



Myth and Realities about orphanages in Cambodia

Over the years long-term residential care centers or *orphanages* have become part of Cambodia's landscape. Travel agencies, hotels and tuktuks drivers have included visits of orphanages in their sightseeing tours and many orphanage directors are practicing an "open door policy", welcoming any visitors into their centers. Tourists and foreigners are offered a victimizing image of children that misleads their overall perception of orphans in Cambodia.

This page aims to inform and educate visitors about the situation of vulnerable children and the orphanage industry in Cambodia.

Note: Friends-International's definition of an orphan is, "a child who has lost both parents through death or disappearance".

Myth: "Cambodia is full of orphans waiting in orphanages for a family"

Reality: Orphanages are indeed numerous in Cambodia. There are 258 orphanages in the country, of which the government runs 21 while 237 are privately owned. However, the vast majority of children living in orphanages are not orphans but still have their parents. In fact, according to government statistics, only 26% of these children have lost both parentsⁱ. Cambodia was once full of orphans and displaced children after the war in the early 80s who needed a place to stay; however, this is not true anymore.

Furthermore most orphans do have family relatives that can take care of them. According to estimationsⁱⁱ, there are 553'000 single and double orphans in Cambodia, accounting for 8.8% of all children. The number of children living in institutions is in comparison quite small (9'460 children and youths less than 18 years old were living in institutions in 2008ⁱⁱⁱ). Let's think about it: if something tragic happened to you, how likely would it be that your child ends up in an orphanage? Members of your family or even close friends would probably care for your child. Well, in Cambodian culture as well as in other cultures, it's the same.

However traditional forms of caring for orphans and vulnerable children are increasingly being replaced by institutions. Since 2005 there has been a proliferation of private orphanages while the number of state orphanages has remained stable. Statistics show that numbers have increased by 65% from 2005 to 2008^{iv}.

So why are those centers called orphanages if the vast majority of the children still have families?

Many long-term residential centers qualify themselves as orphanages, which leads to the aforementioned misconception. Experience suggests that they are more like boarding school since most children visit their families regularly for the important holidays. The term 'orphanage' is most-likely still used because it resonates with foreigners and thus makes it easier to raise funds.

What are children doing in orphanages if they have families?

Poverty and lack of access to education are the main reasons parents are sending their children to orphanages. Orphanages have become the most prevalent and easiest response to the problems of poverty and social exclusion. Many orphanages are actively recruiting children in poor provinces by convincing, coercing or even paying parents to give their children away. Through this kind of recruiting many parents believe that their children would be better off in such a center.

Parents often place their children in institutions in a moment of acute crisis as a survival strategy. But short term intentions often become long term realities. What was meant to be temporary, slowly becomes permanent. Orphanages more often than not are located miles away from the child's province of origin and parents lack the financial means to pay for the transport to and from the facility. In addition, most orphanages have no interest in maintaining contacts with the children's families. As a result, children's ties with their families wither and attachment bonds are broken.

Myth: "A child is better off in an orphanage than in a poor family, at least he/she will get an education, clothing and food".

Reality: A family environment is paramount for the good development of a child. Article 9 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (ratified by Cambodia in 1992)^v underlines the right of a child not to be separated from his parents. The government of Cambodia issued a policy on Alternative Care in 2006^{vi}, which underlines the importance for children to grow up in a family environment because it is considered the best environment for children. This is also in line with the recently adopted UN guidelines on Alternative Care^{vii}.

So the question is: why can't orphanages substitute families?

The findings of more than sixty years of scientific research worldwide confirm that institutionalization prevents the healthy development of children and has long-term impacts in their adulthood^{viii}. In order for children to develop normally, they require a strong attachment to a care giving figure early on in life. This simply cannot be met in institutions which suffer from high staff turnover and a low ratio of staff to children. Very often, children show "indiscriminate 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. If there is one thing that institutions cannot provide children with, it is the warmth and love of a family.

Moreover, many orphanages in Cambodia do not have child protection policies and do not implement the government's minimum standards on alternative care. Unfortunately, there has been no in-depth research into incidences of abuse in Cambodia's orphanages probably because social protection services do not exist in Cambodia and most orphanages do not have a system that would allow children to report

abuses to the management. So the only way to get sound information on abuses would be to conduct one-on-one interview with children and this is not something that most orphanage directors feel comfortable with. However it is safe to say that understaffed teams and lack of reporting mechanisms to effectively handle situation of abuses from staff members or from older children create high-risk situations.

The main child protection issues include the lack of background checks (many orphanages do not require references from their staff and volunteers upon hiring), sleeping arrangements (in some orphanages children of all ages are reported to sleep together in the same room and staff sharing beds with children), bullying, neglect (mainly due to the low staff to child ratio), child labor (many children are required to dance or perform for tourists in the center or sometimes in bars late at night, some are forced to plant rice and farm) and sexual abuse.

Myth: “Thanks to orphanages, children are not ending up on the streets of Phnom Penh, joining gangs, getting involved in crime and/or prostitution”.

Reality: If families were given the appropriate type of support and access to services that helped them in their parental responsibilities vulnerable children and youth may be able to remain with the family. Families living in communities that are adequately supported are not allowing their children to end up on the streets.

In addition, many youths who have lived for several years in orphanages are the ones nurturing feelings of insecurity and fears for the future. Research shows that young adult residents in orphanages fear discrimination, victimization, joblessness and homelessness once they leave the orphanage. They think that society doesn't value them and they don't see how they will be able to be part of an outside community and as a result, they fear leaving the center when they turn 18. In 2008, almost 2000 young adults over 18 were still living in orphanages^{ix}. This figure indicates that orphanages are not preparing youth to live as independent actors of society and their future needs are not taken into account. Most often their ties with their families have become thin if not reduced to nothing over the years. Given the critical role that family relationships play in every aspect of life in Cambodia (to find a job, a house, and a spouse), these young adults are undoubtedly in a vulnerable position, as they have to live the orphanage.

“The reality is that, when young adult orphans leave the orphanages to live in the community, they will be among the most vulnerable members of society, in many cases the very reason they found themselves in an orphanage in the first place. Too often orphanages have not relieved them of their vulnerability, but have only delayed its effects”. ICC-Project Sky^x

Myth: “If we give money to the families they will spend it on other things, not on the children. We cannot trust them; there is always a risk”.

Like in many other Asian countries, family is the cornerstone of society in Cambodia. Poor families are not any different from other Cambodian families; they love their children just as much. If given the right type of support, most vulnerable families will do just the right thing, which is to keep their children with them and send them to school.

Paradoxically orphanages may well end up creating orphans because they tend to cut ties between the child and his/her family. In the past Cambodian families have sufficiently suffered from being torn apart; let's not repeat history. Instead of separating children from their family we should help them stay together.

Parents of children living in orphanages are often praised for their sacrifice and for having made the right choice. We often hear sentences like "rather than watch your child starve to death, if you love your child, you are willing to give them to an orphanage so that they might live". Let's go a step further, rather than separating a loving mother from her child and seeing her cut her feelings, let's help them stay together by supporting the mother instead of sending her child to a center.

In addition, supporting the family to be able to care for their children is a lot cheaper in the long term than having them in a center. International studies show that residential care is a lot more expensive than caring for children in the community^{xi}.

Children should not have to choose between the right to live with their families and the right to access quality education.

In conclusion, why is community-based care preferable for children to residential care?

Family or community-based care such as kinship care and fostering is preferable to residential care because:

- Orphanages tend to separate children from their parents and from family life, which is paramount for a healthy adulthood. Nothing is done to reunite children with their families and little is done to maintain strong relationships between the child and their parents.
- Children living in orphanages cannot receive the individual care and attention they need.
- Most orphanages do not have reintegration programs for their youth. When they become adults, youths who have spent years in orphanages are not adapted to community life and struggle to find their place in society.
- Supporting a child in orphanage costs a lot more than supporting a child in family care.

How can you better support vulnerable children? Take action!

Stop orphanage tourism! Travelers and tourists should refrain from visiting orphanages because:

- An orphanage is a child's home, a place that should be safe and should respect his/her right to privacy and dignity. Children shouldn't be exposed to strangers in their own home. In Western countries, we would never allow tourists to show up in shelters where our children are living. Orphanages should not be open to the public!

- Directors of orphanages often encourage tourists to come to their centers in the hope that they will make donations. Children are therefore kept in a state of poverty that induces the visitors to give: giving will actually not improve the lives of these children! Children should not be used as commodities and as a means to raise funds.
- Few orphanages have a child protection policy and as a result they often allow strangers to be in contact with children, sometimes without supervision. Leaving children alone with strangers exposes them to potential dangers. Not all visitors are well intentioned and it is well known that child abusers try to find a way to get close to children.
- Visiting and funding orphanages fuels a system that is not in the best interest of children.

Support child-focused community programs!

The best way to help vulnerable children is to help their parents or family take good care of them. By funding child-focused community programs, you actually help parents keep their children at home. A community-based service is any kind of support given to families with vulnerable children that helps them support their children within their family. It can be food support, educational support, or support that will enable family members to generate an income (basic support to launch a business, home based production training etc).

List of services coming soon.

Learn now about 7 ways to protect children: <http://www.childsafe-international.org/TFResidents.asp>

ⁱ *Alternative Care Report*, Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation, 2008.

ⁱⁱ *Orphans children affected by HIV and other vulnerable children in Cambodia: a situation and response analysis*. NOVCTF, MoSVY/National AIDS Authority, Cambodia, 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Making a significant difference: the national plan of action for orphans, children affected by HIV and other vulnerable children in Cambodia, 2008-2010*. NOVCT, MoSVY/National AIDS Authority, Cambodia, 2008.

^{iv} MoSVY Alternative Care Database, Cambodia, 2008.

^v *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, General Assembly Resolution 44/25, 20 November 1989.

^{vi} *Policy on Alternative Care for Children*, MoSVY, Cambodia, April 2006.

^{vii} *UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care for Children* adopted by the UN General Assembly on 20 November 2009.

^{viii} Since 1950's the impact of institutionalization of children has been extensively researched internationally. Some of the most important recent studies include the *Bucharest Early Intervention Project* (2005 and 2007), *Roofs and Root, the care of separated children in the developing world* by Tolfree D., Save the Children UK, 1995; *Family Matters: A study of institutional childcare in Central and Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union* by Carter R.,

EveryChild, London, UK, 2005; *Keeping Children out of harmful institutions* by Csáky C., Save the Children, London, UK, 2009. Studies on Cambodia include *The national survey of providers or alternative care for children in Cambodia* by Daigle and Dybdal, MoSALVY, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 2001; *The Project Survey of Alternative Child Care in Phnom Penh and Kanda I* by HOSEA, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 2001; *Child Recovery Centres: Intentions versus Reality* by Vijghen, J., COSECAM, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 2004.

^{ix} *Alternative Care Report*, Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation, 2008.

^x ICC-Project SKY seeks the safe reintegration and social inclusion of young adult orphans back to communities. They aim to provide services and opportunities that counter the effects of institutionalization, nurturing positive attitudes and changes within both orphanages and the surrounding communities.

^{xi} Save the Children 2009 study shows that residential care costs five times more than foster care and eight times more than aid given to vulnerable families in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union.