



CASE STUDY: Building a system of care for children in Uganda

We have long known that, in most cases, children are best cared for and protected within families. In 2013, Uganda had 57,000 children living in child-care institutions and 10,000 on the streets. Since then, ChildFund has been leading a consortium of agencies in an ambitious three-year initiative, *Deinstitutionalization of Orphans and Vulnerable Children (DOVCU)*,² to improve the safety and well-being of children outside of family care in 12 districts.

Working in close collaboration with the Government of Uganda, we have been implementing national reforms of the child-care system (guided by the Alternative Care Framework), which aim to keep **children with families and out of institutions**. The *DOVCU* project was the first of its kind in Uganda and involved a comprehensive package of interventions at household, community and government levels.

Prevention: Reducing the separation of children from their families

The *DOVCU* project aimed to tackle the social and economic challenges that cause children to be separated from their families. Recognizing that poverty, lack of opportunity, and conflict at home were driving children to the streets or to institutions, the *DOVCU* program designed an

integrated package of economic and social support for households. Families struggling to care for their children were helped through cash transfers, savings groups, and business/vocational training, while para-social workers and community volunteers conducted household visits to provide psychosocial support, promote positive parenting practices, and facilitate access to children's services.

Response: Placing children in families

The program also removed children from care institutions, **remand homes** and from the streets. Following an assessment of their situation, each child was then reintegrated within their own family or placed in family-based care. ChildFund and partners also worked closely with the Government of Uganda to: assess and improve living conditions in child-care institutions; establish a comprehensive case management system; and train social workers, government officers, and community volunteers to support and monitor children's reintegration into family care through Alternative Care Panels and Team Around the Child Committees.

Remand homes, also called detention homes, are institutions where courts may sentence juvenile offenders to temporary detention.

We introduced *DOVCU* in our last Impact Report, and now with the program recently ended we can reflect on some of the learning. Evaluation findings reveal positive outcomes for children and families: ^{viii}

- Over the course of three years **DOVCU has reintegrated 1,743 children into their families.** ^{ix} The majority (84%) were reintegrated from child care institutions, 12% were reintegrated from the streets, and 4% were reintegrated from remand homes.
- Through the program's economic and social interventions, almost a third of families assessed as being at high risk of separation are now in the **medium or low risk category.** ^x
- The program has **improved the way a critical mass of child care institutions provide care for children** by supporting them to develop new policies and standards, and by working toward children's reintegration into families.
- Interventions have contributed to a **change in mind-set** among families, communities, and government actors about the importance of family care. ^{xi}

"This was a learning experience for everyone including ourselves, the families and communities we worked with. The assumption was that children living in institutions were better off... Once we helped parents to appreciate that they had a lot of stability to offer their children even in the poorest homes, attitudes began to change."

-TPO Uganda Representative (ChildFund Partner in DOVCU)

Our experience from *DOVCU* has demonstrated how a combination of economic and social support interventions (preventative support) can effectively reduce families' vulnerability and increase their chances of staying together. At the same time, it has highlighted just how challenging and sensitive the process of children's reintegration can be, and how much time and follow-up support it requires. Given the complexity and scale of family separation in Uganda, we know that:

- If we want to stem the flow of children being placed in institutions in Uganda, **the number of sub-counties that receive preventative household support needs to be increased.**
- Alongside poverty, we need to **continue tackling the family dysfunction** that can drive the institutionalization of children: *DOVCU* revealed the benefits of helping families to access support for mental health issues and alcohol and drug misuse so that they could better care for their children.
- We need to **focus more energy on ensuring successful, long-term reintegration** of children into families. During *DOVCU*, children's experiences of reintegration were sometimes problematic, particularly in areas where families had not benefited from any household interventions and where social/community workers were not mobilized to provide ongoing support.
- We need to further **test which combinations of economic and social interventions offered by *DOVCU* are most effective** at keeping children with families.
- We need to advocate for increased **investment in the national social welfare workforce** to ensure that household visits, case management, and monitoring processes are consistently conducted by professionally trained social workers. Guaranteeing the number of social workers required for such intensive work across the country will be an ongoing challenge.
- We need to explore how **innovative technologies such as ChildLinks**, a mobile phone case management system introduced by *DOVCU*, can be harnessed to support other child protection initiatives in Uganda.

Right now, because of the *DOVCU* initiative, there are hundreds of children across Uganda who are at home with families rather than living in institutions. Moving forward, ChildFund Uganda hopes to build on this learning to continue building a system of care and protection for children across the country.^{xii}

As a follow-on to DOVCU, ChildFund Uganda implemented the *Economic Strengthening to Keep and Reintegrate Children into Families (ESFAM)* project.³ This initiative tested how different types of economic support packages for vulnerable households can prevent family separation and support reintegrating children.

ESFAM supported 700 families – 350 who were at high risk of family separation and 350 with children who had returned home – with four economic support packages: business and financial literacy training, cash transfers, village savings and loan groups and matched savings accounts. The goal was to create and implement a graduation model through decreasing levels of poverty and vulnerability. This was combined with psycho-social support and linkages to social services.

ESFAM's combination of social and economic support to vulnerable households yielded exciting results: at the end of the project, children and youth reporting positive adaptive capacity and resilience increased from 11% to 60%, for example. The Matched Savings Account intervention showed how households were able to meet the expenses required for children's development, with 63% of expenses being used for education. This resulted in increased educational outcomes for children – with children with positive educational outcomes growing from a baseline of 52% to 83%. Finally, the households participating in the Matched Savings Account intervention realized a 34% reduction in social and economic vulnerability scores.



3. Funded by USAID through FHI360