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## AIDS AND THE VERY YOUNG CHILD

**Mitigating the impact of AIDS on the very young child. The successes and challenges of a poor rural South African community's efforts to meet the rights and needs of very young children made vulnerable through poverty and AIDS.**

**TREE's integrated approach to early childhood development (ECD) in a deeply impoverished rural community in South Africa.**

### EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

It is generally accepted that the first 6 years of life are a critically important period of growth and development, that forms the foundation for the achievement of future individual potential. To ensure this foundation is in place, it is essential that we meet the young child's rights to survival, protection, development and participation. These rights are severely compromised by the twin scourges of poverty and HIV and AIDS. **The least research has been done on the impact of HIV and AIDS on the very young child in this critical developmental phase of life.**

Currently in South Africa, 61% of young children live in dire poverty, with 23% stunted through malnutrition. 36% die from preventable diseases and South Africa's child mortality figures for children under 5 have doubled since 1997, largely as a result of the AIDS pandemic. Less than 50% have birth certificates, so cannot access state grants, and less than 16% have access to any form of early childhood development programme.

### TREE - Training and Resources in Early Education

TREE, a registered South African Non-Profit Organisation, was founded in 1984 to focus on finding ways to help marginalised young children have opportunities for early childhood development. It is now one of the largest early childhood development organisations in Southern Africa, with a staff of 60, mostly women, who work in deep rural communities throughout the provinces of KwaZulu-Natal and adjacent Eastern Cape, to build the capacity of parents, caregivers and communities to meet vulnerable young children's rights.



**TREE's Vision** is to see a nation and communities that value and affirm young children and give them opportunities to develop to their potential, in line with their developmental rights and needs.

**TREE's key activities** are:

- Community development focussing on the young child
- Training community based pre-school personnel
- Parenting programmes
- Making toys and educational equipment from waste
- Providing resources for early childhood development programmes
- Advocacy and lobbying for the rights of the very young child.

TREE works within the Children's Rights framework, and believes in an integrated approach to early childhood development that sees the young child firmly rooted in family and community. There is a strong focus on HIV and AIDS, which is integrated into all TREE's programmes.

TREE is represented on the provincial Advisory Council for Children, vested in Office of the KZN Premier, part of a national South African strategy to address children's rights.

#### **UNICEF/UNAIDS/USAID**

TREE also subscribes to the UNICEF/UNAIDS 5 Key Strategies to mitigate the impact of HIV/AIDS on children:

1. Strengthening the capacity of families to protect and care for orphans and other children made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS.
2. Mobilizing and strengthening community-based responses.
3. Ensuring access to essential services for orphans and vulnerable children.
4. Ensuring that governments protect the most vulnerable children.
5. Raising awareness to create a supportive environment for children affected by HIV/AIDS.

#### **TREE's Kusaselihle Integrated Early Childhood Development Initiative (KIECDI) in Nkandla**

In 2004, TREE, in partnership with UNICEF and the Nkandla Municipality, initiated the Kusaselihle IECDI programme in this deep rural, poverty nodal area of KwaZulu-Natal. The particular focus was on mobilising the community to better meet the rights and needs of vulnerable young children, infected or affected by the HIV and AIDS pandemic, through community based pre-schools and at household level.

#### **Nkandla Municipality**

Nkandla is a huge area with high levels of unemployment, poverty and HIV and AIDS. It does however have a municipality committed to achieving its Vision of "A Municipality Fit for Children". This commitment stems from the Nkandla Mayor's Office and has resulted in the establishment of a Children's Rights Desk, in line with the South African government's

vision of a framework to integrate services for children. The municipality have now employed the Kusaselihle IECDI Project Coordinator to run the Children's Rights Desk.

After UNICEF supported the municipality to clarify its vision through a HRAP (Human Rights Approach to Programming) process, TREE initiated the establishment of a Multi-Sectoral Stakeholders Forum with representatives from district Departments of Education, Social Welfare, Health, Agriculture, Justice, Police, Home Affairs; municipal representatives and councillors; Childcare Forums; UNICEF and TREE; traditional leaders (chiefs); NGO's & CBO's and community development workers. This Forum meets bi-monthly to monitor and track children's access to basic social services and resolve challenges. TREE has established a register of vulnerable children for referral, tracking and follow up.

### **Community Childcare Forums**

Using a participatory rural appraisal approach, Community Childcare Forums have been established in two wards, Ngono and Ekukhanyeni. They are comprised of representatives from community based preschools, Family Facilitators (who work at household level), traditional leaders (chiefs and izindunas) and local councillors. They played a key role in selecting the Family Facilitators, as well as identifying particularly vulnerable households for intervention. They monitor and track progress and report 'blockages' in social service delivery to the Nkandla Multi-sectoral Stakeholders' Forum.

### **Community Based Pre-Schools as resources in AIDS affected communities**

TREE is developing a model of using the extensive network of community based pre-schools to become centres of care and support for vulnerable young children and their families in the community.

Currently, most of these pre-schools are not registered and receive no state resources or support. This means that they are generally poor in quality, the teachers are not trained, there is little in the way of toys and equipment, and the programme does not provide an exciting, active learning environment for the children. The South African government currently spends less than 1% of the budgets of the Departments of Education and Social Development on early childhood development programmes. However, there is commitment to increase resources for programmes for young children.

TREE's programme in this area focuses on building capacity at 18 community based pre-schools in the above two wards of Nkandla. Strategies include training teachers to provide quality early childhood development programmes, manage their learning site and create educational toys and equipment from waste.

A key component is assisting the community based pre-school develop strategies to identify and reach out to vulnerable children and families in the community. Each pre-school has a comprehensive HIV and AIDS Policy that focuses on inclusion, non-discrimination, confidentiality and universal precautions. They are supported to offer the following services and information to their community on:

- Access to basic social services
- Health and immunisation
- Nutrition

- HIV/AIDS
- Obtaining documents and grants

They also provide a venue for:

- Information meetings on issues pertaining to young children
- Parenting programmes focusing on meeting young children's developmental rights & needs
- Toy making
- Department of Health immunisation and health campaigns
- 'Open Days' - Inclusion of vulnerable children for opportunities to play, develop and learn

South Africa's Department of Social Development has shown great interest in this model as a potential strategy to mitigate the impact of HIV and AIDS on young children, and a comprehensive document has recently been released.

### **Family Facilitators provide support at household level**

Attached to each pre-school are 21 Family Facilitators, who receive a small stipend for the services they provide. Household entry is through a toy kit and play with the children, and encouraging caregivers to join the play. Once relationships of trust have been established, they support vulnerable families through C-IMCI and 16 Key Family Practices, a World Health Organisation strategy that has been adopted by South Africa's Department of Health.

Such support includes:

- Obtaining documents and state grants
- Food parcels/food gardens/nutrition
- Health, growth monitoring, immunisation, Vitamin A supplementation
- Hygiene & safety in the home
- Psycho-social needs of children
- Opportunities to play, laugh, learn, sing and dance
- Managing childhood illnesses
- Promoting 'know your status'
- Promoting PMTCT, VCT and ART, especially paediatric ART
- Guardianship and wills
- Supporting older children return to school

### **Family Facilitators**

The FF's are provided with training in:

- C-IMCI and 16 Key Family Practices
- Providing psycho-social support, especially through play
- Play and opportunities for development
- Accessing basic social services
- Health
- Nutrition
- PMTCT, VCT and ART, "Know Your Status"

- Food gardening
- Child rights

### **Impact on the community**

The Kusaselihle IECDI programme has had an enormously beneficial impact on vulnerable young children and their families/households in the Ngono and Ekukhanyeni wards of Nkandla. More than 1500 vulnerable households have been supported, and over 3900 children. Over 1500 identity documents and birth certificates have been accessed, and more than 500 state grants. Food gardens and savings clubs have been established. Families are accessing basic social services. The sense of 'ubuntu' or a caring community has been re-awakened. Children are seen laughing, playing and interacting. A sense of hope has been regained!

### **A community response to the impact of HIV/AIDS on young children:**

TREE believes that:

- Communities KNOW what needs to be done for their young orphans and vulnerable children
- It is governments' job to provide the following:
  - An enabling environment
  - Capacity building
  - Financial resources
  - Easy access to basic social services

**THEN COMMUNITIES WILL SAY, "WE DID IT OURSELVES"!**

### **CHALLENGES FACED!**

- **Sustainability & resourcing strategies.**
- Stigma mitigates against the early identification of HIV+ children at risk and early commencement & support of paediatric ART.
- Recognising, supporting, rewarding and paying community based family workers (volunteers?).
- Building community capacity to manage such programmes & resources.
- The type, frequency and cost of technical support required.
- Effective monitoring & evaluation systems.
- Costing complex, integrated community based ECD programmes.
- Advocacy campaign for government to adopt a minimum package of services for young children.
- Integration of best practice integrated ECD models into government policies and programmes for service delivery for young children.
- Identifying key components for scale up.
- Supporting governments to provide the framework & resources to take such programmes to scale to ensure impact on a critical mass of vulnerable young children.

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**TREE DIRECTOR** **July 2008**

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