

Research Brief 1: Material and social environment of orphans and other vulnerable children* living in rural Zambian communities

This is no 1 of a series of briefs providing new insights on the well-being of rural children in Sub-Saharan Africa, a previously much under-researched population. Findings are derived from a longitudinal (2008-2010) controlled study in 5 communities of Kafue District, Zambia. This study was aimed at evaluating and developing a results-based intervention programme focussed on the interface between psychosocial wellbeing and livelihood. In addition, the study identified particular risk and protective factors for the psychosocial wellbeing of vulnerable children.

Millions of children in Sub-Saharan Africa are directly or indirectly affected by the AIDS pandemic. In some rural areas, a third of all minors have lost one or both of their parents. Other caregivers are chronically ill or elderly, causing many children to take on the care-giving role. In a longitudinal intervention study in rural Zambia, outcomes for orphans and vulnerable children living with elderly and/or chronically ill caregivers were compared with non-affected children. Findings from this baseline study suggest these vulnerable children suffer from negative material and social impacts that are likely to affect their wellbeing. Low-cost interventions are needed to support them effectively.

Research Questions

- Are vulnerable children more affected by poverty than other children?
- Are vulnerable children experiencing more social problems than other children?
- Are children orphaned by AIDS more affected than other orphans?
- Are orphans more affected than vulnerable non-orphans?

Research Methodology

- Standardised interviews with vulnerable and non-vulnerable children (10-18 years) conducted in 2008 (960 participants)
- A variety of pre-tested and adapted versions of standardised scales to measure the risks associated with vulnerability
- Validated verbal autopsy procedure to determine cause of parental death and identify children orphaned by AIDS

Vulnerable children

- In the context of this research, vulnerable children were defined as:
 - Having lost one or both parents
 - Living with a primary caregiver who is chronically ill
 - Living with an elderly caregiver
 - Living in a child-headed household
- **According to this definition**, 63% of the study population were vulnerable (figure 1). This was due in part to oversampling of vulnerable children.

- Of those who were vulnerable, 50% were orphans, and 13% were non-orphans but were living with a caregiver who was chronically ill and/or elderly. Number of child-headed households was negligible.
- Orphans were further sub-divided into orphaned due to AIDS (20%) and orphaned by other causes (30%).

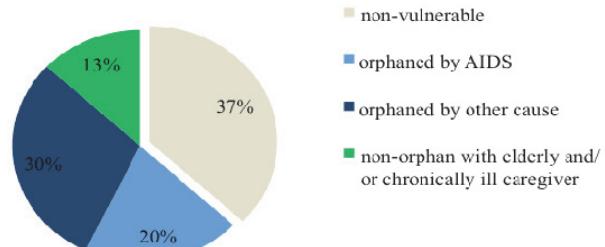


Figure 1: Prevalence of vulnerable groups in the study sample

Key findings

Vulnerable and non-vulnerable children differ with regard to a number of characteristics relevant to their well-being:

1. Material environment

- **Household level:** Vulnerable children do not live in poorer households than non-vulnerable children.
- **Individual level:** However, with regards to their **individual access to resources** they report **less personal possession of everyday items** (such as blankets, shoes, school uniforms, pencils, books etc).

* In this study, participants were aged 10-18

2. Community environment

- **Community stigma:** Vulnerable children feel more stigmatised in their communities than non-vulnerable children.
- **Peer integration:** Vulnerable children feel less integrated in their peer groups than non-vulnerable children
- **Peer bullying:** Vulnerable children report significantly more victimisation (verbally, physically and through property theft) by their peers than non-vulnerable children.
- **No differences were found with regards to perceived social support** (from siblings, teachers and friends) between vulnerable and non-vulnerable children.

3. Quality of care

- **Within household discrimination:** When comparing themselves to other children they live with, vulnerable children feel less equally treated at home than non-vulnerable children.
- **No differences were found in the levels of emotional and tangible caregiver support** received by vulnerable and non-vulnerable children.

4. Daily Stress

- Vulnerable children experience **more daily stress** (such as looking after an unwell person, worrying about family members, having to worry about school fees, excessive chores or work) than non-vulnerable children (figure 2).

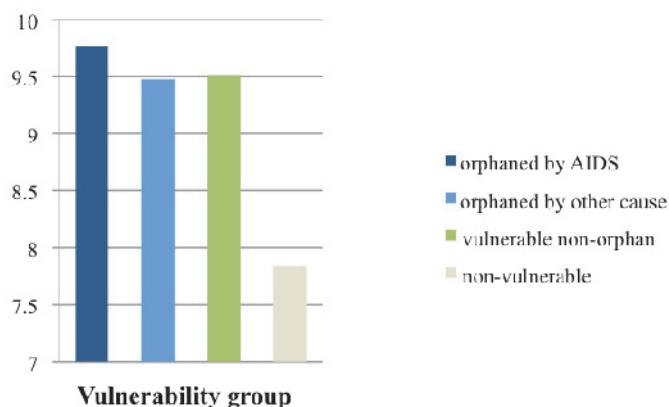


Figure 2: Daily stress levels in vulnerable vs. non-vulnerable groups of children

5. Differences between vulnerable groups

- **Vulnerable non-orphans reported more hunger than orphans.** While orphans do not necessarily live with caregivers who cannot sufficiently provide for their material needs, children living with elderly and chronically ill caregivers seem to be at increased risk of insufficient food.

Conclusions

- While much attention has been placed on orphans, this study highlights risks faced by children living chronically ill and/or elderly caregivers.
- Compared with non-vulnerable children, orphans and children living with chronically ill and/or elderly caregivers experience more daily stress. This also includes social stressors such as stigma, bullying and feeling isolated in their communities.
- While vulnerable children are not living in poorer households than other children, they have less access to necessary items at home. This points to a discrimination of vulnerable children within a household, which is also reflected in perceptions that other children at home are better off in terms of school money, food, and clothes.
- The comparatively high daily stress experienced by vulnerable children is likely to affect their psychological wellbeing (for more information, see briefs 2, 6, & 7).
- Interestingly, no significant differences were found between children orphaned by AIDS, other orphans and non-orphaned vulnerable children with regard to their material and social environment. Therefore, orphans should not be singled out for material or social intervention programmes as target groups. Instead, all children need to be examined for potential vulnerability.

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