

INTERVENTION MEASURES IN ADDRESSING THE NEEDS OF ORPHANS AND VULNERABLE CHILDREN IN MARONDERA, ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

The extent of the vulnerability of orphans and vulnerable children in Zimbabwe has been on the increase. To investigate the challenges faced in addressing the needs of orphans and vulnerable children in Marondera, focus group discussions and interviews were utilised. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data in this study and the data was presented in themes. The findings from the study indicated that there was a need to increase the capacity of the Social Welfare Department. They also indicated the need for proper alignment of policy development and implementation, as well as effective services to be provided by the Department of Education, amongst other factors. It was therefore determined to be imperative that child care and protection services be treated as crucial intervention measures by both the public and the private sectors.

Keywords: HIV/AIDS, orphans and vulnerable children; poverty, protection, social welfare

INTRODUCTION

Orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) have no reliable social safety networks to depend upon in order to adequately manage the risks to which they are exposed daily (Karimi & Maingi, 2019). The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates that there are 153 million children who are orphans. Furthermore, 263 million children and youths are out of school and 53 per cent of them are girls (Fanzo et al., 2019). With regard to health, the World Bank estimates that 69 million children suffer from malnutrition. In addition, 66 million children globally attend classes hungry across developing countries, with 23 million from Africa (UNICEF, 2018a). The extent of the vulnerability of the OVC in Zimbabwe has been on the increase (Skinner et al., 2006). Zimbabwe's Demographic Health Survey (ZDHS, 2005/2006) shows that although the country has high levels of primary school enrolment of 90 per cent, only 24 per cent of children aged 13-18 years attend secondary school (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2007). School drop-out is more prevalent in the poorest households, with dropout attributed to, among other factors, the inability to pay school fees, the need to augment household labour, and caring for sick parents or younger siblings (CSO, 2007; USAID, 2009). The National AIDS Council (2006) report alludes that more than 1.3 million children have been orphaned by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and 50 000 households are headed by children below the age of 18 years due to HIV/AIDS in Zimbabwe. It has been reported that children affected by HIV and AIDS are twice as likely to drop out of school (UNICEF and Government of Zimbabwe (GoZ), 2005; Zimbabwe Vulnerability Assessment Committee (ZIMVAC), 2005). However, the ZDHS (2005/6) indicated an insignificant disadvantage for orphaned children with respect to primary school attendance, with 89 per cent attending school compared to 91 per cent of other children.

These surveys were key sources of information on OVC, as they provided a vivid picture with regard to the extent of the challenges as far as orphanhood and vulnerability is concerned. Other data sources were not adequate and comprehensive, as they excluded crucial information and statistics on vulnerable children and challenges in rendering effective services to this vulnerable group. UNICEF & GoZ (2005) state that other data sources also demonstrated poor reporting of sexual offences and other abuses as far as orphaned and vulnerable children were concerned (UNICEF, 2006). With the high levels of orphanhood and child vulnerability, it is imperative that stakeholders are concerned with child welfare and appropriately evaluate the needs associated with child vulnerability in order to inform the planning and distribution of resources.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study the population consisted of OVC, Non-Government Organisation (NGO) personnel, social workers and community members. OVC in this study encompassed orphans, non-orphans who were also vulnerable, and those without access to basic services. The study incorporated OVC who received assistance from Save the Children (SC) Zimbabwe and those who were not beneficiaries of SC's programmes. The population was also comprised of NGO personnel, representatives from the Ministry of Social Welfare and community members in the Marondera District. The sample was selected using two non-probability sampling methods, which were purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling was particularly relevant in exploring and deeply understanding the phenomenon under study. In order to trace additional participants, the researchers used snowball sampling by asking one informant to recommend other suitable informants for interviewing. In total, five OVC (three males and two females), three NGO personnel, three social workers, three members of the Community Mothers group, as well as three members of the Fight Club participated in the interviews. Two focus group discussions (FGDs) were held. The first one had fifteen participants and the second had ten.

Research entry was sought through written communication whereby the researcher, through formal letters, requested permission to access the research population. The purpose of such was to ensure that informed consent was obtained to access participants who included inter alia OVC, NGO personnel and community members. Data was collected using interviews consisting of open-ended questions, focus group discussions (FGDs), and relevant documents that were consulted in that regard. Documents such as strategic plans, policies, reports and brochures from SC and the government were used to supplement the information collected from the interviews. To ensure validity as far as the data was concerned, interviews were conducted with four key informants, two from the Ministry of Social Welfare and Development and two from SC. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data in this study. The data obtained was analysed in terms of its emerging themes and sub-themes. It was presented in interview excerpts.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The following section discusses the empirical findings from the study.

The Zimbabwe Context

In 2015, after a period of economic recovery between 2010 to 2014, the Zimbabwean economy saw a decline in its Gross Domestic Product due to continued legislative and institutional

reforms which saw the economy beginning a downward trend. The fiscal deficit widened from 8.5 per cent in 2016 to 15.2 per cent in 2017, and was projected in 2018 (World Bank, 2018).

An OVC interviewed in the Marondera district asserted that: *“In the Zimbabwean context right now, whether you are an orphan or not, you are still a vulnerable child because some of the basic needs are not being met, especially during the current prevailing situation where the government is not doing enough to protect the interest of the general population”* (In-depth interview No. 1).

As Tendler (1997:1) noted, the existence of a weak public institution led to inefficient operations which were incapable of combating poverty. This resulted in a situation whereby the state became increasingly unable to perform its basic function of providing social services. Many factors that contributed to the poor socio-economic status included the deterioration of the economy to different degrees, including the cumulative effects of the government’s failure to tackle the budget since the beginning of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (Gibbon, 1995). Evidently the OVC experienced problems in accessing basic services due to the prevailing socio-economic crisis. One of the community members in the study had this to say:

“With the current situation, everyone is working towards getting their next meal. The community will not be able to give you material assistance. They only refer you to some people who can assist you but you can say, as a community, we assist each other” (In-depth interview No. 12).

The failure of the state to act as a safety net when it came to addressing issues regarding orphans and vulnerability led to the growing importance to save the children. Dashwood (1996) posited that it was in fact the ruling elite that furthered the neo-liberal hegemony by continuously failing to protect the poor from the socio-economic crisis. Although HIV and AIDS programmes had been in existence in Marondera, the OVC had not been well catered for. The following participants had this to say:

“When programming started on HIV and AIDS, the focus was only on the adults regardless of the possibility that the People Living With HIV/AIDS (PLWH) could also infect their own children. In that case, there has to be a strategy to look at children living with HIV and AIDS. As such, it has been a long time for these orphans and vulnerable children to be recognised” (In-depth interview No. 7).

Similarly, another government representative mentioned that *“there are not enough health facilities and funds and there will never be enough. We have always talked about child-friendly budgets that would cater for the OVC and so forth, and I feel that we still have a long way to go until that is really achieved”* (In-depth interview No. 5).

These participants revealed that the failure of the government to address the needs of children as far as HIV/AIDS programmes were concerned had serious repercussions for the OVC. In this regard, the vacuum created by the state has been filled by SC. According to the performance failure theory by Esman & Uphoff (1984), NGOs emerged to satisfy the residual unsatisfied demand for public goods in society. NGOs emerged when the government or the market could not provide public goods for those in dire need, or serve the citizens’ general interests. State failure created a situation in which NGOs emerged as novel responses to different types of problems, especially social problems regarding child care and protection. What followed the failure of the Zimbabwean state was a series of events that plunged the country into desperate poverty. A positive development came in 2009 when the government authorised the use of more stable foreign currencies (e.g. United States Dollars, Euros, South African Rands). The government adopted the United States Dollar for all of its transactions (USAID, 2009). Although these measures helped to stabilise the economy at some point,

ordinary Zimbabweans, for whom hard currencies were hard to come by, were largely ignored, therefore resulting in the increase of poverty levels.

Incapacity of the Social Welfare Department

The failure of the Social Welfare Department to cater for the needs of the OVC led to the growing importance of SC and other NGOs in Marondera, as far as addressing the needs of the OVC were concerned. According to one of the interviewees:

“To some extent, for instance in the Department of Social Welfare, we are so limited. We don’t go to outreach, we don’t advertise our programmes and, at times, we are not aware of the problems being faced by OVC in the community. Clients come with a lot of their problems and we therefore may not be doing enough” (In-depth interview No. 9).

It was clear that the inability of the Social Welfare Department to operate efficiently in Marondera was a cause for concern in addressing the needs of the OVC. The Department of Social Welfare was expected to deal with the needs of the OVC but it lacked resources. This incapacity to deal with the problems faced by the OVC rendered the NGOs increasingly significant. With regard to the incapacity of the government to deal with the social problems, an interviewee had this to say:

“There is a need to capacitate the district Social Services Department so that it will be in a better position to tackle the problems faced by OVC because, at times, we lack transport which is mostly an important element when we are talking of OVC. At times we need to go for home and monitoring visits, but without transportation we cannot do all that. There is a need therefore to capacitate the district Social Services officers so that they can be effective” (In-depth interview No. 8).

In the face of very limited human capacity, the social workers in Marondera’s capacity to deal with important aspects of support required to address the needs of the OVC was severely compromised. The social worker quoted above outlined the difficulties faced by the Department of Social Work in this regard. She acknowledged their pivotal role in child protection, but bemoaned the fact that the department found it impossible to do the necessary follow ups – a gap that was necessarily filled by NGOs. In fact, the majority of the participants revealed that the lack of resources on the part of the state had led to the increasing intervention of NGOs, such as SC, in the provision for the needs of the OVC. Some of the participants stated the following in this regard:

“Resources are a constant challenge; they are never enough. Sometimes we have to take in some of the OVC in need because the foster homes and orphan care centres are full to capacity” (In-depth interview No. 16);

and

“Resources are not enough and they will never be enough. We have always talked about child- friendly budgets and so forth, and I feel we still have a long way to go until that is really achieved” (In-depth interview No. 5).

Lack of resources on the part of the state left a huge gap which needed to be filled. Dhlembeu (2004) earlier reported that the Department of Social Welfare was not orphan-friendly, mainly due to a lack of human or financial resources to deal with the excessive numbers of the OVC. This unsatisfied demand for public goods left by the government or market failure encouraged the rise of NGOs. NGOs could, therefore, provide for unsatisfied needs such as those associated with health care, social work and education services for the OVC.

Problems in the Department of Education

One of the research participants said, in this regard, that:

“Lack of funding is a serious problem. For instance, while the Basic Education Assistance Module right now is catering for primary schools, those who are attending secondary schools cannot gain access to education due to lack of funding. When an OVC finishes grade seven, he/she cannot proceed to secondary school because the government does not cater for further education due to a lack of funds” (In-depth interview No. 8).

Empirical evidence showed that the Department of Education did not have enough resources to ensure that the OVC had access to secondary education, leading to more children dropping out of school after their primary education. Despite the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) and the Department of Education’s aim to reduce the number of vulnerable children dropping out of school due to economic hardships, the provision of education services was low and there was evidence of limited success for those most in need of educational funding (GoZ 2006; Wood and Goba, 2011). Although some programmes, like BEAM, had been initiated to ensure the protection and care of the OVC, there was a lot that needed to be done since not all of the children were benefitting because the resources were not enough for the number of the OVC in the Marondera district. More than 165 000 orphans and vulnerable children were failing to access the Basic Education Assistance Module (BEAM) owing to bureaucracy and inadequate resources (Chinhara, 2016). Furthermore, a lot of the OVC had fallen through the safety nets put in place because of implementation challenges. Irrespective of promising programmes such as BEAM, the state had not been successful in ensuring increased accessibility and this could simply be attributed to the incorrect or ineffective implementation of policies and legislations. As a result, there was a need for the successful implementation of these programmes so that they served their intended purpose and addressed pre-determined challenges to achieve their objectives.

Empirical evidence from this study revealed that, despite positive development in other areas, the education sector continued to experience challenges that threatened the rights of the children in Marondera, specifically their right to education. The cost of education remained prohibitive and led to many children dropping out of school and failing to register for national examinations. On this issue, a key informant said:

“For an ordinary Zimbabwean, it’s very difficult to send children to school. The costs of school fees, uniforms and basic food stuffs are still exorbitant” (In-depth interview No. 11).

Another major educational challenge revealed in this study was that although SC had continued to provide tuition for the OVC, children were not getting lessons at school because of the inability of the government to adequately pay teachers’ salaries, and for this reason a number of informal schools had sprouted up.

Lack of Alignment between Legislation and the Realisation of Children’s Rights

On this issue, one of the research participants argued that:

“We have the Orphan Care Policy which has culminated into the National Action Plan. In terms of legislation, the department is the custodian of the legislation governing children’s protection. We have the criminal procedure and the Codification Act for child offenders, in addition to the Maintenance Act and the Guardianship of Minors Act. However, through lack of funding, the projects fail and, therefore, a lot still needs to be done” (In-depth interview No. 8).

Although Zimbabwe had national programmes and policies that catered for the OVC, empirical evidence revealed that a lack of consistent revisions to align legislation, inadequate financial resources and the absence of commitment in the implementation of these programmes negatively affected the OVC in terms of their needs being addressed. The policies just appeared on paper and were not applied in practice. The pursuit of the realisation of children's rights by the state frequently failed to live up to its rhetoric. For this reason, the Zimbabwean context resulted in the huge problem of mass orphanhood and the vulnerability of children. Owing to the socio-economic and political crisis, NGOs played a prominent role in caring for the OVC. Zimbabwe has engaged in piecemeal child law reform. Ringson (2019) posited that much had been said about children's rights in Zimbabwe, but little was known about its impact on the support of the OVC within the rural communities of the country. There was therefore a need to engage in a well-planned and fully-funded child law review and reform process.

Lack of Identity Documents

The state was responsible for the provision of all forms of identity documents but evidence from this study revealed that it had failed to deliver, leading to many lacking proper documentation. It was also revealed that acquiring birth certificates for the OVC in Marondera remained difficult as the Registrar General's Office and regulations governing the issue of birth registrations had to be adhered to. One key informant complained that:

"The government should address the issues of registration of birth. Some of us find it difficult to access assistance from the NGOs and the government just because we don't have the identity documents of our parents" (In-depth interview No. 2).

Similarly, another key informant mentioned that:

"The government should tackle the issue of birth certificates or registration, especially where either of the parents is no longer there or dead, for those who do not have any form of identity documents, because some of the OVC face difficulties to access services available due to lack of birth certificates. The government should help them access the birth certificates or allow their relatives to help them to register their birth" (In-depth interview No. 11).

Without a birth certificate a child was disadvantaged or disabled from realising his/her rights which were guaranteed by Article 6 of the African Charter, which sought to ensure that, upon birth, every child was entitled to a name, birth certificate and nationality. In a similar manner, Yates (2003); Boniface & Rosenberg (2019) posited that without any form of identification, it became difficult for the OVC to access the services meant for them. Lack of birth registration documentation and proof of residence in red tape institutions posed obstacles to accessing the benefits awarded to the OVC. The issue of 'legal age' was of great concern in the inclusion of programmes which assisted the OVC. The inclusion by some agencies of adolescents could be just and reasonable. The lack of legal recognition was both a physical and an emotional hindrance to the OVC. As minors, these children were unable to claim and register for services. The socio-economic context limited the possibilities for the OVC to acquire the appropriate services meant for them. Available financial resources were diminished due to the hyper-inflationary environment and resources which did not match the rising numbers of the OVC. The Social Welfare Department, therefore, did not have the flexibility to effectively respond to the needs of the OVC.

CONCLUSION

Statutory support for the OVC was limited and the Department of Social Welfare did not have the capacity to care for the huge numbers of OVC. While it was acknowledged that Zimbabwe had a wide range of laws and policies in place to support children, such laws were fashioned on the basis of a case-oriented welfare approach. The existing legislation was inappropriate and had proven to be inadequate for dealing with the large numbers of OVC. The rationale identified for the inadequacy was the incorrect implementation of the laws and policies, resulting in their ineffectiveness. Zimbabwe had a promising comprehensive National Plan of Action in support of the OVC. However, policy and implementation were two distinct processes. It was the application, not formulation, of policies that presented the real challenges. The lack of linkages between the policies and the existing legislation created gaps in social services provision, therefore, there is a need to align the two to ensure effective implementation.

The findings from the study indicated that participation of the OVC was crucial to the quality and credibility of the services provided by the NGOs. In order to design and develop meaningful and effective responses to the needs of the OVC, it is important that NGOs make the OVC the centre of the programmes they initiate. SC's overall strategic vision is based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), in which children's rights to participate are promoted by listening to them and supporting their influence. Child participation is facilitated by the meaningful participation of children in matters that concern them. Save the Children has also managed to strengthen local participation in order to fulfill children's rights, including local communities and the intended beneficiaries in programmes pertaining to them, as well as in matters that concern them.

The study further revealed that funding the District Child Protection Committees (DCPC) through local authorities contributed to the sustainability of programmes and ensured that funds were used for the benefit of the affected children. Having a child protection focal person within the local authority was critical in maintaining effective collaboration among the stakeholders in Marondera. This enabled the stakeholders in Marondera to share information regularly and to document the district's child protection efforts, resulting in comprehensive, integrated child care and protection services

In line with the findings presented in this study, it is further recommended that government's efforts be concentrated on redressing the deepening poverty at the national level and policing the implementation of policies in order to protect the rights of children, especially the OVC. Free social services should be accessible to children living in difficult circumstances. The study revealed that some of the children were orphaned as a result of their parents dying from AIDS-related illnesses; such children need care and support. In addition, policies and initiatives from various NGOs and the Departments of Education and of Social Development have to be developed and implemented in order to support children from child-headed families. NGOs need to work with the Department of Social Welfare to ensure that Child Protection Committees at all levels have the capacity to deliver effective monitoring and oversight services to address the needs of the OVC.

It is important to build the capacity of the DCPC so that its ability to effectively monitor child protection organisations, as well as to ensure child participation is enhanced. NGOs need to improve or scale up their activities in the rural areas. The reason for this is that there is a dire need for NGO's services in rural communities, as a high percentage of the OVC are located there. Strategies to improve collaboration between rural and urban districts are necessary in

order to reach out to the OVC who have not been reached by NGO services. NGOs should employ more qualified personnel that have the capacity to deliver much needed services. NGOs possess a deeper understanding of the socio-economic challenges experienced by the OVC, therefore, they are in a better position to design and deliver tailor-made services aimed at addressing those challenges and improving the lives of those children. They also need to source more donations, as the issues of funding and resources have been a barrier or obstacles in NGOs' effectiveness as far as rendering comprehensive services is concerned. Welfare departments also need to develop collaborative relations with NGOs in the process of assisting OVC.

Welfare departments need to transform from social welfare service delivery units to "development" agencies in order to ensure that there is an attitudinal change which is more oriented towards empowering communities. The Department of Social Welfare should develop strong links with the communities, providing inputs such as technical expertise, administrative support and financial assistance. With the help of NGOs, the Welfare Department should also take a proactive role in supporting community strategies by encouraging and supporting child care in the communities. This may include recruiting, training and supervising support persons in communities so that they can provide services to their respective communities with regard to caring and protecting their children. It is crucial that OVC children are provided with the platform to interact with each other. In this way, they can share experiences and become sources of emotional support and empathy for each other. Networking among the OVC can be a means by which children in difficult circumstances voice their concerns regarding the way society or the state treats them.

It is a concern of the researchers that the conclusions and recommendations are more centred or focused on the issue of the NGO's ineffectiveness or failure to address the issue of the OVC. The reason this is a concern is that child care and protection are the responsibility of the state. The state has the responsibility of safeguarding the interests of its citizens with, of course, assistance from or collaboration with stakeholders such as NGO's and other child protection organisations. The topic is challenging in that it addresses the needs of orphans and vulnerables and not the NGO's challenges or inadequacies in addressing the needs. It is therefore important that the reader balance the content of the document so that they are aligned with the topic of the study. The first part of this document focused on the emerging need for NGOs and their effectiveness in addressing the socio-economic needs, therefore hailing as effective their strategies and programmes. However, the conclusion and recommendation part of the study present conflicting points of view, for example indicating that NGO's need to ensure alignment and increased access.

By reading though the conclusion and recommendations of this study, one may simply assume or conclude that it is the the sole responsibility of NGOs to provide child care and protection services, and that the state is merely there to assist NGOs. It should be clear that NGOs emerged as a result of the increased need and failure on the part of the state to render effective and comprehensive services. Therefore, the state should ensure that they strengthen their partnerships and collaborative efforts through increased funding and support of NGO's and other child protection organisations. Another concern is the issue of the responses of the participants or interviewees. As indicated in some of the comments, the responses addressed a different issue from the literature used to support the arguments. This simply raises a question as to the validity and reliability of the data collection instruments.

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