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STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT YOUTH-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS IN KENYA AND RWANDA

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SUMMARY

- There is a growing number of youth-headed households in Sub-Saharan Africa that have specific vulnerabilities not often addressed by current policies and programs in their home countries.
- Where countries have developed strategies to support orphans and vulnerable children, there has been a limited focus on youth-headed households as a social group requiring attention.
- Rwanda has articulated strategies and implemented programs to support youth-headed households, setting a useful example for others in the region.
- Kenya has placed youth-headed households on the policy agenda, however more targeted strategies will need to be developed and implemented in order to support, protect and enable this group of young people.

BACKGROUND

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the dual impact of violent conflict and the HIV/AIDS epidemic has led to dramatic changes in family units and systems of care (Barnett, 2005; Christiansen, 2005). Unaccompanied youth-headed households are increasingly observed throughout the region. This trend is seen as a symbol of the social safety net breaking down (Roalkvam, 2005).

Research has shown, however, that youth-headed households require particular attention from government policy makers and programs. Householdheads often deal with familial care responsibilities and economic deprivation from factors such as displacement, loss of adult primary income earners and difficulty

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in accessing employment or land (Ayieko, 1997; Donald & Clacherty, 2005; Ruiz-Casares, 2010). Many also face a heightened sexual risk due to their social, economic and physical vulnerability (Evans, 2010). All things considered, however, youth who head households also frequently demonstrate resilience, taking on 'adult' roles such as full-time care giving, planning for the future and finding innovative solutions to their problems (Ruiz-Casares, 2009; Ward (Lee)& Eyber, 2009).

YOUTH-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS IN RWANDA AND KENYA

The 1994 genocide and parental deaths from the ongoing HIV/AIDS epidemic have created radical shifts in the composition of households across Rwanda (Des Forges, 1999; MacLellan, 2005). In the 1990s, for example, Rwanda had one of the highest proportions of youth-led families in the world¹ and today, over 100,000 children are believed to live in such households (UNICEF, 2009).

As Kenyan economist Monica Ayieko has argued (1997), an urgent situation among a growing number of youth-headed households caused by HIV/AIDS, including the vulnerability of young females working in the commercial sex trade. Though exact figures are unknown, over the past decade the numbers of children heading their households has continued to increase with the impact of HIV/AIDS on family stability as well as cycles of conflict and displacement, particularly in the Rift Valley and the North East Province (Oyugi, 2000).

Laura Ward and Carola Eyber have also suggested (2009) there is an urgent need to develop and implement community-based approaches to reduce the vulnerabilities faced by such young people, while building on their resiliency and access to existing community social resources. Policies and strategies at the international and national levels are critical to the coordination and resource allocation of such programs.

INTERNATIONAL FRAMEWORKS FOR YOUTH-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS

In 2001, the UN General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS adopted a Declaration of Commitment that sets specific targets for all signatory

nations. In recognition of the special attention needed by children affected by HIV/AIDS, the declaration maintained that by 2005, all signatories develop and implement national policies to assist orphans and vulnerable children (OVC). The declaration further called for an integrated response from all sectors within international and national structures.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has also developed a framework for working with OVC in 2004 (UNICEF, 2004) that recognized youth-headed households require particular forms of support. It stated that:

In practice, care of orphans and vulnerable children comes from... communities caring for children in child-headed households or with no family involvement. Reinforcing the capacity of communities to provide support, protection and care is the foundation of a response that will match the scale and long-term impact of the HIV/AIDS crisis for children (UNICEF, 2004: 19).

YOUTH-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS IN NATIONAL OVC STRATEGIES

RWANDA

Rwanda's National Policy for Orphans and Vulnerable Children was developed by the Ministry of Local Government, Information and Social Affairs in 2003 (MINALOC, 2003). A national strategic plan of action for OVC was also developed, the latest version of which covers 2007 to 2011 (MINALOC, 2006). The main objectives of these policies are to fight against stigma associated with HIV/AIDS and to advocate against all associated forms of abuse, violence and exploitation (MINALOC, 2006: 3).

In Rwanda's OVC strategic plan, the policy recognizes youth-headed households as an increasing problem and one of 13 distinctly vulnerable youth groups (MINALOC, 2003). Two main strategies are proposed to ensure the livelihoods of children are maintained through a system of community based care: the initiation of mentor systems and provision of socioeconomic support for affected households (MINALOC, 2003). Strategic Objective 3.1 outlines that youth-headed households should be strengthened economically through skills training, microcredit schemes

and other income generating activities (MINALOC, 2006). To this end there are budgetary allocations that are administered and coordinated by government and civil society organizations. Also mandated specifically for youth-headed households is the provision of cash transfers and assurance of proper water, sanitation and hygiene facilities (Strategic Objective 4.5.1).

KENYA

Recognizing the urgent needs of OVCs, Kenya passed the Children's Act in 2001 (Kenya Law Reports, 2007), which is intended to protect the rights of all people under 18 years. Additionally, in 2004 a National Steering Committee (supported by UNICEF and other donors) was launched to assess needs and develop strategies to work with OVC in Kenya (GOK, 2005). In 2005, a national policy and initial action plan for OVC were developed by the Department of Children Services, within the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Development (MGCSO) and in collaboration with the steering committee.² The main objectives are to meet children's basic needs, to allow them to develop to their full potential, to protect them from abuse, exploitation and discrimination and to involve children in all decisions that affect them (GOK, 2005: 5). A key initiative of the MGCSO is the Cash Transfer Programme for Orphans and Vulnerable Children, which is intended to strengthen the capacity of households to care and protect OVC through the provision of 1,500 Kenyan Shillings per month (MGCSO, 2011).³

In Kenya, children who live in youth-headed households are additionally recognized as a group who are "vulnerable in the context of HIV/AIDS" (GOK, 2005: 7) and who should be given appropriate support. Objectives or strategies specific to this group, however, are not well-defined. Others describe care giving children as those who sustain the household in which they live, including ailing adults, elderly people and other children (Skovdal and Mwasiaji, 2011: 1). They argue that care giving children have been overlooked in country policies as well as programs carried out by international agencies and advocate for more consideration of this group.

AGE MATTERS: INCLUSION OF YOUNG PEOPLE OVER 18 YEARS

When considering young people who head households, there is a great need to broaden the definition beyond children aged less than 18 years. Some experts highlight that it is difficult to restrict programming for young people who head households to those who are below 18 years,⁴ and found that most community-based organizations in Rwanda include older children in their programs (MacLellan, 2005). Many young people heading families were less than 18 when their parents became sick or passed away and missed the chance to complete their schooling (Thurman et al., 2006; Ward (Lee)& Eyber, 2009). They are often required to take on adult caring responsibilities prior to having a livelihood, acquiring their own home or marrying — other features of adult life that enhance the stability of households (Lee, forthcoming). And yet in Kenya and Rwanda the policies and programmes for vulnerable young people⁵ focus almost exclusively on children under 18 years, leaving a service gap for older but still needy youth. It is also important to note that support to a youth-headed household often benefits several OVC who are under the care of the responsible youth.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In Kenya and Rwanda youth-headed households have proven to be a persistent policy challenge. In order to help formulate appropriate community-level responses and national coordination strategies, this issue should be placed higher on the research agenda to provide more precise data to inform policy.

In Kenya, the Social Protection Policy currently being developed should be unlocked and a multi-ministerial strategy rolled out to care and support such households (Skovdal and Mwasiaji, 2011). This would combine social development with education, health and legal services and livelihood development efforts (see Table 1). Furthermore, the National Policy on OVC should be reviewed and incorporate youth-headed households as policies in Rwanda have exemplified. To offer a comprehensive response to needy youth in both Kenya and Rwanda, a more generous definition of youth that would include those between 18 and 24 years should be included in national-level policies and strategies.

TABLE 1. RECOMMENDED MULTI-MINISTERIAL STRATEGY FOR SUPPORTING YOUTH-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS IN KENYA

Ministry	Activities
Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Development	Coordination of activities; link youth-headed households with Cash Transfer Programme; provision of protection, care and support (at community level, Area Advisory Committees should carry out activities).
Ministry of Youth Affairs	Coordinate livelihood development activities, including entrepreneurship training and grants.
Ministry of Education	Provision of scholarships available for young people who head households (and their children under their care); development of accessible 'adult' education classes.
Legal services and Kenya Police	Assistance with legal services, including orphan land ownership cases and sexual abuse cases.
Ministry of Health	Provision and coordination of home-based care services and health education; waiving of medical fees for youth-headed households; resource allocation and implementation of youth-friendly services.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 In 1996, it was believed that over 13% of households in Rwanda were child-headed (ACORD, 2001).
- 2 The National Plan of Action for OVC has since been revised (2007 – 2010), as stated in the Kenya's National AIDS Strategic Plan(NACC, 2009).

3 1,500 Kenyan Shillings (KES) = approximately 15 USD

4 MacLellan argues that inclusion of older youth as child-headed households is “reasonable and just (MacLellan 2005:7);” as it is disadvantageous to exclude older youth from programmes intended to support vulnerable young people.

5 For example the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) and USAID fund large OVC Programmes in both Kenya and Rwanda which are focussed on children 0 to 17 years old.

MASTHEAD

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