

GLOBAL HEALTHLINK®

THE NEWS MAGAZINE OF THE GLOBAL HEALTH COUNCIL



ENSURING ACCESS
TO FORTIFIED
COMPLEMENTARY
FOODS
PAGE 4

CATHOLIC
CHURCH OF INDIA
RESPONDS TO
HIV/AIDS
PAGE 6

SIERRA LEONE:
HEALTH AND HOPE
AFTER
THE CONFLICT
PAGE 9

RWANDA: PUTTING
CHILDREN FIRST
PAGE 12



Putting Children First

12

An Innovative Approach
that Promotes
Community Ownership

The double devastation of genocide and AIDS has left thousands of Rwandan children orphaned.

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY BEATRICE M. SPADACINI
PRESS OFFICER
EAST AND CENTRAL AFRICA
CARE

Including children in the planning of development programs is often wishful thinking. Most frequently, in every-day life, it is the adults who call the shots and make important decisions on behalf of young people.

But this is not the case in the Nkundabana program run by CARE International in Rwanda. Here, it is the children who have the first and final say. They are the ones who elect their own mentors based on strict criteria of integrity and service, appoint them as their de facto guardians and entrust them with advocating on their behalf. If the elected 'adult mentors' fail to deliver, they can be sacked.

Thousands of children, who have lost their relatives to either AIDS or as a result of the 1994 genocide, are at the core of CARE programs in seven out of 12 provinces in Rwanda.

The name *Nkundabana*, which in the Kinyarwanda language literally means "I love children," carries a great deal of responsibility toward the thousands of orphans who are heads of households. To be chosen as a child mentor, or Nkundabana, is considered an honor and often, those who are chosen, are already model community members, known for

their generosity and altruism. These mentors are volunteers and the most benefits they ever get is a yearly recognition by the children and the community during the Nkundabana Appreciation Day. On occasions, they receive a bicycle to facilitate their visits to the children but, for the most part, they are simply doing a service out of personal good will.

Nyiranzayino Beatrice has been a community-based volunteer for the past year. Her primary motivation for accepting this role was simple. "I am a mother. I think it is good to take care of others. If these children were my own and if I were no longer alive, what would happen to them?"

Rwanda has the highest number of orphans who are heads of households in all of Africa. With 65 percent of the population living below the poverty line and the impact of HIV/AIDS, the children are particularly at risk of becoming destitute and of being exploited by neighbors and uncanny relatives.

"Many orphans and other vulnerable children report feelings of loneliness, isolation and grief," explains Elie Nduwayesu, program coordinator for CARE in the Gitarama province. "These children struggle to meet their basic needs and because they have no adults to guide them, they often lack basic life skills and are not aware of their own rights." The oldest child usually takes care of his/her younger siblings, with an average of five per household.

After an initial community mapping, whereby the village chief and other local leaders identify where all the child-headed households are, the children are invited to formally meet with community representatives and to draw up the terms of reference for the community mentors.

Involving the community is critical in helping people to take stock of the reality of children in their own area and to have a 'mental map' of where the most vulnerable ones live, who the neighbors are and what needs to be done to ensure they do not live in isolation. "The community must provide sustainable forms of support," explains Nduwayesu, "otherwise the children will fall between the cracks and since they represent the future, it is those who are closest to them who must take charge."

Child mentors provide psycho-social support and protect the children from abuse and exploitation. Their role is one of advocate, teacher, counselor, friend and a bridge to the larger community. In Gitarama alone, CARE has trained close to 500 child mentors. Each mentor oversees between five and seven households. During their weekly visits, the Nkundabanas talk with the children, assess the situation in the home, provide advice and culturally appropriate methods of support.

"If one of the children I visit is sick, I make sure they receive medical assistance," says Beatrice. "Sometimes this means fundraising for the medicines or advocating for free treatment given the children's economic situation." Advocating for the children's land right is also a big part of the Nkundabana's job. Despite the laws that on paper must protect the child's rights to the family land, there are relatives and community members who easily manipulate the children and steal their assets.



Photos from the top: Through the Nkundabana program, children benefit from the guidance of volunteer child mentors. Nkundabanan youth dancing in appreciation of their mentors.

"Many of the children do not have proper shelter," adds Beatrice. "Although it is not our job to adopt these children when they are sick, we do, on occasions, take them into our homes until they are feeling better." CARE provides these adult mentors with a series of trainings to better equip them in addressing the needs of orphans and vulnerable children. These cover topics like the Convention on the Rights of Children, the Rwandan laws on child welfare, conflict management skills, basic counseling techniques, and some reproductive health and HIV/AIDS literacy.

The Nkundabana model is so successful that local government authorities are considering replicating it throughout the country. "We are often invited by local officials to present our work with the children," says Theogene Mbaraga, also a child mentor in Gitarama. "For the first time ever, we actually have an official platform from where to mobilize people and advocate for the rights of our children."

For more information on CARE's work, visit www.care.org.



GLOBAL HEALTH COUNCIL
15 RAILROAD ROW
WHITE RIVER JUNCTION, VT 05001
www.globalhealth.org

Non-Profit Org
US Postage PAID
Permit # 1
Putney, Vt.

Become a member of the Global Health Council

Strengthen

our advocacy alliance for global health

Learn

more about global health issues and best practices

Connect

with key players in the global health and development field

Share

your knowledge

Build

on your potential with our career development services

Through our publications, advocacy work, grassroots outreach, policy series and annual conference, the Global Health Council gives you many ways to do all this and more. For membership details,

visit us at www.globalhealth.org or send us an e-mail at membership@globalhealth.org.