

Every Tanzanian child deserves a home: Mkombozi seeks alternatives to residential care

By Tanja Kisslinger, Mkombozi Volunteer

In recent years, the reliance on residential child care, especially for AIDS orphans and street children, has increased dramatically in sub-Saharan Africa. With first-hand experience, Mkombozi knows that residential care of street children, orphans and vulnerable children is not an ideal situation - children affected by poverty, conflict and HIV/AIDS have special needs and require the dedicated care and attention of a family environment.

Mkombozi has been working with Tanzania's most vulnerable children since 1997, providing housing, education, research, advocacy, and outreach. In response to the critical need for alternatives to residential care in Tanzania, Mkombozi has established the Integrated Care and Support for Vulnerable Children and Youth (ICS) programme. The ICS programme seeks holistic, family-based care of vulnerable children, including fostering and family re-unification as alternatives to residential placement. In particular, Mkombozi is currently researching the practice of fostering in Tanzania, to determine its suitability as alternative care.

A recently completed Mkombozi study* of fostering in Australia, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, and the UK shows that the placement of a child with a family other than his/her own is a variable practice, particularly in terms of: recruitment and training of foster care providers; child placement in the foster care environment; support available to foster families; and national approaches to foster care.

Mkombozi's fostering study also shows that, around the world, both formal and informal systems of fostering are practised. Formal foster care involves a third party - typically a social worker, police official, private agency, or government representative - in the process of matching and placing a child with a foster family. Informal foster care (also referred to as "family" or "kinship" fostering) involves the care of vulnerable children by a local authority or by extended family. In practice, informal fostering often occurs without any state involvement, and many informal foster families are not recognised by law.

In Tanzania, foster care exists both formally and informally. The formal foster care system is implemented by the Social Welfare Office, and it places abandoned and institutionalised children into the care of foster families. This formal fostering system is a result of the Tanzanian Government's objective to move away from reliance on residential care centres, wherein the social and psychological needs of children are not adequately supported. The informal fostering system in Tanzania is a natural outcome of the country's pervasive culture of caring for children in the family and in the community. For instance, it is common for an orphaned child to be accepted into an aunt's family, to be looked after by a grandmother, or for some other "good Samaritan" in the community to take the child in and provide for them. In fact, a child is only considered for formal fostering in Tanzania once it is determined that there are no extended family members or community members willing to care for the child.

But formal fostering in Tanzania treads a path littered with obstacles. The laws governing formal practice are more than 30 years old and do not reflect the current social context. Moreover, Tanzania's Social Welfare Office is already stretched beyond capacity and would be unable to cope with a sudden exodus of children from residential centres in search of formal foster care. The Social Welfare Officer consulted by Mkombozi also indicated that nation-wide sensitisation and education would be required before large-scale formal fostering could be implemented in Tanzania.

Problematically, informal foster care is also a strained practise, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa where extended families must cope with the effects of HIV/AIDS. The numbers of children requiring support from extended family and instances of familial poverty have both dramatically increased, whereas the number of available adults to take on caring responsibilities has simultaneously decreased due to illness and death. Mkombozi's research shows that extended family structures in Tanzania's Kilimanjaro Region are also straining under the pressures of unemployment, alcoholism, family violence, gender inequality and the inaccessibility of education.

With a view to the future of fostering in Tanzania, Mkombozi knows there is work to be done. The role of informal fostering must be acknowledged, the possibilities for a formal foster care programme must be investigated, social support networks must be generated, and legislation must be updated. In the end, the most appropriate alternative to residential care for vulnerable children must be socially relevant and culturally sensitive. It is to this end that Mkombozi contributes its fostering study as a tentative, but positive and constructive first step.

*Download in PDF format (383KB): <http://www.mkombozi.org/pdf/200509fostering.pdf>

