



## Eritrea: Collective Responsibility for War Orphans

**B**efore the thirty-year conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the concept of “orphans” as usually defined in western societies, was virtually unknown. The only exception was children who had been abandoned for various reasons and were cared for in institutions (orphanages) supported by foreign church agencies. Within traditional Eritrean society, it was generally assumed to be self-evident that children who had lost both parents would be taken in by members of the extended family; or if no relatives could be traced, they were taken in by neighbors or family friends. Children who had lost both parents automatically become members of the new family and had all the rights and responsibilities of other children in the same family. This “grass-roots” pattern of caring for children in urgent need of protection was wide-spread throughout the country, and especially in village communities and among the nomads. Because the process was taken for granted, no formal agreements or legal documents were required, and adoption and foster care were alien concepts.

As a result of the thirty-year war, the number of children who lost both parents increased in geometric proportions. At the same time, the social structure of the traditional society was grossly disrupted. As a result, the indigenous practices of caring for unaccompanied children no longer functioned, and the Eritrean administration had to make special provisions of group care as long as the war lasted. Immediately after independence, a nationwide survey conducted by the Social Affairs Authority of the newly-formed Eritrean government determined that a total of at least 14,000 children below the age of sixteen years had lost both parents due to the violence of

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war; and that, in addition, a minimum of 100,000 children were in need of special protection because their surviving parents were no longer able to provide the basic necessities of food, shelter and educational opportunities for their children. In order to help, foreign NGOs and church organizations began to construct or rebuild and enlarge orphanages in population centers, and made a concerted effort to introduce the concept of adoption to foreign countries and foster care as the strategies that were widely accepted as the preferred remedies of caring for unaccompanied children. However, the social service agencies in Eritrea had had very negative experiences with foreign adoptions during previous occupations. Therefore, they rejected all offers of help that involved adoption or foster care, and made concerted efforts to close all orphanages as soon as possible. Instead, they formulated a nation-wide plan for the rescue and rehabilitation of unaccompanied children that was largely built on indigenous practices of child care.

The main component of this plan was the reunification of orphans and other unaccompanied children with their extended family. A nation-wide search was implemented to first trace the extended families (aunts, uncles, grandparents and the like), and then to select those members of the extended family who were in the best position to provide the children with the necessary economic and social protections. However, most of the families, including those in relatively good economic circumstances, had been so impoverished by the 30 years of war that accepting one or more children would have imposed unacceptable additional burdens on their lives. An income-generating scheme was therefore devised and implemented whereby every potential host family that accepted one or more children received financial assistance *in kind* that would enhance their economic capacity in accordance with their usual means of livelihood. For example, farmers were given one or more cows, a plough or several goats. Town dwellers received materials that would allow them to open small stores or start up cottage industries.

This program of reunification by means of income enhancement has now in place for at least seven years. It is carefully monitored to ensure that the material assistance is used for its intended purpose and does in fact provide economic and social protections for the reunified children and the host families. In short, the Eritrean social service agencies have

been able to provide decent family environments for many thousands of unaccompanied children by relying on, and slightly modifying, traditional practices of child care that have been an implicit part of indigenous Eritrean culture for centuries. At the same time, the Authority of Social Affairs was able to resist the well-intentioned but culturally alien proposals for international adoption of Eritrean children (without or with parents) that, according to past experience often had serious consequences that were not in the best interests of the children.

Despite extended and prolonged searches it was, however, not possible to trace the extended families of all war orphans. Therefore, an alternative plan was implemented in parallel to provide protection for children who could not be reunified with their own extended families. Small group homes are now being constructed in the various zones of the country. They are designed to provide decent physical and social environments for twelve children who live together with one or two permanent surrogate house mothers. Whenever possible, orphaned siblings are assigned to the same group home, and any group of twelve children living in one small group home is deliberately selected so that they will be of different ages ranging from two to sixteen years, so that over time they, together with their house mother, will form their own new extended family. Moreover, children are placed in group homes close to their village or town of origin, so that in time they will be reintegrated into their own communities. The alternative plan is still in relatively early stages of development, but monitoring of the group homes that have been in existence for at least two years indicates that they appear to be very successful in addressing the needs of the children. Like the reunification program, the group homes are based on indigenous traditions of child care in which the larger community, rather than the nuclear family takes on the responsibility of caring for children who have no parents and are in need of special protection.

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