

Executive Summary

The National Children's Forum on HIV/AIDS was held in Cape Town between the 22nd and 24th August 2001. The forum brought together 90 HIV-affected children (7 to 18 years of age) from around South Africa. The aim of the forum was to provide these children with the opportunity to talk about how HIV/AIDS is impacting on children in South Africa with the intention that their voices be heard by national decision makers. The forum and subsequent activities will ultimately impact on the drafting, implementation and monitoring of policies and programmes designed to address the needs of vulnerable children.

Over the course of the 3-day event, the children spoke about the challenges they face on a daily basis, the way HIV/AIDS has changed their lives and about their experiences of services and other support structures. On the last day of the forum, the children met with representatives from national government and parliament to discuss the impact of HIV/AIDS on children and the roles of civil society and government in addressing this impact.

Several key themes emerged during this process, including the following:

- Many Children are being denied access to education because they are unable to pay their school fees. In addition to this, children who are HIV+ or who are living in an HIV affected household are teased and discriminated against by peers and teachers. In many instances, vulnerable children are not being identified in the education system. Reasons for this include the fact that teachers are unaware of children's home circumstances and when children are identified as vulnerable, schools do not always have the resources to respond appropriately.
- Many health care facilities are not child and youth friendly. Children are often afraid to access advice, counselling, HIV testing and condoms because of the attitude and actions of health care staff. Children also spoke about the lack of medication at clinics and the fact that clinics are inaccessible because they are far from their homes.
- In addition to being HIV- infected or affected, most of the children who attended the forum live in conditions of dire poverty. Their experiences speak clearly to the fact that existing social security measures are not meeting the needs of poor children and their families. As a result, many children are being forced to work or to beg to survive. The children who attended the forum called for improved social assistance and for support to be directed at the individuals and organisations that help to feed, clothe and care for them.
- The children's artwork and discussions reflect their outrage at the high levels of child sexual abuse in South Africa. Some of the children who attended the forum are HIV+ as a result of sexual abuse and they shared their experiences of services and of the discrimination they face as a result of their HIV status.



- The children cited stigma and discrimination against HIV affected people as key problems. They perceived the discrimination to be related to ignorance and to the belief that HIV is spread by touching or that it is a result of bewitchment. The children's experiences highlight the need for more HIV/AIDS awareness and education.
- HIV/AIDS is typically associated with a long and painful death. Children living with HIV+ parents or siblings spoke poignantly of witnessing their suffering. The children described how they struggle to care for their sick parents and about the impact on their lives of losing a mother. Children who had been orphaned spoke about reduced opportunities, desperate poverty and increased vulnerability to abuse and neglect.
- As the HIV/AIDS pandemic continues to grow, so do the number of children living without adult caregivers. These children often take on the roles of caregivers and breadwinners. They are unable to access social security and rely almost entirely on the generosity of others and the services of NGOs. The children's stories bear witness to the strength and courage with which they face these challenges and their determination to escape from their current circumstances.
- Most of the children who attended the forum were living in the care of someone other than their biological parents, including grandparents, aunts, uncles and older siblings. While for some, these carers were a source of love and support, many other children spoke about being exploited and abused by them. The children's experiences highlight the need for mechanisms which support families that take in children.
- Many of the children spoke about the support that they get through being involved in a church. Others however felt unwelcome in church because of the attitudes and actions of church leaders and members of the congregation. The children emphasised the importance of speaking about HIV/AIDS in religious institutions and about the positive role that religious leaders can play in the fight against AIDS.
- The children who attended the forum were all fortunate enough to be linked to an organisation that provided them with some form of support. The children spoke at length about the important role that NGOs and CBOs play in their lives and they called on government to "help them to help more children".

The children's experiences highlight the need for more emphasis to be placed on the implementation and monitoring of existing policies. Linked to this is the need to allocate substantially more resources to programmes which help to meet the basic needs of vulnerable children. Grassroots health, education and social development service providers, in both the governmental and non-governmental sectors, need to be supported in sustainable ways in order to cope with the increasing demand for assistance.