

CASE STUDY

# Preventing family separation during the COVID-19 pandemic in Uganda



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Betty<sup>1</sup> lives in a village in the Tororo district in Eastern Uganda. Betty's husband went out to work two years ago and never returned. She was pregnant with her fifth child at the time and has since had to bring up her children alone with no support from their father. Betty thinks her husband left as he could no longer stand the stigma associated with one of their daughters' disabilities. Betty has always struggled financially but managed to feed her children by taking in her neighbours' washing. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck in 2020, this source of income dried up. Stuck at home with no money coming in, many of her customers started to do their own washing. Betty says:

“Sometimes we would go days without food. I went months without paying rent. The landlord was always on my case. I felt like giving up.”

Betty

Betty became desperate and contemplated sending her children to live with relatives. After Betty's husband left, two of her children had gone to live with an aunt. They had been severely maltreated, and Betty collected them after a neighbour informed her of their plight. The children returned home fearful and withdrawn and Betty did not want to send them away again.

An outreach worker from the NGO the Child's i Foundation learned of Betty's situation and offered assistance. Betty was given emergency financial aid, support with parenting, help to buy school materials, and regular visits from social workers. Betty recalls what a huge difference this made.

<sup>1</sup> Names have been changed to protect identities.

“After a few days, they returned with an assortment of food items including rice, maize flour, sugar, salt, beans, groundnuts, peas, and milk. They also gave me two sacks of charcoal. You just cannot imagine how excited I, and my children, were.”

### Child i Foundation's outreach officer

After discussions with staff from the Child's i Foundation, Betty decided to set up a business selling cold drinks. She was given the funding to buy a fridge and initial stock and is now self-sufficient once more. She can send two of her children to school and hopes that the rest will follow soon. Betty understands how important it is for children to be cared for by their parents and has vowed never to be separated from her children again.

“At least life is much better now. I have no debt. My children are healthy. I can't even contemplate 'throwing them away' [abandoning them]... Children are better off living with their parents. Nothing can replace motherly love. Nobody can care for children the way you want or would. So, except in very desperate circumstances, children should be and grow up with their parents.”

Betty

Betty's situation is sadly not unique. Tororo borders Kenya and much cross-border trade dried up because of restrictions imposed by COVID-19. Child's i Foundation staff saw rising rates of poverty, unemployment, stress, and violence against women and children during this period. A combination of school closures and higher rates of poverty has led to concerns about child trafficking. Movement restrictions also made it hard for social workers to visit vulnerable families. The Child's i Foundation adapted to meet these challenges by offering emergency financial assistance, converting to remote case management, and using community volunteers to identify and support vulnerable families when social workers could not reach them.

Although the pandemic was a difficult period it also offered an important opportunity for learning and innovation. Staff from the Child's i Foundation have a renewed appreciation of evolving needs of families, and the necessity of constant adaptation. Community volunteers were a key source of support during the pandemic, and the Child's i Foundation is now investing more in building their capacities. The challenges posed by the pandemic have also meant that government, Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs), and community groups have had to pull together to support children and families. Collaboration has become even more vital.

The Child's i Foundation is funded by UBS Optimus Foundation and UK Aid. Their programmes to prevent family separation are complemented by UNICEF-funded work around the recruitment and training of social welfare officers at the sub-county level. UNICEF is also supporting the establishment of district alternative care panels. These panels of professionals make decisions about placements into alternative care and are used to ensure that no child is unnecessarily separated from their parents.

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