

SWAZILAND

Despite hunger and homelessness, Sandile dreams of school

Fourteen-year-old Sandile Dlamini sits on a mat outside one of the burned huts of his grandparents' homestead. He is shy, but smiles often. He looks down at his bare feet before he answers the question about what he hopes for. He has much to contemplate, as his family has suffered from Swaziland's current drought, as well as from the recent forest fires that swept his community. With scorched walls and burned-out roofs and doors on their former houses, Sandile and his siblings sleep in a temporary tent shelter donated by the Swaziland Red Cross Society. The family is also food insecure. Due to the drought, which the Government declared a national disaster, the Dlaminis harvested very little maize this year.

But Sandile doesn't think of hunger or homelessness. Instead he says his hopes are for school. He says he dreams of going back one day.

"I went to school for one term," he says. "But the money for school fees ran out, so I had to leave." While his parents were alive, there was no money for school fees, so he never attended. After his parents died – most likely from AIDS – his grandfather, Jerome Dlamini, took him to the primary school. Sandile, then 12 years old, was enrolled in Grade 1. But his grandparents could afford only one term. He left school and never returned.

Sandile's two half-sisters, 15 and 16 years old, are also out of school. All three children remain at home during the day, performing household chores like fetching water and collecting firewood.

The Swazi Government has not turned a blind eye to the problem of orphans and other vulnerable children (OVC) who are out of school because they cannot pay school fees. In 2004, the Government took a major step towards achieving universal primary education by establishing a bursary to cover school fees for the nation's growing number of OVC. However, despite the impressive efforts from the Government, a number of challenges remain. The process of disbursement of the OVC bursary is complicated. Delays in paying schools have been inevitable, placing the Ministry of Education under increased pressure and forcing head teachers to provide for students without additional funds from Government. As a result, many schools turn OVC away. As a matter of fact, the bursary was never enough to cover school fees for all of Swaziland's orphans who wish to attend school.

To assist the Ministry of Education, UNICEF initiated a review of the bursary processes to identify challenges resulting in delays in disbursement, and to

identify strategies to allocate sufficient funds to cover all OVC who wish to attend school. UNICEF also established a Commission of Inquiry on OVC funds to make recommendations in this regard.

Back to Sandile; he smiles when asked whose image is stitched on his shirt, but then he shakes his head, indicating that he doesn't know. The secondhand Mickey Mouse jersey he wears was donated by the Swaziland Red Cross Society.

"We received help from UNICEF and Red Cross after the forest fires," says Sandile. "The clothes and blankets were the best because it is still cold at night."

UNICEF donated 150 survival kits to families impacted by the fires in Swaziland. The kits included items such as clothing and blankets, cooking utensils, hurricane lamps and pots. The kits were distributed through the Swaziland Red Cross Society.

While blankets and cooking utensils are small comfort, they will help sustain Sandile until his dreams of returning to school come true.