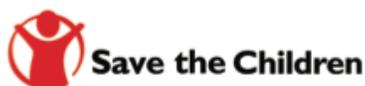


# Better Volunteering, Better Care

Collected viewpoints on  
international volunteering in  
residential care centres

Country focus: Cambodia

**Better  
Care  
Network**



**Better  
Care  
Network  
Netherlands**



**FAITHd  
ACTION  
INITIATIVE**



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## Methodology

This overview is intended to contribute to discussions on residential care centres as an anecdotal research piece on the situation in Cambodia. Cambodia was chosen as a focus country due to visibility of the issue in international media, and the ready access to key actors on the ground.

This overview was informed by online resources, academic and institutional literature, and input from a range of organisations and individuals working to address and raise awareness of this issue in Cambodia.

## Cambodian context

Decades of civil war, occupation by external forces, and brutal dictatorship have left Cambodia a struggling nation; one that is far less developed than many of its neighbours (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2013). Historical repression left the nation devoid of a whole generation of intellectuals, politicians, and an upper class; a society bereft of essential values, identity, and clear hopes for the future. While the population below the poverty line has fallen to 22.8%, the multi-dimensional poverty headcount is much higher at 45.9%. As stated by the UNDP 2013 Analysis on Cambodia, this implies that “individuals living above the income poverty line may still suffer deprivations in education, health and other living conditions consequent of this poverty.” As of 2010, close to half of the nation’s population were children under the age of 18, and 40% were chronically malnourished and 11% acutely malnourished, according to the Cambodia Demographic and Health Survey.

In 2013, the under-five mortality rate stood at 52 out of 1000 children, with many children dying from preventable diseases (United Nations (UN) Data, 2013). In addition, children from poor families can face a high risk of exploitation, child labour, and other challenges directly affecting their rights and wellbeing. Vulnerable children in need of special protection in Cambodia include: orphans, children with chronically ill parents, children of migrating families, abandoned children, young children infected or affected by HIV, child abuse victims (sexual, physical or emotional), street-living children, children in conflict with the law, child victims of sexual or labour exploitation, children with disabilities, children affected by drugs, and children whose basic physical needs are not being met (National Multi-Sectoral Orphans and Vulnerable Children Task Force, 2008).

## Siem Reap

This case study focuses in particular on Siem Reap; Cambodia’s biggest tourism destination, as orphanage volunteering and orphanage tourism are at their most prominent in this area. However, the situation in Siem Reap province is found

throughout the country; especially concentrated in major populations and tourist areas, such as Phnom Penh, Battambang and Sihanoukville.

Siem Reap city is situated on the Siem Reap river, approximately 10km away from the temples of Angkor. The number of tourists visiting Cambodia has been rising in recent years. In 2005, 1.4 million tourists visited Cambodia, 8 years later, In 2013, this number has tripled, with 4.2 million tourist arrivals registered (Ministry of Tourism, 2014). Siem Reap is the key tourist destination – demonstrated by the fact that Siem Reap airport saw nearly double the amount of arrivals than Cambodia’s capital city of Phnom Penh in 2013 (Ministry of Tourism, 2014).

The booming tourism industry in Siem Reap, however, does not have an obvious effect on the economic development of the surrounding province. This becomes apparent when leaving the central areas of the city and traveling just a few kilometres into the countryside. As with much of Cambodia, 80% of the province’s population are farmers, and 75% rice farmers (Commune Database Online, 2010). Large swathes of the population illegally migrate to Thailand for seasonal labour, where they can earn 10 times more per day working on construction sites than they can in their own villages (Bylander, 2013).

Education in rural Siem Reap, as in most areas of the country, is limited and of low quality. Although primary school enrolment stands at 116%, drop-out rates increase dramatically through high school, with lower secondary enrolment at 53%, and upper secondary at only 25% (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, 2014).

There are 104 registered non-governmental organisations in Siem Reap. These include 21 international NGOs and 63 local NGOs that are working in different ways to support the development of the area (Cooperation Committee for Cambodia, 2013). However, regulation of non-governmental organisations (hereafter referred to as NGOs) and international non-governmental organisations (hereafter referred to as INGOs) is not robust, and standards and checks developed at a policy level are infrequently implemented.

## Residential care in Cambodia

The following is the definition of residential care in Cambodia:

*“Institutional or residential care is a group living arrangement for children in which care is provided by remunerated adults for service provision, eg. orphanages, recovery centres and child protection centres. Children in such settings receive full-time care for an appropriate length of time.”*

- Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans, and Youth Rehabilitation (MoSVY) (2006)  
*Prakas on Minimum Standards on Residential Care*

In 2011, the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans, and Youth Rehabilitation (hereafter

referred to as MoSVY) estimated that there were 553,000 single and double orphaned children in Cambodia, with the majority of these children being cared for within their communities. In 2009 77% of the children living in residential centres had one or more living parents (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), n.d.). There has been a general increase in residential care centres in Cambodia but there is limited data on how many exist and how many children reside inside. The Ministry of Social Affairs database shows that for the entire country there has been an increase from 154 residential centres in 2005 to 269 in 2010 in the whole country.

*“MoSVY also recognises that since residential care facilities are increasing rapidly and not all facilities within their database are registered with MoSVY, but instead with other ministries including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Rural Development, the actual number of children in residential care could be much higher, as residential care is increasingly utilized as an alternative to parental, traditional community and extended family forms of care.”*

- MoSVY (2011) Attitudes towards Residential Care in Cambodia.”

It is estimated that nearly all of these facilities are funded by overseas donors and that international volunteers play an important role in funding them (MoSVY, 2011).

Although there is specific legislation in place to protect children and regulate the process of opening residential centres, including outlining the type of process that should take place for a child to be placed in one, implementation is still minimal. The Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans, and Youth Rehabilitation 2011 report *A Study of Attitudes Towards Residential Care in Cambodia*, states:

*“MoSVY has taken a strong stance in the Policy on Alternative Care for Children and the Minimum Standards, enacting policies and frameworks that favour family and community-based care over residential care, but these have not been adequately enforced.”*

MoSVY describes itself as powerless to prevent new residential care centres from opening. A large number of residential centres are therefore very likely to operate unregistered or registered under other ministries and are subsequently not properly monitored.

### **Residential Care Centres in Siem Reap**

The number of residential centres in Siem Reap has increased dramatically as the number of tourists has increased. It is widely recognised and well documented outside of Cambodia that residential care institutions are not a positive solution for children because of issues including delays in development, risk of physical and sexual abuse, neglect, and attachment disorders (Browne, 2009). As of 2010, the number of orphans in Siem Reap Province was not increasing – according to statistics from the National Committee for Sub-National Democratic Development which documented 5,047 orphans or abandoned persons under 18 years old in 2008, 4,445 in 2009 and 5,014 in 2010. Given this fact, the rapid development of Siem Reap city, the influx of development organisations working with children and improvements in healthcare, it

should have been a more likely outcome that residential centres would decrease rather than increase.

In 2010, the number of residential centres in Siem Reap was estimated to be around 30, based on a list developed by the Ministry of Social Affairs. In late 2013 a quick mapping exercise and online search put this number to more than 60 residential centres, indicating a drastic, continued increase. This mapping is not exhaustive and it is believed that there are many more residential centres in Siem Reap – many of which will be unregistered and will not appear on government lists.

Based on extrapolations from reports on the number of children in residential care centres in 2010, there could be more than 3,000 children currently living in residential care in Siem Reap province. Most of these are likely to reside in Siem Reap city, as there are a few examples of residential care centres located in rural Siem Reap province. However, in the Siem Reap city area, as of 2010, the number of orphaned or abandoned persons under the age of 18 was documented as 718 in the National Committee for Sub-Democratic Development database.

Residential centres for children in Siem Reap come in many guises, as is the case throughout the world. Some of these centres serve a legitimate need, are set up in the best interests of the children, and have robust child protection policies in place, strong social work support, and exit / reintegration strategies for the children. However, as most specialists in the area agree, these kinds of facilities are the exception rather than the rule.

It is common to find institutions in Siem Reap that have been set up because of a perceived need. Often well-intentioned foreigners, responding to obvious poverty in the region and the number of seemingly vulnerable children, set up institutions believing it is the best way to help. These institutions vary in their sophistication, with some demonstrating best practice, and others lacking in resources, expertise, and policies to adequately respond to the needs of the children in their care (MoSVY, 2011).

A third type of organisation, which is becoming increasingly common in Siem Reap, is institutions set up specifically as business opportunities. The influx of money and gifts to children's institutions has inspired some people to set up their own institutions, specifically to generate income, with limited consideration for the welfare of children. The children in these institutions are often either bought from their families, or are there on the promise of access to a superior quality of education which may, or may not, depending on the institution, be forthcoming. At the worst, these institutions have been known to deliberately keep children poorly clothed and malnourished in order to generate donations from visitors, and there have been recorded instances of physical and sexual abuse. These types of institution have caught the attention of international media in recent years featuring in videos and articles on *Al Jazeera*, *The Guardian*, and *The New York Times*:

- [www.aljazeera.com/programmes/peopleandpower/2012/05/201252243030438171.html](http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/peopleandpower/2012/05/201252243030438171.html)

- [www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/02/cambodia-child-protection-workers-call-for-end-to-booming-orphanage-tourism](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/02/cambodia-child-protection-workers-call-for-end-to-booming-orphanage-tourism)
- [www.nytimes.com/video/world/asia/10000002940698/cambodias-scam-orphanages.html](http://www.nytimes.com/video/world/asia/10000002940698/cambodias-scam-orphanages.html)

## Child protection issues in residential care centres in Siem Reap

One of the most significant problems associated with the plethora of residential care centres in Siem Reap, is that the majority show signs of being developed for the purpose of using children to benefit the owners and managers, rather than being established in the best interests of the children themselves. This is evidenced by some of the problems listed below, as well as by the institutions' marketing strategies, which entice visitors and volunteers on the basis of financial need.

It should also be noted that the occurrence of the child protection breaches outlined below are selected examples from a collection of many similar stories provided by informants. It should be understood, however, that all of the residential care centres referred to below have had, or are still receiving, volunteers from large, established, sending companies.

### Separation of children from families

There is no formal research or data on the reasons why children in Siem Reap, or Cambodia as a whole, enter residential care facilities. One of the major reasons is thought to be poverty. However, it is apparent that residential care in Cambodia is being used as a 'solution' to almost any type of difficulty that children encounter, whether they have been trafficked, sexually abused, or suffer from disabilities (MoSVY, 2011). There are increasing reports of children entering residential centres on the promise of access to education and other opportunities. This is despite the fact that institutionalisation of children is declared to be considered as the "last resort" by the Cambodian government and that it has been shown to have a variety of potential negative effects upon the long-term development of children (MoSVY, 2011).

### Inadequate / inappropriate human resources

Volunteer organisations promote their programmes by emphasising that volunteers are needed to care for children in residential care centres. This is often an indication that there is a lack of staff caring for the children in the residential centres:

*"Volunteers at these placements help to dress, feed and wash the children, who are always happy to be in the company of volunteers, as disabled people are often rejected in Cambodian society"*

- International Volunteer HQ, "Orphanage / Childcare" opportunities in Cambodia

At the same time, often volunteers are not required to have any special skills to care for, or work with, vulnerable children. The Minimum Standards for Residential Care in Cambodia states that staff working in a caregiving position are not allowed to be

younger than 25 years old (MoSVY, 2006). Volunteer organisations, therefore, allowing 18-25 year olds to work with children in residential centres in this capacity, breach these Minimum Standards.

“Volunteers must be 18 years or older on the program start date and have at least a high school education”

- International Volunteer HQ – Volunteer in Cambodia

The lack of staff to care for the children was evident when one undercover reporter from the Swedish radio show *Kaliber* was repeatedly left alone to care for the children in a residential care centre. When volunteering in Siem Reap, he was left with the responsibility to care for the children and was allowed to bring the children out of the centre by himself.

*Many young people living in residential care spoke of emotional neglect from staff. The very low staff-to-child ration in many residential care facilities supports their claims.*

- MoSVY (2011) *Attitudes Towards Residential Care in Cambodia.*

### **Internal displacement of children**

*“When I was 10 years old or so, me and my six friends where moved from an orphanage in Phnom Penh to the orphanage in Siem Reap. We all knew how to play traditional instruments and how to do traditional dance. In the new orphanage nobody knew how to do that so we were brought to live there so that we could perform for tourists.”*

- Care leaver, 18 years old.

As suggested by MoSVY’s report in 2011, and by informants involved with child protection in Cambodia, when children are removed from the care of their parents, sometimes parents do not know when or if they will see their children again. While some residential care centres maintain a relationship with parents, others prevent parents from visiting their children, and some institutions even move the children to other places in the country without their family’s consent. As evidenced by the quote above, children may be moved in order to populate institutions in other parts of the country that need more children, or children skilled in music or dance.

The residential care centre referred to above was heavily funded and supported by tourists and volunteer walk-ins as well as volunteer placement agencies. One of the long-term supporters of this particular residential centre was a British man, who later moved on to open his own residential centre and volunteer program in Siem Reap. He brought two of the children from that centre to stay in his residence. Two years later he had expanded his organisation to two residential centres for 60 children. He was subsequently arrested for sexually abusing more than 10 boys in the shelters. Earlier, he had also been arrested for having abused another group of boys on the street but was released due to lack of evidence. The local director was charged with the illegal

removal of a child to the centre (BBC Wales, 2011).

At the time of these arrests, the children were moved to yet another residential centre where they still remain. The initial locally-run Cambodian residential care centre moved location and changed its name, but it continues with a similar modus operandi.

### **Foreign sexual abuse**

Action Pour Les Enfants (APLE) is a non-governmental organisation dedicated to ending child sexual abuse and exploitation in Cambodia. Their work has exposed other instances of foreign sexual abuse in residential care centres:

*“The number of institution-based exploitation cases is increasing in Cambodia. The fact that a significant part of these child sex offenders have previous convictions in their country of origin underlines the need for effective measures. All organisations that work directly or indirectly with children should have an implemented child protection policy. One crucial element of a child protection policy is that all employees in these organisations have to provide a police clearance certificate before they start working. However, a good child protection policy contains multiple measures to avoid child sex offenders from entering the organisation. In addition, the Cambodian government should implement more effective control and sanction mechanisms to prevent abusive and exploitive situations inside alternative care facilities. At the moment, the Minimum Standards for Alternative Care are not enforced consistently. Unregistered alternative care facilities and alternative care facilities that do not meet the Minimum Standards for Alternative Care often are allowed to continue their practice for a long time.”*

- APLE (2014) *Investigating Child Sex Offenders*

### **Physical abuse and neglect**

There have been media reports, both in Cambodia and internationally, on the poor conditions of both locally and internationally run residential care centres. The reports cite poor hygiene, lack of access to healthcare, and other issues breaching the government's Minimum Standards for residential care and children's rights. The government has closed down a few of these residential centres with support from NGOs (*Phnom Penh Post*, 2013).

In other cases volunteers, placed by volunteer placement organisations, took notice of the poor living conditions of the children. In the featured volunteer stories on Project Abroad's website a volunteer describes the following situation in a residential care centre in which she was placed by a sending company:

*“The boys on the other hand used to live in what can only be described as a shack. The shack was in such a terrible state, no better really than a dump for the chickens and ducks to lay their eggs and roost in. There were no walls, mere cardboard, clothes were hung on barbed wire, there was no door, no flooring, just the natural muddy earth, and no electricity.*

Volunteer, Project Abroad's website

It is evident that volunteer organisations are still sending volunteers to these organisations, despite such conditions being reported.

### **Child Labour**

Children living in residential care centres are used in many different ways to solicit donations from foreign visitors. Informants reported that for many years in Siem Reap it has been commonplace for centres to send out children, sometimes late at night, to solicit visitors to the centres. The children frequent the popular nightspots for tourists, such as the Old Market area where tourists come for dining and drinking (*Phnom Penh Post*, 2013). At times, volunteers would accompany the children. In other another case the director sent children out to beg for money to support the residential centre.

Another popular way for residential care centres to solicit funding from tourists is through traditional Apsara dance performances. These are advertised by posters and flyers in restaurants and hotels and are endorsed by postings on famous travel sites, such as Trip Advisor. The income generated from dancing and visitors sometimes reaches such levels that it actually covers the majority of the costs for the whole residential care centre, meaning that the children labour for their whole existence, including food, materials, and staff salaries (Assisting Cambodian Orphans and the Disabled Organisation (ACODO) Financial Report, 2011).

### **Visitors to residential care centres**

The lines between volunteering, voluntourism, and tourism are very blurred. Many people who volunteer have ended their placement feeling that they didn't really make a contribution but rather were just visiting. Others who visit an institution for a day often feel they have been engaged in volunteering. It is impossible to say how many of the people visiting Siem Reap end up visiting an residential care centre or volunteering in one. While some people do engage in long-term volunteering placements of a few months or more, the majority of visits are short trips with the average stay visitors in Siem Reap being only 6.75 days (Ministry of Tourism, 2014). This doesn't give people long enough to gain any kind of in-depth understanding of the complexity of the situation with which they are interacting.

While some people arrive in Siem Reap specifically intending to volunteer, having arranged placements through volunteer agencies or directly with institutions, others arrive on holiday and are motivated to volunteer at some point during their stay. Many residential centres in Siem Reap rely on volunteers for their funding (MoSVY 2011). Therefore, the centres overtly advertise opportunities to volunteer or spend time with the children. Residential care centres operating in the best interests of the children would usually be at pains not to disclose their location to the general public, and would be careful about what images and personal details of children are available online. However, many institutions make their location readily available on their website, and in flyers and promotional material in local hotels and restaurants. Often the language and messaging they use encourages strangers to build personal relationships with children

both before and during a visit – which can play a large part in creating and fuelling some of the other problems outlined in this report.

*GSC volunteers have the opportunity to become part of the center's extended family as they live, work, and play with the children and bond with the local staff.*

Global Service Corps, Orphanage Care Program

Even by spending a short time in Siem Reap, it is clear how common visits to residential care centres have become. Examples demonstrating this include:

- Flyers from tourist orphanages found at restaurants, cafes, and hotels. These residential care centres may promote dance shows by the children, offer volunteering placements, or provide other opportunities to engage with children. Taking sunset trips to the temples with children from residential centres, whose services are available to pour champagne, have been cited as orphanage experiences from past visitors.
- Temple tour guides offering visits to residential care centres. Many tour guides are offered payment by residential care centres in return for bringing tourists to visit. Tour guides offer visitors the chance to visit a centre, where their engagement may end in a brief visit or extend to future visits in a volunteering capacity.
- Tuk tuk and moto drivers offer opportunities to visit residential care centres when picking up guests or when guests make enquiries.
- Famous tourist destinations, such as floating villages, also include floating residential care centres where there are clear scams to buy bags of rice at highly inflated prices that are later sold back to the seller. Children live on a tiny square boat which tourist boats pass by so that passengers can be convinced to buy things for the children. Some residential care centres are also situated along roads to tourist sites.

### **Residential centres accepting volunteers**

Many residential care centres in Siem Reap work with international volunteers. To understand the approach that residential care centres have towards volunteering, websites of the 62 mapped residential centres in Siem Reap were examined. 23% did not have a website or the website was unavailable during the research period. 15% of centres did not have any information about volunteering.<sup>1</sup> However, 61% of these residential care centres advertised volunteer opportunities, with 57% offering direct volunteer work with children in different forms. A lack of child protection policies and procedures is evident with only 23% having some form of statement of child protection or request for police background checks in relation to volunteering. In some church-run

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<sup>1</sup> This does not necessarily mean that they don't work with visitors and volunteers, however; as some webpages included pictures of foreigners interacting with children in what looks like volunteering activities i.e. in a classroom setting.

orphan homes, the offer of volunteering was specified as a mission trip.

For one of the residential care centres examined it was unclear how the organisation worked with volunteers and children, since the current volunteering opportunities offered focused on working with adults in other programs rather than on their residential centre. Of all these residential centres, there was only one that stated their focus when working with volunteers was on building the capacity of local staff. This centre, therefore, didn't seem to offer any direct volunteering work with children.

It is possible that residential centres have child protection policies and procedures that are not advertised on their webpages. However, it is also well known that several of the long-established orphanage tourism residential centres have child protection policies available to those who ask, but which are not actually used or put into practice.

*“Once you enter the premises, it is very clear that they are [the child protection policies] just documents and the practices described are not being observed. Anyone with a keen eye on child protection issues will notice many problems including lack of staff, poor hygiene, crowded sleeping areas, violence between children, and reports of violence and abuse from staff. In addition, volunteers are unsupervised, creating additional risks or opportunities for child sex offenders to build harmful relationships with children.”*

Christian Larsson, Angkor Hospital for Children, Siem Reap

While a child protection policy and steps towards organisational transparency are important, they must be well implemented and understood by all stakeholders in the organisation in order to have any real value. Without such implementation, there is the risk that such policies become more akin to marketing tools to project a sense of responsibility.

### **Volunteer sending organisations working with residential care centres**

A quick internet search for volunteering opportunities in residential care centres in Cambodia provided a list of 25 volunteer sending organisations. These organisations are effectively travel agents who facilitate placements for volunteers in residential care centres in Cambodia. As demonstrated above, few residential care centres have adequate child protection policies. This is also the case for many of the volunteer agencies who work with such centres. 64% of volunteer sending organisations examined have no child protection policy or statement describing their effort to protect children and 44% do not request any kind of police background check.

Nearly half of the volunteer sending organisations examined offer placements in residential care centres in Siem Reap. On the website of 3 companies it is not possible to determine where in Cambodia their residential care volunteer opportunities are based. All of these companies charge for the service of placing volunteers. None of the companies/organisations that send volunteers reveal on their webpages who their residential care partners are, a strategy which makes it possible for them to prevent people applying directly to the residential care centres themselves but also diminishes

their operational transparency. Some companies have restricted direct contact with the projects for their customers through their terms and conditions.

*“3.19 Prohibition against direct contact. You agree, understand and acknowledge that Rustic has invested considerable resources in securing Your Placement and/or Project, As a consequence, You agree that You shall not directly contact any Project Staff, Volunteer Coordinator, school or any other similar contact or resource provided or otherwise disclosed to You by Rustic and You agree that You shall not, under any circumstances, directly enter into any services arrangement with any such person or entity, without Rustic’s prior written approval that conflicts with any of Your obligations hereunder to Rustic.”*

Rustic Volunteers, Terms and Conditions - Volunteer Program

It should be noted that it is a possibility that once information is requested from a volunteer company, they might provide more comprehensive information or requests about police background checks. However, there have been several cases of media investigation that have shown that companies are not following the child protection and police background check procedures that they advertise.

This was the case when the investigating radio show *Kaliber* went undercover to volunteer in a residential centre in Siem Reap. When applying for the placement with one of the largest volunteer placement organisations, Projects Abroad, the journalists were asked to provide two references and a police background check. To test the company, they didn’t submit the police background check but instead gave two references. The company never questioned why they did not provide the police background check and never contacted the referees. The reporters were placed, shortly after this first contact, in a residential care centre in Siem Reap, where they had unsupervised access to the children and could even bring them out of the residential centre unaccompanied by local staff members.

Child protection specialists working in the region view this lack of child protection awareness and responsibility from volunteer sending organisations as a major problem. Having a proper child protection policy not only shows that the company takes the issue seriously, but it also sends a statement to volunteers applying with the company. Effective policies aim to ensure that volunteers are aware of the consequences of mistreatment or abuse of children, as well as clarifying what volunteers should do if they see abuse or if they themselves are put in difficult positions.

## Volunteer experiences

There are a variety of accounts of volunteer experiences in Siem Reap, and in Cambodia, easily available online. The first review quoted below is an example of an experience shared by a volunteer as a way of positively rating the experiences. The second excerpt is taken from the travel blog of an individual who volunteered at an residential care centre in Siem Reap.

*“We worked at the orphanage each morning until mid afternoon; it was hard work but always well appreciated. During my trip, we built a stage of tiles, so that the children could put on recitals to raise money for the orphanage; rebuilt roads that had sunk and flooded, worked in the rice paddies and also spent a lot of time bonding with the children there.”*

- Posted by HappyCamper, reviewing an experience with Rustic Pathways, on GoOverseas.com

*“If there was a place I found which needed help, then surely me showing up on their front door lending a hand would be good enough? How right I was - I was lucky enough to spot an old college friend on Facebook who had done some volunteering at an orphanage in Cambodia; so he sent me a few details and I waited until I got to Siem Reap. I was instructed to email “Mom” who runs the orphanage, but only use simple English - when I did so I was surprised to get a reply almost immediately stating “Yes, come tomorrow from 9am. You can teach.” God, what had I got myself into? I’m no teacher!”*

- Posted by Atredgidgo on Travellerspoint Blog, Bish Bash Bosh and Away

### **Experiences of Bouny Te, former orphanage volunteer in Siem Reap and founder of the Women’s Resource Centre**

Bouny began volunteering in Cambodia in 2007, when, in her words, “the concept of orphanage tourism was pretty much unknown, although the practice was common.” With Cambodian heritage and a minor in early childhood education, Bouny not only was more qualified to work with children than most volunteers she encountered, but also spoke the local language.

Bouny volunteered with Cambodia Orphan Save Organisation (COSO) for three months and saw many other visitors and volunteers, both in COSO and in Siem Reap in general, during that time.

*“There were so many volunteers in Siem Reap – they were going anywhere that they could find a place.”*

Bouny recalls that the children were kept in very poor conditions, and they would never actually receive the donations that were given to the residential care centre. It was accepted that the institution didn’t have enough money to send them to school.

*“The children were very well “trained” and knew what to say and what not to say – even to a Khmer speaker. They wouldn’t give any answers about their families.”*

After a while Bouny became suspicious about how donations to the residential care centre were being used as, while it was obvious the director was making money, the institution remained in a very poor condition. In addition, children would come in and out

of the centre all the time. There was no regulation in terms of who was staying at the centre. This, alongside other instances she encountered involving inappropriate behaviour and sexual abuse, led her to report residential care centre to the relevant authorities and ask more general questions about the orphanage industry in Siem Reap.

Bouny's experience in Cambodia motivated her to return to Canada to study to be a social worker. Feeling that one of the roots of the residential care problem was the lack of support for mothers in Cambodia, Bouny founded the Women's Resource Centre in Siem Reap. WRC is a drop-in centre providing emotional support, information and referrals, and informal education for women and girls in Siem Reap.

COSO orphanage where Bouny volunteered is still open, but now operates under the name Cambodia Development Organisation (CDO). CDO's website currently states:

*"We do ask that, if you are planning ahead on volunteering, please email us so that we know when you expect to be with us. However, if you find yourself in Siem Reap with a day or two to spare, then do just turn up and help in any way you can."*

- "Volunteering for CDO"

### **Experiences of Jane Reas, former orphanage volunteer in Siem Reap and author of 'Boy, have we got a vacation for you': Orphanage Tourism in Cambodia and the Commodification and Objectification of the Orphaned Child.**

Jane Reas travelled to Cambodia in 2008 having pre-arranged a volunteering placement in an residential care centre. When she arrived in Siem Reap, she was confused by some of the experiences she encountered while volunteering:

*"One day there was a coach-load of professionals from Singapore at the orphanage there for team-building exercises. There were even orphanages that would arrange sunset tours for tourists, and the children would pour champagne for the visitors as they sat in deck chairs."*

Some time later, Jane decided to return to Cambodia and conduct research for an academic paper on the phenomenon of orphanage tourism in Cambodia. As part of her research she visited about 30 projects in Siem Reap and talked to founders, managers, and staff. She found it very easy to access the institutions and could "walk in anywhere". Jane also interviewed many people who had been tourist volunteers at orphanages in Siem Reap. In her experience, many people were uncomfortable with their experiences:

*"Almost without exception people said: - 'I was left with so many questions' – 'I put it to the back of my mind, as I didn't know what to think about it' – 'I wasn't sure how to deal with it'".*

Jane has completed her PhD thesis on the topic.

## Positive change

There has been a great deal of media attention on the issues surrounding international volunteering in residential care centres and orphanage tourism in Cambodia. One of the earliest articles on the subject of was published in the *Phnom Penh Post* in 2007. Entitled “Orphanage Tourism: A Questionable Industry”, the article focused on the lack of regulation and poor standards of care in residential care centres, and the common practice of pulling children out of education to perform dance shows for tourists. However, it wasn’t until a few years later that the issue seemed to reach the attention of international media. Richter and Norman’s 2010 paper on AIDS orphan tourism in South Africa captured the attention of the UK newspaper *The Guardian*; interestingly Cambodia was the country chosen to open the piece, despite focusing on the research on South Africa.

Michael Horton from ConCert, an organisation that seeks to connect tourists in Cambodia with appropriate ways of becoming involved with NGOs, spoke at the WTM World Responsible Tourism Day in 2011 and 2012 about the situation of residential care centres in Cambodia. Harold Goodwin, Professor of Responsible Tourism at Manchester University, directly connects these presentations with subsequent action from Responsibletravel.com to remove references to orphanage placements from their website.

In the same year, MoSVY released their paper *Attitudes Towards Residential Care in Cambodia*. Supported by UNICEF, this paper generated controversy by drawing attention to the fact that over 75% of children in Cambodian “orphanages” have one or more living parents. Also in 2011, Friends International launched their “Children Are Not Tourist Attractions” campaign with the support of UNICEF. The campaign was launched as part of their wider “ChildSafe” initiative, which seeks to educate tourists about the risks to children in SE Asia. Featuring a micro-site, flyers, and leaflets, the campaign targets people online before they travel, and through restaurants and guesthouses during their time in Cambodia.

In 2012 the *Al Jazeera* People and Power documentary on orphanage tourism Cambodia was aired and articles on the issue appeared in *The Telegraph* and *The Huffington Post*. In addition, this was the year Orphanages.no was launched. While aimed at looking at the broader global issues residential care, the website contains many examples and resources from Cambodia. In 2013, Daniela Papi, the founder of an NGO and educational travel organisation in Cambodia, who is particularly active in advocating against orphanage tourism and volunteering, was featured in Radio 4’s Four Thought, and a related BBC News Magazine piece on the relative merits on volunteering, with a special focus on orphanage volunteering. The BBC News Magazine article generated nearly 800 comments from readers.

Outside of the Anglophone media, the documentary by the Swedish radio show *Kaliber*, focusing on orphanage volunteering in Cambodia, was released in 2013. Subsequent

related media included coverage in Finland and the Netherlands by outlets such as NRK, Svenska Yle, and Dagens Nyheter.

In 2014, a renewed effort by *The Guardian* (this time from their Australia office) brought fresh attention to the issue in Cambodia and further contributed to the debate about the potential negative impacts of volunteering. The New York Times covered the issue in June 2014 with a short video documentary entitled “Cambodia’s Scam Orphanages”.

Some of this media coverage has significantly stimulated public interest, and child protection specialists and actors working in this topic in Cambodia have been approached by numerous students and documentary makers interested in covering the issue for academic and media projects, even in the last few months.

It is difficult to assess the impact of this coverage, and especially as to whether it resonates beyond those already active in this field, although many feel that there is a higher level of dialogue and awareness among travellers and volunteers. Actors on the ground in Cambodia are heartened that the issue is being represented in international media, and they are able to use the coverage in order to support their work and advocacy activities.

## Final thoughts and recommendations

Ideally, volunteering should not involve direct contact with children, but rather follow models similar to those where a volunteer works next to the local professional. However, even in this case, the reality is that many NGOs in Cambodia don’t have the resources or systems to manage a volunteer program effectively and responsibly, and do not understand the child protection risks involved. As such, even these models of volunteering can leave children open to the same risks of exploitation. It is important that, rather than recommending one model over another, stakeholders are encouraged to develop an understanding of child protection in a variety of settings to enable them to make appropriate choices. Possible next steps relevant to Siem Reap and Cambodia include:

- A mapping of existing residential centres (registered and unregistered) in Cambodia, including a count of the number of children living in each.
- Minimum standards check-ups for all existing residential centres.
- Lobbying and support of government ministries and departments to implement a National Alternative Care policy which outlines the types of care that are most appropriate for children who legitimately can no longer live with their biological parents.
- Development of services by the government and NGOs to support the safe reintegration of children from residential care centres.
- More public campaigns (similar to Children Are Not Tourist Attractions) targeting tourists in more languages.
- Child protection training for hotel managers and staff.

- Advocacy targeting donor forums and meetings to encourage them to ensure robust child protection policies and procedures in organisations that they support, and a focus on working with organisations to move towards alternative models, such as reintegration and supporting families.

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It is through collaboration and connections with the following organisations that the collection of the information and insights in this case study has been made possible:

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Angkor Hospital for Children  
Cambodia Social Work Network  
First Step Cambodia  
Friends International  
First Step Cambodia  
Globalteer  
Grace House Community Center  
Independent Residential Care Network  
Interweave  
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