

Grandparents caring for young children

Lydia Nyesigomwe, Director, Action for Children, Uganda

Action for Children (AFC) defines orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) as those who have lost one or both parents due to AIDS or any other cause, and all other children who are in a life-threatening environment caused by poverty, which predisposes them to abuse and neglect. Uganda has 2 million of the 12 million orphaned children in Africa. HIV/AIDS, conflict, natural disasters, endemic diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis and rising levels of poverty are claiming the health and lives of millions of productive adults in Uganda, leaving their children orphaned and vulnerable. Loss of adults to care for, protect, teach, mentor and love children is the leading cause of vulnerability. Traditionally, extended families and community members would care for these children, but the complexities of the problems are eroding traditional support networks, leaving orphans and vulnerable children with little if any adult care and supervision. Among OVC, those under the age of 8 are an extremely vulnerable group, particularly if they also face malnutrition, micronutrient deficiency and lack of stimulation during early childhood.

In 2001, AFC carried out a baseline survey in the pre-urban areas of Kampala, to investigate the support systems for OVC. The results were interesting, revealing that over 75 percent of these children lived with their grandparents. With support from the Bernard van Leer Foundation, AFC started the Grandparents Action Support (GAS) project, to strengthen the capacity of grandparents as caregivers for OVC. The project also supported the establishment of community-based ECD centres and pre-primary schools.

AFC has a holistic and integrated approach to care for OVC in the 0–8 age group, delivering interventions using locally available resources through community-based ECD centres.

Interventions are directed towards the individual child, the caregiver/family (grandparent), the childcare setting, the community (local leaders and health systems) and the wider policy environment (political leaders and civil servants who make law and policies for care of OVC).

The principle focus of the interventions is to help the child to survive and thrive. We look at all aspects of child development, including physical development (motor development, food and nutrition, cognitive development), language and sensory development, psychosocial and emotional development, family economic strength, income-generating activities, health and child protection. The emphasis is on creating a supportive social environment by strengthening families and communities to meet the needs of their children.

Grandparents as caregivers

The majority of elderly caregivers are willing, and find comfort, satisfaction and meaning in parenting orphans and vulnerable children. Many of them, however, have very limited economic resources. Poverty, social isolation, lack of or reluctance to seek services, lack of education, inadequate housing, ill-health and fear of stigmatisation are some of the challenges facing many grandparents who are caring for young children. The burden of looking after children can also affect the grandparents' physical and psychological well-being.

Styles of child-raising today are very different from the way the grandparents themselves were raised and the way they raised their own children, and this can cause problems. Grandparents may be unaware or reluctant to learn about the prevailing realities of today, such as in technology, language usage, health and nutrition. For example, for many older people medicinal herbs serve as their primary healthcare,

Table: Summary of expected results from the Action for Children intervention areas

| Goal | Results | Indicators |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| Improve social conditions for ovc | Better care provided for ovc | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • siblings stay together; • psychosocial and emotional care for ovc; • children are in clubs (child brigades). |
| | Improved health and nutrition | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • home-based care for ovc and grandparents/caregivers; • food gardens; • food supplements; • access to community clinics; • child days for immunisations; • emergency medical care. |
| | Improved access to legal care | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • preparation of wills by caregivers; • children obtain birth certificates; • family/community courts empowered to handle children's cases; • child rights clubs in communities; • decreases rate of child abuse. |
| | Increased household incomes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • access to microfinance, and sustainable businesses. |
| Support families and households | Strengthened households | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • stable households; • access to microfinance, and sustainable businesses. |
| Quality education for ovc | All ovc in schools | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ECDS in communities; • pre-primary schools opened up; • all children (girls and boys) attending ECDS or pre-primary schools; • sensitisation of grandparents to need for education. |

and they may be reluctant to seek more modern medical help for the children in their care, such as immunisation and other preventive measures.

There may be problems of communication between children and grandparents, and different understanding of the child's responsibilities, and his or her rights. For example, acceptable ways to discipline children have changed significantly over the past two generations. It is no longer acceptable to use corporal punishment, which some

grandparents may find difficult to understand. Also, many grandparents still view a boy as more important than a girl, and may prioritise education for a boy ahead of a girl. Grandparents may also want to divide work according to gender roles (for example, cooking for girls), rather than promoting equal roles and responsibilities.

AFC's strategy for empowering elderly caregivers
AFC uses special outreach efforts to address the problems facing elderly caregivers, and to provide



Many elderly caregivers for ovc have very limited economic resources and are unaware of the prevailing realities of today, such as in technology, language usage, health and nutrition. Action for Children's 'Grandparents Action Support' project helps strengthen the capacity of grandparents as caregivers

them with support. Home visits are especially important. AFC social workers and community counsellors talk to the grandparents, carry out a needs assessment, and make a family case plan which describes the problems faced by the family, the strengths of the family, objectives and goals, and planned activities. With this case plan, members of the family understand what they need to do within a specified time period, and the social worker also uses it to plan interventions. Training to equip the grandparents with the skills

and knowledge to care for their grandchildren is also carried out by the social workers and other AFC personnel. Regular training includes income-generating activities, malaria control, children's rights, hygiene and sanitation.

AFC also works to promote broad community awareness, to increase community support for grandparents. This involves making the needs of elderly caregivers visible, and encouraging active support of grandparents by family, friends, service

providers, educators and political leaders. This is done through community training and sensitisation, with workshops and consultative meetings.

Grandparents are organised in Action Support Groups (ASGs). Each group usually has between five and 10 members. The groups meet once a week to discuss their problems and share solutions, and to support one another. The leadership in the groups rotates so that each member has the chance to act as leader, which increases confidence among group members.

Further training is carried out within the ASGs. Grandparents are trained to ensure food security, and are given farming tools. They are also offered training in adult literacy so that they can read and count their money, as well as support the children in their school homework.

AFC gives grants (USD 100) to individuals and groups to help them start income-generating activities. Grandparents usually set up small businesses such as crafts, vegetable and food sales, or build houses for hiring out.

AFC also encourages and assists elderly caregivers to seek legal advice, for example over land ownership and inheritance rights. They are also helped to relocate to their ancestral homes if they wish to do so.