

The Code Voluntourism Policy

Does your business
include **voluntourism**
products with children
or visits to orphanages in
its tourism programs?



We protect
children in
travel and
tourism

For more information visit us at
www.thecode.org and www.ecpat.org

The Code Voluntourism Policy

As part of sustainable and responsible travel and tourism development, the industry must ensure that only responsible and safe forms of voluntourism are undertaken.

Companies should exclude visits to orphanages from tourism packages as it drives institutionalisation which causes harm to children. Without regulation and care, some forms of voluntourism allow un-vetted access to children that puts them at risk of being trafficked and sexually exploited.

To address this issue, The Code developed a voluntourism policy for its current and prospective members, in addition to its main six criteria to protect children.¹

1 When companies join The Code they commit to six essential steps to keep children safe.

The Code Policy outlines criteria and provides guidelines for:



Organisations interested in membership of The Code



Organisations offering voluntourism products, or considering offering such products



Organisations currently involved in orphanage activities as a tourist attraction

This policy outlines the risks of various forms of voluntourism, including the critical risks noted in orphanage-related activities² in relation to child protection, and states the criteria by which organisations (private commercial companies, social enterprises and charities) may apply to join The Code. This document is mainly intended for use by the Secretariat of The Code and Local Code Representatives (LCRs) when assessing a membership application, and as a guide to potential Code members outlining the conditions under which they can be considered for membership. This document can be also used by other organisations and entities, to protect children.

2 The Code supports efforts of organisations advocating for deinstitutionalisation of child care systems, towards foster care and other family-based care models, while strengthening the capacity of social services to identify children that are at risk of being abandoned or separated from their families. More at: www.bettercarenetwork.org

The document is divided in five parts:

- 1 Definition and scope
- 2 Risks of voluntourism in relation to child protection
- 3 Selection criteria for new members of The Code
- 4 Criteria related to voluntourism
- 5 Additional materials and resources

1 Definition and scope

The term 'volunteer tourism' or 'voluntourism' is used in many ways. Therefore, definition and delimitation of scope is necessary.

The travel and tourism industry proposes a variety of possibilities including the dimension of 'doing something good and meaningful at the same time'. While volunteering is a valuable way to contribute to society that can bring positive benefits to both the community and the volunteer, certain forms of voluntourism have been shown to have a range of harmful consequences, including increasing the risk of child sexual abuse and exploitation.³

The diversity of packages and customer behaviour varies and keeps evolving. For example, it may be the 'consumerist' way of booking a two-week trip teaching English to children in Bolivia, where the customer takes annual leave 'with a special touch to it' and with a departure possible at short notice. It may also be a 'local village tour' for example in Cambodia, stopping for a couple of hours at a local orphanage to practice English, help with arts or sports activities and take pictures. Alternatively, it may be the long thought-out process of preparing, via a volunteering agency, a nine-month volunteering commitment helping a local NGO in organising extracurricular sporting activities for public school-going children, for example in Kenya.

According to the ABTA (Association of British Travel Agents) Volunteer Tourism Guidelines (2016) volunteer tourism is generally comprised of the following:⁴

3 ECPAT International (2019). *Thematic Note, Sexual Exploitation of Children & Voluntourism*.

4 ABTA (2016). *Volunteer Tourism Guidelines*. Practical guide for travel companies delivering volunteer tourism experiences.

- Travel experiences purchased as part of a package that includes flight, accommodation and/or other elements of the trip (e.g. work placement);
- The opportunity for tourists to ‘work’ while on a trip;
- The expectation that work is delivered ‘free of charge’ at the point of delivery;
- The concept that the work the traveller (or volunteer) does, will benefit the recipients and the tourist at the point of delivery.

Definition of voluntourism:

Within these guidelines, volunteer tourism – voluntourism – is defined as organised and packaged tourist trips with a duration of a few hours to a year in which the main purpose is to volunteer. The volunteer provides their ‘work’ within the destination free of charge. While the concept of “voluntourism” generally includes an element of international travel, similar risks to children also apply in the context of domestic and local travel and tourism, when a person is allowed to volunteer with and for children in an organisation or an orphanage without previous background checks (also when such activities may not be organised by a company).

Definition of an orphanage⁵:

Formal terminology refers to ‘institutional care’, which is an important distinction to highlight as other alternative care systems are generally in the best interest of the child. As ‘orphanage’ is a popular term, this policy provides the following description. The term ‘orphanage’ is often used to denote forms of residential care (whether they care for orphaned children or not) including hostels, shelters, children’s homes, children’s villages etc. However, this term is not representative, as in practice these facilities often admit children who are not actually orphans.⁶ Residential care refers to any group living arrangement where children are looked after by paid staff in a specially designated facility. It covers a wide variety of settings ranging from emergency shelters and small group homes, to larger-scale institutions such as orphanages or children’s homes. This can include orphanages, children’s centres, shelters, boarding facilities, transit homes, children’s villages and other such non-family-based settings.

5 Better Care Network (2016). [Newsletter on ‘orphanage’ voluntourism.](#)

6 UNICEF (2018). [Volunteering In Nepal.](#)

2 Risks of voluntourism in relation to child protection

Three main types of voluntourism products are typically offered: environmental protection oriented activities; activities with and for children; and animal care activities.

Prior to the collapse in tourism due to the COVID-19 pandemic (2020), voluntourism in its various forms was on the rise. The market for 'meaningful holidays and experiences' has been attracting many travellers and the forecast over the coming years is that this expansion will resume during the recovery phase of the travel and tourism, as part alternatives to mass tourism. Estimates of the size of this market vary widely, however a 2018 study estimated the amount spent by around 10 million volunteers at around USD 2 billion annually.⁷

The Code policy specifically considers and applies to voluntourism activities that involve direct or indirect contact with children. Activities with children encompass items such as: residential centres for children (including orphanages), day-care centres, teaching, sports activities, creative classes, etc. Activities that put children in direct contact with adults, in particular when criminal background checks are not required, present risks that cannot be reduced to zero, but can certainly be minimised. This is consistent with the approach of The Code initiative, which works with travel and tourism companies to manage and minimise the risk of trafficking and sexual exploitation of children, fully aware that zero risk does not exist.

⁷ Bennett, C, Collins, J, Heckscher, Z. and Papi-Thornton, D. (2018). Learning service: The Essential Guide to Volunteering Abroad. Cornwall: Red Press.

As the demand for voluntourism grew, some organisations such as the Better Care Network⁸ noted a pattern in some tourism destinations of organisations creating new residential care facilities for children (orphanages), with a view to capitalise on this opportunity to gain financial support from tourists. A range of international actors have been drawing attention to the issue of how voluntourism, and the demand for ‘orphanage’ experiences, is fuelling a rise in the number of residential care centres, and encouraging the separation of children from their families in countries across the world.

The role of tourism in such children’s rights concerns is highlighted in the Children’s Rights and Business Principles and the Committee on the Rights of the Child on the Impact of the Business Sector on Children’s Rights.⁹ A global initiative, [*Better Volunteering Better Care*](#), led by Better Care Network and Save the Children UK, has documented the negative impact of volunteering in orphanages and other forms of residential care centres for children. It has brought together actors from the travel, education, child protection and faith-based communities to promote responsible volunteering alternatives.

In 2019, the International Forum for Volunteering in Development launched the [*Global Standard for Volunteering for Development*](#). This is the first standard of its kind, and will support organisations that work with volunteers to improve their practice and their impact. While not focused on tourism specifically, the Global Standard gives extensive guidance to volunteer organisations so that all community members and volunteers are kept safe and free from harm. Specifically, in line with The Code’s voluntourism policy, the standard calls upon volunteer organisations not to accept working with companies that have orphanages and other residential care centres incorporated (or with the possibility to incorporate) in tourism programmes or packages.

8 Better Care Network was launched in 2003 as an interagency initiative aimed at strengthening and supporting family and community-based care options for children and discouraging the use of residential care.

9 UNICEF (2012). [*Children’s Rights and Business Principles*](#) and UNICEF (2013). [*General comment No. 16 On State obligations regarding the impact of the business sector on children’s rights*](#).

Much attention has been focused on this particular issue in Cambodia and other countries in Southern Asia (such as Nepal) primarily due to a wider availability of research and campaigns by organisations such as Friends International¹⁰. However, child protection experts have expressed concern on this matter in over 20 countries worldwide – including countries in Africa and Central and Southern America.¹¹

The key concerns over volunteering in residential care centres and visiting orphanages as a tourism excursion include the following:

- **It fuels the growth of orphanages** focused on financial gain rather than ensuring the well-being of children, by drawing funding and resources to institutions that benefit from recruiting more children and keeping them for as long as possible. Children in these institutions are often used as a commercial means to attract funds through donations or volunteers¹². Over sixty years of research demonstrates that residential care can be very harmful to a child’s development, and the Guidelines of the Alternative Care of Children, welcomed unanimously by the UN General Assembly in 2009, state it should generally be used only as a temporary option for children requiring alternative care¹³. In 2019, the UN General Assembly adopted the Resolution on the Rights of the Child calling upon states to phase out the use of institutions and replace them with more appropriate forms of care; and to take appropriate measures to prevent and address the harms related to volunteering programmes in orphanages, including in the context of tourism, which can lead to trafficking and exploitation¹⁴. The resources channelled into residential care centres from voluntourism create a scenario where this too often becomes the first option for a child, especially in countries where no other forms of alternative care, such as foster care, exist.

10 Child Safe Movement. More at: www.thinkchildsafe.org

11 Better Care Network [Advocacy and Outputs](#).

12 The Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation with technical support from UNICEF (2011). [With the best of intentions: A study of attitudes towards Residential Care in Cambodia](#).

13 UN General Assembly 64/142(2009). [Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children](#).

14 [Key Recommendations](#) developed by Better Care Network and endorsed by 256 organisations, agencies and networks, including ECPAT International (2019) and A/RES/74/133. Resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly on 18 December 2019.

- **It separates children from their families.** Approximately 80% of children in residential care centres worldwide have one or more living parent¹⁵. Many families in poverty are persuaded that residential care is a good option for their child, without fully understanding the risks involved. Providing resources, materials, and western volunteers all serve as an incentive for parents to believe their child will be better off in an orphanage. Volunteers are misled to believe that children in these centres have no one else to care for them, potentially leading to misguided attempts to ‘adopt’ children.
- **It can disrupt children’s development.** The flow of even well-meaning volunteers means constant need for adjustments on children’s parts. There is evidence that volunteering leads to children becoming attached to multiple short-term visitors and volunteers, and are subject to repeat abandonment when these volunteers leave. These repeated patterns of attachment and abandonment are not healthy for the positive development of vulnerable children¹⁶. Repeated abandonment can have serious effects and generate trauma to children, in particular those who have been victims of various forms of violence.
- **It can put children at risk of exploitation and abuse.** While many volunteers have the best intentions, the lack of a screening process and proper supervision allows those with malicious intent easy access to vulnerable children. While a stranger would never be allowed to enter a school, much less a group home, in the countries where volunteers arrive without prior screening/criminal background checks and safeguards in place, somehow this has become an acceptable process overseas. This can, and in some instances has, led to the sexual abuse and exploitation of children¹⁷.

15 Better Care Network (2010). Working Paper: [Families, not Orphanages](#) and Better Care Network (2016). [Children in Institutions: The Global Picture](#).

16 Linda M. Richter & Amy Norman (2010). AIDS orphan tourism: A threat to young children in residential care, *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies*.

17 Australian Government, Australian Institute of Criminology (2019). [Benevolent harm: Orphanages, voluntourism and child sexual exploitation in South-East Asia](#), *Trends & issues in crime and criminal justice*.

In the context of COVID-19 pandemic, increasing vulnerabilities have been identified, including economic hardship, more time spent online, and reduction in support services. While international tourism numbers have declined during the pandemic, local and regional tourism is also a source of access to children for perpetrators¹⁸.

Other forms of voluntourism such as teaching, sports, activities carried out in day-care centres, local, rural and religious communities may also expose children to the risk of sexual exploitation and abuse. These risks can be minimised by introducing clear policies and procedures such as supervision and requiring criminal background checks from all persons applying to work/volunteer with and for children. Awareness should also be raised among children, parents, caregivers and local communities on the risk of sexual exploitation and trafficking.

Certain forms of tourism in rural areas involve local communities that share their cultural practices or daily coexistence, while tourists carry out some educational or artistic activities with children. While such community tourism has strong potential to help improve the living conditions of the most vulnerable communities, reduce poverty and improve intercultural relations, the direct and uncontrolled access of travellers to local children, in particular in communities that are not aware of potential risk, may expose children to sexual exploitation and abuse. In such settings the contact can be made by potential offenders directly with the community or through a private person, however companies that include these types of activities need to take action to mitigate risks to children's rights.

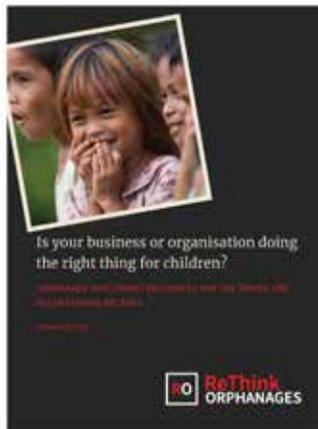
The evolving trends in the travel and tourism industry, in particular as part of post-COVID-19 recovery, the inherent risk of volunteering in contexts where there is potential contact with children, and the harm created by having orphanages as tourism entertainment, require a shared response from governments and the industry. This can include adoption of child protection

18 The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (2020). [*Aggravating Circumstances. How coronavirus impacts human trafficking.*](#) ECPAT International (2020). [*Strengthening responses to child sexual exploitation in Asia during COVID-19.*](#) ECPAT International (2020). [*Plea to protect children from sexual exploitation in Latin America during the COVID-19 pandemic.*](#)

standards as part of national codes¹⁹, cooperation with NGOs and travel and tourism companies.

Considering the above, The Code provides guidelines and outlines criteria for the selection of potential organisations applying for its membership and for application to current members.

Find out more about the consequences of orphanage tourism in *Orphanage Divestment Resources For The Travel And Volunteering Sectors* by ReThink Orphanages, Better Care Network.²⁰



19 ECPAT International (2020). [Codes of Conduct on Child Protection for the Travel and Tourism Industry in the Americas.](#)

20 ReThink Orphanages, Better Care Network (2020). [Is Your Business Doing The Right Thing For Children? Orphanage Divestment Resources For The Travel And Volunteering Sectors.](#)

3 Selection criteria for new members of The Code

The Code acknowledges that children in orphanages or residential care centres are at high risk of abuse and exploitation and are exposed to further risk of harm due to voluntourism and excursions for tourism entertainment. The Code also acknowledges that other forms of unregulated voluntourism can put children at risk of trafficking, sexual exploitation and abuse. Therefore, The Code has implemented the following criteria for member companies.

The Code does accept:

- Membership of organisations involved in voluntourism activities that limit child-related voluntourism to supervised activities, such as teaching or, sports, and that have clear policies and procedures in place to minimise the risks and maximise the benefit to children in these settings, including through the requirement of criminal background checks.
- Membership of organisations involved in voluntourism activities which do not focus directly on work with children. The Code acknowledges that even though these volunteers are not in direct contact with children as part of their volunteer assignment, they may still be staying in communities in indirect contact with children and where power imbalances are evident as visiting adults hold high status as visitors or potential donors.

The Code does NOT accept:

- Membership of organisations involved in voluntourism activities which involve orphanages and other forms of residential care settings or programmes. Children in these settings are at high risk of abuse, exploitation and trafficking which is only exacerbated by voluntourism.

- Membership of organisations that have visits to orphanages and residential care centres incorporated (or with the possibility to incorporate) in tourism programs or packages.

Instead, to support vulnerable children, The Code suggests that these organisations consider learning about, working with, or donating to programs supporting children in families and at-risk communities.²¹ Such programs include family strengthening, economic development, positive parenting, social work training, family-based care alternatives; or advocating with governments to develop laws and policies, if they have not done so already, to improve their national legal frameworks to address the sexual exploitation of children in the context of travel and tourism with its online elements more effectively, and create protective environments for children.²²

The Code does not make a distinction between the organisations involved in voluntourism activities – these can be private commercial companies, social enterprises, charities, or others.

The Code does make a distinction between organisations involved in responsible voluntourism activities and those that have orphanages in their tourism programs. Since 2018, all new applicants have been required to adhere to the voluntourism policy and criteria from the commencement of their membership. Existing members are asked to demonstrate their adherence to the criteria in line with the reviewed voluntourism policy as of 2021. New applicants are screened to determine if they are involved in voluntourism activities with children or which involve orphanages by the secretariat, in collaboration with the [Local Code Representatives](#) (LCRs), where applicable, upon receiving the application through the website.

The application process implies communicating with the applicant to clarify any voluntourism activities. If the decision is positive and the first invoice is paid, the applicant will be accepted as a member of The Code. This approval will be partly contingent on the applying company meeting the minimum standards outlined in the criteria for voluntourism in Section 4.

21 Better Care Network (2021). [Strengthening Family Care](#).

22 ECPAT International (2019). [Legal Checklist](#)

4 Criteria related to voluntourism

Members and applicants that are involved in voluntourism activities²³ are required to adhere to a minimum set of criteria, in addition to the six core criteria of The Code. The six criteria are:

- 1 A declaration, annexed to the agreement and signed by the member offering voluntourism packages, stating that 'no voluntourism programs which involve orphanages or other forms of residential care centres for children' are included in the products offered by the member to its customers.
- 2 The organisation can demonstrate that:
 - Their partner organisations have appropriate child protection procedures in place for relevant voluntourism activities. The Code members and applicants that are not directly involved in voluntourism activities but promote providers of such products should have a system in place that checks if these providers adhere to an extra minimum set of criteria, next to the six criteria of The Code, as described in this section.
 - It integrates clauses on child protection in relation to voluntourism into contracts of its partners offering voluntourism activities on behalf of the organisation.

²³ Local Code Representatives (LCRs) should also check if these projects are suitable for children and if the list is complete.

3

The organisation can demonstrate a procedure to check the travellers who want to participate in a voluntourism activity. This must include:

- A criminal record check or other 'proof of good conduct' from a government agency such as the police or judiciary, e.g. certificate of good conduct or similar document from a recognized government agency in the criminal justice system, preferably police. The record check/certificate should not be more than 6 months old. The criminal record check should be conducted by the organization independently without any obligation to state the results/reasons to the traveller. The certificate of good conduct can be independently verified by the organization, without prior reference to the individual. No one without such a background check is sold a voluntourism product related to children.
- An undertaking of good conduct, including ensuring child protection from sexual exploitation, is signed and returned to the organisation by the traveller before the traveller participates in the voluntourism activity.

4

The organisation involved in voluntourism activities can demonstrate that awareness on the issue of volunteering directly or indirectly with children has been provided to the traveller prior to departure. This includes:

- Organisations involved in voluntourism activities with direct contact with children have obligatory basic training²⁴ on child protection for travellers prior to departure, and receive support and guidance throughout their placement.
- Organisations involved in voluntourism activities that do not focus directly on children are obliged to inform travellers about child protection issues prior to departure.²⁵

24 The Code offers e-learnings on child protection from sexual exploitation in travel and tourism to Code members; for reference see also the [Volunteer Checklist](#), Better Care Network.

25 Child Safe Movement. Be a Child Safe Traveller, [7 Tips for Travellers](#) to Protect Children During Your Travel.

- Modality of the awareness is flexible (may take the form of written material, online learning, face to face, etc).
- Travellers should sign an acknowledgement that such a briefing has been received.

5

A specific section in the annual report of The Code is to be completed by the members every year on their voluntourism products (if any). A list of the volunteering programs and projects has to be included in the annual report to The Code.

6

The organisation can demonstrate that systematic feedback on the traveller is given by the organisation hosting the customer who has participated in a children-related program to the company/agency at the end of the volunteering travel experience.

This is the minimal standard for voluntourism products, which should not preclude these members from taking further steps to achieve a higher standard in terms of management. It is also recommended that Code members implementing the voluntourism policy carry out additional follow-up activities, such as meetings, trainings or updates on trafficking and the sexual exploitation of children, as part of the implementation of the criteria. This can be done with support from the Local Code Representatives (LCRs) and through The Code e-learnings.

5 Additional materials and resources

In order to provide relevant support to applicants and members offering voluntourism products meeting the requirements in this policy, additional materials have been developed. This includes:

- A template for the declaration, annexed to the membership agreement and to be signed by the member offering voluntourism packages, stating that “no programs with orphanages or other forms of residential care for children” are included in the products offered by the member to its customers.
- Adaptation of The Code’s report format to include information about implementation of additional criteria for voluntourism providers (Section 4 of this policy).

The development of the following materials is the responsibility of the organisation involved in voluntourism:

- Assessment tool of child safeguarding policy and measure by the counterpart.
- Template of a Certificate of Conduct.²⁶
- Support to companies in locating/establishing prior to departure awareness material on volunteering for/with children.

The industry should communicate with customers, as tourism is a demand-driven industry, to redirect travellers and tourists to solutions that meaningfully help children and support communities; and respond to those that are already aware and are requesting companies to make ethical choices. This can be done in cooperation with The Code’s Local Code Representatives (LCRs) that are mostly ECPAT International members and other NGOs, such as ReThink Orphanages and Better Care Network.

²⁶ [Example of Certificate of Conduct.](#)

Acknowledgements:

The Code Voluntourism Policy is the result of collaboration of ECPAT International and The Code with the partners committed to a range of activities to improve and promote child protection from sexual exploitation in the context of travel and tourism. The Policy was developed by a working group of ECPAT member organisations and other partners who provided feedback, including:

ECPAT International members:

Fundación Munasim Kullakita Bolivia; ECPAT Brazil; Aple Cambodia; EQUATIONS India; SANLAAP India; ECPAT Indonesia; KAAGR, Kenya; EDIAC/ECPAT Mexico; CWIN-ECPAT Nepal; CHS Alternativo Peru; PEaCE-ECPAT Sri Lanka; Uganda Child Rights NGO Network; ECPAT Germany; Defence for Children – ECPAT Netherlands; ECPAT UK and ECPAT USA.

Other organisations and partners:

The Code members

The World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) Human Trafficking Taskforce

ReThink Orphanages (previously Better Volunteering Better Care Initiative)

Law Futures Centre, Griffith University

Destination Mekong Child Protection Experts Group: ASSET-H&C powered by Institut européen de coopération et de développement (IECD), Sampan Travel and Myanmar Responsible Tourism Institute (MRTI) through an Advisor



**We protect
children in
travel and
tourism**



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