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## A Rising Tide: The Invisible Grassroots “Movement” for Children

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*A guest post by Jennifer Lentfer of [how-matters.org](#)*

Growing up, my family life was not easy. My father drank and it weighed heavily on my mother, who did her best to maintain as much normalcy for me and my brothers as possible. Looking back, our home’s “culture of silence” was often the most difficult part for me to bear, more than the yelling or the financial stresses or the unpredictability of my father’s behavior. As a child I had so many overwhelming feelings inside of me that simply had no place to go.

Since the 1990s, the crisis of millions of children infected and affected by HIV in sub-Saharan Africa became well documented. It was during this period that I traveled abroad for the first time to Zimbabwe at the age of 19, hoping to get as far away from home as possible. I then went on to become an aid worker, and it is no wonder that I was drawn to children’s programming in sub-Saharan Africa. Even though I was from middle America, from another culture and upbringing, I knew what it was to feel that loneliness, shame, burden, and vulnerability.

Both scholarly literature and policy papers told us at the time that the extended family – the traditional source of support for African children without parental care – was the primary safety net of care for children infected and affected by HIV. It was understood, at least by some observers, that most children were getting by not because of sweeping national-level policy protections or major international programs. Rather, those who survived and thrived did so because of the local efforts of people who organized their communities to keep children in school, mobilize and assist foster parents, and provide psychosocial support for children grieving or caring for ill parents.



The author, with her great grandmother, in the U.S. state of Nebraska, 1977.

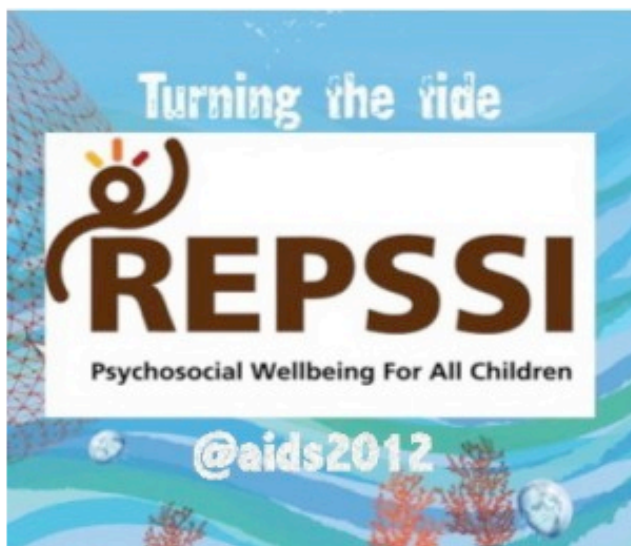
## *Building on Tradition*

Assistance to children and families affected by AIDS and poverty within their immediate communities builds on long-standing African traditions of community-level sharing of agricultural labor, assistance in times of drought and other calamities, and shared child care, much like the rural, farming area where I grew up. In fact, across Africa, the poorest and most vulnerable people set up indigenous, resilient, and often informal coping mechanisms such as self-help groups, church groups, burial associations, grain loan schemes, and rotating credit and loan clubs (Lwihula & Over, 1995; Mutangadura et al., 2000, Wilkinson-Maposa et al., 2009). Most of these community initiatives grow out of the concern of a few motivated individuals who work together to support vulnerable children. They spring from a sense of people's obligation and desire to care for those in need.

I know intimately that it is this sense of obligation that can give children the care they need to become healthy and happy adults. My own family did not exist in isolation either. The proverb "it takes a village to raise a child" was no cliché, but my lived experience. Even when things were hard, I now realize how much that love, care and protection existed around me and strengthened me.

## *Communities ARE "Turning the Tide"*

According to a 2004 survey by the University of Kwazulu-Natal, there are at least 50,000 community-based organizations (CBOs) in the South African non-profit sector alone, which contradicts the dominant image in the aid and philanthropic sectors that services are mainly provided by formal and professionally-run NGOs. In Malawi a CBO mapping exercise identified over 1,800 CBOs focused on orphans and child protection (Network of Organizations for Vulnerable and Orphaned Children, 2005). A Ugandan study for the Joint Learning Initiative on Children in AIDS in 2007 revealed that the prevalence of community-level initiatives for children affected by HIV was one per 1,300 people. Most were independent groups or linked to local churches, schools, or clinics. While these figures may vary in other countries, there is evidence of many CBOs are assisting children needing protection by extending emotional support and social services into areas and communities that are often not sufficiently reached by government or international agencies.



Today with the support and love of family members, friends, and trained professionals, my family has done a lot of healing and I am so grateful for it. In its ten years since its founding, REPSSI has worked with over 100 non-profit organizations and government agencies in almost 2,000 projects across southern and east Africa so that every child has this same chance. There are 5 million children and their families and communities who I know are also grateful.

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REPSSI will be celebrating its [10th anniversary](#) throughout Africa this year and at the [XIX International AIDS Conference](#) in Washington D.C. on July 21st. This year's conference theme is "Turning the Tide Together."

*The author wishes to thank Zanele Sibanda for her contributions to this article.*

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