



# Memory Box Project in South Africa

**CERI**  
Children's Emergency Relief International

## Memory Box Project

Country: South Africa

Implementation period: 2008-2011

Total beneficiaries: 5,835 orphan & vulnerable children

Total budget: \$1,800,000

\*Funded through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)

**Rampant rates of HIV-infection and death by AIDS** have left millions of children completely orphaned across South Africa. Some of them had only one living biological parent, rendering them vulnerable and at risk of poverty and human trafficking. Given the urgent need across Africa for psychosocial intervention that nurtures resilience and identity in OVC (orphaned and vulnerable children), this PEPFAR (President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief) memory work project aspired to scale-up what was previously mostly a localized, university research-based community outreach initiative.

**CERI, in partnership** with the Sinomlando Centre for Oral History and Memory Work in Africa, School of Religion and Theology, University of KwaZulu-Natal, implemented the Memory Box Project. The project was carried out from 2008 to 2011 with the aim of delivering psycho-social rehabilitation and resiliency training to caregivers of orphans and vulnerable children throughout South Africa. CERI reached six provinces in the country: Eastern Cape, Free State, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, and North West.

### SOUTH AFRICA STATISTICS (2008)

Orphaned/Vulnerable  
Children: 1.7 million

AIDS-Related Deaths:  
1,000 per day

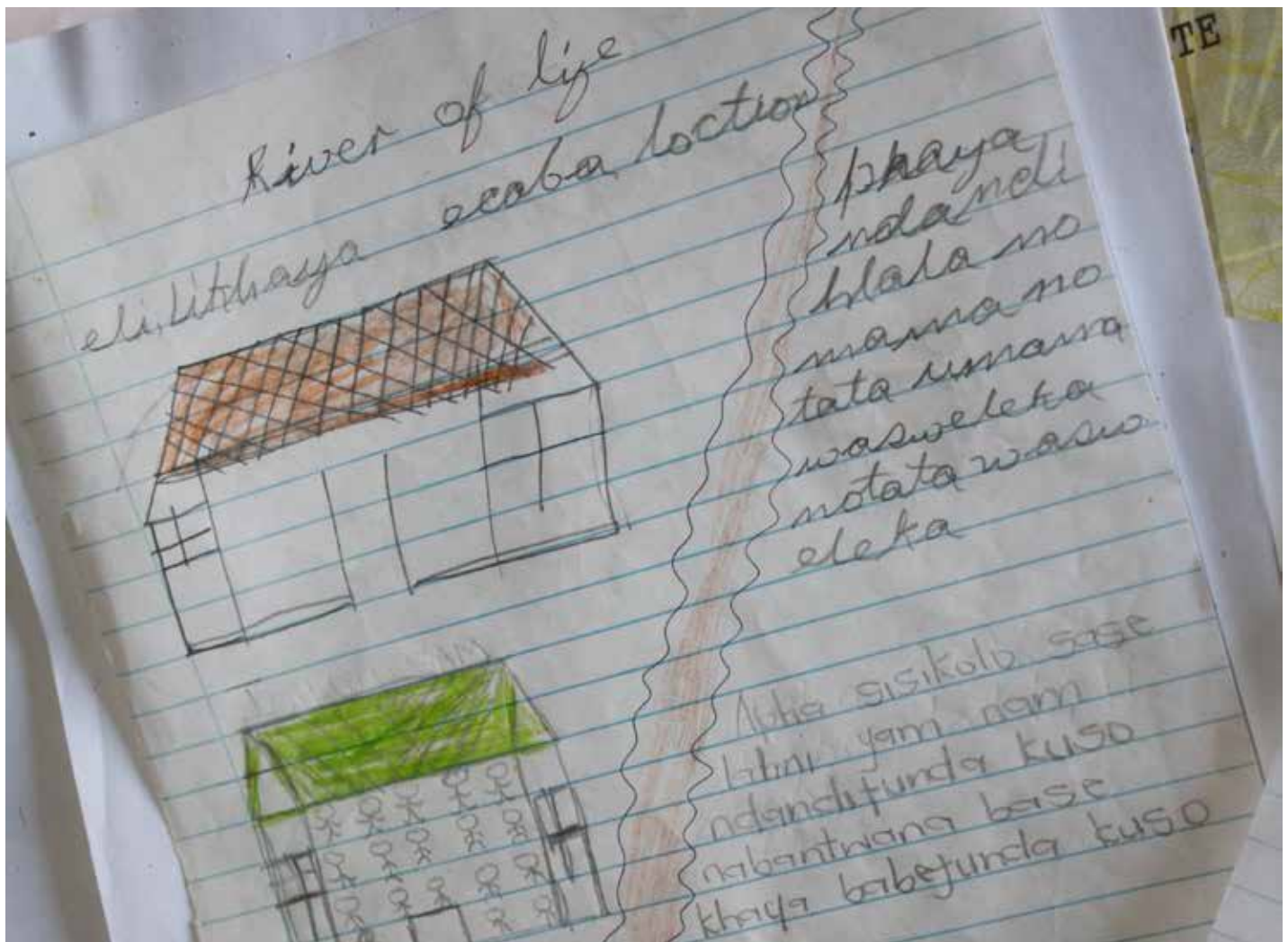
New AIDS Infections:  
1,500 per day



**The project goal** was to implement a national scale-up of memory work training for staff and volunteers of OVC service providers in South Africa. Memory work seeks to create and nurture a “safe place” where previously silenced family memories can be shared between adults and children without risk of stigmatization or fear of disclosure. The memory-box methodology is a family-centered psychosocial intervention which facilitates intergenerational dialogue among immediate and extended family members. The purpose of the intervention was to enhance resilience and nurture identity in orphans and vulnerable children, particularly those who have lost parents or primary caregivers to AIDS in South Africa. Resilience can be defined as a child’s ability and capacity to recover his/her well-being and life potential in spite of suffering through one or more life misfortunes.

## MEMORY BOX PROJECT OBJECTIVES

1. Train 135 Memory Trainers (MTs)
2. Train 2,000 Memory Facilitators (MFs)
3. Reach 3,700 OVC



**No extensive research exists** on the long-term effects of psychosocial support-loss to generations of children. Although the memory-box methodology is not a cure-all for the emotional losses of the children and their primary caregivers, it is a proven best-practice methodology for enabling children and families to cope and process through the fear, grief, and trauma associated with loss.

**The project ended in 2011**, but plans were made for sustaining the important memory work that CERI and Sinomlando had begun in South Africa. The memory box trainers who were certified through the program gained improved opportunities for sustained employment by AIDS relief organizations, which then increased the likelihood that they would continue to put on regional memory box workshops modeled after those conducted during the Memory Box project operations. Additionally, Sinomlando was training individuals and partner organizations in the memory box methodology of psychosocial support before this national scale-up effort facilitated by CERI, and the Centre has been continuing to do so since the project's end.

## Success Story 1: Mama Vilakazi

A product of the apartheid system of forced removals, the village of Sheepmoor, Mpumalanga Province, has scant infrastructure and is far removed from local job opportunities. However, the village has been fortunate to have Mama Vilakazi as its resident. With the outbreak of HIV/AIDS in the late 1990s and the growing number of orphans, the retired Mrs. Vilakazi took vulnerable children into her home and fostered them. She also started an organization, called Zimeleni (Zulu for “to be independent”) to serve vulnerable children.

A volunteer for Zimeleni, Phindile, was chosen to attend Sinomlando's three-month Memory Work training course. Upon returning to Sheepmoor, she ran a four-day workshop, which was attended by the rest Zimeleni's (Zulu for “to be independent”), volunteers, local counselors, and a social worker from the local Department of Social Development.

During a follow-up evaluation visit two months later, the CERI/Sinomlando team interviewed Mama Vilakazi. For the first time, Mrs. Vilakazi said, she realized the



*“Someone has switched on a light”*

*--Mama Vilakazi,  
follow-up evaluation*

importance of listening to children and recording their stories. Mama Vilakazi said she personally witnessed the increase in her foster children's self-esteem and resilience through the process of Memory Work, and noted that she wished the same for all other OVC.

## Success Story 2: Memory Work Helps a Bereaved Teenager Regain Positivity

A 14 years old orphan was living with her grandmother and siblings after being traumatized by the death of her mother from AIDS. The girl disobeyed her grandmother and refused to assist the family with household chores. She stopped attending school and was often found spending time in the company of older boys.

After an introductory visit from caretakers from Tlamelang Home-Based Care at Khunotswane (near Zeerust), the family agreed to participate in the Memory Box process. As the Family Closure Report was being prepared, the girl apologized to her grandmother and siblings for her behaviour. Afterwards, she began to attend school and help more around the house. The memory box facilitator felt confident that this positive change in the girl's attitude and lifestyle was due to the timely and well-implemented Memory Box intervention.

