Misguided Kindness

Making the right decisions for children in emergencies

Save the Children

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Save the Children is the world's leading independent children's rights organisation, with members in 29 countries and operational programmes in more than 120. We fight for children's rights and deliver lasting improvements to children's lives worldwide.

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Cover photo: Nine-year-old Andrise's home was destroyed in the earthquake that struck Haiti in January 2010.
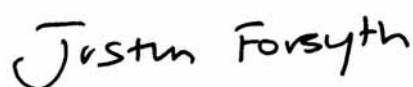(Photo: Colin Crowley/Save the Children)

Contents

Foreword

In every humanitarian crisis, concerned outsiders respond to tragedy with actions that take children away from their families and communities. Again and again, girls and boys are mistakenly labelled as orphans and 'rescued' from affected areas and taken into orphanages or adopted into new families elsewhere in the belief that they will be better cared for away from their devastated homes.

In the face of suffering it's all too easy to get caught up in emotion, to feel an overwhelming urge to gather up children and take them to safety. But this misguided kindness can actually cause significant harm to children and families already suffering from the impact of disaster. In reality, lessons learned from emergencies around the world demonstrate that girls and boys are usually far safer and better cared for in a family environment in their own communities.

This report aims to dispel the myths underpinning the widespread use of orphanages and international adoption in response to humanitarian crises. It reveals the realities faced by children and families affected by conflicts and natural disasters and the organisations working to assist them. Most importantly, this report seeks to inform individuals, organisations and governments wishing to make the right choices about the care and protection of vulnerable children in emergencies. It demonstrates what action is needed to keep families together during crisis, as well as what can be done to help children separated from their relatives return to a safe and nurturing family environment.

The importance of financial and in-kind donations during humanitarian crises cannot be underestimated. Without this generous support, Save the Children and many other organisations would not be able to work to protect the world's most vulnerable children. However, a fundamental shift is needed in how children in emergencies are perceived by those wishing to assist them. This report appeals to people to make sure that their invaluable assistance is channelled towards interventions that keep families in emergencies together rather than apart.

Justin Forsyth

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Acknowledgements

Glossary

Child: Every human being below the age of 18 years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.[1]

Donor: A member of the public or an organisation (e.g. non-governmental organisation, government body, corporate sponsor) offering a contribution, often financial, for a specific project or cause such as a fundraising appeal.

Emergency: A situation that threatens the lives and well-being of large numbers of people, which requires extraordinary action to ensure the survival, care and protection of those affected. Emergencies tend to fall into one of two categories: either sudden or rapid onset emergencies; or those that develop more gradually but may continue for many years as chronic emergencies. Emergencies include natural crises such as hurricanes, droughts, earthquakes, famines and floods, as well as situations of armed conflict and mass movement of refugees.[2]

Family-based care: A short- or long-term care arrangement agreed with, but not ordered by, a competent authority, whereby a child is placed in the domestic environment of a family headed by parents other than his/her own who have been selected and prepared to provide such care, and are supported in doing so.[3]

Family-like care: Arrangements in the community or within a larger facility, whereby children are cared for in small groups by one or more specific parental figures, in a manner and under conditions that resemble those of an autonomous family.[4]

Humanitarian agency: For the purposes of this report, humanitarian agencies are inter-governmental organisations (including the United Nations) or non-governmental organisations that provide material, technical and logistical assistance to prevent or respond to emergency situations that represent a critical threat to the health, safety, security or wellbeing of a community or larger group of people.

Informal care: Any private arrangement provided in a family environment, whereby a child is looked after on an ongoing or indefinite basis by relatives, friends or others, without this arrangement having been ordered by an administrative or judicial authority or a duly accredited body.[5]

Institutions: Settings where children are looked after full time for at least one month due to the temporary or permanent inability or unwillingness of their parents to provide care, in any public or private facility with a capacity of more than ten, staffed by salaried carers working pre-determined hours/shifts, and based on collective living arrangements.[6] Residential facilities for the physically or mentally disabled or for the chronically or long-term ill are included,[7] as are general-type boarding schools.[8]

Kinship care: Family-based care within a child's extended family or with close friends of the family known to the child.[9]

Orphan: A child, both of whose parents are known to be dead.[10]

Residential care: A group living arrangement in a specially designed or designated facility, where salaried staff ensure full-time care on a shift basis for children who cannot be looked after by their family, due to the latter's inability or unwillingness to do so.[11]

Separated children: Children separated from both parents, or from their previous legal or customary primary caregiver, but not necessarily from other relatives. These may therefore include children accompanied by other adult family members.[12]

Trafficking: A child has been trafficked if he or she has been moved within a country, or across borders, whether by force or not, with the purpose of exploiting the child.[13]

Unaccompanied children: Children who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible for doing so.[14]

Introduction

On 12 January 2010 nearly 2 million people in Haiti were violently shaken by the worst earthquake to hit the country in 200 years. Many survivors lost their families and homes, an estimated 230,000 people were killed and 300,000 injured. Schools, government buildings, hospitals and essential services were destroyed.[15]

In no time the media was flooded with heart-wrenching images of crying children lost among the rubble, desperate for family, food and shelter. Money poured in as people around the world reacted to the crisis with overwhelming generosity, helping to raise huge sums. Humanitarian agencies were inundated with offers to help, including well-intended requests to foster and adopt children orphaned by the crisis.[16] Within days of the earthquake, countries had moved to fast-track adoption and Haitian boys and girls were taken over the border.[17] Concerned individuals and groups travelled to Haiti to rescue children from the devastation and bring them to a better life. In the chaos of the tragedy, children were simply taken away.

The hasty response to rescue children in emergencies

Separating girls and boys from their families in emergencies is nothing new. From the war in Vietnam to the genocide in Rwanda and the Asian tsunami, people have responded to tragedy by evacuating children from their homes, placing them in orphanages or with strangers in places distant to their communities. Yet this often has unintended but damaging consequences.[18] The presumption is that children separated from their families will be better cared for away from their devastated communities and that locating their parents or relatives is an impossible task. **In reality the number of girls and boys who have actually lost both parents in disaster situations is usually greatly overestimated, while the ability of communities to respond to children's needs is underestimated.** These factors can contribute to a hasty reaction to rescue children and separate them from their homes. Moreover, in large-scale disaster situations such as the earthquake in Haiti, where infrastructure is severely damaged and government services are virtually destroyed, it is almost impossible to verify children's family situations immediately. Girls and boys frequently become incorrectly labelled as orphans, leaving them highly vulnerable to permanent separation from their families and communities.[19]

Needless separation of children

Experience has taught humanitarian agencies that children who are separated from their parents during emergencies often have living relatives or neighbours from their communities who are both willing and able to care for them. Placing boys and girls who actually still have families into orphanages or evacuating them overseas can be harmful to their immediate and long-term psychological wellbeing. It may result in permanent separation from their parents or other family members and can add to the distress they have already experienced. We saw this happen in Haiti, as the misguided kindness of some unwittingly caused further harm to children.

In emergencies, efforts should instead focus on reuniting children with their relatives and supporting them within family-type settings within their own communities. This is not only a child's basic human right, it is also critical to restoring their wellbeing and helping them recover from trauma. **Put simply, very often the best way to protect children is to keep them with people they know well and trust.**[20]

Humanitarian agencies are guided in their work with separated children in emergencies by a number of legal frameworks and guidelines. Chief among these are the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child,[21] the Inter-Agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children[22] and the United Nations Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children.[23] These promote the care of children within their families wherever possible and seek to ensure that all actions and decisions are governed by the best interests of the child. **For children who become separated in emergencies, family reunification is the first priority. Any action that may hinder this – such as adoption overseas, evacuation and placement in an orphanage away from the family's likely location – is to be avoided.** If reunification is not possible, or is not in a child's best interests, supporting girls and boys within family settings in their own communities is the next best alternative.

In countries where the use of orphanages or other types of institutions is the traditional response to caring for vulnerable children, evolving to a more family-oriented approach can be challenging. **However, change is possible.** Experience from Rwanda, Sri Lanka and Indonesia has shown that the way in which humanitarian agencies support separated children and their families in emergencies can play a significant role in improving the long-term care and protection of vulnerable boys and girls. Support from the public for humanitarian interventions directed at keeping children within their own families and communities, rather than

separating them, can play a key role in bringing about this transformation.

This report examines how the public's response to emergencies can have a significant impact on the lives of affected children – either for better or worse. It identifies how myths regarding the number of orphans and the best way of caring for children separated from their families in crisis situations can shape interventions, resulting in misguided attempts to rescue girls and boys by placing them in orphanages or adopting them overseas. It then explores successful alternatives for caring for children separated from their families in emergencies, including innovative tracing methods for reuniting them with their relatives and strategies for supporting them in well-monitored family environments.

Above all, this report urges people to make sure that their generosity in the face of a humanitarian crisis is targeted towards interventions that help children – rather than potentially cause them further suffering or harm.

> "I'm concerned about our public understanding and the way that could shape responses. We come in with misplaced sympathy to somewhere like Haiti and want to take children away because somehow we think we can do things better than the Haitians themselves. The reality is that children are better off with their own kin and we have to come up with strategies to make that happen."
>
> Dr Neil Boothby, Professor of Clinical Forced Migration and Health Director, Columbia University[24]

What happens when children become separated from their families in emergencies?[25]

When crisis strikes, from earthquakes and flooding to mass population displacements and armed conflict, children are at risk of becoming separated from their families or from other responsible adults.

Children become separated for a range of reasons. In the chaos of conflict or natural disasters, separation may be *involuntary*. Children may be separated from their usual caregivers in the confusion of the crisis, may flee their homes when they are attacked or be left alone when family members die or are taken to the hospital. In other cases, separation may be *voluntary*. Families may feel that they have no choice but to send their children to relatives or friends, or to place them in care institutions for safety, or in the hope that they will be adopted into a caring family from a richer country.

All children are at risk during crisis. However, research indicates that boys are more likely to become separated from their families than girls. Children with disabilities moreover, may be abandoned or placed in institutions if their impairment limits their agility or makes them more difficult to care for. Well-intentioned interventions from outsiders can also cause unnecessary separations of children from their families, for example when girls and boys are evacuated without international guidelines being followed, or sent away for adoption without adequate checks to verify their adoptability.

Regardless of the cause and motivation, a child's separation from their family during an emergency situation is highly distressing and can have a long-term negative impact on their wellbeing. Separation can be traumatic, especially if it is sudden, violent and associated with the death of a family member. Loss of their families, exposure to frightening experiences and insufficient care in their new living situations can result in grief and suffering in children of all ages, including young infants. In particular, children under five are ill-equipped to cope with the stress of separation and can be severely affected, sometimes with life-long consequences.

Children who become separated from their caregivers in emergencies lose their care and protection just when they need it the most. Without their families to protect them from the negative social and psychological impacts of emergencies, children are at risk of physical, emotional and sexual abuse as well as exploitation, illness, injury and even death. Children may also be abducted into forced labour, conscripted into the military or trafficked. For children who are placed in institutions or hastily adopted into families outside their countries, lack of safeguards for their rights can leave them highly vulnerable to further distress and exploitation.

1 The harm caused by supporting institutional care in emergencies

In the wake of disaster, support for orphanages is often the public's first-choice response. With tragic stories of families torn apart by natural disasters or war, individuals and organisations including faith-based groups, foundations and businesses, send generous donations to fund orphanages that can care for children who have lost their parents. Overnight, new orphanages and shelters spring up, while existing care homes are bolstered with cash, food, clothes and toys. Significant rises in the number of care institutions after emergencies have been reported in countries including Sierra Leone,[26] Rwanda,[27] Indonesia,[28] Liberia[29] and Sri Lanka.[30] For example, in the wake of the December 2004 tsunami, the international community supported the Indonesian government to set up at least 17 new childcare homes to care for 'tsunami orphans' in the province of Aceh, and international assistance for children's homes increased fourfold between 2005 and 2007.[31]

Despite good intentions, support for these orphanages and other forms of institutional care in emergencies can actually **increase** the numbers of separated children. The very existence of orphanages can encourage families to place their children in care in the hope that they will be better looked after. This is exacerbated when institutional care takes funding away from services that could support families to care for their children and help rebuild communities.[32] Institutional care is no substitute for a family and sadly there is a large body of evidence to show that orphanages and other forms of large group residential care can be negative and potentially exploitative environments for children to grow up in.[33]

But why is there such public support for orphanages? A number of myths and assumptions regarding children in emergencies play a key role in shaping the public's response.

Myth 1: There are countless numbers of orphans

When an earthquake strikes or civil conflict takes over a country, concerned observers often assume that there are huge numbers of orphans who have no one to care for them and nowhere to go. The reality is that in humanitarian crisis situations, the number of children who are completely alone without any adult is often lower than the public imagines. In large-scale emergencies, most children who become separated from their families are taken in by other relatives, neighbours or friends who spontaneously (or informally) foster them.[34] After the earthquake in Haiti, UNICEF estimates that 95% of separated children were taken in by neighbours or families known to them or their parents.[35]

Many children separated from their families in emergencies are eventually reunited with a surviving parent or other relatives, either spontaneously or after tracing efforts. The key priority in an emergency is to identify these children, initiate family tracing efforts and in the interim, provide their substitute caregivers with support to care for them adequately. Above all, reunification of children with their families is seen as critical to their protection.

Myth 2: Creating new orphanages is an appropriate way to help children in emergencies

In emergency situations, institutional care tends to proliferate as money pours in from abroad to support orphanages, children's homes and other types of residential centres. These may be run by government or by private providers, including international and local NGOs, faith-based organisations, private businesses and concerned individuals. While some of them may be officially registered with their governments, others operate independently and may not be regulated or even known to the authorities.[36] Although many of them genuinely aim to provide support and care for children in need, others may have less charitable motives. Unregulated, unscrupulous care institutions have been known to recruit children in order to profit from international adoption or child trafficking.[37]

Regardless of their motives, experience has shown that when people set up these kinds of institutions to support orphans in an emergency situation, they can undermine existing community methods of caring for children. By creating children's homes, orphanages and other types of residential centres, families may be prompted to put their children into care in the hope that they will receive food, education and other benefits. In short, by sending out the signal that there are others there to provide care, orphanages can cause further separation of children from their families in emergency situations.[39]

> "There are many so-called orphanages that have opened in the last couple of years that are not really orphanages at all… they are fronts for criminal organisations that take advantage of people who are homeless and hungry. And with the earthquake they see an opportunity to strike in a big way."
>
> Frantz Thermilus, Chief of Haiti's National Judicial Police[38]

Myth 3: Orphanages are mainly used by children who are orphans

Poor 'gate-keeping' within many orphanages means that children may be admitted without proper checks to establish if their families are alive and whether it might be possible to reunite and support them to stay with their parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins or other adults known to them.[41] In the worst cases, orphanages may even actively block family reunification efforts if they rely on having a certain number of children in their care in order to continue to receive financial assistance or donations.[42]

Moreover in many countries the term 'orphan' applies to children who have lost one parent, as well as children who have lost both parents. The result is that the overwhelming number of girls and boys in residential care, particularly in poor countries, have

Aceh: Needless separation of children from their families

97.5% of the children placed in residential care in the aftermath of the December 2004 tsunami in Aceh (Indonesia) had been placed there by their families so that they could receive an education. If funding had been directed at helping families and communities rather than institutions, the majority of these girls and boys could have remained at home.[40]

The myth about 'orphans' in institutional care[44]

Contrary to popular belief, a large proportion of children living in institutional care have at least one living parent.
- In **Zimbabwe** nearly 40% of children in orphanages have a living parent.
- In **Sri Lanka** research found that 92% of children in private residential institutions had one or both parents living and more than 40% had been admitted due to poverty.
- In **Azerbaijan** 70% of children living in institutional care have parents.
- In an assessment of 49 orphanages in conflict-stricken **Liberia**, 98% of the children had at least one surviving parent.

at least one living parent.[43] Many of these children never manage to return to their homes and grow up away from their families and communities.

Myth 4: Institutions provide quality care for children

While most people would agree that children should not remain in orphanages in the long term, it is not well understood that even very short stays in institutional care can be extremely harmful for babies and young children. Children under the age of three are particularly vulnerable. Recent studies have demonstrated delayed brain development among infants in institutions due to extreme emotional neglect and inadequate care.[45] Some research suggests that as a rule of thumb, for every three months that a young child resides in an institution, they lose one month of development.[46] If young children grow up in large group care, a lack of long-term individual care and attention can result in permanent brain damage.[47]

For boys and girls of all ages, residential institutions rarely offer sufficient individual care and can result in physical, social and emotional underdevelopment. Moreover, in many countries the conditions of care

institutions are inadequate, lacking basic hygiene and nutrition standards, with cramped living conditions and insufficient numbers of trained staff to care for large groups of children. In the long term, children are more likely to grow up with lower educational qualifications, literacy levels and social skills and may struggle to adjust to living independently as adults.[48] Worse, children in institutions appear to be significantly more vulnerable to exploitation and violence, with a number of studies reporting wide ranging physical, sexual and psychological abuse. Exposure to these levels of violence can leave children with lasting developmental problems, injuries and trauma.[49]

Even in well-run care institutions children may suffer from a lack of positive adult interaction and emotional care, which can limit their emotional and social development. While they may sometimes benefit from a better material existence, children in institutions often lose touch with their families, and the distress caused by separation from their parents and siblings can leave them with psychological and behavioural problems.[50] Losing the opportunity to grow up in a family and as part of the community can have a lasting impact. Nothing can replace the personal attention and love of a family member, no matter how poor the family.

Myth 5: It is cheaper to care for children in orphanages than in families

Despite extensive evidence regarding the potentially harmful impact of institutional care for children (and an abundance of international guidelines promoting care within the family and in family-like placements), support for orphanages in emergencies remains popular. For concerned outsiders, setting up new orphanages can seem like a sensible way to help children separated from their families in emergencies – a simple solution that shows quick results and quantifiable impact. Supporting children within families on the other hand, may take longer to generate results and is less tangible. To donors and governments, a brightly painted new orphanage may appeal more than the image of a child being cared for by a foster family in the humble

"We never had any affection; we had all the material things; a bed, food, clothing; but we never had love."

Child brought up in an orphanage in El Salvador[51]

surroundings of their shelter.[52] Building orphanages, moreover, is often mistakenly believed to be a more cost-effective way of caring for children, when in reality it is much cheaper to support children within families.

To some extent, these misconceptions can be attributed to humanitarian agencies who have failed to win people over to the importance of supporting children within families. Humanitarian agencies need

Funding orphanages vs. funding families[53]

Over and over again, research demonstrates that many more children can be supported in family care for the cost of keeping one child in residential care.

- In South Africa, a study found that residential care was up to six times more expensive than providing care for children in vulnerable families and four times more expensive than foster care.
- In Romania, the World Bank calculated that residential care for children cost between $201 and $280, while family reintegration and (local) adoption cost an average of $19 per child.
- In east and central Africa, Save the Children UK found residential care to be ten times more expensive than community-based forms of care.
- In Tanzania (Kagera region), the World Bank found that the annual cost for one child in residential care was more than $1000 – approximately six times the cost of supporting a child in foster care.

It is true that costs may increase for a temporary period when countries move from institutional care to family-based care, for example to fund training of social workers and develop social welfare services to run tracing and foster programmes. In the long term however, it costs more to keep a child in an institution, where funds are required to pay salaries for staff, maintain buildings and provide food and other services for children.

The money that goes to sustain these institutions could instead be targeted at caring for much larger numbers of children within families. The bottom line is that programmes to keep children within their own communities, surrounded by neighbours, friends and families that they know and love are ultimately much cheaper – both financially and in terms of emotional cost to the child.

to do more to communicate the benefits of family care over institutional care to their donors as well as to communities and governments in countries hit by emergencies. Changing attitudes can be challenging however, particularly in cultures where placement of vulnerable children in orphanages is the norm and practices such as foster care and family tracing are unfamiliar. Moreover, government departments responsible for child welfare are often understaffed and under-resourced and may not even be aware of the alternatives to institutional care, which can make it difficult to change the status quo.[54]

It is also important to be aware that in many emergency situations, there will be those who have a vested interest in keeping orphanages up and running or opening new ones. Orphanages provide employment for large numbers of people who rely on them for their livelihoods and they can attract donations more easily than other forms of family-type care for children.

So what's the alternative?

Not all forms of residential care are the same. In crisis situations, humanitarian agencies carry out an assessment of existing residential care facilities to identify which ones are providing adequate care and can be used for temporary refuge if necessary. Wherever possible however, the first choice response is to ensure that children are cared for by their own families or in family-type settings, including kinship care, foster care and small group care.

Examples from around the world demonstrate that there are many ways in which families can be supported to help care for children in crisis situations, which are more cost effective and better for boys and girls than institutional care. The public, donors, governments and agencies need to ensure that their funding and actions are directed towards these positive initiatives and away from the potentially harmful impact on children of institutionalisation.

What if it was your child?

Imagine if your home and town were destroyed by flooding. What if you lost all your possessions and your family business was wiped out? Given the alternative, would you prefer to send your children away to strangers in an orphanage where they might get some food and education? Or would you prefer to be helped to get back on your feet and supported to keep your children at home and in school?

In most cases, families in emergencies don't feel as though they have a choice. As money from outsiders pours in for new orphanages instead of to families and communities, parents may see residential care as the only way for their daughters and sons to survive. But if children are moved to an orphanage outside of their community or adopted, they may never see their parents again.

The money that is spent on orphanages could be as easily spent on supporting families to keep their children and ensuring they have enough to feed and educate them. No matter how well run an institution is, nothing replaces a loving and nurturing family environment.

2 The harm caused by adopting and evacuating children in emergencies

In almost every humanitarian crisis on record, children have been taken away from their communities, often with disastrous consequences.[55] In many emergencies, such as the earthquake in Haiti, international actors and members of the public advocate for sending 'orphaned' children to other countries under the assumption that they will be better cared for. Most people believe that these children have lost their parents and have nowhere to go.

Myth 1: There are lots of orphans without relatives to care for them

The instinct to rush in and rescue children through international adoption may be a natural response to a tragic situation. However, in the chaos of emergency situations, where infrastructure may be crippled and child protection systems destroyed, there is often no way of knowing if a child has living family members who may be able to provide care. Tragic cases have emerged where children have been adopted abroad only to find out later that their surviving relatives have been desperate to find and care for them. For example, after the genocide in Rwanda, refugee children living in make-shift orphanages were mistakenly assumed to be orphans and taken to Europe for adoption.[56]

Myth 2: 'Rescuing' children by adopting them away from their communities is appropriate in emergencies

There are clear international guidelines regarding the adoption or evacuation of children outside their countries in an emergency. These state that any initiative that could result in the unnecessary separation of children and families is to be avoided.[58] In particular, adoption of children at the height of an emergency is strictly opposed by the United Nations and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), who state that adoption should only be considered once all possible steps to try to trace a child's parents or other surviving family members have been carried out. This may be up to two years from the start of tracing efforts.[59] While this may seem like unnecessary bureaucratic red tape, it is aimed at protecting children and is based on experience that it can sometimes take many months to trace and reunite girls and boys with their families.

Similarly, only as a last resort and in very specific circumstances of compelling health, medical or safety issues, should children be evacuated from their communities without an adult family member. Separation of these children from their families is meant to be temporary, with specific international humanitarian laws in place to facilitate their return.[60]

International adoption in emergencies[57]

The practice of organised international adoption originally began as a humanitarian response to help children caught up in armed conflicts and political crises. Amid the devastation of Europe in the Second World War, thousands of children lost their families and as a result were placed for adoption, mainly in North America. In the 1960s and 1970s, children from the conflicts in Korea and Vietnam and from the civil wars in Latin America became the main source of children for families overseas to adopt.

Adoption of children away from some of these countries was facilitated by two key factors:

1. As a result of conflict or economic/social circumstances, large numbers of children were either orphaned or left by their families in institutions (although not necessarily on a permanent basis).
2. Their governments were either unable or unwilling to control and regulate the agencies involved in international adoption.

These laws are designed to protect children and prevent unnecessary or permanent separation from their families when moving across borders. Not only does evacuation create potential legal difficulties and confusion regarding which country has national jurisdiction for a child's welfare, but crucial information may be lost about young boys and girls when they are moved to a new country, making it difficult for them to be returned home to their families. Tracing is far simpler and more successful if the child remains close to their home location or with others from their community.

History is littered with examples of children being evacuated in violation of international guidelines on a 'temporary' basis during crisis situations:[62]

- Of the 2,500 children evacuated from **Vietnam** to the US and UK in the 1975 'Babylift', fewer than ten were reunited with their families.
- About 20% of the 69,000 **Finnish children** who were evacuated to Sweden during the Second World War never returned home.
- An estimated 5,000 **Spanish children** who were evacuated to other countries during the Spanish Civil War never returned.

"In these kinds of situations, there are all types of charities and church groups with, to be fair, good intentions… But that's not the way to go about it – it doesn't help an already messy situation. Children with no documentation get whisked away, and their families don't know what has happened to them… Not only is it against the law, but it is taking advantage of people in a lousy situation."

Richard Danziger, Head of Counter-Trafficking at the International Organization for Migration[61]

Keeping children within their own communities

Humanitarian agencies working to protect children in emergency situations are guided by the 1993 Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption which provides the legal framework for regulating adoptions across country borders.[63] In accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, it stipulates that children should only be adopted overseas after "possibilities for placement of the child within the State of origin have been given due consideration" and when intercountry adoption is in the child's best interests.[64]

As much as possible, the rule is to keep children within their own communities and, where reunification with their own families is not an option, to place them with a stable family from the same cultural heritage and social background. If children require permanent substitute families, national adoption should always be explored before considering international adoption. For young children in particular, this is seen as the best way to meet their need for emotional security and enable them to be raised in their community of origin.[65]

Myth 3: International adoption at the height of an emergency is a safe way to respond to separated children

The danger of allowing children to be taken away from their communities in times of crisis is not just the risk that they may be permanently separated from their families, but that they may be exploited for financial gain. Governments are often in a weakened state and unable to enforce national and international adoption laws, with the result that children and their families are especially vulnerable.

Rescuing children

Unfortunately, it is in emergency situations that international guidelines are most likely to be violated, with attempts to take children outside their countries or communities without checking that they are adoptable and whether they might be placed with relatives or friends within their own countries and communities.

- US missionaries attempted to take 33 children between the ages of two months and 12 years out of **Haiti** a few weeks after the earthquake without the necessary paperwork. It subsequently materialised that 20 out of the 33 children had living parents, who, it was reported, had been provided with cash, food and blankets to give up their children.[66]

- French NGO Zoe's Arc tried to fly 103 children aged between one and ten years old from **Chad** to foster homes in Europe, claiming that they were Sudanese victims of the conflict in Darfur. Investigations revealed, however, that they were natives of Chad and that most of them lived with at least one adult or parent figure.[67]

> "When I saw the airplane I became very sad. I didn't want to leave my country. That's when I realised that a more intense pain would start, because I asked myself 'Maybe my mother and father are alive, I leave the country, I leave my land, I leave it all…' I got on the plane but I felt they had torn away my roots."

Child adopted overseas during the civil conflict in El Salvador[73]

Evidence suggests that child-trafficking is a growing concern[68] and that there are cases of unregulated adoption agencies colluding with orphanages and other care institutions to coerce families into sending their children to be adopted overseas.[69]

Although adoption to a family overseas may seem like a practical solution to dealing with children separated from their parents in a humanitarian crisis, it has been linked to high numbers of girls and boys in institutions.[70] With peak demand for children to adopt coming from Western countries during emergency situations, unscrupulous or even well-intentioned adoption agencies can profit from the treatment of children as commodities. In some cases, families may be persuaded to give up their sons and daughters in the hope that they will be adopted by a well-off individual from a richer country who will provide them with a better life. In other cases, girls and boys may be sent away from their countries without consent from their families and without adequate vetting of their adoptive parents – leaving them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

Rescuing children from Haiti[77]

A major concern for agencies working with children after the earthquake in Haiti was the numbers of girls and boys sent overseas for adoption without documentation or adoptive families. The Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS), one of the leading US agencies serving immigrants and refugees, reported the case of a 12-year-old boy who arrived in the USA on an American military plane without any documentation or information on how to trace his family. In another case, a three-year-old child who arrived in the USA on a private plane arranged for orphans was put into a children's shelter after their adoptive family pulled out of the process. Both children endured difficult separations from their families and everything familiar to them. With little documentation or information, identifying the best care options for these children and tracing their families was delayed for months.

"While we understand the good intentions of individuals who seek to provide love and support to these vulnerable children, we must safeguard against the unnecessary loss of family, community and culture. And we must make sure our good intentions lead to the best possible outcome for each individual child."

Statement by Kristen Guskovict, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services, US Congressional Briefing, 27 January 2010.

Fast-tracking adoptions out of Haiti[78]

In the aftermath of the earthquake in January 2010, the Haitian government moved to speed up international adoptions that had already been in the pipeline before the disaster struck. The response from the international community was divided, with ten countries (including Belgium, Canada, France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Switzerland and USA) publicly pushing to expedite adoptions, while at least 30 countries made explicit statements against international adoption. There was a subsequent rapid and significant increase in adoptions (compared with adoption trends in the previous seven years), with Canada, USA, Luxembourg and Belgium almost tripling their numbers of adoptions from Haiti within three months of the earthquake.

While in principle the fast-tracking of these adoptions was carried out in the best interests of the children involved, the rush to send girls and boys overseas meant that "essential steps in the adoption process providing safeguards for children, biological parents, prospective adoptive parents and others were disregarded."[79] After the earthquake, neither Haiti nor countries who received children were in a position to fully ensure the adoptability of children. In practice this meant that:
- some biological parents in Haiti were not given the opportunity to consent to the adoption of their children across borders
- some children were not consulted or prepared for being transferred to other countries
- some countries that received children from Haiti did not ensure that the adoptive parents were suitable or prepared to adopt a child who had lived through trauma
- few governments were sufficiently prepared to welcome large groups of children arriving from Haiti and did not have adequately trained professionals with experience in dealing with emergency adoptions
- some children were taken overseas for adoption without appropriate registration and identification procedures. Without the paperwork to confirm their eligibility for adoption, some children have been left in 'legal limbo' and may not receive the same benefits as children adopted from other countries.

The implications of the response to 'save and adopt children out of harm's way' are clearly serious for Haitian children. With limited clarity regarding which children are available for adoption, the initiation of legislative procedures to expedite adoptions in an emergency situation can be detrimental to children's rights.

"We've had hundreds of children who've had their identities erased. They can't find out who their birth families are. They can't go back and trace them. They have nothing. They've erased their identities."

Advocate for ethical adoption, Cambodia[76]

Myth 4: Adopting children out of their countries in an emergency is good for their wellbeing

Adoption for any child is challenging, requiring often dramatic adjustments to a new family, home and even culture. For children who are adopted hastily overseas at the height of a humanitarian crisis by agencies that may not meet international standards on adoption, the impact on their psychological wellbeing may be significant.[71] Children may be completely unprepared for the move, may have little time to say goodbye to their relatives or friends and may be separated from their homes without really understanding what is happening to them. Coping with this sudden loss, while at the same time trying to adjust to living with strangers in a foreign country, often in an unknown language, may add significantly to the distress of children already suffering from the shocking impact of a humanitarian crisis.[72]

Separating children from their homes during times of crisis flies in the face of lessons learned from other emergencies. These demonstrate that the best way to help a child to overcome the effects of trauma is to restore a sense of normality by providing structured activities, care and nurturing in their own community.[74] Uprooting children and placing them in a new environment can delay their recovery by preventing them from settling back into routines and breaking their ties with natural support networks such as family, friends and neighbours. In the long term, the severing of ties from family members as well as the culture of their home country can have a significant impact on a child's identity as they grow into adulthood.[75]

No matter how dreadful the situation may look in the aftermath of a natural disaster, **rescuing children from emergencies by taking them away from their homes is not the answer**. At best, evacuating or adopting children out of a country at the height of an emergency is an expensive way of helping a relatively small number of children that forces them to make a drastic cultural adaptation. At worst, it is abusive and exploitative and diverts much-needed money away from families and communities caring for separated children within the country.[80] Above all, it denies children their right to be with their families.

In emergency situations such as the earthquake in Haiti, the international community should support governments to enforce adoption laws designed to protect children and to prevent unintended separations from families. Reuniting children with their families must be the priority.

3   Reuniting children and families in emergencies

Lessons learned from emergencies around the world have resulted in the development of some key strategies for working with children in emergencies. In situations where government welfare systems have broken down and communities are under strain, families are the single most protective environment for children. In line with this, the initial efforts of humanitarian agencies should be directed at preventing family separation and keeping children together with their parents or relatives.

For children who do become separated from their families, voluntarily or involuntarily, their care in safe, family-type environments and reunification with their relatives is a first priority. Above all, the aim is that all actions are carried out in the best interests of the children involved.

Preventing family separation

Work can be done even before the onset of an emergency situation to try to pre-empt family separation. When there is advance warning of an emergency, such as an impending upsurge in conflict, or where emergencies can be reasonably predicted (eg, seasonal flooding or mudslides), international humanitarian agencies need to work with governments and communities to raise awareness about the risk of family separation and how to

mitigate it. This includes designating 'safe places' where family members can meet in case of emergency and making sure that young children memorise their full names and addresses so that they can be more easily identified if they get lost. Parents may also be alerted that placing their children in residential care, such as boarding schools or orphanages, may result in permanent separation.[82]

Similarly, in the event of planned mass evacuations or population movements, agencies should work together with those who have to move to put practical measures in place to prevent family separation, such as ensuring that families travel together and that all children are accompanied by an adult from their immediate or extended family.

Preventing secondary separation

Often it is not in the immediate chaos of disaster that children become separated from their families, but in the uncertainty and hardship that follows. Humanitarian agencies can work to prevent these separations by publicly assuring people that aid will be provided, warning parents to keep their children with them and providing material assistance to families as rapidly as possible so that they can continue to care for their sons and daughters.

"I would like to rejoin my family because I feel great sadness when I remember my mother."
Rwandan child separated from their family after the genocide[81]

Disaster risk reduction[83]

Save the Children's Disaster Risk Reduction programmes work with children and communities vulnerable to disaster. Through camps and workshops, children learn about the causes and effects of disasters and the importance of knowing what to do when there is an emergency. Save the Children and its local partners also help children and communities to develop emergency plans so they are prepared for crisis and can minimise risks such as family separation.

Ple is a 15-year-old girl who lives in the rural province of Phayao in Thailand. Every year her community faces flooding during the rainy season, which cuts off roads and damages land and crops. Through Save the Children's programme, she has learned about disaster risk reduction. "We have done a community map identifying where the risks and safe areas are. Our community map also identifies which families have children and elders, and how we can help them when a disaster strikes."

Family tracing and reunification[84]

The reality of most emergency situations is that often children do become separated from their families, accidentally or intentionally. Children who are found unsupervised without any adult minder are usually referred to as *unaccompanied*. Other children may be spontaneously taken in and cared for by extended family members, neighbours or friends when a crisis occurs. In either case, there are a number of steps that tracing agencies follow to try to ensure that children are safely reunited with their families and that they have temporary care and protection until this is achieved. While tracing work can be very difficult and time consuming, it can also be extremely rewarding when girls and boys are successfully reunited with their loved ones.

Identification

As a starting point, tracing agencies try to identify which children are separated from their families and where they can be found. This is usually done through an assessment in the early phase of an emergency. As well as in households in the community, children are frequently found near

hospitals, clinics, schools, churches, temples and mosques and in community welfare centres and orphanages. Family members may also come forward to report missing children at this time.

Identifying children who have been separated from their families can be complex. There is a risk that identifying a child as 'separated' will raise expectations of special treatment and encourage families to pretend their own children don't belong to them in the hope of assistance. In contrast, other families may hide children they have taken in, fearing they may have to give them up. After the tsunami in Aceh, Indonesia, it was difficult to identify children who had been separated from their families, as the majority had been taken in by other families, many of whom had lost children of their own. Fearing that these children would be taken away from them, many families were reluctant to come forward.[87]

As much as possible, humanitarian agencies try to avoid creating false expectations of assistance to families caring for separated children, while also reassuring them that the identification process is not meant to undermine care arrangements that are beneficial to children.

Family tracing and reunification methodologies

Family tracing and reunification methodologies were developed in the 1980s by international non-governmental organisations and United Nations agencies, based on extensive experience derived from conflict and other emergencies in Africa. In particular, after the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, when humanitarian agencies were faced with over 100,000 separated children, it became clear that working together to share information and cooperate was crucial. Best practice in family tracing was developed and by 2004 major international agencies had agreed to base all action on the *Inter-Agency Guiding Principles on Unaccompanied and Separated Children*.

For children separated from their families in emergencies, the Interagency Group for Separated and Unaccompanied Children brings together organisations with extensive experience of family tracing and reunification, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross, the International Rescue Committee, Save the Children, UNICEF, World Vision International and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to respond in a coordinated and effective manner to children in need.[85]

Using the media to identify children separated from their families[86]

If it is available, the use of the media can reach a large number of people in a short period of time. In **Albania**, the names and descriptions of separated children were broadcast over the radio, printed in the newspapers and shown on television. Battery-operated radios were distributed and a special radio frequency used to broadcast news and tracing information on unaccompanied children to refugee populations with great success.

In **Rwanda**, radio was used to promote the ideas and methods of tracing and reunification, for discussions of psychosocial needs of children and to inform parents of how and where to find information on their missing children.

Documentation and registration

Once children are identified as separated, the first step is to collect and record information from them, including details about their family, where they come from and how the separation happened. Where possible, this information is then entered into an information management system, such as the Inter-agency Child Protection Database. This is a shared database used by humanitarian agencies, including UNICEF, the International Rescue Committee and Save the Children, to store information about separated children together with information from parents who have reported missing children. Each child is interviewed, their photo taken and their details recorded. As a general rule of thumb, the better the information collected, the higher the likelihood of reunification.

Family tracing

With help from people in the community, agency workers use any information they have to search for missing children, parents or other family members. A central tracing location is usually set up, where all information about the possible whereabouts of family members is collected and then circulated through community networks. Tracing starts immediately in the area where a child is found and then spreads to the surrounding areas. Tracing can be done by sending out messages about missing children by word of mouth, by circulating flyers and posters to places where people gather, or by alerting communities over the radio or in newspapers. In Haiti, for example, a 24-hour hotline was set up to collect information about children separated from their families. Over the years, innovative tracing methods have been developed in emergency situations around the world, which have helped to successfully reunite children with their parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles.

As the aim in emergencies is to reunite families as quickly as possible, agencies start tracing as soon as they can. In situations where large groups of children may be separated from their parents,

Tracing the 'untraceable' [88]

After the genocide in Rwanda, dozens of humanitarian agencies worked under the coordination of Save the Children and the International Committee of the Red Cross to reunite children with their families. Results were impressive, with over 56,000 children reunited over a period of six years. Some 'untraceable' children, however, were left behind – many in residential care centres, where the hopes of finding their families dwindled as the years passed.

The International Rescue Committee pioneered new tracing strategies in Rwanda to help these 'impossible to trace' cases, including an inventive new tool, the *historical mobility map*. By asking young children to draw pictures of everything they could remember about their homes and families prior to their separation, social workers were able to stimulate discussions about daily tasks, relationships and geographic points of interest. In many cases, this helped to trigger new clues and pieces of information to help to trace their families successfully. Using this and other aggressive tracing strategies, more than 180 'untraceable' children and 370 children living in care centres were reunited with family members between 1999 and 2002.

3 REUNITING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN EMERGENCIES

priority is given to children who are unaccompanied or under the age of five years. For these children, special techniques may be needed to facilitate tracing (as they may be too young to know their names or addresses), such as posting their photographs on community boards and photographing their clothing and other items to help their caregivers identify them.

Verification

If families of children are successfully traced or come forward, agencies make sure that the relationship between the child and family member is genuine and that the child wants to be reunited with them. For example, when families turn up to present themselves as caregivers (spontaneous reunification), agencies then check to make sure that they are actually from the same family, asking them to name identifying features such as a birthmark or to reveal other facts about the child.

Reunification

If parents or family members are successfully traced, they can be reunited with their child. First however, an assessment is carried out to make sure that the family is willing and able to care for the girl or boy and that reunification is desired by the child and is in their best interests.

Although family reunions are often joyful occasions, they may also be traumatic and complicated, requiring careful preparation and supervision. In cases where children have been separated from their families for extended periods, they may have become attached to a temporary caregiver; or if they are very young, they may not even remember their family.[89] Moreover, families themselves may have mixed feelings about reunification (especially if the initial separation was deliberate) and foster families may not be willing to surrender children they have taken in. In these situations, agency staff work with both families to prepare them and the child for a return to the family environment.

Successful tracing and reunification

- After 12 years of civil war in **Sierra Leone**, UNICEF reported that 98% of children who remained separated from their families were reunited with their immediate or extended family.[90]
- Over a six-year period, Save the Children and the International Committee of the Red Cross helped to reunite over 56,000 children with their families after the genocide in **Rwanda** in 1994.[91]
- During the civil war in **Mozambique**, national and international organisations were able to reunite more than 14,000 children with their families over a four-year period.[92]
- A tracing and reunification programme for approximately 10,000 children after the **Nigerian** civil war reunited all but 79 children with their families.[93]

Follow-up

After reunification, agencies carry out follow-up visits to check that children have settled back in happily with their families. Often local community-based or government organisations can help with this, as well as with ongoing observation and monitoring. Families may require support to keep their children, particularly if the original separation was due to poverty. Strategies to help with the reintegration of children are crucial to ensuring that reunifications are lasting.

Family preservation

Emergencies can make people poor overnight, with families who find their homes and means of livelihood destroyed left struggling to cope. Unless their basic needs are met, children can be at risk of abandonment. This includes children who are traced and reunited with their relatives and those who are spontaneously taken in by extended family or neighbours. To keep these families together and prevent further, secondary separation of the children they are caring for, humanitarian agencies work to

Marie-Ange's story[95]

Marie-Ange was only nine years old when the earthquake hit Haiti. Separated from her relatives, she was later found alone and in shock in the middle of a busy street in the capital. Fortunately, a family took pity on her and took her into their home, where they provided her with shelter, food and clothing for more than two months. During that time Marie-Ange was registered in a family tracing and reunification programme and interviewed by two case workers from Save the Children. They managed to locate her mother, who was desperately looking for her but feared the worst.

Marie-Ange's mother had given her little girl up for dead when, after an extensive investigation and verification process by Save the Children, she was told her daughter was alive and well. After embracing Marie-Ange she said, "You have brought my daughter to me. I thought she was dead. It is amazing to see her again. We are all so happy that Marie-Ange has returned home – we are a family again."

In Haiti, humanitarian agencies are working with the Ministry of Social Welfare agencies and UNICEF to reunite lost children with their parents. Staff work with children to coax leads to help them trace their families using any information they can – addresses, names of neighbourhoods, details of relatives. Sometimes the children are too young to remember or too traumatised to open up. But as more children are registered, the hope of reuniting them with their parents stays alive.

provide vulnerable communities with basic supplies and services. This may include food, shelter, medical assistance, a source of income, schooling, safe areas for children to play and legal services. This aid is targeted at communities as a whole, prioritising the most vulnerable households. Above all, the aim is to help families to continue supporting their children and prevent unnecessary separation.

Through extensive work in emergencies over the past decade, humanitarian agencies have developed a robust system for helping to trace and reunite separated children with their families. While conducting successful tracing activities in emergencies requires training large numbers of staff, it can be done without the need for a highly developed infrastructure. Creative strategies and tools developed in countries around the world mean that even years after separation, children may be successfully reunited with their families. Not only does this provide a hugely important safeguard for vulnerable children in emergencies, it can mean everything for a parent grieving the loss of their child.

"The period of separation was terrible. In the middle of the war and its horrors, I was separated from my child and that was worse to me than all the fighting… I am the happiest woman in the world now that Dijana is back with us. The whole family has now been gathered together again, and although we are poor and life is difficult, we are happy and love each other a lot…"

Mother reunited with her child after the war in former Yugoslavia[94]

4 Supporting children within families in emergencies

Years of experience in responding to emergencies has demonstrated that keeping children within families is the best way to protect them from harm and exploitation. As described in the previous chapter, a key goal of reunification programmes in emergencies is to support separated children in family-type settings within their own communities, while simultaneously working to trace their relatives.

Care for children within substitute families not only avoids many of the risks of harmful institutionalisation, but also potentially enables children to experience individual love, care and protection from parent figures in a way that reflects local customs and traditions.[96] Critically, it provides children with the opportunity to continue to experience family and community life, which means they are better equipped to cope practically and emotionally with adulthood.[97] As long as it is in the best interests of the child, humanitarian agencies try to build on existing care traditions and practices within different cultures and to involve community leaders and local authorities in identifying and monitoring care for children in crisis situations.

Why care for children in families within their own community?[98]

- Children remain within a family setting and are therefore better prepared for family reunification.
- For children whose parents have died, remaining within their own community brings psychosocial benefits and can reduce the impact of the loss.

- Children are more likely to have individual attention than in a residential setting, resulting in stronger child development and wellbeing.
- Children can be readily integrated and immersed in their culture and learn a range of skills through the experience of community and family life.
- Children are able to maintain established networks and links to their community, such as friends and school, and are more likely to feel a sense of belonging.
- For children who face stigma and exclusion due to the label of 'orphan', being part of a family can offer some protection, understanding and defence against discrimination.
- Children can be cared for in a way that recognises their unique and individual qualities, their preferences and opinions.
- Supporting children in families is much cheaper than in orphanages, especially over the long term.

So how should children be cared for in emergencies?[100]

At the onset of an emergency, when there may be high numbers of children separated from their families, girls and boys may be supported within temporary emergency care centres to help provide for their basic needs on a short-term basis. These are often makeshift tents, buildings or shelters which spring up or are set up in the aftermath of a disaster. Where possible, and if safe to do so, efforts are made to try to keep children in the same area where they live or were found, as this is where their families are most likely to look for them. The time

The Guidelines for the Alternative Care for Children[99]

In recognition of the gaps in the international legal and policy frameworks relating to care for children, international guidelines have been approved by the United Nations to guide workers helping children separated from their families in emergency and non-emergency situations. *The Guidelines for the Alternative Care for Children* highlight the importance of enabling children to remain in, or return to the care of their families and where this is not possible, to try to provide care for children within family-type settings within their communities.

spent in emergency care centres should be as short as possible and no longer than 12 weeks, while efforts are made to reunite children with their families or to find another care solution.

Informal fostering

In most emergencies, the majority of children separated from their families are taken in by extended family or neighbours. This represents a traditional cultural response to helping lost children that many countries around the world share. As much as possible, agencies try to support this initiative once checks have been carried out with relevant households to make sure children are safe and being cared for. As long as it is in their best interests, children are encouraged to remain with their informal foster families and at the same time they are registered with agencies so that efforts to trace their parents or relatives can be initiated.

Kinship care

For children and babies who are found alone or with no one to care for them, the key priority is to provide them with some form of family care as soon as possible. Where possible, they are placed with extended family members or other adults they already know from their own community (once these relationships are verified and an assessment made to ensure this is within their best interests). In this way the child is able to stay in a familiar setting, close to friends, while tracing is carried out to find their immediate family.

Formal fostering

If it is not possible to find suitable known adults, children may be placed by agencies with well-monitored foster families. Ideally, if the country has well-developed emergency preparedness plans, a

"After the earthquake, many children have been spontaneously taken in by members of their community and are often fine there… However, it is necessary to provide help to those who have nowhere to go. We follow up and check in on the children who are receiving informal foster care within their communities and continue to provide protection and help to those who have been separated."

Georges J Revolvus, Save the Children, Haiti[101]

"A child is a child, and it does not matter if you have brought him to this world, picked him up, received him spontaneously or formally."

Rwandan foster mother[103]

network of foster families may already have been identified and trained in advance. In most cases, however, agencies work with local authorities and/or community members, such as religious leaders, community health volunteers or women's associations, to identify suitable families who are willing to care for babies and children separated from their own.[102]

Whether placed with extended family or outsiders, motivations for fostering children need to be scrutinised carefully to ensure that people are not taking in children for personal gain and that they are able to offer them care and security.

Child-headed households

In some cases, it may be an option to support small groups of children to live together. This may include groups of siblings or friends. In specific situations, where older children are able to provide adequate care for each other, have strong social support and are able to get by economically (while still pursuing an education) this may be an appropriate care option.[104]

Residential care

If there is no viable alternative, children may be supported within existing residential care facilities. Ideally these should be small group homes, where surrogate parents are responsible for a small group of children and where normal family life can be better replicated than in large-scale institutions. However, no new orphanages should be established in emergencies to provide care to large groups of children on a permanent or long-term basis.[105] As noted previously, institutions that provide simultaneous care to large groups of children almost always fail to meet their emotional needs. Worse still, they can result in placement of girls and boys who are not in fact orphaned – thus

splitting up families. Once institutionalised, children find it hard to integrate back into their communities and risk permanent separation from their families.

As there tends to be a proliferation of institutions in emergencies, as well as significant numbers of children placed in existing orphanages, boarding schools or children's homes, agencies may also carry out a rapid assessment of these institutions to ensure that that they are providing adequate care. As much as possible, these institutions need to be supported to initiate tracing activities to reunite children with their families. If the institutions are below standard, efforts should be made to transfer children to more suitable family-like settings.

Above all, frequent changes in the type of care should be avoided, as this can be harmful to the child's development and ability to form attachments.[107] In all cases, immediate initiation of tracing activities to encourage reunification with children's families is of utmost importance.

Support for care arrangements

Support to avoid secondary separation

Whichever type of care children are taken into when they are separated from their parents in emergencies, they need to be monitored and supported closely. For families who take on more children, it can be a huge struggle to get by and there is a risk that they will subsequently abandon them to orphanages when they find they cannot cope. To mitigate this, agencies work with government and communities to support families caring for children other than their own. This can involve helping them to secure access to basic services such as health and education and any relief entitlements available to them. Families may also be supported through development of livelihoods programmes (for example, cash for work schemes),

Guiding principles[106]

A number of guiding principles have evolved to assist those working to help children separated from their families in emergencies.

These include:
- Base all decisions on the best interest of the individual child.
- Respond to the care and protection needs of vulnerable children in families and communities in an integrated manner.
- Prevent and respond to family separation.
- Prioritise reunification for all separated children or long-term stable placements for children unable to be reunited with their families.
- Ensure that children and their caregivers have sufficient resources for their survival and maintenance.
- Promote local responsibility for the care and protection of children.
- Listen and take into account the child's opinion.
- Use and develop family-based care alternatives wherever possible.
- Ensure that care placements meet agreed standards.
- Ensure each child's care placement is registered, monitored and reviewed.
- Ensure that all services are provided without discrimination and with attention to the specific needs of the child.

Substitute family care in Mozambique[108]

During the 17-year civil war, children separated from their families were welcomed into the homes of rural Mozambicans. As part of a programme run by Save the Children, volunteers from the Organization of Mozambican Women and government officials played a vital role in identifying families willing to care for these boys and girls. Prompted by a sense of social obligation to care for children in emergency conditions, substitute families did not receive a regular payment.

A study of children fostered during the conflict in Mozambique indicated that their foster parents were the people who had "helped them the most and to whom they would turn if they had a problem". However, children still felt a strong sense of relatedness to their birth families. In one example, Anna, who was captured by rebels at the age of 12, felt life had improved since coming to live with her foster mother, yet still hoped to find her birth family one day.

child-friendly spaces run by community volunteers, day-care provision and drop-in centres providing educational, social work and vocational work services. Community groups can play a key role in identifying families who may be particularly vulnerable and at risk of abandoning their children.

Support for families that take in children can also be provided in the form of training for foster carers. After the genocide in Rwanda for example, foster families were trained on topics such as nutrition, hygiene, income generation and child development.[109] In some places, associations of foster carers can also provide useful peer support for carers to ensure they provide sufficient care for their children.[110]

Monitoring to prevent exploitation and neglect

Although children are generally much better off within a family than in residential care, they may still run the risk of neglect, abuse, exploitation or denial of their rights. Families who take in children (related or unrelated) in emergency situations may do so for a range of reasons, from genuinely wanting to help them, to hoping to gain additional aid or using them as domestic servants in the household. While care of children without parents, particularly if they are part of the extended family, is seen as an automatic duty in some parts of the world (often for religious reasons), in many cultures there is frequently an expectation from foster carers that they should receive something 'in return' – either labour or material goods – for taking on a child.[111]

In Haiti for example, children from poor, usually rural families are often sent to live with host families in cities to perform domestic work in exchange for shelter, food and education. Although some are well cared for, other 'restaveks' experience involuntary domestic servitude, are denied access to education

and suffer extreme exploitation and abuse. In such cases, humanitarian or child protection agencies can help to mediate.

Community members can play a critical role in monitoring children who are being cared for by families other than their own. While trained social or child welfare workers should formally follow up with foster children through regular visits, friends, neighbours and teachers can informally keep an eye on children to make sure they are being adequately cared for. Community groups, such as child protection committees that watch over child welfare issues and children's clubs, which provide a safe place for children to express their needs and concerns, can also help.[112]

Care should be taken to ensure that fostered children are not stigmatised or treated differently from other children in the family (for example, doing the same amount of work, getting the same food, attending school) and that there are no signs of neglect or abuse. By involving the community in the support of foster children, boys and girls can be provided with greater protection than in the more closed environment of residential care.[113]

Examples from around the world demonstrate a wide range of tried and tested ways in which families can be supported to help care for children – from placement within well-monitored foster families, to support for small group households. Done well, these offer a cost-effective and safe way of caring for children that keeps them within their communities and avoids the harmful impact of unnecessary separation through placement in orphanages or adoption overseas. Above all, support from the public and donors for these initiatives can help children to grow up safely in their own homes and communities.

Community monitoring of foster families in Sinje Refugee Camps in Liberia[114]

A brutal conflict in Sierra Leone during the 1990s resulted in large numbers of people fleeing to the bordering country of Liberia. Save the Children worked in two refugee camps in the Liberian town of Sinje, where many children had become separated from their families. While many of these girls and boys had been taken in spontaneously by related and unrelated carers, others were placed within foster families. Save the Children worked with a number of community groups set up by the refugees to make sure these children were carefully monitored and supported. These included the Association of Concerned Carers (an organisation of foster carers), a Child Welfare Committee (CWC) which had been set up by concerned individuals to respond to child protection problems in the community and Boys' and Girls' Clubs, which provided children with a space to discuss issues affecting them.

With support from Save the Children, who provided the groups with training on child protection, foster children were visited regularly by volunteers from the Concerned Carers and CWC to make sure they were being cared for adequately and integrated within community life. On a more informal level, the Girls' and Boys' Clubs provided children with the opportunity to share concerns about abuse or neglect with other young people they could trust. In this way, children within the clubs worked effectively as informal 'front-line child protection agents'.

"One girl told us of the case of a young fostered boy: she had observed that he was being badly treated by the foster carers. He had a heavy burden of work and was sometimes beaten if he failed to carry out his duties. He was dirty and badly clothed and was not attending school. She directly raised her concerns with the foster parents and contacted the Concerned Carers who in turn referred the case to the CWC. The girl and the Child Advocate provided advice to the family, as a result of which the situation improved. He has been able to remain in the house, with monitoring…"

(Case study of the care and protection of separated children in the Sinje refugee camp, Liberia. Tolfree 2002)

5 Working towards lasting change

Experience shows that helping children to be safely reunited with their relatives, while supporting them with temporary care and protection in well-monitored family settings can make a huge difference to the lives of girls and boys in emergencies. **But this is just the first step.**

To ensure the protection and care of children, not only during times of crisis but before and after emergencies, countries need to work towards transforming their child care systems on a long-term basis so that they can support family-based services such as family tracing and reunification, well-monitored kinship care, foster care, small group homes and domestic adoption.

Challenging but worthwhile

Although the benefits are well documented, promoting care within families as a better alternative for children to institutional care or international adoption can be challenging – both in emergency and non-emergency contexts:

- Traditionally, institutional care is still the main form of formal care for children without families in many parts of the world. (Although informally, spontaneous community care in emergencies may be extremely common.) Introducing new ideas and practices for caring for children as part of an emergency response can be met with resistance by local communities and governments, who may feel imposed upon by outsiders. Moreover, national legislation regarding child welfare may be oriented to placing children in institutions, with little provision for family-based care alternatives such as fostering or national adoption, which can make it difficult to implement new practices.[115]
- Governments, particularly those operating in emergency situations, may feel daunted by the challenge of transforming their care infrastructure to support family-based services such as family tracing and reunification and well-monitored foster care. Others, however, may see it as an opportunity to start that change, supported by donor funds and technical support.
- Cultural and religious beliefs in some countries mean that communities are less receptive to the idea of children being cared for by 'strangers'. In particular, in cultures where fostering children is traditionally seen as a means of benefit for the caregiver rather than a way to protect and care for children, communities may have legitimate concerns that fostering in emergency situations will result in boys and girls being treated badly.
- Governments may be deterred by the potential cost of supporting family-based care within communities, despite evidence that institutional care is a more expensive option long term.

In Haiti for example, the history of reliance on institutions to provide care for children, the tradition of using girls and boys as 'restavecs' and limited care legislation, means that introducing new practices of family care will take time. In line with this, some agencies are continuing to support children in carefully selected residential care homes while also working with the government to pilot a family fostering programme.

Transforming care for children

Despite these obstacles to change, experience indicates that practices initiated in anticipation of and in response to emergencies can serve as a starting point for transforming the way in which countries think about and care for vulnerable children long term – providing a demonstration of what the public and donors' money can do if it goes to the right places.

Before disaster strikes

Work that is done before a disaster can have a significant impact on children's lives. Past emergencies have demonstrated that in countries where the basic infrastructure for social work is in place and disaster preparation and mitigation plans are developed, government agencies are better able to respond to children separated from their families during disasters.[116]

Humanitarian and child-focused agencies can help countries to prepare for a potential emergency and to protect their children in the longer term, by assisting them to build comprehensive child welfare systems and services. These include:

"Countries with pre-existing, well-established child protection systems are better able to cope and recover from the 'shock' caused by disasters such as earthquakes, floods and environmental change."[117]

- legal and policy frameworks around family care and deinstitutionalisation
- training social workers, government officials and communities to support vulnerable boys and girls
- establishing social protection mechanisms to ensure that families are able to support their children.[118]

Emergency preparedness plans for responding to children's needs can also be developed. For example, foster families can be identified and trained in advance to provide short- or long-term care in the event that boys and girls become separated from their families during a crisis.

Changing the culture of care in Rwanda[119]

In cultures where the idea of living with strangers is unfamiliar, policies or laws to regulate care practices such as fostering may not exist. Before the war in Rwanda, fostering was uncommon. However, with estimates of 400,000–500,000 children lost or separated from their families during the genocide, huge efforts were made to reunite or foster children in families rather than place them in residential care. Humanitarian agencies such as Concern Worldwide and Save the Children worked closely with the Rwandan government to produce national legislation and policies to guide fostering, which endure to this day.

When disaster strikes

Practices initiated as part of emergency responses can also play a significant role in transforming childcare systems on a lasting basis. By revealing new ways of supporting children, emergency response activities can produce debate, open up funding and help to reform existing childcare structures. Humanitarian agencies can play an important role in advocating for policies, legislation, practices and systems regarding childcare in emergencies and work with governments to develop their ability to plan and implement these changes. For example, child protection responses after the genocide in Rwanda and the 2004 tsunami in Indonesia and Sri Lanka have helped pave the way for new child welfare policies in those communities and a shift towards family-based rather than institutional care.

After disaster strikes: Transforming child protection in Aceh[120]

When the tsunami hit in late 2004, the impact for children in Aceh, one of Indonesia's poorest areas, was immediate. UNICEF estimated that up to 15,000 children were separated from their families, with the vast majority spontaneously taken in by neighbours, friends and extended family overnight. The Indonesian government reacted decisively, issuing a number of policies to prevent further separation of children from their families, including a ban on adoption, travel restrictions and deployment of policemen to exit points such as airports and sea ports to prevent children being taken away.

As part of the emergency response, government and civil society staff were mobilised to carry out family tracing and reunification, whereby 2,853 children were registered and 82% were placed in family care. Humanitarian agencies also worked with the government to develop a structured system of family monitoring and support and to advocate against institutionalisation. According to a recent evaluation, these initial emergency responses have now evolved into substantial child protection systems in Aceh, with international agency support helping to "pave the way for new child care and placement policies and practices, including a shift in governmental policy away from sole support for orphanages as a childcare option in favour of substantial support for vulnerable families in order to prevent child–family separations".[121]

Key components of Aceh's child protection transformation include:
- establishment of a child protection unit in Aceh's Ministry of Social Affairs and child protection bodies in sub-districts
- revision of laws and policies on child protection including the promotion/regulation of family-based care for children without parental care
- a rise in numbers of trained social workers and child protection staff
- a huge increase in government allocations to child protection and social welfare – 912% increase between 2006 and 2008.

At the national level, the Indonesian government has begun to shift its policies and support from institutions towards family-based care, with the establishment of a National Standards of Care regulatory framework for childcare institutions and the declaration of family care as a priority in the Country Strategic Plan.

Support from the public and donors for initiatives that keep children within their families and communities – both in emergency and non-emergency contexts – can play a critical role in shaping the way in which countries develop their systems of care for children in the long term. Not only does the development of a strong child welfare system oriented around family care mean that countries are better equipped to respond to children's needs if emergencies strike again, in the long term it builds the foundation for children to be protected and cared for appropriately during times of stability. For vulnerable girls and boys, this means they can grow up safely within their own communities long after an emergency ends.

6 What needs to change: Conclusions and recommendations

The public, other donors and governments must all take action now to ensure their support in emergencies is directed towards humanitarian interventions that work to bring families together and keep girls and boys within their communities. Efforts to do this in the aftermath of emergencies in some countries have already led to significant transformations in the way in which girls and boys are cared for, including the development of new adoption and care legislation designed to protect children and prevent unintended separations from families.

Replicating some of these successes and effecting real changes in the way that children separated from their families in emergencies are supported, requires action on a number of fronts.

The public can help to play a key role in helping children in emergencies by:
- avoiding support for the creation of new orphanages that provide group care on a long-term basis and unlawful adoption or evacuation of children overseas
- directing support to emergency response agencies that are experienced in working to trace families in emergencies, supporting separated children in well-monitored family care, and providing essential services and supplies to enable communities to care for their children

- advocating for family care by speaking up at work, places of worship, schools or community meetings to educate others about the realities facing children in emergencies and encouraging support for family and community care solutions.

Other donors (including governments, faith-based organisations and corporations) can help children in emergencies by:
- avoiding support for the creation of new orphanages that provide group care on a long-term basis and unlawful adoption or evacuation of children overseas
- targeting support towards initiatives to trace families in emergencies, support separated children in well-monitored family care, and provide essential services and supplies to enable communities to care for their children
- supporting initiatives to build child protection services on a long-term basis, including de-institutionalisation efforts and the development of family-based care alternatives to enable countries to respond to and prevent separation of children from their families in emergencies.

Humanitarian agencies (including United Nations agencies and non-governmental organisations) can do more to help children separated from their families in emergencies by:

- working with countries vulnerable to crisis to ensure comprehensive emergency preparedness plans are developed for responding to and preventing the separation of children
- supporting the rapid development, implementation and monitoring of family tracing and reunification services in emergencies in coordination with governments and communities
- promoting family-based care initiatives that build upon existing care services in emergencies, including formal and informal kinship and foster care and national adoption, in coordination with governments and communities
- providing training and support for the people and institutions who play key roles in the protection environment for children, including parents, community and social workers, policy makers, government officials and children.

National governments can make a commitment to reuniting families separated in emergencies and keeping children within family care in their own communities by:

- developing emergency preparedness plans for responding to separated children, including identifying and training foster families who can care for children during crisis situations
- implementing measures to regulate international adoption at the height of emergencies, as well as unregistered or unlawful care institutions
- working long term to build a child welfare system orientated around family preservation and family-based care rather than institutionalisation. This includes:
  - ensuring that all care decisions are based on the best interests of each individual child
  - allocating long-term resources for services such as family tracing and reunification and well-monitored family care
  - developing a legislative framework that provides for family care options, including fostering and national adoption
  - establishing social protection mechanisms that enable families to care for their children in crisis situations.

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- unless a reasonable time has passed during which all feasible steps to trace the parents or other surviving family members have been carried out. This period of time may vary with circumstances, in particular those related to the ability to conduct proper tracing.

Adoption should only be considered once it has been established that the child is free to be adopted. In practice, this means either that there is no hope for successful tracing and reunification or that

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Misguided Kindness

Making the right decisions for children in emergencies

"Save the Children's striking new report highlights how the public's understanding and response to emergencies can have a real impact on the lives of suffering children. With every humanitarian crisis we risk inflicting untold damage through misguided attempts to rescue girls and boys by creating new orphanages or adopting them overseas. We – the outsiders – need to incorporate the lessons learned from past emergencies and focus on bringing families together – not tearing them apart. This report is essential reading for any person who has ever donated their money to help children in crisis."

Dr Neil Boothby, Allan Rosenfield Professor of Clinical Forced Migration and Health Director, Program on Forced Migration and Health, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University

"This is an excellent and much-needed report. It captures the key challenges and issues around caring for children separated from their families in emergencies and will serve as a vital advocacy tool for the organisations working to help girls and boys in crisis. Most important, it sends an urgent message to the public to make sure that their generosity in response to humanitarian crisis helps rather than harms children."

Ghazal Keshavarzian, Better Care Network

"When disasters affect children, decades of accumulated knowledge and experience about how to react appropriately in emergencies can still be outweighed by knee-jerk responses grounded in the mentality of 'get the children out' and the creation of new 'orphanages'. These kinds of reaction are harmful for children and go against virtually every lesson that we should have learned by now. It is critical that the messages conveyed by Save the Children's *Misguided Kindness* report are acknowledged and urgently acted upon by individuals, agencies and governments."

Nigel Cantwell, International Consultant on Child Protection Policy

Save the Children

savethechildren.org.uk