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Community-based support for orphaned children in rural Lesotho

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Introduction

Ha Moeketsane is a remote mountainous rural area in the Mokhotlong district of Lesotho, consisting of small villages governed primarily by local chiefs. There are few if any support networks in place: traditional communal mechanisms have broken down as a result of migratory work patterns, the sinking economy, and the effect of HIV/AIDS on the productive population. The government is unable to provide services to this area, leaving a myriad of social problems unaddressed. A subsistence economy and a mixture of traditional and Christian beliefs dictate life. This creates barriers to development, as superstition and lack of information lead to stigma and silence in the face of the spread of HIV/AIDS. People who are infected with the virus are not the only victims. There is an ever-increasing population of children whose parents have died from the disease, and the problems faced by these orphaned children are a major concern in communities. The scale of the problem is highlighted by a survey conducted by GROW¹, an indigenous NGO operating in this district. The survey found that there are 3000 to 4000 orphaned children in the area, representing 5% of the total district population.

Working with orphaned children and communities

Many development organisations assess the needs of orphaned children without consulting the children or communities, denying participation on the part of the people they seek to assist. This often leads to one-off delivery of services to meet assumed needs. The children may be left with limited disposable resources, while suffering from a variety of other long-term psychological, social, and economic difficulties. They are also subjected to the isolating effects of jealousy from others in the villages who consider their personal level of poverty to be as critical. GROW has taken a different approach to working with orphans. It has developed a participatory, community-based approach which supports caregivers as well as the orphaned children themselves.

GROW began working in Mokhotlong district 11 years ago, addressing issues surrounding horticultural development. Since then, it has expanded, and introduced programmes in agriculture, non-formal education, infrastructure development, health, and nutrition. Some of the programmes target certain groups like shepherds or pregnant mothers, while others are open to the community in general. The focus of the programmes has shifted in recent years to address issues surrounding HIV/AIDS. Members of the communities identified their growing concern over the

¹ Previously, Generating Rural Opportunities for Well-being but now simply known as GROW.

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prevalence of orphaned children in the district, defined locally as children who have lost either one or both parents. GROW has sought to collaborate with the community on possible strategies to alleviate the burdens faced by these children.

Members of the GROW Health and Nutrition team met first with 27 people identified as caregivers of orphaned children to discuss needs and possible solutions. The majority of caregivers are mothers or sisters of the deceased parents. Along with economic needs, caregivers identified psychological and social stresses, including negative behaviour changes, feelings of helplessness, depression, isolation, and stigma as problems facing the children. The caregivers also faced extra stresses: many were elderly family members, now caring for their grandchildren with limited resources and energy. They suggested bringing the children together in a group to enable them to share their frustrations and problems, receive training in life skills, and begin to develop a support network, as well as allowing caregivers a much-needed rest from the burdens of childcare. The caregivers also wished to form an association to provide support for one another and to the children, although they were reluctant to express a need for psychological support for themselves.

Developing a support network

The Health and Nutrition team chose to pilot the project in the village of Ha Ntsika. This village is home to GROW's field office, and there are about 25 orphaned children living there. The children were invited to meet for a session consisting of activities designed to promote unity and self-expression. The facilitators sought to encourage participation from the beginning by actively involving children in the sessions. Children are used to being passive recipients, whether in the household, school, or community, and part of the facilitators' work was to instill the idea that the children could develop and govern their group themselves. As expected, the children were apprehensive about participating. This was evident in the first few sessions, as the facilitators encouraged participation, but often encountered

Box 1: Guidelines for behaviour

- Indicate a desire to speak by raising your hand
- Do not laugh at what others say
- Avoid side conversations while others speak
- Be attentive
- Do not argue in an aggressive manner

silence. Despite this, the children evaluated the sessions positively, displaying enthusiasm to continue.

The first session sought to lay the foundation for future sessions. The children developed guidelines, with the assistance of the facilitator, to encourage everyone to participate and to promote a safe environment. They envisioned a place where all could express their thoughts and ideas without fear of harassment, humiliation, or personal threat. Their guidelines are shown in Box 1.

After the guidelines were completed, the facilitators recorded them on a piece of chart paper, and suggested that they be put on the wall as a reminder for all in attendance to respect one another during the sessions. The facilitators also suggested that participants could add or remove guidelines as the sessions progressed.

The facilitators then introduced sessions to promote life skills, as vulnerable children tend to face an assortment of concerns and disadvantages accompanying the lack of strong adult role models in their lives. These sessions focused on developing communication skills, feelings-recognition, coping, decision making, and assertiveness skills. Other sessions provided training in HIV/AIDS awareness, care, and prevention, as vulnerable children tend to be at higher risk of contracting the disease. Sessions also included art activities, and the facilitators introduced a variety of artistic media to allow the children to explore different forms of creativity and expression. Although the children were encouraged to express emotions or needs in their art work, they were free to create anything they wanted to. Many of the sessions included team-building and trust-building activities. The facilitators felt that it was important to promote these skills, as isolation and mistrust often plague the lives of orphaned children. Each session ended with a participatory evaluation, through group discussion, question sessions, and individual comments.

The programme also sought to involve families that care for orphaned children. Caregivers met as a group to discuss issues surrounding the care of orphaned children, and to seek methods to support the children and one another. The sessions for the children also gave caregivers a break from their childcare responsibilities and provided an opportunity for them to relax or fulfill other commitments.

Empowering children and communities

The children of Ha Ntsika have responded positively in the first ten months of the programme. The group elected members to govern its activities and speak on their behalf, and to strengthen their ability for self-governance. The group also sought the assistance of a young man from the village, who acts as a guide and mentor. He is currently facilitating the sessions with the assistance of older children, working with GROW staff and the children to develop session plans, reporting mechanisms, and evaluation tools. A young woman from the village also volunteered to assist the group, and will commence training in the near future. Members of the group have introduced new art activities to the sessions, utilising locally available materials, and have facilitated a variety of life skills sessions. They also invited other vulnerable children from the neighbouring village of Tsekong to be part of their group. More experienced group members guide children from the new village through activities and sessions.

The group has also helped other villages to develop a similar support structure. This process began through a combined day camp designed to introduce children from the new target village of Sibi to activities, ideas, and lessons developed in the pilot programme. The children from the group in Ha Ntsika co-facilitated both formally and informally, presenting activities related to HIV/AIDS awareness and life skills development. Children from Sibi participated in the last few GROW-facilitated sessions in Ha Ntsika in order to gain an understanding of how the sessions progressed. GROW facilitators then moved to Sibi to assist the children in that group, along with children from the neighbouring villages of Lilatoleng and Ralithlare. Two people have already volunteered to mentor the combined group, and are training with GROW facilitators in the communities. After an initial round of sessions, each of these villages will be encouraged to develop the independence shown by the group from Ha Ntsika. GROW staff continue to visit the Ha Ntsika group occasionally, to conduct life skills sessions, monitor progress, and discuss concerns with the group. Currently, about 50 to 75 children from five villages attend sessions regularly. The ratio of participating girls to boys is approximately 2 to 1, owing to the fact that many orphaned boys work as shepherds and so cannot attend sessions.

The children are also demonstrating their ability to contribute effectively to their communities. The Ha Ntsika group prepared and performed a play about the importance of strong respiratory health. They presented it at a community event geared towards creating awareness of care,

prevention, and treatment options related to respiratory infection, a chronic problem in the rural mountain areas of Lesotho. The audience responded well to both the performance and the content of the play, and the children enjoyed the opportunity to participate actively in a community event.

The children gain a variety of benefits from membership of the groups, including the development of strong friendships with other children facing similar problems. Older children demonstrate concern for the welfare of the younger members, acting as surrogate siblings during the sessions. Positive reactions from group members create a sense of empowerment for those that volunteer to facilitate sessions or introduce new activities. In conjunction with training in life skills, this positive reinforcement helps develop confidence and self-esteem. The enthusiasm demonstrated by the children, both to participate in and to govern the group, bodes well for the future.

Caregivers have noticed positive attitudinal changes in the children as a result of the development of the groups. The caregivers also meet sporadically and have begun a communal garden project, with the objective of providing food for the children's support sessions and generating income. However, they remain wary of expressing personal needs. Hopefully, this will change with time.

Challenges

Developing a psychological support mechanism in the rural communities of Mokhotlong presents many difficulties. Development efforts traditionally involve delivery of tangible goods and services, in the hope of improving economic livelihoods. There are few experiences of this kind of work to draw on in the South. Information must be borrowed and modified from research done in the North and adapted through trial and error to meet the needs of children in rural communities. Resistance comes in many forms, primarily from a lack of understanding in the community at large. Facilitators try to overcome this by informing communities of their work through public gatherings and meetings with local groups that govern development in the villages. Fortunately, the carers of orphaned children recognise the need for this kind of support, seeing first hand the difficulties faced by the children.

In a perfect world, the children would not only see the value in gathering to form support networks, but also take the initiative to do so themselves. However, at this stage they still need to be guided through the preliminary steps of development. The process is slow, as it is a learning experience for both facilitators and participants, but the children are responding well, displaying a desire to learn and lead.

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GROW's ultimate goal is to leave behind knowledge and skills so that the groups and networks can continue to thrive on their own.

Breaking the social stigma surrounding orphaning presents another significant challenge. With the rise in the prevalence of HIV/AIDS, superstition surrounding the death of young adults, and the exploitative behaviour of some people in the community, care must be exercised to educate all to the true nature of this social phenomenon. GROW and other organisations continue to promote HIV/AIDS awareness in the area through teacher training and village gatherings, in an attempt to create an atmosphere of cooperation and acceptance for vulnerable groups.

Some of the greatest problems facing orphaned children in this country are labour exploitation and sexual abuse. As mentioned previously, many young boys are sent into the mountains to perform the dangerous task of shepherding. Faced with the risks of exposure, cattle theft, sexual abuse, and lack of nutritious food, these children are most in need and difficult to reach. Some attend literacy classes offered in the evenings by GROW's literacy programme, but many will never attend formal schooling. Other children, both boys and girls alike, are sexually abused in the home and community. A culture of silence surrounds sexual abuse in the home, and law enforcement agencies lack the authority under current legislation to

intervene effectively. A legislative initiative by the government of Lesotho, under pressure from NGOs and other civil society groups, seeks to reform the national Child Protection Act. The next step for GROW will be to seek solutions to these problems in the district of Mokhotlong through cooperation with various local and national agencies.

Conclusion

The initial goal of the sessions facilitated by GROW staff is to assist children in building skills and coping mechanisms to address difficulties faced in their daily lives. The sessions also seek to develop skills, confidence, and a sense of togetherness so that children can create a place of their own, where they can express themselves freely and grow among empathetic peers. GROW also wishes to see the children act as an empowered and positive body in the communities, dispelling the myth that they are helpless and burdensome. Finally, the children need a place to have fun, make friends, and enjoy life, free from hardships faced in their daily lives. The group in Ha Ntsika seems to be successful in many of these respects, and has gone on to impart skills to children in neighbouring villages.

Facilitators continue to monitor and evaluate the efficacy of the sessions through group evaluations, observations of behaviour, and initiatives taken by the children. Caregivers play a pivotal role in providing support in the home and to the groups, allowing for their acceptance and growth in the communities. Ultimately, success will lie in the continued work and cooperation of these groups in developing a strong future for the children.

The devastating effects of HIV have not yet reached their peak in Lesotho. Over the next few years, the number of orphaned and vulnerable children will increase dramatically. Hopefully, programmes will be in place in rural areas to address the situation as it progresses, allowing children and caregivers hope for a better future.

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