

Michael Horton ConCERT Presentation at WTM WRD - 9th November 2011

ConCERT's role is helping visitors to help – (**show leaflet**)

Our mission is to maximise the **benefits** from **tourism and travel of all kinds** for the people of Cambodia

It's relatively easy to increase the levels of activity – (*more volunteering, more donations, more sponsorships...*)

It's much more difficult to ensure that this activity brings real benefits to the people you wish to help

Tourism is at an interesting phase along the road to responsibility. Whereas in the past, people were content just to visit destinations and had little regard for their impact on the communities they visited, increasingly travellers want to feel they can contribute in some way.

Much of this is driven by the tourism industry, and whilst people wanting to help others less fortunate than themselves is in itself a positive development, most of us need a lot of help and guidance to make informed choices about how we can best get involved, so that our interventions brings real benefits to the people we wish to support.

Unfortunately, whilst the tourism industry is generally doing well in meeting the demands of its customers by providing activities that are very rewarding, (indeed in many cases, life changing), it is doing less well in ensuring that those activities are meeting the real needs of the people the industry is purporting to help.

We shouldn't be too surprised by this. The industry's primary expertise is tourism; it is still poorly equipped to truly understand the issues and the projects that it is becoming involved with, which can be extremely complex, often harrowing, and invariably rife with difficulties.

My experience, after 6 years in Cambodia and 3 and a half years running ConCERT, is that these difficulties are present in many sectors of activity, but are the greatest in 3 of the most emotive areas; projects that:

- Build half decent houses for people who don't have one
- Deliver healthcare services to people who have little or no access to such
- Provide help for orphans and other children in crisis

To challenge, or even question, people's involvement in such activities is both sensitive and controversial but the subjects are so important that they must be explored. Time constraints mean I can only touch on one of these this afternoon, so let's look at projects involving children:

Emotions run high when visitors are faced with children living in difficult conditions. Holiday packages that include visits to, and voluntary work in, orphanages have a wide appeal, from gap-year teenagers to middle-aged professionals who wish to do good during their holidays, and the numbers continue to grow.

Orphans have become commodities in the developing world where it's now trendy for tourists to "give back" when travelling to destinations less affluent than home.

People are increasingly being told by many agencies, (including schools and universities, travel companies, volunteer placement organisations, and the general media), that it is easy for them to do something during their travels that can "make a difference". This ever increasing supply of resources, (both volunteers and financial), encourages more and more people with a limited understanding of child care, and with very mixed motives, to start orphanages of their own.

In Siem Reap, this phenomenon has become an industry with over 40 orphanages, and an industry in which the very people the visitors are trying to help, tragically often end up worse off because of their interventions.

Richard Bridle, the country head of UNICEF in Cambodia, expresses his concern that many residential centres for children have turned to tourism to attract funding and that, by doing so, they put children at risk. He further

states that even the best-intentioned tourists and volunteers are funding a system that is helping to separate children from their families.

****Then show the Friends poster**

So, how can that be?

ConCERT's experience is that the problems this brings are manifold:

- Orphanages have become the first choice for children in need, not the last, indeed 72% of children in Cambodian orphanages are not orphans
- Many centres are operating an open door policy for visitors and volunteers with the aim of raising more funds, and with little regard for the safety and wellbeing of the children in their care
- Poor state regulation and control means it is easy for paedophiles to visit and volunteer with children, (even to establish their own centres). Since 2003, one of the child sexual abuse investigation NGOs working in Cambodia, Action pour les Enfants, has, on its own, provided evidence to the police that resulted in 161 arrests, 87 convictions, and a further 33 cases awaiting trial.
- Many centres are being run primarily as a means of providing an income for the founders and their families; some centres get 100% of their funding from tourists
 - Children are often coerced/forced into fundraising activities – giving out flyers at night in the street, dancing for tourists, working for the owners in some other way
 - Children are deliberately kept looking dirty, scruffy, and malnourished to elicit maximum sympathy from tourists
- Whatever their motives, the vast majority of people running the “orphanages” have little or no skills and experience in operating something as complex as a residential childcare institution; many have never managed any type of enterprise. In the most benign cases they have limited knowledge, or interest, in:
 - Basic planning and administration, including transparent financial management
 - Criteria and assessment procedures for admission of children to their centre
 - Maintaining links with families or reintegrating children with their families or communities
 - Child protection procedures
 - Staff recruitment, training, mentoring and discipline
 - Pastoral care and child development
- Vulnerable families are encouraged to send their children to the orphanages in the belief they will be better cared for than at home. One of ConCERT's community centre members is aware that 3 of the community's poorest families are currently being repeatedly approached by an orphanage in Phnom Penh, (some 200 miles away), that is encouraging the families to send their children there
- More worryingly, this attitude is seeping into the consciousness of poor Cambodian families, who are now often actively seeking places for their children in such centres in the two-fold belief that their children will be better off, and that there are no alternative solutions – again, remember that 72% of children are not orphans but simply come from families who are struggling to take care of them
- In many cases, extremely vulnerable children are brought from distant provinces, breaking links with their families and making them even more at risk. If these children are used to make money for “orphanage” owners, their movement is quite simply internal human trafficking

Occasionally, extreme events make the headlines:

- Children trafficked through orphanages
- Paedophiles working in or running orphanages
- Children being physically, mentally, and sexually abused in orphanages
- Corruption, where the money given is used for other purposes

Whilst these issues occur in a minority of cases, and of course are extremely serious when they do, what is happening in the vast majority of orphanages is also damaging to children, their development and welfare, and their families.

Not only are a large number of orphanages run by people who don't know what they're doing, we then add to this mix a constant stream of well-intentioned but ill-informed and often emotional volunteers and visitors.

Most of these also have no experience or skills in how to provide appropriate pastoral care for institutionalised and often traumatised children; they also have little or no knowledge about the country, culture, and overall situation they are supporting.

They rely on the orphanage owners for guidance, who often, ironically, believe that tourists from developed nations, and who have had a “good” education, will somehow bring the skills that are needed. Talk about the blind leading the blind...

So, what’s the alternative?

The current situation is very effectively holding Cambodia back from moving on to more appropriate services for children in need. The Cambodian government passed draft legislation last year regarding alternative care for children in which it clearly stated that placing children in residential care should only be considered after all other alternatives have been explored and discounted.

In the case of children and orphanages, a far better solution, (and the Cambodian government’s stated position), are community based support services for children and families in crisis. Poverty reduction is key to solving the root cause of this issue; the poorer the family, the more likely are desperate mothers to send their children to residential centres. Holistic community development programmes are positively designed to keep families together and provide a wide range of services:

- emergency food support
- education
- social services and counselling
- healthcare programmes
- crucially, most offer vocational training aimed at income generation, and other support such as community microfinance facilities

The tourism industry needs to become more aware of the orphanage tourism issues, and the benefits of holistic community based support programmes. It also needs to help tourists to make informed decisions on how they can best to improve the situation for children and families living in extreme poverty.

It would then be easier to:

- channel tourism assistance into the development of more appropriate community based support services, and increase the number of child focussed community support programmes
- encourage the tourism industry to move away from orphanage tourism

It would also develop and promote responsible tourism in general

The tragedy is that tourism has a great potential to bring real benefits to its local communities, including of course the children in them. The goodwill from travellers and within the industry is considerable, and the support they together can bring is increasingly important as the current international economic situation has resulted in traditional donors cutting back on their programmes.

To have any chance of doing this successfully, the needs of children and families living in extreme poverty, (and the appropriate response to those needs), have to be properly understood as a first step. Visitor activities then have to be designed and managed so that they can contribute to addressing those needs and not just provide a satisfying experience for the paying guest. It is extremely distressing for those of us active on the ground and aware of the problems to see people’s time, money, and good intentions often making the situation worse.

It’s time for Responsible Tourism to move into the next phase so it can truly deliver what it promises, both to the communities it purports to help, and to those of its paying customers who are led to believe they are truly “making a difference”.