



Next Generation Nepal

## **Orphanage Trafficking and Orphanage Voluntourism**

*Frequently Asked Questions*



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## 1. Introduction

NGN receives many enquiries from concerned members of the public and organizations about the phenomenon of orphanage voluntourism and its connection to orphanage trafficking. Can volunteering in an orphanage *really* cause child trafficking? What ethical volunteering options are available as an alternative? What is being done to stop child trafficking into orphanages? To help answer these questions—and to provide an overview of an understandably confusing topic—NGN has prepared this briefing paper in which we answer the most frequently asked questions we receive about orphanage trafficking and orphanage voluntourism.

## 2. What is meant by the term “voluntourism”? What is the general situation around orphanage voluntourism in Nepal?

“Voluntourism” is a growing trend in which tourists do voluntary work to help communities or the environment in the places they are visiting. In 2008 it was estimated that the value of volunteer tourists globally was approximately U.S. \$2 billion and there was an average of 1.6 million voluntourists a year<sup>1</sup>. Historically, the creation of organizations and programs in the 1950s, notably the VSO, US Peace Corps, and Volunteer Graduate Scheme (now Australian Volunteers International), are seen as the catalysts for international volunteering<sup>2</sup>. It is only recently, however, that the concept and industry have really taken off. A combination of factors—including greater awareness of what is going on in the world, growing concern about the state of the environment and global poverty, and the desire of young people to gain experiences for their CVs—have helped create a high demand among tourists to add a volunteer component to their travel experiences. More generally, niche markets within the tourist industry have begun to flourish in the last two to three decades, with voluntourism becoming one of the most popular options (other examples include ecotourism and adventure tourism).

While construction, teaching, research, environmental cleanups and conservation are activities that voluntourists routinely engage in, projects involving children—including orphanages—are one of the most popular<sup>3</sup>. In many countries there are huge problems of corruption and abuses in orphanages that have come about due to the profit that these institutions can bring in from tourists who volunteer or visit them during their travels. People either pay to volunteer in them, make donations during and after their time there, or both.

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<sup>1</sup>[http://www.salon.com/2013/08/23/volunteer\\_tourism\\_doesnt\\_work\\_partner/singleton/](http://www.salon.com/2013/08/23/volunteer_tourism_doesnt_work_partner/singleton/)

<sup>2</sup> Kristen Lamoureux, “Chapter 3: Voluntourism” *First Comprehensive Travelers Philanthropy Handbook* Center for Responsible Travel (CREST)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

### **3. Why do people from developed countries want to “help” people in developing countries through volunteering?**

With globalization and constant access to information and media, people are more aware of what is going on in the world, and the disparities that exist between developed and developing countries. A large percentage of people who partake in voluntourism are young, recent graduates, and volunteering is seen as a good way to help those less fortunate than themselves whilst simultaneously gaining valuable experiences to strengthen their CVs. It is easier and cheaper to travel around the world than it ever has been. Guidebooks and information online make traveling to remote areas much more possible for the average person than ever before. Many people want to travel, but with their increased social awareness, many also want to “give back” to the countries they visit. Incorporating a short volunteer component into their travel plans is seen as an easy way to do this. Additionally, as with any other industry, as it grows, more and more people learn about it, and it thus becomes an option that might not have even crossed someone’s mind previously.

### **4. Why are so many children placed in orphanages in countries like Nepal?**

The initial rise in orphanages in developing countries cannot be attributed to the same factors. Context specific history, poverty, natural disasters, epidemics (such as AIDS) and conflicts are all things connected to the global rise in orphanages. However, in most cases, one of the reasons that their numbers continue to grow is the availability and willingness of paying orphanage voluntourists and well-intentioned charities that wish to support orphanages and children's homes. The funds which these individuals and charities provide fuel the orphanage business.

In Nepal, the rise in orphanages and children's homes has followed a similar trajectory to other parts of the developing world: poverty, lack of educational opportunities, changing laws that allowed orphanages to conduct international adoptions, and the 10-year civil war. Parents began to send their children to what they perceived were safer and better conditions. They were often persuaded to do so by traffickers claiming that they could provide these things to children, when in fact they were exploiting the vulnerability of families for personal profit. Although the conflict is now over, people continue to send their children away through traffickers, believing that they are actually sending their children to safe boarding schools.

Orphanage voluntourism incentivizes those involved in the burgeoning orphanage industry to bring children from villages to orphanages in the city and tourist areas. In some cases it even encourages managers to deny the children proper care, because

the worse conditions the children appear to be in, the more they will pull at the heart strings of volunteers, thus making it easier for the orphanages to solicit donations.

## 5. Are children in orphanages really “orphans”? Is it good for them to be placed in orphanages and children's homes?

Studies conducted by the Government of Nepal, the United Nations and NGOs have shown that the majority of children in orphanages and children's homes in Nepal are not in fact “orphans”; an estimated two out of three children in orphanages and children's homes have at least one living parent.<sup>4</sup>

NGN concurs with international and Nepali laws and policies that the institutionalization of children should only be used as a last and temporary resort when all other options have failed; staying within the family unit is the best option for the vast majority of children.<sup>5</sup> The institutionalization of children in orphanages and children's homes has many negative effects on the physical, emotional and psychological development of children. It leaves children more vulnerable to abuse and neglect. Even in circumstances where children leave an orphanage having received an education, they have often lost all contact with their families, communities, local languages and so on. This dislocation from families makes it harder for youth to inherit land, and ask for their families support to find jobs and arrange marriages; things which are culturally very important in Nepal and are the responsibility of the family. Many young people who grew up in orphanages and children's homes in Nepal end up being unemployed and resentful about their childhood experiences. In some cases, NGN has even witnessed ex-orphanage youth turning to orphanage trafficking because it is the only business they know; and hence the orphanage trafficking cycle continues.

Put another way, the argument is simple: if asked the question, the vast majority of people would say that they would rather grow up in the care of a poor but loving family than in the anonymity of a children's home. Wherever possible, all efforts should be made to keep children with their families.

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<sup>4</sup> UNICEF/Tdh, 2008, *Adopting the Rights of the Child*, states that 85% of children in children's homes have at least one living parent; CCWB/Amici dei Bambini, 2008, *Final Report on Monitoring of Child Care Homes Programmes*, states that 58% of children have at least one living parent.

<sup>5</sup> The UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children GoN Child Policy, and GoN Standards for the Operation and Management of Child Care Residential Homes, are all definitive that institutional care should only be used as the last and temporary resort for children, and that so far as possible children should remain with their families or be placed in an alternative family-based care settings.

## **6. What is the difference between an “orphanage” and a “children's home”?**

The two terms are often used interchangeably in Nepal, although technically an “orphanage” is an institution where both children's parents are deceased, whereas a “children's home” is an institution where children are being cared for because their parents are unable to care for them, for various reasons. In practice, in Nepal, most so called “orphanages” are caring for children who are not in fact orphans, and many children in orphanages and children's homes have been deliberately and unnecessarily displaced or trafficked from their families.

## **7. Is there a connection between the growing demand for orphanage voluntourism and orphanage trafficking?**

Children in Nepal are being deliberately trafficked and displaced from their families to meet the requirements of well-intentioned orphanage volunteers, as well as to attract donations from wealthy individuals and charities that wish to support *apparently* destitute children. Children are usually displaced from rural communities in Nepal where poverty and a perceived lack of educational services persuade families that there is a 'better life' for their children in the city. These factors create a ready supply of families willing to allow their children to be taken away from their villages for “an education” in Kathmandu. The families are usually promised that their children will be sent to high-quality boarding schools where they will get a good education, and that this in turn will lead on to good jobs and prosperous careers. However, in practice, the children are usually taken to profit-making orphanages or children's homes where the managers present the children as “orphans” or “destitute.” By presenting the children in this way, the orphanage owners can make a strong case to sympathetic and compassionate foreigners for financial or material support. In most cases, the motivation of the orphanage owners is not in the best interests of the children, but is simply to make a profit.

## **8. Is there any proof to connect the growth in orphanage voluntourism with child trafficking?**

The vast majority of the orphanages and children's homes in Nepal are located in the main tourist areas of the country where foreign volunteers are most likely to spend time. Of registered orphanages and children's homes in Nepal, up to 90 percent are located

in the five main tourist districts<sup>6</sup>, out of a total of 75 districts across the whole country. If the non-registered children's homes were also to be taken into account, the proportion of orphanages in tourist areas would probably be even higher. The high concentration of orphanages in tourist areas does not necessarily match high areas of population or need. NGN believes it is no coincidence that orphanages are being deliberately set up in areas where paying tourists can most easily be lured in.

NGN has received reports of orphanage managers in Nepal asking traffickers to "bring them children" specifically because they have foreign donors willing to support their children's home. Similarly, NGN has seen evidence of orphanage owners deliberately keeping children in destitute conditions to attract more and higher levels financial donations. Similar stories have been reported in other countries as well, such as Haiti, where orphanage managers have admitted to keeping children thin as this will encourage foreigners to send more money.<sup>7</sup> Reports such as these suggest that charitable donations and volunteering are having the very opposite effect from that which was intended; they are keeping children away from their families, and sometimes keeping them in destitute conditions. Children have become a lucrative poverty commodity in Nepal.

## **9. Are all orphanages and children's homes in Nepal trafficking and displacing children? Which are the "good" orphanages?**

Even though two out of three children in orphanages and children's homes in Nepal are not orphans<sup>8</sup>, and only 10 percent of homes meet the Government's own minimum standards<sup>9</sup>, it would not be accurate to say that every children's home is trafficking or displacing children. Some children's homes and orphanages are very well run. However, even some of these so-called "well run" homes may have unknowingly and indirectly displaced children from their families (because a trafficker may have brought them "destitute" children without telling them the truth about the children's background). The problem for tourists—and even for Government agencies and NGOs working in this area—is that it is very difficult to identify the few "good" orphanages from the "dishonest" ones without a full and detailed investigation, which is of course near impossible for

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<sup>6</sup>Data from CCWB, 2012, *Some Facts of Child Care Homes in Nepal*, puts this figure at 90%; whilst data from, CCWB, 2013, *State of Children in Nepal*, puts this figure at 82%.

<sup>7</sup>[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jennifer-morgan/forprofit-orphanages-keep\\_b\\_838206.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jennifer-morgan/forprofit-orphanages-keep_b_838206.html)

<sup>8</sup> UNICEF/Tdh, 2008, *Adopting the Rights of the Child*, states that 85% of children in children's homes have at least one living parent; CCWB/Amici dei Bambini, 2008, *Final Report on Monitoring of Child Care Homes Programmes*, states that 58% of children have at least one living parent.

<sup>9</sup> CCWB, 2011, *Status of Children in Nepal*, shows that only 10.3% of children's homes meet the GoN *Minimum Standards of Operation for Residential Child Care Homes* (2003). To NGN's knowledge, no Government of Nepal data has been released since this time to provide a more current picture of the number of homes which meet the new standards for child care homes.

tourists to do. For this reason NGN advises against orphanage voluntourism except in special circumstances (see sections 9, 10 and 11 below).

Some children's homes and orphanages have taken positive steps to actively search for the families of children, and then reconnect and reunify these children with their families. NGN endorses this approach and we approve of people who financially support these kinds of organizations. The Umbrella Foundation is one such “good” child care organization which has changed its focus towards the reconnection and reunification of children in its care—see <http://umbrellanepal.org/>. There are a number of good organizations in Nepal which have followed a similar path, and efforts should be made to support them in this process

## **10. What can be done to address the problems connected with orphanage voluntourism?**

There are many things that organizations and individuals can do to address these issues. Across the board there needs to be increased awareness about the problems associated with orphanage voluntourism. This can be done through greater awareness raising by governments, embassies, aid agencies, NGOs, the travel industry and the media. In some countries, such as Cambodia, campaigns are already well established through initiatives such as Childsafe (see <http://www.thinkchildsafe.org/thinkbeforevisiting/>).





Above: The ChildSafe Network online campaign against orphanage voluntourism. See: <http://www.thinkchildsafenetwork.org/thinkbeforevisiting/>.

In Nepal, however, awareness is only just beginning through the efforts of NGOs like NGN, working in close partnership with the Nepal Government, civil society, embassies and UNICEF. We are encouraged by the recent decisions of the British, French, Swiss and U.S. Embassies to change their travel advice wording to tourists, warning them of the dangers of orphanage voluntourism. We are also encouraged by the efforts of the Government of Nepal which is working on developing ethical guidelines for tourists considering volunteering in orphanages. However, more still needs to be done by the tourist industry itself so that it takes an active moral stance on the issue. We would like to see the tourist and volunteer industry issue explicit warnings in travel guidebooks and websites, and improve their vetting of orphanages more carefully before allowing appropriately trained people to volunteer there.

We should always remember that the vast majority of volunteers are well intentioned and do not wish to do anything harmful to children. All efforts should therefore be directed at helping potential volunteers to make ethical and informed choices before committing to a volunteering project.

## 11. How can people practice ethical voluntourism?

For people who want to “do good” in the world through volunteering, a helpful start is to consider their own skill set and how this can be best utilized for the benefit of a community. They should also consider the long-term sustainable impact of their volunteer placement on the host community. Volunteers need to do their research, ask priming questions to volunteer agencies about the impact and sustainability of their work, and demand an ethical marketplace for volunteer placements.

In relation to children, volunteers are always best placed supporting projects that encourage children to remain with their own families, rather being made to leave or stay away from their communities. Projects that help poor communities grow into economically thriving places where people want to stay and have prosperous lives are always a good bet. Projects that help local communities improve their livelihoods and educational systems can often do more good for children than projects which work directly with displaced children in orphanages. Projects that train local people to improve their skills so they themselves can become the “change-makers” in their own communities are also highly valuable and empowering. Volunteers should seek out these sorts of projects first, and create a demand for them within the voluntourist industry.

For practical advice about choosing an ethical volunteering placement, we strongly recommend people visit the excellent Learning Service website at: [www.learningservice.info](http://www.learningservice.info). There are many resources available on this website about ethical volunteering options, including the downloadable toolkit, *Learning Service: Tips and Tricks for Learning Before Helping*, which is a must-read for every potential volunteer.

Researching and choosing an ethical volunteering placement takes time and effort, but this is time and effort well spent if a person is serious about *helping* and not *harming* disadvantaged communities.

## 12. Is it ethical to volunteer in orphanages?

Officially in Nepal it is illegal to volunteer on a tourist visa. However, in practice, tens of thousands of people do volunteer in Nepal each year on tourist visas, and the tourist industry provides a huge range of well-publicised services to this effect that are largely overlooked by the Government. A simple Google search for "Nepal orphanages volunteering" will reveal many such opportunities.

For those that choose to volunteer, NGN believes that the *only* people volunteering in orphanages and children's homes are: (i) those with appropriate child-care or social work-related skills; and (ii) those who can volunteer for long enough to have a meaningful and sustainable benefit for the children and staff. These are the standards which most developed countries would expect from people wishing to volunteer with vulnerable children, and there is no reason why these standards should be any different for Nepal.

So, if a person is interested in volunteering in an orphanage in Nepal, they should first ask themselves a few soul-searching questions:

- Do I have the professional skills and training to work directly with vulnerable children?
- Will I be able to volunteer for long enough to benefit the orphanage?
- Will the work I do be sustainable after I leave?

If a person does **not** meet these standards then they should consider volunteering somewhere else where their skills will be more beneficial for a local community (see the advice given in section 9), or helping in other ways (see the advice given in the sections 11 and 13).

If a person **does** meet the above standards and decides they are suitable to volunteer in an orphanage, then they should investigate the orphanage as best as possible, if necessary by fielding questions through the volunteer agency that is arranging their placement. Questions they should ask are as follows:

- Can the orphanage prove that the children are genuine orphans and have not been separated from living family members?
- If the children are not genuine orphans, is there a good reason for this and, very importantly, is the orphanage actively involved in reconnecting the children with their families and/or keeping them connected with their families?
- Does the orphanage have a child protection policy that is actively being implemented?

If the orphanage or volunteer agency cannot satisfactorily answer these questions then the volunteer would be advised to steer well clear.

Finally, and very importantly, potential orphanage volunteers travelling to Nepal would be strongly advised to check that an orphanage meets the Government's minimum standards of operation (up to 90 percent of orphanages do not!), and this can be done

by contacting: Namuna Bhusal at the Central Child Welfare Board on +977 9851139474 or [namuna@ccwb.gov.np](mailto:namuna@ccwb.gov.np).

### **13. Are there any ethical alternatives to voluntourism?**

An ethical option for those who wish to really engage with a foreign culture, whilst being certain they are not doing any harm, is to consider signing up with agencies that offer “learning-service” projects. These are schemes that offer individuals the chance to *learn* about a culture before *intervening* as a volunteer. These schemes recognise that there are many wonderful things which foreigners can learn from traditional cultures in places like Nepal. NGN likes this approach because it stresses the need to understand a foreign culture before trying to solve its problems. To find out more about this ethical approach, NGN recommends the Learning Service website (see: [www.learningservice.info](http://www.learningservice.info)), from where one can download the publication *Learning Service: Tips and Tricks for Learning Before Helping* and watch the helpful videos.

One learning-service organization operating in Nepal, which NGN is aware of and we believe are running good learning-service schemes, is Where There Be Dragons (see: <http://wheretherebedragons.com/>). There are many organizations like this offering learning service type projects, and tourists can seek these out.

### **14. What should a volunteer do if they encounter an orphanage they suspect is abusing or has displaced children from their families?**

If a volunteer ever finds themselves in a situation where they suspect that children may have been trafficked or displaced from their families, or are being abused in other ways, they should gather all the evidence they can and report it to: Namuna Bhusal at the Central Child Welfare Board on +977 9851139474 or [namuna@ccwb.gov.np](mailto:namuna@ccwb.gov.np). The individual should then cease volunteering in the orphanage, and certainly not make any financial donations to the orphanage. NGN has produced a separate advice sheet on this issue which is available on the NGN website or by contacting us by email.

### **15. What can people do to prevent and tackle orphanage trafficking in Nepal?**

There are many ways people can help prevent and tackle orphanage trafficking in Nepal:

- Spread awareness amongst your friends, families and communities about the dangers of orphanage trafficking and orphanage voluntourism.

- Only volunteer in an ethical and sustainable way by following the advice given above.
- Support NGOs and charities that help improve education and livelihoods in rural areas of Nepal (this will improve the quality of life in poor areas of Nepal and thus prevent children being trafficked).
- Support NGOs and charities that reconnect and reunify trafficked and displaced children with their families.
- Enjoy your holiday in Nepal and spend money on activities and products that support the local economy.

## Further information

The official **British Embassy** travel advice on orphanage voluntourism is:

*If you are planning to volunteer in Nepal you should research the legitimacy of any organisations you are planning to use. The Social Service Council of the Government of Nepal maintains a list of legitimate volunteer organisations email: [info@swc.org.np](mailto:info@swc.org.np). The British Embassy has received reports of volunteer opportunities at orphanages which are profit orientated organisations rather than charities. If you are volunteering at such an organization, you could be contributing to child exploitation. Contact the Nepali [Central Child Welfare Board](#) for confirmation before signing up to volunteer for such organisations.*

The official **French Embassy** travel advice on orphanage voluntourism is:

*There are over 11,000 children living in “orphanages” in Nepal, yet an estimated two-thirds of these children are not orphans. Despite international and Nepali laws and policies against the use of children’s homes, except as a last resort, thousands of children continue to be displaced from their families into children’s home. “Orphanages” have become a lucrative business in Nepal with profit to be made from both the families—who are deceived as to what will happen to their children—and from well-intentioned foreign tourists who donate funds in the belief they are supporting genuine orphans. 90 percent of the 759 children’s homes in Nepal are located in the tourist areas of the country, i.e., Kathmandu, Lalitpur/Patan, Bhaktapur, Kaski and Chitwan. It is not unusual for children living in “orphanages” to be maltreated, and in fact Government data shows that only 10 percent of children’s homes in Nepal meet the Government’s own legal standards. It is very common for children in homes to be denied access to their families and forced to lie about their names and origins, and in some cases to suffer physical, psychological and sexual abuse. This causes long-term psychological damage on the children concerned, and it puts them at significant social and economic disadvantage as adults. Children’s homes commonly try to engender sympathy from tourists in the hope they will pay to volunteer or make financial*

*donations. The willingness of tourists to provide funds to children's homes endures the ongoing demand for children to be unnecessarily displaced from their families.*

*Orphanage Voluntourism usually begins with tourist paying a volunteer agency, or children's home directly, for opportunity to volunteer at a children's home for a few days or weeks. There are many volunteer and tourist agencies based in both Nepal and foreign countries which offer this service (it is likely that most foreign-based agencies are unaware of the illicit businesses they are involved with). Volunteers can pay up to U.S. \$200 per week to volunteer in a children's home. What may begin as an "experience" for tourist whilst on holiday can evolve into scenarios where they return home to raise funds for their chosen "orphanage" and in some cases, to establish their own INGOs in their home country to raise further funds.*

It can be accessed here: <http://www.ambafrance-np.org/Orphanages-and-voluntourism-in>

The official **Swiss Embassy** travel advice on orphanage voluntourism is (translated into English by NGN):

*Some vigilance is needed before embarking on voluntary work within non-profit organizations. You should be especially careful when it comes to childcare institutions, or when you are requested to make a contribution towards costs. Local or international organizations can unscrupulously use such poverty-alleviation projects as a way to benefit from the generosity of tourists. Before you leave, check with the headquarters of the organization in terms of employment, type of employment, insurance, etc. You should also know that most countries require a work permit, including a permit for voluntary activity which is unpaid. This document should be requested before the offset.*

The official **US Embassy** travel advice on orphanage voluntourism is:

*A number of Nepal-based volunteer organizations maintain websites offering volunteer opportunities. The Embassy has received reports that many—if not a majority—of such opportunities, especially those involving volunteering at orphanages or "children's homes," are not charities, but rather are profit making enterprises set up with the primary purpose of attracting donations from abroad and financial support from volunteers. Many of the children are not, in fact, orphans, and thus volunteering at such an organization indirectly contributes to child exploitation. An organization's bona fides can be confirmed by contacting the Nepali Central Child Welfare Board (CCWB), attention Namuna Bhusal (tel. 977-9851139474 or e-mail [namuna@ccwb.gov.np](mailto:namuna@ccwb.gov.np) ).*

It can be accessed here (under "Local Laws and Special Circumstances"):  
<http://travel.state.gov/content/passports/english/country/nepal.html>.

Other embassies in Nepal are considering changing their travel advice for tourists, so check for the latest updates with your consulate before travelling.

For more information about NGN see: [www.nextgenerationnepal.org](http://www.nextgenerationnepal.org)

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