

BEYOND ORPHANAGE VISITS

RESOURCES FOR TRAVEL AND VOLUNTEERING ORGANISATIONS

ON RESPONSIBLE ALTERNATIVES TO ORPHANAGE TOURISM AND VOLUNTEERING



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Introduction: beyond orphanage visits

It is now widely accepted that visiting or volunteering in orphanages is harmful to children. The purpose of this resource is to bring together in one place some of the best resources about this issue – this is to assist travel and volunteering organisations in three ways:

- to properly understand the problem;
- to consider some of the responsible alternatives; and
- to consider how to safely and responsibly transition towards these alternative approaches.

This resource has been developed by Martin Punaks for the Responsible Tourism Partnership. [Martin Punaks](#) is an experienced international development and child protection consultant who has worked at the front-line of orphanage trafficking and voluntourism, as well as in a supportive role with travel and volunteering organisations wishing to improve their products, services and projects.

The resource is divided into six sections:

- 1. Introduction: beyond orphanage visits**
- 2. The Problem: why are orphanage visits harmful?**
- 3. Alternatives: what does good practice look like *in principle*?**
- 4. Alternatives: what does good practice look like *in practice*?**
- 5. Pitfalls: what should be avoided when developing alternatives to orphanage visits?**
- 6. Transitions: advice on safely moving away from orphanage visits**

Some important things to be aware of:

- ❖ This resource was originally developed a series of online web pages on the Responsible Tourism Partnership website. These web pages include hyperlinks to models of good practice and other useful resources. This report brings these web pages together into an accessible PDF which still includes the original hyperlinks – so it will be most useful if accessed online.

- ❖ The term ‘orphanage’ is most commonly used in this debate, but this term can be limiting in so far as travellers and volunteers visit a range of residential care services for children, which can be equally as harmful. Children’s residential care can be known by multiple names including: orphanages, children’s homes, childcare homes, institutions, boarding schools, hostels, children’s villages and many more. I have mostly used the term ‘orphanage’ in this resource, but this should be understood to include the full range of children’s residential care services (see more on the use of terminology in the Pitfalls section).
- ❖ I use the term ‘orphanage visits’ in this resource to refer to both orphanage tourism and orphanage volunteering.
- ❖ I do not ‘name and shame’ in this resource, but where appropriate, I do ‘name and fame’. However, where I cite an organisation as a model of good practice, my endorsement *only* refers to the specific practices discussed and should not be understood as an ethical endorsement for the organisation’s practices as a whole.
- ❖ When transitioning away from orphanage visits, organisations are strongly advised to seek professional support from qualified child protection and responsible tourism experts. Details are available in the Transitions section.
- ❖ The child protection, tourism and volunteering sectors are constantly changing, and while the information provided in this resource is correct at the time of writing, I cannot guarantee that it will remain so.
- ❖ The images used in this resource are based on real photos which have been turned into illustrations by Lucinda Rose Gardner-O’Brien of people and places: responsible volunteering. As a society we are sharing more images than ever before. Whilst this brings many benefits, we need to make sure that the images being shared will not harm anyone. The consequences of taking and sharing photos of children without their parents or guardians’ permission not only infringes on their privacy but may, in some situations, reveal their location and put them at risk of abuse by those who wish to harm them. The images we are sharing show real situations without infringing on any individuals’ privacy. We hope they will make people stop and think about how images are used, as well as encourage good practice when it comes to volunteering.

The Problem: why are orphanage visits harmful?



Orphanage tourism and volunteering – as well as orphanages themselves – are harmful for children for a whole range of reasons. Not every one of these reasons will apply in the case of every orphanage trip or volunteer placement, but many of them will apply, and this is why orphanage visits are never a responsible option. I explain below the main reasons why orphanage visits are harmful, followed by some of the most high-profile campaigns to have highlighted these issues.

The main reasons why orphanage visits are harmful

Visiting orphanages or volunteering in orphanages is bolstering an outdated model of care which is proven to harm children

Paradoxical as it may sound, orphanages do not help vulnerable children – they harm them. There is no such thing as a ‘good orphanage’. [Eighty years of research](#) has shown that regardless of how good the quality of care is in an orphanage, it will still hamper the physical, emotional and intellectual development of children and reduce their life chances. This happens for a number of reasons. The inability for young children growing up in orphanages to develop a strong bond or attachment with a primary carer – who would normally be a parent-figure or foster carer – results in the impairment of early brain development and a condition known as attachment disorder.

Furthermore, growing up in an orphanage away from one’s family and community impairs post-care survival skills and coping mechanisms. In many countries a young person’s family and community is their safety net in the absence of social welfare provisions, and without these vital relationships there is nobody to turn to for help with getting a job, to arrange their marriage, or from whom they can seek advice, borrow money or inherit land. However happy children and young people may *appear* to be in an orphanage whilst tourists and volunteers are visiting, it is very common for them to experience confused identities later in life as adults and feel angry and resentful. A particularly shocking [study in Russia](#) followed a group of young people after leaving institutional care and found that 1 in 5 committed crimes, 1 in 7 became a prostitute, and 1 in 10 took their own lives.

Despite the overwhelming evidence, some people still believe that orphanages are a necessary evil – the only option for children who have no parents, or who have disabilities, or are at risk of abuse or neglect by their families. The reality is that 80% of children living in orphanages around the world are [not orphans](#), and even those who are genuine orphans could – with the right support – be living with uncles and aunts, elder siblings, grandparents, or in foster care and adoption. Similarly, children at risk of abuse or neglect from their families could also be living in forms of alternative family-based care. As for children with disabilities, a review by the [World Health Organisation](#) found that when placed in institutions they are more likely to experience violence. There is now a powerful movement, backed by the [UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children](#), to end the institutionalisation of children globally by 2050 and ensure

all children can grow up in family and community-based care settings. Even in some of the most challenging countries and contexts, such as Rwanda or Moldova, huge progress has been made and the facts are proving that this transition – known as deinstitutionalisation or care transformation – is possible.

This short animation narrated by [JK Rowling](#) outlines some of these issues, as does this blog by [Save the Children](#) which summarises the evidence I have mentioned above. This video by [Harvard University](#) explains the harm that neglect in institutional settings can cause to children. Lumos' publication [In Our Lifetime](#) makes a strong case for how and why deinstitutionalisation is possible, and there is lots more information about this on the [Lumos](#) and [Home and Homes for Children](#) websites. So when tourists or volunteers visit or financially support orphanages – albeit with good intentions – they are inadvertently supporting this harmful form of care which unnecessarily keeps children away from families and communities where their best interests lie.

Visiting orphanages or volunteering in orphanages may incentivise the trafficking and unnecessary displacement of children from their families

Whilst tourists and volunteers visit orphanages under the impression that the children are there because it is in their best interests, or they have no other option, the reality is that in many cases the *only* reason the children are there is because they are being commercially exploited as poverty commodities to attract fee paying tourists and volunteers to visit them. This is known as the 'orphanage business' and was recognised as a form of trafficking in the [US State Department Trafficking in Persons Report in 2018](#) (see pages 22-23) and by the [Australian Government](#) in 2018.

In my own work in Nepal I lost count of the number of well-intentioned and intelligent foreign volunteers, donors and volunteering organisations I met who supported orphanages – and had done their due-diligence – but had been scammed into believing that *their* orphanage was 'legitimate'. Sometimes, years after their initial contact, through a chance encounter, they found out that the children they believed were orphans or destitute did in fact have families who wanted them back but were being refused access.

Orphanage trafficking is a simple but lucrative business model in which well-intentioned but naïve families are persuaded to let their children go to a 'boarding school' or 'children's home', often for a fee,

on the promise of a good education and brighter future; and well-intentioned but naïve foreign tourists, volunteers and donors are persuaded that supporting the orphanage, financially or materially, will help the children, whereas in fact the profits are going into the hands of the orphanage managers. Sometimes the children are well-cared for materially but denied many other human rights, whereas in other cases the children are intentionally starved, denied medical assistance or actively abused to pull on the heart-strings of the foreign visitors.

These reports by [Next Generation Nepal](#) and [Lumos](#) explain how the trafficking process works in Nepal and Haiti, respectively. These articles and videos show how the business model works in [Cambodia](#), [Kenya](#), [Nepal](#) and [Uganda](#). The Australian academic, Kate Van Doore, has made an [influential and convincing legal argument](#) as to why this should be considered as a form of trafficking. There is more and more evidence emerging of orphanage trafficking occurring in other low-income countries where tourists, volunteers and donors support orphanages – and as many supporters have found out to their horror, their ‘good work’ has been indirectly fuelling this trade in children.

Foreign orphanage tourists and volunteers do not have the necessary skills to care for vulnerable children in orphanages

Whilst there are strict laws and policies in place in North America, Europe and Australia about who is allowed to work with or have contact with vulnerable children, based on their professional qualifications and experience, these same standards are often not applied to tourists and volunteers visiting orphanages in low-income countries. Arguments made to justify these double-standards tend to fall into three categories: (i) there is a shortage of skilled personnel locally to care for children in orphanages; (ii) there is a shortage of resources to pay for skilled personnel locally to care for children in orphanages; and/or (iii) the visitors bring joy and happiness to the children’s lives and do no harm. Unfortunately, these arguments do not stand up to scrutiny.

Whilst there may be a shortage of some types of professional staff in some countries – but by no means always – it is hard to justify how a foreigner who does not speak the local language or understand the local culture, and may have limited experience of childcare, is a better substitute to care for children than a local person with childcare experience. For institutionalised children who have already suffered the trauma of family separation, it is by far preferable to have long-term local carers from their own culture

who can better prepare them for independent living. Foreign visitors and volunteers may in fact exacerbate identity problems amongst children who have been separated from their communities. In one case I was involved with in Nepal we worked with a group of children who had grown up in an orphanage with foreign volunteers and donors who had surrounded them with ‘Western’ culture. As part of their reintegration process, before they could be reunified with their families, we had to help ‘re-educate’ them in Nepali dress and customs. Following the same rationale, if an orphanage genuinely is short of resources to pay for local staff, supplying them with foreign personnel will not improve the situation – a far better option is to financially support the orphanage in the *short-term* to recruit local staff, and in the *long-term* to deinstitutionalise. And as for bringing joy to the children’s lives, the words of a young man I know who grew up in orphanages in Nepal is the best response to this claim:

There were so many volunteers: short-time, long-time, middle-time, according to visa! ... Sometimes they organise program and I don't want to go. Children sometimes feel angry because they want to do what they want. There is a nice movie and children they want to watch, but volunteers organize a football program and house managers say you have to go. And all children were angry ... Why foreigners come to Nepal? Why do they go in orphanage? That time they come for short time and they give love to us, but then they leave, and when I write they don't reply. I say to a volunteer, 'Sister, I am very lonely', and they say, 'No problem I am here', but then they go their country and I write but they don't reply. When I was little everyone can love me, now I am big and I need love.

Orphanage tourists and volunteers can exacerbate psychological problems similar to attachment disorder

The rotating door of tourists and volunteers coming and going from an orphanage can also exacerbate psychological problems similar to attachment disorders. Children enjoy the feeling of love and affection offered to them by a volunteer – in the absence of their parents or primary carers – only to be followed by a form of grief when the volunteer leaves. This is a cycle which repeats itself over and over again. This eventually results in a resistance to forming emotional attachments with people they meet. This syndrome is illustrated well in this [short film](#) by The Umbrella Foundation and Forget Me Not, and is similarly covered in this [short film](#) by Lumos.

Orphanage tourists and volunteers open the door to child abuse and exploitation

Whilst the vast majority of foreign visitors to orphanages are well-intentioned, unfortunately the intentions of a small minority are less benign. This paper by the [Australian Institute of Criminology](#) documents how the rise in orphanage tourism and volunteering creates opportunities for child sexual exploitation by child sex offenders. Whilst child safeguarding measures implemented by travel and volunteering organisations – as well as by host governments and orphanages themselves – may help mitigate these risks, ultimately the promotion of an industry which allows non-professionals to have direct access to vulnerable children creates opportunities for child abusers to find cracks in the system. Similarly, child abusers can easily find less-reputable orphanage tourism and volunteering providers – of which there are many – who do not have child safeguarding measures in place. The shocking case of a high-profile Canadian aid worker [convicted of sexually abusing two boys](#) in Nepal illustrates how easily this can happen.

Orphanage tourism and volunteering falls foul of many of the broader criticisms of the voluntourism industry

The popular, easily-accessible and commercial form of volunteer travel – known as ‘voluntourism’ – can be attributed to the increased ease and affordability of international travel; a greater awareness of global issues; a desire by young people for adventure and experiences to add to their curriculum vitae (and expectations by universities and employers for them to have these experiences); and a genuine concern for social justice, global poverty and climate change. It is thought that the voluntourism industry is worth around [USD 2 billion per year](#).

Whilst there are undeniably philanthropic motives associated with those who volunteer internationally, critics accuse voluntourists of: (i) not having the relevant skills or experience to address the development problems they are assigned to; (ii) being more concerned with satisfying their own objectives and egos than meeting local needs; (iii) of being ‘white saviours’ espousing neo-colonial and Orientalist values; and (iv) ultimately doing more harm than good. Orphanage tourism and volunteering falls foul of all these critiques.

Pippa Biddle’s 2014 blog, [The Problem with Little White Girls \(and Boys\)](#) was one of the first popular critiques of voluntourism and hasn’t lost any of its uncomfortable rawness. The mainstream media, such

as [the Guardian](#) and [Daily Beast](#), have since explored the issue in more depth, with particular reference to orphanage volunteering. The Pakistani-American journalist, Rafia Zakaria, deconstructs donor-centric voluntourism through the lens of the ‘white saviour industrial complex’ in these articles – [here](#) and [here](#) – while Courtney Martin articulates voluntourism as the [reductive seduction of solving other people’s problems](#). Perhaps most powerful of all are the voices of those on the receiving end of voluntourism. Stephen Ucembe’s [personal testimony](#) of being a recipient of orphanage tourism in Kenya, and Rishi Bhandari’s views on voluntourism in Nepal – [part 1](#) and [part 2](#) – offer vitally important perspectives which need to be heard.

Campaigns to highlight the harm caused by orphanage visits

There have been a number of high profile and successful campaigns against orphanage tourism and volunteering. One of the earliest campaigns, [Orphanages.no](#), bears testament to the time in Cambodia when critics of orphanage tourism had to hide behind anonymity out of fear for their own safety. This was followed by the perhaps the most iconic of all orphanage tourism campaigns, [Children are Not Tourist Attractions](#) by ChildSafe, which remains a popular image and catchphrase. ChildSafe’s more recent campaign, [Don’t Create More Orphans](#), is equally powerful. ReThink Orphanages – the coordinating initiative for the global orphanage volunteering movement – has launched its own campaign called [The Love You Give](#), which includes a film showing the perspectives of orphanage volunteers, care leavers and those involved in family strengthening work. Freedom United’s [End Orphanage Child Trafficking](#) campaign asks for volunteer tour operators to take a stand against child trafficking into orphanages by stopping offering orphanage placements. Finally, Lumos has recently launched a powerful new campaign called [#HelpingNotHelping](#) which has been promoted by JK Rowling.

Alternatives: what does good practice look like *in principle*?



Whilst mainstream thinking is increasingly accepting that orphanage tourism and volunteering is harmful, the difficult question remains: which areas of responsible tourism and volunteering could be offered *instead* of orphanage visits? In this section and the next I focus on what some of the answers to this question may be. This should *not* be understood as a comprehensive guide to responsible tourism and volunteering – it is intended as a resource which brings together *some* of the current thinking on this topic together with a few examples of organisations, initiatives and toolkits which demonstrate good practice.

This first section covers principles of responsible tourism and volunteering and some links to organisations that provide a “101” of advice on responsible tourism and volunteering.

The next section references organisations and resources which demonstrate particular aspects of good practice.

Principles of responsible tourism and volunteering

International development principles

Whilst much can be said on what responsible volunteering does or does not mean, the bottom line is that responsible volunteering should be designed around meeting the needs of the local community, supporting them to build their own capacity to solve their own problems, and should *never* cause harm. In other words, responsible volunteering should be based on international development principles. Although this sounds obvious, unfortunately too many volunteering programmes disproportionately focus on the customer experience of the volunteer over the needs of the community.

If we accept that international development principles are the basis for responsible volunteering, it is important to acknowledge that international development itself has had an ethically complex history. Its various guises since the 1950s have been accused of prioritising technology, macro-economics and ‘Western’ ideologies over the priorities, needs and cultures of local communities and marginalised groups. Whilst most people today accept that international development is a necessary means to address global poverty, climate change and social justice, the current thinking is that development is more likely to be successful and sustainable if it is community-designed and driven – as opposed to being top-down or donor-driven. Furthermore, the dialogue that happens between donors and recipients in these development relationships needs to recognise the fundamental power differentials at play. These concepts are as important for travel and volunteering organisations in their dialogue with local partners as they are for development organisations. Vicky Smith articulates well the impact of these power differentials on the relationship between commercial volunteering organisations and local partners in this [article](#) from 2015:

Some non-profit organisations, faced with public sector austerity, declining international development aid and intense competition for support have partnered with tourism operations and media in more recent years to help increase awareness and income generation through volunteer travel. It was the relative lack of experience of not-for-profit development organisations in such a marketing approach that enabled innovative commercial tour operators to first gain their foothold and develop the voluntourism market in the 1990s. Other organisations understand the brand value of being a non-profit or charitable organization is great, and value capitalist profits above impacts and use altruistic marketing messages to mask increasingly commercial operations. At other times local community members may be led into exploitation of children and tourists by facilitating these money-making markets, rather than considering actual needs and impacts. Some are emotionally driven by wanting to help, believe it's the right thing to do, and don't understand or accept that not only are they not positively contributing, but in actual fact they are likely causing more harm than good.

From a practical perspective, one of the best resources for understanding how to align volunteering programmes with the complexity of development principles is Forum's [Global Standard for Volunteering in Development](#). The Standard is designed for all organisations that work with volunteers to ensure they are contributing to the [Sustainable Development Goals](#). The Standards ensure that: all development programmes are designed in partnership with local communities so they respond to community needs; all community members and volunteers are kept safe and free from harm; the intended impact of the programme is identified before and tracked throughout; and volunteers are fully prepared, trained and supported. The Standard is a practical quality assurance toolkit divided into themes concerning: designing and delivering projects, duty of care, managing volunteers and measuring impact. Under each theme there are specific actions to be implemented and indicators to measure whether these are being adequately met. The Standard also specifically prohibits volunteering in or with orphanages.

Along similar lines, Comhlamh has developed a [Code of Good Practice](#) for Irish volunteer-sending organisations. The Code has a strong emphasis on global justice, solidarity, and good development practice which addresses locally identified needs. It also promotes development education so as to help volunteers understand the context of what they are doing so they are better placed to address the root causes of inequality and poverty. The Code also explicitly recognises the power differentials I have discussed above. Signatories of the Code commit to the implementation of five values, under which

there is a set of principles and indicators which provide guidance for the development and implementation of volunteer sending programmes.

A final principle of development worth specifically highlighting is that of ‘sustainability’. Essentially this is the view that development should not be a band-aid approach to individual problems, but should tackle problems holistically and at their root causes so they do not reoccur. For volunteering organisations this means several things: (i) having a focus on skilled volunteers whose role it is to transfer their skills to local people, so as to prevent the need for ongoing volunteering placements; (ii) not doing a role which could be undertaken by a local person, and thus undermining local skills and the local economy; and (iii) ensuring that the roles volunteers play are part of a broader development plan for the community (for example, there may be little benefit in volunteers running a sanitation and health awareness programme if there are no plans to introduce clean water and toilets in the village).

Child protection principles

When considering volunteering placements as alternatives to orphanages, it is important to have an understanding of child rights and child protection principles. Central to these are the [UN Convention on the Right of the Child \(UNCRC\)](#) and the [UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children](#). The UNCRC recognises children’s right to a family environment, right to be cared for and live with parents, and right to maintain contact with parents. These are rights which are frequently contravened through the orphanage model of care. The Guidelines supplement the UNCRC and reinforce that: “the family is the best place for a child and efforts should be primarily directed to enable a child to remain or return to his/her parents or, where appropriate, to other close family members”. The UNCRC is the most widely ratified UN treaty in the world and provides a legal foundation to reinforce the evidence I discussed in The Problem section, which points towards children’s best interests being served in family and community-based care.

It is therefore a basic principle that responsible volunteering should *only* support projects which help keep families and communities together – and *never* projects which separate children from their families. There are many ways families and communities can be strengthened. Sometimes the links are obvious - for example a family-preservation project will use practitioners to provide support to vulnerable families dealing with challenging issues such as alcoholism, debt, chronic health problems and domestic violence.

But sometimes the links may be less obvious - for example, an income generation project may enhance economic livelihoods which increases the chances of families being able to adequately care for their children; or a project which supports locally-provided early child development centres, schools and colleges will incentivise families to keep their children with them in the local area, rather than sending them to an orphanage for a 'better education'. Even an environmental conservation project may enhance environmental preservation and sustainability, and thus reduce the risk of natural disasters creating circumstances where families are forced apart. The same rationale can be applied to supporting health projects, women's empowerment, disaster preparedness and many other community development approaches which enable family units to remain strong, prosperous and healthy. This is not to suggest that volunteers will automatically have the skills to work on such projects – or that the necessary safeguarding procedures will be in place to facilitate volunteers – but as a principle it does provide an ethical compass as to what is and what is not child and family-friendly development.

Child safeguarding is of course another vital part of the puzzle. Keeping children safe is *everyone's* responsibility – this includes both the prevention of harm and abuse, and effectively responding to reports or suspicions of abuse. All organisations have a duty of care to protect children they work with, have contact with, or who are affected by their work. [Keeping Children Safe](#) is a helpful resource for organisations of all types working with or in contact with children. It has a set of International Child Safeguarding Standards, out of which come a range of tools, resources and training materials, including a self-audit tool for organisations. It is easy to navigate, internationally-relevant and user-friendly.

Similarly [ChildSafe](#) is a user-friendly resource to provide advice on how to prevent child abuse in an international context, and how to effectively respond to child abuse. ChildSafe has also partnered with G Adventures and Planeterra Foundation to develop [Global Good Practice Guidelines](#) specifically for the child welfare and travel industry. In ChildSafe's words, the guidelines were developed to provide a common understanding of child welfare issues throughout the travel industry and to provide all travel businesses with guidance to prevent all forms of exploitation and abuse that could be related to travellers and the tourism industry. The Guidelines are divided into four sections on: (i) preventing and responding to child abuse arising from tourist interactions; (ii) enabling products and services to have the best impact on children; (iii) ensuring CSR initiatives reinforce child welfare; and (iii) guidelines on implementation.

Finally, the Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism – better known as [“The Code”](#) – is an influential multi-stakeholder initiative for the travel and tourism industry aimed at providing awareness, tools and support to prevent the sexual exploitation of children. This can include prostitution and pornography, trafficking, voluntourism, orphanage tourism and mega sporting events. When companies join The Code they sign up to six criteria or steps to keep children safe – these include: policies and procedures, training, contracts and supply chain management, providing information to travellers, collaboration and support for stakeholders, and annual reporting.

Child safeguarding understandably often becomes associated with the more extreme forms of child exploitation, such as trafficking and sex-tourism. Nobody would disagree that these are unacceptable, but where the debate gets more contentious is around the ‘grey areas’ of how to interact with children whilst travelling, such as taking photos of children or giving gifts and money. G Adventures has developed a [good short video](#) on some of these issues using the premise that if you wouldn’t do it at home, don’t do it while you are travelling overseas.

Perhaps the most contested question in the debate around children and volunteering is: is it ever acceptable to volunteer directly with children? Views amongst child protection and responsible tourism experts are divided. Writing in its *Essential Guide to Volunteering Abroad*, [Learning Service](#) views all childcare placements with vulnerable children led by non-professional volunteers as dangerous, and therefore does not recommend them. The one exception it makes is for qualified professionals, but it questions whether their skills may be better put to use building the capacity of local staff rather than direct work with children. Meanwhile, voluntourism critic, Ruth Taylor, makes a [well-argued case](#) as to why, in the right circumstances, and in conjunction with local stakeholders, and with child safeguarding and the best interests of the child at the heart of any decision, volunteering placements working directly with children can be effective.

Learning and development education

An alternative perspective to the international development and child protection principles I have outlined above, is the view that volunteering can be reframed as being about learning and development education. It is important to stress that this approach does not contradict the values I have outlined above, but it is a complementary approach which shifts the focus onto the volunteer as someone whose

objective it is to critically learn from their experience and from the expertise of the people and projects they are placed with.

Undoubtedly the thought leader in this space is [Learning Service](#) whose book, *The Essential Guide to Volunteering Abroad*, has been endorsed by Noam Chomsky. Learning service flips the American concept of ‘service learning’ to emphasise that volunteers need to *learn* before they can *serve*. Learning is embraced as a primary purpose of a trip overseas, rather than a by-product, and service consists of humble and thoughtful action designed to do no harm, and which has not necessarily been fixed in advance. Similar to an NGO designing a development programme, until a volunteer has learned about the context in which they are operating, how can they be sure which types of action will help? Re-framing volunteering in this way shifts the power dynamics; re-focusses what can be measured as success on to the volunteer as much as the community; and can be considered as an antidote to ‘white saviour’ syndrome. The learning service approach emphasises the importance of a ‘learning mindset’ through which volunteers should approach all forms of social engagement, be it at home or overseas. Self-reflection on the volunteer’s motivations and skills prior to a trip, and using the volunteer’s learning at home after the trip, are just as important as the trip itself. I will showcase some examples of learning service trips in the next section.

[people and places: responsible volunteering](#) also deserves a mention in this section for its recent [campaign](#) on Instagram which flips the white saviour concept into positive and concise advice for tourists and volunteers on how to help communities and how *not* to be a white saviour. Its handle on Instagram is [@peopleandplace.volunteering](#).

101s of responsible tourism and volunteering

Considering how complex and nuanced debates on responsible tourism and volunteering can be, some organisations should be credited for condensing these ideas into concise “101” guides, checklists and other accessible resources. I will showcase some of these below.

- ❖ The [ReThink Orphanages](#) website has lot of useful information about orphanage tourism and volunteering generally, as well as a [useful check-list](#) for choosing the right kind of volunteering programme. ReThink's campaign website, The Love You Give, also has a useful [volunteer checklist](#).
- ❖ Responsible Volunteering's website includes a useful [tick-box function](#) to check your choice against their quality standards for responsible volunteering.
- ❖ Lumos's #HelpingNotHelping campaign includes a [useful page](#) with practical advice for volunteers, which Lumos developed in partnership with International Citizen Service (ICS).
- ❖ The Learning Service website has a range of [informative videos](#) offering advice on different aspects of ethical volunteering, and co-author of the Learning Service book, Claire Bennett, gives 10 useful tips for effective volunteering [here](#).
- ❖ Next Generation Nepal has condensed a lot of information into [7 tips for ethical volunteering](#); one of which is simply to be an ethical tourist.
- ❖ Comhlamh offers a short and free online course called [Where Do I Start?](#) for those interested in international volunteering.
- ❖ Voluntary Service Overseas – International Citizen Service (ICS) has a concise advice page on [Responsible Volunteering](#), including a short video and a checklist.
- ❖ The UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office includes [specific advice](#) on volunteering with children and, in particular, warns against orphanage volunteering.
- ❖ Two Dusty Travellers has written a good blog literally covering [101 Simple Responsible Tourism Tips](#).

Alternatives: what does good practice look like *in practice*?



In the previous section I covered some of the principles of responsible tourism and volunteering. In this section I give examples of organisations and resources which showcase good practice or offer alternatives. As a reminder, note that where I cite an organisation as a model of good practice, my endorsement *only* refers to the specific practices discussed and should not be understood as an ethical endorsement for the organisation's practices as a whole.

Organisations that do not support orphanage tourism and volunteering

ReThink Orphanages keeps a [list of organisations](#) that have never supported orphanage tourism or volunteering, have ceased doing so, or are in the process of withdrawing. It is worth delving deeper into the work of some of these organisations.

- ❖ [Intrepid Travel](#) was one the first travel organisations to move away from orphanage tourism. It has since taken an [active role](#) in advocating against orphanage tourism and supporting initiatives which promote family-based care.
- ❖ [Projects Abroad](#) announced in 2017 that it would stop supporting orphanage volunteering placements. Since 2018 it has been working with child protection agencies to [withdraw its support](#) gradually and carefully so as to ensure no harm comes to the children involved.
- ❖ [GVI](#) has also withdrawn from offering orphanage volunteering placements, and its [website](#) outlines the responsible transition strategy it took to make this change.

Skills-match volunteering

Matching a volunteer's skills to a self-identified need in the recipient community is key part of responsible volunteering. However, it is important to recognise that this includes both hard and soft skills. Whilst technical qualifications and professional experience are, of course, a vital part of a person's skills-set, a volunteer's softer skills and aptitudes are also vitally important in making an appropriate match.

- ❖ [Skilled Impact](#) is a volunteering organisation working in India and SriLanka on women's empowerment, disability, teaching and education, and business and social enterprise. It has clear sustainable development and cross-cultural learning objectives. As well as matching skills of volunteers to community needs, it uses a comprehensive vetting process, works with local organisations and partners that understand the community, and aims to build local capacity rather than dependency.
- ❖ [people and places – responsible volunteering](#) is a social enterprise which almost began as a campaign to 'name and shame' unethical practices in the volunteer sector, but instead took the more noble

path of establishing an ethical and responsible volunteer agency to show-case good practice. It has more than achieved this goal by winning the 2009 Responsible Tourism Awards – Best Volunteering Organisation and the 2013 World Responsible Tourism Awards – Best for Responsible Campaigning. It describes itself as a bridge that enables volunteers to work with programmes that enable local people to access the skills and experience they need to build the future they want for themselves. It strongly emphasises that informed consent and transparency is essential to achieve these goals.

- ❖ [Skillshare International](#) is a volunteering organisation working in Africa and Asia in areas of health, gender justice, livelihoods, sports for development and conflict transformation. Supporting the agenda of its local partner organisations is a key part of its approach. It also has a strong focus on development education and building the leadership capacity of its local partners.
- ❖ [Palms Australia](#) views itself as a development agency with a strong development philosophy. It places skilled Australians, from a range of disciplines and trades, in long-term assignments in remote communities to build the skills of local people. It only works with communities that have identified for themselves a skill which they want to develop.

Volunteering for children

With so many ethical and safeguarding issues to navigate around volunteering directly with children, many organisations choose not to support any forms of direct work with children. However, children's issues remain a very popular cause which volunteers want to support. Some volunteering organisations have managed to successfully square the circle by re-framing their projects as volunteering for children. This often involves supporting the work of children's NGOs and projects through 'back room' support rather than working directly with the children.

- ❖ [The Advocacy Project](#) develops partnerships between Peace Fellows (volunteers) and local organisations in marginalised communities working on human rights and social justice issues. The Peace Fellows role can be any or all of the following: to help the local partner identify programme or advocacy opportunities; amplify the partner's voice and raise awareness of their work through blogging, videos and news bulletins; provide administrative, management and media support, such

as helping the partner develop or improve its website; and undertake fundraising and international promotion of the partner's cause, which continues after the Peace Fellow has returned home. While many of the Advocacy Project's placements are supporting child rights initiatives, the Peace Fellows do not have direct contact with children as this is not where their skills are most needed.

- ❖ [The Umbrella Foundation](#) (TUF) is a development NGO rather than a volunteering agency, but it accepts volunteers to support its programmes in Nepal. TUF has seen a revolutionary transformation during its life-time which deserves special mention here. In its early years TUF ran eight children's homes housing more than 300 children, along with many 'orphanage' volunteers who provided the organisation with vital income. In line with best practice, TUF gradually and responsibly transitioned away from the children's home model towards family reintegration and community development, and simultaneously transitioned its volunteering programme towards more responsible practices no longer involving direct work with children. It currently takes a maximum of 2-3 volunteers at a time with skills which can support the organisation's development programmes – for example, a recent volunteer was a nurse and midwife who ran a sexual and reproductive health workshop with staff. The volunteers will occasionally get to meet children and young people at supervised social events, but they do not work directly with them.

Learning service and development education trips

A growing trend among travel, volunteer and development organisations is the re-framing of volunteering as development education, learning adventures and learning service trips. A few of these deserve special mention here.

- ❖ [Ayana Journeys](#) is a Cambodian responsible travel organisation and an official partner of Learning Service. In line with the learning service philosophy it provides travel experiences with an emphasis on experiential learning to foster cultural empathy, a widening understanding of global issues, and an opportunity for travellers to reflect on their potential as members of an international community. In practice this is actualised through meetings with local NGOs, social entrepreneurs, community leaders and change-makers, and facilitated educational activities such as debates and workshops.

- ❖ [Where There Be Dragons](#) has also adopted the learning service philosophy. It offers small group, custom-crafted travel programs in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Groups are led by experienced educators to develop an understanding of critical global issues through immersive travel, meaningful engagement, and empowered leadership. Activities such as language study and homestays are essential parts of its programmes. Dragons' aim is to build empathy and foster a feeling of shared responsibility for a collective future.
- ❖ [Global Exchange](#) is an international human rights organisation promoting social, economic and environmental justice around the world. As part of its mission it facilitates development education 'reality tours' where participants can learn about a country's history, politics, economy, religion, government, health care, agriculture, education and environment, providing an opportunity to see first-hand beyond what is communicated by the mass media. Tours are not designed to provide immediate solutions or remedies to global problems, nor are they simply a kind of voyeurism. Rather, reality tours are meant to educate people about how we, individually and collectively, contribute to global problems, and then to suggest ways in which we can contribute to positive change locally and internationally.
- ❖ [Palms Australia](#) run development education trips known as 'encounters'. These are small group tours that provide insights into daily life and culture in Timor Leste, Samoa, and Myanmar. These enable travelers to gain a greater insight and understanding of sustainable approaches to development.
- ❖ [Human Connections](#) is a non-profit organisation in Mexico providing social and development education through bespoke travel experiences. It aims to empower communities while fostering conversations that shift perspectives and increase understanding.

Sustainable tourism

Some organisations have intentionally moved away from volunteering placements altogether, or simply do not provide them because of the ethical complexities associated with volunteering. Instead they see responsible, ethical and sustainable travel as playing an important role in its own right.

- ❖ [Clean Travel](#) is an independent community of local travel organisations that offers sustainable tourism experiences. It sees itself as the natural successor to volunteer tourism. Its tours enable travellers to both see the world and contribute to the communities they are visiting. It aims to empower local and sustainable operators with the tools and support needed to compete in the global market and reach more travellers directly, and it aligns its goals with the Sustainable Development Goals. Interestingly, its Founder, Macartan Gaughan, previously worked for The Umbrella Foundation in Nepal (discussed above) where he founded a trekking organisation led by care leavers – an initiative which ultimately led him on to establish Clean Travel.
- ❖ [SocialTours](#) is a social enterprise in Nepal influenced by CSR, responsible tourism, value-based decision making, and sensitivity to the local environment, local culture and local economy. It plays an active role in the sustainable tourism debate in both Nepal and globally.

Action at home

Whilst most of the debates about responsible volunteering have, rightly, focussed on the in-country placement element, there is a growing interest in what happens to these individuals after they return home and the role they can play. This links closely with the development education and learning service approaches to travel and volunteering discussed earlier. These ideas not only concern how individuals [process their experiences](#), but also to how they remain connected to the issues they learned about during their placement, and in turn, how they link these experiences with social action in their home context. [The Advocacy Project](#) (discussed above) has an obvious element of action at home through fundraising and awareness raising of the social justice issues Peace Fellows learn about while overseas. [International Citizen Service](#) has also introduced an action at home element to its volunteering programme which asks returned volunteers to engage in social change projects which benefit their local communities. These schemes are not just about recognising the need for social engagement within your own community, but also about recognising that there are systemic causes of inequality, poverty and environmental degradation which cross international borders and operate on a global scale. In a similar vein it should also be noted that high-quality and responsible volunteering programmes have existed *within* countries in

the Global North for decades, providing motivation and skills-matching opportunities for people to ‘volunteer at home’. For more information about these schemes see [Vostel](#) in Germany and [NCVO](#) in the UK.

Third party brokers

A notable segment of the volunteering sector includes third party portals that promote and sell volunteering projects designed and led by others. www.wegweiser-freiwilligenarbeit.com and www.guidistovolontariat.fr are two sister online portals that do this by connecting prospective volunteers with volunteering organisations. These portals have deliberately excluded orphanage volunteering projects, as well as lion cub and unethical elephant projects. Volunteering organisations which wish to include their projects on the websites must undergo a screening process, and, indeed, membership is regularly refused to organisations because of their orphanage volunteering placements. The portals’ ambition is to increase the online visibility of well-run and responsible volunteering projects that benefit local communities.

Modern slavery statements

In response to the growing body of evidence linking orphanages with child trafficking, Australia was the first country to recognise orphanage trafficking in its legislation. Australia’s Modern Slavery Act requires large businesses and other entities with an annual consolidated revenue of at least AUD\$100 million to report in their [Modern Slavery Statements](#) how they have assessed and mitigated the risk of orphanage trafficking and child exploitation in orphanages in their supply chains. The Australian Government has also published [clear guidance](#) to assist organisations with this process. Meanwhile in the UK, where the UK Modern Slavery Act does not specifically reference orphanage trafficking, TUI still chose to include in its [Modern Slavery Statement 2017](#) (see page 45) how it prohibits orphanage visits (and school visits during school hours) as part of its efforts to curb child trafficking – a move which was applauded within the child protection sector.

Pitfalls: what should be avoided when developing alternatives to orphanage visits?



Organisations which make the decision to move away from orphanage visits should be commended. However, *how* an organisation makes this transition, and *which* types of projects or services it transitions to, can be ethically challenging to navigate.

This section discusses ‘pitfalls’ associated with certain models of tourism or volunteering which organisations may choose to transition towards. Pitfalls can vary from well-intentioned shifts in focus which inadvertently result in ethically compromised models of tourism or volunteering, through to deliberate attempts to green-wash projects and services.

The next section considers what practical resources are available to assist organisations in making the transition.

Attempts to make orphanage visits appear safe and ethical

Unfortunately some organisations respond to the criticisms levied against orphanage visits by trying to ‘improve’ the standards of how they engage with orphanages. They take the view that this will make the visits ethically acceptable. For all the reasons I gave in The Problem section on orphanage visits, this is simply not a viable option. Even if, in the highly unlikely scenario of all concerns around child safeguarding, trafficking, skills-matching, undermining local care givers, attachment issues, and so on, being adequately addressed, orphanage volunteers are *still* supporting an outdated model of care for which there is overwhelming evidence that it harms children. This therefore contradicts the primary principle of ‘do no harm’.

I have personally witnessed some creative but ultimately flawed arguments presented as to how organisations claim they have managed to circle this square – these include: putting comprehensive child safeguarding measures in place; only providing long-term volunteers to supposedly avoid creating attachment disorders; only partnering with orphanages where they are registered with the government and due-diligence has taken place; or even, most absurdly, making the argument that because the orphanage is not-for-profit it must be good. (On this last point, *all* the orphanages I worked with in Nepal which were trafficking children presented themselves as not-for-profit NGOs).

Another more convincing – but ultimately still flawed – argument I have seen involves making the case that the ‘local community’ want the orphanage to exist as there would be nowhere else for the children to go if it were not there. This argument fails to recognise the heterogeneity and power differentials of actors *within* a community. It is likely that the orphanage owners and staff will be financially benefitting from the orphanage, so will of course have an incentive for it to exist. The argument also fails to deconstruct the complexity of reasons as to why parents allow their children to be placed in orphanages, varying from not understanding why institutional care is harmful and what the alternatives may be, through to situations involving force, fraud and coercion. Lastly, the power differentials between the

wealthy travel or volunteering organisation, or other donors, which are providing resources and social status, will inevitably influence community views on why the orphanage is 'needed'.

A final argument I have seen made is that volunteers are being sent to 'small group residential homes' as opposed to orphanages or institutions, with the rationale that these do not harm children in the same way. Small group and family-like residential care is a contested area within the child protection and disability sectors, with some actors taking the view that there are special circumstances where family-like homes are acceptable for some groups of children, whilst other actors disagree. Regardless as to whether small group homes are or are not an acceptable form of care for children, sending volunteers to such places falls foul of many other problematic areas such as safeguarding, skills-matching, using local child care staff, and so on.

If there is ever an acceptable time for a volunteer to work in an orphanage, it is if: (i) the volunteer is a professional and qualified practitioner (such as a social worker or psychologist); (ii) the volunteer has undergone child protection checks; (iii) the orphanage has implemented a child protection policy; (iv) the practitioner is predominantly supporting local staff so as to build their capacity; (v) there is nobody locally who could provide this type of technical support; and (vi) the orphanage is undergoing a transition towards family-based care for the children, so the practitioner is not reinforcing a harmful model of care. Such a scenario is of course essentially pro-bono professional support towards deinstitutionalisation.

Orphanages and institutions: euphemisms and terminology

To detract from growing criticism of orphanage visits, some organisations have stopped using the word 'orphanage' and have re-branded with terms such as NGO, children's home, boarding school, childcare centre, day-care centre, children's village, children's crèche, church home, hostel, shelter, rehabilitation home, home, small group home, community centre and other words to describe what is essentially the same, or a very similar, model of care. However, to complicate matters, some of the services which are associated with these terms *could* also potentially be beneficial to some groups of children if run in a correct way for the correct purposes. Furthermore, some volunteering organisations offer childcare or teaching placements, which appear to have nothing to do with orphanages, but in reality the childcare

or teaching is taking place *within* an orphanage. The terminology can be very confusing and is not always the best indication of what is actually happening in practice. It is therefore helpful to delve a little deeper into residential care practices to understand what types of care services are considered harmful for children.

A more technical word for an orphanage is a ‘children’s institution’. A children’s institution is any kind of residential care with an ‘institutional culture’, which means that children are separated from their families, isolated from the broader community and/or compelled to live together; children and their families don’t have sufficient control over their lives and the decisions which affect them; and the requirements of the organisation itself takes precedence over the individualised needs of the children (see Lumos’ [In Our Lifetime](#), p.12). So children’s institutions *could* include a whole range of residential care services, including, but not limited to orphanages and children’s homes. So long as these care facilities have an institutional culture, and despite perhaps the best efforts of those running the service to make it family-like, they will unfortunately *still* be harmful to children. This is a key point that is often misunderstood. Whilst everyone agrees that institutions which traffick and exploit children are harmful, many people believe that institutions which are well run must be ‘good places’ for children to grow up, whereas in fact this is not the case. In other words, all forms of institutional care should be avoided by travel and volunteering organisations.

Other types of volunteering with children

Travel tours and volunteering placements which involve children are understandably popular products offered by organisations. Replacing orphanage trips with litter picking trips along dirty river basins are unlikely to have the same appeal! This is why many organisations look to other projects involving children as financially viable alternatives. However, despite its obvious appeal, this route still contains many ethical pitfalls to navigate which I will explore here with some of the most popular child-focussed alternatives.

Childcare

In using the term ‘childcare’ here I am referring to day-care schemes where children are looked after while their parents are at work, and then return to their families in the evenings. Whilst such schemes have benefits for both children and families, they are generally not a responsible option for volunteers or tourists. Whilst supporting such schemes help to enforce family-based care, putting foreign tourists or volunteers in such contexts is problematic from a safeguarding, skills-matching and local sustainability perspective. The only scenarios where this would be acceptable is if a volunteer is a qualified and experienced child-carer, is playing a role of supporting or building the capacity of local staff, and child safeguarding measures are in place.

Teaching

Sending volunteers to teach English overseas is a popular type of placement and is judged by many to be responsible and safe so long as child safeguarding measures are in place. After all, many international volunteers will have a good command of English and therefore could be considered ‘skilled’. However, it is unfortunately not quite this simple. This [excellent article](#) by Dianne Ashman – a qualified teacher who now works in the volunteering sector – explains how a lack of familiarity with the local context, the short-term nature of teaching placements, and the risks associated with displacing or disempowering local teachers mean that developing responsible school-based volunteering needs a more nuanced approach. Dianne goes on to suggest some practical and responsible roles which skilled volunteers can play in an educational environment – these involve assisting local teachers, after-school clubs and developing creative resources. A note should also be included here on ‘school tours’ which have become a popular activity on the itinerary of many tour groups. Unfortunately school tours also have their pitfalls which I will discuss in more detail in the community-based tourism section below.

Community-based tourism

Community-based tourism (CBT) is becoming a popular activity offered by the travel sector to tourists wanting direct and experiential interactions with local communities. CBT can include visits to rural villages, visits to schools and other local organisations, homestays, the use of local businesses and many other offerings. When run well, meaning that the management and decision making of CBT remains within the local community, it attributes power back to local communities and contributes to the local

economy. With its bottom-up approach and authenticity in connecting tourists with real families and communities, it is understandable how it can be viewed as win-win ethical alternative to orphanage trips. There are indeed [many reasons](#) to praise CBT as a form of responsible tourism, but it also brings with it a number of child protection risks which may not immediately be apparent, and need to be addressed. The obvious risks concern child sexual abusers taking advantage of the likely lack of child safeguarding procedures in an environment for which this has never previously been a priority. But there are also more nuanced risks around children being taken out of school to perform cultural shows for tourists, school tours which disrupt lessons, obtrusive photography, the handing out of sweets and gifts to children creating a dependency culture, and inappropriate or culturally insensitive contact between tourists and children. Whilst CBT is generally a much better environment for travellers to interact with children than in an orphanage, there are still many risks associated with children becoming ‘tourist attractions’ which need to be carefully managed. [ChildSafe](#) is thankfully working with this growth industry to raise awareness of and mitigate the risks amongst all relevant stakeholder groups. See [this article](#) also. A final word of warning on CBT is around what types of community settings are showcased to tourists. While a functioning and prosperous village may help to overcome outdated notions of ‘third world poverty’ or ‘backwardness’, darker forms of CBT such as slum tourism and poverty tourism may do the opposite by exoticising poverty and reinforcing white saviour concepts which responsible tourism should avoid.

Other popular types of voluntourism

For those wishing to move away from all forms of volunteering involving children, it is important to say a few words about other unethical forms of voluntourism which need to be avoided when seeking alternatives to orphanage visits.

Conservation

The connection between tourism and exploitation of captive animals is [widely publicised](#), and tourists themselves are influencing the market to move away from activities such as elephant riding and swimming with dolphins. However, with uncomfortable similarities to orphanage tourism, some entrepreneurs have managed to capitalise on the desire of volunteers to make a positive contribution towards

animal conservation, resulting in exploitative schemes such as fake orphan lion cub sanctuaries. This [article](#) gives a good overview of both ethical and unethical practices in relation to conservation voluntourism programmes. Some good environmental conservation organisations which take volunteers include [Wildlife Act](#) which came second place at the World Responsible Tourism Awards in 2018 and promotes small group sustainable wildlife conservation, and [SEED Madagascar](#) which involves small groups of foreign volunteers in conservation field-work while supporting them to learn about conservation, the local culture and the local language.

Healthcare

Medical voluntourism has not reached the mainstream media to quite the same extent as orphanage voluntourism, but it has a [growing number of critics](#) concerned about: the lack of qualifications and experience of medical volunteers (particularly when they perform medical procedures they would not be allowed to perform at home); the lack understanding of the local context in which they are treating patients; the lack of opportunity for follow-up with patients due to short placement periods; and the undermining of local health-care systems and health-care providers. This [article](#) by Emily Scott, a Registered Nurse who has worked in international healthcare settings, contains good advice for want-to-be medical volunteers. This [article](#) by Guidisto gives a good overview of different types of medical internships and volunteer positions, and as well as guidance of how and when this can be done responsibly.

Building projects

Enthusiastic but unskilled foreign voluntourists paying to build a school in a dusty rural village, only for it to be knocked down afterwards so it can be rebuilt again by local professionals – or rebuilt by the next group of voluntourists – has perhaps become the archetypal image in the public’s minds about all that is wrong with voluntourism. Why this is an unsustainable model which does not contribute towards development does not need much explanation. However, if it is carefully managed, there are cases where volunteers can meaningfully contribute to building projects. For example, the education NGO, [First Steps Himalaya](#), welcomed foreign volunteers after the 2015 Nepal earthquake, when labour was in short supply, to join local people to help re-build schools using earthquake-resistant earth bag materials. This was done under the close supervision of professional builders. [HUSK Cambodia](#) allows a limited number of foreign volunteers to assist with the rebuilding of damaged houses for families which are vulnerable

to family separation and their children being placed in orphanages. This is of course managed sensitively in partnership with local community leaders.

Volunteering in emergencies

Disaster tourism is [ethically contentious](#), as is its close relation, disaster voluntourism. One of my own defining memories in the days following the Nepal earthquake was meeting a group of international backpackers who had chosen to fly into Nepal immediately after the earthquake to ‘see what it was like’. They used up valuable bed space in one of the emergency rescue shelters, tried their hands at moving rubble to see if they could find anyone alive (with no training or plan as to what they would do if they did find someone), and after a week took a free flight out of the country which was being offered by the US Government for genuinely traumatised tourists. The dangers of disaster voluntourism are well articulated by Learning Service co-author, Claire Bennett, in [this article](#) where she advised potential volunteers not to rush to Nepal after the earthquake, and instead she offered suggestions on safer ways they could help. Next Generation Nepal undertook [some research](#) nine months after the Nepal Earthquake which concluded that skilled foreign volunteers who were already present in the country at the time of the earthquake, and therefore understood the context and local referral pathways, were beneficial for response efforts, e.g. engineers who could assess damaged buildings. The research also concluded that unskilled volunteers who swooped in after the earthquake, looking for opportunities to help, were a drain on already limited resources and were a danger to themselves and others.

Transitions: advice on safely moving away from orphanage visits



The purpose of this resource is to help organisations currently supporting orphanage visits to understand why these activities are harmful and to consider transitioning towards more responsible practices. Whilst this should be the goal for all responsible travel and volunteering organisations, it is very important to emphasise the need for this transition to be carried out in a carefully planned and safe way, with professional support where necessary. To simply cut off financial or other types of support to an orphanage partner may result in harm coming to the children. In this situation the orphanage partner may do one of several things: (i) find a new partner and continue operating using the same harmful practices; (ii) move the children to a more exploitative situation, such as another orphanage or even a form of child slavery; (iii) leave the children to fend for themselves on the street; or (iv) reunify the

children with their families, without any professionally-supported preparation or assessments being undertaken to determine what types of support they will need in their new placement. On this last point, it is always essential that *before* children are moved out of an orphanage, assessments and preparation is needed, as otherwise the children may be at risk of harm, abuse or being re-institutionalised. Principles underlining responsible divestment are the same for all types of organisations managing environmental, social and governance (ESG) risks in their supply chains, and failure to do this by travel and volunteering organisations risks reputational damage to the organisation, as well as risks to the children.

Responsible and safe divestment

A responsible and safe divestment strategy is not just about developing alternative responsible products or services to replace orphanage visits, but *also* about ensuring that the orphanage partner is supported to safely and sustainably move away from the orphanage model of care. This is a complex process involving:

- ❖ a good understanding of local laws, policies, regulations, culture and services relating to child protection; a good understanding of the socio-economic context of the area where the children originate from, why they were initially separated from their families, and what services exist in the areas from where they originate which could support their reunification or other family and community-based placements (this information will dictate the parameters in which the transition process can happen, for example: What are the laws and permissions needed to support child reunification? Which government services or NGOs work to support deinstitutionalisation?);
- ❖ detailed assessments undertaken by social workers of each child and their new potential placement, and professionally-guided plans for how the children can be safely and sustainably prepared for and returned to their families or other placements;
- ❖ a plan to support the orphanage workforce to find alternative and ethical employment or business opportunities, where appropriate, so as to ensure they do not simply establish another orphanage or be left unemployed;

- ❖ a comprehensive and sensitive communications plan for all relevant stakeholders, and most important of all, sensitive communications with and involvement of the children themselves;
- ❖ efforts made to protect resources (financial, personnel and material) which are currently supporting the orphanage so that, where appropriate, they can be redirected to supporting family and community-based care;
- ❖ training and support provided to stakeholders to guide them through the process; and
- ❖ plans for how the process will be managed, financed and monitored to ensure it is achieving its goals and not putting the children at further risk.

The above is *not* a comprehensive list of everything which needs to be included in a divestment strategy, but it does give a top-line overview of the process and emphasises the seriousness and complexity of what is involved. These child-focussed activities need to happen alongside any moves towards alternate models for responsible tourism or volunteering.

To support the transition process organisations are strongly advised to seek support from reputable child protection organisations, and experts specialising in deinstitutionalisation and responsible tourism and volunteering. I provide details about some of these below.

Divestment resources and initiatives

The ‘Orphanage Divestment Action Group’ is currently developing a divestment resource to support travel and volunteering organisations in transitioning away from relationships with orphanages. The Group is made up of leaders from the travel, volunteering, and child protection sectors and is convened by Better Care Network, working with partners from the ReThink Orphanages global coalition. The purpose of the resource is to equip operators with the information they need to make this transition responsibly. The resources will include a step-by-step guide to the divestment process, as well as useful guides to the case against orphanage visits, child protection principles and practice, communication tools, links to external resources and case studies of organisations that have successfully transitioned

away from relationships with orphanages. The resource is scheduled to be launched in November 2019 – check the [ReThink website](#) for the latest information.

Another emerging initiative worth watching closely is the ABTA and Home and Homes for Children led [Orphanage Tourism Taskforce](#), involving founding members TUI, Intrepid Travel, Projects Abroad and Exodus Travels. Its mission is to develop, coordinate and implement a whole-of-industry response to orphanage tourism, making it unacceptable. Its work will fall into two broad categories: (i) education and awareness raising with the UK public; and (ii) education and influencing of the travel industry at UK and in-country level. The Taskforce is coordinating closely with the Orphanage Divestment Action Group and may help implement its recommendations. If successful, the Taskforce is a mechanism which could be replicated across other countries.

Child protection organisations

The following is a list of some of the main child protection organisations and initiatives whose work covers deinstitutionalisation, alternative care and orphanage visits.

- ❖ [Better Care Network](#) is a global resource for people and organisations working to support children who lack adequate family care.
- ❖ [ReThink Orphanages](#) is a global, cross-sector coalition of organisations working to prevent family separation and unnecessary child institutionalisation by shifting the way countries in the Global North engage with overseas aid and development, in particular through orphanage trips and volunteer placements.
- ❖ [Lumos](#) and [Hope and Homes for Children](#) are global child protection organisations with missions to end the institutionalisation of children. Both are actively engaged with the orphanage tourism and volunteering issue.
- ❖ [Family for Every Child](#) is a global alliance of local civil society organisations working together to improve the lives of vulnerable children around the world.

- ❖ **Friends International** is social enterprise working to support marginalised children and youth, and their families, and has an active network across South East Asia. Friends International runs the [ChildSafe](#) Movement.
- ❖ **RELAF** is a child protection organisation working to support children in orphanages and institutions to enjoy their right to a family life. It is active across South America.

Most countries will have local civil-society organisations with a mandate to support child protection, deinstitutionalisation and family and community-based care. Travel and volunteering organisations are strongly advised to seek advice from these organisations in the countries where their partner orphanages are based. This will be vital in understanding the local context so as to inform a safe and ethical divestment strategy. It is also of course essential to seek advice and gain approval from relevant government authorities in all matters relating to the care of children.

Consultancy support

There are a number of consultancies specialising in the areas of child protection, deinstitutionalisation and responsible tourism and volunteering. I have listed several whom I recommend below:

- ❖ **ALTO Global:** ALTO works with the tourism sector to ensure its products do not inadvertently harm children, their families or communities. It helps clients understand the complexities of tourism's impact on communities, with a special focus on how children are affected. It uses its global network of ethically and socially responsible businesses, NGOs and philanthropists to ensure communities benefit from tourism, and help its clients develop impactful and responsible tourism products and programs that meet consumer demand. Its services include: policy, strategy and impact; monitoring and evaluation; risk management; and training. Contact details: <https://www.altoglobalconsulting.com/>.
- ❖ **ChildSafe Movement:** Powered by leading international social enterprise, Friends-International, ChildSafe offers specialised consultancy services for travel, tourism and volunteering organisations wanting to improve their responsible/ethical practices including: certification of travel and tourism companies: child welfare assessment of products, services and practices, recommendations, training

and support; ad-hoc consultation and training services tailor-made to company needs (ranging from child protection awareness-raising sessions for staff to product/marketing and communications reviews). Examples of specialised ChildSafe trainings include: ChildSafe volunteering, NGO/field project evaluations, communication/marketing and the rights of the child, ChildSafe community-based tourism, ChildSafe child protection training of the trainer. Some of these trainings are available for groups of travellers as well as organisations. Contact details: www.thinkchildsafef.org/; info@thinkchildsafef.org.

- ❖ **Learning Service:** The Learning Service Team offer bespoke training and consultancy to travel companies, schools and non-profit organisations. Daniela Papi and Claire Bennett, co-founders of Learning Service, are both expert consultants who have over a decade of experience of working with partners to audit their current practice, support program design, facilitate strategic planning, and offer professional development. They offer customised services including: ethical voluntourism; volunteer education; bespoke travel planning for those interested in learning before helping; corporate social impact planning, philanthropic workshops, training and consultancy; and lessons learned exchanges. Contact details: <http://learningservice.info/consulting/>; contact@learningservice.info.
- ❖ **Martin Punaks:** Martin has nearly two decades experience working in international development, child protection, deinstitutionalisation, family strengthening and responsible travel and volunteering. Having held senior positions in leading child protection agencies – including Lumos and Next Generation Nepal – he has worked closely with governments, NGOs, travel and volunteering organisations, across many countries, training and advising them in how to safely and responsibly transition away from institutional care and orphanage visits. Martin offers services in: deinstitutionalisation, family strengthening and alternative care; child protection, volunteering and responsible tourism; programme, advocacy and people management; and training and facilitation. Contact details: www.martinpunaks.com; martinpunaks@hotmail.com.
- ❖ **Rebecca Armstrong, Responsible Tourism Matters:** Rebecca is a sustainable tourism consultant with experience of both the mainstream travel industry and working on tourism development at destination level. Combined with her previous career as a lawyer, this has given her a strong insight into the legal and other risks posed to the industry by orphanage volunteering, and by tourism experiences

and excursion content based on interaction with children. This is matched by a practical interest in helping companies to tackle these issues and to develop responsible and market-ready alternatives. Contact details: www.responsibletourismatters.com; responsibletourismatters@gmail.com; +44 7779 102165.

- ❖ **Responsible Volunteering:** Responsible Volunteering is an educational organisation that creates awareness about the challenges but also potentials of voluntourism. Additional to educating potential volunteers and journalistic work, its mission is to inspire the voluntourism industry to become a significant player for global development. The team combines academic and practical experiences in voluntourism, tourism, sustainable development and social work as well as organisational development. Its consultancy focus is on program design, selection and education of volunteers, sustainability management and business operations. Contact details: <https://www.responsible-volunteering.com/>.
- ❖ **Ruth Taylor:** Ruth has been working to strengthen the international volunteering and global learning sector in the UK for the past 10 years. She has expertise in youth engagement and learning experience design, and works with educators and volunteer travel providers to support them to develop and deliver volunteer programmes which effectively promote global citizenship. She holds an MSc in Human Rights from the London School of Economics. Contact details: ruth@ruthtaylor.org.

Further information

For more information about the issues raised in this guidance please contact me at www.martinpunaks.com or martinpunaks@hotmail.com.