

# EMPOWER

2025 Q3 IMPACT EDITION

## Empowering Sustainable Change.



p11

Empowering Families, Strengthening Communities:  
Lessons from The Empowerment Shift

HELPING CHILDREN  
WORLDWIDE

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**HELPING CHILDREN  
WORLDWIDE**



**“We fight the fire,  
not the smoke.”**

Emmanuel “Nabs” Nabieu

# Executive Director's Letter

Our Director of Mission Advance and Partnership Engagement, Emmanuel "Nabs" Nabieu, often says, "We fight the fire, not the smoke." It perfectly captures our approach to the mission of Helping Children Worldwide: we don't just treat symptoms—we go to the source. We equip people to create lasting change for themselves, their families, and their communities.

In this issue, we explore what that really means. Empowerment isn't a buzzword—it's a transformative, generational shift. As Nabs writes in his new book, *The Empowerment Shift*, it's the most effective way to build capacity in those who have been denied opportunity. It's how we move from rescue to resilience, from charity to change. His book describes how.

This kind of work is rarely simple. It requires humility, honesty, and a commitment to learning from both our successes and our shortcomings. Over 25 years, we've seen young people lifted out of poverty—but we've also seen where our early models fell short. That's why we keep evolving.



"FIGHT THE FIRE,  
NOT THE SMOKE"

You'll find powerful stories in these pages—stories that echo ancient truths passed down through proverbs, psalms, parables, and lived experience. As the old saying goes: "Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach him to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime." Empowerment is that teaching—and more. It's trusting people to lead themselves.

This year, we deepened our commitment to that vision through a new alliance with UMC SLAC, shifting leadership and ownership to where it belongs: with the local community. That kind of investment pays dividends for generations.

A few years back, we rebranded our magazine with that word, Empower. We want you to understand why we keep that word in the forefront of our vocabulary as we talk about the mission of Helping Children Worldwide.

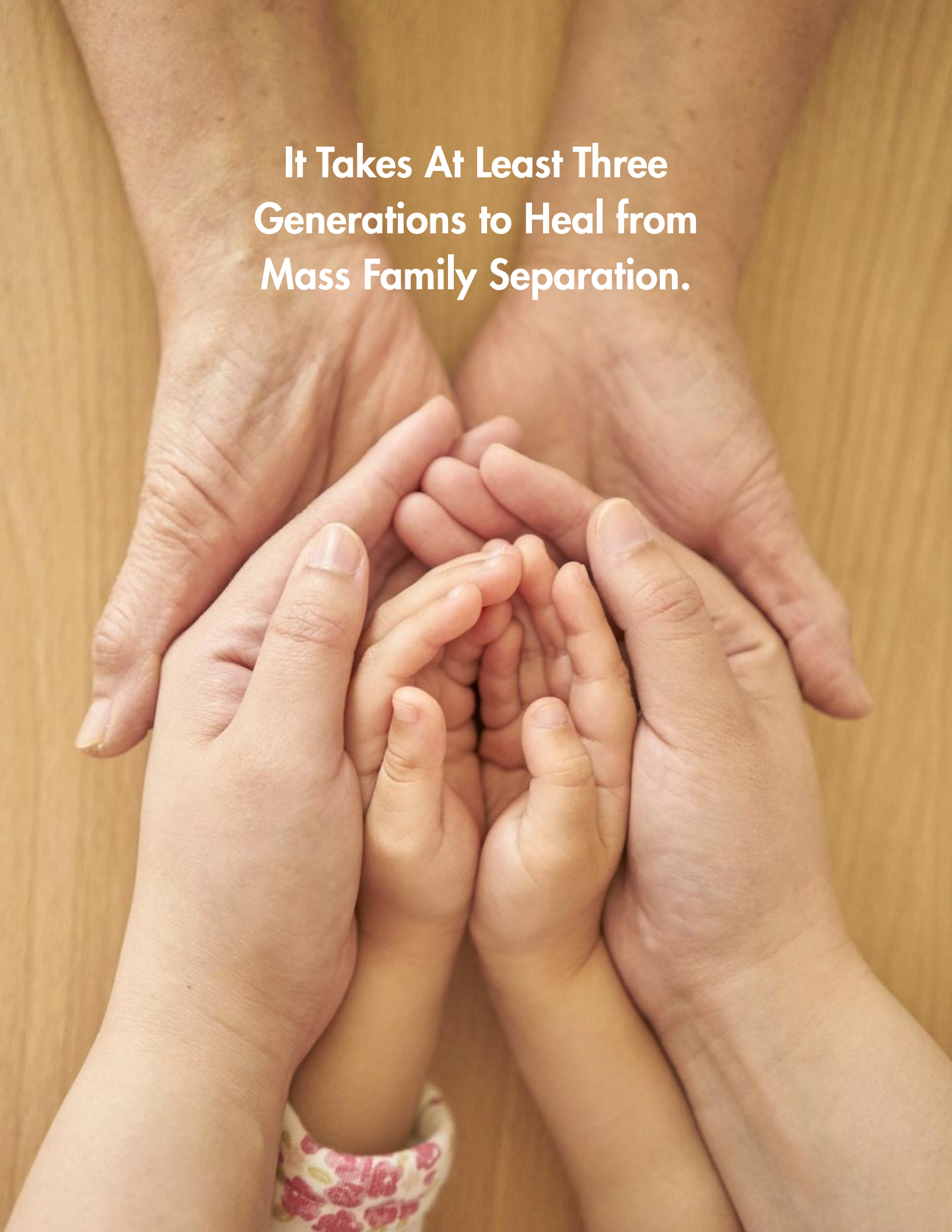
Thank you for reading, for listening, and for walking with us. Every village needs a storyteller at the wellside, passing down generational wisdom. If these stories move you, I invite you to join us in empowering others. The fire is still burning—but together, we can help put it out for good.

With hope,

*Dr. Melody Curtiss, JD*  
**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**



**It Takes At Least Three  
Generations to Heal from  
Mass Family Separation.**



# It takes three generations to heal.

## When Will We Stop Planting the Seeds of Intergenerational Trauma?

We have long believed that family is the best place for a child to grow. "Common sense" derived from lived experiences formed cultural and religious attitudes about the importance of family, and they guided society a long time before we had empirical proof. But now we do.

As expected, research agrees with "common sense" in that the trauma of a child being separated from family is the single most detrimental experience of childhood. The impaired resilience in the child separated from family impacts physical and mental health, intellectual development, executive function, and ability to form healthy relationships. Recent research also shows that the trauma of the experience of separation, when it is not healed in the formative years of that first generation, is often experienced by their children, and if the suffering from the trauma is severe, it can be epigenetically transmitted to future generations. Likewise, recent research has concluded that when a mass separation of children and family has occurred, effecting a significant portion of the population, the impact is not just long, it is wide. The trauma is felt not just within the next generations of that family, but within generations of the evolution of the entire community, impairing societal resilience and well-being.

## Why does it take a community so long to heal from Family Separation?

"There is a great deal of research on the trauma suffered by children in being separated from family, going back a century, and evaluating harms on multiple populations by child and family separation.

Scientific studies did not occur before the science of psychology found credibility in society - and that really only happened in the last century. Recognizing the validity of the evidence of individual harm caused by pulling children away from their parents and close family began with examining the impacts of intentionally harmful and willful acts of government, and then grew to include well-meaning acts of intentional separation, and inadvertent exacerbation of accidental separations. Over time, research identified the nature of the trauma, the impact of the trauma on the person experiencing it, the transmission of the trauma to others who did not directly experience it, and the requirements for healing the trauma. Familial separation is akin to a poison ingested by the human psyche. Like any other poison, without intentional healing interventions, the trauma spreads and the impact of the injury lingers. Unsurprisingly to those of us working here at HCW, it appears that Family Reunification and Empowerment is the antidote.



## **Anna Freud & WWII Evacuations: The Seed of Intergenerational Trauma**

During WWII, Anna Freud (daughter of Sigmund) studied children evacuated from London. She examined the relative mental stability of children experiencing the horrors of war with their families, versus those who were experiencing less war, but more separation, and reported:

**“London children ...  
were on the whole  
much less upset by  
bombing than by  
evacuation to the  
country.”**

In her Observational Nursery studies, Freud found that separation from parents inflicted deeper psychological wounds than bombings. Later studies (by subsequent researchers) of similar evacuees conducted on adults in their old age revealed lifelong impacts—identity disruption, anxiety, and emotional distress—traced to those early separations. These effects were often passed on, not just to children but even grandchildren.

## **Holocaust Survivors: Trauma Echoing into Grandchildren**

Research by Dr. Rachel Yehuda shows Holocaust trauma is passed intergenerationally through both behavior and biology. Children of survivors often exhibit PTSD symptoms and altered stress hormone profiles—despite never experiencing the camps themselves. Some findings suggest these effects persist into the third generation.

## **Children of Enslaved Peoples: Enduring Colonial Wounds**

Dr. Joy DeGruy's work on Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome reveals persistent psychological injuries among African Americans rooted in slavery and systemic racism. These traumas manifest in family dynamics, community structures, and even physical health. The broader Intergenerational Colonial Trauma Syndrome (ICTS) framework connects these patterns to similar legacies in Gaza, Indigenous communities, and more.





## Indigenous Child Separations: The Stolen Generations & Beyond

In Australia, North America, and beyond, the forced removal of Indigenous children has devastated generations. Long-term effects include cultural loss, distrust of institutions, disrupted identity, and higher risks for mental illness and incarceration—still visible among descendants today.

## Global Refugee & Forced Separation Trauma

Studies of refugee families—whether in Gaza, Ukraine, Xinjiang, or the U.S.–Mexico border—show that trauma from family separation lingers across generations. Even when reunified, families report anxiety, depression, and loss of identity among children and grandchildren who were never directly separated.

**“Like ripples from a stone  
cast in water, trauma  
expands outward across  
generations.”**

## Why Healing Takes Three Generations

- First generation (G1): endures direct trauma
- Second generation (G2): inherits behavioral and biological imprints
- Third generation (G3): lives with legacy trauma embedded in systems and narratives

## What Comprehensive Healing Looks Like

- Community-led truth and reconciliation
- Trauma-informed, culturally grounded mental health support
- Legal and policy reforms
- Attachment-focused early childhood programs
- Long-term investment in healing infrastructure

A crucial requirement of healing is the intentional empowerment of families to regain control over their lives and reclaim their narrative. Healing isn't just restoration—it's re-creation. It requires caregivers to model resilience and dignity, pass on affirming language and cultural practices, and—eventually—rewrite inherited trauma responses. In time, empowered families transmit stories not of loss, but of strength, belonging, and hope. Even at the epigenetic level, the story begins to shift.

## Conclusion

Without structural reform, family empowerment, and generational investment, the cycle continues. With intentional care, communities can replace inherited trauma with inherited resilience.

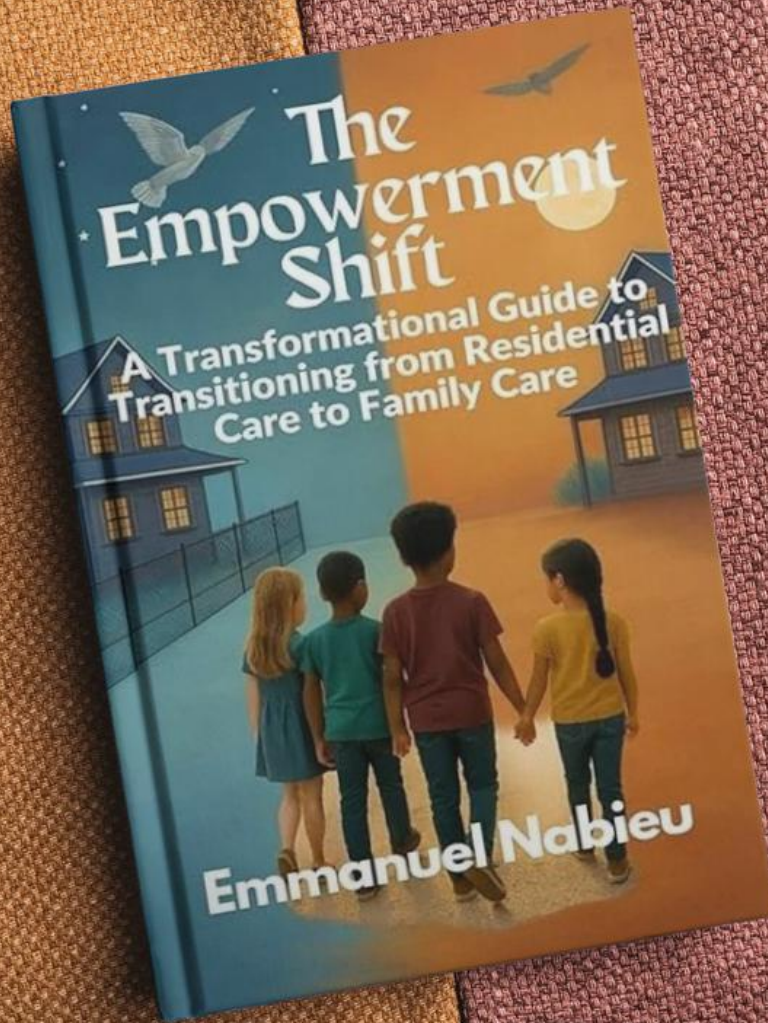
*Dr. Melody Curtiss, JD*  
**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

“Healing from mass family separation and intergenerational trauma takes at least three generations.”



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## Empowering Families, Strengthening Communities: Lessons from The Empowerment Shift

**Empowerment is not giving people what we think they need; it's creating space for them to shape their own future.**

In Emmanuel Nabieu's new book, *The Empowerment Shift: A Transformational Guide to Transitioning from Residential Care to Family Care* (available on Amazon),

he explores why moving from institutional orphanage care to family and community-based care is not just a programmatic change, but a transformational shift in mindset, purpose, and impact. The following excerpt from Chapter 1 (pages 24–28) explains why this shift is so critical—and how it can only succeed through empowerment, collaboration, and locally led leadership.

Transitioning from orphanage care to family and community support is more than a change in operational strategy—it is a profound shift in mindset, purpose, and impact. The Empowerment Shift is about flipping the traditional model of aid upside down. It moves away from dependency—creating handouts toward a sustainable “hand-up” approach that restores dignity, builds resilience, and creates lasting change for families, communities, and the mission itself.

The Empowerment Shift is about putting families back at the center of care, equipping them to nurture, protect, and thrive together. This shift recognizes that:

- Empowering families is the best way to strengthen those in need of support and help them remain intact. Families are not the problem; they are the solution.
- Empowering communities strengthens the social fabric. Communities flourish when families are supported to thrive, creating a ripple effect of stability, hope, and growth.

- Empowering organizations aligns with mission and purpose. Transitioning to caring for children in families restores the dignity of aid work, ensuring it creates independence rather than dependence.

Empowerment restores dignity. When families are given the tools and resources to address their unique challenges, they are no longer passive recipients of aid but active participants in their journey to success. This empowerment shift provides:

- Dignity and Responsibility: Families take ownership of their futures through tailored support plans that align with their needs and strengths.
- Stability and Sustainability: By addressing root causes like poverty and lack of access to resources, families are set on a path to long-term self-reliance.
- Unity and Belonging: Reunifying children with their families heals emotional wounds and strengthens bonds that are vital for a child’s holistic development.



Communities flourish when families are empowered. This transformation isn't limited to individual households—it sparks a collective revival of social and economic health. Through family care:

- Local leaders and organizations are engaged, creating a shared responsibility for child welfare.
- Resources are redirected to strengthen families and empower communities through initiatives such as capacity building, education, healthcare, livelihood support, parenting programs, psychosocial services, and more.

Stigma is replaced by stories of resilience: The stigma around poverty and broken families is replaced with stories of hope and restoration.

This shift represents a profound alignment with the heart of the child welfare mission and ministry to care for children. It recognizes that caring for children means addressing not only their tangible needs—like food, shelter, and education—but also their intangible needs: the love, connection, and belonging that only a family can provide. Children thrive when their physical, emotional, and spiritual needs are met holistically. By transitioning to family care, this shift reflects a commitment to caring for the whole child and nurturing the bonds that give them the foundation to flourish. Families are the first and most enduring source of love and connection for children. When empowered, families can provide the stability and support that children need to grow, heal, and thrive in every aspect of their lives.





This shift is not the end of the mission but the beginning of its expansion. It transforms the approach to caring for children, creating opportunities to touch the lives of many more children, families, and communities. By empowering families and communities, this shift enables organizations and ministries to:

- Reach more children: Family care allows resources to be used more effectively, enabling support for a greater number of children and families in need.
- Strengthen communities: When families are restored, communities are strengthened. This shift builds a network of care and connection that ripples outward, fostering resilience and hope.

Achieve long-term impact: Empowered families are better equipped to break cycles of poverty and vulnerability, creating lasting change for generations.

This shift reflects the deeper calling to not only meet immediate needs but to transform lives in a way that is sustainable and dignified. It is about giving children the love, security, and opportunities they need to thrive—not in isolation but within the embrace of a family and a supportive community. By embracing this empowerment shift, the mission to care for children grows beyond what was previously imagined. It transitions from a dependence model to one of partnership and collaboration, where families are supported to succeed and ministries are strengthened to fulfill their purpose on a greater scale.

This is not just a shift—it is a transformation. It is the beginning of a movement that puts love, dignity, and hope at the center of care. The Empowerment Shift is the gateway to a brighter, more connected, and more empowered future for all.

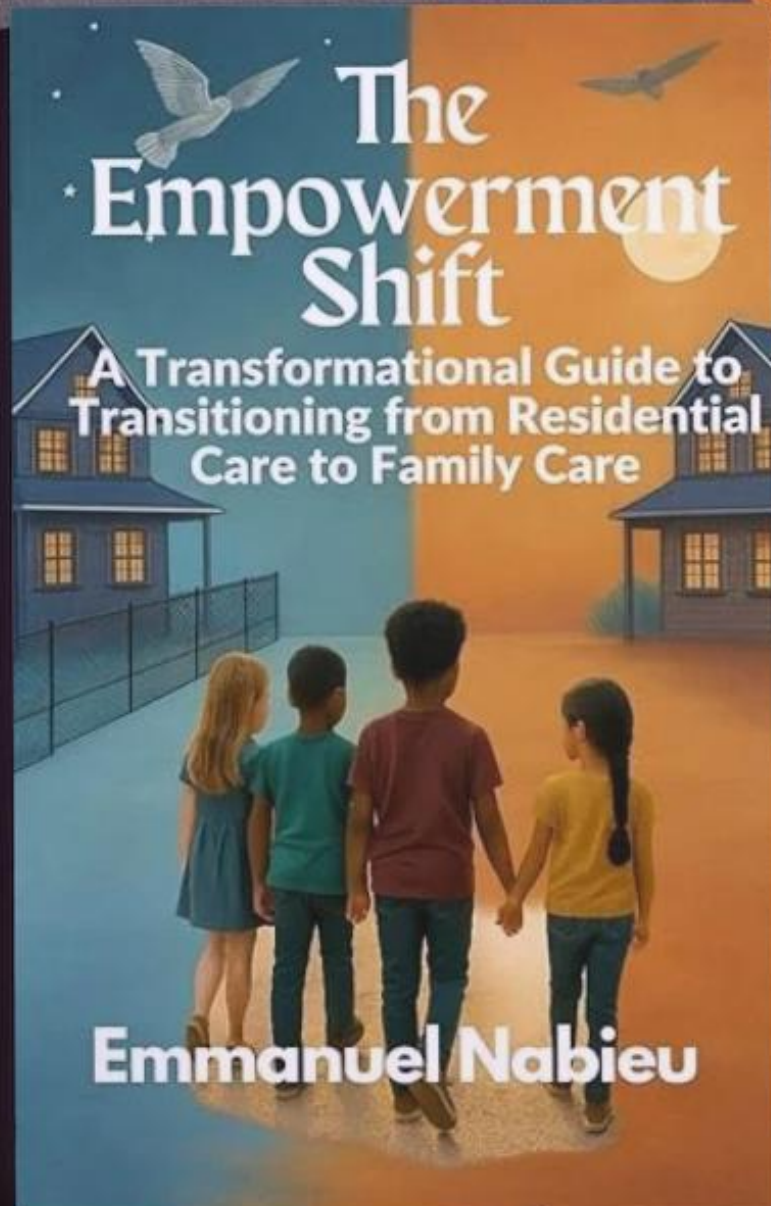


One of the most common questions asked when discussing the transition from orphanage to family care is: who should initiate the shift? Is it the responsibility of the local stakeholders, such as the orphanage director, founder, or board of directors? Or should it come from the international donors and funding organizations, who often provide the financial resources to sustain the orphanage? The answer is both nuanced and simple: while the shift is most effective and sustainable when initiated by local stakeholders, it requires the full support, partnership, and resources of international donors and organizations to succeed. A truly transformational shift to family care is a collaborative process, intentionally designed to empower both local leaders and international partners to work together in a shared mission of advancing child welfare.

Typically, the most impactful shifts to family care are led by local stakeholders. While the initial idea may come from various parties, including partners or donors, it is essential for local leaders to take a leading role. This ensures the initiative is sustainable, as locally driven efforts are better positioned to understand and respond to community needs and long-term goals.

*Emmanuel Nabieu*  
**DIRECTOR FOR MISSION  
ADVANCEMENT & PARTNERSHIP**





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<https://a.co/d/9b4fn5j>



# Empowering Local Leadership & How to Support It

Having spent years in child welfare and protection, and working in communities, I have seen firsthand the life-changing power that happens when local leaders are empowered to guide the future of their own communities. While well-meant external interventions can provide short-term assistance or resources, lasting, meaningful change can only take root through local ownership, and coordination. Here's why empowering local leaders is not just important—it is essential for sustainable progress.

## Local Leaders Know Their Communities Best

Local leaders are in a better position to address a community's weaknesses and strengths than those who do not live and work there. Local leaders are entirely familiar with the cultural norms, historical context, and dynamics that shape everyday life operations. They know the exact needs of their people and can proffer appropriate solutions that might be overlooked by outsiders. When local leaders are at the helm of affairs, interventions and supports are more likely to be relevant, respectful, and effective because they reflect the lived experiences of those involved rather than distant theories or assumptions.

When local leaders take the reins, they adopt the approach to fit local customs and realities, reaching more people and achieving better outcomes. This promotes the belief that local insight is indispensable.



## Empowerment Fosters Ownership and Reduces Dependency

One of the greatest pitfalls of traditional aid and development is the creation of dependency. When solutions are imposed from the outside, communities may come to rely on external resources, expertise, or direction, undermining their own capacity to solve and address issues. Empowerment changes the narrative.

When local leaders have authority, resources, and trust, they become invested in both the process and the outcome. This sense of ownership motivates action, accountability, and innovation.

Communities led by their own members are more likely to sustain progress long after external support ends. Empowering local leaders to tackle challenges with creativity and resilience, often results in approaches that are more cost-effective and culturally appropriate than anything devised elsewhere.

## Collaboration as the Foundation for Real Change

Empowering local leaders does not mean isolating them. The most effective and enduring change happens through collaboration within communities and between communities and outside partners. Local leaders who are uniquely positioned alongside stakeholders, build trust, and facilitate dialogue. Collaboration can bridge divides and help local leaders to navigate conflicts in ways that outsiders cannot.

Through collaboration, diverse voices are heard, and shared solutions emerge. It's in these spaces that brilliant ideas flourish and collective action gains momentum. The process itself strengthens the social fabric and builds the capacity needed to address future challenges.



## The Role of Outside Partners: Support, Don't Control

Outside partners may include NGOs, international donors, agencies or governments—and all have an important role to play, but it is not to dictate or dominate. The most effective support comes from those who listen first, who seek to understand, and who are willing to share power and resources. True partnership means providing resources, knowledge, or connections while respecting local autonomy and leadership.

There are cases where outside partners act as mentors, facilitators, or advocates, helping local leaders access funding, develop skills, or connect with broader networks. This approach honors the dignity and expertise of local actors while ensuring that external contributions are additive, not directive.



## Conclusion: The Path to Sustainable Change

Empowering local leaders is not just a strategy—it is necessary for communities seeking lasting, significant changes. It is about trusting those that live, feel and experience the problems to shape the solutions. It is about building capacity, fostering ownership, and enabling collaboration. And it is about recognizing that real progress comes not from control, but from partnership and respect.

If we want a world where change continues, we must put our faith and our resources in the hands of local leaders. They are the architects of their own futures, and our job is to walk alongside them, not ahead of them.

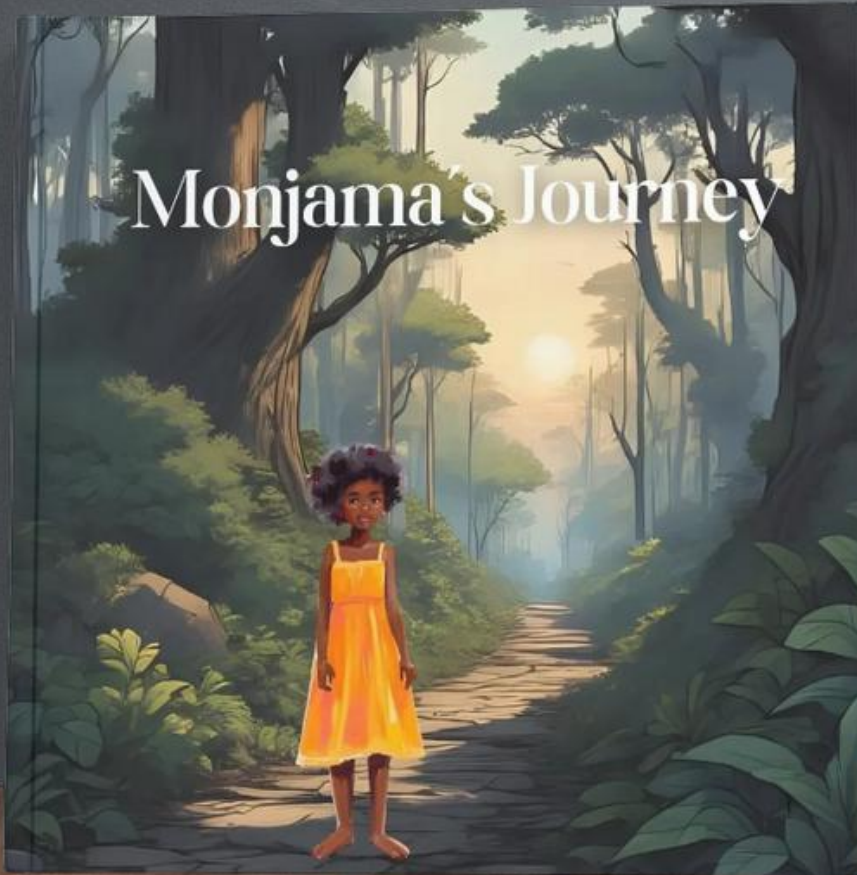
*George Kulanda*  
**CASE MANAGEMENT SUPERVISOR,  
CHILD REINTEGRATION CENTRE**



**“There are cases where outside partners act as mentors, facilitators, or advocates, helping local leaders access funding, develop skills, or connect with broader networks. This approach honors the dignity and expertise of local actors while ensuring that external contributions are additive, not directive.”**

PERFECT FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES:

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Read Mojnama's Journey



Read Twice Orphaned

These read-to-me storybooks are true stories from our Optimistic Voices: *Child's View* podcast series. Download free digital copies of all 6 stories!

"For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen."

Ephesians 3:14-21



# Why HCW is Leaning into Empowerment of Local Leadership

For over 10 years now, HCW has deliberately begun shifting to a focus on community collaboration and empowerment of local leaders in our work to prevent orphanhood. There are many components to this transition, including child welfare, cost effectiveness and sustainable change in the community. The focus of this article will be on the critical role of local leadership to own change initiatives in their communities and the role we now play in supporting and nurturing these local leaders to drive positive change.

As a starting point for anyone in the non-profit arena, we should all acknowledge that it's incredibly easy to disempower local leaders in the name of "doing good"...in our case, it was caring for children who had lost their parents. We wanted so much to care for each child, ensure they were healthy, get them to school, etc. Those are all worthy objectives.

But approaching this work from our perception of one child's immediate needs was short-term in nature and did not take into account the broader landscape that needs to be addressed to promote long-term change. Our stated goal is to help children worldwide and that goes beyond just caring for a single child in need. Although "what does this one single child need" might be a simpler problem to solve, our focus needed to be "how do we create a positive environment for children to grow up in?" If we don't find ways to encourage education, create jobs, address community needs for adequate health care, etc. what lasting change have we accomplished in the long run?

Given HCW's desire to address these longer terms concerns as well as shorter term care of children, we had to do some hard, deep reflection on how we were operating. We found that we were often behaving in ways that were disempowering local leaders.





We realized that we had become in many ways, the “decision-makers”, often directing the actions of local leaders for the good of the children we desired to serve. With this insight, we realized the inherent flaws in this approach.

First, when we disempower local leaders, we assume that “we know best”...We have the answer; we know how to get something done; we know what is best for the children. This of course is presumptuous of us due to the culture differences, distance, resources, skills and knowledge. Additionally, this presumption often lead us to not listen adequately to local leaders and their perspectives. It was easier to tell them what to be done, and since we hold the purse strings, is it any wonder that they would acquiesce to our approach?

Second, when we disempowered local leaders through our actions, we created a dynamic in the local population of “wait and see”. We found that decisions were not being made at the local level until leaders had heard from us...even if they knew the solution needed. This “wait and see” attitude has the affect of slowing everything down. Getting anything done would take longer and cost more when leaders waited for our approval to take action.

Third, when we disempowered local leaders, the surrounding community saw their “wait and see” attitude which had the effect of undermining the trust and credibility of these leaders. People won’t follow leaders that they don’t trust and who lack credibility, which ends up having a negative effect on the community, even when local leaders try to initiate positive changes to improve the community.

At HCW, we have been working on transitioning the way we work with our allies for quite a while now and though it hasn’t been easy, what we have found is that empowering local leaders, involving the entire community in change initiatives, and transitioning our roles to become supporters, nurturers, and consultants (vs. decision makers) brings about change faster and that change is much more likely to stick because there is now ownership at the local level. Change is no longer a “program” that we forced upon them; it is THEIR change efforts that are creating positive change. This results in greater success in both caring for children and helping to create strong, more resilient communities for these children to thrive in. Ultimately, we believe that is the key to addressing even the most pressing problems faced by our allies.



*Rick Auman*  
**CHAIRMAN, HELPING CHILDREN  
WORLDWIDE BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

# Empowering Change: An Inside Look at an MSW Internship with Helping Children Worldwide

As a Master of Social Work (MSW) student seeking a truly transformative internship experience, Helping Children Worldwide (HCW) offers a rare opportunity to blend academic learning with hands-on, globally impactful service. Rooted in values of family preservation, trauma-informed care, and sustainable development, HCW's work stretches across continents—most notably through its partnerships in Sierra Leone—offering interns a front-row seat to the power of international social work.

I was not confined to the background. I am embedded in programs that prioritize the dignity, voice, and well-being of vulnerable children and families. From contributing to the development of reintegration policies for children separated from their families, to assisting with program evaluations that inform future outreach, I am challenged to think critically, act ethically, and serve compassionately.

What sets HCW apart is its unwavering commitment to collaboration over charity. I am thankful to work alongside Sierra Leonean professionals from the Child Reintegration Centre and Mercy Hospital—HCW's longtime local partners—gaining firsthand insight into culturally responsive and community-led care. This collaborative model fosters mutual learning, humility, and respect.

Through this internship I am offered a deeper, more nuanced perspective on global social issues.

Supervision and mentorship are central to Tulane's internship experience. HCW's leadership and staff—both in the U.S. and abroad—support me with regular reflective practice, trauma-informed training, and meaningful feedback that helps bridge classroom theory with real-world application.

Whether supporting family reunification efforts, conducting research to strengthen child welfare practices, or participating in international dialogue around ethical global service, I am an active agent in building a world where children and families are empowered to thrive—not just survive.

I have always felt called to social work not only as a profession but as a purpose. Helping Children Worldwide offers more than an internship—it offers a launchpad for a life of meaningful, justice-driven service.

*LaRacheal Lacy*  
MSW INTERN,  
HELPING CHILDREN WORLDWIDE



“I have always felt called to social work not only as a profession but as a purpose. Helping Children Worldwide offers more than an internship—it offers a launchpad for a life of meaningful, justice-driven service.”



**“If international humanitarian work is to fulfill its promise, we need a shift in donor perception.”**



# Project-Based Funding is Failing Us

## Why Project-Based Funding Is Failing Humanitarian Work.

I am tempted to express more emotional content than would be wise in talking about this topic. It's what my boss, Dana McInturff at the Board of Accountancy in the State of Washington would have called "emotional leakage." It is the visceral reaction that most nonprofit staff feel when donors and funding institutions say they want their dollars to go to something "concrete." It is particularly difficult to respond with just facts when the donor questions how much was spent on staff who did the work versus countable "stuff" the staff used in their work, as if paying the staff was an extravagance or misuse of the funds. This happens at the local program level and at the INGO level, and as the Executive Director of an INGO, I can tell you that we are guilty of promoting that same misguided rubric every time we are called upon to generate a donor recruitment message - "what will my \$50/\$500/\$5000 investment do?" - and we are reluctant to say it pays a small portion of somebody's salary. Instead we say it "feeds a child for a day" or "pays for a village to have a well for clean water." And while that is often the case, it is far more likely that what is needed is to pay a staff salary needed to manage the money and the well-digging project that is necessary before the village could have clean water.

I can say it plainly. Project funding models are easy to sell to donors, but they weaken our ability to create lasting change. When most people give to international humanitarian nonprofits, they want to see results they can measure and celebrate: a school built, a well dug, a shipment of medicine delivered. These time-bound projects with concrete outputs are easier to fundraise for, easier to photograph, and easier to explain.

But there's a hidden cost to this approach—one that directly undermines the long-term sustainability of local communities and the capacity of international NGOs (INGOs) to do the work that truly lasts.

## The Hidden Gap: Capacity Building vs. Project Outputs

Real change doesn't come from a single project. It comes from local leaders becoming creative problem-solvers, local communities taking ownership of their futures, and local organizations gaining the skills and authority to design and lead their own initiatives. Raising local staff capacity to reach this level is the kind of slow, labor-intensive work that rarely fits neatly into a donor's one-year project cycle.

When donors focus their giving only on specific projects, INGOs are left scrambling to deliver "outputs" while sidelining the essential but less visible work of capacity building. As a result, communities remain dependent on external help instead of developing the systems and leadership needed to stand on their own.





## The Work Behind the Scenes That Donors Rarely See

Even among donors who value “locally led initiatives,” support is often limited to funding the project itself. What’s missing is support for the staff who make local leadership possible. Behind every successful, community-driven initiative is a team of skilled professionals at INGOs:

- Designing and writing curricula to train trainers.
- Working jointly with local partners to identify and adapt best practices.
- Developing communication tools and culturally appropriate procedures.
- Spending hours—sometimes days—in sensitive, careful dialogue with local staff to understand needs and gaps.
- Co-creating monitoring materials and evaluation tools that communities themselves can use.

This is not quick or easy work. It requires years of education, training, cross-cultural experience, and professional expertise. It also requires highly creative, curious, patient, and intelligent people—individuals who could easily earn more in the for-profit sector but choose this work out of dedication to justice and human dignity.

## Funding Local Staff Salaries Is Funding Sustainability

When donors provide resources that allow local organizations to hire, train, and retain their own staff, they are directly investing in the self-sufficiency of communities. Local staff members are the ones who remain after international teams leave. They understand the culture, the language, and the history of their communities. Funding their salaries is not an “extra”—it is the single most reliable way to ensure that capacity and leadership stay rooted where they are needed most.

## Why INGO Program Staff Salaries Also Matter

At the same time, international program staff play a vital role in helping local organizations build the skills, systems, and strategies to thrive. They are the facilitators, trainers, curriculum designers, researchers, evaluators, and relationship builders who make collaboration effective. Without stable funding for these roles, INGOs cannot provide the mentorship and technical support that helps local leaders translate vision into practice. Funding staff salaries at INGOs is not overhead—it is the very engine of capacity building.

## The Myth of Overhead and the Cost of Disfavor

Unfortunately, a long time ago the definition of charitable activities got tangled up with charitable purpose, and anything a nonprofit does to operate is treated as extraneous activity. The donor has been conditioned to disfavor funding for all nonprofit employee salaries, but particularly for staff who manage the organization's ability to function. This restriction on using donations to pay for so-called “overhead” such as financial, accounting, fundraising, and administrative oversight staff cripples INGOs. It's also a tiny bit of an Alice in Wonderland dilemma.

Every donor expects rigorous oversight, flawless reporting, and responsible management of funds, yet they often characterize those things as outside of the nonprofit mission purpose and even more often will decline to provide funding to pay for the professionals who provide it. Without adequate investment in accountants, compliance officers, operations managers, and administrators, INGOs struggle to meet basic expectations—let alone develop the kind of forward-thinking strategies needed to address global challenges like eradicating disease, dismantling poverty, ending illiteracy, and confronting injustice and violence.

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## Political Expediency and Government Apathy Increased the Burden on INGOs

The situation is worsened by the fact that governments and government aid agencies, particularly in Europe, North America, and other developed regions, have increasingly pulled back from funding aid to communities in need, both at home and in foreign lands. When governments fail to invest in these essentials, nonprofits are left carrying the weight. Case in point - the closure of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) ended a great deal of direct funding, and all of the capacity building work being done by the USAID professionals employed by the agency. That work supported capacity in local programs, and energized NGOs and INGOs who were collaborating on multi-year cross-organizational initiatives. This makes the work of small, medium and large INGO staff more crucial than ever—they are left to bridge the gaps and equip local organizations, and they are providing the expertise and continuity that governments and agencies have neglected to fund.

## Why Disfavor for Funding Salaries Matters More Than Donors Realize

And here is the uncomfortable truth: without funding for staff salaries, none of this happens. Donors love to fund a clinic. They are less enthusiastic about funding the staff who train local midwives, design safe medical protocols, or monitor the clinic's effectiveness over time. Yet it is precisely these people who ensure that projects succeed and communities thrive long after the donor dollars are spent.

Every donor expects INGOs to provide monitoring, evaluation, oversight, and reporting—to shepherd donor dollars with more precision than many for-profit investment managers. But these tasks are almost never funded directly. Instead, nonprofits are forced to cobble together restricted grants, stretch thin resources, or divert time away from true capacity building just to keep up with compliance.

## The Way Forward

If international humanitarian work is to fulfill its promise, we need a shift in donor perception.

Donors must begin to see that:

- Funding salaries is funding sustainability. Skilled staff are the backbone of locally led progress.
- Capacity building is a deliverable. It may not be as photogenic as a ribbon-cutting, but it produces enduring results.
- Monitoring and evaluation are not overhead. They are safeguards that ensure impact and accountability.

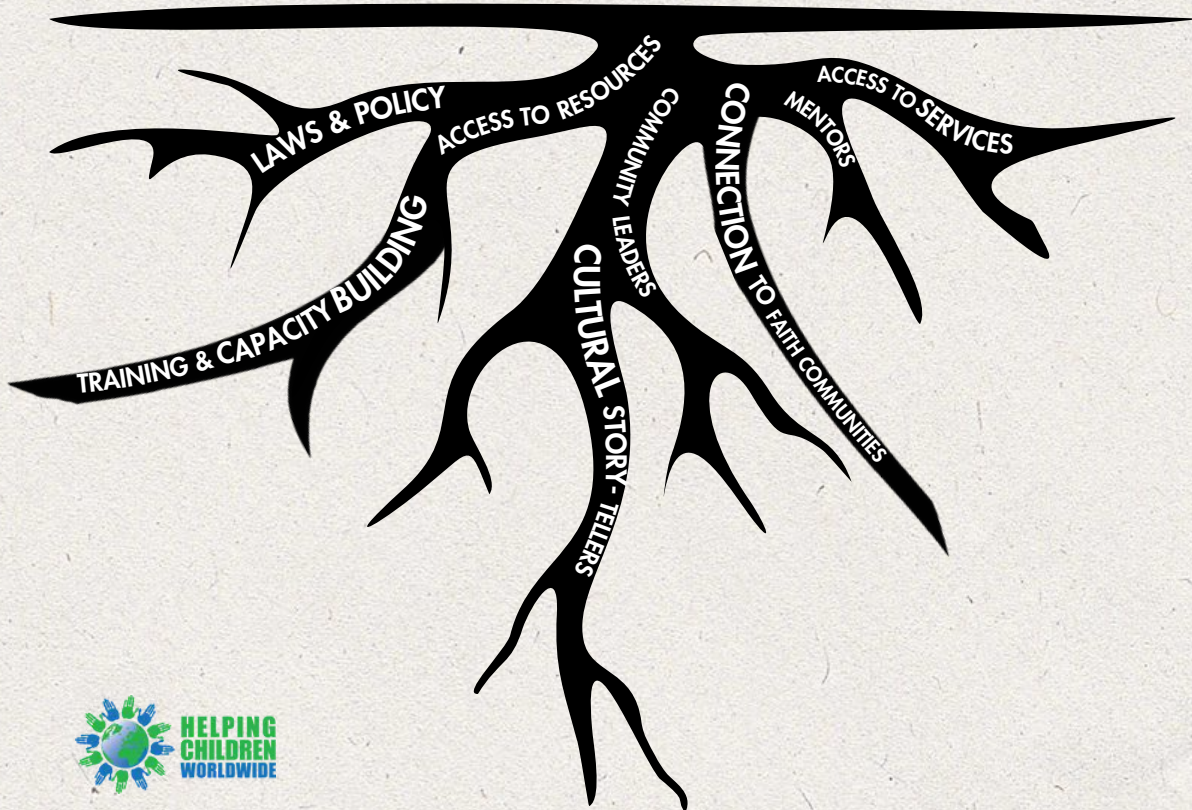
In short: the projects donors love to fund only succeed because of the sustained, behind-the-scenes labor that few are willing to support. If we want communities around the world to flourish with dignity and independence, then donors must invest not just in projects, but in the people and processes that make long-term change possible.

*Dr. Melody Curtiss, JD*  
**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**





*THE ROOTS OF*  
**FAMILY EMPOWERMENT**



# Why I Believe Empowering Local Leaders Is Critical for Long-Term, Sustainable Change

When I think back over the past decade of my work in Sierra Leone's care reform movement, one thing has become increasingly clear: true, sustainable change is not delivered from the outside in, it grows from the inside out. And at the center of that growth are local leaders, men and women who understand their communities, feel the weight of their people's challenges, and carry a vision for transformation.

I've spent much of my professional life walking alongside children and families through the Child Reintegration Centre (CRC ) in Bo, Sierra Leone. When I began this journey, I was part of team shifting from institutional care to family-based care, a major transition not only for our organization, but for our mindset, our systems, and our partnerships.

That transformation was not easy. It took more than just funding or training. It took trust, trust in local leadership.



## Why local leaders are better equipped to respond to the needs of their communities

As local leaders, we know our communities deeply, not just in theory, but in lived experience. We understand the indirect cultural dynamics, the importance of engaging elders and chiefs, and the power of community consensus. We speak the language, not just Krio or Mende, but the language of relationship and shared history.

I remember a case vividly; a small orphanage in Kenema, Grace Foundation (a client of the CRC's Transition Coaching and Mentoring (TCM) Department), who had lost access to their building through the owner. The children were at risk of being displaced with nowhere to go. There were no quick international solutions. But because we, as a local team, were already embedded in the community, we moved fast. We worked directly with the program manager, Mr. Moinina. Together, we mobilized church families to temporarily host the children and began a reintegration process grounded in care, dignity and local connection.

'That crisis didn't require a foreign response, it needed a trusted local response. And that's what we gave.

## The Hidden Gap: Capacity Building vs. Project Outputs

Real change doesn't come from a single project. It comes from local leaders becoming creative problem-solvers, local communities taking ownership of their futures, and local organizations gaining the skills and authority to design and lead their own initiatives. Raising local staff capacity to reach this level is the kind of slow, labor-intensive work that rarely fits neatly into a donor's one-year project cycle.

When donors focus their giving only on specific projects, INGOs are left scrambling to deliver "outputs" while sidelining the essential but less visible work of capacity building. As a result, communities remain dependent on external help instead of developing the systems and leadership needed to stand on their own.

## How empowerment builds ownership and avoids long-term dependency

One of the most powerful things I've seen in my years at CRC is what happens when local people are not just invited to the table, but given space to lead.



When you empower someone to be part of the solution, they begin to take ownership.

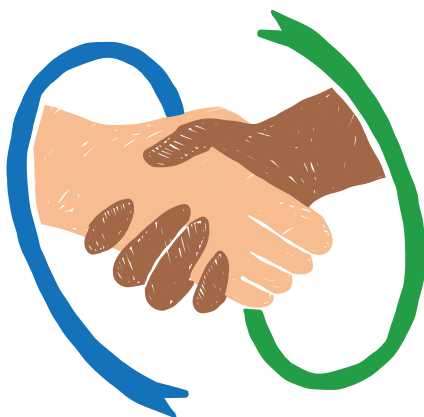
Through CRC and our collaborations, we've trained social workers, community leaders and caregivers on family reintegration, case management, and child protection. After these trainings, many communities formed their own child welfare committees, meeting regularly, identifying vulnerable families, and taking proactive steps to keep children safe and united with their families.

They weren't waiting for another workshop or donation. They took the tools and ran with them. That's the kind of leadership that lasts.

## What outside partners can do to support (but not contro) local leadership

I've also learned that the quality of international partnerships can make or break a movement. Fortunately, in my experience with Helping Children Worldwide (HCW) - our allies, and other global partners, I've seen what good partnership looks like.

They didn't come in with all the answers. They listened. They learned. They invested, not just in programs, but in people. They helped us train and equip our team, supported us during tough reintegration cases, and allowed us to shape the vision for our work. Their question was always, "How can we support you?" not "Here's how to do it."



## The role of community collaboration in creating real, lasting change

When we reunited a child with a family, it's not just a process, it's a story of restoration. But we don't do it alone. We involved the village chief, the school teacher, the local pastor, the neighbor who keeps an eye out. These aren't just service providers. They are protectors, connectors and champions.

Sustainable change happens when everyone has a role to play. When a community feels that a child belongs to them, they stand up for that child.

This is why empowering local leadership is not just a development strategy, it's a commitment to dignity. It's saying, "You are enough. You are capable. You are the answer."

Conclusion: Change that lasts starts here.

Sierra Leone, like many nations, faces enormous challenges. But what gives me hope is the incredible strength and resilience I see in our local leaders every day, those in villages and cities, in schools and churches, in homes and offices. These leaders aren't waiting to be rescued. They're ready to lead.

Our job as practitioners, as partners, as allies, is to walk alongside them. To provide tools, training, and trust. To invest in their growth and believe in their potential.

Because when local leaders rise, entire communities rise with them. And that is how real, lasting, and sustainable change is born.

*David Titus Musa*  
**SENIOR CONSULTANT,  
TRANSITION COACHING AND  
MENTORING DEPARTMENT  
CHILD REINTEGRATION CENTRE**



**“I felt very called to take this opportunity because missions has always been my favorite part of church.”**



# Youth Co-Host Spotlight: Elana Childress of Optimistic Voice's, A Child's View

My name is Elana Childress and I'm 16 years old. I'm a junior at Churchland High School, in Portsmouth, VA. I first got connected with HCW through another youth leader in our area, Kym Pool. She notified me about an opening for a youth cost host on the podcast, *Optimistic Voices: A Child's View*. I felt very called to take this opportunity because missions has always been my favorite part of church. I believe if you have the chance to make an impact, you answer that call from God, and see it through.

A Child's View is about hearing real life stories of hope, connection, and compassion. This podcast is different from others because every episode is unique from the one before. We are always telling a new story, and having the opportunity to share.

When I think about my first recording, I think about how excited I was to embark on this journey. I even think about the stutter I had saying my very first line. But most importantly, I think about the chance to connect with people that have been helped by the amazing work of the Child Reintegration Center and Helping Children worldwide.

**"I felt very called to take this opportunity because missions has always been my favorite part of church."**

**Favorite place to record:** My Moms office or my room.

**Pre-recording snack or ritual:** Saying the Guest's name 20 times so I don't mispronounce it. Coffee and plain potato chips.

**A podcast you love:** New Heights with Jason and Travis Kelce





**“I also hope our listeners grow in their compassion for people who might be different from them, because we are all God’s Children.”**

I absolutely love volunteering, and that love stretches across my multiple hobbies. My mother and I often volunteer at our local food bank, and my competitive dance team hosts an annual benefit show, “Be The Change.”

My hope for the show next year is that we reach every country with our stories. I want as many people as possible to hear how God can move mountains, even in the darkest times. I would tell another one of my peers to start small. Look for local opportunities to make a difference, especially in your church. Participate in community events, take the lead in service projects, or even start a church club at your school!

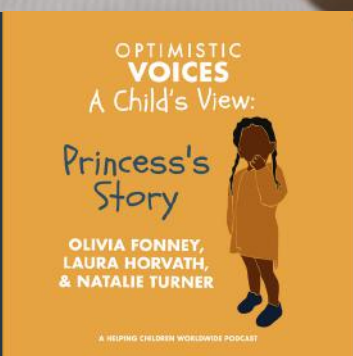
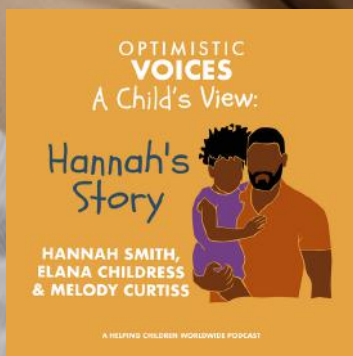
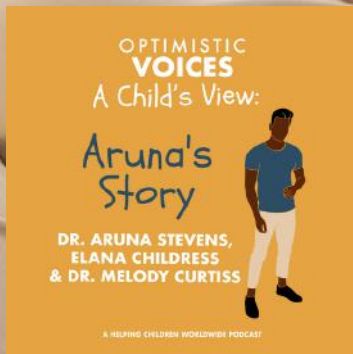
I hope listeners feel hopeful that no matter how dark you think your life may be, there is always someone who is willing to help. I also hope our listeners grow in their compassion for people who might be different from them, because we are all God’s children.

In the future, I hope to earn my undergraduate degree in Nursing, and then earn my midwifery degree. Co-hosting this podcast connects to my future, because it is teaching me how my small actions can make an impact across the world. Sharing a youths perspective on the issues in “A Child’s View” matters because we are the future. We need other youth to understand the importance of our mission, and raise a new generation to continue it.



# OPTIMISTIC VOICES

A HELPING CHILDREN WORLDWIDE PODCAST



Have you listened to our newest podcast series **Optimistic Voices: A Child's View** yet?

Hear real stories of perils and mission impact through a child's eyes, with commentary from a young person. Stories guaranteed to change your perspective!



# Connecting with Mission

Helping Children Worldwide (HCW) is committed to strengthening families and communities, recognizing that a strong family is the foundation for a child to not only live but thrive. When you strengthen families, communities and nations are likewise strengthened, and the need for orphanages disappears. By addressing the root causes of vulnerability, we aim to build resilient communities where children can thrive. We empower local social workers, child protection and child welfare specialists and support their work, collaborating to strengthen national child welfare systems and ensure that every child is able to find permanency in a family. We believe that by investing in sustainable community-led solutions, we can create lasting change and break the cycle of poverty and despair.

Sierra Leone's current child protection landscape underscores an urgent need for stronger, family-oriented solutions. Despite recent legal reforms—such as the 2024 ban on child marriage and growing advocacy against Female Genital Mutilation, and the passing of the Child's Rights Act which enshrines (among many things) a child's right to family —poverty remains pervasive, with nearly 60% of the population living below the national poverty line and staggering levels of malnutrition among children. Around 27% of the 2.7 million children are considered vulnerable and often lack a primary caregiver, while formal protection systems like police units and Child Welfare Committees remain under-resourced and limited in scope and reach. Many children face abuse, trafficking, child labor, early marriage, or placement into orphanages, frequently driven by economic desperation and weak social structures. In this context, institutional or crisis models like orphanages fall short—they can't heal deep family separation, attachment disorders, or social stigma. Instead, the expansion of family-strengthening programs with social support, positive parenting training, and community-based case management is essential to keep children safe, supported, and thriving right where they belong: within loving families and resilient communities.

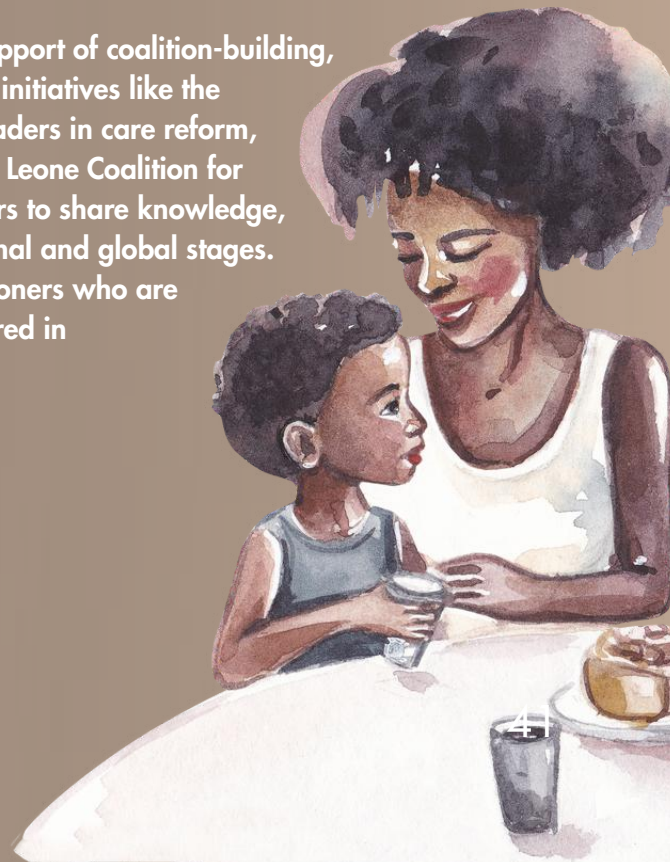




Helping Children Worldwide's approach to child welfare is grounded in the belief that sustainable change must be locally led and contextually relevant. Rather than importing external solutions, HCW invests in building the capacity of local leaders—like those at the Child Reintegration Centre—to design, implement, and adapt strategies that reflect the realities of their communities. This includes technical support for developing case management systems, linking our allies to training in trauma-informed care, and providing ongoing mentorship in strategic planning, monitoring, and evaluation. By equipping local partners with the skills, tools, and confidence to lead their own reform efforts, HCW helps ensure that solutions are not only effective but also culturally appropriate and sustainable over time.

This capacity-building model also extends to HCW's support of coalition-building, peer learning, and cross-sector collaboration. Through initiatives like the Rising Tides Conference and its connection to global leaders in care reform, and HCW's involvement as the secretariat to the Sierra Leone Coalition for Family Care, HCW fosters opportunities for local leaders to share knowledge, shape policy, and amplify best practices on both national and global stages. The result is a growing network of empowered practitioners who are transforming child welfare from the inside out—anchored in local expertise, strengthened by global collaboration, and focused on ensuring that every child has the opportunity to grow up in a safe, loving family.

Please support our work:  
[www.helpingchildrenworldwide.org](http://www.helpingchildrenworldwide.org)



# Strong Family

Sunday  
9th Nov 2025

SAVE THE DATE



## Strong Family Sunday Nov 9<sup>th</sup> 2025

**The United Methodist Church's Strong Family for Every Child campaign provides free resources to help churches:**

**Educate** congregations to advocate for family care models for all children

**Mobilize** advocacy & fundraising for family-strengthening programs

**Support** missions that return and/or keep children in loving families

**Strengthen** communities by helping families in crisis



# Strong Families

Sunday  
Toolkit 2025

A Strong Family for Every Child!

Download it here:



# A final word to readers.

In this edition, Helping Children Worldwide shares the social science behind our plan to turbocharge empowerment efforts in order to tackle the root causes of childhood vulnerabilities. We hope you'll walk away understanding why we operate through local allies to strengthen communities, organizations, and individuals, and how we evaluate program effectiveness through the lens of empowerment. We believe this tag-team approach is the secret sauce to transforming the lives of children facing extreme poverty, life-threatening conditions, and dangerous situations. Empowerment isn't a development phase we're going through, it's the approach that best preserves human dignity and guarantees ongoing commitment to the pursuit of lasting progress.

By evaluating our allies' intentions and ability to adhere to HCW's meticulously crafted mission anchors, we ensure donors can invest with confidence in our rock solid integrity and trust their investments have the best chance to spark lasting change. By holding ourselves to high empowerment standards, we guarantee our global alliances boost community-driven initiatives and experts who really "get" the challenges and can sustain the progress we've made. Together, we keep each other in check to uphold ethical practices, champion local initiatives and adopt orphan prevention strategies.

The next and final edition of our 2025 Empower online magazine will spotlight partnerships, collaborations, and networks that can supercharge impact. It'll be chock full of great stories you'll want to share.

Other great stories and announcements - [helpingchildrenworldwide.org/latestnews](https://helpingchildrenworldwide.org/latestnews)

Get in touch:

[support@helpingchildrenworldwide.org](mailto:support@helpingchildrenworldwide.org)



Don't forget to follow us:

