

Many of you may have noticed various pieces in/on the news media that have related to orphanages in developing countries and the campaigns being run to discourage young people from the UK volunteering in such establishments. The trustees are aware of the very valid arguments being used to suggest that orphanages should be phased out – just as they have been in the UK, and feel that you should be aware of our views of how this affects Bulabakulu.

The trustees have not referred to Bulabakulu Children's Village as an orphanage for many years now – and we have tried to discourage others from using the term. The plain fact is that most of the children and young people that are supported by AGLM at Bulabakulu are not orphans – although all come from families that are unable to send their children to school and the majority do not have a father around.

AGLM has always tried to ensure that every child that has a family with whom they can safely reside during school holidays (even if this is grandparents or aunts/uncles) are strongly encouraged to do so. Bulabakulu is relatively empty at such times and in many respects it is more akin to a boarding school than it is an orphanage. Almost everyone supported by AGLMUK to attend secondary school only attends Bulabakulu for short periods before term commences in order to sort out the requirements for the coming year/term.

There have been a large number of young people (from several western nations) that have volunteered at Bulabakulu for periods ranging from a few weeks to 12 months. These have generally been organised by AGLM (Joshua and Barry) but there have been times when organisations specialising in "gap year" placements have been involved. Groups that came via this latter route were generally not a particularly positive experience for anyone involved and we would strongly agree with the current campaigners that many of these commercial organisations should be avoided. The likes of VSO do not send young people to volunteer in orphanages any more.

The most successful volunteers are those that made direct arrangements with AGLM and were generally providing valuable teaching support at the primary school. Time spent in Uganda and Bulabakulu has the capacity to seriously change the life of any westerner – if they go with the right attitude.

The Ugandan Government is recognising the dangers of institutions such as may be described as orphanages and encouraging all organisations caring for and educating children to ensure that they keep open family links and try to make sure that school holidays are spent "at home". AGLM and AGLMUK are very content with this policy and are completely supportive. Sometimes "home" is Bulabakulu but that is because Mum or Grandma live there.

As we hope that you have noticed through the newsletter and any talks that you might have attended, we have dedicated much of our efforts over recent years to try to get the older young people "on their feet" and living independent lives. Bulabakulu, AGLMUK and AGLM have changed a lot over the last 12 years and we don't mind admitting that some lessons have been learnt the hard way. Further change is undoubtedly needed but it needs to come at a pace at which Ugandan society can cope.