

Spotlight

Small hands, big gloves: Children as caregivers

Tayson Mudariki, Zimbabwe

An article from the HDN Key Correspondent Team

Every week, 3000 Zimbabweans die from AIDS-related illnesses and 1.6 million children have already been orphaned in the country, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

There can be no denying that efforts have been made to respond to this crisis. Zimbabwe has a comprehensive National Action Plan for Orphaned and Vulnerable Children (OVC) that is supported by various stakeholders including government departments, faith- and community-based organisations and nongovernment organizations.

Food, clothes and the money to go to school are provided to orphaned and vulnerable children by these stakeholders. At an international level, a UNICEF and Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) report, titled 'Framework for the Protection, Care and Support of Orphans and Vulnerable Children in a World with HIV and AIDS,' was released in 2004 to raise awareness and help create a supportive environment for children and families affected by HIV.

But despite these efforts, the vulnerability of children involved in home-based care (HBC) work has been ignored; and the fact that behind these heartrending statistics, there are children who have to watch their parents die has been conspicuously overlooked.

The fact is, the vulnerable status of children orphaned by AIDS starts with their parent's illnesses.

Nine-year-old Talent Ncube is the eldest daughter in her family and is responsible for taking care of her bed-ridden HIV positive mother who has been widowed.

Talent props her mother Siphathisiwe, 33, up using pillows on a spring bed that has no mattress. Caring for her mother means Talent has to bathe her and do the washing and cooking for the family.

"I know my mother is ill. I help with doing all the household chores. When I am going to school, I cook for her and the siblings before I leave," explained Talent.

As we talk, Talent tries to clear some space in her small home by collecting a pile of dishes from the floor and piling them on stool that serves as a table. It is difficult for three visitors to fit comfortably in the small hut that serves as both a kitchen and a bedroom for the family.

"She works like an adult. You would not believe she is only nine," said her mother, who, despite her pain, attempts a smile to show her pride in her daughter.

The bed her mother is struggling to sit comfortably on, occupies most of the space in the small hut. The remaining space is used as the kitchen but there are few dishes in the hut and virtually no sign of food. A fire has been lit but is dying down before anything has been cooked.

Talent, like many children in Zimbabwe, will probably be forced to drop out of school. Children in her position are often obliged to leave their studies to take on the role of fulltime carer. Most of them miss out on sports, leisure time and the chance to socialise with their peers.

Many children are left to cope with terrible conditions and witness the suffering of the person they love most in the world, without the skills or knowledge they need to understand what is happening around them.

Talent receives no support from the Bekezela Home-Based Care programme in her area even though the project runs a separate OVC programme.

"Because of funding constraints, the OVC programme is not found in some wards. As such there is little we can do for Talent . . . ," Mrs Moyo, the Bekezela HBC programme officer, said.

"We can only hope Siphathisiwe's children benefit from the food handouts we give to the mother who is an HBC client. We also haven't started training young children as carers," she said.

It appears that the heavy-duty HBC gloves have been designed for adults only.

Children involved in care work have been overlooked in a training sense and no one anticipated the serious increase in the number of children taking on the role. Providing food, clothing and schooling to these children is not enough. The work they do for their sick parents needs to be recognized.

Providing information and training to children who are involved in care work could be the next step needed to turn vulnerable children into valuable children. Right now, the home care glove is too big for their small hands, in both a literal and a metaphorical sense.

Key Correspondent Team
Health & Development Networks (HDN) 2007

The KC Team is coordinated by Health & Development Networks (HDN).

Website: www.thecorrespondent.org Email: info@thecorrespondent.org