Better Care Network Netherlands

'What's wrong with volunteering and internships in orphanages?

Volunteering or doing an internship in an orphanage abroad are popular activities, offering a combination of 'doing something good' for children, experiencing another culture and travelling to a distant country. Various organisations promote or organise these trips, including volunteer-sending organisations, travel companies, foundations, churches, schools and universities, and even orphanages themselves. Better Care Network Netherlands, together with many other organisations around the world, is campaigning to put an end to volunteering and internships in orphanages, often referred to as 'orphanage tourism'. But why?

80–90% Of children in orphanages are not orphans

It is estimated that five to six million children worldwide live in orphanages, and that 80–90% of these children have at least one living parent[i]. The word 'orphanage' creates the impression that these children have no family who can care for them. Instead of 'orphanages', we prefer to use the more precise term 'residential care institutions for children'. Residential care institutions can range from emergency shelters to short- or long-term care institutions on both a large and small scale, in many cases providing permanent care for children.

Reasons for placement in residential care

The fact that children are not orphans does not, of course, mean that they do not need additional care. A child may have been abandoned, neglected or abused. Research shows that poverty is the main reason why children end up in residential care. The residential care facility provides access to food, shelter, education and healthcare[ii]. Discrimination or, for example, a lack of support for parents of children with disabilities can also lead to placement in residential care[iii]. Whatever the reason for placement, children need a stable family environment in which to grow up. Residential care facilities cannot provide the love and individual attention children need to ensure their full development.

The consequences for children

Decades of research show that growing up in residential care can be harmful to a child's health and future opportunities. Long-term residence in a residential care facility is detrimental to a child's cognitive, emotional and social development. Children develop better in family environments [iii]. Many children who have grown up in residential care struggle with the transition to independent living. They often lack the basic skills that are learned in a family setting, such as how to solve everyday problems and how to manage money. These are skills needed to survive in the world as an adult[iv]. Children in residential care are also much more likely to experience violence and (sexual) abuse[v].

A better alternative: care by family members and foster parents

There are alternatives to residential care that are not only cheaper [iii], but also much better for children. In The Netherlands and many other Western countries, children are no longer placed in residential care institutions such as orphanages but instead are cared for in foster families or small-scale family homes. Many governments in countries across Africa, Asia, and South America also have similar policies aimed at providing family-based alternative care or foster care. Nevertheless, in many countries there are still a large number of residential care facilities for children in operation, often supported by foreign donors and volunteer visitors.



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Six reasons why you should not volunteer or do an internship at an orphanage

Owners of residential care institutions or the organisations supporting these institutions often claim that international volunteers can make an important contribution to institutions, for example by teaching children English, giving them extra attention, and helping to organize activities [vi]. They argue that dedicated volunteers can help to improve the situation for these children. Most volunteers, interns, and visitors to such institutions have good intentions and believe they are helping children. However, their efforts can actually have negative consequences:

- *Volunteers and interns contribute to attachment problems.* Every child needs consistent caregivers with whom they can develop long-term relationships in order to explore the world in a safe environment. Healthy attachment is just as important as food and sleep [iii]. When visiting volunteers and interns, who frequently come and go, have direct contact with children, this can have negative consequences because the children repeatedly experience sense of loss [vii]. As a result, they do not develop trust in relationships and face an increased risk of developing severe attachment problems. These attachment problems can lead to children suffering serious social-emotional and cognitive problems later in life [iv]. Children often develop low self-esteem, making them more likely to become victims of individuals with bad intentions. For very young children, attachment problems are also known to have negative effects on brain development [vii].

- *Volunteers and interns lack relevant knowledge and experience.* Most international volunteers and interns are not trained to work with vulnerable children who may be traumatized. Furthermore, they usually do not speak the local language, meaning the children have to adapt to the volunteers rather than the other way around [viii]. Moreover, volunteers do not share the same background as the children they work with and generally lack sufficient cultural sensitivity, which can lead to the children experiencing confusion regarding their own culture and identity [ix]. If you are not allowed to do similar work in the Netherlands because you do not have the right knowledge and experience, then you should not be allowed to do it either abroad

- *Volunteers and interns disrupt children's daily routine.* Children's rights experts and young people who grew up in residential care institutions themselves have expressed concerns about how the presence of international volunteers can disrupt children's daily routine. For example, children have been known to stay away from school on occasions to perform for volunteers and tourists so that donations can be raised.

- *Volunteers and interns take away employment opportunities.* By doing volunteer work, you may reduce employment

Attachment

'Attachment' is the process through which children develop an emotional bond with familiar people, usually their parents or other consistent caregivers. The term refers to a child's tendency to seek proximity to and comfort from familiar caregivers. Children need time to develop and maintain an attachment relationship. Therefore, continuity in care from a consistent caregiver is important. This continuity is lacking in residential care facilities, increasing the risk of a child experiencing attachment problems. For this reason, supporting families is generally preferable to drastic measures such as removing a child from their homes [vii].

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opportunities for local people. In countries that receive many international volunteers and interns, it is especially important for the local economy and the development of the country that employment is created for the local population.

- *Volunteers and interns could be contributing to child trafficking.* Volunteering and internships with children abroad are so popular that they have created a demand for 'orphans' and 'orphanages', which in turn encourages the separation of children and families. Residential care institutions can be lucrative, making them more attractive for struggling families to send their child to an institution on the promise of a better future. Many institutions are run as 'businesses' offering paid volunteer positions and serving as 'tourist trips'. Children are often forced to pretend to be orphans when they are not. In countries such as Nepal, there is evidence that international volunteering in residential care institutions has contributed to the trafficking of children for the so-called 'orphanage industry' [x]. In Haiti, for example, there have also been cases where children were deliberately malnourished to encourage foreign donations. [xi] Removing children from their families with the aim of placing them in institutions where money is earned from well-intentioned but ill-informed volunteers or tourists, falls under the official definition of child trafficking.[xii]



- *Access to vulnerable children can become normalized.* By opening residential care institutions to volunteers and other visitors, these children also become accessible to people with malicious intentions. There are several reported cases of abuse and mistreatment by volunteers in care institutions abroad [ii]. Furthermore, allowing unqualified staff to have access to children in vulnerable situations becomes normalised, even though this is prohibited in the Netherlands. Due to the lack of regulations, supervision and screening procedures in countries where residential care institutions operate, children are more easily exposed to exploitation and abuse [xiii]. Due to the absence of safe and trusted spaces provided by reliable adult caregivers, children in institutions often lack the skills to set personal boundaries and defend themselves against abuse.[xiv]

So what can you do instead? Support families and communities!

If no international volunteers and interns come to help, wouldn't the problems faced by children actually get worse? No! A well-organized, regulated and small-scale care facility where children stay temporarily and which is run by professional staff is not dependent on temporary volunteers and interns. With a stable income and sufficient permanent and professional staff, such a facility can provide children with the right support. By volunteering or doing an internship in a residential care institution, you are helping to sustain a practice that is harmful to children.

We therefore urge you to look for other ways to contribute to the development of children in vulnerable situations. Learn more about or donate to programmes that help children remain within their own families and relatives. These programmes focus, for example, on strengthening families and communities, economic development, positive parenting, social work and family support. Read our criteria for a good project.

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Only when there is no alternative: Residential care as a temporary solution

In 2009, the United Nations developed the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children. The main principle of these guidelines is that governments should, whenever possible, prevent children from being separated from their parents. This can be achieved by supporting families, for example through food assistance or providing resources to enable children to attend school. According to these international guidelines, placement in residential care should never be permitted for children under the age of three, as this can be extremely harmful at such a young age [xv].

Only when there is no other solution within their own family, with relatives, in foster care, or in a family home, may children be placed in residential care, and only under the following conditions:

- They are well-organized and supervised and must immediately begin to guide and support the child's parents and/or family so that the child can return home.
- Care has to be temporary and small-scale, with a maximum of eight children and permanent, qualified caregivers, until a better alternative (such as reintegration into the family with the support of foster care) is found [xvi].

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If you have volunteered or worked as an intern in a residential care facility, or you are thinking of doing so, and you are looking for advice or support, please contact Better Care Network Netherlands [xvii], specialised in children without adequate parental care in low- and middle-income countries.

Better Care Network Netherlands developed a website containing a wealth of tips and background information on the harms and risks of working with vulnerable children abroad. BCNN also provides training and advice on responsible volunteering and internships involving children.

For more information, visit:

- **www.bettercarenetwork.nl**
- **www.thnxnothnx.nl**
- Or contact us at **info@bettercarenetwork.nl**

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[xvii] The network is an initiative of Defence for Children-ECPAT, Kerk in Actie, Kinderperspectief, Wereldkinderen, Wilde Ganzen and Free a Girl.

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