



Feeding body and mind

New Bénin programme helps orphans and vulnerable children

Building on the success of the orphan and vulnerable children (OVC) support programme in Tanzania, CACHA last year brought the programme to Benin in West Africa. The programme now ensures a good start to 50 children, from babies to 18-year-olds, by providing food, medical treatment, schools fees and other critical support.

CACHA serves two villages in Bénin through twice-yearly medical missions: Anoum, a village of 7,000 in the north, and Aklampa, an isolated village of 20,000 in the central hills with no access to electricity or running water.



Starting in early 2008, CACHA volunteers Josée Gauthier and Catherine Dallaire spent 18 months in Aklampa to start up the programme. Because the situation was so different from the Tanzania OVC programme, which support AIDS orphans through the village hospital, volunteers had to be creative in determining how to establish and run the Benin programme.

Orphans in Aklampa

In many parts of Africa, children can be considered orphans if they have lost one or both parents. Mahi, the local language in Aklampa, has words for both a motherless and a fatherless child because both are vulnerable in different ways.

Illness and death are commonplace in this town, where widespread malnutrition and iron deficiency make bacterial infections and malaria hard to fight. At the OVC support programme's inception, the town had over 300 orphans.

The programme could only accept 30 children in the first year. Volunteers assembled a local committee to select the children, based on CACHA's philosophy of ensuring a local voice. The Béninese committee chose among more than 200 applicants, being careful to only support one child per family and to favour bigger families with fewer means. The committee added 20 more children in the second year, and is planning to do so every year until reassessment in 2012.

Selection: worst off or best chance?

While the western perspective tends toward helping the most vulnerable, it is more African to focus support on those who are not seriously ill and have the most chance. Because dropouts are more common at the high school level where fees apply, the committee leaned towards ensuring older kids access to OVC school fees.

In the second round of selection, the committee reached a good balance between investing in youth with potential and helping seriously ill and younger children.

Programme offerings

CACHA's OVC support programme pays for medical treatment at the local clinic or regional hospital, school fees and uniforms, material for making clothing, and food tickets. People can turn in tickets for corn, beans, peanuts, sesame seeds and rice—more in the dry season and fewer during harvest times. CACHA also supports nine youths in apprenticeship programmes such as mechanics, woodworking and sewing.

Volunteers report that OVC children never miss an opportunity to attend CACHA activities such as a day camp, a Christmas dinner, and educational activities offered through the medical missions. Every two months, programme coordinators measure heights and weights of every child to ensure they are growing and to inform the twice-yearly missions.

Library and study centre

Aklampa is a town with few books. OVC volunteers and their handful of books became virtual reference volumes for the children—their Google, as one volunteer put it. This hunger for knowledge led the volunteers to set up a library for onsite reading using funds and books donated from Canada.

The community voted to donate a former dispensary to CACHA for the library, and with additional CACHA funds they added tables and blackboards to create a study centre. The centre provides tutors for every school level, fulfilling a request made during programme evaluation.

Local handoff

Aimé is a local man hired by the OVC support programme to help run the programme in the community, where only about 20 percent of people speak French. Through monthly home visits, he ensures the programme is making a difference by checking on the family's health, nutrition, clothing and other factors. The village kids all call him 'big brother' and seek him out for companionship and counsel.

Although people in Aklampa are aware and appreciative of CACHA from the missions and the OVC support programme, a Béninese NGO called ORASEVE will eventually take over operation of the OVC support programme and study centre, ensuring local ownership and freeing CACHA resources to seed similar projects elsewhere.

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