

Zimbabwe, Camfed and Mother Support Groups

Once a middle income country, Zimbabwe is now one of the poorest countries in the world. In 2007, Zimbabwe ranked 151 out of 177 countries in the Human Development Report issued by the United Nations Development Programme, with rampant hyperinflation and more than 70% unemployment. The official inflation rate, already the world's highest in 2007, continued to spiral in early 2008, with official estimates exceeding 100,000%. As the cost of basic goods continues to skyrocket, even daily necessities are beyond the reach of many families. More than 80% of the population lives on less than \$2 per day. In addition, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has left one in five (1.3 million) children orphaned and 20% of adults infected with HIV.

As these challenges undermine the country's capacity to deliver basic social services, communities are left to cope with the devastating fallout, while ever-increasing losses of adult income earners to AIDS further increase the vulnerability of children dependent on them. In this context, it is critical to strengthen community capacity to support and reinforce welfare and education structures at the local level, so that education is sustained and communities can provide essential protection for children at a time of extreme vulnerability.

Camfed has been investing in community capacity-building in rural Zimbabwe since the organization's inception in 1993, and has steadily expanded those investments over the past 15 years. Camfed Zimbabwe's ability to continue to expand its programs is a powerful testament to the resilience and strength of its staff and of the Camfed model. In 2007, Camfed Zimbabwe's education programs benefited a total of 306,030 children in 18 districts, with the support of 31,030 community activists.

Some of the most vital grassroots groups working alongside Camfed in rural communities in Zimbabwe are Mother Support Groups, which have formed to help support orphans and vulnerable children. These groups complement Camfed's work by serving children not already reached by Camfed's education programs. While many Mothers Group members were excluded from school themselves, they are keenly aware of the value and importance of education, and eager to give needy children the opportunities that they were denied.

Mother Support Groups members benefit from training by Camfed in identifying children's needs within the community, planning initiatives, record-keeping, counseling and guidance for school children, health issues, and income-boosting activities. Camfed also provides grants to Mother Support Groups to support income-generating projects to raise school fees for orphans and provide items such as sanitary protection to enable girls to attend school consistently. Income-generating activities undertaken by these groups include soap-making, bee-keeping, sewing, making and selling peanut butter, and vegetable gardening. Many mothers also play an active role in supporting the welfare of these children by acting as mentors and advisers.

In 2007, 889 Mother Support Groups supported by Camfed were operating in 18 districts in Zimbabwe, and a total of 1,011 were supported by Camfed across Zambia, Tanzania, Ghana, and Zimbabwe. Mothers Groups are often closely aligned with members of Cama (the Camfed alumnae association), a pan-African network of over 7,900 young women leading change in their communities. Cama members and other community leaders mentor Mother Support Groups to empower and support the mothers to take action on behalf of vulnerable children. Angeline Mugwendere, the Executive Director of Camfed Zimbabwe who was also one of the first girls to be supported by Camfed and a founder of Cama, said of the Mothers Groups:

"Zimbabwean rural women's renowned spirit of survival in the face of adversity lives on! Their courage, determination, generosity, commitment and co-operation make them equal adversaries of the challenges that have woven into their lives. Mother Support Groups have...made rural women visible as human beings and social actors by making it possible for many orphaned children to remain in school and at the same time provide each other with a much needed shoulder to lean on and motivation."

Gertrude Mazhindu is the Chairperson of one Mother Support Group in the Wedza district of Zimbabwe. The Mothers Group is well known throughout the region for the products they sell to raise money to fund their work. People come from far and wide to buy the group's homemade clay pots, shoes, tablecloths and natural products such as honey, peanut butter and vegetables. Some of the women in the group have sewing machines, which they use to make new clothes out of old cloth. They also make shoes, which they give to the neediest children in their communities or sell for a profit, which they then use to purchase items for children identified as most vulnerable. Thanks to the profits the mothers make from selling their homemade wares, they are able to buy pens, text books and writing pads for children who are on the verge of dropping out of school.

Once a month, the mothers of Chokodza go to visit families in crisis, such as households headed by the very young or the very old, or those with malnourished or sick members. The women bring food and cook for these families, wash their clothes and talk to them about the problems they face – all vital services for families who are isolated and overwhelmed. In addition to giving social and material support to the neediest in their communities, the group also acts as a support network for the members themselves, sharing skills and boost members' confidence. Since Gertrude joined the Mother Support Group, the mother of four has been able to support her own family with food and clothing through the group's hardship fund while her husband has been out of work:

"We take our inspiration from CAMFED, who came here to assist our children. Now we want to help other children." Gertrude Mazhindu, Chokodza Mother Support Group, Wedza district, Zimbabwe