Reaching Out to Africa’s Orphans: A Framework for Public Action

Reader’s Guide and Executive Summary

The purpose of this study is to provide an overview of the issues pertaining to orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) and, based on the available evidence on interventions, offer some guidelines on the approaches and interventions that best mitigate or cope with the many risks and vulnerabilities confronted by them. To date, there is no package of established knowledge describing how to intervene in behalf of OVC, what kind of assistance is needed, and how to channel it. This study does not pretend, however, to offer that “package” of established knowledge. Its aim is more modest: to collate and organize the available bits and pieces of information from diverse sources on the profile of risks faced by OVC and on the costs and pros and cons of interventions, and then to offer some guidance on what kinds of intervention or approaches might work in a given country context or situation.

The study begins by stressing three points. First, the number of orphans is growing at an alarming rate, and therefore the vulnerabilities associated with orphanhood require immediate attention. Second, because resources are limited and not all orphans are in need of assistance, there is an urgent need to target assistance to the neediest children in a nonstigmatizing fashion, within the framework of the present limited knowledge of what works and what does not. Third, although there is still no blueprint on the best way to scale up interventions, the World Bank’s Multicountry AIDS Programs (MAPs) do offer an opportunity not only to pilot assistance efforts but also to extend assistance to as many of the needy as possible, albeit seeking interagency coordination of efforts both to avoid duplication of efforts and to learn from the experience of everyone involved in this effort. An important rationale for such an intervention is to ensure that orphans’ human development (access to health care and education) is not in any way jeopardized. Clearly, the challenge faced by all stakeholders and donors in channeling assistance to the affected children is enormous.

An important first step is to assess the risks faced by orphans and their specific requirements, which vary a great deal depending on the situation in which these children find themselves. These risks range from economic and social risks to psychological risks and trauma. Available evidence on the magnitude of the orphan problem and the diverse nature of the risks
are reviewed in chapter 1. The approach relies on a risks/needs analysis, which strongly complements the right approach.

Because risk patterns differ across orphans even within a sociocultural environment, it is important to carefully assess those needs that emanate from their vulnerabilities. For example, after the death of the breadwinner in a household, the immediate risk could be a precipitous shortfall in per capita consumption, driving even an otherwise nonpoor household into poverty. Or a child, especially a girl, could be withdrawn from school. Or a child, though food needs are met, might not be able to bear the psychological trauma and so might need immediate counseling.

Understanding the risks of orphans and vulnerable children is critical for attaining the Millennium Development Goals set by the United Nations for education, health, nutrition, and poverty. The reason is that the exposure of these children to risks has a critical impact on the school enrollments, health, and nutritional status of several million vulnerable children. Therefore, prior to launching any intervention in their behalf, agencies and organizations must ensure that they are aware of these children’s risks and needs (which vary a great deal across countries), and, to the extent possible, they must design interventions in such a way as to render orphans and vulnerable children attain the Millennium Development Goals for education, health, nutrition, and poverty. This is done in chapter 2.

Once the needs and demand patterns become clear, it is time to ask: who are the caregivers (on the supply side)? The available evidence is reviewed in Chapter 3. Again, countries differ widely on the nature of caregivers and their strengths and weaknesses. For example, countries vary a great deal in their community capacity, which in turn differs, at least in part, according to the magnitude of the problem. In countries adversely affected by the orphan crisis such as Uganda, a widespread network of national and international nongovernmental agencies devoted to orphan welfare has emerged. Yet even in Uganda, the magnitude of the problem is such that even a vast number of institutions and agencies are able to meet the needs of only 5–10 percent of the affected children. Prior to launching any intervention, then, an organization or agency must know the nature of the networks in operation, the variety of caring arrangements prevalent in the country, and their strengths and weaknesses, and assess whether a community has reached its limit in caring for OVC. This overview is provided in chapter 3, which also describes a quick-and-dirty methodology for assessing community capacity.
Once the risks and needs of OVC and the nature of caregiving arrangements prevalent in a country have been assessed, the next step is to ask: what can be done, by way of public policy, to strengthen the community coping capacity and the existing community-driven caregiving arrangements. For example, if the problem is one of a sharp fall in consumption and the threat is a poverty trap, what interventions could augment a household’s income-earning capacity after the death of the principal breadwinner? The nature of interventions and the various ways in which public action could strengthen community action are reviewed in chapter 4.

A variety of interventions have been put in place by communities, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and governments to address a range of risks and vulnerabilities faced by orphans and vulnerable children in Sub-Saharan Africa. The interventions vary by the scope (i.e., how many children are assisted) and the type of care or assistance provided (such as school and nutrition support, tracing the extended family, or group home), and its quality. The enormous variety in interventions and the differences in their scale of operation, as well as assessments of varying quality, make it difficult to come up with cost norms for different types of interventions. Chapter 5 outlines the methodological difficulties of cost comparisons. Subject to the limitations discussed at length, the chapter provides the best judgment possible as of today of the costs associated with various interventions. But these estimates must be regarded as tentative; clearly, more robust information than is currently available is needed for understanding the cost-effectiveness of various interventions. The broad conclusion of this chapter is that community-driven interventions at the household level appear to be the most cost-effective, and formal orphanages appear to be prohibitively expensive. Within these two extremes are a number of intermediary options with varying costs, and these options are reviewed in this chapter 5.

The most difficult issue in providing assistance to OVC is how to scale up and replicate an intervention that has proved successful and cost-effective when operated on a small scale in a given country. Scaling up necessarily implies confronting three issues on the inputs side: (a) the costs of scaling up and the financial capacity of governments, (b) the organizational/institutional capabilities and community-level resources, and (c) definitive evidence that a particular program intervention has a proven track record of success and thus is worthy of scaling up. In other words, anyone attempting to expand should know first who to focus on, what to focus on, and the capacity (financial/institutional) to deliver the program. There is still no blueprint to how best to scale up and replicate interventions. However, a community-driven development initiative offers
an important window of opportunity to scale up efforts by devolving funds to communities and local authorities and empowering them to launch protective programs in behalf of orphans and vulnerable children. Chapter 6 provides an illustrative road map of the kinds of issues that one needs to confront, underscoring the point that much depends on the individual country situation.

Learning from experience is one important component of any planned intervention on behalf of OVC. But that learning process depends critically on monitoring and evaluation. One reason for the difficulty, noted earlier, in assessing the impacts and costs of past and ongoing interventions is that most institutions that have sponsored interventions to protect orphans have not kept credible M&E systems in place. A brief introduction to the issues surrounding establishment of a good monitoring and evaluation system for OVC interventions, including the challenges and information requirements, is provided in chapter 7.

Although we hope readers will read this entire study, it is hoped that this short reader’s guide will, in addition to providing a glimpse at the full contents of the study, guide task managers to the specific chapter of most critical importance to a given country situation.