Kenya : When orphans become care-givers

- Orphelins du sida, orphelins et enfants vulnérables (OEV) -

Bondo, 24 September 2010 (PLUSNEWS) - The role of grandparents and other members of the extended family in raising HIV orphans is well established ; what is less recognized is the contribution these children make to their carers' lives.

Grandparents, often elderly and infirm, rely heavily on these children for household chores, home care and even income.

Humphrey Ochiel, 16, lost his parents to HIV-related complications five years ago, after which he and his three siblings went to live with their grandmother, who was to take care of them as they attended a local primary school in Nyang'oma, Bondo, in western Kenya's Nyanza Province.

But soon the roles were reversed. Ochiel's grandmother, already very poor and barely able to feed four young children, lost her eyesight and became totally dependent on her grandchildren.

Role reversal

"Now we care for her as we care for ourselves ; we have to struggle to get some jobs like weeding for people in the village to provide food for ourselves, including her," Ochiel said. "We understand she would really like to give us care but we also understand her body cannot allow her."

A 2010 study conducted in Bondo by the London School of Economics found that many fostering households benefited tremendously by taking in children. Orphans were found to contribute to the household's income and provide "valuable care or support to ageing, ailing or young members of their households".

The authors advised caution in using the term "caregiver" to describe foster parents due to the reciprocity, and indeed at times a reversal, of caring responsibilities.

According to Charles Ondogo, the Nyanza Provincial Children's Officer, orphaned children in the province contribute significantly to the incomes of the homes that foster them. "Many engage in employment and not only provide for their brothers and sisters, but also give money towards helping the foster parents, because even those families that take them in are either made up of very old or very poor relatives," he said.

"Even in situations where the fostering family is getting some income, they still have to rely on the fostered child to complement the family income or provide other services like labour in the family farm," he added. "At times this role forces some children, especially girls, to engage in activities like prostitution - some are even forced out of school."

Social protection

Ondogo said it was important for the government to create more social protection programmes. A national cash transfer scheme, intended to support extremely poor households with orphans, is reaching just 77,000 orphans. The programme intends to reach 300,000 by 2012. But there are an estimated 2.4 million orphans, 700,000 of whom have lost at least one parent through HIV.

A 2009 analysis of the cash transfer scheme found that while the effort was impressive, it had significant flaws, including the fact that three-quarters of recipients were not from the poorest 21 percent of households.

An estimated 20 percent of children - twice the national average - in Nyanza are orphans ; the 2007 Kenya AIDS Indicator Survey found that nearly 80 percent of orphans and vulnerable children under 18 in the province received no external support.

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