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Building Community Capacity for the Support of the Orphans' Education:
A Case of Albania

Abstract

This paper focuses on the exploration of strategies and policies on how to develop community capacity aiming at supporting the Albanian orphans' education. The key objective is to propose a framework on how to develop the capacity of a community on dealing with the low academic performance of the institutionalized children (IC) and the lack of the provision and implementation of mentoring programs, strategies and policies based on research on community development. We conclude that the type of care (institutionalized vs foster) plays an important role in the child's developmental and educational outcomes. Then, in the last section of this work, conclusions and recommendations are included.

Keywords: Capacity building, institutionalized children, community support, orphan, education

1- Introduction

Recent household survey data in 47 countries shows that orphanhood from all causes exceeds five per cent in many countries and is over 20 per cent in Lesotho, Rwanda, Swaziland and Zimbabwe. Orphaning rates are lowest in countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CEE/CIS) (UNICEF, 2005). Albania has 31,000 orphans and in a population of 900,000 aged 0-19 year olds (30% of Albanian population is 0-19 years old) that accounts for three per cent. Despite the large change in the population between Albania and Germany, they both have similar number of orphans: 31,000 and 33,000 respectively. There are some differences on how some countries deal with the orphans with regard to their placement: adoption, institutionalized care and foster care. Many developed countries strongly promote foster care as it is found to have more positive developmental outcomes. In the US, no child under three years old is placed in institutional care (Browne et al., 2005) and in 2011, there were 400,540 orphans placed in foster care (AFCARS Report, 2012).

2- Challenges of Institutionalized Children (IC)

In general, most of the studies have been done in third world countries with Africa leading. One reason that there are not many studies on orphans in the developed countries is that the number of ICs is very small and most of them are placed in foster care. Romania is a distinct exception. Romania has a larger number of ICs than all developed countries including USA which has a population of 15 times larger than the prior and as a result it has provided samples for many international academicians (Zeanah et al., 2003; Marshall et al., 2004; Zeanah et al., 2005; Nelson et al., 2007; Bos et al., 2009; Nelson et al., 2009; Smyke et al., 2009; Zeanah et al., 2009; McLaughlin et al., 2010; Drury et al., 2011). There may be a difficulty to project the results of the research done in Africa onto Albania because a large body of research has been done on orphans affected by AIDS/HIV. In all papers focused on orphans of Africa, the reported high AIDS/HIV prevalence is directly translated into high number of orphans. An interesting fact is that, there has been a lot of discussion and constructive debate on the ethics of "foreign academicians" doing research on orphans in Romania (Zeanah et al., 2006a; Zeanah et al., 2006b; Wassenar, 2006; Millum & Emanuel, 2007; Rid, 2012), but there has been no such discussion in the case of Africa.

There have been studies that compare the psychosocial development of orphans with the non-orphans (Bachman Desilva et al., 2012). In some studies the results have been found to be moderated by gender (Drury et al., 2011). In one of them, findings showed that there is a greater need for identification and strengthening of the psychosocial support for the girls than for the boys (Bachman Desilva et al., 2012). It is found that relative to children living in the community, the ICs have abnormal brain activity (McLaughlin et al., 2010); they have shorter telomere length (Drury et al., 2011) and are at a higher risk of neural atrophy in the developing brain

(Browne et al., 2005). They also reported that, the neglect and damage caused by early privation of parenting is equivalent to violence to a young child. ICs have an IQ 20 points lower than their peers in foster care (van IJzendoorn et al., 2008).

3- Country background and definition of an orphan

Albania, as a developing country still remains behind many other countries of Eastern Europe in terms of development where despite economic growth, many people's lives continue to be marked by poverty, unemployment and homelessness. There has been twenty-three years since the system changed from a dictatorial communist to a democratic one. During these years, Albania showed that it did not have experience with periodic change of political leadership and coupled with periodic traumas such as the economic crisis of 1997 and the 1999 Kosovo war, and could not formulate a stable national strategy of how to deal with many issues. A lot of decisions and regulations were ad hoc and changed regularly by the following ruling government. This situation has resulted in a chaotic situation where different state institutions have overlapping obligations and as a result many vulnerable groups have been unable to properly address their issues. Under such conditions, the family, although also under strain, is still the most secure place in most people's lives.

After the collapse of the communist system in Albania, the family structure has undergone a rapid change. The rise in unemployment, the high rate of emigration, the high rate of mobility to larger cities with a hope of employment, the lack of social and supportive programs when compared to then-centralized communist system, all contribute to the financial uncertainty and stress. Such factors have mainly influenced the life of vulnerable children who are at risk of experiencing stressful life events such as divorce, sudden death of both parents, being a child of a teen and unmarried mother, or abandoned because of migration of the parents in search of work.

According to Albanian law on the orphans, children deprived temporarily or permanently of parental care are given the status of orphan. Most of these children have a living parent or parents who for different reasons are temporarily or permanently unable or unwilling to care for them and those children whose parents have both died are usually adopted (Amnesty International, 2008). Most of these children are placed in institutions because of their families' economic problems resulting in their inability to meet basic needs, including food, shelter, health services and education leading to psychosocial distress. The economic and psychosocial problems and possibly the absence of adequate adult care may also lead to increased risk of discrimination and exploitation. Official data related to children in alternative care and young people leaving care is scarce. Most of the official data is collected by the Social Services. The rest of the information used in this work comes from unofficial data sources such as the National Association of Orphans in Albania, Amnesty International, and observations made during field work for this study. This dearth of information highlights the lack of structures in place to collect and analyze data related to children in alternative care. No research

has been undertaken also on young people ageing out of care in Albania (SOS Children's Villages International, 2010).

4- Challenges of Orphans in Albania

Orphans and other young people raised in institutional care in Albania are amongst the most disadvantaged and vulnerable groups: they lack the support, love and care derived from a family environment, the network of family relationships through which children and young people find their place in the wider community and which may assist them when they grow up in finding employment and establishing their own families. They do not only suffer because of their vulnerability and disadvantages but also because of the state's failure in fulfilling its duties and obligations under international and national law and its violation of their rights to family life; to "special protection and assistance" provided by the state for children deprived of parental care; to health care and, to education. According to Article 24.2.e of the Convention on the Rights of the Child: "…State Parties shall take appropriate measures to ensure that all segments of the society, in particular parents and children, are informed, have access to education…" Without laws, policies and services that support families and communities in caring for all orphans and vulnerable children, children in this situation face grave risks to their education, health and well-being, and support for them remains low (UNICEF, 2011).

Poverty is one of the main reasons for the placement of children in institutional care in Albania, and the state does little to help them escape poverty. The state's failure to adequately protect their rights, and in particular to give young people leaving social care the support they need to make the transition to independent life, has consequences that are all too predictable. Many achieve poor grades or drop out of school without acquiring the skills and qualifications that would enable them to live independently. As adults, they are likely to be homeless and to be at risk of extreme poverty and social exclusion (Amnesty International, 2008). In this context, one of the major challenges that governments, international organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) face in their work with the orphans, is the lack of monitoring and mentoring programs which would help with these orphans' school performance. Another resource that would help the government to better deal with this issue is the identification of community's assets, capacities and abilities. Even the poorest neighborhood can be a place where individuals and organizations put efforts based on their understanding and try to find resources to rebuild their capacity (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Thus, the government should be able to mobilize the most important local strengths of the community such as: individuals, associations and institutions by building strong relationships and communication path to help the community how to get involved with this category of children.

United Nations has signed many conventions on the human rights where some of them have the focus on the rights of the minorities and vulnerable groups. Most of the conventions are formulated to protect the rights of adults who can provide

for themselves and protect their own dignity; a word that is not found in the texts of the conventions. Then, we have a convention on the rights of children where the word "dignity" is mentioned eight times because children would lose their dignity even when the state or their protective family can not provide for them. The orphans are more vulnerable than their peers because they lack the basic social structure that would support their psychological development (Cluver & Gardner, 2007). Professor Gary Melton closes his speech where he talks about the power of strong and supportive communities in creating a safe environment with these words: "People shouldn't have to ask!" (Melton, 2013). Similarly, we could very easily say: "Orphans shouldn't have to ask!" The community needs to be close to the orphans to provide a warm environment that would contribute to their healthy psychosocial development. The community needs to be there for both tangible and intangible outcomes. Caring for the education of the orphans or the ICs is a more tangible aspect. Research shows that parental involvement (PI) with the school is considered as an important predictor of the child's academic achievement and social development (Dearing et al., 2006; Englund et al., 2004; McWayne et al., 2008). By default, orphans lack this important predictor (PI) and this makes them a risk group. In the case of the ICs, it could be the community or community representatives who would be involved with the education and this involvement would include: (i) visiting the school, (ii) meeting with the teachers, (iii) discussing with the ICs their performance at school, and (iv) helping them with their studies.

5- The Importance of Community Support on Orphans' Education

According to Albanian traditions children are not easily given to the State orphanages (Children's Homes) regardless of the circumstances of the parents. The best alternative in this case is the informal care, where the grandparents or other relatives take care of the child. Previous studies have demonstrated the importance of the extended family as the predominant orphan caring unit, while noting that some relatives neglect or sometimes exploit orphan relatives (Foster et al., 1995a; Foster et al., 1997; Lwihula et al., 1995; Over et al., 1995). The supportive role of the extended family networks might have a positive impact on reducing the number of children in residential institutions. Children stay under the care of the State orphanages (Children's Homes) until they reach the age of 14. Prior to their departure, they should be consulted about their future, and should receive counseling about the risks of exploitation, sexual health, alcohol and drug abuse, as well as practical instruction in managing a budget, cleaning, and cooking. There is also a requirement that the child should continue to be supported and monitored after leaving care, although no specification as to who is responsible for this or the period for which such support and monitoring should last (Amnesty International, 2008). Apparently, these children remain unsupervised by the state and the voluntary involvement of the community members is needed to make a change and influence the policies and programs that affect the quality of these children's lives (Ohmer & Beck, 2006).

The Albanian law has not assigned this duty (supporting and monitoring) to anyone even though, there are many state organizations that compete to do the same less important tasks. In this obviously forgotten task, there is a great chance for the community to step in and support and monitor the orphans. The first tangible winner in this situation is the orphan of course, but the community will also win. On the one hand the community will prevent the waste of their own taxes that has been paid and spent on the well-being of the ICs. On the other hand, they will prevent a young adult from being part of a criminal network.

The moral concept of child upbringing refers to the socialization and integration of a child into the community. An orphanage director told Amnesty International: "It's true that some of these young people drop out of secondary school and when they go to the dormitory they face life alone and without care and some prefer street life when they encounter difficulties. Our work is lost when these children leave the Children's Home". A girl living in a dormitory commented: "We orphans in dormitory need advice, a kind word and more care" (Amnesty International, 2008). Thus, to prevent all this what happens to the orphans in Albania, it is suggested that the local government develop and implement national policies and strategies to build and strengthen governmental, family, and community capacities to provide a supportive environment for orphans both girls and boys who are in urgent need of appropriate counseling and psychosocial support; of getting enrolled in school and having access to accommodation, good nutrition and health and social services on an equal basis with other children. They also need to be protected from all forms of abuse, violence, exploitation, discrimination, trafficking and loss of inheritance; discrimination and fully and equally enjoy all human rights through the promotion of an active and visible policy of destigmatization of orphans (UNICEF, 2005). The international community, particularly donor countries' civil society as well as the private sector should be attracted to complement effectively national programs to support community programs for orphans in developing countries. These children remain unsupervised by the state and the voluntary involvement of the community members is needed to make a change and influence the policies and programs that affect the quality of these children's lives (Ohmer & Beck, 2006).

Prior to tackling any serious problem, the community should first identify it. Now that we have already identified it, the community organizers should mobilize to solve the problem by attacking it directly without applying for help at the elected officials, and should start training the community members continuously so that they can better help in the process. It is inherent that the identification of the problem is done by a very small group and the work started by this small group would be unsuccessful if a larger number of the society members would not participate. The latter inclusion of the rest of the society can be accomplished not by focusing on the members of the society who started the community development but by focusing on the quality of the work, on social justice and universal values. Most of the multinational NGOs conduct 'community development' projects, which focus mainly on emergency relief activities (Toomey, 2011). Thus, they have been playing mainly the role of the provider for these children rather than assisting the community to become more involved with the orphans' issues. Even, in the case when the families do not have

all the tools to offer their care to these children, the community can be part of such a supportive network through the help of other organizations.

In regard to supporting and monitoring the orphans' education, the community has to define and decide the types of capital that it has to offer. Researchers have categorized the capital of the community in two main groups: human or intangible capital and material or tangible capital (Flora et al., 2004). The human capital is further divided in four smaller groups: (i) social capital, (ii) political capital, (iii) cultural capital and (iv) human capital. The material capital is divided in three groups: (i) natural capital, (ii) financial capital and (iii) built capital. The capitals are defined as tangible and intangible based on whether they are easily measurable, for example the human capital is hard to measure, whereas the material capital is easily measured. Apart from the definition, in our case the human capital is tangible capital as this would contribute more than the material capital to solving our problem at hand: improving the academic performance of the orphans. 'Community-based services' is a very new concept in Albanian terminology that was first mentioned by the legislature in 2007. The Social Protection Strategy 2007–13 aimed to reform Albania's social services where among other areas, it focused on the extension of community-based services (SOS Children's Villages International, 2010). Unfortunately, after five years no concrete steps have been taken and such a strategy was never implemented in Albania.

School, family, and community partnerships can improve school programs and school climate, provide family services and support, increase parents' skills and leadership, connect families with others in the school and in the community, and help teachers with their work (Epstein, 2001). All these stakeholders can be considered as an important part of the neighborhood organizations where through active involvement, its members devote their time and energy to successfully perform their tasks (Wandersman & Florin, 2001). In this regard, it is important that community members believe they have the capacity to make a difference in these children's situation. Intervention programs for orphans and vulnerable children are needed for community-based care to support community coping mechanisms by strengthening the capacities of community members to care for orphans. Outside organizations can develop partnerships with community groups, which can help them develop orphan support activities and encourage caring responses by relatives and community residents (Foster et al., 1997; Thurman et al., 2008).

There have been few studies in the literature that focuses on the community support on the education of the orphans (Chatterji et al., 2009). Bwafwano program in Zambia is reportedly the first of its kind to measure the orphans' school outcomes as a result of community intervention. This program offered free meals, health clinic services, services related to education and ongoing psychosocial support. The school outcomes that were measured were 'school enrollment' and 'being at the correct age-for-grade'. This study showed promising progress and the authors stated that they needed to continue this program in a more rigorous way.

6- Conclusions and Recommendations

Here in this research brief we tried to understand and later suggest the implementation of the community involvement with the education of the orphans in Albania. We faced two main difficulties: (i) there is no official sufficient data on the orphans' situation in Albania and (ii) there is no prior work on community support of the orphans' education. We have provided the necessary background framework that would be helpful for any researcher who is interested to work in this field.

Orphans and ICs are defined differently but in Albanian context they may, most of the time, be considered equivalent because most orphans are institutionalized. The ICs face several escalating challenges in regard to education. They are less likely to attend school, and even if they go to school it is found that their brain operates at lower levels than children who live in a community environment. ICs have a lower IQ than children that live in community care. With the support of the community, one-to-one mentoring programs may be established and this type of individualized care has proved to have positive outcomes as in the case of Bulgaria and China (Nelson et al., 2009). There, volunteers and sometimes paid workers would spend 5-8 hours per day in an orphanage in specially designed rooms.

However, a number of socio-cultural factors may impede community response. Among such factors there can be mentioned orphans' impoverished condition, neglect of the living parents or extended family relatives and community perceptions of orphan behavior and the lack of neighborhood collective efficacy (Wandersman & Florin, 2001) to intervene in the orphans' education related issues and support them. Another factor is the involvement of humanitarian organizations with the situation of vulnerable (orphaned) children, which may inadvertently lessen the level of community support they receive and contribute to their marginalization (Thurman et al., 2008).

Key investments should continue to be directed toward more sustainable and effective community responses to support orphans' school performance. These include greater attention to orphans with a poor performance at school, a proper balance of government and civil society investments on the support of the community for the orphans, and more rigorous evaluation and research to ensure evidence-based programming. Policy should be improved and existing legislation enforced to increase the obligation of local stakeholders and their support for the orphans' education. A similar constructive collaboration was seen in Bwafwano program in Zambia where the orphans were offered a wide range of services made possible by the support of several structures. Children were offered free meals, health services and child psychologist (Chatterji et al., 2009). Relevant governmental structures should be developed to support community's efforts on improving the orphans' situation and these should be based on existing NGO structures. Institutional capacities should be developed to allow for systematic monitoring and follow-up of the orphans school performance. The local government in collaboration with the NGOs should create youth facilities to support young orphans and improve the existing services.

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