

UNPRECEDENTED? CHARITY'S OWN PROBE FINDS MORE DEAD CHILDREN Series: THE MIRACLE MERCHANTS. Special report. First of two parts.: [CHICAGOLAND FINAL Edition]

Save the children. After the Tribune learned a sponsored child had died, Save the Children investigated its Mali operations and found at least 24 sponsors had sent money for dead children.

When Chicago Tribune reporter Lisa Anderson discovered that Korotoumou Kone, the child she was sponsoring in Mali, had been dead nearly two years, Save the Children Federation Inc. said the error was unprecedented.

In 10 of the 24 instances uncovered by the SCF inquiry, donors were notified within 2 to 11 months after the deaths of their sponsored children. In the majority of those cases, notification was made after the Tribune told Save the Children of Korotoumou's death.

Save the children. After the Tribune learned a sponsored child had died, Save the Children investigated its Mali operations and found at least 24 sponsors had sent money for dead children.

When Chicago Tribune reporter Lisa Anderson discovered that Korotoumou Kone, the child she was sponsoring in Mali, had been dead nearly two years, Save the Children Federation Inc. said the error was unprecedented.

But after the Tribune learned that a Bellingham, Wash., family had sponsored a dead child for nearly four years before being notified of his death, SCF began an investigation of its Malian operations.

That inquiry, completed last fall, found that at least 24 sponsors had sent the charity money on behalf of dead children in Mali for varying periods of time.

SCF issued reprimands for several employees and began a wide-ranging reorganization of the way the charity monitors its sponsored children.

In 10 of the 24 instances uncovered by the SCF inquiry, donors were notified within 2 to

11 months after the deaths of their sponsored children. In the majority of those cases, notification was made after the Tribune told Save the Children of Korotoumou's death.

In another 10 cases, sponsors were not notified for at least a year after the child's death. In seven of those cases, the children had been dead for more than two years. In two cases, sponsors weren't told for as long as five years.

Four other sponsors, the Tribune reporter among them, were never notified.

The report, provided to the Tribune by Save the Children, leaves open the possibility that other sponsored children may also be dead, citing "the absence of any established governmental system of reporting deaths in Mali," and "the pervasive problem of many 'same-name' sponsored children."

Among the three SCF employees in Mali singled out for reprimands by the inquiry is the field agent responsible for tracking children in the village of Korotoumou Kone and the zone coordinator who claimed to have been unaware of her death.

A third staffer was reprimanded for writing letters from a child who was dead.

According to SCF, some of the children died from snakebites or accidents, like a fall from a tree and a plunge into a well. Other deaths were attributed to malaria, meningitis, yellow fever, respiratory troubles and hernia. One child "wasted away."

The inquiry report says Save the Children employees in Mali were negligent in notifying sponsors because the SCF staffers failed to prepare required annual status reports on the children.

The status reports, which represent the only required contact between SCF and its sponsored children, are described in the inquiry report as "akin to an annual census to insure that the sponsored child is alive, hasn't moved, married, isn't too old for continued sponsorship and is receiving program benefits."

"Very few" such reports were collected by Save the Children employees in Mali prior to 1996, the report said.

During the period covered by the report, SCF had only two field agents assigned to

monitor some 6,200 sponsored children in Mali. Another agent was hired in January 1997, but the inquiry concluded that more representatives were probably needed.

The inquiry team also blamed personnel at Save the Children's headquarters in Westport, Conn., for sloppiness in recording the sometimes difficult names of Malian children and their villages, a significant cause of errors.

But the principal responsibility was laid on the organization's sponsorship field agents in Mali, whom the report described as "poorly trained and poorly motivated" and inadequately supervised at both the regional and international levels.

The inquiry also found that SCF's Malian operations were hampered by "a confusing web of shared responsibilities which holds no one primarily accountable for ensuring that sponsorship standards are met."

Upon their return to Westport, the SCF investigators suggested that the charity explain to sponsors whose children had been dead for more than a year "the unique circumstances, making clear that their sponsorship dollars did provide benefits to other children," and to offer those sponsors refunds.

The investigators issued numerous other recommendations for improving Save the Children's field operations, including increasing the number of contacts with sponsored children and revising job descriptions for many of the charity's field personnel to clarify responsibility for producing annual status reports.

They also recommended a complete review of SCF's master records in Westport to ensure the correct matching of Malian children with sponsors, and that SCF employees in Mali concentrate on enrolling children living in more accessible locales than places such as the remote village where Korotoumou Kone lived and died.

"In many villages," the inquiry report said, "we do not have a sufficient number of sponsored children for efficient or effective sponsorship management. Sponsored children are spread out over 146 villages, with some villages having fewer than 10 sponsored children and others having as many as 50.

"In addition, we have sponsored children in remote villages that are difficult to reach in

the dry season and all-but-impossible to reach in the rainy season. Travel times to some sponsorship villages can exceed 4 hours (one way). This makes tracking of sponsored children and sponsor servicing inefficient and was a major contributing factor in the Korotoumou Kone/Lisa Anderson case."

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.

Copyright Chicago Tribune Co. Mar 15, 1998