

The PLAN Without A Plan

Once upon a time, we all used to believe in “giving to charity”: there was no question that our monies could or would be deviated, misappropriated or otherwise wrongly used, because by default it was “good”, caring people who were doing this sort of work.

Thanks to the increasing corporatization of humanitarian aid, in my experience, those days are now long gone. Case in point: the tragic, recent disintegration of my donor relationship with PLAN USA, an NGO I supported for 11 years. Clearly, the individual sponsor no longer matters one whit, no matter what degree of commitment he or she has demonstrated over the years to international solidarity and cross-cultural exchange.

My story is as absurd as it is convoluted; in the interest of brevity I am summarizing it here, but anyone who wishes to know more is welcome to e-mail me at catherine.boyle68@gmail.com

In 2003 I began sponsoring “A.” [real name withheld], a young girl in Niger, through PLAN USA. When, several years later, “A.” married and had a child, my sponsorship was transferred to her daughter. Over the years a bond has developed with this family through regular correspondence, the exchange of photos and certain common elements in our lives - specifically, growing produce and raising chickens.

In 2013 I found myself in the position to sponsor a second child, “B.” [real name withheld], in China – a country that has recently become of particular interest to me as I am studying Mandarin Chinese.

In October 2014 I traveled to China to put my language skills to the test, and at the same time I made arrangements to visit “B.” The first wrinkle I encountered concerned the requisite international background check that PLAN demanded to perform: first PLAN staff told me that they “couldn’t” vet me because I am “not a U.S. person” since I live abroad (how I wish that PLAN could convince the IRS of this, so that I would not have to file a U.S. tax return every year!); then they told me that they had already vetted me, along with their other sponsors, but that it would have been “too expensive” to inform everyone of same (??); the next version of the story was that I had in fact already been vetted, but that they were under no obligation to disclose this fact to me. When, in an attempt to facilitate matters, I provided PLAN USA staff with the phone numbers of the relevant government authorities in Ireland and Italy – the two countries where I have lived for the past 11 years – judging from the confused reaction it appeared that they “couldn’t” phone them.

In the end, however, the background check got done somehow and so off I went. On the morning of October 28th, the day of the visit, two representatives of PLAN China came to my hotel and insisted that I sign two documents before we set off by car: the first was an alleged copy of PLAN's "Child Protection Policy", so poorly written in English that it actually stated the opposite of what was intended (e.g., "I will NEVER take photographs of children that are respectful and dignified"); the second was a release form requiring me to sign over to PLAN exclusive rights to any photos and/or video I took during the visit.

As an independent documentary filmmaker who has willingly volunteered her time, skills and personal finances to projects worldwide over the past 12 years (www.catherinefilms.net), the latter document was irritating, to say the least – but if I had refused to sign it, I would not have been taken to meet my sponsored child, which was the whole point of the visit.

So I said nothing and signed the release form... after which PLAN China's staff informed me that in any event I was "not allowed" to take photographs during the visit. One then wonders what the point was of having me sign such a document in the first place - ?

In the end, I was provided with a copy of the ungrammatical "Child Protection Policy" that I had signed, but refused a copy of the release form. PLAN China now apparently claim that the latter document never existed.

From that point onwards, the confusion multiplied in leaps and bounds: PLAN China claims that this is PLAN USA's no-photo policy; PLAN USA – as represented by Mr. Michael Kitay, General Counsel, who has forbidden me to speak with any PLAN employee but himself - claims that this is PLAN China's no-photo policy, and/or it is the "repressive Chinese government" that does not allow foreigners to take photographs.

Interestingly, however, an e-mail sent by one of Mr. Kitay's colleagues in the course of our discussions states that PLAN erred in not advising me in advance that I would not be allowed to take photographs... so in the end, who is actually being "repressive" here?

Moreover, one wonders where the "repressive Chinese government" was during the rest of my stay in China, as I was traveling on my own for nearly three weeks and never had any problem taking photographs, even in remote rural areas. Indeed, the only time I was ever "repressed" or otherwise restricted in China was while I was under the aegis of an American NGO – one which (perhaps coincidentally, perhaps not?) receives billions of USD per annum from USAID.

On November 13, 2014, seeing that my interactions with PLAN USA's General Counsel were not getting us closer to any sort of resolution to this situation, I informed them that I no longer wished to be a PLAN sponsor, but that in the interest of common courtesy and respect I wanted to meet my sponsored family in Niger in person and purchase them a final gift of some sort – a goat, some chickens and/or bags of rice... basically, whatever would benefit them most.

From the moment I provided PLAN with specific proposed dates for this visit, PLAN USA and PLAN Niger have hemmed and hawed and passed the buck back and forth, as a result of which I have acquired a whole new understanding of the aid industry concept of “donor fatigue.”

PLAN also have yet to reply to my registered letter to Mr. Nigel Chapman, CEO of PLAN International (UK) - dated December 17th, 2014 and signed for on December 22nd, 2014 - in which I pleaded with Mr. Chapman to receive my donation for the purchase of a goat or other appropriate gift for the family in Niger, should PLAN USA decide to block my visit.

Once again, we seem to be stuck playing the blame game: PLAN Niger claim that they can do nothing without the consent of PLAN USA (not even receive \$100 to buy a goat for a family); PLAN USA claim that they have “no control” over PLAN Niger's decisions.

When I inquired what documentation I needed to sign off on in order to visit “A.” and her family in Niger, in order to avoid another Plan China-style fiasco (which presumably would be in the interest of all parties concerned), yet again I found myself up against a brick wall of silence – especially when I asked about forms pertaining to media rights.

But I reckon that if I were to phone up PLAN USA's Estate Planning Department and offer to make them a beneficiary of my will, they would probably not hesitate to oblige...

Surely, nonsense per the above isn't what we all signed up for when we decided to “sponsor a child”? After 11 years of regular monetary contributions and ample correspondence, is this how a faithful sponsor deserves to be treated?

Most importantly of all, why is PLAN effectively punishing those whom they claim to serve – in this case, “A.” in Niger – by effectively refusing to allow me to say goodbye to them and/or to receive my monetary donation for a final gift to the family? How serious is PLAN, in actuality, about their humanitarian commitments?

Unfortunately, this PLAN doesn't seem to have much of a plan at all - at least not a long-term one, beyond pocketing cozy USAID subsidies and getting rid of awkward sponsors who actually try to inform themselves and, horror of horrors, dare to ask questions.

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