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Childreach's competitor, Save the Children, maintained in a letter to the Tribune that "child sponsorship has been the single largest source of international private philanthropic revenue for health, educational and the economic programs for poor children in the developing world" over the last 30 years, a period of "unparalleled benefits for the world's poorest children."

But the contributions of Save the Children, Childreach and other child sponsorship agencies, which total less than a billion dollars a year, are dwarfed by the $55 billion a year in official foreign aid to developing countries, as well as the resources of the Third World governments themselves. Together all private groups, including sponsorship agencies and other aid groups such as Catholic Relief Services and CARE, send $6 billion per year in aid.

Childreach. Sponsorship groups' contributions to the people they help are dwarfed by foreign aid and the countries' own resources.

Despite all the poverty and suffering that endures, the evidence shows that the developing world has become a better place.

Children in developing countries are far less likely to die than they were three and a half decades ago. More of them are educated in school, especially girls. People live much longer. And the proportion of the world's population living at the bottom of the United Nations' development scale is much lower.

Just how large a role has been played in this dramatic progress by child sponsorship groups, which have been some of the highest-profile charities active in the developing world?
Certainly, the organizations have accomplished much for residents of the Third World, but probably not as much as one child sponsorship executive claims.

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"Child sponsorship," wrote Worthington, "has underwritten some of history's most profound achievements in human quality of life."

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When the Tribune asked the organizations to support claims of having a global impact on child survival, education and longevity, they offered anecdotal accounts of improving vaccination rates, increasing the use of contraception and improving nutrition at the community level.

They could not provide evidence that conditions in countries where the sponsorship groups are working have improved much more than in other countries.

Childreach, which sponsors more than 1 million children around the world, has provided benefits to "millions of children," Worthington said. "To me, that's a major impact."

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Important as they may be, the contributions of sponsorship agencies complement those of numerous other governmental and private groups seeking to improve conditions.
Tony German, co-author of "The Reality of Aid," an annual critique of foreign aid budgets, estimates that between 8 percent and 15 percent of the industrialized world's government aid goes to basic health, education, sanitation and human needs programs, areas that are most likely to directly benefit children.

Judging from statistics compiled by the United Nations, the improvements in the developing world are indeed dramatic.

The percentage of school-age girls enrolled in primary or secondary school has risen from 38 percent in 1960 to 68 percent. Life expectancy over the same period has increased from 46 years to 62. The number of children who die before they reach age 5 has declined from 250 per thousand children to 99.

In explaining the dramatic progress, development specialists tend to credit economic growth, shifts in government policy and improved public health strategies.

Since 1960, there have been huge advances in medicine, public health and agriculture that by themselves have improved child survival, longevity and food production.

Post-colonial governments have matured, global trade has flourished, and foreign investment by multinational corporations has skyrocketed. All of these, and uncounted other factors have helped lift the fortunes of the developing world.

"I've been in the field and seen some of these (sponsorship) organizations in action," said Timothy Evans, a professor at the Harvard School of Public Health. "Some of what they do is useless, and some of it is great. They're not a trivial force."

But Morris David Morris, a Brown University professor emeritus who specializes in development and is a former Childreach board member, said the child sponsorship agencies "are very small players even in very small countries."

"It is really very arrogant to say we have had a major impact," added Morris, who does agree that the work is locally beneficial. "We work in small areas, and the macro factors have such a large impact."

Against this backdrop of many interacting forces are the child sponsorship groups, with
total annual revenues estimated at $800 million by InterAction, a Washington organization that lobbies on behalf of private relief and development charities. About $400 million comes from U.S. sponsors.

Although a significant portion of that money is used for administrative and fundraising costs rather than direct development, that still leaves hundreds of millions of dollars a year.

Some of those millions help drill water wells, build schools, buy textbooks, deliver vaccines and teach farmers and local health workers new techniques.

Childreach said that its spending in at least three countries is noteworthy compared to the foreign aid those nations receive: Colombia, where in 1994 Childreach spent the equivalent of 10 percent of that country’s foreign aid; Dominican Republic, where its spending equaled 5.3 percent of foreign aid, and Ecuador, where it amounted to 5.1 percent.

Although all three countries have substantial pockets of desperate poverty where such assistance can be put to use, they are wealthy by Third World standards and thus receive relatively little foreign aid. Among all 40 countries where Childreach was active in 1994, its spending, on average, represented less than 1 percent of foreign aid received, according to figures provided by Childreach and the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Citing cost, child sponsorship organizations generally have been reluctant to commission independent evaluations of their impact. The U.S. Agency for International Development does evaluate child survival projects the sponsorship organizations run with assistance from federal grants.

The evaluations suggest that in several projects progress is being made. For example, more babies are being vaccinated against childhood diseases and more mothers are learning to properly treat cases of diarrhea, a leading killer of infants in the developing world.

Important as they are, such contributions coincide with the priorities of numerous other governmental and private groups seeking to improve conditions.
The vaccination campaigns and similar public health initiatives of the World Health Organization and UNICEF certainly have had a major impact on the well-being of children and others in the developing world.

WHO-led campaigns have "zoomed" vaccination coverage rates against childhood diseases, especially measles, since the early 1980s, Harvard's Evans said, while noting that many private groups, including child sponsorship agencies, have played some part in delivering those vaccines to children.

Childreach’s Worthington points out that sponsorship programs have provided such assistance as fuel for the vehicles that transport health workers to distant villages, and refrigeration equipment to store vaccines. "Keeping that cold chain so you can keep that vaccine alive is part of delivering that vaccine," Worthington said.

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About this special report

Between 1992 and 1996, Americans donated more than $850 million to four of the largest and best-known child sponsorship organizations: Save the Children, the Christian Children’s Fund, Children International and Childreach. That money was sent on faith that it would reach an African village, a Pacific island or a Latin American slum and, in the language of the Christian Children's Fund, "work a miracle" in the life of the little girl or boy whose photographs and letters are the sponsor's only evidence of the child's existence. To determine whether such faith is warranted, in 1995 Tribune reporters and editors began sponsoring these 12 children through four organizations without any mention of their Tribune affiliation. Last May, with no assistance from the four sponsorship organizations, Tribune reporters set out to learn how the lives of the sponsored children had been affected. Part One of this special report recounts what the Tribune learned about two of those organizations, Save the Children and Childreach. Part Two, which appears next week, examines Children International and the Christian Children's Fund.