

The benchmark in psychosocial support in Southern Africa



There are more than 34 million orphans in sub-Saharan Africa today, and some 11 million of them are orphaned by AIDS. During the last decade, the proportion of children who are orphaned as a result of AIDS rose from 3.5% to 32% – a figure that will continue to increase exponentially as the disease spreads unchecked. As a result, AIDS is in effect making orphans of a whole generation of children, jeopardizing their health, their well-being, and sometimes their very survival, not to mention the overall development prospects of their countries.

The Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative (REPSSI) was founded with the aim of laying down benchmarks in psychosocial support (PSS) for children affected by AIDS, poverty, and conflict in eastern and southern Africa. REPSSI works with over 140 local nongovernmental organizations to train PSS course leaders and develop courses and manuals, and it cooperates with the governments of the 13 countries in which it operates with the objective of securing recognition of PSS as a basic right and a fundamental element of social policy. The Johannesburg headquarters is responsible for Lesotho and Swaziland as well as South Africa; the Lusaka office covers

Malawi and Namibia in addition to Zambia. The Dar es Salaam office covers Kenya and Uganda as well as Tanzania, and the Bulawayo one handles Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and Botswana.

Building on pilot projects

REPSSI has its roots in the attempts by two Swiss aid workers, Stefan Germann and Kurt Madörin, to combine their ideas about supporting AIDS orphans and offer others the benefit of their experience. Independently of each other, Germann, who was with the Swiss Salvation Army in Zimbabwe, and Madörin, with terre des hommes schweiz in Tanzania, both began translating their ideas into pilot projects in the mid-1990s. While Germann focused on providing courses centrally at the purpose-built Masiye Camp, Madörin – via the Humuliza project – organized teacher training and later created a self-help organization for AIDS orphans in the village of Nshamba. The Humuliza project was supported from the very start by the Novartis Foundation for Sustainable Development (NFSD). Both men, however, shared the same central concern: children who were trauma-

tized by the loss of their parents and also suffered economic and social disadvantages as a result of being orphaned were in need of psychological support as well as material assistance. In October 2000, Kurt Madörin presented his program in a workshop at Masiye Camp. The plan for REPSSI was born at a second event the following year, attended not only by providers of support to AIDS orphans, representatives of aid organizations, and scientists but also by children and young people.



Solid donor community

The aim in creating the new organization was to bring together the different approaches and increase awareness among relief agencies working in the region of the well-founded, tried-and-tested concepts of PSS. In March 2002, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, and the Novartis Foundation for Sustainable Development came together to form a stable donor community, and two months later the first members of staff were recruited. The organization then grew at breathtaking pace, until it became clear that it was unable to keep up with the constantly increasing demands. The management team had to learn to set priorities, while the donors had to appreciate that the managers needed additional professional support.

Customized courses

Through the intervention of the NFSD, the highly motivated Human Resources Department at Novartis International in Basel stepped in to provide support in this area. As part of the Corporate Citizenship program, a team of experts worked with specialists from prestigious training companies to develop customized courses in management skills and leadership, intended to benefit not only staff at REPSSI headquarters but also those in the regional offices. The program has been extremely well received by all those involved. REPSSI staff are highly enthusiastic about the training opportunities that reflect the reality on the ground, and the trainers are delighted with the contribution they are able to make to the success of REPSSI.

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