

Caring for orphans and vulnerable children

Lessons learnt in bridging the skills-gap for community caregivers in South Africa

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Background

South Africa like many other sub-Saharan countries has witnessed a significant number of children rendered vulnerable or orphaned due to the AIDS pandemic. This in turn has increased the need to create safe and nurturing environments for them. This responsibility rests heavily on South Africa's approximately 65 000 caregivers, presenting a significant challenge for an informally employed and remunerated cadre of the social service workforce. They frequently lack the skills to address the needs of children in their care and to respond effectively to their own psychosocial needs. South Africa's Department of Social Development (DSD) initiated the Thogomelo project in partnership with USAID in 2009 in response to the need for community caregiver capacity development, occupational recognition and career-pathing.

Description

The Thogomelo Project aims to enhance the psychosocial wellbeing and child protection skills of community caregivers in order to improve the quality of care offered to the vulnerable children in their care; and to provide credits towards further career development in child and youth care work or social auxiliary work. The Project developed three accredited curricula in psychosocial wellbeing, child protection and supportive supervision. These were piloted between 2009 and 2013 (with 2 704 community caregivers and their supervisors). A three-year extension of contract from 2013–2016 has enabled additional training for 570 caregivers, evaluative research to assess impact and document lessons learnt, and institutionalisation of project management and quality assurance within the South African government.

Development and implementation of the curricula was informed by:

- a rapid assessment of caregiver training (comprising a desk review of existing curricula, focus group discussions with beneficiaries, a literature review and in-depth interviews with key informants in the field);
- a 30-item pre- and post-test survey to assess knowledge gain and retention; and
- a baseline and end line survey to assess the impact of each curriculum on caregiver wellbeing and practice.

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Lessons learned

- Qualitative data provided by the target audience was imperative in developing curriculum content that is relevant and accessible to learners.
- South Africa lacks accredited training for caregivers that is aligned to occupationally based qualifications.
- The country experiences a severe shortage of suitably qualified training service providers registered with the in-country standard generating body, the Health and Welfare Sector Training and Education Authority (HWSETA). Only 30% of the providers surveyed offered accredited training.
- There is little understanding of the psychosocial risks associated with the caregiver occupation, and of the importance of caregiver mentoring and support to sustain quality of service provision to children.
- Data analysis indicates an increase in caregivers' knowledge and skills in psychosocial support, child protection and supportive supervision as a result of the Thogomelo curricula.
- Caregivers provided anecdotal evidence of improved interaction with the children in their care post-training.
- Accredited curricula meet the needs of this entry level of the workforce for career paths, thereby strengthening the social service workforce.

Conclusion / next steps

- Upscaling of implementation through DSD and other partners – non-governmental organisations and other government departments such as the Department of Public Works.
- Further capacity development to increase the pool of accredited service providers equipped to meet the demand for accredited training.
- Dissemination of the project results to increase awareness and response to the psychosocial needs of caregivers.
- Finalisation of a tracking study to establish what career paths caregivers pursue after the Thogomelo training.
- A qualitative study to assess the impact of the Thogomelo training on caregiver practice.

