Orphans win battle for identity papers

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

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

Josephine Mbula Oyuga, a grandparent of 15 orphans

In normal circumstances in Kenya, it would take a long time for Victor Odundo to acquire a birth certificate and open the doors to access other vital documents such as a national identity card. Like many orphans, Odundo 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 a national identity card were stillborn from the onset.

Somehow last year, Odundo managed to secure his Standard Eight examinations because a birth certificate is now mandatory before a candidate can enroll in school or write the national examinations. But today, Odundo and his 14 relatives, all orphans, can breathe a sigh of relief as the future looks brighter, thanks to a government initiative and three organizations to help orphans and vulnerable children across 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 deceased and no documents are available.

The new regulations were introduced a few months ago by the Immigration Ministry after a hue and cry from organizations dealing with vulnerable children when it became mandatory to produce a birth certificate to register for all national examinations.

The new rules will come as a big relief for children's homes, which were caught off guard by the new regulations.

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

Statistics show that there are more than 1 million orphans in Kenya.

Data provided by ActionAid Kenya shows that between 2006 and 2007, the number of orphans and vulnerable children rose from 5.5 million to 7.4 million, 48 per cent of these results from the government.

"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 shares or at least one of the parents is very difficult," Sister Mary Owen says.

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

In the last 15 cases the home presented to the government, these 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 Mary Owen says.

The Kenya Ethical and Legal Issues Network (KeLIN) collaborated with World and ActionAid Kenya to conduct the national forum that presented the case to government to introduce the regulations.

KeLIN's national coordinator, Mr Allan Malecho, says 10,000 orphans are set to get birth certificates in its phase one of the scheme, with ActionAid Kenya anticipating 2,000 such documents to be issued in Nyala and Busia counties.

"Our task has been to educate various stakeholders and teachers about the revised regulations. The responses have been slow but positive," says Mr Malecho.

Standard Eight examination candidates are expected to write 10 examinations next year.

The Ministry of Education has been under pressure to rethink the exam schedule.

"We are trying to ease the acquisition of all documents within our mandate. We, however, have received a total of 35,000 birth certificates," said the ministry's public relations officer Mr Elias Ngeko.

Mr Malecho of KeLIN said the organization is planning to set up a fund to help the orphans pay the fee.

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

3 million

The number of orphaned children in Kenya.

15

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

Sh150

The fee charged by the Immigration department to process birth certificates.

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