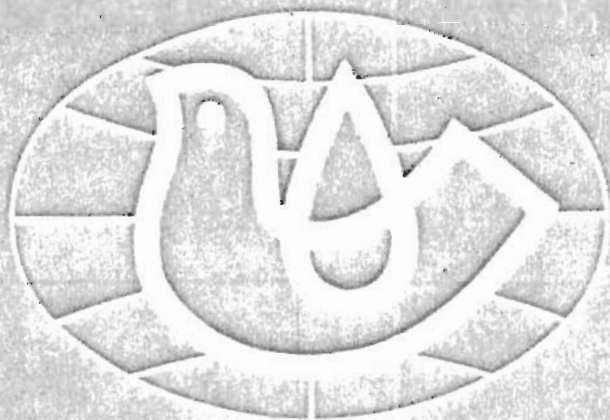


INTERNATIONAL 3 SOCIAL WORK

Vol. XXII No. 2



INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON SOCIAL WELFARE
INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS OF SOCIAL WORK
INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

R.N. 14120/58

INTERNATIONAL SOCIAL WORK

Vol. XXII No. 2 1979 ISSN 0020-8728

R.N. 14120/58

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COVER DESIGN BY YOSHIO SANO

EVACUATION AS A CHILD WELFARE INTERVENTION MEASURE: THE CASE OF THE NIGERIAN CIVIL-WAR*

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LIKE most other disaster situations, a war situation tends to enthrone normlessness in the sense that most of the established patterns of behaviour are suddenly found inadequate. And, as Golan and Vashitz (1974)¹ have said, "one of the increasingly important spheres of professional concern in recent years has been the reactions and coping patterns associated with various forms of natural and man-induced disasters." In such situations, it has been "a long and well-established tradition" in social work to pay special attention to children and their welfare (Silverman, 1977).²

In keeping with this tradition, during the Nigerian civil war (1967-1970), a number of international welfare and relief organizations in collaboration with the "Biafran" authorities arranged to evacuate a large number of children of various ages from the war zones to foreign countries. The exact number of children involved in this evacuation exercise is not known; and may never be known since both the welfare organizations and the "Biafran" authorities did not leave any records of particulars of the children. However, according to A. R. Williams (1972)³, it is known that "approxi-

mately 4,000 to 4,500 children of East Central State origin remained under care in Ivory Coast and Gabon by March 1970." This estimate apparently did not include children evacuated from other affected states such as the former South-Eastern, Mid-Western and the Rivers States. Available records show that eventually a total of 4,454 children were repatriated to Nigeria from Gabon, Ivory Coast and Europe in 1971.⁴ Of this number, 4,415 have since been reunited with their parents or relatives; 17 are placed in foster homes while 22 are in child care institutions.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: first to examine some of the basic issues involved in war-time evacuation of children as an instrument of social work intervention particularly as they apply to Africa, and secondly, to attempt an evaluative analysis of the Nigerian exercise from the point of view of social work and social welfare practice.

In this paper, therefore, the evacuation of children during the Nigerian civil war is seen as an attempt to apply some accepted principles and techniques in social work

*The study from which this paper emanates was jointly sponsored by the Federal Military Government of Nigeria, the International Union for Child Welfare, Geneva, and the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. We gratefully acknowledge our indebtedness to them.

and child welfare intervention to a real life situation. Although large scale inter-ventive operations such as this have been carried out in various parts of the world by international organizations, the Nigerian experience seems different and of particular importance for a number of reasons. In the first place, the evacuation programme entailed the removal of children, with and largely without the permission of their parents or guardians, to foreign countries, outside their normal cultural milieu. Secondly, to the best of my knowledge, this was the first, if not the only, such a massive intervention programme involving children in Black Africa. This point needs to be emphasized because of its possible implications for social work theory and practice. Specifically, it makes possible an empirical assessment of how well some of the "generally accepted" principles in social work apply to the African situation.

The Data

The data utilized in this paper are based on a sample survey of 856 children displaced during the Nigerian civil war; their parents, foster-parents or guardians; and thirty-five social workers currently serving in the four states covered by the study — Anambra, Cross River, Imo and Rivers States, — who in one way or another participated in the resettlement of the displaced children. The children and their parents were also drawn from the four states. Of the 856 children in the sample, 709 were evacuated outside the country while 147 remained within the country (instate) through the crisis.

Cultural Violation

The first, and perhaps, most basic issue to be considered is that of cultural acceptability of the evacuation programme by all the affected ethno-cultural groups in Nigeria. The question of policy being raised is, granting that interventive evacuation of children is acceptable in standard social work prac-

tice, to what extent is the idea of evacuating children outside their national boundaries and cultural milieu consistent with Nigerian customary practice? In other words, did the evacuation programme violate the customs and tradition of the benefiting people? By extension, this question raises another issue even more fundamental to social work practice in Africa and the so-called third world in general, namely, where the officially prescribed and often Western-oriented social work practice is found to run counter to the norms and cultural practice of a beneficiary people, what should be the reaction of the social worker or the agency concerned? This is a question of social work principle cum professional ethics. While the general opinion holds that the welfare agency should not flout the normative codes of the people it is intended to serve, the fact remains that in reality the welfare agencies or organizations do not have the time or patience to inquire into the cultural prescriptions of the people concerned before implementing an approved set of programmes which are perceived to be in their best interest. From this point of view, a post-mortem of the Nigerian programme appears all the more important and professionally rewarding.

To obtain the required information on the acceptability or otherwise of the evacuation exercise in Nigeria, parents of the evacuated children were asked whether they approved or disapproved of the idea of their children being taken out of the country during the civil war. Parents of the non-evacuated (instate) children were asked if they would have liked their children to be among those evacuated. Thirdly, all parents were asked how they perceived the children evacuated from the country during the crisis — as fortunate or as unfortunate ones. The rationale behind this question is that respondents are likely to perceive the children

as unfortunate victims of circumstances if by the evacuation they had been subjected to some culturally abominable act. On the other hand, they are likely to see the children as fortunate ones if evacuation is culturally acceptable in times of war.

Analysis of responses to these questions shows that of 709 parents whose children were evacuated, 597 or 84% said that they approved of the idea of evacuating the children to foreign lands. 102 or 14% disapproved of the idea while 10 or 1% expressed no opinion. This means that an overwhelming majority of parents whose children were actually evacuated saw nothing wrong in evacuating children to foreign countries in times of crisis.

Out of 136 parents whose children were not evacuated, 55 or 40% said that they would have liked their children to be evacuated thus implying approval of the evacuation idea; 21 or 15% would not like their children to be among those evacuated thus implying a disapproval of the idea; while 60 or 44% expressed no opinion. Here again, the proportion of parents approving of the evacuation idea exceeds those who disapproved of it. It is pertinent to note also that among both categories of parents — those whose children were evacuated and those whose children were not — the percentage of respondents who disapproved of the exercise is about the same (14% and 15% respectively).

One question that immediately arises from the above analysis is, for what reasons did a total of 124 parents (17% of all respondents) disapprove of the evacuation programme. This question is particularly important in view of our concern with customary acceptability of the programme. Various reasons adduced by them for disapproving of the evacuation may be summarized under five broad headings:

- a) Lack of clearance : parents resented the fact that their permission was not obtained prior to the evacuation.
- b) Fear of unknown : parents resented their children being taken to unknown destinations by strange people.
- c) Need for children's services : some of the parents said that they needed the services of their children at that time.
- d) Children's health : respondents felt that the children in question were too ill at the time to be taken away.
- e) Personal preference : some of the respondents just said that they preferred to remain with their children.

The most significant fact about the reasons presented here is that none of the respondents indicated that evacuation was against customary practice of his people. Thus the interventive evacuation of children during the Nigerian civil war could not be said to have violated the tradition and customary practice of peoples of Nigeria.

To provide further evidence for this finding, the question of how parents perceived the fate of evacuated children as a group may now be considered.

The data show that among parents whose children were evacuated, 616, (87%) saw the children as fortunate; 53 (7%) saw them as unfortunate; 8 (1%) thought that they are just the same as any other children (i.e. neither fortunate nor unfortunate); while 37 (5%) expressed no opinion. Among parents of unevacuated (instate) children, 93 (68%) perceived the children as fortunate; 8 (6%) perceived them as unfortunate; 2 (2%) saw them as in no way different from other children while 33 (24%) had no opinion. Thus the distribution of responses among the two groups of parents is very similar except that among parents of instate

children, the percentage of those who saw the children as fortunate dropped by 19% to 68% while the percentage of those expressing no opinion rose also by 19% to 24%. For both categories of parents combined, a total of 84% perceived the evacuated children as fortunate. This implies that the evacuated children have not been seen as having been subjected to some traditionally reprehensible activity. The earlier finding is once more supported.

Further, to ascertain whether the views of Nigerian practitioners in the field of social work differ in an appreciable manner from those of the general public on this issue, the 35 social workers who participated in rehabilitation of war-displaced children in Nigeria were asked whether or not they personally approved of the idea of evacuating children to other countries during the civil war.

Out of the 35 respondents to this question, 28 (80%) approved of the evacuation idea; 4 (11%) disapproved of it; while 3 (9%) expressed no opinion. Of the four persons who disapproved of the programme, two were Senior Social Welfare Officers and two were Social Workers by rank. Reasons given by them for disapproving of the exercise fall under two broad categories. First, some expressed genuine fears that a number of the children might be reunited with wrong parents at the time of repatriation. Secondly, some were concerned about possible emotional upsets that such an operation might cause the children. No one mentioned possible violation of the customs of his people.

An important generic difference between the reasons given by professional social workers and those adduced by lay parents for disapproving the evacuation exercise may be observed here. While the parents are preoccupied with their own rights as parents (proper clearance) and physical well-being

of the children, the "professionals" are concerned principally with the child as an individual — (i.e. the psychological and emotional disorganization that early separation from parents and possible wrong placement might entail). This is explained by differences in the orientations of the two groups to child care and child welfare practice.

All the pieces of evidence presented above lead invariably to one and the same conclusion, namely, that interventive evacuation of the type carried out during the Nigerian civil war is compatible with African tradition and customary practice.

In fact, historical evidence also supports this finding. In the olden days, during inter-community or inter-ethnic wars, it was customary practice among the Igbo to evacuate women and children either to temporary shelters set up (at times on top of tall trees) in secret groves or to friendly communities not involved in the conflict. Then, as in the case of the Nigerian civil war, the underlying motivation is the same — security of minors. Evacuation of children to foreign countries is therefore a modern adaptation of the traditional practice but with this major difference: that the crucial decisions as to how, to where and when the child is to be evacuated; and when and how he is to be brought back is taken out of the control of the parent and the kinship group.

Rights of the child

The new emphasis on the rights of children advocated by Silverman (1977)⁵ is not altogether new in the field of social work. Decades earlier Louis Towley (1947)⁶ had traced the linkage between social work and preoccupation with human rights in general. According to him,

"it is inevitable that human rights should be uppermost in the conscientiousness of a profession that is the advocate of the disadvantaged, the deprived, the handicapped. There is no greater social deprivation in our — society than loss or denial of rights."

In view of the above, it appears only natural that the second major issue to be considered here is that of the rights of the children themselves. The question raised is whether the evacuation exercise violated the individual rights of the children as enunciated in the United Nations General Assembly Declaration of the Rights of the child, 1959. More specifically, item 3 of this Declaration states that every child, without any exception whatsoever, "shall be entitled from his birth to a name and a nationality." The issue raised here is whether the evacuation exercise carried out during the Nigerian civil war violated this article of the United Nations Declaration.

With respect to Nigeria in particular and Africa in general, there are cultural or extra-legal dimensions to these rights. With the exception of few matrilineal societies, it is a strong and revered tradition among peoples of Southern Nigeria that every child should go by the name of his natural family. This is one of the points generally raised against legal adoption in Nigeria. It follows therefore that a violation of this article of the United Nations Declaration would also offend the norms and customary practice of peoples of Nigeria.

To give a full and proper consideration to this question, it will be necessary for the two rights — the right to a name and the right to a nationality — to be treated separately.

To obtain the relevant information on possible violation of the right to a name at birth, parents, foster-parents and official guardians of the children were asked to furnish the full names of the children in their care. These were compared with the names by which the children were called at the time of placement. Where a child's original surname had been dropped in favour of that of his foster-parents or guardians, the child's right to a natural family name and self identity is thereby presumed violated. A point that needs to be stressed is that it is a change in the child's surname that is pertinent here. Changes in the child's first and middle names resulting from christian baptism are not in the present context considered infringements on the child's right to a name at birth.

The data indicates that it is mainly among fostered children that such violations have occurred. Out of 59 fostered children in the study sample, 56 or 97% have taken their foster parents' names as their surnames thus losing their original family names.

There were however, some problematic cases where the child, at the time of repatriation and foster placement had only one name. In some cases, that one name turned out to be a nickname such as "Nwapia" or "Rocker." In other words, the child at placement had no family name to be preserved. Such cases were exceptional and arose from lack of proper documentation of full particulars of each child at the time of evacuation. Where the child has only one name the suggested solution is for that name to be retained as the surname while names given to him by the guardians or foster parents should be taken as the first and middle names. In this way, the child's natural family and ethnic identity may be preserved.

Right to nationality :

With regard to right to a nationality at birth, it is considered that a violation of this right could only occur if the children evacuated abroad were not eventually returned to their home country. To obtain information on this issue, social welfare workers covering all the various local government areas in the four states concerned were asked to supply particulars of any evacuated children known or suspected to be living elsewhere either within or outside Nigeria.

Analysis of the responses shows that four such children are known to exist — one in Anambra State, one in Cross River State and two in Imo State. Of these four children, two believed to be living abroad while the other two reside elsewhere in Nigeria. The later instances do not infringe on the children's right to a nationality; they are cases of wrong placement. The former, however, do.

The two children still living abroad are both girls from Umuahia in Imo State. They are said to be living with a family which has apparently "adopted" them unofficially in a certain (named) African country. The parents of the children got to know this through a Nigerian trader living in that country and who knew the "adoptive family" well. The parents have since petitioned to the State Government to assist them recover their children but so far nothing has come out of it. The two girls are still living there. These two cases, if substantiated, constitute a clear violation of the children's rights to both a nationality and a name at birth.

General Assessment:

Having considered two basic issues involved in the evacuation exercise, a general assessment of this programme based on the expressed objectives may now be attempted.

The evacuation programme had two-fold objectives namely, (i) to remove children from war zones to places of safety where their security could be guaranteed; and (ii) to remove children who were sick with Kwashiorkor and other diseases to places where they could receive adequate treatment and care.

With regard to the first objective, it is a known fact that those countries to which the children were evacuated were at peace during the period of their stay there. Those countries were not involved in any wars, domestic or foreign, at the time. Consequently, the safety objective could rightly be said to have been met. With respect to the second objective, medico-nutritional treatment and care, available evidence indicates that the international relief agencies which sponsored the evacuation were in a position to, and that they did in fact provide adequate food and medicine for the care and treatment of the evacuees. Thus from the point of view of the expressed objectives, the exercise was a big success.

However from social work point of view, it is equally important to ask how Nigerians themselves see and evaluate this programme. To this end, the social workers who were in a position to observe the operations of the programme were asked to give a general assessment of it. Out of 28 respondents to this question, 15 or 54% saw the exercise as very successful, 5 (18%) saw it as partially successful while 8 (28%) saw it as unsuccessful. Of the eight respondents who saw it as unsuccessful, five attributed the failure to poor organization; one person blamed it on inadequate resources such as fund, transport and equipment; while two felt that it was due to corruption, inefficiency and nepotism among the staff engaged in the operations. According to them, selection of those to be evacuated was not based strictly on need. For instance, it was

said that relatively healthy children of influential persons were evacuated while orphans with bad cases of kwashiorkor were left behind.

Summary

As a summary, the major findings of the study may be recapitulated. The evacuation of minors in times of war is found to be an acceptable instrument of social work intervention among Nigerians and, by extension, among Africans in general. In applying it however, every effort should be made to safeguard the rights of both the parents and the children themselves.

Secondly, much as the ostensible objectives of the Nigerian evacuation programme may be said to have been fully achieved, there are some evidence of violation of certain provisions of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child in the process. Most of the foster parents have made their wards to adopt their own (foster parents') names thus violating the children's right to a name at birth. The almost universal occurrence of this violation among fostered children suggests that most Nigerian foster parents interpret fostering to mean adoption. Two possible ways of avoiding this situation suggest themselves:

- (a) Proper documentation of the particulars of children at evacuation, and
- (b) adequate and effective supervision of foster care arrangements to ensure that foster parents comply strictly with the terms of foster care agreements one which is that the foster child continues to go by his original (natural family) names.

The data also reveal evidence of possible violations of children's right to a nationality at birth. This pertains to the care of two girls said to be still living in the country to which they were evacuated, against the wishes of their parents and not out of their own volition. In this respect, the Federal Government of Nigeria, the I.U.C.W. and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, are urged to mount an exhaustive investigation into cases of two girls with a view to restoring their inalienable birth-rights.

Finally the study found that the overall success of the evacuation programme was impaired by inefficiency and corruption among some functionaries. It is suggested that greater involvement of affected parents in the decision-making processes would go a long way towards minimizing the influence of such unscrupulous functionaries.

FOOTNOTES

1. Naomi Galan and Balya Vashitz, "Social Services in a War Emergency," *Social Service Review*, Vol. 48 No. 3 (September 1974), p. 422.
2. In a recent article, Marvin Silverman has advocated a shifting of emphasis from expansion of services to extension of children's rights. (See "Children's Rights and Social work," *Social Service Review*, Vol. 51, No. 1, March 1977. This paper identifies with this view.
3. A. R. Williams: Final Report on I.U.C.W. Operations in East Central State (Nigeria), 1970-71, 1972.
4. D. S. Obikoze and A. Muro: Follow-Up Study on the Rehabilitation of War-Displaced Children in Nigeria (Forthcoming) 1978. p. 43.
5. Marvin Silverman: "Children's Rights and Social Work," *Social Service Review*, Vol. 51, No. 1, (March 1977) P. 171.
6. Louis Towley, in *Trends in Social Work, 1874-1956*, by Frank J. Bruno, New York, Columbia University Press.

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