Beyond Trafficking and Slavery: Orphanage Volunteering and the Orphan Industrial Complex
Position paper for the March 27, 2019, Roundtable to discuss initiative paper 35069 from MP Van Haga
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Thank you for including me in this important discussion. The white paper recommendations are sound and rooted in solid evidence and best practices. They present an excellent opportunity for The Netherlands to lead the world in setting higher standards for volunteering as well as better donor social responsibility by supporting the international development of better child protection measures and safer alternatives to orphanages for children without parental care. I recommend that Parliament and the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation enact them without delay.

Moreover, I urge the government to:
- **Recognize the harms of orphanage tourism *beyond* trafficking**
- **Ensure that no Dutch or EU funding goes toward orphanages—but strongly discourage private donation by Dutch and EU citizens as well**
- **Redirect resources to support family-based care according to the UN Alternative Care Guidelines**

This issue is not a question of good versus bad orphanages, nor of good or ill intentions. The problem is the industry that grows up around 'orphans', creating not just an environment for trafficking and corruption but for the commodification of orphans and orphanhood more broadly. Despite the best intentions, this can hamper efforts at child protection, family preservation, and community-based care. Counter to its stated goal, this Orphan Industrial Complex can actually spur the 'production' of 'orphans' for 'consumption' by Western supporters and volunteers—a clear violation of children's rights.

Redefining 'Orphans'
Through various interventions in the past half-century, the term 'orphan' has gone from being a pliable social category to a fixed and immovable label. All children in an orphanage are automatically assumed to be 'orphans', when in fact 80% worldwide have at least one living, locatable parent. The term therefore obscures the actual circumstances of both orphanhood and institutionalization. In Uganda, for example, the number of orphanages has exploded in recent years—despite a drop in the number of children whose parents have died. Over 40% of children in Uganda's 900 orphanages (the most per capita in the world) are there due to poverty and/or to access education. An exclusive, discriminatory focus on 'orphans', as opposed to a universal social protection policy, therefore draws attention away from broader vulnerabilities such as poverty—and in some cases has led to other vulnerable children claiming they are orphans in order to access services.[1] If support is only offered in institutions, then desperate caregivers, lacking knowledge of the deleterious effects of institutional care, will readily place children in an institution in order to access those resources—especially where there is active recruitment into orphanages. The ancillary effects on the entire social protection system are far-reaching. The term 'orphan' is therefore a misnomer—and a stigmatizing one—so much so that practitioners are calling for its abandonment altogether.

The Orphan Industrial Complex: a problem of supply and demand
Nonetheless, the concurrent developments of global voluntourism and the altruistic focus on 'orphans' have led to the industrialization of informal international humanitarian assistance to 'orphans', particularly those in developing countries. This Orphan Industrial Complex (OIC) entails the monetization of 'everything orphan', hence the commodification of orphanhood. It is fuelled by various interventions including fund-raising, volunteer and internship programs, faith- and school-based service trips, the establishment of orphanages and NGOs that support them from abroad, and intercountry adoption. 'Saving orphans' has become an industry that irrevocably harms children and undermines developing child protection systems.

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[1] Cheney, Kristen E. 2017. *Crying for Our Elders: African orphanhood in the age of HIV and AIDS*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

However, I object to the notion that developing countries have an orphan tourism problem; most of those tourists come from developed countries hoping to fulfil their _own_ objectives, whether it is altruism or ego. So it is _we_ who have the problem; developing countries are merely bearing the consequences. They do not have a global 'orphan crisis' so much as a _child protection crisis_ driven by the popularity of such activities as orphan tourism. The OIC provides perverse incentives for the establishment of orphanages and the unnecessary institutionalization of children, compounding various social problems for individual children, families, communities, and nations. The vast majority of orphanages in the developing world are in fact funded by private charitable donations from the Global North—and many donors and orphan tourists have little to no knowledge of child rights or child protection standards. Yet these donations easily outspend under-resourced ministries and NGOs trying to counter these alarming child institutionalization trends. In Uganda, about US$5 million was spent on mission trips to orphanages in 2016 alone; that same amount could have been used to close over 400 orphanages.[2] In Haiti, donor support to the OIC even rivals foreign direct investment at US$100 million.[3] We must therefore address the OIC's demand side as well as the supply side.

Rebuking Myths of Child Rescue
Because of the significant damage they do to children's development, orphanages are a thing of the past in developed countries—and yet they have become a favourite export of those seeking to help children in developing countries. What accounts for this cognitive dissonance? Institutionalization is not only alien to the cultures of the donors; it is alien to many local cultures of extended-family and community child care. It is not, therefore, local culture or even poverty itself that is driving the establishment of orphanages and the institutionalization of children; it is due to the financial opportunities that such an industry presents to agencies, orphanages, and middlemen. If we really want to help children, we must challenge the persistent narratives of 'orphan rescue' that are driving the proliferation of the OIC. Again, these mainly originate in the Global North. We must shift away from the myth of orphanages as 'rescuing children', replacing it with the desire to protect and help families raise children in a safe and loving environment.

The Importance of Deinstitutionalization and Community-based Care Support
More broadly, we must interrogate our own charitable desires and tackle the vested commercial interests that originate here in The Netherlands; they perpetuate the commodification of orphans and create spaces for unscrupulous individuals to manufacture 'orphans' for private gain. Even 'good' orphanages erode traditional community child care systems and hinder the development of national child protection mechanisms. With political will, however, it is possible to reform the international care system by providing strong oversight, strengthening child protection structures, and investing resources in families and communities. In fact, raising children in families costs _far_ less and yet is _far_ better for children than institutional care. If we can redirect even a portion of the vast spending power of people in the Global North to support community-based care _instead of_ orphanages, we can end the era of orphanages in our lifetimes. The Netherlands has an opportunity here to be a global leader in a growing movement to change the way we care for vulnerable children around the world. You can do this not only by divesting in orphanages (as the UK recently did)—and encouraging charities, travel businesses, and the EU to do the same—but by actively supporting the global care reform movement sweeping across Africa, from Ghana to Kenya and Uganda to South Africa, and in Asia, from Bangladesh to Vietnam, that operates according to established UN Alternative Care Guidelines. Let's change the narrative, from child rescue to child protection and empowerment; strengthening child protection systems rather than undermining them; supporting families not orphanages; dismantling the OIC rather than fueling it. I would be happy to help the Dutch government implement the proposed changes in the white paper, as well as those I recommend here. Thank you once again for your consideration.

For more information, please see bit.ly/orphanindustrialcomplex

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[2] https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2016/may/16/volunteers-stop-visiting-orphanages-start-preserving-families
[3] http://elevatechildren.org/orphanage-funding-social-media-cards/