5 million+ people living with HIV/AIDS in South Africa:
• 1 million+ children have lost a mother
• 2 million+ children have lost a father
• 300 000+ are double orphans
• 500 000+ children have a mother who is sick with AIDS.

Programmes to address vulnerability in AIDS-affected communities need to be scalable and effective.

Why schools?
• Educators see children every day of the school year for five days of the week and are therefore in a unique position to change their children’s lives and to monitor children who have been identified as vulnerable.
• Support within schools will bring children to schools and keep children in school, with obvious long terms benefits.
• Schools are made up of many components, each potentially valuable as a resource for care and support, including school governing bodies and the broader school community.
• Education policy in SA provides the framework for an inclusive education system that encourages schools to address all barriers to learning, including social vulnerability.

ARks replicable model of school based support
In collaboration with the Media in Education Trust (MIEET) and the Department of Education, this initiative is a replicable model being piloted in a cluster of 8 schools in rural KwaZulu-Natal, providing services to over 2000 children daily.

The project employs:
• A team of 3 community workers in each school
• A social worker per cluster of 4 schools

The project provides the following services:
• Breakfast to all children every school day
• Lunch at schools on weekends and holidays
• Systems for identifying and monitoring vulnerable children
• Assistance with grant applications:
  • Assisting individual families
  • Weekend visits to schools by state officials to process documentation

Lessons learnt:
• The pilot illustrated the feasibility and efficacy of identifying and supporting vulnerable children through schools.
• Feeding children through school will not necessarily increase the number of days that the child attends school but is likely to impact on the child’s ability to concentrate and participate in class.
• For sustainability and to secure the buy-in of school management teams, the DOE need to be integrally involved in planning this project, introducing the project to schools and monitoring its implementation.
• It is essential that all local partners feel part of the process from the outset and that each partner bring a contribution to the table. Roles and responsibilities should be clearly articulated at the outset through MOUs with all key stakeholders.

The existence of a local “champion” is critical to the success of the project. The identification (and support) of a local champion should be integrated into the planning phase.

A replicable model needs to remain flexible enough to acknowledge and accommodate local needs and capacities.

Communities with local service providers are essential in replicating models of intervention across communities. These need to be characterised by open dialogue and mutual respect.

In the pilot, the roles of the school-based community workers were not adequately negotiated and contracted at the outset. As a result, we are not getting the benefit of the work carried out by the worker. We will address this by providing job descriptions, contracts, clear targets and a formal supervision and management structure for community workers in future clusters.

The community workers can also play an extremely valuable role in supporting the school community as to make the best use of limited resource i.e. the community workers can be trained to do much of the preparatory work around grant access.

Remarking on focused core project objectives is a key challenge in an area where needs are great and varied and services are scarce.

Strategic partnerships with other organisations are critical.

Recruiting and retaining professional social workers is problematic in rural areas of SA. A centre based and supervised auxiliary social workers or welfare officers presents a viable alternative.