

Let's Raise Children in Families

PROGRAMME CASE STUDY



Thierry

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.

Thierry lives with his family on a small sloping hill in a three room house in a semi-rural area near Kigali City. Outside the house there is a courtyard with banana trees and a small roofless structure where chickens and a hen repeatedly hurry in and out. Next door, a child sings softly and distant conversation floats by as dried leaves fly up from the recently swept ground.

Now 21 years old, Thierry has lived in this quiet place for the past 5 years. Before that, he and his younger brother, Jean-Paul, lived in a nearby children's home. They had been placed there at the ages of 11 and 9 years by their widowed mother, Mukamana, when she was acutely ill with HIV and unable to care for them. Their baby brother, Alain, also HIV positive and unwell at the time, remained with his mother, in the care of a family friend. Everyone saw the boys' time in institutional care as a temporary measure. They hoped it would not go on too long.

Settling into the children's home took Thierry and Jean-Paul some time. They missed their mother and brother and wanted to be together with them. However, the centre provided them with the one thing that they wanted more than anything: an education. After two years out of school, they were able to continue.

"I was sad at the home because I knew that my mother was sick and poor and suffering. But I was also able to study freely for the first time in my life, without responsibilities and challenges. I wanted to get an education and this seemed like the only way." -Thierry

Over time, Mukamana and Alain were able to access antiretrovirals. Their health improved and they grew stronger. Every week, they visited Thierry and Jean-Paul at the institution. For a few years, the older boys spent school holidays at home but a permanent return was not

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yet thought possible because the family had no stable place to stay and no funds for school fees, adequate food or other costs. When the TMM programme began, and the director of the centre asked Thierry if he and Jean-Paul wanted to return to live permanently with their mother, Thierry was conflicted. He wanted to be with his mother but worried that his family's poverty would make it impossible to continue his studies. His mother shared these fears and initially refused to take the boys back; she wanted them to complete school and felt that doing so would be impossible were they to move back in with her.

Before returning home

At this point, the TMM social worker and psychologist undertook a detailed assessment of Thierry's and Mukamana's desire to be re-unified and the appropriateness of reintegration.

"We had meetings to talk about what would happen. These sessions were helpful because they explained what it was going to be like and put my mind at ease." - Thierry

After determining that, fundamentally, Thierry, Jean-Paul and their mother wanted to be reunified and that their shared reluctance was based on access to school and material concerns rather than worries about their relationship, the District social worker and psychologist undertook a detailed assessment of the family's needs. Decent shelter and food were determined to be necessary prerequisites for reintegration. A local leader was approached about providing a small parcel of his land to the family, and the government supported the construction of the simple three-room structure where the family now resides. A food allowance was provided for the first 24 months after reintegration, and an educational grant was provided by past sponsors of the children's home. These measures were put in place to prevent the children from being returned to institutional care, and more fundamentally, to ensure that they could grow up happily and safely in their family.

Once at home

Although Thierry's and his mother's early concerns were addressed before the boys returned home, and everyone was happy to be together again, settling in to life as a family under one roof was challenging. The children loved their mother, Alain and their new baby sister, who was born after a short-term romantic liaison between Mukamana and a man unknown to the children. Nevertheless, living in the children's home had impacted Thierry's sense of his own needs in relation to those of others:

"The child I dropped off at the centre was different to the one who returned to me...he did what he wanted, when he wanted. No one at the institution paid him particular attention or looked after him as an individual. He couldn't listen; he was too independent. This disturbed me greatly." - Mukamana

Mukamana had learned from the district social worker about the harmful effects of institutionalisation. Rather than getting angry, she decided to be patient with Thierry and Jean-Paul and to speak with them about why they needed to communicate better with each other. The social worker and psychologist, when they came to do follow up visits, supported Mukamana and the children by discussing these issues with them. Thierry grew to feel freer to speak about the difficulties he experienced on returning home, which resulted from what he saw to be his lower standard of living and unreasonably high levels of adult supervision and control. He and Mukamana listened to each other and, over time, grew closer. Thierry came to understand his mother's questions and concern to be her way of showing that she cared for him:

"In the children's home, there is no family. No one cares about you in the way a parent does. It is their job, they are paid to look after you. Home is different in quality – a parent loves you...The only thing I miss about the home is the football I watched on TV." - Thierry

Ongoing support

Like all families, parents' and children's needs change over time. After a period without financial support, last year Mukamana's health worsened and the household was without any income. The family's circumstances deteriorated markedly. Thierry was in his final year of secondary school and at risk of dropping out to support the family. The District social worker intervened by helping them to access a small grant to start an income generating activity. The chickens and hens that wander around Thierry's yard are the product of this investment.

Nowadays, Thierry helps his mother with the business of selling eggs while he waits for news about a scholarship to the University of Rwanda, where he hopes to study politics. He is in regular contact with friends from the children's home who have also been reintegrated and closely follows their progress. He says they are managing well within their families, they have the support they need, and, more than anything, they are happy to be home, as is he. To make it, he said, you need help from others but 'love is the most important thing.'