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RESEARCH ARTICLE

EVALUATION OF SUPPORT FACILITIES FOR INSTITUTIONALIZED ORPHANS IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

A supportive environment is critical to the realization of the full potential of any child, not excluding orphans. Being institutionalized – although much better than living on the streets or with abusive relatives – can never substitute for the benefits of being raised by caring parents. The surest way of providing a child with a simulation of an experience of parental care and affection is by ensuring a supportive environment for the child right in the midst of institutionalization, and the way to achieve this is by putting the necessary support facilities in place. This paper examined the support facilities needed to create a supportive environment for institutionalized orphans; as well as the adequacy of such support facilities in institutions/orphanages in Nigeria. Recommendations for improvement were further made.

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INTRODUCTION

Every child's ability to learn and grow is dependent on how the environment responds to some of his/her basic needs. Every child needs to feel physically and emotionally protected, respected, and valued; therefore, persons in the environment where a child finds himself/herself must create a healthy environment within which the child's dignity is protected and he/she feels stimulated enough to explore and develop his/her full potential. Children are more vulnerable to changes in their physical, emotional and social environments because of their rapid physical and mental health growth. The health and well-being of children depends on the safety and quality of their physical/natural environments, built environments and social environments – at home, school and in the community. Children also need to be in environments which protect them from violence, abuse, exploitation, injuries and neglect. Every child has their own rate and pattern of development and although research has identified what can be referred to as norms of development, babies and young children need to be allowed the time and the support necessary for their own personal development. From the onset, growth and development must involve opportunities to play, interact, explore, create, learn and solve problem. Additionally, children need in their environments, adults that are flexible and responsive, who can adapt to their immediate interests and needs and who are interested and attentive caregivers; good relationships that encourage them to participate actively; and opportunities for them to communicate their feelings and their thoughts. Thus, a stimulating physical space and the assistance of trained childcare professionals are factors that can help provide a positive environment for children to grow and develop (Olarate, 2012).

During early childhood, children undergo rapid growth that is highly influenced by their environment. The more stimulating the early environment, the more a child develops and learns (Olarate, 2012). Experiences in the first few years of life have been proven to have a significant impact on shaping a child's future health, well-being, personality, and behaviour (Olarate, 2012).

Developing an early emotional connection to a caregiver is also critical for an infant's well-being. The absence of attachment to a consistent caregiver – such as occurs in a poorly run orphanage – can have significant negative effects on brain development and cognitive functioning (World Health Organization, 2009). In other words, a supportive environment is essential to the positive development of a child. Findings from a study conducted by researchers at the University of British Columbia (2010) showed that children who report having more support in their community are also more likely to have high self-esteem, optimism, overall health, happiness and less sadness. It then means that to make any environment fit for the holistic development of a child, the necessary support facilities must be put in place.

Orphans, like other children, need a stimulating environment with adequate support facilities to foster the growth and development of their full potential. Institutions/orphanages that are responsible for the care of orphans are therefore expected to factor these support facilities into the environment provided for the orphaned children. All across the globe, several institutions/orphanages have been established to absorb the ever increasing number of orphans. Not all orphans are institutionalized; some roam the streets, some live in child-headed homes, some are sheltered by relatives or significant others, but a significant number of orphans live in institutions/orphanages. Although living in institutions/orphanages is preferable to living with abusive or neglectful relatives, institutions/orphanages may however not be able to adequately provide children with the support, and nurturing that comes from living in a caring, loving, knowledgeable family environment. Many children living in orphanages develop what are called post institutionalized (PI) issues and behaviors, which are caused from lack of stimulation, little affection, limited movement, few choices, not being taught proper emotional outlets, etc. Development in individuals is continuous, genetically determined and environmentally structured and responsive. Institutionalization of infants and young children in 'adverse conditions', provides an environment with low emotional tones and poor stimulation with lack of sufficient responsive caretaking (David, 2001). In children, deprivation through separation from parents/caregivers presents a constant phase of detachment in

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addition to other problems such as inattention and over activity, social and cognitive developmental delay, which may not return to normal levels even when a nurturing environment is provided (Kreppner, O'Connor, & Rutter, 2001; Farruggia, 2003). Institutions/orphanages are expected to provide the basic needs of shelter, food, and clothing but observation from findings shows that these needs, in some instances, are not adequately tended to and in cases where they are provided, such provision is still not sufficient for the orphan population. There are other necessary support facilities such as health care, education/vocational training, psychosocial support, etc., that simulate a normal nurturing family environment and these should be put in place to stimulate the right physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development of an orphan.

Research Questions

In light of the observations above, it is imperative to ask certain pertinent questions: What is the importance of support facilities to institutionalized orphans? Do orphanages in Nigeria provide these support facilities? If yes, are the provided support facilities adequate? What can be done to ensure/improve the provision of adequate support facilities for institutionalized orphans?

Objectives of the Study

This paper aims at achieving the following objectives:

1. To explain the concept of orphanage and institutionalization.
2. To enumerate the importance of support facilities for institutionalized orphans.
3. To assess the support facilities provided by orphanages in Nigeria for institutionalized orphans.
4. To make recommendations on how to ensure/improve the provision of adequate support facilities for institutionalized orphans.

Concept of orphanage and institutionalization

According to the Wordnet definition, an orphan is a child who has lost both parents (Wordnet, 2007). However, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Joint United Nations Program on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS), and other groups label any child that has lost one parent or both parents as an orphan. This approach has identified three types of orphans: a maternal orphan, is a child whose mother has died, a paternal orphan, is a child whose father has died, and a double orphan, is a child who has lost both parents (UNAIDS Global Report 2008). An orphanage is an institution that houses children whose parents are deceased or whose whereabouts are unknown. It is a public institution created to provide care and protection for children without parents. Simply put, an orphanage is a residential institution devoted to the care of large numbers of children. The first orphanages, called "orphanotrophias", were founded by the Catholic Church in the 1st century amid various alternative means of orphan support. The Jewish law, for instance, prescribed care for the widow and the orphan, and the Athenian law supported all orphans of those killed in military service until the age of eighteen. Plato (Laws, 927), as cited in The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume XI, says: "Orphans should be placed under the care of public guardians. Men should have a fear of the loneliness of orphans and of the souls of their departed parents. A man should love the unfortunate orphan of whom he is guardian as if he were his own child. He should be as careful and as diligent in the management of the orphan's property as of his own or even more careful still." The care of orphans was referred to bishops and, during the Middle Ages, to monasteries. Many orphanages practiced some form of "binding-out" in which children, as soon as they were old enough, were given as apprentices to households. This would ensure their support and their learning an occupation.

Importance of support facilities for institutionalized orphans

The importance of support for orphans can not be underestimated. Orphans, by virtue of their circumstances, face a myriad of vulnerabilities and in most cases, when there is no adequate support; they find it very difficult to cope with these risks or the stress that arises from the inability to cope. This in turn brings about far reaching negative consequences for the orphans. Research has established that social support and active coping effectively help to mediate stress. Additionally, face-to-face support groups are positively correlated with desirable outcomes, resulting indirectly from adaptive coping skills and responses (Sullivan, 2003). Orphans, including institutionalized orphans should enjoy care and support in these core areas: psychosocial support, education/vocational training, food and nutrition, legal and protection, shelter and care, health care (GHARP, 2007).

1. Psychosocial support – refers to interventions that support orphaned children to cope with the emotional and social aspects and impacts of orphanhood. As a result of being orphaned, children might experience traumatic events such as stigma and discrimination, isolation and loneliness, violence and exploitation, lack of adult support and guidance. Psychosocial support is important for orphaned children because it helps them overcome the challenges posed by their circumstances and it builds in them coping mechanisms as well as trust and hope in their future. Psychosocial interventions also help orphaned children build self-esteem. Orphaned children should be provided with age-appropriate support that recognizes that children often respond differently to trauma and loss.
2. Education/Vocational Training – refers to activities that support orphaned children's intellectual development across the age span from preschool to secondary level. There should be consistent school attendance for school age children, caregiver skills in early childhood education for preschoolers should be built, and increasing access to vocational training for older children should be provided. Education is important because every child has a basic human right to learn how to read and write and to be provided with quality education. Education is a basic right for every child to guarantee a responsible livelihood in society. Furthermore, education is the key to development, which can be used to effectively combat poverty – it reduces abject poverty and hardship. Education and vocational training is important to build a strong foundation and hope for the future of disadvantaged children (Child Survival Aid Ghana, 2012). Access to basic education is meant to allow orphaned children to live a healthier and more productive life. An educated child would have wider choices and opportunities in the future to improve his/her socio-economic status; and to be in position to take on new social responsibilities in the community (NELA, 2008).
3. In addition, vocational training is most important for the rehabilitation process of children at risk, in this case, orphans. If children are empowered economically, they can survive with grace and dignity. Without education, empowerment is harder for children to achieve.
4. Food & Nutritional Support – refers to the provision of food and nutritional support. Orphaned children need access to adequate and appropriate foods to meet their bodies' nutritional needs. Food and nutritional support is important because insufficient diet will make orphaned children malnourished and malnourishment can lead to poor health and low resistance to disease. It could also lead to lack of energy and concentration in school, work, or play (NELA, 2008).
5. Shelter & Care – refers to activities that support orphaned children to live in a safe physical environment and to grow up within the confines of a family and a community. Institutional care should only be considered as a last resort due to concerns about the effects of residential care on children's development. Activities aimed at ensuring children have a guardian in place

should they lose their current parent or guardian(s) as well as efforts to place institutionalized children in permanent families (through reintegration, fostering or adoption) should be implemented. In addition the area of shelter and care includes basic material support for physical needs such as bedding and clothing that are not covered under other areas such as food and health care. Shelter and care is important for orphaned children to meet their developmental needs, to equip them with knowledge and skills required for independent life in the community, to help them retain sense of belonging and identity, and to help them benefit from the continuous support of network within that community (NELA, 2008).

6. Protection & legal support – refers to all efforts to protect orphaned children from neglect, abuse, exploitation and trafficking as well as protection of their legal rights such as civil registration, guardianship and inheritance. This area also includes activities to prevent and confront stigma and discrimination faced by orphaned children. The importance of protection and legal support affords orphaned children access to Protection from maltreatment by those responsible for their care; protection from economic exploitation and work that is hazardous, that interferes with their education or harm their health and physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development; protection from sexual exploitation and abuse; protection from being sold or trafficked; protection from being subjected to torture or degrading treatment. If they become a victim of armed conflict, torture, neglect, maltreatment or exploitation, protection and legal support helps them to receive appropriate treatment for their physical and psychological recovery and reintegration into society (NELA, 2008).
7. Health Care – refers to efforts to ensure orphaned children have access to age-appropriate preventive and curative health care offered through public services. Healthcare is one of the main social services essential for the wellbeing of orphaned children. It includes preventive care which involves actions aimed at preventing or avoiding illness, promotive and curative care which is centered on actions that are taken once a person falls ill or is injured to reduce or completely remove pain. Health care is important for orphaned children because it puts them in a state of physical and mental wellbeing that provides an opportunity for them to achieve their greatest potential.

All these support facilities are invaluable to institutionalized orphans. To ensure that orphans achieve their full potential, institutions must create a supportive environment that upholds their right to survival, development, protection and participation.

Assessment of support facilities in Orphanages

There is an increasing body of evidence that orphanages, especially large orphanages, are the worst possible care option for children (Wikipedia, 2012). In large institutions, all children particularly babies may not receive enough eye contact, physical contact, and stimulation to promote proper physical, social or cognitive development (Wikipedia, 2012). In the worst cases, orphanages can be dangerous and unregulated places where children are subject to abuse and neglect (Wikipedia, 2012). In a study by Bilson & Cox (2005), findings showed that conditions in many institutions were poor. In many state institutions there was poor sanitation, inadequate sleeping arrangements, and children were not provided with a nutritious diet. The emotional needs of children were rarely met and some fundamental rights were violated. Findings of international research undertaken over a period of almost 20 years, shows that for many children institutional care has had a serious and negative impact on their social and educational development, well-being, and human rights (Green, 2000; Sample, 2006; UNICEF, 2003). The effects of institutionalization for young children are not simply psycho-social and educational. Recent research in Romanian orphanages into the brain development of children aged less than 4 years shows structural changes that may explain the cognitive, socio-emotional, and

behavioral difficulties that are observed in many children from such institutional backgrounds (Eluvathingal et al., 2006). Further evidence shows that care in family-type settings (the child's natural or extended family, foster care or adoption), is immeasurably better than life in even a well organized institution for almost all children. The individual, one-to-one love and attention that only parents (whether birth, foster or adoptive) can give, is extremely powerful and cannot be replaced by institutional care in promoting the development of children. Furthermore, there is a huge body of evidence from a wide range of countries, that institutional care is very much more expensive than family-based alternatives. An assessment of the evidence indicates that on average, institutional care is twice as expensive as the most costly alternative: community residential/small group homes; three to five times as expensive as foster care (depending on whether it is provided professionally or voluntarily); and around eight times more expensive than providing social services-type support to vulnerable families (Carter, 2005). The condition of living in most of orphanages is at the minimum level due to the fact that many of the orphanages often depend on charity donations, which may not effectively cater for the huge cost of maintaining the orphanages. Besides this, the number of children in some orphanages greatly surpasses the number of caretakers, which makes it near impossible to be able to give adequate attention and care to any one child per time.

The Nigerian context

Orphanages are located in different parts of the country, owned and managed by government, philanthropic organizations, non governmental organizations and individuals. Orphanages and other Child Care Institutions play key roles in children upbringing in Nigeria, however, managing these institutions in a professional manner still poses serious challenges (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, 2007). In a longitudinal study, Momoh (2010) monitored seven community based organizations in 25 rural communities in order to assess the provision of care and support for orphans. The findings noted that the organizations, through external funding were able to provide nutritional, psychosocial, educational, and health support for the orphans. The study concluded that funding continues to be the most challenging factor facing community based organizations in their bid to support services to orphans in rural communities.

Also, the information gathered from the directory of orphanages in Nigeria as compiled by the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development (2007), showed that most of the orphanages in Nigeria depend largely on donations, agricultural ventures and subventions; and as reported by virtually all orphanages which obtain subventions, such subventions were irregular and inadequate. Furthermore, the general observation made from the compilation of the directory of orphanages in Nigeria by the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development (2007) reveals the great disparity in the available facilities in Nigerian orphanages. Some orphanages have ultra-modern physical settings while some are in dilapidated states. There is variability in the amount of training received by caregivers as well as in the availability of important facilities such as portable water, electricity, transportation, clothing, medical, recreational, and educational facilities. The quality and frequency of monitoring of orphanages also vary from state to state. While some are well monitored, others are not. Orphanages complain about not receiving symbolic and other forms of support from ministry officials. Clearly, orphanages in Nigeria have managed to provide the necessary support for children in their care the best way they can. However, due to lack of adequate funding, most orphanages have not been able to provide maximum support for the orphans in their care. Observation made from literature show that in most orphanages, some of the caregivers are not properly trained to adequately respond to the needs of the children, and apart from this, the number of children being catered for largely surpasses the number of available caregivers. This, of course, makes it near impossible for

the caregivers to give maximum attention and care to one single child per time.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Orphanages have helped thousands of children by providing them with stable residence that they would otherwise not have had. Orphanage care, however, is not so much of a perfect substitute for being raised in families by accepting, affectionate and caring parents. Residence in orphanages should not prevent children from having a permanent and secure home either through careful adoption or foster care and it is important that caregivers ensure this. However, for children whose orphanage experience is transitory in nature and for those children who cannot be placed in families, it is extremely important that they experience a sense of well-being in spite of their childhood situations or disadvantages. Orphans, including institutionalized orphans are vulnerable and fragile children who need the constant exposure to support facilities to cushion the negative effect of their vulnerability. It is imperative that such support facilities are provided in adequate measures by caregivers of various institutions/orphanages. This, however, may not be so effectively carried out when orphanages are not in proper shape because of lack of funding. It is therefore recommended that governments at national, state and local levels should give financial support to approved orphanages, depending on their capacities and needs. Subventions in cash or kind should be substantial, regular and well monitored. The government should also establish careful and frequent monitoring of orphanages to ensure their compliance with stipulated guidelines. Furthermore, it is recommended that the staff (founders inclusive) of orphanages should be properly exposed to caregiving, as well as fund raising skills. Orphanages should also employ more caregivers in order to build the gap in the current ratio of caregivers to orphans in most orphanages. Not every orphanage can provide all the services needed by the children. It is recommended that orphanages establish formal referral systems for the benefit of the children. They must refer children in their care to other institutions for those services they might not be able to provide e.g., health care, education/ vocational training, etc. Referrals/Linkages can be established with treatment sites, hospitals/health centers/health outpost, social services agencies, faith-based organizations, facilities providing vocational skills training, and NGOs with support groups.

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