



DEALING WITH A NEGATIVE PERCEPTION

Kaeme Foundation in Ghana

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this document is to provide ideas and recommendations for Kaeme Foundation to deal with the negative perception the Ghanaian public has about its motive and vision. Given the services Kaeme provides to the orphaned and vulnerable children in Ghana, it is critical that all stakeholders are well-informed about its purpose in order to provide the needed support in a collaborative way. Kaeme has operated in Ghana well over a decade and it is therefore imperative that this misconception is dealt with through deliberate and strategic steps for the needed results the organization seeks. These steps are provided in this document.

BACKGROUND

In Ghana, in times past, before colonization, children were considered as one of the most important possessions anyone could ever have and were even regarded as the future custodians of the land (Gyekye 1996). In view of that, every child's success was not only the responsibility of the parents, but the extended family and the community at large.

Referring to this practice, Frimpong-Manson states "Although no child welfare system existed in the pre-colonial Gold Coast, it was customary for the extended family - through kinship foster care and other community networks - to provide care and protection for children whose parents were unable to do so" (Frimpong-Manson 2014). Extended family members took care of orphaned and vulnerable children for various reasons including the fear of being punished by dead ancestors for the neglect of the child. It was widely believed that "The spirits of the dead parent, particularly that of the mother, is watching to see how the child is treated, and will reward with misfortune and calamities those foster-parents who neglect their charges" (Kaye (1962: 37).

Unfortunately, over the years, the advent of industrialization and modernization of various cities created urban migration (Frimpon-Manson 2014) resulting in many fathers abandoning their families for the cities. World War II - with its subsequent economic depression - followed by HIV/AIDS and other

diseases, all contributed to the spike in the number of abdications and orphaned and vulnerable children in the country.

In response to this shift in society, many welfare systems, including the establishment of private orphanages and institutions, emerged in the country attempting to address the well-being of vulnerable children and orphans who lacked the needed care of a family that every child deserves. As expected, these homes became places where children were neglected and abused rather than protected as indicated by Mr. Adongo (Adongo 211). Adongo mentions how allegations of sexual and physical abuse, human trafficking, and corruption began to emerge amongst many of these organizations that were offering welfare services to these children.

These physical and emotional abuses have very devastating mental and physical developmental effects on the children. Research by the Bucharest Early Intervention project portrayed the importance of raising children in a family setting as supported by the study that discovered children raised in institutions possessed an IQ 10 points lower than children raised in foster families, and even about 30 points lower than children who were never brought up in any form of institution (The Flaws on Institutional Care 2021). Eric Rosenthal and Laurie Ahern (2013) confirm the detrimental effects on the development of institutionalized children - in their article featured in the Journal of Public Mental Health titled, Segregation of Children Worldwide: The Human Rights Imperative to End Institutionalization - as "DRI has found that institutionalization of children exposes them to high risk of physical, sexual and emotional abuse. Even clean and well-staffed orphanages are psychologically damaging. Well-intentioned but misguided donors often perpetuate institutionalization by investing in the building or rebuilding of institutions instead of investing in community-based alternatives."

As a result of this, and in seeking solutions to these problems, in 2006 the launch of the Care Reform Initiative came with a change in focus of child welfare provision in Ghana. This initiative was brought about by USAID, UNICEF, and Orphan Aid Africa - a U.S.-based NGO - in partnership with the Department of Social Welfare in Ghana (Frimpong-Manso 2014). He further mentions how the aim of this initiative was to enhance the capacity of the Department of Social Welfare in

supporting family and community-based care in providing welfare for children. Frimpong-Manson (2014) further states, “The reform is to be undertaken through four components. The first and most important component is to strengthen the capacities of families through family support services in order to keep children within their original families and communities” (pg. 416). Those who unfortunately find themselves in the orphanages were to be reunited with either their parents if they are still alive, or with extended family members. This is not just a novelty in Ghana – it is recognized and implemented around the world.

The terms ‘family reunion’ and ‘reunification’ have been used interchangeably by various international bodies, although the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in its Handbook of selected terms and concepts, defines both as follows: that is family reunion/reunification as the steps taken to unite or bring family members together, most especially children, spouses and elderly dependents (Europe 2021).

A Council of Europe article on family reunification further sheds light on this by stating how many international declarations like the EU Directive on the Right to Family Reunification (2003/86/EC), the European Social Charter (revised 1996), and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 16) clearly recognizes the respect for and protection of family life as a fundamental human right (Europe 2021).

Eric Rosenthal and Laurie Ahern (2013) joined this clarion call to ending institutionalization by stating “Through the Worldwide Campaign to End the Institutionalization of Children, DRI is calling for a moratorium on all new placements of children in orphanages. No new institutions should be built. Research shows that children thrive in a family or family-like environment, and all children are capable of being supported to live in the community.”

In Ghana however, there has been fierce resistance to and many roadblocks placed in front of the stakeholders who seek to implement what the CRI and other international institution acknowledge as the way to resolving the problem described above. Kaeme, being one of these important stakeholders, has not been spared from such problems.

KAEME FOUNDATION

With an understanding of the issues as expressed above, John and Marcia Stevens of the USA established Kaeme Foundation to partner with the Department of Social Welfare in Ghana, to embark on intensive reunification of children in orphanages across the nation. Kaeme means ‘Remember Me’ in the Ghanaian Twi dialect. It is a fitting name for an organization that seeks to help orphans and vulnerable children – no child is forgotten.

Kaeme has focused on returning the children to their parents or relatives, under a reunification program. In order to accomplish this great task, Kaeme sends a staff of professionals to orphanages who complete profiles of each child to know what their true family status is. A database is created, and together with the Department of Social Welfare personnel, a care plan is developed for each child found in each orphanage. Then, all the children whose circumstances allow for reunification are reunited with their relatives through a determined process.

In working with the Department of Social Welfare to fulfil the Department’s mandate in implementing the CRI, Kaeme has reunited over 150 children with either immediate or extended family members. Kaeme, after reuniting the children with family, continues to provide social and economic interventions the lack of which pushed the families to send their children to the institution in the first place. Children 18 years and above are provided assistance for independent living away from the orphanages. Kaeme has also supported other older children who could not make it to the universities and other higher institutions to learn a trade such as sewing, carpentry and other hands-on skills. Through this effort, the DSW has been able to completely reunite many children and has closed down a few orphanages, this being in line with the vision of the CRI. Kaeme is perfectly positioned to continue to work with DSW and other NGOs to reunite as many children as possible with their family members.

To appreciate some of the impact of Kaeme’s work in the communities, here are some of the responses to the survey conduct among staff and non-staff on the question, How would you rate the impact of Kaeme Foundation in the past 5 years:

- The impact has greatly affected children and families in very positive ways.
- Excellent and impressive contributions to the growth of families.
- Kaeme has brought families together. Children are now growing up with their parents, guardians and their siblings as one.
- Kaeme has done tremendously well putting smiles on both the faces of parents and children they help.
- Over the past 5 years, Kaeme - together with Department of Social Welfare - has worked relentlessly to reunite over 130 children from residential homes across the regions in Ghana into healthy loving families with support and periodic follow-up. This is done via visits or phone calls with the help of a community mentor assigned to each child.

From these efforts, it is obvious that those who work for and with Kaeme recognize the positive impact the organization is having on children in the country. What Kaeme needs to do is improve in their publicity efforts regarding the many good things that are being done. “One great truth of public relations is that ‘communication must follow performance’” (Center, Jackson, Smith and Stansberry pg. 233).

PROBLEM OVERVIEW

Kaeme is not well known. In spite of its seemingly laudable goal and focus to reunite children with their families, Kaeme has faced continual perception problems at multiple levels. This paper seeks to analyze these perceptions, and recommend ways to help Kaeme with effective public relations programs that will improve the social and cultural perceptions about the organization, among others to dispel the falsehoods around what Kaeme does and doesn't do, and its purpose and role in conjunction with DSW.

Unlike the cases of other NGOs such as O Africa and UNICEM who do similar work as Kaeme, only a few people who may have had a direct working relationship with Kaeme know anything about the organization. Each of the 14 survey respondents among the staff and non-staff members on how Kaeme is perceived

outside, mentioned Kaeme is not well known. This lack of knowledge on Kaeme's purpose, coupled with misconceptions, have given the organization different operational issues over the years. Kaeme has to travel to many of the districts in the country before officers in the district hear anything about the organization. This reality and perception have come about because Kaeme has made little effort to publicly share its achievements. In the past, this has even delayed Kaeme's work for many days as it happened a few years ago when interns were prevented from working because the new Minister of Women and Children was not yet familiar with Kaeme. In many instances, unless an introductory letter is given to Kaeme by DSW headquarters, many regional and district officers refuse to work with Kaeme because they do not know the organization, the work that it does, and its relationship with DSW.

KAEME AS AN ADOPTION AGENCY

Many people believe Kaeme is an adoption agency and its ultimate goal is to have children adopted to the United States. This misconception motivates the public to occasionally call Kaeme's offices to inquire about the processes of adoption in Ghana. It has also led to additional operational difficulties.

For example, in 2010, a member of the Kaeme board was falsely accused and arrested on charges of illegal adoption and child trafficking. He was later set free at the preliminary stages of the court process by the judge who concluded that there was no merit in the charges against the member.

This misconception has been promoted by some officials of DSW who had hoped that Kaeme would provide monetary resources directly to DSW rather than through the transportation and man-power of professionals that is rather offered. When this did not happen, they became belligerent and antagonistic regarding Kaeme.

In addition, orphanage owners and managers having this idea that Kaeme is an adoption agency become weary of Kaeme due to the misconception that children are profiled to be placed for adoption rather than to be reunited with family or

relatives. Some orphanage managers see adoption as a threat to their livelihood. As a result, they sometimes become hostile, resistant and uncooperative with the work. If children are adopted, the number of children in their facility drops and the need for their services as well as their donation supply may be affected. Some also fear the possible closure of their facility, and so may buy into these misconceptions and promoted them within the district they are located.

KAEME AS AN ORPHANGE CLOSER

Although Kaeme has no authority to close down any orphanage in Ghana, many of the owners of these institutions believe that is the task given to Kaeme by the Government of Ghana – to shut down institutions. Only the officials of DSW are mandated to either close down orphanages or provide license to operate the same. This power is derived from the CRI “The aim of the Care Reform Initiative (CRI) consequently is to change policy and the provision of child welfare services. It is to enhance the capacity of the Department of Social Welfare in encouraging family and community-based care as it is considered a more sustainable approach to child welfare. Residential care is to be avoided whenever possible and only be used as a last resort by shutting down 90% of the orphanages in the country” (DSW, 2006).

RECOMMENDATIONS

To overcome these challenges, Kaeme should implement the recommended measures and activities based on the following:

- **CLEARLY DEFINE, UNITE AND ENGAGE STAKEHOLDERS**

Stakeholders are a very important and integral part of every successful organization. Gartenstein emphasizes their importance this way “Stakeholders are people interested in your company, ranging from employees to loyal customers and investors. They broaden the pool of people who care about the well-being of your company, making you less alone in your entrepreneurial work” (Gartenstein 2018). Stakeholders need to be conversant on the organization’s purpose, aware of one another, and clear on the role they play. At the moment, only a handful of DSW

officers work with Kaeme staff. Even when the team is working in a district, just a select few move with the team to participate in the actual work.

Kaeme's stakeholders can be defined to include:

1. The Department of Social Welfare
2. The Ministry of Women and Children representing the Government
3. Orphanages and Residential Institutions
4. Caregivers, Parents and Family Members
5. The Orphan and Vulnerable Children
6. School Teachers and Mentors
7. Kaeme Staff

Ensuring each stakeholder is regularly updated, adequately engaged and commonly united as to the vision and work of the organization will grant it social license and help reduce suspicion and misconception about the motive of Kaeme. According to the CSRIO "...an operation is said to have a social license when it achieves ongoing acceptance or approval from the local community and other stakeholders who can affect its profitability" (KPMG 2013, p. 4). Kaeme's success is measured in successful reunification and the aftermath support given to the children. Every stakeholder is key to the realization of this success.

In a survey conducted among current and former employees of the Department of Social Welfare, a majority of the respondents acknowledge the great collaborative work Kaeme does with the department. However, they all recommended a continuous engagement between the two organizations, and between Kaeme and the general Ghanaian society.

- **UTILIZE STAFF TO FULL CAPACITY**

The staff of every organization is its first and most important public relations tools as confirmed in the following: "The first public of any organization is its employees – the people who make it what it is" (Center, Jackson, Smith, Stansberry, pg. 23). Furthermore, Harrison (2011) also states "Stakeholder engagement begins

productively with employee relations, where employees respect the pathways of communication between staff and management, and employees feel they are part of the planning process for an organization (Harrison 2011; L'Etang 2008). Being the front line of the organization, it is important they understand what it stands to achieve so they can represent the organization correctly. Fortunately for Kaeme, 100% of the staff surveyed know what this vision is. However, a few of the staff expressed a lack of openness and involvement, and the need for improvement with their condition of service.

- **PROACTIVELY ENGAGE PUBLIC MEDIA**

To accelerate the process of creating positive public awareness of Kaeme, the organization must engage the mass media, among other activities such as those listed above. “Media relations involve the relationship the organization enjoys with various media outlets and identities, and has expanded to include interaction through social media networks and platforms” (Gill 2014, Johnston & Sheehan 2014; L'Etang 2008). The CEO of Kaeme, Mrs. Helena Obeng-Asamoah, has had a long and successful career with expansive experience working for the Department of Social Welfare and Children in various capacities. With Helena’s numerous media encounters from her previous positions, it is recommended that she head a small in-house media committee.

- **MAXIMIZE SOCIAL MEDIA**

Social media handles of Kaeme have until now been targeting the American audience as a driving source of support. It should be used to promote Kaeme’s image in Ghana, where the larger negative perception exists. The advantage of using social media is its ability to “go direct” and bypass the gate-keeper and agenda-setting roles of mass media (Center, Jackson, Smith & Stansberry 144). As many of the beneficiaries of Kaeme’s work graduate from college, they should be engaged to promote the positive image of the foundation through an Open-Source Branding strategy “...where citizen stakeholders become co-builders of the brand through the

social media eco-system, a system not regulated like traditional media” (Gill 2014, Vernuccio 2014).

RECOMMENDED ACTION ITEMS

- **CLEARLY DEFINE, UNITE AND ENGAGE STAKEHOLDERS**
 1. Establish Quarterly Meetings with DSW officers at the national, regional and district levels. A regular but rotating meeting involving a larger group of officers and staff will create awareness about Kaeme among the larger DSW community.
 2. Institute regular collaborative work with DSW, UNICEF, O Africa and other NGOs - together with orphanage operators, for effective protection and reunification of children and their families.
 - a) Establish a working committee drawn from each stakeholder mention above.
 - b) Create adequate publicity through flyers, leaflets, and PSAs about these programs.
 - c) Manage social media platforms among the group members for easy communication and dissemination of information.
 - d) Organize the support of group members to dispel any misinformation they come across about Kaeme.
 - e) Train Social Workers and District Authority Focus Personnel on care reform.
 - f) Sponsor training on career change for owners/managers of institutions.
 - g) Support and train young adults over 18 years old who are at present institutionalized in order to access independent living.
 - h) Train NGOs, religious groups and other opinion leaders on care reform and terminology when engaging with media.

3. Collaborate with DSW to organize community forums in towns where orphanages and institutions are located. At such a forum, local opinion leaders and community stakeholders would be invited.
4. Engage community leaders to ask questions on any topic related to Kaeme's work and its reunification efforts.

These activities will ensure credibility for Kaeme, unity among stakeholders, and allow the external community to recognize Kaeme's support to the system.

- **UTILIZE STAFF TO FULL CAPACITY**

1. Organize a Monthly Planning Session with junior staff. Identify action items that will address misconceptions, then give assignments and time frames. Follow-up on accomplishments and any challenges that need to be addressed for the following months' efforts.
2. Establish a Quarterly Training Program of staff by inhouse and external resource persons in the related fields of profession to ensure that the interest of each member of the staff aligns with that of the organization. "It is important that internal staff are aligned with the intrinsic identity for their organisation, which is characterised and nurtured through relationships with management" (Doorley and Garcia 2011).
 - a. Training programs must cover areas such as:
 - i. Responding to a direct question about Kaeme's motive in relation to adoption.
 - ii. Effective communication for dealing with disgruntled orphanage owners/operators.
 - iii. Communication skills for interactions with external family members, teachers and mentors.
 - iv. Constructive team work skills for collaborating with members who are not Kaeme staff.
 - v. Use of most effective and appropriate terminology and language to use when engaging with media.

- **PROACTIVELY ENGAGE PUBLIC MEDIA**

1. Prepare a media kit with information and facts about Kaeme, PSAs and branding marketing materials.
2. Conduct both Radio and Television interviews about Kaeme's work for the communities, and provide entities with media kits for follow-up coverage.
3. Organize workshops for media professionals on the use of the proper terminology, the problems of institutional care, and societal impacts to thus encourage family care for the betterment of the country and its citizens.
4. Create print media coverage on some of the work done in various communities.
5. Engage in other public sensitization of the work being done.

This will have to be cumulative, consistent and long-term to have lasting behavioral change (Center, Jackson, Smith and Stansberry 142).

- **MAXIMIZE SOCIAL MEDIA**

1. Review and update the foundation's website to more accurately and impactfully reflect what is being accomplished, similar to that of UNICEF's, O Africa and others. Comparing www.kaeme.org , www.oafrica.org and www.unicef.org.
2. Display colorful photos of their beneficiaries.
3. Tell more of Kaeme's success stories including photos on the website.
4. Teach all stakeholders how to access all social media handles.
5. Utilize the power of networking to spread the word and maximize the impact of the online presence.

CONCLUSION

Kaeme Foundation has done tremendously well in its core objective of reuniting orphans with extended family members and vulnerable children with their families. This has been done in collaboration with the government's

Department of Social Welfare and other NGOs. It is stated that most of the children in Ghanaian orphanages are not orphans. "The Department of Social Welfare estimates that 80% of orphanage-housed children in Ghana have family. Many of these families do not have the resources to house, clothe and care for their child" (kaeme.org).

Unfortunately, many people in Ghana have incorrect and even harmful perceptions about Kaeme, as well as wrongly believing that it is an adoption agency or an entity with the power to close down orphanages. It is observed that lack of exposure to and involvement of Kaeme's stakeholders in the work being done is currently perpetuated by the organization. A conscious effort to improve in this area, including effective and proactive engagement with the media, will go a long way in helping the public perception of the organization as an important partner in implementing the Government's CIR policy (Johnston, J. & Sheehan, M. (2014).

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