

ORPHANS AND VULNERABLE CHILDREN

Trends in School Access and Experience
in Eastern and Southern Africa



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INTRODUCTION

Across sub-Saharan Africa, the AIDS pandemic has impacted children in a myriad of ways, from parental loss, to HIV infection, to increased poverty and marginalization. These children have been labeled orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) in the international development literature, and a range of interventions have provided services aiming to mitigate the impact of the crisis on human development outcomes, including education.

Now, a decade after the term OVC entered the policy lexicon, it is possible to reflect on the “orphan crisis” and the policy response, and examine how ‘vulnerability’ has shaped the educational outcomes and experiences of African children. We pose the question: is ‘orphan’ a meaningful category in understanding child vulnerability in the context of schooling?

This paper examines access to schooling and educational experiences of orphan youth, moving from a macro lens—analyses of household survey data from Lesotho, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia—to a micro lens—an in-depth secondary school survey and ethnographic study from Lesotho. We find that orphanhood itself is not predictive of lower levels of school attendance, and that there are generally more orphans enrolled in school now than there were in the past. In addition, female orphans have higher primary attendance rates than their male counterparts. A closer look at barriers to school attendance in Lesotho shows that orphans do face certain economic disadvantages, though ethnographic findings identify the lack of adult care, leading to perceived behavioral problems at school and in the community, as a key local measure of child vulnerability.

In sum, it appears that orphanhood itself is an inadequate measure of vulnerability that does little to describe the complexity of challenges facing children in eastern and southern Africa—a finding that policymakers and development practitioners would do well to consider. However, other indicators, such as the quality of adult care in the case of Lesotho, might potentially offer more meaningful measures of child vulnerability.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the literature, orphans are categorized into several categories including double orphans (those who have lost both parents), maternal orphans (those who have lost mothers), and paternal orphans (whose who have lost fathers). For the purposes of this paper, we will follow the most common definition for orphan: a child under 18 who has lost one or both parents to death. It is also important to note that, though the AIDS epidemic is responsible for the scale of the orphan crisis in sub-Saharan Africa, not all orphans are AIDS orphans.

Recent studies of orphanhood and schooling in sub-Saharan Africa demonstrate that parental death may be an inadequate indicator of educational disadvantage. Though orphans do have systematically lower educational outcomes than non-orphans, the significance of the relationship tends to be minimal after controlling for socio-economic status (Ainsworth & Filmer, 2006; Campbell et al, 2010; Lloyd & Blanc, 1996). In other words, poverty in general appears to be a more important indicator of educational disadvantage than orphanhood in particular, although they appear to be interrelated. In a review of DHS data from 11 eastern and southern African countries, Campbell et al (2010) found that household wealth, gender, and region of residence are all more important predictors of school outcomes than orphan status. In a review of over 100 datasets from 51 countries around the globe, including 35 in sub-Saharan Africa, Ainsworth and Filmer (2006) found that, in the majority of countries, the size of the orphan enrollment gap is much smaller than the gap in enrollment between children from different socio-economic backgrounds. Before the full scale of the African AIDS pandemic had been realized, Lloyd and Blanc (1996) analyzed data from DHS surveys across seven sub-Saharan African countries, and found that the characteristics of the household head, and the standard of living in the household where the child resides, were more important determinants of school enrollment and completion than whether the child was living with both parents[?].

Furthermore, evidence demonstrates that, in the African context, family support networks are so strong that they tend to mitigate the impact of orphanhood on the life chances of children (Foster, 2000; Lloyd & Blanc, 1996). However, Case et al. (2004), examining 19 DHS surveys from 10 sub-Saharan African countries, argue that the lower enrollment of orphans in Africa is not accounted for solely by their poverty: orphans are less likely to be enrolled than are non-orphans with whom they live. Qualitative studies tend to support the finding that orphans face barriers to educational participation that are different from those of non-orphans, including stigma and frequent migration between households, but also point to the need for an expanded definition of child vulnerability that encompasses all children whose lives are affected by the AIDS pandemic (Goldberg & Short, 2012; Oleke et al, 2007; van Blerk & Ansell, 2006). For example, many children whose parents are still alive are faced with responsibilities such as caring for sick relatives and working to support their families, or may become targets of abuse and discrimination. Vulnerability is difficult to define in practice, and despite a global commitment to the more inclusive definition of orphans and vulnerable children, policies still tend to single out orphans for services (Meintjes & Giese, 2006).

METHODOLOGY

This study takes a multifaceted approach, combining quantitative analyses of household survey data from five countries with a student survey administered in Lesotho. The quantitative data on student attendance and retention patterns in primary and secondary school, as well as data on secondary school experiences in Lesotho are then placed in the context of an ethnographic study conducted by Smiley (2011) in Lesotho secondary schools.

The household survey component of the study is based on data from ten Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) conducted in southern and eastern African countries between 2001 and 2010. In these datasets, orphans are identified as household members below the age of eighteen with at least one deceased parent. Most double orphans in sub-Saharan Africa become integrated into the

households of relatives or neighbors; therefore, it is likely that household survey data are representative of the majority of orphans overall. However, highly marginalized groups of orphans, such as those living on the streets, in institutions, or in informal settlements, are not represented in this component of the study. Table 1 shows the list of datasets used in this paper.

TABLE 1. DHS DATASETS USED FOR CROSS-NATIONAL SURVEY ANALYSIS

DHS Dataset	Primary Entry Age	Primary Duration	Beginning Month of Academic Year	Survey Enumeration Period
Lesotho 2004	6	7	03/2004	09/2004–01/2005
Lesotho 2009	6	7	03/2009	10/2009–01/2010
Malawi 2010	6	8	01/2010	06/2010–09/2010
Malawi 2004	6	8	01/2005	10/2004–02/2005
Tanzania 2010	7	7	01/2009 & 01/2010	12/2009–05/2010
Tanzania 2004	7	7	01/2004	10/2004–02/2005
Uganda 2001	6	7	02/2000	09/2000–03/2001
Uganda 2006	6	7	02/2006	05/2006–10/2006
Zambia 2007	7	7	01/2007	4/2007–10/2007
Zambia 2002	7	7	01/2002	11/2001–6/2002

Primary school indicators are calculated based on each country's definition of the range of ages and grades associated with primary school. Since these definitions vary across countries, the composition of 'primary-aged children' and 'primary students' is not uniform. In order to improve the accuracy of age-sensitive indicators, children's ages have been adjusted to reflect what their age would have been at the beginning of their academic calendar. In analyzing quantitative data we rely mostly on descriptive statistics, and in the case of the in-depth Lesotho student survey, on regression analysis using fixed effects modeling.

The Lesotho student survey was conducted in Lesotho in 2010, and involved a cross-section of students in the ninth year of schooling, the second year of the secondary cycle. Orphans were defined as either those who had lost one or both parents to death, or who were uncertain as to whether one or both parents were alive. Students with both living parents were classified as non-orphans. This distinction is potentially

important if one considers double orphans to be substantively different from students with unclear orphan status—however, no such differences became apparent in this study. The survey was administered to 550 students in 10 schools across Lesotho, and saw a 99 percent response rate. The schools were randomly selected from the total system of secondary schools in Lesotho, and are intended to be generally representative of average schools in the system at large. However, due to the relatively small number of the primary sampling units (schools), caution must be exercised when interpreting findings.

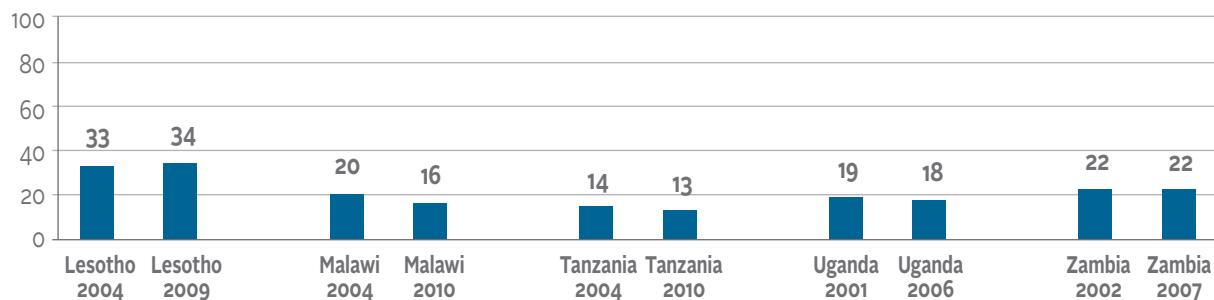
The findings are presented in the following pages. First, we use DHS data to describe broad trends in school attendance and completion for orphans for Lesotho, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia, followed by an analysis of the student survey data and a discussion of Smiley's (2011) ethnographic findings from Lesotho. The paper concludes with a brief summary of the research findings and recommendations for future research.

Primary education trends: A snapshot of five countries

We begin our analysis by examining data collected by the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) for five countries: Lesotho, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zambia, in order to determine the extent of

orphanhood among primary-aged school children in these countries, and to establish whether orphans face any systematic challenges with school enrollment and progression.

FIGURE 1. PERCENTAGE OF ORPHANS AMONG PRIMARY-AGED CHILDREN.



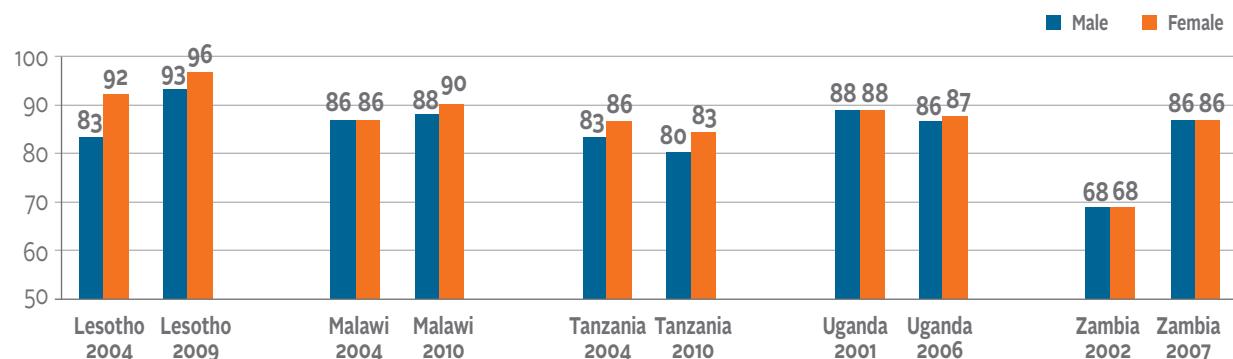
Source: Demographic Health Survey (DHS)

HIGH ENROLLMENT IN PRIMARY SCHOOL

According to the most recently conducted surveys for these countries, the percentage of primary aged children who are orphans, defined as having lost one or both parents, ranges from 13 percent in Tanzania to 33 percent in Lesotho. A comparison of multi-year household survey data suggests that the magnitude of orphanhood did not change significantly in the past several years, with the largest difference between two surveys observed in Malawi (a 4 percentage point decline over 6 years). Moreover, the percentage of orphans among children of primary school age children does not differ considerably between rural and urban areas.

Furthermore, household survey data indicates that school attendance among orphans has slightly increased (with the exception of Tanzania) and remains at a relatively high level. As Figure 2 shows, over 80 percent of both female and male orphans of primary school age attend school, with female orphans demonstrating slightly higher attendance rates in all cases. Across the data set, the lowest total net attendance rates were observed in Zambia in 2002, though Zambia has seen the largest improvement in primary school enrollment rates for orphans among the five countries. Overall, the number of primary aged orphans who are out of school ranges from 18 percent in Tanzania to 5 percent in Lesotho.

FIGURE 2. PRIMARY TOTAL NET ATTENDANCE RATE AMONG ORPHANS (%).

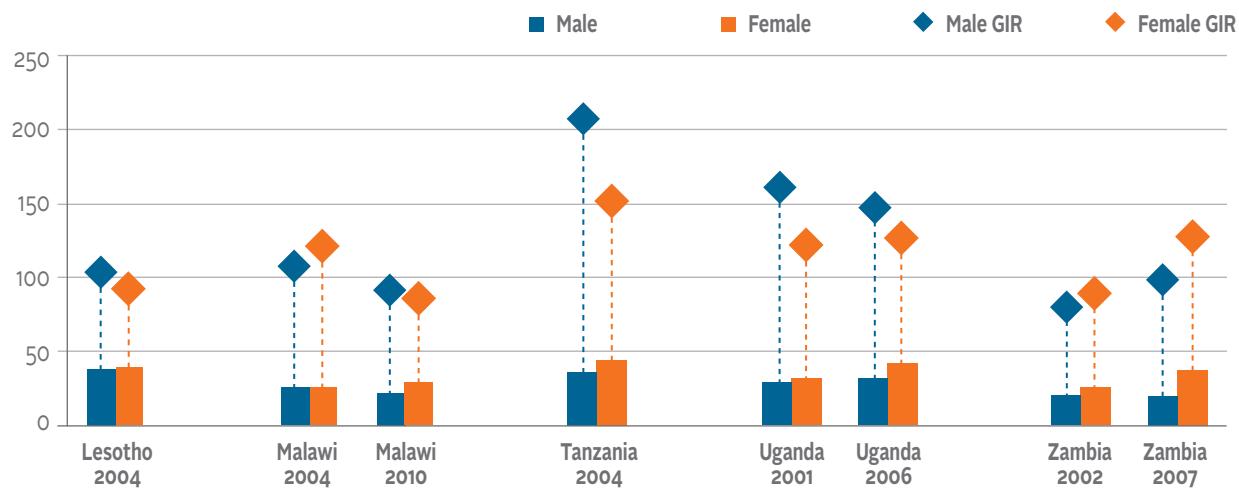


Source: DHS

Even though school attendance rates for orphans appear to be high, an analysis of gross and intake rates to Grade 1 suggests that many orphans in the five analyzed countries enroll later than the official Grade 1 age for the country (see Figure 3). The difference between the net intake rate and gross intake rate demonstrates the extent to which orphans in Grade 1 of primary school are overage. The gap between the overall level of enrollment and age-appropriate enrollment is lower for female orphans, indicating

that they are more likely to attend school on time than males, with the exception of Zambia. Still, the difference between gross and net intake rates points to the inefficiency in the education system at large, where a majority of all children—both orphans and non-orphans—do not enroll in Grade 1 on time. The high gross intake rates (GIR) may also be indicative of a country's increased effort in recent years in enrolling overage out-of-school children.

FIGURE 3. GROSS AND NET INTAKE RATES INTO GRADE 1 AMONG ORPHANS, BY GENDER.



Source: DHS

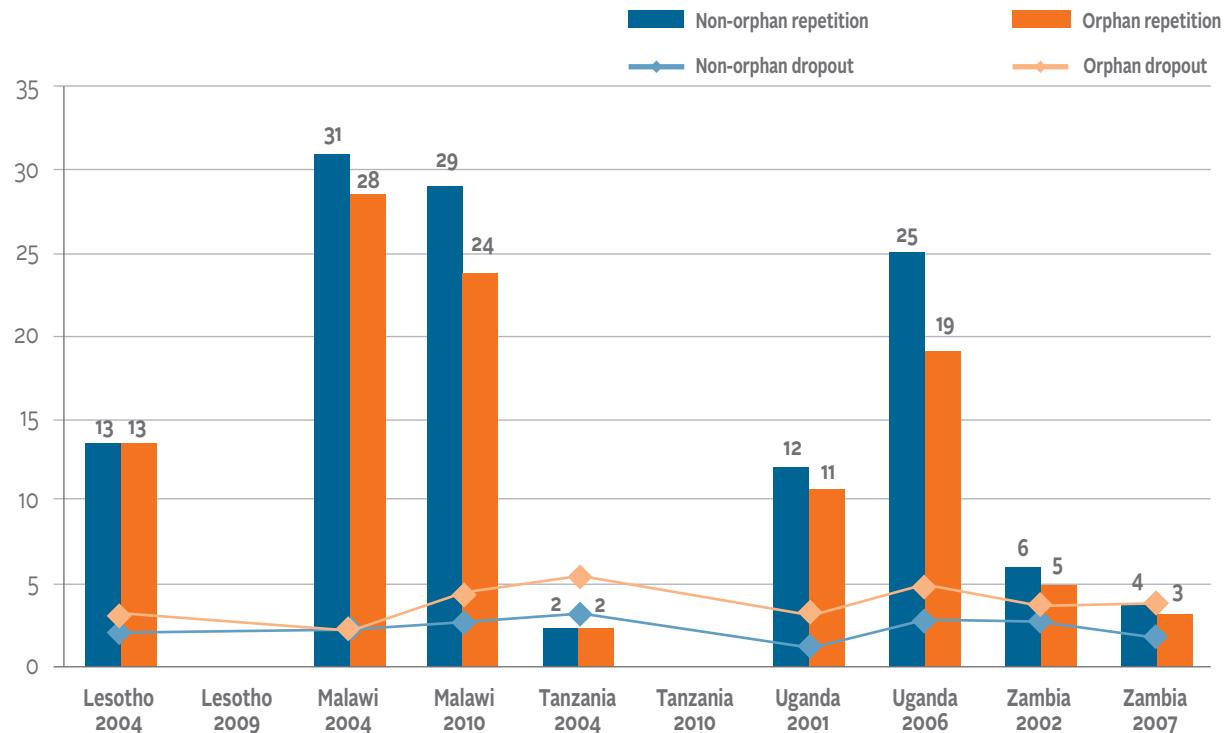
NO SUBSTANTIVE DIFFERENCES WITH NON-ORPHANS

Not only are the proportions of orphans attending primary school fairly high, they are also not substantially different from school access statistics for non-orphan children. In all countries, we found that net attendance rates for the two groups are within two percentage points of each other. Primary gross attendance rates are nearly equal for orphans and non-orphans in three countries (Malawi, Tanzania, and Zambia), but in two others (Lesotho and Uganda), primary gross attendance by orphans is higher than that for non-orphans.

Taken together, these data suggest that, among children who are of the correct age for primary school, orphaned children are just as likely to be attending primary school as non-orphaned children. However, primary schools in Lesotho and Uganda also include significant populations of orphans who are older than the official age for their grade. There are two

possible explanations for a large population of overage students in the school system—older orphaned children who had not previously attended school are now at an older age, or orphans are entering primary school on time but are repeating grades more often, and aging within the system. In Uganda, the additional population of overage orphan students appears to be related to overage school entry rather than repetition rates. Once in school, orphans actually appear to be equally or less likely to repeat a grade than non-orphans. Drop-out rates are, on the other hand, slightly higher for orphans, but the magnitude of the difference registered by the household survey is not large—up to three percentage points out of a combined 3-5 percent drop-out rate as seen in Figure 4. A possible explanation is that, when facing a challenge, non-orphans are more likely to repeat a grade, while orphans are more likely to exit the system.

FIGURE 4. REPETITION AND DROPOUT RATES BY ORPHAN STATUS.



Source: DHS

LESOTHO: A REGIONAL SUCCESS STORY?

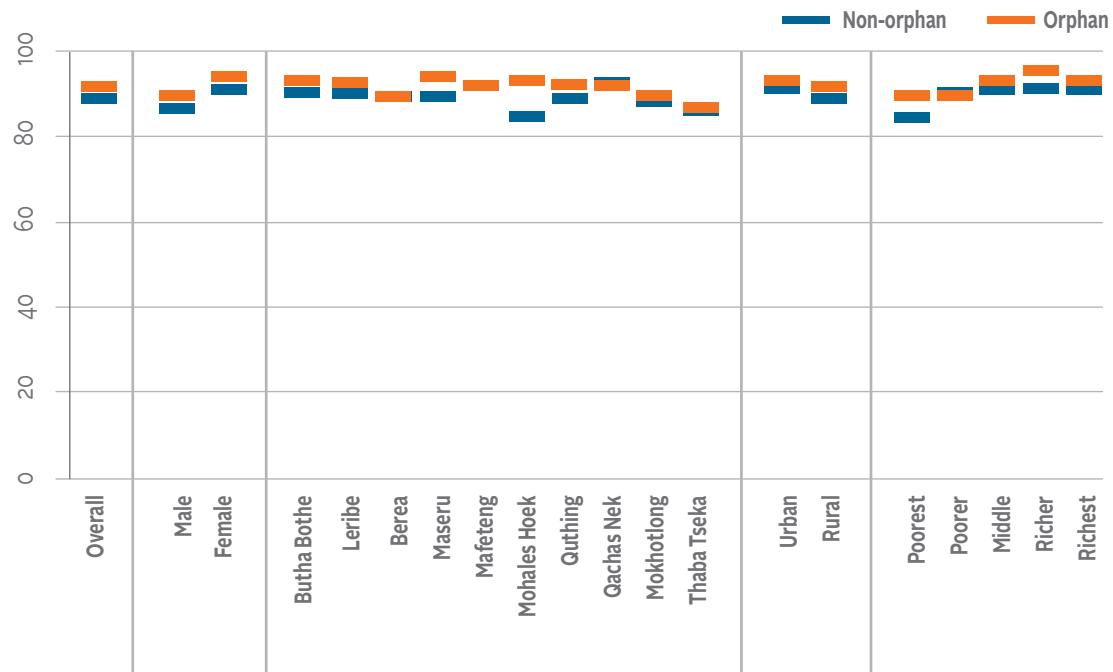
As Figure 5 demonstrates, in 2009, Lesotho's orphans were attending school at a slightly higher rate than non-orphans: 92 and 94 percent, respectively. It may seem counterintuitive that orphans are more likely to attend primary school, regardless of their gender, wealth status, or geographic area of residence, but in Lesotho, the latest household data shows a slight advantage for orphans in nearly every case. The greatest difference between orphans and non-orphans can be seen in Mohale's Hoek, followed by the Maseru region, where the difference is nearly 10 percentage points.

While it would be premature to call Lesotho an unequivocal success story with respect to the school enrollment of orphans, these data are certainly reassuring: we do not observe any disadvantage experienced by orphans in primary education, at these levels of subnational aggregation. However, this also confirms an important finding: in the African context, orphan status does not necessarily equal vulnerability.

Thus, while many support programs target orphans specifically, it is questionable to conclude that orphans are the most vulnerable category of children. On the other hand, it is possible that orphaned children are doing so well in school precisely because they have been targeted for services.

As we conclude that there are no notable differences between orphans and non-orphans in primary school—which arguably has been the focus on most international efforts on expanding access to education—we seek to understand whether this pattern is unique to the primary level or extends beyond it. By taking a closer look at a secondary school system from the region, we hope to identify what, if any, barriers or challenges exist for older orphans as they make their way through secondary into the labor market or tertiary education. In the next section, we explore this issue in more depth by examining data on secondary school attendance and experience in Lesotho.

FIGURE 5. SCHOOL ATTENDANCE RATES IN LESOTHO.



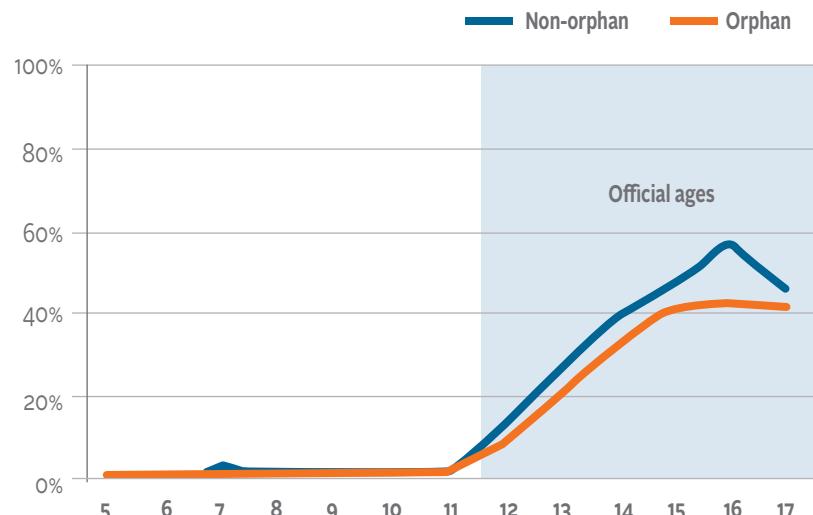
School Experiences of Orphans in Lesotho Secondary schools

SECONDARY SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

Although orphans of each age group are marginally more likely than non-orphans to attend primary school in Lesotho, according to DHS data, the trend is reversed at the secondary level, where non-orphans attend in higher proportions than orphans, as seen in Figure 6 . As the data from primary school systems demonstrates (Figure 4 above), orphans are more likely than non-orphans to drop out of primary school and never reach secondary, than to repeat a grade. Further, not only are orphans less likely to attend secondary school in Lesotho, but their probability

of dropping out while in secondary is greater with older students: the difference is more than 10 percentage points at age 16, which is closer to the end of secondary cycle in Lesotho. Nonetheless, it is important to note that both orphans and non-orphans in Lesotho may enroll in secondary school at much older ages than officially defined as appropriate. In the student sample drawn for the student survey in Lesotho's secondary schools, the student age ranged from 13 to 23.

FIGURE 6. PERCENTAGE OF ORPHANS AND NON-ORPHANS ATTENDING SECONDARY SCHOOL, BY AGE (AGES 5-17).



Source: DHS

STUDENT SURVEY

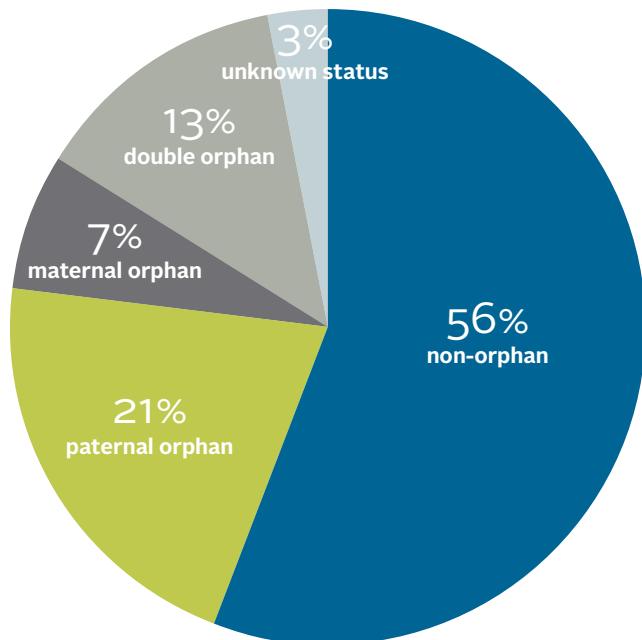
Turning to a closer look at secondary student survey data from Lesotho, we seek to better understand the experiences of orphans as secondary school students, and identify the differences between them and their peers. Figure 7 presents the breakdown of the student sample by family status. As can be seen in the graphic, a large proportion of the surveyed students in Lesotho have experienced some form of family disruption: either one or both of their parents had died, or they were unaware whether or not their parents were alive. This distribution roughly corresponds to the actual prevalence of orphanhood in Lesotho as noted by nationwide household surveys (34% at primary level, see Figure 1 above), in large part resulting from the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

At the same time, the fact that orphans are able to attend secondary school in such large numbers may be a tribute to the support structures currently in place, including a government-funded secondary

level scholarship program targeting OVC. The true proportion of orphans may be best reflected by the household survey data in Figure 6, which provides a bigger-picture view on the likelihood of orphans to enter secondary schools.

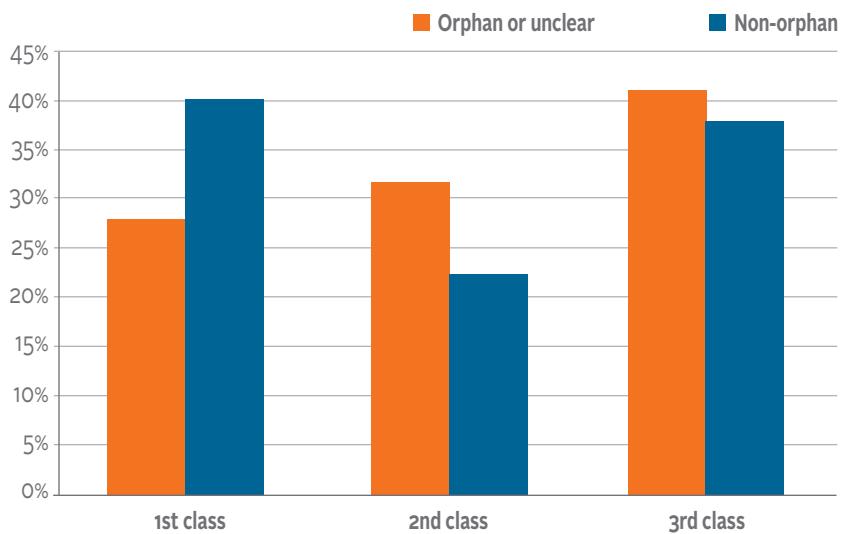
As we examine the population of orphans enrolled in secondary in Lesotho, we noticed the different academic starting levels of the children. Orphans and students with unclear parental status (grouped together for the purposes of this analysis) are less likely to attain Standard 1 grades (the highest performance level) on the primary leaving exam, and are distinctively more likely to attain Standard 3 (the lowest passing level). Still, the differences between these students and non-orphans are not as stark as one might expect, potentially due to the self-selection of more academically capable orphans to attend secondary school.

FIGURE 7. DISTRIBUTION OF STUDENTS BY ORPHAN STATUS IN STUDENT SURVEY SAMPLE.



Source: Smiley 2011

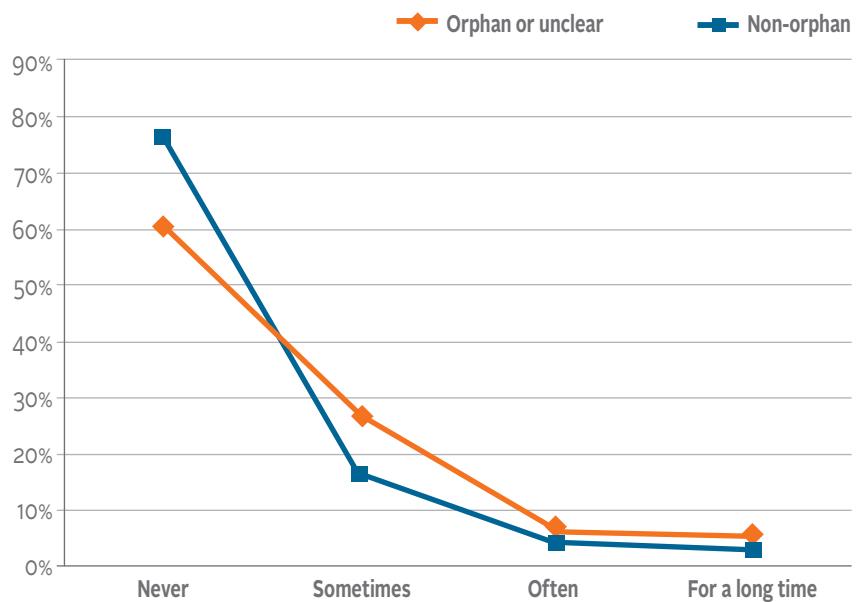
FIGURE 8. PERFORMANCE ON PRIMARY LEAVING EXAM BY ORPHAN STATUS IN LESOTHO.



Once students are enrolled in secondary school, it is important to understand whether their experiences differ depending on their orphan status. For example, orphans might miss school more often than non-orphans because of family hardship, discrimination, and/or unfriendly learning environments. A group-level analysis of orphans and students with unclear

family status compared with their non-orphaned peers showed that, generally, there are no stark differences in the level of reported non-attendance. However, orphans reported that they were more likely to miss school for economic reasons, such as having no money to pay for school fees or having insufficient food at home (Figure 9).

FIGURE 9. MISSED SCHOOL DUE TO LACK OF FOOD.

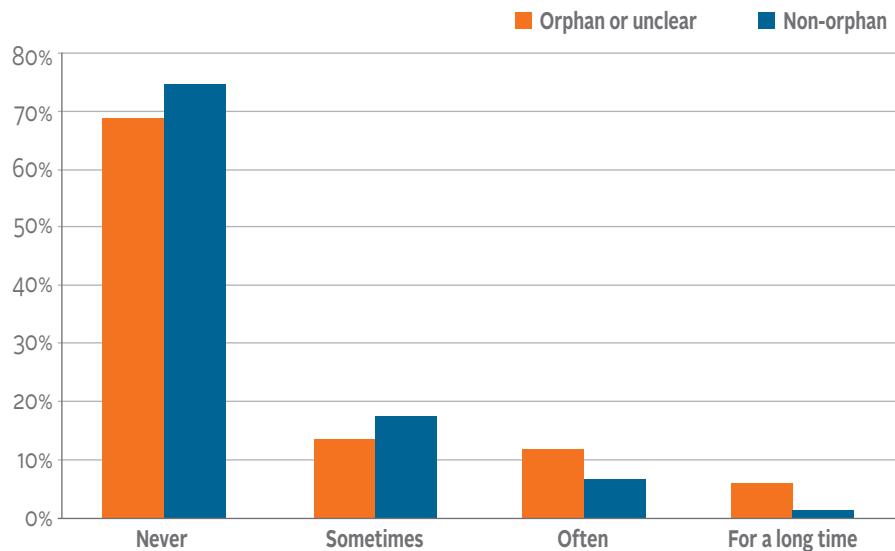


In particular, less than 40 percent of orphans are likely to have missed school due to lack of food since starting secondary, compared to only 23 percent of non-orphans—making the probability of missing school for that reason 50 percent greater for orphans. When the clustered nature of the sample is adjusted through fixed effects regression modeling, where only within-school variation is taken into account, the difference in probability of missing school due to lack of food declines to 30 percent higher among orphans—both a statistically and substantively significant difference between the groups. In other words, orphans enrolled in secondary school are more likely to report missing

school than their non-orphaned peers because of lack of food.

Among other factors affecting school attendance, as reported by the students across the entire sample, is, “unfair treatment by teachers” (Figure 10). Orphans, on average, were more likely to perceive that teachers were mistreating them, and cite that as a reason for missing school. The probability of teacher mistreatment causing nonattendance was 15 percentage points higher for orphans in the sample. The error variance surrounding this estimate was, however, too great to be able to generalize this relationship to the population at large.

FIGURE 10. MISSED SCHOOL DUE TO [UNFAIR]BAD TREATMENT BY TEACHER.



PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

All students, without a substantive difference by orphan status, expected to continue their education at the university level (97 percent). Perhaps this was due to the fact that if students (orphan or non-orphan) reached secondary school, they were already motivated to attain the highest possible level of education. Furthermore, approximately 91 percent of all students, including 90 percent of orphans, expected to land a well-paying job as a result of their schooling. At the same time, however, over half of all survey respondents indicated plans for leaving Lesotho upon completion of their studies (53 percent of the sample), and orphans were slightly more likely to want to do so (59 percent). This demonstrates that, while students place a high economic value on their secondary education; they do not feel assured of their ability to maximize their potential while remaining in their home country. Lesotho's close connection with its economically powerful neighbor, South Africa, makes leaving the country a real possibility.

Once again, we find that the data do not support a substantive disadvantage facing orphans in secondary school, though orphans do appear to be more likely to face challenges related to poverty—indicated by proxies such as lack of food and money for school fees. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the context of the secondary school experience for Lesotho orphan youth, we turn to the Smiley (2011) ethnographic study, which shines a brighter light on the challenges facing orphans in their everyday school routines.

Understanding the context: An in-depth look at Lesotho

Smiley (2011) conducted an ethnographic study over a nine-month period, from August 2009 through April 2010, in a rural village in Lesotho. The study aimed to answer the following research question: At the secondary level, how does 'vulnerability' shape the educational participation and home life of young Basotho? The researcher purposefully selected one typical secondary school in rural Lesotho to serve as a case study. School-based observation on a variety of themes and activities were carefully recorded, and in-depth interviews were conducted with approximately twenty teachers and administrators. A group of students in the ninth year of schooling was at the heart of the study, representing double orphans, single orphans, non-orphans facing other significant life challenges such as ill or abusive parents, and children with no outward signs of such challenges. The group met twice weekly to write on themes related to their lives. The researcher collected 113 diary entries on ten topics from eighteen students, also visiting most of the children at home and interviewing each of them in depth.

Ethnographic research findings demonstrated that, locally, child vulnerability, referred to by all participants as "neediness," was related not to parental death, but to the absence of a strong caregiver in the child's home, whether a parent, other relative, or non-relative. According to both adult and child research participants, a strong caregiver was defined as one that provides children with material support as well as behavioral guidance, leading the child to 1) appear physically well cared for and 2) follow local norms of appropriate child behavior. Child behavioral norms were locally described as a submissive attitude and respect for the absolute authority of adults. According to research participants, children lacking strong adult caregivers tended to resist these childhood norms, displaying an attitude of stubbornness that was locally defined as an unwillingness to submit to

adult control and act properly. Stubborn children also had a tendency to engage in behaviors considered the domain of adults: both positive (such as income generation and caring for family members) and negative (such as pre-marital sex and alcohol abuse).

Locally, neediness was not equated with poverty—even very poor children, living with a good caregiver, were not considered to be truly needy, and were not expected to have stubborn behavior. A double orphan living with a caregiving aunt was not needy, but a child with a father working in South Africa and an alcoholic mother, and no other strong caregivers around was needy. Thus, in Lesotho, orphanhood and vulnerability (neediness) are not one and the same. Importantly, stubborn children were assumed to be needy because of their "bad" behavior, and children without strong adult caregivers were expected to be stubborn.

The theme of stubbornness was strongly related to this local definition of vulnerability. Though it played out in a variety of ways in children's lives, stubbornness was particularly evident on the school grounds, where strict rules required students to conform to local ideas about child behavior. Vulnerable children tended to act in conscious opposition to school rules and adult authority, and as a result, were more often targeted by teachers for corporal punishment. For example, an orphaned 18 year-old research student involved in the study was beaten for wearing a hat that did not match the school uniform. Speaking Sesotho rather than English on the school grounds, allowing one's hair to grow too long, talking during the morning assembly, being late to school, talking back to teachers, and failing to do what was asked by an adult were all common examples of the 'stubborn' behavior associated with needy students. Observation and interview data revealed that these students were likely to consider dropping out of school rather than face daily confrontations with teachers.

Thus, it was clear that needy children have a qualitatively different educational experience than those with strong adult caregivers at home, with particular challenges related to the school environment. In Lesotho's schools, the dependence on corporal punishment and expectations that children will conform to strict standards of obedience appears to increase the likelihood that needy children will drop out of the system—even while government policies aim to increase secondary school access for the same group of children.

Conclusion and Agenda for Future Research

This mixed-methods study provides both a macro and micro lens to examine one complex development challenge: schooling for orphans and vulnerable children in sub-Saharan Africa. By triangulating the literature and a variety of data sources, including a set of DHS household surveys and a student survey and ethnographic data from Lesotho (Smiley, 2011), a clear pattern has emerged: orphanhood, per se, is not a very strong predictor of vulnerability, at least in relation to educational participation. Poverty in general, and lack of adult care in particular, appear to be more strongly associated with educational challenges than orphanhood, and it is the overlap between these categories that often leads them to be used interchangeably. Thus, to answer our original research question, it does not appear that 'orphan' itself is a particularly meaningful category in understanding child vulnerability in the context of schooling.

So how does one define child vulnerability if it is not

based on orphanhood? One of the major lessons that can be drawn from this study is that, to some extent, all children who live in poverty, particularly those in AIDS-affected environments, can be considered vulnerable, though different groups of children will face a range of challenges in different contexts.

Another lesson relates to the negative impact of strict school environments on the healthy development of children, particularly those without strong caregivers. More research should certainly be done, at both the macro and micro levels, to determine better ways to measure different types of child vulnerability, moving beyond the basic indicator of orphanhood towards more holistic and localized definitions. As ethnographic data in Lesotho revealed, local ideas about childhood and vulnerability can lead to new understandings that lend themselves to meaningful policy solutions.

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