Whenever we want to demonstrate that a society is developed, it is better to make sure that the society includes the mental, physical and social well being of its children. Early childhood development is vital for life long success. Families are the main actors towards development of a society whose role in the cultivation and upbringing of children serves as the foundation of their society. Responsible families are those which continually give love, care, and kindness to their children and seriously attend to their needs and problems. However, there are many children who are not lucky to experience love, care and affection because of their irresponsible families. Economic problems, death of parents and unplanned pregnancy are some of the main factors which makes children dispossessed or orphans.

Literally, an orphan is a child whose biological parents are deceased or otherwise unable or unwilling to care for him/her. And an orphanage is a residential institution devoted to the care of orphans.

In Eritrea the idea of orphanage was introduced in the 1943 by some British-Americans who wanted to help poor Eritrean families. There was only a feeding program in the Debesito area. Later in 1948 the Godaif orphanage was established with a very small infrastructure and members. It was organized and administered by Eritrea community board. After independence the Eritrean government, based on the policy of social justice as well as the experience that was gained on child caring during the armed struggle, focused on advocating for the rights of children. Within the 26 years of independence the government invested a lot of money and human resources to make sure that each and every child gets what he/she deserves. In the first few years of independence the target groups were martyr’s children but later abandoned children and orphans were also included with the rise in number of orphans. Mr. Tesfu Solomon, director of the children’s safety department with in the Ministry Of Labor and Human Welfare (MLHW), gave an explanation about the principles and strategies of the government towards children, specifically orphans.

All the orphanages in Eritrea are in Godaif, Keren and Mendefera operate under the auspices of the Ministry of Labor and Human Welfare. The first step was to reorganize the orphanages based on research and to find solutions for the high number of orphans at that time, which was estimated to be ninety one thousand. This sum included both Eritrean and Ethiopian orphans. The native ethiopian orphans were soon after sent to their mother land. Then based on the research findings the MLHW launched five basic strategies to reduce the number and lessen the burden.
The first strategy was the reunification program, which is unifying the orphans with their close relatives by providing economic means. Some families were given kiosks and some farmland and others livestock based on their choice and capacity to lead their life. The purpose of this program was not only economic but also to boost the relationship between the children and their close relatives. This allows the children to interact and integrate in every activity of the society, to know about the values and culture of their society and have a sense of feeling of importance. The strategy was a better solution to identity crises and neglect ion. As a result, the strategy produced social and economic benefits.

The second strategy was adoption. Orphans who were abandoned by their biological parents are given to adoption seekers. The children’s safety committee with in the Ministry of Labor and Human Welfare took a deep study about the adoption seekers’ economic, social and psychological wellbeing. Then, at last, when they find it convenient a legal agreement is made between the orphanage and the adoption seekers. The MLHW are in a continuous campaign in order to raise the awareness of the society about adoption and how an adoption seeker should raise and nurture an adopted child, especially in the early formative ages of the child. The adoption seekers included not only local Eritreans but the Eritrean diaspora and expatriates also play an important role in taking care of the unfortunate parts of the society. Many friends of Eritrean people also take part by either adopting or supporting orphans from different regions of Eritrea.

The third strategy is the group home strategy. This program is meant for orphans who are not fit with the first and second strategies. Naturally, human beings are social beings. As far as integration is concerned, establishing group homes was a necessary part of the strategies. A group of 10 to 12 children were made to be raised by single care taker. They live like one happy family. We can mention some purposes of this strategy. The first thing is to build a network between the community and the orphans and to minimize the sense of “us” and “them” but a “family” and “society”. The second one is to build not only their physical development but also their mental development. It is always better to take care of few children as one family than taking care of hundreds in an orphanage. In group homes there is strong family attachment and good outcomes.

As Mr. Tesfu Solomon indicated, this group homes are practiced throughout the country within 24 sub zonal administrations. With continuous campaigns and increasing awareness of the society good results are coming.

Foster care is the fourth strategy which allows volunteers to come to the orphanage and provide the orphans with necessary materials or the volunteers make an agreement to take care of the
children for certain period of time. However, through time when the attachment increases they completely agree to adopt the children. So we can consider foster care as the stepping stone to adoption.

The fifth strategy, which is taken as the last option, is the orphanage. In this program, children under 4 years are held in the orphanage. Some of the orphans were abandoned by their parents. Some of them have lost their parents due to different reasons like accidents, war and HIV/AIDS. So it’s the government responsibility to take a good care of those orphans.

At this time, in the Godaif orphanage, there are almost 20 orphans and 24 care takers. It has adequate infrastructure and first aid giving clinic with 3 nurses. The fact that it is located within the compound of MLHW makes the mechanism of caring easy. The MLHW is not only concerned about the abandoned children, but also children who are disabled, street children and children who have mental health problems.

Even though the government has a complete autonomy over the orphanage, there are also some concerned individuals and religious institutions that play part in the caring and nurturing of the orphans. Interested individuals and communities come to visit the children with food and other necessary materials to entertain them and to assure them that they are not all by themselves. Doctor Peter Swishter, who came from Germany with his colleagues is one of the concerned individuals who give health care support. And Doctor Mohammed from Orotta Hospital gives medical checkups every month for free. Some governmental and non-governmental institutions provide materials like books, clothes and toys which are helpful for the development of the children. This collective endeavor is a huge progress towards building healthy and developed society.

No one can imagine how it feels like to be an orphan except those who have experienced it. A feeling of being neglected, underestimated and loneliness. However, thanks to the noble culture of the Eritrean society and the government’s efforts towards the rights of children such problems are nearing extinction. There is a great proverb in Tigrigna which says “tsestbiku n’hitsanat”, meaning all the best for our children. This proverb of our forefathers was spoken long before the introduction of orphanages. This shows us that there is a deep rooted culture in the care of children. Therefore all the beautiful creatures around us regardless of their social, economic and psychological situation, deserve our attention.