

Spotlight

Rabbit breeding empowers HIV-affected children

Sandra Mujokoro, Zimbabwe

An article from the HDN Key Correspondent Team

"The increased spiral of adult deaths in so many countries means that the number of children orphaned each day is expanding exponentially. Africa is staggering under the load."
- Stephen Lewis, Former UN Special Envoy for AIDS in Africa.

Life has not been easy for 15-year-old Gift Muchanjanja of Mandeya in Honde Valley, eastern Zimbabwe, since the death of both his mother and father in 2004 and 2005 respectively.

He is an only child and now that his parents have passed on, he lives with his aunt, her six children and his grandmother.

Gift is one of more than a million children orphaned by AIDS in Zimbabwe. According to a 2006 United Nations Joint Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) report, more than 15 million children under the age of 18 have been orphaned as a result of the disease.

The report notes that as HIV spreads among the adult population of sub-Saharan Africa, the brunt of AIDS-related deaths is likely to hit this decade and as a result, millions more children will lose their parents.

Children orphaned by AIDS are likely to miss out on school enrolment, have their schooling interrupted or perform badly as a result of their situation. Expenses such as school fees and school uniforms present major problems since the carers of many orphans cannot afford to pay for them.

Gift agrees and fidgets with his fingers as he tells of how the Male Empowerment Home Based Care project (MEP), partially funded by Irish Aid, has helped his life change for the better.

He says it used to be difficult for his aunt and grandmother to get enough food to feed their family of nine. It was even harder for them to raise the money needed for school fees for the children, to clothe them and to ensure that they had a comfortable childhood.

But there is renewed hope in Gift's life, thanks to the small livestock project that was started by the MEP. The project has enabled him to pay his school fees and live a better life with his extended family through proceeds from the sale of rabbits.

"I am very happy about this project because my life has really changed for the better. I was one of the first groups to benefit from the rabbits pass-on project. We were trained by Africare on how to breed the rabbits and it was helpful for me," said Gift.

The small livestock project was started in 2005. Africare, an international humanitarian organization responsible for managing the MEP, launched the project as a means to help orphaned and vulnerable children cope with their situation. Currently, there are 70 children involved.

Many children have been heavily affected by HIV and have been left with siblings to look after when their parents pass on. They are forced to turn into adults overnight and have to assume the role of providers for their families despite still needing parental care themselves.

According to Clibert Kuuyangepi, 38, responsible for training the children to raise the rabbits, there has been great improvement among the children involved as they have been able to earn a living for themselves.

“We are the pioneers of this project in this area and now we have no school drop outs here because the students can pay their own school fees,” said Kuuyangepi.

He explained that when the project started, it targeted 55 children affected by HIV, 39 of whom were living with a sole surviving parent while the remainder were the heads of their households.

The project was targeted at children in early high school, identified by members of MEP. The project started with seven rabbits, which were given to three children. Each child was given two rabbits to rear with an understanding that when the rabbits reproduced, the child was supposed to pass on the offspring to another child.

Each child also gave at least two baby rabbits back to the project, which were later sold to assist other vulnerable children.

“The impact of this project on the children has been tremendous. Not only are the children able to send themselves to school but now rabbit meat is helping improve the nutrition in the households. If there is a patient in the home they may want meat instead of vegetables and the rabbits have come in handy,” said Kuuyangepi.

Jane Nyandoro, 40, is one parent who has benefited from her son’s involvement in the project. Her husband died in 2005, leaving her with four children to take care of.

One of her sons, Leesert Nyandoro, a Form Two student at Muterere School was lucky enough to be chosen as a beneficiary of the small livestock project in 2006.

Today Leesert has 13 rabbits, which have made it easier for him to pay his fees as well as those of his siblings.

Mrs Nyandoro said the rabbits had improved nutrition levels in her household as well as substantially increasing their income. An average sized rabbit costs between Z\$ 400,000 and Z\$ 600,000, approximately US\$ 5.

There is a general consensus amongst the beneficiaries of this initiative that it is difficult and expensive to ensure that the rabbits have enough food pellets, since the programme’s donors stopped providing them. Kuuyangepi explained that the pellets are the best food for the rabbits because they enabled the rabbits to grow faster, and encouraged faster breeding.

Rabbits have a gestation period of 30 days and can produce about 12 babies per pregnancy. Kuuyangepi and Gift said the various training sessions they had received from Africare had taught them about alternative feeds such as crushed sunflower seeds as well as a mixture of crushed beans and maize that had helped them cope.

The problems with feed are minor when contrasted with the huge benefits the programme has brought HIV-affected children and their families.

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