

Our family radio program: a tool to enhance open and distance learning for the vulnerable children

**THEME: SOCIAL JUSTICE**

**SUB THEME: SCALING UP QUALITY EDUCATION FOR ALL**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

Education is a basic right, guaranteed by the government of Zambia, and is invaluable for improving one's quality of life. Despite the introduction of free primary education in Zambia, there are still some children who do not attend school. The reasons some parents and guardians do not send their children to school vary; some of the common ones are that children are asked to do household work, some girls are forced into early marriage for economic gains. With the economic burden of running big households, some extended families are now opting to leave children of the deceased to take care of themselves. Thus there are other children who have been orphaned and are left to take up responsibilities of running a home.

The Ministry of education has put in place interventions to protect children's right to education. One of them is called "Our Family Radio Program". This is an interactive radio program that aims at helping teachers, parents and guardians to provide Life skills support for orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) in the community and government schools. The program addresses issues affecting OVC, such as the impact of HIV/AIDS, exclusion of children from the mainstream educational system, and child exploitation and abuse, while discouraging potentially detrimental traditions such as early marriages. "Our Family" builds on existing Ministry of Education life skills curricula, especially focusing on HIV/AIDS education through village –to –village information sharing.

The program ensures that the hard to reach children have access to an education. Most rural children do not go to school because of the long distances they have to cover to and from the school. Distances as long as 11km have to be covered twice a day. This has seen a lot of absenteeism among pupils especially girls who are less enduring. Even the boys who are stronger do not attend school every day of the week. As a result the boys and girls drop out of school and find themselves engaging in vices such as beer drinking or drug abuse, early pregnancies and early marriages. Their desire for school is completely put off.

Our Family radio program helps these children to learn some skills they need for survival as well as gain knowledge about contemporary issues affecting society.

**OBJECTIVES:**

The objectives of Our Family Radio program are:-

- To empower OVC with the knowledge, attitudes and skills to set goals and make choices in challenging situations.
- To provide basic HIV/AIDS prevention life skills.
- To promote abstinence, mitigate stigma, child abuse and gender-based violence.

- To promote good nutrition and hygiene
- To provide information on reproductive health.

## **THE PROGRAM**

Through radio listening, groups and organized foster families, OVC and their care givers listen to three radio programmes per week. The radio programmes are broadcast in local languages. Caregivers and their children listen once a week to a fifteen minute drama, which takes the form of a serial soap opera, illustrating Life Skills topics.

The next day, the children listen to a fifteen – minutes broadcast with their school teacher, which serves to reinforce the previous drama broadcast. Using this guide, the teacher discusses key points with the children before, during and after the broadcast. Before the broadcast, pupils are given an overview of the topic of the day. They are also asked questions related to the drama in the previous broadcast to establish how many children listened to the Our Family program and discussed it at home with their parents. The children who listened and discussed the program are recorded on a Record Sheet. This is followed by a discussion question which highlights the teaching objective of the day. The follow-up activities include topics for discussion with the learners' caregivers. In this way, children serve as active agents for family –based behavioral change.

A final weekly broadcast targets the community based discussion groups, who report back to community radio stations. These community based discussion groups enhance the support given to OVC, providing a forum to reflect on OVC issues as well as the network of services available to them.

The ministry of education helps with quality assurance at all levels in the production of the OVC Life Skills Program. Producers at Education Broadcasting Services are responsible for formulation and pre testing of topics, including the recording and formative evaluation of radio programs. Their field counterparts at zone level help in monitoring and adherence to quality while the teachers are left to implement the programs in close liaison with partner radio stations.

## **LEARNING ACHIEVEMENTS SCORED**

The radio program has reached out to 2000 learners in the 2 provinces of Zambia where it is aired on 3 community radio stations.

The topics covered under the Our Family radio program include HIV/AIDS education, sexuality and puberty, forms of child labor and child abuse, right to education, coping with grief, child to child parenting and practical skills at home. A number of children, parents and guardians have been reported to have changed attitudes towards certain stereotypes previously held. For example, the importance of educating both girls and boys has been realized by some parents and guardians through this radio program. A girl named Chikondi from Kalomo district used to sell food stuff by the roadside. After attending the radio program, the parents enrolled her at a nearby basic school where she is doing her 6<sup>th</sup> grade. Parents and guardians are able to discuss with their children topics on the radio even those considered taboo, such as sexuality and HIV/AIDS issues.

Children are often expected to perform chores that contribute to the success of a functioning household. These chores include sweeping, washing plates, farming and keeping the house clean. Learners have learnt to share ways for managing their time with their parents or guardians, so that the parents and guardians can help them reconcile the work at home and school.

Learning some of the practical skills has helped children develop the skills needed to generate income for them in future. They have also acquired life skills which makes them assertive in life.

## **CONCLUSION**

While the Ministry of Education helps with quality assurance, there is need for more political will. There is inadequate funding for the program to continue being aired to the hard to reach. With more funding, a lot of the vulnerable children would be reached with Our Family radio interaction which brings education to their door steps. The program is in line with one of the EFA goals to achieve life skills for young people and adults and requires to be enhanced and scaled to all out of school children. It is hoped that the government will scale up the program to the other 7 provinces and continue to render support to initiatives that enhance the policy of education for all.