Think before you help
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Last year I participated in an exchange programme with a school in Indonesia. During my stay there, I visited an orphanage. When we arrived, I immediately felt welcome, we were surrounded by smiling children who treated us as if we had known them for years. It was an amazing day and after an emotional goodbye, I left with a feeling of satisfaction, I felt as if I had done something good for those children. I looked back on this experience many times, however, I never took a moment to think critically about how a visit as such, actually influences those children.

A while ago I watched a ted talk from a woman named Tara Winkler, in this talk she spoke about why her charity work at an orphanage in Cambodia was one of the biggest mistakes she had ever made. It was after watching this ted talk, that I started to dig into the painful truth about orphanages. What I found out is that the laughing faces of the children I met in Indonesia, told a misleading story.

Many people believe orphanages to be these joyful places where children are given a second chance and where all is good. Unfortunately this picture is not realistic. Even though the orphanages often have all the good intentions, they can never fulfill the role of a family. The staff works in shifts and therefore a caregiver cannot be a parent figure on which a child can rely at all times. Also, in many cases, there is an ongoing stream of tourists (which I am sorry to have been a part of). These tourists come visit the orphans for a day, give them the love they are longing for and when the day is over they will leave, thinking they have done something good. What they do not see is that the children stay behind, reminded of their abandonment, time and again. The same cycle goes for volunteers and interns, these people generally stay at an orphanage for about half a year. During their stay they form a very intense bond with the orphans, but after half a year they leave, again abandoning the orphans. Institutionalized orphans go through these unhealthy cycles many times, and this is not without a risk. Over 60 years of international research shows that the institutionalization of children causes a tremendous increase in the risk of developing mental illness, attachment disorders and speech and growth delays. Furthermore, many will struggle a lot with integrating back into society. Research also gives us some data that is more concrete, children who grow up in institutions are ten times more likely to end up as a sexworker, forty times more likely to have a criminal record, and 500 times more likely to commit suicide.

Finding out all of the negative effects that growing up in an orphanage brings with it, shocked me. With this in mind, the question why these institutions even exist, and why they are still growing in numbers, became more and more urgent to me.

The one and only reason for the increase of orphanages in developing countries is the increase in popularity surrounding this “charity”. Many people want to do something good in this world, and many of these people choose to do this by volunteering or donating to an
orphanage. Hereby, we have created a huge demand for charity work in orphanages and thus also for orphanages. This demand has clearly not been ignored, over the past years we have seen a tremendous growth in the number of orphanages in developing countries. In Uganda, the number of orphanages has even risen by 1600% since 1992. What is remarkable however, is that 80% of the children living in these orphanages are not actually orphan, they still have one or two parents. Many poor families are promised a better life for their children in orphanages but are not informed about the risks of separating their child from his or her family. The growth is not fueled by a rising level of poverty, an increasing number of orphans or whatsoever. This growth is only happening because people like you and me are doing what they think is best, but clearly this is not the case! Because of the lack of worldwide recognition for the issue, goodwilling people are fueling an industry that is tearing families apart and unnecessarily exposing children to the risks of growing up in an institution.

Awareness for this problem is already growing and along with that, there are numerous organizations promoting an alternative way of helping children in need. This alternative way is based on family oriented care. The idea is to invest the money that is now used for residential care in a support system for low income families. This way we can enable families to take care of their own children. In situations where it is not possible for a family to stay together because of, for instance, domestic violence or the death of parents, we can use that same money to provide children with good foster care. Unlike residential care, foster care will provide the child with a constant and reliable caregiver.

The cold truth is, the more people want to do good by supporting orphanages, the more of these orphanages are going to be set up, the more children are going to be separated from their families and consequently will be exposed to the risks that follow. This vicious circle needs to be broken and we can do this by drawing attention to the problem. I believe that it is possible to end the era of orphanages and that is why I call upon whoever reads this essay to spread the word!
Bibliografie


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