



*The names in this story have been changed to protect the identities of the family members.*

Hope for Children goes to great lengths to allow children who have been orphaned to remain with their extended families. HFC understands that in addition to losing their parents, many children are subjected to further trauma when they are placed in orphanages away from any remaining family members. When at all possible children supported by HFC are placed in familiar homes and surrounded by loved ones. At first glance this would seem an ideal situation, but this week I witnessed a terrible example of how children can be neglected even within their own family.

Alem, one of our beneficiaries, is 10 years old and lives with her aunt Genet. Alem's parents both died of HIV/AIDS when she was very young. She and her two siblings were left without guardians and Genet took the responsibility of looking after them in addition to her three children. Genet used to beg on the street, but now receives support from HFC to care for her two nieces and nephew.

A few weeks ago Alem took a fall on her way to school and broke her arm. Genet did not address the injury right away and allowed Alem to suffer for three days before taking her to a doctor. By then the wound, which was protruding through her skin, had become gangrenous. Genet and the doctor immediately decided to amputate Alem's arm without seeking a second opinion or advice from Hope for Children. The incident was not reported to our office until after Alem's arm had been amputated above the elbow.



Since most Hope for Children caregivers are close family or friends, Hope has assumed thus far that these individuals will do everything in their power to look after the children in their care. Alem's terrible situation has been a wakeup call to everyone. In response, the staff arranged for the community committee (a group of older women in the community who have been elected to solve disputes) to conduct a meeting for every caregiver within the organization. In the meeting they stressed the importance of each caregiver's position and the responsibilities that go along with it.

At the end of the meeting Alem's story was told without naming names to protect the family. However, Genet eventually came forward to take responsibility for her mistake. Following her emotional acknowledgment, the community committee consulted the entire group about how to handle the situation. The caregivers unanimously voted to have the three children taken away from their aunt and put into a group home. The committee announced that the children would be picked up on Monday, but several women demanded that they be taken right away. Five minutes later two community committee members and myself followed Genet to Alem's home.

After our arrival we spent several hours in the family's room discussing the situation. My understanding was a bit limited due to the language barrier, but I gathered that once Genet returned to her home she was not eager to give the three children up. After several phone calls back and forth with the office, Genet conceded. Alem was in tears, she was not happy about being taken away from her family. Her older brother and sister were gone and therefore not given any input in the matter. Genet tearfully dressed Alem in her nicest clothes and we returned to the Hope for Children office. The discussion continued involving various staff, concerned community members, and some of our sponsored children. In the end it was decided that the three would temporarily go into an existing group home until the seventh one opens.

Despite the seemingly unanimous support for this decision, I and a few other staff members have great concerns over the way this situation was handled. The committee failed to consult Alem or her siblings and their future was decided by a group of outraged caregivers with little information about the situation at hand. Community perspectives concerning Hope For Children matters are extremely valuable in many circumstances, but in this case I feel that intense emotions overwhelmed the group and caused them to make a rash decision that might have harmful consequences on the children in the future. These are children that have previously lost their parents to HIV and the act of being ripped away from their aunt by the entire community may prove just as traumatic.