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**Zambia: Dwindling education support for orphans**

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**Imagine your life today if a lack of school supplies, shoes or clothes had stopped you from going to school. Without an education, where would you be? In Zambia, many students are facing this dilemma. Many of them are eager to go back to school, but they can't afford the required essentials.**

Without basic school supplies, they are forced to drop out, closing the door on the opportunities education provides.

Daisy Chirwa, 24, faced similar challenges during her education on the Copperbelt Province of Zambia. Her parents divorced when she was aged two and remained under the care of her mother.

“My parents separated when I was two, from that time, I never heard from my father,” she said. “So even the small costs were too much for my mother to pay for me at school.”

The problems faced by Daisy are not new to Zambia. They are endemic in the Zambian society and these problems have been made worse by the failure of the traditional family system to take care of children who have lost parents for one reason or another.

The increase in adult mortality rates due to HIV/AIDS, combined with widespread poverty has weakened the extended family system. Karen Sichinga, the Executive Director of the Churches Health Association of Zambia (CHAZ) attributes the high numbers of orphans and vulnerable children to the AIDS pandemic.

“The HIV/AIDS epidemic, by and large contribute to the large number of orphans and vulnerable children that we speak of today.” She explained that the number of orphans and vulnerable children in Zambia is estimated at over one million.

The study conducted by CHAZ to assess the impact of the orphans and vulnerable children, care and prevention programme in 2008, revealed that orphans and vulnerable children face many challenges.

According to the study, the biggest challenge faced by orphans and vulnerable children include lack of school support, followed by inadequate food. Basic requirements such as soap and blankets and human rights abuse are the other challenges.

Ms Karen Sichinga said at CHAZ, they work to solve this problem by providing school supplies for elementary students and comprehensive high school scholarship to those in need.

The executive director said this is being made possible with the support from cooperating partners such as the Danish Church Aid who have partnered with the organization since 1993.

“We concentrated on school education… many of these orphans had siblings, so we wanted them to look after their siblings when they finish college,” Ms Sichinga added: “The Dan Church Aid once in a while sends us containers full of exercise books, clothes and shoes and we distribute these items to the orphans and vulnerable children through our mission health facilities.”

The CHAZ support to orphans has had a huge impact on the lives of orphaned children in Zambia. Daisy Chirwa received support from CHAZ to complete her training in physiotherapy.

“I am grateful to CHAZ for the support they gave me. I am now working at Petauke Hospital. Without their support, I would have not realized my dream,” she said.
Karen Sichinga, said it is the goal of the Churches Health Association of Zambia to change the lives of orphans and vulnerable children in the country.

“Our goal is to empower the children… to make sure that these children attain a certain level of education, get employed and start looking after their siblings.”

The CHAZ AIDS Programme Officer, Harrison Musonda, said his organization has supported more than 50,000 orphans and vulnerable children in the last seven years. He warns of serious consequences on the nation if these children are left off the hook.

“If we don’t take care of this group then definitely we shall be seeing a despondent type of population that will be a nuisance to society. You may wish to know that about 400,000 and above are already in the street.”