

## Traditional Fostering in a Post-Conflict Context: The Case of Laroo-Pece Women's Association in Northern Uganda

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### Introduction

The prevention of family separation and, in particular, children dropping out of family care is a matter of global concern with local relevance. Paragraph 6 of the Preamble to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) underscores the need for children to be accorded the right to grow, develop, and receive primary protection within the family setting. The United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (UN Resolution 64/142, 2010) urge countries to 'support efforts to keep children in, or return them to, the care of their family' and where separation is inevitable, 'finding another appropriate and permanent solution, including adoption and *kafalah*<sup>10</sup> of Islamic law'. The Guidelines give primary focus to family care for children, either by their parents or guardians, or when appropriate, other close (non-) family members. Article 8 of the UNCRC entitles children to family relations as a way of preserving children's identity. Article 9 of the UNCRC underlines that only on grounds of necessity, in the best interests of the child, by the competent authorities, and in accordance with applicable law and procedures should a separation of children from their families prevail. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (African Union Commission, 2016) prohibits the unjustified separation of children from parents (Article 19); entitles separated children to maintaining regular contact with parents unless not in their best interest

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<sup>10</sup> The Islamic *Kafalah* is a form of alternative care where a family takes in an abandoned child, a child whose natural parents or family are incapable of raising him or her, or who is otherwise deprived of a family environment, without the child being entitled to the family name or an automatic right of inheritance from the family. (Assim, 2009, 44)

(Article 19(2)); and urges member states to undertake measures that support and build the capacity of parents (Article 20).

At the national level, the Uganda Constitution recognises the family as the natural and basic unit of society that is entitled to protection by society and the State. It provides for the minimisation of all conditions that may cause separation and outlaws undue separation (Art. 31(2)); Art. 31(5)). Under Article 34(1), children's right to know and be cared for by their parents or legal guardians is enshrined. The Children Act (as amended) 2016 guarantees children the right to live with their parents or guardians (Section 4(1a)), while Sections 5 and 6 give preference to bringing up children in a family environment. Uganda's National Alternative Care Framework (Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2012) gives primary priority to keeping the family together and to prevent separation.

Amid emphasis on family care for children and the prevention of family separation by a score of international, regional, and national laws, guidelines, and standards, there is a shared view that for some inevitable reasons, such as conflict, some children find themselves falling through the cracks of less protective families. Chimanikire (2004) highlights orphanhood and separation from their families among the significant impacts of conflict on children, with boys and girls being affected differently. Particularly boys are forced to commit violent acts while girls suffer sexual exploitation. Owing to conflict, the duration of children's separation from their families tends to be lengthy, during which they suffer traumatic experiences. Moreover, as children experience conflict, leading to blurred identities, they find it hard to imagine their role in the post-conflict society (*ibid.*).

This chapter presents a traditional fostering model adopted by a group of women in Northern Uganda, analysing its potential for building resilience and for contributing to social capital and social development within the broad context of post-conflict situations. The paper draws from data obtained from a broader study conducted in Uganda under the PROSOWO project (*Professional Social Work in East Africa*). The study examined the indigenous and innovative models of social work practice in Uganda. While the study was broadly conducted in three regions of Uganda, namely North (Gulu District), Central (Rakai District) and Western Region (Rukungiri and Mbarara Districts), this chapter focuses on one indigenous social work model, namely the traditional fostering of children by LAPEWA identified in Gulu District. The term LAPEWA refers to a women's association in the two communities, Laroo and Pece (see further below).

The study was qualitative, adopting a practice-based research approach. The methods used included interviews with two LAPEWA leaders, a focus group discussion with LAPEWA members, and three extended case studies with LAPEWA members who, at the time, had foster children in their care. In addition, one in-

depth interview with a foster child aged 15 and key informant interviews with two probation officers were held. Audio-recorded data was transcribed verbatim to facilitate capturing the originality of the views shared by the participants of the study and post-coded, guided by emerging patterns and themes. The research objectives and other issues from the emerging data facilitated the generation of themes. Essentially, data was analysed using a thematic analysis method.

## **Family Separation, Armed Conflict, and the Quest for Alternative Care**

Worldwide, millions of children are said to be deprived of family care (Dozier et al., 2012; Walakira et al., 2014; Better Care Network, 2014). These include, among other categories, the orphaned, abandoned, and maltreated children. Walakira et al. (2016) identify children in residential childcare institutions and children in street situations as more visible among children deprived of family care and a protective environment. Globally, childcare institutions accommodate as many as eight million children (Save the Children, 2009; Pinheiro, 2006). Moreover, the Better Care Network (2014) notes that this number might represent an underestimation attributed to gaps in global statistics and the many unregistered children's homes worldwide. Children in street situations, specifically children 'of' the street, constitute a population of children deprived of family care. UNESCO (2017) estimates the number of street children at 150 million globally. Most run to the streets owing to domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, the death of a parent, family breakdown, war, natural disaster, and socio-economic collapse. In Uganda, just as at the global level, the statistics on children in childcare institutions is not very exact, but estimates point to between 40,000 and 50,000 children (Riley, 2012; Walakira, Dumba-Nyanzi and Bukenya, 2015), while the number of street children is estimated at 10,000 (UNICEF, 2015; Walakira et al., 2016). The Consortium for Street Children (2016) points out that in Uganda, 44% of street children connect with the streets at the very young age of between five and 10 years. While these two categories of children are deprived of their right to grow up in a nurturing family environment, particularly children living in street situations go without the basic needs. These children justify the need for alternative care.

Children in armed conflict and/or living in contexts recovering from conflict contend with many realities, including eroded family capacities to care for them (Walakira et al., 2016). Some of these children completely drop out of broken families while others fail to trace their families, since they become separated from their parents in situations of war while too young. This was the situation in Northern Uganda during and following the two-decade (1986-2006) civil war.

## Formal and Informal Foster Care

Within the alternative care literature, the concept of traditional or informal fostering is uncommon. Literature gives an impression that fostering originated in modern times (see Johnson, 2005). Thus, there is a skewed impression that fostering in its strictest sense is basically a formal alternative care practice. However, situations where community members organise themselves to informally provide family-based care for separated children with whom they share no blood relations, can clearly be identified as informal foster care. Traditionally, child fostering in sub-Saharan Africa was not uncommon (Grant and Yeatman, 2012; Alber, Martin and Notermans, 2013). Though less popular, some literature shows that in traditional times, informal child fostering was widespread before coming under pressure from civil wars in many parts of Africa (Gale, 2008), economic hardships, and changing work patterns. In other instances where informal fostering is referred to, kinship care (children being cared for by people related to them) is implied (Johnson, 2005; Gale, 2008). Gale, in reference to Sierra Leone, contends that for countries recovering from civil war and engulfed by poverty, malnutrition, and limited access to adequate medical care, the community is the best setting for caring for separated children. Gale particularly describes what he calls ‘stranger care’ – a phenomenon where a child informally finds him or herself in the care of adults or households unknown and strange to him or her. This form of care arrangement is said to be common and useful in post-war settings.

Gale (2008) notes that as families and communities weaken or even collapse due to conflict, the need for child fostering grows. War leaves many children either without primary caregivers or, as they scatter for safety, unable to return home. Their agony is heightened by the fact that some children separated from their parents due to conflict find themselves at a crossroads regarding whether to define themselves as orphans or non-orphans since they are unaware of whether or not their parents still live. This was the case in Northern Uganda. According to Levey et al. (2016), the availability of care from other sources for orphaned children or children separated from their parents serves to ameliorate the loss of a parent (borne by children) and the hardship that comes with it. This is said to have a strong impact on such children’s development. Corbin (1997) echoes the need to focus on children and families affected by armed conflict in Africa and underscores the essence of practitioners to understand the effect of their war-affected experiences on social services, health facilities, and educational settings. But for children separated from their parents, access to social services is often only tenable through alternative care.

Whereas young children are often exposed to conditions that rob them of meeting their basic needs for health and development (McElroy et al., 2012), children in conflict and post-conflict situations score even worse. Uganda is among the

countries with many children failing to reach their developmental potential (ibid.). The Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD), UNICEF and the Economic Policy Research Centre (2015) report that, in Uganda, among all children aged zero to four, 55% live in poverty, of whom 24% (or one in five) live in extreme poverty. Among all children aged six to 17, 38% live in poverty, of whom 18% are in extreme poverty; 15.2% of all school-aged children (aged six to 17 years) never attended school in 2011, 33% of under-five-year-old children are stunted (low height for age), 13.5% are underweight (low weight for age), while 5% are wasted (low weight for height). Although these figures are silent on the disaggregation between: a) children living with their parents or guardians and those separated; and b) children in conflict and post-conflict and those in stable settings, the MGLSD and UNICEF (2014) and UNICEF (2015) both attest to the fact that children in conflict and post-conflict situations as well as separated children contribute highly to these figures.

Essentially, various alternative care options are advanced in the event of family separation, including kinship care, fostering, domestic adoption, intercountry adoption and, as a last resort, institutional care. The UNCRC as well as Uganda's Children Act (as amended) 2016, and the National Alternative Care Framework prioritise kinship care over the various formal alternative care options. However, as society increasingly becomes individualistic and materialistic and as social relations become commodified (Kasente et al., 2002), kinship care is increasingly compromised. Northern Uganda has not been spared from such realities. The conflict that affected the entire region made it difficult for separated children to benefit from both kinship and formal fostering since, more or less, everyone was hard-hit. Moreover, the effects of conflict, including the collapse of nurturing environments, transcend the end of the conflict (McElroy et al., 2012; International Refugee Trust, 2014). Moreover, as Santa Barbara (2006) observes, children are affected by the impact of war in specific terms. Their attachments are frequently disrupted in times of war owing to the loss or emotional unavailability of parents or guardians. In some cases they face total loss of adult protection and become even more vulnerable as 'unaccompanied children', as they are often referred to in refugee situations.

### **Socio-cultural Context**

Gulu District (where data for this chapter was collected) is occupied by the Acholi of Luo ethnicity, said to have migrated from Bahr el Ghazal in South Sudan (The Northern Trumpet, 2017). The Acholi are a socio-political entity composed of chiefdoms headed by the *Rwot* (ruler) and an overall king. Culturally, the chiefdoms are responsible for the social order and social wellbeing of the Acholi people. The chiefs, for instance, mediate between conflicting parties and preside over cultural

ceremonies geared towards maintaining harmony and social order, such as *mato oput* – a traditional ceremony that aims at restoring relationships and promoting forgiveness between clans that would have been affected by either an intentional murder or accidental killing (Tom, 2006).

The family takes a central role when it comes to the care for and the protection of children. Traditionally, the concept of orphanhood had little space in Acholi culture. Representing what Lajul (2013) describes as the traditional African philosophy among the Acholi, at any one point in time, a child had a father and mother figure, regardless of whether the child had lost his or her biological parent(s). However, the armed conflict disrupted the social order of the Acholi to the extent that the phenomenon of children without parental care gradually emerged. The phenomenon of night commuters, where children left their families every night to seek safety on the streets, ultimately resulted in increased numbers of street children and their permanent separation from their families (Spitzer and Twikirize, 2014).

The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) conflict, that spanned two decades, severely undermined the capacity of families to care for their members, and children were the primary victims. More than a decade since the war has 'officially' ended, the Northern Region still grapples with the effects of the conflict, including a very negative score in child vulnerability indicators (Spitzer and Twikirize, 2013; Walakira et al., 2016). According to the MGLSD and UNICEF (2014), child poverty was found to be highest in Northern Uganda among children aged zero to four and six to 17. In the region, younger children were nearly three times more likely to suffer from poverty than children in the Central Region, while older children were twice more likely than their peers in the Central Region to be extremely deprived. The same report noted that Northern Uganda had the highest share of underweight children; children in the region expressed more worry of violence, including household or domestic violence, than in any other region except Karamoja; and 20% of school-age children had never attended school, a higher percentage than in all other regions. UNICEF (2015) remarks that the population of the Northern Region is among the poorest 20% of the country's overall population, with less than one in 10 children of secondary school-age attending school. It is against such a backdrop that Walakira et al. (2016) characterise these children as multi-dimensionally deprived, including cases of family separation, with adverse impacts on children's physical and psychological wellbeing.

### **Traditional Fostering by Laroo-Pece Women's Association (LAPEWA)**

Traditional fostering forms an indispensable indigenous social work model. In the context of Northern Uganda, a less common, yet critical, form of alternative care



for children – traditional fostering – is evolving, giving some children the chance to live and develop. In this chapter, we focus on traditional fostering as offered by a group of widows under their umbrella association called Laroo-Pece Women's Association (LAPEWA). Laroo and Pece are two communities in Gulu District in Northern Uganda. Hence, LAPEWA is a grassroots women's organisation. In the aftermath of the armed conflict, these women began taking on unaccompanied children living on the streets. The presentation that follows captures the philosophy underpinning the LAPEWA traditional fostering model, the transitions that the model has undergone, the motivations of the actors involved, the model's gender dimensions, the strengths and challenges integral to the model, and lastly its discussion and conclusion.

### **Philosophy of the LAPEWA Traditional Fostering Model**

LAPEWA started in 1997 as an association of widows in Gulu District. The initial membership was 100 women from Laroo and Pece communities in Gulu who came together with the aim to economically empower themselves through a 'cash round' scheme. In this scheme, members regularly pooled money and gave it to randomly selected members on a rotational basis until all group members had accessed the funds. Over time, LAPEWA members began noticing a number of social problems in their communities which they felt needed attention, yet appeared to be neglected. One of these was the phenomenon of young street children who were being used by older street children and adults to commit crimes, such as breaking into people's houses, shops, and kiosks to loot. Once caught, some of these children faced death perpetrated by their victims and angry mobs. During such times of heightened conflict, there was less social order, and violence was often resorted to as a form of justice against any wrongdoer or perceived criminal. Yet, these children neither had anybody to offer them protection against exposure to such risk nor did they have an opportunity to return to regular family settings. Tension due to conflict was high and families were in disarray.

In 2000, the LAPEWA women rethought their focus to include traditional fostering of children. At the time, many children were victims of orphanhood, family disintegration, destruction of the social fabric, higher HIV rates, gender-based violence, street violence, and lawlessness. According to UNICEF (2011), these factors strongly contribute to children dropping out of family care.

We resolved to go to the district and explain to the authorities that as women, we are seeing this unfortunate thing happening, we already have an association, and we need to help these suffering children on the streets. (LAPEWA leader)

The process of getting children off the street started out as a crisis response. As children got beaten, LAPEWA women who conducted foot patrols on the streets

of Gulu town intervened, rescued the children, and took them to their homes. That was how they started fostering children. The process later evolved from a crisis response to a preventive one. Rather than waiting to rescue and attracting victimised children to their homes, the women developed mechanisms to identify children at risk and to offer them alternative care. For example, they staged drama performances and concerts in the streets of Gulu town and other neighbouring towns, such as Koch-Goma, Anaka, and Nwoya, with the intent to expose the plight of children and encourage these children to leave the streets for family life. Some of the drama themes were HIV and AIDS, the causes and manifestations of domestic and gender-based violence, how children get wasted on the street, and how children get injured when stealing.

### **Transitions Undergone by the LAPEWA Traditional Fostering Model**

Whilst LAPEWA women started fostering children very informally, before long, their contribution received recognition. The concerts staged by LAPEWA members received public exposure. The Gulu District leadership came to know about them and, in due course, recognised the association members' traditional foster care practices. The recognition manifested itself through the linking of the women to the court which, in consultation with local leaders, encouraged and presided over these women's taking an individual Oath of Court that qualified them as persons fit to care for and raise children. The requirements to qualify as a 'fit person' is provided for in Uganda's Principal Children Act (Government of Uganda, 2016). The process of selecting fit persons involves communities identifying fellow community members whom they consider morally upright and trusted to care for children. The LAPEWA women's previously demonstrated moral character and concern for children made it easy for them to be selected by their community members and forwarded to court as suitable candidates for the position of fit persons.

As fit persons, LAPEWA members received children in need of family care from the Child and Family Protection Unit (CFPU) of the police and the probation and social welfare officers, the two primary social work units in charge of child protection in Uganda. For instance, whenever CFPU had to deal with the case of a child offender, such as being involved in stealing, they would refer them to LAPEWA. The court also assigned care responsibilities. Often, though not always, during court sessions, LAPEWA had a roster that defined which of their members were expected to attend court, stand as sureties for the child(ren) and, thus, return with those children for counselling and guidance. Sometimes, by the time of the court sitting, the women had already had the children (having been handed to them by the CFPU or a probation officer), while in other cases, they only got to link



up with the child in court. In either case, the women first talked to the children in question and comforted them in preparation for the court session. The court, in the presence of the probation and social welfare officers, then released the children to the fit persons, thus sparing the children from ending up in the remand home, a form of institutional care for children in conflict with the law. Moreover, it is not uncommon to perceive and treat children in remand homes as perpetrators of crime as opposed to victims of child protection failures.

### **Sources of Motivation**

Initially, the motivating force behind the actions of LAPEWA's traditional fostering was implied, that is, it came from the wish to save young children from the undesirable experiences of living on the streets. In addition, taking an Oath of Court propelled the LAPEWA members to keep active and carry on the daunting challenge of traditionally fostering children amid difficult and challenging socio-economic circumstances. As of 2016, 22 LAPEWA members had taken the Oath of Court. The women felt very trusted, appreciated, and recognised, especially in a legal sense. The status, exposure, and nature of responsibility that the title of fit persons accorded them was very motivating. As fit persons, they stood as sureties for children in conflict with the law. Instead of such children being remanded, they were handed to the fit persons to take care of and guide them until the next appointment to appear in court (after 21 days). During that time, the fit person counselled the child, attempted to find out from him or her what exactly had happened, and to see if the child accepted his or her guilt and was remorseful, or whether he or she was actually innocent.

The other sources of motivation were the opportunity to be linked to external support. For instance, between 2007 and 2012, LAPEWA women were linked by the district to external support from Save the Children for the first time. Save the Children offered a cash grant of 105,000 UGX (approximately 29 US\$) to the fit persons for the 21 days they took care of the children as they awaited reappearance in court. In case the court acquitted a child, the fit person would take him or her on. This was followed by conducting family tracing alongside an assessment of the child's readiness to be reunited with the family. This involved working with the probation and social welfare officers. The cash grant facilitated transportation during family tracing and resettlement where it happened. If tracing yielded success and both the child and parents were ready to reunite, the child would be resettled; but if tracing proved unsuccessful or the family was unprepared to take in their child, the fit person remained with the child indefinitely.

To better understand the motivating factors, it is necessary to reflect on the fact that until 2007, these women had shouldered the responsibility of childcare for vulnerable children without any financial support. And after being weaned off the

support in 2012, LAPEWA members continued to foster children as before. They continued receiving children from the police, from probation and social welfare officers, or from court, and sustained the tracing of the children's families using their own meagre resources, sometimes utilising their VSLA.

### **Gender Dimensions of the LAPEWA Model**

The LAPEWA model was implemented by women, all of whom were widows. These women demonstrated a strong spirit of sacrifice and voluntarism. This seems to have been less appealing to men. However, the association opened its doors to both male and female children. The role of men in the process of traditional fostering basically became important at times when the *mato oput* ritual that preceded the fostering of children who had committed serious offences had to be performed. With time, the LAPEWA members' VSLA group admitted a few men, some of whom occupied leadership positions and offered guidance. At the time of the study, they had not been directly involved in fostering. The gesture of the LAPEWA members fits well in the frame of reference that women perceive and appreciate the childcare roles much better than men (Luwangula, 2015).

### **Strengths of the LAPEWA Traditional Fostering Model**

This model was identified with significant inherent strengths. First, the contributions of LAPEWA members helped to close the gap left by the absence of a reception centre in Gulu District, thus saving children from potential institutionalisation. The LAPEWA model further constitutes a structure for conflict resolution at the community level. The women are a reference point for matters involving children to local leaders and community members. The model illustrates a gesture of sacrifice in modern materialistic and individualistic times. Sacrifice was manifested through regularly committing time to attend court sessions, working without any pay, and offering space to accommodate the office of the association. The foster parents were very much intrinsically motivated. A case in point is that, despite the challenges that the women had been put through by some of the fostered children, taking such forms as stealing their hard-earned income, property, or clothing, the women did not rethink their consideration to offer help. Another key strength is that, unlike formal fostering, this process does not require extensive paperwork and documentation. In formal fostering, a prospective foster parent has to prove his or her suitability to foster a child, go through a rigorous process of assessment by an Alternative Care Panel, and procure a Care Order. Traditional fostering is based on the sanction of the community regarding the prospective foster parent as being fit to take on the child.

## Challenges Integral to the Model

Traditional foster parents faced various challenges. Some of the children taken in were unscrupulous even when embraced as members of the family. More often than not, these children had a history of being in conflict with the law, and some did not completely reform. Yet, in practice, the probation officers rarely visited the traditionally fostered children to support the foster parents in reforming the children. Some of the children stole from the foster household and disappeared with their loot. In one case, a foster parent had a cash box in which she kept proceeds from the sale of tap water. A foster child (aged about 13) took off with the entire cash box just two months after she had been taken in. Another challenge was the concealment of identity commonly reported among relatively older children. This made family tracing rather difficult. Some foster parents also experienced false accusations from foster children's biological parents or guardians once they had been traced. After the foster parents had struggled to raise, rehabilitate, and support the children in acquiring vocational skills, their parents or relatives might appear and claim that the foster mothers had abducted their children. However, the formalisation of foster care practices meant that the foster care parents were protected against such false claims. The fact that all the children under their care were known to the authorities meant that the foster parents were at least protected. Therefore, when such claims were made, the foster parents could contact the probation and social welfare officers, who then mediated between the foster parent and the claimants of the fostered child. The claims also set in motion the preparatory process for the reunion of the foster child with his or her parents a) once the claimants had been proven to be the genuine parents or guardians of the child; b) once the child had shown a willingness to be reunited; and c) if the reunion was assessed to be in the child's best interest.

Difficulties related to the costs of daily living also presented another challenge. Since Pece and Laroo are urban suburbs of Gulu town, the cost of living was high, given caregivers' survival in a monetary economy. The women had to use their meagre resources to cater for the fostered children's feeding, medical care, clothing, and other basic necessities. Moreover, in the event of sickness involving hospitalisation, the traditional foster parents forfeited their work to attend to the foster children in the hospital until they were discharged. Difficulties in meeting the foster children's education costs were also a daunting challenge, especially where the foster parents struggled to educate their own biological children. Universal Primary Education (UPE) schools were relatively expensive for the foster care parents. Some of the UPE schools in Gulu charged up to 36,000 UGX (~10 US\$) while others levied up to 60,000 UGX per child per school term. The following remark illustrates the challenge:

When your biological children are going to school and you don't have enough money to send the foster child to school, too, the latter painfully remains at home. And you see the foster child miserably looking at the counterpart going to school every morning. The child appears withdrawn. You also feel bad. (LAPEWA member)

As a way of dealing with this challenge, some LAPEWA members approached school administrators and appealed to them to offer educational support to the fostered children. In one of the cases, a member of LAPEWA who was fostering two children whose mother had a mental health problem approached a Religious Sister of Mother Theresa primary school in Gulu, and the children were accepted at that school at no cost.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The LAPEWA model was identified to have saved many children from various risks associated with conflict, including the high risk of developing mental health problems, common among children and adolescents exposed to armed conflict (Betancourt et al., 2013). It further saved children from early relationships and marriage, characteristic of vulnerable youths in conflict and post-conflict settings, including in Northern Uganda (Schlecht, Rowley and Babirye, 2013). The LAPEWA model also saved several children from potential institutionalisation in a context where the majority of childcare institutions are profit-oriented to the extent that any welfare improvements are seen as an encroachment on the profit margin. Uganda has witnessed the proliferation of childcare institutions (Walakira, Ddumba-Nyanzi and Bukenya, 2015), on the one hand, as a response to the weakening option of kinship care and, on the other hand, largely motivated by the potential monetary benefits of running such institutions and aiding international adoptions, rather than organising a childcare system based on benevolence. The effects of institutional care are well documented. These include, among others: inappropriate care for children; children falling short of love and affection (Csáky, 2009); developmental damage (ibid., citing Browne, 2009); attachment defects (Ainsworth, 1967; Abela et al., 2012; Bakermans-Kranenburg, Dobrova-Krol and Ijzendoorn, 2011); effects on neurological development, social and behavioural development, and cognitive development of children (Abela et al., 2012). On this note, traditional fostering, argued to be necessary in conflict and post-conflict settings (Gale, 2008), was seen as worthwhile. The traditional foster parents under LAPEWA offered nurturing environments, which is critically important in shaping young children's future health and development.

From a theoretical stance, this traditional fostering model can be interpreted as contributing to the resilience of children as members of the family and community. The support given to the child by the foster family serves as a response to a myriad of stressors and risk factors such as poverty, violence, abuse, and illness that

undermine the healthy social functioning of the affected children. As children's exposure to vulnerability is ameliorated through traditional foster care, resilience is built, which, in turn, salvages the children from disposition to behavioural disorder (Ingram and Luxton, 2005). Thus, we infer that when these children benefitting from traditional foster care are rated along the vulnerability-resilience continuum (Ingram and Luxton, 2005), they are more likely to incline towards resilience with minimal possibilities of vulnerability, stress, and psychopathology compared to if they had remained out of family care. The care, support, and protection extended to the foster children in the form of formal mainstream education and vocational training enable them to relatively withstand shock arising from poverty and other risks.

The LAPEWA model further subscribes to the social developmental approach in promoting the welfare of children, their caregivers, and their community. The model attempts to promote the wellbeing of a cross-section of community members while, at the same time, linking them to economic development. According to Midgley (1995), social development is distinctively concerned with linking social and economic development efforts. The LAPEWA model sets in motion a set of strategies linked to economic development that foster the welfare of children, women, and the community. For instance, vocational skills training for fostered children assures the children of both social and economic benefits that transcend the individual children and reach well into the community. In practice, the beneficiary children become economically relevant to themselves, their families, and their community in the long run. At the same time, their status changes from one of a social problem to that of a social and economic asset to the community. Interpreted from the developmental social work perspective, vocational training for fostered children represents a social investment capable of 'enhancing the children's capabilities to participate in community life and the productive economy' (Midgley and Conley, 2010, xiii). Similarly, the VSLA approach to economic wellbeing by LAPEWA members translates into social wellbeing for child caregivers, the children under their care, the neighbourhoods, and the larger community. VSLAs, for instance, foster an enterprise culture among involved members. Such a culture is associated with promoting social change (Midgley 1995, 104). The interventions of LAPEWA thus represent what Midgley (1995, 38) refers to as 'deliberate human action' towards a process of change. The LAPEWA model takes a community-based form of intervention that, as Midgley (1995) argues, is very compatible with social development. Community-based practice interventions are further prioritised under the developmental social work approach as critical in promoting independent living of community members (Midgley and Conley, 2010). Evidence from Uganda attests that children rescued from street situations and supported to acquire

vocational and apprenticeship skills are more likely to secure their own independent living and incline towards reduced involvement in crime (Luwangula, 2017). Such interventions become very relevant to social work practice.

Arguing from a social capital theory, the LAPEWA fostering model demonstrates a 'sense of community' as implied by Putnam (2000, cited in Keeley, 2007). The model further represents common facets that underline social capital, such as the resources inherent in social relations which facilitate collective action (Garson, 2006); 'tangible assets [that] count for most in the daily lives of people: namely goodwill, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse among the individuals and families who make up a social unit' (Hanifan, 1916, cited in Keeley 2007, 102). Traditional fostering is duly underpinned by social relations among members, trust, norms, common purpose, collective action, goodwill, reciprocity, sympathy, and social intercourse, all of which constitute elements and dimensions of social capital.

It is imperative to note that the relevance of this model transcends the post-conflict settings. The fact that the phenomenon of children dropping out of family care is not only attributable to conflict but also to other factors, such as parental separation, violence against children, orphanhood, child trafficking, and child labour, means that such children in need of alternative care can equally benefit from traditional foster care beyond post-conflict settings in Uganda and Africa. However, some conditions must pertain. First, there ought to be willing community members ready to offer community-based care for children deprived of family-based care. Second, social workers should have lived up to their obligation to popularise community-based care for children in need of alternative care. Third, community caregivers that volunteer to traditionally foster children are appreciated in some way, such as prioritising them in the allocation of government programmes, such as the Youth Livelihood Programme (YLP), Uganda Women Entrepreneurship Programme (UWEP), Operation Wealth Creation, and Northern Uganda Social Action Fund (NUSAF).

As a concluding remark, traditional fostering as an indigenous model of child protection has a clear place in social work practice, particularly as alternative care for children. Literature that presents the fostering of children as formal alternative care implicitly dismisses informal community-based care beyond kinship care for children in need of family care. It is, thus, in order that traditional models, such as LAPEWA, that render a cultural script of fostering underpinned by social distribution of childcare among adults regardless of relations, are popularised. This is because they have the potential to insulate children without family care against suffering. The model is thus relevant on many fronts. First, in the way it helps to protect children deprived of family care; and second, because it connects to the indigenisation discourse of social work, whose emphasis on culturally relevant



social work practice and education cannot be overemphasised (cf. Rankopo and Osei-Hwedie, 2010; Gray, Kreitzer and Mupedziswa, 2014).

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