The HIV/AIDS pandemic has had, and continues to have, many devastating impacts. Among the least well documented, appreciated and addressed is the impact on young children living in affected communities. The Bernard van Leer Foundation seeks to improve this situation by working with others – as a funder, convener and facilitator – to bring together knowledge, policy and practice.

The Bernard van Leer Foundation: specialised in early childhood development

The Bernard van Leer Foundation is a private grantmaking foundation which funds and shares knowledge about work in early childhood development. Its mission is to improve opportunities for young children by supporting programs growing up in socially and economically difficult circumstances. We have over four decades experience of funding field work in over 40 countries and disseminating lessons learned.

We work primarily by supporting projects, which are implemented through local partner organisations to ensure sensitivity to culture and context. By keeping tabs on research and district knowledge from learning, we are constantly seeking to position influence policy and practice through our publications and support to advocacy.

The foundation’s overall approach has been characterised from the start by a holistic view of early childhood. That is, we believe that attention to the material and physical wellbeing of young children is not enough; they also need support to develop socially, emotionally, cognitively, intellectually, culturally and spiritually.

We view our work as both an end in itself and a means to an end. We are guided by both a child rights framework which emphasises children’s quality of life in the present, and a complementary belief that investment in the early years pays long-term social dividends by shaping the next generation of adults and families.

Building on decades of experience in sub-Saharan Africa

Since well before the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the field work we have funded in sub-Saharan Africa has sought to build on the strengths of communities and traditional family caregiving practices. We have consistently sought to identify low-cost and easily replicable strategies to improve children’s wellbeing and development.

A typical example of our approach is the development of the Jozi childcare model with the pastoralist Samburu tribe in Kenya. Our programme work with the Samburu sought to build on the familiar model of grandparents taking care of young children in an enclosed space under a tree, and introduce new thinking about the nutrition, early stimulation and preparing children for primary school education.

We can point to some significant successes. In Kenya, our involvement for over two decades in promoting pre-school education has contributed to some 41% of Kenyan children participating in early childhood services, compared to an average of 4% for sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, and the development of a nationwide network – unique in the region – of training centres for early childhood educators.

Approaching HIV/AIDS from the perspective of young children

The foundation entered the HIV/AIDS arena through a side door. As the pandemic gradually approached HIV/AIDS from the perspective of young children

Emphasising psychosocial wellbeing and strengthening circles of care

Our response to young children affected by HIV/AIDS draws on our broader experience about how children develop, and how they and their caregivers can be helped to face stressful circumstances successfully. In particular, we emphasise young children’s need for the psychosocial care and support that is provided by predictable everyday routines and stable relationships with affectionate adults.

We believe that the most appropriate care for young children generally comes from their families, who in turn need the support of their communities. We therefore emphasise community support for fragile households – such as those headed by chronically ill parents, grandparents or eldest siblings – through mechanisms such as assistance for income-generating activities and home visits from trained community volunteers.

We favour community-based daycare centres for young children, which can have several impacts: providing stimulation, socialisation opportunities and school preparation for children; giving parents and caregivers the opportunity to spend time on income-generating activities; and serving as a focal point for motivating communities.

Communities, in turn, need the support of governments. We seek to coordinate with state-provided services whenever possible, and believe it is imperative that governments work to develop universal access to services such as health, education and social security. Policies should seek to build the capacity of extended families and communities to care for vulnerable children, as this is generally more appropriate than institutional care.

Practice: Testing approaches through programming

Of the 200+ projects we currently support through local partner organisations around the world, around 50 are in sub-Saharan Africa. Half of these projects deal directly – and the others indirectly – with young children in the context of HIV/AIDS. Since 1998 we have made over 100 grants to programmes specifically focused on young children affected by HIV/AIDS.

Some representative examples of our HIV/AIDS programming include:

1. The Kenya Orphans Rural Development Programme, which motivates and supports rural communities in Western Kenya to set up early childhood development daycare centres, providing caregivers with repute and preparing children for primary school;
2. The Siyafundisana (“We Learn Together”) project, implemented by Training and Resources in Early Education in South Africa, which trains community volunteers to promote good child-rearing practices through home visits and the use of toys as learning aids;
3. The Child Protection Society in Zimbabwe, which is pioneering a community fostering model, the aim being to keep orphaned children rooted in their own communities and to replicate as closely as possible the positive aspects of family-based care;
4. The Uganda chapter of the African Network for Prevention and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect, which works on gender socialisation – challenging submissive gender stereotypes and educating and empowering girls to defend their rights in situations which may lead to the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Descriptions of all our current partnerships can be found on www.bernardvanleer.org/partners.

Knowledge: Disseminating lessons learned and contributing to debate

In addition to funding field work, we share knowledge through publications. Through our publishing programme we publish innovative new programmes, synthesising and disseminating lessons learned, and influencing the development of policy.


In addition to fully supporting UNICEF’s Global Campaign, “Unite for Children, Unite against AIDS”, the foundation is a founding member of the Coalition on Children Affected by AIDS (www.cocaia.org), an ad hoc alignment of over 100 organisations formed with the aim of raising children’s issue higher up the international HIV/AIDS agenda in advance of the 2006 International AIDS Conference.

With an eye on the Toronto conference, we convened a series of four workshops specifically on the issue of psychosocial care and support. This culminated in agreement on a five-point Call to action – which prefaces the publication Where the heart is – stressing the importance of family- and community-based care and government provision of universal integrated services.

We co-chair the HIV/AIDS working group of the Consultative Group on Early Childhood Care and Development (www.ecdgroup.com), a well-established inter-agency consortium with a strong track record in influencing decisions at a regional and international level.

We are also piloting a ‘communications interface’ model, implemented by the Human Sciences Research Council in South Africa, which aims at consolidating knowledge on young children’s issues and advocating at a national and sub-national level. We hope this pilot will inform similar advocacy efforts in further countries.

Bringing together knowledge, policy and practice

We seek to leverage our impact on the wellbeing and development of young children affected by HIV/AIDS by working with others to bridge the gaps between knowledge, policy and practice: funding innovative new programmes, synthesising and disseminating lessons learned, and influencing the development of policy.

Please visit www.bernardvanleer.org for further details of our latest activities.

Policy: Working with others to improve advocacy for young children

We have consistently sought to identify low-cost and easily replicable strategies to improve children’s wellbeing and development.

Some representative examples of our HIV/AIDS programming include:


HIV/AIDS, young children and the Bernard van Leer Foundation: Generating knowledge, informing policy and practice