



Published by the International
Reference Center for the Rights of
Children Deprived of their Family

Monthly Review

Nº 170 – MARCH 2013

EDITORIAL

Child-headed families – A form of alternative care among others?

The phenomenon of child-headed families – mainly present in Sub-Saharan Africa – raises the issue of the role of such an option within the continuum of alternative care measures – the sign of a recognised social fact but of concern in several regards.

The phenomenon of child-headed households raises numerous issues relating to the rights of every affected child, even though it is recognised as a ‘new type of family’ (General Comment Nº 3 – 2003) and accepted as an alternative care measure by the 2009 UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children (§ 37). The ISS/IRC suggests initiating a reflection process on the implications resulting from this form of care.

An option between challenges and reality

Even though this care option is indeed recognised and framed within international standards, its reality in the field entails a heavy burden to carry for those young (even very young) adolescents led to provide for and ensure the needs of their siblings, of a sick parent and/or their grandparents. This arrangement gives rise to considerable pressure upon those children heading a household, who are at higher risk of lack of schooling as well as of exploitation and abuses linked to the search for incomes for their family and the absence of a protective adult.

Furthermore, the example of Zimbabwe (see p. 5) illustrates the need for support and protection for this type of care, which, to a great extent, still remains informal. Indeed, for such a measure to be beneficial for all the children in the household, numerous efforts are required from the political powers, as much with regards to the identification and the registration of these ‘self-managed’ – known as informal – households, as in relation to the periodic monitoring and support provided to these children. The children’s

access to basic social services (access to health care, birth certificates, education, financial support), the opportunities provided to children heading families in order for them to retain their rights to childhood, the training of professionals, are as many implications resulting from raising it as a relevant child protection option.

Moreover, this support entails the allocation of a minimum of resources – resources that precisely lack in those countries, which this type of family context is mostly present in. It is therefore not surprising that NGOs and civil society currently take over to ensure, as much as possible, the well-being of children in this kind of households.

In addition, whether temporary or permanent, this care measure should be decided in the child’s best interests and together with the child – whenever his age allows for it – as would be done with any other measure. Any challenge therefore lies in the determination of the interests of every child in the household, including those of the eldest one as head of the family, in order for this option not to be experienced as a sacrifice made by the latter. Let us remind ourselves, however, that if the safeguards and preconditions are not respected, then this measure may soon become harmful to the rights of children and, in particular, of those children heading households, given the thin line between risk and benefit in this context.



32 Quai du Seujet ■ 1201 Geneva ■ Switzerland
irc-cir@iss-ssi.org ■ www.iss-ssi.org

Is it necessary to think about other strategies to maintain groups of siblings together?

If the aim is to maintain groups of siblings together, could this care measure be questioned? Could the care of these groups of siblings – whether temporarily or permanently – in adapted public structures or foster families not respond better to the needs and the interests of every child (in particular the eldest one as head of the family) by including an adult acting as a reference person? The scope of the reflection may extend to the issue of adoption, given the

progressive context of the profile of children adopted abroad (in particular, the children's age and groups of siblings)?

The major challenge for the affected States eventually seems for them to remain inventive, taking into account the available resources to develop strategies to maintain groups of siblings together, which protect the rights and interests of every child in the household.

The ISS/IRC team
March 2013

