Families' Efforts to Secure the Future of Their Children in the Context of Multiple Stresses, Including AIDS

Scott Drimie and Marisa Casale [a]

Introduction: Family Planning Amidst Multiple Stressors

Many countries in southern Africa are home to a large number of poor rural people, dependent on rainfed agriculture, barely subsisting even in years without shocks, and highly vulnerable to the vagaries of the weather, the economy, and government policy. Within this context of multiple livelihood stressors, including the effects of the AIDS epidemic, families attempt to plan and act to secure their own livelihoods and the future for their children. The context of multiple stressors and decreasing resilience has left many communities more vulnerable to external shocks than in the past. The increase in vulnerable households means that any crisis, whether it is due to climatic shocks, civil disturbance, or economic mismanagement, becomes increasingly difficult to absorb.

Gaining an understanding of how parents plan and act to ensure the welfare of their children is a complex task. The interaction of various social, economic, and political factors necessitate the adoption of a range of interdisciplinary methods. This brief is based on a report commissioned by the Joint Learning Initiative on Children and HIV/AIDS (www.jlica.org) in early 2007. The approach was to review published and unpublished literature largely from southern Africa to identify the major issues emerging around family decision-making, and then to utilise this to analyse recent case study material documenting how families are coping with stress across sites in the region. Continual interaction with JLICA Joint Learning Group I (Strengthening Families) helped refine the analysis and arguments.

Results of Study

Resource-constrained communities in southern Africa are affected by multiple stressors, including climate-induced shocks, and the pervasive AIDS epidemic. It is clear that AIDS exacerbates the impacts of poverty and other stressors that affect vulnerable families. The disease hits young children through effects on their parents, including lost family livelihood and employment income when breadwinners become ill and die, and when available family resources have to be shared among affected kin.

Families are often unable to recover sufficiently from these "entwined" stressors, particularly when AIDS has undermined their resilience, with the result that they are unable to adequately secure the long-term future of their children. Rather, short-term demands around basic survival limit choices and—with few material resources, inadequate external support, and poor access to appropriate services—the long-term welfare of children becomes a serious challenge for many families. In other words, as resources erode, the capacity for coping decreases and the capacity for planning disappears.

Another clear finding is that families alone often cannot provide for all of their children's needs, particularly education, food and nutrition security, and secure property rights. Many of these require outside support. Access to services is therefore important in determining the quality of a given level of care. By implication, increasing the resilience and range of options that families have, through services and safety nets, can benefit children.

A core argument is that the lack of investments by families—and the governments that support them—in human capital (education), coupled with adverse conditions during childhood (multiple stressors affecting already fragile livelihoods), are often associated with lower living standards in the future. Therefore, to avoid increased risk of poverty, exploitation, malnutrition, and poor access to health care and schooling, early intervention is critical in avoiding the potential poverty trap.

The results of the literature review coupled with the in-depth case studies show that people are aware of the threats to their welfare and, equally important, of their limited options to sustain their families and livelihoods. In many case studies it appears that families are "coping" in that they are not able to improve their living conditions and are living with the constant threat of things getting worse. This study suggests that those measures that are being pursued are not enough to provide children with the means and skills to achieve a stable existence. Furthermore, some of the current coping strategies adopted could contribute to future insecurity, accentuating this threat of deteriorating future livelihood conditions. This is worrying, because it points to the widening gap between the rich and the poor in Southern Africa.

Implications and Policy Recommendations

A clear argument has emerged for more comprehensive interventions that are sustainable and truly enabling for families to strengthen livelihoods and security of their children. It is evident that the challenges facing families in the region are many and varied, particularly in a context of multiple stressors, which means that no single inter-

[a] **Scott Drimie**, International Food Policy Research Institute/RENEWAL, **Marisa Casale**, University of KwaZulu-Natal/HEARD.

vention can provide sufficient support and protection for the well-being of children affected by these stressors. This becomes particularly significant when looking at the extended timescale of the AIDS epidemic in southern Africa. However, there are still large gaps in understanding how and why the interaction of stressors impact households differently. Some find their livelihoods destroyed, while others survive and some even manage to adapt their livelihoods to benefit from the situation. This relates critically to finding programs that underpin family strengthening and supporting community responses.

Integrated responses are needed, often best provided by local community-based organizations that operate in an enabling environment facilitated by the state. To date, family and community safety nets have supported the majority of vulnerable children. However, there is need to ensure that government actions give all children universal access to services, and the security and assistance families need to care for children. Governments thus have a crucial role to play, particularly in providing education, health, and social services that meet the needs of families that are considering their children's futures. Policies that need attention are those that promote children's physical and psychological well-being, and the capacity and stability of their families.

A common thread throughout the paper is the trade-off between competing needs and priorities that families are forced to juggle—whether physical, social, or spiritual. One such trade off is between current "coping" and future welfare, for example, food security today versus future food security and status, as well as investment in education for the future. Worryingly, various coping strategies pursued today, to deal with current shocks and stressors, further jeopardize the future security of households and children. This indicates the risk of families getting caught in vicious downward spirals that they may not be able to break out of.

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JLICA
JOINT LEARNING INITIATIVE ON CHILDREN AND HIV/AIDS

INTERNATIONAL FOOD POLICY RESEARCH INSTITUTE
2033 K Street NW • Washington, DC 20006-1002 USA
T 1-202-862-5638 • Skype ID: ifprihomeoffice
F 1-202-467-4439 • E s.drimie@cgiar.org
www.ifpri.org/renewal

JOINT LEARNING INITIATIVE ON CHILDREN AND HIV/AIDS
651 Huntington Avenue 7th Floor
FXB Boston , MA 02115
P 617-432-0656 • E info@jlica.org

About RENEWAL

Facilitated by the International Food Policy Research Institute, RENEWAL is a regional "network-of-networks" in Sub-Saharan Africa. Currently active in five "hub" countries (Malawi, Uganda, Zambia, South Africa, and Kenya), RENEWAL comprises national networks of food and nutrition-relevant organizations (public, private, and nongovernmental) together with partners in AIDS and public health research. RENEWAL aims to enhance understanding of the worsening interactions between HIV, food security, and nutrition, and facilitate a comprehensive response to these interactions. RENEWAL is grateful for support, at present, from Irish Aid, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the International Development Research Centre (IDRC, Canada), and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

About JLICA

The Joint Learning Initiative on Children and HIV/AIDS (JLICA) engages practitioners, policymakers, and scholars in collaborative problem-solving, research, and analysis to address the needs of children living in the context of HIV/AIDS. Its goal is to protect and fulfill the rights of children affected by HIV/AIDS by mobilizing the scientific evidence base and producing actionable recommendations for policy and practice.

Note: This brief is based on a RENEWAL working paper containing preliminary material and research results. These papers have not been subject to formal external reviews managed by IFPRI's Publications Review Committee, but have been reviewed by at least one internal or external researcher. They are circulated in order to stimulate discussion and critical comment.

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