

**‘You Can’t Change The World, But You Can Change
The Life Of This Child’: Child Sponsorship And The
Tension Between Charity And Justice**

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Child Sponsorship Basics

Compassion Sponsor a Child Donate Gifts of Compassion Blog

There's nothing better than knowing you're making a real difference in the life of a child living in poverty. Here's how.

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1

Choose a child

Choose the child you'd like to connect with and become their sponsor. Each week, they'll attend a
- 

2

Build a relationship

Get to know your sponsored child through letter writing. It's quick and easy to write online—and
- 

3

Change a life

Your support gives a child life-changing opportunity to develop spiritually, socio-

Child Sponsorship Basics

- 9.14 million children estimated to be sponsored worldwide
- Annual transfers of sponsorship funds are approximately US\$3.4 billion
- At least 207 organisations have international sponsorship programs
- 90% of fund flow through the 10 largest agencies (see Table 1)

TABLE 1
THE 10 LEADING INTERNATIONAL CHILD SPONSORSHIP PROGRAMS

Organization	International Headquarters	Year Founded	Number of Countries	Contribution per Month	Sponsored Children ^a
1. World Vision ^b	USA	1953	100	\$30	4,100,000
2. Plan USA	USA	1937	49	\$24	1,500,000
3. Compassion International ^b	USA	1952	26	\$38	1,288,632
4. ChildFund International	USA	1938	31	\$24	510,000
5. Children International	USA	1980	11	\$22	340,000
6. Christian Foundation for Children and Aging ^b	USA	1981	23	\$30	291,262
7. Kindernothilfe ^b	Germany	1959	28	\$30	145,814
8. Save the Children	USA	1932	50	\$28	120,000
9. SOS Children's Villages	USA	1949	132	\$28	80,000
10. Bornefonden	Denmark	1972	5	\$34	72,473
Others ^a (197)					692,979
Total					9,141,160

^a Child sponsorship organizations by donating country: United States (61), United Kingdom (43), France (18), Canada (10), Italy (11), Australia (9), Denmark (7), Spain (7), Norway (6), Germany (4), Sweden (4), and others (16).

^b Faith-based organization.

Source: Wydick, Glewwe & Rutledge, 2013, 'Does International Child Sponsorship Work? A Six-Country Study of Impacts on Adult Life Outcomes', *Journal of Political Economy* 121(2): 393-436.

Strengths

Intuitive appeal for donors

Highly durable funding

Stimulates further development engagement

Source of community employment

Improved outcomes for children long-term*:

- Education attainment
- Employability
- Community leadership
- Reported psychological wellbeing/aspirations

Weaknesses

Inequality/paternalism

Questions of dependency

Community conflict

Potential for discrimination

Programmatically complex to run

- High overheads
- Exploitable targeting
- Child protection issues
- Dependent on local competencies

Sources: van Eekelen, 2013, 'Revisiting Child Sponsorship Schemes';
*Wydick et al, 2013, 'Does Child Sponsorship Work?'

Tensions

- Individual/household level benefits do not by themselves overcome the most serious concerns:
 - Reinforcing racially laden stereotypes of need vs wealth; ignorance vs knowledge
 - Commodifying children's vulnerabilities as an 'ethical' product for wealthy consumers
- Need to consider more than the empirical question of how to improve individual outcomes over time
- Need to address the normative question of how to reconcile global inequalities and the paternalism generated through charity



Image Credit: Jim Needle 1989

Reflections

Child sponsorship can help by:

1) Personifying the stranger

- Encouraging relational investment that grounds abstract ethics
- Making visible the explicit obligations and responsibilities
- Creating local-local connections

2) Mobilising resources

- Facilitating long-term wealth transfers at the substate level

These two elements, although modest, create the possibility for child sponsorship to facilitate **redistributive justice**

Reflections

- Child sponsorship schemes need to be able to demonstrate that they ‘work’ – i.e. they produce the benefits they seek for children
- To move towards being agents of justice, not just charity, they need to:
 - Acknowledge their limits as community or structural development
 - Approach children as full and equal partners in the process
 - Work with families and local communities as the main agents of change
 - Challenge donors to adopt a redistributive justice framework