

# Update 2023: Child Protection and Voluntourism

## Preliminary findings on the German voluntourism market

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ECPAT Germany and Tourism Watch @ Brot für die Welt continue to be highly concerned about the situation of children in the context of voluntourism. The already well-known risks such as abuse, grooming and exploitation, general risks to well-being, as well as to the emotional and cognitive development of children due to abandonment and traumatization in the context of orphanage volunteering persist. Based on previous studies on the German voluntourism market in 2015 and 2018 ([From Volunteering to Voluntourism](#)), a new market analysis (Sept 2023) analysed 50 offers by 25 providers (including 7 interviews) active in the German market. At the UN Roundtable on Child Protection in Travel and Voluntourism, ECPAT Germany and Tourism Watch @ Brot für die Welt present preliminary findings on three lead questions and derive recommendations regarding the regulatory framework for the German market.

- What is the market relevance of voluntourism in Germany?
- What kind of products do providers offer?
- Which child protection measures are integrated in these offers?

### What is the market relevance of voluntourism in Germany?

Since the last report in 2018, the Corona pandemic has had a major impact on the market for volunteer services abroad. Many providers suspended their offers in 2020 and 2021. Before the pandemic, the number of volunteer travellers had increased to an estimated range of 15,000 to 25,000 in 2017. Interviews with leading providers in September 2023 suggest that these numbers would need to be revised slightly downwards. Nevertheless, the market is expected to return to pre-pandemic levels this or next year at the latest. Besides the commercial market, there are also publicly funded programs for international volunteering in Germany. From 2024, we expect a shift towards voluntourism as government programmes are planned to be defunded in the coming years.

**Regulated services** are programs supported by the German government. Participants spend six to 24 months in projects abroad (for example International Youth Volunteer Service or "weltwärts"). Target groups of the programmes are young adults aged 18-28. The organisations have to go through a certification process and offer 25 seminar days for preparation and follow-up. The certification process, however, pays no special attention to child protection measures.

**Flexible volunteering offers (Voluntourism)** are not predetermined in time and duration of the volunteer stay, as well as open to different age groups. This opens the possibility for participants younger than 18 or over the age of 28. The regulatory framework for the flexible market does not require mandatory child protection strategies. Ten of the 25 companies analysed are from Germany, while 15 are international companies, mainly from the US, Great Britain or Australia.



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## What are current products on the German market?

Most commercial providers of voluntary services are “generalists”, offering placements for volunteers in environmental and social projects. Although projects with children and education projects are still the most popular areas for volunteering, environmental and animal projects are increasingly in demand. Providers of environmental projects don't seem to be aware that child protection measures are also important in this type of offer, as volunteers may have direct contact with children in their host families or in the communities where the projects are located. The marketing of authentic experiences, including homestays, seems more popular compared to the 2015 and 2018 research results. This is reflected in the predominance of host family accommodations or volunteer houses, which pose their own child protection risks, even if the volunteer projects are not directly focused on working with children but rather in the environmental sector. Further, the findings show a new trend towards more diversified target groups. Whereas in previous analyses companies were almost exclusively targeting young people, we now see offers aimed at 30+ on sabbatical, families or seniors. As far as orphanages are concerned, the situation is mixed: of the 25 checked providers, nine offer programs in orphanages. Half of the remaining 16 providers who do not offer orphanage volunteering explicitly oppose such practice. A search for "orphanage" in the *weltwärts* database yields 33 hits (out of 124 organisations, as of 29.09.23).



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## What kind of child protection measures are integrated in voluntourism offers?

An important part of a well operating child protection strategy is the process and the criteria for the selection of volunteers. The current measures in place are, however, not sufficient. As an example, out of 25 providers, only half require a police clearance certificate in the selection process. Another aspect that plays a crucial role in a child protection strategy is the preparation of volunteers. Currently, 24 % of the providers offer no preparation at all, while the majority (68%) offer courses with a duration of one or two days, and only a few offer longer courses. Furthermore, there is a lack of transparency regarding the content of the seminars and the consequences of non-participation. Although some providers stressed the need for better preparation and selection of volunteers, the preparatory seminars are often not obligatory for the participation in the programs.

Additionally, almost half of the providers (11 out of 25) have codes of conduct in place, thereby providing guidance for responsible volunteering. Such codes of conduct generally include rules for child protection in and outside the project. While most of these documents contain binding rules for volunteers to sign before the stay, with breaches possibly leading to termination of the trip, some only consist of ethical guidelines that volunteers are encouraged, but not obliged, to follow. In this case, the codes act as an awareness-raising tool. It should be noted, however, that most of the providers checked - 14 out of 25 - do not have such guidelines at all, whether binding or not. Only two of the 25 providers signed the Child Protection Code (The Code) and thereby implement a holistic child protection management system.

## Recommendations for a regulatory framework addressing child protection in voluntourism offers in the German market

Tourism – including voluntourism is a highly unregulated economic activity. In addition to voluntary measures by companies, legal frameworks for corporate responsibility as well as for child protection can play a major role in effectively protecting children in the context of voluntourism.

The Federal Child Protection Act (Bundeskinderschutzgesetz) and the Child and Youth Strengthening Act (Kinder- und Jugendstärkungsgesetz - KJSG) regulate the protection of children in Germany and provide comprehensive measures for institutions and organisations working with children. However, it does not provide a legal basis for child protection in the case of offers that fall outside the scope of child and youth welfare (SGB VIII), which is the case for all commercial voluntourism offers. Neither child protection policies nor background checks, such as police clearance certificates, are mandatory.

- *We recommend harmonising the regulatory framework for commercial and non-commercial volunteer services to have the same child protection standards for all places of action, both in Germany and abroad.*

There are specific regulations in place for regulated volunteering abroad. The Federal Volunteer Service Act (Bundesfreiwilligendienstgesetz - BFDG) as well as the Youth Volunteer Service Act (Jugendfreiwilligendienstgesetz -JFDG) require professional supervision and certification procedures for placement sites. However, specific regulations for the protection of children in the host countries are missing.

- *We recommend including mandatory child protection standards in the certification process of all providers of volunteering. This includes a ban on volunteering in orphanages.*

The Act on Corporate Due Diligence Obligations in Supply Chains (Lieferkettensorgfaltspflichtengesetz -LkSG) only applies to large corporations with more than 1000 employees. None of the companies offering voluntourism falls under the law. In the absence of a stricter law, we require voluntourism providers to act with due diligence in accordance with the UN Guidelines on Business and Human Rights. We call on operators to identify human rights risks and implement procedures to protect children from abuse and neglect in the context of their offers.

- *We recommend all companies not to offer volunteering in orphanages. We urge all companies offering voluntourism to become member of and implement the Child Protection Code (The Code), a well-established tool for travel companies to address child protection risks within the scope of their business activities.*



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Author: Kathrin David, Researcher

Ownership: ECPAT Germany and Tourism Watch @ Brot für die Welt

Contact: Antje Monshausen, Tourism Watch, Brot für die Welt, board member of ECPAT Germany, [antje.monshausen@brot-fuer-die-welt.de](mailto:antje.monshausen@brot-fuer-die-welt.de)