

UNICEF helps children get a second chance in Addis Ababa

BY GEORGE MORRIS
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They sit and wait for the small but determined grassroots charity to help them. Grubby faced and hungry: Their needs are many and the resources to spare are limited.

The children waiting their turn on wooden benches outside the charity's Addis Ababa offices are thin, a few pieces of hand-me-down clothing protect their tiny bodies.

One of those waiting is 12-year-old Seble. She never knew what caused her mother's death. What she did know was that for the rest of her life she was responsible for leading her blind father around Addis Ababa to beg for money.

"Being a beggar makes me so ashamed. Every day, I go to school but afterwards I am forced to beg for myself and my father.

"I tried so hard to keep the truth away from my school friends" she says, holding back the tears, "but one day someone from school saw me on a street corner and it made me feel terrible."

Redeem The Generation is a charity attempting to help the vast number of children in Ethiopia whose lives hang on a knife edge. The organization supports those who have been orphaned by AIDS or simply abandoned by parents who cannot cope.

They also support children like Seble, whose family members are in no position to look after her. Now, she has money to support herself and wants to be a teacher when she grows up.

As part of a new programme aimed at helping Ethiopia's more vulnerable children, UNICEF is trying to find the resources to support Redeem.

As the name suggests, Redeem attempts to help a child's journey into adulthood. Participants are taught self-respect, how to look after themselves and mutual support. Through small grants of money, children are also given enough to buy themselves food and attend school.

If they have one or more parents, Redeem helps by giving materials and money to start small cottage industries from home, such as baking *injera*, a local type of bread that they can sell.

As well as helping stricken children, Redeem provides training and information to children and young people on sex, love, HIV/AIDS and family planning all over the country.

Redeem believes that over two million young people have been reached in this way.

The charity's director and founder, Ashenafi Addisu, helps in almost every aspect of the charity's work. "I am manager, counselor, social worker and volunteer," he says, "any money I have goes straight into the charity."

"The thing is, I truly believe there is so much potential among these children. One of them could become the next prime minister, famous footballer or have any amazing, talented job."

Ashenafi is no stranger to adversity himself. He became an orphan at the age of nine after running away from a forced marriage. Through dogged determination and a bit of luck, he was able to educate himself all the way to university.

Despite the offer of well-paid jobs, he could not leave the street children behind and founded the Redeem charity in 2001.

He started by walking the streets, handing out one Birr (USD\$0.15) notes to children and then sitting down to talk. His advice ranged from warning them about HIV/ AIDS to ensuring they wrapped up warm during the rainy season.

The children responded to his kindness by giving him a nickname - Temiro, or, "The One Who Teaches."

But Ashenafi faces a huge challenge. Ethiopia is struggling to cope with nearly 5 million orphans, many of whom were orphaned by AIDS. Even though his organization has touched so many lives, there are still a hundred times as many left out in the unforgiving streets.

He admits as much: "My Addis Ababa branch is trying to support over 700 children at the moment. We can only find new families or school support for 138 of those we care for. In this office alone, we had to turn down over 2,000 applications because we simply did not have the resources to cope"

The charity has been given a lot of support from more fortunate Ethiopians. Redeem the Generation can boast as many as 1800 volunteers throughout the country.

One such volunteer is Netsanet Zewdise, a 22-year-old law student from Addis Ababa. She is involved in all parts of the charity, from organizing youth activities to giving one-on-one support to orphans.

Netsanet says that Redeem the Generation is helping her train for a future in child protection. She says, "I can't just live for myself when this is happening around me. I have to live for others."

Even though the volunteers have given many children much needed care and support, Ashenafi stresses the need for more trained, permanent staff. At present there are only five full-time workers caring for more than 700 children.

Money is still crucial. Redeem is still unable to afford a car, a fact that reduces their ability to reach out to the community. "There is so much I want to give these children," says Ashenafi, "I dream of a music centre and a sports centre, places where they can grow and develop."

UNICEF, in partnership with Redeem the Generation, is trying to find over US\$57,000 to assist Ashenafi and his helpers reach more of Ethiopia's vulnerable children. This money could help existing outreach programmes and support new initiatives.

Finally, Ashenafi says: "The most important thing we have is love. The volunteers, the staff, myself we all love the children so much." In the absence of a car and a sports centre, a small bank note and love is all the team at Redeem can offer. But for some 700 children in Addis Ababa, it has meant the difference between hope and despair.