



Collected viewpoints on
international volunteering
in residential care centres
Country focus: Nepal

**Better
Care
Network**



**Better
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Network
Netherlands**



Hope & Homes for Children



Better Volunteering Better Care is an initiative led by Better Care Network and Save the Children UK

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Contents

Methodology	4
Nepali context	4
Residential care in Nepal	4
Issues associated with residential care in Nepal	6
Visitors to residential care centres in Nepal	9
Voices for change	13
Final thoughts and recommendations	15
Sources and references	17

Methodology

This overview is intended to contribute to discussions on international volunteering in residential care centres as an anecdotal research piece on the situation in Nepal. Nepal was chosen as a focus country due to recommendations from a range of informants who raised concerns about severe negative impacts of international volunteering in centres in Nepal. Availability of research and connections also contributed to the choice of Nepal as a country focus.

This overview was informed by online resources, academic and institutional literature, and interviews with informants. The authors would like to acknowledge the upcoming report from Next Generation Nepal, *The Paradox of Orphanage Volunteering*, a study undertaken by specialists resident in Nepal, spanning a much longer period of research, and a greater variety of resources than this case study. Readers interested in this issue in the Nepali context, are advised to refer to Next Generation Nepal's report for further details and clarification.

Nepali context

Nepal is ranked as one of the most economically disadvantaged countries in the world. It is ranked 157th out of 187 countries on the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2013). Nearly 25% of the population lives under the international poverty line of \$1.25 a day (World Bank, 2010) and 80% of the population are subsistence farmers (International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) 2008). The country faces particular development challenges because it is topographically mountainous, without roads, electricity or other basic services.

Nepal is emerging from a ten-year civil war that left over 13,000 people dead (Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR), 2012). A guerrilla war, fought mainly in rural areas, divided communities, broke down trust between families, and left parents fearful for the safety of their children.

Government services, including schools and hospitals, were forcibly closed. Many people lost their livelihoods.

Since the official end of the civil war, political uncertainty and instability has plagued governmental progress in Nepal. There have been 7 prime ministers in the 7.5 years since 2006. The interim government, which had powers only to write a constitution, failed unequivocally to reach a consensus, resulting in the dismissal of that government and re-elections in November 2013. Stagnation at a national level has made development and implementation of policy difficult, as government bodies wait to see the outcomes of hugely significant government decisions, such as whether Nepal will decentralize into federal states, before taking action. At a local level, many services have not reopened since the conflict and those that have are fragile.

Residential care in Nepal

The war affected many children, with some losing one or both parents, others displaced and some separated from their families. However, the conflict also incentivised families to send children away to the city where it was believed that they would be safer and have a greater chance of a good education. According to a 2005 report by Child Workers in Nepal, it is estimated that over 40,000 Nepali children were displaced over the course of the Maoist uprising.

Terre des Hommes refers to the response to this issue in its 2011 report as '*A nineteenth century response to a twenty-first century problem*'. Official government statistics for 2010-11 reveal that there are 759 registered children's homes, looking after 15,095 children, with 58% of those children having at least one living parent (Nepal Central Child Welfare Board, 2012). Child protection specialists working in the country estimate much higher figures. While the number of unregistered homes is unknown, they are widely apparent.

These homes are usually small institutions, housing around 10 children (Joel Borgström, World Childhood Foundation). Right4Children estimate the real number of institutions in Nepal to closer to 1400. A 2008 study by Terre des Hommes and UNICEF estimated that 85% of children in “orphanages” had parents:

“The rate of institutionalisation in Kathmandu is higher than that of Cambodia (193 per 100’000 children aged 0-17) or even China.”

Ten Steps Forward to Deinstitutionalisation, Terre des Hommes

Nepal has ratified the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child and child’s rights provisions were made in the interim constitution of 2007. At first, government policy advocated in favour of residential care for children, but this has changed in recent years. The Central Child Welfare Board (CCWB) now advocates kinship care and family reintegration, with institutionalisation as a final option.

“The 2005-2015 National Plan of Action for Children was openly “promoting children’s homes” and recommending an “increase in the number of orphanages”... currently the 2010 revision of the ten-year National Plan of Action for Children 2004/5-2014/5, the CCWB 2011 Strategic Plan and Budget, the MWCSW Activity Plan and Budget July 2011-June 2012 and the Three-Year National Plan Chapter on Children now contains provisions and a budget for the implementation of family-based alternative care.”

Ten Steps Forward to Deinstitutionalisation, Terre des Hommes

However, the CCWB has extremely limited capacity and has not been able to follow through the change of rhetoric with a change of practice. In addition, experts expressed concern that while government policies advocate for kinship or alternative care, these concepts are not well understood and village officials often still see residential care as a good option for children and families.

CCWB has set minimum standards for children’s care homes but has not been able to adequately enforce them.

“CCWB categorized child care homes (hereinafter “centres” or “child centres”) in four categories, A, B, C and D. According to an official survey published in June 2008, only 6 child centres (1.32%) were found in category A, operating above minimum standards. Only 56 centres or 12.33% were found in category B which managed to achieve minimum standards whereas the vast majority were operating below standards (194 centres or 42.73%) or “far below” the norms (198 centres or 43.61%).”

Terre des Hommes Mala Project (Project Cooperation Agreement 2011-12)

The Central Child Welfare Board currently does not have the capacity to proactively enforce minimum standards, although it has shown the capacity to be reactive – they have conducted investigations, raids, and even closed homes in response to complaints of abuse.

Reasons for voluntary placement in residential care

The factors leading to families sending their children to residential care are complicated. Informants suggested that while destabilisation resulting from civil war was certainly a major instigating factor, this could not be a full explanation, considering that the conflict ended in 2006 and the number of institutionalised children remains high. Poverty and food security issues may influence some parents’ choices:

“All nine biological parents interviewed cited poverty as the main reason for sending their children to the child centre.”

Adopting the Rights of the Child, Terre des Hommes/UNICEF

Further, there is evidence that discrimination or stigma in cases of widowhood or divorce can be a push factor:

“There can be a variety of cultural reasons for sending an orphaned child away. “Children of widows” are humiliated by other children and adults because it is seen as bad karma not to have a father. Radiko chora – son of a widow is a derogatory word. Children belong to the patriline and the new family does not easily accept them. Therefore women who remarry

are often forced to leave their children behind.”

*Terre des Hommes Mala Project
(Project Cooperation Agreement 2011-12)*

Poor quality education in remote areas, coupled with the burgeoning private education market, seems to be making a significant contribution to instances of voluntary placement in residential care centres. For decades, the richest families in the community may have sent their children to boarding schools in the cities – this action is associated with high status. Sending children to care homes for free or for a low cost is seen as a good opportunity to improve a child’s future:

“The study found that educational opportunities are by far the main motive for families to send their children to centres in the Kathmandu Valley... In terms of the perceived benefits of institutionalizing their child, a good education was mentioned by 100 per cent of biological parents.”

Adopting the Rights of the Child, Terre des Hommes/UNICEF

Issues associated with residential care in Nepal

“I am concerned by the rapid growth in the institutionalisation of Nepalese children, a process that is fuelled by the financial and other aspirations of at best, entrepreneurs, at worst, criminals. The welfare of the children is not central to this development. Children may have their rights ignored (e.g. to grow up in a family, have free association - see CRC) and they may be abused physically and sexually. Such abuses happen all too often in the institutional care setting.”

Philip Holmes, CEO of Freedom Matters and Producer of Channel 4 documentary ‘Nepal’s Orphan Trade’

Residential care centres in Nepal have not attracted as much media attention or NGO support as their counterparts in Cambodia, but recent scandals and exposés have brought more public attention. The Central Child Welfare Board has

investigated claims of abuse, shut homes, and, in some cases, the owners have been arrested. An investigation in 2013, spearheaded by a coalition of donors (www.packedmybag.com/happy-home-nepal-abuse-scam/), resulted in the exoneration of the perpetrators and reports of those connected to the case being threatened by the police. There are reports of some influential residential care centre owners being closely connected to the government.

Of course, there are a minority of institutions striving to provide the best possible care for children and going beyond minimum standards. Others may be genuinely struggling under the pressures resulting from a lack of planning and a lack of resources. However, the fact remains that by the government’s own measures the majority of residential childcare homes are not even meeting the minimum standards of care and there is much evidence of abuse, neglect and exploitation.

Physical abuse

Physical punishment is a widely accepted method of enforcing discipline in schools in Nepal. One blog, aimed at volunteers potentially interested in working in orphanages in Nepal advises that:

“... in Nepal it’s normal to beat children up when their naughty. You’ll might think such a thing is inexcusable. It’s simply not allowed back home. But in Nepal, everyone will turn a deaf ear when you complain. The children are used to the beating - the staffs beat them to bring some discipline in them, and even Social Welfare Council approves of milder form of beating.”

Volunteer in Nepal, ‘What Orphanages are Like’

“Physical abuse and humiliating treatment were reported to the research team at a child centre in the Kathmandu Valley. According to one child: “The caretakers hit me and all the other children often. The worst is when they hit the disabled boy; they hit him the most.”

Adopting the Rights of the Child, Terre des Hommes/UNICEF

“There were beatings from the very beginning, she was beaten with a pipe and her finger was broken. They said “If you tell your parents you will be hung up and killed. We are not related, nothing will happen to us if you get killed.”

Sumita, mother of child, transcript of ‘Nepal’s Orphan Trade’

Neglect

Many childcare institutions in Nepal do not provide adequate care and supervision of the children. There are reports of children with insufficient food, clothing and healthcare.

“During the periods without caregivers the children had to steal to survive. “When I think about before I get angry. They just left us. All together there were 14 of us with no food, no school, they left us. They are very bad.”

Voluntourism and Nepal, Storytellerproductions.net

“Subsequent medical check-ups revealed the children were malnourished and suffered from body lice. Mingma was diagnosed with TB and is under antibiotic medication.”

Unhappy Home, Nepali Times

Link to Child Labour

Several of the recently investigated and exposed residential care centres admitted to using children in their care as free domestic servants.

“Prasamsa Prajapati, 15, who was recently rescued from Nabakiran Bal Ashram, complained that the orphanage operator compelled her to toil at his and his relatives’ homes. She said that she and her friends had to work as domestic slave at the operators and their relatives’ home. “I had to work at their homes as domestic helps after school. We even had to skip school when the operator and their relatives had function at their homes,” she said.”

Unscrupulous orphanage operators abusing children, Republica

Effects of institutionalisation

The detrimental effect of institutionalisation, as opposed to family-based care, has been well-documented. Issues that face children in Nepal in particular include that there is no capacity or provision for professional emotional support of children in institutionalised care.

“Orphans and children who have been ‘abandoned’ (once or several times) require psychosocial support. Child centres are not adequately equipped to provide this support... Despite the recognition that children suffer from psychological issues, none of the centres reported having professional child counsellors on the payroll or a retainer.”

Adopting the Rights of the Child, Terre des Hommes/UNICEF

In terms of the cultural context, the dislocation of children from families removes many of the rights of the child to participate in the family. Families are instrumental in arranging rites of passage, such as marriage, and sons are accorded a certain status at funerals. This social context is taken away from children who grow up in institutions, which can have a dramatic impact on the future status and security of the child.

“This...makes it harder for youth to inherit land, and ask for their families support to find jobs and arrange marriages; things which are culturally very important in Nepal and are the responsibility of the family.”

Frequently Asked Questions, Next Generation Nepal

Separation of children from families

In Nepal, informants report children being recruited from their families to live in residential care centres. This process almost always occurs from remote rural areas towards the cities. It began in large numbers during the 10-year “People’s War”, when families’ main incentive to send their children away was safety and wanting to prevent recruitment into the Maoist army.

Since the end of the war the major incentivising factor has been education. There may be little understanding of the differences between sending a child to a boarding school and sending them to an orphanage with a promise of private school education.

Families have been known to pay large sums to “middlemen” for their “service”.

“Families can pay up to \$500 for a trafficker to take their children to an orphanage. It is a legitimate and in some ways respectable way for these middlemen to make money. We say “trafficking” and they say “social work”.”¹

Interview with Martin Punaks from Next Generation Nepal

“The traffickers may charge the families a “placement fee” or they may undertake to look after the children “for free”. The latter option can empower the trafficker/home owner. If the families subsequently change their minds and wish to retrieve their children then the home-owners’ might demand that in return for getting their children back they compensate the home for the keep of the child that has been provided “free”. The children are effectively owned by the children’s home and the poverty-stricken parents are unable to ransom them back. This kind of hold over children and families is totally illegal.”

Behind the Smiles, Freedom Matters

“Families looking for better education for their children succumbed to the deceptive promises of a network of traffickers who strategically convinced parents to turn over relatively large sums of money or exchange of precious goods or land in return for taking their children to Kathmandu or India. Unknowingly, they were paying a trafficking network to falsify death certificates of parents, declared their children orphans and subjected the children to horrific living conditions in illegal institutions in the capital city of Kathmandu... Traditionally girls have been sent to India and boys to orphanages in Kathmandu.”

*Terre des Hommes Mala Project
(Project Cooperation Agreement 2011-12)*

A contributing factor for these types of operation, until quite recently, was inter-country adoption.

“Padam Bahadur Shahi, a 32-year-old forest guard from Jaira VDC in Humla has spent every day of the last six weeks at Kathmandu’s District Administration Office’s Child Welfare Council, asking when his child will come back to him. Two years ago, when he was struggling

to take care of his three children when his wife fell ill, a friend suggested that he send his oldest son to the Tuguda Balbalika Udaya Kendra in Kathmandu to be looked after. Shahi found out last July that his son, Kobi Raj, was now an adopted child in Spain.”

On Sale, Nepali Times (2007)

“While worldwide the number of orphans and abandoned children is diminishing, in Nepal official records show that it appears to be increasing. Some centres report that they sent over 70 children abroad for adoption in a period of three years, with 100 per cent of adoptees being ‘found by the police’ or ‘abandoned’. As a corollary to this, biological parents are misinformed and routinely asked to sign documents that they do not understand.”

Adopting the Rights of the Child Terre des Hommes/UNICEF

The Government of Nepal suspended inter-country adoption in 2007. It was reinstated in 2009, but due to the controversy many embassies of western governments themselves continued the ban. However, the practice of falsifying documents to create “paper orphans” has continued. Putting a picture of a child in a newspaper and not having any response from a family to claim them (despite families most often coming from remote areas outside of newspaper access) is said to be enough to pronounce the child abandoned. Furthermore, there are reports of corruption at district level where documents are routinely forged. This is compounded by the fact that registering the birth of children is a difficult process so many children do not have birth certificates.

As the process for inter-country adoption has become more difficult, and demand has decreased, experts suggest that the large amount of money to be made in removing children from their families is linked instead to the tourist industry, especially through engaging tourists as short-term volunteers in a children’s home

¹ The use of the word “trafficking” in this circumstance does not correspond with the international definition of trafficking (UN Trafficking Protocol, 2000). However, a range of INGOs in Nepal (as evidenced by the quotations in this study) believe it is appropriate to use the word in this context.

Visitors to residential care centres in Nepal

Tourism is Nepal's largest industry and largest source of foreign currency revenue. There is only one international airport in Kathmandu, although there are regular domestic flights to the tourist centres of Pokhara and Chitwan. The link between tourism and residential care centres is apparent from geography. 90% of children's care homes are in the top 5 tourist areas (the 3 districts of the Kathmandu valley, Pokhara and Chitwan). More than half of institutions are in the Kathmandu valley.

"In Pokhara, the homes are all on Lakeside, even though the price of land is really expensive there and there are other areas in Pokhara where it would be much cheaper and more convenient to run a child centre from. I am not sure about the most recent figures, but in the past it was more like a ratio 70% in lakeside and 30% in other parts of the city whilst Lakeside is in the far west side of Pokhara, and it doesn't make sense as most items will be far more expensive than other areas of the city (house rent or land purchase, food, services, choice of schooling, etc). There is obviously a large incentive to stay close to the tourists."

Interview with Douglas Maclagan, Right4Children

In recent years, media and advocacy from a small number of organizations has been exposing the link between volunteering and the increasing prevalence of the institutionalisation of children.

"Smith says children are being intentionally trafficked to meet the growing demands of the voluntourism market. "The existence of a seemingly endless supply of volunteers willing to pay considerable amounts for the 'volunteer experience' has encouraged the business aspect of ensuring there are enough orphans to meet volunteering demands to veer in the direction of greed and exploitation"."

Voluntourism and Nepal, Storytellerproductions.net

In Nepal it is illegal to volunteer on a tourist visa. Officially, voluntary work requires a work permit. However, there is a lot of bureaucracy involved

and the criteria for gaining a work permit as a volunteer is unclear. Only very large organizations, such as Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), gain volunteer visas for their volunteers. Nearly all other volunteers operate "illegally" on tourist visas.

Nevertheless, tens of thousands of visitors volunteer in Nepal every year. There are many volunteer sending organizations sending volunteers to Nepal, and the majority of local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and schools are willing to host them. Within Nepal, volunteer placements are well-publicised on noticeboards in tourist areas and online, and many travel agencies offer placement services. Until now, this has been largely overlooked by the government of Nepal, although informants reported that 2014 has seen something of a crackdown by the Department of Labour, with organisations suspected of hosting volunteers receiving phone calls to warn of a possible spot check.

Ways in which volunteers are introduced to residential care centres in Nepal

Volunteer sending organisations from the volunteer's own country. These are usually profit-making companies, although some are NGOs. They often charge high fees. An ex-employee of Projects Abroad, one of the biggest sending agencies in the world with a base in many western countries, reported that in the late 1990s the company sent around 30 volunteers a year to Nepal, where as in 2013 this figure was closer to 1,600.

Travel agents within Nepal. Many trekking agencies and travel agents in Nepal can arrange for an orphanage placement. Some agencies are closely connected to specific institutions.

"There are many tour agents/drivers who will arrange treks and trips, and also take people to orphanages – often these agents will have their own "orphanages"."

Joel Borgström, World Childhood Foundation

Residential Care Centres' websites. The internet makes volunteer opportunities globally accessible without the requirement of the services of a placement agency or a

middleman. Residential care centres can advertise for volunteers on their website and they receive responses from around the world.

Local “friends”. Trekking guides, hotel owners or others in the travel industry befriend tourists and convince them of the plight of children in the neighbourhood.

Religious groups. Volunteers with religious affiliations may find connections to religious institutions.

“...Buddhist or Christian Westerners meet with co-religionists in Nepal and they agree the need to set up a home founded on their religious values or to care for “needy” children from their faith.”

Behind the Smiles, Freedom Matters

Opportunism. Informants suggested that many volunteers that end up in residential care centres claim that they did not plan it from the beginning, but they took an opportunity that presented itself in-country. The majority of residential care centres are based in tourist areas and have prominent signs outside welcoming visitors. Leaflets and flyers stating the urgent need for volunteers in children’s homes are abundant in tourist areas.

“I set up my volunteer experience myself, after finding a leaflet from the orphanage pushed under the door of my hotel.”

Natalia Gligor, orphanage volunteer

“Ambush.” Children from institutions can be deliberately sent into tourist areas to beg or recruit volunteers.

“I have seen this happen many times. Children approach tourists with postcards or trinkets to sell, and convince tourists to come to their orphanage.”

Interview with Douglas Maclagan, Right4Children

How volunteer opportunities are advertised

The language used in marketing for orphanage volunteer placements plays on emotions, such as pity, and portrays both the children and the institutions as needy and helpless. Volunteering marketing is closely tied up with tourism marketing language (describing both the exotic

beauty of the country and how unique the experience will be). There is little evidence for the marketing of orphanage volunteering in Nepal encouraging critical thinking or careful selection.

“This Program is an enriching and life changing experience for our volunteers as well as for the children too! Through the Volunteer Work with Children at Local Orphanages in Nepal, you will have a chance to help children & make a real difference to Orphaned Children in Nepal... Most of the orphanages in Nepal are poor resourced, under staffed, and are struggling to run their programs. Thus, what you will be doing will vary in each Orphanages!”

VCAP Nepal via Idealist

“Full of mountains, glaciers and rivers, located in lap of Mt. Everest is Nepal, one of the most beautiful countries in world. There are many homeless children in Nepal and orphanages are full to overflowing. Do something for the children of Nepal and volunteer at one of the many orphanages found in this beautiful country... The orphanages are located in Kathmandu Valley, Chitwan and Pokhara, all popular tourist destinations and famous for their beauty.”

Volunteer Travels Ltd

Volunteer motivations

Volunteering in an residential care centre has become such a mainstream activity that examples can be found of volunteers who have not thought through their reasons for volunteering.

“We receive hundreds of enquiries from volunteers. Most often they say that they want to ‘make a difference’ and ‘give something’, and others have unclear motivations.”

Interview with Eadaoin Close, Communications Director, Umbrella Foundation

“I met a tourist in the tourist centre of Kathmandu who said he was thinking of volunteering in an orphanage. When I enquired why, he answered that he didn’t know. “To get some experience” was his eventual answer.”

Megan Jones, UNICEF Child Protection Unit and independent researcher on orphanage volunteer motivations

Informants' experience was that volunteers tended to be young "backpacker-types" without experience of working with children. The nationality of volunteers seem to be represented in the same proportions as tourists in Nepal – mainly from Western Europe, Australia and America, although one volunteer interviewed for this research was from eastern Europe.

The majority of orphanage volunteers seem to have sincere motivations to help those who seem to be the most vulnerable.

"All of the people I know who volunteered in an orphanage were well-intentioned, and saw it as a way to do good in a troubled country. The majority also left thinking that they had a positive impact – if they heard reports of "bad" orphanages they certainly didn't apply it to the work they were doing in a "good" orphanage."

Royston Robinson, volunteer and freelancer in Kathmandu

Of those interviewed for this report only one identified that there could have been negative impacts from their work. She stated that she realised this only after staying more than one month in the centre.

"Because people feel such pity for children from poor countries and sometimes feel like doing something about it (having the purest intentions) it allows individuals to abduct children from the mountain / hill areas and put them in a home (and say that the children are orphans) and get funds to run it and beside it, get some funds as their salary and grow a big business based on children from less privileged families."

Natalia Gligor, orphanage volunteer

Potential negative impacts of international volunteers

Fuelling corruption

Western volunteers bring with them a lot of money – either in terms of immediate placement fees or in fundraising contributions once they return home.

"Now [...] the orphanages are targeting Western volunteers, who come to work for a few weeks during their travels. This is where I fail to understand the sums of money that

drive the current scam. It seems to go like this: The volunteers pay a percentage over the real cost of their bed and board, and some make a personal donation. That doesn't seem like much money, but there are a lot of volunteers. After they get home these conscientious young people raise thousands of euros, or pounds, or dollars, to support the place where they had such a significant experience."

Nepal's orphans: fighting child trafficking (Al Jazeera)

The fact that volunteers usually stay only for a short time (1-4 weeks) means that monitoring the impact of their contribution is incredibly difficult.

"Once they are there, the owners ask a lot of questions to ascertain the situation. Are they regular tourists or one-time tourists? What are their interests and background? They can then tailor-make a request for support. They allow them to stay for long enough to make emotional connections to the children, but not long enough to get suspicious. If they send money for, say, a painting project, they will paint one room, and send a picture of it back as proof that the project was completed."

Interview with Douglas Maclagan, Right4Children

Recent reports in the media include stories of residential care centre owners enriching themselves while keeping children in appalling conditions and stories of owners in personal debt, or at risk of having house repossessed, using donated money for personal expenses. Another scam is to launch an appeal to build a permanent house for the centre as rent is too high, but to register it in the name of the proprietor so they legally own a new house in the Kathmandu valley (example highlighted by Philip Holmes). A Kathmandu residential care centre raided in 2014 had several sponsors for each child (up to 12 for each) and raised money several times over for the same child to have an operation.

"It is just a big business. I don't know what he (the owner) does with the money but he certainly isn't spending it on the children".

Pien, Dutch Volunteer, VolunTourism and Nepal, Storytellerproductions.net

“At the worst forms of children’s homes the resident children are seen as being nothing more than a resource to be utilised for attracting funds. This is naturally a very powerful, emotionally-charged tool as potential donors come face to face with individual named children with a tragic story to tell (the story may be fabricated) and who needs to be fed and clothed and “given a chance in life”.”

Behind The Smiles, Freedom Matters

Even in situations where no money changes hands, foreign volunteers can fuel corruption in less direct ways.

“A volunteer can bring a stamp of respectability, apparent transparency, or their language skills can be used for orphanage marketing e.g. websites”.

Fake Orphanages Profit from Western Volunteers, New Matilda

The Nepali government-led Alternative Care Working Group offers clear advice on this issue for potential volunteers and donors.

“...many of these homes are in fact run as profit-making enterprises to raise funds from such visitors for the financial benefit of home managers or other parties. Despite foreign volunteers offering their time and financial support in the belief they are helping children genuinely in need, there is evidence that children are being deliberately displaced from their families to enable this fraudulent behaviour to happen, and in some cases children are being abused to engender further sympathy and support from unbeknown tourists.”

Rotating caregivers

“They [the children] said to me that they find it difficult to have a lot of different people living with them all the time, they get attached and then they hurt a bit when the volunteer leaves.”

Christine Fletch, orphanage volunteer

A wide body of research supports the view that children need family-based care, or if that is not possible, long-term and professionally-trained carers. In situations where there is an open-door

for short-term volunteers to be in the position of caregiver, it can feed attachment issues in children.

“We had volunteers coming all the time but we didn’t speak to them as we didn’t speak English. They came, they [played] with us, sometimes buying us chocolates and sweets, and then they [would go] away,” Milan says.

Fake Orphanages Profit from Western Volunteers, New Matilda

Risks of Child Abuse

The fact that most volunteers are well-intentioned creates and supports a system where those who have other intentions have open access to children.

“According to child centre staff, foreigners had offered to take the children on an excursion. Later the staff found out from the children that on this excursion the “foreigners had sexually abused them and even videotaped them performing sexual acts”.”

Adopting the Rights of the Child, Terre Des Hommes/UNICEF

Few institutions have the capacity to conduct background checks on international volunteers and so are unable to enforce even basic child protection procedures. A quick exploration of the first 25 results on Google for the term “volunteer orphanage Nepal” demonstrated that only 12% of organisations offering such placements requested a background check. A further 8% of organisations stated on their website that volunteers “must have no criminal record, history of pedophilia or warrants issued for your arrest in any country” but requested no documentation from volunteers to prove this. Only 8% of organisations had any kind of child protection policy featured on their website.

“There is no vetting or background checks of volunteers. Shrestha of the CCWB said that he is aware of cases of sexual abuse by “volunteers”.”

Cashing it big on children, Nepali Times

“I did see a few volunteers, including 2 older guys who made me very uncomfortable regarding the safety of the kids. I know that there is a paper on the wall regarding police checks, but I can’t see how it can help...”

Christine Fletch, orphanage volunteer

Incentivising the use of residential care

Experts expressed concerns that volunteers tend to make certain assumptions about the children's home they work in, such as that the children are real orphans without anywhere else to go, and the intentions of the owners are good.

“Many foreigners continue to provide funding to institutions instead of family based care, without always verifying if the children they support are in need of institutionalization.”

*Terre des Hommes Mala Project
(Project Cooperation Agreement 2011-12)*

These assumptions, combined with the assumption of Nepali families in rural areas that the education their child will receive in the city, often provided by foreigners, is worth sending their children away for, is driving the placement of children in residential care. What both the government and childcare specialists declare as the “last option” is incentivized so that it becomes the first option for both Nepali families and volunteers.

“In recent years, there has been a large increase in the number of new child centres in Nepal. Just over half (56 per cent) of child centres in the three study sites were less than five years old. In the Kathmandu Valley, this figure rose to 61 per cent... The issue of children from remote areas being separated from their parents is not new. It is primarily done for education purposes and this practice has been going on for approximately 15 years. What is new is the scale of the child population being displaced.”

*Terre des Hommes Mala Project
(Project Cooperation Agreement 2011-12)*

“The negative impacts of the volunteer program can be...when they bring gadgets into the children's home and show signs of wealth that the children will never achieve. One volunteer said in front of a child, that she might adopt children in the future, and the girl immediately said “adopt me!” There is a general feeling that Nepal is not a good place and that they can escape to the West.”

Interview with Eadaoin Close, Umbrella Foundation, reflecting on some problems encountered during Umbrella's previous volunteer program

Voices for change

“In fact, orphanages have never been a part of Nepal's home-grown response to children lacking parental care. From time immemorial the preferred way to care for and protect orphans was to send them to the extended family, also known as “kinship care”. It remains one of the primary responses today, and it needs to be strengthened and made safe.”

Deinstitutionalisation in Nepal, Terre des Hommes

All the child protection experts and agencies interviewed for this report were working on projects that either aimed to combat the separation of children from families, or provide alternative models of care for vulnerable children. There has also been a small but growing trend for childcare homes to move towards deinstitutionalisation and family reintegration, which is now advocated by the Central Child Welfare Board and other government bodies. However, these trends are very small in the face of enormous challenges such as increased displacement of children, increasing profits from volunteers and donors and high-level corruption offering protection to perpetrators. There is little structural support for reintegration at government level.

“Government rhetoric and policy is changing – but with a complete lack of capacity to enforce and an impossibility of changing mindsets at a local level.”

Interview with Joel Borgström, World Childhood Foundation

Prevention work, family reintegration efforts, and promotion of alternative care is expensive and timely. Thankfully, there is evidence that some of the projects working in these areas have been successful. The Terre des Hommes Mala Project, working in family preservation and alternative care, is one such example:

“With the appropriate kinds of support, most families would be able to keep their children with them...To prevent families from making the decision to abandon or give their child up, a family may just need some brief intervention with counselling, access to other types of service

or some short term funding to assist them until a solution to their issue can be found.”

Ten Steps to Deinstitutionalisation, Terre des Hommes

Public consciousness of the issues in this report, both within Nepal and in the international community, is growing. Previously, the spotlight was on problems associated with child trafficking (e.g. the best-selling book *Little Princes*) and issues around inter-country adoption (see US Documentaries “Paper Orphans” and “Nepal’s Orphan Trade”). Recent raids of some of Kathmandu’s most notorious children’s homes have led to newspaper exposés in both Nepali and international newspapers and online blogs. Recently (2013-4) the emphasis has shifted towards the impact of foreign volunteers and donors. A piece in *The Guardian* in May 2014 focused on the impact on voluntourism in residential care centres in Nepal (“Nepal’s bogus orphan trade fuelled by rise in ‘voluntourism’”).

The majority of voices on this issue working within Nepal offer the simple advice to avoid all orphanage volunteering. Most volunteers do not have the skills to work directly with vulnerable children, and it is extremely difficult for short-term volunteers to ascertain if an institution is reputable or exploitative. A blanket ban advising against volunteering in residential care centres doesn’t mean that all facilities and all forms of volunteering are bad. It simply means that it is a field too easily exploited.

“The message to aspiring voluntourists is just don’t do it. It’s illegal, the activity can support organised crime, and is not in the best interests of the child.”

Behind the Smiles, Freedom Matters

“Unfortunately, at the present time in Nepal it is difficult if not impossible to adequately monitor children’s homes in a way to ensure that orphanage voluntourism will be ethical and will not indirectly contribute towards child exploitation.”

Next Generation Nepal, Report on Orphanage Voluntourism

Recently several embassies have changed their travel advice with regards to Nepal, to urge

extreme caution to their citizens when planning to volunteer directly with children in institutions.

“A number of Nepal-based volunteer organizations maintain websites offering volunteer opportunities. The Embassy has received reports that many—if not most — such opportunities, especially those involving volunteering at orphanages or “children’s homes,” are not charities. Instead, they are profit-making enterprises set up with the primary purpose of attracting donations from abroad and financial support from volunteers. Many of the children are not orphans, and volunteering at such an organization indirectly contributes to child exploitation.”

US Embassy Advice on Volunteering

“The British Embassy has received reports of volunteer opportunities at orphanages which are profit orientated organisations rather than charities. If you are volunteering at such an organisation, you could be contributing to child exploitation. Please choose volunteer opportunities carefully, there are too many children in Nepal needlessly displaced from their families into this gruesome trade.”

British Embassy Advice on Volunteering

“Volunteers should first consider donating to or working on projects that aim to develop and strengthen local communities, to create longer-term alternatives for children living in poverty.”

Australian Government Smarttraveller on Volunteering Overseas

Of those who suggested that international volunteers can sometimes be useful in a childcare setting, several tight restrictions are recommended. These stipulations in effect exclude the majority of people currently attracted to or engaged in orphanage volunteering.

“Foreigners are advised to only volunteer in or financially support children’s homes if: (i) they have the professional skills to do so; (ii) the home meets the Government’s Standards for the Operation and Management of Child Care Residential Homes...and (iii) it can be proven beyond all reasonable

doubt that the children in the home are genuine orphans, or they are being actively reconnected or reunified with their families.”

Nepal Government-led Alternative Care Working Group

Some of those interviewed maintained that the issue should not be seen as black and white, and that there was a danger in tarring all volunteers and volunteer programs with the same brush.

“In my experience good overseas volunteers can make a very positive, badly-needed input into an institutional childcare arrangement. Not everyone agrees with me as the counter argument is that the temporary nature of volunteering does more harm than good by developing emotional bonds that are painfully broken when the volunteer returns home. I accept the risk of that but the benefits delivered by well-chosen volunteers outweigh possible disadvantages. And volunteers can establish a lasting relationship with the childcare facility, making return visits and helping with genuine fundraising needs.”

Interview with Philip Holmes, Freedom Matters

Some organizations are changing the way they work with volunteers. The Umbrella Foundation, an organization which rescues vulnerable children and reintegrates them with their families and rural communities, began working with international volunteers within their care homes as an extra pair of hands. However by 2009 they formalized their process and now have a robust system, an annual audit, and they are registered with Comhlámh (responsible practices in volunteering body in Ireland). Visitors must commit to a minimum time of 3 months and must provide a criminal record check. Volunteer activities are based on skill-sharing with local staff and administrative support. Umbrella now do not allow volunteers to work directly with children in their care homes. They are also considering changing their volunteer programme to be a “learning” programme through which volunteers can still have an affiliation to the home but they undertake work that is totally non-disruptive.

“Children are not tourist attractions. Since the release of Connor Grennan’s ‘Little Princes’ book, our homes in Kathmandu have received a lot

of attention from people wishing to visit us. To fully protect our children, we must insist that people do not do so. The Umbrella Foundation is a safe place for children who were victims of trafficking and neglect. To allow visitors to enter our homes, interact with them and take their photos would be inappropriate and insensitive.”

Umbrella Foundation (website)

This evolution from unregulated volunteering to more tightly controlled volunteering was evident in interviews with other organizations, including Next Generation Nepal and Right4Children. Both of these organisations have restricted the volunteers they work with to a minimal number of highly-qualified volunteers, such as counsellors or psychologists.

Future activities and recommendations

The following recommendations for creating positive change around the situation on international volunteering in residential care centres in Nepal were articulated by interview informants:

- Quantitative research on the volunteer/voluntourism sector in Nepal to inform future work in this area.
- Next Generation Nepal recommends lifting the ban on volunteering on a tourist visa. Their suggestion is to develop a permit system through which the government can regulate volunteers and also have a revenue stream. Given that it is difficult to conduct advocacy around international volunteering, Next Generation Nepal recommends to support this call for legalisation.
- There is an opportunity for a large-scale campaign, aimed at tourists, similar to the Childsafe/Friends International “Children are Not Tourist Attractions” campaign in Cambodia, in order for tourists to fully understand the implications of the choices they are making when volunteering in a residential care centre.

It needs to rival the ubiquity of the flyers and posters offering volunteer placements.

- There is the possibility of offering strong guidance to volunteer placement organisations, which includes some of the information in this report and the guidance from the Nepali government and various embassies on this issue, encouraging them to suspend programs sending unvetted volunteers to work with vulnerable children.
- An organisation called ENGAGE Nepal promotes local volunteering amongst Nepali youth. Informants suggested it may be interesting to look at ways to connect local and international volunteering as an alternative, as a) volunteers will not be associated as much with status or money, so only places really needing volunteer support will request them, b) local volunteers are much better placed to report bad practice and abuse, and c) local volunteers are more likely to have relevant skills including language ability.

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Christine Fletch (orphanage volunteer in Nepal)

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An ex-employee of Projects Abroad (anonymous)

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Joel Borgström, World Childhood Foundation
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