

## CASE STUDY

# Supervised independent living for care leavers in Rwanda



Patrick<sup>1</sup> was just a few months old when his family left him at an orphanage in 1995. There are no remaining records from this time, and Patrick does not know who his family is or why they felt they could no longer care for him.

Patrick spent his childhood in the orphanage until his late teens when the government of Rwanda decided to end the use of residential care to give all children the opportunity to grow up in a family and community. As his facility was gradually closed down, social workers from the government's National Child Development Agency (NCDA) supported him to find a new home.

Patrick had formed strong relationships with the caregivers at the orphanage and viewed them as his 'mothers.' He didn't like the idea of being fostered by another family. When his orphanage closed, Patrick opted to be supported to live independently.

“I found the idea of moving to a new home tough as I didn't feel comfortable calling another person mother other than this one. So, I requested that they don't move me to another home and rather rent a home for me and I would be okay.”

Patrick

With the help of UNICEF and the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Hope and Homes, NCDA established a programme of supervised independent living for young people such as Patrick. This programme aims to ease the transition from residential care to living independently in the community and is part of the broader Tubarerere Mu Muryango Programme (Let's Raise Children in Family) care reform programme.

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

It provides young people aged 16 and above, leaving residential care with a package of support while they adjust to their new lives. Assistance is tailored to meet individual needs, and can include help with accommodation, schooling, and employment, as well as learning basic life skills such as cooking, financial management, and how to access health care services.

“The young person will have been in the institution for 20 years without knowledge of how to handle day-to-day business, clean their own houses or even wash clothes because they are used to being helped by the domestic workers in the home.”

**NCDCA social worker**

Young people are supervised by social workers and community volunteers, and staff from residential care facilities also support the transition. Of around 3,400 children and young people reintegrated from residential care into families and communities from 2012 to 2022, 16 percent went into supervised independent living arrangements.<sup>2</sup>

After a period of preparation, Patrick eventually left the orphanage when he was 21. He initially felt frightened and alone and missed his caregiver.

“I was so hurt and scared because I was going to leave my ‘mother’s’ care. There was nothing that I did without consulting with her.”

**Patrick**

He describes the challenge of having to think for and look after himself:

“Inside the orphanage, you develop a dependence mindset... you live almost responsibility free. They pay all the bills for you and that doesn’t allow you to grow and be able to live responsibly as an adult today, tomorrow, and in time to come.”

**Patrick**

Patrick’s social worker from the NCDCA confirms that many young people struggle with the adjustment to life outside of residential care.

“We have to prepare the young adults to go into independent living with a lot of patience; because it’s difficult for them to understand why they have to move from orphanages into independent living.”

**NCDCA social worker**

The NCDCA and their partner NGOs use a combination of individual and group work to prepare and support young people for independent living. They have found that it is particularly valuable to have sessions with another young person living independently who can demonstrate that it is possible to live successfully in communities. These sessions build the confidence and capacities of young people going into supervised independent living. The length of support provided varies but can often last for several years.

<sup>2</sup> Figures provided by NCDCA and UNICEF

“If it's one who is sharp, responsible, and loves working for him/ herself, it is very easy to close the case ... but we have some cases that have run from 2016 until now.”

**NCDA social worker**

Young people choosing to live in supervised independent living arrangements have a smoother transition to life in the community if they have a good network of support from community leaders, neighbours, and local government authorities. NCDA has met resistance from these stakeholders who argue that care leavers should not be prioritised as ‘they have hands and are strong enough to help themselves.’

Social workers have worked hard to sensitise officials and communities on the challenges that these young people face and encourage them to offer more assistance.

“Slowly by slowly they will understand why these young adults need to be supported because they have no families and have nowhere to start life, to survive independent living.”

**NCDA social worker**

With the help of NCDA, Patrick has become a successful young person who can inspire others.

He is now 27 years old and has left the programme which help has helped him to have a rich professional and personal life. After studying tourism, he works as a chef and tour guide and recently got married. When asked about what he enjoys, Patrick says:

“Inside the orphanage, you develop a dependence mindset... you live My life, the way I am living. I have been surrounded by peace, love, and my wife to whom I can tell everything. When I was living alone, I had no one to talk to about my background.”

**Patrick**

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