

# JUST CARE: JUST VOLUNTEERING

**Exploring the impact of volunteering  
in orphanages and institutional care  
on the lives of vulnerable children**

*Small Group Session*

**tearfund**

Ireland

“All Children have the right to grow up in a caring family environment” UNICEF<sup>1</sup>

## Background and Introduction

Welcome to this Tearfund Ireland Resource for churches, youth leaders, and others exploring the theme of residential care for children and volunteering overseas.

Tearfund Ireland is a Christian, international relief and development organisation working to see people lifted out of poverty for good. We uphold the principles of the Dóchas Guide to Ethical Communications and we are signatories to a number of Codes of Good Practice in Ireland including the IDEA Code of Good Practice for Development Education<sup>2</sup>, the Comhlámh Code of Good Practice for Volunteer Sending Agencies<sup>3</sup> and uphold the principles of the Dóchas Ethical Guide to Communications in our work<sup>4</sup>.

### Good intentions can be harmful

The idea of “giving back” or ‘making a difference’ by volunteering overseas is well known in Ireland. Many of us have either volunteered overseas ourselves, or know someone who has. Volunteering in orphanages is popular with many; spending time caring for, or teaching children living in residential care. Although it is usually done with the best of intentions; research<sup>5</sup> shows that: volunteering in orphanages fuels systems that separate children from their families, harms their development and increases the risk of them being abused. Even well run, well-resourced, orphanages with staff that care about the children cannot replace the care and stability of family-based care in the community.

At Tearfund Ireland we believe that children belong and thrive best in families.

### A note about the sensitivity of the issues

The themes addressed in this session relating to orphanage volunteering can be controversial; especially, if an individual in your group has volunteered in an orphanage in the past, or someone close to them is engaged with organisations who promote it.

It is important to explain why orphanage volunteering can cause harm, referring to the extensive research completed over the last few decades. This is not about shaming people or telling them that what they have been doing is bad or wrong. Rather, it is about looking at the issue from a variety of perspectives including those of the people and communities directly involved, to draw attention to the harm that can be caused despite good intentions.

Talking about children in orphanages/alternative care situations may be a trigger for some people who may themselves be experiencing or have experienced adoption, family violence, separation or family breakdown. Participants may even have their own experiences of living in 'out of home' care or within child protection systems. This is a sensitive issue. Facilitators are reminded that participants may feel uncomfortable talking about it. It is important to have some knowledge and understanding of who is in the group before introducing this topic.

## A Group Agreement

Consider creating a group agreement (if you don't already have one) with some ground rules for the conversation. That could include things like:

- People in the group come from diverse backgrounds and that sensitivity and respect are required.
- We will not speak over each other. (Consider a 'talking stick' or a hands-up approach if necessary).
- We are all here to learn and we will ask questions when we do not understand.

There is a risk of participants disclosing personal information. Therefore, a clear statement (see below) needs to be made at the start of each session, so that participants DO NOT make personal disclosures and also understand the concepts of 'limited confidentiality' and 'safeguarding reporting' - requirements under the Children First Act 2015 (in Ireland) as well as your own organisation's Safeguarding Policy and Procedures.

## The impact of growing up in an orphanage

Growing up in residential care/orphanages has a negative impact on children - here are some of the facts<sup>6</sup>:

Approximately 5-8 million children live in residential care across the world.

Around 80% of children living in orphanages have at least one living parent.

Decades of research has shown that growing up in an orphanage has a negative effect on a child's health, development and long term life outcomes.

Young adults raised in orphanages are 10 times more likely to fall into sex work, 40 times more likely to have a criminal record and 500 times more likely to take their own lives than their peers<sup>7</sup>.

The Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, endorsed by the United Nations in 2009, state that: governments should, wherever possible, promote family-based care and prevent children being separated from their parents.

Orphanage tourism and volunteering is helping to financially sustain the orphanage industry worldwide.

## **Volunteering in Orphanages is a harmful practice – here are some of the issues**

**Vetting volunteers:** Orphanages who accept volunteers usually have very limited resources or systems in place to conduct necessary procedures to carry out background checks. Inadequate vetting of volunteers can put vulnerable children at increased risk.

**Attachment issues:** Volunteers spend a limited time in the orphanages, but even in the small amount of time, bonds with the children are created. Every time a volunteer leaves; children are left behind, repeating the cycle of abandonment, which can have adverse effects on their well-being and development.

**The orphanage industry:** The more people volunteer in orphanages, the more orphanages become profitable. This creates the need for a growing orphanage “industry” and can perpetuate a supply and demand chain for volunteering opportunities in orphanages, as well as child trafficking. There is more and more evidence of cases of children being trafficked into orphanages for the sole purpose of generating funds.

**Practice in Ireland:** In Ireland, orphanages are considered an out of date model of care because we know they’re not the best option for children. Why do children in Eastern Europe and the Global South deserve any less?

## **How to use this resource**

This resource features three short video clips of child-care expert Stephen Ucembe with follow up questions for discussion. Stephen has lived experience of growing up in an orphanage in Kenya and is the co-founder of the Kenyan Society of Care Leavers.

This resource follows a non-formal learning approach. A key part of non-formal learning is reflection on our individual learning. Participants might benefit from using a learning journal to track their feelings and thoughts in relation to the topic.

It will be important to build trust and good communication within the group. Make sure you provide adequate time for at least one warm-up activity. You can find ice breaker resources related to this topic in the Just Care:Just Volunteering resource, available on the Tearfund Ireland website [HERE](#).

You will find further resources at the end of the pack, which you may find helpful for your own learning about this topic, and to inform the work you do with participants.

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## Session Outline

### Welcome and introduction

Welcome the group and begin with an informal activity or other ice breaker activity such as the Word Cloud below.

### Word Cloud

**Aim:** To explore knowledge and perspectives about childhood, including identity, family and community.

### Materials / resources needed:

The facilitator can either use a digital platform (such as Mentimeter) or a flipchart.

Post-it notes.

**Note:** If using Mentimeter in person, the participants will need to access the word cloud on their smart devices.

**Time required:** 5-10 minutes

## Methodology

The facilitator uses an open-ended question and seeks the group's responses, e.g.

“What word comes to mind when you think of children?”

“What word comes to mind when you think of a positive childhood?”

“What word comes to mind when you think of volunteering overseas?”

“What word comes to mind when you think of orphans?”

If using Mentimeter, the facilitator should have Mentimeter open on their computer, and Mentimeter will provide a code that participants should enter on the [www.menti.com](http://www.menti.com) website via their smart phones.

The participants should take out their smartphones to input their chosen words.

Words will appear on the facilitator's screen. The facilitator can decide whether or not to display the words as they are entered or to wait until everyone has finished entering their words to avoid participants influencing each other.

If working with a flipchart, the facilitator writes the statement up on a flipchart. Participants can sit in small groups to share ideas before writing their post-its or they sit on their own and write the words on post-its. The facilitator then invites the participants as a group to put their post-its on the flipchart. When all the post-its are on the chart, the facilitator then groups them and reads them out.

Give participants a few minutes to look at the words on the screen. Observe patterns.

## Debrief

Ask participants if they have any comments on the words that have appeared on the screen. Are any of the words a surprise?

## Note to Facilitator

Depending on your group and previous engagement with the topic/resource; you can stick to questions about childhood generally, or you can begin to introduce questions about volunteering and orphanages.

Due to the sensitive content of the session it may be better not to ask participants to self-identify which words they submitted. When using Mentimeter, all responses are anonymous.

## Section 1 – Stephen Ucembe’s story

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In this section we will hear Stephen Ucembe’s story and consider why children live in orphanages and residential care institutions today. We will explore the question: What happens when a child is separated from family members and put into an orphanage?

*“A Father to the fatherless, a defender of widows is God in his holy dwelling. God sets the lonely in families;” Psalm 68:5-6a*



Play video clip 1 of Stephen Ucembe’s Story (6 mins)  
<https://youtu.be/hnwxmg9ZcIY>

Invite people to comment on what they have heard.



### Questions for discussion

How does Stephen's story resonate with your personal values and beliefs?

Traditionally our understanding is that children who grow up in orphanages are orphans, that have no parents. Listening to Stephen’s story, do you think that this is this the case in Kenya? Or across the world? Why?

What impact do you think being separated from family members might have on a young child? Stephen talks about never being called by his name, not having any individualised care, never experiencing physical affection, not speaking his mother tongue – how would this impact on a child’s sense of self-worth?

Stephen’s father came to visit when he was a young child. Why do you think contact was discouraged? Whose needs were put first? The child’s needs or the needs of the institution? Are there any circumstances in which the needs of an institution should be put before the needs of a child?

## Section 2 - Orphanage donors and supporters

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It is not unusual for people in the Ireland to know someone who has visited or volunteered in orphanage. In this section Stephen talks about the impact of volunteers and donors visiting the orphanage where he grew up.

*“Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress.” James 1:27*



Play video clip 2: The impact of visitors and volunteers (3.43 minutes)  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JpeAF1E\\_k6E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JpeAF1E_k6E)

Invite people to share any reflections

Note to the group leader: There are two things to keep in mind. We must place at the centre, and listen first and foremost, to those with experience – this is not an abstract conversation.

Much research has been done in the past decade on the impact of institutional care on the life of a child and we are learning all the time. This is not about condemning anyone’s work in the past but about seeing how we can do things in the best interests of the child in the future.



### Questions for discussion

Stephen observes that children in the community don’t run to strangers in the same way as children in the orphanage used to. Why do you think there is a difference? Why might this be a cause for concern in terms of child safeguarding?

As a child development professional, Stephen speaks of the attachment issues experienced by children in the orphanage setting. What impact might the constant coming and going of staff and visitors have on the psychological and emotional development of a child?

How appropriate is it for children to be ‘paraded’ for visitors or to have their stories told without their permission?

### Did you know?

Introduce some of the facts and figures related to orphanages and orphanage volunteer, you may like to use the questions adapted from Just Care:Just Volunteering Activity 7: The Big Quiz (see Appendix 1)

## Section 3 – A growing movement for change

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In this section Stephen talks about how the way society is caring for orphaned and vulnerable children has changed with the recognition that children thrive in a safe and nurturing family but don't do so well in an institutional care setting. He shares about a global movement that is already underway to keep children in family.

*“Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed. Take up the cause of the fatherless; plead the case of the widow.” Isaiah 1:17*



Play video clip 3: Signs of hope and a growing movement for change (6.24 minutes) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ATYtOLdtJ0>



### Questions for reflection and discussion

Do you agree with Stephen that the family is the model unit of society? Why? Why not?

There is a global shift to support children within the family unit. What are some of the benefits of this shift in thinking?

Stephen gives the example of several Governments including the Kenyan, Rwandan and Ugandan Governments that are actively phasing out institutional care in favour of family and community-based care. Stephen calls for our support for this work.

What could we do to be a voice for change? How might we support initiatives to see more children growing up in safe and nurturing families?

## Section 4 Taking Action – some suggestions

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- Speak to at least one other person about one thing you learned.
- Look up the Irish Department of Foreign Affairs travel advice about visiting and volunteering in orphanages <https://www.ireland.ie/en/dfa/overseas-travel/know-before-you-go/backpacking-volunteering-adventure-tourism/#Volunteering>
- Educate yourself about why there is a global movement to see a shift in how we care for orphaned and vulnerable children around the world. (See Appendix 2 for further resources).
- Sign up for the 5-part Tearfund Ireland Learning Journey ‘Rethinking how we Care’ <https://info.tearfund.ie/learningjourneys>

Make a commitment to do what you can to see children grow up in safe and nurturing families. Ask the participants to stick the post it notes up on a flip chart or wall for the group leader to review after the session and to follow up on if needed.

## Final Reflection

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Ask the group to take 5 minutes to reflect on what they have heard and discussed in this session.

Give each participant a three post it notes. Ask them to write down

- one thing they have learned,
- one thing that challenged them and
- one thing that they will do as a result of participating in this session, one on each of the post it notes.

Ask the participants to stick the post it notes up on a flip chart or wall for the group leader to review after the session and to follow up on if needed.

## Appendix 1

The Big Quiz adapted from Just Care:Just Volunteering – a youth work resource exploring the impact of volunteering in orphanages and institutional care on the lives of vulnerable children<sup>9</sup>

### The BIG Quiz

**Aim:** To gauge the level of understanding about the topic among the participants and to encourage them to think about the issue of the institutionalisation of children.

#### Materials / resources needed:

Pens and paper.

Flipchart paper for debriefing.

Copies of the answer fact sheet.

#### Time:

10 minutes

#### Methodology

Split the group into teams for the quiz.

Encourage them to give their team a name.

Explain that you will read (or display) some multiple choice questions. They should agree as a team which answer they think is correct and note it on their answer sheets.

Give each group a pen and paper.

At the end of the questions, switch the answer sheets among the groups so that another group is 'correcting' the answers.

See which team had the most correct answers – they are the winners!

## Debrief

Discuss the participants' answers. Mix the teams up in new pairs or groups of 3, and ask them to chat to each other about what you have just heard. How did it make you feel? After groups have chatted for a few minutes, the facilitator asks if anyone would like to share? Use flipchart paper to note what participants:

Were surprised by:

Were already aware of:

Want to know more about:

## Note to Facilitator

The answers are in bold type on the quiz and the answer sheet below provides more detail.

## Quiz Questions

1. Orphanages are the most cost-effective way to care for vulnerable children?  
a. True    **b. False**
2. What percentage of children living in orphanages in Nepal, have at least one living parent?  
a. 10%    b. 30%    c. 50 %    **d. 85%**
3. How many children in Haiti (population 11 million) are living in institutional care facilities?  
a. 15,000    **b. 30,000**    c. 45,000    d. 60,000
4. By what percentage did the number of orphanages in Cambodia increase between the years 2005-2010?  
a. 15%    b. 30%    **c. 75%**    d. 100%

5. By what percentage did Moldova reduce the number of children living in orphanages between 2007 and 2013?

a. 10% b. 30% c. 50% **d. 70%**

6. Which country has a 10 year strategy to phase out the institutional care of children by 2032?

**a. Kenya** b. Uganda c. Ghana d. Rwanda<sup>9</sup>

7. Which country was the first to recognise orphanage trafficking where children are deprived of their family and exploited for profit as a form of modern slavery?

a. Ireland b. Kenya **c. Australia** d. USA

8. Does the Irish government have a clear policy statement on Irish support for overseas orphanages and orphanage volunteering?

a. Yes **b. No**

## Appendix 2 Further Resources

Tearfund Ireland Rethinking how we Care learning journey: <https://info.tearfund.ie/learningjourneys>

Tearfund Ireland Just Care:Just Volunteering Biblical Reflection Companion for Churches and Faith Based Youth Groups: <https://share.hsforms.com/12lsDcRf-7SP-EVtJmsF-p5Adk1d>

The Faith to Action Initiative: <https://www.faithtoaction.org/start-here/>

The Home Coming Project run by Home for Good with the aim of inspiring and equipping individual Christians and churches to promote family-based care for children around the world: <https://homecomingproject.org/resources>

World Without Orphans Resources: <https://wworoadmap.org/>

The Global Churches Pledge: <https://globalchurchpledge.org>

The Better Care Network: <https://bettercarenetwork.org/>

The Comhlámh Put Children First Campaign: <https://comhlamh.org/volunteering-and-orphanage-care/>

Please contact Tearfund Ireland for more information and support: [emma.lynch@tearfund.ie](mailto:emma.lynch@tearfund.ie)

## References

- 1 <https://www.unicef.org/eca/media/3661/file/in-focus-keeping-families.pdf>
  - 2 <https://www.ideaonline.ie/index.php?/what-we-do/capacity-development/quality-and-impact/good-practice/code-of-good-practice-for-development-education/>  
IDEA is the Irish Development Education Network
  - 3 <https://comhlamh.org/code-of-good-practice/> Comhlámh is the umbrella network for Irish Volunteer Sending Agencies
  - 4 [https://www.dochas.ie/assets/Dochas-Ethical-Guide-D8\\_Final-v2.pdf](https://www.dochas.ie/assets/Dochas-Ethical-Guide-D8_Final-v2.pdf)
  - 5 <https://comhlamh.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Children-First-Report-May-2019.pdf>
  - 6 <https://rethinkorphanages.org/problem-orphanages/facts-and-figures-about-orphanage-tourism>  
[https://lumos.contentfiles.net/media/documents/document/2017/03/Global\\_Numbers.pdf](https://lumos.contentfiles.net/media/documents/document/2017/03/Global_Numbers.pdf)
  - 7 <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2019/oct/24/jk-rowling-urges-students-not-to-volunteer-at-orphanages>
- Pashkina (2011)..Sotsial'noe obespechenie, 11:42-45. Cited in Hansen J, Kristofersen LB, Myrvold TM eds. Orphans in Russia. Oslo, Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research (NIBR-rapport 2003:1)
- 8 <https://www.tearfund.ie/get-involved/resource-hub/development-education/alternativecare/>
  - 9 All these countries Kenya, Uganda, Ghana and Rwanda are working to phase out institutional care and for children without parental care to be cared for in a family based care setting. <https://nccs.go.ke/sites/default/files/resources/OVERVIEW%20OF%20THE%20NATIONAL%20CARE%20REFORM%20FOR%20CHILDREN%20%20PRESENTATION-.pdf>