Responding to Namibia’s OVC Crisis

The Crisis and its Effects
Namibia faces a serious crisis in its rapidly growing population of orphans and vulnerable children (OVC). In 2001 Namibia had about 97,000 orphans under age 15, which accounted for almost 14% of the age group. Estimates are that by 2021 the country will have over 250,000 orphans, which means that one in three Namibian children will be orphaned. Over three-quarters will be orphaned by AIDS.

The exact number of other vulnerable children in Namibia, children who are in need of care and protection, yet is unknown. However, with one in five of all adults infected with HIV, the at-risk population is clearly large.

Families and communities are stepping up to care for and support OVC, however, broad based support for these caregivers needs to be scaled up rapidly. The care burden is falling heaviest on grandparents, who need or will soon require care themselves. Other family members and non-relatives who are providing care for orphans now have extra children to feed, clothe, send to school and care for. Many of these caregivers are poor and struggle already to provide for their own. Meanwhile, by claiming the health and lives of people in all spheres of society, people’s ability to secure food diminishes, and institutions such as schools, health facilities and businesses are less able to function. As such AIDS is widening poverty and creating a need for more resources to support OVC and their caregivers.

Caregivers and communities need substantial assistance if this crisis is to be managed. All children have the right to education, health care and protection. However, despite all efforts by government to protect the rights of children, these rights are under threat. With such a large proportion of orphaned children, tremendous investment and focus will be required to raise the nation’s future generations to be educated, healthy and productive.

Government has recognised that it is vital to reinforce the coping capacities of communities and government services and accordingly developed policy, institutional and financial frameworks addressing the OVC crisis.

The National Policy on Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children approved by Cabinet in August 2004 highlights the responsibilities of the Ministry of Women Affairs and Child Welfare (MWACW), which has been charged with ensuring the legal care and protection of children.
At the same time the OVC policy emphasizes the **cross-cutting** nature of all **issues relating to orphans and other vulnerable children** requiring co-ordination and collaboration between all Ministries, non-governmental organisations, community based groups, Church networks, and the private sector.

The **OVC Steering Committee**, which by cabinet directive was enlarged to a **Multi-Sectoral Permanent Task Force** in December 2002, **launched** a five-year strategic plan in 2001 that focused on the mobilisation of resources for home-based care for orphans and vulnerable children. The task force meets quarterly to review the plan and advise MWACW. Regional and sub-regional OVC committees have been established, and in some regions community support programmes have been started. In terms of monetary support, Government put in place mechanisms for orphans and their care-givers to receive a monthly welfare grant. In addition, in 2003 the Office of the President contributed N$10 million towards the establishment of an **OVC Trust Fund** to help orphans and vulnerable children who do not receive any other kind of assistance. In order for OVC to effectively participate in the planning and implementation of relevant strategies, policies and programmes, targeted training activities for social workers and OVC are needed, too. Quite often, orphans and other vulnerable children are wise beyond their years and mature enough to help make decisions about their own and their siblings’ protection and care.

Non-governmental organisations, Church groups and development partners are contributing to OVC care and support through the mobilization of funds, the provision of technical support to MWACW, the development of community-based projects, and direct assistance to orphans and vulnerable children.

Despite all efforts, many orphans are not yet receiving the grants to which they are entitled. Caregivers need to provide birth certificates of the children, death certificates of the parents and other documentation confirming that they are supporting the orphans, before they receive the grant. Particularly in poor rural areas some people do not have this documentation and elderly caregivers often do not have the energy or resources to go back and forth getting the documentation required. Considering that more than half of all orphans in Namibia live with grandparents, these issues need additional attention and assistance from social and other community development workers.

Concerning financial resources it appears as if the N$10 million that has been placed into the OVC Trust Fund is hardly enough to meet the increasing needs of the rising numbers of orphans and vulnerable children. Plans on how to ensure the sustainability and continuous replenishment of the funds are still to be developed.

Since the implementation of the OVC Five Years Strategic Plan has not been assessed yet it is also difficult to judge the progress that has been made to date at community level. However, experience from the field suggests that most communities are not yet receiving adequate assistance to care for and support orphans and vulnerable children and that the rights of OVC are threatened. This **situation calls for widespread and on-going co-ordination** involving all Line Ministries and their development partners.

![Heavy Orphan-care Burden on Grandparents](chart)

**Sources:** DHS 1992 & 2000, in UNICEF, *Africa’s Orphaned Generation*

OVC is not just a Child Welfare issue. The real issue is the challenge of addressing the multiple impacts of HIV and AIDS on families and communities throughout the country. The children are in the care of over-extended extended families. Families and communities are struggling to cope with the extra mouths to feed and more school development fund fees to pay while there are fewer and fewer adults to earn a living, plant and harvest the crops or care for cattle.
Conclusions and Recommendations

There are no quick fixes to any of the challenges brought on by AIDS, and problems associated with the large numbers of orphans are no exception. The government is taking the right approach by caring for orphans in their homes and communities as opposed to placing them in institutions like orphanages. As we have seen, communities and extended families have demonstrated their willingness to care for orphans and vulnerable children themselves. Support for these caregivers from Social Development as well as from Economic Development Ministries urgently needs to be scaled up.

As poverty is weakening the capacity of households and communities to provide adequate levels of care to orphans and vulnerable children, it is important to scale-up poverty reduction programmes and support community development responses to the OVC crisis. Community support groups need to be trained on nutrition, emotional support, referral mechanisms for government agencies and income-generation. At the same time it is essential to nurture income-generating community support structures assisting the growing numbers of grandparents and youth to take care of orphans and vulnerable children.

Government and its partners need to facilitate access to seed funding and resources to start community gardens and small business enterprises. The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development is needed to help these families with group farming efforts and ensuring food security. The Ministry of Trade and Industry also has a role to help organize communities to develop small and medium enterprises and provide access to credit in the high HIV prevalent localities. It is critical to assist communities to be able to cope for the long term needs in caring for their OVC and to go beyond charitable and piece meal “hand-out” initiatives.

The Economic Development Ministries have a much stronger role and capacity in making an impact on helping families cope with OVC support than just through social welfare approaches. Yet, it is still just the Social Development Ministries which have stood up to counter this massive challenge. The Ministry of Women Affairs and Child Welfare, the Ministry of Health and Social Services and the Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture are making commendable efforts. But they cannot do it alone.

Orphans and vulnerable children are often stigmatized, isolated, discriminated against, disinherited and deprived of their rights to education and health. It is therefore crucial that foster-parents, guardians and other caretakers are being encouraged to assist orphans and vulnerable children to claim their rights. At the same time it is essential to inform families about the importance of writing a will and to provide respective support in order to ensure that children’s inheritance rights are protected. It is also recommended that the rules for orphan grant qualification are being simplified to accommodate the difficulties orphan care-givers often face in proving their situation. In addition, government needs to promote positive images of caring for orphan and vulnerable children and to acknowledge and recognise the vast numbers of volunteers working throughout the country devoting time and energy to assist them.

The Ministries of Education need to ensure that children who cannot afford to pay school fees or a uniform are not denied access to education. This requires close monitoring of school admission policies and practices as well as providing clear communication channels should a dispute arise. The Ministry of Health and Social Services needs to equip all primary health care clinics with supplies required for home-based care and to nurture a positive and accepting attitude among the clinic personnel towards home-based care programmes. Where access to services is problematic one stop multi-purpose centres could be established in communities, such as for example at clinics. Social welfare officials could work together with Home Affairs officials registering birth and processing welfare grant applications. At the same time, community liaison officers could provide information on community development projects and offer legal assistance.

The numbers of orphans and vulnerable children are moving beyond the nation’s coping capacities. Managing a crisis of this scale requires accurate and accessible information. Correct and timely information is needed on the

Facts & Figures

- About 25% of Namibian households care for at least one orphan.
- 80% of orphans live in rural areas.
- 20% of children under age 15 in Caprivi have lost one or both of their parents—the highest percentage in the nation.
- Over half of Namibia’s orphans live in Omusati, Oshana, Ohangwena and Oshikoto.
- Double orphans ages 10 to 14 are 8% less likely than non-orphans to be enrolled in school.*
- Orphans are at-risk of not receiving the healthcare, education and support they need, and are likely to suffer from depression and other negative psycho-social effects.

Sources:
Census 2001 and *NDHS 2000
number and profile of orphans and vulnerable children requiring care and support, on service providers and on the effectiveness of diverse approaches for OVC care and support in order to plan and effectively monitor the implementation of a multi-layered and integrated response. Government is currently in the process of developing a database, based on consultations with communities and recording of OVC and their caregivers. It is essential that it is being used and updated at the national, regional and constituency levels so that appropriate responses can be formulated. It is further recommended that a study on the progress of the OVC strategic plan is being conducted. The final year of the plan, 2006, is fast approaching. An assessment of the current plan and accurate orphan data are crucial to developing an effective strategy for the 2007-2012 timeframe.

Parliamentarians and other leaders play a crucial role in raising awareness on OVC issues and advocate and strategize for strengthening communities’ capacities to cope with the impact of HIV/AIDS. It is crucial to mobilize political will and allocate national resources in order to develop a comprehensive safety net for orphans and vulnerable children. The establishment of the OVC Trust Fund is highly recommendable. However, in order to ensure the sustainability of the fund it is crucial that mechanisms are being put in place that guarantee the replenishment of funds and prevent it from drying out. Businesses and individuals need to be encouraged to take advantage of tax breaks attached to contributing to the fund, and international donors must be petitioned to make contributions.

If Vision 2030 is to be achieved, all the branches of Government will need to be actively involved in implementing the OVC policy. The private sector, Church networks, NGOs and Development Partners must also fully come on board.

Namibia’s families and communities are strong in coming together to support orphans and vulnerable children. However, they cannot do it alone. Government and its partners must commit substantial time and money to equip them with the skills and resources required to care and support orphans and vulnerable children in their communities without falling deeper into the poverty trap. Orphans and vulnerable children are children who need love, care, support, and guidance - children who play, learn, and grow like any other children. With one in three Namibians being orphaned by 2021, Namibia’s future generations will be orphaned generations. Cross-cutting and broad based support is required from all stakeholders for Namibia to raise them.

### References

- SIAPAC for the Ministry of Health and Social Services and UNICEF (April 2002), *A Situation Analysis of Orphan Children in Namibia*, Windhoek

---

**United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)**

1st Floor, Sanlam Centre

PO Box 1706

Windhoek, Namibia

Tel +264 61 204 6111

Fax +264 61 204 6206