

Strengthening Family Capacity to Care for OVC: Making Care Sustainable

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In Africa, a high percentage of orphans still live in a family setting, but many of these families face significant pressure to provide for the material and emotional needs of all members of the expanded household. This situation is worsened when the family is composed of adults who are HIV/AIDS infected and find themselves periodically incapable to work to sustain their families.

AVSI'S OVC program focuses on individual children within the context of their family and larger community. Each child within AVSI's OVC program—in Rwanda, Kenya, and Uganda—receives an individualized package of services ranging from direct services to indirect services whose benefit extends to the entire family or community.

For each child enrolled in the program AVSI makes an intervention plan with specific proposed activities linked by two main aims: the education of the child and the promotion of the child's and family's self reliance. To reach these goals, a multi sectoral approach is needed that takes into consideration the specific needs of the child and/or the family which are assessed at the moment of enrollment and followed up on a regular basis through visits, either at home, at school or in the office. The three services that AVSI considers essential for all children are in the following core program areas: education, health and psychosocial well-being. Other services are then provided according to the specific needs encountered. In cases of severe economic vulnerability, AVSI coordinates income generating activities and skills based training for the parents or older siblings of the sponsored child.

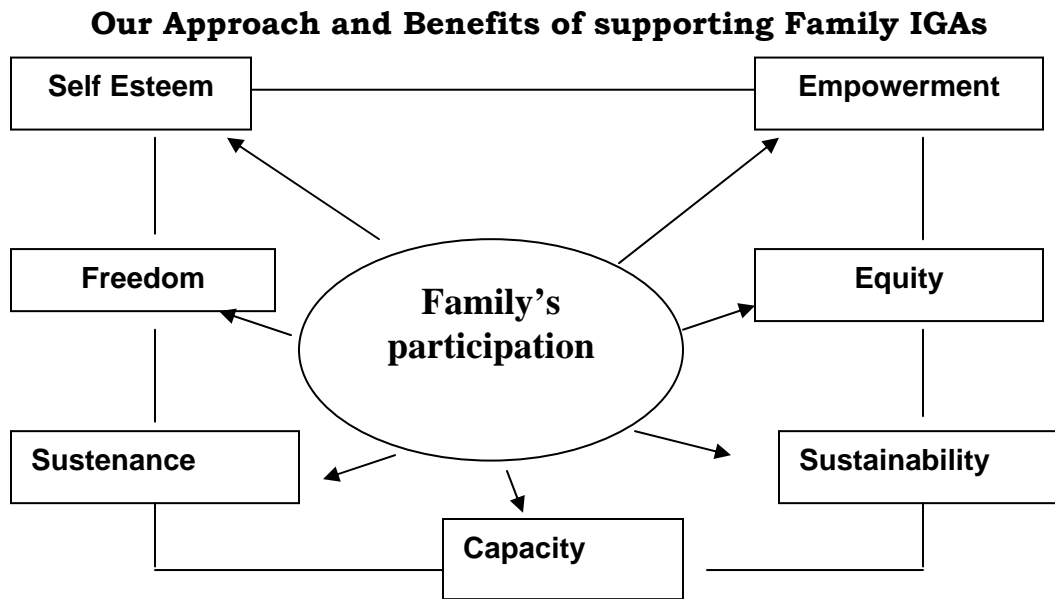
AVSI's OVC program has a second complementary objective: to increase the capacity of parents, guardians and communities to care for their orphans and vulnerable children. Family and community capacity to care for their children, especially the most vulnerable, implies a number of factors that go beyond financial resources, and that can be affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Looking at the family, capacity to care for vulnerable children implies first and foremost the recognition and acceptance of personal and collective responsibility for the well-being and growth of each child.

“The first need of a person, especially if he/she is in a condition of poverty and injustice, is to be aware of his/her ‘I’. This elementary need is responded to with education, without which there is no chance of a future, because nothing can last without an aware ‘I’, not even the most sincere generosity.”(Luigi Giussani, from Foreword to UN Workshop on Children in Armed Conflicts, New York, 5th June 2001.) In agreement with this fundamental principle, AVSI considers education of the people the stone and frame of any intervention, particularly those aimed at the well being of children and youth.

Through their education, adults can increase their responsibility and discover how they can help their children. The opportunity for parents, guardians and older youth to be actively and regularly engaged in dignified work, contributes not only to economic stability of the family, and thus coverage of basic needs, but also allows the adults to enjoy a real sense of fulfillment. These methodological concepts are important also in the way IGAs are organized and implemented.

AVSI strongly believes in family involvement in a participatory process, which will allow them to become independent and self-reliant; AVSI is convinced that program implementation must be guided by a concern for supporting the parents'/guardians' responsibility for the family and not supplanting it by providing hand-outs directly to the children. Economic support interventions in the form of savings mechanisms, Business Skills Training (BST) and Income Generating Activities (IGA) represent an opportunity for the families not only to gain business capacities and empower themselves economically, thereby making the project results sustainable, but mainly to become resilient and capable to face the difficult situation they are living and to nurture their children's growth. We hope that in the long run the families will be able to sustain themselves and to cater for their own children. Moreover, this intended result will not only lead to economical empowerment and equity, it will also allow the guardians to reach freedom and self-esteem, leading the families to a higher level of general psycho-social wellbeing.

This graphic represents the many positive outcomes of family participation in improved business ventures launched or promoted by IGAs.



Types of Economic Strengthening Provided

Recognizing the strengths and role of the implementing partners, AVSI decided to support local initiatives to nurture small businesses and income generating activities among OVC families and groups. A wide-range of business activities and support are often grouped together under the heading of IGAs. The most important criteria which unite the efforts which AVSI chooses to support are: 1. Participation of adults or youth in the decision to pursue the particular IGA which implies an interest, adequate skills, and commitment; 2. Realistic understanding of the market and potential for sustained activity; and 3. Capacity of local CBO to provide follow-up support to the individual or group.

IGAs provide families with immediate relief and support for their family's well-being through increases in income which very often lead to improved outcomes for children in terms of education, nutrition and overall health. From past experience, AVSI is convinced that IGA support implemented through healthy, strong CBOs as intermediaries can also greatly improve the psycho-social health of the participating adults, and especially those living with HIV/AIDS. AVSI works with partners to take measures to increase the chances that each IGA investment will lead to long-term benefits, rather than only short-term relief and subsistence. While market integration and value-chain development are important to the long-term potential of the small businesses of these families, AVSI is convinced that given the relatively extreme level of vulnerability of these populations, the first action needs to be taken together with the individuals themselves in the context of a relationship. The experience and skills gained through training and guided investments in business activities are valuable assets which individuals can build upon as future opportunities arise. IGAs are effective because they are context-sensitive and with minimal support grow from the assets embedded within the communities.

The IGAs supported by our partners cover initiatives as diverse as community based savings and loans, small retail business promotion, agriculture and livestock keeping, and provision of start-up tools.

- Community based savings and loans

A number of community based organizations which partner with AVSI in the implementation of this project have developed simple savings and lending mechanisms to support member's efforts to invest in business ventures and cover large expenses. In most cases, solidarity groups develop naturally within the setting of a CBO. A revolving fund is initiated either through initial member contributions or an input from the CBO to the group. The group decides on the length of the loan cycle, whether interest will be charged, and the method of determining the order of receiving loans. These revolving funds provide opportunities for individuals and groups to access small loans that can provide for the necessary start-up materials or a capital investment into a business. Different models are offered by various organizations depending on the experience and preferences. In Kenya, for example, many parents of OVCs are involved in merry-go-round savings groups which generated considerable support for micro-enterprises among members.

A great benefit of this mechanism is the solidarity and the sense of sharing that is born and grows among the members of the group. This can help them in answering not only to their economic needs, but also to other essential aspects of their life. In Rwanda, for instance, the Abishyizehamwe Association, whose members were implementing income generating activities together, were confronted with the problem of their younger children who had not yet started to go to school. The association members decided to work together to come up with a solution. Together they pooled resources and opened a nursery school for their children. Being together helped them in becoming more aware of their own resources and possibilities.

- Agricultural Undertakings

Improved seeds provided to OVC caregiver families can ensure that nutritional needs are met and often provide surplus crops that can be sold. It is important to remark that no economic strengthening is possible when families have no food. *“There is no economic activity that can take place when families have no food security, we first ensure food security to the families and then we plan with them an IGA. Otherwise if you give a loan to a family to start an IGA when that family has no food, chances are high that the loan will end up buying food instead of its*

intended purpose. Our approach as ODECO is that ensure food to the families through knowledge in sustainable and improved agriculture, then IGA after...) observes Caroline Masiga, the director of ODECO.

- Livestock and animal rearing

Families and groups have been provided with livestock and related skills or tools, including poultry (both indigenous and high breed chicken), piglets, heifers and goats. These interventions are particularly attractive since they support good nutrition on top of being a source of income. Poultry initiatives in particular help families with malnourished children who are in danger of stunted growth by allowing them to supplement their children's diet with eggs. Whenever possible, AVSI encourages linking with the relevant government ministries to help participants take advantage of the training and expertise of agricultural extension officers.

- Provision of Start up tools

In collaboration with vocational training, AVSI aims to provide start-up kits to empower students to put their education into practice and overcome the barrier of limited capital, thus gaining important business skills either through entrepreneurship or through regular employment. In Uganda, examples of the start-up kits offered include catering, tailoring kits and sewing machines, and carpentry equipment.

- Business Skills Training

Often in collaboration with specialized local organizations, AVSI aims to provide all individuals and groups participating in business support interventions with comprehensive and relevant Business Skills Training (BST). The objectives of such training are: 1) to improve knowledge and skills in business management; and 2) to give/ enhance the ability of the participants to identify viable business opportunities and select the suitable IGA for their individual circumstances, according to their own weaknesses, strengths, opportunities, fears and motivations in business initiation and management.

AVSI would like to offer all parents or guardians of OVC with the chance to be exposed to BST, because it considers it the basis of capacity building for the implementation of IGAs.

- Vocational and Technical Support

Older OVC who have left school or are otherwise out of school, often times face extremely limited opportunities for employment and regular income. Secondary education in much of Africa is costly and in many cases the number of spots available is limited. Although vocational training is perceived as a second-best solution by many young people, AVSI is convinced that high quality technical training, linked to apprenticeships and support for micro-enterprises and collectives (financing and encouragement for entrepreneurship), can give youth the concrete tools to enter the market either as an employee or as an entrepreneur. To improve demand, AVSI circulates information about training options and provide sponsorships or top-off funds for students to attend training institutes.

AVSI is always looking for innovative partnerships with the private sector and government ministries to enhance the training experience and chances of securing employment and the resources needed to grow successful businesses. In Rwanda, for example, this year AVSI started a collaboration with a big private Rwandan enterprise involved in the flower business (mainly roses) and in the production of vegetables for sale on the local and international market. Rwanda

Flora agreed to organize a training course in horticulture for 18 AVSI supported children. The course was equally divided into theory and practice and every 15 days one day was dedicated to life skills, information about HIV, nutrition, IGAs, and employment contracts.

AVSI has found a great level of interest among older youth for enrollment in vocational training across the three countries, and takes advantage of this involvement to address other areas of concern including health, hygiene and behavior.

- Community and Collective Initiatives

In Rwanda where the tradition of community based organizations is less developed than in Uganda or Kenya, AVSI has been implementing the OVC project with community level associations, many of which are composed of mothers and widows. AVSI has assisted these organizations in their transformation into collectives according to the legal requirements and guidelines established by the Rwandan government in recent years. The resulting collectives have since received training and technical assistance to function as business collectives which can generate revenue to benefit all members and their families. Training on financial management, project planning and implementation and support on profit sharing and reinvestment have enabled the Rwandese collectives to grow their business activities while also providing immediate help to ensure that the educational and health needs of all their children are being met.

A specific mention among the community initiatives can be given to adult literacy courses organized by some local partners in Uganda and to AVSI Kenya for adults living in the slum of Kibera. By learning how to read and write, these parents can discover better their “I” and become more aware of the needs of their family and their children

- Health Care for children and families

The support to health care for children and families is one of the core interventions of AVSI for OVCs, given the strict correlation of health with education and production.

In each country health care is provided to the ones in need, according to the possibilities given by the health system in place in the country. In Rwanda AVSI is paying the health insurance for all the children in the program and all the members of their families. In fact the Government has promoted a Health Insurance System that was decentralized from the district to the health center level in 2006.

Local partners are invited to consider health care for children and families and to leverage partnership among themselves and with other organizations focused mainly on this sector.

Results

Within a year, AVSI has seen an increase of IGAs implemented in all the countries as a result of advocacy efforts and training given to local partners and AVSI local staff. In 2006, 4,241 families participated in some IGA, while 7,255 participated in IGAs in 2007.

The supports given are helping families to achieve a degree of economic stability and independence that enables them to provide better care for all the children in the household. Families are more capable to provide for their basic needs, education, health, medical bills and to save some money. An evaluation study done in Gulu district, Uganda, on 104 individuals supported, showed that after one year 62.5% were able to pay school fees and provide scholastic materials to their children not enrolled in the AVSI OVC program, 98% were able to change diet

for their family members, 85.6% had some small savings, 33.6% have expanded their business, 4.8% did hut rehabilitation or were able to pay house rent. In Kenya, some groups of parents in the Kibera slum of Nairobi have organized themselves to prepare food for their children and other needy pupils. This “school feeding program” received support as an IGA and is improving the quality of education for OVCs.

The benefits of IGAs can be many for people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) and their family members who gain both physical and psychological strength through the activities, and are helped to break down the wall of isolation and discrimination and to build up their resilience.

AVSI recognizes this work as a beginning of understanding how it is possible to monitor and measure the full impact of income generating activities for the most vulnerable children, parents, and families. It is our hope that by incorporating elements of sustainability in the project, we can enhance the capacity of families and communities to care for all of their children.