CHAPTER 6

The Zimbabwe Study of OVCs

Our main purpose in this study was to explore an effective and sustainable project management approach for the social development of orphans specifically in Zimbabwe, and Southern Africa in general, drawing on systems theory and original empirical work in Zimbabwe. ‘Development’ in this study, denotes efforts or processes that are directed to improve the physical, emotional, spiritual and psychosocial well-being of OVC, and nurturing them to realize their full human capabilities. We also adopt the Brundtland Commission (United Nations, 1987) definition of sustainable development as that which ‘meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’. This includes empowering communities to meet comprehensive developmental needs of OVC that are sensitive to their age and context, and sustaining them all the time over time. It also entails bringing up OVC into productive citizens who are aware of their rights and responsibilities despite their vulnerabilities in early life.

Specifically, the research study sought to:

- understand, through an extensive survey, the particular social condition of orphans in Zimbabwe
- determine the theoretical or paradigmatic foundation commonly applied to social development project management practice for orphans
- apply systems methodology in particular pluralism, to social development project management research on orphans; and
- propose a systems-oriented framework for social development project management that can bring sustainable benefits for orphans in Zimbabwe and Southern Africa more generally.

A survey of the literature concerned with OVCs and interventions aimed at promoting their welfare, together with many years of personal experience in the social development field, point to a perpetual failing to sustainably address the growing and related challenges of OVC, social conflict, poverty, and diseases in Zimbabwe and Southern Africa. We argue that a new or improved way of managing social development efforts is required, demanding learning and experimentation with currently invisible or unpopular approaches, or giving new meaning to existing ones.
Koskela and Holwell (2002) observed that the whole of the field of project management lacks theoretical capacity to deal with the need to improve its practice. Jackson (1995:38) summarizes this predicament:

If you do not know what your theories are you cannot explain your knowledge and pass it on to the next generation. If you do not have a theoretical check then you cannot appreciate that the methods you use might be working for the wrong reasons—perhaps because they appeal to the powerful and lend themselves to authoritarian usage.

Our methodology sought to allow the study to be guided by the voices and experiences of vulnerable people that were expected to be served by the envisaged new framework for social development management practice as espoused by systems ideas of human empowerment, freedom and participation. These ideas are ingrained in, for example, grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1998, Strauss, 1987); experiential enquiry (Heron, 1971); interactive planning (Ackoff, 1974); dialogical enquiry (Randall, 1981); participatory rural appraisal—PRA (Chambers, 1983) also known as participatory learning and action-PLA (Jayakaran, 1996); and social action (Yeich and Levine, 1992). We draw on modern interpretive, emancipatory and postmodern paradigmatic systems-orientations. Jackson (1995) argued that true knowledge resides in local community contexts and not in the ‘fads’ of experts. We were mindful of this advice.

We adopted ‘story telling’ or ‘narrative inquiry’ (Boje, 1991; Denning, 2004; Gabriel, 2000; Andrews et al., 2009) as the primary form of collecting research data. Andrews and others (2009:13) observed that ‘a theory of the mind as a pattern recogniser’ is the basis of storytelling approaches. The semantic structures and temporal ordering of information in a story act as an attention-focusing mechanism (Gerrig, 1993) and aid ‘mental construction of an event’. Narrative is multifunctional in the sense that it attempts to appeal to emotions, as well as recount facts and events (Martin, 1986).

The study also adapted aspects of action research. Consistent with action research, inquiry into complex social phenomena requires fusing investigation with practical experience in order to derive practical judgment and solutions. Often criticized as unscientific and that its ‘findings are anecdotal, based on telling stories rather than doing science’ (Greenwood and Levin, 1998:54), Action Research (AR) goes beyond conventional social science research as the most reliable and appropriate form of