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Rwanda Child Policy Spells Possible End of Orphanages

by Ivan Broadhead

During the 1994 genocide, about a million Rwandan children lost one or both parents. Dozens of orphanages were built to care for these vulnerable youngsters. Now, in the next few years, the Rwandan government hopes to close the majority of the country’s children’s homes. Rwanda’s so-called "child deinstitutionalization" (DI) policy, which, despite initial concerns, is attracting global support.

Orphanages grew after genocide

Rwandan Prime Minister Pierre Habumuremyi observes that there were only a handful of orphanages in Rwanda prior to the genocide. Today, there are more than 30. "Orphans were not part of Rwandan culture. Children are the responsibility of the community - especially children who have lost a parent," he explained. "That was one of the tenets of Rwandan culture."

A growing body of research suggests orphanages are not always the places they were envisioned to be. Claudine Nyinawagaga is Rwanda country director with the British charity, Hope and Homes for Children.

"Children raised in institutions lack a very important element of love. Some are facing malnutrition; sexual abuse; there is not follow up to ensure the children are receiving an adequate education," Nyinawagaga said.

Led by the prime minister and assisted by Hope and Homes for Children, Rwanda is pursuing a national policy of child "deinstitutionalization", or D-I, under which Rwanda’s orphanages will gradually be closed.

Inside Rwanda’s orphanages

Even institutions run by well-intentioned owners have their shortcomings compared to a good family home.

Until recently, Mpore Pefa orphanage in Kigali’s suburbs, sheltered more than 50 children. A rusty axe lies on the floor outside a dormitory where children sleep up to four per bed.

The walls in the dormitory are pockmarked. The bed is a foam mattress with an old sheet draped across it. The room smells of stale urine. It is absolutely filthy.

Deinstitutionalizing children

In May, Mpore Pefa will be the first orphanage in Rwanda to close under the national D-I policy. With due care, youngsters will be placed in loving homes and looked after by specially trained foster families or, where possible, their own extended families. Annonciate Bamurange is Mpore’s director.

"The government showed me the advantages of children growing up in a family. Some orphanages won’t join the program. They see kids as a business," Bamurange stated.