

Let's Raise Children in Families

PROGRAMME CASE STUDY



The essential roles of the Rwandan social service workforce in supporting the reintegration of children into family and community life

In 2013, in collaboration with UNICEF, the government of Rwanda established the Tubarerere Mu Muryango (Let's Raise Children in Families - TMM) programme to enable the closure of large-scale residential care institutions for children and promote family-based care. The programme aims to build strong systems of protection and care that will have sustainable and wider benefits for children in Rwanda. This case study profiles the reintegration experiences of one child who has participated in TMM. It is based, where possible, on interviews with the child, his or her family, district social worker and psychologist, community child protection volunteers (known in Rwanda as Inshuti z'Umuryango – IZU – Friends of the Family), neighbours, peers and others. All names and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect the anonymity of all concerned.

The reintegration of boys and girls from institutions into family-based care is a complex undertaking that requires family tracing, planning, guidance and support from skilled service providers. In Rwanda, social workers and psychologists employed by the National Commission for Children (NCC) and assigned to a specific district work together using two complementary set of professional perspectives and skills. These professionals perform a variety of roles, many of which centre on removing children from harmful institutional care to ensure that they can grow up in families. They encourage care home managers to support children's family and community reintegration and to transform their facilities into community outreach centres. The social workers and psychologists trace families and assess children and relatives to determine whether reintegration is possible and in the child's best interests. They identify the needs of the individual child and family in order for reintegration to be successful, and work to ensure that these requirements are met before the child is placed. For children without relatives, social workers and psychologists find, assess and approve foster families to care for the child, work to ensure a good match, and provide ongoing monitoring and support,

as needed. They also support young men and women over or nearing the age of 18 to understand and make a transition from institutional care to independent living in the community.

Post placement follow-up

These pre-placement efforts are only part of the work involved in family reintegration. The other key aspect is the monitoring and follow up that takes place after a child has been placed in the home of relatives or a foster family. It involves providing ongoing support to meet the material, educational, health and psychological needs of the child and family and ensuring each child's successful integration in the community. It is focused on achieving the overall wellbeing of the child, including preventing and responding to violence and maltreatment. This work post-placement is time-consuming and takes place over an extended period of time. Tasks include:

- Working with family members to explore how to respond to challenging child behaviours, such as aggression and other behavioural issues and extreme withdrawal

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- Facilitating communication between parents and children
- Assisting parents to access social protection, such as cash grants, when/if there is a deterioration in a family's financial circumstances
- Helping community members to better understand and welcome reunited children through sensitisation activities about the effects of institutionalisation
- Advocating in schools for the inclusion of children with behavioural issues and special learning needs

The varied and specialised skills that are required to undertake these tasks are developed through professional training, technical supervision and experience. In general, social workers explore and work to address the cultural, social and economic causes of the problems that children face, while psychologists focus on individual emotional and social integration issues, and provide support that is more focused on the individual. Both professionals have a degree in their field that provides them an initial basis for the practical, organisational and ethical challenges involved. They also receive training and technical supervision regarding the process of supporting family reunification and reintegration. They not only support the needs of reintegrated children and their families, but also work to ensure the protection of all boys and girls from violence, neglect, abandonment and exploitation.

Working with community volunteers

Social workers and psychologists are supported in their work by the Inshuti z'Umuryango (Friends of the Family – IZU), a network of child protection community volunteers that numbers 29,674 and is operating in every village in Rwanda. IZU work in pairs (one woman and one man who have been selected by their community) to identify vulnerable boys and girls in the community through referrals from schools, clinics or social services, or through their own observations. Included in this group are recently reunited children and those in foster care. They are part of the community-based child protection system, which works to address the needs of all children and their families. The IZU make household visits and provide guidance and assistance as possible. They also try to sensitise community members to the needs of children, including those who have lived in institutional care, and facilitate sessions for parents to strengthen their parenting skills. All have received training in child safeguarding and positive parenting, and they can refer complex cases to district-level social workers

and psychologists. This referral of difficult and complex cases is crucial to ensuring that the professional child welfare workforce can prioritise meeting the needs of the most vulnerable boys and girls and can take the time required to do so.

Impact on children and families

In Rwanda, there is a growing body of experience and evidence demonstrating the importance of professional skills for ensuring the safe and effective reintegration of children into families and communities. Vulnerable families often have complex needs and challenges that require professional assistance from trained social workers and psychologists. These include a combination of extreme poverty and family breakdown, illness, conflict, violence or abuse. For example, they may be called upon to provide support to parents who are trying to manage challenging behaviours of a previously institutionalized child, or they may be required to rely on their expert knowledge of the system to enable poor families to access the range of services required for the care and protection of a child with disabilities. They may need to make and support referrals to the health and social protection systems for those living with HIV or caring for children who are HIV positive; helping young care-leavers to access safe and affordable housing; conducting workshops for teachers on the needs and behaviours of children who have been deinstitutionalized. Social workers and psychologists assigned at district level play these and many other crucial roles.

In 2013, an assessment conducted by Tulane University compared outcomes for children assisted to return from institutions care to families and supported with reintegration by social workers and psychologists with other children sent back to their families by residential facilities without such support. It found that the involvement of professionals was associated with reintegrated children having higher levels of self-esteem and satisfaction with their placement. It also found that professionals were especially adept at helping families to deal in non-violent ways with challenging behaviours caused by separation and institutionalisation.

The professional and volunteer social workforce in Rwanda are together assisting children and families to access much-needed material, medical, psychological, educational and social support. This collaboration has contributed greatly to the success of the TMM programme and the development of an integrated national system for the protection and care of children. This workforce is essential to Rwanda's ongoing efforts to ensure that boys and girls can grow up happily and safely in a family.