

SPEECH

FXB international
François-Xavier Bagnoud



AIDS Orphans and Vulnerable Children: A Time to Act

Speech delivered at Media Tenor Agenda Setting 2001 Conference
Bonn, Germany, 2 November 2001

By Albina du Boisrouvray, Founder and President

The Association François-Xavier Bagnoud (FXB as we call it), named after my son who was a helicopter rescue pilot, lobbies for the full implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. For more than 12 years, I have lobbied at the Davos World Economic Forum, in the halls of the US Congress, in the slums of India, everywhere I go, to improve the situation of orphans and children left out of society's safety net in the world.

These activities – speeches, written advocacy statements, and loud denunciations of accepted but faulty wisdom – aim to bridge the divide between the beneficiaries of those working in the field and the decision makers who determine policy and funding.

Globalization is often thought of in economic, political, or communications terms, but we do not look enough at the effects of cultures, families, traditions, poverty, non-existent healthcare systems, epidemics, and yes, terrorism and its tragedies. We do not use enough the analytic tools of the inextricable link between Health and Human Rights applying them to social analysis to foresee the social consequences of the deprivation of the poor. Where exclusion, loss of dignity, lack of education, poverty fester and thrive, this unhealthy social fabric breeds social diseases of instability and insecurity leading to epidemics of war and terrorism.

As the AIDS pandemic burst on the global scene in the 1980s, I undertook a partnership with the late Dr. Jonathan Mann to help society realize that the globalization of this disease and its nurturing bed in poverty and discrimination was a worldwide threat.

UK economist Tony Barnett explains it when he says that "AIDS can be described as a long wave disaster because it is a disaster that is a long time in the making and in which the major effects have already begun to occur long before the magnitude of the crisis is recognized and any response is possible."

One of the most tragic effects of the AIDS pandemic is the huge number of orphans that it leaves as the straight losses in its wake. For a long time, the extent of the pandemic predicted for Africa was underplayed or ignored. Peter Piot of UNAIDS recognized two years ago that the African figures were worse than what Dr. Jonathan Mann had predicted at the FXB Center for Health and Human Rights applying those tools of that inextricable link between health and human rights.

Now the extent of the pandemic is equally ignored in India, China and Russia with potential disastrous effects worldwide. In Rajasthan, India, FXB estimates, through its blood bank screening of the migrant worker population, that HIV prevalence in those groups went up to 17% in some months. Russia admits in Irkutsk, Siberia, an 11,000% increase over cases reported in January 1, 1999. In China, pockets of infection up to 20% were disclosed by courageous doctors. It is important to remember that an unchecked epidemic doubles every year.

Understanding the AIDS spider webs of the roads of transmission, in the billions of people in India, China, Russia, Eastern Europe – the same webs as in Africa with several extra ones – it is very realistic to say that in this decade if nothing is done in regard to worldwide access to triple therapy that will keep parents and the social fabric alive, we can expect at least 100 million AIDS orphans in the next eight years.

What surfaced in Africa after an invisible and silent spread of 10 years is about to surface in those countries. As for the number of children that will find themselves decivilized and out of the safety net of society, we must remember that there are also another 100 million children that roam the streets of our mega cities, street kids, identified since 1991, and now again by Casa Alianza.

Children have no voice – children do not buy, vote or lobby. FXB has chosen to put all its energy into becoming a voice not only for the expected 100 million orphans of the AIDS pandemic, in this decade, but for all children in the same state of destitution and despair reeled backwards into de-civilization. These children all lose the possible advocacy of their parents for their rights specified in the Convention on the Rights of the Child and have no one to stand up for them. Society's record for their defense is very poor. A Portuguese Nobel laureate, author Jose Somaraga, said it well: "what is the weight of an orphan on the political scales in China or Russia? What is the value of an orphan on the stock market in New York?"

There is no economic model to answer these questions, nor is there one to show the ultimate effect on all of us of the millions of people living in poverty and disease without any hope for the future.

I recently asked two leading economists – Tony Barnett and Alan Whiteside – to write a book on the economic impact of AIDS. They concluded that AIDS and orphans had significant impact on local economies, but not on the global economic outlook, since existing economic models could not measure that. That may be true in the university, but I find it hard to believe that the deep poverty, despair and disease which I fight in my field work can exist in any part of the global village without having some real economic impact on all of us.

Traditional economic models that use standard economic statistics such as GDP growth do not include the medium and long-term effects on those considered to be outside "the market." They do not gauge the effects of poverty and hopelessness on youth of the poorest countries. However, when speaking about the political and economic consequences of AIDS and AIDS orphans, we must think outside the market, outside the box of inadequate existing economic models.

Maybe the next winners of the Nobel Prize for Economics will be those who demonstrate the effects of the conditions of the destitute on the well-being of the affluent, the indirect effects of the AIDS pandemic and its orphans on our global economy and vice versa.

The President of the World Bank, Jim Wolfensohn, touched on it recently when he said: "that between 20,000 and 40,000 more children will die worldwide and some 10 million people will be condemned to live below the poverty line of \$1 a day because of the terrorist attacks." And with what new sociological models can we measure the impact of a huge population of desperate, hungry, destitute roaming children, perfect candidates to be indoctrinated to become heroic martyrs as human bombs.

Anisa Miriam Bouziane said it rightly. "The terrorists have identified the growing desperation and have used it as fuel for their political objectives. They hijacked the legitimate despair that is so much part of the non-Western world."

Yet, the economic tragedy of the AIDS pandemic is so visible on the effects it has on its orphans. The great majority is under the age of 15 and they accumulate even greater burdens as responsible heads of household when a grandparent or other guardian caregivers die. In FXB projects for them in Rwanda, we see children, some as young as 10, heads of about 13 percent of households.

Orphans run greater risks of being malnourished and stunted. But children whose parents are there but sick are also affected. A study in Abidjan showed that families with a member sick from AIDS cut spending on their children's education in half and reduced food consumption by 40 percent so that they could cover healthcare expenses. Studies show that AIDS orphans are more vulnerable to sexual abuse, receive less education and healthcare than other poor children. They are often denied access to schooling because of the stigma and the irrational ignorant fears surrounding AIDS.

A few months ago, the president of Tanzania described this problem in his country. "The death of breadwinners, or their inability to work due to illness, creates severe hardships for children," he said. "As a result, a good number of such orphans – approaching a million – end up fending for themselves through child labor including its worst forms such as commercial sex."

When a parent dies, children, particularly girls, may also be denied their inheritance and property. In addition, laws and practices that deny widows their rights and property have devastating consequences on children after their father's death. In most countries there is an inadequacy of legal institutions to safeguard these children's rights. These orphans and very poor vulnerable children, financially desperate and emotionally broken are pushed by hunger into exploitive situations such as prostitution, drug dealing and criminality, and end up swelling the ranks of the street children already numbering 100 million.

In some communities of sub-Saharan Africa, 25 percent of HIV-infected working-age adults will have to do without life's necessities. In Zimbabwe alone, production of livestock and crops in a household with an AIDS death was reduced dramatically; cattle by 29 percent; groundnuts percent cotton 47 percent; vegetables 49 percent and maize 61 percent. In the same country a study showed that agricultural workers lost 10 percent of their monthly working time attending funerals.

Agriculture and rural development are being severely hindered by the shortage of labor and capital and the lack of agro-technical research because technicians have died of AIDS. HIV/AIDS disrupts social networks as people lose assets and their ability to earn income. Universities and middle schools have lost their teachers; in Zambia, two teachers are dying for every one that graduates from training school; in Cote d'Ivoire 5 teachers die of AIDS every week. The ranks of civil servants have been depleted. And life expectancy is reduced by as much as 30 years.

As bad as the economic consequences are, the indirect effects of AIDS and AIDS orphans; namely, the potential for global terror and disruption among 100 million parentless children who have nothing and are open to all sorts of evil enticements, is staggering. Studies in the industrialized world have demonstrated that the same conditions suffered by AIDS orphans have produced violence, criminal actions and deaths in developed countries. A study on criminality in England, for example, found that 57 percent of the children who commit crimes had either dealt with the death or the loss of contact with someone emotionally important for them, like a parent.

Other studies point to the fact that lack of parental care is the best indicator of violence or criminality in their future.

Dr. Joyce Lashof, a former president of the American Association of Public Health, was quoted in a New York Times article on youth and criminality in US pockets of poverty, saying: "what we are seeing is the complete destruction of the social environment for these kids, economic opportunities, stable relationships, harmony, safety of school, hope for the future, everything that makes up living has kind of disappeared for them." She emphasized the "three-fold increases in homicide and suicide in the last 30 years, which experts say signals the depth of their despair for the future."

In a world reeling from terror, these children are among the prime recruits in an army of already at least 300,000 child soldiers involved in 33 conflicts in almost every region of the world. Thirty percent of the guerrillas in Colombia are under 18 years of age. In West Africa, a rebel commander said that a 12-year-old is the ideal soldier. Old enough to carry an AK-47 and to understand and carry out an order, but too young to have any compunction against terrorists acts of human destruction.

And the stories told by those child soldiers are more than terrifying.

A girl, 16, from Uganda. "They made us kill the boy with a stick. I knew him from before. We were from the same village. I refused to kill him, and was told I would be shot. After we killed him, they made us smear his blood on our arms."

In our FXB projects in Rwanda, we have reintegrated such children. One little orphan boy who was 9 at the time of the genocide had become an excellent killer. He told us how he executed people without any qualm, saying "God did not have pity on me, it is my time now, to take revenge."

From Peru, a girl recruited at the age of 15 by the Shining Path rebels said. "They killed all the people there, old and young. They made us drink their blood; eat their liver and their heart which they took out and sliced and fried."

And in Sierra Leone, Ibrahim, a child who became soldier at 8 and at 14 was called General Shareblood, told a French reporter that he drank a cup of human blood every morning mixed with drugs, sending one of his 50 child soldiers to fetch a prisoner or an innocent civilian whose head he cut off with a machete.

In Algeria, one report cites 12-year-old boys decapitating a 15-year-old girl and playing catch with her head. What can we conjecture here about the millions of AIDS orphans and destitute desperate children, perfect candidates not only for child soldiers, but for terrorists and mad dictators?

We know that both the Taliban and its opposition force 11-year-old children to fight. We have seen on CNN that Al Qaeda trains young boys 10/11 years in its camps in Afghanistan. We know that Al Qaeda uses the Internet to recruit and that Bin Laden doesn't hesitate to pay for the trips of thousands of mujahedeen from Egypt, the Gulf States, Syria, Jordan and North Africa to train them in the Afghan camps.

So, if you link all the information and facts that I have just said to you, you will find that it draws a very worrying and dark picture of the social and economic destruction within poverty, compounded by the added poverty brought on by the AIDS pandemic in which the orphans and vulnerable children in the same destitute conditions must be the most urgent concern because of what it means in the future and the threats that are unavoidable.

Dare we even imagine children indoctrinated into turning themselves into bombs?

People think of the AIDS pandemic and compounded poverty that affect those millions and millions of children as "out there" until their silent painful reality breaks into our faces with tremendous violence. But we just saw that there is no longer an "out there". We are all in this together and we have to take action with the same emergency as we do when we go to war.

This calls for all the best solutions, those under governments' noses, and creative new ones, leveraging the solidarity and generosity of the affluent parts of the planet. It takes a lot of money to do it, but it is possible. At FXB, we calculated that a fund of \$20 billion for right now could bring first necessity programs, as the ones FXB has been doing for 12 years, to 40 million of those children. What is \$20 billion in a world where \$250 billion were easily spent to fight the Y2K bug and where the immediate toll of terror on New York's economy approaches \$82 billion?

If we don't pay attention to these issues, it will cost much more later and make more innocent victims and their orphans. This planet is our village or mega city, if you prefer. We are one global extended family, and we need to help each other as good neighbors do. Can we encourage corporations and affluent individuals to learn the reflex of giving small sums of money from huge profits, from superfluous spending, to create an international fund for the orphans of the AIDS pandemic?

This requires a change of mentality, a new set of ethics for the new economy and order of this new millennium. The poorer children of the future become our global family responsibility to raise, and it is mandatory on ethical levels and on security levels that affluence be shared and used to restore at the grass roots the safety nets needed for the social reintegration of the millions of orphans, and vulnerable children of the Village Earth.

On September 11, watching the horrifying images of planes deliberately, for intolerable mad terrorism and hatred, fly into the two World Trade Towers killing thousands and destroying New York, I could not help seeing as a water mark beneath those images another plane, a Sabena flight from Conakry to Brussels, unknowingly carrying two desperate West African teens who had smuggled themselves into its landing gear mechanism. Despairing of their futures in Africa, Yaguine Koita, 14, and Fode Tourkana, 15, hoping to find a better life in Europe, froze only themselves to death.

On their dead bodies a letter was found that was transmitted on the 4th of August 1999 by AFP Brussels. It speaks more eloquently than anything of what we must do for those who live in a world of the violence, disease, lack of education, exploitation and poverty. In part, the letter pleads with European leaders. "We put our trust in you. Please help us," it says. "If we are sacrificing ourselves and putting our lives in jeopardy, it is because we are suffering too much in Africa, and we need your help to fight against poverty and bring war to an end. However, our greatest need is education. So we are asking you to help us study to become, like you, in Africa."

If we don't listen to their harmless, meek voices today, and if we do not act now, we will face tomorrow a shattered future with more violence born, this time, of despair.