



The children at All As One are taught to consider the other youngsters at the orphanage as brothers and sisters. This promotes a sense of belonging which is important to a child's development

# The HOPE Givers

In a land where mothers are often too poor to feed their own babies, *Leah Oatway* discovers the group bringing hope to an otherwise hopeless situation

**O**n a hot, muggy Friday afternoon at a small villa compound deep in the slums of Freetown, Sierra Leone, five-year-old Abdulai races from his final lesson of the day to grab the well-used football and join his friends out.

Dressed in an over-sized yellow T-shirt that falls just below his knees, his eyes narrowed with concentration, he skirts around the older boys who have gathered on the villa's terrace to play, to score an impressive looking goal that lands near the plant bed at the far end of the grounds.

After a few congratulatory pats on the back from his friends the boys play on, while their disinterested female classmates plait each other's hair and munch on small bags of jelly sweets – a rare confectionary treat handed to them by visitors.

Abdulai and his school friends are just a handful of the estimated 350,000 orphaned and abandoned children currently fighting for survival in the West African nation six years after the decade-long civil war that ravaged the country ended in 2002.

He and the 42 other children at this orphanage and children's centre, run by Dubai-based charity All As One (AAO), aged between one month and 16 years old, are

considered the lucky few. They have a home, a bed and eat three meals a day, every day.

Surrounded by a high wall with its own guards and green, manicured grounds, the centre – which also provides informal education and access to health care – is a world away from the chaotic, dusty city lurking just outside the gates where street children, many barefoot and naked, forage for food with stray dogs.

Established in 1997 to help care for the hundreds of thousands of destitute and abandoned children living in the poverty-stricken country, AAO relies on private donations from UAE residents to improve the life of the 43 orphans in its care.

More than half the money comes from private donors in the UAE. In the past year alone, several consignments have been flown in, containing emergency aid, clothing, toys and educational materials, which have helped to save the orphans from a dangerous and uncertain future on the city's streets.

Almost everything at the villa, from the children's toothbrushes to the beds they sleep in and the clothes they wear, is donated.

"The role these donors play in running the orphanage and safeguarding these children's futures is vital," says Matthew Morgan-Jones, the Dubai country director of AAO.

Like many of Sierra Leone's orphans Abdulai's single, teenage mother, faced with the extreme poverty which continues to strangle the West African country six years after the war ended, simply could not afford to keep him.

Desperate for him to have the chance of a better life, and keen to try and make one for herself by returning to school, she handed her two-month-old baby over to Sierra Leone's Ministry of Social Welfare (MoSW) in 2003, who in turn handed over duty of care to AAO.

There are no government-funded orphanages in Sierra Leone, where the civil war killed tens of thousands and left thousands more injured, orphaned, homeless and desperate.

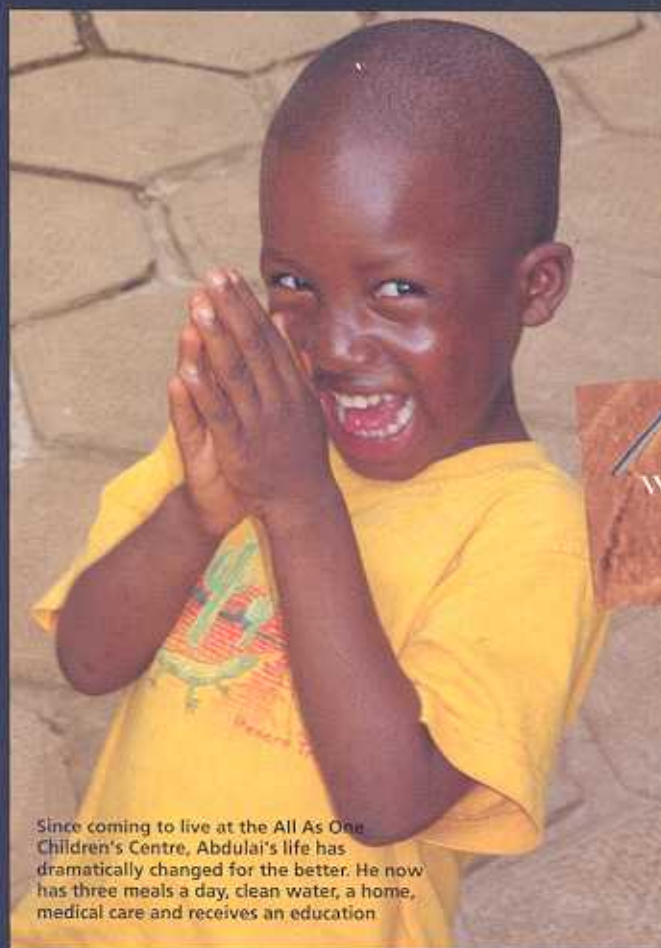
So while the West African country's security and political situation is steadily improving, the 48 orphanages set up by local and international non government organisations (NGOs) such as AAO during

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All As One's sponsorship programme matches children with donors abroad who have the opportunity to write to their assigned child and contribute to All As One's ongoing work in Sierra Leone

All As One provides kindergarten, primary and junior secondary classes for the children at the orphanage. Here, some of the girls enjoy an after-school break



Since coming to live at the All As One Children's Centre, Abdulai's life has dramatically changed for the better. He now has three meals a day, clean water, a home, medical care and receives an education

Part of the activities of the All As One Children's Centre include time for the children to express themselves artistically through music and dance and lots of time to play. Friends Sahr and Eric share the fun!



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the war and in its aftermath continue to play a vital role in supporting those orphaned and abandoned children battling for survival on its broken streets.

Deanna Wallace, AAO's founder and director, said Abdulai's story is all too familiar in Sierra Leone, a country currently languishing at the bottom of the UN Human Development Index, where national unemployment is at a staggering 75 per cent, one in four children die before they reach their fifth birthday, and one in six women die during childbirth.

"The situation is similar to teen mothers everywhere," she said. "The difference is that in Sierra Leone there are no welfare programmes for teen mothers so without that help the children literally face starvation and death." Ms Wallace, who has herself adopted one of the children – Hayley, five – said these mothers are often schoolgirls who are not ready to be a parent.

"They are not mature enough and they want to continue going to school, which would not be possible if they were raising a child," she said. "The birth mothers are looking for a way for the child to have a future and for them to have a future too."

While the boys play football outside, upstairs in a nursery room three members of staff attempt to dam the flood of tears that relentlessly pour down

the cheeks of a malnourished one-year-old boy called Osman.

The offer of an oat biscuit proves a successful temporary measure but the end of the treat marks the end of the silence and with a shudder, the tears fall hard again.

Osman arrived at the children's centre on the back of his barefooted father just a few days earlier.

His father had hiked for more than 12km in the midday heat, over rust-coloured dirt tracks and pothole-ridden roads, in the hope of providing his hungry son with a better life.

Poverty had driven his wife away from the family home five months earlier and with no money to feed himself, and desperate to see his fragile son survive, he made the heart-wrenching decision to hand over his child to AAO staff.

He loved his son, he said, but was unable to continue providing for him. Following a visit to the MoSW in Freetown, guardianship of Osman was given to AAO staff until his father is able to support him again. No one knows when that may be, if ever. The centre's staff can only do their best to settle the toddler, who misses his father, into his new home and life.

"To see a man carry a child on his back like this is not too common. It shows he really loves his son," says Steven Amara, the manager of AAO's orphanage.

"He cared for him enough not to just kill him, which has happened."

Despite being rich in natural resources, including diamonds, coffee and cocoa, years of mismanagement and corruption have stalled Sierra Leone's progress. The new

president, Ernest Bai Koroma, faces a tough challenge to turn things around.

Having emerged from more than a decade of civil war in 2002, some 70,000 former fighters who were disarmed and rehabilitated have swollen the ranks of young people needing jobs.

Although the promise of a better future is evident in the scores of construction projects along the country's magnificent, unspoilt beachfronts, the rising food prices that are crippling countries around the world are not helping the population of nearly six million, who rely largely on imported foods.

This, says Sia Nyuma, 31, the AAO's resident nurse, is the main reason parents have to give up their children.

"The cost of living is very high," she says. "These parents have no food for themselves. When the parents return to the orphanage to visit their children, which can be once a month, sometimes less, they don't tend to get upset."

"They miss their children as much as anyone – they have strong bonds with them – but in such circumstances you are forced to sacrifice what you want for the good of your child."

"These parents cannot afford even one meal and their relatives are in the same situation. Families tend to have five or even six children, the numbers are always increasing, so how can they look after them?"

AAO has space for another four or five orphans, but with the rainy season now underway staff say the spaces will fill quickly as the streets flood and living conditions worsen.

Ms Wallace says the rains are the biggest obstacle currently facing staff. "We are in the rainy season in Sierra Leone and this has required us to build a new structure on the grounds for a covered cooking area and a

Clean and available water is a constant problem in Sierra Leone. Children and families often bathe, do their laundry and drink from the same source



more protected structure for the school," she said. "It also means the children have to spend a lot more time indoors and this is hard on everyone."

Rainy season aside, staff also face an ongoing battle to protect the children from dangerous illnesses like malaria, typhoid, tuberculosis, diarrhoea and parasites, rampant in Sierra Leone.

"This is the main reason we had to have a clinic on the grounds of our new centre," Ms Wallace admitted. "In the past our trips to the doctor were much too frequent and costly."

AAO's staff, supported by several large, private donations from the UAE, have secured land in Grafton, east of Freetown – one of the city's poorest districts where several displacement and amputee camps were set up during the civil war – to build the orphanage's new centre.

It is hoped the land will house three children's homes, a school that will follow the government curriculum and a medical centre.

Staff also plan to start a series of vocational training courses to help prepare the children for independence when they reach 18 and leave the centre.

In the meantime, Peter Ndemoima, 38, a teacher at the centre, packs up his

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things on the ground floor balcony he uses as a classroom and prepares to leave the centre for the weekend. Before he heads home he talks about the aspirations of the children. All, he says, have ambitions for high-earning careers, many of them dream of becoming doctors.

A few of the boys whisper they have their sights set on playing for Chelsea and Barcelona, their favourite football clubs. Although none have been to school before arriving at the centre, Mr Ndemoima says they quickly follow his maths, English and social study classes and are keen to learn.

After 30 minutes of football and drawing, the support workers call the children – the girls before the boys – to wash in the outdoor shower and brush their teeth.

Then, with clean clothes, they head for a small, secluded area surrounded by trees and flowers where they gather to praise God and give thanks.

Eyes shut with concentration, clapping, laughing and smiling, it is difficult to imagine the traumas some have suffered.

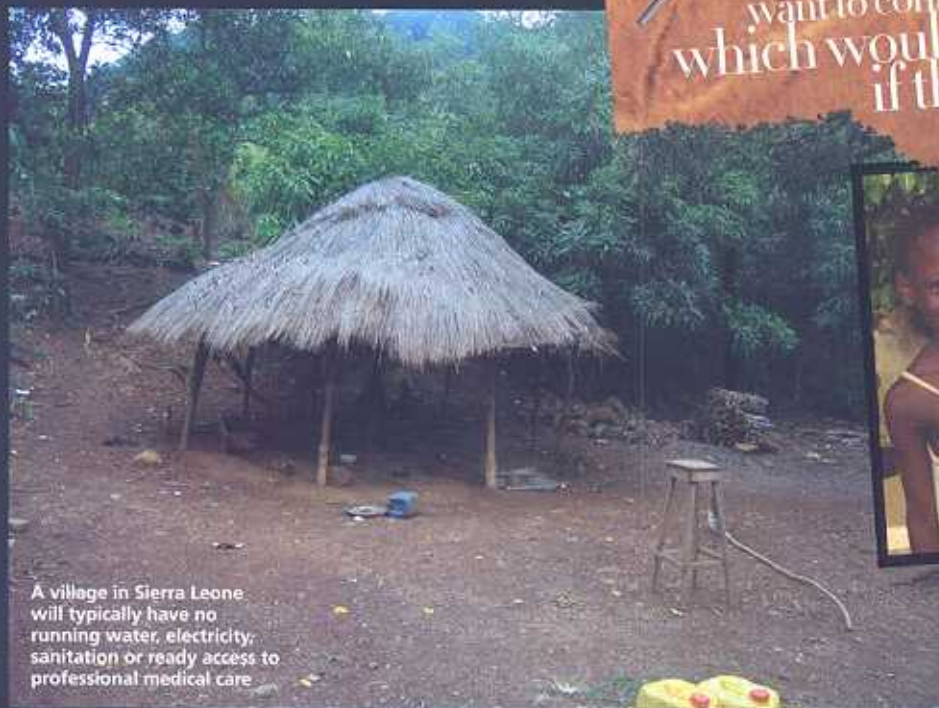
Ms Nyuma says the children are extremely resilient and is confident they have a bright future despite their experiences. Many of the parents return to the orphanage monthly to visit their children and check on their progress. All, she says, are pleased with the way their children are developing.

"The children have memories," she says, "but they choose not to think about what has happened too much."

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Asked what she feels have been the centre's greatest achievements since it opened 10 years ago, Ms Wallace grins.

"The children's centre is full of them!" she says. "Most of the children in our care



A village in Sierra Leone will typically have no running water, electricity, sanitation or ready access to professional medical care

"They are not mature enough and they want to continue going to school, which would not be possible if they were raising a child"



A typical street scene in Freetown, Sierra Leone where up to 70 per cent of the population is unemployed. Top: These girls, like the other children at the All As One Children's Centre, are provided with food to eat, an education, available medical care and a loving, safe environment

came to us either sick or malnourished. We've been able to see all of that dramatically change for the better."

Her favourite story, perhaps unsurprisingly, is that of her own adopted daughter Hayley, who is still at the centre but will move to the United States later this year to start a new life with Ms Wallace.

Hayley was born in the countryside and both parents died before she was one year old. She was then left in the care of a family member who had no means of looking after her. She reached the point of starvation and became ill with malaria and typhoid.

In an effort to save her life, the family member brought her to Freetown and AAO.

"Hayley was close to dying when she arrived at the centre in 2002," her adopted mother recalled. "At the age of 18 months she arrived severely malnourished and with both malaria and typhoid. She had skinny little arms and legs and could not walk because she had no muscle tone. It took one year for her to regain enough strength for that."

"Now she is a beautiful, healthy and very active five-and-a-half-year-old."

Unicef is working with the government in Sierra Leone to protect children, particularly those who are orphaned and vulnerable.

Last summer, a Unicef survey of the country's NGO orphanages, 27 of which are run by Christian and Muslim groups, found children were being indiscriminately committed to unregulated care homes. As a result, minimum standards for orphanages have been drawn up by Unicef and accepted by the MoSW. There is also a strategy to reintegrate the 1,871 children being cared for back into their communities.

NGOs in Sierra Leone have concerns that a national social welfare budget of just one per cent, combined with rising food prices and lack of access to education, could see the children thrust back into the same situation.

But Unicef is in talks with the UN World Food Programme to arrange financial and food support for the families of these vulnerable children in a bid to keep them at home.

The welfare of the young is an issue close to Sia Koroma, Sierra Leone's First Lady's heart.

"I am very happy to support orphanages such as All As One. Their work is vital," said Mrs Koroma. "I feel they are doing a great job in looking after children who are vulnerable. The war in Sierra Leone has left some very difficult legacies and the high number of orphans is one of them."

"There is a general duty on all of us to protect vulnerable children."

Mrs Koroma said the government takes child protection seriously and supports the work undertaken by NGOs such as All As One.

"I see this as another opportunity to make a real difference to women and children," she said. "I want to give the children a better future, to improve their quality of life, give them a better education, better health and make them into better adults."

Since her husband became president, she has been planning her attack on Sierra Leone's development crisis – particularly the struggle facing women and children. But she knows the path will not be smooth. "Poverty is a significant barrier for children to enjoy the privileges of good education, health and other services," she says. "The government is

taking practical steps to combat poverty. In the end I believe that the children in Sierra Leone look to a better future." ■

## FOUR DIRHAMS-A-DAY

The All As One Children's Centre in Sierra Leone is an orphanage, medical clinic and school caring for vulnerable children – and you can help.

Giving just Dhs4 a day (Dhs120 per month) for a year will help sponsor a child and give them a chance at life.

As a vital sponsor, you'll receive a photo and information on a child whose life you have helped to save. Everything you give goes directly to the care of the children and All As One's ongoing work in Sierra Leone.

For further information on how you can help the children of Sierra Leone, email [sponsorship@aaodubai.org](mailto:sponsorship@aaodubai.org) or phone (04) 3116578.