

Strengthening the care environment through the home-based programme

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Home-based programmes are emerging as the most powerful vehicles for strengthening the care environment for children throughout the world. While communities are endowed with traditional knowledge, in many instances they lack the capacity and know-how to support these programmes. Without this capacity, the full potential of home-based programmes cannot be achieved, and the programmes cannot be fully used to complement the efforts of civil society and the government to strengthen the care environment.

The term 'environment' is perceived to encompass the situation, background, location, up-bringing, atmosphere and surroundings. As an organisation, the Community Foundation for the Western Region of Zimbabwe, therefore views the care environment with reference to the situation, surroundings and atmosphere in which a child grows. The care environment, from the point of a mother's expectancy, should be such that it adequately provides for the child to grow and reach its full potential.

The Foundation views the following as key needs in the care environment:

- family and community support;
- access to healthcare;
- access to food;
- access to education and recreational facilities.

The care environment in rural communities is unique depending on the history and socio-economic situation prevailing in the region. Underpinning the care environment in the western region of Zimbabwe are the cultures and traditions of the people of the region. We therefore see culture as a starting point for strengthening the care environment.

The war leading to Zimbabwe's independence in 1980 exerted many pressures on families in this region, and left a host of other fears and restrictions. The pressure of having to look after the family at the same time as dealing with harsh conditions such as poverty and loss of parents can result in anxiety and depression. The care environment has also been greatly affected by the recent poor performance of the Zimbabwean economy, which has led to increasing poverty. Any programme must take these factors into account if it is to be successful.

Some children do not have a family to look after them, and have no idea of normal family life. On the other hand, despite the economic and social difficulties prevailing in the western region of Zimbabwe, there are many children who grow up in a normal family environment. However, extended families are increasingly unable to act as a safety net for children. The role of home-based caregivers, and also traditional leaders, is therefore increasingly important, and these groups in turn need support.

Enlisting the support of the local leadership in any community is critical to achieving a strengthened care environment. There are two distinct types of community leaders: traditional leaders and political leaders. Traditional leaders include village heads, kraal heads and chiefs, while political leaders include councillors and members of parliament. Traditional leaders are very important because of their permanence in a community. Enlisting the support of traditional leaders can ensure sustainability of the programme, and also often motivates support from the whole community because of respect for the leaders. Elected leaders are equally important for the implementation of a

home-based programme, as they are policy and law makers. The programme can lobby these leaders for child-friendly policies and support in strengthening the childcare environment.

Community involvement is key to strengthening the care environment through a home-based programme, because the programme depends on local community resources. Community participation and involvement must be enlisted at all stages and through all activities of the programme.

Building the capacities of families and communities is of paramount importance for a strengthened care environment, i.e., facilitating people to gain skills and financial resources. Our belief is that once people have this capacity, they are able to do things on their own, and this leads to self-reliance and sustainability of the programme. Support to the family is an important component of any home-based programme. This includes raising awareness on the importance of the involvement of both parents in the child's care and upbringing.

Some of the objectives for community capacity building are:

- create awareness of the contradictions between traditional systems and taboos, and the needs of children, for example, after the loss of a parent;
- help adults identify vulnerabilities in children, and explore ways of developing communication between adults and children that help and protect children without undermining the role of the adult;
- provide carers with information and skills in early childhood development practices.

Community ownership

Planning together with communities is essential and has been shown to produce the best results. For example, the Foundation involves communities, through participatory procedures, in needs assessments to identify the needs of the children, and also in planning the way forward. The community must also have leadership of the programme, taking responsibility for its development.

We also involve children in plenary sessions. Consultation with children about their needs and aspirations provides invaluable information

– the children's views are accessed through discussion panels in child fora and kids' clubs. The involvement of children contributes to a holistic programme that takes into consideration not only what adults think children need, but also what children themselves think they need for a strengthened care environment.

Another approach to strengthening the care environment is supporting programmes that enhance food security for families and the community. We also co-finance income-generating programmes to increase resources available for families.

We also work to promote the extended family concept. This traditional care system has been declining because of social and economic changes, but it is very effective in accommodating orphaned and vulnerable children. The home-based programme is a fusion of the old extended family model and the new system which promotes individualism.

The home-based programme can also be strengthened by supporting indigenous initiatives from the community. For example, we support traditional initiatives like the Isiphala Senkosi/ Chief's Granary concept, where the village collectively ploughs a common field so that the underprivileged in the community can be assisted in times of need. Also, the Foundation has helped some communities through donations of donkeys, ploughs, cows and scotch carts which are communally owned and available to assist underprivileged and vulnerable families. These resources are also used by the communities as a form of resource exchange, for example, if a villager uses the communal resources for tilling his field, he will contribute a certain percentage of his yield to the underprivileged families.

Community ownership of the home-based programme leads to its success. The community must also be the ultimate authority in implementation of the programme. If too ambitious a programme is pressed on the community, or too much is expected in too short a time, the programme is bound to fail.