

The Twin Crises in Uganda

HIV/AIDS and Poverty

When the first AIDS case was diagnosed in Uganda, there was little understanding of the cause of the disease. Some locals in fishing villages and trading centers blamed witchcraft. For many years individuals who tested positive for the disease were routinely outcast and stigmatized. Even after a nationwide AIDS awareness campaign led by Uganda's president in 1986, the mysterious disease continued to be shrouded in fear.

By the 1990s, hundreds of thousands were dying each year. In some regions of the country, a third of the population was infected. To date over 1.6 million Ugandans have succumbed to the disease and another 1 million are living with HIV. Unlike other diseases, AIDS devastates the population of 17-45 year olds, the most productive age group in Ugandan society. As the farmers, artisans, and educated professionals began to die off, Uganda's economic and social order, already shattered by years of war and political upheaval, was further disrupted. The healthcare system was overwhelmed as hundreds of AIDS patients swarmed local medical centers with no more than 30 beds each. When infected farmers became bedridden, their families were forced to sell their ancestral land to pay for medical treatment. Many families gave their entire accumulated wealth to local, traditional healers, who eagerly took the money but hadn't the slightest understanding of how AIDS could be treated.

In part a result of the impact of HIV/AIDS, approximately one third of all Ugandans live in absolute poverty, lacking access to adequate food, clothing, healthcare, education and housing.

Despite the overwhelming numbers, Uganda is a success story in the battle against HIV/AIDS. Unlike many other African governments, the administration of Ugandan President, Yoweri Museveni, has earned international acclaim for its leadership in promoting HIV awareness and prevention. However, even as the HIV/AIDS crisis begins to recede, the plight of the children left behind by the disease worsens by the day.

The Plight of Vulnerable Children

Life for most Ugandan children is very difficult, even for those with both parents still living. The many Ugandan children living in poverty rarely attend school, eat more than once a day, sleep in their own bed, or have access to basic medical care. In a country that depends on agriculture for over 80% of its GDP, the need for labor is at a premium. Children are often

forced to work all day in the family garden. They fetch firewood and water, assist in planting and harvesting, or babysit younger siblings. We call vulnerable these children living in poverty without access to healthcare, education and the basic necessities of life.

The Plight of Orphans

Like the Ugandan government and many international relief organizations, New Hope defines orphans as children under the age of 18 who have lost one or both parents. In 2005, for every two people that died of AIDS, there were five new orphans. To date, there are over 2.3 million orphans in Uganda alone. Approximately 10% of the entire national population consists of orphans under the age of 18. Despite the country's success in combating AIDS, the orphan crisis in Uganda is one of the most acute in the world.

The life of a Ugandan orphan is scarred by a degree of cruelty and neglect beyond the comprehension of most western observers. After watching both their parents waste away slowly from AIDS, the child is almost always left without an able, and many times not even a loving care giver. Siblings are invariably separated. Some are sent to grandparents, aunts, uncles or cousins. Generally speaking, the more distant the relative, the higher the degree of neglect. Orphans are treated as outsiders and given last priority in everything from distributing food at dinner to medical and school fees. If a foster family's financial situation worsens, the orphans are the first forced onto the street. With nowhere to go, girl orphans are often forced into prostitution or an early marriage. Boys join the swelling ranks of the street kids—homeless children who congregate in gangs, dig through garbage for food, sleep on store verandahs and subject themselves to all sorts of labor and even sexual exploitation.