



**Transform
Alliance
Africa**



Ending institutional care in Africa

Questions & Answers



Introduction

Love. One-on-one care and attention. A sense of belonging and identity. Safe spaces to play and learn. Trusting relationships. Being part of a community.

These are things that all children need to grow up happy, healthy and strong - and that only a family can provide.

Unfortunately, too many children today are growing up in orphanages or children's homes. Such places even when delivered by well-meaning care providers, can never replace a family.

An estimated eight million children are already living in institutions around the world. Several million more are at risk.

It doesn't have to be this way.

Child rights organizations, UN agencies, governments, universities, faith communities, practitioners, youth who have exited children's homes/orphanages, and committed individuals are joining forces to put an end to institutional care in Africa and ensure all children grow up in the love of a family.

Working in partnership with beneficiaries, these actors are strengthening families and communities, building

the capacity of local professionals, and developing family and community care options for children who cannot remain with their own parents. A future without institutions is possible.

“Institutions can be closed but a family can never be closed”.

– A young person from institutional care



Why do you think it's necessary to move children out of orphanages?

“When my child first left the institution he suffered from fear, lack of confidence and had speech problems”

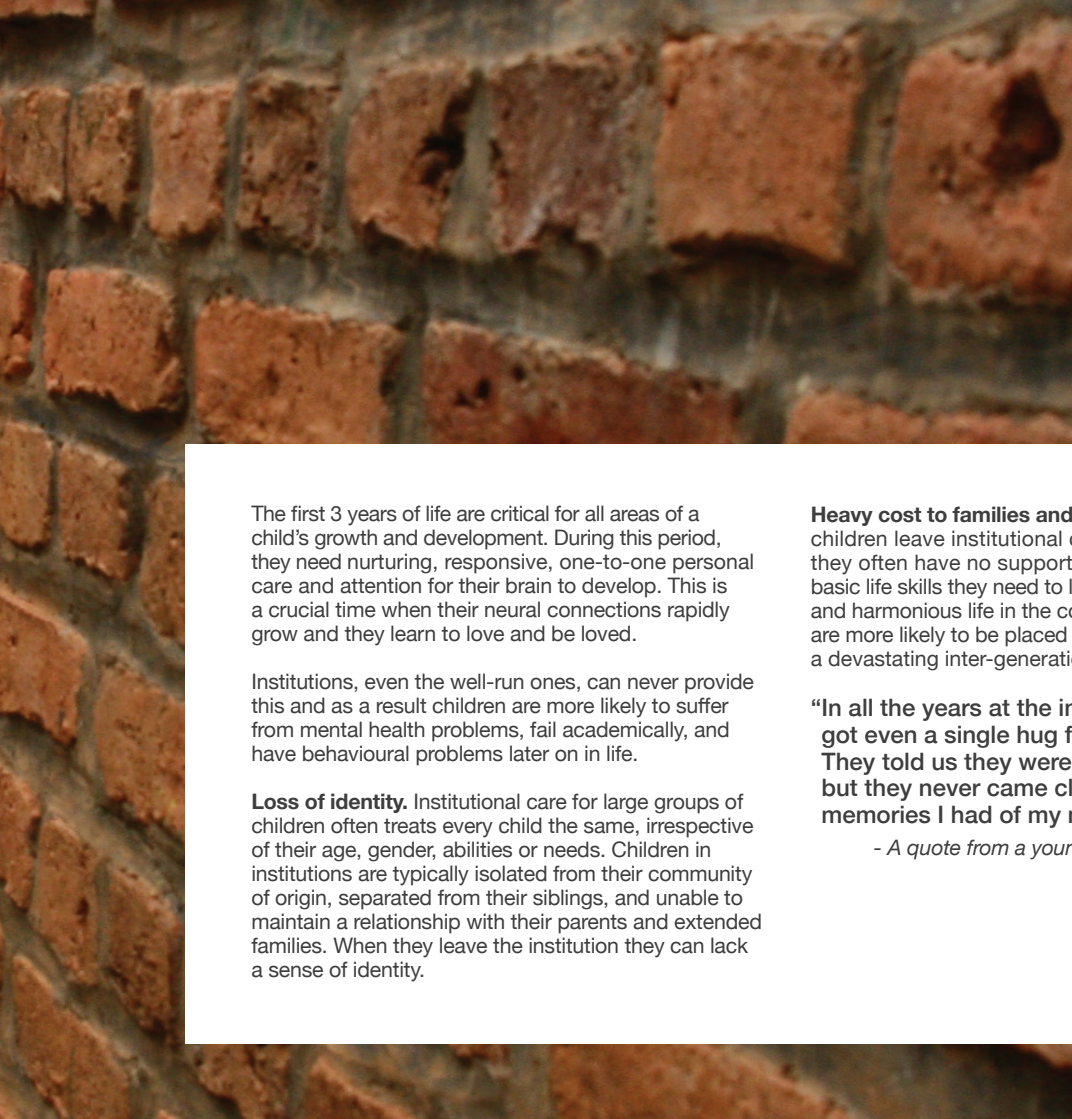
- A parent to a re-integrated child

Institutional care violates children's rights to development, protection and survival. All African countries have ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). 41 out of 54 African countries have ratified the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child which recognises that children should grow up in a loving family environment to achieve their full potential and harmonious development of his or her personality.

Decades of research show that institutional care has damaging effects that last a lifetime.

Unsafe. Children in orphanages are not only among the most marginalised in society, but highly vulnerable to neglect, physical and sexual abuse. Studies show that violence in institutional care is six times higher compared to family care settings.

Toxic stress and damaged brain development. Research shows that the neglect of children in institutional care leads to a build-up of “toxic stress,” which has a devastating impact on brain development.



The first 3 years of life are critical for all areas of a child's growth and development. During this period, they need nurturing, responsive, one-to-one personal care and attention for their brain to develop. This is a crucial time when their neural connections rapidly grow and they learn to love and be loved.

Institutions, even the well-run ones, can never provide this and as a result children are more likely to suffer from mental health problems, fail academically, and have behavioural problems later on in life.

Loss of identity. Institutional care for large groups of children often treats every child the same, irrespective of their age, gender, abilities or needs. Children in institutions are typically isolated from their community of origin, separated from their siblings, and unable to maintain a relationship with their parents and extended families. When they leave the institution they can lack a sense of identity.

Heavy cost to families and communities. When children leave institutional care as young adults, they often have no support network and lack the basic life skills they need to live a fulfilling, productive and harmonious life in the community. Their children are more likely to be placed in an institution, creating a devastating inter-generational cycle.

“In all the years at the institution, I never got even a single hug from a housemother. They told us they were our ‘mothers’, but they never came close to the vague memories I had of my mother”

- A quote from a young person from an institution

But aren't orphanages still needed to care for orphans?

Between 80% and 96% of children confined to institutional care have at least one living parent, according to global research.

The simple answer to this is no.

Studies have shown that nearly all children in institutions have living extended family. Many parents, who love their children, make the agonising decision to put them in an institution because poverty, disease, stigma and prejudice, or crises like war and the HIV/AIDS pandemic have made it too difficult for them to provide for even their children's basic needs. Building institutions has become an unfortunate reactive response to these challenges.

If given the right support, most of these parents and relatives could take care of their children instead of placing them in institutions. When children do lose their parents or need to be separated from them because of neglect and abuse, quality alternative family and community care should be available before a permanent solution is found.

While many institutional care providers are well-intentioned, support for institutional care diverts energy away from efforts to reunite children with their families and provide long-term strengthening services for families and communities.

With more resources and political will, African countries can establish child protection systems that better align with their family and community values and support children's development. A quality child protection system ensures that children are not separated from their parents and families unnecessarily. However, when separations must or do occur, there must be suitable alternative family and community care for

children, according to their needs, circumstances and in their best interests.

A child protection system includes:

- **Family strengthening services** provided at the community level and supporting families at risk to stay together and become stronger, through: parenting support, housing support, strengthening family and social relationships, access to health, nutrition and education services, respite care, to specialist support for families with children with special needs, and income generation.
- **Informal family care** provided by extended family or other caregivers identified by the community or child. It is widely used across Africa and could be expanded with more resources.
- **Formal family care** regulated by the State. It takes several forms, like foster care, kafaalah, and guardianship.
- **Small scale residential care** that replicates a family environment. It is a last resort used for limited periods of time or where children's specific needs require it – for instance, to provide therapeutic care or treatment for children who have suffered trauma or severe abuse or neglect, or to enable large sibling groups to remain together.
- **Domestic adoption** can be a permanent solution when it is in the child's best interests and when all options for reintegration within the family of origin have been explored and discarded.

But can African countries successfully implement family and community care?

Successful initiatives show that if the resources invested in institutional care were redirected to strengthen families and community care systems, there would be no need for orphanages at all.

Rwanda - Through the Care Reform Initiative (CRI), the government is committed to moving away from institutional care to family and community care alternatives. Since 2011, nearly 2,000 children and youth from 15 institutions were reunited with their families, placed with extended or alternative families, or moved into independent or community living.

Sudan - The government has committed to a new system of care for vulnerable children that explicitly rejects institutional care. Since 2003, 3,934 children from 3 institutions were transitioned into families.

South Africa - The ACTIVE Family Support model demonstrates how to strengthen families and help prevent separation through timely and tailored support. From 2001 to 2011, 4,460 children and youth were supported within their families.

Kenya - In 2015, the government launched the Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, which is intended to reduce reliance on institutional care, enhance family and community care, and provide harmonised national guidance for child care and protection.

Ghana - Through the Care Reform Initiative (CRI), the government is committed to reducing reliance on institutional care. The government is seeking to prioritize support to family and community care approaches to children without appropriate parental care.

Uganda - The government has established an Alternative Care Framework to protect children from unnecessary separation, to grow up and thrive in families and not institutions. The Ugandan Government, civil society and international partners have been developing a National Alternative Care Action Plan that will see the implementation of the Alternative Care Framework.


What about children with disabilities or very complex special needs?

All children have the same rights to care and protection. Children with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of institutions.

All efforts should be made to ensure children with disabilities grow up with their families and enjoy appropriate care and support for their particular needs as provided by the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. States should provide early and comprehensive information, services and support to children with disabilities and their families. Access to education, community based rehabilitation services,

day care and respite services make it possible for children with disabilities to grow up in their families and communities. States should also engage in public campaigns to combat stigma and discrimination against children with disabilities.

When the immediate or extended family is unable to care for a child with disabilities, the State must make every effort to provide alternative care within the wider family, and failing that, within the community in a family setting.

A young child with dark skin and short hair, wearing a red t-shirt, is the central focus. The child is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. In their hands, they are holding colorful plastic blocks. One hand holds a vertical tower of blocks in shades of blue, purple, orange, and red. The other hand holds a horizontal structure made of yellow, green, and red blocks. The background is slightly blurred, showing other children in a play area.

“The vitality, sustainability, and moral standing of a society depend on the extent to which it provides opportunities for all its children to achieve their full potential to grow up to be responsible and productive adults, and to be become successful parents of the next generation”

- Jack. P. Shonkoff and Linda Richter

Isn't all this very expensive?

Family and community care is a better, more cost-effective way to care for children. In Tanzania, research found that the annual cost for one child in institutional care was more than USD\$ 1,000, compared to approximately USD \$180 for supporting a child in foster care . In South Africa, institutional care was found to be six times more expensive than family-based care.

By investing in early childhood development and family strengthening services instead of institutions, many more children and families can be helped to become self-reliant and positively contribute to the society. Research shows that investing in quality early child development, which supports both children and their families, is one of the most powerful investments a country can make with returns over the life course many times the amount of the original investment.

Furthermore, a child care and protection system developed to prioritise preventing separation of children from their families and communities, will lead to reducing the number of children who need formal care.

African countries face many challenges to their development - what makes you think this should be a priority?

“I am poor. My daughter left home to find a job as a housekeeper to earn a living. Things did not go as expected, she came back pregnant. In the pain of giving birth she suddenly passed away. The child survived I had a child of my own and it was too difficult for me to look after both of them. So I brought the baby to the institution to be cared for”

- A mother living in poverty

Investing in eradicating institutional care and the transition from institutions to families and communities can help achieve important development goals.

Fight inequality and exclusion. Discrimination against people with disabilities and other marginalized groups is a key reason why children end up in institutions. By supporting children to stay with families and communities, governments promote social justice and human rights and help build cohesive communities.

Improve education. Children are often placed in institutions in order to access education. By strengthening and developing educational services, including early childhood services and vocational training in the community of origin, more children will benefit as well as their wider communities.

Build healthier, empowered communities. Child protection reform engages the whole community and focuses on ensuring that all have access to basic health services, so that no family places their child in an institution because they need health care.

Tackle child poverty. Families affected by poverty are more vulnerable to separation. Studies show that a majority of the young people who have left children’s homes and orphanages are economically and socially incapacitated. This is a critical indication that institutional care reproduces and amplifies the vulnerabilities it purports to address. Strategic investment in child protection systems with a focus on at risk families can address the root causes of family separation by linking education, health, social protection and other relevant services at grass roots level. This can have significant economic benefits.

What can I do to help?

“The institution and the local leaders play a big role. When a poor parent brings a child, instead of helping them, they instead recommend that the child be placed in the institution, yet if they supported the parent the child could be cared for even though the parents are poor”

The State has the ultimate responsibility for children’s care and protection. Private and institutional donors can provide crucial resources to support the transition from institutional to family and community care.

Donors can best support a better future for all children by funding initiatives that help children and their families within their community. This includes through education, health care, nutrition programs, livelihoods support, community services and early intervention especially for children with disabilities, programs and services to help youth leaving care integrate into society and lead independent lives, adult learning and economic development, and local volunteer services.

Civil society organisations can also take the courageous step to join the movement for family care by working in partnership to persuade governments to embark on comprehensive care reforms.

Ultimately, everyone can help. Join the movement to eradicate institutional care, raise awareness and spread the word: together we can create a global groundswell of commitment and achieve long-lasting change.

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Transform Alliance Africa

Partners:

