

# Children Displaced: Deinstitutionalisation of Child Care Institutions in Tibetan Exile Settlements in Dharamshala, India

Institutionalised Children Explorations  
and Beyond  
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## Abstract

This study assesses the present situation of the deinstitutionalisation and alternative care arrangements in exile settlements concerning various cultural and socio-structural factors. It explores how elements of social structure and culture operate to transform the residential care institutions to community-based alternative care arrangements for 10,000 young Tibetans uprooted from Tibet and presently settled in India. Their day-to-day problems of repatriation and resettlement in an unfamiliar demography with distinct ethnic values are pushing them to the margins. The dependence of these children on their exile government, the host community and the uncertainty of going back to their country makes them depressed, dependent and vulnerable to trauma and negligence. The study uses cross-sectional, descriptive, exploratory and qualitative methods. Primary data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Open-ended questions were used for interviews in order to gain in-depth information from the respondents. Twenty-five informants were selected on a purposive basis to facilitate a focus on information-rich cases that illuminate the research questions. The selection criteria of informants apply to their professional experience of deinstitutionalisation in Tibetan settlements, professionals having experience of heading care institutions, officials of the Central Tibetan Administration, people from non-government organisations, development agencies and government officials who were a part of the interventions. Respondents from both state and non-state agencies were selected for the study to avoid bias.

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**Keywords**

Children, Tibetans-in-exile, care institutions, deinstitutionalization, cultural and socio-structural factors

The institutionalisation of children in care institutions is considered an important segment of child social welfare services. The care institutions are viewed as a place where vulnerable children could get all kinds of support needed. Besides food, shelter and education, something which the child desperately needs is guidance and support to face the hardships of day-to-day life.

According to a report on transition from institutional to community-based care published in 2009 by the Ad Hoc Expert Group on the Transition from Institutional to Community-based Care of the European Commission (EU), 8 million children across the world live in care institutions, and half of them are at risk of being trafficked because of fluid care programmes and policies. A number of countries have already started winding up care institutions and reuniting children to their parents or alternative systems. This has been criticised due to lack of a back-up plan for children with no families and no home (Whetten, et al., 2014). The critiques believe that removing children from the care institutions is not the best thing to do. At the same time, caregivers and child rights activists urge that family-based care is the best care for the children. The question remains as to how to initiate the deinstitutionalisation of care institutions, as it is a complex and long-term process, and there is less understanding of the term ‘deinstitutionalisation’ itself (Morrison, 1977).

In this study, the understanding of deinstitutionalisation is derived from the European Commission Daphne Programme (1997) and is referred to as the process of transforming institutionalised child care systems to integrated family and community-based care services. The concept is treated as finding and appropriating alternative care in terms of housing, treatment, education and rehabilitation for children in the community who require public care and support.

**Refugee-host Relationship: Tibetans as an Exile Community in Dharamshala**

Community is a hugely debated, variedly understood and (sometimes) vaguely defined concept having sociological, political, psychological and anthropological dimensions (Goe & Noonan, 2007; Gowar, 2014; Lawthom & Whelan, 2012). For example, Tonnies, long back in 1887, delineated how close-knit communities had come into conflict as new markets emerged during industrialisation.

Displacement caused by war, civil unrest, conflict, foreign occupation or natural calamity has effectively created new kinds of collectivities like refugee community, exiled community and asylum seekers (Braithwaite, Salehyan, & Savun, 2018; Yamazaki, 2013). United Nations Human Rights Council Resettlement Services (2011) notes that ‘the country of asylum and the local,

regional and national governmental, social and economic structures, within which refugees live', can be called as 'host community'.

The Tibetan community living in exile headquartered at McLeodganj, in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh, representing over 1,22,000 Tibetans living in exile, perceives itself as the de jure representative of Tibetans and is increasingly acknowledged by the international community (McConnell, 2013). The governance system in the exile, known as Central Tibetan Administration (CTA), has a Parliament, Executive, Tibetan Judicial Commission, different departments like Religion and Culture, Home, Finance, Education, Security, Information, International Relations and Health, Ministries, the post of Prime Minister and the Cabinet. This governance system is legitimately recognised by the Tibetan people and considered as the continuation of the government of autonomous Tibet. It looks after the overall development of Tibetan refugees and was established on 29 April 1959, soon after the Dalai Lama reached India.

The refugee-host relationship, in the case of Tibetans and Himachalis, living in Dharamshala has several overlapping dimensions. Rubli (2017) delineated the dimensions of conflict and peaceful co-existence in the refugee-host relationship in the case of Mahama refugees. The report observes that 'occasional negative personal encounters' can result in mistrust, feelings of insecurity and violent conflicts among host and refugee communities and can pose a potential threat to the peaceful co-existence. The report views perceived inequality related to access to services and competition over scarce resources as a root cause for such encounters. Many scholars point out conflict as a prominent theme in their investigation of host-refugee relationship (Brown & Foot, 1994; Gordon, 1987; Weiner, 1978; Yamazaki, 2013). Falcone and Wankgchuk (2008) observe that the 'pressure of inter-cultural misunderstandings, inter-community jealousies and persistent mistrust has periodically given way to violent outbursts', between the Tibetan exile community and the Indian community. Tarodi (2011) noted that the relationship between the Tibetan and local Indians has not always been tranquil. He argued that by and large, the negotiations of Tibetans living in exile in India with the Indian host community are mostly successful, as the Tibetans are rarely involved in any criminal activities and avoid conflicts with the local community. The Tibetans settled in India as refugees have so far successfully manoeuvred themselves to negotiate with laws, rules and restrictions of the host community. Even though Tibetans have received better treatment compared to other refugee groups in India, their lives are circumscribed within the numerous political and legal restrictions that refugees in India face.

## **Deinstitutionalisation of Child Care Institutions in Tibetan Settlement: Constraints and Challenges**

Deinstitutionalisation cannot be possible without alternative care systems and strengthening of the care process at family and community levels. The Tibetans are an exiled community spread over forty-four residential settlements across ten states in India. McLeodganj, Dharamshala being the home of the Dalai Lama, is

one of the most important exiled settlements in India. The small hill town situated at the foothills of the Himalayas has two communities co-existing together—Himachalis—mostly the Gaddis, a nomad tribe inhabiting the area since 8th century A.D. and the Tibetans, the original residents of Tibet, now political refugees injected in the area in the 1960s aftermath of the Tibetan uprising. The status of Tibetans as an exiled community is very peculiar and different from refugees from other parts of the world. India has not yet recognised Tibetans living in exile as refugees even after more than 55 years, according to the Geneva Convention.

Today, the exile settlement is the most preferred place for hundreds of Tibetan children migrating to India. Due to an uncertain future and the sinocised status of Tibet, the settlement is overwhelmed by a growing influx of refugees. The exiled settlement as a diasporic group is facing the challenge of integration to gain access to the culture of the host society (here, Indian) without losing their own cultural identity. The exile's long distance nationalism and exclusion put these children in danger of getting lost in the distant culture of the host community and thus, creates an identity crisis among them. The persisting ethnic identities and vanishing cultural differences in the last 60 years has created a fear among the young Tibetan generation in Dharamshala of getting assimilated into the host community. This has slowed down the process of carrying cultural continuity from one generation to the other and has created hesitation among the caregivers to go for a sustained transition from the institutional care to family-based and community-based alternatives, as they are multi-cultural and radical, whereas formal institutions governed by the Tibetan exile government is internally homogenous.

Child welfare services offered through child care institutions in Tibetan settlements in India are concerned about providing the appropriate care environment to children at the right time. Though the community in Dharamshala itself has an uncertain future as a nation-state, it struggles to meet a set of problems related to the special needs of the increasing number of children seeking care and help. The issue of providing quality care, either full time in residence or through care agencies, is quite challenging, as the community do not have an integrated continuum of services for migrated children and their families. The child care programmes, which are currently in practice in various Tibetan settlements in India, are mostly isolated and have no connections with programmes of the host country. There is a huge gap in the care services for children who migrated from their home communities in Tibet to India as refugees. There are no adequate community-based care programmes to reach children and their families in the absence of home-based and residential options to link the children with their families, peer-groups and respective communities. There is a growing prevalence of mental illness and distress among children living in exile due to the doubt of their self-identity and future (Nair & Pandit, 2017).

Deinstitutionalising child care systems, to bring the remedial efforts to connect children with their natural environment, is not an easy task for the exile community, as the child care institutions of the Tibetan settlement in Dharamshala are quite different from other institutional frameworks, especially from the Indian counterpart with respect to size, competence, community relatedness, family

involvement and other factors. The isolated child care institutions of the settlement look like warehouses rather than family-centred, community-based care systems. The challenge for the exiled community is that staffing a home in the community with trained house parents needs a sophisticated and humane care treatment programme, well financed by the donor agencies and administratively supported by the government in exile. A significant number of children in the Tibetan exile settlement in Dharamshala still receive small institutional care facilities in the form of Tibetan Children Villages (TCVs), which now, due to increasing number of children having refugee status, needs comparatively large and secure residential care facilities in the form of family-centred interventions with diverse residential options. At present, TCVs are catering to the needs of 16,000 Tibetan refugee children, right from few months old to students at the higher studies level. There are a total of five TCVs with three in Himachal Pradesh, namely Dharamshala, Gopalpur and Bir, and one each at Bylakuppe in Karnataka and Ladakh. TCVs also has eight residential schools, six-day schools, nine-day care centres, five vocational training centres and five youth hostels.

The key issue in deinstitutionalisation of child care institutions is not merely the residential option but to mobilise the entire child care ecosystem into an overall environment for positive change (Roby, 2011). It requires an activated set of linkages between the care programme and other socio-political institutions/systems of the exile government, connecting children with the family, school, peer group, recreational system, healthcare system, social-service system and other informal networks. This requires deinstitutionalisation interventions in a number of supporting socio-political and cultural systems to develop an integrated child care service network to ensure continuity of care (Van Ijzendoorn & Juffer, 2006), followed by an expansion of the adaptive capacity of the community circumscribed within numerous political and legal restrictions that refugees in India face.

## **Analysis and Learning Outcomes from Dharamshala**

Since the Tibetan exile settlement in Dharamshala exists with a host having incompatible objectives (Kreisberg, 1973) and perceived divergence of interest (Pruitt & Jeffrey, 1986), the socio-cultural construction of deinstitutionalisation of care institutions is quite different from others. Here, the challenge is to engage the young children, often homeless in a different geological area, with different ethnic and religious belief systems. The Tibetan children are going through the socialisation process in a different land with a different belief system, culture and social practice, which makes them lost in between two different cultures—one of their homeland—the other of the host community (here, India), which they are now a part of. This contrast in the socio-cultural atmosphere brings various psycho-emotional outbreaks in these children. Although the child care centres in exile are socialising these children in Tibetan culture and values through narrated history (Yankey & Biswas, 2012), the failed efforts of the community for the

complete freedom of Tibet in the changing geo-political conditions of South-East Asia often distorts the picture and creates a kind of hopeless feeling for the children living in an imagined community (Nair & Pandit, 2017). Affirming the possibilities of the complete assimilation of the refugee community into the host local community, the administration of Tibetan exile settlement is reluctant to decentralise the institutional care services to community or family-based care systems. Rather than looking at the care institutions as a place for a long-term care, the Tibetan settlement looks at it as an established set of social patterns, including the cultural artefacts and practices that the Tibetan community has adopted for the care of its young generation. The interviewed officials of the Tibetan Government said that deinstitutionalisation of the care system means the breakdown of a socio-cultural system of established patterns of political and social control, which determines how children should be viewed and treated in the community and what rights and obligations they have in reference to their community when they grow up.

The study's research strategy is qualitative, and the inputs gained from the field are in the form of experiences, perceptions, actions and attitudes of the respondents involved in the deinstitutionalisation of child care interventions in Tibetan settlements. Purposive sampling strategy was used to gather a broad range of experiences as opposed to a generalisable and random sample (Patton, 1990). Access to field was facilitated through the office of CTA in McLeodganj. Interviews with the respondents took place from July to August 2019. Open-ended questions were used to gain the information from the respondents. This also allowed the respondents to express their interpretations of deinstitutionalisation in their own way and facilitated rich discussions of the respondents' perceptions and experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). A total of 25 interviews were conducted. The interviews took place in settings chosen by the respondents and all the interviews were recorded after gaining consent from the respondents. The in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with the heads of child care institutions of the exile settlement and with the officials of CTA were conducted in order to deal with deinstitutionalisation of child care services in Tibetan exile settlement and with the aim to know the root causes of why children are placed in the institutional care, and how and in what ways the children can be removed from institutional care and placed in alternative care or be re-integrated in their respective communities.

The information gained from the interviews reveals that there is less understanding of the scope of deinstitutionalisation of child care services in the exiled community itself, and community-based facilities cannot be delivered effectively until and unless the problem of institutionalised conventional child care services shall be realised and recognised by the community members. Lack of state-level child welfare infrastructure and an established system for family support and alternative family-based care in Tibetan exile settlement is a major obstacle in the process of deinstitutionalisation. Further, no particular attention has been paid to the process of deinstitutionalisation and socio-cultural issues related to it. The cultural factors wanting to keep residential child care institutions, resistance from officials of the institutional care and lack of alternative placements

for children in the exile settlement also makes the process sensitive and complex. Instead of receiving constructive critical observations on deinstitutionalisation, the Tibetan community still relies on the common perception that taking the children away from institutional child care systems will uproot them from their present culture and the political struggle for a free Tibet. Presently, the care arrangements in the exile settlement are in the form of institution-based boarding schools where children live and study at the same premises.

## **Conclusion**

The process to deinstitutionalise child care services in the Tibetan exile settlement in Dharamshala is slow. Rather than making child care services as a collective living arrangement where children can be looked after by adults who are paid to undertake this function, it is still mostly in the conventional form of institutional care limited to foster care, kinship care and adoption. During the interviews, the interviewed officials of care centres revealed that institutions are not ready for change, as there are very few attempts by the exile government agencies and NGOs to transform institutionalised care to community or family-based care services. Even though the exile government believes that all children in the community have a right to live and be raised in a family environment, the fund allocated for the development of social services on the local level is inadequate, and there is no holistic and considered policy for deinstitutionalisation of child care services.

Further, placing children from formal institutional care into families is not so easy in the case of Tibetan exile settlement, as no formal studies have been conducted to know how interventional programmes in the form of family care works for these communities, which are stateless and territoryless. Since geographies are closely associated with political affiliations and identity, and it further intersects with statehood (Marston & Mitchell, 2004), the idea of the nation-state with defined territories still remains central for communities having a socio-political status (McConnell, 2013). For a political community without sovereignty over the territory, it is difficult to realise that the deinstitutionalisation of children care services is a democratic process and requires an established relationship between children and the state. It is not simply a formal uprooting of community or family-based residential systems to replace institutional systems but a collective and sustainable process of the social and cultural transformation of entire the childcare ecosystem. It will not be possible without having a new socio-cultural understanding of family, law, public policies, social and cultural practices and various other factors involved in it. Hence, deinstitutionalisation of child care services for the Tibetan community living in exile in Dharamshala needs to establish formal relations between children, families, state and communities based on institutional socio-cultural mechanisms to identify a set of mutual rights and obligations to replace the present institutionalised care system. This needs effort to extend and improve child care systems to promote the

capability of the community, to gain access to social and cultural integration in a foreign land and in a distinct socio-political environment. For a community, which is struggling for maintaining their own socio-cultural identity out of an established image of a refugee community from last 60 years, deinstitutionalisation is one way to generate new social and cultural dynamics within the community, which shall help to settle down the long-pending issue of the citizenship status of children who are presently helpless, homeless and uprooted refugees and are getting 'lost' in the distant culture of the host country.

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