



# Vulnerability of HIV/AIDS orphans to floods in Malawi

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## ABSTRACT

Referred to as the ‘forgotten casualties’ of climate change (Cutter 1995), very few studies have examined the precise nature and magnitude of climate change impacts on children, let alone on the growing number of orphans and vulnerable children in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), where climate change is already expected to exact its worst humanitarian toll. This paper examines personal, familial, and contextual circumstances that arise when children lose their parents to HIV/AIDS and how these situations mediate exposure to the impacts of climate-related disasters. Using the case of flash floods that occurred in Malawi in 2015, and drawing on perspectives from political ecology and social vulnerability theory, the findings of a qualitative study ( $n = 51$ ) suggest that orphans’ vulnerability to floods was mediated by a number of specific circumstances. These include pre-existing physical health status of surviving parent or guardian, domestic roles they inherited following incapacitation or death of a parent, and social norms governing property inheritance within the traditional extended family system. In addition, the findings also show that the floods shattered livelihoods, forcing orphans into prolonged engagement in exploitative labour pursuits. Furthermore, the findings show that the rainstorm also swept away mementos left behind by parents, with profound effect on orphans’ emotional wellbeing, which affected their interpretation of the meaning of the disaster. The study underscores (i) the potential of climate change to re-configure social relations and entrench orphans’ subordinate status (ii) the historical specificity of the factors that mediate the effects of climate change on children.

## 1. Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that climate change will disproportionately impact children. According to UNICEF, more than half a billion children currently live in areas with extremely high flood occurrence, leaving them highly exposed to the impact of climate change (UNICEF, 2015). However, because climate change has such variable impacts even among individuals in the same community, area, region or country, it does not affect all children equally. Climate-induced disasters that may have little or no effect on some children could have shattering effect on other groups of children.

This paper seeks to contribute to the literature on climate change by examining personal, familial, and contextual situations that arise when children lose one or both parents to HIV/AIDS and how these circumstances amplify exposure to the impacts of extreme weather events. Although not specifically focussed on children, a number of studies have generally shown that different groups of people face different degrees of exposure to and prospects of recovery from climate disasters, mediated by socially defined roles and responsibilities (Cannon, 2002; Sugden et al., 2014). Factors that underpin unequal social impacts of climatic disasters include socioeconomic status, age and geographic location. In a study on flooding in urban Lagos, Nigeria, for instance,

women faced not just excessive exposure to but also slower recovery from flash floods. The same study, however, also indicates that among the women affected, the impact of the floods was not uniform; it considerably varied by physical location or place of residence of the women (Ajibade et al., 2013).

Similarly, examining the impacts of and responses to extreme flooding in coastal and floodplains of Bangladesh, Sultana (2010) found variations in impacts structured along the lines of gender and socioeconomic status. Again, although this study was not about children, it serves as an important reminder of the highly uneven impacts of climate change. In fact, the study shows that communities in Bangladesh perceive and relate differently to different types of floods depending on the timing and longevity the flooding. These communities distinguish between seasonal floods that are cyclical in occurrence and beneficial in terms of enriching valleys, irrigating crop-fields and maintaining hydrological balance on the one hand, and prolonged floods which are irregular and unpredictable and, typically detested, because they destroy infrastructure, crops and livelihoods, on the other. This study further found that when prolonged floods occur, women emerge worse off because of a tendency among husbands to mortgage off their wives’ possessions, such as kitchenware, jewelry, utensils, and livestock, as the first line of defence against livelihood stress in the immediate aftermath

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of the flooding. While by no means exhaustive, these studies highlight differential impact of climate-induced disasters.

A key principle guiding policy efforts geared toward improving climate change adaptation is the need to prioritize the needs of vulnerable groups. Children as a group with social, cultural and political status distinct from adults are especially vulnerable to the impacts of climate change (Cutter 1995; Bartlett, 2008). HIV/AIDS orphans or children living in HIV-affected families are, however, even more vulnerable.

Thus, the conceptual rationale guiding this paper is that the negative impacts of extreme weather events such as floods are likely to be more burdensome on social groups who already have pre-existing vulnerabilities. To that effect, research from other domains has identified specific aspects of HIV/AIDS orphans' personal lives and social circumstances that make them overly vulnerable, but how these circumstances might increase or mediate the vulnerability of these children to the impacts of climate change remains unknown. For instance, studies have shown that HIV/AIDS affected families tend to be extremely poor. The long period of illness that typically precedes HIV-related death drains household resources and assets, sometimes leaving the children in debt (Whiteside, 2002). If one parent survives, they usually also have HIV/AIDS, which makes them dependent on the children for nursing care, nutrition, and emotional support. This situation forces the children to assume adult roles and responsibilities prematurely (Evans and Becker, 2009; Bauman et al., 2006). If both parents are deceased, the children are likely to be placed in poor households, usually female-headed, or to be fostered by grandparents, who themselves may in different ways depend on the same orphans e.g. for food, chores or farm labour (Mkandawire et al., 2014; Chirwa, 2002). After the death of biological parents, the transition to being parentless is typically uncertain and rough for the orphaned children, often marked by violence, property grabbing and forced evictions by paternal relatives (Zagheni, 2011; Izumi, 2007). While not exhaustive, the foregoing highlights unique attributes of orphans that can mediate exposure to the impacts of climate change.

Although is still thin, there is a growing body of literature that is examining the issue of vulnerability of children in SSA within the context of complex interaction of multiple stressors and causal links that incorporates HIV/AIDS and climate change as components of an array of the key stressors. The study by Drimie and Casale (2008), for instance, shows that HIV/AIDS hampers the ability of families and communities to rally from the impacts of stressors such as extreme weather events. In addition, HIV/AIDS particularly reduces the ability of families to make livelihood choices that focus beyond immediate survival needs, making it difficult for households to engage in long-term planning that would secure the future of their children (Drimie and Casale, 2009). Generally, the interactions between HIV/AIDS and climate change and the implications of this interface for children are evident by the fact that AIDS devours household- and community-level capacity, as well as the capacity of institutions such as state and civil society to support livelihoods (Drimie and Gillespie, 2010; Shackleton and Shackleton, 2012).

The present study builds on these studies to extend the literature on the interaction between HIV/AIDS and climate change to the realm of orphans, as a special group of vulnerable children. Already expected to experience the worst impacts of climate change, SSA is home to 80% of children orphaned by HIV/AIDS (Parry, 2007; Watson et al., 1998). Many countries in SSA have a large number of orphans. For instance, 10% of the population in Malawi are orphans. South African and Uganda each has 7% of its national population as orphans (UNAIDS, 2014). This implies that efforts to address the question of climate change adaptation in SSA would have to take into account the needs and challenges of this growing demographic. The current paper adds to this literature by examining how orphanhood increases vulnerability to the impacts of climatic events through the lens of flash floods that took place in Malawi in 2015.

## 2. Political ecology approach

This study draws on the political ecology framework to examine the vulnerability of orphans to the impacts of climate change. Political ecology brings together historical, structural, and spatial aspects of vulnerability to the impacts of climate change into a single analytical framework. It also seeks to demonstrate how exposure to and risk of climate change impacts is socially and politically produced and maintained (Adger, 1999; Rocheleau, 2008). Within the context of this study, for instance, orphans' vulnerability to climate-induced disasters could be understood as socially- and politically-produced (Forster et al., 2005; Kalipeni et al., 2004), as resulting from lack of appropriate support systems and resources to reduce the exposure to the impacts of the floods. Another key point is that exposure and vulnerability to climate change is often unevenly distributed. Different groups of people face varying degrees of exposure and vulnerability, depending on the nature and degree of access to support systems and resources needed to prepare for, moderate, or reduce the adverse effects of climate change (Blaike et al., 1999; Robbins, 2011). Typically, vulnerability results from failure of individuals or groups of individuals to rally from exogenous shocks emanating from interplay of causal forces and multiple processes operating at local, national and global scale.

Vulnerability is also located within complex link between political economy, kinship systems, social traditions and cultural politics (Blaikie, 2008; Robbins, 2011). This highlights the role of social power in shaping vulnerability to climate change (Pelling, 1999), including aspects of societal organization such as social mores, traditional beliefs, kindred networks, resource entitlements, and socially constructed rules governing property inheritance dictate the nature of support systems and resources available to orphans to protect themselves from the impacts of climate change.

In societies with deep social inequities, women tend to face greater exposure to risk and have lower capacity to mitigate the impacts of disasters. A feminist political ecology standpoint is thus required to better understand how vulnerability to climate change impacts is mediated by gender differentiated risk and opportunities that men and women encounter in their daily life (Rocheleau et al., 2013; Bezner-Kerr, 2005). Gender norms and roles, for instance, interact with place, socioeconomic and environmental conditions to structure the impacts of climate change for male and female orphans differently. Feminist political ecology also represents a marked departure from a dualistic understanding of gender to one whose precise meaning stems from its intersection with other identities, roles and responsibilities. It also rejects the notion of women as an undifferentiated group by drawing attention to the varied dimensions of power and context in which gender interacts with other structural factors such as class, race and culture to shape people's experience of the impacts of disasters (Rocheleau et al., 2013).

## 3. Malawi: physiographic and socioecologic context

The effects of climate change in Malawi manifest themselves in various ways, including intense but sporadic rainfall, seasonal floods, droughts and prolonged dry spells. The social impacts of climate change in Malawi is within the context of other persistent structural problems, especially poverty and income inequality, chronic household food security and high rates of HIV/AIDS. More than 70% of the population lives in the rural areas as subsistence farmers and the national per capita income is about \$300. Estimates suggest that 75% of Malawians live on less than \$2/day and HIV/AIDS prevalence is currently at 10.6%. Malawi has more than 1.3 million orphans (Malawi Government, 2014). Food insecurity is persistent due to poor weather conditions but also due to historical reasons linked to structural adjustment programs (SAPs). These economic reforms have created a number of problems including the deterioration of peasant agriculture. To cope with the ongoing welfare decline, Malawians increasingly

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