

**Hope and Homes for Children
Partnership with Soroptimist International**

Project Sierra: a Family and a Future

Project Report: January – March 2009

Programme Overview: Young Mothers

Locations: Bo, Makeni and Freetown – working with 150 young mothers and their children – approximately 300 beneficiaries at any one time.

This project targets vulnerable single young mothers who are living alone. The scheme aims to reintegrate these young mothers with their families or empower them to be independent, active members of their community.

Update: Young Mothers

Freetown

We have been working with 46 young women and all of this group are now ready to exit the project and have been reconciled with their wider families. We met with each family to talk about the future and to convey to them how important it is that they continue to actively support their daughters, to help them stay focused on making progress in either their studies or skills learning.

There has been a real change in the young mothers during their time on the project; their bonds with their children are far stronger, and the relationships they have with family members, peers and school staff have become more positive. To prepare them for living independently, we held group-counselling sessions to help them fully utilize all their skills. They have been encouraged to attend our Health Centre for free advice and support in the future if they encounter problems with regards to using contraceptives.

During these sessions, the "Head Girl" who represents all of the young women, thanked the team for the support they had been given to change their lives for the better and she expressed the determination they all feel to make the best use of all they have learnt.

Makeni

There are 13 young mothers and 13 babies currently enrolled at Makeni. The aims this quarter were to continue to improve the overall health of beneficiaries, to help them improve their school performance, to further strengthen their bonds with their families and communities and to assist families in securing their livelihoods.

Ten parents of the young mothers have applied to receive small business support. They previously ran profitable businesses which were lost during the war. We plan to provide capital to allow them to rebuild their businesses.

The team have reported that relationships between mothers and their families are getting stronger. The neglect and rejection many felt when they joined the project have been tackled through counselling, mediation and wider awareness-raising work and parents are now playing an integral part in their daughters' lives. The team have noticed how much the actions of beneficiaries determine the extent to which they will be accepted by their family or community – and also noted that people are now not only accepting them but actively offering their support.

We continued to provide day care to all the children; the babies are fed, clothed and have a safe place to play and interact with their peers. The project provides a meal a day to the mothers, and in the current economic climate, many of them depend heavily upon this. Many were malnourished when they first enrolled but their health has improved dramatically due to provision of food and basic healthcare.

Bo

There are 93 young women enrolled into the Young Mothers project in Bo; 83 receiving vocational training and the rest in formal schooling.

While they are in class, their babies are cared for, fed and can play safely at our day care centre. One hour is put aside every day for the mothers to come in and breastfeed.

The “Woman Talk” sessions that are held on Saturdays have been well attended – they were introduced to give women a chance to talk about the challenges they face with regards to sexual health, such as sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDs. They are really helping them to gain a better understanding of the health risks they are likely to face and how to minimize them.

In addition, on alternative Saturdays, other health workshops have been held, including a session on hygiene and one on the causes and prevention of anaemia. These talks are being given now, as the rainy season approaches, because during this time risks to overall health are very much heightened.

A team from Soroptimist International visited and met mothers and graduates who are now living independently. Having the chance to get to know the Soroptimists was something the team appreciated deeply.

Programme Overview: Integrated Child and Family Support (ICFS)

Locations: Bo, Mattru, Makeni, Kamakwie, Tambakha – approximately 200 families, with up to 1000 family members.

This project targets the most vulnerable children and their families within individual communities. The aim is to strengthen families that are at risk of breakdown due to extreme poverty, illness or death of a parent. Beneficiaries are identified by working with local community leaders and organisations. The support for each family is

individually tailored to that family's needs. The overall aim of this project is to work with an individual family to enable them to become self-sufficient. As one family leaves the programme a new family joins it.

Programme Update:

Bo

We are working with 40 families and 148 individual children in Bo.

The health situation of families is improving as a result of free healthcare provided and health talks held out in the community. Sixty-two children and 11 parents were treated for various illnesses.

Family visits continue to be crucial, not only to follow up progress but to address issues on the spot where possible. They also used the visits this quarter to sensitize all caregivers and community members on the rights of children. We partner with the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's Affairs, to tailor our activities in line with Government policy and also the Family Support Unit of the police in handling cases of child abuse, making all our beneficiaries aware of child rights, parental responsibilities and government policy.

Extra support was given to the children of a family whose caregiver has died (her mother has now offered to assume the role of main caregiver, so the team will continue their support through this difficult time.) Other families and children are making real progress; one boy who attends the United Islamic Primary School has been singled out as an exceptional student: very intelligent, dependable and hard working.

Makeni

There are 40 families and 125 children enrolled on this project. The team have reported that there have been significant improvements on several fronts: a real improvement in family relationships, a decrease in the number of health issues reported at the clinic and a sharp reduction in the number of complaints made about beneficiaries, either in school or in their homes and communities.

The team feel strongly that that these changes would not have been possible without the wider support they are receiving within the community – and they also report that the awareness-raising workshops they've held for local people and meeting beneficiaries in their homes regularly have been instrumental in making this progress.

In addition, the team have assessed the families who have been receiving small business support and 60% of them are doing well and are now in a position to provide for themselves and are able to afford to support their children through school. The remaining 40% still need more support to put their businesses on a sound footing, to the team will continue to work closely with them towards this end.

The operations team from our Freetown headquarters held a workshop for our project coordinators, social workers and community members to develop a concept paper for our Community Child Rights Monitoring Group. The participants learnt more

about their role in protecting children from abuse: how to intervene and how to report any cases of abuse to the right authorities. The workshop also allowed the team to draw up set criteria for the recruitment and support of group members.

Mattru

There are 40 families and 144 children being supported directly by this project. The team have reported improvements in the overall health and behaviour of children and the ability of families to provide for their basic needs. The team has also reported that the home visits they make are crucial and that they enable them to effectively modify their interventions according to needs and progress. The visits have allowed them to give extra support in cases of bereavement or difficulty.

During their visits they conducted assessments of all families in all three communities: Ywabeko, Sogbini and Jong, in terms of their socio-economic and psychological development. They concluded that the majority of families will soon qualify to exit the project, as they have made real progress. The team has more work to do to establish which families are ready to exit sooner and which later and will now start to prepare each exiting family, but this assessment now is hugely encouraging and is a real milestone in their work together.

The team has had support from Radio U.N, Kiss 104 FM and “Voice of Women in Mattru” station amongst others, who help to inform the public about this work at the local and national levels.

Tambakha

This project supports 40 families, with 120 children.

The team in Tambakha have started work with the families who are able to exit the project within the next four months. They are helping 17 families to prepare for living independently, as their ability to provide for themselves has been secured, family relationships are strong and their health is also good.

At the same time, the Management Sub-Committee, who is responsible for identifying the vulnerable families for the project, has started work so that when these families exit, other families in need will receive support immediately.

The team also continued to work closely with all the families, through regular visits, to ensure their progress continues and to give them extra support where necessary.

One child fell critically ill during this quarter and our social worker immediately arranged for her to be taken to Kamakwie Hospital, where she was operated on straightaway. The doctor who performed the operation said the fact that she had got there when she did probably saved her life.

Kamakwie

We are currently working with 40 families and 150 individual children in this rural area. Our aims this quarter were to make sure families continue to progress well (through home and school visits) and to facilitate access to healthcare services, where needed.

The team gave closer support to families dealing with particular difficulties; coordinating preparations for one boy's surgery and giving support to several families who have been affected by the failing health of their caregivers.

The team has identified six families who are close to being able to live independently. They have started to work together with the families to prepare for this.

Programme Overview: Children Living Alone

Location: Freetown – the team works with up to 50 children at any one time.

The project targets vulnerable children who are living on the streets of Freetown, with the aim of reunifying them with their family, extended family or wider family.

The project will help these children return home. However, reintegration into family and community life can be difficult and requires ongoing guidance and support. When they join the project the children are counselled, given access to healthcare and provided with nutritious meals. Emergency placements are available when deemed necessary. Meanwhile, the staff work with the family and community to mediate in the child's safe return and assess whether the family requires extra support. Once the reunification has taken place, social workers monitor each child's progress and care.

Programme Update:

There are 48 children enrolled on this project and each will be graduating soon, so the work in this quarter has been focused on preparing for this.

Fifteen of the children are now back in formal education and the others (in an older age group) have now finished their vocational training and completed internships with local businesses. The most recent interns stayed in their positions for longer than expected, as their employers found their work valuable. The hope is that this will have improved their ability and skills and their chances for employment.

To prepare the children for their graduation and their future, we have held discussions with all of them, as a group, to find out how we could best help them through this stage. They commented on how important it was that they have start-up kits for employment (appropriate to the vocational training they've undertaken), so that they can continue to practice their skills, provide for themselves independently and also to try to contribute to their family's income, where possible. They also told us how important their graduation was to them, and that having this certified properly would help them to seek employment.

The team has been working with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports so that each graduate will be presented with a certificate on their Graduation Day. They have also all received start-up kits.

We also held informal, child-friendly workshops to find out how the children felt personally about the future; their fears and aspirations, and to help them to prepare for and adjust to living independently of our support. One-to-one counselling was given to each child and extra support given to those who needed more.

The team also held a meeting with all the parents and caregivers of the boys, to prepare them and convey to them how important their support will continue to be to their children.

The team has been able to impact significantly on the lives of these children. When they enrolled on the project, they were living on the streets, had been rejected by their families and were regarded in their local community as outcasts. Today, many of them have been reconciled with their families and are living with them. Where this has not been possible, they have been reintegrated with people in their local community, have learnt solid vocational skills and are equipped to earn their livelihood. People respect them and the project has rekindled their hopes for a better future.

Hope and Homes for Children
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Case Study – Young Mothers Project, Bo

Suba, now 17 years old, joined the Young Mothers Project in Bo a year ago. She lost her mother during the war and was abducted by militia fighters, aged four. She suffered many forms of abuse and lost all contact with her relatives, including her Father who became a militia fighter in another region of Sierra Leone.

When the war finally ended Suba was reunited with her Grandmother at a displaced persons camp. Shortly after, she fell pregnant and sadly her baby died after birth, due to the lack of appropriate care that was available to them. This painful loss coupled with the prevailing hardship in the camp devastated Suba and she became very frail and sick. Fearful for Suba's health, her Grandmother escaped with her to Bo in search for better medical care.

In Bo they found themselves with no shelter, food or money, as they had sold all of their possessions to travel there. They were unable to afford medical help and the Grandmother had to resort to begging on the streets. At this time, Suba was reunited with her father who had suffered amputated limbs from the war. Suba was happy to have a family again and somewhere to live but without the assurance of money to provide daily food and medical care, Suba was unable to support herself and her family.

Suba couldn't make enough money from selling local goods so resorted to prostitution at night to earn money to care for her family. Her father was angry with her for doing this and confronted her about it. Sadly, he later passed away.

Whilst working one night, Suba robbed a man and was detained by the police. During a routine visit to the police station, one of HANCI's social workers met with Suba and after hearing her story they began counselling her. They encouraged Suba to stop working as a prostitute and to engage herself in something worthwhile for her future. Suba was enrolled on the Young Mothers Programme and the team has continued to counsel her.

Suba opted to be trained in tailoring and she has shown admirable signs of commitment and success. She remains fully engaged in learning her new trade, whilst helping her Grandmother with her small business work. The HANCI team has also discovered Suba to be a very talented singer who most enjoys singing traditional songs.

Suba's Grandmother is very proud of her Granddaughter and grateful to HANCI for their timely intervention in her life. She is so happy to know that Suba has a secured future.

Names have been changed to protect identities.