

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Rwanda's Orphans – Care and Integration During Uncertain Times

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Children and youth are considered to be the cornerstones of development in post-conflict, state-building practices. In the case of Rwanda, the government has engaged in an ambitious, state-initiated deinstitutionalization project that anticipates the closure of all officially registered orphanages between 2012 and 2014. As a consequence, all orphans in institutional care will return to their extended families or be placed with foster parents in order to be given the opportunity to grow up within a Rwandan family environment. By investigating the lived realities of orphans before their departure from the orphanage, it becomes apparent that there is no 'one size fits all' approach to systems of child care as historical and psychosocial dynamics play a crucial role.

Introduction

In an idealised account of East African social ties, John Roscoe describes Africa's traditional life in the early 20th century as 'No one ever went hungry... there were no orphans because all the father's brothers were fathers to a child' (Roscoe 1911: 12). While doubts arise about whether such an idealistic state has ever existed within any African community (Iliffe 1987), Rwanda has come closer than any other country to achieving this goal. Two decades after Rwanda's genocide in 1994, the country's government is heavily invested in the well-being of its young orphaned generation.

Since April 2012 when Rwanda's government brought about comprehensive reforms to address the rights of Rwanda's 3323 children,¹ teenagers and young adults (NCC 2012) living in institutional care, the government

has shifted to become an integral part of the larger imaginary of a developed Rwandan nation. Orphans play a particularly symbolic role in Rwanda's national vision because they represent the legacy of genocide, as Prime Minister Pierre Habumuremyi explained in a speech: 'Orphans were not part of Rwandan culture' (Broadhead 2012) before genocide but turned into a reminder of the past. Traditionally, the community and the extended family were expected to take charge of those children who had lost one or both parents, leading to Habumuremyi's claim that the concept of orphans did not exist in Rwanda's social fabric before 1994.

The basis for the assertion that orphans do not exist in Rwanda rests on the perception that the responsibility of the family towards its members is limitless. The Rwandan government advocates the idea of the extended family where 'its members were responsible for the protection of the vulnerable, care for the poor and sick and the transmission of traditional social values and education'

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(Foster 2010: 56). Rwanda's official narrative, disseminated through the media, official speeches and education programs (Freedman et. al 2011: 298ff), affirms that in order for Rwandan society to return to a stable and balanced social order, all children living in orphanages need to return to their communities or Rwandan foster families.² The importance of Rwandan tradition within the family consequently becomes reinforced as an ideal developmental goal. This strategy emphasises a close-knit community based on pre-colonial traditional values, when Rwandan culture was unified and undivided.³ As a result, Rwanda's orphans play a pivotal role in their society, which strives to negotiate the reconciliation between the violent past of genocide and a harmonious vision of the future.

The Rwandan government seems to have taken international policy advice and research seriously in their quest to improve the lives of the country's orphans. The government alongside the international organization *Hopes and Homes for Children* (HHC), an organization that works with institutionalized orphans around the world, has committed to a two-year project with the objective to close all of Rwanda's 34 registered orphanages by the end of 2014 (NCC 2012).⁴ While Rwanda's deinstitutionalisation (DI) policy foresees the reunification of thousands of children and teenagers dependent on institutional care with their communities (NCC 2012; Broadhead 2012), there is a clear lack of research in Rwanda that has considered a local, social and cultural analysis by actively listening to orphans to understand their roles within society. It is vital to recognize the perceptions of the affected regarding the changing circumstances they face prior to repackaging solutions to meet the needs of children in institutional care. This paper's main aim is to present the challenges and paradoxes that orphans between the ages of 18 and 27 at Rwanda's largest orphanage face before they establish their position within their communities and Rwandan society at

large. A fundamental challenge at present is thus to shift away from the vague, generalizing information about African children and youth in institutional care as a whole, to accounts which place emphasis on understanding the subtleties of local, historical, political and cultural contexts. This research offers a window through which to understand institutional care in a post-conflict country from the perceptions of orphans before their unification. The research brings together several years of interviews, conversations and inquiries into the lives of orphans at Nœl Orphanage from the very beginning of the DI policy to the final days of the orphanage's existence. The analysis of this research thus first and foremost cautions against generalized approaches to orphan care that disregard the local, cultural and historical influences on a country's population. Secondly, the research shows that national and international aims and ambitions do not often correspond to the orphans' own visions of their future. While it is true that the challenges of orphanhood on the global scale are a varied combination of poverty, lack of education, inequality and marginalisation (Abebe 2009), the approaches to orphan care need to be tailored to the circumstances of the respective country.

Methods

This project began with a desire to understand what can be said about Rwandan society and its changes among Rwanda's young generation two decades after genocide. The aim was to include social and traditional pressures that orphans born between 1987 and 1996 need to re-interpret and navigate in the course of creating their own identity and place in Rwandan society. More narrowly, my research focuses in particular on the lives of teenagers and young adults who grew up at the Nœl Orphanage, and traces their journey and experiences in their preparation to leave the orphanage in the coming months. Is familial care not only in theory but also in praxis considered to be the better

approach to orphan care? What was therefore important for me in this research was to understand the mental processes of both the individual and of the community.

This article draws on quantitative and qualitative research findings and project work with orphans over a two-year period between 2012 and 2014. Extensive fieldwork was carried out at the Nœl Orphanage, the largest officially registered orphanage in Rwanda in the northeastern part of the country with over 500 children at the beginning of the DI policy. This study mainly relies on anthropological methods, combining forms of interviews with participant observation, small surveys, focus groups and analyses of written texts and drawings from Nœl's youth. Simultaneously, research was carried out in Kigali to meet several unified children, other researchers, psychologists and NGO workers. During my research period at the Nœl Orphanage, I also volunteered, helping in particular the teenaged orphans with school homework and teaching them English. This process allowed me to continuously engage with 40 to 70 of Nœl's orphans who were between 18 and 27 years old⁵ shortly before their unification while simultaneously supporting their personal development. On many occasions I relied on participant observation to understand how certain dynamics between orphans, staff members and social workers functioned. While there remained many orphans under the age of 18 with whom I also had regular and extensive contact, a particular contradiction existed for the age group focussed on in this research. Despite the fact that these older orphans are legally adults, they are denied the possibility of leading an independent life. At Nœl Orphanage the boundaries between childhood and adulthood are particularly stark: everyone who is economically reliant on the institution is considered a 'child' and automatically enters the unification process.

In the sections that follow, I explore how international conceptions of the boundaries between childhood and adulthood have

informed local approaches to orphan care within a post-conflict setting. Another core theme that will guide this paper is the poignant role that Rwanda's history has played in how orphans perceive the DI policy and their place within Rwanda's society. Since the emphasis of this paper rests on the contradictory understanding of childhood and adulthood amongst orphans of Nœl Orphanage, the final section of the paper attempts to listen to the voices of those who are unified against their will.

From Universal Perspectives to Local Perceptions of Orphanhood

Rwanda, similar to other post-conflict countries with a high percentage of young people, reconceptualises young people's position within society 'in relation to the nation in order to accommodate development goals' (Cheney 2007: 43). Thus the social construction of childhood and orphanhood will serve as the basis for this chapter in exploring the motivation of the Rwandan government to re-integrate children living within government institutions into local communities. The Rwandan government has appropriated and adapted international conceptions of children's rights in order to justify its ambitious unification project, which has been heavily influenced by the country's history. The state as such plays a crucial role in instilling a certain idea about its past, present and future into Rwanda's young generation. Rwanda's post-conflict path to nationhood, which is still unfolding, therefore provides a unique context to study how contestations over concepts of nationhood and orphanhood crucially intersect. An important aspect of childhood is one that connects the local with the global (Cheney 2007: 3), and which places the study of children not only under the microscope but also views childhood as part of a larger intersection rather than in isolation. The anthropological understanding of childhood is thus attuned to a global view where the observer and the observed are to be found next to each other and childhood

is seen as a 'form of culture and as a cultural process as well as a mechanism through which children are raised' (Fass 2008: 15).

Throughout Western history, the care of children who have lost one or both parents has depended upon the development of government structures and the social construction of childhood (Ennew 2005). Judith Ennew, in her anthropological study on orphanhood entitled *Prisoners of Childhood*, argues that orphans have always played a pivotal role in two domains – mythology and social welfare provision (2005: 139). In Greek and Roman myths, there was a tendency 'for hero figures who were the biological sons of kings to be brought up by humble foster parents' (2005: 131). These ideas have consistently been reproduced in European narratives with Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* as one of the most famous examples. Dickens portrays a picture of London where orphans experience the hardship of social life but nonetheless carry great expectations, implying a certain faith that the 'orphan hero will turn out to be royal or at least wealthy' (Estrin 1985: 14).

The reality of early-modern orphanhood, as Ennew (2005: 130ff) points out, did not follow the mythological and romanticised version. Instead, abandoned children were considered to be 'the creature who stands utterly naked' (Pullan 1989: 6) before the mercy of strangers since orphanages were supported through public funds. A change in the approach towards children who did not enjoy the economic support of their parents corresponds to the development of capitalism during the Age of Revolution 1789–1848 as identified by the historian Philippe Ariès (1960). The construction of 'the child' as a different life stage from adulthood was a modern invention that did not exist before the 17th century. The creation of a separate life stage gradually led to the retreat of children to the private sphere. While children had always been physically present within our societies, they did not represent a conceptual category and this

resulted in little attention placed on children for a long time. Children were part of the local community and entrusted with duties similar to adults. According to sociologist Jens Qvortrup, 'They were not kept away from putative dangerous events – from sexuality to executions' as no one was aware that children constituted a specific separate group (2005: 2) that needed protection from harm. Qvortrup explains that children were initially perceived as 'animal-like' (2005: 2) creatures who would enter the world of adults as small grown-ups from a very early age. In the Arèsian vision, children were part of the public life and not restricted solely to the family until the 17th century, when other developments such as 'a decrease in infant mortality, changes in the European educational system, increasing class stratification, and a gradual withdrawal of the family from the wider web of social relations' (Ulanowicz 2013: 1) took place. Furthermore, 'In medieval times, the idea of childhood did not exist' (Ariès 1960: 125); it was their gradual retreat to the private sphere that created the notion of a childhood which then became associated with certain styles of clothing, sexual innocence and financial dependence. Qvortrup says, 'Children in modern society basically belong to the private family, which is portrayed as a "haven in a heartless world" or a retreat from the openness of public society' (2005: 2). Childhood became a time of cultural reproduction, where children were taken out of the labour force and enrolled in schools. While children were thus considered indispensable in pre-modern public life, the cultural definition of children in modernity signifies the opposite.

The modern concept of childhood resulting from the epistemological break regarding children during the 17th century also changed the way orphans have been perceived within social structures (Cook 2004: 4). Attitudes towards orphans and orphan care changed from informal fostering and welfare support within the extended kinship system to institutionalized desertion (Ennew

2000: xiv). This shift parallels the increased economic burden that children inflicted upon their family as a result of their financial dependence. Children were no longer seen as young adults who provided labour but as innocent beings, who brought happiness to their parents (Qvortrup 2005: 5f). Funds had to be raised for children outside of parental care who became the focus of charitable pity. The orphan who has lost one or both parents, embodies the 'unhappy child,' as opposed to the happy child living with his/her parents. Therefore, orphans who represent a vulnerable figure deserve our sympathy and aid (Holland 1992: 148). This image of the suffering orphan has influenced government attitudes, international organizations and donors alike. The construct of the orphan as a vulnerable human being has driven development policies and international programmes.

Different agents on the national and international level have interpreted the situation of orphan care and child protection through the lenses of various discourses, taking into account children's rights to educational opportunities and discussions on health (Daugherty 2012; Carr 2013; Thurman et al. 2008). In this context, international experts use different models and strategies to create the concept of orphanhood and child care. Little agency is left for orphans who carry a double dependency: 'It is dependency on various forms of caretaking systems, and orphans are prisoners of their own dependency' (Qvortrup 2005: 14).

Within the international discourse, the concept of the orphan and the child is thus most frequently framed within a human rights context that assumes that 'families are the best place for children's rights to be secured' (Ennew 2005: 133). The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), established in 1989, contains six articles (Articles 3, 9, 10, 20, 21, 25) that establish standards for the care of children where the nuclear family remains the central unit. The particularity of the UNCRC lies in

its recognition of the concept of childhood and children's rights as universally applicable to 'all cultures and societies across the North-South and the rich-poor divides' (Lewis 1998: 91). The universal recognition of children's rights is often compared to the recognition of women's rights or the emancipation of slaves in America, and it has often been argued that 'children's rights have [...] become perhaps the dominant programme within a social system which makes sense of the adult/child relationship' (King 2004: 274). Children have become universally recognized as one of the most vulnerable members of society who require a safe and secure family environment to reach their full potential. Over the last fifty years, studies (Goldfarb 1945; Bowlby 1951) have consistently documented the adverse effects of children's emotional, social and cognitive development within long-term institutional care. International organizations, the media and policy makers have thus furthered the idea that children need to grow up in families rather than institutions. Research by various international medical experts (Roy et al. 2000; Chou & Browne 2008; Zeanah et al. 2002) has indicated that children who receive substitute parental care tend to have high rates of emotional and behavioural disturbances, resulting from a lack of family support. A family environment, whether this be the extended family or foster parents, is designed to offer children continuing parental guidance and the opportunity to develop deeper relationships within a family environment:

Long-term institutional care tends to be associated with discontinuity of caregivers and shared care among many staff, none of whom has an exclusive caregiving relationship with individual children (Roy et al. 2000: 140).

Within this setting of international expertise and research, individual states maintain

specific responsibilities for the care of orphans, which is set out within international programmes and international law. International definitions of childhood and thus orphanhood have affected national constructions of the concept of childhood and orphanhood as well as the states' role as care takers. The state in this context implements an enabling force that provides social services and social protection to the children. The role of the Rwandan state as such not only carries a specific responsibility for the well-being of its children, but it also disseminates a certain vision of orphanhood and childhood.

Genocide as a Crossroad for Rwandan Orphans

In 2012 in a speech addressing 2,500 pupils and students, President Paul Kagame highlighted the great expectations that lie within Rwanda's children and youth. Kagame demanded, 'We are capable but we must make right choices, we must fight for our dignity [...] We should take our destiny.'⁶ Rwanda's DI policy as such presents a bold plan that uses Rwanda's children as the foundation for the development of a national conscious where the unification of all children living in institutional care projects progress from the top down and to the international community. While the role and meaning of Rwanda's orphans have been influenced by the Western ideal of childhood, it needs to be analysed within the wider development of Rwanda's historical trajectory. President Kagame's idealisation of the young generation stands in stark contrast to President Juvénal Habyarimana's regime (1973–94), which glorified Rwandan peasantry for 'their intimate knowledge of the ecosystem and their ability to extract resources from the land' (Ansoms 2011: 242). The current government's narrative on Rwanda's reconstruction and development, instead, stresses young people's own abilities in order to distance themselves from being victims of the past and encourages them to

become Rwanda's future leaders (Pells et al. 2014: 297).

Since Rwanda's independence from Belgium in 1962, the lives of many Rwandan children have been deeply affected by a variety of changes to the Rwandan state. While the state saw a major power shift from a Tutsi minority rule to a Hutu majority government, the years during the two Republics (1962–94) were characterized by 'remoteness, authoritarianism and secretiveness' where the intrinsic worth of being Hutu was emphasized (Clark 2008: 89). Ethnic identities and rampant corruption played a particularly tragic role which resulted in social upheavals that led to 'successive waves of Tutsis fleeing to neighbouring countries' (Pells 2014: 279). In 1990, the Tutsi diaspora, led by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), invaded the north of Rwanda and triggered a civil war that culminated on April 6th, 1994, when President Habyarimana's plane was shot down over Kigali airport. This incident allowed the Hutu extremists in Habyarimana's regime to 'turn Rwanda into hell on earth' (Verwimp 2013: 5). In the following 100 days, between 500,000 and 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu were killed. The genocide also caused a rapidly changing and evolving construction of childhood and orphanhood; the genocide resulted in one in ten children losing one or both parents and an estimated 110,000 children living in child-headed households as a result of parental death or imprisonment (HRW 2003: 44). In the aftermath of the genocide, Rwanda experienced a proliferation of orphanages⁷ and until recently, the Rwandan government had successfully managed to keep these orphans 'out of sight, out of mind, out of accounts and outside any form of monitoring' (Ennew 2005: 139).

Rwandan orphanages remain a legacy of colonial rule when the Belgian state attempted to place abandoned children into orphanages, managed by the state. These children would then be used as manual labourers in the fields, as an archival source on Belgian policies towards orphans reveals:

Le décret du 12 juillet 1890 place les enfants de moins de 16 ans, dont les parents manquent à leurs devoirs d'entretien et d'éducation, ou orphelins abandonnés, sous la tutelle de l'Etat. Il crée des écoles agricoles et professionnelles dénommées "Colonies d'enfants indigènes" (Laude 1956 : 21).⁸

This attitude of the Belgian colonial rule towards orphans reflects the wider experience of children within Rwandan society at the time. Children were regarded as essential labour 'whose contributions often made the difference between a family surviving and thriving' (Pells et al. 2014: 298) and were rewarded for their 'good behaviour' with inheritance or a good conjugal match. Colonialism, however, also introduced opportunities for children to acquire new skills through education which reduced the power of parents over their children. Nonetheless, ethnic segregation during the two Republics upheld the deep structural inequality among the Rwandan population, where those children further away from power had fewer opportunities. According to Pells, 'In short, for the majority of young people this period was characterized by land insecurity, limited access to education, apprenticeships and employment' (Pells et al. 2014: 298).

Since the genocide in 1994, the Rwandan state has taken the opportunity to enforce a certain optimistic vision on the Rwandan population, in which children and youth can grow up with economic opportunities and within a sheltered family environment. In a recent report of the UN Office Geneva on Rwanda's engagement with its young generation, the committee experts lauded the country's 'creation of an impressive architecture of laws, policies and constitutions to protect and promote the rights of children' (UNOG Report 2013). Since the adoption of the Rwandan Constitution in 2003, the government has been constitutionally bound to promote social welfare. The relevant policies

are built within the frameworks of two larger objectives: Vision 2020 Umurenge Program (VUP) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) (Corry 2012: 8). Both of these goals aim to 'relieve the burden of poverty, disease, inequality and other obstacles' (Corry 2012: 8). Several policies, laws and programmes thus aim to create a more cohesive Rwandan society, targeting three areas in particular: poverty and depravity reduction, empowerment, and social cohesion and inclusion (Corry 2012: 8). Rwanda's post-genocide generation falls under the category of empowerment as the national discourse frequently portrays Rwanda's orphaned youth as victims of its dramatic history who also have the right to grow up within a secure family environment. The *National Policy for Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children* states that 'Rwanda's children have experienced suffering due to bad governance [...] during and even after colonisation' which then resulted in genocide as the 'culminating point of bad management' (SAF 2003).

Through this concentrated focus on children's rights, the situation of orphans also came to the centre of attention. In Rwanda, an orphan is defined as 'a child who has lost one or both parents' and is often placed in context with the definition for *vulnerable children* 'as a person under 18 years, exposed to conditions that do not permit her/him to fulfil her/his fundamental rights for her/his harmonious development' (SAF 2003). This understanding of orphanhood as a vulnerable group without agency has mainly been advocated by the Ministry of Gender and Family Protection (MIGEPROF), the main actor for the promotion and protection of children's rights in Rwandan society. MIGEPROF's vision of orphans and vulnerable children aims to 'protect the rights of the child and to ensure the physical and psychosocial long term development' (MIGEPROF 2007: 11) along with the UNCRC, ratified in 1990. While the prevention of child institutionalization, as championed by the UNCRC, cannot necessarily be equated with the

closure of orphanages, Rwanda aims nonetheless to send a powerful message of social development and progress to the international community.

The DI Policy Problematicized Among Orphans

The research which has gathered together the contradictory meanings and interpretations of childhood, youth and adulthood have often neglected the children's and youth's legitimate voice in contributing to its conception. The international discourse that argues that we adults should listen to children, simultaneously describes children as too incompetent to make decisions independently. In this way, the demarcation between the life stages of childhood and adulthood becomes visible through the denial of certain rights to children that they will only gain in the process of becoming an adult. The concerns, anxieties and options of the young adults of the Nœl Orphanage were never taken into consideration when those in charge implemented the DI policy. The aim of the DI policy, as one local NGO worker described, 'has been the Rwandan way of going back to those traditional values that have been lost during colonialism – when the community looked after children and old people' (Mr. Viateur, interview, January 2014). The idealised vision of a safe place within a family and a functioning society, however, is not necessarily reflected in the view of those adult orphans who are soon to be unified.

The dissolution of the Nœl Orphanage and with it the decline of the international support network has created anxieties amongst Nœl's youth that they will not be recognized as a full member of Rwandan society. Over the last decade, the Nœl Orphanage, with international support had turned into a place with prospects. The children and youth were provided with the best opportunities possible: their boarding school fees and university fees were paid by international sponsors, they received financial support

for various internship programmes and they were given housing, food and clothing. The ultimate goal of this international support was to allow the children and youth a smooth transition from childhood to youth and then adulthood where they would be able to create prosperous and stable lives for themselves. With the DI process currently in the final phase at Nœl Orphanage, the bubble of educational opportunities has slowly been bursting. Children and youth are faced with the harsh reality of having to provide for themselves and unable to rely on such an extensive support network as before. This unexpected realisation of independence has left many of Nœl's post-genocide generation to their own devices with few prospects of reaching 'adulthood' within the frame of Rwandan culture. All those children, youth and young adults who are unable to live independently of the Nœl Orphanage are considered part of the unification project. The interpretation of childhood in synonymous terms with the idea of dependence, once more shows that in Rwanda 'the social status of adult is achieved [by building a house and getting married]' as opposed to Western culture where law reinforces one's age (Cheney 2007: 55). This infantilisation of Nœl's young adults, however, is significant as it has serious repercussions for their self-esteem and their self-confidence. Herein lies the irony of Nœl's orphaned adults: the Rwandan government aims to empower its children to create a sustainable future for the country (MIGEPROF 2006: 11), while at the same time it successfully discourages the children from having confidence in their abilities to achieve social change. Children and youth are perceived to be in need of protection, which is directly translated into practice by HHC who makes clear that every dependent orphan needs the security of a family environment. Additionally, the definition of all orphans, regardless of their age and their current situation, as 'children' appears futile to a successful social integration of Rwanda's post-genocide generation. How can Nœl's

post-genocide generation independently navigate their own lives, if they are restricted to a category that perceives them as incapable of making decisions?

One British NGO worker, who is also funding the university fees and living expenses of one of Nœl's 'youth,' angrily described the unification process as 'exhausting.' She said 'I spent the whole afternoon explaining to them [*Hopes and Homes for Children* (HHC)] that Claudine⁹ will not go back to the extended family.' She continued 'she is now studying and she needs to finish in order to start her career – not go to some family' (Mrs. Sharon, interview, January 2012). Claudine is a 26-year-old journalism student at the University of Kigali, who has been consistently approached by HHC to return to her extended family. Despite the sponsorship of Claudine's education and living costs, her case is still considered to be reliant on the institution and classified as dependent on the orphanage. 'I do not want to go anywhere, especially not my extended family,' Claudine explained, 'because then, I will not be able to finish my studies. I will have to do what the family tells me, which probably means I have to look after my younger siblings.' While the future of children growing up in a Rwandan institution is already fragile and insecure, the unification process by no means puts young people's minds at ease, but rather makes them more anxious about their future. Twenty-year-old Primitive explained: 'We do not know where they will send us to. It could be somewhere, even really far away on the hills.' While HHC stresses their strong commitment to finding suitable homes for Nœl's orphans, the children and youth's own opinions and anxieties are not taken into consideration.

During discussions with employees of HHC who are in charge of preparing and executing the DI process, their narratives alternated between the children's need for protection within a stable family environment and the opportunity for their empowerment by allowing the orphans to grow up within

society rather than being pushed to the margins. One of the psychologists explained that the selection process of foster parents or the extended kin is 'based on the individual case' where 'we¹⁰ look through the files of the children to find their extended families. Then we make contact with the family and we prepare them to take on the children' (Mrs. S, interview, November 2013). All families, extended kin as well as foster parents, receive financial or material assistance from the organization in order to adequately provide for the well-being of the children and youth. However, all employees were very elusive about the actual figures of the financial support for these families.¹¹ These economic incentives may range from providing the family with cattle to building a new house to accommodate the new member, as one researcher on this issue has noted in an interview. I asked HHC their opinion on whether the children are better off in families rather than within an institution. They consistently responded that while this is a difficult question, from what they have experienced 'the answer is mainly yes – particularly for the smaller children.' The employees of HHC additionally insisted that 'we do not work with the category "orphan" because there are many different types of orphans' (Ms. Christine, interview, February 2014). Instead, the organization as well as the government, confine anyone who is dependent on the orphanage to the category 'child.' Economic dependency rather than life stage dictates the unification process implemented by HHC and overseen by the Rwandan government. All those children, youth and young adults who are unable to live independently of the Nœl Orphanage are considered to be part of the unification project.

In several discussion groups, the young adults began to share their ideas and opinions about the different ways of growing up within an orphanage and within a family. While the messages of the government and HHC have consistently indicated that the family is always a better environment,

the youth of Noël have been more hesitant about this answer. In several group discussions on different ways of growing up, Noël's youth insisted that an orphanage, while having many disadvantages, also provides a certain quality of life. 'The orphanage is better than a bad family,' Jean-Claude clarified in one of our sessions. Jean-Claude, a 26-year-old young adult, is among several who have resisted their unification. 'Why shall I go back to my uncles and aunts? They know that I am here [at Noël Orphanage] and they never came to visit. They don't want me,' Jean-Claude explained. Despite the proximity of Jean-Claude's extended family who live only a short distance away, they have never once visited Jean-Claude since 1994. The unification process, therefore, triggers a certain sense of anxiety within Jean-Claude and many other youth of the post-genocide generation, as they cannot anticipate what will happen to them once they return to their extended kin. Jean-Claude's motivation in resisting the unification process is his fear of being murdered by his family for his land. 'I hear about so many stories where one brother kills another one for land rights. I am scared what they can do to me. I don't want my parents' land. I just let it go,' he explained in an interview, waving his hand and slumping back in his seat. Rwanda remains one of the few regions in Africa that has allowed for a high density of people due to its ecology, where access to land and resources rights remains a cause for conflict (Bigagaza, Abong & Mukarabuga 2002: 53ff). In Jean-Claude's case, when his parents were killed during the genocide, their house and land was distributed among his extended family. In our conversations, Jean-Claude was aware that his return into the circle of the extended kin would allow him to legally re-claim the land of his parents, which he feared would result in his death. As a consequence of those social and psychological pressures coming from within the extended family and society, many of Noël's older youth aim to resist the unification process.

Additionally, little attention has been paid to potential follow-up processes. One researcher working on health-related issues with unified children explained: 'I do not know how they [HHC] will sustain this process. This is not sustainable long-term' (Ms. Bridget, interview, January 2014). While the employees of HHC consistently referred to the benefits of children growing up within a family environment, possible negative repercussions on those unified children and youth have not been considered. In particular, there is no distinction made between the reintegration into foster families or the extended family, due to the high pressure and time constraints under which HHC are forced to work. Additionally, there remains little flexibility for organizations, such as HHC, to modify guidelines and programmes crafted at the centre of the government. 'Once the policy is signed, it is like a contract that needs to be fulfilled under all circumstances,' a local NGO worker said (Mr. Viateur, interview, December 2013). Another project manager, heading orphan-reintegration projects and working with vulnerable communities all over Rwanda, further cautioned that 'children are not a programme' and therefore need to be taken more seriously in their social, psychological and economic needs. In a similar vein, employees at the orphanage reflected upon the imminent closure:

Je suis contente que j'ai trouvé quelqu'un avec qui je peux parler en français. J'ai pas le temps d'apprendre l'anglais et les personnes qui parlent français, je peux leur dire la vérité. Dans tous les pays où on a fait ça [DI policy], on a laissé des orphelinats. Qu'est-ce qu'on va faire avec les pauvres enfants quand la mère meurt? Je vais leur [those people who bring the children to Noël Orphanage] dire: "Donne les enfants au gouvernement!" Nous avons un Président de l'étrange – qu'est ce qu'il sait de

notre situation? Mais on peut pas parler de ça (Noël Orphanage employee, interview, January 2014).¹²

Within national organizations and among Rwandan professionals working with orphans, the DI policy is regarded as a means of demonstrating to the international community Rwanda's development progress while simultaneously disregarding the needs of the children themselves. The rapid closure of all of Rwanda's orphanages within two years allows the RPF-led government to reinforce Rwanda's status as role model for Africa where post-conflict reconstruction is not only a possibility but a lived reality (Pottier 2002: 47). 'Kagame wants to show how Rwanda is different to other African countries,' a medical doctor working with HIV orphans explained. He said:

Take corruption as an example. Rwanda is less corrupt than all other African countries. There [in other African countries] 100 per cent flows into the pockets of the officials, but here in Rwanda, it is only 80 per cent. With the other 20 per cent, Kagame paints houses or builds roads and the people stand next to him and clap. The closure of the orphanage is just like that (Mr. Viateur, interview, March 2014).

As one director of a national NGO further revealed, the Rwandan government will not necessarily lose donor money with the implementation of the DI policy, but rather attract more international funds that will be channelled to support the children's reintegration. As an official document demonstrates, Rwandan orphanages are currently funded mainly by 'private donors from abroad and the amount of their funding is mostly unknown' (NCC - Cabinet Brief: 3). However, with the focus on the DI policy and thus also the Integrated Child Rights Policy (ICRP) that ensures children's care

and reintegration into families, the Rwandan government was able to secure the support of international donors, including the Global Fund, USAID and Plan International. From January to December 2012, the support of international donors was estimated to be Rwf 8,456,144,461 (± US\$ 13,009,453) while the State expenditure for child care, social protection and poverty reduction from the Ministry of Local Government (MINALOC) was estimated to be Rwf 1,315,207,623 (± US\$ 2,023,396) (Government Document 2013: 2). The government's aim with the DI policy as such is two-fold; on the one hand, the complete closure of all orphanages will demonstrate the success of the government's development plans and further reinforce its position as donor-darlings of the West. On the other hand, this policy also aims to reinforce behavioural changes among Rwanda's young generation to create an inclusive and unified society.

While this DI policy might have originally been introduced as in the best interests of Rwanda's children, youth and young adults growing up in institutions, their future remains extremely uncertain. During this process, the children and youth of Noël Orphanage will lose the only space that has provided them with safety and security where they are also offered more opportunities than elsewhere. For over a decade, international organizations, such as British NGOs and others, have consistently sponsored the children's education at Noël Orphanage. As one British aid worker admits: 'These are opportunities they might never get if they live "in the hills" with poor [foster] parents or the extended family' (Mrs. Sharon, interview, January 2014).

Conclusion

Through the increased attention on youth, children and orphans, Rwanda's message to the outside world is clear: the protection of Rwandan children and orphans plays an important role in Rwanda's development. However, a closer look at laws, policies and

programmes demonstrates a lack of clear definition concerning children's rights and appear to be directly translated from the global to the local without further amendments. The Rwandan government may have introduced the DI policy in the best interests of Rwanda's children and youth growing up in care institutions, but the orphans' future remains extremely uncertain. During the rapidly implemented DI process, the children and youth of Noël Orphanage will lose the only space that has provided them with safety and security and where the children were also offered opportunities not available elsewhere.

The government's vision of national development has achieved immense progress over the last two decades, and emphasises young peoples' need to re-negotiate what it means to be a 'Rwandan citizen.' This ambitious push forward will also likely create new constraints and challenges for Rwanda's young generation. In particular, orphans become exposed to new vulnerabilities within the process of being unified with foster parents or their extended family. The Rwandan government has not put any harnesses in place to protect its orphans from physical or emotional abuse within their new environment. Simultaneously, there is not enough psychological support for the children and the new parents to understand the orphans' needs and overcome the children's and youths' often troubled past. While there is no doubt that long-term institutional care has a detrimental effect on children's social and mental development, there is an equally great risk of damaging a youth's childhood by ignoring their particular social, historical and cultural circumstances.

Notes

¹ In recent years, a new law *Relating to the Rights and Protection of the Child* was passed, which framed a *National Integrated Child Rights* policy alongside the creation of a National Commission for Children in 2012.

² International adoption is forbidden in order to give Rwandan children the opportunity to grow up in their own cultural and social environment.

³ In order to support the political goal of Rwandan unity, the official narrative explains that before colonialism, Rwandans lived together peacefully in clans that cut across ethnic groups. The government's aim is for Rwandans to fully abandon ethnic categories, invented by the Belgian colonialists, and return to the pre-colonial harmony. For a closer analysis see Freedman et al. 2011.

⁴ HHC is an international organization working with institutionalized orphans globally.

⁵ The female to male ratio was almost equal, with a few more male participants.

⁶ President Paul Kagame addressing 2,500 Students at #MeetthePresident in 2012.

⁷ Shortly after genocide, over 100 orphanages were established of which there are 34 institutions left that are now run by the Roman-Catholic Church and/or international organizations (NCC 2012).

⁸ The decree of 12 July 1890 puts orphaned or abandoned children under the age of 16 years, whose parents fail in their duty to look after them and educate them, under the supervision of the state. The state in turn creates vocational schools within the domain of agriculture that are called 'Colonies of Indigenous Children.'

⁹ All names have been changed to ensure the individuals' anonymity and protection.

¹⁰ There were roughly 15 psychologists employed by HHC analysing the several hundred cases of the children at Noël Orphanage.

¹¹ Foster parents are chosen on a voluntary basis, where the respective applicant needs to reach out to HHC in order to start the selection and screening process.

¹² I am very happy that I have found someone to talk to in French. I do not have time to learn English but to those who speak French I can tell the truth. In all

those countries where they implement the DI policy, orphanages continued to exist. What are we going to do with those poor children when the mother dies? I will tell them (those people who bring their children to the orphanage): 'Give your children to the government' We have a president who grew up abroad, what does he know of our situation here? But one cannot speak of these things.

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