

TESTIMONY

TESTIMONY BY GETE MINALE – ORPHAN AND STREET CHILD

Gete Minale ran away from home after his mother died and joined a group of street children who like him had traveled to Bahr Dar, capital of Amhara Region, after losing their parents. After several months eking a living on the streets of Bahr Dar, Gete and his friends were approached by a teacher from a local primary school who was working on a UNICEF supported pilot project designed to empower community based organizations to meet the needs of orphans and street children living in their neighborhoods. Gete and his friends joined the first grade in January 2005. They receive 75 birr a month which they use to buy clothing and supplies for shoe shine kits which they use to earn money. They have been promised school uniforms and with the assistance of the teacher and the local community organization they hope to find a place to live off the streets. The following are excerpts from an interview conducted with Gete.



“My name is Gete Minale. I am 14-years-old. I was born in an area called Arida Mariam, also known as Arb Gebeya. My mother died recently. I never knew my father – he died before I was born. My mother had many children and those children used to make her angry – I believe she died from being angry.

“After my mother died I could not get along with my brothers so I left everything and came [to Bahr Dar]. There is a bus that serves the town of Arb Gebeya. When I asked the driver to take me, he refused. Then I met some sheep traders going to the market in Bahr Dar. I came with them on foot. It was a full day’s journey. We left at 6:00 am and arrived here at 6:00 pm.

“I came to Bahr Dar last September, one year ago. Since arriving in Bahr Dar I have been living on the streets of Kebele 10. There is a bicycle shop called Abe’s Cycle Shop - that is where we sleep, in front of the shop.

“I don’t want to go back to my home. I would not have a place to stay so I don’t want to go back there. I don’t have seeds or land so if I did go back I could not survive. How would I live?

“I have aunts and uncles, but I don’t want to live with them either because I do not want to fight with them. As long as I can survive, I will live in Bahr Dar. And if I find someone who can support me I would like to move on to another place. If someone were to offer me work and ask me to come with them, I would go.

“When we wake up in the morning we wash our faces and if we have money we go to where we can eat breakfast. After eating breakfast we may go and study. Otherwise we will take our shoe shine boxes and shine shoes until it is time to go to school. After school we either go to Lake Tana or the River Nile to bathe and swim and then we will study for a while. When it gets late we take out our shoe shine boxes again and try to find shoes to shine.



“Recently, arrangements have been made for us [to eat the leftovers] from student meals served at the cafeteria in the Poly University.

“There is a person called Yaya Police at the local police station. We call him Yaya Police, though his proper name is Wondimagegn. He is from the Child Protection unit.

“He said, ‘if you want to go to school, eat this food and learn and you too might make it.’

“The most difficult part about living on the street is during the rainy season. It is wet and cold and unbearable.

“The other day, for example, I was sleeping outside and caught a cold. Yaya Police arranged a free visit to the clinic and when I got checked, they asked me why I had waited so long to seek treatment. I had thought it was just a cold but I had been lying down for a week or so, not able to get up. They told me that I was very sick and they gave me 55 tablets. When I finished those 55 tablets I was cured and from then until now, thanks be to God, I am fine.

“Another problem we face is from youth who have homes but who come and bother us at night. If we had our own home we could lock the door and nobody would disturb us. They come to where we are sleeping, even though they have a home to go to. They go through our pockets – and if we tell them not to, they then want to beat us up. They rough us up and leave, but then we call the police and after that they leave us alone.

“People don’t want to rent out rooms to us. They say, ‘we don’t want to be chasing after you to pay your rent.’ The other day four of us went together and tried. The home owners asked us where we were living now and we told them Kebele 10. They asked us for identity cards, which we did not have. ‘If we have to provide all of this then we might as well just stay where we are,’ we said. But now the rainy season is approaching and things will get difficult. Yaya Police has agreed to help us rent a place.



“There are people who discriminate against us. There are also those who bring us close to them. But one person cannot handle it all, because there are so many street children, three people will not be able to build so many houses. If everyone were to contribute, however, they would not only be able to use it for that but also be able to use it for other things.

“I do not like living on the street at all. I am here only because I have been separated from my family. If I had a family like my friends, then I too would go to school so that I can become somebody, just like my friends.

“Last September we wanted to register in school. But when we went, they told us that it was full. By chance we met a teacher, Gash Kassa. We asked if he would help us, and he agreed to help us be like our friends. We quickly went to Yaya Police and got him to act as our parent and “had him sign for text books and then we started school in January. Since then, thanks be to God, we are moving forward with our school.

“When I have finished my education and I am supporting myself I want to teach others, people who live on the street like myself and my friends – I want to teach them. If I finish my education, I would like to be able to say, ‘I was once like you’. I would then tell them to be like me.

It is estimated that there are 4.6 million orphans in Ethiopia today with AIDS contributing to a continual increase in the number of orphans. The number of street children is estimated to reach 300,000 nationwide and could be much higher.

The extended family system, a strong feature of Ethiopian societies, has traditionally absorbed and cared for orphaned children. The escalating toll of HIV/AIDS on orphans as a whole in the face of pervasive poverty, however, is over-stretching this traditional system.

UNICEF is advocating for and supporting the rights of children affected by HIV, including efforts to alleviate the personal and social impact of the pandemic by ensuring comprehensive care and support to children and families affected by HIV and AIDS. Strategies include strengthening the capacity of extended families, mobilizing and strengthening community and home-based responses, strengthening the capacity of children and young people to meet their own needs, ensuring the government protects the most vulnerable children and provides essential policies and services and creating an enabling environment for HIV and AIDS affected children and their families.

UNICEF is also trying to reduce the vulnerability to HIV by ensuring that all children access their rights to health, education and protection. It is the children who are most vulnerable overall who are also the most likely to be infected with HIV. This is particularly true of adolescent girls and young women - aged 15-24 who constitute between 40 and 50% of all new infections.

UNICEF, in partnership with the federal and regional HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Offices, and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs is responding to the needs of orphans and vulnerable children in Ethiopia through collaborations with and support to NGOs, youth organisations and community-based organizations. Assistance focuses more on increasing and strengthening community care for children in affected households rather than on institutional care.

The soaring number of children who are being orphaned by HIV/AIDS is demanding more and more resources. In a costing exercise conducted with the Government of Ethiopia, UNICEF estimates that it would cost around US\$300 per year to provide for the basic needs of an orphaned child, including counseling and psychosocial support. An estimated 250 million dollars per year is required in order to provide 20 per cent public support to assist community-based organizations and extended families to take care of these children. To date UNICEF only has less than 10 million which is why the campaign, both globally and locally is aimed at leveraging sufficient resources to meet the needs and fulfill the rights of orphans and all other vulnerable children.