

My name is Sarah Galane, I am the founder and managing director of the Samaritan Centre, which is registered as a children's home in Polokwane, Limpopo Province. It is an organization that devotes itself to providing care and support for orphans and vulnerable children left in destitute circumstances. The centre is currently accommodating thirty-four children, who have been legally placed by a children's court. They have been referred from different areas around the Province; they range in age from 6 months to 14 years. We have a multi-disciplinary team composed of psychologists, paediatricians, teachers, ancillary care workers, child and youth care workers, and legal advisors etc. This team ensures that every child receives a holistic package of care tailored to that child's individual needs.

The Samaritan Centre offers a range of programmes that include:

- parental care;
- psycho-social support;
- educational programmes; and
- outreach programmes – OVC support groups.

In my nine years experience of working with children I'm of the view that foster care is not an option for most of the infected children and some of the orphans. The option of foster care in the present environment poses a number of problems:

1. The identification of suitable parents or family systems that can provide the above is a long and complex process. It requires manpower beyond that which is available at present in the Department of Social Development.
2. The monitoring of a successful placement faces similar constraints.
3. Because of high levels of poverty, there will be a group of people simply in it for the money. Nevertheless, foster care programmes remain an option, where guarantees for the safety and physical as well as emotional security for the child are possible.

Nowadays the spirit of ubuntu no longer exists, in part because of the fading away of extended family systems, in part because of economic factors, but also because of stigma. The stigma attached to the death of a parent due to HIV/AIDS, has severe consequences for the child. Many children are brought to the Samaritan centre when foster care placements breakdown, when the carers find out that those parents died of HIV/AIDS or the child is positive.

At times people accept the responsibility of fostering the children with the aim of accessing the grants, without the passion for such children that is the reason why they end up being abused, emotionally, physically and sexually, some are deprived of their basic needs.

For example recently we admitted a six year old sickly orphan who had been staying with an aunt in a village.

1. He was removed from that family because he was left alone during the day despite his poor health, and you could read between the lines as to why this has happened to him.

2. He was deprived of food despite the fact that social workers supplied food for him.
3. He was emotionally abused for asking about his food.
4. Looking at his condition, one could conclude that he was not properly taken care of until such times as he was removed to the Samaritan Centre.

The option of placement in a children's home (with similar guarantees) should remain open. There is plenty of evidence that orphans placed in small groups (8-10) with a natural age distribution and suitable care givers can grow-up with no more than normal wear and tear. The following issues are important:

1. Guarantee of adequate financing over 10/20 years.
2. Continuity of care givers as far as possible.
3. Professional monitoring of the groups.
4. Embedment in local networks of NGOs and other relevant organizations.

We will only make an impact on the orphan tsunami if both options are exercised. I hope that these considerations will be taken into account.

The school principal gave me a call to report a ten year old orphan who was repeatedly sexually abused by her adult uncle who was staying with her even though he was married, whilst the wife abused her physically and emotionally. The problem was identified at school and the neighbours confirmed. I reported the case to the social worker in that area and the child protection unit, but the principal ended up being asked to open a case with the police. The child is now placed under the care of the very principal.

These are just some of the problems that children are going through and based on that, I am quite aware that it is costly to place children in child and youth care centres for proper care purposes but I think we should invest in the children for us to shape the future of this beautiful country.