



Why we don't support orphanage volunteering

Early September, Dan Radcliff, Executive Director of the volunteer travel company IVHQ expressed his views about the benefits of orphanage volunteering in a blog titled "[Why we support orphanage volunteering](#)". As an initiative campaigning against volunteering in orphanages, Better Volunteering Better Care (BVBC) welcomes this opportunity to broaden the discussion and offer readers facts on this issue.

More than 80% of children living in orphanages are not orphans; they are separated from their families because they are poor, disabled, from an ethnic minority, have experienced violence, or because they are suffering from other exclusion factors. This is probably the most critical fact in the discussion around orphanage volunteering, a fact that unfortunately did not appear in Dan Radcliff's blog.

"In a perfect world, children would grow up with their parents in a loving family home. In many cases this simply isn't possible and residential care centers fill a gap as best they can" Dan writes. This is partly true: despite our best efforts to help the millions of children in institutions to regain their right to a family, there are cases where this will prove difficult or impossible. For a small number of children, living with parents, extended family or with an alternative family through adoption or foster care is not an option. Individualized and small group care in a setting as close as possible to a family are then part of the toolkit, the range of options that should be made available for every one of them.

The situation we are currently facing is however dramatically different: in most developing countries, orphanages have become the standard response to poverty and exclusion, an easy fix for governments unable or unwilling to tackle complex social and economic challenges, an appealing project for donors who are keen to see quick "results" (it is indeed easier to count the number of children living in institutions than to quantify the impact of social services to strengthen family care or promote positive parenting), an attractive volunteering project for well-intentioned individuals looking to make a difference. Yet in most cases these children have parents and families willing and capable to care for them, if support was available to them.

Little do volunteers know that other types of care are not only cheaper longer term but also much more positive for children: 60 years of evidence-based research shows that children do not develop well in institutions mainly because they are not getting the individual attention and care they need from a stable attachment figure. The impact of institutionalisation on long terms outcomes for these children is also often bleak. The fact that orphanages and other forms of congregate care for children have been eliminated from child welfare systems in these volunteers'

countries and replaced by support services for families and family based care options, should be a strong indication that the weight of evidence and practice goes against this type of care.

Dan Radcliff briefly refers to adults « who have benefited from growing up in residential care centers and openly praise the role of international volunteers ». It is unfortunate but maybe not coincidental that voices of children are not related in his article. What BVBC grassroots member organisations working with institutionalized children are hearing in their daily work is different: children express feelings of loneliness and insecurity; the vast majority miss their families. This may be difficult to believe for visitors and volunteers who often feel overwhelmed by the affection, hugs and smiles of the little ones. Little do they know that these behaviours are signs of attachment disorder fuelled by a rotation of unskilled visitors and volunteers who have little understanding of how their behaviour can impact negatively on the emotional and social stability of children. Stephen Ucembe, founder of the Kenyan Society of Care Leavers, articulates how these behaviours impacted him as a child in his article: "[I wish someone had taken me in when my mother died](#)".

Little do volunteers know that children in residential care are already at a higher risk of abuse and exploitation¹ and are exposed to further risk of harm by unqualified and unsupervised international volunteers. While many volunteers have good intentions, their very presence normalises the practice of unqualified volunteers accessing children. Significant overlap between international volunteering and child sex tourism has been noted in research due to the particular vulnerability of children in residential care centres, and children's perceived accessibility.²

Seldom are volunteers made aware by the tourism industry, including major volunteer sending agencies, that by supporting orphanages they are diverting essential resources away from more positive community-based options. Little do they know that many orphanages receive funding on the basis of the number of resident children in their care. These institutions, therefore, have no interest in supporting children to remain in the care of their families or reinvesting funds into family-based care for fear of jeopardizing future funding. Little do people know that orphanage volunteering has become so popular it has created a demand that encourages the expansion of such institutions – orphanages are being opened simply to satisfy this demand and many volunteer sending agencies, therefore, have no interest in diverting from such profitable activities. This is the case in Cambodia, Nepal, Ghana and Kenya- countries where IVHQ operates, despite efforts by the governments in every one of those countries to shift services for vulnerable children away from institutional care (for more information on care reform efforts by country, visit: www.bettercarenetwork.org).

So the real question is not how to differentiate between “good” and “bad” orphanages - as such a debate is only diverting attention from the fact that institutionalization of children should not be used as a one-stop solution but only as a last resort and for the shortest period of time possible.

The question is not whether or not better solutions exist, as Dan Radcliff seems to believe. UNICEF, governments, child protection organizations, academics, international education programs, faith-based groups, actors from the travel and tourism industry as well as international volunteer programs have long become solutions-focused and are working together to support

¹ United Nations Secretary General. World Report on Violence against Children. (2006), 183.

² ECPAT Global Study on Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism 2016.
<http://globalstudyscctt.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Expert-Paper-Better-Volunteering-Better-Care.pdf>

community-based programs providing essential services to parents and caretakers that allow children to grow up in their families or in a family environment.

BVBC member organizations have years of experience and expertise working in marginalized communities across the globe: their work consists in avoiding the placement of children in orphanages by strengthening family structures, allowing parents and caretakers to get back on track, supporting income generation and taking better care of their children, helping orphanages to reintegrate children into their families and to transition into new models that are servicing entire communities. This critical work is happening on a global scale, from Cambodia to Nepal, from Moldova to Ukraine, from Brazil to Argentina, from Kenya to Uganda.

The real question here is what would it take for organizations such as IVHQ to join the international efforts to move beyond the orphanage model and support local partners to transition from orphanages to community-based services. Isn't it time to become part of the solution?

For more information visit: www.bettervolunteeringbettercare.org

Get in touch: volunteering@bettercarenetwork.org

Other resources for best practice for international volunteering with organizations working with children:

- www.comhlahm.org
- www.globalsl.org
- www.learningservice.info
- www.orphanages.no
- www.thinkchildsafes.org

BVBC is an inter-agency initiative created in 2013 by Better Care Network and Save the Children to build awareness of the serious risks associated with volunteering in orphanages, and promote better volunteering practices that protect children. Since then, [BVBC has grown into a global movement](#) involving actors from a variety of sectors, including leading child-focused development agencies, child protection experts, academics, international education programs, the travel and tourism industry, faith-based groups, and international volunteer programs.