

Reuniting Unaccompanied Children and Families in Mozambique: An Effort to Link Networks of Community Volunteers to a National Programme

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ABSTRACT

This article describes Mozambique's effort to respond to the needs of one group of vulnerable children: children who have been separated from their families as a result of the current emergency. It begins with a brief overview of Mozambique's policy for "unaccompanied children", a term used to underscore the fact that most of these children have been separated from parents and extended families and are not orphans *per se*. It examines initial efforts to implement this policy through the development of a national tracing and foster care programme, and subsequent attempts to link these national responses to networks of community volunteers throughout the countryside. Mozambique's experience is discussed in the light of its potential to inform programme development for unaccompanied children in other war-affected countries.

Introduction

The UNEconomic Commission for Africa estimates that between 1980 - 88 at least 900,000 people died in Mozambique because of destabilisation (ECA, 1989). The situation has only recently improved following the recent peace accord between FRELIMO and RENAMO and, in fact, RENAMO stepped-up attacks in many parts of Mozambique in the early period after the agreement in order to continue to negotiate from a position of strength.

Children have been especially vulnerable to the effects of RENAMO terror. UNICEF believes that between 1980-88 there were 494,000 destabilisation-related deaths of children under the age of five years (UNICEF, 1989). Children who survive RENAMO attacks also face a range of traumatic experiences. A recent study of over 500 children in 49 war-affected districts throughout Mozambique

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indicated that the majority of these children had witnessed murder (77%), rape (63%) and torture (88%) of civilians (Boothby, Upton, and Sultan, 1991), and FRELIMO reported that:

"200,000 children either do not know the whereabouts of their parents or have suffered the terrible trauma of watching their execution or their death". (FRELIMO, 1989).

Due to chronic food shortages, thousands of children have been malnourished during their critical early years and could be permanently stunted, both physically and mentally. Thousands have never been vaccinated and are likely to succumb to diseases that could be prevented by EPI programmes. The combination of war, famine and massive displacements have placed Mozambican children at grave risk, often overwhelming the capacities of the government and the international relief community to respond to their need for food, protection, shelter, and medical attention.

Initial Responses to Unaccompanied Children

Since 1985, the Government of Mozambique has addressed the matter of unaccompanied children through its "Children in Difficult Circumstances" policy. The policy argues that the best interests of unaccompanied children dictate that they be reunited with parents or extended family members as a matter of urgency. If reunification with parents or extended family does not prove to be feasible, then placement of the unaccompanied child in a foster family is considered to be the next best option. The use of orphanages, on the other hand, is to be avoided whenever possible. All institutional forms of child care are viewed as placement options of last resort.

The National Directorate of Social Action (DNAS), the nation's child welfare agency, originally housed within the Ministry of Health, was charged with responsibility for implementing the government's policy for unaccompanied children. With assistance from UNICEF and Save the Children Fund (UK), DNAS drew up plans for a family tracing and reunification programme. It also piloted several programmes to stimulate foster family placements for unaccompanied children in parts of rural Mozambique.

Neither of these mid-1980s efforts to implement Mozambique's policy proved capable of providing meaningful assistance to unaccompanied children. Part of the problem was that DNAS was snared in the hierarchal structures and centralised

orientation of the Ministry of Health and was never able to develop the capacity or the flexibility needed to work in the countryside, where drought, malnutrition and starvation had exacerbated the conditions caused by RENAMO's brutal war. While DNAS had placed staff in all ten provincial capitals, only a few social welfare agents worked in district level positions where the vast majority of displaced people (*deslocados*) live. Given that most of the countryside is only reachable by air, not by road, DNAS was not in a position to mobilise the kind of community-based action needed to facilitate a massive tracing effort. By 1988, less than 100 unaccompanied children had been reunified with their families through DNAS' tracing programme. The centrally planned foster care programme also failed to build upon community traditions. Matrilineal and patrilineal peoples have, at a most basic level, different ways of perceiving kinship which may entail different placement choices in cases where a child's mother and father are not available. These and other diverse cultural practices among distinct ethnic and linguistic groups in the North and the South regions of Mozambique were ignored. As a result, numerous examples emerged of children who had been subjected to material and emotional neglect in some foster families and, at the extreme, cases of abuse were reported, some of which resulted in fostered children running away.

Another problem involved the programme's effort to provide material assistance to families who expressed a willingness to care for unaccompanied children. While the need for material assistance was evident, its linkage to a foster care programme in *deslocado* communities where the vast majority of residents were destitute had a negative impact on both the child and the community. Because DNAS' programme was implemented outside of local community structures, there was no strong kinship tie and thus no strong emotive link between the fostered child and the foster family and, often, the fostered child was the last "family member" to receive the food, clothing, and other assistance used to stimulate these placements. To counter this tendency, social workers began to insist that material assistance be given directly to the fostered child and not shared with other children in the family. This approach only made matters worse as the special attention paid to the fostered child did not facilitate genuine integration within the family.

Finally, the DNAS foster care programme tended to undermine traditional child welfare responses in the *deslocado* communities in which it was implemented. Even in peaceful times, it is not unusual in Mozambique to have children reside with adults from their extended families or wider clans, and throughout the war the vast majority of the country's unaccompanied children have been provided family care through these spontaneous kinship responses. With the introduction of

DNAS' material assistance-foster care programme, however, a number of traditional adult caretakers wanted to be compensated, as non-traditional caretakers, for meeting what before they had perceived as a communal obligation. These tensions often exacerbated the pressures already faced by both the child and the traditional caretaker and created new rifts between traditional and DNAS-supported foster families within *deslocado* communities selected for DNAS programmes.

The Lhanguene Initiative

By 1988 Mozambican child welfare advocates were raising questions about the efficacy of the nation's response to unaccompanied children. DNAS' National Director was one of the harshest critics:

"We were thwarted by the Ministry of Health and its unresponsive bureaucracy, and by the lack of commitment on the part of UNICEF and the NGOs to work together on programmes for unaccompanied children. It was not a high priority for them and we [DNAS] just did not have the human or financial resources, transportation, logistical system, or the technical expertise to make the programme work on our own....[Another problem] was that as an agency we had not learned how to work with the people in the communities".

(Mangueria, 1990).

DNAS' inability to launch a sustainable tracing effort, or to work through community structures to place and follow-up on unaccompanied child in foster families, dictated that new approaches be developed and other players become involved.

The effort to re-think Mozambique's response to unaccompanied children took place as part of the "Lhanguene Initiative" which was organised in 1988 by DNAS, the Department of Special Education, Save the Children Fund (UK), and Save the Children Federation (USA). The initiative brought together representatives of government agencies and international NGOs that worked in rural Mozambique to examine how associations of volunteers could be formed in *deslocado* communities to promote local solutions to the problems faced by displaced children, including unaccompanied children. The initiative also hoped to utilise members of these community associations as core components of a national tracing programme that would be linked together through DNAS-led tracing teams and its provincial and central offices.

Programme activities took place over a six-month period and were organised into two phases. Phase one involved a seven-week workshop for national-level staff of relevant government agencies and NGOs held at the Lhanguene Centre in Maputo. During this time, participants designed training modules for district-level associations of primary school teachers, police, military, members of the Mozambican women's and youth organisations, and other volunteers who might become members of the community associations. As part of this training, procedures developed to identify, document, search for and reunite children and families were organised into a six-part process:

1. Identification:

The tracing and reunification effort would begin with an active search to identify all children in need of assistance in locating lost family members. Procedures were devised to identify and document unaccompanied children in orphanages and other child care institutions, hospitals and feeding centres, living on the streets in urban areas, and with substitute families in *deslocado* centres or refugee camps in neighbouring countries.

2. Documentation:

Procedures and forms were produced to record biographical information on children who were identified as unaccompanied and in need of assistance in locating lost family members. It was decided that Polaroid cameras should be made available to tracing teams and that a photograph of each child should be taken and attached to the biographical form which was then sent to DNAS central office and transferred into posters and circulated nationwide.

3. Tracing:

Procedures, in turn, were established to initiate active searches for the documented children's lost family members in other locations, including the children's original communities, *deslocado* centres, towns and other urban locations where people from the children's original communities might have fled, and refugee camps in neighbouring countries. Techniques were outlined for disseminating information on lost children through word-of-mouth and written communications, mass community meetings, poster canvassing, and radio, newspaper and television announcements. Participating NGOs were to provide the air transportation and logistical support required to undertake the search for lost family members in areas not accessible by truck or other means.

4. Verification:

After a child's relative was identified, procedures were developed to verify whether or not both parties - the child and the relative - wanted to be reunited with one another.

5. Reunification:

Guidelines were developed for the safe return of the child to the family. At the time of reunification, the family was to be provided with a "kit" of basic food staples, farming tools and seeds to help with the initial transition period. In addition to transportation support, participating NGOs were also to provide a wider range of assistance to the community and the schools whenever possible. Support for agricultural projects, water projects, health clinics, pre-schools, vocational training and recreation programmes were deemed to be most appropriate.

6. Follow-up:

Along with procedures for formal "home visits" by DNAS social workers, basic ideas were outlined on how the wider community might help to support the child and the family after reunifications took place. Including neighbours and other kin in reunification ceremonies, helping the family secure god-parents for the child (if he or she did not already have one), and alerting school teachers or health workers about any special needs or problems the child might have were among the ideas adopted by Lhanguene participants.

As part of the Maputo-based workshops, national participants field-tested their revised tracing procedures at several youth facilities and *deslocado* communities in and around the capital. In two week's time, over 200 unaccompanied children were documented and their biographical data and photographs were printed on a series of posters that were subsequently used as part of an inaugural family tracing campaign. The first effort to search for missing family members under these revised procedures took place in Chibuto district, Gaza Province, where twenty-eight of the children documented in Maputo had come from. A small group of original Lhanguene participants worked with FRELIMO Party members, citizen volunteers and provincial-level DNAS agents to organise a series of community meetings and poster canvassing among *deslocado* settlements in and around this district capital. Within days, relatives of 25 of the 28 children from Chibuto had been found. The tracing teams also worked with community volunteers to identify an additional 200 children in Gaza who needed assistance in locating lost parents or other relatives.

The second phase of the Lhanguene Initiative established similar tracing teams and community associations in several parts of rural Mozambique. Tracing workshops were conducted in Gaza, Inhambane, Sofala and Zambezia for up to 35

district representatives per province. After a week's instruction, participants divided themselves into small groups and flew into rural districts to work with community leaders and volunteers to initiate tracing campaigns in some of the worst war-affected areas of the country. More than 1,500 unaccompanied children were documented through these efforts, one-half of whom were eventually reunited with their relatives through the subsequent mobilisation of communities, volunteer work and massive poster canvassing.

The Lhanguene Initiative indicated that if DNAS and NGOs could work together with local leaders and community volunteers in war-affected districts, significant numbers of unaccompanied children could be documented and family members located for them within a two to three month period of time. The near-unanimous desire on the part of parents and other relatives to have the children returned to them as soon as possible also suggested that family reunification was a viable placement option for unaccompanied children in many of parts of southern and central Mozambique.

Based on these initial results, three members of the International Save the Children Alliance working in Mozambique agreed to cooperate to expand the tracing effort to all provinces. Save the Children Fund (UK) would continue to support DNAS central, as it had in the past, and help the Maputo city office to establish and maintain a computerised data base system for storing and cross-checking tracing documentation generated in the districts. In addition, Save the Children Fund (UK) would support expansions of the tracing effort into Inhambane and Zambezia provinces. Redd Barna (Norwegian Save the Children), in turn, which operated material assistance programmes in Manica, would work with provincial DNAS staff to support tracing activities in that province. Finally, Save the Children Federation (USA) would expand its work in Maputo, Gaza and Sofala provinces and, by 1990, would begin to extend support to Tete, Nampula, Cabo Delgado, and Niassa provinces as well.

Informal Networks

While the tracing efforts that evolved out of the Lhanguene Initiative began to strengthen the nation's response to unaccompanied children, the programme was also fraught with problems. To be sure, registration, documentation, searching and record-keeping is tedious, exacting and time intensive work with many opportunities for errors, especially in the unstable settings in which much of the active tracing activities occurred. Over the next two years, as the programme expanded into other provinces and additional groups of community volunteers were established throughout the country, DNAS proved increasingly unable to keep-up with the

monumental task of documentation, data collection, logistical support, and long-term planning. But rather than simplify its procedures, delegate responsibilities, or decentralise its approach in other ways, DNAS insisted that all documentation be transferred to, and all programme activities be cleared through its central office in Maputo. One of the most negative aspects of this bottleneck was that the amount of time required to complete the tracing process from identification to documentation to reunification often increased from what was once three months or less to what is now six months or more.

At the same time DNAS was overwhelmed with programmatic responsibilities at the central level, tracing teams in some districts were identifying ways to make the tracing effort more effective at the local level. The most important development at the local level involved the identification of the informal kinship systems for disseminating and exchanging information on separated family members that already existed in much of rural Mozambique. The informal tracing system involved networks of local people who had a keen interest in the problems of kinsmen, including children, who had been separated by war. It included people who had managed to escape from RENAMO, and who had assumed responsibility for seeking out relatives of other kidnapped or impressed people they had met while in RENAMO's controlled zones. It also included chiefs and other traditional political leaders because they are often the first authorities consulted in matters of separated family members, as traditionally their sanction was required to mobilise rural people. Traditional healers, church leaders and traders were part of these networks as well, because these individuals usually had their own links to counterparts within Mozambique and in refugee camps and other communities in neighbouring countries.

Members of some district-level tracing teams also began to learn more about how rural people and *deslocados* consulted healers who would divine whether a missing child was alive or well. If divination indicated there had been a death, healers would advise holding a funeral ceremony. Sometimes they would make a mistake, and a "buried" child would show up, at which time the healer prescribed one of several "treatments" necessary to cleanse the child's spirit from past traumas or wrong-doings. If the child's parents were dead or absent, the healer often would offer advice about with whom the child should reside. Here, too, healers were already active in facilitating family placements through community structures for children without parents of their own.

While the Lhanguene workshops had paid insufficient attention to these pre-existing informal tracing networks, members of tracing teams quickly began to merge the formal and informal systems - a collaborative effort that usually led to dramatic increases in both the number of unaccompanied children documented and the number of documented children reunited with family members. After a

RENAMO attack, or when FRELIMO liberated rural towns or villages from RENAMO control, members of both networks joined together to identify unaccompanied children and search for missing family members. Formal tracing teams continued to send registration forms to DNAS's central office in Maputo, where data was entered into its centralised computer system, cross-checked against adults with claims for missing children, and transformed into tracing posters which then were sent to *deslocado* centres throughout the country. When tracing materials arrived in the districts, community volunteers organised mass meetings and distributed posters in *deslocado* centres. FRELIMO armed forces often cooperated by carrying posters to areas where formal tracing teams could not venture because of the lack of security. Traditional leaders, healers and traders, on the other hand, who did not depend on formal tracing documents or posters, were often able to identify lost family members more quickly. Word-of-mouth communications were passed through kinship networks and trading routes and, in this way, traditional political leaders and healers and local traders were able to extend the tracing effort even further into RENAMO-controlled zones and across political boundaries to refugee settlements in neighbouring countries.

In Morroneau, for example, a district capital in Sofala Province, members of both formal and informal tracing systems began working together after an August 1989 RENAMO attack had scattered most of the area's population. Within days, over 800 children and adults who had been separated from one another were documented. While 350 children were eventually reunited with relatives through formal tracing procedures, an additional 320 reunifications were facilitated more quickly through grassroots searches and citizen initiatives. Despite the effectiveness of this combined effort, DNAS did not formally acknowledge the role of the area's traditional leaders and traditional healers, or include the "spontaneous" family reunions facilitated by them as part of the national statistics on family reunifications.

Decentralisation and Expansion

DNAS' reluctance to acknowledge the roles of traditional leaders was in part the result of the government's earlier modernisation strategy. After independence, FRELIMO sought to radically transform what it referred to as "an economically backward agrarian society" through its unique interpretation of "scientific socialism", which required the virtual elimination of many of the underpinnings of Mozambican society such as polygamy, puberty rites and traditional healing. The role of the chiefs was officially abolished, forcing many of them underground and into alliances with RENAMO. In the same way, traditional healers were excluded from the government's health system and branded as purveyors of "obscurantism and superstition".

With the alienation of traditional healers and traditional leaders, FRELIMO had put itself at a distinct disadvantage in most of rural Mozambique. Because of FRELIMO's tradition of ideological hostility, many of these natural leaders had aligned themselves with RENAMO, at least until the mid - 1980s when FRELIMO began to adopt a more conciliatory posture towards them. The change in FRELIMO's attitude, in part a pragmatic decision based on the need to include healers and spiritualists as part of its military campaign, coupled with these leaders' growing alienation with RENAMO's tactics, led many of them into new alliances with governmental authority. These alliances, in turn, have been an important factor in turning the fortunes of war against RENAMO, especially in northern Mozambique (Lauriciano, 1990; Wilson, 1991).

FRELIMO's courting of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and other western donors also triggered a range of socio-economic changes that affected the nation's humanitarian assistance effort as well. The donor message was clear: decentralise government programmes in favour of private and non-governmental initiatives, or suffer significant decreases in financial support. In 1991, DNAS separated from the Ministry of Health and was re-established as the Secretariat of Social Action (SEAS). An initial review of programmatic activities by the new SEAS director confirmed that DNAS had largely proven itself unable at least at this time to maintain programmes that reached children and families at the district level. Later that year, SEAS formally announced its decision to redefine its role from an implementing agency to a policy-making body. The tracing effort would no longer be so closely bound to the Maputo office or its staff.

The move towards decentralisation has enabled staff of national and international organisations working with unaccompanied children to better understand the perspective at the local level: government workers come and go - and may be trusted or mistrusted - but traditional and local leaders usually remain. This perspective has encouraged both national and international organisations to discover and to build upon pre-existing community networks in a variety of ways, including the provision of direct financial support, training, application of technology when possible, and the linkage of these local groups to wider networks of volunteers and organisations. As a result, more than 8,000 volunteers, supported by over 700 national and international organisations are now involved in day-to-day tracing activities throughout Mozambique. Formal associations of national and international organisations linked to informal associations of community volunteers have managed to reunite more than 14,000 unaccompanied children with their families over the past four years. Many community volunteers, including traditional political leaders and traditional healers, are now the primary implements of their community's foster care, mental health, traditional pre-school, vocational training, and mentoring programmes for displaced children as well.

In some districts, tracing efforts continue to profit from close collaboration with Social Action (SEAS), especially where social workers already had close ties to grassroots networks. In other districts, Social Action staff have been too weak, too overburdened with other responsibilities, and too often transferred from one province to another to be effective in carrying-out tracing activities. Some Social Action staff have refused altogether to work with traditional political leaders or healers.

It can be argued that the government's inability to deliver services may have provided the opportunity for NGOs to develop more sustainable and cost-effective strategies for displaced and unaccompanied children. Indeed, many of these non-governmental organisations have closer relationships and more informal authority in war-affected districts than Social Action. Open to question, however, is how far any NGO, especially an international one, should go beyond its own mandate and replace government's function.

Lessons Learned

Mozambique is not alone in the struggle to provide care and protection to children separated from their families because of war, natural disasters and mass population displacements. An historical review of this issue indicated that they have existed in virtually every past war or refugee crisis in this century (Ressler, Boothby & Steinbock, 1988). Unaccompanied children also are to be found in almost all of present-day emergencies including Kampuchea, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Kuwait, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Suriname, Yugoslavia, Zaire, Ethiopia, Somalia, Liberia, and others. On the basis of past and presence experience, it is certain that the future will produce its share of unaccompanied children as well.

There is a basic lesson to be learned from Mozambique that could assist with similar programmes in Africa and other countries: reuniting children and families is likely to be a high priority for war-affected communities, but not for government agencies or NGOs, especially in times of war, drought and starvation. As a result, no government agency or NGO can be very effective in documentation, tracing and reunification work without the active involvement of refugees or dislocated people themselves. Moreover, since lost family members are motivated to find one another, informal networks of people will already be communicating with each other about these matters apart from formal programmes initiated by national or international agencies. Tracing and reunification activities - whether government, non-profit or private - should identify active local leaders, build upon their informal systems, and then do what it can with its technological advantages (posters,

telephones, computer data bases, and rapid transportation) to assist these networks, while the networks, in turn, assist the formal programmes. Moreover, when there are cooperating networks of community-based volunteers, they can also be effective in the selection of appropriate foster families, programmes of psycho-social intervention, skill training, famine relief and delivering emergency supplies.

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