

Rossine Assamoi identifies herself as a grandmother who bears the pain of having buried all three of her children, each a victim of HIV/AIDS. To add insult to injury, she now faces the hardship of grandchildren's deaths, which she poignantly explains as 'burying the future.'

For many youth present at the workshop on Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Resource Constrained Areas at the Youth Pre-Conference, Assamoi's words resonated strongly. As a representative of Save the Children, Canada, she spoke at length of the issues affecting orphans and vulnerable children as well as the interventions and achievements that her organization has seen over the course of their work.

Many people are aware that AIDS kills, but many are also ignorant of the result that AIDS deaths have on the families left behind. As children are left orphaned, forced to take responsibility for siblings, lead households, and provide for those remaining, they become extremely vulnerable. Psychological trauma deeply affects orphaned children, who may suffer from stress, depression, and a great deal of hopelessness. Limited or constrained resources may prevent these children from attending school and make them extremely susceptible to exploitation and abuse at the hands of those who appear to be well meaning.

As with all remedies, interventions for orphans and vulnerable children must be context-specific. Assamoi stressed that while not all methods are approved by all people, it is vital that each community understands what works for them and try to implement these strategies. For example, if a child best expresses herself through drawing, what could be a better form of therapy than to offer her a crayon and some paper? Previously, extended families were able to provide psychosocial support to children; however, as the AIDS virus devastates communities, these networks are disappearing.

One of the greatest challenges to child-led households is poverty. To address this issue, Save the Children supports a program offering seed funds to communities and training, where it is wanted, in order to help foster income-generating activities. In other words, sustainability is the name of the game, and in Ethiopia, these programs have been rewarding and successful.

Education remains inaccessible in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa to child-headed families that cannot afford the costs of supplies or uniforms. Therefore, advocating for universal free education is a priority, as school settings provide a safe haven for children where social stigmas may be left at the door.

It is heart-warming to hear that Save the Children has seen successes in many of their initiatives with orphans and vulnerable children, from the implementation of non-discriminatory by-laws towards people living with aids in Ethiopia to the development of HIV/AIDS education programs in primary and secondary schools.

Assamoi proudly divulged that increased self-esteem in orphans and vulnerable children has been a great outcome of Save the Children's work, saying that "many children who come back from the brink of death become jubilant; they don't even seem sick." What an incredible testament to the resilience of children.

- Hannah Renglich, 19
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