rapidly in Cambodia between 2005-2015 with many residential care facilities set up without registration, posing risks to children. Many children in residential care were recruited from families in rural areas experiencing the effects of poverty or struggling with access to services, including quality education. Most children in residential care facilities have parents and families, who could care for them if they were provided with some support. However, a disproportionate amount of funding for vulnerable children has been directed towards residential care services, creating a situation where children are separated from their families because of poverty or to access education rather than being offered services in their communities, allowing them to grow up with their families.

Growing up in residential care is harmful to children and is associated with many negative impacts on children's emotional, social, physical, and cognitive development. Children need safe loving families- not institutions- for their optimal development. This is why Khmeng Onka Care Leavers Network advocates for organisations providing residential care to transition their services, and support children to be raised in families and as a part of their community.

Importance of families

Children belong in families. Orphanages, even the good ones, have adverse impacts on children and cannot replace the important role of family in a child's life. No place is better for a child than their own home and family. That is where they receive the love and affection they need. Government and non-government organisations who are working with vulnerable children need to take steps to ensure children are supported to be raised in their families. Children who are already in alternative care and exiting residential care need to be provided with adequate services as care leavers so that they can transition back into community, complete their studies, find employment, and access other critical services, including social protection schemes.

Message to organisations and donor involved in residential care services

Our message to organizations providing residential care services and to their donors is please support the transition of residential care services so that children can be reintegrated back into their families and supported to live with their families or in their communities independently. Support families to be able to care for their own children, through initiatives such as livelihood programs, supporting children's education, health care, community services and counselling services. Work with local authorities to provide family strengthening services to families at risk of separation. Children should not be separated from their families due to poverty. Contribute to efforts to keep families together!

Message to donor country governments

International level commitments have been made to phase out institutional care. However, currently residential care institutions continue to be propped up by private funding coming from donor countries. The overwhelming amount of financial support for residential care institutions has created a thriving industry called the orphanage industry in which children are separated from their families, trafficked into orphanages, and institutionalised for profit.

Governments of donor countries have an important role to play in redirecting private funding away from institutions and towards family care. Governments need to regulate funding sent by their citizens, residents, and domestically registered entities to overseas orphanages, and regulate voluntourism to ensure companies and charities operating in their country are not facilitating orphanage tourism overseas. These are necessary measures to combat orphanage trafficking. Financial support from donor countries should be redirected towards family strengthening efforts, the transition of residential care services, reintegration of children back into families and to aftercare services for young people exiting care, consistent with international obligations and commitments.