

Orphans and Vulnerable Children

Background

Orphans and vulnerable children are those children unfortunate to have been deprived of their first line of protection – one or both of their parents. By 2010, an estimated 106 million children under age 15 are projected to lose one or both parents. Among them, the number of children orphaned by HIV/AIDS is expected to jump to more than 25 million. In 12 African countries, projections show that orphans will comprise at least 15 per cent of all children under 15 years of age by 2010. This is a situation exacerbated by the unrelenting surge of AIDS-related deaths.

Although the reasons vary greatly, separation from parents and family does tend to be detrimental for the overall well-being and development of the child. In addition, placement in institutions is often not the best solution for separated children.

Forced to cope alone

Children without the guidance and protection of their primary caregivers are often more vulnerable and at risk of becoming victims of violence, exploitation, trafficking, discrimination or other abuses. In conflict situations, involuntary separation from

both family and community protection, sometimes across national borders, greatly increases the child's risk of exposure to violence, physical abuse, exploitation and even death. Surviving children face malnutrition, illness, physical and psychosocial trauma, and impaired cognitive and emotional development.

Unaccompanied girls are at especially high risk of sexual abuse. Meanwhile, unaccompanied boys are at high risk of forced or 'voluntary' participation in violence and armed conflict.

HIV/AIDS and children

Losing a parent is devastating in any circumstances, but children orphaned by AIDS-related causes often suffer the added pain of being stigmatised or ostracised by their communities. Children whose parents have died of AIDS, whether or not they are themselves living with HIV, may be shunned or badly treated because of a fear of HIV and AIDS and ignorance about how HIV is transmitted.

They may also have undergone the trauma of being effectively orphaned whilst their parents were still alive, helpless as the adult became chronically ill and

Children can be orphaned or made vulnerable – either temporarily or permanently – when they have:

- ▶ Lost their caregivers or guardians (orphans).
- ▶ Lost contact with their caregivers. For example, street children, unaccompanied displaced or refugee children.
- ▶ Been separated from their parents. For example, where parents are detained or children are abducted.
- ▶ Been placed in alternative care by their caregivers. For example, children with disabilities or children from poor families who are placed in institutions.
- ▶ Been kept in prolonged hospital care. For example, on grounds of health status, such as HIV status.
- ▶ Been detained in educational, remand, correctional or penal facilities as a result of an administrative or judicial decision. For example, suspected or convicted offenders or child asylum seekers.

incapacitated by disease. The emotional and economic impact of a parent's death is therefore often felt long before the arrival of death itself.

Orphans and children made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS are frequently deprived of basic human rights. They often receive inadequate protection, care and support, and do not have access to essential services such as health, education and birth registration.

Many orphans have to drop out of school so that they can earn money to survive and look after younger brothers and sisters. And many orphans may have nowhere to live and so may be forced to live on the streets.

With no home or people to protect them, such children — and particularly girls — may feel they have no option but to resort to selling sex to support themselves and their brothers and sisters. Or they may be forced to do so by others. Children in this situation are



Three-year-old Putri lives in an orphanage on Nias Island, Indonesia, where as many as 2,000 people died in a quake on the island in March 2005. *Credit: UNICEF/HQ05-0537/Josh Estey*

themselves highly vulnerable to HIV infection because they are often not able to control when and with whom they have sex, or whether they have safe sex.

Children living on the streets are also more at risk of becoming involved with drugs — HIV/AIDS is, furthermore, a risk for those who intravenously inject drugs with shared and contaminated needles.

The worldwide picture

In **Burkina Faso**, official statistics estimate that orphaned and abandoned children accounted for almost 18 per cent of the country's 13 million population in 2003.

In **Lao**, the maternal mortality rate is one of the highest in the region, and the number of children living or working on the streets is increasing in urban areas — most are aged between six and 10 years.

In **Liberia**, there are an estimated 230,000 orphans, with 36,000 orphans due to AIDS-related causes.

In **Mozambique**, the AIDS pandemic has produced a generation of orphans and heightened children's vulnerability to proportions never seen before. Of the country's estimated 1.6 million orphans, 17 per cent have been orphaned by AIDS.

In **Nigeria**, a rapid assessment of orphans and vulnerable children, conducted in 2004 with UNICEF support, revealed that there were about 7 million orphans — 1.8 million of whom were due to HIV/AIDS.

In **Uganda**, one in four households foster at least one child as extended families and relatives care for many of the orphans and children affected by HIV/AIDS, providing for their

nutrition, education, health and development needs. However, the caregivers are overburdened and many lack the resources to ensure the full realisation of their rights.

UNICEF's approach

Children tend to cope much better if they are cared for by family members or relations, and if they stay in their communities, rather than going to live in orphanages.

Making sure that orphans go to school is also a top priority for UNICEF, because this can make them feel secure and give them a sense of continuity as well as teach skills that will help them support and protect themselves as they grow up. Every child has the right to an education.

By putting children into school and keeping them there, a normalcy can be provided that many children lack, as well as providing a means of emotional and social support. In addition, education has clear preventive benefits too, especially for girls — it is known as the "social vaccine" against HIV infection. Yet because of school fees and other barriers more and more children are out of school. This must be changed by removing or reducing these barriers.

Other major activities undertaken by UNICEF include the development and support of the implementation of national policies, strategies and action plans regarding orphans and vulnerable children; mobilising leadership; and securing long-term resources for strengthening child protection interventions.

UNICEF is supported entirely by voluntary contributions.

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