

Social work in Zambia: 'Children have the right to love and security'

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World Social Work Day offers an opportunity to celebrate and reflect on the profession's transformative work with families and communities



'This is just like any normal family, all the children here are loved.' Photograph: John Vidal for the Guardian

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"All children have the right to be loved," Joseph, a Zambian social worker, told me as our bus navigated one of Lusaka's bumpy, dusty streets.

When we cleared the maze of people eking a living on the streets and turned to the entrance of Empowerment Village, Joseph explained: "Every child here belongs to a family, the village was established with a charter stating that all children need love, respect, and security."

He caught my gaze. "It is their right," he emphasised. Of course I agreed, but I frequently find myself left speechless when observing countries with the fewest resources revealing some of the

best social work practices.

The people in this part of Zambia receive minimal financial, health or educational support from the government. No funds from UN agencies find their way to the streets where there is no fresh running water, nor toilets. Money comes from what can be grown, made and sold. It is an environment the UN would describe as extreme poverty.

As we entered Empowerment Village, the women welcomed us with dance and singing. The children stopped playing football and ran to greet Joseph and the other social workers, who they see as part of the wider family.

Many of the children had been abandoned at a graveyard or the door of a church or found in the streets. Many of their parents had died from HIV/Aids and others, as happens in so many cities around the world, had lost contact with their extended family when their parent moved to search for a better life.

Joseph and other social workers from the SOS Children's Villages search for the children's extended family members and invite them to become members of Empowerment Village.

"Children are always better off with the families, but they need support," Joseph explains. "When we really can't find anyone in the original family, the children can live with a new mum and they become her children for life, but we never stop trying to find an original cousin or relative; that is their right."

One of the village members showed me around. "Everyone has to contribute here," she said. "We started with nothing, just a place to grow corn, now we have chickens and vegetables, which we sell in the markets, and we have bought a milling machine and can grind maize. We are saving for a bigger mill."

In addition to the village's economic plans, the social workers have supported the community to establish a school where play is used as the main medium for learning. Children are able complete their schooling and then seek paid work.

Outside one of the houses where children live with an adoptive mum, I chatted with some teenage girls. I asked one what she wanted to do when she left school. "I want to be a teacher," she said. Another girl shouted: "I want to be a beautician". I questioned: "A beautician, what's that?" "Oh no," she cried and ran to her house hiding her face, but came back a moment later, "I meant beauty therapist". Her friends and the social workers burst into laughter; she laughed the loudest. As we walked on Joseph said, "You see, this is just like any normal family, all the children here are loved."

A time to celebrate

The theme for this year's World Social Work Day is promoting community and environmental sustainability. It will be celebrated by social workers in all countries and will bring common messages to governments, communities, employers and partner organisations. There is much to celebrate.

The profession of social work has immense experience in working with families and communities to transform desperate situations.

Our approach of tackling the many effects of poverty and marginalisation and working with and alongside communities for their self-led development is the profession's key contribution in solving social problems. This approach needs to replace the old welfare model, where governments and international agencies provide last minute assistance (if at all), rather than listening to and working with people and communities.

The focus of social work in supporting the development of care arrangements in families and communities, ensuring everyone has a voice and influence over their futures, and also in shaping social services to meet the needs and aspirations of communities should be celebrated.

Social workers are often reluctant to take credit for their successes. World Social Work Day is a time to celebrate the achievements of the profession and, as Joseph so perfectly emphasised, to ensure children's rights - including the right to be loved - are fulfilled.

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