

## **My experience of volunteers : Growing up in an “orphanage” in Kenya**

Stephen Ucembe founded the Kenya Society of Care Leaves in 2009 to provide support to young people leaving institutional care. Significantly influenced by his own experience of growing up in institutional care, Stephen now works with Hope and Homes for Children as a Regional Advocacy Manager. The organisation’s vision is a world in which children no longer suffer institutional care. In this article, he shares his perspectives of volunteers visiting “orphanages”.

### **A Day Out**

Occasionally, well-wishers would fund a trip for us to visit local animal orphanages. These were often the only moments we could see beyond the walls of the institution. Early morning we got ready, and the rare sound of the engine of the bus rattled the bunk beds that we slept on. In joy we lined up to be bathed, and in less than an hour we were sitting in a bus that slithered across the city to the animal orphanage. Freedom belonged to the animals that roamed in the fields. For those that were caged, it must have seemed like prison. With both hands I crawled along the fenced to see them through the wire gauze. Sometimes we were allowed to throw in some food by the rangers. After a whole morning of amusing our eyes and minds were taken back to our own orphanage.

After each visit, I sat down in reflection and wondered how in all ways but being human I had also been reduced to the level of a caged animal. I liked the fact that volunteers came and brought candies and toys, I liked that they brought clothes, both torn and new, and food, cooked and raw. But I never liked the constant thought and feeling of being reduced to an animal caged in a zoo. This was a constant reality for almost 14 years of my childhood.

### **The volunteers arrive**

Dressed in a uniform of blue shorts and yellow and blue t-shirts branded with the name of the orphanage, we were gathered under a tree for shade, standing at the centre of the institution to wait for the visitors. We never called them volunteers then, but visitors. The only thing that we never had were shoes. My feet had gotten used to the rough pebbles underneath, and had hardened - hardened enough to crush twigs and sometimes even thorns bent when they came into contact. Often, the reason behind not wearing shoes was to show how impoverished we were, to persuade donors to donate more. The institution staff had taught us a routine. They paraded us, and as soon as the visitors arrived in tour vans we had to exude joy. Indeed, we jumped up and down, and raptured in unison with song and dance that welcomed them.

We knew that the only way to ensure they came back again to help the institution was by how much they smiled at our entertainment, and by the tears, sadness or sympathy that came when they were told that we were “orphans”. I remember the senior staff on duty standing at the centre of a circle of volunteers pronouncing how some of us had been abandoned by their parents, how others had been picked from the streets and others rejected by families. The majority of us often dropped our heads in shame and embarrassment during these introductions. The term orphan, although sometimes used with good intentions, had become a homogenizing and pathologizing label. It stole away our individuality and dignity

Silently I felt sad and miserable to have people gawk at me and have cameras flashing at our faces. Most of the volunteers were taken round the institution to see where we slept, where our food was cooked, and told of upcoming projects. Some committed to help, and others gave a one off donation. Some of these encounters were brief, they pulled down their sunglasses, walked back to the vans and from the vehicles they waved us goodbye. At this point some of us had gotten used to

their coming and going, but others not - especially the younger ones: tears knocked at their eyelids. They tried not to cry in an environment where crying was almost taboo. This is a practice with visitors had become a routine that made many of us feel even more alienated, isolated, stigmatized, helpless, hopeless, and weak.

There were some volunteers who came and stayed longer. Every morning they showed up to play with some children. We acknowledged their presence. Many of us felt they were closer to us as adults than the absent staff; they were a reflection and model that adults too could interact with us children. We did indeed cling to their presence like they were never going to leave. But again, they had to leave. All we could do is curl and behave like nothing ever happened, but deep inside they had shattered our trust.

Many had their favourite children - especially the younger ones who got momentary hugs and kisses, and were called "sweet", "adorable". On the other hand, those not "adorable", were left alone. Additionally, it was sad because this fermented envy and resentment amongst older children, and many living with disability who were just to be seen from a distance and unappreciated. There were instances where volunteers became attached to some specific children and they offered to sponsor their education and meet other needs. Again this reinforced the feelings of envy. Some children had parents and relatives but as the volunteers had been told they were orphans, the children were denied an opportunity to visit their parents to maintain this lie. If they visited or were taken home then they were not orphans. The institution, fearing that they would lose funding and support, couldn't let this happen.

So long as volunteers are funding or bringing donations, doors are always wide open in institutions, and there are few adequate child protection measures and systems in place. The voices of these children are often stifled, living in a culture of "to be seen not heard". And their damaged self-esteem makes them easy prey for volunteers, staff and even older peers in the institutions. Young people who have left institutional care have highlighted sexual violence by volunteers. Similarly, the media has highlighted violations on institutionalized children by some volunteers. Between April-June 2014 Mathew Durham a missionary from Oklahoma was found guilty of defiling around 10 children in an institution. A British Airways pilot Simon Wood was found guilty of molesting children in institutions during stopovers in Kenya. These children and young people often hardly report such violations, because they fear reprisal. With gated and hedged fences around them, they essentially lack the privilege of space, of cries and voices being heard by a neighbour whom they can approach and report to. They can be trapped in a defeatist environment, whose concept of care and protection is neglect, exploitation, and oppression in many ways.

### **The situation for vulnerable children in Kenya**

Today, according to the Kenya Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children in Kenya launched in 2015, it is estimated that between 30–45% of the 2.4 million orphans and vulnerable children in Kenya are living in children's homes or orphanages. Convinced by the presence of over two decades of research on the short term and long deleterious effects of institutional care, the guidelines were developed to strengthen alternative family and community based care and reduce reliance on institutional care. The majority of the institutions in Kenya are still supported by foreigners. Many of these foreigners, indeed, are well intentioned.

However, we need to understand that funding institutions frustrates the government's efforts to transform the care sector to that of family and community based care. What is worrying is that international voluntourism has expanded and is now also being reinforced locally by individuals and

groups from business, local churches, colleges and university students. Most institutions now have their Sunday and Saturday schedules full of volunteers.

Funding and supporting institutions disrupts the local family and community-based child protection systems. We deny local families and communities a sense of responsibility and accountability. This has often led the local communities to start referring to these children as “the children of the institution”. These community systems, although incapacitated a times to provide materially, remain a fundamental pillar in ensuring that children have a sense of belonging, identity and that they receive the love they need for growth and development.

Our efforts should be to strengthen this more sustainable system. Our efforts should be to keep families together and strengthen a sense of community. We need to be cautious and conscious that our actions or funding do not deprive children their sense of dignity. A child in Africa, or a child in any developing country deserves the same rights, dignity and respect as any child elsewhere, there are no second hand children.

*This article is a contribution to a month-long blogging campaign to #StopOrphanTrips, coordinated by Better Volunteering Better Care. Better Volunteering Better Care is a cross-sector global working group made up of individuals and organisations campaigning against international volunteering in orphanages, and supporting responsible volunteering alternatives. Throughout May, leading up to International Children’s Day on June 1st, Better Volunteering Better Care members and bloggers from around the world are working together to raise awareness of the problems surrounding volunteering in orphanages, and calling on volunteer travel providers to stop orphanage placements.*

### **What can you do to help?**

- 1) Please share this article with your friends and family on the hashtag #StopOrphanTrips.
- 2) Sign the Avaaz petition calling for travel operators to remove orphanage volunteering placements from their websites by the next Responsible Tourism day at WTM in London in November 2016. Don’t forget to share it and include the hashtag #StopOrphanTrips too
- 3) If you’re a volunteer tourism operator who is happy to #StopOrphanTrips, then please let us know @vickysmith or [volunteering@bettercarenetwork.org](mailto:volunteering@bettercarenetwork.org) – we’d love to highlight your support of the campaign.