

11

Through the Eyes of the Sponsored

Brad Watson and Anthony Ware

Child sponsorship (CS) international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) have a long history of using individual change stories in their marketing materials. However, a feature of the ongoing debate over the merits of CS-funded programmes is the reality that those parts of the discussion accessible in published literature have often been dominated by Northern journalists, aid industry insiders and academics. Often, the perspectives and lived experiences of those who are, or who have been sponsored in the South, have been marginalized and pushed to the periphery of discussion by experts in their haste to pass judgment on the legitimacy of CS-funded interventions. Yet, of all the perspectives on CS one might explore, perhaps one we should consider to be equally significant, is that of sponsored children and previously sponsored adults. The lived experience of those who grew up within a CS scheme, their own analysis of that experience, and the impact the experience has had on their lives, is an important set of perspectives to capture in a volume of this nature.

Unfortunately, any attempt to provide a cohesive, representative sample of sponsored child experience and perspective presents an insurmountable task. It is impossible to accurately reflect the incredible diversity of experiences that millions of children have had, across hundreds of countries, through numerous CS INGOs. Conceding this reality, the following chapter presents seven short contributions from individuals who participated as beneficiaries in an assortment of CS schemes. Collectively, they represent a small range of positive change stories. They are not in any way representative of every child's experience, or even of the average sponsored child. Rather, because they come from individuals of differing ages, socio-economic background and education levels, they are best seen as anecdotal, diverse, and illus-

trative of the positive impact CS can have in at least some, if not a vast majority of cases. Notably, the voices of children who have been superficially impacted or perhaps even negatively impacted by sponsorship are conspicuously absent below.

The Third Girl Child

by Sadhna (sponsored in a World Vision Area Development Program)

Hello friends, my name is Sadhna. I am 15 years old and I am in tenth grade. I live with my family in South Delhi in a resettlement colony. I have two elder sisters and two younger brothers.

I am the third girl child. My mother told me that when I was born it was one of the saddest days for my grandparents and for our relatives. They cursed my mother for giving birth to a daughter for the third time and they did not allow my vaccination. It hurts growing up where your presence is neglected and ignored. It is painful when your family members taunt you for being a girl. There was a time when I went into a shell of loneliness.

When I was eight years old, I was enrolled in World Vision's sponsorship programme. Today, I am 15 years old. This journey of seven years has been very beautiful and I have understood the definition of sponsorship, which means to share love and to accept someone else as your own. As time passed I made new friends within the sponsorship programme, but the turning point in my life was when I was called for a 'child journalism' workshop.

Twenty children were selected out of 40 to 50 for further training and I was one of them. I participated whole-heartedly in the workshop and learnt a lot, not only about journalism but also about enhancing our personalities. Now I have a dream for a new life. My ambition is to be a journalist or a TV reporter. I am just waiting to complete my school, so I can pursue my dream. Today, I have left all my sorrows somewhere behind and it is a time when I am happy about being a girl.

I am very active in my school academic and cultural activities. Now I am able to understand my lessons very well. My teachers appreciate my understanding and my ability to ask the right questions. My friends in school come to me for my advice and trust me. If they are undergoing any issue, especially gender discrimination,

I counsel them and their parents or guardians. Today I am a member of the youth club.

My parents support me and love me. They played the most important role in my success by allowing me to participate in World Vision's programmes. The biggest day of my life was when my father said, 'I am proud of you – I am proud of you being my girl, my daughter. If I knew girls could be like you I would have never desired for a boy.' He also said, 'Today people and children know me by your name. I am happy and proud to be your father.'

I thank God and World Vision for making me what I am today; for being my guide, my supporter and my teacher. I want to tell everybody: stop discriminating, start loving, start accepting and believing, only then will we have a beautiful world where we can live. Have faith in God and in yourself and never miss any opportunity. You never know when an opportunity can work magic in your life.

I feel very good about coming into sponsorship because, whoever my sponsor is, I have not met them but I know that they love me very much. Just like how I have never seen God but God helps me – so also my sponsors help me a lot. I have not received letters from them but every year I have sent them an APR (Annual Progress Report) and photos. I also do drawings for them with my own hands and write messages for them. I feel very happy with this.

I am confused about this matter: they don't know me and have not met me, but for seven years they have been with me and have helped me and my community. I feel very good when sponsors send the children letters and photos. But I also feel a little sad that I have not met my sponsor. I really wish to meet them.

World Vision has helped many people in my community: they helped with educational support, provided notebooks and books, helped widows, provided water filters for clean and pure water, and gave mosquito nets to protect us during summer.

World Vision helps everybody, not just sponsored children. They give everyone equal opportunities. They conduct life school for transformational development (LSTD) through which the children receive a good education. They have also started youth clubs and children's clubs, through which much change has happened.

The best thing is that through children's clubs and youth clubs we discuss the issues in our society and we awaken people – raise

awareness – through plays. We conduct big programmes on these issues. We ourselves, the children, call police officers and people from different organizations and government officers to make them listen to our voice.

There are many changes I have seen in the lives of the children in my community. Arjun would not go to school and would take tobacco and sniff drugs. He used to steal and gamble. Today, he and his three friends run the Little Champ Children's Club. In his club, there are 21 children, who were once caught in such habits but today they have changed and are going towards a better life.

Maya was a girl with no identity. She came from a very traditional family and used to be sick, frequently experiencing fits. So, she was very weak, physically and mentally. Through the letters from her sponsors, and with the counselling, direction and love from World Vision, Maya is very happy today. She is also very good in her studies.

Poor children, orphaned children and children who have fallen into bad habits and are not in school were provided education as a result of help through World Vision's youth clubs. Today, four out of the 20 children have obtained admission in regular schools. The remaining children will also get admission in July.

Change has come in the lives of these children. Today, they dream of a beautiful tomorrow. Today, they know what they want to become. For me:

Tomorrow was dark under the shadows of sadness,
suddenly a silver light shone through the darkness.
Someone held my hand; I held it tight and just followed the light

I entered a new world, a world which is my today;
full of joy and happiness, sorrow and darkness all washed away,
A new life has come, where there is no sorrow or sadness; just
hope and dreams to live and win.

With thanks to Amrita Upali Singh, Community Development Coordinator, South Delhi Area Development Program for facilitating this story, and to Joan Nirupa, World Vision India, for translating Sadhna's work into English.



Figure 11.1 Sadhna
Sadhna dreams of becoming a journalist or TV presenter, and has participated in World Vision child journalism workshops.

Grateful I Am

by *Lina Marcela Trujillo* (formerly sponsored in a SOS Children's Village)

My name is Lina and I would like to tell you a bit about my life: about growing up in SOS Children's Village, and how my sponsors have made me extremely happy.

I lived in the Municipal district of Valle de San Juan, in the Tolima district in Colombia. I lived there very happily with my parents and my five brothers and sisters. My Mama loved us a lot. I remember that we were always playing and the big children looked after the smaller ones.

Mother died when I was six. Father could not cope and did not have the financial means, so he abandoned us. I was really scared because I did not know what would happen. After the funeral, one of our aunts took my sisters and me to SOS Children's Village Ibagué, near where we lived. She did not have enough money to take care of us all.

I clearly remember the day when I arrived. It was a lovely place with 16 houses all near each other, and nine children living in every house. They were looked after by a woman, many children called her 'Mother'. When I saw so many boys and girls, I felt calm. I understood that I was not the only one who had lost her parents.

They organized a welcome party with balloons and lots of delicious food. I then met the other children who would become my brothers and sisters: Liliana, Diego, Mauricio, José, Ovidio and Paula.

I felt really calm when Nohelia hugged me. She looked after us lovingly, waiting for us when we came home from school. I will never forget those moments. Although we had no blood ties, we formed a loving bond that still unites us. Nohelia became our guardian angel, a blessing and the greatest inspiration to start new adventures. She taught us respect and a passion for life, and reminded us to value every little thing that God gives us daily.

I remember the first time Nohelia told us about the sponsors. To be honest, because we were so small, we did not really understand. However, I found it amazing that people who lived far away thought about me, and wanted to help me.

It was a great joy to get wonderful presents such as Christmas and birthday cards with my name written in them. It made me feel valued and important! Even though they were written in another language, I understood that when things are heart-felt, the universal language of love touches us all. Sponsors from far away gave me not only affection but also the chance to go to school, to have a family, to play and to do many things that I would not have been able to do. When I was about 11 years old I joined a children's choir, took dance lessons, art classes and I learned how to play the guitar. The money gifts the sponsors sent were kept in a bank account until I was bigger.

Suddenly, one day I started getting photographs and letters addressed to me! I enjoyed seeing their beautiful traditional dresses. I learnt that there were seasons in other countries and the weather was not always like it was here in Colombia. I found their way of dressing and their dances strange! I wanted to write to them about my own experiences, tell them about my daily life, thank them for all the good things they were doing for me. I knew that I was only able to go to school, eat and have a happy life thanks to their generosity and love.

When I was around 15 years old I had a phase where I found it hard to follow the rules and keep the agreements I had made. My SOS mother, Nohelia, talked to me and we agreed that it might be better if I spent some time with my aunt. I was not too sure, but agreed to go and I spent one year and three months with my aunt.

I began to miss the place where I had grown up: my brothers and sisters, my family, my mother and my home were all there. It was a difficult time for me. I also thought about all my plans, those that I had told my sponsors, and I felt I was going to let them down.

I decided to return, to change, to improve, and to understand that what they asked me to do was for my own good because they wanted me to be happy. I realized that I had a great path ahead of me, and the chance to write a different story for me and my brothers and sisters.

When I was 18, I started on my path to independence. This is when most of us begin to live outside the Children's Village. It was hard at first. I was not sure what I wanted to do. Life can be quite hard, especially alone and living outside the SOS Children's Village. I then met a great friend called Adriana; she and her family helped me all the time. But I can also tell you that the thought of Nohelia fed my soul daily. I knew she would never abandon me, she has always been there for me and I can rely on her.

When I was 19, I was interested in starting a vocational training course at SENA (National Learning Services of Colombia). I studied to be a beautician because it is a good way to earn a living and I can improve people's mental and physical health. I got a lot of pleasure from studying this, but I was always worried because I knew it was very difficult to find a good job in Ibagué. This is why I thought about setting up my own business.

When I told the youth worker in the SOS village about my plans, she said I could open my business with money that had been saved for me from my sponsors. I was so excited when I realized my sponsors had been so generous and that my dream could come true!

I wrote a project proposal and worked out the costs. Now I am my own boss and I am independent. I sell Colombian artifacts to tourists, made from recycled materials, so it is good for the environment. For example, I sell 'Manillas', bracelets designed with different textures and colors; and 'Mochilas' – hand-woven bags that are popular not only in Colombia but also abroad. I also make small bamboo souvenirs.

I have not been lucky enough to personally meet my sponsors, but I do not lose hope that I will one day. I want to see them, and to say thank you with a smile, a hug and thousands of words. I want to let them know how grateful I am for all the good they have done. May God bless them!

With thanks to Ms. Julia Braunegg, Assistant to Head of International Donor Services, SOS Kinderdörfer, for facilitating this story.



Figure 11.2 Lina

Lina sells Colombian artefacts and woven products to earn a living. She is pictured displaying some of the items sold in her store.

My SAO Life

by *Nerissa P. Soledad* (formerly sponsored by Baptist World Aid)

'God is good all the time and all the time God is good'. This will always be my declaration of thanksgiving to the Lord for his goodness even though life in the Philippines was not easy for us in 1981. There were six children in the family and I was the second child and only girl. We lived in an urban area in the western part of the Visayas. My mother was a Catholic however my father had no religion.

Our home was made up of light materials, coco lumber as wall, palm thatch roof, and sand as floor. If it rained, it was also raining inside because our roof was dilapidated. When my father had no job or contract for carpentry works, my mother and I accepted laundry from other people in exchange for just enough money to

buy our food, rice, vegetables and fish. I would often assist my mother rinse and dry the clothes. She suffered from asthma and I was happy to help.

I was only six years old when I entered the Baptist Australia Share An Opportunity Sponsorship programme, as a first grader in my elementary school. Because of the various activities, I was able to overcome my shyness and actively become involved. I received monthly financial assistance and this was used for my school uniform, school supplies and other needs. There were also instances that we were given items like blankets, mosquito nets and some basic grocery items through the sponsorship. We also had annual medical and dental checkups. At first we were required to go to church but later on it was my own free will to attend. It has reaped its reward because through it I became a faithful Christian and have joyfully served the Lord until this time. I developed a relationship with the Lord in which I truly enjoy.

When I was yet a child, I would always witness the hardships in our daily lives and this compelled me to strive to finish my studies and to have a regular job. I believed that only education could uplift our economic situation, through hard work and the financial assistance I received monthly from my sponsor, Kylie Brown. She supported me for 11 years of school and four years accounting course. I successfully graduated from College in April 1995, with a degree in Accountancy. My first dream was to become a Teacher but because of financial incapacity I wasn't able to pursue this course.

By the grace of God, I got a job as a bookkeeper in a local newspaper two months after I graduated from College. My sponsorship had a ripple effect on myself and my family, because I was able to support my siblings' schooling needs as well as needs in my family. I was so happy when our house was repaired through my salary. I was also able to support the medicine my asthmatic mother needed. I could sense the changes in the way they treated me. They would often wait for my decision in some situations, and because I am the only one who earns regularly, they would always depend on me for their daily need.

In September 1999 I got the opportunity to visit Australia to promote the sponsorship programme, during the 25th anniversary. More than 300 Australian friends committed to sponsor a child.

And the most wonderful thing that happened was, my sponsor Kylie decided to support again another child after seeing the result of her help to me.

In 2000 I was assigned as a Holistic Development Facilitator, working directly with children and parents in the community. I was also placed in charge of sponsorship in our area. This was truly very meaningful to me, being a former sponsored child. One of my assigned tasks has been to distribute financial support to the children, and to facilitate letter writing. The first time I did this I got so emotional, because I could relate to the joy of the children when they receive their support and wrote letters to their sponsor. Seeing them transformed and living a fulfilled life is a great accomplishment for me. My dream and utmost desire for them is to see them finish their education and have a regular job to sustain their daily needs.

The present programme focuses mainly in empowering children. We run various activities focusing on things like values formation, character building, advocacy on environmental protection, personal hygiene and value of savings. In my own assessment, this is truly beneficial to them. The participation of the children is sincere and they signify that they are thankful to be a part of the programme and they know from the very start they do not get monetary assistance. With the old programme, which was more welfare, their involvement sometimes was anchored on what they can get in terms of monetary handout. But right now, I can actually discern that their participation is purely because they want to become developed individuals and not because they can get something.

I am now a mother of five children, and the wife of a Pastor. Furthermore, I am a Holistic Development Facilitator working directly with the children. I am a living testimony that indeed sponsorship can make a great difference in the life of a child. Just like the Lord Jesus who placed much value in children, it is always my prayer that the Lord will use me as His instrument in touching the lives of the children under my care and continue on making a difference in their lives which will eventually impact their family and the whole community as well. To God be the Glory!

With thanks to Anthony Sell, Director of International Program, Baptist World Aid Australia, for facilitating this story.

My Story

by V. Masilamani (formerly sponsored by Compassion International)

I, V. Masilamani, was born on 5th January, 1975 in a village near Madurai city in Tamil Nadu, India. My parents were proud to have a son and the meaning of my name is 'faultless gem'. My sister's name is Nallathai, meaning 'good mother'. My father only studied to fourth grade, and my mother did not go to school at all. They were farmers and worked together on a small 1.5 acre plot. For them farming was like gambling. Success was largely dependent on rain-fall, which is a random process. My parents also owned some buffaloes whose milk was our other source of income. Of eight children born to my parents, only my sister and I survived, by God's grace.

There was a Church of South India primary school in our village, started by American missionaries in 1887. Due to our poor economic situation and the lesser importance placed on girls' education at that time, my parents did not send my sister. Instead, Nallathai looked after the buffaloes from the time she was just seven years old. By God's grace, I studied. After my fifth grade, I was asked to look after our buffaloes and my sister was sent to help my mother as an agriculture laborer.

When school reopened in June 1980, after summer holidays, all my friends headed to a high school about three kilometers from our village, but I continued to go behind the buffaloes. One fine day, a month after school reopened, my primary school teacher came to our house and fought with my father. He said that if my father refused to send me to school, my teacher will consider me as his own child and give me an education. By God's grace, my father enrolled me in high school after that intervention by my teacher.

Every day I walked to school. A month after I was admitted, my primary teacher told my father about a Compassion project in a small town called Batlagundu, about 50 kilometers away. Being the only son, my mother refused to send me. She was afraid. However, my teachers convinced my parents. I registered for sponsorship along with many others in 1986. There were two hostels in the same campus; one was a World Vision project, the other a paying hostel. Students in the fee-paying hostel needed to pay Rs.100 per month (approximately USD6.5 at that time). Those of us who regis-

tered for sponsorship still needed to pay half of this, until we received sponsorship. By God's grace, I was sponsored the next year by Mr. MacClanaghan from the USA, who helped me for two years. From my village alone, five students received sponsorship, and a Compassion home, the Martin Memorial Children's Home, was started in Batlagundu.

Our first warden was Mr. Rathnakumar, a science teacher. Every day we had morning and evening prayers and he delivered the word of God powerfully through songs and stories. We all really enjoyed this, and this prayer time experience has been so useful till today. I was thrilled to have good food in the hostel. In my village, our regular food was made from cooked ragi seeds. Only occasionally did we eat rice at home, and we could only afford meat during festivals. But in the Compassion home, we ate rice every day, and non-vegetarian at least once a week.

Because we were sponsored, we were given two sets of school uniform, one set of color dress, textbooks and notebooks, as well as soap, oil, et cetera every year. My parents were so happy. On the education side, since our hostel was on the school campus, we found it very easy to go to school. After classes, we were given tuition. I started reading newspapers and periodicals very enthusiastically. We were also given music lessons and sports equipment. I greatly enjoyed cricket and kabadi. Above all, we were given very good spiritual food. Some of us were trained by missionaries from Campus Crusade for Christ, and did village ministry with them during holidays.

Unlike most of the others, I stayed in the home until I completed my 12th grade. The facilities, as well as spiritual and academic guidance, in the hostel really shaped my future. One of our tutors encouraged me to do post-secondary study.

Through God's grace my sponsorship continued. Between 1992 and 1998 I received a Bachelor of Science in Mathematics and a Master in Science from The American College, Tamilnadu. Then I enrolled in a Master of Philosophy in Mathematics at Madras Christian College so I could become a Lecturer. I graduated in 1998 and immediately got a Mathematics Lecturer job in an engineering college in Chennai. I worked for three years, and then I quit the job to study a Master of Technology degree in Computer Science from the best engineering institute in our country, the Indian Institute of Technology, Kharagpur. It was a dream come true for me!

After I graduated, I got a job as in-charge of computer science and engineering department in an engineering college. During this period I married Josephine Lilly Chithra, a qualified mathematics teacher. We have two sons: Joel is ten years old, doing fifth grade, and Josh is three years old. In 2004, I commenced a doctorate in computer science and engineering at the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology, Madras. I graduated in 2009 and joined the Indian Institute of Information Technology, Design and Manufacturing, as an Assistant Professor in computer engineering. I am enjoying my work, and planning to do a course on theology to do effective church ministry.

My Lord and saviour Jesus Christ has blessed me abundantly through various people including my sponsors, Compassion home officers, wardens, teachers et cetera I always remember my sponsors and the primary teachers who brought me back to education, and also to the Compassion home. After I informed Compassion India I had dedicated my thesis to them, I was thrilled to receive an email from my former sponsors, the Todds. I came to know that they are also professors living in New Jersey.

To radiate the love and kindness shown onto me by my sponsors, God has given me an opportunity to support my sister's son's education from his 7th grade to his Diploma in Mechanical Engineering. Now he is running his own business and he is supporting my sister's family. My parents are still living in our village, and we often visit them or have them come and stay with us for a few months. May God help us to reflect his image in all our lives.

My Life Growing Up in Poverty

by Cindy Petro (formerly sponsored by Children International)

My name is Cindy Petro. I was born in the Boston neighbourhood of Cartagena, Colombia, in 1992. My community has had many problems with safety, violence and sanitation. It is located on the edge of a trash-filled swamp that would flood our neighbourhood during heavy rains and make us sick. There were no paved streets. Everything turned to mud – even the dirt floor of the wooden shack where my family and I lived.

My childhood was made more difficult because my parents separated when I was just two. My father went to Barranquilla, leaving my three siblings and I living with our very sick mother. Our economic situation wasn't good. Every morning my mother would take me with her to her friends' house, where she would help them do the chores. As payment, they would give us food. Later, she worked as a maid with the condition that they would let her be with me. That's how she took care of my needs. My maternal grandmother also supported us. What I remember with great admiration was the care and love that my mother always expressed to me and my three siblings, no matter what she was going through. Still, I always yearned for the love of my father.

When I was five, Children International came to my community. They enrolled me in the sponsorship programme, and soon an angel appeared and sponsored me. Such happiness! When I received my first gift, I was excited. I liked the clothing very much. And the first time I received the education kit was very exciting for me. I liked it a lot because I felt very special when I went to school with all my school supplies.

Up until then, I didn't know how important Children International would be in my life. I happily received all of the gifts during my 12 years of sponsorship. Medical and dental care, including medicines, were always available. People in the community medical centre kept me in good health. They were very kind to me when I arrived, and they always took care of me. For me, the community centre was a place where I was appreciated and assisted to have better health. All of that made me feel better and more secure.

Because I was sponsored I was also included in the Youth Programme. I participated in the workshops, which really strengthened me. I learned that we can overcome problems if we really want to (that poverty can be overcome), to value ourselves as people, to have a life project and to set goals for ourselves. I had a lot of fun playing, sharing in group, being tolerant and responsible.

This programme helped me clarify my goals and strive to achieve them, no matter the difficulties that get in the way. I always wanted to be a nurse, and Children International helped me to make that dream a reality. When I finished high school, I applied for a HOPE scholarship through Children International. I was very happy when I heard that it was approved. I was supported during all my semesters.

They paid for everything; I didn't pay for anything, not even the graduation fee. Without this help I could never have succeeded.

Thanks to God and Children International, now I'm a nursing assistant. I stood out as the best student because I really wanted it and I wanted to improve more and more each day.

I feel really happy to have had Children International's help, because they contributed to the realization of my dreams. Having studied nursing, and now practicing it, means changing my life story – a story full of love, but also with many economic challenges. My dream today is to become a head nurse, or a teacher of young children. I want to serve people and work with boys and girls.

Now my life is different. Although I have a daughter and I'm a single mother, I can take care of her needs and also help my own mother. My goal is to continue on with becoming a professional in my career, to offer my daughter a good future, never forgetting to give her love, and to help my family, my mother, my stepfather (who gave me a father's love) and my siblings, from whom I have always received unconditional love and who give me the strength to move forward.



Figure 11.3 Cindy

Cindy works as a nurse's aide for the Infant Development Center of the Juan Felipe Gómez Escobar Foundation in Cartagena, Colombia. She provides daily nutritional, educational and emotional care to underprivileged children of teenage mothers. Pictured is Cindy with her daughter.

A True Testimony

by Edwin Sithole (formerly sponsored by Plan International)

Reminiscing the era before Plan's direct involvement in my life is like a torturous experience to me. After my father died, my mother could go to some cities to work as a domestic worker to raise money to meet some necessities. I grew up in the hands of my grandmother. Our home was the tiny, dust-impregnated village of Zamchiya, in Zimbabwe.

I vividly remember each time the school headmaster would enquire about outstanding school fees, my name was always featured on top of the list. Each time we were sent home to collect the fees, others would indeed return with the money but for me there wasn't anyone to give me help. Well-wishers in the village, after granting me some manual jobs and house chores, would donate some paltry payments which I saved 'till I had the required amount. By the time I could get enough money for fees almost half of the term would have lapsed!

I was always lagging behind in terms of my performance, simply because of this arduous task of looking for school fees. When Plan International came to our area offering fee support, at first we were suspicious. Like many who grew up in the remotest parts, I was very skeptical. Conspiracies were extremely rife. One of the most dubious was that the organization's sponsorship scheme was a guise, whose real intention was to kidnap children and traffic them for forced labor and slavery in Europe!

Somehow my name was taken and I was sponsored in 1993 at Zamchiya Primary school. Suddenly I did not have to worry about school fees. My tenacious life totally changed and the rough life I had experienced came to an abrupt end. Every year, I would look forward to Christmas cards, and photos of my Japan-based foster parent. Gifts of reading books, pencils, pens and writing pads made me a hero in the village. My esteem as an individual was lifted. I liked being photographed together with Plan's staffers in our school compound. At times I would call my friends and my grandparents simply for a snap photo.

I was able to finish school in 2002 when I was in my Ordinary-level studies. I was replaced by my sibling and was accepted for

Plan's support for higher education. With Plan's help I am now walking tall, having attained a National Diploma in Mass Communication only offered at Harare Polytechnic. Today I can humbly walk with pride because my full potential has been cultivated and sprouted out. I have convinced myself that no one will ever act as a barrier to anything that I want or dream in life. I have become more of a juggernaut.

Through the educational scholarship of Plan I am proudly leading our own local development community-based Non-Government Organization, Alight Zimbabwe Trust (Plan Alumni) as its founding national coordinator. My role with the Alight Zimbabwe Trust has given me a good platform to help others, something I had longed for since I was including within the scheme of Plan. My mentor, mother and friend from Japan, Yoko Sakurai Nakamura, imparted in me the humanitarian imperative that has permanently left me with a burning desire to always look forward to helping others in the best way possible.

After Plan helped me, I feel no one can make a meaningful living on this earth without being helped in one way or the other. My life is a full testimony joyfully shouted to my society and the entire world that a hopeless future can be positively changed into an inspiring, meaningful and promising life, made possible through compassionate and tender intervention. Who knew that one day I would be able to fend for my siblings, who are all doing well in their education and industry? That I would become an inspiration to my younger brothers and sisters? That in my lovely village, they all look forward for great things from me? They now realize that it is possible for a little boy whose skin never knew jelly, whose torn clothes a needle could no longer mend, whose lips were always cracked due to under-nutrition, could have a life worth reckoning! Hope of attaining a national qualification was a fantasy, the hallucinating of an orphaned boy whose major childhood preoccupation was herding cattle and goats, chopping firewood, picking wild fruits and gathering insects for a living. There has never been a journalist in my family or compound's genealogy. I broke the ranks, but such a jump start was only made possible by this organization used by God.

Today's sponsorship programme in Zimbabwe is different from the one our generation went through, because in our time it was

needs-based. We could eat and forget, even though the importance of education was not in some of us. Today is now a rights-based approach. If someone is empowered through this rights-based approach, obviously there is a sustainable development. The most crucial thing one can do for an orphaned child like myself is, simply, affording him or her equal opportunity to education. Non-Governmental Organizations' activities have been popular largely because they offer food handouts and food hampers, but somehow this has crippled people's initiative. Affording someone opportunity to attend school is the greatest empowerment a society can be granted. One cannot give a colleague fish, but should give the fishing rod itself. That is the starting point of the lifeline. Education is the vital cog that breaks the vicious cycle of poverty.

From Rescued to Rescuer

by Rajendra Gautam (formerly sponsored by Asian Aid Organisation)

My name is Rajendra Gautam. My life in the mountains of Nepal started with high expectations, as the first born son of the Hindu priest in a village called Nayagaon 6 in the state of Kavhre, approximately 80 kilometers south east of Kathmandu. I was destined to be heir of the holy rituals and our family wealth. Even when I was just small, my father had begun grooming me to be a priest, and his successor when I was older. However, his life was suddenly cut short when he died of Tuberculosis in 1983. I was only four years old.

My whole family's world changed in that instant; my mother was cursed for 'eating her husband' and deceitful villagers took our house and family land away from us. We had to live hand-to-mouth to survive, with just a few chickens, a cow and a goat. My mother, along with my younger sister, eked out our existence for a couple of years but then my mother also took seriously ill with Tuberculosis. Before she died she asked kind village people to carry her to Scheer Memorial Hospital in Banepa for treatment.

Despite this being a Christian hospital, my mother believed she would be cared for and, more importantly, she knew that they would also care for her children. It was arranged that I would go to

boarding school in Roorke, India while my sister stayed in the care of Nepalese hospital staff Pr. Naseeb and Mrs. Rama Basnet. Because I was now orphaned, I stayed with them in Banepa during my summer vacations and my sister lived with them for some long years until she got married.

My years at boarding school were a mixture of tumultuous problems that included; racial discrimination from teachers and fellow students, language difficulties and adapting to a new culture and religion. This contrasted with my ongoing academic success. I did not have very much and survived on what little I was given or could work for, yet I had one thing many of the other boys did not have: a photo. The photo was a picture of my sponsor and his wife, and I clung to this as if my life depended on it. This photo gave me hope. It gave me courage to carry on when times became unbearable. This photo represented people that loved and cared for me even though I had never met them. My solace was this love and the letters that arrived at irregular intervals, saying that I was important and encouraging me to keep doing my best in my studies.

I did not know it then, but my sponsors started with a monthly commitment of \$30 to Asian Aid. By the end of my schooling they were paying \$50 a month. The money was given to the school to cover tuition, books and boarding. Extra contributions around Christmas time helped buy gifts that keep us clothed. Yet, my whole schooling experience was shadowed by pain and loneliness of having no parents for support, love, protection or guidance. It was this blend of emotion that spurred me to become a school prefect and advocate for my fellow Nepali students, who were treated poorly.

Asian Aid gave me hope in providing an education, uniforms and boarding through the sponsorship programme in Australia. As the Australian director of Asian Aid, 'Mummy Eager' regularly visited my school to ensure that sponsored children were cared for appropriately and to smother us with some motherly love, which we all so desperately craved. She was a constant in my life which motivated me to strive to please her and my sponsors with hard work and dedication. Mummy Eager continues to mentor and support me as I run a charity organization that I am director of.

My sponsorship continued throughout my years at school, 12 years in all, and provided me with the motivation to progress to

further study and ultimately begin a career as a pastor and missionary. In reality, the sponsorship has continued my whole life. Being sponsored does not always mean financial assistance, but can be having people who pray for and look out for me and my family. Around the time I moved to Pokhara with the aim of starting a church in 2004, Dad and Mum (my sponsors, Peter and Fiona) initiated further sponsorship to help with my ministry. This continued to build the bond that I had shared with my sponsor parents when I was a child into a family connection that still continues to grow and strengthen as each year passes.

In 2011, my family and I were overjoyed to be visited by Dad, Mum, Josh and Nicole. It was a time of celebration in finally meeting face-to-face and bonding as only families can. Being a Seventh-day Adventist pastor allowed me the unique opportunity to baptize my sponsor 'sister' Nicole in a ceremony which will be remembered by us all as a defining moment in our families' history.

Sponsorship has given me the opportunity to be educated, to build a life of my own and to be able to give back to my community of fellow Nepali's by offering the same opportunity to children in similar or worse circumstances than what I was. God has guided me in building a school to provide education, starting a safe house for rescued girls who had been sold to sex traffickers, and to be part of a vibrant community here in Pokhara that is committed to continuing the mission of being the hands and feet of Jesus.

I can truly say that I was fortunate enough to be rescued from a life of poverty and am now honored to have been called to be a rescuer of my fellow Nepali men and women, boys and girls.

With thanks to Rajendra's sponsor for facilitating this article.

Discussion

The seven stories presented above are delightful and heart-warming. They are drawn from children and adults sponsored by seven different organizations, across five different countries. Read together, they provide a tribute to the potential for CS to profoundly impact the lives of sponsored children. They highlight the strengths and potential of several CS-funded interventions, and as first-person narratives, they provide us with a glimpse of what successful child sponsorship looks like from the perspective of the sponsored. The stories are from the

perspectives of those who are still being sponsored, from those only recently out of such a programme, and from those who are well-and-truly adults looking back on their formative years. Yet despite this diversity, there are a number of significant commonalities and themes that run through most or all of these stories.

Poverty is often described in terms of material deficits. However, implicit in the narratives above is an understanding of poverty as being lack of opportunity and capability, driven largely by marginalization and resulting in a debilitating sense of hopelessness. What these stories illustrate is the power of CS to provide hope, evidenced through powerfully affirming relationships. At one level, relationships are formed with individual sponsors. On another, they are formed with CS INGO staff and other children enrolled in sponsorship programmes. To some extent this accounts for effusive thanks offered to CS INGOs. Perhaps the most lovely evidence for this claim occurs in the narrative of Sadhna, a 15 year old student sponsored through World Vision for whom sponsorship provided a timely escape from restrictive gender roles, a restoration of fatherly pride, and the possibility of a career in journalism. For Sadhna:

Tomorrow was dark under the shadows of sadness,
suddenly a silver light shone through the darkness.
Someone held my hand; I held it tight and just followed the light.

Another recurring theme is the value placed on new or greater educational opportunity. Each of the stories functions as an account of unlikely success, with children rescued from a life of manual labor or economic disadvantage by the opportunity to attend school and participate in various related programmes. In these narratives education is positioned as key to success, with the CS INGO functioning as a catalyst, removing barriers and enabling school attendance, encouraging academic progress and facilitating the achievement of individual potential. Edwin Sitholes' remarkable transition to respected journalist provides an evocative account of success insofar as, 'Hope of attaining a national qualification was a fantasy, the hallucinating of an orphaned boy whose major childhood preoccupation was herding cattle and goats, chopping firewood, picking wild fruits and gathering insects for a living'. From an individual's perspective, such commentary offers a stern rebuke to those who have mocked the idea that a small monthly donation could change the life of a child.

For the authors of these stories, there is what Nerissa P. Soledad refers to as a 'ripple effect'. Education has resulted in improved self-esteem, formation of life-purpose, affirmation of self-efficacy and, ultimately, employment and attainment of income and the means to choose life outcomes. For each narrator the opportunity to attend and complete school has been transformational, leading to the conclusion that, 'Education is the vital cog that breaks the vicious cycle of poverty.' In the case of Cindy Petro, 'Although I have a daughter and I'm a single mother, I can take care of her needs and also help my own mother. My goal is to continue on with becoming a professional in my career, to offer my daughter a good future, never forgetting to give her love...' The dignity inherent to the possibility of personal choice amid difficult circumstances shines in each of the narratives.

Common to the narratives above is the explicit reasoning that the personal nature of sponsorship was an important factor in individual success. While critics have linked sponsorship to paternalism and dependency, the narratives above suggest that for some children sponsorship, confusing as it may be, communicates a level of compassion and care by a distant stranger which creates a sense of encouragement, and is motivational in a way that whole community assistance, arguably, is not. Put simply, being singled out for special treatment was instrumental in high achievement and high self-esteem for these individuals. Thus, through CS, children and youth may feel valued, loved, cared for and personally connected to powerful, perhaps even God-like actors in their lives providing hope in counterpoint to the harsh realities of poverty and disadvantage. For Rajendra Gautam, 'I had one thing many of the other boys did not have: a photo. The photo was a picture of my sponsor and his wife, and I clung to this as if my life depended on it.' Having said this, it is also clear that the role of the sponsor in this is just one of many. Personal attention and relationships with local school teachers, mothers of orphan homes, tutors, INGO staff and various other concerned adults, each played a crucial role in leveraging sponsorship as a vehicle for personal improvement.

Beyond merely knowing they had a sponsor, communication and quality of relationship with sponsors is a recurring issue in the success stories of sponsored children. All the individuals expressed gratitude for sponsorship, the majority felt affirmed by being selected for support, and most seemed to value sending letters and receiving gifts. The sense of personal connection was sometimes accompanied by a strong desire to meet sponsors (or at least learn more about them). For some, this promoted learning about places and people beyond their

otherwise narrow experience. For others, this sense of personal connection with sponsors led to a desire to fulfill the expectations they felt were inherent in the sponsorship relationship, perhaps expressed in the dreams they shared in correspondence with sponsors. In the case of Lina Trujillo, the decision to return to her orphanage and to make something of her life was partially because, 'I also thought about all my plans, those that I had told my sponsors, and I felt I was going to let them down.' We note a sense of confusion or disappointment in some cases that the sponsor is not known, as well as a degree of dignity and pride associated with knowing names and meeting sponsors in person.

Throughout most of the narratives there is a recurring belief expressed that a higher power is responsible for the sponsorship and resultant transformation. In part, this may be because a number of the CS INGOs featured are Christian. However, this is also due to the religious worldview of many sponsorship beneficiaries. Rather than sponsorship being viewed as a charitable transaction, sponsored beneficiaries may make sense of their sponsorship by framing it within the context of a spiritual journey. For secular readers this may seem strange, especially given the recurring historic tendency to criticize CS INGOs for evangelizing and forcing their religion on vulnerable others. In these narratives, at least, religion has been perceived in terms of a personal journey in which they retained agency, rather than an experience of coercion. For Rajendra Gautam the opportunity to meet his sponsors and baptize his sponsor's daughter is accompanied by a deep sense of pride, intimacy and blessing. V. Masilamani accounts for his ongoing sponsorship as due to God's grace, while Nerissa Soledad is emphatic that her life is testimony to God's goodness. With respect to secular critics, it is evident that for some sponsored children at least, the attainment of sponsorship and the success derived from ongoing support, may be richly significant in terms of one's faith.

In a number of the stories, receiving personalized help rather than institutionalized assistance has fuelled a personal commitment to help others. This desire to give back, or pay it forward, might be referred to as development of a virtuous circle in which sponsored beneficiaries determine to give back to their own families and communities. Beyond being inspired to dream for a better future for themselves, the accounts of sponsorship above reveal potential for sponsorship to inspire service and compassion in young people who have been recipients' of others' compassion, and allowed to participate in society as equals rather than being poor and singled out. Nerissa Soledad's account typifies accounts

in which sponsored children grow up and 'pay it forward'. Writing enthusiastically from a Christian world view she asserts, '...it is always my prayer that the Lord will use me as His instrument in touching the lives of the children under my care and continue on making a difference in their lives which will eventually impact their family and the whole community as well.' Without reference to religious belief, Sadhna enthuses that, 'My friends in school come to me for my advice and trust me. If they are undergoing any issue, especially gender discrimination, I counsel them and their parents or guardians.'

Many a story is untold in the narratives of this chapter. What, we may ask, has been the experience of young people who were individually sponsored yet did not thrive academically? To what extent did they benefit and what might they write about their experience of sponsorship? Did they also frame their support through a religious world view? Having experienced compassion, do they find less evident ways of paying it forward? Nonetheless, what is significant about the themes explored above is that the impacts described here appear across the boundaries of institution, country, and even the model of child sponsorship. It would appear that at its best, the personalized support of child sponsorship at the time children are at their most vulnerable, can have a deeply personal and transformational impact in a way other institutional support and programmes most likely could not.

At time of writing, sponsorship spans orphan care, education, family support, pooled funding for community development, rights-based interventions and use of representative children who may receive no direct, tangible benefits. An ongoing challenge for CS INGOs is to collect and disseminate positive and negative change stories that give voice to children in CS programmes in ways that respect the integrity of their narratives, diversity of experience, and potential as change agents in CS processes. While this chapter honors those who have benefited from CS, it flags the need to honor other, less effusive voices marginalized in the ongoing quest to improve the lives of children through child sponsorship.