

Better targeted care, support and protection for children affected by AIDS needed to stem the tide

TORONTO/NEW YORK, 14 August 2006 – The AIDS epidemic continues to affect children disproportionately and in many harmful ways, making them more vulnerable than other children, leaving many of them orphaned and threatening their survival, says a new report by UNICEF, UNAIDS, and the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR).

According to Africa's Orphaned and Vulnerable Generations: Children Affected by AIDS, 12 million of the 48 million orphans in sub-Saharan Africa have lost one or both parents to AIDS. In Zambia, 20 per cent of all children are orphans, 50 per cent of them due to AIDS, leaving a population of roughly 10 million to support over 1 million orphans.

In the most affected countries it is proving increasingly difficult for surviving parents or their extended families to protect and care for the expanding number of orphans and vulnerable children.

"President Bush's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief has brought increased attention to families and to children living with and affected by HIV/AIDS," said Kent Hill, Assistant Administrator of the Bureau for Global Health at USAID. "To date, the Emergency Plan has supported care for three million people, including 1.2 million orphans and vulnerable children. With the number of AIDS orphans still growing, we must accelerate this progress. By strengthening critical programs at the local level, the international community can ensure that orphaned and vulnerable children receive the care, support and protection they need."

The situation of children affected by AIDS varies significantly across families, communities and countries. The report shows that, compared to other children, they are at higher risk of missing out on school, living in homes with insufficient food, and suffering from anxiety. They are also at higher risk of HIV infection, especially adolescent girls and young women in the 15-24 age-group.

"Responding to the needs of children affected by AIDS is complex. The data presented in this report will lead to better responses, reflecting local realities and meeting local needs," said Michel Sidibe, Director of the UNAIDS Country and Regional Support Department.

The impact of AIDS on vulnerable children will last for generations in sub-Saharan Africa. International agencies, non-government organizations and all other actors need to do more to support the responses of the worst-affected countries.

Some challenges can be addressed locally with support to caregivers, extended families and communities and with measures to counter the stigma and discrimination that surrounds AIDS. But others, such as ensuring that children affected by AIDS can go to school, have access to health care, receive protection against abuse and that their families receive financial support for looking after them require commitment, resources and service provision from both national governments and civil society and the international community.

"We must do more to help. Millions of children affected by AIDS are out of school, growing up alone, vulnerable to poverty, marginalization and discrimination.

Children who have lost parents and care-givers are left without their first line of defense. One of the most effective ways to keep these children safe is to invest in education, especially for girls," said UNICEF Deputy Executive Director Rima Salah present at the conference.

"In keeping with the theme of the Toronto International AIDS conference - 'Time to Deliver,' - we have a moral obligation to act with no delay."

The report was launched as part of the UNITE FOR CHILDREN, UNITE AGAINST AIDS campaign which aims to put the missing face of children at the centre of the HIV/AIDS agenda and serve as a platform for united efforts to stop the spread of the AIDS epidemic and its impact on children .