

Title: Hope for Orphans: Models of Community Care as an Expression of Social Entrepreneurship for Vulnerable Children in an African Context

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Abstract:

With approximately one-sixth of the world's population, or almost one billion people, living in extreme poverty, preventable diseases like HIV, Malaria, and Tuberculosis claim the lives of approximately 50,000 people each and every day (World Health Organization, 2008). Family breakdown, separation of children from their parents, and the need for child protection and care stem from this poverty and lead to other problems that affect children as well as their families and communities.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic, in particular, is unprecedented in the enormity of its impact on children, families, and communities in Sub-Saharan Africa (United Nations' Children's Fund (UNICEF), 2004, 2006). AIDS has claimed almost 20 million lives worldwide and an estimated 40 million people are currently living with the illness (UNICEF, 2006). In the wake of this humanitarian crisis, children, already one of the most vulnerable segments of society, have been forced to bear much of the brunt of the disease. It is estimated that by next year, 15 million children under the age of fifteen will have lost one or both parents to AIDS, in sub-Saharan Africa alone (Hunter & Williamson, 2000).

As North American Christians consider how to care for children deeply affected by the global.

AIDS pandemic and extreme poverty, we know we must respond in ways that demonstrate God's love and appropriate care for orphans and vulnerable children. At the same time, Christian congregations and organizations must consider effective practices, appropriate technology, and a commitment to the basic rights of children.

Institutional forms of care, however, are how we often imagine proper caregiving for orphans. Orphanages, and the more contemporary children's villages, involve large numbers of children living in an artificial setting which effectively detaches them not only from their own immediate and extended family and from their community of origin, but also from meaningful interaction with the community in which the institution is located. Among the risks associated with institutional care are the reduced ability to form lasting attachments, community stigmatization, and transitional risks related to housing, education, and employment when children leave institutional care (Dunn, Jareg, & Webb, 2003; Williamson, 2004).

While institutional care settings (i.e., orphanages and children's villages) are a common response to caring for orphans and at-risk children and youth, social science research in the field highlights social entrepreneurial practices with better outcomes that nurture children, while strengthening their families and communities.

This presentation builds on understandings of risk in institutional settings, such as orphanages, and highlights grassroots human services offered in central Africa offering better care for orphans and vulnerable children (Olson, Knight, & Foster, 2006). Leading advocates, researchers, foundations and

other social entrepreneurs, including many from the faith communities, have offered ways to support children to live with their families in their communities. There are multiple family and community-based models of care that are seeking to do just this. From these efforts, we have identified fundamental strategies to improve the safety and well-being of orphans and vulnerable children, to protect their rights, and to provide for their needs.

For example, provision of care that is in the best interest of a child most often occurs when children remain in the care of their immediate or extended families (recognized as their key safety net), for the sake of continuity of care, and when community capacity is strengthened in order to provide the highest level of care for children orphaned by AIDS.

The goal of family and community-based models of care is for orphans and vulnerable children to be supported by familiar adults (as far as possible) and to remain within their own communities. Programs of this type seek to strengthen the familial households where these children live so that they may provide adequately for their care and protection.

Family-based care in a community is not only more likely to meet the developmental needs of children, but also more likely to equip them with the knowledge and skills required for independent life in their communities. By remaining within their own communities these children retain a sense of belonging and identity and also benefit from the continuing support of networks within the community. Furthermore, these approaches benefit from being potentially far less expensive than institutional care and hence more sustainable (Tolfree, 1995, 2005).

Foundational principles and several examples of community and family-based models from an indigenous African perspective will be presented. Also presented are the requisite knowledge and technical skills required to develop organizing and entrepreneurial practices in this field of practice. Models from faith-based community associations offering skills training, education, and micro-economic opportunities in Kigali, Rwanda will be included.