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Home learning during COVID-19

Farm Orphans Support Trust (FOST), Zimbabwe

Introduction

FOST was set up in 1991 to facilitate support for vulnerable children in Zimbabwe's farm worker communities. Farming families and communities lost significant income and support networks during land redistribution and have limited rights and little access to social services. Seventy-four per cent of all orphaned children in Zimbabwe are orphaned due to AIDS¹ and over 60 per cent of orphans and vulnerable children are cared for in grandparent-headed households.²

Through its work to enable effective, community-based protection systems in remote areas, FOST ensures that children can grow up with their siblings in a familiar environment by providing access to education, vocational and life-skills training, psychosocial support, self-help groups and child-led child protection and participation activities.

The programme

As a member of the National Education Cluster in Zimbabwe, FOST has been supporting the government's Ministry of Education to respond to the challenges of COVID-19. A number of different measures have been taken in order to minimise the disruption to children's education since lockdown restrictions caused schools to close in March 2020. One such measure has been the rolling out of school lessons over the radio. Lessons over the radio ensure that those children who don't have access to smartphones or internet connections are able to continue their learning during this time.

“Education cannot wait. The more we drag on this, the more we affect our children's future.”

Blessing Mutama FOST Director



¹ World Health Organization (WHO) (2014) *World AIDS Day: Business Unusual: Time to end the AIDS epidemic*. <https://www.avert.org/professionals/hiv-social-issues/key-affected-populations/children>

² Mushunje, M. (2014) Interrogating the relevance of the extended family as a social safety net for vulnerable children in Zimbabwe. *African Journal of Social Welfare*, 2 (4), p.78-103



Implementation

The Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the National Education Cluster, liaised with the national radio station, Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC), to free up some slots in their weekly programme so that lessons could be broadcast on different subjects and for different age groups. The initial focus was on primary school children.

Using the existing curriculum, selected teachers prepared summary versions of lessons to be shared with children across the country on the radio. The teachers pre-recorded themselves delivering the class in the ZBC radio studios in Harare and the lessons were broadcast in their timetabled slots during the week. FOST has played a key role in promoting the radio programmes to children and families in the communities in which they work and also in providing technical support to the design of the programme as a member of the National Education Cluster.

Impact

- Education for most children is continuing, which is positive.
- Geographical coverage of the lessons is wide.
- Despite the challenges this initiative has faced, given the latest government decision to postpone the reopening of schools due to a spike in the number of COVID-19 cases, learning from these challenges is being implemented to continuously adapt and improve the radio lessons programme, recognising that they are able to reach a large number of children within the country. These adaptations include developing caregiver guides to support students to benefit from the radio lessons, providing study packs for all students to accompany the lessons they listen to, and identifying community volunteers to track learning and support students.



Challenges faced

- The time taken to start the initiative due to the consultation and approval protocols common within government systems.
- The limited number of radio slots available to allocate to school lessons.
- Difficulty in knowing how many children are actively listening to the radio lessons.
- The challenge of the one-way communication of radio means children can't ask teachers if they don't understand something.
- If children need further explanations on a particular topic, it can be difficult for parents if they don't have that knowledge, and even more so if a child's main caregiver is a grandparent, which is the case in many of the communities FOST works in.
- Technology, particularly in reaching the most vulnerable rural populations. Some of the most vulnerable families FOST works with don't have radios or smartphones. Many remote areas also can't access the radio network. UNICEF pledged to donate 2,500 radios, but the level of need is much greater.
- Even if families do have radio devices, reception is limited in remote areas.
- Children with hearing impairments can't access radio lessons.

Next steps

Schools in Zimbabwe were due to open on 28 July, however due to an increase in COVID cases the Ministry of Education postponed the reopening of schools; a new date is still to be decided. As a result, the radio programme has been developed to now include all school grades.

Resources required

- Solar-powered radios.
- Links with existing radio stations.
- Time to actively promote radio classes, particularly within remote communities.
- Study packs for students to follow alongside the lessons.
- Community volunteers.

Top tips

Investing time in raising awareness of the radio lessons within communities is valuable in the long run.

Considering ways to provide wraparound support to the lessons themselves, such as accompanying written materials for students and volunteers to support as outreach in the community.

Identifying donors who will support the provision of radios, or promoting a donation of second-hand devices.

CONTACT DETAILS

Find out more about FOST at www.familyforeverychild.org/farm-orphans-support-trust or contact Blessing Mutama at blessing@fost.co.zw

