



Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative

Bringing hope to AIDS orphans in Africa

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At a glance

Issue

- The need for psychosocial support for AIDS orphans in Africa.

Objectives

- Build capacity and develop sustainable programs to provide support for AIDS orphans.
- Leverage the assets and skills of the Novartis Foundation for Sustainable Development to create a pilot project, attract additional funders, and evolve the project to a wider regional focus.
- Benefit from financial and non-cash resources – especially skill transfers from within the Novartis company – to build capacity of a regional NGO.

Activities

- Led development and helped attract additional funders for Humuliza AIDS orphan project in rural Tanzania.
- Expanded upon the successful pilot, working with other funders and NGOs, to create a regional initiative for psychosocial support in 13 countries in southern and eastern Africa.

Results

- Humuliza project has reached 3 000 AIDS orphans in a single district in Tanzania. Through replication of its efforts, it has helped thousands more throughout the country.
- REPSSI, working through dozens of organizations and institutions in sub-Saharan Africa, has reached nearly 300 000 AIDS orphans. Its goal is to reach 5 million by 2010.
- The collaboration has achieved significant successes in transferring best practices in labor management, leadership and financial skills. Through involvement of business partners, a local university and others, many services were provided pro bono.
- By involving Novartis South Africa's auditing partner, REPSSI realized significant savings along with meaningful enhancements in managerial capacity. For example, REPSSI's audit costs were cut by 30 percent.

Bringing hope to AIDS orphans in Africa

In 13 African countries, an initiative started by the Novartis Foundation for Sustainable Development with Swiss and Swedish development agencies helps children affected by HIV/AIDS, poverty and conflict. Novartis South Africa and Novartis Human Resources also provide training to enhance non-governmental organizations' effectiveness in the region.

As the AIDS pandemic ravages sub-Saharan Africa, the deadly disease has left behind more than 15 million orphans – children who have lost one or both parents to AIDS. These young survivors face a challenging life of daily threats from poverty, exploitation and infection. Their childhood can slide into hopeless despair.

Beyond food and shelter, these AIDS orphans have a critical need for psychosocial support after the loss of their parents and any semblance of stability. For too long, these children were forgotten, left without either psychological support to help them cope with their loss, or social support to help them develop personally and move on with their lives.

Beginning a decade ago

In 1997, the Novartis Foundation for Sustainable Development (NFSD) sought to focus its efforts on these children for whom too little had been done. Initially, the Foundation helped develop and support a program to provide psychosocial care for AIDS orphans in Kagera, Tanzania. Known as the Humuliza project, this pilot program was developed in partnership with the Swiss charity Terre des hommes. Considered too risky a venture by many established charities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Humuliza represented an opportunity to break new ground and create solutions in an area of immense need.

In Kagera, up to one-third of all children had already lost one or both parents to AIDS. They faced daunting problems: a loss of emotional security and confidence as the world around them collapsed; the sudden responsibility of having to care for younger siblings; and a lack of money for food, clothing or school fees, forcing them out of schools and into the fields to survive. Most had lost self-confidence and hope. Yet research by the Foundation and others indicated that if favorable conditions could be developed for these children, many would be resilient enough to cope and move forward in life.

A program was designed to encourage the children's development, promote their abilities, give them survival skills and strengthen their self-confidence. Among key areas of need, Humuliza began to focus on helping orphans deal with grief, reduce their own risks for HIV/AIDS, cultivate life skills, develop goals, build self-esteem, learn through play, provide peer care, and manage the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS.

Humuliza's pioneering programs received international recognition for helping stabilize children psychologically and socially. Manuals were developed for adult caregivers and teachers leading the programs. Children worked together to help each other cope. Teachers and other adults were trained to counsel distressed children. Radio programs were produced to raise awareness of the problems of AIDS orphans. Self-managed youth organizations were created, so that orphans could experience friendship and mutual help.

A nine-person professional team provided practical support, including agricultural courses, English classes, a bank that offered micro-credits, self-defense courses for girls and financial assistance in extreme hardship cases. To date, the Foundation has contributed USD 1.4 million in direct funding support, while also serving in an important consultative role.

Expanding to serve the region

By 2002, as the AIDS orphan problem continued to grow in Africa, a think tank was organized and supported by the Novartis Foundation for Sustainable Development to evolve a larger region-wide effort. Two additional donors joined in support: the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA).

The result was a broad new effort, the Regional Psychosocial Support Initiative (REPSSI), working in 13 countries in eastern and southern Africa. Like the pilot program, REPSSI's aim is to enhance the provision of psychological care and support to children affected by HIV/AIDS, poverty and conflict. Since the inception of REPSSI, funding from the Foundation has reached almost USD 2 million in direct cash contributions.

To date, REPSSI has collaborated with more than 140 aid organizations to train employees of the partner groups in how best to help these children. REPSSI also advocates for recognition of psychosocial support as a basic right and an essential element of social policy, and it advises governments and international organizations on developing programs.

The REPSSI initiative has achieved success on many fronts:

- Establishing strategic partnerships with significant NGOs, international agencies and national governments.
- Adapting existing psychosocial programs and training leaders.
- Developing materials and documentation for use in similar efforts.
- Launching awareness programs, training and capacity-building for partners.
- Creating a ‘school without walls’ to exchange knowledge and best practices.

Building leadership skills

In 2006, as the growth of REPSSI outpaced some of the team’s own management capabilities, Novartis Corporate Human Resources offered to provide leadership and management training.

The knowledge and skills Novartis could transfer to the REPSSI staff would build the organization’s long-term effectiveness as the leading authority in psychosocial support in southern and eastern Africa. The leadership of the Novartis business in South Africa also has been active in coaching, training and providing consultative support.

The Novartis Foundation, REPSSI and Novartis Corporate Learning identified specific areas for leadership development and agreed on a mid-term strategy:

- Reviewing REPSSI Human Resources policies and procedures.
- Providing training in basic leadership skills for the REPSSI team.
- Establishing project management skills to support the planned growth of REPSSI.
- Developing business acumen for the REPSSI leadership team to manage growth and build more independence from the group’s funding partners.
- Improving REPSSI’s communications strategy.

Business case

The work the Novartis Foundation for Sustainable Development has accomplished for AIDS orphans – developing the Humuliza pilot project in Tanzania, then applying its lessons to gain additional partners and foster a regional initiative – is an important example of how a corporate foundation can leverage a modest investment to make a huge difference.

Novartis is not active in research and development for HIV/AIDS medicines, but plays a significant role in the fight against leprosy, malaria and tuberculosis through far-reaching access programs. Even without a direct business relationship, Novartis believes all global stakeholders have a part to play in a major health crisis like HIV/AIDS.

As a corporate citizen and healthcare company, Novartis and its Foundation have focused on specific areas where they can contribute best: through funding, creative partnerships, leveraging resources and models, taking risks to initiate new ideas and transferring management skills to NGOs. These efforts create significant social value.

The company’s products may benefit from attention paid to corporate citizenship in regions where Novartis has significant businesses, but that is not the case in many low-income areas. Nevertheless, innovative social responsibility efforts can help foster new private-public alliances and trust, where cooperation was previously non-existent or tentative.

Internally, corporate citizenship efforts help motivate employees, bringing a new dimension to the work of those who participate directly – as with the Novartis Human Resources and Novartis South Africa involvement with REPSSI. Employees have an opportunity to address a significant social need as individuals and as part of a larger team. This also benefits retention and recruitment.

The Foundation, by involving itself early in the AIDS orphan problem, not only demonstrated a clear sense of corporate social responsibility, but also enhanced its role beyond merely providing funds. Today, the Foundation is widely viewed as a leader in developing pioneering programs and initiatives. These efforts have further enhanced the Foundation’s reputation with UN organizations and other NGOs, exemplifying how social problems can be tackled through creative partnerships.

About the Novartis Foundation for Sustainable Development

The Novartis Foundation, (www.novartisfoundation.com), with a staff of seven, has more than 25 years of experience in development policy and cooperation. In addition to managing access-to-health programs around the world, it hosts international symposia and forums about new approaches to development cooperation.

The Foundation holds consultative status to the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC). Prof. Dr. Klaus M. Leisinger, a recognized expert in business ethics and corporate responsibility, is president and CEO of the Foundation, as well as professor for development sociology at the University of Basel. Under his leadership, the Foundation has developed and supported programs that have benefited millions of poor people in developing countries.

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