

## Spotlight

# Zambia's HIV-affected children turn to the streets

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An article from the HDN Key Correspondent Team

Just a stone's throw away from the posh Manda Hill Shopping Mall in Lusaka, Zambia's capital city, little kids mill around traffic lights sniffing glue and pestering motorists and pedestrians, alike, for money, food and whatever else they can scrounge.

Many of the kids, dressed in filthy rags, are regarded as a menace to society due to their anti-social behaviour.

Near the traffic lights a big poster warns members of the public not to give money or food to the children, euphemistically referred to as 'street kids'. According to the poster, giving money or food only causes the children to remain on the street.

Many of these so-called street kids are part of a generation of children in Zambia that is growing up without parental care, support or guidance. The children are consequently vulnerable to exploitation, abuse and disease.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates that there are approximately 1,250,000 orphans in Zambia – that is, one in every four Zambian children – with about 50% under nine years of age. Orphans are defined as children who have lost one or both parents.

The extended family network, a traditional safety net for orphaned children, is breaking apart due to the enormity of the HIV crisis throughout the country.

Additionally, the huge number of orphaned children is overwhelming national health, social welfare and education systems in Zambia, as in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa.

Most of the children face a bleak future, without parents to care for them and little, if any, assistance offered by the government.

The children are often traumatized by the death of parents, stigmatized through association with HIV and often thrown into desperate poverty by the loss of bread-winners. They live under enormous pressure and suffer depression and other psychological problems.

Young girls, in particular, are the first to be denied educational opportunities in favour of boys, and are forced into early marriages with older men, which puts them at higher risk of HIV infection.

Children, both girls and boys, turn to the streets in search of a better life but the reality that confronts them can only be described as grim.

Street life creates extreme vulnerability to violence, exploitative and hazardous labour, sex work and trafficking. In fact, internal trafficking of children has become rampant in Zambia. Sadly, there is little to no awareness of this social malaise.

Nothing short of a Herculean effort is required to help the growing legion of orphans in Zambia to lead normal lives.

A holistic approach which includes provisions for nutrition, health and cognitive development,

and educational and psychosocial support is required to effectively respond to the orphan crisis in the country. Addressing these basic needs at an early age would give orphaned children a healthy start and more hopeful future.

Strengthening family systems and community care mechanisms is fundamental to this holistic approach because putting children into institutional homes can have a devastating effect on their self worth and identity. Furthermore, there needs to be a concerted effort to keep children in school because it is one recognized shelter that can help the children to discover their own potential.

The government must protect the children of Zambia with improved institutional, legal and social conditions, hopefully bringing an end the need to 'protect' motorists from 'street kids' at traffic lights.

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