



**Australian  
Lutheran  
World Service**

## **Points for schools to consider before entering into an international project/activity**

Having an international focus as part of your service learning program may involve a partnership with an overseas group. This may or may not involve sending students and/or teachers overseas as part of that program.

If you want to incorporate this aspect into your service learning program, you could ask the following questions:

### **1. Ensure you have extensive knowledge of the organisation through which you are working – and this means developing a relationship with it.**

Questions to ask to gain this knowledge include:

- What is their vision and mission? Does this support your school's vision and mission?
- What is the organisation's long-term work plan? How does your project fit into this plan?
- Do they just keep on doing the same work year after year in the same place or are they empowering people so that they become self-sufficient?
- Does the organisation deal with more than just one aspect of the community (e.g. education)?
- How will your organisation be involved in long-term, sustainable change for the community in which you are helping?
- Is there transparency in relation to where your dollars go?
- Do you receive an initial budget for the project and then an acquittal showing how funds were spent?
- Do you receive financial statements including audited financial reports?
- Do you receive a copy of their Annual Report (there is a national Code of conduct which regulates what any Australian non-government organisation has to include in the contents of its Annual report and what it should receive from overseas non-government organisations receiving funds)?

If you have this information you should be able to answer all the points listed below. If you can't answer these, you must do more checking.

### **2. Does the organisation approach its work with the policy of "Nothing about us, without US!"?**

The significance of this approach must be instilled in students no matter what the focus of your service is, even if there is no activity/project but just learning through classroom investigation.

If students are involved in a domestic or overseas project this policy has to be applied in all the steps i.e. deciding what activity will the school undertake and the objectives; planning; organising; monitoring progress.

The people who are the focus have to be given a voice AND be listened to in all steps. The process has to be from the bottom up not from the top down.

If you follow Point 1 above, you will know if this policy is in place and that a participatory approach is in action.

In Christian service learning the focus should be on the beneficiary/ies and not on the students (or the school) in Australia feeling "good" because of what they are doing.

### 3. Does the organisation follow a 'Do no harm' approach?

In order for your school to be sure you are doing no harm you need to know the context....cultural, political, economic, environmental.... in which the project/activity is being implemented.

Examples include:

Politically, is the government a signatory to the *Declaration of Human Rights*, the *Rights of the Child*? What are the policies in the country regarding women and girl children? Is the organisation working within government regulations with regards to education and health policies?

Very frequently, projects benefit only a few in a community i.e. often those with the loudest voices. An activity that benefits one, two or some may do harm to many.

Consider the messages in the articles *Orphanage tourism* and *Hands-on help can be harmful* (at end of document).

### 4. Are you involving students in *inclusive development or service*?

Is anyone being left out or is there the potential for anyone in the community to be excluded from the benefits you believe will stem from the project (consider: people living with disabilities or illness, girls, boys, the elderly, vulnerable groups within the community etc.)?

Does the organisation in general support people living with disabilities in the community? How will these people benefit from the project that you are supporting? Has the design of the project considered what people living with disabilities will need?

Is the organisation in general working towards justice for all people in the community? How is this demonstrated in the project you are supporting?

Is the project exclusive to one church/religious affiliated group? Our Lutheran schools in Australia are inclusive places, so it makes sense that our support for overseas people would also be inclusive.

### 5. Is *sustainability* the guiding principle in the approach?

Sustainability must be a guiding factor in whatever you decide to do. In essence it means that the benefits of the supported project/activity will continue to and be of advantage to the people *after* you are no longer having your input. In reality, it is possible only when there has been capacity building of the target group.

There is too much evidence of non-sustainable projects, even when people had the best of intentions in the first place ... e.g.

- empty schools because the donors' funds came to an end;
- non-national teachers leave and there has been no agreement with the government to supply national teachers;
- the overseas source of student scholarships ceases so suddenly children no longer attend school;
- broken water points with no community water maintenance group and no community maintenance fund;

- houses made of non-local materials that are too expensive to be replaced by the local people when necessary;
- livestock given but no training in livestock care given;
- teachers who do not want to return to their communities because they have seen extremely well resourced classrooms in other countries;
- crops dying because there has been no training in the correct use of organic pesticides or herbicides etc, etc.

If your school is undertaking an in-Australia service project encourage relationship building; continuity of visits if these are essential to the effectiveness of the project; empowering of beneficiaries so that they are learning a skill, offering input and being empowered by the project not just being non- active, dependent recipients; a regular reviewing of the effectiveness (impact) of the project.

Also, as much as possible, have a group of people leading the project at the school to ensure that when one key teacher leaves, the project does not collapse or when a year level of enthusiastic hands-on students graduate, there is no incoming group to continue it.

#### **6. Obviously if sustainability has been a guiding principle then the organisation and your project should be following an empowerment approach.**

So if there is a true empowerment approach inherent in all that the organisation (and therefore your project/activity) does, you shouldn't be entering the project without an end-point planned.

If you are doing the same activity year in, year out with the same recipients, then you are not empowering your target people. You are in essence creating a dependency on your input. (Obviously, if your project involves an aged care facility, this is a different situation.)

Christian service should ensure that the givers of the service recognise the God-planted and nurtured potential, experience, wisdom and knowledge of the recipients and encourage that to blossom and be enhanced.

#### **7. Does the organisation encourage advocacy by the people?**

Hand-in-hand with empowerment goes the ability to advocate for the provision of the services which any government as the duty-bearers should provide.

Amazing results have been achieved by, for example, bonded labourers, bonded house girls and the like in countries where NGOs have focused on empowering the people and have taught them how to advocate successfully. Instead of becoming lifetime recipients of hand-outs they have been able to regain their God-given dignity by learning how to advocate peacefully and being successful in doing so.

If your project involves your school repeatedly supplying a service which the government of the country in focus should be providing, little will change. *You may be thinking that there are governments that are too poor to supply the necessary services.* This is very rare. The fact is that there are almost no poor governments in this world. There are poor countries with poor people. These poor countries receive money through government to government arrangements (bi-lateral) but sadly the money ends up in the pockets of the government members or in very poorly planned projects which do not meet the needs of the people.

You need to make sure that you don't take over doing things that governments should be doing to keep the cycle of them doing nothing continuing.

If you are helping to build a school, make sure that the government is working with you to provide and pay teachers. If international help does everything, they will never choose to do something.

### **8. Introduce students to terminology of respect and which preserves dignity.**

This means teaching students to always see the person first and, as a result, acknowledge this in the terms they use.

E.g. 'people who are blind', NOT 'blind people'. 'People living with albinism, NOT 'the albinos'. Emphasis must always be on the person who has potential and has something to give those who are willing to learn from them. This means that students need to be encouraged to realise that service learning is not about them doing something "kind" or "good" for those other poor people. There is an element of condescension in this thinking.

*See the real me, not the refugee!* Is quite a clever phrase if students are working with people who are refugees.

### **9. Ongoing hand-outs and gifts of money don't preserve God-given dignity either in Australia or overseas.**

In the special cases of emergencies and disasters funds are required but these are directed through Australian non-government organisation that ensure those funds move through the correct channels.

However, if continually fund raising and handing money or gifts over to an organisation, your school is building a focus which isn't part of service learning.

The focus in this case is on the students who are raising money/giving gifts and not on the capacity and potential of the recipients. Also, you need to be sure your gifts are suitable to the context to which you are directing them.

E.g. Some schools support the giving of gifts at Christmas to overseas countries.

Some things to consider:

- Is there a supply of safe, clean water for use of the toothbrushes that are often recommended by organisations?
- What happens when toothpaste which may be included is finished? (Poor families will not spend money on toothpaste.)
- Does the giving of clothes damage the vendors at the markets who sell second-hand clothing in the village? (Also can be applied to educational supplies, etc. – what do you do to local communities when you send 'stuff'?)
- Is the giving of school supplies really what the students need? How do you know?
- Some organisations ask for lollies to be included as gifts. Should children be given lollies when it is often not part of their normal diet? Should 'Westerners' teach poor children that eating sweets is a good thing, particularly when we know they will have no access to dental care? Are 'Westerners' teaching poor children that 'sweet is best'?
- Some organisations ask for items that need batteries. What happens when the batteries go flat?
- How do you know that these gifts go to the children to whom they are intended? Are any children left out? How do you know?

- How does giving the gift help in the long term? Does it change a poverty situation?

### **Develop a work plan**

After you have considered all the points listed above, it is then a good idea draw up a work plan / operational plan for any project. This would include:

- Clearly stating how this project fits into your service learning program
- Objectives
- Identification of key activities
- Plan for a monitoring and evaluation process of the impact of the project

ALWS hope the above points raise some stimulating thinking and discussion prior to undertaking an international service learning project within your school.

***God be with you in your international service learning planning!***

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**National Times**



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***Hands-on help can be harmful***

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Illustration: Simon Bosch

More Australians are adding a dash of volunteer work to their overseas holidays in poor countries. Between the trekking and the rafting, they are building houses in remote villages and working in orphanages.

They want to give back; they are appalled by global inequality; they seek personal fulfilment through encounters with the destitute and disadvantaged. Whatever the motive, the impulse to help is commendable. But the impact on the locals is not always beneficial.

At this time of year, students are planning - or embarking on - gap-year adventures that may combine mountain climbing with manual labour; and middle-aged professionals and new retirees are pondering how to have fun but spread goodness.

Before setting off, here is a question worth consideration: what consequences flow when an 18-year-old from Sydney's privileged suburbs goes to a village to build a house with a bunch of similar volunteers? Given their last encounter with bricks was with their Lego set, it is possible the youngsters won't build a sturdy house. More likely, the locals could teach them about unskilled manual labour.

Quite possibly, the young people are taking jobs from the locals. The youngsters benefit from the feel-good factor, their confidence and self-reliance grow. But manual labour is what is in abundance in the developing world. Who gains most here?

Being good is not as easy as it looks when the uninformed stumble naively into the complex world of international development. Experienced aid and development professionals are urging Australians to do their homework before they become "voluntourists". Decent impulses need to be channelled in useful ways.

The multimillion-dollar gap-year industry, for example, has come under recent scrutiny for its programs. Private operators charge hefty fees to provide the young with travel and volunteering experiences, but an ill-thought-out program can be bad for communities and for relations between rich and poor countries.

A report last year from the British research body Demos said the gap-year industry could be seen as a new form of colonialism, a new way of the West exercising power in the Third World.

One in five people who took one of the gap-year packages said they believed their presence in the place they visited made no positive difference to the lives of those around them, with one respondent in the study saying, "I felt that the local community could have done the work we were doing; there were lots of unemployed people there ..."

But a good program, the Demos report said, ensured the young people had relevant skills to offer and gave them opportunities to continue their work once they returned home.

Another popular way to volunteer abroad is to work in orphanages for a short stint.

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Australians have visited orphanages in Cambodia and Bali, bringing gifts, money and their skills. So common is this practice that it now has its own name, "orphanage tourism". But are the children helped or harmed by the stream of tourists who move in and out of their lives?

[Friends-International](#), a Cambodia-based development organisation, has called on tourists to stop the practice.

"Orphanages must be a safe place for children, not a tourist destination," it says. It claims the number of orphanages has proliferated in order to milk tourists of money; in Cambodia they are a booming business.

An official study showed just a quarter of the children in the orphanages had lost both of their parents. The most unscrupulous operators sent children to tourist haunts to do song and dance routines in order to lure rich Westerners to the institutions. A recent BBC radio documentary showed some of the orphanages in Bali were effectively rackets, exploiting the children and tourists alike.

Child development experts, such as the South African professor Linda Richter, co-author of the paper *AIDS Orphan Tourism*, have pointed out the psychological damage on very young children of a string of broken attachments with short-term caregivers passing through their orphanage.

A volunteer may believe her or his contribution to be valuable but, in the wider scheme, it may be harmful.

We don't allow a parade of volunteers in Australian child-care centres. Apart from safety concerns, we know children need to form secure attachments to regular carers.

Volunteers are needed abroad but mainly those with specific, often technical or high-level skills. Once nurses were needed, now midwife trainers are needed, for example.

Reputable organisations such as [Australian Volunteers International](#) respond to formal requests for skilled volunteers from organisations in developing countries. Applicants are put through a rigorous and competitive process of selection.

[TEAR Australia](#), a Christian development and aid agency, has harnessed the enthusiasm of Australians who are demanding the overseas aid experience. It has done this by setting up educational tours of development projects to bring Australians into contact with local communities. This is less about Australians "doing" the work and more about "learning" what the locals are doing.

Some people can't empathise unless they have first-hand experience and, once touched, they become lifelong ambassadors for a fairer global economic order; they become significant donors, letter writers and lobbyists.

But, if the first-hand experience is a pit stop between climbing mountains and riding elephants, you have to wonder who is benefiting from the experience.

The volunteer might find it "awesome" at the time and be chuffed by the locals' "gratitude". But they may learn no lasting lessons about rights and justice and even, unwittingly, do more harm than good.

## Orphanage Tourism

When travelling through a developing country it is easy to become overwhelmed by the situation of children. Poverty and social issues are very visible and often travellers are moved to take action and want to contribute in a meaningful way. It is important that the international community does take action, however contributions can unfortunately often add to existing problems or create an environment where children are kept in vulnerable and dangerous situations.

This document seeks to assist travellers and volunteers in finding a way to contribute, yet avoid situations or actions that may lead to child exploitation. Certain 'tourist attractions' such as orphanage tours exploit children's vulnerabilities.

**Before visiting or volunteering in an orphanage consider the following questions:**

### 📌 How do I harm children by visiting an orphanage?

Many orphanages rely almost entirely on donations from visitors to survive. Thus directors may purposefully maintain poor living conditions for children to secure funds from tourists. Children who appear underserved may come across as a cry for help more than children who appear well fed and cared for. This of course places guilt on tourists if they do not help immediately. By visiting orphanages and making a donation you may be fuelling a system that exploits children.

### 📌 In my own country would I consider visiting a shelter for children during the course of my day?

Most people would never consider going to an orphanage, shelter or residential home in their own countries. Why? An orphanage is a child's home and they have the right to privacy in this space. Orphanages are not zoos and tourists should not be allowed to move through their home. In most developed countries this would be a clear violation of children's rights and there are laws to protect them from such exploitation. Children in developing countries are no different from those in the developed world. They should be afforded the same basic rights.

### 📌 Is my contribution sustainable?

Investing in the future of Cambodian children is a valuable contribution. Investing in Cambodian families is also a valuable pursuit. Projects that aim towards strengthening community-based work provides the conditions under which alternative options may be offered to children and their families. A sustainable contribution should be aimed at breaking intergenerational cycles of poverty and exploitation. Orphanages do not offer a long-term sustainable response to the situation of vulnerable children. By investing in families and communities we are laying the foundation for better conditions for children.

**Orphanages should be a last resort option for children in need. If children are to be placed temporarily in an orphanage, how can it ensure that it works in the best interest of the child? Here is a set of questions to help you evaluate the intentions of orphanages:**

### 📌 Is the orphanage legally registered with the government?

Orphanages should disclose if they are registered with their national authority. This is an important process as all registered orphanages are bound to uphold the national minimum standards of care for children in their facility. They are also subject to a process of inspection by the government authority to monitor the standards.

### 📌 Does the orphanage have a child protection policy?

A lot of orphanages do not have child protection policies in place to ensure the safety and well-being of children in their care. Without a child protection policy, abuses of children may go undetected. It is important that orphanages can demonstrate that they have made attempts to safeguard children from dangers and vulnerabilities. In addition to this it is also important that children are aware of their own rights in the orphanage.

### 📌 Are visitors allowed to just drop in and have direct access to children without supervision?

Allowing visitors to have direct contact with children can place children at risk especially when visitors are unsupervised. Good organizations have policies in place to protect children and should not allow visitors to just drop in and have access to children. Visitors to an orphanage should never be left alone with children or allowed to take the children away from the orphanage unattended. Allowing visitors to the centre may result in a pattern of grooming whereby children begin to trust all visitors to the centre, this makes children vulnerable to abuse from visitors with ill intentions. Background checks should be conducted for all staff and volunteers interacting with children. Orphanages who allow people to walk in off the street with no background checks and interact with children are not protecting the children in their facility.

### 📌 Are children required to work or participate in securing funds for the orphanage?

Children residing in orphanages should in no way be used to promote or secure funds for the orphanage. Children should never be used as a promotional tool, be required to dance, sing, to make or sell products as a way of increasing revenue for the orphanage. This is child exploitation, child labour and violates children's rights and personal safety. By forcing children to engage in revenue rising they are being groomed to participate in the methods used for begging and street work that renders children even more vulnerable to exploitation.

### 📌 Is there long-term, trained and well-supervised staff?

Children who are living in outside the family unit often have complex needs and require specialist staff to accommodate these needs. Continuity of staff is important for children to attach and bond with a single caregiver. Where possible a constant caregiver should be appointed to attend to the child's daily needs promoting consistency and secure attachments to caregivers. Supervision of staff assures that they are upholding the rights of the child and that any difficulties they encounter are met and addressed. Orphanages that rely on foreign volunteers and staff undermine children's needs for developing long term and meaningful relationships.

### 📌 Are sibling groups kept together?

It is important that children are not separated from their siblings. Children should have the opportunity to live and stay in small family environments where they have the chance to bond with caregivers and their siblings. Consistency of care is important to children in creating long and lasting relationships. Remaining with siblings also allows children to stay connected to their cultural and family roots whilst they are separated from their families.

### 📌 Does the orphanage have an active family reunification program?

Are orphanages actively involved in maintaining relationships with living family members so that children can rejoin their family and community? Orphanages should be encouraging community alternatives such as kinship care and foster care above institutionalized care. Orphanages should be able to demonstrate how

they are actively exploring family and community care options for children residing in their orphanage. In Cambodia, the government released Minimum Standards of Care as part of its alternative care policy that explicitly states that all orphanages must actively seek family and community alternatives for children living in institutionalized care.

**📍 Is the orphanage located in the same community that the child previously lived in?**

Displacement of children from their community of origin reduces the chances of the child being reintegrated into his or her community. It also causes disruption of daily routines such as continuity of education, culture and social life and ties. It is important for children to remain connected with their families and community for healthy mental and social development.

**🏠 Is the orphanage set up to replicate family living or small groups?**

It is important for a child's development and life after living in institutionalized care to be provided with the opportunity to learn the life skills that come from residing in a small family environment. A small family environment models essential life skills such as cooking, cleaning, how to interact with adults, managing a budget etc. These skills are essential for young adults in learning to live independently from their families. Some children living in orphanages who lack this stimulation become institutionalized and are unable to be an active participant in life outside the orphanage. Living in a small family environment gives children an opportunity to create meaningful relationships with adults and strong bonds with other children.

**🙏 Does the orphanage respect and accommodate children's background and religious beliefs?**

Each child has the right to practice his or her own religious and cultural beliefs. In no way should a child be persuaded or unduly pressured to practice a religion other than his or her own in line with cultural beliefs. Real and meaningful steps should be taken to ensure that a child can practice his/her own religion and cultural beliefs. This may include, but is not limited to, access to religious sites, interaction with religious and cultural leaders, and a specialized or modified diet.

<http://www.thinkchildsafe.org/en/content/tip4/gna.html>