

Africa Bureau Brief

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Increasing Learning Opportunities for Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Africa

Forty percent of all school-aged children in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) lack access to basic education. As a number of countries in the region face an increasing number of deaths due to HIV/AIDS, the number of orphans and children affected by HIV grows. Currently, 34 million children in SSA are orphans, with 11 million of these orphaned by AIDS. By 2010, orphans will account for at least 15 percent of all children in 12 SSA countries. The challenge to educate these children is great and will continue to grow as the epidemic reaches its peak in many countries.

Education is critical to a child's development and, especially in the case of orphans and children affected by HIV/AIDS, education can provide stability in lives that otherwise may feel very unstable. Parents and other caregivers in HIV-affected households, however, often do not have the financial resources to send children to school, and sometimes children's help with household tasks is deemed more important. While Ministries of Education across Africa have been working to strengthen education systems to attain the worldwide goal of Education for All, many of these same ministries are facing drains on

their capacity to deliver quality education due to the impact of HIV/AIDS. Parents, extended families, communities, and governments dealing with the impacts of HIV/AIDS are challenged to provide their children a basic education and the necessary skills to survive and thrive. In such an environment, innovations to provide education for all children are badly needed.



A caregiver with her charges in South Africa.

R. Zurba/USAID South Africa


Who Misses Out?

In sub-Saharan Africa the impacts on access to education vary from country to country depending on the stage of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, poverty levels, existing levels of primary school enrollment, and other factors. Preliminary evidence indicates that in countries where enrollment is high, orphans' school access

is equal to that of their peers. However, in countries with lower enrollments, there is evidence that children who are orphaned are less likely to attend school, or when they do, their attendance is more erratic than that of their peers.

Not only are Africa's 34 million orphans at risk of missing their education, but HIV/AIDS makes other children vulnerable to this risk as well. In some cases children living in HIV-affected households who must care for sick parents or look after





siblings are even more likely to be deprived of educational opportunities than their orphaned peers. Where HIV/AIDS destroys local economies and communities are struggling under the loss of productive members, families that have not been directly touched by HIV/AIDS may still be unable to send their children to school.

It is likely that as HIV/AIDS takes a greater toll on economies, families, and communities, more children will be forced to drop out of school or will never enroll at all.

Additional Needs of Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC) in School

Children in school who are made vulnerable or orphaned by HIV/AIDS suffer from sporadic attendance and other learning challenges. Children of HIV-affected families and orphans face stigmatization, are likely to be malnourished, and often need greater psycho-social support than their school peers. In those countries where the epidemic is at its peak and orphaning rates are high, the social safety nets provided at the community-level are being over-stretched and instances of child-headed households are increasing. Older siblings in these circumstances may forego their education in order to send their younger siblings to school.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Strengthening Communities

Experience has shown the importance of supporting families and communities to provide primary assistance for children affected by HIV/AIDS. Children without the basic necessities for survival—shelter, food, clothing, medicine, emotional support, and care—will not likely benefit from learning opportunities, no matter what services the education system provides.

For this reason, in addition to seeking broad support to households from health and welfare services, some communities have garnered aid to provide targeted health and nutrition support for HIV-affected children at school. School and community mobilization interventions can provide training to help communities target children most in need, and identify services easily delivered at school and most likely to encourage school attendance and learning outcomes. Examples include provision of

school snacks, deworming medicine, and HIV/AIDS counseling.

Communities, thus, can play an important role in insuring that HIV-affected children are ready to benefit from services provided by Ministries of Education and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

Strengthening National Education Systems

USAID and other donor organizations, Ministries of Education, and their partners continue to invest in the reform of national educational systems, which serve the majority of Africa's students, and are working to achieve universal enrollment by 2015. HIV/AIDS threatens to erode the gains in enrollment and quality made in the past decade. Hopes of attaining Education for All by 2015 make it imperative that governments and partners redouble efforts in national education reform, and seek innovative strategies to provide opportunities to the underserved.

A CALL FOR INNOVATIONS

Though Ministries of Education, their partner organizations, and local actors are employing a variety of means to increase educational access for children affected by HIV/AIDS and to ensure that these children are able to learn and thrive, we need to go further in exploring innovative approaches. Before undertaking any educational interventions, reasons for nonattendance and/or drop-out should be explored and programs tailored accordingly.

Some approaches currently being taken include making education systems more responsive to the needs of OVC, providing complementary learning opportunities, and offering incentives to families or schools in return for a child's educational participation.

Making Schools More Responsive to the Needs of OVC

Some primary schools *tailor their daily timetables and school calendar to fit the needs of children* whose assistance is needed at home or whose labor is needed to ensure the family's survival. Flexible scheduling allows those who otherwise would not

be able to attend a full day of classes, such as child heads of households, to continue their education.

Complementary Learning Opportunities

In cases where OVC are falling between the cracks of the national education system, or where the system is not meeting their needs or is otherwise inaccessible, it may be appropriate to establish complementary learning opportunities. These opportunities can be “custom fit” to the special needs of local OVC and the community. Often it is much easier for these types of programs to customize their daily timetables, school calendar, and curriculum to the needs of OVC. Some successful examples of these types of complementary programs include radio education and community schools.¹

Alternative learning opportunities can be provided through radio or distance education to those who are not able to

attend school because of financial or geographic barriers or because their labor is needed at home. Radio programs are cost-effective and can provide wide-coverage reaching areas where there are no schools. Zambia’s Interactive Radio Instruction program, supported by USAID, is based on the national curriculum and offers literacy, numeracy, and life skills for HIV/AIDS prevention education to out-of-school youth in 30-minute daily broadcasts. In 2003, the program is delivering education to 11,500 youth.

Community schools could also provide the flexibility needed to meet the educational needs of children who do not have a school nearby, or have to work. These schools are developed through community

¹Though these programs may not be “traditional schools,” it is crucial that they not be developed or viewed as outside the educational system.

initiative, often with the support of local, national, or international NGOs. Community schools are currently providing education to some of the most disadvantaged children in **Malawi**, **Mali**, and **Zambia**. In **Mali**, with USAID support, 15 percent of all primary school children (200,000 children) attend community schools.

Incentives to Families or Schools

Incentives often times serve as an economic transfer to families in exchange for freeing up children’s

time to attend school. Different types of incentives have been successful in increasing access to educational opportunities. It is widely recognized, however, that these types of interventions are often not sustainable and that participation may decline as incentives are withdrawn. The issue of ownership by local communities is especially important when considering incen-

tive programs. History shows that communities are best placed to identify the children in need of assistance, therefore decreasing the likelihood of stigmatization and increasing community support to any project. Examples of incentives used in the past include elimination of school fees, scholarships, school feeding, and grants to schools.

A recent trend in many African countries is the *elimination of school fees* at the primary level. Though this has proven successful at increasing enrollments, there is evidence that financial considerations are still a barrier to educational access in those countries where this policy has been implemented, for example **Malawi** and **Uganda**, as there are other costs associated with school attendance (including the opportunity costs of lost labor).

A number of local and international *organizations provide scholarships* to orphans or other vulnerable



South African school children.

R. Zurbar/USAID South Africa

children. U.S. government Ambassador's Girls' Scholarship Programs in **Namibia** and **Swaziland** focus on HIV/AIDS-orphaned girls. Typically, these scholarship programs are most effective when combined with some type of "mentoring" program. In **Mauritania**, for example, the mentoring component is organized through girls' mentoring centers throughout the country. These centers provide a place where girls can review their school lessons and be mentored by professional women.

School feeding or food aid has long been used as a catalyst for educational participation. In some cases, meals are provided at school, in other cases, food is sent home in exchange for a child's participation in school. USAID-supported school feeding programs in Northern Ghana have helped to foster greater community involvement in schools in northern districts and have contributed to increased attendance of both boys and girls. School feeding programs can, however, be expensive to set up and administer and so should only be considered if there is community interest and involvement.

Block-type grants paid directly to schools or school management committees in exchange for schools removing financial obstacles for vulnerable children may also be effective.

Future directions include gathering information on innovative efforts to increase learning opportunities for OVC and data on the effectiveness of these efforts.

RESOURCES

Forgotten Children: The Legacy of Poverty and AIDS in Africa.

A 13-minute video following the lives of children on the streets of Lusaka, Zambia. To order, visit www.usaid.gov/regions/afr/pubs/ordervideos.html or email abic@dis.cdie.org.

Children on the Brink 2002: A Joint Report on Orphan Estimates and Program Strategies.

Available at www.usaid.gov/pop_health/aids/Publications/docs/childrenbrink.pdf or email abic@dis.cdie.org.

USAID Response to the Impact of HIV/AIDS on Basic Education in Africa.

Available at www.usaid.gov/regions/afr/pubs/docs/hived_brief.pdf or email abic@dis.cdie.org.

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Eritrean school children.