

Support Structures for Families in Crisis: The Africa Experience
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Introduction

The world is in perpetual turmoil, going from one crisis to another. These crises affect human lives, especially the family, the nucleus of every society.

For operational concept definitions like Crises and Family:

Crisis according to Caplan 2011 is a state when people face an obstacle that is for a time insurmountable by the use of customary methods of problem solving. It could be that there has been fire outbreak, flood or wars and items need replacement. Members of the family would suffer severe health or safety issues if help is not provided.

On the other hand, **family** is a group of people affiliated by consanguinity or co-residence/shared consumption. In most societies in Africa, the family is the principal institution for the socialisation of children.

Classification of Crises

1. Developmental or Maturational Crises

This is described as to have a normal stressor and occurs as one move from one stage of human development to another, e.g.

- Getting married
- Expecting first child
- Being good parents to children
- Facing mid-life problems
- Retirement or late stage of life
- Child abuse
- Aging and death

2. Adventitious or Structured Crises

An unexpected crisis that arises suddenly in response to an external event or a conflict concerning a specific circumstance, such events are out of one's control and the individual has no means of forecasting its occurrence, e.g.

- Natural disasters like floods
- Riots and wars
- Earthquakes
- Airplane crashes
- Car accidents
- Oil spillage
- Tsunamis
- Landslides
- Tornadoes and hurricanes

Family Crises

Family crises refer to stress factors experienced by members of a family unit which may include loss of income or death of the bread winner. It is a situation when the family needs to make a change and be able to get back to a functional level once more.

When a family is under crises, it is understandable for family members to become disorganised for a period, there is tension and stress, physical and emotional problems, depression, anxiety, lack of sleep, loss of appetite and disorientation.

Political instability and wars, flooding etc. have rendered many families homeless in some African countries. Children, the aged and women are worse hit especially by the impromptu nature of their departure from their family abodes to open camps after trekking long distances to avoid the bullets of war that kill without guilt.

Many are afflicted by exhaustion which makes the children who cannot understand why they are in such dehumanising condition to cry profusely while the adults wear gloomy faces. They are hungry and unkempt. The memory of seeing their loved ones massacre leaves much to be desired.

In camps, there are no basic infrastructures like toilets, portable water, health facilities and food coupled with the fact that they are living in overcrowded conditions.

The Nigeria story is pathetic, the sustained insurgent attacks in the Northern part of the country is alarming. The insurgents – Boko Haram (Western education is a sin) prefers soft targets that are defenceless and unarmed civilians destroying their towns and villages leaving heavy casualties and a large population of displaced persons. Helpless children are attacked and killed daily in their schools and school girls are abducted and taken to unknown destinations. Families in the south/south and south – east are faced with the problems of oil spillage and loss of farmland which is their source of livelihood; floods that leave many homeless and causes loss of properties. Kidnapping for Ransom leaves families dejected and disoriented; rapist attacks all over the country, the problems are endless.

The Consequences of these Problems are:

- Disruption in socio-economic wellbeing of the people
- Creation of large population of orphans
- Disruption in academic calendar of schools
- Incessant epidemics of cholera and other water borne diseases with high casualties in the camps
- Disruption of farm activities

Crises Intervention and Families Support

Crises intervention involves helping families to overcome crises and it requires a number of Professionals and flexible services.

They may be in the form of:

- Financial assistance
- Provision of transport to a safe environment
- Assistance in locating and moving to an affordable accommodation
- Assessment of children's immediate needs including identifying signs of abuse and neglect
- Enrolment of children in schools
- Active referrals to address acute health care needs including psychiatric health
- Advocacy with centre links and other government agencies to access entitlements
- Provision of adequate security to vulnerable persons.

Extended family support is very strong in Africa. They render immediate support to their relations going through crises. They provide relief materials such as clothing, food, and accommodation where necessary to relations in crises.

- Social support by non-governmental organisations like the United Nations, Humanitarian Development and relief agencies, Red Cross, both local and international.
- Financial and material support from churches and private individuals
- Supports from government which include provision of essential social services, accommodation, portable water, food, drugs and medical personnel.

These supports help to ameliorate their sufferings. It is never enough as the government is always expected to do more.

The response of government to crises in Africa is obviously affected by the budgetary condition of each country and the political will of the government. While some countries are facing relatively stable budgetary conditions at the onset of crises, others are dealing with severe budgetary imbalance. So, some countries are able to implement scheduled family policy changes during crises and even introduce additional temporary measures.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, African countries still have a lot to learn from the Western world to prepare for and deal with the crises situations. These crises leave a lot of people homeless and without farmland to farm which is the source of their daily bread.

Meteorologists should be able to assess climatic conditions and educate governments on how to avert the ill-effect of disasters which bring about family crises e.g. flood and tornados.

Governments should develop the political will to deal with disasters.

Governments should put in place low cost houses for displaced families.

Camps should be secured to prevent further attacks on the displaced families and adequate water supply to the camps to prevent cholera outbreaks.

The rate of corruption is very high in most African countries like other developing countries in the world. Most relief materials are diverted by government officials for their own use leaving the affected families in worse crises.

Governments should ensure that relief materials are under the care of people with integrity.

Thank you.

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