

## *Working Children in Zimbabwe*

By Michael Bourdillon  
University of Zimbabwe

Presentation to Conference on Orphans and Vulnerable Children in Africa  
Uppsala, 13-16 September, 2001.

*My work has been on street children and working children, rather than being explicitly on AIDS orphans. There are however a number of areas of overlap:*

- *Many working children and street children are orphans*
- *Work and income generation is a coping strategy for orphans*
- *Some working children are precisely made vulnerable through the work of caring for sick adults*
- *Perhaps most importantly, many ideas and experiences in the field of working children may apply to interventions related to AIDS orphans – we need to ensure that people working on different categories of vulnerable children learn from each other.*

*On the context of vulnerable children in Zimbabwe, the incidence of AIDS is one of the highest in the world. According to a 1997 survey, there were over 35 000 households headed by someone under 20 (roughly one in 70 country wide) and of these over 3 000 were headed by someone under 15. These figures were probably an under-estimate at the time, since they omitted children who were effectively heads of household in the presence of an adult too old or too sick to be effective. Also they do not take account of children who are the main breadwinners of households where there is an adult head. And the numbers have increased since 1997.*

*I have in mind a 14-year-old orphan girl I met at an earn-and-learn school, who had three younger siblings staying with her elderly grandmother. The girl not only earned her own keep and school fees, but also sent money home for the schooling, clothes and upkeep of her younger brothers and sisters. (This would no longer be possible, since – partly in response to the campaign against child labour – the estate concerned no longer employs children under 15.)*

*Added to these figures, there are around 24 000 orphans likely to be homeless (and in some cases possibly stateless) as a result of the land redistribution programme.*

*All these children need an income.*

## Working Children in Zimbabwe

*In our book on working children in Zimbabwe<sup>1</sup>, we look at a number of categories of working children.*

- 1) *There are children involved in a variety of kinds of informal trade, sometimes on their own and sometimes with kin (especially girls with their mothers), sometimes living with their families and sometimes living on the streets. Occasionally such children worked for a low, fixed wage, paid by an adult. Always, the income from the trade contributed to the livelihood of the child, and sometimes to the livelihood of the whole family. In several cases, the work provided money for school fees and books, making schooling possible even while it hindered schoolwork by preventing the child from giving adequate time and energy to school assignments. Occasionally, the work leads girls into dangerous sex work.*

*Banning their work would help few, if any, of these children. That would leave them and their families with even less to live on. Indeed, one of their problems is that authorities often harass them and sometimes confiscate the goods they are trying to sell.*

- 2) *There are children working in small-scale agriculture, sometimes on their family plots, and sometimes used by their families to earn money through contract work on the plots of others. These children usually expressed pride in the contribution they were making to their families*

*Occasionally such children are seriously exploited. We came across one 7-year-old boy who was required to work at guarding fields from goats from dawn to dusk for seven days a week, for which the employer sent a pittance to his parents. He could not go to school and had to cook his own meals, for which he was initially given no instruction.*

*Other studies show that sometimes the children worked in agricultural and domestic work for over forty hours a week, similar to the working hours of children in formal employment. Sometimes, we felt that parents could have done something to relieve the burden on their children. But such work is usually considered as permissible child work for their families, and is unlikely to be affected by any campaign against child labour.*

- 3) *There are children, sometimes as young as ten years old, in domestic employment. Sometimes they are working for distant kin, but an unrelated family may employ them. Often these children live in the home in which they are working, have no formal hours and no free time. They provide cheap labour, on call all day and everyday. The conditions under which these children work need attention, but the children often need the income and the shelter that their jobs provide.*
- 4) *There are children in commercial agriculture. I studied certain earn-and-learn schools run by a company on their tea and coffee estates. At these*

---

<sup>1</sup> Michael Bourdillon (ed.), *Earning a Life: Working Children in Zimbabwe*. Harare, Weaver Press, 2000. Distributed in Europe and U.S.A. by African Book Collective: abc@dial.pipex.com

*schools the children were admitted on condition that they contracted to work for the country. In the peak tea-picking season (the first term of three in the academic year), the children had to work for seven hours in the morning before attending school in the afternoon. At other times, life was a little easier, with school in the morning and work in the afternoon. There are certainly problems with the schools, especially in the peak season, when children and teachers complain that the children often doze during classes. The children complain that work is deemed more important than school by the company and they have a number of complaints about their conditions. The schools have a high dropout rate from children who are unable to cope (but not much higher than that of neighbouring schools, where children often drop out because they are unable to pay their fees).*

*In these institutions children receive the same rates as do adults for the work they do, and the company subsidizes the schools and the meals of the children besides. So the labour is not cheap labour. Nevertheless, the institutions have been criticised by academics and the press from time to time as exploiting child labour.*

*The schools are unable to meet the high demand for places from all around the country. There are a number of reasons given by the children for wanting to attend these schools:*

- Without them, they could not attend school. Several children spoke about “sitting at home” before they gained admission to one of these schools.*
- The school facilities and teaching were good and produced good results. Some children voluntarily moved from normal day schools to these schools precisely to improve their results.*
- The schools gave independence to the children. One girl I met used the school to escape pressure from her family to marry.*
- The children gained status within their own families through their independence, and especially if they used some of their income to contribute to family livelihood.*
- Some of the children spoke about learning business and economic responsibility.*

*Although there is need to address some of the problems faced by the children at these schools, both the children now in them and people who have been through them speak of them as being helpful to poor children who have no other option. Company management, however, finds them burdensome, especially when the company’s products are stigmatised by the campaign against child labour.*

- 5) Some children are involved in informal mining, including underground mining in harsh and dangerous conditions. These may be in operations conducted by kin or other small-scale operators. When some of these children attended a workshop, they pleaded to be allowed to work on formal mines, where wages are higher and safety conditions are better. This will not be possible, since underground mining is listed as one of the worst forms of child labour, to be abolished by the I.L.O. convention 182. While I do not advocate sending children underground, in this case, it would be better than the available alternative.*

- 6) *We describe one category of working children who are not working for an income. These are children who are involved in caring for sick adults, usually a parent or other close relative. While there have been hints at this way in which children can be affected by AIDS in this workshop, this category of children rarely receives much attention. The children are sometimes pulled out of school to perform this demanding role, and sometimes have no time to spend with their peers. Their health is sometimes endangered. In several ways, the rights of these children are infringed. The rights come into conflict with the responsibilities of the children to care for important people in their lives, people who desperately need the attention of the children. Some of the children speak of the benefits they gained from getting to know an elderly person well before the latter's death. This category of working child stands out from the others I am talking about, but children in this category deserve more attention than they usually receive.*

*I return to the issue of working children who work because they need an income. Some people make a distinction between child labour, which is harmful to the children, and child work, which is not. But there is no real difference between labour and work. As I have pointed out, even labour that is harmful to children might be preferable to available alternatives. In most societies in human history, children are expected to do some productive work. No society that I know of approves of lazy or idle children. Work is not worse for children when they are paid for it – some people seem to think it is alright to make children work as long as they do not get paid for it.*

*So I come to my conclusion: there is nothing wrong with child labour. There is certainly something wrong when working children are abused or exploited. It is important that we find ways of protecting working children, and where possible of improving their conditions. But we must enable them to find appropriate work and incomes rather than impede them from doing so. Where children need incomes, we need to encourage adults to provide them with protected employment. And this must be a useful strategy in societies that have many orphans and whose social structures and support systems are threatened.*

## **Education**

*One of the rights of working children that needs attention is their right to education. When we speak of children's right to education, many people think of the need to ensure that they attend school. When work gets in the way of school, such people think that the work must stop. On the other hand, when children need the work, we have to think differently. Now their right to education means that we have to find a form of education that fits in with their work and is appropriate to their life worlds. The education must be adapted to fit the needs of the children, rather than forcing children to fit the needs of the educational system.*

## **Empowering Children**

*Some of the most effective initiatives for helping working children have involved the children themselves in thinking about and defending their rights. The aim is to empower children, by bringing them together in clubs and movements.*

*There are movements of working children now in several continents. These have sometimes been successful in helping the children develop their communities as well as training the children in democratic politics.<sup>2</sup> A key element in these movements is that the children are enabled to think about, and speak about, their problems for themselves and to indicate what are their most pressing needs. Adults have been involved in initiating such movements, and the children continue to look for adult support in resolving problems that arise. Nevertheless, children are able to undertake their own initiatives in reaching out to other children who need help.*

*One example of how such a movement can work is a movement for child domestic workers in Senegal. The children meet in clubs on a weekly basis, largely for recreational purposes. At these meetings, they are able to discuss problems arising from their work, and sometimes older children have been able to intervene successfully with employers on behalf of their younger colleagues. The clubs have also been able to initiate appropriate educational programmes, including a programme leading to a certificate in domestic service – such programmes easily acquire support from employers.*

*I also wish to mention children's clubs in Nepal. Save the Children, Norway initiated these, mainly as a programme in support of children's rights. They involve entertainment, community research and community work. The clubs have been so popular, that they rapidly spread to all villages. In them, the children break down caste barriers and gender discrimination. The children take their own initiatives, including community projects that they know to be necessary to keep the support of adults.*

*A key element of many of these movements is training children in research. Children learn to look for others in their community, particularly those with problems. They learn to understand the causes of some of their problems, and through this understanding comes the possibility of coping with them. Through such training, children grow in both competence and in self-confidence, and they break down community prejudices against their competence. The children learn to involve other children, and even adults in their projects.<sup>3</sup>*

*The point about such movements is that they develop a momentum of their own. While adult help and support is needed, especially in the initial stages, they can quickly reach many more children than adult initiators are able to reach. This clearly has attractions in those countries where the number of orphans is stretching support systems beyond their limits.*

---

<sup>2</sup> See Anthony Swift, *Working Children Get Organised: an introduction to working children's movements*. London, Save the Children Alliance, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> A good example of this kind of work has been involvement of children in environmental conservation in the Caribbean. See Chris McIvor (ed.) *The Earth in our Hands: children and environmental change in the Caribbean*. London, Save the Children, 1999. Also Roger Hart, *Children's Participation: The Theory and Practice of Involving Young Citizens in Community Development and Environmental Care*. London: Earthscan, 1997. Roger Hart is preparing a video on children's participatory research in Nepal, and Save the Children Alliance has been involved in this kind of work in many countries.

*Orphans and Vulnerable children in Africa:  
Victims or vestiges of hope  
Abstract from Karen Marie Moland and Liv Haram*

### **Gendered experiences and challenges of orphans and vulnerable children in Kilimanjaro and Arusha Regions in Tanzania**

This brief outline sketches a research venture on the gendered problem of vulnerable children and orphans in the context of the AIDS epidemic in urban and rural districts in Arusha and Kilimanjaro Regions in Tanzania. In general, research on the problem of vulnerable and orphaned children has not been a priority in social research on AIDS, and even less attention has been devoted to gender issues in this context.

#### **The scope of the problem**

The rapidly increasing pandemic has significantly increased the number of orphans and children living in families and communities affected by HIV/AIDS. Also in Tanzania, the AIDS epidemic has left an increasing number of children orphaned or in charge of households with parents suffering from AIDS. Seeing their parents and care givers become ill and die leads to psychological and social stress often aggravated by the stigma associated with AIDS (Dane and Leveine 1994). It has often been claimed that children with orphan status have been non-existing in traditional African society (Foster, Makufa et al. 1997). Traditional institutions like the extended family and child fostering catered for the needs of children who had lost their biological parents (Goody, 1982). During the last decades this situation has changed dramatically and the number of orphans left to cater for their own needs is increasing by the day. As a consequence traditional institutions have been overburdened and can no longer secure the needs of all (Kilonzo and Hogan 1999).

The changing political, economic and cultural context of rural and urban life in Tanzania has also altered the life chances of orphans in general and of children orphaned by AIDS in particular. In Tanzania the increasing problem of orphans is hardly reflected in government welfare policies. In a situation where structural adjustment policies have set the political agenda, public spending on social welfare has been radically cut. Education and health services are no longer accessible to everybody. Orphans and children in families affected by HIV/AIDS are particularly vulnerable in this regard. While the state has few or no means to handle the orphan problem, communities have by and large been left to solve the problem locally.

#### **Care and coping as gendered issues**

It has been documented that much of the burden of caring for people living with HIV/AIDS and of orphans falls upon women and girls. When illness strikes a family or when children are orphaned, it is commonly the girls who are forced to drop out of school, care for younger siblings and take on the responsibility of nursing the sick parent

(Connolly 2001). It has also been documented that female children on the basis of their customary role in the household are more attractive for fosterage than male children.

Generally fosterage means protection (Urassa, Boerma et al. 1997) but it may also be connected with economic and sexual exploitation and abuse, and hence an increased risk of contracting HIV. The extent of the burden of care and household work left to female children in families hit by AIDS in Arusha and Kilimanjaro has not been documented.

In their study of the Kisesa community of Northwest Tanzania Urassa et al (1997) observed that outside assistance to orphans was rare. The only type of assistance in place was that of the extended family. When the support system and the safety net represented by the extended family are missing, orphaned children have to cope on their own. Coping strategies are gendered within local cultural and economic contexts. While destitute boys in Tanzania may end up in the streets, “street-girls” is not a known concept. A “solution” for a destitute girl is rather going into domestic work as a “house-girl”. House-girls get a bed and usually only get paid food for work. Street-boys and house-girls are both prone to sexual and economic exploitation, but as street-boys appear publicly in the streets, their suffering is a visible problem that the authorities are aware of. The house-girl by contrast is confined to the domestic sphere where her experiences remain hidden and unattended. This study will therefore pay particular attention to the girl child and adolescent both during parent’s illness and after parent’s death. This project will look into the processes that result in a particular coping strategy and will discuss what this strategy involves in terms of survival and HIV- risk.

The research agenda

**The present project will investigate the situation of boys and girls in families affected by HIV/AIDS in Kilimanjaro through a gender perspective. It will examine the acute problems of care, support and protection of children when the capacity of families and communities to handle the problem has been overburdened or severely curtailed. Of particular interest is how gender works in connection with parents’ illness and death. In what kind of situations does gender make a difference? This research project is concerned not only with the status of the orphaned girl and boy, but also with the situation of the child in HIV/AIDS-affected households during illness leading finally to parents’ death.**

**The phase of parents’ illness has received comparatively little attention in research as well as in intervention projects. It is usually not until the child has been orphaned that assistance is activated. It is the way the orphaned child is socially constructed as a destitute that has activated concern from humanitarian organisations and that has defined the need for assistance. At the same time it has entailed stigmatisation (Foster and Williamson 2000). The need to define a broader target group including all vulnerable children and the demand for intervention during the phase of parents’ illness has increasingly been recognised (see e.g. Connolly 2001).**

**Little is known however about how local communities in Kilimanjaro and Arusha handle the problem of AIDS-related sickness and death in the parent population, and how the orphan status is interpreted and acted upon traditionally and in the context of modern life. To what extent is the extended kinship network operational in contemporary Kilimanjaro/Arusha and how does it work in relation to the boy and the girl child during parents’ illness and after their death? This project will look at the construction of the**

**concept of orphan in Kilimanjaro/Arusha and examine its relevance in different social, economic and cultural contexts.**

Central research questions

- *How does gender make a difference to the child in HIV/AIDS affected households? What is the difference between a girl growing up in an HIV/AIDS affected household and a boy growing up in the same kind of environment?*
- *How is the situation of children in connection with parents' HIV/AIDS related illness and death handled in local communities in the traditional and modern sectors of the economy in Kilimanjaro/Arusha?*

### **Research Objectives**

- *To build up an empirical understanding of the different situation of boys and girls as children and youth affected by the AIDS epidemic.*
- *To use this empirical understanding in planning interventions to reduce the vulnerability of orphans.*

### **Methods**

*Being intervention oriented, the research project will be carried out in a participatory manner involving relevant institutions including local schools, churches and NGOs, as well as youth clubs, parent groups and community leaders. The main informants of the project are the children in families affected by AIDS and their potential care providers. The major research tool will be qualitative interviews and focus group interviews, but also limited surveys to map the magnitude of the problem of missed care will be done in collaboration with local NGOs<sup>4</sup>. Because rural-urban migration is an aspect of the orphan problem, both rural and urban locations will be included in the study.*

### **References**

- Connolly, M. (2001). Principles to guide programming for orphans and other children affected by HIV/AIDS. Orphans and vulnerable children in Africa: Victims or vestiges of hope, Uppsala, Nordic Africa Institute.
- Dane, B. and C. Leveine, Eds. (1994). AIDS and the new orphans: Coping with death, Auburn House.
- Foster, G., C. Makufa, et al. (1997). "Perception of children and community members concerning the circumstances of orphans in rural Zimbabwe." AIDS care **9**: 391-406.
- Foster, G. and J. Williamson (2000). "A review of the current literature on the impact of HIV/AIDS on children in sub-Saharan Africa." AIDS **14**(3): 275-284.

---

<sup>4</sup> An important collaborative partner in this project is "Women against AIDS in Kilimanjaro".

Kilonzo, G. P. and N. M. Hogan (1999). "Traditional African mourning practices are abridged in response to the AIDS epidemic: Implications for mental health." Transcultural Psychiatry **36**(3): 259-283.

Urassa, M., T. Boerma, et al. (1997). "Orphanhood, child fostering and the AIDS epidemic in rural Tanzania." Health Transition Review **7**(2): 141-153.