

BRIGHTER FUTURE | Red tape broken as ministry makes it easier to apply for documents

Orphans win battle for identity papers

New regulation a big relief for children whose parents died without acquiring papers for them as they risked missing out on national exams and inheritance

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I made endless trips to the government offices after selling my cow and chickens to raise bus fare. I was taken from office to office, but no one seemed to be able to help"

Josephine Mbula Oyuga, a grandmother of 15 orphans

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In normal circumstances in Kenya, it would take a long time for Victor Odongo, 15, to acquire a birth certificate and open the doors to access other vital documents such as a national identity card.

Like many orphans, Odongo does not have his parents' identity cards because when they died, he was too young to secure them or even know who his parents were.

Without a birth certificate, it meant that acquiring other documents like an identity card were stillborn from the outset.

Sometime last year, Odongo risked failing to sit for his Standard Eight examinations because a birth certificate is now mandatory before a candidate can enrol in school or write the national examinations.

But today, Odongo and his 14 relatives, all orphans, can breathe a huge sigh of relief as the future looks brighter, thanks to a government initiative and three organisations to help orphans and vulnerable children access these vital documents.

In the new scheme of things, a headteacher will only need to write a letter to the relevant authorities indicating the date of birth declared during admission.

An assistant chief can also write the letter if the parents are dead and no documents are available.

The new regulations were introduced a few months ago by the Immigration ministry after a hue and cry from organisations dealing with vulnerable children when it became mandatory to produce a birth certificate in order to sit national examinations.

The new rules will also come as a big relief for children's homes, who were caught in the same predicament when their proteges attained 18 years, but could not acquire identity cards.

Such homes can now write a letter to government officers and indicate the history and date of birth after an



Ms Josephine Oyuga, and her 15 orphaned grandchildren have every reason to smile after they were issued with birth certificates following intervention by the government and three NGOs in Western Province.

age assessment test.

"Orphans often found it extremely difficult to get an education or employment after reaching 18. The process of obtaining these documents was just too hectic and only a lucky few eventually got them," says Dorothy Onyango, the founder of Women Fighting Aids in Kenya (Wofak).

Without these crucial documents, orphans often lost their inheritance to greedy relatives and even third parties.

"Orphans and abandoned children could not benefit from any property left by their parents as most did not have documents to prove who they were," says Pascaline Kang'ethe, ActionAid Kenya's national coordinator for HIV/Aids programmes.

Statistics show that there are more than 3 million orphans in Kenya.

Data provided by ActionAid Kenya shows that between 2004 and 2006, the number of orphans and vulnerable children rose from 1.8 million to 2.4 million, 48 per cent of these a result of HIV/Aids deaths.

"It is a bureaucratic chain that has been broken and we hope the move

will benefit those at the grassroots quickly," says Sister Mary Owen, executive director of Nyumbani Children's Home.

The home has more than 110 resident orphans and another 3,000 living with extended families across the country.

"Tracing relatives of abandoned children to get their names or at least one of the parents is very difficult," Sister Owen says.

At Nyumbani, Sister Owen says, they work with a medical doctor who carries out the age assessment tests.

In the latest 12 cases the home presented to the government, three have been issued with the documents while the others are at an advanced stage.

"We are now happy because it is so much easier to apply for these documents," Sister Owen says.

The Kenya Ethical and Legal Issues Network (Kelin) collaborated with Wofak and ActionAid Kenya to conduct the national forum that prevailed on the government to introduce the regulations.

Kelin's national coordinator, Mr Allan Maleche, says 10,000 orphans are set to get birth certificates in its phase one of the scheme, with Action Aid Kenya anticipating 2,000 such documents to be issued in Siaya and Busia counties this year.

"Our task has been to educate provincial administrators and teachers about the revised regulations. The responses have been slow, but positive," says Mr Maleche.

He says the focus is now on the Western and Nyanza regions where the number of orphans has been rising sharply.

An outstanding case is that of Ms Josephine Mbula Oyuga, a grandmother of 15 orphans from Lugulu Location, Bumala District.

"I made endless trips to the government offices after selling my cow and chickens to raise the bus fare. I was taken from office to office, but no one seemed to be able to help me," she says.

Ms Mbula lost four sons and six daughters-in-law to HIV/Aids in a

3 million

The number of orphaned children in Kenya.

15

The number of orphaned grandchildren that a woman is taking care of.

Sh150

The fee charged by the Immigration department to process a birth certificate.

period of three years and was left to care for 15 grandchildren aged three to 17 years.

None of the children was registered at the time of their parents' deaths. To worsen matters, she also did not own an identity card.

"I did not have my children's documents so I was challenged to prove the relationship between me and the orphans," Ms Mbula told *Saturday Nation* at her home.

It took the intervention of the three organisations for all the orphans to be issued with birth certificates and an identity card for herself.

Contacted, the Immigration ministry confirmed that the initiative was progressing smoothly.

"We are trying to ease the acquisition of all documents within our mandate. We, however, charge a small fee of Sh150 for an orphan's birth certificate," said the ministry's public relations officer, Mr Elias Njeru.

Mr Maleche of Kelin said the organisation is planning to set up a fund to help the orphans pay the fee.

"It may sound a trifling amount but it is a lot of money for orphans in rural areas," Mr Maleche says.

DIRECTIVE STARTED STAMPEDE

Rush for documents causes long queues at Immigration offices

If there is a government office that has received the highest number of visitors this year, it must be the Department of Civil Registration.

A month ago, Ministry of Immigration and Registrar of Persons officials were handling about 600 people seeking birth certificates in a day in Nairobi.

Though unquantified yet, this has translated into a huge revenue spinner for the exchequer with fees ranging between Sh50

and Sh150.

The upsurge in demand came after a directive that no pupil could join Standard One or sit examinations without the document.

About 800,000 pupils are expected to sit Standard Eight examinations while about 300,000 will sit for Form Four exams.

Headteachers and parents have had a tough time acquiring these documents with allegations of bribes flying from all corners of

the country.

The matter has found itself on the floor of the House, with MPs seeking to find a way to ease the issuance of such documents.

The Education ministry introduced the new regulations to curb cheating and impersonation during examinations, according to Education Minister Sam Ongeri.

The deadline has been extended at least once and parents were given up to June 30 this year.



Immigration Minister Otieno Kajwang