

FEATURES

Banking On a meal

HIV/Aids has left many children without parents, and no hope for the future. But with the help of an initiative aimed at alleviating poverty and supporting the needy, some children do regain the strength to carry on, writes **STHEMBISO HLONGWANE**



FEEDING THE HUNGRY ... Children enjoy a meal at the community HIV/Aids relief project near Rodepoort. Pictures: Leon Sadiki

THABANG! Thabang! Please wake up, Nonhlanhla Mgumani says while shaking her younger brother, who is huddled beneath layers of warm blankets. Seconds later, Thabang pops open an eye and stretches his arms, with a huge yawn.

Muttering and grunting he lifts himself up and puts on his shoes. He clears his throat and mumbles: "Yeah! I'm awake."

It is near daybreak and Siyoville township, near Rodepoort in Johannesburg, is slowly picking up pace.

Nonhlanhla (19) and Thabang (14) leave their grandparents' two-roomed house which they share with six other unemployed relatives.

Hand-in-hand, the siblings quick-

en their steps towards the local community hall for their daily breakfast prepared by Hilda Khoeni, the co-founder of Tusanaang HIV/Aids Relief Project.

On the day of the City Press visit, 275 children are queuing up for their first meal of the day.

On the menu is a hot bowl of cereal, tea and buttered bread. But before eating, they must first say their prayers and register their names on

'The country has one of the highest rates of income inequality in the world'

the database for the purpose of keeping records.

Nonhlanhla says she repeated Grade 11 two years ago after her mother died of an HIV/Aids related illness.

"I could not concentrate at school. Life was too difficult. But with the help of Cego Khoeni I have managed to find closure and get some healing," she says with a faint smile.

According to the general household survey, 60% of children in South Africa live in households with at least one working adult, while 38% (nearly seven million children) live in households with no working adult.

Yet amid this sea of desperation, a group of locals have started an initiative that aims to alleviate poverty and support the needy.

The project is run in collaboration with the Food Bank SA. The Food Bank programme has been tried and tested in more than 20 countries across the globe including Ghana, Japan, India, Mexico, the United Kingdom and Argentina.

The Food Bank's non-vegetarian soup kitchen helps schools, civic centres and social services organisations by giving them fresh food parcels.

Five months ago, the

Bank collects food to distribute to the needy.

Van der Walt says that since April the Food Bank Johannesburg has delivered 75 tons of food, transported, 9 000 food parcels and helped 443 beneficiary agencies feed the needy.

The Food Bank SA says "the country has one of the highest rates of income inequality in the world, with the richest 10% of the population receiving almost half the income and the poorest 20% receiving 3.3%."

"While poverty and food insecurity are high, the rural areas have approximately two-thirds of the country's poor live - are particularly hard hit."

The Food Bank's Alan Gilbertson says they are planning to expand throughout the country.

"With adequate support from government and the private sector we could launch 20 food banks within three years."

Khoeni (51) says, through the government's social security agency and Food Bank SA they are able to provide immediate hunger relief to families who cannot afford food and who receive inadequate government assistance from plans such as the food stamp programme.

"We have vegetable gardens that we started to make sure that this programme is sustainable."

As the City Press team prepares to leave Siyoville, a well-fed and relaxed Mgumani tells us she plans to study for a diploma in emergency medical services next year.

"I want to be a paramedic and help those who need medical attention."

GETTING AHEAD

Vegetable gardens are regarded as a reliable and sustainable way to fight poverty

