

TESTIMONY

TESTIMONY BY MANDEFRO KASSA – ORPHAN AND STREET CHILD

Mandefro Kassa moved to Bahr Dar, capital of Amhara Region, after growing up as an orphan on the streets of Woreta, a provincial town located on the junction of the Bahr Dar- Gonder and Woldiya highways. After several months eking a living on the streets of Bahr Dar, Mandefro 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 Mandefro.



My name is Mandefro Kassa. I am 14. I am a first grade student at Dil Tchibo School.

I was born in Ketena 5 (district) of Woreta Town. My father was a school guard. My mother used to sell tella (home-made ale). They are both dead. I only hear about them talking about my father, I didn't know him at all. I didn't know my mother well either. I have an older sister – she is the one who tells me of them. It was my sister who raised me, but she had to work to make ends meet. The street has been my home since I can remember.

It has been more than one year since I came, and all this time I have not seen one good thing about living on the street. Everything is horrible. It is frightening to live on the street. You don't sleep with confidence. There are some drunks who come to where we sleep - youth who can't go home because it is too late. They come on top of us and take away our covers. At that time we get frightened and we don't sleep comfortably because we are afraid.

The rainy season is terrible. You don't sleep for a minute. And it rains a lot in Bahr Dar. It doesn't rain during the day, it rains at night. And then we just stay up the whole night talking.

We sleep in kebele 10 There are some shops and that is where we sleep, in front of them. The older youth have beds. They don't go to school. They work during the day collecting wood. They make their beds. We, students, don't even have a place to put our books. We sleep on flattened carton boxes.

We have nothing else except clothing, and even that is from the assistance we just got. We used to go to school wearing each others clothing. For example if Yibeltal has extra clothes then I would go to school wearing his clothes. And if I have extra clothing then he would go to school wearing mine.

If you are weak you cannot live on the street. You get exploited. If you do not want to fight with others then you should not live on the street. A weak person cannot live on the street. Children who

live at home come and insult us. At that point all you can do is feel sad – there is nothing else that you can do. If you hit them, they could have an older brother – it is usually the younger ones who insult us. We just keep quiet because we are in someone else's territory. If it were in our home then we would fight and move on. Because we are in someone else's turf, even if he insults us, we keep quiet.

What I wish for is a home, for shelter. I want to be able to support myself and live, and to help my friends.



In September we all went together, to register in school. We were told that it was full. They even told us to bring 20 birr for the guards, for us to be able to register. We were registered at the school as orphans. After that Gash Kassa, a teacher at the school, passed it on [to the St. Rufael; Idir – a community based organization working with orphans and vulnerable children through a UNICEF supported project) and then the money came right away. We do not know what organization sent the money for us. It is called social affairs, or something like that. The money came – we each received 225 birr [for three months]. After that we bought new

clothes. With what remained we bought our shoe shine kits and polish. Now we do not have a problem with shoe polish. Now we can work as much as we want, if we want to work, but we prefer to focus on our education.

We had looked for a place to stay for the rainy season and we were told, 'we rent out only to those who have identity cards, we do not rent out rooms to those without identity cards,' so we continue to live on the street.

They don't give identity cards to us – because they tell us to bring money. It costs 20 or 30 birr to get it. They say that we are too young – 'only those who are 18 years old can get an identity card,' they tell us.

If we get money, the eight of us students, we want to rent a room (dorm) to pass the rainy season. When the rainy season comes we don't even have a place to put our books or our clothes.

We live in harmony with each other, looking out for each other. If somebody has something, we share it and eat. We share what we eat, we share what we have to wear. If we get something, we share it. We do not fight like other street children. When we go for walks into town and we see them fighting amongst each other and people trying to break them up. We see them smoking cigarettes, chewing chat, begging. We, on the other hand, are embarrassed to beg from people. If we get hungry we run to work not to get handouts.

If a person wants to help street children - for those who go to school they need exercise books and pens, and they need shelter - and they need food. If a student gets food and educational materials, he can learn. The main thing though is shelter – a place to put away books. If you look at our books and compare it to other's, ours don't even look like books.

When I am educated and I have gotten myself off the streets, I want to help my street children friends and give advice to those who come from the countryside and end up on the street, and get them to return.

We came here because we did not have any family. If they have family instead of suffering like us they would be better off living with their parents.

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.