

**EXPERIENCE OF JERUSALEM ASSOCIATION CHILDREN'S HOMES  
(JACH)**

**ON**

**REUNIFICATION AND REINTEGRATION (DE-  
INSTITUTIONALIZATION) OF CHILDREN**

**PAPER PRESENTED ON A WORKSHOP ORGANIZED BY THE  
NETWORK OF ORPHAN AND VULNERABLE CHILDREN**

**(ON DE-INSTITUTIONALIZATION: THE WAY TO COMMUNITY  
BASED CHILD SUPPORT PROGRAMME)**

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## 1: Introduction

Jerusalem Association Children's Home ( JACH) was established in 1984/85. The organization is humanitarian and non-governmental established with the objective of assisting those orphan children who lost/separated from their parents/relatives due to the then civil war and consequent famine. Basically children were admitted to the children's Homes from temporary feeding centres established in Wollo and Tigray areas.

The Organization had opened and run six children's Homes in different parts of the country. In the orphanages over 800 children have been assisted. Many of the children were between the age of three years and ten years during admission. The primary concern during the opening of the orphanages was provision of basic services such as shelter, feeding, health services, education etc.

In the later times, when children grown up, the need to rehabilitate them became a major concern. Until 1996 such rehabilitation activities were not conducted in a well organized way. In this regard, a six-year strategic plan was designed in 1996. In the six years strategic plan three major projects were identified and implemented. These are **Institutional childcare** (boarding services), **Reunification** of Children with their families and relatives and **Reintegration** of children with the community by enabling them to acquire certain practical skills.

Because of the implementation of the reunification and reintegration programmes the number of children in the Homes decreased and some of these Homes are closed. At this moment in time, there are only three children's Homes located in Debre Zeit, Debre Berhan and Bahir Dar. In the Homes there are 57 children receiving basic boarding services. Other 44 children are attending basic skill training at different training Centres in Addis Ababa and places where the Homes are located.

Having accumulated experience and expertise, with the gradual decrease of children in the institutions and closing of some of the Homes JACH has made a strategic shift and started working on community based childcare projects since 1996. It has such projects in Bahir Dar, Debre Berhan, Dire Dawa and is at last preparation is under way to start in Debre Zeit town.

For the implementation of the reunification and reintegration programmes different strategies/activities have been designed and implemented.

## 2 Strategies Followed for Reunification of Children with Their Families/Relatives.

To reunify children with their families/relatives the following strategies/steps are followed.

### 2.1 Information Update:

To get necessary information about children and their families all available documents including children's personal files (biography) have been consulted.

### 2.2 Guidance and Counselling:

Continuous guidance and counselling services have been provided on the objective of reunification programme both for children and staff.

### 2.3 Summer Family Visit:

Those children whose families/relatives addresses are identified from available documents have been made to go for tracing of their families/relatives during the summer vacation (it is called summer family visit). The visit has multiple objectives.

- a) Children can be acquainted with community life outside of the JACH.
- b) Families of children can be oriented and be aware of reunification of their children from the briefings they get from their children.
- c) Children can develop responsibilities in organizing and bringing appropriate information about their family situations.

### 2.4 Family Tracing and Socio-economic Survey:

Having some information from children themselves about their families/relatives, experts from the organization go for socio-economic survey of the families/relatives and also for observation of the local socio-cultural and economic environment. This is called Family Tracing and Socio-Economic Survey. In this stage of the activity, experts from local government offices, community leaders/elders and religious leaders are involved as appropriate.

### 2.5 Analysis of the Data Gathered During Family Tracing and Socio-Economic Survey:

Based on the information gathered, comments forwarded by partners involved in the survey, analyses is made up on the case of each child. Based on the analyses result, recommendations are forwarded whether a child is legible for reunification or not.

## **2.6 Consent by Children:**

The consent of children who are 16 years old and above is required in writing to be reunified with their families/relatives.

## **2.7 Child-Family Reunification:**

As indicated above a number of pre-reunification activities have been performed. One of these activities includes orientation and guidance and counselling services provided to children at Homes level. Once a child is identified as legible for reunification the actual reunification is conducted in cooperation with local concerned government offices, specially Labour and Social Affairs Offices. The families/relatives of children receive a rehabilitation fund of Etb. 2360.00 until the end of 1999 and Etb. 3600.00 since 2000 per child during actual reunification. Agreement is also signed between JACH, children's families and government representatives. The purpose of the agreement is to establish a legal ground for the relation among the reunified child, family and government for the future.

## **2.8 Follow Up:**

After reunification, there is continuous follow up. The follow up is helpful in understanding whether children are assimilating themselves with the family way of life and local socio-cultural environment and to provide guidance and counselling if there is any problem. The follow up which takes place at an interval of three months lasts for one year as an activity. But when there is a need a counselling service can be extended beyond that. The follow up and counselling services are conducted not only by JACH staff but also by experts from local concerned government offices, community and religious leaders and elders.

From 1996 to July 2002, a total of 150 children were reunified with their families/relatives.

## **3. Strategies Followed To Reintegrate Children with the Community**

The reintegration program involves enabling children of 16 years and above to become self reliant with in their community. The program bases it self on different packages most of which are skill training oriented.

Major Strategies/Activities followed in the reintegration of children are the following:

### **3.1 Guidance and Counselling:**

A series of guidance and counselling sessions are conducted to prepare children and staff for the implementation of the program.

### **3.2 Assessment of reintegration schemes:**

Youngsters themselves with the support of the organization conduct a study by which they shall become self reliant in the future. The study usually includes assessment of training opportunities and the demand for the skills in the market. Consecutively those youngsters who are interested to start life through the different reintegration schemes present training or trade proposal based on their inclination.

### **3.3 Evaluation of the assessment:**

The proposal submitted by the youngster is evaluated by a trust fund committee established at each Home. The committee analyses whether the training scheme or the proposed petty trade is appropriate and feasible in terms of cost, duration, marketability, etc.

### **3.4 Approval of the proposal:**

Based on the recommendation by the trust fund committee, the management at each Home approves the proposal and consequently youngster/s engage in the training.

### **3.5 Sponsorship:**

Based on the agreement reached with the trainer the organization sponsors a trainee child and pays training fee. The organization also pays living allowance for the trainee while he/she is on training.

### **3.6 Legality:**

Training agreement is signed between the trainee and the organization as well as between the sponsor (JACH) and trainer using two formats with different contents.

### **3.7 Follow up, Guidance and Counselling:**

During training, experts from the organization attentively follow up the trainee and the trainer. This is to ensure whether the training is performed as per the agreement and also to know that the trainee takes the courses seriously. Trainees are also provided with guidance and counselling services while they are on training beyond the material and financial support they receive.

### **3.8 Termination:**

Once the training is successfully completed and the trainee is awarded with legal certificate/diploma, the organization pays a rehabilitation fund and signs a termination agreement with the youngster which shows that he/she starts to lead an independent life.

### **3.9 Support beyond the termination:**

The support in the form of advise continues until the youngster assures him/her self that he/she does no longer need any assistance from the organization. In some cases employment opportunities are assessed by the Organization and many youngsters benefited out of such assistance.

From 1996 until July 2002, 477 children have left the JACH Homes by involving themselves in different reintegration schemes.

Major schemes in which children trained and started their own independent life include:

- Metal works and Auto-Mechanics
- Higher education
- Apprenticeship at different fields (garage works, binding, woodwork, etc)
- Agricultural training
- Cookery and Catering
- Hair making and Cosmetology
- Sewing and Embroidery
- Special training for the disabled (woodwork, leatherwork, sewing and embroidery)
- Typing
- Small business (as one of reintegration schemes)

#### **4 Problems in the Process of Reunification and Reintegration**

#### **4.1 Problems encountered so far in the Reunification and Reintegration Process of the Children**

The major problems in the process of children reunification are the following.

##### **4.1.1 Incomplete personal information for most of the children:**

Since many of the children were collected from temporary feeding centres of the CDPP (RRC by then) during the drought time, most of them had no complete information on their family background. Although very few of them had some information they were not complete.

##### **4.1.2 Resistance by Children, Staff and Families:**

Children resist to accept reunification with their families. The resistance is observed specially by those children whose families are residing in rural areas. Families of this group of children are interested to accept their children. Contrary to this, those children whose families are residing in towns are less resistant to be reunified where as their families are less interested to accept their children compared to families in rural areas. During the first year of implementation period, some project staff (support staff) resisted the project due to their feeling of job insecurity.

##### **4.1.3 Poor Socio-Economic Capacity of Families to Accept their Children:**

A significant number of families who were traced during the socio-economic surveys were not capable to receive their children. This is due to the recurrent drought that affected many areas in the North.

##### **4.1.4 The Ethio-Eritrea war:**

The boarder conflict that persisted for three years (1998- 2000) had also calmed the reunification programme for sometime especially in Tigary area.

##### **4.1.5 Discrepancy between The Original and Present Names of Children:**

Many children have got another name from the original name they got during their childhood. This has brought difficulties during family tracing work.

##### **4.1.6 Non Acceptance of Parents:**

Few parents resisted to accept their children. They become suspicious to accept for many reasons. One of the main reasons is that some parents might have already concluded that the child is already dead. Others tried to know about the whereabouts of their children and lost their hope. Hence accepting the current reality became a challenge to them.

#### **4.1.7 Drought and Family income Limitation:**

The recurrent drought and consequent family income limitation becomes an obstacle for reunification though families are interested to accept their children.

#### **4.1.8 Geographic Inaccessibility:**

Families/relatives of some children are in remote areas where it is not accessible and are with limited or no social services and economic infrastructures.

#### **4.1.9 Problem of Adaptability to Local Environment After Reunification:**

Some children have faced problems to adapt themselves to their family and local socio-cultural environment after they are reunified. Few of them run away from their homes where they are reunified and sometimes come back to the locality where they were brought up in the Homes.

#### **4.1.10 Limited Experience of JACH:**

When JACH started reunification of children with their families, there was very limited experience in the country from which the Organization can learn. It started implementing the reunification activities with very little knowledge. Until it learned from experience, the organization has had some limitations as to how to go about it and implement the program. Major limitations could be cited as, inadequate knowledge about the specific locations of children's families/relatives, less experience in cost estimation to undertake the whole process of child-family reunification, existence of inadequate database about each child, etc.

#### **4.1.11 Is Cost Intensive:**

It requires to mobilize huge financial, material, manpower and logistics resources. The need to mobilize such huge resources has brought burden on the Organization's resources utilization.

### **4.2 Major problems Encountered During Reintegration of Youngsters Include:**

#### **4.2.1 Resistance by Children and Staff:**

Similar to that of the reunification programme, in the implementation of the reintegration programme there was resistance both from children and Homes staff. Resistance among children is emanated from dependency syndrome they developed and filing of insecurity when they start to live in the community. Similarly the resistance from the staff is due to their feeling for job insecurity. Such feeling was developed specially among the support staff.

#### **4.2.2 Limited skill training opportunities which fit to the capacity of children:**

Until recently there was no many and diversified training opportunity to youngsters where they can acquire basic skill training. Many of the existing training centres are not accredited by authorized government bodies.



#### **4.2.3 Problem in job security:**

After acquiring basic skills, youngsters are facing problems in securing job. This is due to scarcity of job opportunities and feeling of dependency syndrome on JACH to search jobs for them.

#### **4.2.4 Problem in self Decision Making:**

Children usually incline towards few training types to which some other children have joined earlier. They sometimes blindly decide to join such types of training, whereas their capacity does not allow them to compete for such trainings.

#### **4.2.5 Financial constraint:**

Every training is expensive. To afford cost of training which includes training fee, living allowance, medical expense, clothing, rehabilitation fund and other operating costs, the organization has passed through recurrent financial constraint.

#### **4.2.6 Problem of Environmental Adaptation After Completing Training:**

The grown up youngsters had problems in adapting themselves to the societal norms and values. This emanated from two sides. One, the youngsters themselves have passed through inadequate socialization process since they are brought up in Children's Homes. And two, the community sometimes labels the youngsters as if they are different people. The youngsters also do not trust the community as if it does not care for them. This develops suspicion on one upon another. As the result, some youngsters frequently move from one place to another and shift from one job to the other.

#### **4.2.7 Problems in Relation to Children With Physical and Mental Disabilities:**

JACH has been serving for 28 children with mental and physical disabilities in its Homes. This group of children have not benefited from the reunification programme since all of them unfortunately have no relatives who are capable of taking care of them in the future. In Ethiopia there are very few specialized centre where such group of people can be trained and rehabilitated on the basis of their limited capacity. The attitude of the community towards the disabled and to accept this group with their capacities and limitations as its member is very minimal even if they can be trained and are capable of becoming productive citizens. This worsens the problem to reintegrate children with disabilities.

## **5 Strategies Designed and Actions Exercised to Alleviate the Problems Mentioned Above in the Implementation of Reunification and Reintegration Programmes**

### **5.1 Reunification**

#### **5.1.1 Information Update:**

To strengthen and update personal information of children, in addition to what is available in their personal files, interviews and continuous discussions were conducted with children themselves to retrieve what ever they have registered in their mind during their childhood about the place of birth, names of their parents and other relatives, etc. Older children provide important information about the younger children specially if they are coming from the same area.

#### **5.1.2 Public Announcement:**

Community meetings and market days have been used as a means for announcement and disseminating information in search of the whereabouts of children's families and relatives. This strategy has minimized travel to each and every small district for family tracing which is very costly in terms of finance, time and manpower.

#### **5.1.3 Children as a Means for Information Gathering:**

Some children who have identified their families and go for vacation have been also given a mission of gathering information about the whereabouts of their friends' families whose addresses are not yet traced. Through this means families of many children were identified.

#### **5.1.4 Development of Dynamic Thinking among the staff and Self Determination Among Children:**

To minimize the resistance by staff and children on the implementation of reunification and reintegration programmes, continuous orientation for staff and guidance and counselling for children have been provided. The orientation for the staff focuses on building dynamic thinking and put the needs of vulnerable children who are grown up at their hands as a priority in their mind and work for the success of reunification and reintegration programmes.

Intensive guidance and counselling services on self decision making and life skill experience/assertiveness have been given to children. Moreover, children are exposed to practical community life through the vacation visit scheduled for children who have got families/relatives and excursion tour to those who have not yet identified their families/relatives to visit different places in the country.

#### **5.1.5 Community Life Animation:**

Before children go back to the community, they acquire practical skills in agriculture and other small business activities, including financial management. This is done to animate a real community living in the home compound. Children work as a farmer, seller, buyer, herdsman, etc. This is done with the intention that the skill they acquire can help them to adapt community life easily and to become productive and skill disseminator to the rural farmers since most of them are originated from the rural community and are expected to resettle in rural areas. Their knowledge on basic financial management also intended to help children to guide their families to invest the rehabilitation fund on income generating activities to improve family livelihood, which in turn is expected to bring about sustainable economic empowerment at the family level.

#### **5.1.6 Post Settlement Emotional Support:**

Until a reunified child and reintegrated youngster proves for being able to be adjust himself/herself to the local community setting, follow up activities are performed using different mechanisms to support them in their emotional stability. A team of social workers from the JACH makes tours to different places to provide post reunification and reintegration guidance and counselling services both to the reunified children and reintegrated youngsters, families and community members. Information exchange on the situation and status of reunified and reintegrated child have been done through letters, telephone and other communication means with families and local government authorities. The local government authorities and community elders have played vital role in assisting children to adjust themselves to the community life. In few cases **Re-reunification** of children was done for the second time. This is to mean that a child is reunified again after he/she run away. The child is re-traced and taken back to his/her family again.

### **5.1.7 JACH Develops its Own Expertise:**

After coming across with many difficulties in the practical implementation of the reunification and reintegration programmes, the JACH is acquiring more experience and becoming more professional in implementing the programmes. It continuously monitors and evaluates the outcomes and revises its implementation strategies timely and act accordingly.

### **5.1.8 Donor Base Diversification:**

To overcome financial constraints, diversification of a donor base abroad and due emphasis to local fund source are the best strategies utilized by JACH.

### **5.1.9 Proving Disability Does not mean Being Dependent on Others:**

The final destination of children with some disabilities is to live in the community. The Organization has exerted its maximum effort to find appropriate sort of training to enable this group of children to acquire basic skills. A needs assessment research was done and the capacity and potentialities of each child with disabilities has been identified.

In addition, thorough assessment was conducted to identify appropriate fields and places of training. There are very few organizations who have such special facilities and can offer training in marketable skills to this group of children.

Eighteen children of this group have joined skill training in the identified training centres. Few of them have already completed their training and started to live within the community. To minimize the challenges these children will probably face when they start to settle in the community, life skill training is provided. They are also starting to experience independent life by living with the community while they are on training. Areas of focus in training of this group of children include training on playing musical instruments, leather work, wood work, sewing and embroidery, hair making and cosmetology. Some of these children have already secured their means of living and proved that they are productive and not dependent.

## **6 Lessons Drawn from De-institutionalisation Processes of JACH Homes.**

- 6.1 Making children and families to know each other through summer family visit before actual reunification is advantageous.
- 6.2 Direct participation of children in all stages of reunification and reintegration processes is important for sustainability.
- 6.3 While children are in Homes, enabling them to attend their education in community schools, participate in religious, cultural, sport and other social events, is very advantageous to facilitate latter reunification and reintegration activities.
- 6.4 Children make a small community/identity while they are in Children's Homes. When they go out, they need to be together. To encourage them to make a net work/ association after they go into the community can help them to share their common values, problems and can help them develop confidence and feel a sense of belongingness.
- 6.5 Thorough socio-economic assessment at family level with the participation of families, community members and local government authorities creates strong foundation for reunification and stability of children in the community after they are reunified.
- 6.6 Direct involvement of children in assessment of training opportunities, and other decision making on matters which concern them help youngsters to become more committed and responsible for their training.
- 6.7 The De-institutionalisation process has shown that, the more children stay in institutional life the greater the chance of getting detached from the real community life style. This creates dependency syndrome which in turn makes the reunification and reintegration programmes painstaking.
- 6.8 The JACH is learning from this reality that institutional care should not be considered as the best option for the care of disadvantaged children. It should be taken as the last option and children should stay for as short time possible in institutions until they are reintegrated into the community.
- 6.9 Institutional childcare should be discouraged.

- 6.10 The more children stay in institutions, the more they prefer to live by their own instead of rejoining to their family/relatives. This is an indication of loss of family love and affection.
- 6.11 When required to establish Children's Homes every arrangement needs to be organized to establish a database of each child which in turn will help in the process of reunification and reintegration schemes.
- 6.12 The life in Children's Homes should not be far away from the real community life style.
- 6.13 If establishment of institutional care is chosen as an option, it has to be considered as a last resort, and if it is for children from the rural community, it is preferable to establish children's Homes in rural settings as far as children have originated from the rural community and are expected to go back and settle in such rural areas.
- 6.14 While children are in Homes orientation should be given in an organized manner to develop their outward looking towards the real community life. This has to be supported by practical visits and exercises of the actual life style of the community from where they have come.