

A focus on young African children

The Bernard van Leer Foundation's strategy for East Africa focuses on supporting existing efforts in the region to develop and deliver holistic, integrated, community-based early childhood development interventions. Other than the risks posed by inadequate care due to the terminal illness or loss of primary caregiver, the effects of HIV/AIDS on children are unknown. What is clear, is that they are especially vulnerable.

BvLF supports 21 partner organisations in East Africa. Programmes reach an estimated 21,780 young children under eight years old and their caregivers.

Caught in a vicious circle

Young, disadvantaged children in East Africa face multiple challenges. The region is experiencing increased poverty, rising prevalence of HIV/AIDS (except in Uganda) and deteriorating basic services such as health and education. HIV/AIDS exacerbates this deterioration.

Psychological effects – resulting from the loss of parents, child labour, exploitation, migration, sibling separation, and grandparent and extended family burden – spin off an already vulnerable situation. This accelerates the vicious circle driven by the interrelationship of poverty and HIV: vulnerability and prevention go hand in hand and survival challenges enhance HIV vulnerability. HIV/AIDS has become a generalised problem affecting all children as it intersects with and multiplies the risk factors.

The donor community has responded to the HIV/AIDS epidemic with an adult focus. Attention to children generally – and young children specifically – is lagging. Ongoing community and government efforts and actions should be strengthened and reinforced. For example, Uganda and Kenya have made primary education free and accessible for the majority of children. However, more support for such initiatives would help improve the quality of the education and support schools can provide.

Providing social and economic safety nets

Toddlers in Africa usually have a variety of caregivers. But what if households are already overburdened with bereavement and struggling to make ends meet? Do they have the time to provide important psychosocial support to young children as well as meet their physical needs?

Community-based early childhood development (ECD) programmes are essential to mitigate the effects of HIV/AIDS on youngsters. Such programmes provide social and economic safety nets, ensure that children have access to day care or pre-school, and work with caregivers to enhance their skills in psychosocial support.

BvLF's strategy has three objectives:

- To backstop community efforts to support at-risk householders with young children, especially where HIV/AIDS is likely to pose a threat to child development.
- To understand and analyse the psychological and social effects of HIV/AIDS among young children, with a view to providing local organizations with wider knowledge and awareness about how to identify potential problems and build up local capacity to respond.
- To promote the position of young children on multiple agendas to ensure that the youngest members of society benefit from national and regional programmes and policies.

Bernard van Leer Foundation

The Bernard van Leer Foundation (BvLF) supports early childhood development activities in about 40 countries. It takes a holistic approach to the development of young children from birth to age eight, addressing a range of issues that include education, childcare and health. In the area of HIV and young children, BvLF focuses on community-based care and psychosocial support for children who have lost their parents and caregivers.

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Addressing myriad problems in Kenya

The Community Support to AIDS Orphans project focuses on strengthening the efforts of the orphaned child's family and the rest of the community in providing care and support, especially for children under eight years old. The project is part of community support by the Kenya Orphans Rural Development Programme (KORDP), established in 1996.

The project addresses myriad problems in an integrated way in an area where poverty and lack of proper care systems for children are resulting in malnutrition, increasing health problems, school drop-out, abuse and neglect, increase in street children and child prostitution. The project is ongoing in 60 villages in the Busia and Bungoma districts in Western Kenya, along the Ugandan border. Strategies include:

- Sensitisation of the wider community.
- Establishing 23 community-based early childhood development centres; training of at least two ECD teachers per centre.
- Addressing food insecurity through training in improved farming practices and providing subsidised farm inputs.
- Supporting care-giving families to take on other income-generating activities.
- Establishing and training community committees to manage the ECD centres and other project activities.
- Educating and training community members of children's rights in the context of HIV/AIDS, emphasising psychosocial support, birth registration and property inheritance rights.

Benefits to families and children

By the end of 2004, the project reached 2,700 children. Between 2002 and 2005, 1,180 children from the ECD centres enrolled in primary school. More than 250 families directly benefit from support in income-generating activities and 400 in improved farming practices. They serve as trainers, which means the total number of beneficiaries is much higher.

KORDP has already shown potential for replicating these results. During the second phase of BvLF funding, additional locations have been added and coverage has been more than doubled.