

# Child vulnerability and social protection in zambia essay examples

[Law](#), [Security](#)



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## **Executive Summary**

Even though discussions about HIV/AIDS have pre-occupied academic and policy debates for decades, scientific research has reached remarkable scale, and, prevention methods are getting more advanced, the prospects for a cure are still not bright. Advances in prevention mechanisms have reduced the prevalence of the disease but it still has devastating effects on individuals and families in developing nations. One of HIV/AIDS's major effects is the breakup of families and the creation of orphans.

The death of parents often leaves children to care for their siblings. Young people yet to experience their childhood are forced into parenthood at a time they themselves are in need of parenting. This creates what are popularly known as child-headed or sibling families. These are households that have no adults that are over eighteen to take care of children. It creates a sad reality in developing contexts in particular the case at hand of Zambia.

Governments need proactive social protection policies and mechanisms that

augment local community and international non-profit organization efforts at addressing this issue. Without enough input from the state, sibling-headed families are vulnerable to outside forces that cause, hunger, disease and sometimes grievous bodily harm. Local communities can also aid by providing not just basic material needs but near parental care.

## **Introduction**

This policy brief examine the issue of sibling-headed families in the Sub-Saharan country of Zambia. It explores their vulnerabilities and needs by reviewing the presentation of poverty and need in the documentary “ There Brother’s Keeper” and other secondary sources.

## **Defining Sibling-Headed Families**

The problem of sibling families is more magnified in developing contexts especially Africa South of the Sahara where the social service system is barely function, families struggle even with the presence of both parents and some of the basic governance mechanism is lacking. For older children whose parents die and they are left to take care of their brothers and sisters a conundrum occurs. They are faced with a choice of whether to continue acting like a child or at once to adopt adult responsibilities. Most choose to take care of their younger brothers and sister. Thus they become vulnerable to endless economic, political and social forces. In already struggling or developing economies the provision of social services is limited since local and international non-profit organizations are more actively involved than the government

Sibling-headed families are characterized by the absence of adults or

guardians in a family. This creates a situation whereby the provision of material and emotional needs of children have either to be met by other children or they are not met at all. A growing body of literature is emerging on the nature and functioning of sibling-headed families. This literature points to the ability of young people not only to exert agency in the face of adversity but to also find smart ways to fend for their immediate and long term means despite the odds (Ruiz-Casares 2005). This research also show that children and young people in sibling-headed families are intelligent and extraordinary survivors who have an immense ability to go through day to day hustle and prove that they are competent innovative actors.

Most social protection programs focus more on the general idea of the presence of a crisis but fail to decipher the needs of the children and caregivers which lead to desperate and ineffective policies that to some extent make the situation worse. According to Payne (2012: 400), this preoccupation with agency has the effect of forcing social interventions without taking account the day to day experience of children and their child caregivers. Sibling-headed families are often views “ as social problems in which expressions of agency run contrary to the mainstream moral and social order in society” (Payne, 2012: 401). They are seen as a risk to the children under the care of their sibling and to society. This is argued to be because sibling-headed families are seen as deviant incubations with the capacity and probability to produce deviance in individuals who inhabit them (Guest 2003).

One of the problems with situating the needs and problems encountered in sibling-headed families is the disagreement in the research on the

prevalence of sibling-headed families. A survey done by the Ministry of Sport Youth and Child Development of Zambia shows could not identify sibling-headed families. This research is supported by results from other survey (Boerma et al., 1997; Schenk et al., 2008). This has been attributed to the limitation of the methods used especially quantitative survey methods. The documentary “ Their Brother’s Keeper” uses the more qualitative, film approach which focuses on three families. It manages to capture the concerns and needs of child caregivers more explicitly. The problem lies with policymaking since it mostly targets bigger groups, this group of sibling-families is lumped together with other orphans when policies are tabled making it difficult for effective policies to emerge and make the conditions of the children better. Another argument for the reason why sibling-headed families face difficulties in being counted is argued to be the fact that sometimes these families are transitional before a long term arrangement for the care of those children can be mapped. Qualitative methods work in enumerating the needs of child caregivers.

## **Understanding Child and Caregiver Needs**

The needs of children differ from the needs of adults. According to Sebates-Wheeler and colleagues (2009: 111), child-specific vulnerabilities emerge out of unbalanced power relations and disadvantages caused by difficulties in accessing resources (2009). Child responsibilities also differ in comparison to those of adults. Children generally lack voice in most societies. They are not mature enough to either make decisions, have a voice, rights and are often constrained by adult behavior. Besides child-specific vulnerabilities, there

are also child intensified vulnerabilities that do not affect only children but the whole population. Drought, famine and malnutrition affects both adults and children but children feel the impact of these more than adults since they interfere with learning and other necessarily basic needs of children. Evidence shows that children do experience vulnerabilities more than adults do (Sabates-Wheeler, 2009). Children's needs begin with the need for parents and protective guardians. In the absence of parents, the future of the child is disrupted. When a child who needs a parent is given the task to perform parental duties, their needs grow beyond those of a regular disadvantaged child.

A problem arises when the targeted household is led by an individual who themselves are children. Their ability to manage and budget is limited due to the fact that they are still young and have not been exposed to how money or other resources are managed. The basic economics of scarcity they barely understand yet they have to provide for the family. One researcher observes that due to the delicacy of the problems faced by children, there is often a homogeneous way of prescribing solutions to their needs which leads to ineffective policy prescriptions (Sebates-Wheeler, 2009: 110). Child vulnerabilities are often difficult to figure out and understand in households where children have adult parents or guardians. These problems become worse in situations where the supposed guardian is also a child in need of protection. How to protect the protector is a problem and understanding the protector's needs might not translate to protecting the children that the child guardian is taking care of.

The needs of vulnerable children are often intertwined with the availability or

absence of social protection. For young vulnerable children who are victims of HIV/AIDS social protection is critical in making sure that a better future is mapped and poverty is reduced. Social protection has been identified as the primary condition and agenda for reducing vulnerability and risk of low-income households with regard to basic consumption and services, has become an important part of the development discourse (Sebates-Wheeler et al., 2009: 109). The concept of social protection is understood in a as a way to provide a safety net so that individuals do not get affected by changes in income or any other social circumstance. It entails providing food and other necessary basic needs for survival. These basic means are often transferred to individuals who are believed to be in charge or control of the household in which the vulnerable children live.

It is argued that what is central to the concept of social protection is a great concern with risk reduction and vulnerability. This is achieved by developing disadvantaged individuals' capacity to evade, cope with and recover from shock (Shepherd et al., 2004: 8). Social protection should also be able to see poverty not as a static and permanent state but as a temporary life arrangement due to some unfortunate circumstances (Jones, 2008: 257). Since temporary situations have expire, so should also poverty be able to end if enough effective social protection mechanism are put in place. One of the ways this can be achieved is for policymakers to treat sibling-headed families as special cases that in essence shouldn't exist (Shepherd et al., 2004: 9). Policy should make provisions for integration of children into child support environments where adult supervision and guardian is possible. Thus informal social protection networks like friends and family and the broader

community vulnerable children live in is critical to their well-being. Without informal social protection, formal channels like government policy and elements like aid can be ineffective. The traditional conception of family in Africa goes beyond a single household. Enabling and providing access to extended family can also aid sibling-headed families in addressing vulnerability and needs problems.

## **Recommendations**

In the documentary Benny, Doris and Paul are at the mercy of limited community aid. The community and international non-profit organizations can do as much but the problem persist without government taking considerable policymakers that identify the problem as a critical social and economic problem in need of immediate government attention. As argued earlier government involvement is critical in attending to the needs to child caregivers. Social protection is also argued to refer to a broader set of policy measures that governments can adopt to deal with issues of poverty and deprivation. In the documentary we witness children being forced to make difficult choices of leaving school so that they can attend to their siblings. This is a case in which government intervention is not just needed but demanded.

Child-sensitive social protection is argued to be not only the best way to provide for sibling-headed families, it also play into the common understanding that social protection for children is a human right that needs to be honored and respected. The number of HIV/AIDS deaths in Africa has decreased over the past decade but the casualty number is still considerably



high. Child-headed families are faced with difficult odds that go beyond hunger and disease. Local communities can in conjunction with government remove the stigma of seeing sibling-headed families as a problem through engagement with affected families. Most of these young families are also vulnerable to violence and child labor practices. This is where child labor laws together with law enforcement can get actively involved.

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