Empowering children affected by HIV/AIDS to meet their own needs through child-led organisations (based on RIATT: Case Studies)

A case study of a collective of child-led projects based in the Nshamba area of North Eastern Tanzania

1. Starting with the children: The origins of the projects

Nshamba is a small trade centre of about 8 000 inhabitants situated in north-eastern Tanzania. The people living around the trade centre are mostly smallholder peasants who eke out a small living in the largely infertile soil. The area is characterised by poverty and has been deeply affected by the AIDS pandemic. From 1997 Novartis Foundation for Sustainable Development and the DEZA (Swiss Agency for Cooperation) funded a small counselling intervention for orphan children in a few local schools. After the counselling programme the question was what could be done to provide ongoing support for the children? Kurt Madoerin who had initiated the counselling programme responded with an approach that was rooted in his own history with labour organisations – why not start an orphan organisation led by the children themselves?

But characteristically he did not start with his own ideas about what this organisation should look like he asked the children. 17 orphans (aged between 13 and 20) from different villages were invited to a workshop in March 2000. At the workshop the young people spent time identifying their existing strengths and the things they needed help with. They identified areas in which they could support each other and then they talked about the possible functions of an orphan's organisation.

Orphan children list strengths and needs
Things I need help with
- Missing someone to share my problems with
- Taking on the responsibilities of my parents, such as looking after younger siblings.
- Isolation from my peer group
- Failing to attend school for some days because of my inability to pay school fees; this
- adversely affected my final results
- Sleepless nights thinking about my father's death and the heavy responsibility I face
- My *shamba* is covered in weeds because I have no time to tend to it
- Facing harsh treatment from my uncle who threatens to starve me if I don't work.

Things I do well
- Learning to communicate with adults on different matters
- Looking after my siblings alone
- I am stronger and more confident today because I have successfully completed so many duties even work that boys usually do
- Learning to tolerate and deal with my problems
- Respecting and understanding others like me who have lost loved ones
- Learning to work to earn money to satisfy basic needs
- Trying to bury my problems and play with my friends
- Being polite
- Learning to live within my means
- Learning to ignore rude people.

At the end of the workshop five groups, each with an action plan had been formed in order to start an orphan organisation. The young people named the organisation "Vijana Simama Imara – VSI" (Youth standing upright firmly). By the end of 2004 there were 1'300 VSI members distributed in 17 clusters.

Initially the organisation catered for children aged 13 to 18 but the younger brothers and sisters of these children began to ask if they could join. In 2002 the Rafiki Mdogo (Little friends) were formed. These children met once a week for games and activities at a meeting run by older VSI members.

Child-led groups for children living with elderly grandarents – TatuTano

Through working with the VSI and Rafiki Mdogo Kurt Madoerin became aware of the situation of old people in the area. Many old people no longer had sons and daugthers to look after them and many were also looking after their grandchildren. The Kwa Wazee Project began in 2003 initially as a project to provide cash transfers to needy elderly people in the area.
During 2008 an evaluation of the impact of the cash transfer to the elderly was conducted. During this evaluation the evaluators worked with children to understand the impact of the cash transfer on the children living with the grandparents (Hofmann, Heslop, Clacherty, Kessy 2008). At the same time a small qualitative study (Clacherty 2008) was conducted to find out about children who lived with their grandparents. It was clear from both the impact evaluation work with the children and the qualitative study that life was very hard for children living with grandparents. The biggest issue was that they had a very heavy burden of work as there were no able adults in the house to earn money or to do the heavy labour.

In response to this a group of the children who had been involved in the evaluation attended a workshop where they were asked "how can you support each other with your heavy workload?" The children made a decision to start small groups. Initially through these groups the children helped each other with the heavy work they had to do like collecting firewood and water. Subsequently the group activities have grown to include other activities such as income generation, savings, agriculture etc. In December 2013 there were 170 TatuTano groups with 1'250 members.

Child-led groups for child-carers

Child-led groups for children looking after ill parents have also been set up in the Nshamba area. Similar to the Kwa Wazee project these groups grew out of a cash transfer to adults made by the Symphasis organisation. The adults who received the cash transfer meet regularly to discuss their mental and physical health. During these meetings facilitators noticed that they identified their children as their biggest support and they thought that this must place a heavy burden on the children.

The children were invited to a workshop where they talked about the challenges they faced, It was clear that the burden of work (similar to the KwaWazee children) they

carried was heavy but (also similar to the KwaWazee children) they carried a heavy burden of emotional stress too. They had to contend with the discrimination against their family from community members because their parents were ill and the lack of basic needs because their parents were often too ill to work. During the workshops the children set up local neighbourhood groups where they could begin income generation projects and support each other

In reflecting on the growing understanding of how to facilitate a child-led organisation Kurt Madoerin says that one of the lessons learned is

> *"the importance of basing any child-led organisation on the children's own interests in order to create or release the energy needed to keep the groups going."*

In all the projects in Nshamba the children defined their own interests as the basis for the organisation. A big issue for the children who became TatuTano-members was the stigma attached to being an orphan so when the children formed the groups one of the issues that informed its structure was the need to give them as orphans a new identity. Another issue of concern was the heavy workload and extreme poverty, so the group was formed to help each other with work and to find ways of making money.

2. The goal: Meeting psychosocial needs through a child-led organisation

The nature of participation in the collective of child-led organisations in Nshamba is informed by a body of principles drawn from a range of different disciplines. The first principle relates to meeting psychosocial needs.

Meeting psychosocial needs

What is interesting about the child-led projects in Nshamba is that all of them have as a central goal "psychosocial well-being". This may be surprising as a child-led organisation is a long way from what we have come to regard as typical of a psychosocial projects (counselling and support groups for example). But the definition of psychological well-being is a broad one based on the work of Armstrong, Boyden, Galappatti and Hart (2004) who see material conditions, human capacity and social ecology as essential elements to work in if one is to create psychosocial well-being.

Psychosocial well-being
- <u>Social ecology</u>. This refers to the circumstances of children's social worlds, including their relationships with peers, kin, neighbours and others (extent and quality), the degree and nature of social support, care, mentoring and services available to them, and the implications of their social identity (gender, class, location, ethnicity, religion) for life experiences and events.
- <u>Human capacity</u>. This refers to the status of children's individual resources in relation to

cognitive capacity, social competence, personal identity and valuation, emotional well-being, skills and knowledge – as is necessary for good functioning and interaction within their social, cultural and material environment.

- <u>Material environment</u>. This refers to the material conditions of children's lives, including those pertaining to physical environment and infrastructure, status of food and livelihood security, and degree of physical safety and comfort.

Culture and values are not seen as separate entities but rather as an overarching concept that shapes the content of the three domains.

The child-led organisations described here therefore promote psychological well-being by working directly in the realm of the social ecology of the child by extending their social network. So the participation of the children and young people is related directly to their psychological health. Participation is also to the second and third principal in that the improving of the children's material environment is done through increasing the children's capacity to provide for themselves i.e. through their participation.

Note that with regard to this final point Kurt Madoerin (in characteristically interesting imagery) describes the approach as "a milk man approach rather than a fire brigade one." A milk man delivers a small amount of milk every day in a sustained way but a fire brigade comes in a with a load of water to put out a fire and then goes away. Many responses to improving children's material conditions are of the fire brigade variety but this project uses a slow and sustained approach built on the idea that the children themselves can solve the problem often without outside help. This points to a second principle in which the approach to participation is rooted.

Creating agency through protagonism

Essentially protagonism means that children are seen as social actors who have a right to participate in whatever matters to them, short- or long-term. But as Reddy and Ratna (2002) describe, protagonism moves beyond the typical forms of participation that we see in many children's programmes.

> *When Children's Participation is seen within the frame of protagonism it takes on another dimension; the right and the ability to advocate on one's own behalf, to be in control and a part of decision-making processes and interventions. (ibid, p1).*

Within the frame of protagonism participation can be placed at the highest point of Hart's Ladder of Participation (Hart, 1997). The activities are child-initiated and child-directed; the children make the decisions supported by adults.

Children involved in evaluation

An example of how children can be involved in evaluation of a project and how this builds their capacity and gives information that allows project staff to improve the project is the ongoing evaluation work done in the child-led organisations in the Nshamba area.

During 2009 the main emphasis in the Symphasis project was to help the children set up small income generation projects (these are done in small groups). At a recent training the children did an activity to assess the performance of these groups. They used a version of the "Spider tool" developed by Save the Children where children choose from a list of key Quality Elements (KQE) that they see evident in their group. They then choose elements they would like to see more of and then define one or two very concrete activities in order to progress toward the intended goal.

The children worked very hard and concentrated on this exercise – which hopefully will improve the performance of the groups, but it was also a very practical life skill training in assessment, planning, goal setting and communication in the group.

The following table outlines a few of the Key Quality Elements that the children felt their groups had. Numbers denote the number of groups who chose this element

Social KQE	Operational KQE
cooperation (20), love (10), trust (18), common decisions (16) , build friendship (10)	discipline (3), working hard (8), being interested 3), regular meetings (3), good attendance (3), planning (1)

The exercise also highlighted the fact that there was sometimes a conflict between "Children having their own agenda" and "Support from adults" because some parents were imposing decisions without discussing it with the children. The project staff addressed this issue in the parents meeting in order to find a good balance between these two KQE's for the children.

Child-led group meetings, microfinance to meet basic needs and intergenerational activities

Child-led group meetings
All of the child-led activities in Nshamba are structured around children's groups. The TatuTano-groups are neighbourhood-based. Children living near each other and who can easily cooperate and communicate form their groups. They elect their leaders (chairperson and accountant) which get trained by Kwa Wazee.
Each month the representatives of the groups meet in their respective geographical areas, called "cluster". There at the moment 13 clusters. The groups report about the activities of the past month, about challenges and successes and present their plans for the following month and deposit their saving.

Microsavings and microcredits to meet basic needs
Microfinance is central to the way the child-led organisations operate but this too is rooted in a participatory approach. Training programmes are run in to build children's own capacity in financial literacy in order to meet their material needs. It is clear that this does not only improve their material situation but also has a huge impact on psycho-social well-being.

Income generation:
The following is a description of the projects run by three of the child-led groups:
Maendeleo-group (Kahiyo-Rwigembe: 8 members):They keep 15 chicken and one goat. Further they started to cultivate sunflower and sorghum. Finally they buy and sell sugar cane and avocados. In

> December 13 they had 22'000 Tsh. On their saving account.
> *Watoto-group (Itongo: 3 member)* :they have three projects: a tree-nursery, buying and selling eggs and firewood, and keeping 5 chicken. Their saving is at end December 11'000 Tshs.
> *Juhudi group (Bunyagongo, 7 members)*: They are buying and selling "dagaa" (small dried fishes) and firewood. They had 9'200 Tshs. savings.

Inter generational activities

Apart from the child-led nature of the collective of groups in Nshamba one of the most striking characteristics is the fact that all of them encourage intergenerational contact.

The Tato Tanu groups, which are structured around children who live with grandparents, have a strong focus on intergenerational dialogue. Some children and grandparents meet to discuss issues and plans for the year. One of the focuses of the psychosocial support work is on improving communication between grandparents and children.

The Symphasis group works in a similar way. See box below for an example.

Encouraging intergenerational work and equality in the Symphasis project
Extract from the 2009 midterm report.

"In this project we have had the very special opportunity to be able to work with the parents as well as with their children. We do bring parents and children together sometimes but mostly we run separate groups.

It is a delicate challenge to strengthen the children and to include the parents in this process due to the traditional relationships between adults and children where children are not supposed to have their own voices. We hope that the process we followed in the development of economic activities will bind parents and children together in a common objective.
We explained to the parents and children that all economic activities are on a loan basis (either in kind or in cash). We explained why it was going to be a loan and not a hand-out. One of the strongest reason was that we wanted the children to become good and self-confident business girls and boys as this would help them to cope in the future with sick or even without parents.
We proposed to the children and to the parents that we would give each child a loan to start a small business but that this loan would be deducted from the parent's regular cash payment if children failed with the repayment. This made the income generation activity a common venture. Parents and children signed the loan agreement. We insisted with the parents that the children should be the implementing actors in order to be better prepared for the future. What struck us was how seriously the children engaged with this process they were very much equal partners in deciding to start an income generating project – they were not pressured by their parents.
What is striking about this is that the children are completely equal partners with the adults and the have as much say in the way things are run as the adults.

One good example of positive impact of the participation on families comes from the Symphasis group which works with child-carers. An evaluation activity asked children to rate their support of their parents before the first set of workshops and then again after the workshops. They indicated a very clear shift toward a higher level of support.