

Giving Hope: Orphan & Vulnerable Children's Empowerment, Rwanda

The Young Women's Christian Association of Rwanda (YWCA) is a non-governmental, non-profit organization, established in Rwanda in February 1995, following the genocide and in response to the rising concern for the many widows and children left in its wake. Its goal is to improve conditions of life for women. Many of its members are widows. The mission of YWCA is to bring together women who would like to practice Christian principles, and help them to undertake activities that enable them to improve their community's education, health, social, and economic conditions.



Young people affected by HIV/AIDS participating in a YWCA program that gives them hope for tomorrow by showing them skills today. Photo: CWS

The HIV/AIDS in Africa – Giving Hope program is a Church World Service-sponsored program, implemented in partnership with AFRUS-AIDS coalition member American Jewish World Service and with technical support from the micro-enterprise development organization Trickle Up. The primary goal is to protect the rights of and to provide support to orphans and vulnerable children affected by HIV/AIDS that they may be empowered to manage their own well-being and the stability of their families, to participate in the social and economic development of their communities, and to live in the shelter of hope. This Giving Hope program is made possible through the generous support of the St. Marys United Methodist Church Foundation, and other U.S.-based foundations supporting Church World Service's Africa Initiative and HIV/AIDS work.

In 2001, statistics indicated that AIDS had killed one or both parents of 13.4 million children in Africa under the age of 15. These numbers are projected to increase as millions of other children currently live with sick and dying parents. By the end of 2001, AIDS had orphaned over 11 million children across sub-Saharan Africa, including 613,000 in Rwanda. It is predicted that the number of orphans will continue to rise for at least the next decade. Traditionally, children who have become orphaned or vulnerable have been absorbed by their extended families. But, with the rise of HIV/AIDS, and its impact on the health and livelihood of extended families and communities, it is increasingly more evident that this "absorption" process is being strained. Families and extended families are breaking down as sick family members, orphans, widows and elderly are forced to join other households, or even worse, remain alone. When parents become sick or die children are more likely to be malnourished or fall ill, to withdraw from school, to lose their homes and inheritance, to suffer economic hardship as they assume responsibility for other siblings, to be abused and exploited making them more vulnerable to HIV infection themselves, and to suffer from psycho-social distress, fear and isolation all worsened by the stigma attached to HIV/AIDS. The average age of an orphan in Africa is six. This implies

that care and support will be needed at least another 12 years. Heads of state, religious and grassroots leaders, and international donors, in conjunction with the UN, have recognized that today's resources can be most effectively used by strengthening the response and abilities of communities, families, and children themselves. Church World Service is responding to this call and with this multi-year initiative aimed at orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) program strengthening, networking, peer learning, and the dissemination of best practices to assist additional churches and grassroots organizations being called to respond to the needs of orphans and children affected by HIV/AIDS.

The Giving Hope program seeks to reinforce the capacity of and support the expansion of church and related organizations to build child-centered programs and networks. Three-year, four-country Giving Hope program objectives include: 1) to increase support and self-empowerment of 26,400 children (6,600 households) affected by HIV/AIDS (including orphans, child-headed households, and orphans and vulnerable children currently living with elderly or HIV+ parents / caregivers) in three countries of East Africa, through the capacity building and sustainable expansion of community-based HIV/AIDS interventions; 2) to increase local attention to the growing number and needs of child-headed households, orphans, and vulnerable children affected by HIV/AIDS; 3) to reduce HIV/AIDS transmission among 30,000 youth through special support for creative youth-led HIV/AIDS prevention and education initiatives targeting their peers, in areas of high HIV-infection rates such as border towns, migrant worker communities, intra-country routes, post-conflict/resettled communities, and in high concentrations of displaced persons and refugees.

There are four related activities that will occur during this program. They are: 1) support for lead OVC partners; 2) creation of varied community education programs addressing HIV/AIDS and stigma, child rights, inheritance laws, and other OVC-related issues – creating a supportive and enabling environment in which OVC households can feel accepted and secure; 3) increase the peer learning and networking that provide organizations across nations, cultures, and religious boundaries to exchange ideas, dissect their problems, creatively seek solutions, and strengthen their resolve to ensure that their own work most appropriately meets the needs of their population; and 4) the Giving Hope program seeks to reduce HIV/AIDS transmissions by reaching 30,000 youth, over a three-year period, with creative, youth-oriented HIV prevention strategies