

## Article

# Enhancing foster parent-orphan relationships in rural community based orphanages

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**In the face of increasing number of orphans in Southern Africa, local community-based orphan programs are being considered as important conduits for social integration of orphaned and vulnerable children. The purpose of this study was to ascertain social and behavioral characteristics of foster parents that promote relationships with orphaned and vulnerable children. Focus group discussions were conducted with 30 foster parents drawn purposively from Chimanimani District of Manicaland Province in Zimbabwe to qualitatively explore their expectations. Results of the study showed that the majority of foster parents in the community based initiative were middle-aged women. Criteria considered important by foster parents selection were the individual's social standing, common experience with orphans, ability to inculcate life skills to orphans and responsiveness of the foster parent. The results point to the need to involve local institutions in the selection of appropriate foster parents for sustainable orphans-foster parent relationships.**

**Key words:** foster parents, orphans, community-based initiatives, qualitative

## Background

Over the last decade, Sub Saharan Africa has remained the region with the highest levels of HIV/AIDS infection in the world (UNAIDS, 2003). According to recent estimates, there were approximately 40 million people infected with the HIV virus in 2006 with 60% of the total residing in Sub Sahara (Sandasi, 2006). Concomitantly, orphaned and vulnerable children (OVC) have become an increasingly large percentage of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa due to the AIDS epidemic (Zimmerman, 2005).

In Zimbabwe, although the HIV/AIDS infestation rates have been declining over the last 5 years (estimated at 15.6%, according to the Central Statistics Office, 2007), the number of children orphaned due to HIV/AIDS is still considered to be high. As number of studies have attempted to assess the impact of the pandemic on the society using social and economic costs that are both quantifiable and non-quantifiable. Using, sampling methodology, Central Statistics Office (CSO) (1998), showed that at least 1 in 70 households surveyed in Zimbabwe were headed

by a child. Furthermore, related studies re-vealed that orphans suffer loss in many areas of family that lead to the following: - depression, malnutrition, homelessness, starvation, crime etc.

Various social safety nets have been developed in the country to respond to the problems being faced by orphaned and vulnerable children (OVC). At the national level, the government of Zimbabwe promulgated the National HIV/AIDS policy to provide a conducive environment for the operation of stakeholders that include non-governmental organizations, communities and civil society. The multi-sectoral approach to HIV/AIDS noted in the policy document has seen an upsurge in community-based orphanages throughout the country that seek to reintegrate orphaned and vulnerable children into the mainstream society.

## Responses to the orphan problem in Chimanimani district

Chimanimani District is one of the areas in Zimbabwe with a high number of orphaned and vulnerable children. Located in Manicaland Province, the District had a popu-

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**Table 1:** Population distribution by orphanhood status and district

Orphanhood status	Chimanimani N (%)
Both parents alive	38 541 (69.5)
Mother dead	2 378 (4.3)
Father dead	10 696 (19.3)
Both parents dead	3 847 (6.9)
<b>Total</b>	<b>55 462</b>

lation of 107 117 people consisting of 29 807 households (OVC Census Report, 2005). In 2005, the district had about 55000 orphans (Table 1).

The researchers studied a community based orphanage program in Chimanimani district. The project seeks to strengthen the capacity of the local institutions to adequately address the physical and psychosocial needs of orphans in a sustainable, integrated and cost effective manner.

### The problem

Enhancing the quality of foster parent-orphan relationships has often been identified as key to the successful integration of orphans into mainstream socio-economic activity. Lack of fluidity of this relationship can lead to social anathemas such as orphanhood juvenile delinquency. Thus it becomes important to understand the desirable characteristics of foster mothers that can enhance the re-integration process of orphans into mainstream society.

### Objective of the study

The main objective of this study was to determine the qualities that are desirable in foster mothers that promote orphan-foster mother relationships in community based orphanages in the district.

### Literature review

#### What entails foster parenting?

Literature on foster care of parenting acknowledges two types of foster care viz. informal and formal foster care. Formal foster care is commonly practiced in developed countries such as the USA, UK and Australia. In Britain, the British Agencies for Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) conceptualize fostering as a way of providing a family life for children who cannot live with their own parents for a number of reasons and children will return to their parents once the problem has been solved. Johnson (2005) notes that in Uganda foster parenting is the placing of a child with a person who is not his or her parent or relative and who is willing to undertake the care and maintenance

of the child. Most agencies in developed countries indicate that selection of foster parents is strict. For instance, as Johnson (2005) notes in the UK, age, marital status, income and sexual orientation of the potential foster parent are not considered as important variables. However, before an orphan is integrated into a foster parent's home, training and preparation is usually conducted by recruiting agencies. Within the formal child-care system in South Africa, foster care is considered to be the preferred form of substitute care for children who cannot remain with their biological families and who are not available for adoption. According to Section 31(1) of the Constitution of South Africa, every person belonging to a cultural, religious or linguistic community the right to enjoy their culture, practice their religion and use their language. Children placed with foster parents with a different background from their own may be denied the right to enjoy their culture, or to practice their religion or to use their language. Thus, cultural considerations are important in ascertaining the nature of foster parents.

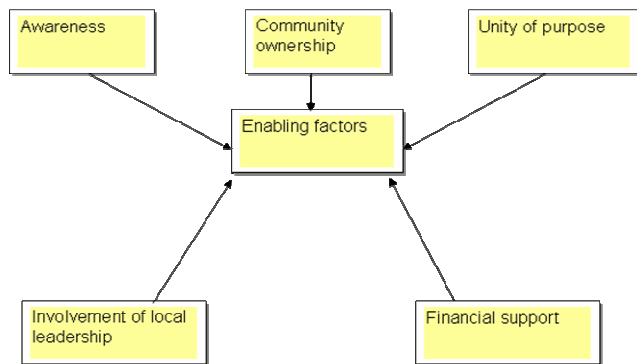
Informal fostering is a worldwide phenomenon however is more conspicuous in developing countries. The major difference between formal and informal fostering is that in the case of the latter no legal obligations are usually attached. It is quite evident in various parts of Africa. The extended family system is a conduit through which informal foster parenting takes place. Because of the strain to the extended family system due to HIV/AIDS, a number of development agencies have been building on the concept of informal fostering to capacitate communities to take care of orphaned and vulnerable children.

### Ideal characteristics of foster parents

Much of the literature on the ideal qualities of foster care of parenting has been done in the context of the developed country scenario. This is partly because in most developing countries where informal foster care is predominant, fostering of children takes place without a word being applied to orphans' situation (Johnson, 2005). Thus fostering takes place "unnoticed" as it is regarded a normal part of the lives of African communities. Orme et al. (2004) suggests that social, personal, relational characteristics are critical in enhancing emotional and behavioral adjustment of children. Other researches in foster parenting also showed that quality of parenting, quality of the home environment, parents, mental health, availability of the needed social support, education and income are essential considerations (Chase-Lansdale and Brooks-Gunn, 1995) (Figure 1).

### Community mobilization

Awareness raising and community mobilization are an important part of community based orphan care programmes. Sensitizing the community about the extent of the problem of orphans helps to trigger psychological



**Figure 1.** Underlying tenets of community based orphanages

readiness on the part of the community to come up with appropriate responses. Key community members for instance school authorities and church leadership are particularly encouraged to contribute to awareness raising. These members already command a lot of respect as people who hold influential positions in the community hence their involvement is likely to be very effective. Effective awareness raising should lead to the mobilization of various interested stakeholders that include donor agencies, non-governmental organizations, government ministries and local community institutions. Each and every one of these parties have got an important part to play hence the need to concert their efforts so that together they can achieve what neither could have alone. Whilst non-governmental organizations and government institutions may offer technical and material support, community members' contributions that might take the form of indigenous knowledge and labour cannot be overlooked. During this awareness-raising phase, community members who are interested in becoming involved in orphan care will also emerge. Community volunteers who constitute a very crucial part of the community based orphan care programme are normally pooled as a result of these efforts.

### Recruitment of community volunteers

Community volunteers whose main task is to make regular visits to orphan households are a most valuable resource in assisting children to remain within the community. Community volunteers already have the motivation as they have a social and moral obligation to offer assistance to the needy members of society. Key informants such as teachers can be very instrumental in identifying potential volunteers known to them.

Community volunteers are recruited through local churches and are chosen for their demonstrated concern for orphans. This system of recruitment is said to be effective as it draws volunteers who are not only reliable but command a lot of respect in the community the careful selection of volunteers is also essential to ensure that levels are retention is kept very high. The majority of vo-

lunteers are women who constitute 94% with men claiming the remaining 6% of the total number of volunteers. Men's involvement is said to be mostly in the supervision of female community volunteers than orphans care activities. This is normally the case because gender roles in Zimbabwe tend to confine women to do more of domestic chores and childcare than men.

### Enumeration and registration

Volunteers are trained in enumeration and assigned to count the orphans in their respective areas that normally consist of a 1-2 km radius from the volunteer's home. Key informants like kraal heads and church leadership should also be actively involved to ensure fairness in the enumeration process. Initially all identified orphans are recorded in the master register prior to the consideration of the neediest children. The prioritization process commences after the entry of identified orphans in the master register. Prioritization is an essential process that ensures that the neediest orphans are identified and that their needs are adequately catered for. Given that the number of orphaned children is quite high, prioritization is necessary to ensure that the limited resources are channeled towards the neediest children.

Some of the practical criteria used to identify children in need of care include:

- I. Children living on their own without adult supervision or attention.
- II. Children staying with a terminally ill parent.
- III. Children in households being looked after by an elderly grandparent.
- IV. Children in dirty or tattered clothes.
- V. Withdrawn appearance.
- VI. Shelter in poor state of repair
- VII. Lack of domestic animals or crops
- VIII. No food in the house / hut and no sign of recent fire for cooking.

### Visiting orphaned households

Following the prioritization process, volunteers are tasked to look after the identified orphan households. Their main responsibility is to offer support and advise to the caregivers in the given households, child headed households are given particular attention. During these visits, volunteers constantly undertake assessment of needs for the households that they visit. They also offer services such as cleaning, cooking, help in the fields as well as assisting a child to get medical attention in the case of illness. Psychological support through prayers and counseling of caregivers is also part of the community volunteers' responsibility. Older girls are also given similar support in the form of advice particularly on issues related to sexual and reproductive health.

**Table 2.** Representations by village

Village	Males	Females	Total
Ngatidane	1	9	10
Nechigonda	1	2	3
Murwanemhanga	1	3	4
Makandwa	1	12	13
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>30</b>

### Record keeping and feedback

Record keeping is also a necessary and important component of community based orphan care. Volunteers are trained to document details of each and every household they visit particularly those on Priority Register. Some of the details they record include that they talk to, what needs they observed, what action is needed for that particular household and what the volunteer did. Information is then recorded once every month to the supervisor at a site meeting that community leaders are encouraged to attend. Record keeping and reporting back has been found for be very essential as it helps to keep volunteers highly motivated and ensuring that the community is recognizing and appreciating their efforts. Equally important is the fact that this exercise also helps the supervisor to compare the level of support given to each household and where necessary discuss with the volunteers where visits are not consistent or inadequate. Further it also serves to maintain a high degree of solidarity within the volunteer group is also enhanced.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Research philosophy

Leedy (1980) argues that most researchers combine pure and applied research in the manner they feel that the *“ultimate goal is a study that is helpful in solving social problems and at the same time making a valuable contribution to the theoretical social-science literature”*. In this study, a largely qualitative research technique was used. According to Higson-Smith (1995), a qualitative research design entails studying objects, persons or events that cannot be quantified either due to their nature or the present non-availability of adequate measuring instruments or because their quantitative measurements would be meaningless to the research. In specific areas of social reality, purely qualitative research is often the most adequate method of investigation (Higson-Smith, 1995).

### Study site

The research was conducted at Chikwakwa primary school in Chimanimani District. Respondents were selected purposively from four villages of Chikwakwa ward

namely Nechigonda, Ngatidane, Makandwa and Murwanemhanga. The representations were as follows. Table 2. Other stakeholders who were attended the training workshop included the local headman, agricultural extension officer, and the school headmaster who provided the venue for the research.

### Data collection tools

FGDs, by their nature calls for trust building between communities and outsiders, so that respondents ‘open up’ and able to share their information. Basically, the FGDs served the purpose of letting the local people familiarize themselves with group discussions and to allow them to gain confidence that they can ‘teach’ outsiders about their environment and livelihoods (Schilderman, 2002). Issues that were discussed included:

- I. The characteristics of a good counselor
- II. Type and nature of activities that volunteer mothers are involved in on a day to day basis
- III. The problems/constraints that volunteer mothers are encountering
- IV. Community based solutions to the identified problems

Data was analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively by relating them to the objective of the study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### Conceptualization of foster parenting

The definition of volunteerism in the context of community based orphan care work has been a subject of considerable debate in the development work. Of particular interest is how the term is defined and applied from one area to the other, what is the role of these community volunteers and what is their source of motivation. A volunteer is defined as a person who pledges to assist materially, financially and emotionally orphans or children in difficult circumstances without being paid.

Under community based orphanages, volunteers were mostly women, aged 35 years and above, neighbors to these children, they belonged to the same community with these children, parents of these children’s friends, and they shared years of common experience with their deceased parents as such they feel obliged to respond and they are duty-bound to help the children.

### Responsibilities of foster parents (volunteers)

The main responsibilities of community volunteers included orphan visitation, orphan enumeration, identification and registration of orphans. Each volunteer regularly visited a given number of orphan households, on average ten to provide psychosocial support in the form of pray-

ers, organizing recreational events like Christmas parties and counseling, and also assist in the procurement of material support where necessary for things like washing soap, salt and matches. Projects in the villages to sustain orphans included goat, rabbit and honey production.

In grandparent or child headed households volunteers often performed practical tasks such as fetching water, firewood, sweeping the house, assist the sick to seek medical attention as well as encourage older siblings in child headed households to do some of these practical tasks. Community volunteers were also responsible for mobilizing resources for the orphans through weekly contributions, requesting for donations from their various churches and initiating income generating activities like petty trading, community gardens and soap making.

Similarity of services provided by foster parents can be drawn from South Africa's Community-based child care & support programme in Tekwane, which include regular home visits to ensure the psychological, physical, security and educational well-being of the children, legal and material assistance, counseling services, assistance with income generating projects, training and capacity building of community volunteers and training for potential foster parents (AIDS Africa Best Practice, 2002).

### **Desirable characteristics of volunteer parents as viewed by respondents**

Respondents highlighted a number of dimensions to enhance the quality of the foster mother-orphan relationships. These aspects are summarized in Table 3.

In developed countries, research on children and families identified a number of parental and familial characteristics that contribute to orphaned children's behavioral and emotional adjustment (Downey and Coyne, 1990). These include the quality of parenting, the quality of family functioning, the quality of marital functioning (in families with two parents), and the quality of the home environment, parents' mental health, and the availability of needed social support. There are also some researches indicating the importance of some of these factors among foster children and families (Orme and Buehler, 2001).

Results of this study showed that the foster parents' social standing, ability to educate orphans (provision of guidance) and communication skills were considered important variables in foster parents. Respondents further noted that foster parents should be imbued with love for orphans to enhance their relationship. However, it was argued that the religious orientation of foster parents was important in the exhibition of compassion and love for orphaned and vulnerable children. These findings are consistent with (Wolins, 1963; Cohon and Cooper, 1993) who noted that foster parents with more problems and therefore poor social standing are less likely to be approved to foster and more likely to discontinue fostering earlier. In Ethiopia, a follow-up study on community

based foster homes demonstrated that children growing up in community-based homes were able, provided their foster parent(s) are respected members of the community, to develop vital networks of support and competence necessary to equip them to face adversity to a certain degree (Jareg, 2005).

Results also underscored the need for foster parents to be able to teach orphans. This notion is also suggested in literature on foster parenting. According to Orme (2001), foster parent education is important to fostering.

### **Challenges faced by foster parents**

Some of the problems faced by volunteer parents included lack of money to buy school uniforms and pay school fees, some orphans did not have proper housing structures (huts need to thatched). Cases of misunderstanding between orphans and volunteer parents were rife as there was a misconception that they may be receiving material benefits from non-governmental organizations. In addition, there was general unavailability of materials to construct proper kraals for goats and beehives. High rates of mortality among goats and rabbits and lack of water for the nutritional gardens were also noted as some of the major hindrances to the initiative. These results are consistent with Beard, (2006) who examined the prioritized needs of 31 Community Based Orphan Care (CBOC) programs in Malawi. Respondents identified their most important needs, which included food/water, supplies, buildings, transport, medicine, and programs.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **Conclusions**

The majority of foster parents were middle-aged women, relatives or neighbors, who had a common experience with the deceased parents of orphaned children in the community. Community members identified responsiveness, education and good social standing as some of the main characteristics desirable in foster parents. These traits were shaped by religious and cultural values of foster parents. Major problems faced by foster parents included lack of financial and material resources to sustain income-generating projects and thus this stifled their ability to assist orphans.

### **Recommendations**

Community based institutions such as churches and traditional leaders should be proactive in the selection of foster parents. Characteristics of potential foster parents to consider include good social standing, common experience with families of orphaned children and the ability by the parent to relate favorably with orphaned children.

**Table 3.** Qualities of foster mothers that promote relationships with orphans

Characteristic	Notes
Full of love	Ability to love normally shaped by Christian and traditional values
Compassionate with orphans	Orphans may fail to appreciate the effort that volunteer parents are investing for them
Humble	The volunteer parent has to put himself/herself in the shoes of the orphans, should not impose themselves
Assertive /trustworthy	Honesty or trustworthiness is key so that the volunteer parent becomes an integral element of the daily lives of orphans and acceptable to them
Should be a person of good social standing	Orphans may imitate bad or good behavior by volunteer parents Facilitates the acceptance of the parents ideas for example in solving disputes Enjoys respect from the general society
Should not be discriminatory	Volunteer parents should not be selective when dealing with orphans they should be treated equally
Educative	Important to educate orphans about good manners especially against the backdrop of HIV/AIDS pandemic
Regularly visit orphan households	Allows the parent to have an intimate knowledge about the socio-economic situation of the orphans and the nature of help they need
Should be clean/smart	Cleanliness can be emulated by orphans Improves the closeness between orphans and volunteer parent Assists in gaining societal approval
Secretive	Should be reserved so that whatever the parent encounters at the orphans should not be spread around as this will further ostracize and stigmatize the orphans
Good communication skills	The volunteer parent should show concern for the orphans e.g. in monitoring school work such as tests, end of term exams The volunteer parent also needs to encourage children to engage or participate in extra curricula activities such as soccer and netball

Training of foster parents on how to relate and communicate with orphans is important to ensure that they impart life skills (social, cultural and technical) to orphans and vulnerable children

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