

An Assessment of Psychosocial and Empowerment Support Interventions for Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT This study assessed the different psychosocial and empowerment interventions offered provided to orphans and vulnerable children in a peri-urban district of Zimbabwe. A qualitative design was adopted with the aim of documenting and capturing the views and narratives of the participants. Data was collected through focus-group discussions and personal interviews with thirty (30) children who were purposively sampled. The results of the study show that despite the growing number of orphans and vulnerable children in Zimbabwe, very few interventions have been designed and initiated to meet the psychosocial and empowerment needs of orphans and vulnerable children. Most of the interventions and programmes in existence are mainly centred on meeting the material and day-to-day needs of these children. Interventions singled out as accessible to orphans and vulnerable children included cash transfers, narrative theatre, educational support and therapeutic counselling.

INTRODUCTION

Children who have been orphaned by HIV/AIDS and other terminal illnesses continue to face many challenges. Most of these children are forced to leave school, take up prostitution, suffer from depression and anger, or engage in risky sexual behaviour like survival sex which predisposes them to the risk of being infected with HIV (Serey et al. 2011). Chandiwana (2009) argues that the different challenges and threats faced by orphans include a shortage of material resources, child labour, lack of access to schools, and various forms of abuse. There is also a significant number of vulnerable children in sub-Saharan Africa. The category of vulnerable children comprises of "...children orphaned from armed conflict and other causes, children whose parents are sick and dying of AIDS, child slaves, and street children" (Sabbaro et al. 2001:26). The number of children who are orphans and vulnerable children continue to rise worldwide and Southern Africa has witnessed a significant

surge in the number of reported cases of orphaned and vulnerable children over the past decade (UNICEF 2004; Chitiyo et al. 2008). The number of orphaned and vulnerable children in sub-Saharan Africa was estimated to be around forty-three (43) million in 2004 (UNAIDS 2004). In Zimbabwe alone, orphans and vulnerable children were estimated to be over 1.5 million in 2010 (Chitiyo et al. 2008; Chandiwana 2009). Given the rising number of orphans and vulnerable children, many African countries are faced with the biggest challenge they have ever had to confront (SAFAIDS 2011). This challenge is that of providing meaningful psychosocial, material and educational support to orphans and vulnerable children (Mhaka-Mutepfa 2010; Serey et al. 2011).

Given the plight of orphans and vulnerable children, it is quite clear that some form of public assistance is required to provide these children with food, healthcare, education and psychosocial support (Chandiwana et al. 2005; Stover et al. 2006). There is a growing realisation among governmental and non-governmental agencies across the globe that orphans and vulnerable children "need various types of support ranging from those things necessary for survival, such as food and health care, to those interventions that will provide a better quality of life in the future such as education, psychosocial support and economic self-sufficiency" (Stover et

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al. 2006:22). Available empirical work also supports the view that the provision of empowerment and psychosocial support is a significant social protection mechanism to address the various challenges faced by orphans and vulnerable children (Sabbaro et al. 2001; Chandiwana et al. 2005; Nyawasha 2006). Thus, the introduction of psychosocial and empowerment support to orphans and vulnerable children is not a uniquely Zimbabwean phenomenon. In many countries in Southern Africa there has been more emphasis on psychosocial and empowerment support as an important component of any programme or intervention aimed at improving the life of orphans and vulnerable children (Boler and Caroll 2003; Strebel 2004).

Zimbabwe is one of the countries that has adopted a comprehensive response to the needs of orphans and vulnerable children particularly those who have lost their parents to HIV/AIDS (Mushunje and Mafico 2010). Several interventions have been employed as ways of responding to this serious challenge. The provision of services to orphans and vulnerable children is mainly centered on key strategic areas including health care, nutrition, education, and socio-economic empowerment (Nyawasha 2006). In Zimbabwe, interventions and programmes aimed at improving the lives of orphans and vulnerable children have mainly been initiated by communities, non-governmental agencies and the government (Chandiwana et al. 2005). However, the increasing number of orphans and vulnerable children continue to impose a serious burden on communities, non-governmental agencies and the government (Serey et al. 2011). Many communities are poor and struggling to cope with the drastic effects of HIV/AIDS (Chitiyo et al. 2008). Also, the current economic climate in Zimbabwe has seen the operation of major non-governmental agencies being downsized because of limited resources and funding (Mhaka-Mutepfa 2010). Against this background, it is of interest to assess the different interventions in existence in Zimbabwean communities in response to the plight of orphans and vulnerable children.

Between Being an 'Orphan' and Being 'Vulnerable'

An orphan is broadly defined as any child who has lost one or both parents to illness or

natural causes. Most of the children who are orphaned in sub-Saharan Africa have lost their parents to HIV/AIDS and in that sense they are often referred to as 'HIV/AIDS orphans' (Chitiyo et al. 2008; Lusk et al. 2003). On the other hand, a vulnerable child refers to any child who is living under difficult circumstances whether in their own homes, on the streets or in a place of safety. Children who are looking after terminally ill parents are also classified as belonging to the category of vulnerable groups. Jackson (2002) refers to all such vulnerable children as 'children living in distress.' In the case of Zimbabwe, most of these vulnerable children have moved out of their homes and are living on the streets. Prior research has showed that these children are forced to move away from their homes mainly because of the hardships and challenges that these children face (Sabbaro et al. 2001; Nyawasha 2006; Chitiyo et al. 2008).

It has to be stated that in some of the cases it is usually or barely impossible to make a distinction between an orphan and a vulnerable child. Strictly speaking, all orphaned children are vulnerable. The term orphan and vulnerable children (OVC) is a basic term used to refer to all such children who are orphaned and those living under difficult circumstances. In this study, the term orphan and vulnerable children is used to refer to children who have lost their parents to different causes and also those who are living in distress.

Objectives of the Study

- (a) To assess the various forms of psychosocial and empowerment support interventions accessible to orphans and vulnerable children.
- (b) To examine the perceived benefits and impacts of interventions designed to provide support to orphans and vulnerable children

METHODOLOGY

Study Area

The study is based on the work carried out in two high density suburbs (townships) of Mabvuku and Tafara in Harare, Zimbabwe. The two townships have bore the brunt of Zimbabwe's economic meltdown. Many people living

in the two areas are poor and cases of cholera, malaria, typhoid and HIV/AIDS are prevalent. Basic services such as water supply, sanitation and road networks are non-existent.

Participants and Sampling

The participants in this study were drawn from six different children groups under the care of a Harare-based non-governmental organisation. The children groups were formed by social workers and nurses working for the organisation as a way of offering psychosocial and empowerment support services to children living in the two suburbs. The children comprised of those who are orphans and those looking after a parent living with a terminal illness such as cancer or HIV/AIDS. Five children were purposively sampled from each group to form part of this study. There was no knowledge on whether the selected participants were infected by HIV/AIDS or any other terminal illness. A sample of 30 participants was drawn and selected for inclusion in the study through purposive sampling technique.

Data Collection

Two main methods of data collection were used and these are:

(a) Focus Group Discussions

A total of four (4) focus group sessions were held with the participants. Focus group discussions were used to gather the participants' views on the different psychosocial services they receive from their community, the government or other non-governmental agencies. Focus group discussions offer the researcher the best option of yielding thick insights or descriptions from the participants. Morgan (1988:12) argues that "the hallmark of a focus group is the explicit use of the group interaction to produce data insights that would be less accessible without interaction found in the group". It is through group interaction that quality data is produced.

(b) Personal Interviews

In addition to focus group discussions, the researcher also interviewed all the thirty (30) participants individually. The purpose of this

form semi-structured interviewing was to allow each participant a chance to freely express himself or herself outside the group environment or set-up. All responses were audio-taped and later on transcribed.

Data Analysis

Data collected through focus groups and individual semi-structured interviews was analysed through thematic content analysis. Thematic content analysis in this study proceeded through breaking the information collected into themes which were emerging from the data. The researcher identified trends and patterns emerging in the data. Trends and patterns emerging from the data were coded and classified into different categories and then used to make inferences on the different services accessible to orphans and vulnerable children in Zimbabwean communities.

RESULTS

Cash Transfers and their Role in Meeting the Economic or Material Needs of Orphaned and Vulnerable Children

The findings of this study reveal that the most common form of assistance offered to orphans and vulnerable children is through cash transfers. A majority of the participants (69%) highlighted that they use the cash to meet their economic or material needs such as buying food, clothes, stationery or other basic household commodities. The participants revealed that under the Cash Transfer Programme, they receive a total of US\$20 a month. The results of the study show that recipients of the Cash Transfer Programme are using the money for initially intended purposes. The cash transfer scheme was introduced by the Government of Zimbabwe in partnership with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to help orphans and vulnerable go to school, have access to medical care and afford them a chance to basic household commodities. Evidence gathered in this study shows that the cash transfer scheme is achieving its overall objective of assisting orphans and poor households to have access to the most basic social services. One participant revealed that, "*the money we are receiving each month has been very helpful. We can now afford to supplement whatever we get from well wishers with*

this money. We use the money to buy mealie-meal, sugar or bathing soap. The money might be so little but it is really making a huge difference in our lives. I consider cash transfers as a unique form of empowerment ever seen in the history of our country”.

The above sentiment is consistent with findings and recommendations of previous research on the benefit that accrue through the use of the cash transfer system as a way of fighting poverty among orphans and poor households. Mushunje and Mafico (2010) consider the cash transfer scheme as an innovative way of providing for the social protection needs of orphans and vulnerable children. As evidence from this study tends to show, the cash transfers scheme is an example of an empowerment intervention that is considered by the majority of the participants as addressing mainly the economic challenges faced by most orphans and vulnerable children. However, several participants raised concerns regarding the current amount which the children or households are receiving each month. A participant suggested that *“there is need for the government to periodically review this money we are getting; it is not enough to meet all our needs. We do not have parents to look up to and sometimes we go without food or electricity as the US\$20 is not enough”.*

Narrative Theatre Programmes and the Accompanying Psychosocial Benefit

Narrative theatre interventions have been identified by the participants as an important psychosocial mechanism enabling orphans and vulnerable children to meet their needs. Previous research on orphans and vulnerable children has shown that orphans and vulnerable children are faced with psychological, social and emotional problems within society (Nyawasha 2006). Due to social stigma attached to being orphaned in most African communities, orphans usually do not open up and share their feelings regarding their condition. A significant mechanism which encourages these children to open up is the narrative theatre approach. Narrative theatre involves encouraging children to open up and share their views mainly through storytelling, drama and poetry. It encourages children to reflect on the different circumstances they find themselves in. The results of this study indicate that the benefit of the narrative theatre

intervention lies in the way it promotes problem-solving on orphaned and vulnerable children. A participant revealed that, *“the writing and drama exercises we do every week have been beneficial. It is through these activities that we fully express how we feel about a life without a parental figure. We have learnt to cope with this reality. Above all, through drama and other related exercises we are equipped to solve problems on our own”.*

This study reveals that interventions designed to address the challenges faced by orphans and other vulnerable children within society need not only look at the economic or material needs of these children. Given the various challenges faced by orphans and vulnerable children any mechanism designed to address such challenges need to consider how the emotional or psychosocial needs of these children can be prioritised. There is an increasing agreement in literature that the needs of orphans and vulnerable children are not only economic or material but also psychological, social, spiritual and emotional (Nyawasha 2006; Mhaka-Mutepfa 2010, Serey et al. 2011).

Another significant contribution of the narrative theatre intervention is its reported effect on building individual confidence on orphans and vulnerable children. Seventy-one (71) percent of the study participants highlighted that it is through writing activities, poetry and drama that their confidence improves. These children revealed that they develop a positive self-concept whenever they participate in activities related to writing, poetry and drama. One participant had this to say, *“...there is so much stigma associated with being an orphan in this area. Our lives have been stigmatised and this has resulted in most of us losing confidence with ourselves. The narrative theatre intervention has helped us to regain our lost confidence in so many ways”.*

As the results of this study have shown, narrative theatre interventions address an important area often neglected by many programmes or interventions which largely focuses on only the material needs of orphans and vulnerable children.

Children Camps as a Form of Psychosocial Empowerment

The results of this study indicate that children’s camps can be an empowering interven-

tion that can be used to address the different psychosocial needs of children who are orphaned or those living in neglect. The participants in this study highlighted that they consider the various camps which they have attended as empowering and educative. The excitement and interactions coming out as a result of these camping activities is seen as useful in helping the children to cope with their different life circumstances. One participant revealed that, *“for some of us who are staying in homes where our parents are terminally ill, we get an opportunity to see and experience the other side of life. Our homes are filled with misery because it is not any easy thing to see a parent languishing in pain and agony. We play a care-giving role in our homes and this is not an easy thing to do given our age”*.

A majority of the participants (68%) highlighted that children camps are beneficial as they facilitate the process of learning and self-discovery. The participants indicated that they learn new things each time they are in camp. Thus, being in camp is often accompanied by sharing of ideas on how best they can defy odds and become better people in the unforeseeable future. A female participant revealed that, *“I have learnt so many things in camp. Listening to other people’s experience has encouraged me to give the much needed care to my sick mother”*.

The sentiment above shows that children’s camps are useful in addressing the psychological and emotional needs of children. They provide an environment of sharing and learning which will assist the children to cope with their difficult circumstances.

The Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM)

The Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) is one form of an intervention introduced by the Government of Zimbabwe in 2001. Its underlying philosophy is that of reducing school dropout due to economic hardships. It is based on waiving fees and levies for all students who are identified by school principals and teachers as in need of educational support. The results of this study show that most of the orphans and vulnerable children who are in school are beneficiaries of the BEAM intervention. A majority (69%) of the study participants indicated that they find the educational support

they receive as making a meaningful contribution in their educational lives. One participant reported that, *“...had it not been of the assistance we get through the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) most of us would have been out of school now. We do not worry about school fees as all is catered for...”*

Different studies conducted in many parts of Southern Africa have shown that most orphans and vulnerable children are out of school mainly because they have no one who can pay school fees and levies for them (Chitiyo et al. 2008; Serey et al. 2011). UNICEF (2010) revealed that a lower percentage of children who are orphaned are in school compared to those with both parents alive. Against this backdrop, any form of educational support given to orphans and vulnerable children is seen as going a long way towards meeting the intellectual needs of these children (Chandiwana et al. 2005; Mhaka-Mutepha 2010).

The findings from this study have shown that educational assistance to orphans and vulnerable children is an important form of empowerment intervention addressing some of the challenges faced by orphaned children. This is consistent with findings from other parts of the world that have shown that educational support to orphans and vulnerable children can help reduce poverty and keep these children in schools (Serey et al. 2011). Educational support mechanisms are also reported as having the capacity to restrain children from looking for early work opportunities. Family poverty forces orphans and vulnerable children to quit school and look for work in mines, farms and other industries (Serey et al. 2011).

Therapeutic and Bereavement Counselling

Study participants indicated that one of the most useful forms of psychosocial support that they receive is therapeutic counselling. As the results of this study show, counselling services to orphans and vulnerable children are mainly offered by nurses, social workers and members of local church groups. The different circumstances that these children find themselves in entail the need for counselling services. Most of the children have lost their parents and find it difficult to cope with life. Study participants revealed that bereavement counselling sessions have helped them to come to terms with their

individual losses. A study participant indicated that, *“it was hard to accept that all my parents are deceased but through the counselling, I have learnt to accept the situation and move on with my life. The bereavement counselling sessions can be so emotional but create a space for bereavement and healing”*.

However, several participants indicated that it is often difficult for them to access counselling services in their areas. They revealed that in situations where they might need counselling services they are often told that the nurse or social worker is over-burdened with work and can only attend to them at a time to be determined by the local non-governmental organisation where the social worker is employed. Such a challenge is not unique to Zimbabwe only as most countries worldwide are experiencing a serious shortage of skilled social workers and counsellors. Besides the shortage of counselling services, there is emerging agreement among the participants that such services allow them to deal with their personal challenges particularly the grief accompanying the loss of a beloved parent or guardian.

Those children looking after terminally ill parents revealed that counselling services help them to overcome the challenges that come with being caregivers to their sick parents. They indicated that they have such a huge responsibility in being carers of the sick and they are in need of counselling services. A participant looking after a terminally ill parent revealed that, *“as carers of the sick we often encounter many challenges, we are usually emotionally drained because of what we go through each day. We benefit in so many ways through counselling sessions”*.

Results from this study indicate that counselling services to orphans and vulnerable children remain an important psychosocial intervention that can address the psychological and emotional needs of orphans and vulnerable children.

Community Support

Community-based support for orphans and vulnerable children in Zimbabwe has been heavily promoted by government and donor agencies. Given the limited resources that the government and donor community can offer, communities have assumed the responsibility of

looking after orphans and vulnerable children (Chandiwana et al. 2005). The findings of this study reveal that community-based social support to orphans and vulnerable children is a significant feature of Zimbabwe's response to the plight of orphans and vulnerable children. Study participants revealed that several community-based associations provide food, clothing, books and money to orphans and vulnerable children. Study findings show that different communities are committed in addressing the challenges and needs of orphaned and vulnerable children. Besides the involvement of established community associations or groups, orphans often receive material and social support from neighbouring families. Evidence from this study shows that there is an increasing realisation among community members in the Zimbabwean society that there is need for a community-based approach to the problem of orphans and vulnerable children. This is consistent with findings from other parts of the world (Stover et al. 2006). The involvement of the entire community in addressing the needs of orphans and other vulnerable children is also increasingly gaining recognition or prominence in literature (Chandiwana et al. 2005; Stover et al. 2006).

DISCUSSION

The results of this study have shown that there are several psychosocial and empowerment support interventions designed to meet or address the needs of orphans and vulnerable children in Zimbabwe. As the results of this study tend to show, the most common form of intervention addressing the material and economic needs of orphans and vulnerable children are cash transfers given to children each month. The cash received through the cash transfer scheme is used by the children to buy food and other essential household commodities. Literature on social protection indicates that the use of cash transfers is not unique to Zimbabwe or the Southern African region (Mushunje and Mafico 2010; Slater 2011). In South Africa, poor households receive a basic income grant to enable them to buy food and basic commodities. In most countries cash transfers have been proven to be a useful tool for reducing child poverty and inequality (Farrington and Slater 2006; Slater 2011). In a study conducted in Chile, Agostini and Brown (2011) found that cash transfers are

useful in reducing household poverty especially in rural areas. In another study examining and comparing the poverty reduction effectiveness of cash transfer programmes in South Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, Barrientos and Dejong (2006) concluded that cash transfer programmes are an effective mechanism of reducing poverty.

Narrative therapy is one intervention which has gained prominence in literature as a way of addressing and meeting the psychosocial and emotional needs of orphans and vulnerable children (Sliep 2004). The results of this study showed that narrative theatre facilitates a process of communication and problem-solving among the children which can help them cope with their different circumstances. There is consensus in literature on psychosocial support for children that through participation in drama or poetry, narrative theatre promote the development of critical consciousness (Sliep and Meyer-Witz 2003). As the results of this study have indicated, there are various interventions that can be used to meet the psychosocial needs of children. In most societies, children camps have proven to be useful in addressing the needs and challenges of orphans and vulnerable children (Nyawasha 2006; Mhaka-Mutepha 2010). Results from this study indicate that children camps are educative and promote the sharing of information and ideas among the children. There is conclusive evidence in fields such as social work and health promotion that children camps create a social space that allows children to explore the different solutions to their challenges (Nyawasha 2006; Mhaka-Mutepha 2010). The results have also shown that bereavement counselling services to orphans is a unique way of responding to the psychosocial needs of children in Zimbabwe. Previous research has highlighted the need for orphans to be given a chance to deal with the grief associated with the loss of a loved parent (Nyawasha 2006). Bereavement counselling as a helpful response to the needs of orphans opens up the space for children to grieve and also move beyond the stage of grieving and focus on their social and educational lives.

In Zimbabwe one key empowerment intervention with a focus on meeting the educational needs of children from poor households including orphans is the government funded Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM). Evidence collected in our study have shown that

the Basic Education Assistance Module is among the very few schemes focusing on providing school fee subsidies to orphans and vulnerable children who are still in school. Similar to other studies, the participants in this study consider educational assistance as a useful form of support that can help reduce poverty in the long term. Previous studies conducted in Zimbabwe and other parts of the world have highlighted the need to mainstream education in all approaches designed to provide support and empowerment to orphans and vulnerable children (Chandiwana et al. 2005; Stover et al. 2006). These studies suggest that interventions should aim to meet the educational needs and challenges of children who are orphaned or those in distress.

The role and importance of community-based support is also evident in the data as 67% of the respondents highlighted that they rely mainly on community-based structures and organisations for both social and economic support. These respondents revealed that the most immediate and reliable form of support is the one they receive from ordinary community members and community organisations. The results of this study show that community responsiveness to the needs of orphans and vulnerable children in Zimbabwe has been phenomenal and this has helped in lessening the burden on government agencies and other civic or non-governmental organisations. This finding is consistent with recent calls in literature on the need for community action to take precedence over all other externally driven interventions on orphans and vulnerable children (Schenk 2010; Datta 2012).

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that Zimbabwe has adopted a comprehensive response to addressing the needs and challenges of orphans and vulnerable children. This response to the plight of orphans and vulnerable children involves the active involvement of government, civic organisations and the community. The different interventions in existence in Zimbabwe focus on addressing all the various challenges facing orphans and vulnerable children and these include social, educational, emotional and educational. It is quite clear from the findings of this study that the harsh economic environment that Zim-

babwe has gone through did little to prevent the different sectors of society to respond to the challenges faced by orphans and vulnerable children. While the various interventions have been perceived as useful and accessible to all those in need, there is a severe need that these interventions be scaled up as a way of coping with the increasing number of children who need support given the impact of HIV/AIDS in society.

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