

The orphanage industry: Flourishing when it should be dying

Nigel Cantwell and Emmanuelle Werner Gillioz

Abstract

Deinstitutionalisation of alternative care systems is a major challenge in many countries of Africa and Asia in particular, where care provision is essentially left in the hands of non-State actors and overwhelmingly takes the form of large residential facilities. Under those conditions, private providers have a virtual monopoly and are thus in a strong position to resist change. The bulk of the funding for these so-called 'orphanages' – where the great majority of children are not in fact orphans – usually comes from well-meaning charitable sources overseas. In recent years, 'orphanage tourism' has been developed as one highly profitable means of securing support. This article looks at how this phenomenon serves to tear families apart in order to 'create orphans', and argues that convincing foreign contributors to withdraw their support will be key to stopping the 'orphanage industry' from flourishing.

Keywords

Orphans, orphanages, voluntourism, financing alternative care, UN Guidelines

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Why 'orphanages' are still flourishing

The reasons for which formal alternative care for children overwhelmingly took the form of placements in institutions in most parts of the world vary greatly from country to country and region to region. Similarly diverse factors explain the demise or persistence of institutional care according to the country or region concerned.

In Western Europe, North America and Australasia, facilities accommodating scores of hundreds of children have now largely been replaced by more appropriate residential care settings and family-based options.

Deinstitutionalisation of the care system has also gathered considerable momentum in Central and Eastern Europe since the 1990s, with a gradual reversal of the policy of Communist-era governments which saw large institutions established as virtually the sole means of providing out-of-home care.

At the other end of the spectrum, however, are many countries in Africa, Asia and, to a lesser extent, Latin America, where it is rather the lack of governmental policy – or at best a lack of resources to ensure its effective implementation – that accounts for the persistence of institutional care. In these countries, formal alternative care provision has been essentially left in the hands of non-State actors: NGOs, faith-based organisations and other private initiatives. Invariably, this provision takes the form of medium-size or large-size residential facilities frequently operating with little or no governmental oversight.

In many of these countries, the number of such facilities has in fact been increasing substantially, especially since the start of this century. They include Cambodia, Ghana, Haiti, Nepal and Uganda, with the latter in particular having seen an exponential rise, from an estimated 35 in the mid-1990s to some 800 at the present time (Cantwell, 2017, p.19). The special irony of this situation is that the bulk of financial support to the facilities in question – 80% in the case of Uganda, for example (ibid., p.20) – comes from private sources based in countries where institutions have been justifiably phased out.

This willingness to fund these facilities is the major factor behind the development of what Kristen Cheney (2017) very neatly terms 'the orphan industrial complex'.

In this scenario, the facilities are not labelled 'institutions' but are referred to as 'orphanages'. The children in their care can therefore be given the status of 'orphans', even though at least three-quarters – and more usually 90 per cent – have at least one parent or close kin who could and would look after them with appropriate support. Children with families are thus actively recruited to become 'orphans', and 'orphanages' can then secure funding for their care from well-meaning individuals and groups in financially wealthier countries. These include 'orphanages' set up or supported by agencies directly or indirectly involved in intercountry adoption, as in Ethiopia, Nepal, Haiti and – until 2009 – Guatemala. To add insult to injustice, those same agencies then decry the fact that 'orphans are languishing in institutions' to which they have in truth largely caused them to be brought, and argue in favour of the need for these 'orphans' to be adopted abroad.

The virtual monopoly of care that non-State care providers can enjoy puts them in a powerful position to resist change and any meaningful oversight. Sometimes they use children purportedly in need of their care as bargaining chips: responding to opposition to mandatory registration by 'orphanages' in India's Kerala State, for example, the government official responsible had to warn that 'any move to put pressure on the government using children cannot be agreed to'. The relative ease with which they can obtain funding, relying on the charitable compassion that 'orphans' arouse, makes them viable business concerns and serves as an incentive both to maintain those that exist and to create additional facilities.

New kinds of tourism create fertile ground

Non-State care providers are inventive in their fundraising strategies and are profiting from a new trend: the massive growth of volunteer tourism – 'voluntourism' – in recent years. Voluntourism is grounded in the attractive notion of devoting part of one's vacation to supporting an ostensibly worthy cause. It may involve helping out for a day or a week during vacation or join a project for a month or more, thus coupling adventure with experience-related content. The concept of 'traveling with a purpose' has grown in popularity, especially among students and young independent travellers. Voluntourism has become a boom sector of the global travel industry, with as many as 10 million volunteers a year spending up to US\$ 2 billion on such opportunities. In sub-Saharan Africa, the travel market targeting young people is one of the largest growing sectors. And not surprisingly projects involving children, including volunteering in 'orphanages', are the most popular among young people.

Orphanage voluntourism has been defined as 'the donation of money and goods, attending performances, or volunteering on a short-term basis at orphanages as part of one's holiday' (Guiney and Mostafanezhad, 2015, p. 133). Voluntourists usually pay for this experience, either directly to the 'orphanage', or through a volunteer agency or tour company. Once they return home, some such tourists continue to contribute financially and may even register a charity or establish an international non-governmental organisation to support the institution.

The case of Cambodia

The way that 'orphanages' have developed and multiplied in Cambodia provides an instructive concrete example of how Cheney's (2017) 'orphan industrial complex' has come to thrive.

In Cambodia, directors of 'orphanages' have long adopted an open-door policy towards tourists, travellers and volunteers. They partner with travel agencies, hotels, tour operators and taxi drivers, who offer visits to their facilities, whether to attend traditional dance shows performed by children, to teach English for an hour, a day, or a week, or even to 'give love' to 'orphans' and have an 'authentic experience'. Many of these institutions depend mainly or entirely on donations from visitors and, in some cases, orphanage directors deliberately maintain their orphanages in squalid conditions, in order to arouse their pity. This influx of voluntourists has created a demand for 'orphans', with directors of institutions actively recruiting children from rural provinces, convincing families to place their children in exchange for the promise of a good education. These children therefore become commodities, where the profits directly benefit the orphanage directors. There are numerous documented cases where the bulk of funds

obtained have not been invested in the children's care, instead enriching the owners of the facilities. The practice of receiving overlapping donations is also common – after returning home, a group of volunteers would raise funds for a building, while another group from a different country would do exactly the same.

In 2011, a report by the Cambodian government and UNICEF revealed that the number of children in orphanages had increased by 75% between 2005 and 2011, a rise similar to that of foreign tourists visiting the country. A similar correlation can be observed in other countries where the practice of orphanage tourism is widespread. Nowadays, over 16,000 Cambodian children live in 406 institutions primarily funded by overseas donors. According to UNICEF, 77% of the children living these facilities have one or both living parents, and more have living grandparents.

Increasing recourse to unqualified and unvetted short-term volunteers in 'orphanages' has had devastating effects: more children living in institutions (corresponding to more children being unwarrantedly separated from their families), vulnerable children being exposed to various forms of abuse, in contexts where regulations are weak, with norms and minimum standards rarely being met. Furthermore, the constant succession of foreign faces in these institutions fuels attachment disorders, as well as a feeling of serial abandonment among children. Finally, voluntourism in an 'orphanage' reinforces the orphan myth among foreigners, who are unaware that they are basically contributing to a system which tears children away from their families for financial gain.

The demand generated within the voluntourism industry, essentially in countries with higher per capita incomes, also diverts key resources which could be used to fund less expensive, more appropriate forms of support and care within the communities concerned. Such practices serve to maintain the emphasis on 'orphanages' as an alternative care option, but they also create specific risks of harm and exploitation for children whose placement in care was unjustified in the first place.

Flying in the face of international standards

The drafters of the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children were already well aware of these problems more than 10 years ago.

First, of course, the UN Guidelines urge States to develop tailored strategies to deinstitutionalise their alternative care systems (§ 23). They also set out requirements for accrediting, inspecting and monitoring all formal alternative care settings, public and private (§ 105), covering staffing and all aspects of quality of care.

But of special importance in the context of the concerns set out in this article are three very specific provisions in the UN Guidelines:

- ensuring that economic goals are never a prime purpose of providing alternative care (§ 20);
- financing care provision in ways that do not encourage unnecessary placements (§ 108);
- prohibiting the recruitment/solicitation of children for placement (§ 127).

Clearly, 'orphanages' are frequently and systematically breaking all these fundamental rules, largely at the incitation, however unwitting, of foreign supporters.

In conclusion: cause for hope?

While the UN Guidelines thus provide a clear basis and framework for tackling the 'orphan industrial complex', this article demonstrates that doing so is not just a question of encouraging governments to follow these standards. It is certainly necessary to have governments onside as far as possible but success is no less contingent on preventing all forms of external support for 'orphanages', especially support from abroad.

In this regard, campaigns such as 'Children are not tourist attractions' and 'Don't create more orphans' by the ChildSafe Movement, as well as initiatives such as Better Volunteering Better Care (BVBC), a network bringing together actors across the travel, education, child protection and faith communities to discourage orphanage volunteering and promote responsible alternatives, have significantly contributed to building momentum on this issue. As a result of BVBC advocacy efforts, major volunteer placement agencies recently decided to stop placements in orphanages, and orphanage tourism is now widely discussed at major events in the tourism industry such as the World Tourism Market in London.

Current debates in Australia also provide a good example of potentially effective ways of moving forward. The Australian government is considering including 'orphanage trafficking' in a Modern Slavery Act that could become law in 2018.

As a result, Australian individuals, organisations and companies would be banned from facilitating orphanage tourism.

The fact that Better Care Network and ReThink Orphanages, the Australian arm of BVBC, recently put together a dossier of resources on this question, including the above-mentioned on Australia, is a further indication that those involved in protecting children's rights in relation to alternative care are effectively marshalling the arguments for combating the phenomenon.

Pivotal now is the degree to which those arguments can effectively convince supporters of 'orphanages' that, far from contributing to children's welfare, they are in fact aiding and abetting serious violations of the human rights of the children concerned. Laws and standards notwithstanding, it is this realisation that will be key to stopping the orphanage industry from flourishing.

About the author

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