

# Community care or the institution?

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The lay pastor looked intently at his congregation and intoned passionately, tears streaming from his eyes with bitter memories:

*“I lost my parents when I was still very young and I grew up moving from home to home. In most of these homes I was abused. Many times, I was denied food and falsely accused of committing heinous crimes. I am sure if I grew up in an orphanage, I would not have suffered the way I did at the hands of my relatives! Support me as I render help to these children of God”*

Standing besides him was a motley collection of children from his orphanage. They looked forlorn and lost. Here and there, I could see members of the congregation wiping tears off their eyes. The huge collection made in support of his orphanage at the end of the service was evidence enough that the lay pastor’s appeal for help had struck a chord in the congregants. A few days later, he approached me and asked whether there was money from my organisation that he could use to look after the children. He enumerated the huge bills in terms of food, clothing, and school support that he had to pay to keep the orphanage going. When I mentioned to him that our policy as SCOPE OVC was to support family contact tracing or re-integration of children back into the community; it was evident he was not happy with this response. In the whole period I was with SCOPE OVC, he never brought up the subject.

As I write this article, it is unfortunate that this lay pastor has a number of pending criminal cases of defilement of minors in the courts of law. He is alleged to have sexually molested a number of children under his care. Immediately it became public that there were problems at the orphanage involving the lay pastor, people who claimed to be relatives to the children suddenly surfaced and spirited them away! The government, through the Ministry of Youth, Sport and Child

Development, has taken over the orphanage and placed an injunction against the pastor restraining him from stepping into his orphanage.

His case is by no means an isolated one, on many occasions, our daily papers carry headlines of scandals such as misappropriation of funds at orphanages, sexual abuse of children, children being kept in inhumane conditions, children being looked after by unqualified minders in orphanages including stories of children being 'sold off' as cheap labour. This is not to say, all orphanages in Zambia are not providing a good service. Most of these institutions have been providing the much needed material support, school assistance, HIV prevention, counselling and psychosocial support, medical care, day care facilities, religious education and promotion of foster care. And without doubt, staff in most of the orphanages has shown matchless compassion for the children under their care. The mushrooming number of orphanages is however a new phenomenon and presents several challenges. A study conducted through World Conference of Religions for Peace and UNICEF in 2003 revealed that of the orphanages they documented, 50% were established since 1999 and that lack of funds was a major limiting factor in terms of service provision.

### **The culture of caring**

As recent as 20 years ago, the main orphanages in existence were those run by the Catholic Church. Even then, the children being looked after were those that constituted rare cases of children abandoned at infancy and childhood and had no traceable next of kin. It was almost unheard of to take a child to an orphanage or worst still offer a child up for adoption. In the majority of cases, there was always a grandmother, grandfather, uncle or aunt somewhere who was ready to volunteer or 'inherit' the orphan. Although such people, in most cases were poor, there existed a strong spirit of sharing the little that was available. Notions such as those that said *'the one who may look after you in old age, may not necessarily be your biological child'* were prolific. Phrases such as *'umwana wa nshiwa ni mwana lesa'* meaning, an orphan is God's child, motivated community members to take into their care orphans and other vulnerable children. Without romanticising that era, cases of abuse of orphans

were there, except that communities used to frown or condemn perpetrators of abuse very harshly.

### **The eighties and beyond**

With the advent of HIV/AIDS in the early eighties, the attendant problem of increasing numbers of orphans and vulnerable children became accentuated. The amount of money that was brought to bear on the problem increased correspondingly. When SCOPE OVC was formed in 2001, the atmosphere at that time was such that if one paraded a number of orphans and purported to be supporting them, the chances of getting funding were high. In some instances, merely assembling a series of photographs showing snort nosed children was enough to get 'children's sponsorship'. What became clear was that when money finally landed in Zambia, the proportion that went to the upkeep of children was much lower as compared to that which went into administration. For example, one major problem we found with many programmes we supported was the low levels of skills and knowledge of basic programme or project administration. As a result, accountability of resources was a major problem we often encountered. The worst offshoot of this era was the belief that if orphanages were built, administrators trained and children herded into these centres, it would be to the benefit of the children. Consequently, communities were mobilised to identify and screen orphans and vulnerable children and later send them to the centres. Communities were not encouraged or supported to care for the children within their communities. Within a short time, these so called orphanages became over crowded and this coupled with poor managerial skills, saw many of them closed by government due to unhygienic conditions, indiscipline, and socially related problems that emanated from the centres.

During this period, there were programmes, such as the *Kwasha Mukwenu [help your neighbour]* project of Lusaka, the *Mulenga District Orphans and Vulnerable Children's* programme of Kitwe and the *Kalomo District Orphans and Vulnerable Children's* programme of Kalomo that maintained a community focus. These programmes

emphasized that no matter what happens, there are community members who are ready to take into their care orphans and vulnerable children and that all they need is to be supported to provide the best care possible. These community programmes were able to demonstrate that it was much cheaper to care for children in the communities than in the orphanages. They demonstrated that they have resources [shelter, farming methodologies, community leadership structures, time to listen] which could be used to supplement support to children. They argued too that orphanages were 'alien' to Zambian culture and that these could only care for incredibly small numbers of children as compared to those that were already being cared for by communities. In one planting season, the Kalomo community [made up of subsistence farmers] requested that the SCOPE OVC project support them with maize seed, and fertilisers, while they tilled the land using their own means. From the sale of the farming produce, the Kalomo community was able to support many children and they had enough surplus to carry over into the following year. SCOPE OVC did not need to repeat the process the following year. Sarah Bowsky of FHI recently commented that

*'Communities have always had to deal with vulnerable children and orphans. Our responsibility is to figure out from the communities what they need and how we can support and strengthen their traditional ways of caring for orphans and vulnerable children'.*

How true her comments are!