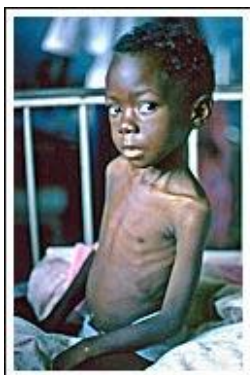




AIDS orphans in sub-Saharan Africa: a looming threat to future generations



While the tragedy of the HIV/AIDS epidemic has been drawing increased media attention, one of the most troubling aspects of it – the long-term impact on African societies of some 11 million AIDS orphans in sub-Saharan Africa – has been featured less often.

There are more than 34 million orphans in the region today and some 11 million of them are orphaned by AIDS. Eight out of every 10 children in the world whose parents have died of AIDS live in sub-Saharan Africa. During the last decade, the proportion of children who are orphaned as a result of AIDS rose from 3.5% to 32% and will continue to increase exponentially as the disease spreads unchecked. As a result, the disease is in effect making orphans of a whole generation of children, jeopardizing their health, their rights, their well-being and sometimes their very survival, not to mention the overall development prospects of their countries.

The AIDS epidemic contributes to deepening poverty in many communities, since the burden of caring for the vast majority of orphans falls on already overstretched extended families; women or grandparents with the most meagre resources. Such households are expected to earn 31% less than other households. Without a real safety net, street life is the recourse for many orphans, who often suffer from poor health, trauma and psychological distress, making them more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.

The overall situation has reached alarming proportions also because women have moved from the periphery to the epicentre of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa. Averaging over 55% of all people living with HIV/AIDS, girls and women are disproportionately affected. Meanwhile, constraints on their access to education and treatment, coupled with their inability to find paid employment, are causing rural households often headed by women to slide further into poverty.

With AIDS-ravaged economies starting to crumble, urgent national strategies are needed to strengthen governmental, community and family capacities and to redouble international cooperation to reverse the tide of this global calamity. "We're all struggling to find a viable response, and there are, of course, some superb projects and initiatives in all countries but we can't seem to take them to scale," says Stephen Lewis, the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa. "In the mean time, millions of children live traumatized, unstable lives, robbed not just of their parents, but of their childhoods and futures."

What is often overlooked is the ripple effect the epidemic will have on future governance, social structures and growth of the worst hit countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Dramatically high mortality rates will result in the depletion of much of the labour force, both in urban and rural areas, with the losses having a profound impact on the very foundations of economies and state administration. Undoubtedly, sub-Saharan Africa is not alone in facing this challenge – several

countries in Asia are beginning to feel the early impact of the "lost generation" of children orphaned and made vulnerable by AIDS. With the toll of AIDS orphans threatening to reach 25 million by the year 2010, this problem should remain at the centre of attention of all concerned – governments, the public and the media -- to stem the spread of this scourge.

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