Better Volunteering, Better Care

Executive Summary
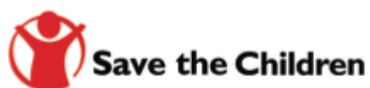
Introduction

In 2013 The Better Care Network and Save the Children UK began an inter-agency initiative to review and share existing knowledge on international volunteerism as related to the alternative care of children in developing countries. This initiative brings together key actors from across the child protection, education, corporate, faith-based and tourism sectors to share their respective experiences and identify global communication and engagement strategies to address the issue.

Definitions

Orphanage / residential care centre: For the purposes of this document we will be using the term "residential care centres", as most children in such facilities often have one or more living parent, and so the term orphanages does not truly represent the situation in question. Residential care refers to care provided in any non-family-based group setting, such as places of safety for emergency care, transit centres in emergency situations, and all other short- and long-term residential care facilities, including group homes.[1]

International volunteerism: Understandings of "international volunteerism" and "voluntourism" can differ greatly – as can understandings of what short and long term placements mean. In general, we are referring to the practice in which people give freely of their time to support a cause that promotes some form of social good. For the purposes of this project, we are solely concerned with international volunteerism – that of engaging in this activity outside of one's home country. In addition, with regards to international volunteerism in residential care centres, we would like to consider any kind of "visits" – meaning entering into an residential care centre for any length of time where one is not considered a member of staff, or a key stakeholder in that institution's (and therefore children's) on-going development.

Rationale behind the project

With growing interest in volunteer-tourism around the world, there is an increasing trend of volunteering within residential care centres such as orphanages and children's homes. In sub-Saharan Africa the increased global discourse on HIV/ AIDS-affected children can create the misleading perception that children have no family or kin to take care of them, and contributes to an increasing trend of volunteering to care for "AIDS orphans".[2] It is estimated that more than 2 million children live in institutional care[3] and that four out of five of children in institutional care have parents.[4] Volunteers themselves come from a broad range of backgrounds – foreign and national – and include students

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[1] *United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children*, 15th June, 2009, A/HRC/11/L.13, page 9
[2] Richter, L M and Norman, A. (2010). AIDS orphan tourism: a threat to young children in residential care. *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies*. 5:3. p217-219.
[3] UNICEF. (2009). *Child Protection Report Card*.
[4] Brown, K. (2009). *The Risks of Harm to Young Children in Institutional Care*. Better Care Network.

during their gap year, members of faith-based groups, and employees from corporations and governments which in some instance have specific policies for their employees to conduct volunteer work.

A growing evidence base has consistently highlighted the negative impact on children of living in residential care such as orphanages[5] – especially when a parents or close family members are still living nearby. The increasing trend in volunteering in these facilities compounds the issue and the impact on children. Not only does it encourage the expansion of residential care centres, but it also makes children vulnerable to abuse in those areas where regulation is lax, creates attachment problems in children who become attached to short-term visitors, and perpetuates the myth that many of these children are orphans in need of adoption.

There is a critical need to raise awareness of the risks of harm involved in these volunteering practices, through informing all actors involved of the negative impact on children's well-being, development, and rights. It is also critical to be able to positively and respectfully suggest ethical volunteering alternatives that are in line with the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children welcomed by the United Nations in 2009.[6]

The first priority of this initiative was to conduct a review of the practice of international volunteering in residential care centres, to understand the extent of the problem, the key stakeholders involved, and to identify groups already working to promote best practices in this area.

The review focused on three key areas:
1) Who is promoting volunteer opportunities in residential care centres, and why?
2) What are the current trends in volunteerism, and who could be agents for change?
3) What are some solutions, or alternative models, being presented?

In addition, case studies were conducted into the current situation of volunteering in residential care centres in four specific countries: Cambodia, Ghana, Guatemala, and Nepal. These countries were chosen due to the quantity of information available about alternative care and the strength of connection to actors working towards best practice in volunteering in those countries.

The methodology included:

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[5] Browne, K. (2009). *Risk of Harm to Young Children in Institutional Care*. Accessed on 21 May 2013 at: http://bettercarenetwork.org/docs/The_Risk_of_Harm.pdf ; Williamson, J., Greenberg, A. (2010). *Families not Orphanages*. Accessed on 21 May 2013 at: http://bettercarenetwork.org/docs/Families%20Not%20Orphanages.pdf; McCall, R. (2012). *The Development and Care of Institutionally Reared Children*. Child Development Perspectives. Volume 6, Issue 2. pages 174–180

[6] United Nations. (2009). *Guidelines for the Alternaive Care of Children.* United Nations. Retrieved on 3 December 2013 from: http://bettercarenetwork.org/docs/Guidelines-English.pdf.

- Informant interviews with over 75 experts from across the child protection and volunteer travel sectors
- Literature review
- Internet analysis
- Volunteer surveys

The purpose of this study was not to conduct formal academic research on the topic of volunteering in residential care centres, but rather to provide an overview of current perspectives, literature and initiatives in this area. Throughout the process, an overall picture of volunteering in residential care centres was garnered, and a range of lessons were learned, along with key advice and recommendations from interview informants on how to promote change in this setting.

Who is promoting volunteer opportunities in residential care centres, and why?

Volunteering in residential care centres was found to be popular with individuals from a wide range of backgrounds. It is not exclusive to one particular demographic or nationality. This study found the practice to be particularly popular with people from Western Europe, the USA, and Australia. However, there are indications that it is also popular in countries such as Korea, Japan, and China, though a thorough examination of these populations was outside the scope of this study.

Experts referenced two particular volunteer groups during the course of this study:
1) Students
2) Christian faith communities

Promotion of volunteering in residential care centres occurs in a range of different ways.

- **Promotion by organizing communities**. Taking the examples of the two prominent communities noted above, promotion is occurring as follows:
  - Within student groups, volunteering is promoted as a rite of passage, an opportunity for professional development, and an access point for authentic, adventurous travel experiences. Volunteering is also directly linked to academic credit within the American and IB school systems. Volunteering in residential care centres is not promoted specifically, but rather appears to be a popular choice with young people. One exception to this is when young people who are interested in education or social work are encouraged to engage in placements with children in order to gain practical experience for their future careers.
  - Within Christian faith communities "orphan care" was identified as being strongly associated with any kind of overseas mission or service. Specific "orphan care" ministries are a popular form of overseas assistance by churches and congregation members are encouraged to volunteer within those ministries.

- **Promotion by sending agencies.** There are volunteer agencies catering to all audiences. Agencies catering to faith communities tend to be exclusive in their advertising and selection process, as is the case with agencies catering to the corporate sector. However, more general volunteer travel agencies often offer a range of programs for different audiences. For example, within one agency it is possible to sign up for family-volunteering, teen volunteering, volunteering for retirees, etc. Out of the 23 organizations in the first two pages of a Google search for "volunteer abroad", 20 offer childcare/orphanage opportunities. These placements are frequently referred to as "top placements" or "most popular".

- **Promotion by local agents.** Within receiving countries, it is becoming increasingly common for the local tourist industry to promote opportunities to volunteer in residential care centres. Travel agents, hotels, restaurants, tour

guides, and taxi drivers are engaged in encouraging tourists to visit or volunteer in orphanages. This may be demonstrated quite passively, through displaying leaflets and posters from local orphanages, or more actively through recommending particular centres to tourists.

- **Promotion by INGOs**. Many international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) fund residential care centres in the global south. They are often active in recruiting volunteers to visit these settings. In addition, inappropriate marketing by INGOs, either through direct sponsorship models or asking individuals to support their projects and "make a difference in a child's life," were seen as contributing to the perception that such placements are worthwhile and appropriate.

- **Promotion by residential care centres.** It is becoming increasingly common for orphanages to reach out directly to prospective volunteers, either through their own websites, social media, or by advertising on volunteer sites. In addition, orphanages advertise in-country through placing leaflets in hotels and restaurants and working with the local tourism industry.

- **Promotion by the media.** Interview informants often referenced unhelpful stereotyping of poverty in mainstream media. Uncritical portrayals of "western heroes" establishing residential care centres, or volunteering in them, were seen as being instrumental in promoting the assumption that such activities were unquestionably beneficial to all involved.

- **Promotion by peers.** The rise of social media (especially Facebook and Instagram) has made it easier than ever to instantly share experiences with friends and relatives. In sharing images of their volunteering activities, individuals are effectively promoting their own experiences to their peers. It is worth noting that media and photography policies are not evident in some residential care centres, and photographs of children can be taken by volunteers and shared online without permission or regard to due process.

Opportunities for volunteering in residential care centres were identified in over 20 countries:

- Vietnam
- Cambodia
- Thailand
- Indonesia
- Nepal
- India
- Ghana
- Gambia
- Uganda
- Kenya
- Rwanda
- Ethiopia
- Tanzania
- South Africa
- Haiti
- Guatemala
- El Salvador
- Mexico
- Nicaragua
- Peru
- Chile

Eastern Europe was previously a popular destination, but experts suggest that the changes in alternative care regulations in this region have resulted in the practice becoming less common.

Motivations for promoting volunteer opportunities in residential care centres fall broadly into two categories:

1) **A desire to help vulnerable children.** Many private residential care centres are established with the best intentions to help vulnerable children. Although often referred to as "orphanages", research in a variety of countries have shown that between 80-90% of children in these centres have one or more living parent. This situation is sometimes not fully understood by orphanage founders, staff, and volunteers. However, there are also situations where those involved with the orphanage are aware of the children's background, but believe that they can provide a better standard of care for the children within the orphanage, in comparison to the family and community settings. As there is often limited institutional funding with Government Ministries already overstretched and donors increasingly promoting alternative methods of care and discouraging residential care, these organizations often rely on volunteers for funding, additional human resources, and access to support networks. In addition, many organizations see working with international volunteers as an opportunity for positive cultural exchange.

2) **A desire for personal gain.** In some countries, individuals set up residential care centres as businesses, using the volunteer model for their personal financial gain. Instances of families being paid for placing their children in an orphanage are increasingly common. Income can be generated by soliciting donations from visitors, or by charging fees to volunteer. There are cases of children being kept deliberately malnourished, and their living conditions deliberately deprived, to generate pity donations from international visitors. The practice of children being trafficked from their families into orphanages, or within a country from one orphanage to another, is a reality in some areas. In addition, paedophiles, taking advantage of a country's lax regulations, have been known to set up institutions as an easy way to gain access to vulnerable children. These institutions are often funded through working with volunteers.

Although it is worth noting that there are documented cases of individuals volunteering in residential care centres specifically with the intention of sexually abusing children, in general, volunteers in residential care centres have good motivations, Additionally, for the most part, few people understand the reality of the circumstances within which they are volunteering.

The possibility that the experience has a bigger positive impact on the volunteer than on the organization or children involved is widely accepted, and often articulated by volunteers. Despite this, there is a strong, underlying belief that such volunteer placements are contributing positively to children's lives and hosting organizations, communities, and society in general. Most informants identified this belief as arising from a lack of understanding of the problems surrounding residential care, and a lack of awareness of child rights and child protection best practices.

What are the current trends in volunteerism, and who could be agents for change?

Current trends

International volunteerism was seen by industry experts to have peaked around 5 years ago, and is now in decline. The decline is attributed to a range of possible factors, including the negative press surrounding volunteering in Europe, the economic crisis, and the increase of university tuition fees in some countries. Volunteering agencies noted an increasing pressure to offer short-term volunteering packages that were more affordable and that could fit into holiday periods.

Volunteerism is now seen as less of a product in its own right, and it is increasingly included as a component in other travel products. While authentic volunteering experiences remain popular, these are now more often delivered through adventure travel packages rather than as pure volunteering experiences. Within adventure travel, companies now include very short volunteer placements so that travellers have the opportunity to "give back" as they journey. Experts were concerned that this approach makes it harder to implement best practices, as the volunteering part of the travel experience is less visible.

Experts also perceived an increased desire for visitors to connect directly with host communities and local NGOs, rather than working with a larger INGO or agency. They saw this as being driven by the negative press surrounding INGO effectiveness and transparency, the issue of having to "pay to help", and the increasingly available opportunities in a digital world. As a result, experts saw the potential for international volunteerism to become increasingly unregulated. In addition, informants expressed concern about the growing trend for home-stay accommodation, and about giving groups and individuals unrestricted access to potentially vulnerable children and communities, with little understanding of the complexities and risks involved.

Within the corporate sector, international volunteerism is not a priority for many national companies who prefer to arrange volunteering opportunities within their local area. However, international and global companies were identified as becoming increasingly involved in the development sector as part of their corporate social responsibility policies. Global companies, especially, were seen to be setting a trend for developing strategic development partnerships with INGO actors. While these kinds of initiatives are currently not within the scope of many organizations, the increasing desire of the corporate sector to demonstrate responsibility and social awareness was perceived to be an opportunity for positive engagement on issues of child protection.

In faith communities, volunteering is often not referred to as such, as people see activities in the service of others as an extension of their beliefs, rather than as a stand-alone activity. Helping those less fortunate is considered a prominent part of a life of faith and therefore a key element of participating in a faith community. Trends in overseas Christian missions catering for large numbers of individuals, are quite similar to those of secular volunteering, being fuelled in recent years by the growth of the

internet and cheaper air travel. The Journeys of Faith publication from the Faith to Action Initiative suggests that Churches in the United States spend $1.6 billion each year on short-term mission trips. It is worth noting that there were no suggestions of the decline of mission activities, compared to the secular travel industry noting a decline in the populating of volunteering placements.

The need to be perceived as "responsible" was a recurring theme across the volunteering sector – including within faith communities. Recent media and literature on the potential negative impacts of volunteer travel, as well as challenges surrounding development and aid, have led to greater critical reflection about what responsible international volunteering entails. The one volunteering population where this is less apparent is volunteers from within the education sector and student volunteers. A sense of entitlement and a lack of understanding of global issues were both cited as barriers to young people making informed decisions about their choice of volunteering placement.

It should also be noted that despite the openness to conversations about responsibility and sustainability, understanding of the relevance of child rights and child protection in this setting is severely limited.

Agents for change

There is a need for a multi-angle approach to raising awareness about orphanage volunteering and promoting more responsible models of international volunteering. While messaging must be targeted and appropriate for each audience, experts identified the need to approach multiple actors at the same time in order to create "echoes" of best practice throughout the sector. For example, a volunteer's wish to choose a responsible placement needs to be met with a range of responsible options for them to pursue (and vice versa).

Consequently, all stakeholders within the orphanage volunteering model were perceived as potential agents of change. It is worth noting that the conversation about volunteering in residential care centres was seen as an entrance point for further discussion on responsible and ethical volunteering.

Fig. 1 Orphanage stakeholders
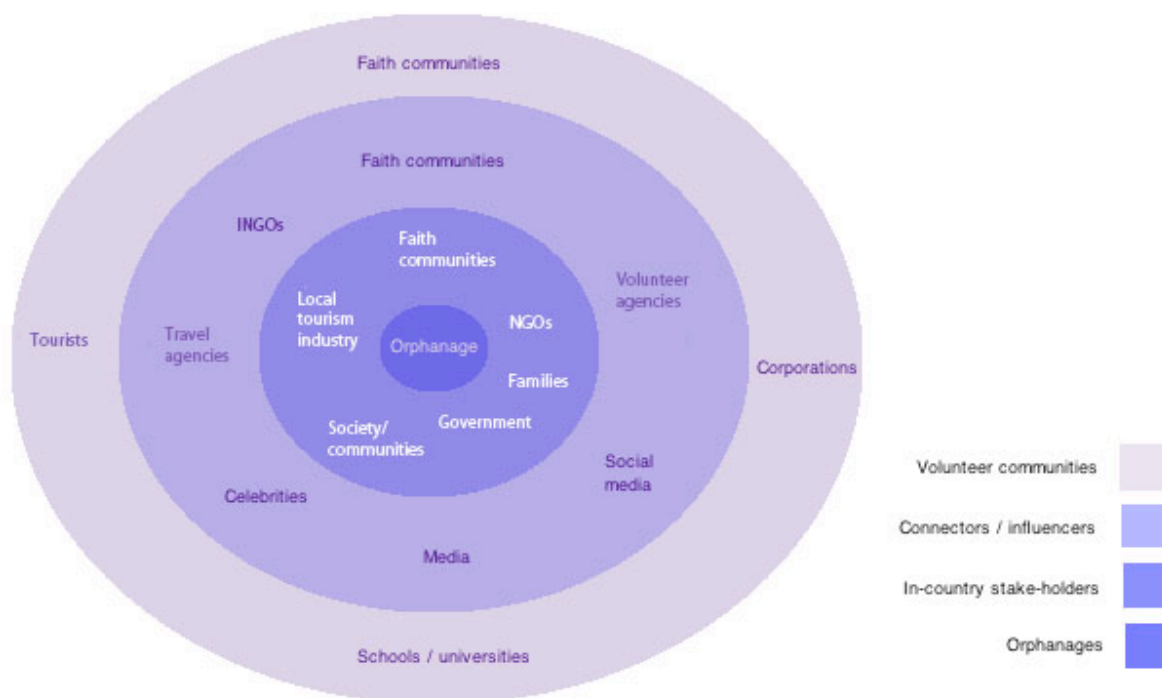
Groups not included in fig. 1 (due to the fact that they are not directly connected to residential care centres) but which informants referenced as being potentially influential include:

- Industry governing bodies (i.e. travel industry regulators and organizations such as the London Benchmarking Group)
- Curriculum providers, such as the International Baccalaureate
- Online content aggregators, such as ratings and review sites
- Embassies
- Airline operators
- Travel guidebooks

What are some solutions, or alternative models being presented?

There are already a variety of individuals and organizations advocating against volunteering in residential care centres, advocating for responsible volunteering, and advocating for greater awareness of child rights and child protection issues across the travel industry as a whole. Current approaches and ideas to creating change on this issue include:

- **Production of best practice guidelines.** A range of organizations have produced guidelines, and related trainings, to help organizations and individuals volunteer overseas more responsibly. Some guidelines specifically include child protection policies and best practice.*
- **Code of conduct initiatives and "sign up" schemes.** The Code is one example of a scheme aimed at raising awareness of child exploitation and child rights, and using a "sign up" scheme encourages organizations to improve their practices according to pre-determined standards.*
- **Certification initiatives.** As demonstrated by the Fair Trade Volunteering initiative, organizations can receive Fair Trade Volunteering certification if they meet certain criteria.*
- **Development education.** Some organizations are focusing on educating volunteers about aid and international development issues in order to help them make more informed choices.
- **Movement building.** Evidenced by some of the media focusing on Cambodia and Nepal, some individuals and organizations have been working to connect with a range of different actors and raise awareness of issues surrounding orphanage volunteering and ethical volunteering.

Initiatives such as these in general will include the requirement for police background checks for those undertaking work with children.

Concerns relating to some of these ideas included the issue of ensuring on-going best practice within organizations. Guidelines and sign-up schemes were seen as an important method of engagement with companies, but some informants noted that companies saw these as a solution in themselves, rather than as being a starting point for an on-going practice. Development education was a highly valued approach by informants, but it was viewed as not yet being effectively scaled or monetized to have real impact.

As there are many different definitions of "ethical volunteering", it is not possible to present comprehensive volunteering models that address all the concerns identified. However, the approaches below are some elements of volunteering models that have been used by organizations seeking to act in a sustainable and responsible manner. It is important to note that these elements are not appropriate to all types of volunteer, but should be targeted appropriately at different volunteer demographics.

- **Skills-based volunteering.** Individuals (or organizations) are matched to an NGO or development project to contribute their skillset and expertise to solve a specific problem.
- **Volunteer matching.** International volunteers are partnered with local volunteers to design and deliver projects together.
- **No direct contact with children.** Organizations prioritise skills transfer between adults, rather than international volunteers having direct contact with children (there are possible exceptions to this e.g. for healthcare professionals in situations without time or resources for effective skills transfer).

- **Long-term approach.** Volunteers commit to longer periods of time in order to build more effective relationships and have a more positive impact.
- **Partnership projects.** Volunteers or organizations partner with development actors to design programs together, utilising resources from both sides.
- **Volunteer preparation.** Organizations invest in thorough pre-trip preparation and orientation training to be sure that both the volunteer, and the organization and the above all the beneficiaries that the organization serves can make the most of the volunteer's experience.
- **Experiential education.** Organizations take a learning approach to travel and encourage participants to "learn before helping", rather than focusing on volunteering activities.
- **Integration of home-based activities.** This can be approached in a number of ways. Some organizations make at-home volunteering a criteria of selection for volunteer travel placements. In addition, some organizations work with volunteers upon their return home to help them understand how their experiences can continue to inform their lives at home, and how their daily choices may still impact the communities that they were keen to assist.

Final thoughts

Many of the experts contributing to this project expressed the view that a significant barrier to creating change in this area was that two pervasive assumptions still dominate understanding of the issue:

1) Residential care centres are a positive solution for vulnerable children
2) All well-intentioned volunteering has good outcomes

As such, in order to create change, there is a need for a complete paradigm shift in these two areas. Both perspectives are heavily ingrained in cultural, societal, and religious frameworks and have been reinforced by decades, if not centuries, of practice. Improvements in alternative care, and a critical approach to volunteering, are still relatively new ideas, only understood and discussed by a small minority.

Due to the intensely personal nature of volunteering, and the strong emotional pull of the plight of vulnerable children, informants warned of alienating volunteers and organizations if messages were perceived as overly critical and judgmental. Condemning all volunteering activities was seen to be unhelpful. Informants suggested it is essential to work in a targeted way, understanding the nuances in the approaches of different volunteering groups, in order to create wide-reaching social change.