

**National Emergency Response Council on HIV/AIDS,
Mbabane, Swaziland**

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Documented by Scott Drimie, Human Sciences Research Council, sedrimie@hsrc.ac.za

**NERCHA Intervention: Ensuring Food Security for Orphans and Vulnerable Children
in Swaziland (*Indlunkhulu* Project)**

Where:

The NERCHA project sites visited were the Mvuma and Nkamanzi Chiefdoms situated in the Hhohho province in the Middleveld Food Economy Zone in northern Swaziland. According to a recent ante-natal clinic survey, Hhohho province has an HIV prevalence rate of 36.7 percent, which is one of the highest rates recorded globally, although slightly lower than the Swaziland national average of 38.6 percent.

Who:

The National Emergency Response Council on HIV/ AIDS (NERCHA) is a statutory Council, established in December 2001. NERCHA is tasked to oversee the conversion of the "National Strategic Plan for HIV/AIDS" produced by HIV/AIDS Crisis Management and Technical Committee, into action. NERCHA is thus mandated by the Swaziland government to co-ordinate all activities and deal with all aspects of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The institution attempts to ensure that appropriate and comprehensive services in the areas of prevention, care and support and impact mitigation of HIV/AIDS are delivered to the people who need them at grass roots (community) level. The NERCHA Directorate is responsible for co-ordinating and facilitating the national response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, including identifying gaps in the response and proposing interventions to implementing agencies where necessary.

Why:

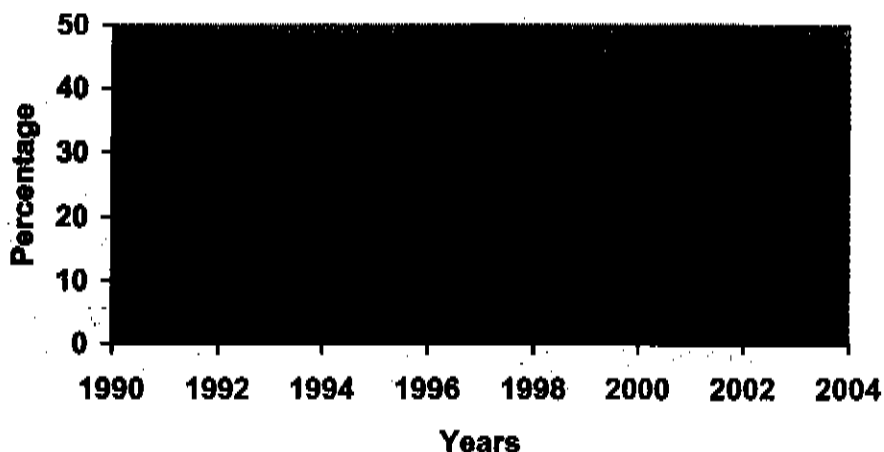
As elsewhere in the region, the HIV/AIDS epidemic is a serious threat to Swaziland. It is thought that the epidemic started in Swaziland about two decades ago. In the initial period, the epidemic was largely unseen and the main source of data pertaining to the epidemic was notified AIDS cases (Whiteside *et al*, 2003). From the first AIDS case reported in 1987, there was a steady increase in the number to over 150 in 1993. In 1992 the first national survey to determine prevalence of HIV in the country was carried out among women attending a sample of antenatal clinics. The results of this survey indicated a prevalence of 3.9 percent among pregnant women. Since 1992 such studies have been carried out at ante-natal clinics every two years. In 1994 the HIV prevalence rate was 16.1%. The subsequent surveys showed a worrying trend of a steep increase in the prevalence rate on a survey-by-survey basis.

The results of the 2002 survey indicate that Swaziland now has the second highest HIV prevalence rate (38.6 percent) in the world (after Botswana) (see UNAIDS 2003). This is consistent with near uniform high infection rates within the sub-region. Another finding of the 2002 surveillance survey worth noting is the fact that the epidemic is widespread within the country. In fact, according to Whiteside *et al*, the uniqueness of Swaziland in terms of HIV/AIDS stems from how uniformly bad the epidemic is (2003).

With 66 percent of households in Swaziland already living below the poverty line, the impoverishing impacts of HIV and AIDS will result in many falling deeper into poverty. Another major concern arising from the epidemic is the estimated 60,000 orphans in

Swaziland in 2003, with approximately four children per household and an average age of 11 years old. At least 15,000 households are headed by children, which have no resources or skills to provide for their basic needs. The growing number of these households in Swaziland indicates that the extended family is finding it increasingly difficult to cope with the additional financial burden of feeding and caring for orphans.

Figure 1: HIV Prevalence level among pregnant women in Swaziland



Thus it is clear that the HIV/AIDS epidemic has continued unabated. In short, it threatens to undo many of the social, health and welfare gains made in the past couple of decades in the country.

What:

The NERCHA Directorate has divided the response to the epidemic into three core areas; these being prevention, impact mitigation, and care and support. NERCHA's Impact Mitigation office seeks to reduce the impact of the disease through various interventions and particularly by increasing community participation and strengthening of programs of organizations addressing the impact of HIV/AIDS in society. Impact Mitigation operates in three fields:

- Orphan and Vulnerable Child Care where the focus is on providing basic needs of this group through social support, food security, education and income generating projects by skills training;
- Legal Response that seeks to review/amend or bring about new legislation to respond to issues of HIV/AIDS; and
- Government Capacity to deliver services by assisting government to develop and implement HIV/AIDS strategies in the work place.

The care of orphan and vulnerable children (OVCs) has been divided into four components, these being (1) food security, (2) socialisation, (3) psycho-social support and (4) economic empowerment.

With whom:

The implementing agency that NERCHA is working with in the case of orphan and vulnerable children is the Ministry of Agriculture and Co-operatives (MOAC). In addition, NERCHA utilises existing social structures to deliver HIV/AIDS services. In the provision of orphan care at the community level, these services are delivered through the Chieftaincy system. The Kingdom of Swaziland is divided into 368 *Imphakatsi* or Chiefdoms, the most

basic level of societal organisation and the structure that rural households will first turn to when in need of assistance.

How:

With the number of orphans projected to reach 120,000 by 2010 there is an urgent need to provide OVCs with access to food as well as adequate care and support services. To address this, the traditional concept of *Indlunkhulu* is being revised. This is a *siSwati* term referring to the provision of food from the Chief's fields for members of the community that are unable to support themselves. In Swazi law and custom, Chiefs are responsible for the welfare of orphans within their area and, although this concept has fallen away in many Chiefdoms, it provides an existing basis on which to build a sustainable mechanism for the delivery of food to orphans and vulnerable children. The project involves providing support for farm inputs to all Chiefdoms through the MOAC. Fields allocated for *Indlunkhulu* are communally attended and the produce distributed to those who need food in the communities, with a particular emphasis on orphans and vulnerable children¹.

Food Security – the Indlunkhulu system

Over 150 Chiefdoms responded to NERCHA's initial request in 2002 for the re-establishment of *Indlunkhulu* fields. After being sensitised to the needs of OVCs within their communities, each Chieftaincy appointed a committee to be responsible for co-ordinating the project. In addition to a Chief's representative, the committee included representatives from the church, male and female youth, women's traditional regiments, schools, community police, rural health motivators, the agricultural extension service of the MOAC, and local non-governmental organisations. These groups were selected for existing involvement in the welfare of children. The first task of each committee was to compile a register of all OVCs eligible for feeding in the Chiefdom. A principle adhered to was that all orphans and vulnerable children that required assistance with feeding were eligible, not only those whose parents were known to have died of AIDS-related illnesses. In the case of the Mvula Chiefdom, 94 children were registered as OVCs. This community-driven evaluation represents a value decision that ensures that the entire community engages with the situation of the vulnerable.

The MOAC provides the initial agricultural inputs, which are funded by NERCHA, for the *Indlunkhulu* fields, which are then established with the assistance of labour from the local community. The agricultural inputs provided for each community include tractor time, seeds, fertiliser and pesticides. Seeds that are provided include maize, sorghum, cowpeas, beans, sweet potatoes and groundnuts. The quantity of the supplies varies according to the size of the land available for the *Indlunkhulu*.

OVCs also assist in tilling the *Indlunkhulu* fields to enable them to obtain practical experience in subsistence farming. The participation of the children in the preparation and harvesting of the fields ensures that important life-skills central to the rural local economies of the Chiefdoms are shared through the elders sharing their experiences. Without their active participation, many of these children would be denied the knowledge of their communities. In the context of modernisation many indigenous knowledge systems have been lost, a process that may be accelerated by the increasing numbers of orphans and children denied the guidance of their parents or community elders. The active participation of the entire household in the localised economy is a traditional concept that is being strengthened by the *Indlunkhulu* fields system. Community members insist that such practices should not be compared to child labour or exploitation of vulnerable groups in the community, but a

¹ A vulnerable child may include someone taking care of a sick parent(s), who may be infected by HIV and is therefore expected to die.

valuable process that ensures the survival of orphans in a context of increasing poverty and vulnerability.

Once the commitment of the Chieftaincy is evident, a supply of grain and pulses is placed by the MOAC in each Chieftaincy to feed OVCs until the first harvest from the *Indlunkhulu* fields is ready. It is intended over a period the harvest will replenish the orphan food supply, whilst the excess will be used to purchase future agricultural inputs. In this way the *Indlunkhulu* fields are intended to provide a sustainable source of food for OVCs. Indeed, by the end of the 2002 planting season one female Chief had harvested 40 tonnes of maize indicating the potential output of the system. However, due to the ongoing drought emanating from 2002/2003, many Chiefdoms will not harvest enough to feed and restock the orphan stores and will, in the short-term, require continued assistance from the Swaziland government.

A rapid assessment of grain storage facilities revealed that these were not adequate in most communities, which led to NERCHA supplying five tonne storage tanks each community targeted in the *Indlunkhulu* project. In order to safeguard the quality of the food distributed, each community supplied with a tank were given E500 to construct a shelter for the tank. Technical assistance was provided by the MOAC. The grain storage facilities have proved to be a strategic intervention in that they have been used not only for produce from the *Indlunkhulu* fields but also for food from other donors.

The MOAC and NERCHA will monitor the situation of the Chiefdoms to ensure that they are sufficiently stocked to sustain themselves without the seed inputs. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation would potentially be provided by the government's early warning system situated within MOAC to gauge future stresses on communities. The underlying objective of this approach is to ensure the sustainability of the intervention through the provision of the basic infrastructure of a renewed economic system. As will be discussed, the *Indlunkhulu* concept forms the nucleus of a comprehensive system that focuses on immediate relief for vulnerable and orphan households, the rehabilitation of local economies facing the vagaries of increasing poverty and HIV/AIDS, and the sustainable development of systems incorporating ongoing economic empowerment and social support.

Socialisation – building on the Indlunkhulu system

NERCHA recognises that in addition to access to food, orphans require social and psychological support to ensure that they develop to be productive members of their communities and society at large. NERCHA has therefore utilised the structures put into place for the *Indlunkhulu* project to provide care and support services for the OVCs within communities. Thus the mentorship of orphan children in the agricultural process inherent in the *Indlunkhulu* field system.

Children that are orphaned often lack basic life skills due to their young age and relative inexperience in socio-economic activities. In the absence of a parental figure to impart such knowledge, orphans may not benefit from the guidance and support that families with such figures are better placed to experience. To address this issue, each orphan family is placed under the supervision of a trained *Lutsango* care mother. *Lutsango* is a traditional regiment in traditional Swaziland society comprised of all married women. Local women suitable to care for OVCs are identified by the Chieftaincy committee. Their role is to access food from the *Indlunkhulu* stores and be responsible for the health, development and emotional well being of these children.

Training is presently being developed for the care mothers and will be delivered through the national and regional *Lutsango* offices established with NERCHA assistance. The training will cover issues such as how to care for HIV positive children, HIV education and

prevention strategies for children, as well as basic life skills such as hygiene and nutrition. The Chieftancy committees will manage the *Lutsango* initiative at the local level, with technical and financial support provided by central government. The overall vision and national co-ordination of the programme will remain with NERCHA.

One objective of this system is to enable orphans to remain within their own communities. Assigning local women to care for OVCs will enable them to stay on their parental land, cared for by community members known to them before their parents died. In the case of vulnerable children with sick parents, a relationship can be formed with the care mother before the child is orphaned. The presence of an individual carer for each child will also assist in the protection of vulnerable children against abuse and exploitation on the loss of the parental protection.

Through funding from The Global Fund To Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (see www.theglobalfund.org), NERCHA has been collaborating with the Deputy Prime Minister's Office to build Social Centres (*kaGogo*) at each Chieftancy. The concept of the *kaGogo* structure is being used to promote social responsibility at this level and each centre will be used as feeding and Early Childhood Care and Development Centres. They will also be used to provide health care and educational assistance as well as be used for any other social event that the community sees as being beneficial.

Each centre is built by the community itself using local materials and labour at a cost of E35,000. A common design is followed, which has been supplied by NERCHA and which ensures that there is space for community meetings and for the children to gather and play, for a private counselling room where HIV-affected persons can seek professional support, a store room and office, and a cooking area. In the Nkamazi Chieftancy the community were able to leverage a donation of bricks through a Manzini company where one of its members worked. The centre was then tiled with locally produced tiles, made on site using a machine supplied on loan from NERCHA. The skills in tile making were intended to stimulate economic opportunities in the community although the machine was being allocated elsewhere on completion of the roof. NERCHA had identified the provision of additional tile making machines as important assets to underpin economic opportunities in a number of communities.

Psychosocial Support – building on the Lutsango system

The provision of psychosocial support for HIV/AIDS orphans is a crucial component of orphan care. Orphans are often traumatised at the same time as being bereaved and may be marginalized and excluded from the communities due to the stigma associated with AIDS. This may lead to stress, depression and hopelessness as they struggle to maintain their families and property. After caring for sick parents, children may feel responsible for their death.

These difficult questions are being considered by NERCHA in a context where orphan numbers are increasing and there exists a general limited human capacity to engage with these problems. One option under serious consideration is the training of rural health motivators working with professionals to monitor and advise orphans. In addition, in order to ensure that the child is given emotional support and integrated into the community, the social centres established in each Chieftancy will be central venues where out of school orphans can regularly meet and play. This enables the *Lutsango* care mothers to observe children who are experiencing psychological problems and then refer them to professional assigned to particular communities. It is NERCHA's vision that local and regional supervisors for psychosocial support would be trained to work in partnership with *Lutsango* mothers to identify problems with children and to provide knowledge of appropriate interventions where necessary.

Economic Empowerment Programme – building on the Indlunkhulu system

It has been well documented that the labour impact of HIV/AIDS and the caring of HIV positive people can seriously deplete the resources of a household. One such outcome of these impacts may be the forced removal of children from school due to the reduced economic status of the households. Thus these children may fail to gain an education and skills needed to support themselves in the future. In addition, orphans that lack financial resources or are too young to work must be cared for by their communities, something that many are unable to do due to the increasing loss of productive members of society and rising death rates amongst the extended family.

NERCHA's economic empowerment programme is intended to help communities to financially support OVCs and to revitalise their local economic situation. Income generating programmes have been piloted in a few communities in order to transfer resources and skills essential to underpin economic recovery in such places. An initial needs assessment is carried out in participating Chiefdoms to assess existing levels of infrastructure, natural and human resources and to identify potential income generating activities. NERCHA will then provide necessary equipment and relevant training required to support these activities. The income from successful projects will be shared between participants and a Fund created to support local orphans and vulnerable children.

NERCHA maintains that economic empowerment begins with education and thus one of the priorities will be to ensure that OVCs have access to educational bursaries to enable them to remain in school. It is envisaged that local OVCs will also have the opportunity to participate in income generating projects and so learn necessary skills.

Benefits and Impact:

The loss of economic and human resources has left many communities struggling to provide OVCs with the assistance needed to survive. The interventions designed and implemented by NERCHA and its partners aims to establish a comprehensive orphan care programme that will enable communities to fulfil this responsibility and provide OVCs with access to food as well as care and support services. NERCHA's approach has been to build upon existing systems and structures to deliver HIV/AIDS services and to promote the active participation of local community members to ensure that these services reach OVCs at community level.

Time line:

The project was started in September 2003, in line with the ploughing season, which had just began. At the end of February 2004 most of the 315 Chiefdoms in Swaziland had been assisted with farming inputs and had ploughed mostly maize, beans, groundnuts, juko beans, cowpeas and sweet potatoes.

Gaps in evidence:

It is not possible to ascertain that this initiative will revitalise the traditional system in a way that is sustainable over the long-term, particularly considering the fact that it fell away due to a range of issues such as increasing poverty levels in the recent past.

How is this different from standard interventions?

The NERCHA "philosophy" is based upon four tenants, which may be instructive for other interventions:

- A national vision informs all interventions in that the reach must be as wide as possible across the country. This is to ensure that equity is a key principle and that the human rights of all people are addressed. In NERCHA's perspective, it is "easy to create pockets

of privilege”, through establishing a closed orphan intervention for example, but this will leave a large number outside.

- The challenge for NERCHA is to ensure that all interventions are ultimately driven from the communities themselves after initial facilitation. Through enabling communities to respond themselves, the projects have more chance of success and long-term sustainability. The debilitating effects of poverty limit affected people’s perspectives, as their choices are ultimately severely limited. The challenge is therefore to break this impasse.
- NERCHA is determined not to create new structures but to find and build on local initiatives. In NERCHA’s view, there is always something to work with at community level, which will ensure that duplication is avoided and capital costs are reduced.
- The challenge of sustainability must be considered throughout every intervention particularly in an environment where donors have a short-term financial commitment.

Constraining factors:

Additional ideas or potential improvements:

An important dimension of the project, which deserves further discussion, is the provision of seeds by the MOAC. Although hybrid seeds have largely been provided, it is expected that indigenous drought resistant seeds used traditionally will be disbursed. These seeds are economically more accessible and relatively resistant to the impact of drought and are therefore regarded as important options for the future despite the potentially lower yields. Forty communities have received traditional seed varieties through the intervention in a partnership between NERCHA, MOAC and the World Food Programme. Traditional crops that are no longer commonly in use such as cassava will also be utilised in the future. The focus on indigenous knowledge systems such as traditional cropping will have a bearing on the future sustainability of the interventions. Another dimension to the use of traditional seeds is that of the higher nutritional value of such plants and the re-invigoration of traditional planting systems.

The effectiveness of using traditional crops needs to be carefully assessed before a major rollout is considered. For this reason the University of Swaziland has been commissioned to monitor and evaluate the impact to feed into policy decisions.

Scaling up / scaling out; implications:

NERCHA and the MOAC are looking towards increased yields on the *Indlunkhulu* fields to help the communities to develop capacity to procure farm inputs without outside support and thereby sustain the programme. This is highly dependent of the drought situation in the country, which has severely impacted on food security.

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