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Giving Hope: Asset-based Empowerment & Reconciliation for Youth Caregivers

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Abstract

The rising number of orphans across Africa has overstretched informal fostering systems. As a result, Africa's adolescents and young adults, ages 12-24, have emerged as the heads of their households and the caregivers of their siblings. This paper shares the philosophy and key components of the African development initiative *Giving Hope* that works with these youth caregivers. The *Giving Hope* initiative employs an asset-based empowerment methodology to facilitate the restoration of youth caregivers' sense of self, belonging, power, and collective responsibility. Evidence of the power of this collective responsibility and the development of peace from "within" a community are illustrated by youth caregiver's participation in peace building and reconciliation efforts during the 2008 post-election violence in Kenya. Traditional needs-based perspectives to development and conflict prevention are challenged by the positive results of the asset-based empowerment approach—a renewed sense of community, empowerment, and leadership that comes from within.

Giving Hope: Asset Based Empowerment and Reconciliation for Youth Caregivers

Every culture professes, “Our children and youth are our nation’s future.” The asset-based empowerment methodology, called *Giving Hope*, posits that “Our children and youth are also our present.”

In early 2008, post-election conflict swept across Kenya. Within communities, households rose up against households, businesses were looted, livelihoods destroyed, unity divided. Yet, amidst the devastation there were courageous youth who stood up and said, “No” to their peers, and who reached out to their families, neighbors, and strangers to provide support. These youth are part of a new, uniquely African development initiative called *Giving Hope*. The *Giving Hope* program works with youth who have assumed the caregiver role in their families, following the loss of parents or other adult caregivers to AIDS or other causes.

The *Giving Hope* empowerment methodology employs an asset-based approach in working with youth caregivers. This approach recognizes and reinforces the skills, ideas, and capacities youth caregivers have today. Additionally, it works to restore youth caregivers’ relationships and sense of connectedness with their peers and the wider community. It is this connectedness that supported youth caregivers and gave them the courage to stand up for peace in 2008. It is also this connectedness that youth caregivers have to share with others.

This paper shares the philosophy and key components of the *Giving Hope* asset-based empowerment methodology. It also presents illustrations and a discussion of the methodology’s contribution to youth caregivers’ peace building and reconciliation efforts during Kenya’s 2008 post-election violence. In doing so, existing needs-based perspectives to development and conflict prevention are challenged, and an asset-based empowerment approach is recommended. The asset-based empowerment approach can positively transform the way existing and future interventions work—not only with youth, but also with whole communities. *Giving Hope* experience suggests that a new focus on community assets over needs and on possibilities over problems can lead to society’s renewed sense of collective responsibility and the strengthening of development *and* peace from within.

The Giving Hope Empowerment Methodology at Work

Background

The *Giving Hope* empowerment methodology evolved over a period of three years (2003-2005), as the international organization Church World Service worked in conjunction with partners across East Africa. It grew out of partners’ search for new ways to address the dilemma of growing numbers of orphans and vulnerable children emerging from both the swell of HIV and AIDS and conflicts in the great lakes region.

Sub-Saharan Africa is home to more than 12 million orphans (UNAIDS, 2008). With the continued loss of already HIV-infected parents and caregivers, UNICEF (2003) predicts that this number will exceed 20 million by 2010. An orphan is defined as a child under the age of 18 who has lost one or both parents. Given the rising occurrence of orphans and in the wake of overstretched informal fostering systems, African adolescents and young adults, ages 12 to 24, have emerged as the heads of their households. Referred to as youth caregivers, they are shouldering the primary care responsibilities for their younger siblings, and often times ailing adults.

This emerging social group of youth represents more households than the traditional child-headed household definition suggests. For example, within this youth caregiver group are adolescents and young adults who may neither be the oldest (head) within their home, nor 18 years old or younger. Yet, they are carrying—sometimes exclusively—the primary responsibility for the well-being of their families.

While these youth struggle to meet their care giving challenges, they are often faced with grief, stigma, economic stress, and exploitation and abuse (Foster & Williamson, 2000); all of which is made more severe by a loss of connection with their peers and to their community. Empirical as well as scientific research suggests that this loss of connection leaves youth caregivers both socially isolated and emotionally distressed. Among caregivers in the East African nation of Rwanda, research found “very high levels of depressive symptoms,” as youth surveyed registered over the clinical cutoff for adolescent depression on the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression (CES-D) scale (Boris, Thurman, Snider, Spencer, & Brown, 2006, p. 597). As one might predict, research also demonstrates a strong correlation between the emotional state of children and the emotional state of their caregivers (Boris et al., 2006; Weissman et al., 2006).

Adolescence and the transition into adulthood is a complicated time for young people. It is a period in which youth search for their identity amidst new experiences and social environments; experiences and environments that have the potential to positively or negatively influence their physical and psychological development. Many national and international initiatives have come to the aid of Africa’s youth caregivers and HIV-affected households. Most responses, however, tend to be need-driven and care and support directed. With this needs-based focus, youth caregivers and the members of their households become labeled as “vulnerable” and consequently assumed incapable of critical accountability. When expressed openly and frequently in front of youth themselves, this voiced assumption of incapacity has the potential to become internalized—implanted within youth’s developing self-concept and identity.

As an old adage suggests, “As the twig is bent, so grows the tree,” so too may an isolated and bent youth grow into an isolated and broken adult. A different approach is called for; one that does not simply respond to “bent-ness.” The *Giving Hope* asset-based empowerment methodology presents an alternative approach. It redirects attention from needs, to instead focus and respond to youth’s assets—ideas, skills, resilience, and renewed relationships.

Asset Based Community Development Process

The asset based community development (ABCD) approach encourages the formulation of policies and the development of interventions based on a recognition and reinforcement of the capacities and skills of people and their neighborhoods (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Kretzmann and McKnight founded the ABCD process upon a belief in and value for people’s unique individual *and* combined assets—gifts and capacities. ABCD is built around the premise that significant community development emerges from within a community, not from the outside; as such, change can only take place when people within that community are invested—contributing their gifts to the development effort. Additionally, it is built around a concept of community that strengthens the interconnectedness people have and their collective responsibilities. Simply put, ABCD is process that is capacity based, internally focused, and relationship driven (Rans, 2005).

While ABCD is built from the inside out, it typically requires an external stimulus to get the process started. This stimulus is a catalyst that does not create, but rather energizes change (Bergdall, 2003). It can be as simple as an encouraging word from a social service practitioner or as complex as a regional development initiative committed to mapping and reinforcing community assets. While ABCD focuses on the assets of communities, it does not imply that these communities do not need additional resources (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Rather, it is anticipated that outside resources can be used more effectively if programmed toward community-led investment.

Asset-based Empowerment Application for Youth Caregivers

The *Giving Hope* empowerment methodology applies the asset-based approach to the sub-group (community) of youth caregivers. As such, it builds upon the significant strengths that youth caregivers and their households possess by 1) Restoring relationships, structures, and routines in

youth caregivers' lives; and 2) Recognizing and reinforcing youth caregivers' existing assets (i.e., their existing knowledge, skills, resources, resilience, and newly restored relationships).

Development practitioners, known as Animators because of their animation and facilitation role, serve as asset-based catalysts energizing youth caregiver communities (Mott, T., 2008). Specifically, over a two-year period the Animator's role is to:

- 1) Cultivate solidarity among youth by creating safe and respecting spaces where youth caregivers can come together and form supportive youth working groups.
- 2) Foster self-confidence within youth by recognizing and reaffirming youth caregivers' existing assets and the combined assets of their youth working groups.
- 3) Incite youth to action by stimulating youth caregivers' and youth working groups' critical thinking, goal setting, decision-making, and joint action toward the realization of group projects and individual dreams.
- 4) Inspire youth leadership by respecting youth's voices and reinforcing group-appointed youth working group leaders' capacities as peer educators.
- 5) Reinforce youth's investment by reaffirming the value of youth caregivers' contributions and joint investments in group goals and individual dreams, and by applying top-up investments from outside resources.
- 6) Promote youth's self-reliance by encouraging youth working groups toward independent management and collaboration with other community-based association structures.
- 7) Stimulate youth's transformation of adults within their wider community by creating opportunities for local authorities and community members to engage with, witness, and appreciate the capacities of youth caregivers and their youth working groups.

Youth Caregiver Outcomes of Asset-based Empowerment

The *Giving Hope* asset-based empowerment methodology leads to four key outcomes. These are an improvement in youth caregivers' sense of self, belonging, power, and collective responsibility.

1) Sense of Self: An improved sense of self is typified through youth caregivers' creation of a *dream*. A dream is an experiential exercise that each caregiver participates in and subsequently leads their siblings to participate in. The dream exercise is a personal reflection process that encourages the expression of feelings such as anger, fear, or sadness, as well as joy and happiness. Additionally, it leads youth caregivers to reflect on what has been important to them thus far in life, what is important to carry forward, and what do they want for their futures and the futures of their families. The tangible result of the dream exercise is a drawing that each "dreamer" creates, depicting their different feelings, as well as their future goals.

Youth caregivers' dreams are the scaffolding for the qualitative process of restoring youth's sense of self, purpose, optimism, vision, and hope for the future. Youth caregivers' dreams serve as a talking point that opens the door to conversations with other caregivers, as caregivers present and explain their dreams to each other. Dreams encourage a personal and expressed reconciliation with the past and positive imagining of the future. Dreams also become the goals that caregivers rally around to support the realization of.

2) Sense of Belonging: An improved sense of belonging is typified through youth caregivers' participation in a *youth working group*. A youth working group is comprised of youth caregivers (usually 12-15 per group) that live in proximity of each others. This group becomes the environment for interaction between youth themselves, and between youth and the Animator. A youth working group functions like a typical "association" with special emphasis on youth's leadership and ownership of the group, including group plans, actions, rules, etc. In addition to youth caregivers, each group includes a youth-nominated Adult Mentor who provides moral support, and who participates and benefits equally in group activities without managing or controlling the group.

Peer group belonging is strongly associated with positive socio-emotional development (Newman & Newman, 2001). As such, youth working groups are the scaffolding for the qualitative process of restoring youth's sense of belonging, acceptance, comfort, security, trust, value, and contribution. Through the initial dream sharing exercise, youth caregivers come to identify with each other and their similar situations, challenges, fears, and aspirations. The youth working group becomes the site where youth caregivers overcome their state of "frameworklessness." As such, a foundation is constructed for the development of strong bonds between youth caregivers and the sharing of emotional support, moral advice, and hands-on assistance. Observations show that youth working group members become like extended family members for youth caregivers and their households.

3) Sense of Power: An improved sense of social and economic power is typified through youth caregivers' participation in *livelihood activities*. These activities occur in conjunction with youth's participation in youth working group activities. Groups begin by identifying each member's gifts/assets and then devising plans to employ their combined skills and resources. Groups typically begin working together in merry-go-round agricultural, reconstruction, and health and hygiene type activities to reinforce the care giving efforts of each member. From there groups gain experience and confidence to launch small joint projects, such as vegetable gardens, food kiosks, animal husbandry, charcoal selling, etc. These joint projects feed youth working group savings accounts, as well as future lending activities to facilitate the realization of youth care giver dreams. Members access group funds to engage in skill training and launch small businesses, such as hairdressing salons, taxi driving, petrol stands, egg production, sewing shops, etc.

Active and extended group participation builds youth's skills in problem-solving, communication, and decision-making, all of which contribute to a stronger sense of security and confidence to engage in a range of challenging and new activities (Newman & Newman, 2001). Youth working group livelihood activities are the scaffolding that reinforces youth's sense of social and economic power, control, self-reliance, and access to opportunities. Observations show that participation in livelihood activities leads youth caregivers to more proactive care giving, community-based interaction, and accessing of community services.

4) Sense of Collective Responsibility: An improved sense of collective responsibility is typified through youth caregivers' individual and group *outreach activities*. Youth reach out to assist and accompany other youth caregivers regularly through their youth working group activities. Yet, as youth's sense of self, belonging, and power mature, they begin taking-up additional responsibilities; youth begin using their gifts/assets to assist others in their immediate family, extended family, and community. Observed examples of youth outreach include the mentoring of another youth to leave the streets and join their youth working group, assisting an elder with harvest, educating peers in HIV prevention, serving on community development committees, investing in the start-up of a youth working group in a neighboring community, and opening their homes to care for other orphaned and homeless children.

The force that holds citizens (i.e., families, youth working groups, communities) together is care (McKnight, 2003). Youth outreach activities are the scaffolding that reinforces youth's sense of collective responsibility, connection with their larger community, and reconciliation with prior feelings of inferiority and marginalization. Youth's reconciliation with their prior feelings of social isolation and judgment becomes an important influencer of future actions. By reconciling their past self-concept with present, harmony is restored and youth move forward, not only with self-confidence, but also with understanding and a deep sense of connection and care for others.

Summary of Quantitative Outcomes

Since 2004, the *Giving Hope* asset-based empowerment methodology has been introduced and tested at-scale in four countries—Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda, and Tanzania—and has recently been introduced to Mozambique and Ivory Coast. Table 1 quantitatively highlights those reached with asset-based empowerment.

Table 1
Cumulative Giving Hope Statistics (August 2004 - March 2009)

	Country	No. Youth Caregivers <i>(equivalent to no. of households)</i>	No. Children in Youth Caregiver Households	No. Youth Working Groups	No. Adult Mentors	No. Host Communities	No. Animators <i>(Asset-based Catalysts)</i>	No. CWS Implementing Partners
1.	Kenya	2,174	7,726	226	208	106	75	4
2.	Uganda	802	2,801	69	66	44	50	2
3.	Rwanda	4,777	14,488	352	352	111	100	1
4.	Tanzania	1,611	4,836	240	240	162	114	1
5.	Mozambique	147	532	15	2	10	10	1
6.	Ivory Coast	0	0	0	0	0	10	1
TOTALS		9,511	30,383	902	868	433	359	10

As of March 2009, the *Giving Hope* asset-based empowerment methodology has reached a cumulative total of 9,511 youth caregivers. This represents a total of 30,383 children and youth living in youth-headed households in 433 communities of East and Southern Africa. These youth caregivers are currently working together in 902 youth working groups; this represents an average of 10 youth per group. These youth working groups are being animated by 868 adult mentors and 359 Animators. The average cost of animation and asset reinforcement per youth working group, per year (for a suggested two-year period) is approximately USD \$3,500. This represents an estimated USD \$350 per youth caregiver household, per year.

Asset-based Empowerment Contributions to Kenyan Reconciliation

Empirical Illustrations of Kenyan Youth-led Peacekeeping and Reconciliation

In January 2008 the sense of community and collective responsibility of the asset-based empowerment approach was powerfully demonstrated across Kenyan communities where *Giving Hope* youth working groups exist. While many people were rising up on the pretext of their differences, youth caregivers were rooted in their connection with and care for others, and thus reached out to help group members, peers, neighbors, and strangers. Testimonies continue to surface explaining how youth intervened by stopping other youth from rioting or by saving women from being raped. Additionally, testimonies abound that demonstrate how youth working group members cared for—morally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically—those who lost family members, homes, and businesses.

The following stories illustrate some of the youth caregiver work toward keeping peace and facilitating reconciliation from within.

Youth-led Community Dialogues: As violence was still continuing, youth caregivers in Nairobi, Coast, Rift Valley, and Nyanza Provinces appealed to local elders to hold community meetings where people could openly talk, dispel tension, and begin work toward peace and healing. As a result, youth helped mobilize committees comprised of youth, community leaders, and representatives from women's associations. These committees moderated 22 community dialogues. While these meetings started off tense and static, people gradually opened up and a dialogue of peace and reconciliation was born. Youth took the lead in encouraging participants to rise above their divisions and embrace one another as brothers and sisters. Youth also helped to uncover the different causes of continued violence. Causes identified included but were not limited to historical injustices, youth unemployment, poverty, unequal land division and housing upgrades (for slum areas), and organized youth gangs susceptible to manipulation from politicians. As a result of these dialogues, some local leaders formed community-based committees to continue monitoring and promoting peace. Youth

caregivers were asked to be a part of these committees. Additionally, in Mathare slums, a ten-point peace and reconciliation resolution was drafted and presented to the provincial administration and police by youth caregivers, village elders and women leaders.

Youth Caregivers Outreach to Unemployed Youth: As cited in community meetings, one of the causes of young people's involvement in the post election violence was unemployment that made them idle and susceptible to manipulation by politicians. During the peace and reconciliation dialogues, youth caregivers heard the challenges of unemployed youth—peers—in their communities. Recognizing their own potential to transform their peers, youth caregivers offered training in starting a business and risk management. These trainings sought to equip their peers to start their own small income-generating activities. With capital support from Church World Service, more than 220 new small businesses were formed as a result of youth caregivers' outreach to these unemployed youth.

Youth Working Group Support to Destroyed Businesses: Many youth caregivers lost their own small businesses as a result of random destruction and violence. As such, youth working groups focused efforts toward revamping these destroyed and looted businesses for their group members. With capital support from Church World Service, more than 100 small businesses were restocked or reestablished through youth working group support.

Preach Peace, Heal Our Nation Conference: In Kisumu, youth caregivers helped organize a peace conference that brought together 500 youth. At the conference, participants committed to living in harmony with one another, respecting the sanctity of life, and restraining from violent acts. As an action-oriented outcome of the conference, participants in turn reached out to an additional 1,156 youth through formal and informal peace dialogues. Notable results of this youth-caregiver-led initiative include improved relations between community youth and adults.

Peace in Diversity Walk: Kisumu youth working groups also mobilized other community youth groups to participate in a peace walk through town visiting the worst hit avenues and ending at the hospital. The community groups that participated included puppeteers, the brigade band, and *bodaboda* cyclists (bike taxis), as well as various community associations and religious groups. The walk attracted hundreds of youth and bystanders. In their own creativity and energy, youth chanted, held puppet shows, and sang everywhere they walked--spreading a message of peace and restraint from violence.

Peace-focused Sporting Events: Throughout Nairobi, Nyanza, Rift Valley, Coast, Eastern, and Central Provinces youth caregivers organized more than 50 community-wide sporting tournaments. The events attracted very large crowds, thus providing the opportunity for youth caregivers to promote a message of peace and social cohesion.

Youth Caregiver TV Documentary: A selection of youth caregivers and the children in their households participated in the filming of a documentary that highlighted the role of the youth caregivers in restoring peace and tranquility during and after the post election violence. The youth played a lead role in planning the story line, tracing their leadership in peace and reconciliation community meetings. The youth developed the idea of a documentary so that they might reach out and share their experiences and examples as peace keepers with other youth. The documentary demonstrated to other youth that restraint from violence is a collective responsibility and paramount to peace, reconciliation, and a productive future. The documentary was aired by two Kenyan TV stations.

Church World Service has been disseminating the *Giving Hope* asset-based empowerment methodology in Kenya since 2005. National partner organizations actively employing the methodology are the Organization for African Instituted Churches (OAIC) Kenya Chapter, Young Woman's Christian Association (YWCA) Kenya Chapter, Medical Assistance Programs (MAP) International, and Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood (GROOTS) Kenya. The program-related areas in Kenya where youth working groups reside and thus mobilized peace and

reconciliation efforts were: Nyanza Province-Nyando, Migori, Rachuonyo, Siaya, and Bondo Districts; Rift Valley Province-West Marakwet and Mt. Elgon Districts; Coast province-Mombasa District; Eastern Province-Masinga District; Nairobi Province-Nairobi District; Central province-Gatundu and Kiambu Districts; and Kisumu East, West and Central.

Implications of the Asset-based Empowerment Approach in Situations of Conflict

Those involved with peace and reconciliation recognize and respect actions toward sustainable peace and preventable violence need to come from within (Newman & Schnabel, 2002). Youth caregivers' behaviors and contributions to peace in their own communities during the Kenya post-election violence of 2008 illustrate this action from within. Additionally, they illustrate how the asset-based empowerment approach, if applied more broadly in multi-sectoral development initiatives, may contribute to the wider communities' building of peace from within.

Peace demands collective participation. It is a process that becomes stronger with each additional pair of hands that joins in the work. It requires individuals to not only stand against violence, but also be solidly connected to others. This connection can be achieved through a sharing of hope and visions for their future. As outlined in the presentation of the *Giving Hope* youth caregiver program, the asset-based empowerment approach works to build this shared hope and vision by recognizing and energizing a community's collective gifts. This process provides the opportunity for all, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, education, and economic status, to participate and be valued by society for their individual gifts as integrated into and depended upon by the whole.

The power of belonging and connectedness cannot be overlooked in peace building and conflict prevention. As the youth caregivers' stories attest, socially marginalized groups—such as the unemployed youth, the landless, the economically depressed—can become susceptible to political manipulation. It is highly common to see those who feel they do not belong to a group or who feel they are being left outside of progress to become “spoilers” of peace. Spoiling peace provides these individuals with a voice (Newman & Richmond, 2006). Social inclusion and valued group participation can provide individuals with an alternative. Asset-based empowerment breaks down the walls that create marginalization.

Asset-based empowerment builds individuals' sense of collective responsibility, connection with each other, and reconciliation with prior self-concepts of marginalization and injustice. Reconciliation with one's feelings of injustice becomes an important influencer of one's future actions. Reconciling the past with present relationships and future opportunities can restore an individual's harmony and build a deep sense of connection and care that creates peace today and prevents further conflicts tomorrow.

Asset-based Empowerment Future Applications

Call for Wider Application of Asset-based Approach

As already described, the asset-based empowerment process has the power to positively and concretely affect youth caregiver social, emotional, and economic development. The positive changes in youth caregivers' sense of self, belonging, power, and collective responsibility contribute to not only stronger youth, but also stronger communities. These are stronger communities because of their connectedness and because their capacities, ideas, opportunities, and development emerge from within. As such, implications of the asset-based empowerment process on socio-economic community development can be easily appreciated.

Correspondingly notable is the influence of the asset-based empowerment process on community peace building, reconciliation, and conflict prevention. Its value has already been exemplified by youth caregivers' actions in Kenya and the ripple effect their peace building efforts had on local elders, community associations, and other youth. Its application gave rise to confident youth

caregivers and strong youth working groups. These groups not only withstood the divisions the post-election violence sought to create, but also reached out to connect with others and work for peace.

What is currently called for is a wider application of the asset-based empowerment approach. What is requested is a transformation of the way national and international development (and peace building) practitioners “see.” What is recommended is the adoption of a new perspective that sees assets over needs and works on possibilities not problems. What will be the result is a renewed sense of community, empowerment, and leadership in development from within.

Call for Research

While this paper illustrates the important outcomes of the asset-based empowerment approach as captured during its application with youth caregivers in East and Southern Africa, it is recognized that these illustrations are currently based on informally collected data. Additionally, it is recognized that more scientifically documented data would provide a stronger foundation for dissemination and application of the asset-based empowerment approach across the development sector. As such, Church World Service calls for the formation of new partnerships with national authorities and academic institutions for the purpose of conducting research. Specifically, Church World Service recommends more scientific documentation of the current effects of the asset-based methodology within the youth caregiver population group, as well as further research of the possible effects that wider application of the asset-based methodology can have on multi-sectoral development initiatives.

Conclusion

Sustainable peace and socio-economic development is not something that can be packaged and shipped to those in need. As such, international and national efforts to support development and encourage peace can do more by recognizing and validating people’s capacities than by emphasizing people’s needs. Development and sustainable peace emerge from within. They are the outcomes of people’s appreciations of their own strengths and capacities, their contributions to their community’s development, and their community’s contribution to the building of their nation.

In March 2008 when peace was newly established in Kenya, Nobel Peace laureate Prof Wangari Maathai (2008) called out:

It is now the collective responsibility of all sectors of society...indeed, every Kenyan, to ensure that this [peace] process continues, is nurtured and protected by all who believe in the common good rather than in personal gain. (p. 7)

The asset-based empowerment approach transformed Kenyan youth caregivers’ social isolation into a renewed sense of belonging, socio-economic power, and collective responsibility. This collective responsibility was clearly demonstrated in youth caregivers’ outreach and reconciliation activities during the post-election events.

This is the sort of collective responsibility that Prof Maathai called for. This is also the sort of collective responsibility that all can develop through a wider recognition and reinforcement of the assets and gifts all possess.

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