

Ageing, Livelihoods and HIV/AIDS Briefing NotesNo: 5

The Orphan 'Crisis' and the elderly

Key Points:

- **The role of the elderly as principal carers of orphaned relatives has been neglected.**
- **Nearly two-thirds of all elderly female headed households contained orphans**
- **Households receive little support for the care of orphans - the elderly receive least support**
- **Only 4.5% of elderly households receive government benefits for orphans**
- **These children are primarily supported through the pension placing pressure on the financial assets of elderly households.**

Considerable attention is currently being placed on the situation of children orphaned as a result of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. What is often neglected however is the role of the **elderly as principal carers of orphaned relatives**. Our survey results revealed that elderly headed household, and in particular female headed households are more likely to look after orphans than younger household heads (see BN XX on household composition). Nearly two-thirds of all elderly female headed households contained orphans. 24% of all children looked after by elderly headed households had lost at least one parent. 38% had lost a father, 42% had lost a mother and 20% had lost both parents.

In-depth case studies revealed that the elderly see it as their duty to care for these children – an extension of the role they have traditionally played caring for grandchildren whose parents work away - 'It is my responsibility to look after my grandchildren' (elderly man Okahao Constituency). However with increasing age and declining strength this is proving difficult for many as one female household head commented that *'In the past, I had strength, I was able to care for even small children but now that I do not have the strength I cannot look after them'*

Support for Orphans

The government currently provides foster grants for orphaned children. Survey results (overleaf) revealed that the take-up of these grants among respondents was extremely low. In fact **only 4.5% of elderly households stated that they received these grants**. This low-take-up as explained by respondents and local informants/service providers is due to a combination of factors that concern the registration of orphans which is necessary for the payment of the foster grant.



Households receive little support for the care of orphans - Elderly households receive least support

| Type of Support | All Households | Elderly Headed Households |
|---|----------------|---------------------------|
| No support received | 73% | 81% |
| Support from surviving parent (financial) | 6% | 3% |
| Support from surviving parent (other) | 9% | 4.5% |
| Support from GRN (e.g. foster grant) | 7.5% | 4.5% |
| Support from Community | 3% | 4.5% |
| Other | 1.5% | 2.5% |

(Source: Omusati Household Survey 2005/6)

Many elderly household heads were simply unaware of the procedures to register orphans and lacked basic information. This has been compounded by the fact that the majority of the elderly lack basic literacy skills. Moreover, as registration takes place in towns many interviewees especially, in remoter areas, cited lack of transport and time as a further complication. A number of interviewees who were aware of the grants were unable to travel to register orphans in their care. During busy times e.g. ploughing/harvesting they (as the main providers of household livelihoods) were unable to leave their fields. The major problem in accessing foster grants related to the failure to locate the death certificate of a deceased parent. Many elderly household heads had never met their daughter/son's partner – a situation that for many reflects a breakdown in traditional Owambo social mores governing relationships and sexual partnerships.

Our research revealed **evidence of local initiatives to assist with problems of accessing support.** Although only noted in two locations, the mobile registration of orphans was cited as one of the most important interventions. Other local initiatives included church baptisms providing orphans with necessary documentation and orphans' committees

established by some village headmen to help the elderly secure access to benefits. At present, 81% of the elderly receive no support for the orphans in their care. These children are primarily supported through the pension placing pressure on the financial assets of elderly households. 'I struggle for my grandchildren to eat if I have nothing I sometimes ask my neighbours because my children that used to support me are no more.

Skipped Generation Households: Broader implications

Orphaned children are increasingly growing up in households missing a generation (their parents) as such it has been argued that many elderly carers are unable to provide particular forms of support e.g. educational.

Population Ageing and Sustainable Livelihoods in regions affected by HIV/AIDS

is funded by the ESRC (RES-000-22-1427).

The project runs from August 2005 until November 2006.

Project website:

www.ageingnamibia.group.shef.ac.uk

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