

Why State plans to close down children's homes

► Official says many years of research have provided overwhelming proof that institutional care does more harm than good to children.

► Institutions are warming up to government idea and taking children in their care back to their families and seeking alternative care for those who do not have homes to go to.

JACINTA MUTURA

Kelly struggles to fight back tears as he recounts events that have forced him to involuntarily confront the difficult questions of life and its struggles.

At 13 years, "Kelly, whose real name has been hidden to protect his identity, has known three homes, different parents and guardians and in totally different circumstances.

For nine years, he lived with his biological parents before he was taken to a children's home over negligence and about six months ago, he found a new home in a foster family, thanks to the government's plan to phase out all children homes in eight years.

As Kelly explains how his mother occasionally left him under the care of his older brother who would again leave him alone and unattended, he loses the battle with the tears that freely flow down his cheeks as his voice breaks.

"Sometimes my mother would go and leave us in the house. My elder brother would go out to play with his friends and leave me alone in the house. Sometimes, power would go out and neighbours would help us," he says

Kelly was taken away from his mother together with his older brother when he was about nine years old due to what authorities argued to be a case of negligence, and were placed in a children home.

"I did not know anyone in the children home. There was a boy who always bullied me but my brother came to my rescue. I did not like staying there," says the boy.

But Kelly's tribulations are temporarily relieved. He has a place to call home in foster care until the time their parents would convince the authorities of their readiness to take him back.

The brothers are among more than 45,000 vulnerable and orphaned children the government intends to remove from more than 850 children homes and reunify them with their families and communities.

"I will stay here until my mother is ready to receive us back. I love my mother so much because she was taking care of us after they separated with my father. They parted ways because she felt like my father was discriminating against my older brother," Kelly

asserts.

However, Kelly feels at home. He can again experience motherly love and a sense of belonging. He has blossomed and it is evident in his improved school performance.

"I like staying here because I can express myself freely. I can even ask for more food if I'm not satisfied. I couldn't do that back in the children's home. My foster brother is my age and we can play together," he adds.

Back in the children's home, he was assigned to wiping tables and sweeping the compound but there are additional duties in the foster family.

"I can clean dishes, clean the house and wash my clothes. Mum (foster) has taught me to do more other duties," he says.

The boy found a place to call home as a result of a robust campaign under the ambitious government-led National Care Reform Strategy for Children in Kenya that seeks to phase out all children homes in a 10-year plan that runs from 2022-2032.

According to Abdinoor Mohamed, Chief Executive Officer of National Council for Children's Services (NCCS), the idea is to remove vulnerable children and orphans from the Charitable Children Institutions (CCI's) commonly known as children's homes and orphanages, and transition them to family and community-based care before the 2032 deadline.

"This is informed by many years of research that provides overwhelming proof that institutional care does more harm than good to children," said Mohamed.

According to Mohamed, the care reform strategy emanates from the belief that all children belong in a family backed by overwhelming scientific evidence that children under institutional care suffer severe and sometimes irreversible developmental setbacks as opposed to those raised in families and communities.

The plan also results from the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child that states that children should grow up in a family environment and that priority should be given to support the child's parents and extended family.

"We are reintegrating children currently in institutions back to their families and communities. The strategy also proposes prevention of family separation to ensure that children do not end up in institutions as well as placing vulnerable children in alternative care," said Mohamed.

According to United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and other studies done globally, at least eight out of 10 of these children have biological and extended families and, with appropriate support, their families could look after them.

On this basis, the government has taken deliberate steps to transform the childcare system in the country.



850

NUMBER of registered private charitable children Institutions in Kenya



1,700

CHILDREN living in government-run Institutions including rehabilitation, remand, reception and rescue centres

9.5

MILLION

CHILDREN deprived of more than three basic rights

15,752

ESTIMATED number of children roaming the streets in Kenya

3.6

MILLION

NUMBER of orphans in Kenya and prone to poverty, neglect and abuse

21.9

MILLION

CHILDREN in Kenya below the age of 19

8

MILLION

CHILDREN around the world live in institutional care



Susan Njeri, a foster parent, prepares bedding at Rosana Children Home dormitory situated at Igonji village in Kiambu County. [Samson Wire, Standard]

Even as government deploy machineries to enact the directive, institutions are warming up to the idea and taking children in their care back to their families and seeking alternative care for those who do not have homes to go to.

At Hossana Children's home in Githunguri, Kiambu County, out of the 95 children who were placed in the institution, 11 have been reintegrated with their communities and only 19 are on residential care and 65 others on outreach programme.

According to the institution's manager Isaac Ndung'u, there has been a vigorous groundwork led by children officers, social workers, counsellors and partnering civil society groups and non-governmental organisations who are helping them in the transition.

"We thought children being in institutions was the best thing to have happened to mankind, but we have now realised that the outcomes of children that may have raised in children homes or orphanages are not good," said Ndung'u.

A scientific study titled Bucharest Early Intervention Programme found out that children raised in institutions are far more stunted physically with significantly low Intelligence Quotient (IQ) and that they far more likely to have social and behavioural abnormalities.

The study examined the effects of early institutionalisation on children's development focusing on children

abandoned at or around the time of birth living institutions in Romania.

"We have now realised that some milestones for children raised in homes are delayed but our intention was not to negatively affect them. We intended to host them and bring the best out of the children but if it becomes unproductive then we are not serving their best interest," said Ndung'u.

There are also research findings that children who exit the institution struggle to integrate in the community and to survive independently due to the structured caregiving in the institutions, and Ndung'u attested to that.

"Some of them cannot do basic things like preparing tea because they are used to getting tea made for them. Most of things are done for them but it should not be like that because eventually they will have to live on their own."

Ndung'u says the effects of not growing up in a family are evident in some of their care leavers who tried their hand in marriage but failed terribly.

Implementation of home care strategy will be done under three pillars which involves prevention of separation in families to avoid sending children to institutions, identifying alternative care for the children and tracing, reintegration and transitioning them to their families and communities.

The alternative care options identified include kinship, foster care,

guardianship and adoption.

However, there is a government continuum that discourages foster care as first priority when a child already has relatives.

According to Ndung'u, in collaboration with counsellors, children officers, social workers among other stakeholders, they initiated the process of using alternative care methods such as foster care for children whose place of origin cannot be traced through an elaborate case management plan for a seamless transition.

The teams are now banking on churches and community meetings to sensitise the people on the care reform and to recruit more foster families.

The anticipation is that by the year 2032, all the children in the CCIs will have gotten their families or reintegrated with the communities.

However, there has been reluctance among some private children homes owners and donors holding on to children and murmuring on possible "wastage of resources" and infrastructural investments.

"We need to ask ourselves is it about investing in the children or in infrastructure because when the best interest of a child is realised, that argument should not matter," Ndung'u argues.

Kickstart Kids International's Olturoto Children's Village, a CCI that was providing care for abused, abandoned and neglected children in Kajjido County, has also reintegrated all the children back to the community.



A children's home is like a magnet in the community that pulls needy families and children to think that it is the only solution to the problems they are encountering. Poverty should never be a reason to separate a child from their family."

Peter Kamau, director of Child in Family Focus

RESEARCH

Study shows children who grow in children homes have low IQs and stunted growth

Numerous global studies have shown most children who grew up in children homes and orphanages suffer stunted growth, have low Intelligence Quotient (IQ) and experience abnormal social development.

The Romanian scientific study titled Bucharest Early Intervention Programme found out that institutionalised children were far more physically stunted compared with children raised in their biological families or in foster families.

The study also found out that for every 2.6 months spent in a Romanian orphanage, a child falls behind one month of normal growth with significantly lower IQs and levels of brain activity.

The study, which was comparing the developmental capacities of children raised in large-scale institutions with non-institutionalised and fostered children, also suggests that children below the age of three years are particularly more vulnerable.

Further the study revealed that "the children in institutions were far more likely to have social and behavioural abnormalities such as disturbances and delays in social and emotional development, aggressive behaviour problems, inattention and hyperactivity, and a syndrome that mimics autism."

The study sampled random 208 children with a mean age of 22 months spread across three care arrangements in Romania.

It indicates that lack of human eye contact, visual and physical stimulation means that essential neurological processes within the brain are sometimes never triggered, causing brain stunting and low IQs.

"The lack of toys, play facilities and developmental education also leave many children with reduced motor skills and language abilities. Physical stunting is the result of poor nutrition and sickness caused by overcrowding, poor hygiene and a lack of access to medical care," reads the report.

Further it reads: "Even well-run care institutions can have negative developmental effects on children. For example, the distress caused by being separated from parents and siblings can leave children with last-

ing psychological and behavioural problems."

The poor caregiver-to-child ratio in many institutions was also found to have an effect on the way staff respond to children's needs, hence denying them love, attention, and consistent care required for growth.

It was also found out that "the closed and often isolated nature of institutional care, together with the fact that many resident children are unaware of their rights and are powerless to defend themselves, make institutionalised children significantly more vulnerable to violence and abuse."

However, the report indicates that it is difficult to assess the scale and nature of violence in institutional care because it is largely hidden.

Another Russian study shows that care leavers, are more likely to experience mental health problems, struggle to form healthy relationships and to adapt to the demands of independent living.

The social consequences found in children raised in institutions was found to have created 'lost generations' of young people who are unable to participate fully in society on evidence that many children who enter institutional care at a young age are physically, socially and emotionally underdeveloped.

The lack of life options available to children leaving long-term institutional care, in particular, makes them more vulnerable to criminal behaviour as a means of survival. They are also more likely to develop anti-social behaviour, attachment disorders, and to struggle with positive parenting.

According to the Romanian report, care leavers are especially vulnerable to exploitation and abuse "as they are less aware of their rights and accustomed to following instructions without question."

"They may be less able to find work or to develop social relationships. The harm caused to children from spending substantial parts of their childhood in care inevitably has consequences for society as a whole," reads the report.

[Jacinta Mutura]



The lack of toys and play facilities leave many children with reduced motor skills and language abilities.

- Report,

Coming tomorrow
Hundreds of children lack the chance to spend their childhood with their families. Read about the lifelong damages that children's homes leave.