



Progress in Responsible Tourism

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‘Working with Children’ – Our Mistake!

Sallie Grayson, Programme Director, peopleandplaces

One of *people and places*’ core values is that volunteers will work *with* local people, not instead of them – nowhere is this more important than in projects where childcare is the primary focus: vulnerable children need care and nurture that is both consistent and culturally appropriate.

We prepare all volunteers for their placements as thoroughly as we can – some volunteers even say we over-prepare! – and during this preparation, we explain and emphasise that no volunteer will be on their own while teaching or tending children (if they *do* find themselves in that position, we will support their stopping work.) Teachers, social workers, counsellors, nursery nurses, teaching assistants – all need to be working *with* local professionals and staff – otherwise, where is the skills transfer? Where is the sustainability and is it ever ethical? Volunteers will not be working alone with the children.

So why has it taken us 5 years to realise that the category ‘working with children’ on our site was misleading? Not one of our volunteer programmes is designed for the volunteers simply to ‘work with children’. Teachers and teaching assistants work *with* local teachers; healthcare professionals work *with* local carers and professionals. This teamwork approach is abundantly clear when people read the on-site project details and are matched and prepared for their work – but the search options for ‘type of project’ on our site were most definitely misleading!

So we have changed the option to read ‘childcare projects’ *not* ‘working with children’.

‘Oh for goodness sake’, I can hear you cry – ‘that’s just semantics!’

NO – IT’S NOT!!!

The vast majority of volunteers appear to want ‘work with children’. A search in October 2011 for the specific phrase ‘volunteer with children’ brought up 341,000 links – and a quick scan of the first 50 showed that over 70% were links to voluntourism recruitment organisations – i.e. opportunities to ‘work with children’ in orphanages or childcare centres.

This is an appeal to the reader's heart. After all, who wouldn't want to ease a child's suffering? But, it can never be appropriate, responsible or ethical for short term volunteers to replace long term care and nurture – it is irresponsible and fraught with danger to support or create such environments.

Orphanage/childcare tourism has huge potential for negative – indeed, harmful – results. There has been plenty of recent discussion about the harm that can be done, even by well-meaning people who genuinely want to volunteer to do good, but are ill-informed: people who have not thought through that their short visit to hug and play with gorgeous kids has real potential for damage; people who wouldn't dream that the 'orphanage' they are helping could be guilty of child trafficking and abusive relationships.

The burgeoning 'orphanage industry' in countries such as Cambodia and Thailand is a huge scandal that we have a responsibility to halt NOW! The scandal is exacerbated by members of the media suggesting that travellers can volunteer for free, or for very little cost, by searching out orphanages when they are *already in country!* How on earth are travellers – especially young travelers – meant to check the credentials of an organization at such short notice?

I am not campaigning here for sending organizations' exclusivity – I am simply pointing out that young travellers are especially easy prey. So what can we do to ensure that volunteers do more good than harm, rather than the other way around?

FACT – there is real demand for short term volunteer travel with the opportunity to engage with children. If those of us who are trying to be responsible and ethical simply pull out and say we will not manage such volunteer programmes, we will create a vacuum – a vacuum that will quickly be filled by the unethical (or at best wilfully ignorant) – and believe me, there are already way too many of them out there: organisations that offer opportunities to hug children for a few days or a couple of weeks; even worse, opportunities to counsel them!; organisations that do no checks on volunteers; organisations that allow schools to sack local teachers because they know a volunteer will teach for free – perhaps, worst of all, are the organisations that fail to carry out due diligence on the orphanages they work with, enabling local charlatans to purchase and exhibit children who are not orphans.

YES – all of the above is really happening.

At *people and places*, we *do* send volunteers to work in orphanages. But we only place skilled and experienced volunteers to work alongside local people, *not* instead of them, and only with the informed consent of the excellent local staff and trustees of the orphanages – who have their own strict guidelines about how volunteers may engage with the children. Volunteer recruitment organisations need to do everything possible to ensure that both sides are fully informed and can thus make informed decisions.

The following is the bare minimum responsibility we believe sending organization should undertake – and the minimum assurances that should be made to potential volunteers:

- Due diligence on the project – are the beneficiaries safe, will the volunteers be safe, is there any exploitation of purported beneficiaries, does the project operate within local law
- Due diligence on volunteers – will the community be safe, is the volunteer who they say they are, do they have the skills and experience the project needs
- Preparation of both the project and the volunteer, including clear codes of conduct for the volunteers

people and places has had codes of conduct since our launch. Many of the projects where we work already have their own child protection policies; some, particularly the smaller community projects we work with, did not – we have worked with them to develop an appropriate policy.¹ All our volunteers are asked to accept the terms of the policy before they can work on the project. The child protection policy is not simply a list of rules and commitments to protect the children – it also educates and protects the volunteer. When recruitment organizations take responsibility to undertake due diligence and ensure that all stakeholders are well informed of the potential for good and bad, there will be less operational opportunities for the unscrupulous, money-grubbing and downright wicked – as well as the naive, uninformed, unskilled and untrained.

On-the-job skills share by example – the very foundation of *people and places*' programmes – means that volunteers working in "childcare projects" will indeed be engaging with children. We are duty-bound to protect those children and the volunteers who seek to "make a difference". This is hugely challenging work and we are by no means perfect – we question the ethics of our childcare projects daily – and without the support of our local partners who are in and of their communities we would make many more mistakes.

So there are **no** opportunities on a *people and places* programme to "work with children". If only this could be said of the volunteer travel voluntourism industry as a whole.

¹ You can read the *people and places* responsible tourism policy, including our child protection policy, here <http://travel-peopleandplaces.co.uk/About.aspx?category=25>

A Little Responsible Tourism is a Dangerous Thing...

Michael Horton, Chairman and Founder, ConCERT

ConCERT, (*Connecting Communities, Environment & Responsible Tourism*) is a Cambodian organisation based in Siem Reap, the service town for the Angkor Wat World Heritage site in Cambodia. Siem Reap receives around 2 million international visitors each year and for the past 3 years, ConCERT has been helping visitors to find the best way they can give support to Cambodia during their stay. It works with 25 well managed and financially transparent NGO members in and around the town, who cover many areas of activity: community development; education; child care; water supplies; environmental protection and education; vocational training; HIV/AIDS support; agriculture; health care; fighting human trafficking and child sexual abuse; land mine clearance. It knows in detail what each organisation does, and the type of help it needs.

ConCERT also works with around 60 business members in Siem Reap: hotels and guesthouses; bars and restaurants; tour operators and others. It trains their staff about responsible tourism, provides them with leaflets, and the businesses refer any guests, (who wish to make a donation or volunteer), to the ConCERT office. In addition to answering their general questions about Cambodia, ConCERT staff advise visitors on the most effective ways they can help. This depends on several factors: whether they want to donate money or volunteer; what their particular concern is; how long they are in town; whether they have any particular skills etc.

So, why does ConCERT do what it does; why is there a need to advise visitors who see people in great need and who simply want to offer their help?

We are in an interesting phase of tourism. Whereas in the past, people were content just to visit destinations and had little regard for their impact on the communities they visited, increasingly travellers want to feel they can contribute in some way. Whilst this in itself is a positive development, most people need help to make informed choices about how they can best get involved, in order that their intervention brings real benefits to the people they wish to support. Unfortunately, whilst the tourism industry is generally doing well in meeting the demands of its customers by providing activities that are very rewarding, indeed in many cases, life changing; it is doing less well in ensuring that those activities are meeting the real needs of the people they are purporting to help. This is hardly surprising as the industry's primary expertise is tourism; it is still poorly

equipped to truly understand the issues and the projects that it is becoming involved with, which are extremely complex, often harrowing, and invariably rife with difficulties.

Nowhere is this more true than in projects involving children. Emotions run high when visitors are faced with children living in difficult conditions and many people, both independent travellers, and those on organised tours, are willing to give their support in some way. In Siem Reap, this phenomenon has become an industry, and one in which the very people visitors are trying to help, tragically often end up worse off because of those interventions.

Richard Bridle, the country head of UNICEF, expresses his concern that many residential centres for children have turned to tourism to attract funding and that, by doing so, they put children at risk. He further states that even the best-intentioned tourists and volunteers are funding a system that is helping to separate children from their families.¹

Through supporting the rising number of private residential care centres, many of which refer to themselves as orphanages, in popular tourist destinations such as Siem Reap, well-meaning visitors are unwittingly promoting and perpetuating the needless break up of poor families in the misguided belief that they are helping. At the same time, this practice is diverting funds and attention away from more appropriate, and cost effective, community support based solutions. Extremely vulnerable children are removed from their families and communities, sometimes being moved to different provinces, thereby losing their natural first line of defence. If these children are used to make money for orphanage owners, their movement is quite simply internal human trafficking.

Families on or below the poverty line are most at risk, especially mothers without an income earning partner, and who are bringing up children alone. In Siem Reap province 300,000 people, (33.6% of the population), exist below the poverty line; the figure exceeds 40% in several communes.²

Despite rising criticism, debate and critique within academia, international & local child care agencies, and the media, the orphanage tourism industry continues to grow, and attracts an ever increasing supply of resources for privately owned orphanages.

The number of Cambodian children living in long term residential care centres has more than doubled over the past 5 years from 5,751 to 11,945, and yet only 28% of children in the centres are actually orphans. In the same period, whilst the number of government orphanages has remained stable at 21, the number of privately run 'orphan-

1 Voice of America 23rd March 2011

2 Siem Reap Provincial Data Book 2009, National Committee for Sub-National Democratic Development (SRDB,NCDD)

ages' rose by 88% from 132 in 2005 to 248 in 2010.³ The rise continues; in Siem Reap town alone there are now over 40 such centres and in the month of May 2011, ConCERT became aware of 2 new ones.

This rapid increase in residential centres is not in response to a rising number of orphans and vulnerable children. In the early 1980s following years of conflict, there were many orphans and children separated from their families in Cambodia. As one would expect, over the past 30 years the numbers have reduced considerably. A report by the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veteran's Affairs and Youth Rehabilitation, (MoSVY) and the National AIDS Authority, estimated there were 553,000 orphans in Cambodia in 2008.⁴ In the vast majority of cases anywhere in the world, children who lose their parents are cared for by their extended family or community; the above figures confirm that this is also the case in Cambodia with only 0.6% of Cambodian orphans living in centres.

Bodies such as UNICEF, Save the Children, Friends International, grassroots NGOs like PEPY Ride, and ConCERT, assert that the rise in tourists wanting to become more involved with the places they visit and to 'make a difference' during their stay, is driving the increase in children being placed in these institutions. The 88% increase in private centres over the last 5 years even exceeds the 76% increase in tourist arrivals to Cambodia over the same period.⁵

In addition, this increase comes at a time when residential centres, especially in the developed world, have been largely replaced by other ways to support children. The findings of more than 60 years of scientific research worldwide confirm that removing children from their families and communities and placing them in institutions, even in centres with high levels of resources and child care expertise, brings considerable problems and should only be considered in circumstances when there are no other options. Even in such cases the focus is still on finding ways to re-integrate children into their communities wherever possible and as soon as it is practical and safe to do so. This position is in accord with that of the Cambodian government, that placing children in residential care should only be considered as a last resort; after all other options have been explored.⁶

Many of the 'orphanages' are concentrated in the most popular tourist destinations and visitors are constantly approached to visit privately run centres where they can volunteer or make a donation. This is certainly the case in Siem Reap. In the town and surrounding 5 districts of Angkor Thom, Banteay Srei, Prasat Bakong, Puok, and Siem

3 Richard Bridle, Cambodian Country Head, UNICEF, "The Cambodia Daily", 21st March 2011

4 Orphans children affected by HIV and other vulnerable children in Cambodia: a situation and response analysis

5 Ministry of Tourism website, June 2011

6 MoSVY's Draft Prakas Procedures to Implement the Policy on Alternative Care for Children Chapter 7: Item 22 dated January 2010;

Reap, with a population of some 500,000, (3.5% of the country's total), the 40 'orphanages' represent 15% of the national total. All too often, people who are only in town for a few days visit the ConCERT office and say, "We have a day to spare and we'd like to do something to make a difference. We'd like to visit an orphanage, take some books and pens, and play with the children..." In addition to sunrise at Angkor Wat and touring the Tonle Sap floating villages, visiting an orphanage has been added to the activity list of many tourists.

The irony is that the visitor's genuine desire to 'do good' often results in making matters worse for the very vulnerable children they believe they are helping. Very often, children show indiscriminate and inappropriate demands for affection and are unusually friendly towards others, including strangers. What seems *so lovely* to foreigners who are welcomed into orphanages by children holding their hands and hugging them is in fact a sign of their distress.⁷

Holiday packages that include voluntary work in orphanages have a wide appeal, from gap-year teenagers to middle-aged professionals who wish to do good during their holidays, and the numbers are still growing. Orphans have become commodities in the developing world where it's now trendy for tourists to 'give back' when travelling to destinations less affluent than home. People are increasingly being told by many agencies, (including schools and universities, travel companies, volunteer placement organisations, and the general media), that it is very easy for them to do something during their travels that can 'make a difference'. This ever increasing supply of resources, both volunteers and financial, encourages more and more people with a limited understanding of child care and very mixed motives to start orphanages of their own.

ConCERT's experience is that the problems this brings are manifold:

- Many centres are operating an open door policy for visitors and volunteers with the aim of raising more funds, and with little regard for the safety and wellbeing of the children
- Poor state regulation and control means it is easy for paedophiles to visit and volunteer with children, (even to establish their own centres). Since 2003, one of the child sexual abuse investigation NGOs working in Cambodia, Action pour les Enfants, (APLE), has, on its own, provided evidence to the police that resulted in 161 arrests, 87 convictions, and a further 33 cases awaiting trial.⁸
- Many centres are being run primarily as a means of providing an income for the founders and their families
- Others are run by people with a genuine concern for the children in their care, but who simply don't have the necessary skills and resources

7 Friends International – Myths and Realities about Orphanages in Cambodia

8 APLE handbook, Feb 2011

- Whatever their motives, the vast majority of people running the “orphanages” have little or no skills and experience in operating something as complex as a residential childcare institution; many have never managed any type of enterprise. In the most benign cases they have limited knowledge, or interest, in:
 - Basic planning and administration, including transparent financial management
 - How children are selected for admission
 - Maintaining links with families or reintegrating children with their families or communities
 - Child protection procedures for staff, volunteers, visitors, other children, and home visits
 - Staff recruitment, training, mentoring and discipline
 - Pastoral care including nutrition, health and safety, hygiene, basic healthcare and first aid
 - Child development, including the monitoring of educational development
- Vulnerable families are encouraged to send their children to the centre in the belief they will be better cared for than at home. One of ConCERT’s community centre members is aware that 3 of the community’s poorest families are currently being repeatedly approached by an orphanage in Phnom Penh that is encouraging the families to send their children there.
- More worryingly, this attitude is seeping into the consciousness of poor families, who are now often actively seeking places for their children in such centres in the two-fold belief that their children will be better off, and that there are no alternative solutions
- In many cases, extremely vulnerable children are brought from distant provinces, breaking links with their families and making them even more at risk. If these children are used to make money for ‘orphanage’ owners, their movement is quite simply internal human trafficking

Added to this mix is a constant stream of well-intentioned but ill-informed volunteers and visitors, most of whom have no experience or skills in how to provide appropriate pastoral care for institutionalised children, and with little or no knowledge about the country, culture, and overall situation they are supporting.

The problems resulting from tourism supported residential care in Cambodia are highlighted by looking at UNICEF’s 15 Formal Care indicators, published in 2009.⁹

The first 5 look at national statistics and the last 3 look at national legislation & policy frameworks; the middle 6 focus on practices within individual institutions and, from ConCERT's experience in Siem Reap, many if not most of the private centres achieve low scores in these indicators:

- Indicator 6: Contact with parents and family; (% of children in formal care who have been visited by or visited their parents, a guardian or an adult family member within the last 3 months)
- Indicator 7: Existence of individual care plans; (% of children in formal care who have an individual care plan)
- Indicator 8: Use of assessment on entry to formal care (gate keeping); (% of children placed in formal care through an established assessment system)
- Indicator 9: Review of placement; (% of children in formal care whose placement has been reviewed within the last 3 months)
- Indicator 10: Children in residential care attending local school; (% of children of school age in residential care who are attending school within the local community with other children who are not in residential care)
- Indicator 11: Staff qualifications; (% of senior management and staff/carers working with children in formal care with minimum qualifications in childcare and development)

Even the best institutions are a compromised substitute for children growing up in their own family, and most privately run 'orphanages' in Cambodia are far from being 'best'.

Orphanage tourism also has a profound effect on local culture. Bringing 45 children together in an orphanage not only makes it much easier for the people in charge to provide them with some basic level of care, compared with trying to support them individually in their families and communities; it also enables the complexities, harsh realities, and downright unpleasantness of their individual stories to be simplified and sanitised. Once transformed into lovable innocents, poor, sick, and vulnerable Cambodian children can be packaged and marketed to meet the demands of the privileged tourist and added to the list of possible holiday activities. This reinforces the erroneous view that vulnerable children are abandoned in Cambodian culture, and strengthens the notion of cultural superiority in the tourists.

Tourism supported child residential centres needlessly break up families and expose children to other cultures in uncontrolled, confusing, and often dangerous ways. Their own cultural identity is threatened on many fronts: unsupported contact with an unend-

ing stream of foreign visitors and a foreigners approach to life that disconnects them from being Cambodian; the emphasis given to the importance of learning English; traditional dances reduced to money making, on demand, exhibitions; reinforcement that Cambodia and Cambodians are poor and 'bad' and all things foreign are rich and 'good'. ConCERT staff see many children and young people who have real identity and cultural crises after leaving their centre, which is not surprising after extended periods of being showered with attention from emotional tourists, repeatedly told they are 'beautiful' and 'special', and shown tantalising glimpses of other worlds.

So, what's the alternative?

Well, because the problem is largely caused by people's desire to do good, it also contains its own solution, though it will be far from easy to effect it. What is needed is a better understanding by the industry of the problems, which will then enable it to design and offer activities to its customers that better meet those needs. ConCERT is working at all levels, helping the various stakeholders to better understand the issues. It works with individuals and groups who want to help, with the projects themselves, and with the industry.

In the case of children and orphanages, a far better solution is community based support services for children and families in crisis. Poverty reduction is key to solving the root cause of this issue; the poorer the family, the more likely are desperate mothers to send their children to residential centres. Whilst most residential centres have their exemplar: the child who now has a good job, or is studying overseas, or has a generous sponsor for her family, these are a tiny percentage of the total. Despite their rhetoric about breaking the poverty cycle, most do little or nothing in this regard as they have little interest and experience in developing life skills for the children in their care.

By contrast, holistic community development programmes are positively designed to keep families together and provide a wide range of services: emergency food support, education, social services and counselling and healthcare programmes. Crucially, most offer vocational training aimed at income generation, and other support such as community microfinance facilities. Through these services, children and their families will be able to maintain or regain their dignity, and preserve and value their cultural identity.

The tourism industry needs to become more aware of the orphanage tourism issues, and the benefits of holistic community based support programmes that include family support, education and income generation. It would then be easier to:

- channel tourist assistance into the development of more appropriate community based support services by helping tourists to make informed decisions on how they can best to improve the situation for children and families living in extreme poverty

- encourage the development of more child focussed community support programmes through increased help for projects already engaged in these activities
- encourage tourism businesses such as hotels and restaurants to support community support projects and move away from orphanage tourism
- develop and promote responsible tourism in general

The situation ConCERT faces in Siem Reap illustrates the issues very well. There are 300+ charities of one sort or another in the province, many of whom target tourists for support. It is a destination where great wealth and privilege rub shoulders with abject poverty. It is a very short stay destination and most visitors are only in Siem Reap for a few days. Over 90% of the visitors to the ConCERT office want to do something to help children; most of those wish to support or visit an orphanage.

ConCERT staff discuss why unplanned visits to schools and orphanages are not in the best interests of the child, and that volunteering for a day or two brings little benefit and is usually disruptive and emotionally distressing for children. ConCERT very deliberately only has 2 residential centres amongst its 25 members, and both of these have strict rules about volunteers and visitors. The staff talk to visitors about the practices in these centres to highlight how a well-run residential centre should be operated, and how complex such an undertaking is. They explain that the other 23 ConCERT members are all involved in community support to a greater or lesser extent, even the environmental/conservation NGOs have strong community development programmes, and that their activities are providing support for poor communities, thereby reducing the likelihood of children being separated from their families.

ConCERT firmly believes that tourism has the potential to bring real benefits to its local communities, but that to do this successfully, the community's needs have to be understood as a first step. Visitor activities then have to be designed and managed so that they bring real benefits to the most needy and not just provide a satisfying experience for the paying guest. It is extremely distressing for those active on the ground and aware of the massive needs to see people's time, money, and good intentions often making the situation worse.

It's time for Responsible Tourism to move into the next phase so it can truly deliver what it promises, both to the communities it purports to help, and to those of its paying customers who are led to believe they are truly "making a difference".

ConCERT – "Connecting Communities, Environment & Responsible Tourism" - is a non-profit organisation based in Siem Reap, Cambodia. Our aim is to reduce poverty, and we do this by bringing together people who want to help, and local organisations that need the kind of support they can give. www.concertcambodia.org