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Voluntarily into an orphanage?

Orphanages in the Global South and their support mechanisms

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Orphanages are popular among donors. They are also popular places for volunteering. This article deals with the theological and historical background of Christian commitment to orphans, especially in the German context, and presents research findings from recent years on the welfare of children in orphanages. It also scrutinises the usual ways of thinking and presents alternatives that are in the best interests of the children.

Introduction

Orphanages in countries of the Global South and the mechanisms of support from countries of the Global North are the focus of this article. This topic is examined from different perspectives and includes theological, biographical and historical backgrounds as well as important research findings from recent decades on the welfare of children in orphanages. This leads to the question of whether the orphanage system is in the best interests of the children and what role Christian actors play in providing support.

The article is based on a joint presentation at the Christian Community Development Conference (CCD) in Berlin.¹ However, it goes beyond this, especially when considering the current and historical situation in Germany.

Before I delve into this topic, let me first define two basic terms:

- Orphans include full and half orphans who have lost both or one parent, as well as so-called social orphans: Their parents are still alive, but for various reasons they have become estranged or estranged - a relationship breakdown.
- Orphanages are group-based, residential care for children and young people provided by employees and volunteers. Synonymous terms are orphanages, children's homes, children's villages,

¹Green, P; Köker, M; Lynch, E. (2022): Rethinking how we care about the orphaned and vulnerable children. (Unpublished)

(Group) accommodation (shelters), residential groups and, in some cases, boarding schools and hostels. Up to eight million children worldwide continue to be cared for in orphanages. The fact that exact figures are not available can be seen as an indication of the invisible vulnerability of these children⁽²⁾.

Theological background

A father of the fatherless and a helper of widows is God in his holy dwelling place. A God who brings home the lonely, who brings out the captives, that they may prosper (Psalm 68:6-7a)

These verses probably belong to one of the oldest surviving psalms, which praises God for his deeds and is also a model for the actions of his followers. God is described as the father of the fatherless. Metaphorically speaking, it is a metaphor for God's care in difficult situations and expresses the longing for a relationship and a true, eternal home. At the same time, however, it is also about a concrete perspective for action towards a home for orphans and widows in the here and now.

A workbook for faith-based social work and diaconia writes: "In the Bible, as in the entire ancient Near East, widows and orphans are among the groups whose legal, economic and social status is regarded as particularly precarious. Because these groups found it difficult to secure justice for themselves in a patriarchal society, God himself is seen as the one who listens to their cry of distress (Ex 22:22), provides them with justice (Deut 10:17f) and takes action against their adversaries (Ex 22:23). This leads to an appeal to the community to stand up for widows and orphans in a similar way. Therefore, in Israel and Judah, various provisions were developed to protect the rights of widows and orphans - alongside whom other groups in need of protection such as foreigners, Levites or slaves are often mentioned - and to ensure their survival."³

Therefore, concrete care for orphans and widows is part of a religion that accepts God as pure and faultless (James 1:27). This is not limited to the charitable care of individuals, but is also about a just social and legal framework.

True praise that pleases God is to bring justice to the fatherless, to support widows and to help the oppressed. (Isaiah 1:17)

What do these three groups of people have in common? They are each characterised by missing or dysfunctional relationships: The widows no longer have a partner, the orphans lack a parent, while oppression a form of unjust relationship in through exploitation. With Myers⁴, Corbett and Fikkert⁵ this corresponds to the biblical definition of poverty, which essentially the result of broken relationships. In other words, creating and improving relationships is always a central task in the fight against poverty. It is therefore necessary to build community and not just alleviate material hardship. What significance does this aspect have for the care of orphans?

²Christou, E. (2023): Inspiring Christians to Rethink Orphanages. (Unpublished).

³Bieberstein, S. (2021): Widows and orphans. In: Lanckau, J; Popp, T; Hentschel, A; Scholtissek, K. (eds.): Biblisches Arbeitsbuch für Soziale Arbeit und Diakonie. - Tübingen. S. 183-187.

⁴Myers, B. L. (2011): Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development. New York.

⁵Corbett, S; Fikkert, B; et al. (2009): [When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself](#). Chicago.

Back to the Psalm 68 quoted earlier: both the fatherless, who are often referred to as fatherless in the Bible, and the widows suffer from a particular form of broken relationship and loneliness, because they have lost a family member. Most English and some German translations of the passage read: He creates a family for the lonely (Psalm 68:7a GNB). Families are conducive to the well-being of children because they are where holistic and caring relationships are practised that designed to last a lifetime. The family is the model for a caring home.

Historical digression: orphanage dispute

Before entering the topic of orphanages in the Global South, I would like to make a brief historical digression into the situation of orphanages founded by Christians in Germany. This is because there are certainly parallels that can be relevant to the international context. I will limit myself to a few outstanding developments as examples.

Francke Institutions

Inspired by a study trip to the Netherlands, the pietist August Hermann Franke founded the Glaucha orphanage in Halle in 1698. It had a strong educational focus that was hardly comparable with traditional orphanage foundations of the time. "In Francke's institutions, the term 'orphanage' rather encompassed a complex, rapidly growing conglomerate of schools that was constantly adapting to new requirements - from orphan and poor schools to a Latin school (Latina) and an exclusive paedagogic centre."⁶The school complex also included a publishing house with a print shop and a pharmacy with laboratories. The orphanage thus receded into the background. As a school and educational centre rather than an institution for the basic care of orphans, it developed into an institution with a strong educational focus, especially for the children of clergymen. In 1727, the year of Franke's death, only 134 of the 2,000 children in the institutions were orphans.⁷The aim was to learn a profession, while at the same time the children's labour was used economically in the orphanage. Pastor's families in particular saw the orphanage as the only way to finance their sons' path university, with an education in true piety also playing a formative role⁽⁸⁾.

The so-called orphanage in Halle served as an example for faith-motivated foundations in other regions of Germany, as well as in other countries, such as England⁹and India, fuelled by the orphanage's own publications. "As the Indian social structures made orphan care according to the European model superfluous, the missionaries concentrated on the 'planting' of the knowledge of God"¹⁰through educational institutions with home-like accommodation in boarding schools (hostels). The institutions in Halle remained an exception and imitators

⁶Sträter, U. (2009): The Glaucha orphanage outside Halle. In: Veltmann, C; Birkenmeier, J. (eds.): Kinder, Krätze, Caritas. Orphanages in the early modern period. Halle. S. 77-87.

⁷Kramer, G (2004): August Hermann Francke. A biography. Halle. In: Veltmann, C; Birkenmeier, J. (eds.): Kinder, Krätze, Caritas. Orphanages in the early modern period. Halle. S. 77

⁸Härter, K. (2009): Orphan care and orphanages in the context of early modern policey: regulatory laws and official measures. In: Veltmann, C; Birkenmeier, J. (eds.): Kinder, Krätze, Caritas. Orphanages in the early modern period. Halle. S. 49-66.

Löffelmeier, R (2010): Annotation to: Veltmann, Claus / Birkenmeier, Jochen (eds.): Kinder, Krätze, Caritas, Waisenhäuser in der Frühen Neuzeit. In: EWR 9, No. 2.

⁹The orphanage founded by Georg Müller in Bristol in 1835 is well known. His motivation was the glorification of God. "It seemed to me to best realised by building an orphanage. It had to be you could see, even with the natural eye." Müller, G.: Autobiography. In Richter, T. (2019): Role models of faith III: Georg Müller - The orphan father of Bristol.

¹⁰Birkenmeier, J. (2009): Worldwide impact of the Halle orphanage. In: Veltmann, C; Birkenmeier, J. (eds.): Children, Scabies, Charity. Orphanages in the early modern period. Halle. S. 103-105.

often only adopted individual elements, with corresponding consequences for the quality of the start-ups.

Criticism was also levelled at the institutions themselves, which we will also encounter again when looking at orphanages in the global South: In connection with the granting of state support, they had a political issue. They were criticised:

"in reality not to be a social institution for Glaucha and Halle, but a flourishing commercial enterprise in favour of the Pietist movement, which is hidden behind the façade of a

"The orphanage was only disguised as an 'orphanage' in order to collect donations and enjoy the benefits of the electoral privilege."¹¹There was also the suspicion of installing an "ultimately unevangelical commercial intercession business,"¹²because the prayers of the orphans were particularly valued and - according to the criticism - took place in connection with donations.

Orphanage dispute

As early as 1760, a critical countermovement emerged in the course of the Enlightenment. The orphanage controversy¹³ was triggered by an irreconcilable discrepancy between pedagogical ideals and actual living conditions. In many institutions, the children's everyday lives were characterised by the often one-sided production in the workshops, which were intended to be profitable. The poor health situation did not go unnoticed by contemporaries for long. Deficiency diseases such as scurvy, the rapid spread of infectious diseases and increased mortality were observed. Scabies in particular was considered a typical orphanage disease. Soon the orphanage controversy throughout Germany was no longer just about reforming the homes, but about the fundamental question of whether children were not better off in foster families. Some homes were closed and attempts were made to integrate children into families⁽¹⁴⁾.

Against this background, Johann Hinrich Wichern later favoured the family principle and always saw education in orphanages as the ultima ratio.¹⁵ Let us now turn to orphanages in the Global South to see whether they actually house orphans, what educational, financial and faith-based motivations exist there, and whether they have similar health or other consequences of concern to them.

Excursus: My background

I, too, was not aware of the problems of growing up in institutions for a long time, although I have come into contact with them. As children's homes are generally supported with the best of motives, the topic of this article is definitely controversial. I would therefore like to summarise the stages of my

¹¹Sträter, U. (2009): The Glaucha orphanage outside Halle. In: Veltmann, C; Birkenmeier, J. (eds.): *Kinder, Krätze, Caritas. Orphanages in the early modern period*. Halle. S. 77.

¹²Ibid., p. 80.

¹³Vanja, C. (2009): Enlightenment and the orphanage controversy. In: Veltmann, C; Birkenmeier, J. (eds.): *Kinder, Krätze, Caritas. Orphanages in the early modern period*. Halle. S. 113-125.

¹⁴This was not always successful. There was often a mixture with the enlightened ideal of education in the countryside, which then often took place in families. It was not until the post-war period that the concept of child welfare came to the fore. At the same time, looking at the overall context, important changes in the care of orphans were brought about by external changes at the legal level: In the Roman Empire, orphans were seen as free people, whereas previously they were considered slaves. This was the basis for care and provision by faith-based actors, including the establishment of orphanages. The situation was different in the Empire. Orphanages were now organised almost exclusively on a communal basis. This favoured the decline of Christian institutions.

¹⁵Statistics of the Inner Mission of the German Protestant Church (1899). In: Friedrich, N. (2009): Orphanages in the 19th and 20th century. In: Veltmann, C; Birkenmeier, J. (eds.): *Children, Scabies, Charity. Orphanages in the early modern period*. Halle. S. 135-136.

Raising awareness - from a certain naivety to an informed and critical debate

- to show by way of example that this can often be a lengthy process. At the same time, I would like to illustrate some of the facets of children's homes and their support mechanisms.

On a longer trip through India during my studies, I volunteered in a children's home run by the organisation Mother Theresa's and gave food to disabled children. I wanted to do something good and experience something. When you were in Calcutta, it was basically one of the things you did as a backpacker.

In Kenya, I visited a somewhat run-down orphanage outside the capital. The director said that it was his birthday on the same day as mine. I was emotionally gripped by this and considered donating something to it on my next birthday.

During my four years working in South Sudan, we occasionally attended church services at a children's home nearby and usually stayed for lunch. I quietly questioned the fact that sauerkraut was delivered in shipping containers from the USA, but not yet the concept of an orphanage itself. In short, I was initially quite favourably disposed towards children's homes. In hindsight, however, I would describe this self-critically as naive and ignorant.

Later, I slowly became a little more sceptical. In Zimbabwe, I visited a home where the toddlers were looked after in residential groups of the same age. Volunteers from Europe and North America played with them. It became clear that the African orphans remained isolated from their own culture and environment, for example through predominantly European food, a separate school, well as through the predominant care of young people who do not speak the children's mother tongue. The European director also lived several kilometres away. I had expected this to be different, because when he solicits donations in his home country, he describes himself as the children's father.

The real turning point came when I was posted to Cambodia for four years. At that time, the Southeast Asian country had become a major tourist destination. The number of orphanages in the country had grown by 75% in a short space of time. Children's homes were mainly established in areas that were attractive to tourists. Help from international tourists was actively advertised here. I became aware when I learnt that 80% of the children in orphanages still have at least one parent. I had to throw overboard the basic assumption that children in orphanages no longer have living parents.¹⁶

Through my work with Christian non-governmental organisations, I have had the privilege of getting to know various initiatives that promote alternatives to orphanages. One of these is M'Lup Russey in Cambodia. The name means "under the shade of a bamboo", a metaphor for the protection a family can give a child. "M'Lup Russey recognises that all children and young people are vulnerable in all areas of life - physically, mentally, emotionally and experientially.

- grow and develop when they are individually cared for in a family they call their own."¹⁷ A dialogue was first established with directors of children's homes about this connection, with many of them being aware of the detrimental effects of institutionalising children.

¹⁶Jordanwood, M; Unicef; Royal Government of Cambodia (2011): With the best intentions. A Study of Attitudes Towards Residential Care in Cambodia. Phnom Penh.

⁽¹⁷⁾ M'Lup Russey Organisation: Welcome. <https://mluprussey.org/en/>

¹⁸In addition, lobbying was carried out to the legal basis for closing homes that did not meet the minimum standard. Children from these institutions were integrated into families with good selection and support processes, as well as with the involvement of the village community and the support of social workers. In order to organise this transition, a system of short-term foster families was established and social workers were trained, which had not before. In addition, children who were about to leave the home were networked with each other and taught life skills for life after leaving the home. This showed me that there definitely alternatives to institutionalised care in homes, but also that this has to be done holistically and professionally.

Factor poverty and education

What reasons lead to institutionalised care, especially when young people in most cases still parents, relatives or other alternatives? The most important push factor in the Global South is neither the death of parents, nor neglect, nor abuse, but is usually poverty. Poverty is rarely the only reason, but usually the underlying reason together with another factor. It is poverty+ illness, poverty+ unemployment, poverty + drug abuse, poverty + natural disaster, poverty + domestic violence, poverty + the death of a parent.¹⁹

At the same time, there are pull factors that make placement in an institution seem attractive. These include the hope of being provided with basic needs and, in particular, education. It is therefore not surprising that in the study 'With the best of intentions'²⁰, 91.9 per cent of the family members surveyed agreed that a poor family should send their child to a children's home if they find it difficult to pay for schooling themselves. For this reason, many children in Cambodia only enter an institution when they start school and are not there during the school holidays⁽²¹⁾.

Questionable effects

So what are the negative effects growing up in an institution? More than 70 years of research²² have shown that even the best children's homes are virtually unable to meet the holistic needs of children. Many studies have shown that growing up in an , especially for young children who live there long-term, has negative physical, intellectual and social effects. These tendencies include:

Developmental disorders: In institutionalised children in homes, certain brain functions²³ and motor skills are less developed or delayed. This is attributed to a lack of relationships. For example, a study from Zambia, which observed the different effects of growing up in families and institutionalised homes, compares a

¹⁸Jordanwood, M; Unicef Royal Government of Cambodia (2011): With the best intentions. A Study of Attitudes Towards Residential Care in Cambodia. Phnom Penh.

¹⁹Faith to Action (2018): Rethinking Orphanage Care: An Introduction to Family Care. https://www.faithtoaction.org/wp-content/uploads/Rethinking-Orphan-Care_Website-Version.pdf

²⁰Jordanwood, M; Unicef, Royal Government of Cambodia (2011): With the best intentions. A Study of Attitudes Towards Residential Care in Cambodia. Phnom Penh.

²¹Ibid.

²²Literature review on the topic, : Better Care Network (BCN). <https://bettercarenetwork.org/>, Kinected: www.kinected.org.au/resources

²³Fox, M; et al. (2004): Relational Poverty in Early Childhood and its Impact on Child Development. In: Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience.

significant difference. Gross motor skills are 90% developed when growing up in families and only 55% in the home context. For fine motor skills, the figure is 85% compared to 47%, for language skills 67% to 35%, and in the area of socio-emotional development 88% in the family compared to 42% in the home⁽²⁴⁾.

Attachment disorders: The psychological dangers to which younger children in particular are exposed in care homes also include attachment disorders, which can be caused by the absence or change of attachment figures. It can be seen, for example, in social promiscuity and exaggerated attachment behaviour, i.e. a friendliness that does not distinguish between caregivers and strangers, or an exaggerated urge for attention²⁵. This tendency can be exacerbated by the care of regularly changing volunteers.²⁶ On the other hand, the symptoms of attachment disorders can decrease in a secure environment such as a foster family, for example, as a long-term study in Romania shows.²⁷

Relationship of dependency: A comic strip about life in a children's home shows four different types of regular queuing: for morning speech, at school, before meals and for medical care²⁸. This illustrates the mostly rigid rules and orders, such as fixed timetables, which must be adhered to. As a rule, children are not given the opportunity to make independent and individual decisions, which makes it difficult for them to do so later as adults living on their own.

Peer groups and separation: Children in residential care grow up in a group of children and young people of the same age. Often this group is also more or less separated from the village community, the culture, the environment of origin, as well as their own relatives or parents who are still alive. This can also result in a lack of personal experience with various social actors from different age groups. As a result, it is often difficult to interpret body language and distinguish whether someone has good or bad intentions. This facilitates exploitation and makes integration into society more difficult after leaving the institution.

It becomes clear that growing up in a children's home means that certain relationships, experiences and skills that are needed as an adult are rarely fostered. Even if this is not always the case, it is inherent in the orphanage system. For this reason, I often heard in Cambodia that orphanages do not exist because of the orphans, but that orphans exist because there are children's homes.

Questionable effects afterwards

What does the situation of young people look like after they left the home? One of the pull factors was the prospect of a better education and the associated hope of a better life. Are these hopes being realised?

²⁴Alliance for Children Everywhere (ACE): Case Study on Family-Based Care. Lusaka. In Faith to Action (2018): Rethinking Orphanage Care: An Introduction to Family Care. https://www.faithtoaction.org/wp-content/uploads/Rethinking-Orphan-Care_Website-Version.pdf.

²⁵Zeanah, C; Smyke, A; Dumitrescu, A. (2002). Attachment disturbances in young children: Indiscriminate behaviour and institutional care. In: Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 41. pp. 983-989.

²⁶Richter, L. M; Norman, A. (2010): AIDS orphan tourism: A threat to young children in residential care. In: Vulnerable Child and Youth Studies. S. 217-229.

²⁷Kliwer-Neumann, J. D. et al. (2023): Attachment disorder symptoms in foster children: Development and Associations with Attachment Security. In: Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health. 17:98.

²⁸Gray, A; Sao, S. (2015): Home. A Cambodian Story. Phnom Penh. S. 15.

A study²⁹ asked young people who will soon be leaving care how they see their future. One of them says that he doesn't know how to live in society. Another young person his fears metaphorically: "I feel like a duck that is let out of the cage to be roasted." Their concerns centred on interpersonal issues: they would like to understand social situations and how to solve problems. Apparently, they have the impression that growing up in an institution does not adequately prepare them for life outside the institution and that they are left to their own devices. The young people who leave a home also fear that they will be drawn into criminal activities, recruited for drug dealing or forced to steal, as well as having to fight for a piece of land to live on.

Unfortunately, these concerns are justified. Young people who leave an orphanage are disproportionately vulnerable and cannot count on the support of a lifelong family in this situation: A long-term study in Russia tracked the fates of children from orphanages over 30 years and found that one in five children leaving an orphanage became a criminal, one in seven fell into prostitution and one in ten committed suicide.³⁰ The situation is similar in other countries: In Cambodia, 89% of adults surveyed who previously grew up in an orphanage lived below the poverty line. In an Indian study, the vast majority earned less than an unskilled labourer would normally earn.³¹ These two studies and others also report that a large proportion of respondents experience severe emotional stress when they leave the home.³²

The interesting thing is that in the Cambodian study, 23 of the 27 respondents, i.e. the vast majority, completed secondary school. In this respect, the homes have fulfilled their promise, as the educational goals have been achieved. But that is not nearly enough. Therefore, growing up in an institution has the opposite effect in terms of education, skills and social stability and does not adequately prepare for the transition to adulthood.⁽³³⁾ For me, as a trained teacher, the realisation that relationships and family are more important than education was painful at first.

Human trafficking

Exploitation through human trafficking is an extreme form of dysfunctional relationships. In the context of orphanages, the term 'orphanage trafficking' is used, which is increasingly seen as a modern form of slavery. There are various aspects and phases to this: As part of the recruitment process a home, during and after the stay in the home.

In a narrower sense, orphanage trafficking is the recruitment or transfer of children from families to orphanages with the intention of financial profit or exploitation. For example, some orphanages actively recruit children from poor families who have little

²⁹Jordanwood, M; UNICEF, Royal Government of Cambodia (2011): With the best intentions. A Study of Attitudes Towards Residential Care in Cambodia. Phnom Penh. P.: 60f.

³⁰Harwin, J. (1996): Children of the Russian State 1917 -1995, New York.

³¹Iofa (2011): Research Report: Transitions Initiative Cambodia. Phnom Penh.

³²Tata Trust, Udayan Care, Unicef (2019): 'Beyond 18, Leaving Child Care Institutions - A study of Aftercare Practices in Five Indian States. New Delhi.

³³Van Doore, K. E; Nhep, R (2023): Orphanage Trafficking and the Sustainable Development Goals. In: Udayan Care: Institutionalised Children Explorations and Beyond. 10, S. 76 - 84.

Tata Trust; Udayan Care; Unicef (2019): 'Beyond 18: Leaving Child Care Institutions - A study of Aftercare Practices in Five Indian States. New Delhi.

The recruitment can be commercially motivated, as once in the home they can be used to generate sympathy, which in turn can generate donations. This recruitment can be commercially motivated, because once in the children's home, they can be used to generate sympathy, which in turn can generate donations.³⁴This can even occur in Christian circles. In South East Asia, for example, one hears of the so-called

'unholy trinity': the joint founding of a church, a Bible school and an orphanage, with the orphanage providing the finances for the other activities.

Whilst in residential care, there are cases of children being exploited, intentionally or unintentionally, for sexual acts when inadequate child protection measures are in place,³⁵some of them for payment. There are also cases where babies from care homes are trafficked for adoption. These aspects are not the rule, but the structure of institutionalised care can facilitate this form of exploitation⁽³⁶⁾.

After leaving the home, there is an increased vulnerability to becoming a victim of human trafficking and exploitation, as explained above.

Missionary-evangelistic motivation

Before I turn to the specific mechanisms of support, I would like to talk the motivation. There are various narratives that consciously or unconsciously justify the support of and volunteering in orphanages, such as that of the White Saviour, the so-called "orphan crisis", i.e. the large number of orphans worldwide, from the field of neoliberalism, as well as the urge for personal development.³⁷A closer and critical examination of these motivations would be interesting, but goes beyond the scope of this article. Here I would like to limit myself to faith-based justifications, even if this may be a controversial aspect.

As indicated in the chapter on the theological background, Christians are motivated by these verses to care for the weak and orphans. Orphanages will be understood as an operationalisation of this mission,³⁸whereby it is only one of various possibilities. The focus here is on the aspect of caring for and providing for children.

In addition, a missionary-evangelistic justification for children's homes can also be observed. Children are supposed to find faith in Christian-run institutions by being moulded accordingly. There seem to be hardly any precise figures and studies on this motivation so far, so I can only shed light on this complex anecdotally from my own experience.

In Cambodia, there were Christian-run homes in which children became believers. This made it necessary to them in another area for life after their stay in the home, namely for the culturally different life in a Buddhist-influenced culture in which they live

³⁴Van Doore, K. E; Nhep, R (2023): Orphanage Trafficking and the Sustainable Development Goals. In: Udayan Care, Sage: Institutionalised Children Explorations and Beyond. 10, S. 76 - 84.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Van Doore, K. E. (2016): Paper Orphans: exploring Child Trafficking for the Purpose of Orphanages. In: The International Journal Children's Rights, 24(2), pp: 378-408.

³⁷See e.g. Van Doore, K. E; Nhep, R. (2023): Orphanage Tourism and Orphanage Volunteering: Implications for Children. In: Frontiers in Sustainable Tourism. S. 1-13.

³⁸Ibid.

after they leave the home. To this end, special life skills courses were organised in this area and the young people were networked to provide mutual support.

Another example was more worrying: a church founded by missionaries had several orphanages spread across the country. The children in the home were baptised together and then counted as church members. This made it possible to communicate appealing numbers of baptised people and church members to the donors in the church's home country. The assumption that the threshold for religious abuse of power³⁹ was crossed with minors is obvious, but can neither be proven nor dismissed out of hand.

The question arises as to whether there are better alternatives in terms of child welfare and effectiveness. Because:

9 out of 10 people in the world are led to faith in Jesus by their family. Families are therefore by far the most effective agent of evangelisation and mission. Nothing has such a positive effect on evangelisation as missionary families and nothing has such a negative effect as the disintegration of healthy family structures. The future of the church can be determined by the development of the family⁽⁴⁰⁾

Donations and operations

Children's homes and orphanages in the global South are often supported from the global North.⁴¹ This is often done with the very best of intentions. However, they can directly or indirectly motivate homes to take in more children.⁴² In addition to financial support, visits and missions to children's homes also play an important role. Here there are commercial and non-commercial offers, for example as short-term assignments, as longer volunteer assignments in the framework of a gap year, or also in the context with commercial

"Orphanage tourism", for which the term "voluntourism" is often used. Ultimately, however, they also serve as a means of acquiring further support and donations. In this way, assignments in orphanages reinforce systems that separate children from their families, hinder their development and increase their vulnerability to exploitation. In other words:

As the demand for voluntourism increases, initiatives (...) out that in some destinations new shelters for children (orphanages) seem to be set up for the sole purpose of maximising profits and rely almost exclusively on the financial support of tourists. Since 2010, a number of international actors have drawn attention to how voluntourism and the demand for orphanage experiences

³⁹Soldan, W; Kessler, M. (2021): Guidelines for dealing with religious abuse of power. (Working Group on Religious Abuse of Power of the Evangelical Alliance in Germany).

⁴⁰Reimer, J; Faix, W (2017): Family - the future of the church. Marburg.

⁴¹For example, one projection estimates Christians in the UK alone donate 528,000GBP per year to orphanages in the Global South. In: Christou, E. (2023): Inspiring Christians to Rethink Orphanages. (Unpublished).

⁴²Interparliamentary Taskforce on Human Trafficking (2023): Working Group on Orphanage Trafficking and Exploitation in Residential Care Settings.

have caused an increase in the number of childcare centres, thereby encouraging the separation of children and their families worldwide⁽⁴³⁾.

The issue of volunteer placements in orphanages must also be critically scrutinised because children's homes often do not have the resources to volunteers before and during their placement. Volunteers also form a relationship with the children during their temporary placement. However, every time a volunteer leaves the home, the children are left behind. As indicated in the chapter on attachment disorders, this recurring cycle of abandonment can have a negative impact on wellbeing and psychosocial development.⁴⁴ Furthermore, it has been criticised that commercial orphanage tourism offers in particular often play on neo-colonial stereotypes.⁴⁵

From Germany

Against this background, the question arises as to how Germany supports children's homes in the Global South, either financially or through missions and visits of varying duration. It is not difficult to find organisations and works that support children's homes in the Global South, and most people know someone in their circle of acquaintances who has already visited or donated to a children's home. However, robust quantitative data is largely lacking. The exception is a market analysis of commercial orphanage tourism. Of the 25 providers analysed, nine continue to offer placements in orphanages. Without giving exact figures, it is concluded that projects with children are still the most popular, "with Germany occupying a prominent position within Europe."⁴⁶ In contrast, an analysis of internet searches for the term "orphanage" comes to the conclusion that these were searched for less frequently in Germany than in other Western European countries.⁴⁷ However, it should be critically considered that this result would probably have been different if common synonyms in German usage such as children's home and orphanage had also been taken into account.

A mapping of support for children's homes in three European countries, including Germany, finds that churches and faith communities are very involved in supporting children's homes in other countries.⁴⁸ In contrast, many of them also take the role of families and communities very seriously.⁴⁹ This is a glimmer of hope for possible change.

For comparison, it is interesting to look at Great Britain. Several surveys have been carried out here. Churchgoers donated three times more to children's homes in the Global South than adults who do not attend church. In twelve months prior to the study, 44% did so

⁴³The Code (2016): Does your offering include voluntourism products or tourism activities in orphanages, children's homes or residential institutions for children? Bangkok. (Translated by ECPAT Germany 2018) p.7.

⁴⁴Tearfund Ireland (2021): Just Care: Just Volunteering. Dublin.

⁴⁵ECPAT and others (2022): Focus on children's rights - Shaping a new start for tourism.

⁴⁶Bread for the World, ECPAT (2024): Minimising child protection risks in voluntarism. Recommendations for policy design.

⁴⁷Seidel, F. (2019): How big is the active demand for orphanage volunteering? A study on behalf of Rethink Orphanages.

⁴⁸Taylor, R; Champagneur, B; Seidel, F. on behalf of the ReThink Orphanages European Hub (2020): Mapping the European Contribution to the Institutionalisation of Children Overseas. United Kingdom, France and Germany.

⁴⁹Nowak (2019) in: Van Doore, E; Nhep, R. (2023): Orphanage Trafficking and the Sustainable Development Goals. In: Udayan Care, Sage: Institutionalised Children Explorations and Beyond 10, pp. 76 - 84.

of practising Christians, most of whom (76%) donated directly to the home in the Global South. Similarly, churchgoers are seven times more likely to visit or volunteer children's homes, with eight per cent of respondents having done so in the last twelve months. These 2019 surveys demonstrate the significant role of churchgoers, although it is notable that within this group, various free churches donate even more and visit homes more frequently.⁵⁰ Churchgoers appear to be part of the problem. When speaking to those commissioning the studies, it is emphasised that churches are also seen as part of the solution due to their strong commitment and interest in children and families.

Interestingly, the analysis of internet research in Germany on volunteering in orphanages also concluded that changes on the supply side in particular would make a difference, as interest is mainly focussed on children.⁵¹ This is another glimmer of hope. However, in contrast to other countries, there are as yet no binding child protection measures for the commercial voluntourism market. With the exception of 11 commercial tour operators who have signed up to "The Code",⁵² self-regulation seems to have failed so far.⁵³ In the area of non-commercial and often state-funded volunteer services abroad, there are legal regulations and standards that sending organisations must demonstrate, but there are no specific regulations on child protection in international locations. And "the deployment of volunteers in orphanages has not yet been regulated at any level - neither in the commercial nor in the non-profit sector."⁵⁴

Conclusion

"An institution can never be a home."⁵⁵ Numerous research studies have shown that growing up in a children's home can have negative effects on health and development, and that there is an increased vulnerability to poverty, loneliness and human trafficking after leaving. These consequences are an inherent part of the orphanage system. As orphanages are not the best option for children, in many countries they are now seen as an outdated form of care that only considered temporarily or when no other alternative is possible. Instead, family or family-like care is favoured. Why should we treat children in countries of the global South differently?

On the other hand, donations and volunteer placements from supporting countries in the Global North keep children's homes alive in the recipient countries of the Global South and consciously or unconsciously encourage the creation of further homes. In addition, volunteering can exacerbate some of the risks associated with changing allegiances. Christians and faith-based organisations play a crucial role in supporting orphanages in the Global South, although precise data from Germany is still lacking. However, this is in the

⁵⁰Christou, E. (2023): Inspiring Christians to Rethink Orphanages. (Unpublished).

⁵¹Seidel, F. (2019): How big is the active demand for orphanage volunteering? A study on behalf of Rethink Orphanages.

⁵²The Code (2016): Does your offering include voluntourism products or tourism activities in orphanages, children's homes or residential care centres for children? Bangkok. (Translated by ECPAT Germany 2018)

⁵³Bread for the World, ECPAT (2024): Minimising child protection risks in voluntarism. Recommendations for policy design. Berlin

⁵⁴Ibid.

⁵⁵Interparliamentary Taskforce on Human Trafficking (2023): Orphanage Trafficking Legislative Action Summary.

<https://taskforceonht.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Orphanage-Trafficking-Legislative-Action-Summary-WEB.pdf>

Contradiction to a relationship-orientated theology based on the family model. Even if missionary goals are pursued, the end should not justify the means.

Raising awareness is often a longer process, as my own story illustrates. However, the historical example has shown that faith-based actors are able to change their practices. This could be a precedent that gives hope. By returning to a fundamental appreciation of families and children, Christians can be part of the solution.

Perspectives

There are a number of countries in the global South that are in the process of moving towards family-orientated alternatives to children's homes.⁵⁶ However, as support from the global North is a driving force, the question arises as to what prospects for action there are here, especially for Christian actors in Germany?

Countries such as Ireland, where sending organisations have committed to actively phasing out volunteering in orphanages as part of a standard,⁵⁷ or the USA, where the State Department warns against volunteering in orphanages in its official travel warnings, can serve as role models. Similarly, Australia prohibits support for and work in orphanages in connection with modern slavery legislation.⁵⁸ Christians have been a driving force in many of these initiatives. At the same time, countries such as Australia,⁵⁹ the USA⁶⁰ and the UK⁶¹ have Christian initiatives, as well as global networks⁶² that mobilise communities towards family-based care and provide resources, tools and expertise⁽⁶³⁾.

Conversely, a faith-based initiative by Christian actors in Germany would be desirable. Initial discussions are taking place in this area.⁶⁴ This could provide German-language resources that raise awareness and highlight opportunities for action. In addition, it would be helpful to research the extent of support for children's homes in Germany. At the same time, critical interaction with sending organisations that continue to offer volunteer services in orphanages, as well as working towards standards that exclude financial support for volunteer assignments.

⁵⁶See for example: Tearfund, Tearfund Ireland (2017): Caring for Orphans. Footsteps 101.

<https://learn.tearfund.org/en/resources/footsteps/footsteps-101-110/footsteps-101>.

⁵⁷Rethink Orphanages Australia, ACFID (2019): Partnerships with Overseas Orphanages. Implications of the Modern Day Slavery Act 2018.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Kinected: <https://www.kinected.org.au/resources> . (Including tools to check whether a home meets a minimum standard and advice on short-term assignments)

⁶⁰Faith to Action. <https://www.faithtoaction.org/>

⁶¹Homecomingproject. <https://homecomingproject.org/>.

⁶²World without Orphans. <https://worldwithoutorphans.org/>.

⁶³Also: Better Care Network: <https://bettercarenetwork.org>. (Including tools that help to accompany the supported home in the change process or to withdraw from it)

⁶⁴https://worldwithoutorphans.org/about/europe/country/people_organization/309447