

Cambodia's Orphan Business

People & Power goes undercover to reveal how 'voluntourism' could be fuelling the exploitation of Cambodian children.

[Juliana Ruhfus](#) 27 Jun 2012 12:42 GMT [Cambodia](#), [Child trafficking](#), [Child rights](#), [Investigative](#), [NGO](#)

Between the 1970s and 1990s, Cambodia was ravaged by civil war. Since its return to peace there has been a boom in tourism with over two million visitors every year. Keen to help this war-torn country, increasing numbers of tourists are now also working as volunteers. Most come with the very best of intentions - to work in schools and orphanages, filling a gap left by a lack of development funding.

But, inadvertently, well-intentioned volunteers have helped to create a surge in the number of residential care homes as impoverished parents are tempted into giving up their children in response to promises of a Western-style upbringing and education. Despite a period of prosperity in the country, the number of children in orphanages has more than doubled in the past decade, and over 70 per cent of the estimated 10,000 'orphans' have at least one living parent.

And perhaps most disturbingly, stories have emerged that Cambodian children are being exploited by some of the companies organising the volunteers or running the orphanages.

Reporter Juliana Ruhfus and director Matt Haan travel to Phnom Penh to investigate this phenomenon and end up as 'undercover volunteers' in a failing orphanage. Their resulting film for *People & Power*, Cambodia's Orphan Business, reveals how 'voluntourism' - the fastest-growing sector of one of the fastest-growing care industries in the world - is fuelling a high-profit volunteering business that sees volunteers' dreams exploited and Cambodian children separated from their families.

The team's journey starts with a visit to The People's Improvement Organisation. Here Western volunteers help Cambodian teachers in an orphanage and school that caters for children in a slum where families cannot afford to look after them or give them an education.

Though the conditions are challenging, this could perhaps be said to be volunteering at its best, with the skills and labour brought by the volunteers making a genuine difference. But it seems to be an exception more than the rule; according to critics the majority of orphanages see volunteering as a way to generate income for their owners rather than as a way to help children.

Income generators

At Lighthouse Orphanage, the team gets to see voluntourism in action. In addition to gap year students, its owners have turned to school groups to increase revenues. Having donated thousands of dollars, Canadian high school students have spent a week refurbishing the orphanage and playing with the kids. And as the Canadians prepare to depart, a fresh group of foreign students - from a school in Singapore - are pulling up in a bus.

Tour operators routinely assure such groups that they are bringing happiness to Cambodia. Sadly there appears to be little awareness of the psychological damage being done to children forced to form an endless series of new relationships with strangers - many of whom seem to get as much from the affection the 'orphans' are encouraged to display as the children do from the volunteers.

It is also impossible for donors to know where their money is actually going. Various reports indicate that the huge influx of donor money has attracted unscrupulous business people to open orphanages for the wrong reasons.

Yan Chanty and Kong Thy ended up on the streets of Phnom Penh when their French-funded orphanage, *Enfant du Sourie Khmer*, was closed down after it was discovered that the director embezzled money meant for

the children. Now in their mid-20s Chanty and Kong tell us how the director forced them to act happy to encourage more donations.

Both young men are deeply traumatised by their removal from their parents and life in the orphanage. Yet, Chanty and Kong are the survivors. They tell us how half of the orphanages' former inhabitants are now homeless and living on the streets, while many have mental problems and some have even died.

And it is not just Cambodians who are said to be benefiting from the money being made in this business. International volunteering companies are also tapping into the profits.

Having volunteered in Cambodia for the past three years, Australian Demi Giakoumis was surprised to learn how little of the up to \$3,000 paid by volunteers actually goes to the orphanages. When volunteering through one of the world's leading commercial volunteering company, Projects Abroad, she says she was told by the director of the orphanage she was placed at, that it only received \$9 per volunteer per week.

Indeed, the overall picture that Demi paints of the industry is not charitable at all; children being kept in deliberate poverty to encourage ongoing donations from volunteers who have become attached to them and organisations that repeatedly ignore volunteers' concerns about the children's welfare.

Failed orphanage

Finally, SISHA, a child welfare and anti-trafficking non-governmental organisation, points the team towards an orphanage known as CUCO (the Childrens Umbrella Centre Organization). Following serious complaints from volunteers who had been placed at CUCO by the UK-based Projects Abroad and others, SISHA requested a series of government inspections. The orphanage failed them all.

Wearing hidden cameras, Ruhfus and Haan volunteer for work at CUCO and without being asked to show any credentials or form of identification they are immediately taken in by its director, Sineth Sok. It soon becomes obvious that he is making no effort to comply with the government's minimum standards. There is open sewage in the courtyard, the ceiling of the boys' rooms lies open to the weather and, by his own admission, the director is unable to feed the children properly.

Most shockingly, in a country which has made international headlines as a playground for Western sex offenders, Sok seems happy to allow Ruhfus and Haan to take children off for an 'excursion'. He even lines the youngsters up so the 'Western volunteers' can choose which ones they want. A short time later, the pair who have taken the precaution of asking a social worker to accompany them (in the guise of an interpreter), drive away with four of the children.

When the team encounters a young Dutch volunteer at CUCO, it becomes clear that Projects Abroad still works with the orphanage in spite of the damning government inspections and the complaints about it from previous volunteers. The volunteer told the Al Jazeera team that he had not been given a criminal background check before his placement - which at the very least raises questions about the efficacy of the company's vetting procedure and where its priorities lie.

As one of the world's leading placement bodies, Projects Abroad says it supplies 26 countries with 8,000 volunteers annually. According to its annual report, in 2010 alone, it had an annual turnover of \$24m, making over \$3m in profits.

Responses to allegations

Projects Abroad declined to give Al Jazeera English an interview to discuss the issues raised by the film, but said in a statement that the CUCO orphanage receives \$50 per month for every volunteer placed by the organisation. The company said that even if the allegations against that particular institution were shown to be correct it would still be better for the children if the orphanage had vetted volunteers in place. It added that since 2010 it has done criminal background checks on all volunteers over the age of 30 and for those younger, they require a written reference from a school, college or named referee.

In a further statement that arrived in the interval between the completion of this programme and its transmission, Projects Abroad told us that it had "never been made aware of the damning government inspections" at the CUCO orphanage to which our film refers.

9/18/2017

Al Jazeera also contacted Sok, the director of the CUCO orphanage featured in the film. He denied all the allegations in the film.

The Cambodian government says it will clamp down on failing orphanages, and in 2011 launched a campaign entitled "Children are not Tourist Attractions". Meanwhile UNICEF asserts that 'orphanage tourism' and the related increase in the number of children in residential care is in contravention of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Source: Al Jazeera



[Tell us what you think](#)