



Children of Armed Conflict: The Case of 105 Ethiopian Children Repatriated After Extended Stays in a Somalia POW Camp

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In recent years, and particularly since 1973, thousands of children in Ethiopia have been displaced from their homes and separated from their families as the result of family flight or government resettlement in the face of episodic drought, drought-induced famine, and armed conflict. Many government, international, and private agencies have endeavored to house and care for these children. These efforts have extended to tracing and reunification procedures, placement of children in foster households, and establishment of orphanages as permanent homes for children who have lost their families or for whom no families can be found.

Against this background of chronic disruption, this study reports on the status of a subset of children belonging to a cohort of 375 children who were imprisoned at the time of the war between Ethiopia and Somalia in 1977, kept in the Hawaye prison camp, and not brought back to Ethiopia until 1988. As of November 1989, 282 of these children had

been reunited with one or more surviving parents in Ethiopia. The remaining 93 children (and 12 who were later located), the subjects of this report, were living initially in one of six orphanages previously organized to support children displaced within Ethiopia.

Described here are the issues involved in assessing and addressing the ongoing problems of social adjustment and integration these children have encountered in the first eight to 10 months since their return from Somalia. Some of these issues are particular to the social and historical context of Ethiopia; some reflect the special circumstances in which the children were kept while in the Somali POW camp; and some are common to all settings where children are separated from parents and home in a refugee setting.

Arising from this description of issues are recommendations for further policy and action, aimed at improving life for these repatriated POW children and at strengthening the more general approach to displaced children within Ethiopian society. These recommendations are directed in part to the government and private voluntary agencies working in Ethiopia and in part to the international community.

THE PROBLEM OF DISPLACED CHILDREN

The problem of displaced children should be seen within the context of the overall situation of children

0051-2438/1992/0202-0085\$03 00/0

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in Ethiopia, where, under normal circumstances, the essential elements for survival and development of children (such as food security, health services, education, and psychosocial stimulation) are marginally provided or not present at all. As in most developing countries, children in Ethiopia struggle to survive and grow in an adverse environment that exposes them to early death, malnutrition, and psychosocial deprivation. Ethiopia is considered to be one of the poorest countries in the world, where two-thirds of the country's households are below the minimum income requirement to meet the essential needs of the family.

The situation is more dire in light of current demographic trends of high fertility rate (6.8 births per woman of reproductive age) and high birth rate (46 per 1,000). With a population of 48.7 million, Ethiopia is the third most populated nation in Africa after Egypt and Nigeria. Women of reproductive age and children under 15 years of age constitute 66% of the population; children under 15 and 5 years of age constitute 46% and 18% of the population, respectively. At the present annual growth rate of 2.9%, the population is expected to double in 25 years, with the proportion of children under 15 years of age exceeding 50% of the population by the year 2000. The high reproduction rate and rapid growth in numbers of children under 15 years of age, in a setting of serious poverty and underdevelopment, become sources of high morbidity and mortality among women and children [1].

Drought and Drought-Induced Famine

In recent years, the major cause of displacement of children in Ethiopia has been drought and drought-induced famine. These disasters cause large-scale population migration, as families move in search of food, water, income, and employment. In the process of this migration, children get separated from their families. Some children are left without adult care because of the death of both parents. Other children, especially older ones, abandon their homes against the wishes of their parents in order to escape from the hardship, to search for better opportunities elsewhere, and to reduce the family burden of child care. Occasionally, parents in difficult situations either request families, friends, and neighbors to care for their children or leave them at shelters or institutions. In resettlement movements, children are left behind without their families or are resettled in different localities.

These patterns of "dispersion" in crisis response have been described as "the final stage in the process of famine when whole communities, involving tens of thousands of people, flee their home areas with whatever possessions they have (which is next to nothing) and descend on the towns as an act of desperation" [2]. Displacement is what peasants do when crisis erupts, forcing the breakup of families, the abandonment of children, and separation from the land and the collective living unit.

Historical accounts of drought and famine date back as far as the ninth century and reveal a continuous succession of one leading to the other [3]. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, the northern part of Ethiopia has suffered a number of severe famines, and, since 1950, Welo, Tigray, the northeastern parts of Gonder, and Shewa have experienced famine almost once every 10 years [3]. Analysis of recent famines in Ethiopia shows that, although drought and famine have delivered the final blow in exposing regions to devastation, these areas had also suffered poor agricultural production, accelerated soil degradation, and destabilization from periodic conflicts. Famine is thus the last stage in a host of interrelated natural and social processes [4].

Since 1973, drought and famine have occurred more frequently and with widening impact throughout the country. In the early 1970s, drought and famine were concentrated in northern Ethiopia and only gradually engulfed the southern regions. In 1984 to 1985, the famine situation became much more severe and widespread. Thousands of families were destabilized and separated in the course of migration and resettlement. In 1987 to 1988, another serious drought and famine hit the same areas and the same populations. In these last two episodes of the 1980s, it is estimated that, of the eight million people believed to have been affected by food shortage, about one million people perished, either on their way to or after reaching resettlement and refugee camps [5].

Official statistics indicate that, as a result of these two bouts of drought and famine in the 1980s, approximately 25,000 children have been left homeless and unaccompanied by a parent or legal adult guardian [5].

War

Another major cause of destabilization of children in Ethiopia is war, both internal and external. The long years of internal as well as external armed

conflict, which has accelerated in recent years, have caused unaccounted and probably uncountable deaths, displacement, and suffering to children in Ethiopia. Much social turmoil also resulted from the long-standing border conflict between Ethiopia and Somalia. The conflict reached a high momentum in 1979 when a large number of Ethiopians were deported en masse to Somalia following a raid. Among the Ethiopians who became prisoners of war during this exacerbation of the conflict and were repatriated after 11 years of imprisonment were 375 children. Among these, through the efforts of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Ethiopian government, 282 were reunified with their biological parents while the remaining 93 were placed in different child care organizations.

The Fate of Displaced Children

In traditional Ethiopian society, an individual in crisis could always fall back on his or her family or the larger kinship group. It was common for the wealthy to take care of needy relations. Godfathers (*yetut abat*¹) and godmothers (*yetut enat*²) had the responsibility to care for their "children" should the real parents be unable to do so. Even among the relatively poor, those who were needy or sick were assisted by the kinship group. In the case of the death of the head of a tenant household, for example, the landlord, in some cases, would take on responsibility for caring for the younger children. When the children became old enough, they would become tenants and work on the landlord's farm. For example, among one of the ethnic groups, the Oromos, the *gosa* (a large extended family network) had the functions of a public welfare system, providing crop, cattle, and health insurance and serving as an adoption agency. Adoption, popularly known as *gudifecha*, was commonly practiced in the Oromo culture.

When the needs of children could not be met by families, aid and cooperation from nonrelatives and the community in general became operative. Giving alms and providing meals to the needy was traditionally and still is a common practice among Christians and Moslems of all socioeconomic levels. Children who had lost one parent or both are given over to churches to be brought up in the service of clerical institutions. Among the Moslems, the institution of the *wagf*, which is land made available to the mosque, functions to support religious, educational, and welfare activities, including the care of orphans.

The provision of the *zakat*, or alms tax, is also made available to benefit parents, relatives, the poor, and orphans.

Other practices, less supportive of children, may also have pertained in past times of hardship and, to some extent, have been observed with increasing frequency in the last decade, during times of severe economic and social distress. In his article entitled "Childhood in Traditional Ethiopia," Richard Pankhurst, quoting Nathaniel Pierce, states that:

... in times of difficulty the up-keep of children was often trusted to better-off kinsman or even complete strangers. Such adoption was sometimes induced by abandoning youngsters in the vicinity of the proposed foster parents' house [6].

Many experienced welfare field workers active in famine-stricken areas of Ethiopia during the past decade have observed a breakup of indigenous support systems for children in severe crisis and the lack of services operating during the recent famines and displacement. On the other hand, others who worked in famine-stricken areas described the strong extended family system of foster care parenting, reinforced by religious values and vows binding people to protect and care for orphaned children. Still others who have also worked with displaced children caution against a general policy of reunification and foster care for displaced children, noting that, in light of changed values created by the famine crisis, the foster children become the first victims of deprivation and abandonment at times of further difficulty. In many cases, these observers state, foster children are sought after solely as another source of labor for the foster families.

In view of the magnitude of the current problem of displaced children, policies and guidelines have been formulated by the government to facilitate the identification of orphaned children, the reunification of unaccompanied children, and the establishment of children's homes and villages for those who cannot be reunified. As a result, displaced children eventually come under the placement and care of emergency services such as shelters, institutions, foster families, and, recently, community-based homes.

Major setbacks have been encountered by the Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) and the various organizations involved in the identification, care, and placement of children under difficult circumstances. Insufficient and low-quality

services attributable to inadequate and unsustainable funding and shortages in manpower and material are at the top of the list of factors. The lack of professionals to handle the emotional and social needs of displaced children traumatized by physical hardship, abandonment, and loss of loved ones has left the human aspects of the children's needs unfulfilled. The complexity of coordinating the efforts of government and nongovernment organizations charged with the welfare of children has also been identified as a major obstacle.

The report that follows, describing the reintegration efforts on behalf of 105 children held in a Somali POW camp for 11 years, reflects some of these underlying issues and problems facing Ethiopian society in its attempts to cope with the general phenomenon of displaced children.

METHODS OF THE STUDY

The ICRC, working with the Ethiopian and Somali governments, identified among the Ethiopian prisoners of war in Somalia a total of 375 children in need of family tracing services and, in coordination with the Ethiopian National Children's Commission (now known as Children, Youth, and Family Welfare Organization), managed to find parents or family members who would take responsibility for all but 93 of these children. The National Children's Commission then arranged to have these 93 children placed in government and private agencies that volunteered to care for them.

Visits were made by the author to five of the six sites where, according to the official list, the 93 children were said to be residing. These five sites were widely dispersed, some within and others quite distant from Addis Ababa. Because of difficulties in arranging a visit, the sixth site could not be visited, but the caretaker in charge was interviewed during one of his visits to Addis Ababa.

Information on demographic characteristics, family background, placement and care history, and health status was obtained from orphanage records, interviews with administrators and caretakers, and discussions with the children themselves. Visits were then made by the author to the agencies that had sponsored the children in these sites: the Ethiopian Orthodox Church Council for Child Care, the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekene Yesus, SOS Kinderdorf International, and the Rehabilitation Agency

for the Disabled. Persons in these institutions in charge of sectors directly responsible for the children were interviewed and provided further information.

When the visits to the various caretaker organizations were made, it was found that some children had left for the long *kerempt* (the long summer recess) with acquaintances and that others had already been transferred or had left their caretaker organizations for good. It was also discovered that the organizations in which the children were placed had very high caretaker/child ratios and that housemothers, if there were any, did not know the POW children well enough to answer questions on individual children. A further difficulty in case finding was created by the fact that many of the older adolescents were often not on site but instead were roaming the towns and cities of the region, having been dismissed by their institutions for failing to live in line with the rules and regulations of the institutional settings. Others, refusing to accept the conclusions of the formal tracing agencies, had struck out on their own to seek news of the whereabouts of their parents or relatives, from whom they had been separated for 11 years.

Consequently, for some children, the information that could be obtained was relatively fragmentary. It was also found during the course of the survey that an additional 12 children had been repatriated from the Somali POW camp, bringing the total number of children who were evaluated, at least on some parameters, to 105.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Background History and Initial Placement

Since the children were captured and taken as prisoners when they were very young, from a few months to about five years old, they have very little or no recollection about their lives before imprisonment. Eight of the 105 are known to have been born in the Somali POW camp. Data on names, ages, status of parents, other family members, and early experiences during imprisonment were provided by co-prisoners who knew the family prior to abduction or during imprisonment and who were interviewed by the receiving agencies and institutions who attempted to obtain information on these children when they were first brought back from Somalia. Additional information was obtained from papers written by older ex-prisoners who, upon their re-

turn, were assigned to a government training school and wrote descriptions of their experiences. At the point of inquiry, eight to 10 months after the children were repatriated, these were the only sources of information about the children's lives prior to imprisonment.

Questions pertaining to prison experiences produced emotional strain and brought tears to some children. Because the survey did not provide resources to offer psychological or social support for children who might become upset by the nature of the questions, these difficult issues were not probed in depth. However, some of the older children had already related their experiences to caretakers who became close to them, and thus some of the information was available through interviews with these caretakers. The children describe inhumane treatment, hunger, physical discomfort, severe physical punishment, and hard physical labor. Some survived by supplementing their meager diets with weeds, frogs, and other wild animals. Some had witnessed the death of parents and had seen co-prisoners die of helplessness, disease, and violence. At least one child continued to suffer severe emotional disturbance, requiring ongoing psychiatric treatment.

Positive events were also remembered and described, such as attachments to adult co-prisoners and peers. Many of the adult prisoners were educated professionals and served as teachers in the prison schools, providing for the children an excellent education up to grade 12. The maximum was extracted from scarce resources: many children learned to write by using for paper discarded cigarette packs and cartons and by making ink from a slurry composed of bird droppings and chemicals from old batteries. As a result, the majority of these children were at an educational level commensurate with their age. According to their reports, these educational activities were stopped, however, shortly before the time of repatriation, and the older children were then required to work on farms under very hard conditions. The children reported listening to nostalgic music and enjoying entertainment provided by prison groups. The events heralding the time of release and repatriation, including the arrival of the airplanes of the ICRC and the visit by the Ethiopian ambassador, were recalled vividly by the older children.

The children returned to Ethiopia in January 1989,

after 11 years of living as prisoners of war. They recall the news of their release and their subsequent arrival via ICRC plane transport at Dire Dawa in Harage (the entry point in Ethiopia) as the happiest moment in their lives. The fanfare and enthusiasm with which they were received and the promises of what was to come made the children feel happy and gave them (the older children reported this) high hopes for the future.

On arrival from their temporary shelters in Dire Dawa, the children were taken to a residential institution a few kilometers from Addis Ababa, where they stayed for 15 days. The children did not have pleasant memories of their stay in this institution, reporting a regimen of hard routine and neglect. The children were then given to various sponsoring agencies that volunteered to accommodate them. The agencies then assigned the children to the existing caretaking institutions already under their jurisdiction, giving each child a specific place within one of their previously established orphanages, homes, and hostels, some of which were located outside Addis Ababa and all of which were established to take care of children displaced within Ethiopia as a result of poverty, war, drought, and drought-induced famine.

The Present State of the Children

Of the 105 children identified, 58 are boys and 47 are girls, with ages ranging from three to 17 years. Recorded ages may themselves be inaccurate, in that for many they are simply estimates, which, in the view of many of the caretakers, understated the age of some of the older children.

Nine of the 105 are no longer residing in an institution: seven have left to try life on their own; one has reportedly been reunited with her mother, although this information could not be confirmed; and one has joined the Ethiopian army. The remaining 96 children are now residing in a total of 14 different institutions, as opposed to the group of five to which they had originally been assigned. This dispersal reflects the serious conflicts some of the children had with their caretaker organizations and the difficulties they experienced in reintegration.

Education. All but three children (for whom places in the second term could not be found) were attending school at the time of the site visits. One was in nursery school, and the others were in grades 1 to

10. All speak Amharic, and, among the older children, 20 were reported to speak fluent Somali. For the 75 children for whom academic performance evaluations were available, 16 were rated as excellent, 20 as very good, 26 as good, 19 as satisfactory, two as fair, and two as poor. (The last two were both boys who had been in Mogadishu and therefore had not been schooled in the POW camp. Medical care was the reason for this assignment for at least one of the boys, who had lost an arm in the course of the conflict.)

Health Status. Health status data were obtainable on 79 children and derived from institutional records based on assessments made by physicians or nurses associated with the public hospitals affiliated with the institutions. Virtually all of the children were still suffering from malaria, and many had pneumonia and anemia. Several had gastritis, head sores, schistosomiasis, and chronic stomach ailments. One suffered from what was reported as a heart problem, and another suffered from asthma. Among the physically handicapped, one girl was paralyzed in both legs from polio, a boy (mentioned above) had lost his left arm during the war, and another boy was physically stunted from severe malnutrition.

Social and Emotional Issues. Social and emotional adjustment problems are reflected in caretaker reports on the children: four children were described as aggressive and undisciplined, five as depressed, one as a bed wetter, and another as biting his nails continually. One girl was said to have had an emotional breakdown and required two trips to Addis Ababa for psychiatric treatment. She was diagnosed in a hospital in Addis Ababa as having both neurological and psychological problems and was given medication. An important component of her distress was that she had been separated from her brother and assigned to a different institution. Another girl was also under treatment for psychological problems.

Since emotional and social problems are difficult to assess in a survey site visit, especially since the informants (the caretakers) were often unfamiliar with their POW charges, the incidence of emotional maladjustment problems may be an underestimate.

Family Information. Sixteen of the 105 children were siblings and, with the exception of the one pair mentioned above, had been kept together in family units. Although it had been presumed that all of the 93 children on the initial list (as well as the other 12

Table. Parental Information

Parent	Dead	Alive	Unknown	Total
Father	43	9	32	84
Mother	42	18	24	84

who were later discovered) were parentless and without close relatives, subsequent inquiries have revealed that some had living parents and that almost half of these children had close surviving relatives. Many of these later discoveries were made by the children themselves, whose incessant search for identity and connection often proved partially successful. Specific information on family ties was available for 84 children (Table).

Among those listed as dead, two of the fathers and 14 of the mothers had died in prison in Somalia. Among the group of 84 children, 59 have been found to have one or more close relatives: brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, grandfathers, or grandmothers. Efforts are now underway to assess the home situations of these various relatives and to determine the feasibility of family reunifications.

DISCUSSION

The survey findings indicate that the majority of the repatriated POW children are managing to begin the process of reintegration, by going to school and abiding by the social rules of group life. The survey also identifies the need to address in more detail a set of specific issues relating to the health and the emotional and social readjustment of these children. In comparison with the other children in these orphanages and homes, the POW children, many of whom spent up to 11 years in the Somali camp, were described as having more difficulty re-entering Ethiopian society, in part because they had acquired certain attributes of "foreignness" during their stay out of the country, in part because they had witnessed more serious trauma, and in part because at an early age they had been forced to learn very assertive and independent coping mechanisms.

A particular feature of the behavior of the majority of these children upon their return to Ethiopia was their intense desire to find a living relative, to whom they could claim they belonged. Unlike the children displaced within Ethiopia, for whom the question of surviving relations had usually been more definitively resolved, these POW children knew that the

data were incomplete and refused to accept the conclusions of official tracing efforts. Consequently, they were always restless, inquiring of all visitors and strangers about their relatives, leaving their assigned sites to search for somebody in particular or to follow up on a vague hunch or clue.

The older boys constituted a particular management problem for the caretaker institutions because they were unusually aggressive and unruly (in comparison with the other children in the orphanages who were not POWs) yet were also seriously untrained and unequipped for adult, productive lives.

CONCLUSIONS

On the basis of the results of this survey, a report was submitted to the Ethiopian National Children's Commission in which a series of recommendations was made. The main points urged upon the Commission are summarized below:

1. Designate a special representative on behalf of the repatriated POW children to serve as a liaison with all sponsoring agencies.

2. Allocate additional funds to the caretaker agencies to alleviate the immediate needs of these children, particularly clothing and food.

3. Identify those children with particular physical and psychological needs and find the means to provide them with additional appropriate services.

4. Review the cases of older adolescents, both those who have left the institutions to try life on their own and those still on site, in order to provide or find for them vocational training and rehabilitation programs that will allow them to enter the work force in short order.

5. Strengthen the official tracing and reunification capacities so that this high-priority need of the children to find their own relatives will be supported by the full force of regional and national agencies.

6. Consider the possibility of establishing at the

various caretaker institutions programs in farming, animal husbandry, etc., so that the older children can begin to acquire essential skills and contribute in productive ways to the group economy.

7. Undertake an in-depth psychological assessment of this cohort of children to improve our understanding of the developmental age-specific needs of children in especially difficult circumstances such as war, imprisonment, family separation, and loss.

8. Develop staff competence in handling such special situations as the rehabilitation of repatriated prisoners of war and other displaced children in especially difficult circumstances.

9. Alert responsible authorities, communities, assisting agencies, and individuals to the great vulnerability of these children and educate the entire society to value and support the pursuit of peace, for peace is a primary need of all children. ■

AUTHOR'S NOTE

¹ *Yetut abat* and *yetut enat* mean literally breast father and breast mother. The phenomenon is a form of bonding through a symbolic suckling of the breast.

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