

Policy Brief

Synthesising research evidence to inform decision making



The
University
Of
Sheffield.

Reuniting Abandoned Children with their Extended Family in Kampala, Uganda: Recommendations for Practitioners and Policy Makers

Summary: There are currently over 50,000 children in childcare institutions in Uganda. An estimated 82% of these children have been abandoned, and the majority have traceable family members. An exploration of local attitudes provides an insight into how the extended family can be supported in looking after abandoned children. This policy brief is based on research carried out in three slum communities in Kampala, Uganda, and reflects community attitudes towards reuniting abandoned children with their families.

Key Points

- 82% of children in childcare institutions in Uganda have been abandoned, 85% of these children have traceable family members
- Orphanages have been presented as the most suitable option for abandoned children, however these can be damaging
- Reuniting abandoned children with extended families is considered the best approach by local communities
- Extended families are seen as facing barriers to raising children, such as lacking resources or being overstretched

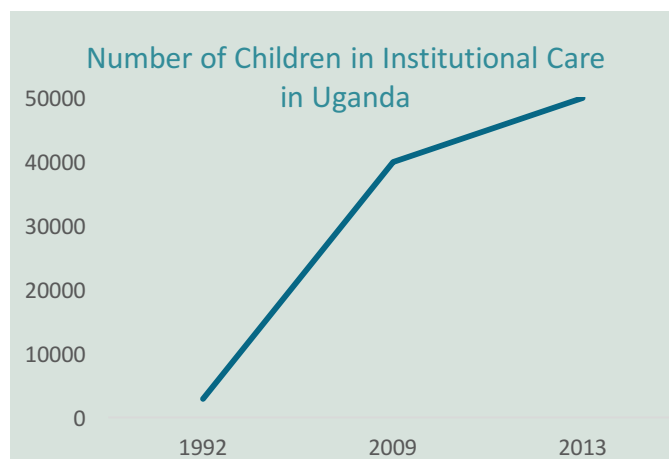
What is the issue?

There has recently been a surge in the number of childcare institutions in Uganda, with estimates now putting the number over 800. This trend has been influenced by the outcry of an 'orphan crisis' in Uganda, however investigation from the government shows that the majority of children in institutional care have **traceable family members**. The government of Uganda has shown its support for reunification, however the number of abandoned children in childcare institutions is still increasing.

What is Reunification? Reunification is the process of reuniting abandoned children with their parents. When this is not possible, children can be reunited with their extended family, or other members of the local community through **national adoption**.

Why is this important? Studies show that growing up in institutional care can be damaging for a child's emotional, physical, and cognitive development. The potential profit that can be made from **intercountry adoption** also harbours corrupt practices, making institutional care even

more harmful for children. The extended family is a traditional care mechanism in Uganda, however this is often overlooked in humanitarian interventions. International interventions often prioritise Western values, overlooking the potential role of the community/extended family.



What is the evidence?

The evidence for recommendations within this policy brief are based on research conducted over six weeks in three slums communities: Katanga, Kivulu, and Namuwongo, in Katanga, Uganda. Interviews were conducted with 18 community members in order to gain an insight into local perspectives on issues surrounding abandonment.

Causes of abandonment – Community members thought abandonment had two main causes: lack of resources such as food and income, and instabilities in the relationship of the parents.

Extended families – Extended families were considered to be important in raising children, providing much needed support to families who were struggling. However, barriers such as lacking resources or being overstretched were seen to limit their ability to look after other people's children.



EWAFE
PROJECT

Reuniting Abandoned Children with their Extended Family in Kampala, Uganda: Recommendations for Practitioners and Policy Makers

Reunification – Reunification was viewed positively in that it provides much needed emotional support for children and strengthens family connections. Childcare institutions were viewed negatively as they harbour corrupt practices and little is known about the outcome of the children. There were concerns over parents abusing the services provided at orphanages.

Conclusions

As opposed to their presentation to the international audience as the most appropriate solution for abandoned children, childcare institutions were on the whole viewed negatively within the local communities engaged with in this research. The extended family was considered to play an important role in raising children, however barriers such as overstretching limited their capacity in realising this potential role. The research therefore shows that greater community engagement should be carried out when designing interventions in order to determine where family support is needed.

What should be done?

Discussions with community members in Kampala indicate that organisations should have a holistic approach that not only considers the situation of the child, but assesses the need of the family as a whole. This has the potential to both help prevent separation in the first place, but also to support families who are reunited with their children.

Support Families to Stay Together:

Thorough assessment of the **situation of families** should be conducted in areas in which NGOs operate. This will help identify vulnerable families before children are abandoned and provide support where necessary in order to reduce the risk of abandonment occurring in the first place. Some areas to consider during this assessment include the family's access to resources, such as food, income, clothing, and shelter.

Another factor to consider would be whether the parents are together and in a stable relationship.

Work Towards Deinstitutionalization:

Organisations that currently do not have a reunification programme should immediately work towards developing a **reunification programme**. Community engagement, such as that carried out in this research, should be undertaken to assess the capacity of extended families to look after children that are currently being raised in childcare institutions, and efforts should be made to help the quick transition of these children back into family-based settings.

Strengthen Extended Family Network:

Connections with the extended family should be **supported and strengthened**. The extended family are a potentially vital resource to help raising children. Organisations should therefore encourage parents to utilise this resource, and engage with families to encourage joint efforts in raising children. This is another factor that could help prevent abandonment. Potential barriers faced by extended families included overstretching and lacking resources, these are therefore key areas that should be supported by organisations working within the arena of child welfare.

Support Families During Reunification:

Families should be continually supported after reunification. This includes assessing the capacity of the extended family before reunification, as outlined in the previous recommendation, and evaluating **where support should be directed**. Continually assessing the capacity of the extended family and providing support after reunification will increase the likelihood of success of the reunification process.

Sources & More Information:

Cheney, K. E. (2012). Killing them softly? Using children's rights to empower Africa's orphans and vulnerable children. International MoGLSD. (2012). *Baseline Study: The State of Institutional Care in Uganda*. Kampala: MoGLSD. Social Work, 56(1), 92-102.
Alternative Care Framework www.alternative-care-uganda.org/
Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children
<http://www.bettercarenetwork.org/>

