How orphanages in Uganda profit from children's misery

Foreign volunteers are boosting an industry that sees the young and vulnerable as valuable assets. Helen Nianias explains how attitudes are changing

It can be a nightmare when the person sitting next to you on an aircraft decides to launch into conversation. And the flight from Entebbe to Heathrow is particularly chatty. Smartphones are unlocked and photos shown by young westerners returning from volunteering stints in Uganda, talking about how sweet the children they worked with are, how impoverished the orphanage and how eager they are to go back.

It's this sunny enthusiasm that has helped Uganda's orphanage industry to mushroom. In the 1990s there were 1,000 children living in orphanages, now there are thought to be 55,000. It is testament to how much volunteers want to help, but underneath the orphanage crisis lies the cynicism and naked profiteering of some unscrupulous people.

At one institution an hour's drive outside of Kampala, the owner, who goes by the name of Mama Beulah, is incredibly keen to show what the orphanage can offer to volunteers. I'm taken on a tour of the accommodation and the accountant's office where I am shown the filing system before the 100 or more children who this is all

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supposed to support are mentioned. It is clearly a fine line between having well-balanced books and being totally business-oriented. 'Money is the life blood of any company,' Beulah intones.

Visiting an institution is a bit like immersive theatre – you wonder what exactly is being put on for your benefit. As we walk across the rust-red grounds to the children's dorms, Mama Beulah shouts at some surprised children: 'Did you get the toys Mayim sent?' In the kitchen, a concrete shack with holes in the side to let light in and smoke out, Beulah says that the children eat four meals a day. Out of the corner of my eye, a social worker purses her lips. I'm later told the children all eat out of the same pot, like a trough.

The dorms are separated into boys' and girls' rooms, but there aren't enough bunks for 100 children. There is a little, filthy room that contains the children's personal possessions – rucksacks and blankets – all tumbled together. It is a monument to the erosion of the personal inside an orphanage.

Volunteers have painted their own names on the bricks of the outdoor dining area, but there's nothing to denote the orphanage's permanent residents. It pays to make sure donors are as enthusiastic as possible. Donations come in thick and fast – a $50,000 grant here, a monthly payment from a sponsor for a child there, plus a volunteer who pays $25 a day to stay, it adds up.

Worryingly, volunteers are also given maximum access to the children, as they crave emotional connection and physical proximity. Some institutions even allow the children to spend time with volunteers in their bedrooms. The recent case of Richard Huckle, the British 'gap-year paedophile' who preyed on children in Malaysia, should serve as a cautionary tale, but plenty of orphanages don't do background checks on their volunteers.

Some research now suggests that growing up in an orphanage is bad for children, even if the intentions are pure. It is believed that 80 per cent of orphans worldwide have at least one living parent or family who could care for them. It is often conflict, poverty or a lack of support that drives parents to give up their offspring to institutions. They are often told that their children will get a better education and have a better chance in life in an orphanage, and many sign agreements that they will not try to contact their offspring again.

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Hope and Homes for Children (HHC), a charity working internationally to close orphanages, says that children who grow up in orphanages are 40 times more likely to have a criminal record than those who grow up with a family and 500 times more likely to commit suicide, and – the scope for abuse and neglect aside – the damage of growing up without any one-on-one love and attention can last a lifetime.

Children often grow up with developmental problems, such as delayed speech, and it is not uncommon to see babies lying still and silent because they know nobody will come to look after them.

'Uganda is Africa's version of how Romania used to be,' says Dr Delia Pop, HHC director of programmes. 'There is a significant crisis – kids in institutions, which are hugely deregulated, massively privately funded, with up to a quarter of a billion dollars going in yearly to maintain places like this, and with a very weak government that fails to regulate and be accountable. 'Orphanages need to be put in the history books and we need to move forward to supporting families and holistically look at the best thing for children.'

Janet Museveni, wife of president Yoweri Museveni, has been campaigning for orphan rights, and founded the Uganda Women's Effort to Save Orphans in 1986, but orphanages have still blossomed. Now more dynamic change is afoot. Neighbouring Rwanda aims to close all of its orphanages by 2020, and is making brisk progress.

'They've managed to deinstitutionalize children and make them part of the family and I think it's something we can do,' says Zaina Nakubulwa. She supervises government social workers in Kampala, and is firm in her belief that orphanages should be used for short-term emergency care only.

'Already, our policies are very clear that the family is the best care unit for child development, and of course institutionalization is the last resort. I believe we can do it, but in Rwanda the government is committed to this cause. We need to see someone at top leadership coming out and saying that the family is the best care unit.'

At the orphanage, a six-year-old girl wearing a grubby pink tutu and a broad grin runs over and looks up. Her name is Joy, and Beulah says in a scandalized voice her mother used to live in the orphanage, but then abandoned her own child. Beulah shakes her head. But if you don't have a role model to follow, what choices are you afforded? If you don't know what it's like to have a mother, how much harder is it to be one? With the private orphanage industry rocketing it stands to reason there will have been many stories like Joy's, and there are many more to come.

If money is the lifeblood of any orphanage, then getting as many children into them as possible makes the blood pump a lot faster. More children in the same building means a bigger budget. Even if the orphanage owner treats the children as their own, they'd be naive not to have one eye on the bottom line, so the children are a commodity, whether this is intentional or not. As we leave Beulah's place, there are two toddlers sitting on the porch of a small house just outside the orphanage grounds. Quick as a dart, Beulah is over there talking to the parents. They can't afford to look after their children. Beulah comes back, looking pleased. These could be her latest acquisitions.

HHC is one of a number of organizations that is working to stop children being seen as valuable assets. 'I am ambitious but I am not overly ambitious – I believe in the next five years we will be able to stop the growth of orphanages,' Dr Pop says. 'We want to create a model that the government can measure, see how much it costs. And know it is not a US or UK or European model, but it is a mixture of good practice and context.'

Helen Nianias is a freelance journalist. Some names have been changed in this report. Every pound donated to Hope and Homes for Children's End the Silence campaign before December 27th will be matched by the UK Government. For more information visit endthesilence.com.