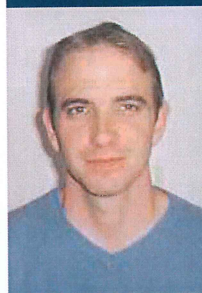


# THE TRUTH IS BAD ENOUGH, OR IT SHOULD BE!



*In conversation with  
Chris Desmond*

**H**ow many children will be orphaned by AIDS, and how many children will live in child-headed households by the end of the decade? The simple answer is many. But is that enough to convince policy-makers or the general public that we should be doing more than we are? In a country that has become accustomed to social ills, horror stories and impending crises, what does it take to warrant special consideration?

It would seem that advocates and researchers think that disasters are not enough, but that catastrophes might get some attention. But does the approach of publicising high estimates of the impact of the AIDS epidemic help in facilitating a response? Has our society hardened to the point that disasters simply do not do it for us anymore?

Take the example of child-headed households, an emotive and tragic consequence of adult deaths. In some situations, children are forced to head households after the death of their parents, and teenagers have to take on the adult roles of care and financial support in an effort to cope with the loss of caregivers. Child-headed households are seen as one of the key social challenges associated with the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

These households are often spoken about as if they exist in great numbers across the country. According to the available data, between 0.25% and 0.50% of South African households are headed by children under the age of 18 years. This would seem somewhat less than is suggested by claims for aid made in anecdotal reports, but it is still a very large number of children living in extremely difficult situations. Although a small percentage, the data suggest that in the region of 30 000 households are headed by children under the age of 18 years.



It would appear that, in our efforts to find dramatic stories, we do not take the time to consider what it is we are talking about. For example, what does it mean to be a child-headed household and are there not other forms of households associated with HIV/AIDS that also place children at risk?

According to the 1999 October Household Survey, there are fewer households with no adults than there are child-headed households, suggesting that some child-headed households contain adults. Who are these adults, and do they constitute additional burdens for children?

There are also nearly as many households with only people over the age of 70 and under the age of 18 years as there are households that are child-headed. This would suggest that rather than highlighting only one dramatic-

sounding type of vulnerable household, more time should be spent understanding other vulnerable household conditions and feasible ways to respond – especially as larger numbers of children are becoming more vulnerable as poverty escalates.

South Africa has many social problems, and it is no easy task to convince others of the need to prioritise a particular issue. The temptation exists to portray a worst-case scenario in attempts to gain attention. This approach, however, can have many negative side-effects – not least for social problems, the scale of which is not exaggerated and requires no hyperbole.

People can be overwhelmed by a problem and begin to think that it is too large and too late to do anything about it. From my experiences with working with governments in Africa, I have found that moderate presentations on the impact of AIDS, as opposed to doomsday approaches, elicit a much more energetic response.

Alternatively, if the problem is exaggerated, the issue itself may begin to be questioned. This questioning process may take matters to the opposite extreme, prompting arguments that the entire problem and not just the estimated scale, is a fallacy. Rape, HIV infections, murder, traffic accidents and orphaning, even at the most conservative of estimates, are all of a scale needing urgent national attention.

As a researcher, I want to spend my time trying to identify and evaluate solutions rather than only trying to convince people of the existence and scale of problems. Generally, we know what the issues are and should be devoting our energies to solving them. \*

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