

Hope and Homes for Children (published 2016)

Where have the children gone?

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Pioneering Deinstitutionalisation in South Africa

2016 has been a groundbreaking year for the work of Hope and Homes for Children in South Africa. We first began working there in 2001 and our early focus was on helping vulnerable parents and children to stay together – supported by many of you through Project Ubuntu.

Recently, in light of our strategic focus on ending the institutional care of children worldwide, we have reassessed our work in South Africa to see how we can have the most impact there. To this end, we have carried out an extensive research project to provide the first reliable picture of institutional care in the country and used those findings as the catalyst for a unique pilot project to close three orphanages in Gauteng Province.

Our Project Director in South Africa is Lourenza Foghill who first joined Hope and Homes in 2009 as Regional Development Officer in Witbank. Lourenza has wide experience of development work with women, children and communities across Africa. Here she explains the scale of her current task – and why the skills she acquired in an earlier career as an investigative journalist have proved so useful this year.

South Africa is a country of contrasts. It is hard to find an adjective that sufficiently describes this place, but perhaps 'tempestuous' would be a good start. The super-rich live cheek-by-jowl with the desperately poor, separated by high walls and electric fences. Jobs are scarce, especially for young people, which fuels poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, gang violence, violent crime, and anger.

This is undoubtedly a beautiful country, richly endowed with natural resources and a great entrepreneurial spirit but equally, it's a hard country for the most vulnerable members of this society; children born into the fractured communities who find themselves growing up in an increasingly hostile environment.



Despite the fact that South Africa has some of the most progressive legislation in existence with regard to the protection of children, news stories here highlight the growing number of babies that are abandoned every day. Newborns are discarded into pit-latrines, babies are found in the open 'veld' and homicide accounts for the deaths of hundreds of children younger than five, every single year. But what happens to those who are rescued? This is where the trail goes cold. Where do those children go to?

In 2015, Hope and Homes for Children gave me the opportunity to be part of their global mission to eradicate the institutional care of children, by leading their work in South Africa.

<https://www.hopeandhomes.org/blog-article/where-have-the-children-gone/>

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In August 2016, Hope and Homes for Children delivered induction training to 33 child protection professionals in Gauteng Province as part of the "One Child One Family" project

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The first problem we had to confront was the dearth of accurate data on the number of registered Child and Youth Care Centres (children's homes) in the country.

The Government's best guess is that there are approximately 345 orphanages, housing approximately 21,000 children. But there was no data on the ages or backgrounds of the children who live in these institutions. We had no answer to the single most important question: what happens here to the basic right of every child to grow up in a loving family, so clearly set out in both South Africa's Constitution and its Children's Act?

"As elsewhere in the world, the success of our work in South Africa will depend not only on closing orphanages, but also on helping to develop the systems and services that are needed to support vulnerable children to live in families and to prevent family breakdown in the first place."

To answer this question, Hope and Homes for Children undertook a major research project called "Children Count SA" in order to provide a comprehensive 'picture' of what institutional care looks like in South Africa. We needed to know why children are placed in orphanages, what kind of care they experience there, how long they stay in these institutions and where they go when they leave.

It was a mammoth task, given not only the lack of reliable statistics but also the sheer geographical size of the country. We started from scratch by triangulating research via the internet to identify the numbers of institutions per Province and contacting child protection professionals in each of the nine Provinces. At the same time, we had to cut through vast amounts of 'red tape' in order to access what little information was available at Government level.

Despite its excellent objectives, the Children's Act that governs child protection here can also 'mask' a failure to deliver services to children in need of care and protection. Requests for meetings and information were often met with refusal or ridicule, because "we have the Children's Act here, so there are no problems".



Another hurdle we faced is that orphanages in South Africa are largely managed by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – charities, international agencies and other non-profit groups. This meant we had to deal with both the NGO and the Government sector – and the two are not on good terms. Hope and Homes for Children has worked long and hard this year to get the two groups to communicate more effectively and I am very proud to say that good progress has been made.

Induction training being carried out to 33 child protection professionals in Gauteng Province as part of the "One Child One Family" project

Child protection professionals taking part in a Hope and Homes for Children training workshop. The session provided essential

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information on the harmful effects of orphanages and how best to move children into family and community based care.

The “Children Count SA” research project was finally completed in June 2016. The results were based on data collected from 78 institutions across all nine Provinces of South Africa and the intensive assessment of eight of these facilities.

Our findings confirmed that South Africa’s child protection system relies on institutions and placing children into long-term residential care as a first option and not a last resort. We also found that the majority of the children who are living in institutions in South Africa are younger than 12. They will remain in institutional care, on average, for anything between two and a half to ten years. Family breakdown is the main reason for children entering institutional care in South Africa but prevention and early intervention programmes to support families are scarce and poorly resourced. Foster care and adoption are grossly under used to provide alternative care for vulnerable children.

“This is exciting, pioneering work to reform South Africa’s child protection system”

As a direct result of our findings, Hope and Homes for Children has now been able to move on to the second phase of our project here, working with the South African government to end the institutional care of children via our “One Child One Family SA” programme.

This is exciting, pioneering work to reform South Africa’s child protection system, in the first instance by ending the institutional care of children younger than three and reducing the institutional care for older children. To this end, we have come to an agreement with the Child Protection authorities in Gauteng Province to begin a three year demonstration pilot project to close three institutions in the area.

As elsewhere in the world, the success of our work in South Africa will depend not only on closing orphanages, but also on helping to develop the systems and services that are needed to support vulnerable children to live in families and to prevent family breakdown in the first place.

The launch of Hope and Homes for Children’s “One Child One Family SA” programme marks an historic moment in the history of child protection in South Africa. The Gauteng Department of Social Development is very enthusiastic and supportive of our work, and it has the power and reach to influence national government. We are well underway, setting up the pilot project in the Province and cooperation levels are really good.

This is such an exciting time to be working for Hope and Homes for Children in South Africa. We can now look forward to being the catalyst for real change and improvement in the way that vulnerable children are cared for here.

Lerato: A child with no name

Lerato is three years old and spends her days lying alone in a cot in an orphanage in Gauteng Province in South Africa. She was abandoned at birth, left bundled up in a cardboard box near a train station. Passers-by found Lerato and took her to the police who delivered her to the institution.

Lerato had no identifying documents or personal items with her when she was found and so the staff at the institution gave her a first name and a surname – the name of the orphanage. She was two years old before she was even issued with a birth certificate; until then, officially, Lerato didn’t exist.

Invisible to the authorities, Lerato is invisible within the orphanage too. The staff there have so many desperate children to care for, they don’t have time to give this tiny girl the individual care and

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attention she needs. As a result, Lerato has been slow to learn to walk and she doesn't speak. Once a month, Lerato receives a visit from an occupational therapist but the rest of the time she just lies in her cot, waiting for someone to notice her.

Hope and Homes for Children believes that no child should suffer the injustice of this kind of care. Through our "One Child One Family SA" project, we will work with the social workers and the institution staff to make sure that Lerato gets the support that she needs. At the same time, we will look for a family to love and cherish Lerato for life. Because, like every child in the world today, Lerato has the right to know that she matters and that she belongs.