

Targeting children and youth in Nairobi's slums

In the Kwa Njenga slums in Nairobi, Kenya, four out of every 10 children have lost one of their parents by age 12. These HIV/AIDS orphans lack food and are malnourished. They have few clothes and blankets – most orphans wear rags. Relatives caring for such orphans usually live below the poverty line and cannot give them proper care and support.

A Fondation Mérieux project aims at preventing and controlling the spread of the disease by training and engaging children and youth.

Little hope for orphaned children

Many orphaned children are experiencing deepening poverty, enormous mental stress and a profound sense of insecurity. Due to lack of support from their relatives, these children often:

- Withdraw from school, thereby losing their opportunity for long-term self-reliance.
- Face stigma and discrimination.
- Suffer from neglect and overwork.
- Engage in production labour from a young age.
- Are at risk of sexual abuse; many young girls enter sex work to survive and support their families.
- Grow up increasingly at risk of HIV infection.

Children growing up with low self-esteem, little sense of security, little or no education, and poor social skills have almost no chance to pull themselves out of poverty. Many will never become productive, self-sufficient citizens and parents. Instead, many living in the slums will likely bring instability, crime and other problems to society, perpetrating the human rights abuses they have suffered.

Rising crime, homelessness, growing number of street children, increased sex work and exploiting girls and women will create another generation of ill-cared for, at-risk children.

Children living with HIV/AIDS

The most common way for a child to acquire HIV/AIDS is from the mother before or during labour, or through breastfeeding. Babies born with HIV/AIDS usually die within two to three years, but some may reach primary or secondary school age. Some are infected through sexual abuse, contact with infected blood, or unscreened transfusion.

Numerous children in the Kwa Njenga slums project are living with HIV/AIDS. They are attended by poor family members and friends who lack access to medication and health care. Many die miserable, painful deaths.

Encouraging behaviour change

To address the root problem of poverty, the project is also setting up and sustaining effective, integrated child services on HIV/AIDS. This will involve broad, continuous care, voluntary counselling and testing services.

The long-term objective is to reduce HIV/AIDS and encourage behaviour change among children and youth. The objectives are to educate and counsel them, as well as offer home-based care and support for those affected and infected.



Fondation Mérieux

The foundation's mission is uniting and mobilising world authorities on infectious diseases in order to reduce the negative effects of emerging pathogens through prevention (mainly vaccines), diagnostics and therapeutics. Its goal is to conduct efficient, sustainable, useful projects aimed at fighting against diseases and health conditions that have the greatest burden in the developing world – particularly HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria.

Fondation Mérieux actions include field projects, conferences and seminars and support to research programmes. It promotes innovative solutions that accelerate the development, application and sustainability of cost-effective health care interventions that address the diseases and health conditions in the developing world.

www.fondation-merieux.org

Peer groups for training will be identified, which will help integrate prevention activities. Educational materials and literature will also be provided. Participatory methodologies, such as puppetry, drama, video, song and dance, are expected to encourage behaviour change. Sports activities will mobilise children and youth. Recreation activities, practically non-existent in the project area, will help to set a forum for discussion on topical issues.

The project, launched May 2005, will last for eight months and is expected to reach 6,000 children and youth, both orphans and those living with HIV/AIDS.

Expected results

The project, through training, is expected to inform children and youth about the dangers of the disease. HIV/AIDS prevention and care will ensure their physical, emotional, social, educational and material well-being. The focus on children and youth will reduce infection and complications resulting from the disease.

At the same time, the project will identify children specifically affected and target community support to them. It will identify abandoned, orphaned or mistreated children and place them in foster homes or put them up for adoption. Finally, the project will encourage behaviour change and advocate that HIV/AIDS is at once a health issue and a human/child rights issue.

This € 13,100 project will be monitored and evaluated regularly by Poverty Relief Aid. Fondation Mérieux is supporting this Poverty Relief project by making available funds and scientific expertise to aid in this important initiative.