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RESEARCH

Reintegration of Institutionalised Orphans into Families of Origin: Challenges Faced by Caregivers and Social Workers in Tanzania

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Abstract
A family is a significant element in child care and development, particularly for orphans who suffer psychological problems due to the absence of their biological parents. In this regard, the study explored the challenges caregivers and social workers face in reintegrating orphans into their families in the Dar es Salaam Region, with a focus on orphans"" well-being. This study used a qualitative approach, unstructured interviews, and a multiple-case design. The study also used thematic analysis and Bronfenbrenner""s ecological theory (1992). Nevertheless, twenty-three research participants (20 caregivers and three (03) Social Welfare Officers) were involved. The findings revealed that, in reintegrating orphans, caregivers and social workers faced various challenges, such as the refusal of relatives to accept their children and the unwillingness of children to go back home due to maltreatment they had experienced in their families. Other challenges included difficulty tracing families, funding shortages, lifestyle differences between orphanages and families, and economic difficulties for families. Consequently, most orphans remained in orphanages even after reaching legal age for reintegration. The study concluded that to properly reintegrate orphans into families, multiple systems, such as families, orphanage management, and the government, should cooperate. Finally, the study recommended that the government support interventions to reintegrate institutionalised children and facilitate a smooth transition from institutions to families.

Keywords Child · Reintegration · Caregivers · Institutions · Families · Tanzania

Introduction

In Tanzania, the reintegration of institutionalised children into families is legally mandated. According to the Child Act, Cap. 13 R.E. 2019, reintegration is the process of reuniting orphaned children with their parents, guardians, relatives, or neighbours once they have acquired sufficient skills and abilities to adapt to the natural environment after their institutional life. In this study, reintegration involves preparing children to reunite with their living parents, guardians, relatives, and other community members, and helping them maintain bonds and cope with their ancestral environment after institutional life. A caregiver is an employed person in an institution who takes the responsibilities of looking after orphan children due to the death of one or both biological parents. However, in this study, a caregiver is any adult responsible for caring for orphan children and returning them to their families. Meanwhile, an orphan is any person aged below 18 who has lost one or both of their biological parents and is currently living in the institution.

The Magnitude of Orphans in the Institutions

Worldwide, about eight (8) million children aged 3 to 18 live in institutions (Goldman et al., 2020). Tanzania is estimated to have a large number of orphans. Mbwambo et al. (2023) report that in the country, over 1.3 million

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children are orphans, having lost either one or both parents. Nevertheless, among the children available in the country, about 24,067 are cared for in 140 orphanages, of whom 11,925 are males and 12,142 are females (Christopher & Mosha, 2021).

Overall, studies show that the number of children living in orphanages is increasing. Despite the reported higher number of children living in orphanages in Sub-Saharan Africa, such an increase does not correspond to the services provided to these children, since the services offered, mainly psychological services, are insufficient to meet their needs, and most children live in crowded environments. Therefore, these situations have highlighted the need to reintegrate these children into their families and communities of origin for their future well-being.

Strategies for Reintegrating Institutionalised Children into Families

Different approaches have yielded success stories in reintegrating children into families. For example, in Ghana, Frimpong-Manso et al. (2022) reported that planning, monitoring, and evaluation influenced successful reintegration. Likewise, in Zambia, Mumba (2021) found that approaches that follow the alternative care and reintegration guideline, in which children were placed in homes and supported through the provision of start-up capital for the establishment of independent living in the community, were successful in this community. In Tanzania, Veadsto et al. (2026) found that social welfare officers used strategies such as cooperation with social welfare officers, stakeholder involvement, family tracing and assessment, educating children on the value of family life, and counselling to reintegrate institutionalised orphans into families.

In summary, it was observed that approaches supporting children to establish independent lives in the community, family tracing, placing children with living parents and other extended family members, and placing children in halfway houses operated by different countries to reintegrate them into their families were employed. However, such approaches provided limited emotional and psychological support, making it difficult for children to accept returning home.

Challenges for Reintegrating Institutionalised Children into Families

There are different challenges in different countries regarding reintegrating institutionalised children into families. In Nepal, family reintegration is becoming more challenging as some guardians hesitate to assume full legal responsibility for these children (Lovera & Punaks, 2015). In Sub-Saharan Africa, challenges in reintegrating institutionalised children are not significantly different from those in developed countries. For instance, research conducted by the United Nations Children's Fund and the Government of Malawi (2019) found that most parents in Malawi hesitated to support reintegration because they believed it would lead their children to drop out of school. In Uganda, the reintegration programme's implementation period was too short, and project personnel had limited time to carry it out and evaluate outcomes (Laumann & Namey, 2019). Furthermore, Muguwe et al. (2011) in Zimbabwe found that financial difficulties hindered children's transition from urban orphanages to village homes.

In Tanzania, Ascharia and Asatsa (2020) reported that relatives of children in orphanages demanded money from orphanage owners to accept the children into families on the orphanages' behalf. Because of these challenges, numerous initiatives have been implemented to facilitate the reintegration of orphan children from orphanages into their families of origin. For instance, in 2009, the Child Law Act was enacted to safeguard a child's rights and social welfare within their family of origin. The government also established the national guidelines for reintegrating institutionalised children into their families in 2019 through the Ministry of Health, Community Development, Gender, Elderly, and Children (MoHCDGEC, 2019). Despite these efforts, caregivers and social workers still face largely unaddressed challenges in reintegrating these children, particularly in Tanzania. Therefore, the study emerged to address the knowledge gap.

The Purpose of the Study

The study aimed to explore the challenges caregivers and social workers face in reintegrating institutionalised orphans into their families of origin in the Dar es Salaam Region, Tanzania. Specifically, the study: (i) examined the challenges faced by caregivers and social workers in reintegrating institutionalised orphans into their families of origin and (ii) analysed the measures for improving the reintegration of orphans living in orphanages into families of origin.

Research Questions

Two key research questions guided the study: (i) What challenges do caregivers and social workers face in the process of reintegrating institutionalised orphans into their families of origin? (ii) What measures are used for improving the reintegration of institutionalised orphans into their families of origin?

The Theoretical Bases of the Study

Urie Bronfenbrenner's 1992 Ecological theory, which describes the complexities of human life, guided the study. According to Bronfenbrenner's theory, an individual's personality and behaviours are influenced by the immediate social setting in which they interact. The theory further asserts that environmental factors shape a child's development, from the immediate context of family and school to broader cultural ideals and programmes (Bronfenbrenner & Evan, 2000; Feinberg, 1992). Furthermore, the theory advocates that children's perception of complexity is influenced by five psychological systems: the Microsystem, Mesosystem, Exosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem. Microsystems are the closest contexts for children's interactions, including the family environment or institutional care setting, friends, neighbours, schools, and health providers. In fact, an orphan's personality development is influenced by the attachment and care they receive in their orphanage. This first level of the theory aligns well with the current study because the nature of care and friendship within orphanages, schools, health systems, and neighbourhoods predicts how easy or difficult it is to reintegrate orphan children into their families of origin. Moreover, mesosystems, the second layer, explain the relationships between microsystem elements. This study supports the view that successful reintegration of orphan children into their families of origin largely depends on the influence of caregivers responsible for parenting in orphanages, in collaboration with family members who are expected to be linked to the orphanages before reintegration. The neighbourhood, schools, and mosque can also act as push or pull factors in children's reintegration into their families of origin. The third level is the exosystem, defined by social systems, including community regulations, policies, and conventions. This level operates through different media, including radio, television, periodicals, and newspapers. In addition, this level supports the study by providing knowledge about the value of a family environment for child care and development, and the expected treatment in such a context, as opposed to orphanages.

The macrosystem refers to the laws, attitudes, and cultural values that protect the welfare of orphan children. Policies, legislation, national programmes, and cultural norms that encourage children to remain in their families of origin also help reduce reintegration challenges when reintegration into families of origin is needed. In this regard, clear laws and a positive attitude toward reintegrating orphan children into their families of origin make it easier for children to return to their families and communities of origin and live independently after leaving the institutionalised setting.

Finally, Bronfenbrenner (1992) described the chronosystem that encompasses the dimension of time as it relates to a child's environments. Elements within this system include the timing of a parent's death, which automatically changes the status of a child to that of an orphan. These physiological changes occur as a child ages and with health conditions in either the child or their parents. In connection with this theory, the current study examined how factors within orphan children contributed to their readiness to be reintegrated into their families of origin. Therefore, ecological systems theory provides a useful framework for this study, as it explains how factors at different layers of a child's living context shape reintegration challenges and strategies, such as family conditions and school-related factors.

Methods

The study used various methods, including the research approach and design, sample and sampling procedures, data collection methods, ethical considerations, and data analysis procedures, to explore the challenges caregivers and social workers face in reintegrating institutionalised orphans into their families in Tanzania.

The Approach and Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach because the research objectives required the researcher to interact with participants. Kombo and Tromp (2006) stated that qualitative studies rely on flexible, interactive research strategies, including interviews and focus group discussions. Likewise, this study employed a multiple-case design. Moreover, the Dar es Salaam Region of Tanzania was chosen because it has a high number of children living in institutions, as Makuu (2019) reported that the Dar es Salaam Region has a high number of children living in institutions, with about 2000 vulnerable children.

Sample and Sampling Procedures

Twenty-three research participants were purposively recruited for this study; of these, 20 were caregivers, and three (03) were Social Welfare Officers. The sample size (23) was chosen based on Omari (2011), who stated that a sample of 20–30 participants is sufficient for a qualitative study. Regarding participants' characteristics, most caregivers were female (15), while a minority were male (5). Age-wise, participants were between 25 and 35 (3), 36 and 45 (4), 46 and 55 (5), 56 and 65 (7), and 66 and 75 (1). Regarding inclusion and exclusion criteria, the study included caregivers aged 25 and above with at least 2 years of experience serving orphans in institutions. The study excluded caregivers serving orphaned children in other settings, such as families. Likewise, Social workers aged

35–44 (3) were involved to understand the challenges they face in reintegrating orphans into families and measures for improvement, as they are overall in charge of the welfare of orphans and other vulnerable children in the districts. The social workers involved in this study were those responsible for serving orphans and other vulnerable children in their area. However, Officers assigned to other activities were not involved in this study.

Data Collection Method

The study administered unstructured interview schedules to both caregivers and social workers to obtain their views on the challenges they faced in reintegrating orphans into families and on measures to improve the process. Interviews were a suitable tool because they allow exploration and the collection of in-depth information from respondents (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). The interviews were conducted in the centre's confidential interview room, with each participant interviewed individually in Swahili, the participants' native language, and each interview lasted 30 to 45 min. During the conversation, the information was recorded on a smartphone and later transcribed for further reflection and interpretation.

Data Analysis Procedures

Interview information from participants was analysed by following the six steps suggested by Creswell and Creswell (2018). First, the interviews were transcribed and organised using multiple sources. Then, all gathered information was examined to assess its overall believability and thoroughness, using field notes and audio data. Next, a word denoting a category was written in the margins after the data were arranged and categorised into patterns. The fourth step involved gathering data to develop categorical meaning, where coding descriptions created themes. The fifth step was representing and describing themes, and the conversation was structured around interconnected individual viewpoints, themes, and subthemes; finally, data were interpreted as the final stage.

Findings

The study explored the challenges caregivers and social workers faced in reintegrating institutionalised orphans into their families of origin and their views on measures for improvement.

Challenges Faced by Caregivers and Social Workers in Reintegrating Orphans into Families

In the first part, the study explored the challenges caregivers and social workers face in reintegrating institutionalised orphans into families.

Relatives in Families of Origin are not Ready to Accept Their Children

The findings revealed that in reintegrating institutionalised orphans into their families and communities of origin, caregivers and social workers faced various challenges, like the reluctance of relatives to accept their children, as one caregiver shared her views by saying:

"Many families fail to accept their children because of the dependency syndrome they have created when the child lives in an orphanage. Many relatives believe that the orphanage should do everything for the child; when they are told that the child should be integrated into the family, they see that they have added another burden to the family" (A caregiver aged 43 from institution number 3).

The findings in the above accounts indicate that relatives' unwillingness to accept their children back home delayed efforts to focus on reintegration. Meanwhile, some relatives were ready to take their children home; however, families' economic difficulties led them to abandon their parental duties, leaving children in orphanages.

Orphans Were not Ready to Return Home

The study found that most children did not want to return home because the orphanage lifestyle differed from the environment they experienced at birth. For instance, the caregiver said:

"Most of the children who live in orphanages have developed a state of dependence, so when it comes to being reunited with their families, they find it difficult to accept. At the orphanage, life is different from real-life African families since everything is done for the child: dishes are washed, there are workers to sweep the yard, food is cooked; in general, life is not compatible with the environment of our families where we grew up" (A caregiver aged 48 from institution number 2).

The above accounts indicate that orphans refuse to return to their families because they receive better education at orphanages, such as studying in English-medium schools, since it was challenging to get that chance in their families.

Different Life Styles between the Orphanages and Families

Participant information revealed that lifestyle differences between orphanages and family environments affected the reintegration process. Some children were not prepared for reintegration because of the treatment they received at the orphanages, which was different from what they received from their birth families, creating difficulties for them to accept the reintegration. For emphasis, one Social Worker said:

*"Children once told to go back home and live with their relatives, most of them refuse, and some don't want to hear the news about their homes; if you start telling them that news, they remain crying. The orphanage's life is much different from that in families since in the orphanage, the children eat good food, are taken care of, and are brought up well" (*A Social Worker aged 36 from District A).

The above accounts revealed that, in institutions, orphans were not prepared to live independently after leaving the orphanages. Likewise, the treatment they received in orphanages motivated them to remain in the institutions, regardless of their legal age.

Difficulties in Tracing Families of Origin

Moreover, difficulties in tracing families affected the reintegration processes. The findings from caregivers revealed that it was difficult to reintegrate children into unknown families and relatives since the majority of these children were brought into the orphanages at a younger age when their biological parents had died. For instance, one caregiver shared his views by saying:

*"Orphans, especially those who have no parents at all, find it difficult to prepare a plan to reunite them with a family; he continues to stay in the orphanage when there is no other way to do it, and the child knows that I am the only caregiver and his father" (*A caregiver aged 31 from institution number 7).

The findings indicate that management did not provide responsible officers with the resources and training needed to reintegrate children. Consequently, the implementation of reintegration programmes was delayed because staff had limited knowledge of how to facilitate them. Then, monitoring children in the orphanages that were supposed to be reintegrated became an issue because staff had limited time for follow-up, as they were overwhelmed by many duties.

Economic Difficulties in Families of Origin

Subsequently, findings revealed that economic hardship in families was an obstacle to caregivers' ability to facilitate the reintegration of orphans into their families; most relatives were not ready to accept their children due to poor living conditions. During the conversation, one caregiver said:

"Some relatives are not ready to accept their children because of the poor living conditions in their families. When the child lives in an orphanage, they feel that they have become a burden because they know that in the orphanage, the child will be helped and given everything he needs, rather than if he lived with them in a family" (A caregiver aged 49, number 14).

The findings indicate that poverty in families was a major challenge in reintegrating orphans from orphanages into their families. Consequently, relatives refused to care for their children, leading them to surrender parental duties to orphanages.

In summary, the findings indicate that caregivers and social workers faced various challenges in reintegrating orphans from orphanages into families, including family members' unwillingness to accept their children, orphans' reluctance to return home, and difficulties in tracing families. Other challenges were economic difficulties in families and a shortage of time and limited power for Social Workers to facilitate reintegration.

Measures for Improvements, Suggestions from Caregivers and Social Workers

Caregivers and Social Workers presented various practical suggestions to improve the reintegration of institutionalised orphans into their families.

Orphans' Care in Orphanages to Follow Traditions and Customs of the Natural Settings

Participants suggested that care for children in orphanages should follow the traditions and customs of their natural settings, and that reintegration stages should be properly followed to avoid unnecessary conflicts that could emerge after reintegration. One caregiver presented her suggestions by saying:

"Child care in orphanages should follow the traditions and customs of child care and the natural foundations of the family in the respective country, so that the child, when reunited with his family, can adjust easily. If families' lives conflict with the traditions and customs of orphanages, it will be difficult for the child to accept his family's environment when he is sent to live with his siblings" (A caregiver aged 43 from institution number 2).

Consistently, social workers suggested that, when reintegrating children, stakeholders should be ready to support children living in families, and children in schools and colleges should not be disturbed by reaching legal age for

reintegration; instead, reintegration arrangements should be made when they finish their studies. For emphasis, one Social Worker said:

"Stakeholders must be ready to support orphan children while they live in families, and relatives must be ready to accept their children upon leaving the orphanages. Moreover, orphans in schools should be allowed to continue with an orphanage's life regardless of their attainment of the legal age for reintegration, and they should be given entrepreneurship education for their future career development" (A Social Worker aged 44 in District B).

Supporting Funds for Reintegration

In addition, participants suggested that, to improve interventions and programmes focused on children's reintegration, the government, NGOs, and other stakeholders should provide financial support. The government should also set up a special fund to support reintegration processes. During the interview, one caregiver suggested that:

"For children to reunite with a family, the most important thing is money; therefore, various people from companies and organisations should help the government achieve the exercise of reuniting the child with the family by donating anything. If they do that, reuniting the child with our family as guardians will be very easy; as you know, every step you take regarding these children needs money" (A caregiver aged 25 from institution number 6).

The findings indicate that the total cost of children's reintegration includes funds for family tracing, accommodation, and transporting the child and staff from the orphanage to families. Likewise, other costs emerged for follow-up and family empowerment after children's reintegration, which are difficult for orphanage owners to manage. In this regard, government support across all aspects of children's reintegration is critical to facilitating a smooth transition from orphanages into families.

Reviewing Policies and Laws of Children's Reintegration

Participants subsequently suggested that the responsible governmental authorities should review and regulate laws and guidelines that govern the reintegration of institutionalised orphans, since orphans are still young at 18 and find it difficult to establish independent lives. For emphasis, one Social Worker said:

"The government should review the child law that requires a child to leave the orphanage at age 18, so he can complete his studies while still living in the home. The age limit for a child staying in the home should be raised to 21 years. He will have been able to recognise himself and start being independent at 18 years old. The orphan is still young, and his ability to recognise himself and make decisions is very low" (A Social Worker aged 36 in District A).

The findings in the above accounts indicate that the government-set age for child reintegration was a challenge for most orphans pursuing their studies, because the proposed age was beyond the majority, who were in secondary and vocational studies. Therefore, such laws and guidelines should continue, as academic progress for these children was jeopardised when they were forced to join their families without completing their studies.

In summary, participants suggested that, for sustainable family-based reintegration of institutionalised orphans, various practical measures such as following the traditions and customs of the natural settings in caring for orphans, reviewing policies, laws, and guidelines for children's reintegration and supporting funds for reintegration are vital for safe, guided children's rights to live in Families.

Discussion

The study aimed to explore social and psychological challenges caregivers faced in reintegrating children from orphanages into their families and communities of origin. The study identified a lack of relatives' readiness to accept their children as one obstacle to children's reintegration. This situation was justified by dependence syndrome that developed in their minds that the orphanage was everything to their children, and allowing children to come back was viewed as another burden to families. The findings are similar to those of a study conducted in Malawi, where relatives did not want their children to reintegrate into families, fearing that they would drop out of school (UNICEF & GoM 2019). Likewise, a study in Bagamoyo, Tanzania, reported that relatives of children in orphanages demanded money from orphanage owners to accept children into families on the orphanages' behalf (Ascharia & Asatsa, 2020). In connection with that, Faith to Action Initiatives (2016) maintained that when children stay connected with families such as parents, siblings, grandparents, and other blood relatives, they develop a sense of belonging, love, and connections that enable them to learn and participate in cultural traditions and social skills that help them interact effectively with others. Therefore, if family members refuse reunification, the child may feel abandoned and refuse to return to the family (Lovera & Punacks, 2015). In this regard, more educational campaigns and interventions focused on children's reintegration are vital to help relatives understand the value of family life for children's well-being.

Nevertheless, reintegrating children from orphanages into families requires funding. According to the study, a shortage of funds for caregivers limited reintegration

processes because NGO and other stakeholder funding was insufficient to meet demand. Consequently, caregivers and social welfare officers failed to implement the programmes as instructed by the guidelines. The findings aligned with those of Muguwe et al. (2011) in Zimbabwe, which showed that financial difficulties hindered children's transition from urban orphanages to village homes. Therefore, for successful integration, government authorities, including policymakers, must focus on early identification and intervention by coordinating existing community support, including developing and introducing a minimum support package for children and their families.

Notably, lifestyle differences between orphanages and families led children to neglect their family environment; in orphanages, they were given everything they wanted, and staff handled all activities children could do as part of the life skills package. Consequently, children found it difficult to cope with family life, which they had never experienced while living in the orphanages, and eventually returned to the orphanages after reintegration. These findings align with van IJzendoorn et al. (2020), who found that institutions under private or public management, staffed with amenities that do not provide a child with a family setting, are associated with poorer outcomes. Consequently, children developed various psychological disorders such as isolation, depression, and low self-esteem, and others considered institutional care their home forever (UN, 2019). Noting the contribution of ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) in the current study, it is evident from the findings that the described interactions in the different layers explained by the theory, such as the interaction within the orphanages, support offered by caregivers, interaction between orphanages and the families of origin, social systems, laws and attitudes of the community, have significant influence on the process of reintegrating children into their families of origin. Specifically, some families of origin resisted receiving their orphan children returning from orphanages because of ineffective collaboration and interaction between orphanage leadership and relatives in the families of origin.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study findings provide important insights into the challenges caregivers and social workers face in managing the reintegration of orphans living in orphanages in Tanzania. It is concluded from the study that the nature of care and support within the orphanages, the collaboration between the orphanages and the orphan children's families of origin, the attitudes of caregivers and relatives of the orphan children in homes, lack of resources, and less effective policies and guidelines contributed to making reintegration a challenge. In response to these difficulties, the study proposes improvements, including education geared toward attitude change among relatives of orphans in families of origin, reviewing policies and guidelines guiding their integration, and improving financing. It is therefore recommended that reintegrating orphan children living in orphanages be considered a core function of government structures, rather than leaving it to social workers and caregivers.

Significance and Implications of the Study

This study holds substantial value for policymakers, social work practitioners, and child welfare advocates in the sense that it identifies an important gap in the existing policies and regulations, especially on the decision to use only age factors as a reason for reintegration rather than linking them with other social and financial reasons, hence facilitating policy revision. Moreover, the findings describe a gap in implementing the existing framework, reflecting the government's strong commitment to reintegration but a lack of structured, institutional dissemination and operational funding. In fact, the study challenges the traditional placement of children in orphanages, which limits their interaction with local communities and provides artificial, temporary support for basic needs. Under such circumstances, a secondary challenge arises from the inability of children raised in orphanages to adapt to independent or typical family life in an African context.

Limitations of the Study

The study relies heavily on qualitative accounts from specific municipalities in Dar es Salaam and selected institutions; under these conditions, the findings may reflect localised socio-economic conditions and may not fully capture reintegration dynamics across the entire country. Also, relying on data from caregivers and social workers to describe children's reintegration limits our direct understanding of their lived experiences. Finally, the study does not track long-term outcomes, leaving the long-term sustainability of the reintegration process unmeasured; future studies should address this.

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Data Availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Ethical Approval The authors followed the research clearance procedures and obtained a research permit No. AB3/12(B) from the Research Information System Board of the University of Dar es Salaam. In addition, researchers obtained research permits from the Regional and District Administrative Secretary. Moreover, the researchers upheld confidentiality, privacy, and beneficence toward participants. Conversely, caregivers (children's parents) and social workers provided consent to participate in this study.

Consent for Publication The author has accepted the article to be published in this journal.

Competing Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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