4

Issues in Historic Child Sponsorship

Brad Watson, Harwood Lockton and Manohar Pawar

Introduction

Arguing that children serve the international humanitarian community as 'embodiments of a basic goodness' and 'symbols of world harmony', Malkki (1997) and Bornstein (2005) warn that in Child Sponsorship (CS) children are not just 'ambassadors of hope', they take centre stage as symbols in 'explosive moral terrain'. Peter Stalker's 1982 article in the *New Internationalist* epitomizes the tension that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s over CS-funded interventions. Although Stalker (1982, p.1) referred to sponsorship of one million children by international 'foster parents' as an extraordinary international exchange, he parodied CS INGOs and their advertising, featuring a picture of a small child and the header 'Please do not sponsor this child'. Stalker (1982, p.2) was explicit in his critique, bluntly asserting that '...in almost every other way in which the donor is better off through a sponsorship scheme, the sponsored child or family is correspondingly worse off'.

The negative portrayal of CS by Stalker and other *New Internationalist* journalists in the 1980s was embraced by critics in non-CS INGOs and is understandable given that the publication was co-founded by Oxfam, a leading advocate for poverty reduction through community development. In 1985 the *New Internationalist* informed readers that 'doubts about the principle of singling out individual children for special children had been circulating for years among the voluntary agencies' (*New Internationalist*, 1985, p.4). For CS INGOs the critique cut deeply, not because they were unaware of the pitfalls of traditional forms of CS, but because it portrayed them as unethical, irresponsible and ineffective at a time when they were riding a wave of unprecedented public support. Strident critique of CS INGOs reached a

crescendo in 1998 with a *Chicago Tribune* 'Special report' titled 'The Miracle Merchants: The Myths of Child Sponsorship'. The Tribune's journalists featured sensational accounts of alleged organizational ineptitude. The special report – fairly or not – depicted Save the Children USA, Childreach, Children International and Christian Children's Fund as collectively lacking accountability, transparency and efficacy. Having assumed a vital role of 'child saving', with children as 'deserving victims' CS INGOs found themselves cast in a new role, that of 'villains' (see Mahood and Satzewich, 2009, pp.55–58 for a fuller discussion of social problems and claims making).

Unfortunately, the task of revisiting earlier critique of CS is complicated by several factors. Firstly, although media accounts and exposes have had undue influence in swaying perceptions of CS, they are typically limited by reference to a small number of CS INGOs and reliance on opinion and anecdotal accounts at particular points in time. Secondly, much of the historic critique of CS-funded interventions refers to the sponsorship of individual children or families through direct service provision, cash transfers and gift-giving. Referred to in Chapter 3 of this book, such activities may be loosely described as welfare provision and may be classified in a typology as IICS (Individual/Institutional Child Sponsorship) or IFCS (Individual/Family Child Sponsorship). These forms of assistance should not be confused with CDCS (Community Development Child Sponsorship) which involved a paradigm shift away from individual welfare to community development, community empowerment and poverty reduction for whole communities. Thirdly, an abundance of anecdotal evidence used to condemn historic CS INGO activity is still largely matched by '...a scarcity of empirical research-based evidence about the impact of child sponsorship on recipient families and communities' (Brehm and Gale, 2000, p.1).

In documenting critique of past sponsorship practice it must be noted that that many large CS INGOs have evolved over time. For example, one history of Plan International observes that between 1937 and 1983 Plan International was involved in a '...transition from child welfare to child, family, and community development ...' (Molumphy, 1984, p.302). A similar trajectory has been evident with World Vision which, in the mid-1970s moved beyond support of individual children in orphanages and home environments, to a 'family-to-family' model in which sponsorship funded benefits became more family focused (Watkins, 1998, p.3), and then to community development initiatives by the 1980s.

Mindful of the caveats above, and the anecdotal nature of much of the evidence used to bolster critique, this chapter discusses a range of historic criticisms of CS as they relate to IICS and IFCS to the 1990s. The manner in which leading CS INGOs have proactively changed, responded to critique and set new benchmarks for best practice are discussed in the final chapter of this book (see Chapter 15).

Issues for historic CS funded orphan care (IICS)

A concern for CS INGOs involved in historic provision of orphan care in the global South in the 1950s and 1960s was the steady decline of traditional orphanages in Northern countries throughout the twentieth century. Shughart and Chappell (in McKenzie, 1999, p.153) have observed that in 1933 approximately 144,000 children were cared for in orphanages in the USA. However, 'by 1977, only 43,000 children were living in orphanages. And by 1980, the orphanage had for all practical purposes ceased to exist'. Shughart and Chappell point out that by the 1960s the financial cost of family-based foster care in America was approximately half that of support in an institution, however the shift was also due to the activism of social workers and researchers who had concluded – based more on selected clinical research than comparative evaluations – that institutions were often unable to meet children's social and developmental needs. Thus, over the course of the twentieth century a bleak and rarely contested view of orphanages developed, based on the presumption that 'Any amount of orphanage experience is harmful. The damage is greatest during the first years of life and increases dramatically with length of stay in an institution' (McCall in McKenzie, 1999, pp.129–130).

The impact of institutional life funded by CS INGOs has been called into question, especially where children with families or supportive relationships were funneled into dormitory style orphanages. Dr. Chun Wai Chan, an ex-resident of Faith Love Home in Hong Kong writes:

> It was a very regimented and totally insulated environment... We were stigmatized...and treated like aliens... We had gates right in front of the school, with a sign saying 'ORPHANS HOME'. There was barbed wire – it was more or less like a correctional institution.... Each time I returned home, I felt less and less like I belonged there... Little by little, I noticed how different I was becoming from the rest of my family... (in Tise, 1993, pp.45–46).

Clearly, not all orphanages were run in this way, and Chan's account represents one negative story, in one cultural context with a very positive eventual outcome in which Chan eventually became a cardiologist in the USA and served as a director of Christian Children's Fund (CCF). Although they maintained that orphanages could transform the lives of some children, CS INGO staff increasingly suggested throughout the 1960s and 1970s that as a welfare measure, placement of children in orphanages was costly, prone to manipulation, potentially harmful to some children and more importantly, did little to address the underlying conditions that perpetuated poverty. In the case of the Shanghai Canaan home, segregation of children from the broader society meant that:

> We had lots of problems with those kids... They had been isolated from the community, and they couldn't adjust to being outside. They stopped going to church, they found it difficult to find jobs, they didn't know the outside customs, they were maladjusted (Mills in Tise, 1993, pp.23–24).

A practical problem for CS INGOs engaged in offering direct benefits to children was the unintended side-effect of enormously successful advertising necessitating rapid recruitment of children. Tise (1993, p.66) explains that The Korean Association of Voluntary Agencies conducted a study in 1960 for CCF (known now as ChildFund) to ascertain the origins of children in its funded institutions, length of stay and proportion who returned to the family. 'The findings were unequivocal. A large proportion of these children had been transformed into 'orphans' by their families'. CCF was not alone in experiencing this phenomenon. For impoverished families, offers of free food, shelter and schooling provided significant incentive to place children in institutions.

To its credit, staff at CCF recognized and responded to its self-imposed discovery that it had been inadvertently contributing to the manufacture of an artificial orphan crisis in the 1950s insofar as 'Parents would go through all sorts of shenanigans to get their child into an orphanage so that he could get an education' (Tise, 1993, p.66). However, direct benefits to poor families and poor children outside orphanages could also be problematic. Referring to Save the Children USA's domestic CS programme in the 1980s and 1990s, Maren (1997, p.150) quoted a staff member who described one programme in which 'The pressure is on from headquarters; we're given a month to

sign up so many children or our budgets will be cut. So we signed up anyone who came through the door'. Although this anecdotal account of child recruitment cannot be used to imply systemic issues in worldwide recruitment for Save the Children, it is not unfair to say that numerous CS INGOs found it difficult to balance rapid growth with effective recruiting based on adequate screening of sponsored children prior to enrolment and throughout the duration of programmes. Perhaps alluding to this dynamic Herrell (1974, p.691) observed 'A sponsorship program should be used for finding sponsors to provide for identified needs of priority-risk children, rather than "for finding children for sponsors"'.

Herrell (1974, p.685) conceded in the 1970s that '...an occasional sponsor may have a desire to shape other person's values according to his own religion or ideology....' In the broader context of religious CS INGOs, this concession flagged an emerging debate about the role of religion in foreign aid. Staff at the *New Internationalist* (1989b, p.3) were blunt, stating 'In order for a child to qualify its parents may have to cease certain forms of political or religious activity – or the child may be pressured to take up activities like reading the Bible'. A cartoon accompanied the text and is shown below in Figure 4.1. This was espe-

Figure 4.1 New Internationalist cartoon – Sponsored children as political pawns (New Internationalist, 1989b, p.1)

cially true of orphan care programmes funded by large, religious CS INGOs partnering directly with missions and church groups, and led to concerns over coerced participation of children in religious activity.

Writing over 30 years ago, Livezey (1981, p.10) praised Compassion International for its transparency and forthright declaration at the time that '...a child needs to know about God's love for him as much as he needs food and clothing'. However, the rise of secularism, postmodernism and material definitions of poverty in the Global North have, by and large combined to alter perceptions of the legitimacy of CS INGOs formerly involved in direct evangelism. For most large CS INGOs, religious or otherwise, coerced participation in religious activity is now contrary to their humanitarian charter and various NGO codes of conduct. Having said this, of interest is the growing disconnect between secular aid agencies wary of religion as potentially divisive, and Southern beneficiaries for whom voluntary participation in religious activity is highly valued and central to life. Though not specifically referring to CS, in Ver Beek's (2000, p.31) opinion 'This avoidance results in inferior research and less effective programs, and ultimately fails to provide participants with opportunities to reflect on how their development and their spirituality will and should shape each other'.

It is noteworthy that in its transition to a secular INGO, CCF was criticized for retaining a religious name (see *Christianity Today* articles circa 1994) when it had functioned as a secular INGO for some time. This tension was referred to by Lissner (1977, p.229) when he observed that many INGOs at that time displayed a Christian name and religious affiliation when appealing to constituents, 'while their "modus operandi" vis-a-vis government at home and overseas is distinctly non-sectarian/humanitarian in character...'. While it is a truism that through sponsorship Christians can '...find a way to actively enact their faith' (Yuen, 2008, p.46), a related issue for CS INGOs that have distanced themselves from evangelism is the perception of some sponsors that this has compromised their level of care rather than enhanced it.

Given the emergence of a pervasive narrative that any amount of institutional care is harmful, and the serious issues that arose in orphan care programmes funded by CS INGOs in the 1950s–1970s, it is not surprising that most CS INGOs have transitioned to new forms of sponsorship-funded activity. Ethically-attuned CS INGOs engaged in orphan care emphasize the importance for children of cultural integration, religious freedom, social connectedness, high levels of adult care

Figure 4.2 Summary of key issues for historic CS funded orphan care programmes

in family homes and selection processes designed to ensure that only the neediest children are admitted.

Issues in CS funded direct transfers to children and families (IFCS)

Leading CS INGOs transitioned from sponsorship of orphans in institutions to Family Helper and similar programmes in the 1960s and 1970s (see Chapter 2). The logic of these and similar interventions was simple: small cash transfers to families or children, or various gifts (such as uniforms and books or food) could, it was thought, boost individual or family well-being (and sometimes nutrition), improve school retention and help children in the context of their communities. Diversity was evident. Commenting on the Save the Children UK domestic CS programme in post-World War Two Britain when government welfare services had improved, Freeman (1965, p.119) proudly asserted that sponsored children were not starving or destitute but chosen specifically to benefit from '...the personal interest taken by the

sponsor...' and grants 'spent quarterly by an administrator on the spot on food, clothing or school needs'.

At a very basic level some individual and family oriented cash transfers offered by several CS INGOs in the 1960s and 1970s were not dissimilar to Mexico's current and much lauded anti-poverty cash-transfer programme Oportunidades, praised as an effective innovation benefiting up to four million Mexican families since 2002 (World Bank, 2013) in regards to improved education, health and nutrition. However, unlike Oportunidades with its formidable resources, national presence, rigorous selection procedure using household surveys, comprehensive analysis of socio-economic information, and targeted support to females, CS-funded family helper programmes utilized by CS INGOs in the 1970s and 1980s were often localized, delivered through inexperienced partners, offered in isolation from government services and sometimes exclusive. CS INGOs historically funded only one child or perhaps a small number per family.

Problematically, there is a dearth of historic impact studies investigating the impact of the INGO cash transfers referred to above and it is unclear how effective they may have been. McDonnal and McDonnal (1994, pp.199–204) randomly sampled 5 per cent of Children International's sponsored children in 1993, comparing 4,764 beneficiaries to 627 children who had applied for sponsorship but had not yet received assistance. It is not clear how significant cash transfers were in programming, however of 16 projects analysed the authors claimed that 11 displayed significant improvements in the lives of sponsored children with 'The most dramatic effects...seen on education and physical health...'. Taking a negative view, Stalker (1982, p.2) warned readers that helping individuals was divisive and damaging in societies already sharply divided, and led to family rifts where one child received preferential treatment. In 1989 the *New Internationalist* deepened its critique, declaring that:

> The chosen few may receive extra food, education, clothes, medical treatment and gifts which others do not. Brothers, sisters or other families become jealous. And parents can feel humiliated... (*New Internationalist*, 1989b, p.1).

Although such claims have rarely been tested in a scholarly manner, there is consensus among leading CS INGOs that direct benefits were prone to divisiveness and may have been conducive to corruption, expressed more nicely as 'favouritism' in which '...family, tribal and

Figure 4.3 New Internationalist cartoon – Family rifts (New Internationalist, 1989b, p.1)

other loyalties impact on the selection of children' (van Eekelen, 2013, p.476). A World Vision discussion paper (World Vision, 2006, pp.7–8) suggests that singling out individual children '...creates two classes of children', 'often creates jealousy', 'creates welfare expectations', establishes patterns of 'transactional participation', 'can create dependence', 'can divert resources from development' and can send mixed messages to the community about the role of INGOs.

In a candid assessment of CCF's experimentation with early Family Helper projects CCF staff member James Hoestetler explained that:

> The emphasis was on what we could do for them. There was little thought of encouraging people to do something for themselves... They were capable of doing that, but somehow we saw them as cases. We had caseworkers... They would go out and deliver money to the families. There was very little interaction between the families (Hoestetler in Tise, 1993, p.66).

Reflecting on 25 years of work with CS INGOs, McPeak (2013) addresses the claim that singling out individual children and families for cash payments, gifts such as bicycles, scholarships, and house repairs did divide families, '...inadvertently causing resentment and jealousy'. Further, gift-giving was often difficult to manage at a procurement and distribution level, complex to administer, prone to corruption, hard to evaluate and cash grants were often associated with increased levels of dependency when provided over long periods of time. Although some leading CS INGOs have retained tokenistic gift-giving, and this can be appreciated by child recipients, the usefulness of such gifts is also problematic. McDonic (2004, p.92) describes the exasperation of the mother of a West African child who had been sent coloured pencils, letters, stickers and photographs, concluding:

> Why should I care about these things? They are of no use to me...I need a hoe. That is what I need. I do not need these things. I think I should take my picture back...

Direct correspondence has been identified as problematic for several reasons. Plan International's executive director in the 1950s, Gloria Matthews, defended letter writing, stating that 'person-to-person contact is a good influence. It's a hopeful thing! ... And what's wrong with a kid saying "thank you"?' (Plan International, 1998, p.24). Nonplussed by the presumed impact of a simple thank-you, Stalker wrote in the *New Internationalist* in 1982, 'there's nothing like writing a regular thank-you letter to keep you in your place' (Stalker, 1982, p.2). A follow-up article by the *New Internationalist* (1985, p.4) posited that Bolivian children and their families:

> ...may be permanently marked by psychological and material dependence on their 'padrino' from the North. However well-intentioned such aid may be, the kernel is the creation of a paternalistic relationship which is unnecessary and potentially harmful.

Others, relying on opinion and anecdotal evidence, have pointed to potential shame experienced by parents reliant on handouts to support their children. Yuen (2008, p.49) asserts that fathers in Ghana '...are led to believe that their authority is being undermined by the gifts, attention, and correspondence lavished on their children'. However, the absence of robust studies makes it especially difficult to ascertain the degree to which these and similar criticisms were and are justified across various historic CS INGO programmes.

The nature of sponsor and sponsored child communication and non-communication has been an ongoing issue for CS INGOs. Referring to his sponsorship in a 1950s Hong Kong CCF orphanage, Dr. Chun Wai Chan noted how happy children would feel when they received letters or gifts yet observed that 'About a third of the children at Faith Love Home never heard from their sponsors' (in Tise, 1993, p.47). In contrast, a more recent study conducted by an assessment team from the Institute of Development Studies (Sussex) on behalf of Plan International (2008, p.3) found that 'Only 30–35% of sponsored children receive letters and gifts from sponsors, creating jealousy and disappointment...'. Further, 'claims of positive effects on children's growth, self-esteem and ability to communicate...can't be substantiated enough to advertise them'. This is not to say benefits do not exist for those children who do receive letters, rather, it is a reminder that positive claims should be based on solid research and an understanding of impact on those who miss out.

Critically, sponsor participation rates in communication vary across CS INGOs and the facilitation of meaningful cross-cultural communication is highly problematic, especially where sponsorship transitions from support of children in orphanages or schools (where it is much easier to facilitate communication) to support of children in their communities where language, literacy and cultural differences are more obvious. In the case of Plan International:

> What had been simple for a Spanish child in 1937 could be very hard for a child in Mali in 1987. Plan now worked where literacy was low, education was poor and letter-writing uncommon (Plan International, 1998, p.54).

Pragmatic challenges inherent to facilitating meaningful communication between sponsors and sponsored children include difficulty in bridging cultural or age gaps, necessity of costly translation services, accessing remote areas, protecting sponsors from additional requests for help, protecting children from predators and guaranteeing cultural sensitivity in the exchange of images. Filtering and censoring of correspondence can be difficult and in some cases leads to dictation of letters to children and provision of samples.

The disappointment of some children who receive no contact from a sponsor is evident in the following letter from a youth in India sponsored through the programme of a small Australian CS INGO. When

asked by one of the authors of this chapter to write a sincere letter to her sponsor in 2011 the sponsored girl wrote:

> Dear Sponsor, I write so many letters but there is no reply from you. I feel very bad...I have not received any gifts or letter from you...still you help me. By so many ways you are really good. I thank you for everything... please can you send me any gift or a letter... I would at least feel like you are talking to me, please don't mistake me if I have written anything wrong it is because I wanted to see you. Yours obediently and loving... (Personal Correspondence).

Such letters recognize the willingness of some sponsored children to communicate meaningfully with their sponsors, while also questioning the ethics of a communication strategy that historically prioritized donors and guaranteed correspondence from a child without a commitment from a sponsor to write in return. Sponsorship can be intimate, and letter writing important, although there is some controversy as the degree to which this intimacy is self-constructed and mutually shared. It is noteworthy that Plan International began to emphasize dialogue rather than friendship from 1983, reducing the number of letters required of Foster Children from six per year to one, with an annual report facilitated by Plan International staff (Plan International, 1998, p.54).

Prevalent in early CS critique was the widespread notion that sponsorship of children to attend schools, especially boarding schools, was harmful and that communication with donors created empty aspirations. In one 1989 article (*New Internationalist*, 1989b, p.1) journalists suggested that provision of Christmas cards to non-Christian children was equivalent to Western children receiving a copy of the Koran. Further the authors claimed that programmes which provided education of individual children ensured that:

> They are educated to uselessness, unable to obtain well-paid white-collar work in their own towns or villages and unwilling to do low paid 'menial' labour. As adults they either remain at home dissatisfied, or take their skills further afield, away from the community that needs them.

Given the reality of current rural-urban migration patterns in the Global South, and the Millennium Development goals relating to

education, such critique now seems questionable. Other lesser criticisms may have underestimated the ability of children to contextualize communication from donors. For example, it was speculated that 'a child who learns of a sponsor's large house and reads about their skiing holidays or big cars can become dissatisfied with his or her own community...' (*New Internationalist*, 1989b, p.2). Writing several years earlier Stalker cited one case of a 16 year old girl who 'honestly believed that someday her sponsor, who lived in Toronto, was going to invite her to go and live there' (Stalker, 1982, p.2). He referred to this as creating 'empty aspiration'. However for the most part, these and other claims have remained untested and unstudied in organizations that retain direct benefits to children or families.

It is evident that by the 1980s child welfare activities were increasingly out of favour. As community development and community empowerment ideology became pervasive in the 1980s, INGOs devoted to orphan care, direct handouts and direct service delivery were increasingly motivated to transition sponsorship to a funding tool for community development and poverty reduction. Weaning recipients off direct benefits was often difficult and CS INGOs sometimes found it easier to close their programmes entirely and relocate rather than remain and transition the expectations of former beneficiaries. The cutting of direct cash transfers to families was especially difficult. In 1985 the *New Internationalist* could report that according to a Plan worker in Bolivia:

> We don't want to be paternalistic, so, we're making the families work in local groups, and the contributions are going more to those projects now, and we're cutting down the aid to individual families. A lot of them don't like it. They're writing letters asking their sponsors not to send donations for the groups because they're afraid of losing their money (*New Internationalist*, 1985, p.3).

By the 1980s, community development programmes involving preventative health, women's literacy, primary and vocational education, improved farming practice, local infrastructure and micro-enterprise (see Korten, 1987, p.148) were upheld as having greater potential to reduce poverty and catalyse sustainable change than child welfare activities and handouts linked to direct service delivery, educational support and cash transfers over long periods of time. While this chapter does not discuss issues in CDCS (Community Development Child Sponsorship) it is noteworthy that the transition was often difficult and ironically, would lead to significant criticism that CS

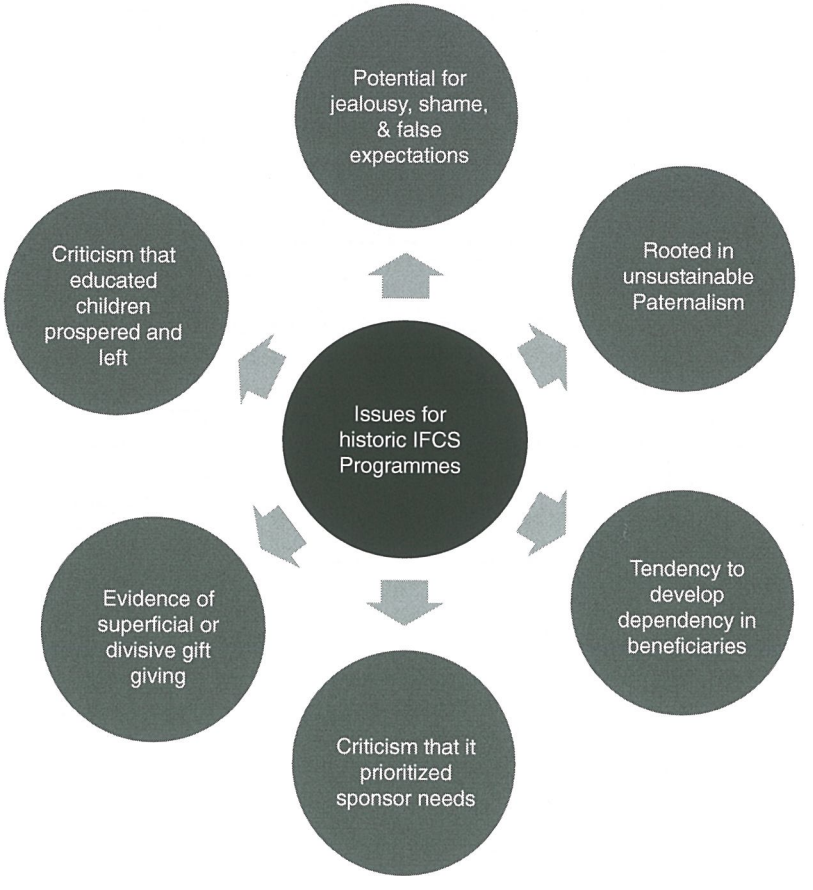

Figure 4.4 Summary of key issues for historic CS programmes involving individual support and direct benefits to families (IFCS)

INGOs were fundraising using a paradigm of individual child welfare while delivering programmes based on pooled funding for community development. Investigated by journalists, this would lead to damaging claims in the 1990s that CS INGOs lacked transparency.

Impact of CS on sponsors and the public in the North

Manzo (2008, p.652) draws parallels between the images frequently used by CS INGOs and historic missionary work, arguing that the

iconography of childhood has functioned for INGOs similarly to missionary iconography utilized in the colonial era. Manzo argues that '...the same image (such as the much critiqued "starving baby" image still featured in many INGO emergency appeals) can faithfully represent a shared value such as the principle of humanity while representing one part of the world as infantile, helpless, and inferior'. In similar vein Jefferess (2002, p.1) argues that 'World Vision Canada's television fundraising appeals construct Canadian sponsor identity in relation to a "needy" "Third World" other. The programmes utilize structures of identification reminiscent of earlier forms of colonial discourse and are dependent on discourses of consumer capital'. A common concern is that CS advertising has contributed to '...creation and solidification of stereotypes', including that of an African continent dominated by disease, dependence, poverty, hunger and helplessness (Mittelman and Neilson, 2009, p.66).

Children were, according to some critics (*New Internationalist*, 1989a) prone to being commodified and 'sold' through marketing activities that presented the child as a product to consumers. Photographed as the passive victims of helpless parents, the children presented to sponsors have been associated with a distorted image of the 'Third World', bereft of context and real understanding of causes of poverty, if not outright racism. Concern over the commodification of children, at the expense of truthful representation, is seen below in Figure 4.5. In the late 1980s Burton, director of Save the Children Bolivia hinted at the difficulty in catching a donor's eye, stating:

> We're trying all different ways of making the children come out more attractive. They don't look good against a plain background or wall. Now we're doing them against natural landscapes or colored weavings. Even some quite ugly children have been sponsored... (*New Internationalist*, 1989a, p.2).

Interestingly for CS INGOs, Yuen (2008, p.49) describes the presence of money in a love-based relationship as problematic while McDonic (2004, p.77) suggests that money invalidates relationships between the children and sponsors. While the cliché that 'love can't buy friendship' is true for many sponsors, and symbolizes western ideals of relationships based on emotion, the extent to which donors view sponsorship as an act of consumerism, and the extent to which sponsored children view financial assistance as irreconcilable with friendship, may be overstated and requires further investigation (see Chapter 13 by Frances Rabbitts).

Figure 4.5 New Internationalist cartoon – Fostering racism (New Internationalist, 1989b, p.1)

Arguing that many historic CS INGOs were doing little to address factors that had rendered children destitute in the first place, Small (1997, p.586) describes CS as the epitome of a donor-oriented programme which '...not only failed to challenge the misunderstanding of donors but it actively pandered to them, packaging the problem into a saleable commodity...'. Small argued that NGOs were often torn between the choice of being wealthy and pragmatic (by commodifying children if necessary and perpetuating a false understanding of causes of poverty) or poor and principled (rejecting sponsorship).

Through trial and error INGOs have discovered what works in eliciting response. Burman (1994, p.2) points out that the 1950s and 1960s were '...the heyday of the hungry child images...' and as a heavy user of child images Oxfam's income peaked in the 1960s with each Pound spent on advertising yielding an enviable 31 Pounds raised. ActionAid UK began mass marketing of CS in the mid-1970s with pre-trialed,

enormously successful 'postal parents' advertisements, often in the form of off-the-press advertising and loose leaf inserts. Conceived by Harold Sumpton, the advertisements featured close-up black and white images of children and statements such as 'Won't you be my "Postal parent" for £4.33 a month?' SOFII (2010) states that 'for press advertising off-the-page they were masterful examples of how to use a small space effectively, with not a millimeter of wasted space'. ActionAid learned that head and shoulder shots were more effective, that four head and shoulder shots worked better than one, and so on.

Implicit in much sponsor recruiting but explicit in World Vision Canada's tagline was the concept of 'Change a life. Change your own'. (cited in Yuen, 2008, p.50). The very idea that a small monthly donation could significantly change the life of a child and the life of a giver has been ridiculed however a more valid criticism is that CS INGOs were slow to communicate the reality of pooled funding for community development. Early 1980s experimentation with advertising for Childcare Partners by World Vision USA, Canada and Australia was consistent with a 1979 plan to move 50 per cent of programmes to a community development model, a shift that would promote self-sufficiency and the Area Development Program (ADP) which became a standardized approach to World Vision's CS in the late 1980s and 1990s (Pratten et al, 2007, p.1).

World Vision's Childcare Partners provided donors with folders containing information about representative children in a community, and sought to move beyond individual sponsorship. Unfortunately, by 1985 the two year trial revealed 'a substantial reduction in their sponsor fulfillment rates', mandating a return to use of specific, named children (Watkins, 1998, p.5). When Save the Children Canada terminated its individual CS programme in the early 1980s and replaced it with community sponsorship it lost 3,000 of its 8,500 sponsors (*New Internationalist*, 1985, p.4). A comment from Robert Brooks, National Director of CCF in Australia in the early 1990s illustrates the tension within CS INGOs well:

> Community development is a better way of helping people...but that's not something people are moved to give money for; it doesn't give them an emotional reward. Whereas they are rewarded emotionally by helping an individual child (Tise, 1993, p.73).

Appeals from INGOs to their constituents to sponsor villages or communities have frequently failed to result in the same enthusiastic

response as for individual CS. CS INGOs therefore have tended to continue to offer individual sponsorship while transitioning to development work. For Plan Netherlands (Foundation Foster Plan Nederland), a board decision in the mid-1990s to move away from individual support of sponsored children resulted in heated constituent reaction. Hondius (2002) states that 'To outside observers, the violence of the conflict was puzzling'. Publicized accounts of sponsorship of children who had died or relocated, and allegations that only approximately 50 per cent of donations reached children (van Krimpen, 2012, p.15), combined with concern over a shift away from individual support, resulting in a stream of negative publicity and a series of legal challenges. Plan Netherland's success in promoting CS to Dutch citizens

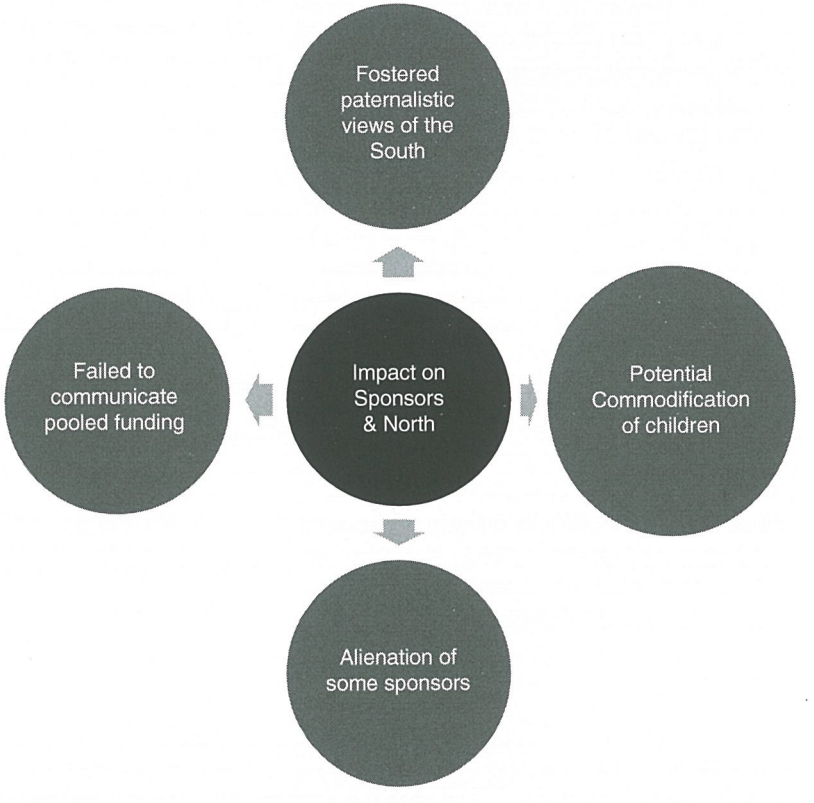

Figure 4.6 Summary of key issues for historic CS programmes relating to impact on sponsors in the North

had been phenomenal to that point insofar as 'By 1994, almost 40 per cent of Plan's worldwide child sponsorships were being financed from Holland alone' (Smillie, 1995, p.200).

Negative impacts on CS INGOs

CS has been identified as an impediment to radical change due to its relational nature. In listing several dangers and drawbacks of traditional forms of CS, Herrell (1974, pp.685–686) expressed concern that the sponsor:

> ...wants a long-term relationship with the child. He wants to watch a child grow up so that he can feel pride in having nurtured the child along as much of the way as possible from infancy to childhood. This may, unfortunately, inhibit the agency from shifting its support from one program to another, for fear of terminating a child-sponsor link.

Herrell also noted that interest in one child could, for sponsors, eclipse their recognition of the need to assist non-sponsored children or the community surrounding the child. Writing a decade later, he argued that when sponsorship funds were provided to the bank account of a community association it had '...major power to mobilize community participation...' and was one of the '...least expensive ways to raise funds for programs serving children' (Herrell, 1986, p.239). Writing in the mid-1990s Smillie (1995, p.136) posited that 'although most child sponsorship agencies now target communities in their field work as much as the child, the child remains the publicity anchor, and projects are therefore smaller, more parochial and are often less cost-effective than others'. A common perception within the INGO sector at large is that the CS fundraising mechanism may have slowed the progress of many CS INGOs in their transition away from individual child welfare activities, to community empowerment and development.

The very rapid growth of a small number of early CS INGOs created significant tension within the INGO sector in the 1980s. Issues of overhead expenses and administration costs have long been politicized by some voluntary agencies keen to position their organizations as more efficient, and consequently, more deserving of public support than government agencies (Lissner, 1977, p.231). From the 1970s this extended to comparisons between INGOs with little consideration for the age of the organizations, quality of programmes, competency of

staff or programmatic outcomes. Concerned about prominent CCF advertising in Lutheran publications, leading to as much as one million dollars per year in income for CCF, a Lutheran INGO, Lutheran World Action (LWA), attempted to politicize administration costs, informing readers that '...the overhead in many such organizations runs from 30 to 50 per cent or more, so that sometimes less than half of what you give usually gets to that child. This is a very expensive business, when mass needs are met on an individual case basis' (Empie in Lissner, 1977, p.233). Although sweeping claims that CS organizations were expensive to run were rarely made with hard comparisons to other INGOs or government agencies, the mud stuck!

Smillie (1995, p.153) identified 'dramatic subterfuge' used by World Vision Germany in the late 1980s in which the organization declared that 80 per cent of donations went overseas without informing donors that money went through several World Vision offices, each responsible for taking a cut, and eventually, 'a hefty proportion was transferred back to Germany, to a marketing company...'. Though CS INGOs of that era went to significant lengths to be seen as good financial stewards, speculation had grown that expensive marketing campaigns, large donor-relations teams and considerable cost in facilitating individual communication and individual benefits ensured that too little money reached developing countries. For the *New Internationalist* staff (1985, p.4) there were better ways to help and 'The money that is spent on sponsoring a single child for one year could immunize 31 children against the six major child-killer diseases...'. Daniel Borochoff, from the American Institute of Philanthropy, was blunt in his assessment of overhead costs associated with linking individuals, stating 'Just think of the savings if the charity didn't have to do this charade of matching up an individual with a kid' (cited in Moore, 1998, p.16). The issue was arguably more complex than Borochoff implied. In reality the administrative expenses of INGOs in Northern countries were also impacted by start-up costs, advertising costs required to establish a donor base and contributions to parent bodies.

Referring to a 1970s USA General Accounting Office study of five large children's charities (including Plan and Save the Children) which cited evidence of poor fiscal management or misrepresentation of policies, columnist Jack Anderson wrote,

> The renowned Christian Children's Fund, like the old lady who lived in the shoe, has so many children it doesn't know what to do. Worse, it doesn't know what it did with $25 million, which was

> raised to feed, clothe, and educate needy children around the world (in Tise, 1993, p.79).

Although CCF largely denied the allegations, sporadic accusations of mismanagement or high cost structures have dogged CCF and other leading CS INGOs for decades. For example, former CCF board member Professor Thomas Naylor's 1994 report triggered 14 front-page articles in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (later picked up the *Washington Post, Chicago Tribune, Christianity Today* and *NBC News*) alleging, among other issues, lavish spending by executives, and a creative accounting system which indicated that 80 per cent of donations benefited children directly when in fact the figure was closer to 50 per cent (Naylor, 2011, pp.1–2). In his expose of Save the Children USA's domestic sponsorship programme, Maren (1997, p.152) charged that the organization misled USA sponsors of the domestic programme by claiming it used 80–85 per cent of income for programme services. Maren countered that on average only US$35.29 of US$240.00 raised annually through sponsorship was disbursed to the direct benefit of each child in the United States. By inference, many CS INGOs were portrayed in media exposés as opportunistic fundraisers. In Lissner's (1977, p.228) view many INGOs, not just CS ones, have followed a zigzag course between income maximization and adherence to agency conviction. Critically for CS INGOs, the combination of their child-centredness, links to individual children, and significant claims about impact have done little to communicate to sponsors the real costs of 'doing business'.

The real cost of CS interventions versus administrative overheads has been frequently queried. Reasons cited for high costs in traditional CS interventions in Southern countries are varied. Singling out CS INGOs for mention, the 1993 *Human Development Report* (UNDP, 1993, p.89) noted that 'Agencies that receive money from child sponsorship organizations, for example, have to spend much of their time collecting copious quantities of personal information about the sponsored children – and employ large teams of 'social workers' for this'. Van Eekelen (2013, p.475) cites high costs in identifying children, monitoring their progress, writing reports, communicating with sponsors, facilitating sponsor visits and following up on difficult cases. In its 1989 article entitled 'Letters to a god', *New Internationalist* (1989a, p.1) staff quoted the head of Save the Children Bolivia:

> Sometimes a sponsor will contact head office in the US asking for a photo. They don't realize how much time expense that means. We reckon it costs $19 a photo with all the administration, work and materials. That's equivalent to a month's sponsorship.

The high cost of maintaining large donor-support teams has also been cited as a reason for significant overheads in traditional sponsorship programmes, as has high levels of engagement with celebrity advocates and mass media.

Strident debate over public fundraising for INGO work has centred on CS as a marketing tool, especially in relation to their depiction of children/beneficiaries, their truthfulness and the impact on donors. According to Mittelman and Neilson (2009, p.63) 'The marketing of child sponsorship programs has been laden with accusations of deceitfulness and disrespect towards the dignity of the children they purport to help'. Lissner's 1977 thesis *The Politics of Altruism* questioned images used by humanitarian organizations for fundraising. Concerned that northern NGOs often misrepresented the South via fundraising strategies laden with unrepresentative images of malnourished children, Lissner (1981, p.1) concluded that:

> The public display of an African child with a bloated Kwashiorkor-ridden stomach in advertisements is pornographic, because it exposes something in life that is as delicate and deeply personal as sexuality...

The unpleasant phrase 'pornography of poverty' has become widespread as 'a term used by development practitioners in the North and in the South to describe the worst of the images that exploit the poor for little more than voyeuristic ends and where people are portrayed as helpless, passive objects' (Plewes and Stuart, 2007, p.23). CS INGOs in particular have been identified as frequent past users (by non-CS INGOs and others) of emotionally manipulative imagery, which humiliated, demeaned and inadvertently misrepresented reality in the South. Plewes and Stuart (2007, p.23) go so far as to say that CS INGOs have been '...demonstrably the biggest users of pornography of poverty images, whether for sponsorship or for fund-raising for humanitarian emergencies'. For Holland (1992, p.154) it can position children and their communities in '...a dangerous area between sympathy, guilt and disgust'. Repetitive use by Save the Children of Kevin Carter's Pulitzer-prize winning picture of an emaciated Sudanese child with a vulture waiting nearby, is perhaps the most infamous example of this.

The tensions inherent in mobilizing public support from a complacent public for humanitarian aid are evident as early as the 1920s when Save the Children Fund UK was criticized for exaggerating levels of need and manipulating emotions. Save responded then by saying 'It has been said – and generally with derogatory intention – that the Save the Children Fund has made capital of our popular emotion. That is exactly what it set out to do' (S.C.F., 1922, p.142). At a time when humanitarian fundraising was in its infancy, Save the Children justified its emotional appeals and imagery as a necessary attempt by a few people to 'open the eyes and stimulate the emotions of their fellows'. Unfortunately, CS advertising in the 1980s frequently featured starving or malnourished children, while the reality of most CS interventions involved school support and programmes in non-famine areas. One explanation for this is the rapid growth of CS INGOS and their employment of senior administrators and specialist marketers with little or no experience of programmes and no mandate to engage in development education. Herrell (1974, p.687) cautioned that:

> Some sponsors may not understand the broad international economic and social forces that have placed certain countries and cultures at a disadvantage in economic development. Instead these sponsors may take a condescending view toward the country, culture and even the family of the child. Sponsorship agencies must resist the temptation to pander to this tendency.

Problematically, the absence of effective development education was not isolated to CS INGOs in the 1950s–1980s.

CS marketing has frequently been identified as an impediment to effective development education. Interestingly, as early as 1920 Save the Children Fund in Britain had already been criticized for not being '...sufficiently educational and constructive' (S.C.F., 1920, p.21). To its credit, in 1925 Save the Children Fund urged readers to consider the importance of not just feeding the hungry (a key aim of the child sponsorship programme) but making hunger impossible. Quoting *My Life and Work* by Henry Ford, the editor of the Save the Children Fund's publication (S.C.F., 1925, p.39) began with the warning that 'It is easy to give; it is harder to make giving unnecessary. To make the giving unnecessary we must look beyond the individual to the cause of his misery...'. The advice was excellent and at first glance provides a sharp rebuke to many historic CS programmes although CS INGOs

emphasizing literacy, numeracy and education tended to view their work as a pre-emptive strike against causes of misery.

Commenting on the daunting logistical challenges evident in serving CCF's 400,000 sponsors and 533,000 children in the early 1990s, CCF's Sponsor Services Director noted 25,000 outgoing phone calls and letters to sponsors in one month alone and enthused that each communication was an:

> opportunity to educate the sponsors about what life is like in other parts of the world. When a sponsor learns that the reason letters take so long in Sierra Leone is that there's no reliable postal system, he or she is being educated (Tise, 1993, p.99).

Unfortunately, the reality is that CS marketing practices have been designed to trigger giving rather than develop understanding. A challenge for contemporary CS INGOs is to do development education much better. This applies to many non-CS INGOs as well. In his review of development education in New Zealand, Small (1997, pp.585–586) notes the proliferation of NZ NGOs since the 1980s and widespread use of messages and images that '...exoticizes world poverty and powerlessness and thereby undermines the international solidarity that is needed to fulfill the dual tasks of tackling the causes of the growing inequalities in wealth and power, and building sustainable people-centered alternatives'. Similar sentiment is expressed by Dogra whose interest in dominant themes of 'difference' and 'distance' in INGO messaging leads to the conclusion that INGOs in general resort to discursive strategies of infantilization and feminization that reinforce colonial ways of seeing things (Dogra, 2012, p.31). Whether there is any difference for CS INGOs is a question requiring further consideration.

A significant criticism – which peaked in intensity in the 1990s – leveled against several large CS INGOs related to the obvious failure of some children to receive direct benefits and lax or blatantly misleading communication between CS INGOs and their sponsors. *The Chicago Tribune* 'bombshells' of 1998, later published by *The New York Times* embarrassed Save the Children, Childreach, CCF and Children International. Singling out the largest CS INGOs for which negative findings would be more newsworthy, journalists attempted to visit 12 children whom they had sponsored over two years. One, a child in Mali named Korotoumou Kone, had died despite sponsorship and letters continuing for two years. Another child, Wagner Villafuerte from Guatemala, had been used to solicit a US$25 birthday gift for a

jogging suit and festive birthday party however received a sweat suit, cup of juice and a packet of cookies. In another case, after US$500 in sponsorship over two years, a child had benefited through five visits to a clinic and US$53 of training for the mother as a rug maker.

Read as case studies, the anecdotal accounts reported above painted CS INGOs as unable to track individual benefits to children at best, and manipulative or dishonest at worst. For the purpose of this chapter it is notable that the cases revealed tension between the oftentimes historic promise of tangible child benefits and the complex reality of monitoring children in often remote locations during a transition to community development initiatives using pooled funding. World Vision has noted that the selection of neediest children in a community is

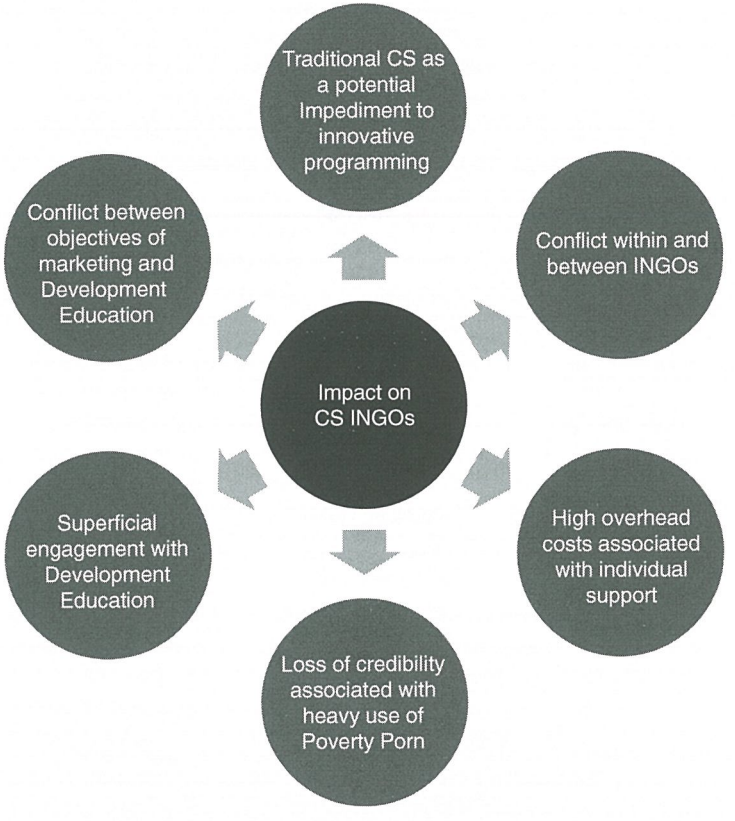

Figure 4.7 Summary of criticisms of CS in relation to INGOs themselves

complicated by high migration and dropout levels, and in some cases, diversion of funds from 'longer term, community-based, sustainable interventions' (World Vision, 2006, p.7).

Nevertheless, for the select group of CS INGOs featured, much work would be required to ensure that marketing messages reflected the reality of programmatic imperatives and information about specific children aligned with reality. The cumulative impact of media exposes was to undermine the pubic legitimacy of CS INGOs, generate disillusionment and perpetuate controversy. Ironically, this occurred as the majority of the large CS INGOs involved were transitioning towards more impactful programmes! A consequence within CS INGOs has been ongoing tension between programming staff and marketing staff as they deal with the reality that 'Every organization walks the fine line between presenting its most appealing program what will generate support, and honestly saying what they are, in fact, doing' (Livezey, 1981, p.4).

Conclusion

Readers who expect sweeping condemnation of all things related to CS are likely to be disappointed with the conclusion to this chapter. As authors we resonate with Theodore Roosevelt's 1910 speech at the Sorbonne, Paris, in which he famously said:

> It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly; who errs and comes short again and again... (Roosevelt, 1910).

Recognizing the overwhelmingly negative portrayal of historic CS by some journalists and various critics, we acknowledge the many staff in various CS INGOs who have, since the 1920s, facilitated programmatic improvements. It is noteworthy that programmes staff in leading CS INGOs have been instrumental in moving CS interventions from orphan care, to family helper programmes and beyond to pooled funding for service provision, holistic child development, community development activities and advocacy. To imply that the push for change came exclusively from outside CS INGOs would be a grave injustice and it may be fairer to say that most CS INGOs have improved again and

again rather than come short again and again. However, also we acknowledge those critics who have been motivated by the compelling logic behind Winston Churchill's reminder that criticism is necessary to correct an unhealthy state of things.

Having discussed a range of historic criticisms of CS as they relate to the individual sponsorship of children in institutions (IICS) and the support of children in the context of their families and home communities (IFCS), it should be evident that much critique needs to be grounded in its historical context. Importantly, challenges inherent to pooled funding for community development (CDCS) and rights-based child sponsorship have not been discussed here. The manner in which leading CS INGOs have proactively changed, responded to critique and set new benchmarks for best practice are discussed in the final chapter of this book (see Chapter 15).

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