Title

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF FOSTER CARE AND ADOPTION SUPPORT ON THE WEL-BEING AND DEVELOPMENT OF VULNERABLE CHILDREN AT ZOE FOUNDATION IN AREA 25, LILONGWE.
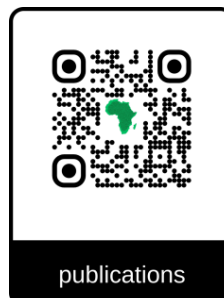
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ABSTRACT

The well-being and development of vulnerable children remain a top priority for Malawi's child protection system. Children in foster care and adoptive families frequently experience specific challenges that impact their emotional, social, and developmental results. While foster care and adoption are acknowledged as important strategies for providing alternative family based for vulnerable children in Malawi, there is little information on how these support systems affect their overall well-being and development. Existing research is mainly focused on institutional care, leaving gap in understanding foster and adoptive family's experiences and the value of various support methods.

Literature indicates that foster care and adoption are important family-based care options that enhance the well-being and development of vulnerable children by offering stable and supportive home environments. Children in foster and adoptive families are more likely to experience positive emotional, social, and developmental outcomes, particularly when caregivers receive adequate support such as training, counseling, financial assistance, and regular follow-up from child welfare professionals. However, in Malawi, most existing studies focus on institutional care, with limited attention given to foster and adoptive families and the effectiveness of support services available to them. As a result, there is insufficient evidence on how these support systems influence children's overall well-being and development, highlighting the need for further research in this area.

This study aims to evaluate the effects of foster care and adoption support on the well-being and development of vulnerable children. The study will use exploratory design and a qualitative method to gather detailed perspectives from important stakeholders. Data will be gathered through interviews and focus group discussions with adoptive parents, carers and child welfare experts. It will also investigate career experiences, challenges in providing care, the developmental outcomes of children in foster and adoptive homes and the availability and effectiveness of support resources.

INTRODUCTION

Foster care is increasingly used for children who cannot be looked after by their own families. This form of alternative is often seen as better than residential care as it allows children to live in a family and form strong relationships with carers. There are many examples of successful foster care programs including disadvantaged groups such as those with disabilities. However, these initiatives are often run by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), reach only a small number of children, and are not fully integrated into care and protection systems. Many countries struggle to establish government-run or regulated foster care at scale.

This study assesses the nature and benefits of foster care and adoption support of vulnerable children which identifies some of the key challenges associated with this form of care in Malawi. It outlines the elements of an enabling environment needed for successful large-scale foster care programs, including legislation, guidance, changes to social norms and a strong social service workforce. This study also provides lessons learnt from Zoe foundation on how to support each

stage of the foster care process.

Background of study

In Malawi, foster care and adoption are increasingly recognized as important alternatives to institutional care, although significant challenges remain in their implementation and support. The government's national policy for orphans and vulnerable children emphasizes family-based care and institutional care as a last resort. While efforts are being made to strengthen child protection systems, challenges remain. Including a lack of aftercare support and potential issues with the international adoption process.

It is estimated that there are at least 2.2 million children living in orphanages in the world. Most of these children are in developing countries. However, this number is an underestimate given that many orphanages are not registered. In Malawi, for example, it has also been reported that some childcare institutions (CCIs) are not registered with the Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare (MoGCDSW), which is the main government ministry responsible for child protection and related issues. In 2017, some of the institutions in the country had been registered in line with the 2010 Child-Care, Protection and Justice Act (CCPJA). The Ministry of Gender, Children, Disability and Social Welfare and stakeholders have generally expressed concern over the increasing numbers of childcare institutions. In 2011, there were 104 CCIs, and by 2014 this had increased to 168. The 2017 report on the monitoring of children in CCIs found the number of CCIs had slightly increased to 169. There were 10, 136 children enrolled in CCIs in 2014 from 6,000 children in 2011. in 2017, the number of children in CCIs dropped by 21% to 8,049: the number of boys was at 4,604 (57.2%) while that of girls was at 3,445 (42.8%). In 2017, the number of institutions was the highest in the southern region at 106 (62.7%) followed by the central region at 48 (28.4%) and the northern region at 15 (8.9%) *(UNICEF, 2019)*.

Globally, foster care and adoption systems provide alternative care for vulnerable children when their families are unable to provide a safe and nurturing environment. Foster care offers temporary placements with vetted caregivers, while adoption provides permanent, legal parental custody. A primary goal is to reunite children with their families whenever possible, but adoption is a crucial option for children who cannot be returned home.

Every child has the right to care for and protect for their holistic development. In Kenya, children make up to 42% of the country's population. An estimated 3.6 million of these are orphans or classified as vulnerable *(UNICEF, 2015)*. According to the *(UN, 2010)* the family is a fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth, well-being and protection of children. The integrated care of orphans and other disadvantaged children in their natural environment in Africa setting is an old practice, but this is different from institutional care of OVC where community link is absent *(al, 2012)*. In African traditional practices, child welfare was a community responsibility. Situations where children were vulnerable and lacked parental care, were approached by a society making intervention through kinship, guardianship and foster care. However, the increased numbers of vulnerable children due to the impact of HIV and AIDS coupled with high levels of poverty, political and economic instability, and armed conflict has overwhelmed many communities and weakened the ability of extended to meet traditional care- taking expectations (Embleton et al, 2013 & 2014). Consequently, other models of care and

support have emerged in sub-Saharan Africa to address the growing orphan crisis, including institutional care (orphanages) be considered before a child is placed in foster care *(Botha, 2016)*.

In addition, in Kenya there are over 700 charitable children's institutions (CCIs), housing approximately 40,000-42,000 children *(DCS, 2012)*. According to *(UNICEF, 2014)* out of 700 charitable children's institutions (CCIs) in Kenya, 591 are legally registered. Therefore, one of the weaknesses of the current practices of institutionalized childcare infrastructures in Kenya is the existence of non-registered children's homes, indicating weakness in the legal apparatus regulating childcare in CCIs. Such weakness may result in *"structural neglect which may include minimum physical resources, unfavorable and unstable staffing patterns, and social-economically inadequate caregiver-child interactions" (al M. e., 2014)*. The most common pitfall impacting on childcare institutions ranges *(United Nations Assembly, 1989)* from disproportionate numbers of children to staff, untrained staff, lack of care and plans for children, lack of resources for proper protection (2014). This contravenes the standards of living adequate for the child's physical, mental spiritual, moral and social development *(United Nations Assembly, 1989)*.

Problem statement

Foster care and adoption support are important child protection techniques that provide vulnerable children with a secure and supportive environment if they lose parental care due to abandonment, abuse, or neglect. These systems aim to improve children's well-being, emotional security, and developmental growth. However, in many low-resource contexts such as Malawi, there is lack of empirical data on how foster care and adoption support services affect children's psychological and developmental outcomes. Most existing studies are conducted in high-income countries and focus institutional and policy frameworks, sometimes overlooking the lived experiences of children and carers in African context.

Due to this knowledge gap, practitioners and policymakers in Malawi struggle to measure the genuine success of foster care and adoption as long-term child welfare solutions. As a result, this study seeks to close this gap by exploring the nature of accessible support systems and their impact on holistic development of vulnerable children in foster and adoptive households.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Main objective

To Assess the impact of foster care and adoption support on the well-being and development of vulnerable children. A case study at Zoe foundation (orphanage) in area 25, Lilongwe.

Specific objectives

- To evaluate the psychological well-being of children in foster care and adoptive homes

- To gather the perspectives of children, caregivers, and professionals on the effectiveness of foster care and adoption in supporting vulnerable children's well-being.
- To identify challenges faced by foster and adoptive parents in supporting children's development

Research questions

- What are the differences in

psychological well-being between children in foster care, adoptive families, and those in institutional or vulnerable home environments at Zoe foundation?

- What are the resource and funding perspectives of caregivers and children on the effectiveness in supporting vulnerable children's development at Zoe foundation?

- What educational challenges do vulnerable children face during and after placement in foster care, adoption, and what interventions have been effective in addressing these challenges at Zoe foundation?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of terms

- **Foster care**

According to section 180 to 182 of the children's Amendment *Act of 2007 (Rankwe Reuben Masha, 2008)* foster care is an alternative care placement that occurs when a child is placed, by court order, with a suitable person, who then becomes a foster parent to the child.

- **Vulnerable children**

Vulnerable children are those that are at risk of harm or negative outcomes due to various factors like poverty, disabilities, or abuse. These children often lack access to basic rights and services such as adequate health care, education, protection and family support. According to United Nations Children's Fund *(UNICEF, 2017),* vulnerable children are those who are living in circumstances that expose them to serious threats to their survival and development. Poverty, lack of parental care, conflict, infirmity, disease or

orphanhood are possible outcomes.

- **Adoption**

Adoption is the legal and social institution by which kinship is established between adoptive parents and the adopted child, which, depending on the type of adoption, are identical or like the natural parenting relationship *(Blagojche Anastasov, 2020)*

- **Social services**

Social services are public offerings delivered by government agencies, non-profit organizations, or private entities to enhance the welfare of individuals, particularly those who are disadvantaged. According to *(Dominelli, 2007),* social services are provisions that respond to the needs of individuals, groups, or communities to improve social, emotional, and physical well-being not supplied by carers who are kin.

- **Foster parent adoption**

Occurs when foster parents are approved by the department to adopt a child when the adoption is in the best interest of a child. *(Freundlich, 2001)* defined foster parent adoption as a formal legal procedure that permits foster parent, who have established a lasting relationship with child, to become child's legal parents. He emphasizes how crucial stability and emotional ties are during foster-to-adoption transitions.

- **Empirical evidence**

The long-term physical and psychological health consequences of early childhood abuse victimization and trauma are well documented. Adverse childhood experiences have been found

to be strongly associated with depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PSTD) as well as chronic health problems, such as hypertension, diabetes, asthma, and obesity *(Anda, 2006, 2003,2012).* Prior research also suggests that former foster youth experience PTSD nearly five times the rate of the general population and twice the rate of U.S. combat veterans *(Pecora, 2005).* Furthermore, high rates of comorbid mental health diagnoses (e.g. depression and PTSD) have been documented in samples of former foster youth *(pecora, 2008 & 2005).*

Foster children, however, frequently come into the system having been abused, neglected, or traumatized, which may hinder their psychological healing even in supportive environments. According to *(Mc Wey, 2021),* foster children showed increased levels of comprehending behaviors including anxiety and withdrawal, especially when their previous trauma was not sufficiently addressed by therapies at all. The significance of trauma informed treatment in foster systems is to reduce long-term mental health issues distress and enhance emotional functioning emphasized by this finding.

Children's perspectives about adoption and foster care often highlight issues with identity and belonging as well as thankfulness for stability. According to *(Selwyn, 2019)* Most children say that foster and adoptive placements provide them with a feeling of mental stability, educational possibilities, and a sense of normalcy. Adopted children, particularly those put in permanent homes earlier in life, report better emotional well-being and greater bonds to carers over time. However, emotional uncertainty, identity confusion and rejection may be problems for older children and children who have been placed more than once. To improve their well-being, these conflicting feelings emphasize the significance of continuous carer interactions and age-appropriate counselling.

According to *(Petren, 2021),* Caregivers, particularly foster and adoptive parents see these systems as crucial to giving vulnerable children a secure and caring environment, but they frequently stress the need for improved assistance and training. Many foster parents endure significant levels of stress because of children's behavioral problems and their restricted access to mental health facilities. On the other hand, adoptive parents who obtain post-adoption services like support groups and expert counselling express higher levels of satisfaction. In addition to these studies, care readiness and support services are essential to maintaining children's well-being, even when foster and adoptive care can be quite successful.

When caring for children who have been traumatized, neglected or placed in several settings, foster and adoptive parents may encounter serious emotional and behavioral difficulties. According to *(Leve, 2019),* children in foster and adoptive homes are more likely to exhibit externalizing behaviors including aggression, defiance, and hyperactivity, which can be challenging for carers to control without proper training. Without the right psychological help, these behavioral issues, which may result from early negative experiences and attachments disturbances and can impact the child's developmental trajectory as well as the dynamics of the family.

Another major challenge reported by caregivers is the lack of adequate support services and resources, including access to mental health care, respite services and educational support. Both foster and adoptive parents often feel unprepared to manage the responsibilities of raising traumatized children *(Cooley, 2020).* Their caregiving efforts are frequently made

more difficult by legal obstacles, long wait periods for services, and uneven caseworker support increase their carer duties. These systematic issues can result in carer exhaustion, placement interruptions, and in the most severe circumstances, adoption breakdown.

Theoretical framework Attachment theory

According to *John Bowlby's (1988)* attachment theory, early bonds between children and their careers are crucial. The idea proposes that stable attachment created by consistent, sensitive, and concern care leads to improved emotional control, trust, and resilience in children. Foster and adoptive children, many whom have experienced trauma, abuse or damaged relationships, are at risk of developing unstable attachment patterns. Effective foster and adoptive care can help these children re-establish stable attachment patterns, which are critical for their psychological healing and development *(Dozier M. Z., 2019).*

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

Research Method

The research used qualitative type of research method. Based on its definition, qualitative research is a method of inquiry used to explore and understand people's experiences, perspectives, and meanings within a specific context. As opposed to quantitative research (that relies on measurable or numerical data) qualitative studies gather non-numerical data on how people live, think and respond to different situations. Consequently, qualitative studies may be undertaken to get insights into people's experiences, behaviors, beliefs, attitudes and motivation. It typically involves observing the population and conducting in-depth interviews or focus group discussions *(Corner, 2019).* This technique aims to explore and understand the complexities of social

phenomena. Experiences, and behavior by gathering rich, non-numerical data. It focuses on in-depth understanding rather than statistical generalizations.

Research Design

The study used exploratory research design. This is a methodology strategy used in investigations where the problem is not well defined or explored in depth. Instead of delivering definite conclusions, it aims to gather insights, explore ideas and propose hypotheses for future research *(Creswel, 2018).* This study seeks to understand the lived experiences, contextual realities, and social perspective of children, foster carers and professionals involved in foster and adoptive care. The purpose is to investigate psychological, emotional and developmental results, which are frequently subjective and diverse, necessitating adaptable and in-depth research. The value of exploratory research derives from its capacity to lay the foundation for more organized future studies, inform policy recommendations and add to the body of knowledge about child welfare interventions in foster and adoptive settings. It also helps to identify new themes, theories, or factors that may be important in enhancing vulnerable children's care and support systems *(Akhtar, 2022).*

Research Setting

The study was conducted at Zoe Foundation, a child welfare organization located in Lilongwe Area 25, which is in the Central Region of Malawi. The organization provides care, support and advocacy for orphaned and vulnerable children through foster care and adoption services.

Response rate

Participants and respondent's responses were all good as they all gave out

positive feedback without being coerced. The researcher's emphasis was to collect primary data from the targeted population sample of the children in foster or adoptive homes and caregivers which was 15 in total and only 12 respondents managed to answer questions 5 caregivers and 7 children which makes the response rate to be 80%. The slight decrease in participation percentage was due to some individuals being unavailable during data collection or refusing to participate, despite being informed of the study's goal and advantages. Table below shows the response rate of the participants that responded.

Demographic information.

The demographic information presents the background information of the data about the participants of the field research study categories of gender and age.

Presentation and Findings

- **To evaluate the psychological well-being of children in foster care and adoptive homes Emotional Experiences and Sense of Belonging in Foster and Adoptive Homes**

Most children characterize their emotional experiences in foster or adoptive homes as a mix of comfort, appreciation, and persistent insecurity. Many people say that being in their existing residences makes them feel protected and cared for. *Children frequently reported feeling "happy because this home treats me well and safe because my caregivers protect me."* Several children explained why they felt this way, citing improvements in daily care, emotional support, and a more stable living environment compared to their former situations. However, a few children expressed emotional concerns. *Some stated that they occasionally wondered if they belonged or were concerned about being moved again, emphasizing the emotional vulnerability involved with foster care.*

- **To gather the perspectives of children and caregivers on the effectiveness of foster care and adoption in supporting vulnerable children's well-being.**

Professional Support and Institutional Assistance in Foster Care and Adoption

The purpose of this interview was to learn about the many sorts of assistance and support provided by foster care experts such as social workers, child welfare officers, and non-governmental organizations. Understanding the type and consistency of this support is essential since professional supervision, monitoring, and resources play an important role in assuring children's well-being and the effectiveness of foster care placement. The responses help determine if current foster care programs meet the emotional, educational, and practical requirements of both children and caregivers.

- **To identify challenges faced by foster children and adoptive parents in supporting children's development**

Behavioral, Emotional, and Educational Challenges in Child Development

The aim of this interview was to investigate the challenges that caregivers have when assisting fostered or adopted children with their social interactions, academic development, and behavioral

adjustment with the children.

Caregivers pointed out several issues associated with their children's behavioral and emotional difficulties. Several caregivers clarified that *"the child has trauma-related behaviors such as fear, or withdrawal"* since *"it is difficult to manage emotional outbursts without professional support."* These obstacles frequently made it difficult to foster strong social interactions at home and in the community.

Summary of research findings

The study explored the impact of foster care and adoption support on the psychological well-being and development of vulnerable children at Zoe Foundation, Area 25, Lilongwe. From a demographic perspective, the study involved 12 participants: six children (3 males, 3 females) aged between 12 and 19 years, and six caregivers (3 males, 3 females) aged 28 to 50 years. This balance in gender and age among participants provided diverse perspectives on the foster care and adoption experiences at Zoe Foundation. Overall, the results show that foster care and adoption services have positive effects on children's developmental growth and psychological well-being, especially when caregivers receive sufficient training and support. However, obstacles including caregiver stress, and societal attitudes still hinder the best possible provision of these services, indicating areas that require special attention and legislative support.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE STUDY

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

Strengthen Caregiver Support.

Vulnerable children's emotional, social, and academic development is significantly impacted by foster and adoptive parents. Giving caregivers ongoing training gives them the information and abilities they need to control trauma-related behaviors, encourage healthy parenting, and successfully address each child's unique needs. Counseling services help caregivers deal with stress, prevent burnout, and build resilience in handling difficult behaviors by providing them with emotional and psychological support.

Increase Monitoring and Follow-up.

Frequent home visits and follow-up by social workers are vital for ensuring the stability and effectiveness of foster care and adoption programs. Monitoring enables professionals to spot possible obstacles early on, assess the quality of care provided, and respond quickly when problems develop. Structured follow-ups can include assessing the child's educational development, social integration, emotional adjustment, and overall well-being, as well as offering advice and assistance to caregivers.

CONCLUSION OF THE STUDY

The study shows that the Zoe Foundation's foster care and adoption support plays an important role in supporting vulnerable children's psychological well-being and development. While children generally receive safety, stability, and emotional support, obstacles such as trauma-related behaviors and community stigma remain. To achieve favorable outcomes, caregiver support must be strengthened, mental health services improved, and access to educational and skill-building resources increased. Overall, effective foster and adoptive care interventions can have a major impact on the complete growth and resilience of vulnerable children in Malawi.

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