Government–NGO collaboration and sustainability of orphans and vulnerable children projects in southern Africa

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Abstract

Given current donor attention to orphans and children made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS, and the need for a new framework that recognizes the complementary roles of nations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), this analysis reviews NGO-operated community-based orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) projects in Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa, and Swaziland. There has been a lack of attention within the field of evaluation to inter-organizational relationships, specifically those with government agencies, as a factor in sustainability. We analyzed evaluations of nine OVC projects funded by the Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation for the influence of government–NGO collaboration on project sustainability. For eight of the nine projects, evaluations provided evidence of the importance of the government partnership for sustainability. Government collaboration was important in projects designed to help families access government grants, initiate community-based solutions, and advocate for OVC rights through legislation. Government partnerships were also critical to the sustainability of two projects involved in placing children in foster care, but these showed signs of tension with government partners. In addition to the more common factors associated with sustainability, such as organizational characteristics, donors and NGOs should concentrate on developing strong partnerships with local and national government agencies for the sustainability of their projects.
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1. Introduction

In sub-Saharan Africa, more than 12 million children under 18 years of age have been orphaned by AIDS (UNAIDS/WHO, 2004). These children face increased economic, medical, nutritional, and psychosocial deprivation. They often drop out of school or attend irregularly; lose their inheritance rights; and suffer from stigma within the community (Global AIDS Alliance, 2005). New funding initiatives have recently scaled up the global response to the problems facing orphans and vulnerable children (OVC),[1] largely through community-based responses. This scale-up occurs within a current international aid culture that often polarizes non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local governments, and assumes civil society has a comparative advantage to affect change and reach vulnerable populations (Hartwig, 2001; Tvedt, 2006). While this has contributed to a proliferation of NGOs worldwide, it has also pitted governments against NGOs as they compete for donor funds. As Tvedt (2006) points out, this theoretical positioning of the state versus the NGO often neglects to take into account that many NGOs are funded in part through the state and/or must work collaboratively with the state to perform their missions successfully.

Given the current donor attention to orphans and the need for a new framework that recognizes the complementary

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[1]For orphans, we include children who have lost their mother, father or both parents, and children under 18 years of age. We use the term "OVC" to include children whose survival, well-being or development is threatened by HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS/UNICEF/USAID, 2004). While

(*footnote continued*)
the term "OVC" may not be appropriate at the local level because of its potential to stigmatize, we use it here to correspond with national action plans, which use the term.

roles of state and non-state actors, this analysis reviews the evaluations of nine NGO-operated community-based OVC projects in Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa, and Swaziland and specifically focuses on the theme of government–NGO collaboration and its influence on project sustainability.

A range of definitions for sustainability has been developed and analyzed (Cassidy & Leviton, 2006; Johnson, Hays, Center, & Daley, 2004; Olsen, 1998; Scheirer, 2005). We make use of a simple definition developed by Bossert (1990): "the continuation of activities and benefits achieved during the project after the donor's funding has ceased." Cassidy and Leviton note evaluators' lack of attention to the inter-organizational relationships important to capacity building and sustainability. Specifically, there has been a lack of attention in the literature to partnerships that include government agencies in relation to NGO project sustainability. An exception is Bossert's review of US funded projects in Central America and Africa, which cites government financing, integration into the national implementing agency, and a mutually respectful negotiating process with governments as important for sustainability. We examine the issue of government partnerships in relation to NGO project sustainability using the example of OVC programs in southern Africa.

2. Government responses for OVC in southern Africa

The countries of Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa, and Swaziland face some of the highest rates of orphanhood in the world. The percentage of children who were orphans ranged from 12% (Namibia) to 20% (Botswana) in 2003 and this is expected to increase to 18% (Namibia) to 24% (Botswana) in 2010. These increases represent the largest UNICEF estimates of orphan growth in all of sub-Saharan Africa. In South Africa in 2003, there were 2.2 million orphans, a figure that is estimated to increase to 3.1 million by 2010. AIDS is a major contributing factor to orphanhood in these countries; the percentage of orphans who lost a parent to AIDS ranged from 50% in South Africa to 75% in Botswana in 2003 (UNICEF, 2005).

These five nations legislated OVC policies in 1999 (Botswana), 2005 (Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa) and 2006 (Swaziland).[2] All policies call for the protection of inheritance rights; medical care, nutritional support, counseling and psychosocial support; and the endorsement of community-based care. All except the Lesotho policy directly address social grants, and all except the South Africa policy explicitly mentioned the provision of school fees for OVC.[3]

The extent of policy implementation, however, is another matter. For example, in Botswana, only 5000 of the country's 10 000–20 000 orphans living with HIV/AIDS are on anti-retroviral therapy, and the country is lacking in HIV-testing facilities for children (IRIN News-Botswana, 2006). The foster care system in South Africa is overburdened and cumbersome. Although OVCs are entitled to a social grant until they reach the age of 14 years (US Department of State, 2006), only a small proportion of eligible children receive these.[4] Only 25 000 of Namibia's estimated 150 000 OVC received a monthly grant from the government.[5] In Lesotho and Swaziland, rates of children's primary school attendance are dismally low, with 65% and 70% of children attending, respectively (U.S. Department of State, 2006). Clearly, though governments are committed to helping vulnerable children, they need the additional support of NGOs, the private sector, and international donors to help all children access the resources and services to which they are entitled.

3. Description of the program

For the past 4 years, the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on AIDS (CIRA) at Yale University has served as external evaluator to Bristol-Myers Squibb Foundation (BMSF)'s Secure the Future (STF) initiative. STF represents a commitment of over $115 million to find sustainable solutions for women, children and communities affected by HIV/AIDS in southern and western Africa. CIRA's Monitoring and Evaluation Unit (MEU) was established through a grant from BMSF to provide evaluation services and training in monitoring and evaluation for STF grantees. Local and international consultants with 5–10 years of evaluation experience and knowledge of the NGO and health sectors, including HIV/AIDS, are contracted by the MEU to conduct evaluations. Initial planning sessions with project staff are followed by a site visit of 3–5 days. Site visits include document review and interviews with organization leaders, staff, partners from other organizations, and recipients of services. Focus groups with constituents are also conducted. Evaluation reports are usually 30–60 pages and review the project's strengths and weaknesses with respect to organization and management as well as with respect to the achievement of objectives. Reports also provide recommendations and lessons learned.

Since 1999, STF has funded 69 projects in southern Africa through the Community Outreach and Education (COE) fund. A request for proposals (RFP) mechanism allowed international, national, and community-based

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[2]Republic of Botswana (1999). Government of South Africa (July 2005; July 15, 2005); Government of Namibia (2005); The Kingdom of Swaziland (2006); Lesotho Ministry of Health and Social Welfare (2005)..

[3]The South African policy refers to the South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996, which makes school attendance compulsory for learners

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between the ages of 7 and 15 years and provides for learners to be exempted from the payment of school fees under certain conditions.

[4]The government is working to address the problems faced by families trying to access foster care grants. (IRIN News-South Africa, 2006).

[5]The Namibian government has set up a trust fund to supplement the monthly state grants. (IRIN News-Namibia, 2005).