

Submission to the Portfolio Committee on
Social Development on the
Children's Amendment Bill [B19B – 2006]

**from the Matjhabeng HIV and AIDS
Consortium**

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Attention: Ms Zola Vice
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1. Introduction

The Matjhabeng HIV and AIDS consortium is the custodian of the Matjhabeng Joint Venture OVC project. It is also the distributor of funds to service providers. The project consists of 8 service providers and is the brainchild of the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund. The project key result areas are:

- support and strengthening of families and households,
- sustainable livelihoods,
- building and strengthening community systems for support of OVCs,
- behaviour change,
- reduced stigmatization in the community and
- psychosocial support.

The area of operation is the municipality of Matjhabeng, the district of Lejweleputswa, Virginia, in the Free State province.

2. Account of a child

Moselanjta Lerata is a 16 year old girl who is in Grade 11. She is the head of a household, and she is responsible for 2 younger siblings. They receive limited assistance from an unemployed adult relative. In 2006 Moselanjta received an award for best learner at school, which was a remarkable achievement in light of her circumstances.

However, over the past year her schooling has been interrupted. Moselanjta's sister fell pregnant and had a baby at the end of 2006. This has presented a great challenge as Moselanjta has had to bear the responsibility of looking after the baby. What is to become of her dream of becoming a chartered accountant?

Moselanjta gives her account of how the support of the Joint Venture has made an impact on her life:

"I have attended workshops and weekend fun activities, and there has been follow up by one member of staff. She meets with us as individuals... and this has been helpful... I used to work for our neighbours, but now with the help of the Joint Venture I am motivated to do people's hair and get some money. I know I am a girl child. With all these challenges I must dream and make my dreams come true. With Matjhabeng Joint Venture everything is possible. The Joint Venture has no money to give, but it is good to be with them."

3. Our challenges

We would like to highlight the following recommendations with regard to child-headed households, which is currently addressed in Clause 136 of the Children's Amendment Bill:

One of the key features of child-headed households is that there is a destruction of human dignity, as the culture of ubuntu is eroded. Where previously extended family and community members would have stepped in to assist children without parents, this is no longer the case. Indeed, in our experience family members caring for orphaned children – including grandparents and uncles – have even been sexually abusing these vulnerable children. We have received many reports from children of verbal abuse from aunts and stepmothers.

Children also relate that in their experience, educators are not caring towards them, and schools seem to have adopted a value system based on the assumption that it is the accumulation of material possessions that makes someone of more importance than another. Both the printed media (newspapers, magazines, billboards) and television contribute towards perpetuating these distorted values, making poor children feel of no significance or importance in society.

Other features of child-headed households are that they are economically disadvantaged i.e. there is less income per capita than for households where there is a parent. The exclusion of children from the education system further perpetuates the poverty cycle. Often children in these households are not at school and some have never even been to school. For some, this is due to the fact that they are single parents. Girls may become prostitutes in order to gain some income for the household.

There is a yearning among children in child-headed households to belong, to be part of a family of caring and loving people. Children responsible for caring for other children do so at the expense of their own childhood. Many children describe being depressed and isolated as there is usually no one to confide in. They lack confidence because of the limited support that they get from the community and other relatives, and this affects their well-being.

4. Our recommendations

We believe that specific targeted support for vulnerable children in child-headed households has the potential to make a huge impact on the lives of these children. Such support should be reflected in the provisions of the Children's Amendment Bill:

1. Psychosocial support

Like all other children, children in children in child-headed households need love, they need healthy relationships and the support necessary to enable them to safely negotiate the different stages of childhood. Programmes need to be put into place to provide this support, and government needs to fund programmes of this nature which are being run by NGOs. (For example the Matjhabeng Joint Venture organizes for children to spend weekends with families, where they can take "time out" from their own stresses to develop relationships. This is also closely linked with a mentoring scheme where individual adults develop a relationship with a particular child.)

Support groups are seen as a means of contributing to children's physical, social, emotional and psychological growth, as well as serving as an important network system. Sharing and discussing of various viewpoints helps children to see that they are not alone in their life situations.

2. Education

Children need to be given support to enable them to complete their education. This includes assistance with school fees and uniform costs, as well as provision of facilities where younger children can be placed during the day.

3. Skills development

For those children who have left school, options for skills development need to be made available to them. These could be done through learnership, internships, bursaries and training programmes. It is essential that these enable young people to progress in their lives and access opportunities for career growth. They must contribute to the employability of the young people and/or their ability to develop sustainable income generating projects. On-going access to information and education, as well as long-term support are also essential (e.g. the provision for upgrading of skills and access to markets).

4. Food gardens

Emphasis should also be given to developing capacity and self-reliance around food security. Children in child-headed households should be encouraged and supported to develop and/or access backyard food gardens.

5. Social security

A central tenet of the support to child-headed households is the improvement of access to social security. Children need to be assisted to obtain the necessary documentation from Home Affairs (e.g. birth certificates, IDs, death certificates) in order to apply for the relevant grants.

6. Municipal services and housing

Child-headed households need to be given priority and reduced fees for municipal services such as water and electricity. In addition they need support to ensure adequate and secure housing where they are able to live in hygienic and safe conditions.