

Concept Note

Community of practice: Promotion of Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVCs) in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

Background

Vulnerable children are defined as those *whose safety, well-being, and development are, for various reasons, threatened*. Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVCs) may include: orphans, abandoned children, street children, handicapped children, child soldiers and those affected by war (displaced and refugees), children exposed to hazardous work, children who are victims of trafficking and various forms of abuse and neglect, and children living in extremely poor conditions. The number of OVCs is growing in Africa as a serious consequence of the AIDS epidemic, conflicts and displacement. To date, African countries South of the Sahara account for more than 40 million orphans, with an estimated 11.4 million children orphaned by AIDS (UNAIDS, 2007). Of the many factors that accentuate children's vulnerabilities, the most important are lack of care and affection, adequate shelter, education, nutrition, and psychological support. Although children are exposed to many facets of deprivation and poverty, children who have lost their parents may be particularly vulnerable, because they do not have the emotional and physical maturity to address adequately and bear the psychological trauma associated with parental loss. In the absence of appropriate caregivers in the community, adequate nutrition, and access to education and health services, OVCs are likely to grow up as relatively inadequate adults with reduced potential to contribute to society or to their country's development.

The degree and type of vulnerability faced by children are shaped by the risk and stress characteristics (i.e., magnitude, frequency, duration, and history) to which they (but also households and communities) are exposed, and these tend to vary between countries and over time (Holzmann and Jorgensen 2000; Heitzmann, Canagarajah, and Siegel 2002). Thus children's vulnerability generally, and

orphans' vulnerability in particular, is very context-specific and must be analyzed within the socio-cultural milieu in which they live.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) recognize some of the aspects of the status of children, particularly health, education and nutrition. However the seamless relationship between the many facets of poverty and deprivation in the status of children and the country specificity makes it rather difficult to capture the phenomenon adequately. This is further exacerbated by the HIV pandemic currently affecting Africa. This has made the sheer magnitude of orphans and their negative impact on resource limited public expenditure patterns particularly difficult. The need to implement policies that do not exacerbate the present status is thus compelling. This should be aligned to a monitoring and evaluation mechanism that measures policy impacts on the inclusion of OVCs into mainstream development, including achieving the MDGs.

Objective of the Community of Practice

The objectives of the community of practice on the social inclusion of OVCs in the MDGs include: (1) To disseminate and generate knowledge on policies, programmes regarding OVCs in member states; (2) To exchange knowledge and experiences on the OVCs and MDGs; and (3) To identify additional targets and indicators in the MDGs that would enable more effective monitoring and evaluation of the inclusion of the OVCs into mainstream development.

Core issues to be discussed

The three main issues that will be addressed through this community of practice on OVCs are: (1) The magnitude and status of OVCs in African countries; (2) Policies to promote the inclusion of OVCs into mainstream development; (3) Country experience of addressing OVCs whether through the MDGs or other specific policies; and (4) The identification of additional targets and indicators to ensure that the MDGs fully captures the inclusion of this excluded group in mainstream development.

First week

During the first week activities/discussions should focus on reviewing the prevalence and magnitude of OVCs within African countries as a socially excluded group. Questions that could help guide the discussion include:

1. What is the definition of orphan and vulnerable children in your country? How many orphans are there in your country? What is the number of vulnerable children in your country? Is the size of both groups known? What are the factors driving the growth in the number of OVCs in your countries?
2. What are the main areas of their exclusion?

Second week

The second week will build on the first week's discussions but will focus more on the policies including the monitoring of the MDGs to integrate and advance the inclusion of OVCs. Questions that could help guide the discussion include:

1. What policies are in place to tackle the exclusion of OVCs in your countries?
2. How do the MDGs in your country monitor the economic and social participation of this group in the developmental efforts of your country?
3. Are there any specific institutions anchoring these policies? How are they organized?

Third Week

In the third week, discussion will focus on country experiences that could be exchanged for the identification of practices worthy of emulation by others.

Questions that could help guide the discussion include:

1. How in operational terms has your country dealt with OVCs? How do you measure success (or failure)?
2. What difficulties did you encounter? What were the roles of partners, including NGOs, bilateral organizations and UN agencies?
3. With the benefit of hindsight, do you think that setting up time-bound quantitative targets have been useful?

Fourth week

The fourth week will synthesize the discussion of the previous three and explore the usefulness of including additional targets and indicators to the MDGs on OVCs. Questions that could help guide the discussion include:

1. Based on your personal and your country's/organization's experience, would you include additional targets on OVCs to the MDGs? If so, what are these additional targets/indicators that through your country experience could capture this vulnerable group?
2. What are the capacity (monitoring administrative, reporting) issues that can arise from the inclusion of additional indicators?
3. Do you think the additional targets in the MDGs give greater visibility to OVCs or risk its disappearance in a sea of indicators?