THEME: CULTURE AND CARE

TOPIC: THE ROLE OF THE EXTENDED FAMILY CARE

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By

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Abstract

The Critical Review Paper (2010) informs that over 90% of OVCs are given care by the extended family system. This demonstrates and appreciates that the extended family care, a form of informal alternative care, in child and youth care, is the most suitable form of alternative care. This explains its growing popularity. The paper therefore demonstrates the suitability of this culture-based form of alternative care for children and youth in need of care and protection among communities, in comparison with orphanages or juveniles, among other categories of formal care.

The paper underscores Suitability of Extended Family Care over Children's Homes in depicting the current situation of the Kenyan child, dependency and child care dilemma, the role of the county governments in CYC work, explores ways of transforming government children services and, the importance and need for professionalizing child and youth care work.

The demonstrated argument is that the extended family has more advantages than disadvantages in providing care to children and youths in need of care and protection, compared to care other alternative models give and its advantages. It is the best form of care that guarantees almost 100% that the vulnerable child or youth will not lose their kinship ties, inheritance including land, and get into marriage quagmires that may be tabooed. In addition, the statistics confirm, it is both the most preferred and the most commonly available form of alternative care in Africa in particular, and the most of the developing world (*see* Loening-Voysey and Wilson (2001: 25). In Bondo Sub-county, Kenya for example, studies among others, Nyambedha et al. (2003; 2006) show that in some orphanages, children ran back to their kinsmen citing a number of sinister experiences including high rate of sexual abuse and alienation from family environment. The paper concludes that the extended family or community care is one of the best if not the best form of alternative care particularly because it is the most common and quite compatible with most cultures, and provides the child or the youth with the ideal socio-cultural institution to acquire values and opportunities for good growth and development. The paper recommends that family-centered care initiatives be encouraged to preserve or/and strengthen the ability of

extended families to absorb and effectively care for OVCs and the youth. Governments and the donor community redouble their efforts to sustainably increase its capacity so as to improve the quality of life of the children in these households, both biological and fostered.

Introduction

Structure of extended Family

In a typical Luo family in Kenya the traditional extended family refers to kinship network of social and economical ties composed of the nuclear family (parent and children) plus uncles, aunties and their families and grandparents both paternal and maternal. In an African setting the extended family is the most important source of support for orphans, as they know where the child's roots are and what the habits of the child's family were. In the traditional African society, the extended family members usually stayed nearby the family of the child/youth, and extended family members were known to each other.(Ayieko. M.A)

This paper demonstrates the suitability of the extended family care as the best approach to providing care to children and youth. It comparatively underscores that the extended family care is more suitable for child care and the youth than orphanages or juveniles, among other categories of alternative care. Its central thesis is that the extended family has more advantages than disadvantages in providing care to the child, orphaned or vulnerable and the youth, compared to care that orphanages can give and its advantages. Statistics confirm, it is both the most preferred and the most commonly available form of alternative care in Africa in particular, and the most of the developing world (Nyambedha et al., 2003; Loening-Voysey and Wilson (2001). The argument relies on empirical facts drawn from various studies and cultural traditions of communities in Kenya, particularly among the Luo peoples of Western Kenya Region.

Among the Luo, children were considered to belong to the entire community and socialization was its responsibility (Nyambedha et al., 2003; Kayongo-Male and Onyango 1991:19). In the same way, so was it the community's responsibility to support the children. The widows were supported to help children grow up within the extended family system where the corporate kin would have the opportunity to continue socializing the children according to their way of life. The paper in the subsequent section, demonstrates the suitability of this form of alternative care even today over the formal forms especially children's homes, and its compatibility with local cultures and its continuing popularity.

Suitability of Extended Family Care over Children's Homes

As the child and the youth are taken care of within the extended family set-up, his or her kinship ties with the family and the community is not interfered with, rather is maintained and

strengthened. In addition, chances of their being disinherited are as low as zero, as opposed to their chances of losing their land and other kinds of inheritance when they seek care in children's homes, despite land being an ancestral right. Marriage is an important rite of passage among the Luo just like other African cultures. The constitution of Kenya also recognizes the family as the basic unit of society so its elevation as fundamental institution.

African cultures value marriage and for biological precautions, and as a value carefully observed in society, incest and marriage with blood relatives is tabooed. One best way the Luo community uses to ensure such deadly event do not result is by ensuring the child and the youth grow in the family set-up guided by some traditional norms and values, whose violation can lead to untold consequences including death, is to bring them up as true relatives: brother, sister, son, daughter, niece, nephew, aunt, uncle, grandchild… In fact, among the Luo, titles like 'cousin, aunt, step-brother etc. do not exist as such but cousins are as good as brothers, to their uncles and aunts, they are children just as the uncle or aunt is as good as referred to as parent. Despite a few problems here and there, even the children and the youth feel more at home when they are in the community than when they are segregated and alienated in the formal alternative care systems. In Bondo Sub-county, Kenya for example, studies among others, Nyambedha et al. (2003; 2006) show that in some orphanages, children ran back to their kinsmen citing a number of sinister experiences including high rate of sexual abuse and alienation from family environment.

However, a number of challenges have confronted the community care system, thus changes in kin-based support systems. These include among other general poverty in the community thus the need for the government and non-state actors to intervene, not to undermine the institution, but to strengthen it.

The Kenyan child and youth could be quite vulnerable than the extended family can single handedly account for. The next section depicts the Kenyan child by evaluating their vulnerability and demonstrates that the extended family is the most needed form of alternative care for such groups of society.

The Kenyan Orphan and Vulnerable Child: Care Preference and the Challenges

It must be noted that today, socio-economic problems have left the Kenyan orphaned and vulnerable child with many uncertainties, some being beyond the extended family to contend with single-hand, particularly at this time when HIV/AIDS is ravaging communities. In some cases, there are indications of continuity in the people's attitudes and value system with regard to support for vulnerable members and that the indigenous kin-based institutions attempt to provide support for vulnerable members. There is, however, also much to indicate that the kinship system, which rests on the extended family network, has changed because of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and other forces that can be traced back in history to the beginning of colonial influence (Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo 1989). There are now great numbers of children and youth suffering from HIV/AIDS, and there have been occasions of prolonged illness and

eventual death of young adults due to the HIV/AIDS epidemic (UNICEF 2012). The extended family has had to cope with the increasing need for support.

Within the community care set-up, due to their hierarchy within the family set-up, children can easily move to stay elsewhere if that can enable them to access assistance. In other cases, orphaned children have declined to stay in foster homes and prefer being assisted within their deceased parents' homesteads. Some of them cite problems of being exploited and having little time for studies. Children have deployed their agency in negotiating for assistance through their own local connections and found ways of dealing with their situation.

The burgeoning rise of the vice of dependency and care in Kenya is catastrophically downplaying the utility of children homes and its meaning. In Kenya, the child, both with parents and orphaned has been misused by the parent and guardian despite not being vulnerable.

In communities where orphanages are being established, some members of the community for example in Ulamba, Siaya County, had demanded that their children be accorded status in an orphanage in the community. In Nyando and Muhoroni, influential people have confronted orphanages to accommodate children who are neither orphans nor vulnerable, defeating the purpose of children's homes, giving justification for the extended family set-up, where it would be crazy for one to go and impose a 'normal' child on another family.

The Role of Government: National and County

Good for a fact, the Constitution of Kenya (2010) makes it mandatory for both levels of government to ensure, in line with the United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child, that the government must ensure they guarantee and protect the child from all forms of discrimination, perceived or real and ensure they are provided for as adequately as the state can afford, by right, not by choice. The Government of Kenya has therefore created (even prior to the promulgation of the new constitution) ministry/department to deal with children's affairs, replicated by way of deconcentration to the most local level (ward), and through the county government, devolved the function so that the child's well-being and interests are guaranteed. Indeed, event at police station, the government has operationalized a department to deal with children's issues. This has become useful to children facing a number challenges including domestic violence but they have done little on orphans and the youth. However, despite the role of government in providing education, medical care, economic wellbeing, food and nutrition, much as the government has made primary education free and much as the county governments are trying to create and expand kindergarten education and youth polytechnics, a lot more, yet, they are to do to ensure equitable access to such by orphans and vulnerable children and the youth. The Government does not play its role well in providing psycho-social support, a role they have left to the voluntary organizations whose support the government has not properly supplemented commensurably.

Recently, in Kenya, through the telecommunication network, it was revealed that some parents abandon their children due to socio-economic hardships the government has failed to address. Some parents, due to such challenges, have even sought to sell off their children for as low as Kshs. 200,000. The government, it means, has a big role to play, for example instead of victimizing such parents, should create regimes to allow such parents to surrender the children to the custody chosen by the community and supported by the government.

The government also, does not have an institution for training child care workers, a big gap in the society, to the extent that some of the care workers are themselves ignorant despite the passion to help. However, this paper appeals to the government non-state actors to move with speed and train child care workers as elaborated in the next section.

Professionalizing Child and Youth Care Work

It need not be mentioned that child and youth care workers need to be equipped with professional knowledge and skills to build their capacities in executing their call. In Kenya, most care workers particularly those in the community, the *kins*, are not trained thus the ignorance that mars their efforts. Best practices can be lifted from Zambia where child and youth care workers must undergo a mandatory training certified by the government before they can engage in child and youth care work. This ensures that they are aware of the international, national and local regimes and institutions that safeguard, uphold and defend children and the youth. The advantage to the care workers is that it makes them professionals in their work and expands their employability which is a motivational factor in care work. In this case, community home visitors would be trained on the various tools such BQCC for an example. In addition, the community home visitors, once trained, would backstop the same in the community.

Conclusion

The paper concludes that the extended family or community care is one of the best if not the best form of alternative care. It is the most common and quite compatible with most cultures, and provides the child or the youth with the ideal socio-cultural institution to acquire values and opportunities for good growth and development. The government has constitutional and legal frameworks for protecting the Kenyan child but these have not been properly explored, thus the Kenyan orphan and vulnerable child still experiences a number of challenges. The government also, does not have an institution for training child care workers, a big gap in the society, yet this is an issue area that requires absolute professionalism.

The paper therefore makes the following recommendations with the aim of emphasizing preference for the community care:

1.   The Governments and non-state actors need to reinvent and strengthen the capacity of the extended family in its efforts to provide care to children and the youth;

2.   The Governments must ensure that able parents who neglect their children are compelled to take responsibility to deal with dependency menace;

3.   The non-state actors to pressurize governments or partner with them to professionalize child care work;

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