



Next Generation Nepal

Ethical Volunteering in Nepal

How to Protect Vulnerable Children While “Giving Back”



Photograph credit: Erik B Wilson/Next Generation Nepal

“I believe passionately in the value and power of volunteering. When volunteering can benefit the individual *and* others, then I am its biggest advocate – not just because of what it did for me, but because most of the NGN staff and Board members began their careers as volunteers. Volunteering is in our DNA. But there are inherent risks to volunteering. Not to the volunteer as much as to the beneficiaries. Almost by definition, an international volunteer will know little about the culture or the nuances of the people they are trying to help. This leaves us vulnerable to those who would prey on our good intentions. When I hear stories of well-intentioned volunteers in Nepal inadvertently causing more trafficking of children by paying to volunteer in corrupt orphanages, it breaks my heart. These are good people who want to help Nepal, and have spent their own time and money to do so. There must be a way to address the problem and the risk. I hope that, together, we can work to make volunteering the force for good that we all know it can be.”

Conor Grennan, Next Generation Nepal (NGN) President and founder, and the author of the bestselling book, *Little Princes: One Man’s Promise to Bring Home the Lost Children of Nepal*.

Orphanage Trafficking

Orphanages are traditionally places that care for children without parents, while children's homes are traditionally places for children who have nowhere else to go. Unfortunately, in Nepal, this is increasingly not the case because children are deliberately and unnecessarily separated from their families to grow up in these places. Parents can be persuaded that giving up their children is a way to guarantee that their child will be provided a good life and education in the city. In reality, in many cases, children are taken to children's homes or orphanages, threatened into hiding their identities and backgrounds, and forced into saying their parents are dead or too poor to look after them. Documents are routinely falsified and families can lose all contact with their children. This practice has become known as "orphanage trafficking."

Orphanage trafficking is a lucrative business as there is money to be made at both ends of the chain. At one end, parents are charged high fees by the traffickers for their "service." And at the other end, there is a ready supply of fee-paying volunteers and donors willing to give time and money to help seemingly destitute orphans. Although children do sometimes end up in children's homes that provide for their basic material and educational needs, all too often, they end up victims of abuse, neglect and exploitation. In all cases they are denied their basic human right to grow up as part of a loving family.

Hard-Hitting Facts!

- Over 16,000 children are living in children's homes and orphanages in Nepal.
- Reports suggest that 85% of these children have one or more living parents.
- Around 80% of children's homes and orphanages are located in the top 5 tourist districts of Nepal (Kathmandu, Patan, Bhaktapur, Pokhara and Chitwan).

Volunteering and Trafficking: The Missing Link

Unsuspecting but well-intentioned volunteers and donors can inadvertently fuel the profit-making orphanage trade. The money that foreigners bring incentivizes the drive to separate more children from their families. 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; they actually need "poor-looking" children to meet their donors' criteria. Similarly, NGN has received reports of orphanage owners deliberately keeping children in destitute or unhealthy conditions to attract more financial donations. Children have become a lucrative



poverty commodity in Nepal, and the well-intentioned but naïve willingness of volunteers and donors to provide funds ensures the ongoing demand for children to be unnecessarily displaced from their families.

Even volunteering in orphanages where the children appear materially well-off can have harmful consequences. Firstly, a rotating door of short-term caregivers has been shown to create long-term psychological problems for the children; they get attached to volunteers who then leave, over and over again, each time causing grief for the child. Secondly, that same rotating door, coupled with the difficulty for Nepali organizations to do background checks on foreigners, leaves the system wide open for less well-intentioned individuals to abuse it. Lastly, even in seemingly “good” children’s homes, there is evidence that children have at times been trafficked or displaced from their families, sometimes without the staff even knowing about it.

Alternatives to Children’s Homes

NGN is often asked what happens to genuine orphans or children from extremely poor families. We are also asked how people can use their money and time wisely to prevent trafficking and family separation. These are our responses:

- The vast majority of orphans in Nepal live happily with other family members or neighbors. Children’s homes should always be the last option and, ideally, a temporary option. If children lose their parents, or their parents are unable to look after them, it is traditional in Nepal for other family members to care for those children, and in most cases this is a realistic option.
- Apart from extreme circumstances, poverty should not be a reason for families to separate. As happens in other countries, families can be supported to remain together. By supporting projects which help poor and rural communities to grow into economically thriving places, with good educational systems and healthcare services, families can be prevented from separating.

Top Tips for Ethical Volunteering

If you are passionate about making a contribution to issues you care about and want to volunteer, here are our tips for making sure you have a positive impact.

- **Do not volunteer in a children’s home or orphanage.** The demand for volunteer placements in orphanages in Nepal is incentivizing child trafficking. Orphanages have become profit-making businesses to meet the needs of volunteers – and not the needs of the children!
- **Before volunteering, adopt a “learning mindset.”** This means readjusting your whole approach towards volunteering and recognizing that you first



Photograph credit: Next Generation Nepal/The Himalayan Innovative Society

Case Study – Mukti Nepal

Mukti Nepal was an orphanage in Kathmandu which was popular with foreign volunteers. Many foreigners used to stay in the home to play with and care for the children, as well as help the owner with fundraising. On the surface the children in Mukti Nepal were happy and healthy, and as far as the volunteers were concerned, they were genuine orphans. The founder of the orphanage appeared to be a dedicated social worker and was an inspiration to the volunteers.

However things were not as they seemed. Behind closed doors, the owner would beat and neglect the children. She would also threaten them that if they informed the foreigners that they were not orphans then they or their families would be harmed. Parents who tried to gain access to their children were turned away. This culminated in the death of a child after she was denied medical treatment following a road accident, and was instead left on the roof and beaten with steel rods and nettles.

Following a tip-off by a visitor, the orphanage was raided by the Government and 20 children were rescued and placed in NGN’s care so they could be rehabilitated and reconnected with their families. Eighteen of the children have now been fully reunified with their families. Were it not for the misguided support of foreign volunteers and donors – who genuinely believed they were helping a good cause – Mukti Nepal would never have existed, the children may never have been removed from their families, and the deceased girl may still be alive.

need to learn from those you wish to help. Only by understanding their lives and the problems they are facing will you know if you are in a position to help them, and how to do so. Learning before helping is not selfish; it means that when you do give help to others, it will be focused and effective. A “learning mindset” means questioning your assumptions, being willing to change your mind, and always being open to learning. See: www.learningservice.info.

- **Research ethical volunteering options thoroughly.** Choosing an ethical volunteering placement requires research and thoughtfulness. If you are serious about wanting to help – and not inadvertently cause harm – then don’t choose the first option that comes along, but research approaches that truly help communities.
- **Consider the suitability of your skills.** Look at your own skill set and how this can be best utilized for the benefit of a community. For example, a website designer is probably not qualified to care for vulnerable children, but he or she may be just what a local NGO needs to help them design their new website. An accountant could pass on valuable knowledge of financial management. Your English grammar skills could be really useful for editing a report. This behind the scenes support may be less glamorous than “hands-on” roles, but it can provide vital support which local projects really need.
- **Consider the sustainability of the project you want to work on.** You should consider the long-term impact of your volunteer placement. Avoid volunteering placements that prevent a local person from doing the same job. Consider how you can use your skills to train local people so that after you leave a local person can become the “change-maker” in their own community.
- **Ask the volunteer agency lots of questions.** Before choosing a volunteering placement, ask probing and informed questions about the ethics of your placement to the volunteering agency, and ask to be put in touch with previous volunteers who can give you a more realistic picture.
- **Be an ethical tourist.** There are many ways to do good while you travel, besides volunteering. Being an ethical tourist means spending money on services and goods that support local people and the local economy, talking with local people to learn about their lives and interests, and sharing your experiences with them. Through this sincere cultural transaction, everyone will benefit.

Take note that volunteering on a tourist visa in Nepal is technically “illegal” under the Immigration Act. While NGN is therefore unable to officially endorse volunteering in Nepal, we are also realistic in recognizing that thousands of people do it each year anyway and tourism companies openly offer volunteering placements. If you do choose to volunteer in Nepal then please follow our advice on how to do it well.



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To Find Out More

- Attend an NGN Wisdom Wednesdays talk. The schedule of speakers is available at: www.nextgenerationnepal.org/Wisdom_Wednesdays
- Read our publication, *The Paradox of Orphanage Volunteering*, which can be downloaded for free from www.nextgenerationnepal.org/Ethical_Volunteering, along with many other useful tips and resources.
- Read Conor Grennan’s bestseller, *Little Princes: One Man’s Promise to Bring Home the Lost Children of Nepal*, for an exciting read about how orphanage trafficking began and the way two foreign volunteers chose to respond.
- For videos, toolkits and information about how to volunteer responsibly, check out: www.learningservice.info
- Still got questions? You can email us at: info@nextgenerationnepal.org

Reporting Child Abuse

If you witness or suspect child abuse while travelling in Nepal, please call the Child Helpline on 1098. If you suspect child trafficking or abuse in an orphanage, please document the evidence and formally submit it to Namuna Bhusal at the Central Child Welfare Board: namuna@ccwb.gov.np or +977 9851139474.