

# ZIMBABWE

## REINTEGRATION OF OVC INTO MAINSTREAM SOCIETY

**Starting Year:** 2005

**Main Topic Area:** MITIGATION - OVC

**Contact Person:**

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**Implementers:**

Mother of Peace Community

**Funding:**

Funding comes from well-wishers.

**Objectives**

The reintegration of OVC programme has the following objectives:

- ❖ To introduce to and provide OVC with family life support environment
- ❖ To create a societally acceptable and supportive environment for OVC
- ❖ To enable Mother of Peace Community Orphanage to support more orphans
- ❖ To fulfil objective 7 of the National Plan of Action for OVC, which aims at reducing the number of children who live out of the family environment.

**Background**

Mother of Peace Community started operating in 1994 mainly providing shelter to abandoned children. Construction of an orphanage was funded by various donors from all over the world on a farm that was provided by the Mtoko Rural District Council.

As an orphanage, the Centre provides shelter, food, clothing, psychosocial support and family environment among its services to OVC. Although the centre has previously had over 160 orphans, currently it looks after 128 OVC. To give the children a feeling of family life at the community, they are placed in a household environment in groups of eight where they stay with surrogate mothers. In these proxy families, the children participate in normal household chores such as gardening, laundry, cooking, and others depending on circumstances and age.

Vice President, Mrs. Joyce Mujuru officially launched the OVC reintegration programme in September 2005, six months into the programme's operations.

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## **Main Activities**

After deciding to initiate an OVC reintegration programme in 2005, Mother of Peace Community Orphanage started to trace family and relatives for all children at the centre. Following the launch of the programme, tracing of family and relatives for all new children admitted is initiated at admittance.

Tracing of family and relatives for the children is a very difficult and tedious process given that some children are abandoned and only found by members of the public who have no known links with the children. In cases of abandonment, children are usually abandoned very far away from their geographical origins. The process is further compounded by the fact that rarely are the children found with birth certificates or other identification documents.

When a child's family or relatives have been identified, the centre initiates contact and discussions to determine the circumstances that led to the child leaving home. Largely and importantly, the discussions centre on whether the family or relatives can accept the child back. Surprisingly, from the successful cases of reintegration so far, it has been noted that the extended family and relatives may not have been part to the decision to abandon the child and might have also been looking for the child.

If the family and relatives are prepared to accept the child back, the Centre arranges for the child to make initial weekend and school holiday visits as preparation for the final release of the child and the eventual reintegration.

Meanwhile, the Centre make use of and relies on local leadership structures such as chiefs, headmen and neighbours to monitor how the family treats the child and whether the child is happy. Local structures of Child Protection Committees have also been very instrumental in monitoring the reintegration process and providing feedback, especially at these initial stages.

The community provides for all costs related with the reintegration, including transport fees for the weekend and holidays visits. Where families and relatives agree to the final reintegration, the Centre continues the responsibility of paying school fees and providing for food, shelter and clothes for the integrated child. Where a child is integrated into a poor family, the centre takes over payment of school fees for all the children in the family so that the reintegrated child does not get stigmatised and discriminated. The amount of help offered depends on the economic status of the family.

Even after successful reintegration, the community does not stop its support to the child. Until the child is 18 years of age, the Centre plans to continue making assessment and monitoring visits so that they are involved in providing relevant support should the child's circumstances change. HIV positive children who have reintegrated receive the same support. Those on ART treatment are not abandoned. Already two successfully reintegrated children who were on ART continue to receive their monthly allocation of drugs from the orphanage. Costs for transport to collect drugs have been wilfully met by families that reintegrated the children while the orphanage has covered those related to medical examinations and provision of drugs.

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## **Outcomes**

Already, 36 (as at June 2006) children have been successfully reintegrated with their family and relatives, while 70 are currently going for weekend and school holiday visits.

The children involved in this programme have registered amazing social and emotional growth. Their self-image has also improved leading them to increase their participation in school activities and improved results.

This has been attributed to a sense of belonging that is cultivated by the reintegration process and the additional love and support they receive from their families.

The orphanage authorities have also reported improvement in behaviour of the reintegrated children.

## **Evaluation**

The programme has successfully integrated 36 children, while an additional 70 are in that process.

It has also received moral support from the Presidency and to this day (June 2006).

The Department of Social Welfare as well as the National AIDS Council in the Mashonaland East Province have expressed their happiness with the programme.

## **Lessons Learned**

The following lessons have been obtained from the programme:

- Reintegration of OVC into mainstream society assists the children to develop a sense of belonging that is necessary for improvement of behaviour and academic performance
- By accepting to reintegrate the children, the families testify to the nature of care and support of the greater society. It has shown that most of the families do not support abandonment of children and that there is no adequate family consultation before abandonment. OVC can therefore be reduced by adequate consultation of family members on the matter.
- The National Plan of Action on OVC is a useful tool in addressing OVC challenges
- Child Protection Committees as well as local leadership structures are relevant social support systems that must be set up and strengthened in all communities.