

All children should belong to a family



Gilbert Luyima (extreme right), his siblings and his mother at their home in Nsangi. Luyima was reunited with his mother from Sozo Children International, a child care institution with support from ChildFund Uganda. PHOTO/ROLAND D. NASASIRA

ChildFund assessment established that extreme poverty was the main reason leading to family-child separation and pushing 60 per cent of the children into institutional care followed by orphanhood at 8 per cent, domestic violence, alcoholism and the need for education.

BY ROLAND D. NASASIRA

Gilbert Luyima a resident of Namalele Village, Nsangi, in Wakiso District, is one of the people whose childhood was characterised by moving from one home to another.

In 2006 aged six, he lost his father who had at the time separated with his mother.

Luyima left his stepmother's rented house where he lived with other siblings from different mothers shortly after the father's demise.

Luyima's life was unstable with him bouncing between two homes, an uncle who lived in Kawempe, and a paternal aunt who lived in Makindye. After a short period of time, Luyima's uncle took him to Mercy Home of Children in Kajjansi along Entebbe Road because he and the aunt who accommodated him became financially incapacitated.

Luyima stayed at Mercy Home of Children, until February 2012, when he joined Sozo Children International, another childcare institution.

While in senior two, in 2015, Luyima

was introduced to the idea of reunification with his mother by one of the social workers.

In 2017, Luyima was successfully reunited with his mother and other step siblings in Nsangi where she had constructed a house. The reunification process was facilitated by ChildFund Uganda and his family received a reunification package comprised of items such as a mattress, bed, foodstuffs, among other items.

"After reuniting with mum, I felt good because I missed her. Reunification was not something I quickly embraced because I was not sure of how I would be received at home especially with other children. When I talked to Mum about it, the reunification was worth it because I was warmly welcomed and now feel at home," Luyima says.

Luyima is now a law student at Uganda Christian University in his first year and after completing his studies, Luyima says he will advocate and fight for children's rights regardless of whether they belong to families or not to have equal opportunities for a brighter future.

Mr Moses Ssebagala, the director of Children Safe Uganda says most children taken to childcare institutions like Luyima are referred by the police, well-wishers and probation officers that sometimes pick them from different places such as streets.

Sadly, babies as old as one day are also referred to childcare institutions. "These are neglected children who are homeless at a time of going to childcare institutions. Some of them are dumped at garbage sites and water trenches," Mr Ssebagala says.

He recalls a time when a baby of approximately seven months was dropped in a trench during the rain. It was almost being washed away by rainwater but as a security guard in the neighbourhood walked by, they heard a baby crying and took it to Children Safe Uganda.

Ms Joanitah Mukalazi Nalwoga, the acting senior probation and social welfare officer for Wakiso District Local Government, says the government introduced the alternative care aspect that accommodates the continuum of care that looks at family, kinship, the community where the child has been staying and fostering.

"Most parents do not abandon their children because they want to. Some do so because they cannot afford to take care of them. We try to identify these gaps through case conferences and find a way of supporting them," Ms Nalwoga says.

Neglecting parental duties

Mr Moses Otai, the country director of ChildFund Uganda, says parents have neglected their responsibilities to ensure that children welfare is at the core of everything they do.

"Our role as Non-government Organisations (NGO) is to compliment what government is doing. What NGOs do is step in and identify gaps in addressing children's rights. We work with local governments to ensure that access

to services for children and for child wellbeing are easily accessible by the parents, the children themselves and putting up structures that support children in places such as schools and healthcare," Mr Otai says.

According to Ms Dorah Musiimire, a child protection specialist at ChildFund Uganda, between 2014 and 2017, ChildFund Uganda established a strong footprint in strengthening alternative care systems through implementing the Deinstitutionalisation of Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Uganda (DOVCU) Project.

It was aimed at keeping and reintegrating children into the care of families. This project was done in a consortium with other organisations.

Together, the DOVCU project partners delivered an integrated package of interventions with the aim of decreasing household vulnerabilities for households at risk of child separation, and households with children reintegrating from childcare institutions.

The project also aimed to strengthen the institutional capacities of government and other key stakeholders to operationalise the alternative care framework and strive for family-based care for all children. The project activities were implemented in 12 districts around Uganda.

Between November 2015, and June 2018, ChildFund Uganda, as part of a consortium implemented the Economic Strengthening to keep and Reintegrate Children into Families (ESFAM) project in Uganda in Gulu, Kamuli and Luwero District.

The ESFAM project tested the idea that effective economic strengthening interventions delivered at household and child levels, integrated with social services, would reduce the effects of the primary drivers of unnecessary child separation (poverty and lack of access to education). ChildFund assessment established that extreme poverty was the main reason leading to family-child

separation and pushing 60 per cent of the children into institutional care followed by orphanhood at 8 per cent, domestic violence, alcoholism and the need for education.

At the inception of ChildFund response in 2014, it was estimated that about 50,000 children were living in about 500-800 children's homes in Uganda.

Successes

ChildFund Uganda has supported government to assess and monitor 160 childcare institutions to date in addition to strengthening the capacities of the social welfare workforce on safe practices for deinstitutionalization and gatekeeping.

The project interventions led to reunification of 1932 children with biological families and foster parents since 2016 to date and 1,150 children were prevented from admission into the residential care institutions because of the Alternative Care training.

From 2019 to early 2020, ChildFund Uganda continued to support alternative care efforts through the Support to Child Care Reforms Project to sustain gains from DOVCU and ESFAM projects in hotspot districts of Wakiso and Kampala for institutionalised care.

Challenges in addressing children welfare

As a local government that takes care of children welfare, Ms Nalwoga decries of limited funding to the Alternative Care interventions. Also, some of the parents who abandon their children are not willing to be reunited with them.

National statistics

According to the 2012 Housing and Population census, the population of children was 56 per cent translating to about 24,640,000 children in the country. The Report further indicates that orphans and other vulnerable children are 8%, which translates to about 1,971,000 children. However, the current number of children under any form of alternative care is not known.

Sources from the Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development revealed that the National Alternative Care Framework was reviewed and formulated the regulatory impact assessment and the National Action Plan. These are soon to be presented to Cabinet for review and considered for approval. The National Alternative Care Framework provides for family preservation, Kinship Care, Guardianship, Foster Care, Residential Care, Independent Supervised living, local adoption and inter country adoption in exceptional circumstances. The ministry appeals to communities, where children cannot stay with biological families, that the extended family system or kinship should be promoted.

This is because, the kinship care option is indigenous, family based, cheap and sustainable in all the communities in Uganda.

According to Mr Otai, government, CSOs and communities need to work together to strengthen parenting mechanisms, intervene and support where there are signs of potential family separation in order to keep children in families.

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