

Chennai, India

October 2005

By **Albina du Boisrouvray, Founder and President**

In 1989, I founded the Association, FXB, that carries the name of my son, François-Xavier Bagnoud continuing the generosity and commitment that marked his short life as a helicopter rescue pilot. We implement in the field, day-by-day, projects promoting the basic rights of the most destitute children, AIDS orphans, orphans from other causes and all vulnerable children.

FXB works in 17 countries with 87 projects fighting the AIDS pandemic, and we lobby at the highest levels for the millions of AIDS orphans and vulnerable children who do not have a voice and who cannot demand the implementation of their rights as spelled out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child – a Convention ratified by all the countries on our planet except the United States and Somalia.

At FXB, we have chosen to focus on the orphans of the AIDS pandemic since these destitute children living in poverty are the most tragic showcase of the more than 143 million orphans from other causes, street children and all other vulnerable children who are not orphans but live in squalor. Current projections of the numbers of orphans from the AIDS pandemic range from 40 to 100 million, but none of these estimates takes into account countries where the AIDS pandemic is in its infancy such as Eastern Europe, Russia, India and China. **What** a terrifying proportion of the youth of our planet who are not raised properly.

Whatever their numbers or status, these children have frighteningly high rates of malnutrition, stunted growth, and illiteracy. Sometimes their relatives exploit them, or take their meagre inheritance. These children live in squalor and abandonment, indignity and horror and are prime recruits for prostitution, drug dealing, criminal gangs, ragtag militias, and terrorists. An FXB survey of sex workers that we carried out in Mumbai, Kolkata, and two smaller cities close to rural areas, two years ago, demonstrated that almost 31% of sex workers said that they had been orphaned as children.

India currently faces a rapidly increasing HIV/AIDS pandemic that could devastate communities, as well as **the national economy**, as it has across sub-Saharan Africa, if not brought under control. In 1995, Sri Justice Ahmadi, former Chief Justice of India, already said **“The only way to preserve public health and to regulate the spread of AIDS is to protect the human rights and civil liberties of infected individuals so as to create an environment where they voluntarily disclose their HIV status and assist in curbing the spread of the disease”**.

Many believe that the proportion of children in India orphaned by HIV/AIDS is far lower than in sub-Saharan Africa. However, because of India’s huge population the actual number of children **now** orphaned by this pandemic is already high. **According to a Human Rights Watch report last year 2 million children have been orphaned by AIDS**. Although this is not yet happening on a large scale in most cities, studies have shown that the problem of orphans in some urban slum areas of India is already severe. We take the definition of an orphan as someone under 18 years of age who has lost a mother or a father or both parents. Even the death of one parent greatly exacerbates the effects of poverty, often resulting in child labor, lack of education and poor health. Orphaning also impacts adults in Indian

society as many have to take on the burden of widowhood and fostering, which is especially problematic for the elderly.

With an increase in HIV/AIDS we can expect to see a higher percentage of double orphans, which means that households will have to increase their number of dependents, fostering parentless children; orphanages will not only mushroom but also be put under greater pressure; and India will find its streets providing hazardous refuge to ever increasing numbers of children.

If action is not taken to support them, the large number of children already doomed to orphanhood as a result of current HIV/AIDS infections will be pushed into high risk groups, contributing to the spread of infection, undermining the prevention programmes that aim to control the virus responsible for their orphaning. Indian NGOs have already begun to take on the challenge of support and protection for AIDS affected children. Now, this support base will have to expand, and do so quickly. India has to learn from the experience of Africa that AIDS does not just strike down the infected, but leaves in its wake behind many more victims, most of them children.

At present, in India, there are no national policies addressing the special impact of HIV/AIDS on children. The National Commission on Children has been tasked with developing a general policy for orphans and vulnerable children as part of the commitments made at the HIV/AIDS and Children's UNGASS meetings. It should also develop a national plan of action for children affected by HIV/AIDS.

The framework for action that we must develop to protect the most vulnerable children against this pandemic rests on the following:

1. We must strengthen the capacity of families to protect and care for orphans and vulnerable children by prolonging the lives of parents **with ARVs** and providing them with economic, psychosocial and other support.
2. Our most potent and important response will be community-based.
3. We must ensure that orphans and vulnerable children have access to education, health care and birth registration.
4. The Government of India must protect the most vulnerable children by improved policy and legislation that channels resources to families and communities.
5. And through advocacy and social mobilization, we must raise awareness of the plight of these children and help to create an environment supportive of them.
6. **The next round of Global Fund Application must address the needs and rights of OVCs.**

There should be no doubt that the best environment for children to grow up in, is a nurturing family and in the type of community in which they will begin their adult lives within the values of the societies which they come from. Residential institutions isolate children from the society in which they will have to eventually live. A family is the only environment in which the emotional, psychological and social needs of children can really be met. We cannot accept a policy of orphanages to raise a growing population of children **that will be warehouses parking millions of kids!!**

The best way to reduce AIDS-related vulnerability in children is to contribute to the economic strengthening of vulnerable households and communities to ensure that children remain in the family. This means working in partnerships with various governmental and nongovernmental organizations to ensure access to food and education and health care to keep parents and caregivers healthy, to provide treatment for those who are already infected, and to innovate initiatives to prevent new infections in parents and infants.

In the case of double orphaned children this means that children will have to be fostered into a new family, a highly problematic situation in poor communities where many people struggle to provide for their own children. **Yet** experience from Africa **and Latin America** has shown that this can be achieved if adequate support is offered to fostering families.

New creative and culturally sensitive approaches are needed to help communities provide for the increasing numbers of orphans. No one model is sufficient. There must be a palette of models, especially within the rich cultural diversity of India. As we all seek ways to assist these children, we must keep in mind the following. Orphans are a diverse group. It is not enough to target orphans as a homogeneous group with the assumption that all will share the same needs. In reality, the impact of orphanhood will vary according to the situation of orphaning, fostering and factors previous to orphaning.

If there is a need to target specific areas for intervention, then those where migratory labor practices are most prevalent are likely to be the areas worst affected by AIDS orphaning and where orphans are most vulnerable.

I would like to offer you an example of family support from Africa which I feel could be adapted for India. In Rwanda, FXB designed low-cost, sustainable community-based units of 80 families each to support orphans, vulnerable children and destitute families affected by AIDS. With in-kind grants, not loans, of about \$100, a one-time investment, provided within **the families of** each unit – people who are pushed under the level of poverty and too **sick** to borrow – start small businesses. As these businesses grow, we have seen families' income go from about 60 cents a day to \$3 or \$4 a day in some instances. The cost of each unit over three years is \$150,000. With a success rate of 85%, these model units act as a stabilizing force for their communities and thus strengthen the national fabric as a whole. They are raising a generation of AIDS orphans and vulnerable children, pulling them out of poverty. With this small one-time three-year investment at the community and family level, we are starting to have a significant impact on eradicating micro-poverty. But it has to be done in partnership with the beneficiaries giving them special individual attention and help. That is why we care for only 80 families within each unit.

This FXB model was called a 'best solution' to support AIDS orphans by UNAIDS in 2002. This model could and should be adapted for India.

FXB India with 200 staff and 35 offices is fully committed to uphold the rights of children affected and infected by AIDS.

Nelson Mandela said "There is no keener reflection of a society's soul, than the way it treats its children."

All of you here today can do a lot. You have the power to integrate the awareness of this huge and growing young population deprived of rights into everything you deal with. You have the power to encourage, educate, and stimulate your governments, corporate leaders and non-governmental organizations to put this issue on the top of their agendas. In addition to all our community-based projects, we, at FXB, have initiated a global campaign four years ago to get the mayors of the world to declare May 7th, AIDS Orphans Day and mobilize their communities, the media, and their own young people in school on this issue.

This year more than 160 mayors worldwide – whose duty it is to enforce the application of these rights in their respective municipalities – have paved the way and committed their cities to ensure respect for the rights of the most vulnerable children. In the past few years more than 250 village leaders in India have done the same with states and municipalities joining the World AIDS Orphans Day mobilization.

In addition, thousands of youth around the world actively mobilized to help their peers. On May 7th, 2006, I hope that India takes a great leap forward by dramatically increasing this great advocacy tool which is a call for action.

The late great genius of the 20th Century, Albert Einstein said: 'In the middle of difficulty, lies opportunity.'

May India through the difficulties in dealing with AIDS find new opportunities to develop innovative solutions to deliver basic human rights, health care, education, food, the protection and the love of a family, and a future of hope for its poorest most vulnerable children.

Thank you.