



Killer AIDS and orphans in Sub-Saharan Africa: An eyewitness's viewpoint **Priyank Nandan**

We are all aware of the deep rooted damage that AIDS has caused in Africa, specifically the sub-Saharan region. One of the most devastating affects of this epidemic has been the millions of children it has orphaned. The statistics clearly reflect the level of damage this demon has caused. According to the United Nations there are no less than fourteen million orphans because of HIV/AIDS. Eight out of every 10 children in the world whose parents have died of AIDS live in sub-Saharan Africa. During the last decade, the proportion of children who are orphaned as a result of AIDS has risen from 3.5% to 32% and will continue to increase exponentially if the disease spreads unchecked.

Mihret is an Ethiopian orphan, not only did her parents carry the HIV and die of AIDS, but they passed the virus onto her, probably during the birthing process. Unlucky in that respect, Mihret is blessed in that she has access to treatments that will allow her to live beyond her tenth birthday – something many other children living with the virus will not have an opportunity to do.

It brings a chill down the spine just imagining the plight of these young innocent kids. The very thought of leading a life in extreme poverty without the protective cover of ones parents is frightening. This will also have long term social and economic affects locally and globally.

The extent of damage can be visualized from the eyes of Logan Cochrane the founder of Working To Empower. He has been doing a lot of work on AIDS related issues and has personally been to this region and understands some of the nature of the problem.

Priyank: Hi Logan. tell us something about yourself and your work?

Logan: Working To Empower works in many areas relating to HIV and AIDS, while our main focus is education. We train educators, create peer education teams, and offer community based education programs. However, education is sometimes not enough. Poverty can be viewed as a related factor for HIV prevalence and thus we also fund income generating projects and support orphans by paying their school fees. Speaking here about orphans, not only do we try and support those already orphaned but we also aim to prevent orphaning in the future through our education.

Priyank: Can you explain the exact nature of problems you have worked on?

Logan: Of course, every society and culture is different. Instead of only viewing this epidemic as a medical problem, WTE develops different programs and approaches according to each need, culture, and local dynamics. One of greatest problems today is funding, now that we have had very positive responses and successful programs many locally based organizations are contacting WTE requesting programs for their areas. WTE also works mostly with refugees or internally displaced persons, this adds components requiring additional concern, such as ongoing conflict or the impact of sexual violence.

Priyank: I am sure you must have interacted with some of these orphaned kids, how does it feel to see so much pain?

Logan: At times it can be overwhelmingly disheartening, but at others it supplies me with a source of motivation to continue the work of WTE – it shows the importance and need of WTE’s work.

Priyank: What do you think can be done to improve the existing conditions?

Logan: There is much to be done, and much that can be done. However, projects and ideas need to be very well thought out before implementation. WTE spends months planning their low-budget projects, interacting with local organizations, their ideas, needs, and demands. Some other projects are implemented by good-hearted well-intentioned individuals/groups and may not have the results that had been intended because there is a lack of this specificity for the local culture, needs, and dynamics.

Priyank: How do you feel more and more people can get involved in this battle against AIDS? How can someone like me or others sitting far far away in the luxury of their homes contribute this cause?

Logan: Getting involved with projects working in this area, who are having positive and successful results, is a great idea. This includes all types of projects from the funding of clinics in Malawi to peer education teams. Help can be offered from home through awareness raising, donations, event planning, and various other projects. WTE has over twenty volunteers who are connected together mostly through the internet doing these types of projects – we are always looking for new ideas and volunteers as well.

Priyank: Can you give us some idea in how long you have been working in this area and what has been your primary motivation for the same?

Logan: I began entering the field of HIV/AIDS by writing a teachers guide for HIV education. Later found myself designing culturally and socially focused programs for HIV/AIDS education, which coincided with the founding of Working To Empower. During 2005 I spent half the year planning programs and forming partnerships, as well as fundraising. Since that time, under recently, I was

working with our partners with HIV/AIDS education (Lugufu refugee camp, Nyragusu refugee camp, Kmpoasse refugee camp, Agoro IDP camp, Baraka eastern Congo, and Cotonou, Benin). Currently I am helping to plan for the next project in the IDP camps of northern Uganda. My motivation is a love for the work.

Priyank: You pointed out earlier that most of your volunteers are connected through internet, don't you think that's an hindrance? Do you plan to have a more dedicated team moving along? By dedicated I mean who can give much more time and effort to the cause?

Logan: Volunteers are connected via the internet, however when I mentioned this I was referring to people helping with our website, writing articles, helping develop proposals, and translating. The internet is a great way to connect with this type of assistance. Our volunteers vary in how much time they put into our work, however everyone puts in more time than they signed up for and are dedicated to the work WTE does.

Priyank: On what parameters do you measure the accomplishments of various WTE projects?

Logan: In different areas there are different ways to measure success of our work. In some cases we work with how many people attend educational/sensitization events. In other areas we are able to track increases in Voluntary Counseling and Testing (VCT) use. Another measure is through the monthly reports our peer education teams send us – both about their continued work and the local situation.

Priyank: What's your vision for WTE say 5 years down the line?

Logan: WTE has had great success with its work regarding HIV/AIDS. We'd like to continue along this line, extending our success to additional regions. Currently we have requests to work in eight additional areas and could potentially be working with these newly proposed projects for the next five years, however funding is an issue we currently are trying to deal with. In addition to new projects, we are continuing and developing our current efforts. Peer education teams continue their work, resource centers are being built up, income generation projects are being started, and education sponsorship for orphans is an on-going work.

Thanks Logan for all the inputs you have provided. Wish you all the best in your future endeavors. All of us pray that you are successful in your cause of providing hope to the lives of millions.