

I find it very revealing, for example, that the children in care in Eastern Europe whom I've met tend to tell you everything almost without knowing you, they need to be able to express all their problems to someone, and normally they can't do this.

When they want someone to talk to, someone who can take up their concerns, children are not looking to tear down the fences round the facility, they have much more modest desires. Kids in some residential facilities in Western Europe can't even have an influence on the food they're given to eat. These kids just want to eat something they like for supper!

Foster care is completely different, there's no comparison. The family set-up provides the socially accepted mechanism for discussing problems; you can always say, "Dad, why on earth do we have to eat lasagne for dinner at 5 in the afternoon; it would be better at 7". He might not agree but at least it's been aired. There's a cultural norm for redress in the family unit, and residential facilities should be trying to approach the cultural norms of the families that the children are from.

So foster care is the answer?

As far as I am concerned, foster care only works for about 85% of kids, it doesn't work at all for the other 15%. I could never have lived in a family unit myself, but generally it must be easier if you can: there's no special logo outside the door, no bars on the windows for protection. Even so, there's still a need for a social worker to be assigned to each child in foster care so that if there are problems the child always has somewhere to turn for support. A lot of social workers nowadays are quite young, they can easily relate to kids.

But in the industrialised countries at least, foster care is usually looked on as a short-term solution: so what about longer-term stability for children?

Many foster parents love their foster children, they make no distinction between the foster child and their own biological children, especially when the placement becomes a long-term arrangement. They should be given the opportunity of having more influence over choices, of taking more responsibility – being the child's legal representative where

necessary and appropriate, instead of having to turn each time to the biological family, to a sometimes disinterested and sometimes uncooperative father or mother, for a signature or decision. Ireland recently amended its laws to give foster parents a little more say – in giving permission for emergency treatment, for example.

After "Make Baby Homes History!"; I would like our next campaign in the industrialised countries to be "Adoption is an Option!" – it doesn't seem to be looked upon like that at present. The long-term plan works out in practice as an "in-care" plan; but for a child of 6 whose parents will never be able to look after him or her again, why is it not a legal requirement that adoption be one of the options in a long-term plan? It may exist as an option in theory but it's not laid on the table. Legislation is very protective of natural parents, but so many children in foster care would love to have the chance of being adopted by their foster parents. At the same time, if the foster parents were to become the legal guardians, they would take on full responsibility without any financial compensation. If your job is a foster parent, you can't just go from being paid one day to being unemployed the next, just because you adopt. At the very least there needs to be a transitional phase in terms of remuneration or allowances.

So, tackling the problems of out-of-home care in a nutshell?

We need to re-think the care system from zero. Not by trying to work out what's best for kids, but by going out to talk with them and making the change together.

Note

1 Day of General Discussion on children without parental care, organised by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Geneva, 16 September 2005.

A Cambodian experience Promoting foster care

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"A child deprived of living with a family is a lame child: He/she lacks part of his/her constitutive essence thus the exercise of his/her rights will also be lame." (Maria Rasa Benechtrict, speaking to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Discussion, Children without Parental Care, 2005)

Providing care for separated children is a challenge in all contexts. Nowhere is this more apparent than in developing countries emerging from a legacy of conflict. In such environments legal and social structures are not effective. Separated children often must fend for themselves or be placed in large orphanages. This paper describes experience with community-based alternatives for separated children in Cambodia, a country in such a situation.

Why out-of-home care is needed

Cambodia suffered throughout the 1990s from conflict, droughts and flooding. Poverty was widespread and many families became fragmented. Children often had to leave their family home to seek work in urban areas. More recently, HIV/AIDS and increasing urban poverty have added further to the numbers of children who lack adequate parental care.

Temporary shelters, such as those provided by World Vision, not only provide for the immediate needs of vulnerable children, they also allow families to be traced. Around a third of the homeless children attending World Vision centres have been reunited with their immediate or extended families. However, shelters cannot address the needs of all children. Those unable to find their families or who have been abandoned continue to live on the street and work in hazardous occupations. These 'separated children' are the most vulnerable; they often lack legal identity and endure sickness and exploitation. As part of an urban underclass, they would benefit from the development of responsible policy that avoids ad hoc measures, since these are costly in both monetary and developmental terms. "Typically these [measures] are the institutionalization of

street children... and imprisonment of delinquent children" (Blanc 1994).

According to Blanc, innovative approaches generally involve local actions as well as the identification of new agents of change. One approach to the problem of separated children is to involve the community in planning a local response. Agents of change include individuals and community networks. These can identify with the needs of the children and respond to them with compassion.

An alternative to institutional placements

Institutions comprise the largest single sector of formalised alternative care. Their role in emergency childcare has been covered extensively in the literature. In Cambodia, institutions are sometimes well-resourced facilities offering a higher level of service than is available to most families. The temptation for families to relinquish their children to an institution may therefore be considerable. However, institutions tend to lead to dependence and segregation, rather than integration in the community. In addition, the costs are extremely high. For example, in Uganda, the cost of institutional care was estimated to be 14 times higher than that of community-based care (UNICEF 2004).

There are also institutions working with disabled or HIV-positive children. Basic care standards are often low and donors difficult to attract. Institutionalisation is an inherent danger in long-term placements, with the result that those leaving institutional facilities are often young unskilled adults with little connection to the broader community. Children need the affection, attention

and social connections that are associated with family-based placements. Another advantage of community-based programmes is that they can reach and accommodate more (UNICEF EAPRO 2000).

Adoption no longer an option

Adoption within Cambodia has proved to be difficult due to a lack of an appropriate legal framework. Formal domestic adoption was stopped in between 1995 and 1999 due to a lack of clarity over inheritance rights and instances of trafficking/child labour. Although lacking the legal tools, the Cambodian government's Ministry of Social Affairs, Labour and Youth stated that aims from 1995 to 2000 included to systematically seek alternative ways of providing care and accommodation to orphans and abandoned children. In 1999 a revised law was passed, but lack of resource for its implementation reduced its effectiveness. Child exploitation of separated children continue to be a source of concern among the NGO community. Since 1998 international adoptions have been limited by Cambodia with periodic freezes prompted by examples of corruption. Restrictions have been introduced in receiving counties waiting for effective implementation of new adoption law and regulations to be put in place. Since 2001, inter-country adoption has also been suspended by an increasing number of 'receiving countries' including Australia, Canada, the USA and many European States. This is due to a lack of child protection measures, since some children were being bought from needy families. In addition, some orphanages were accepting 'processing fees' of several thousand dollars. Once the Cambodian government passes and implements new adoption legislation and procedures in line with the 1993 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation, intercountry adoption may again become possible. The convention exists to provide standards so international adoption is in line with best interests of children. These would vary depending on the situation. No single solution will be appropriate in every case.

Developing foster care

Since 1994, World Vision has placed more than 500 children (aged between 3 and 16) in foster care in the community. The programme has been welcomed

by the Cambodian Government; it has given some structure to community-based care and involved government officers in aspects of planning and monitoring. The approach has been shared with other organisations and training materials available in the national language. These elements assist in developing good practices for care of separated children. Even children with special needs, such as physical and mental disabilities, have found new hope through being placed with supported foster families. The activity has been independently reviewed and has developed a manual of operations consistent with the United Nations declaration on social and legal principles relating to the protection and welfare of children, with special reference to foster placement and adoption and the Convention on the rights of the child. The project's operational manual has been translated and shared within and outside Cambodia.

Fostering requires planning, monitoring and clear legal protection for the children. All decisions need to take account of their views, best interests and protection. This includes maintaining the legal identity of the child. Fostering gives rise to questions of equity with children of the host family. Equal duties and equal access to education, healthcare and nutrition need to be ensured before a placement starts. Potential problems emerge when expectations are unclear and safeguards not fully developed. Foster parents have to attend training sessions, where they discuss child protection guidelines and basic healthcare for children. At its best, fostering can reconnect children to close and supportive relationships, make them part of a stable community and increase their life options. At its worst, it can lead to further abandonment and damage to the child and/or family.

Risks for children emerge if inadequate frameworks are in place to structure and monitor placements. Time and resources are needed for screening families, orientating parents, matching children with placements and addressing issues of support, sustainability and follow-up. Non-government groups can develop processes to assist in these areas, but legislative power, of course, remains the domain of government. Lack of adequate social policy linked to practice reduces capacity of good local practice being extended to other areas. Without



Photo: JIM HOLMES

A child helps with the transport of rice from basic kitchens of an orphanage in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Institutions comprise the largest single sector of formalised alternative care in Cambodia.

adequate social policy and practice, success in one area is unlikely to be replicated elsewhere. Foster care programmes need to build credibility, not only with government, but also with families and the community. Only then will they avoid being viewed or used as a dumping ground, or a source of income/cheap labour.

Philosophy of foster care

The Cambodian experience highlights the following aspects of foster care. It provides a supportive, culturally appropriate family environment, which is preferable to an institution since it is more likely to meet individual needs for long-term care. Substitute families and local communities in a development context are able to take good care of children when the natural family cannot. Foster care offers a stable base from which children can pursue education and vocational training and go on to independent living. Fostering increases the role of civil society in the care of homeless and

abandoned children. Children offer support to each other and, generally, between two and five children will be placed in each foster family. Siblings are kept together and children have the opportunity to build relationships with other children in the household as part of the matching process. The approach is cost effective when compared to operating a 24-hour residential centre. Working in tandem with a temporary shelter it offers children a supported transition from a facility to community and dependence to independence.

Cultural acceptance

Informal fostering arrangements within the extended family are common in Cambodia and these are almost always viewed as long-term arrangements. Short-term fostering is seldom practised and most Cambodians are prepared to care for the children 'as long as it takes' (Gourley 1996). Although there are only incomplete records of numbers of orphaned or abandoned children, the 1998 national health survey found that

approximately 2% of families were caring for one or more orphaned children (UNICEF EAPRO 2000).

In a best-case scenario, a child will be treated on an equal basis with the other children in the household. Sometimes, however, the child of poorer relatives may be treated differently. These children, typically girls, have to do more chores and may even be expected to work as servants. This type of arrangement is generally socially acceptable because the family is seen as helping a child who would otherwise have nothing. Visits and sharing experiences with other foster families can help to set more equitable roles and boundaries for foster children.

Current legislation and procedures

Issues regarding the legal status of foster parents versus that of natural parents need to be considered in the light of existing practice and gaps in current legislation. This includes gaps in birth registration, a major child protection concern in East Asia and the Pacific. A lack of legal identity is a critical factor that can lead to marginalisation and discrimination (UNICEF EAPRO 2000).

Governments can approve a change of status for a child and have the power to take responsibility away from parents. Government approval through legislation is also necessary for a child to be placed with an alternate family. Legal arrangements give all parties some degree of protection. It is also important to consider if it is in the best interests of the child to strengthen links with the natural family. Where this is not possible, World Vision has been permitted to apply for de facto recognition of adoption when the child has been fostered for over a year and both the child and family wish to proceed with this option. However, the current situation could be improved by a review of existing family law and recognition of the legal status of fostered and adopted children.

Recruitment of foster parents

Families have been recruited mainly through community networks such as Christian churches, Buddhist temples, Islamic mosques and cultural associations such as the Vietnamese Association. Networks can strengthen the placement through informal pre-screening, social support and monitoring. World Vision and government staff

visit prospective families to assess their suitability based on well-defined criteria, including not being too wealthy or having too many possessions. (This recognises children's temptation to steal). Neighbours, village leaders and local police are also contacted. Families that already have their own children are given priority. Personal motivation and evidence of involvement in service-related activities are important in pre-screening assessments.

Parents interviewed as part of a project monitoring exercise reported that they were motivated by a desire to help children. For example, "I believe we should help them [street children] because of the drastic national situation, which has caused so many children to be separated from their parents. Khmer should help Khmer." And "As I am a Christian, I believe everybody is God's child, therefore I am encouraged to help others, especially these poor children." Foster families are also attracted by support provided to the placement, which is planned to cover costs and give some benefit to the families own children. This includes financial support, school materials and vocational training opportunity.

Sustainability

Many foster parents express a desire to raise their foster children over the long term. However, the lack of adequate domestic adoption procedures remains an obstacle. This makes children uncertain about their future and highlights the need for both parties to be clear about the expected duration of the foster placement.

All parents interviewed in the evaluation said they think of the children as their own. For example, "I gave them my family name when enrolling them in school." And "Of course I think of them as my own... I intend to share my land with them after they are married."

During the first 12 months of the placement, World Vision staff explore with the family the option to move to income generation assistance rather than keeping the fixed monthly stipend (USD 20–30). Income generation schemes not only reduce demands on World Vision funds, they also have the potential to increase the family income by more than the monthly stipend.

Unsuccessful placements

Approximately 30% of placements have been discontinued after less than six months. Reasons for discontinuing placements include positive outcomes – a restored relationship with the natural family, for example – and negative ones, such as unequal expectations on the part of the children and the care providers, and conflict with other children in the household. The breakdown may be due to an unsuccessful matching process where trust and bonding are slow to develop.

On leaving foster care, some children return to the transitional centre, while others opt for independent living on the streets. For some children the placement ended because some change in the circumstances of their natural family now meant they could return. Older children who have a long history of living on the street may be particularly difficult to integrate into foster families, having become accustomed to the transience and freedom of the streets. Short-term group home living arrangements with a lead tenant have proved more suitable for such children, allowing them a more independent lifestyle while providing safe accommodation and intensive skills training until they reach the age of 18.

Conclusion

Experience from World Vision's foster care programme in Cambodia suggests that perceived cultural barriers to fostering may not be as significant as first thought. While negative attitudes need to be understood and guarded against, a more important factor requiring careful assessment is the personal motivation of potential foster parents. Foster care is an appropriate long-term option for orphaned and abandoned children. The evidence can be seen in the dedication of ordinary Cambodian families, who provide the kind of supportive family environment lacking in former street children's lives.

What have we learned?

- The perception of cultural barriers to fostering unrelated children is not well founded. It has not hindered the development of a small-scale supported foster care programme in Cambodia.
- Recruiting families through faith-based and community networks assists in screening and supporting placements.
- Screening potential foster families involves balancing formal and informal steps, through which information can be gathered that will ensure the best interests of the child.
- Children respond positively to being involved in a matching process with prospective families.
- Children respond positively to family placements, which ensure consistent contact with stable supportive adults.
- Foster children generally develop good relationships with the natural children, who are seen as helpful confidantes and advisors.
- Successful placements have included access to skills training for older children and education for younger ones.
- Many foster parents support formal adoption for foster children.
- For further information on World Vision's work with children see www.globalempowerment.org

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