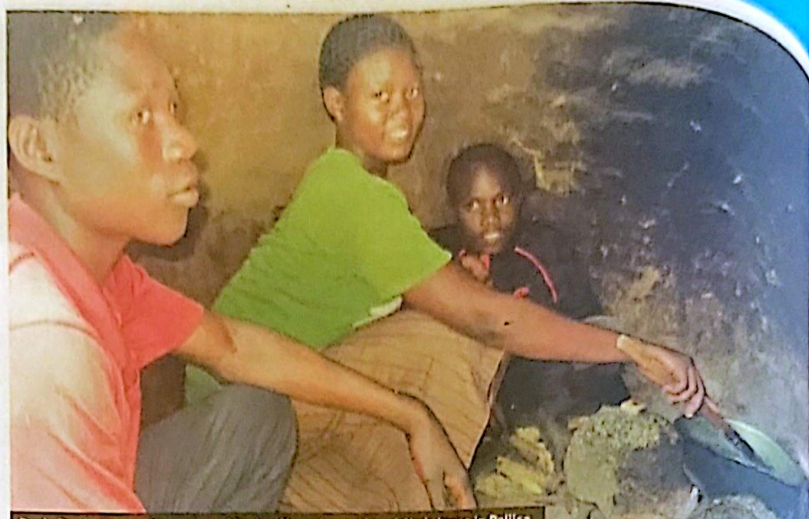


NAMONYO LOST COUNT OF HOW MANY SLEEPLESS NIGHTS SHE SPENT ON THE

LIVING WITH HIV

IN HOME MANAGED BY SIXTEEN-YEAR-OLD GIRL

As Uganda prepares to commemorate the World AIDS Day on December 1, Vision Group is in a drive to get everybody involved in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Today, **Moses Nampala** writes about Doreen Namonyo, 16, who is a breadwinner and taking care of her 14 and 10 year old HIV positive siblings.



Denis Pande, Doreen Namonyo and Fenhas Mweruka cooking at their home in Pallisa

At 16, most girls are just beginning to enjoy their most sensitive stage of growth. It is the age where many begin to carry themselves with grace, conscious of the attention they are likely to draw from the opposite sex.

But Doreen Namonyo of Sidanyi B village, Butebo sub-county, in Pallisa district, has not been lucky and neither does she wish to know that she has turned 16.

At this young age, she is the breadwinner and guardian of her two siblings, Denis Pande, 14 and Fenhas Mweruka, 10.

Namonyo was only 10-years-old and her siblings, barely out of babyhood, when HIV/AIDS claimed the lives of her parents.

The void created inevitably rendered Namonyo to the role of breadwinner and guardian of her young siblings.

The burden of responsibilities resting on her shoulders as she managed this child-headed family, was immense.

"Both my siblings were born with HIV/AIDS," Namonyo says.

Namonyo has lost count of how many times she has spent sleepless nights on the cold floor at Pallisa Public Hospital as she took care of her ailing siblings whenever either of them fell ill.

Often times, Namonyo had no means, let alone a sympathiser to help her take them to hospital.



"Years ago, whenever either of them fell sick, I would carry them on my back to the hospital, which is 10km away," Namonyo says.

Despite the challenges, however, Namonyo still performs well at her studies.

In 2015, she scored aggregate 38 in O' level exams.

"In the past, I seemed not to be focused, but fate seems to have shaped me. My ambition is to become a doctor," Namonyo says.

Namonyo's reason for wanting to become a doctor stems from her personal experiences.

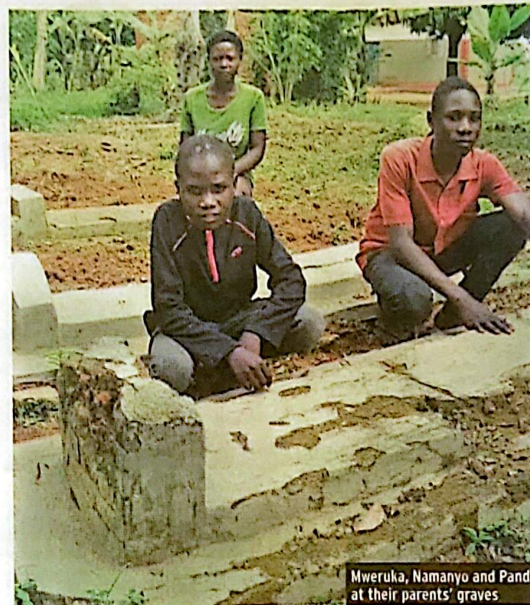
"If it was not for the commitment of the health personnel, my siblings would have died long ago," she says.

OUR VISIT

When *Sunday Vision* visited their home, the three siblings were doing chores.

Namonyo and Pande were doing laundry in the courtyard, while Mweruka, the youngest, had just finished sweeping the compound.

The three welcomed us and



Mweruka, Namonyo and Pande at their parents' graves

Mweruka, the most agile of all, rushed to pick a bench made out of wooden planks; the only piece of furniture spared for guests in the home and placed it under a tree.

From where we are seated, we could see three graves in the backyard.

"Beneath those graves are the remains of our parents, while the one that looks a little newer is for our paternal grandmother," Namonyo says.

She is the only immediate relative who took care of us when our

“Whenever either one of them fell sick, I would carry them on my back to the hospital, that is 10km away

parents passed on,” Namonyo adds.

FACING STIGMA

A chat with the boys leaves you feeling sad and shocked. Apart from being orphaned and living with HIV, they say they face stigma, which confines them to a secluded lifestyle.

"The neighbours have had a negative attitude towards us since the death of our parents. They disapprove of our attempts to play football with their children, saying we might infect them with HIV," Mweruka says.

"We learnt early that we were not welcome to our neighbours' homes. Whenever we feel like playing football, we play at home," Pande says.

Although Namonyo, is HIV-negative, she has not been spared constant nagging and stigma. Many village boys and men have

HOSPITAL FLOOR CARING FOR HER BROTHERS



The siblings wash clothes as part of their chores

tried to have intimate relations with her but whenever she turns them down, she earns a barrage of insults.

"Look, I was just doing you a favour. Everybody around this village knows that you are a breeding house for HIV," they say.

Namonyo is quick to explain that the years of hardship were a sad experience she would not wish for any girl to go through.

"One of the resolves that God has revealed to me in a dream is to stay focused on my studies if I am to leave this life," Namonyo says.

But occasionally, fellow village mates, have confronted her, seeking her mind on what she thinks about marriage. "A woman worthy her name earns respect only when she is happily married," one of her early callers asserts, as if to suggest that she drops out of school and gets married. But Namonyo has learned to ignore such talk.

SURVIVAL SKILLS

Namonyo, Pande and Mweruka have learnt to live in poverty as they have an adequate supply of basic food, ranging from potatoes to cassava.

"When none of the boys is having a health lapse, an ordinary day, irrespective of whether it is time for school or not, the day starts with waking up at 5:00am and going to the garden to dig," Namonyo explains.

The neighbours disapproved of our attempts to play football with their children on account that we would infect them with HIV

Conscious of the fragile health of her siblings, Namonyo takes over the chores of preparing breakfast, which is usually porridge.

The porridge is usually accompanied with leftover potatoes or cassava. As breakfast is served, Namonyo starts preparing lunch. If it is school time, her siblings bathe and rush to school.

Namonyo is always the last person to leave for the nearby Bulangila Senior Secondary School as she has to ensure that lunch is ready.

"Whoever returns home first is obliged to prepare sauce to accompany the meal. This entails picking vegetables from the garden and sometimes preparing them with groundnut paste," she explains.

However, the routine unfolding of their schedule at times get strained.

"Sometimes the boys throw tantrums and go on a hunger strike, refusing to eat food on the staple diet," Namonyo says.

Deep in her heart, she feels sorry for them, but outwardly, she

stands her ground to suppress the tantrums. "I have always told my siblings to avoid stressing me by making outrageous demands outside my means," she says.

"I have also constantly reminded them not to expect favours from other people, save for charity organisations," she adds.

"Occasionally, the ARVS we take cause side-effects such as loss of appetite and nausea. We then lose appetite for the usual diet and long for something different like rice and meat," Mweruka says.

For Namonyo, such a moment is dreadful because they talk and joke less. "Once the moment sets in, I relieve the boys of heavy chores," she explains.

HOPE

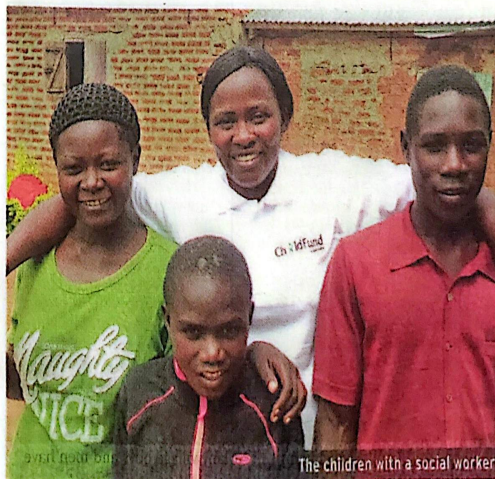
A part from regular food rations, and scholastic materials, Hope of Life International has dutifully provided for the children. They have been considered for the heifer project. "We have allotted them a goat and heifer as *entandikwa* (support) to improve their well-being," Christine Kiirya, the Hope of Life International Community Development facilitator, says.

PARENTS

The children's parents are late Fenhas Mweruka and Harriet Jukira. As a young man, Fenhas, who was a produce dealer, worked hard making substantive savings. When his savings blossomed, he bought a three-acre piece of land, where he constructed a house, according to Namonyo.

Fenhas's health started to deteriorate in 2001. His HIV status was confirmed in early 2002, when he died.

In 2006, Jukira also succumbed to HIV, shortly after giving birth to Mweruka. The virus was passed on to Pande and Mweruka due to lack of awareness about prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV programme.



The children with a social worker