

Child protection in the volunteer tourism sector needs strengthening

Position paper by Defence for Children/ECPAT on the occasion of the Round Table on 27 March 2019 to discuss initiative paper 35069 by the member Van Haga: "A good intention is not always a good idea: a proposal to combat orphanage tourism" (*"Een goede bedoeling is niet altijd een goed idee: een voorstel tot bestrijding van weeshuistoerisme"*).

Defence for Children/ECPAT calls on the government to implement recommendation 1: *"Ensure that volunteer sending organisations and tour operators who offer programmes that involve children are subject to regulations to prevent abuse."*

The implementation of child protection measures cannot be left to the volunteer tourism sector alone. There are commercial sensitivities involved and those active in the sector may lack the necessary expertise. Many volunteer tourism products reflect the interests and desires of travelers, and consequently there is always the chance that this will be at the expense of the interests of local communities and the children who live there. A consistent approach to child protection with regard to the volunteer sector is required. This goes beyond the urgent need to end orphanage tourism. In the Netherlands, tour operators and intermediary organisations who arrange volunteer work or internships are not currently obliged to comply with national regulations on child protection. Existing regulations should respond to the growing trend in volunteer tourism and be extended to organisations that send Dutch citizens abroad to do volunteer work with children. This is especially important given the popularity among Dutch volunteers of projects working directly with children.¹

The commercialisation of volunteer work leads to shorter durations of stay and higher degrees of flexibility with regard to the working hours and activities of volunteers. Lax admissions criteria mean that as many volunteers as possible are accepted. Intensive selection processes would not only be expensive and time-consuming, but also make it impossible to assign every candidate to a project. There is therefore the risk that the interests of fee-paying tourists win out at the expense of children's safety. Children are at risk of sexual and physical abuse because volunteers have numerous opportunities to spend time with vulnerable children or to be alone with them during volunteer projects.²

Children who grow up in residential care institutions such as children's homes are particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Cases of Dutch citizens convicted for child abuse abroad show that institutions are often used as sites to facilitate contact with vulnerable children in order to sexually abuse them. For example, of the previous convictions known to Defence for Children/ECPAT, 8 of the 22 cases involved a residential care institution, and in a number of those cases the perpetrator had already been convicted in the Netherlands of a sexual offence with children.³ In March 2018, the Dutch Chamber of Commerce made it compulsory for anyone who lives or works in a place where children are cared for to register in the Childcare Persons Register (Personenregister Kinderopvang). This

¹ [Report of an inquiry into orphanage tourism \(Rapport enquête weeshuistoerisme\) \(2017\), Better Care Network Netherlands](#)

² [Monshausen \(2016\), From volunteering to volun-tourism, Tourism Watch – Bread for the World](#)

³ www.defenceforchildren.nl/wat-doen-we/themas/seksuele-uitbuiting/wetgeving/veroordelingen

requires a current, valid Certificate of Good Conduct (Verklaring Omtrent het Gedrag, of VOG) issued according to screening profile 84 (taking care of minors) or 86 (working in childcare).⁴ However, this does not apply to those who work abroad in daycare centres or children's homes through intermediary organisations. Moreover, founders and board members of charitable organisations set up in the Netherlands to finance shelters or children's homes abroad do not have to be registered in the Childcare Persons Register, according to the Chamber of Commerce. Defence for Children/ECPAT therefore calls on the Ministry of Justice and Security to investigate this matter and ensure that existing regulations are applied to working with children abroad.

Defence for Children/ECPAT calls on the government to implement recommendation 7: *“Promote responsible self-regulation among agencies and tour operators”*.

A recently established association, Vereniging Volunteer Correct (VVC), has developed a set of quality guidelines for voluntary work in partnership with a number of volunteer sending organisations.⁵ The guidelines apply a "no, unless" principle when assessing volunteer projects in residential care institutions. The guidelines lack criteria that state that affiliated organisations that send volunteers to orphanages should start a process to stop with the orphanage and promote projects based on family-based care. This was against the advice of Better Care Network Netherlands (BCNN). It makes it possible for VVC members to continue sending volunteers to residential care institutions, which then continue to be dependent on temporary volunteers. The VVC guidelines fail to acknowledge the attachment problems that affect children who grow up in institutions. Consequently, the harmful effects of orphanage tourism will not be stopped by the VVC quality guidelines. The Dutch trade association for outbound tourism, ANVR, advises against orphanage tourism, but does not impose conditions or requirements on its members in this respect. At the initiative of Defence for Children/ECPAT, BCNN is now developing an e-learning course on orphanage tourism for all members of the ANVR. Overall, there is attention to the issue in the sector and there are initiatives under way, but they are non-binding.

Self-regulation can work when organisations that offer volunteer work with children abroad comply with child protection regulations. If that does not happen and the sector makes its own guidelines without the involvement of child protection experts, the chances of substantial progress in the fight against orphanage tourism are reduced. Defence for Children/ECPAT therefore strongly urges the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation to follow the advice in Van Haga's initiative paper and enter into discussions with representatives of volunteer sector providers (such as the Vereniging Volunteer Correct), the travel sector, and non-governmental organisations that engage in orphanage tourism in order to establish a quality mark, guideline system or other form of (self)-regulation. These guidelines should be supported by child protection experts.

⁴ www.kvk.nl/advies-en-informatie/zzp/belangrijkste-wetswijzigingen-voor-zzpers-per-1-juli-2018/

⁵ www.volunteercorrect.nl/vvc-kwaliteitsrichtlijn

About Defence for Children/ECPAT and the Tourism Child Protection Code

Defence for Children stands up for children's rights on the basis of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and has branches in more than 40 countries. ECPAT protects children worldwide against sexual exploitation and works in more than 90 countries. Defence for Children and ECPAT are a unified organisation in the Netherlands. Defence for Children/ECPAT is the chair of Better Care Network Netherlands and manages the hotline www.meldkindersekstoerisme.nl .

Tourism Child Protection Code

Since 2003, Defence for Children/ECPAT has supported companies in the tourism sector in combating the sexual exploitation of children through ECPAT International's Tourism Child Protection Code (The Code). There are approximately 20 Code members in the Netherlands, including TUI, Corendon and the ANWB. Tourism companies that commit to the Code of Conduct train staff, inform customers, and integrate the topic into their contracts and codes of conduct for business partners. Since 2016, The Code does not accept membership from organisations that offer volunteer work in orphanages or excursions to orphanages. Organisations involved in voluntary activities limited to education, sports, and daycare are required to take additional child protection measures to minimise the risk of abuse and exploitation.