Harvesting for Life in Mozambique

So far, 325,000 children in Mozambique have lost one or both parents to AIDS. As AIDS claims more lives, children are left orphaned, vulnerable and risk malnutrition, disease, abuse and sexual exploitation. In response to the orphan crisis, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) have set up Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools in Mozambique.

All aspects of farming are taught, from land preparation to harvesting. Normally the children would have learned from their parents but AIDS is disrupting that tradition.

Agricultural extension workers and school teachers use an innovative integrated curriculum to show the children how to experiment with traditional and new techniques on crops grown in small learning fields. Children are encouraged to use what limited resources they have. Courses in nutrition and medicinal plants help them stay as healthy as possible.

Children are motivated to develop into confident young adults. In Mozambique, lessons in singing and dancing, as well as agriculture, help keep cultural traditions alive. Teaching children through dance and music stimulates participation and helps them concentrate better. Skilled facilitators hold theatre and discussion groups to tackle sensitive, difficult yet potentially life-saving issues, like HIV prevention and gender equality under the careful guidance of skilled facilitators.

“The kids are not only learning better farming,” explains WFP field worker Atanasio Rocha Augusto. “They are learning also what they have to do in their lives – diseases, how to cope, better nutrition, good foods for HIV-positive persons. So they all have this knowledge and they transmit the knowledge at home.” No one can learn on an empty stomach, so nutritious energy-giving meals provided by WFP are a vital element of the Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools. Rice, beans, and fish are supplemented at harvest time with vegetables from the fields, giving children a sense of achievement, as they begin to feed themselves.

“Before, we grew crops but with poor results,” explains 16-year-old Maswanei Benjamin. “What we got from a hectare definitely was not going to fill a granary. This knowledge is going to help me. Now that we plant in rows, a small patch of land can give us a lot of food. So this knowledge is definitely going to help me in the future.”

When food is scarce a little farming knowledge can make a huge difference. Knowledge, livelihood skills, gender-equal attitudes, and the confidence to make a living are vital if the next generation is to escape the cycle of poverty and HIV/AIDS-infection.

Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools Expanding Fast

The Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools began in Mozambique with four pilot schools in 2003, but expanded fast with remarkable results. There are now 28 in Mozambique, Kenya, Namibia, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. More sites are being initiated this year in Malawi.

The Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools are transforming the lives of some of the millions of orphaned children in sub-Saharan Africa, empowering them with the agricultural knowledge and skills as well as confidence they need for a safer, healthier, and happier future.

FAO would like to thank the following donors for currently supporting this activity in southern Africa:

Australia, OFDA, and the Republic of South Africa
Questions and Answers:

Why are these additional activities for orphans and vulnerable children necessary?
At the end of 2005, there were 24.5 million people in sub-Saharan Africa living with HIV and AIDS. This has left 12 million children in the region without one or both parents. By 2010 over 18 million children will have lost one or both parents as a consequence of the HIV epidemic. Millions more will be made vulnerable even before they become orphans. Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools (JFFLS) help fill knowledge and skills gaps left by the premature death of parents.

What is the difference between the JFFLS and attaching social workers to children, or creating a school garden?
The difference lies in philosophy and approach. A JFFLS is a living classroom and a school without walls. Through an integrated curriculum of agriculture and life skills, JFFLS aim to empower children, build their self-esteem and foster gender equal attitudes. JFFLS promote livelihood approaches and are more than the traditional psycho-social support that is usually institutional, can be costly and hand-out oriented.

Do the JFFLS replace conventional schooling?
No. JFFLS are meant to complement the existing schooling and social structures, not replace them. JFFLS target the most vulnerable children both in and out of school. The curriculum follows the crop cycle of one year, and usually classes are held two or three times a week. In Swaziland, where most children attend school, JFFLS take place on weekends or after school. In Mozambique, where the most vulnerable children are not attending school, most of the JFFLS are attached to a conventional school, in an effort to encourage children to attend regular schooling.

How are the facilitators at the JFFLS paid?
For sustainability reasons, the JFFLS have a voluntary character and except for a small incentive, no payment is involved. In Swaziland, community facilitators run the program, and they receive a small monthly cash stipend (R50, or US$ 8.50) and like the children who attend, they are given a take-home ration by WFP. Teachers and agricultural extension workers facilitate the program in Mozambique, and as food provided by WFP is cooked on site, the children and facilitators, as well as all the children in attached schools, benefit from nutritious meals each day.

Is this part of a wider plan for the problem of orphans and vulnerable children in the region?
Yes. JFFLS are part of the United Nations and Partners’ Alliance that aims to strengthen the livelihoods of orphans and vulnerable children through social protection interventions in the region. Through this process, the United Nations and its partners identify promising initiatives and build an evidence base for bringing successful initiatives to full scale. Countries in the region have government policies and plans of action for orphans and vulnerable children, but in practice they are often inadequate and implementation and delivery face significant challenges. This process helps identify promising activities for the target group that governments can adopt, support, and bring to scale to help more children in need.

What are the roles of the United Nations agencies?
FAO is the lead agency and is responsible for the quality of the activity. FAO oversees provision of agricultural skills, seeds, tools, and agricultural inputs. The World Food Programme provides food rations for the children, their families, and linked institutions. UNICEF is tasked with promoting life skills, and educating children on nutrition, sanitation and HIV/AIDS prevention issues. UNFPA is involved in most countries to provide support on sexual and reproductive health and gender issues. In addition, the Peace Corps and non-governmental organizations are key partners in this activity.

For more information contact:
FAO Emergency and Rehabilitation Programme in Southern Africa
Regional Interagency Coordination Support Office (RIACSO)
11 Naivasha Road, Sunninghill, 2157, Johannesburg, South Africa
Phone: +27 11 517 1564 Fax: +27 11 517 1549 Web: www.fao.org/reliefoperations