

AFRICA INSIGHT

Elderly take charge in HIV/Aids

At least five people die in Motimposo, one of Maseru's oldest suburbs, every week. Many of the deaths are from HIV/Aids-related illnesses, and since the government is not doing much, a group of elderly residents has come up with a project to give hope to their young people. Nation Correspondent TSITSI MATOPE, who was in Motimposo recently, reports.

Refiloe watched her brother die after a long illness, and taking care of him left her emotionally drained. As she tearfully narrated how he had suffered, none of the mourners in the house tried to calm her down. It was obvious she had endured a lot of pain.

At some point she sank into a chair, hunched over as she muttered her brother's name before being overcome by emotion and choking on her words.

Before he died the previous week, her brother had "died" several times before.

Mourners were still coming to express their condolences, talking in subdued tones and obviously horrified by the squalor and Refiloe's shabby appearance. Nursing her brother, the only remaining close relative, had taken its toll on her.

They lost both their parents more than five years ago.

Oblivious of what those who had come to comfort her were whispering, Refiloe, broke into a fresh flood of tears.

"Her brother was sick for a long time and his illness affected her greatly, especially after the doctors told her there was nothing they could do and asked her to bring him home," a neighbour offered.

29,000

The number of people who have died from Aids-related illnesses this year

What seemed to have made her pain worse, the neighbor added, was that he would go into coma, people would gather at the home thinking he was dead, only for him to regain consciousness after a while.

"This happened three times, and each time it only made her pain worse," a neighbour remarked.

But the last time he did not regain consciousness, and when the neighbours realised that he was dead and wanted to take his body to the mortuary, Refiloe thought he would come to again and asked them to wait until they were sure he was really dead. After about 30 minutes, it dawned on her that he was truly gone. Refiloe had been in denial for a long time, but she finally came to accept that her brother was suffering from Aids.

Old suburb

Motimposo, where Refiloe lives, is one of the oldest suburbs in Maseru, the capital of Lesotho. Here, Aids is referred to as "an illness" and the local residents seek no explanation when they are told someone is "ill".

"It is the will of God," Refiloe mutters tearfully.

"God knows I tried everything but towards the end he couldn't eat, which must have aggravated his condition," she

explained.

But she was also relieved that her brother was at peace, "I am somewhat relieved that he is no longer in pain, although I will miss him," she said.

The amazing thing about Motimposo is the high number of deaths — about five per week — a significant number of them from Aids-related illnesses. Residents say at times up to 10 people die in a week.

Official figures put the number of deaths from Aids-related illnesses this year at 29,000, this in a country with a population of 1.8million. Funerals in Lesotho can last up to a month, with various rites in between.

It is estimated that up to 200 families live in Motimposo, a haphazardly developed settlement five kilometres from Maseru. Just a few houses from where Refiloe was mourning her brother, another group of neighbours were waiting to learn the fate of a sick woman whose relatives had asked everyone to wait outside.

Not too far away is Mathuso Takalang, who is mourning her husband. She does not know when he will be buried because she does not have the money to organise his funeral. Ntseme Takalang died a while back, but she said what she earns as a housemaid is not enough for all the funeral expenses.

So a heartbroken Mathuso was waiting for the government to help her, but was not sure whether she would receive any. She said her husband's illness had taken a toll on the family, leaving her completely drained emotionally and financially.

"My husband was diagnosed with tuberculosis and had completed his treatment before he fell ill again seven months ago," she said. She was forced to leave him alone because she had to fend for the family. But kindly neighbours would often check on Ntseme. But two days before he died, neighbours said they did not see him go to fetch water from a certain neighbour like he was accustomed to, so one of them went to check on him.

"I found him lying on the floor covered with a blanket but with no sign of life, so I called the others," she said.

This family's pathetic situation, which is representative of several others here, is that the three surviving children have no future to speak of. The first daughter dropped out of school after she got pregnant last year and had a baby. She and her baby both depend on her mother. The second child lives with relatives in their rural home while the third one, who is 14 years old, is in Standard Five, although she should ideally be in secondary school.

The family lives in a single room, with all their belongings cramped inside.

"The father of this other child we now have does not pay anything towards its upkeep," Mathuso repeated from time to time.



Participants at the launch of an anti-Aids campaign in Kenya: in Lesotho, the pandemic has greatly affected the workforce. Photo/FILE

It was disturbing to imagine someone on his deathbed living in such squalor.

"Poverty is what is killing us here in Motimposo. We need help. We are just a stone's throw from the city but we have been forgotten," said Mathuso, tears streaming down her face.

As you walk in the scorching sun, the misery and desperation in this shantytown hits you.

One of the dusty roads leads to the home of Nkhono (grandmother) Sylvia and her husband Matela Tjabane, who in 1993 established a non-formal education centre to fight the various ills affecting the community.

Nkhono Sylvia, 72, a former lecturer at one of the colleges in Maseru, says illiteracy, drug abuse, prostitution, poverty and unemployment have made the suburb a breeding ground for HIV and Aids.

"This centre was initiated by senior citizens, some of whom are in their 80s, who after losing their children to Aids, decided to summon the little strength left to see how this ravaged community can be helped," she explained.

The centre runs a pre-school centre, which many orphans from the community attend. They pay a token amount for school fees, or none at all if they cannot afford it.

It also offers those living positively with Aids an opportunity to engage in activities such as making handicrafts.

And Nkhono Sylvia is ready to help those who wish to pursue their education.

"We are old people and when we

It is feared that with the current death rate, there will soon be no land for cemeteries. Worse still, Lesotho has limited land since it is very mountainous

started this project, we would receive help from sympathizer but got none. When we started a library, we expected organisations to donate more books but apart from those we got from the Ministry, none did. We initiated a pre-school class expecting that some companies or civic organisations would chip in but our school still has no windows and the children suffer when it is raining," she said.

She said despite these setbacks, the senior citizens were determined to use whatever was available to continue with their charity work, which is mainly borne out of compassion to give hope to those shunned by society.

"It pains us that instead of the young people coming to help us, they spend most of their time drinking in shebeens. They are undernourished, shabby, hopeless and dull yet they continue drinking. What can the old do? We are dying, weak, tired and want these young ones to take responsibility for their lives and those of the affected," she said.

But the pint sized "golden girl" is full of energy and says she and her husband started the centre in their home in the area to try and dilute the decay in Motimposo.

"Can you imagine such a big place with no public clinic and no police station. The Lawlessness has got out of hand. It is a free-for-all situation."

She said without empowerment or training, most people in Motimposo will waste their lives away, despite their proximity to the city's central business district.

"If the young women here are not given assistance or empowered, they will continue selling their bodies to earn a living and they will get infected with Aids. They know no other way of making money. Many have unprotected sex while the young men roam the streets waiting for an opportunity to either sexually abuse someone or break into other people's homes to steal," she said.

The group of senior citizens, which has 50 members, meets every week to share ideas and put pool resources to support orphans or those who are too sick to