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Kathy Gau, Near East Foundation Country Director for Swaziland, has lived there for over 20 years, in fact has dual American and Swazi citizenship, which helps account for her commanding grasp of both local issues and national character. Ms. Gau directs *Vusumnotfo*, a community organization begun by NEF, which translates to “restarting the economy,” and employs a range of approaches from early childhood education on through business development, to build individual and organizational capacity so Swazi communities can responsibly and effectively pursue development. About 50,000 people in 18 chiefdoms participate in *Vusumnotfo*. Ms. Gau made these observations during a home-for-the-holidays visit:

Business Development —“Swaziland doesn’t have to be poor,” she said of a country where the main industries are sugar and forestry, the culture authoritarian, and life harder than in 1983 when AIDS struck. Working with local associations to enhance business opportunities, “We look at the psychological issues first. I tell them—‘We want you to make mistakes, business is about risks.’ Swazi culture wants to please, so this is very radical.” Given a little start up money, eight weeks, and the challenge of making a profit, the groups develop pilot projects and, “They get smart fast. I see slow, but steady progress.”

Early Childhood Education —“People are so hungry for it,” she said. *Vusumnotfo* started a model pre-school, provides in-service teacher training, and has been assigned a teacher by the government’s Ministry of Education. “But with the kids playing games and having fun...parents don’t think we’re being serious,” which led to a major undertaking, a manual on the physical, mental, and social development of children, titled “Growing Children Straight and Strong.”

Social Development —Citing domestic water supply as but one example of *Vusumnotfo*’s contribution to community well-being—given routine daily “fetching” requires nine-and-a-half hours per household in addition to important implications for HIV, sanitation, convenience, the environment, and more—“But before we do water, we have to do a lot of education.”

Status of Women —“The legal standing of a married woman is that she is a minor of her husband,” she said, telling a lot in a single sentence, then adding, “Once a group of Swazi women get empowered, my advice is to get out of their way.”

HIV/AIDS —“The most effective HIV education is in pre-puberty.” *Vusumnotfo* advocates HIV testing; current US policy against providing condoms is “very detrimental,” and orphanages are needed by only the 10 percent who have no alternative and cannot be accommodated by their community. “I am seeing slow indications of behavioral change,” she gestured a tiny space between her thumb and forefinger, “but it won’t show up in the statistics.” A shocking 39 percent of the country’s adults are infected with HIV—the highest

The Near East Foundation was overseeing a beekeeping project under the Swaziland Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives during the harsh 1991-92 drought, when the National Disaster Task Force coordinated the distribution of food and water through various nongovernmental organizations, including NEF. As a follow up to food distribution, homesteads were given the wherewithal to plant a half hector of maize—with the provision they return a bag of maize at the end of the growing season.

In June 1993, 92 percent of the homesteads overseen by NEF had returned their maize, which was subsequently sold at a profit of about \$11,300. Rather than dividing these funds for projects within each of their communities, the traditional leaders decided to work together, and in December 1995, agreed upon a constitution governing the funds. Following a lengthy internal process—which included substantial capacity building by NEF—a redrafted constitution was authorized in September 1999. *Vusumnotfo* had been established and since then has concentrated on three areas—business development at the community level; civil society and social development; and early childhood development.



Very importantly, problems related to the country's HIV/AIDS situation are mainstreamed throughout these programs:

- Business development activities increase income available to rural households, mitigating the impact of HIV on families and communities.
- Early childhood development activities help insure that children, particularly those orphaned and vulnerable, meet age-appropriate milestones, making them more resilient to the impact of HIV/AIDS in their families; less vulnerable to HIV/AIDS in later years; better functioning adults able to meet responsibilities.
- Improved understanding from best practices in early childhood development provide a foundation for community support for orphaned and vulnerable children.
- Emergence of strengthened community-based organizations in turn empower entire communities to organize and address their HIV/AIDS situation on multiple fronts. Similarly social committees are better able to implement and sustain social services for their communities.
- Also, *Vusumnotfo* conducted several surveys related to HIV and is well positioned for future social research in communities served.

These points are vitally relevant in a region of the world where AIDS has caused average life expectancy to drop to age 40 or less and population is declining. The economy and social fabric is deteriorating due to the loss of women and men in their most productive years. There is a dramatic rise in the number of orphans. And the proportion of people living in extreme poverty has continued to grow for 20 years.

PROGRAM SPECIFICS OVER THE YEAR

In July the NEF project completed a monumental childhood education task underway for two years, the publication of the community training manual, "Growing Children Straight and Strong." A copy of the parenting and early childhood development manual was distributed to all 14 partner organizations with UNICEF, the funder, getting a CD Rom as well.

It was immediately put to productive use over the following months. Fifty-nine key people representing a cross section of gender, age and area, as well as a number of partner organizations, both in and out of government, were trained in the basic concepts of early childhood education; as were 37 other selected caregivers. The manual also facilitated follow up HIV testing as requested.

Every opportunity was seized upon to train the

community at large in early childhood development— National Women’s Day, the traditional July 7 reed dance, on through the NEF project’s participation as facilitator and secretariat in the development of a national curriculum for psycho-social support in Swaziland. Partners included the deputy prime minister’s office, UNICEF, government ministries of public health, health and social welfare, the regional education inspector for preschools, and a number of nongovernmental organizations, particularly those involved with HIV.

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ARTS TO AIDS



General in-service training for preschool practitioners extended to 43 practitioners and 39 preschools, involving more than 1,250 children. Training ranged from art making and volunteer counseling and testing, on through when death touches a child, kitchen gardens and speech and hearing problems, and HIV-related topics like supporting terminally ill people and mother-to-child transmission and antiviral drugs. Also 194 monitoring days of applied knowledge at the preschool level were held and 203 preschool visits conducted. Twenty-one teachers from 10 *Vusumnotfo* areas attended an August workshop on early identification and intervention of learning disabilities; and 45

preschool practitioners the two-session, September workshop on “understanding myself.”

Happily by year’s end the community of Lomshiyo was 75 percent along in obtaining matching funding to construct a preschool, using the low cost \$6,250 design prepared by the NEF project. Two other communities were talking about it—the necessary first step. The structure includes two classrooms, storage, teacher’s corner, common area, and with outside structures and play equipment added, can be built for about \$12,650.

Simultaneously *Vusumnotfo*’s business development program aimed to establish sustainable income-generating initiatives at the community level through capacity training, resource allocation, and assessment at each step of the way.

DOING BUSINESS

A total of 81 days of group formation training within the community at large were held for 209 participants— 22 percent male and 78 percent female; seven existing associations received training to strengthen their organizations; and 10 meetings were held with community trainers and three more with team leaders. In-service training included provision of supplies and funds to learn skills like hair dressing, catering, driving, and computers.



Cutting through the numbers, here’s just one example of an initial project development workshop held in February that involved six associations and in many ways summarizes the issues facing grassroots Swaziland. There were 61 members present—23 percent male and 77 percent female—with an average age of 49. Of their 88 total dependents, 35 were under the age of 20. Six members had immediate family who had died in the past 12 months; and 25 percent of members had taken in children, both family and non-family, during the past

three years. So it is in a country with the highest HIV infection rate in the world.

Technical support, working materials and tools were provided to five associations. That meant grants of about \$1,800 for the purchase of chickens after each member had built a shed from locally available materials and for the stocking of an association's new store; water feasibility studies for other associations and capacity training for yet another needing help after getting financial support for a garden project...and on the list goes.

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Similarly social development at the community level translated to the specifics and diversity of rehabilitating a Lomshiyo shed into a community hall for the Lomshiyo Area Development Committee, compiling a list of all local homesteads, then linking and grouping them for a future water system, and obtaining a grant from the Finland Embassy for roofing of a classroom block for their new school; on through completing a domestic water system for the Nkonjanani community of 982 people in 86 homesteads, with 95 kitchens, and 78 percent coverage of pit latrines and 48 percent coverage of rubbish pits.

you see human behavior for what it is—an untidy process that bumps along at an up-and-down rate,” commented NEF’s well-experienced country director, adding, “The most you can hope for is that the overall progression is angled upward.... Really, there is no ‘them and us’—it only looks like a cleaner process in the United States because we are at a higher level than where Africa is at.”

It may not be glamorous but *Vusumnotfo* is improving the daily lives of thousands of Swazis. “What I love about NEF is that