

HELPING ZAMBIAN COMMUNITIES SUPPORT CHILDREN AT RISK

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SNAPSHOTS FROM THE FIELD



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Cover photo: Zambian children. Dr. Emmanuel Dipo Otolorin/Courtesy of Photoshare

Note: Use of a child's image in this document is not meant to indicate or imply his or her health or family status.

The wide swath of pain and loss created by the AIDS pandemic does not end with the death of individuals but reverberates for years, as nations and communities lose members of their most productive age group: teachers, farmers, civil servants, industrial workers, health care workers and more.

Perhaps the most difficult ongoing loss, though, is suffered by children whose parents sicken and die from the disease. Families affected by AIDS that have not yet lost a parent also struggle to cope with medical expenses and financial strain, the inability of sick parents to work or care for the family, stigmatization and fears for the future. In addition to suffering severe emotional trauma and dislocation, orphans and vulnerable children are far more likely to experience poverty, neglect, poor health and lack of education. They face uncertain futures, often without inheritance or training for a future occupation.

In Zambia, more than three-quarters of the country's estimated one million orphans have lost at least one parent to AIDS, a number that—given the country's soaring HIV prevalence of 20 percent—could double by 2010. Extended families and communities have struggled for years to find ways to support orphans and vulnerable children (OVC), and community-based organizations in Zambia were among the first to respond.

SUPPORTING COMMUNITY INITIATIVE

Recognizing that the response to Zambia's OVC crisis must continue to come from within the most affected communities, the Implementing AIDS Prevention and Care Project (IMPACT), managed by Family Health International and funded by USAID, launched the Strengthening Community Partnerships for the Empowerment of Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children (SCOPE-OVC) Project in January 2000. SCOPE—which also includes partners CARE International and Family Health Trust—is one of the most comprehensive efforts thus far to support OVC and their families by mobilizing and strengthening community capacity.

Based in 12 districts throughout Zambia, SCOPE takes a multisectoral approach, providing grants to a range of community-based organizations that have committed themselves to improving the lives of the OVC in their midst. Since it began, SCOPE has supported more than 70 projects proposed by faith-based organizations, the private sector, NGOs, charities, health care providers, local and national government agencies and other groups; these activities have benefited more than 200,000 Zambian children and their families.

SCOPE works through District-level Orphans and Vulnerable Children Committees (DOVCCs) that provide each district with a framework for planning, networking, resource mobilization and advocacy. The DOVCCs include representatives of key government and nongovernmental sectors, including community-based organizations; most members are salaried staff of government agencies and NGOs. To support the committees, SCOPE provides training, technical assistance, advocacy and small loans to existing and new community OVC initiatives. The committees, which are managed by district officers, are well placed to identify gaps and bottlenecks in service

delivery, create links and referral systems to resources and services, scale up existing interventions and advocate for OVC.

Forming a DOVCC can take some time, since it requires convincing individuals and agencies to work closely together, even where they may have no prior working relationship. The most effective DOVCCs include some community-level participation to ensure that planning activities consider the perspectives and expressed needs of the clients they will serve.

To mobilize at the community level, SCOPE introduced a new type of umbrella organization, Community Orphan and Vulnerable Children's Committees (COVCCs). More than 60 operate throughout the 12 districts. Made up of leaders and stakeholders active at the community level, the COVCCs define strategies and deliver interventions to address the needs of OVC in their immediate locality. Because of their deep roots in the communities they serve, these committees are particularly effective at identifying local OVC needs and understanding the challenges that must be overcome to meet those needs. Their efforts are generally concentrated on one or two activities at a time.

SCOPE's experiences with COVCCs have yielded valuable lessons. It's critical to recognize pre-existing initiative on the part of individuals and community-based organizations and to use that energy to build the new committees. SCOPE also found that capacity building in the form of



Zambian children outside their school

Photo: CARE/Zambia

training in organizational and financial management is invariably rewarding, strengthening these committees and better enabling them to do significant community-level work.

MEETING CHILDREN'S PSYCHOSOCIAL NEEDS

Helping OVC cope with the emotional impact of losing one or both parents is a key focus of activities supported by SCOPE. Psychosocial support can make all the difference in how children and their guardians handle the pain and

upheaval and whether they can successfully forge new lives. SCOPE-supported programs are pioneering psychosocial support for affected children in Zambia, designing culturally appropriate, community-based responses.

SCOPE projects that address these needs begin by training program managers at the district and community levels, based on a training module developed by Family Health International. This training enables participants to initiate community-level interventions that deal with child development and how it is affected by grief, how children cope with losing parents, and how to detect signs of physical, emotional and sexual child abuse.

One successful program strategy has been to train home-based care volunteers who already work with AIDS-affected families facing parental death. These volunteers understand the needs of children in the household and recognize behaviors—withdrawal, delinquency, truancy from school and difficulty interacting with others—that indicate high levels of emotional stress. The training allows them to integrate psychosocial approaches into the assistance they give to families and to identify children who will need ongoing counseling and other support.

COMMUNITY-BASED ACCOMPLISHMENTS

In the poverty-stricken Ngombe Township near Lusaka, the Kondwa Centre began in 2000 as an offshoot of a home-based care program supported by the Lusaka Catholic Diocese. After most of the original program's clients had died of AIDS, the volunteers and staff transformed a former bar into an orphan support program for surviving children between three and eight years old, providing food, preschool education, psychosocial support, counseling and help with medical fees. After an initial enrollment of 30 children, the Centre has grown to serve 70 orphans.

In 2003, SCOPE provided training in psychosocial support to 50 Kondwa volunteers, introducing them to the concept of memory books, a way to help children assemble photos, letters and other mementoes of their parents into a book that can help them cope with grief later. The volunteers are now urging families to collaborate on creating a memory book or memory box, into which dying parents can put precious items for each child to keep; at least 50 households have put together one or the other. These simple activities not only create a physical legacy to help console children after they're orphaned but also create an opportunity for children and parents to talk about the future, something that is very difficult to do for many of these families to do.

“The goodness of the memory books is that the writer [the parent] dialogues with the recipient [the child],” said Angela Gondwe Malik, the coordinator of the Kondwa Centre. “At the end of the day, it gives them a chance to talk about it.”

These volunteers also initiated a children's camp, where the young participants, including nine Kondwa children, discussed their concerns and experiences and co-wrote a book, “Telling Our Stories,” to express the feelings they were sharing.

In Kalomo, staff or volunteers of nine organizations that serve AIDS-affected families have received SCOPE's psychosocial support training. More than 100 children have benefited as a result. The groups—which meet monthly to discuss issues and share experiences—also carry out psychosocial sensitization activities to educate other organizations about issues affecting OVC.

Many parents initially resist having “outside” volunteers or counselors approach their children to talk about concerns. Working through home-based care volunteers—who are already well known to the family—has proven more effective in overcoming such discomfort. Another important lesson has been the importance of forging links with a broad spectrum of community organizations and official agencies. For example, partnering with the Zambian Police Service Victim Support Unit can help programs deal with cases of property grabbing, child abuse and neglect.

IMPROVING FAMILIES’ FINANCIAL SECURITY

Economic stability at the household level is critically important for OVC and their families, whose often meager financial resources are stretched even further when sick adults lose the ability to work and require expensive medication or clinical care. What savings a family has managed to put away are quickly depleted, and children—often the girls—are pulled out of school to seek work, take over household responsibilities or farm the family’s crops. Many families that lose a male household head to AIDS become victims of “property grabbing,” when relatives take household goods and sometimes even the home of the deceased man away from his widow and children.

In rural areas of Zambia, where crops are both a source of nutrition and of income, SCOPE projects have sought to improve household incomes by providing training in agricultural production, access to improved farming technologies and small grants to buy supplies or expand farming efforts.

In Kalomo District, the Muyoba Women’s Group has successfully operated as a cooperative to improve production in small vegetable plots. The group’s 14 members—many of whom are widows and/or responsible for orphans in addition to their own children—got started by pooling financial resources to buy fertilizer and seed for a communal maize field. A year later, the group received seven hand-operated irrigation pumps, seed and fertilizer from SCOPE, which helped increase production and significantly improved household incomes. All of its members can now afford to buy enough food to feed their dependents, send their children to school, go to the clinic when necessary and buy household items. SCOPE also provided training sessions on business operations, farming skills and caring for orphans, and the group has regular contact with the SCOPE community mobilization officer, who provides advice on agriculture, group development and family concerns.



Anna Kasaro (right), a widow caring for four grade-school orphans, uses small-scale loans from SCOPE-funded projects to buy yarn to make garments she sells in the market.

Photo: Development Aid from People to People (DAPP)

A second group, made up largely of widows, had even more ambitious goals: to increase their household incomes while they set up support programs for the orphans in their community living without adult assistance. To raise money, the Makeni Women’s Cooperative Society tried growing tree saplings and raising chickens, eventually settling on production of oyster mushrooms, a high-value crop suggested by a University of Zambia lecturer. With a grant from SCOPE, the group overcame numerous barriers to increase production and build a market for their product. With the support of Makeni Catholic Church and others, the cooperative opened an orphans’ day care center that now serves 64 children. The women—some of whom had lost everything to property grabbing when their husbands died—are now also able to afford more food as well as school fees for their own children. They actively recruit new members, offering life-saving support to new widows overwhelmed by grief as they worry about their children’s futures.

“We are thinking about the OVC, so we find those widows who have no means of surviving and bring them into the group,” said one cooperative member. “We teach them the skills until they have got it [and] they start doing mushrooms at their homes.”

SCOPE has also supported income-generating activities in nonagricultural areas. In 1998, a United Church of Zambia congregation in Livingstone inaugurated a small program to pay the school fees of five orphaned children and buy their school uniforms and equipment. Three years later, it expanded into the Ray of Hope project, which promotes increased income generation for households caring for OVC. With a grant from SCOPE, Ray of Hope created a revolving loan fund and a business training program that now serves 14 member clubs. Club members—many

of whom are women—jointly engage in such business activities as wholesale purchasing of goods to sell at a profit in the marketplace, making bricks and operating a bakery.



SCOPE-supported Mapenzi Community School

Photo: Development Aid from People to People (DAPP)

ENSURING THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION

One of the greatest sacrifices that many OVC are forced to make is forgoing formal education when there is no longer money for school fees or because they must start working to replace income lost when parents become ill. Young girls in particular are often obliged to leave school to take over household, child care or

farming chores. The tragic irony is that children who have lost the stability of a parent-led family and the resources of parental income are in even greater need of an education to ensure that they can thrive on their own. This blow to a child’s intellectual and social development affects not

only individual children but also their communities and indeed Zambia itself, whose future depends on the skills and abilities of its citizens.

Educating OVC is a critical issue that most AIDS-affected communities in Zambia clearly recognize as more and more children leave school. One groundbreaking solution has been the creation of no-fee “community schools,” defined by the Zambia Community School Secretariat as “community-based, -owned, and -managed learning institutions that meet the basic primary education needs of vulnerable children, especially orphans and girls.” A powerful example of community initiative, these largely volunteer-run schools receive many different forms of support from SCOPE, including training, grants, psychosocial support activities, books and furniture, as well as the networking benefits that the SCOPE structure provides all of its recipient organizations.

Near Kitwe, the Mulenga Community School serves a poor community with high unemployment and some of the country’s highest AIDS morbidity and mortality rates. When a participatory community assessment identified lack of educational opportunities as one of the greatest problems facing local OVC, SCOPE provided funds for teaching materials, baking and knitting supplies and furniture and for training in teaching, leadership skills, advocacy and proposal writing.

One of the most important ways SCOPE has supported the school has been to provide training in psychosocial support to its teachers, managerial staff and COVCC members, which has improved the way these adults perceive and interact with their OVC students.

“When we started, we had no skills – we did not know how to handle [these] children,” said Francis Mwansa, the school’s head teacher. “The training in psychosocial support ... has helped [us] uphold and champion the rights of children and provides strong leadership to the development of the school.”

Mulenga Community School’s enrollment has swelled from 150 to 1,020 children in four years. The school continues to improve its curriculum and the preparedness of its graduates, an increasing number of whom pass the exam to continue their education after the eighth grade. The Ministry of Education now supports the school with funds for supplies and allowances for the teachers, and allows it access to the resources of other educational facilities.

SCOPE supports several other community schools in Zambia, most of which have also successfully expanded over time to reach more OVC. Many have faced common challenges, including resistance by surviving parents and guardians to enroll children who are needed at home and low skill levels among a largely volunteer teaching staff. To enlist the support of OVC parents and guardians and enhance their sense of program ownership, some community school programs have set up school-parent committees with a range of planning, managerial, custodial and fund-raising responsibilities; some programs also promote school attendance and encourage parents to think of their children’s education as a necessity. To raise the quality of teaching, schools have used SCOPE funds to pay for formal training, which is often used as an incentive to keep good teachers on staff.