

## **RE-INTEGRATION OF INSTITUTIONALISED CHILDREN INTO SOCIETY: A CASE STUDY OF ZIMBABWE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The study examined the successes and challenges that Zimbabwe has experienced in process of reintegration of institutionalized children into society. The study was informed by the mixed methods research design. The sample comprised of nine randomly selected children's homes out of a total of seventy two registered children's homes in the country. Considerable progress has been made towards achieving the goal of reintegration. The study established that a National child Care Standards document has been drafted by the Ministry of Labour and Social services to facilitate the process of reintegration ,while most institutions have built family type structures to replace the dormitory set up that existed before. Support systems to enhance the process of reintegration have been put in place as evidenced by organs such the National Action Plan housed under the Ministry of Labour and Social Services. The main challenges identified by the study were inadequate financial resources to carry a full scale reintegration process and the difficulties experienced in identifying institutionalized children's familial origins. The study recommends that government avails more funds through the department of social services to enhance the reintegration process.

### **INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

Traditionally child care in Zimbabwe was the preserve of the nuclear family, extended family, clans and communities. The social set-up has since changed and an increasing number of children are unable to grow up in the above mentioned institutions, thus necessitating 'out-of-home' care in the form of children's homes,(Ministry of Labour and Social Services Zimbabwe 2010). The number of orphans and vulnerable children in institutions is continuously increasing. Information from Save The Children (SAVE) indicates that eight million children live in institutions worldwide, (Mulugeta, 2003). The same author notes that in Liberia for instance, the number of orphanages grew from four in 1989 to one hundred and seventeen by 2001. According to International Services and UNICEF (2004), children in residential care increased by 66% between 1998 and 2001 worldwide. In Zimbabwe institutions such as Matthew Rusike and Save Our Souls (SOS) Waterfalls in Harare, Mother of Peace in Mutoko and Manhinga children's home in Rusape house children who are orphaned or abandoned. A study by UNICEF in 2006 reveals that the number of privately funded institutional child care facilities in Zimbabwe has grown to the extent that twenty-four new child care institutions were built between 1994and 2004 and the number of children in residential care doubled.

Institutionalizing children has got some negative consequences for both individual children and for the society. Sachiti(2011) cites a research conducted by a United States based organization which shows that institutional care negatively affects child development and adult productivity. The same study shows that children in orphanages are uniquely vulnerable to the medical and psycho-social hazards of institutional care. Short term effects of institutionalization are that children risk contracting serious illnesses and developing language impairments while long term effects include children developing psychological problems like personality disorders. Sachiti (2011) further quotes Ford and Kroll (1995) who argue that examination of institutionalization reveals that even good institutions harm children, leaving teens ill-prepared for the outside world. Furthermore, a research by Save The Children (SAVE) established that institutional care often causes serious and negative impacts on the development and rights of children, (Mulungeta, 2003). The second international conference on children and residential care held in Stockholm in May 2003 came up with a declaration (The Stockholm Declaration) indicating that the negative impact of institutional care should be prevented through diminishing the use of institutions and strengthening of community based approaches such as re-integration.

The social and economic capacity and traditional coping mechanisms of homes to support institutionalized children are being challenged hence the need for re-integration. Re-integration means to restore to a condition of unity,(Crosson-Tower,1998). In the context of this paper, re-integration means that the children join their biological relatives or foster families or go to live on their own, thus facilitating the ultimate inclusion of the child into the society. The concept of re-integration is in tandem with the contents of article 18 and article 25.2a of The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the child 1999 from where the Ministry of Labour and Social Services Zimbabwe 2010 draws its mandate which recognizes that the child should grow up in a family environment,the family shall be the natural unit and basis of society and the child who is parentless or is temporarily deprived of his/her family environment shall be provided with alternative family care. On the same note Sachiti (2011) points out that children lead physically, emotionally and mentally healthier lives when surrounded by nurturing and caring adults in a family.

In Zimbabwe, the Department of Social Services in conjunction with Child Protection Society of Zimbabwe and other partners spearheaded the re-integration of children into families in all the ten provinces of country. The Department of Social Welfare relies on a government budget for its re-intergration operations. Between 2007 and 2010 a total of 801 children were re-integrated into society, (Child Protection Society of Zimbabwe, 2010). This study examines the successes and challenges that have been experienced in the process of re-integration. This will provide a basis for suggesting intervention strategies that can be utilized to facilitate future attempts of the integration process.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study was informed by the mixed methods research paradigm which integrates qualitative and quantitative approaches (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie and Turner, 2007) to achieve an in-depth and rigorous exploration of the successes and challenges of the process of re-integration of institutionalized children in Zimbabwe. The population for this study comprised of nine randomly selected children's homes out of a total of seventy-two registered homes in Zimbabwe that participated in the re-integration process, (Child Protection Society of Zimbabwe, 2011). Stratified random sampling (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2002) was used to come up with the homes to be studied in each of the major cities of Zimbabwe. This sampling technique was employed because it gave a true reflection of the successes and challenges experienced by children's homes

countrywide. Face-to-face interviews were held with the nine administrators of the institutions who were purposively sampled whilst thirty-six foster mothers who were also purposively sampled responded to a questionnaire. Ninety children who were randomly selected participated in focus group discussions. Using the interview gave researchers the latitude and the flexibility to formulate and modify questions designed to establish the truth through constant probing as the interviews unfolded, (Seale,1999). Questionnaires were considered suitable for use with foster mothers as they permitted the collection of large volumes of data within a short space of time (Fraenkel and Wallen,2002). For children focus group discussions were considered suitable because the empowered participants to gain confidence by being masked by the group hence they proffered honest answers, (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2002).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

This study which sought to examine the successes and challenges associated with re-integration of institutionalized children in Zimbabwe came up with the following findings which are presented thematically.

### **THEME1:JUSTIFICATION OF THE RE-INTEGRATION PROCESS**

Asked to justify the need for re-integration all the nine administrations of the homes pointed out that according to government policy institutional care should be the last resort. Government policy does not encourage institutionalization. This agrees with articles 18 and 25.2a of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the child (1999). Thus government encourages that all children's homes must work towards re-integration from day one that a child is institutionalized. To this effect one administrator said, "*We constantly tell the children that the home is a station, not a destination.*" The main idea is to keep the children in the community as much as possible. Therefore it is government's contention that holding on to the children at any age would be a sign of failure since the child should be part and parcel of the society. This is also emphasized by Sachiti (2011) who points out that children lead physically, emotionally and mentally healthy lives when surrounded by nurturing and caring adults in a family. Thus re-integration has become the goal of all children's foster care institutions.

### **THEME 2: THE RE-INTEGRATION PROCEDURE**

With regards to the re-integration procedure to be followed during the re-integration process all the nine administrators referred the researchers to the National Legislative and Policy Framework as drawn from Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare Services, (2010). This policy framework outlines Child Care Guidelines which adopt the six tier safety net system. The safety nets which enhance care and protection of children, are stated in the following order of priority:

- Biological nuclear family
- Extended family(kinship care)
- Community care
- Formal foster care
- Adoption
- Residential child care facility

Further, all the administrators explained the concept of the six tier safety nets system as being in line with the dictates of the National Orphan Care Policy(1999) which operates on the principle of the best interest of the child (Ministry of Labour and

Social Services, 2010). The National Action Plan (NAP) objective 7, also under the auspices of the Ministry of Labour and Social Services (2010) encourages re-integration of the child into the society through disbursement of funds. These funds are disbursed in phases. An individual care plan is prepared for each child who is ready to be re-integrated. Such a plan details the process through which a child will be assisted to return to his/her family of origin or move to another placement as explained in Section 37 of the Children's Act and National Residential Child Care Standards, (2010).

When asked during the interview how they identified homes outside the institution for the re-integration process, the interviewees responded in the following ways;

All the nine administrators indicated that Social Welfare Officers target the relatives of the children who are ready to be re-integrated. To begin with, they visit the home of the child and talk to the relatives in order to ascertain their readiness to take the child into the family. Social Welfare then makes continuous assessment until the child is finally re-united with the relatives. Follow up visits are made to make sure that the child has settled in. One administrator stated that in cases where the child's relatives are not known, family tracing is done through the chief and the headman with the help of the police. The procedures which are followed to trace the child's origin are in line with Crosson-Tower (1998)'s thinking that re-integration should be interpreted to mean to restore the child to a condition of total unity with the family and society.

Administrators of the six faith based children's homes indicated that, apart from the child's relatives they consider christian families who are willing to foster-parent the children during school holidays. In such instances, church ministers and pastors assist in the identification of such families. The administrators indicated that in identifying suitable families for re-integration ministers and pastors should consider the following factors:

- The foster-parents must be God fearing
- The family should be stable, with a stable income
- The family home should have good facilities like adequate bedrooms and toilet facilities
- The age of the foster-parent must be fifty years or below.

On further probing about why age was an important factor administrator commented, *it is part of the foster care policy*. The administrators also emphasized the point that children were not sent to just any family, as some families could opt to foster-parent children in anticipation of material benefits through the child. As a result, if any parents indicated a willingness to foster a child they would be vetted by the Social Welfare and they had to

go through the rigorous assessment that was associated with the re-integration process. In addition to the qualities cited by the administrators, Crosson-Tower (1998) also found that successful foster parents have a sincere liking for children, have a strong sense of themselves and their own abilities and are able to tolerate a variety of behaviours from children that some other families might find difficult to put up with.

All the administrators pointed out that after foster parents have finally taken in a child, Social Welfare would subsequently make random visits to ensure smooth transition from the institution to the family home. At one of the institutions the administrator indicated that they could ask anyone whom they trusted to go and assess the conditions under which the child

was living, to make sure the child was safe. Staff from the institution could also make random visits to the family home. Communication with the fosterparents could be conducted through either the telephone or through family reports. One administrator emphasized that, “*The transition period forms the basis for family reconstruction and it therefore has to be considered very important.*”

With regards to children’s readiness for re-integration all the administrations concurred that all age groups were considered for re-integration. An administrator in one of the institutions expressed the view that, “*Even babies who are a few weeks old are eligible for re-integration, depending on the circumstances surrounding the child.*” Children of all ages therefore needed to be prepared psychologically for re-integration, through development of relationships with relatives who are ready to take them back. This view echoes the sentiment expressed in the African Charter on the Rights of the Child 1999, articles 18 and 25.2a, that a child should grow up in a family environment and the family shall be the natural unit and basis of society.

To consolidate the ideas which were brought up by administrators on the procedures which are followed in the re-integration process a questionnaire was administered to foster parents who were already working in children’s homes. The responses were as follows:

**Table 1 Length in years of foster parents.**

N=36

Length of service in years	Number	Percentage
1-5	13	36.11
6-10	14	38.88
11-15	3	8.3
16-20	4	11.11
21+	2	5.5
Total	36	100

The table shows that only 5.5% of the respondents had served for more than 21 years in the institutions. The small percentage reflects the dormitory set up that existed prior to re-integration, which set up only required a matron and cleaner. Statistics for those who had served between 3 to 5 years and 6 to 10 years rose significantly from 5.5% to 36.11% and 38.88% respectively. This rise occurred during the period 1990 to 2000 when the concept of re-integration commenced. The concept of re-integration required family set ups within the homes.

In response to the item on the type of training that foster parents received, respondents indicated the following forms of training as reflected in Table 2

**Table 2: Type of training received by the foster mothers. N=36**

Type of training	Number	Percentage
Special training	1	2.77%
Certificate in Early Childhood Development	1	2.77%
Training on the job	34	94.46%
Total	36	100

These results reveal that the majority of the foster mothers are trained on the job. In response to an item on the methods used for on-the-job training the majority cited workshops and seminars. This is in line with National Residential Child Care Standards, Zimbabwe (2010) item number 3.1 which states that all staff and in particular caregivers shall be trained before taking on their responsibility of child caring. Crosson-Tower (1998) concurs with the idea that those who work with children be adequately trained both at college level and within the institution.

### **THEME 3: SUCCESSES OF THE RE-INTEGRATION PROCESS**

The study revealed that the re-integration programme has scored the following successes:

- A National Residential Child Care Standards (2010) document has been produced by the Ministry of Labour and Social Services to guide the handling of children in the re-unification process.
- Family homes have been established to replace the dormitory set up that was in existence within the institutions in readiness for re-integration process.
- Support systems to enhance the reintegration process have been put in place as evidenced by the existence of organs like the National Action Plan which is under the auspices of the Ministry of Labour and Social Services.
- More homes have now been registered as a result of the re-integration process and can now access funding from the government and NGOs.
- A budget has been allocated by the government through the Social Welfare for the re-integration process.
- Early Childhood Development centres and schools have been established within institutions to facilitate early re-integration as institutionalized children are afforded the opportunity to interact with children from the community.
- Transitional homes have been set up for children who attain the age of eighteen before they are re-integrated where they are taught life skills that will enable them to fit into society.
- Children are also re-integrated according to their potentials and are sent to high schools, universities, technical colleges and vocational training centres.
- Community programmes in the form of satellite centres have been established where orphaned and vulnerable children who reside in the community with their relatives are fed on a daily basis with the help of the community.

#### **THEME 4: CHALLENGES OF THE RE-INTEGRATION PROCESS**

Although a budget has been allocated for the reintegration process there are still challenges. Table 3 presents the challenges in rank order where 1 represents a challenge with the highest intensity and 9 represents the challenge with the least intensity.

**Table 3: Challenges being experienced in the reintegration process in rank order**

Rank	Response
1	Limited financial resources to integrate children.
2	Difficulties in identifying children's origins.
3	Negative attitudes of community members towards children from institutions.
4	Difficulties in children adjusting from urban institutions into rural homes.
5	Children who run away from their relatives and foster parents after having been re-integrated.
6	Abuse of children in the relatives' homes.
7	Language differences resulting in communication breakdown between the re-integrated children and the families.
8	Misinterpretation of rights by children.
9	Inadequate school fees and foodstuffs.

During interviews respondents emphasized the fact limited financial resources for the purposes of reintegrating children was the most serious challenge. The department of Social services operates on a budget allocated by government which may not be adequate for the process of reintegration. Another difficulty that was cited by the interviewees was the challenge they experienced in locating children's relatives. The procedure of locating the child's relatives is time consuming and has budgetary implications.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In view of the findings above the study makes the following recommendations:

- The government, through Social Welfare should avail adequate funds to aid the re-integration process.
- The community should be conscientised about the phenomenon of re-integration.
- Follow up activities by the Social Welfare should be intensified to ensure the security of the re-integrated children.
  
- Professional counseling should be part and parcel of the re-integration process.

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