

The need for international standards on archiving the records of unaccompanied children

by Kirk Felsman, Alebel Derib and Stirling Cummings

The case for developing international guidelines on the archiving and management of the records of separated children rests at the intersection of children's rights and theories of child development.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child notes that there should be due regard to the desirability of continuity in a child's upbringing and to the child's ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background. Article 8 focuses on the legal and protection aspects of guaranteeing the child's identity, including "nationality, name and family relations". Such data may help an older child achieve one of the central developmental tasks in the life cycle: establishing a firm sense of 'identity' through knowledge of one's individual and collective history.

In 1998 a project funded by the Andrew W Mellon Foundation and Save the Children Sweden started archiving the original registration records of the so-called 'Lost Boys' of Sudan, a group of some 18,000 refugee children (now young adults) who originated from South Sudan. Hard copies of these records were moved eight times between 1987 and 1996 and were almost destroyed by an agency concerned to free up office storage space.

These documents represent the only written record of their early lives. Individual files contain photographs and an average of eight pages of detailed social history including the child's own descriptions of his experience of displacement. When complete the database will be searchable by multiple indices, including name, nickname, date of birth, age, ethnic background and place of origin. We hope it will yield a model that stimulates discussion and contributes to the development of international stan-

dards and policies on the records of separated children. We anticipate that the project will make personal records available to Sudanese youth who have been or are being resettled in the US, to those who remain in Kakuma Camp in Kenya, as well as to those who have returned to southern Sudan.

When the project was launched field staff with long experience working with Sudanese youth doubted if these refugee minors would really want copies of their records, noting that they already had a strong oral tradition and that many knew their kinship links. However, a series of focus groups with the youth then living in Kakuma Camp in Kenya indicated that they were almost unanimous in their desire to have copies of their personal histories.

"I do not have parents or relatives who could tell me how I behaved or some of the things I said or did when I was a child. But, most of all, I have many questions that I would like to get answers to from my past. To me my records are replacements of the relatives or parents I never came to know very well, or I never had. I would need the information from my childhood to give to my children, as any parent is expected to do."

Registration systems have been developed based upon the short-term need to address the functional purpose of immediate tracing and reunification efforts.

From a child rights and child development perspective, we would argue that agencies involved in tracing and reunification programmes have an ethical obligation to adopt a longer-term view of their documentation, tracing and reunification efforts. We would urge the establishment of guidelines and international standards to deal directly with the need to archive individual social history records of separated children and to provide appropriate access to such confidential records over time.

Kirk Felsman is Senior Research Scholar at the Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University.
Email: felsman@duke.edu.

Alebel Derib works for Save the Children, Sweden and is the author of a recent report on unaccompanied Sudanese children in Pignudo and Kakuma camps (www.rb.se/assets/pdf-filer/program/Pignudo.pdf).
Email: alebel@swedsave-ke.org.

Stirling Cummings' email is SCummings@fhi.org.