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To cite this article: Erick Otieno Nyambedha & Jens Aagaard-Hansen (2010) Educational consequences of orphanhood and poverty in western Kenya, *Educational Studies*, 36:5, 555-567, DOI: [10.1080/03055691003728981](https://doi.org/10.1080/03055691003728981)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03055691003728981>



Published online: 06 May 2010.



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Educational consequences of orphanhood and poverty in western Kenya

Erick Otieno Nyambedha^{a*} and Jens Aagaard-Hansen^b

^a*Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Maseno University, Maseno, Kenya;* ^b*Steno Diabetes Health Promotion Center, Copenhagen, Denmark*

During the past decades, many developing countries have been severely hit by a combination of poverty and the HIV pandemic. However, there has been a debate about the relative contribution of these two factors. This study showed that poverty and orphanhood were two separate but interrelated factors contributing to poor schooling. There were no differentials shown based on double orphanhood or gender. We recommend that educational policies should put into consideration both poverty and orphanhood in order to increase schooling access for children affected by HIV/AIDS and poverty.

Keywords: education; Kenya; HIV/AIDS; orphanhood; poverty; schooling

Introduction

The HIV/AIDS pandemic has been recognised globally not only as a health problem but also as a political problem (UNICEF 2002). More than 15 million children have been orphaned by AIDS globally – out of whom 12 million live in sub-Saharan Africa (UNICEF 2002). One of the consequences of this pandemic has been a viscous cycle between AIDS and poverty in the affected families (Republic of Kenya/UNDP 1999), and the extended family networks are not able to support the increasing number of orphaned children due to lack of resources (Nyambedha 2000; UNICEF 2003). In 1999, the National AIDS Council reported 860,000 AIDS orphans in Kenya (UNICEF 2001, 25). In 1997, 25 million children of primary-school-going age were not in school in sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank 2000 cited in Ainsworth and Filmer 2002, 1).

During the past decade, the relative importance of poverty in general and the death of parents in particular for schooling in sub-Saharan Africa has been debated among scholars and studies have reached divergent conclusions (Bennell 2005, 478–9; Evans and Miguel 2007, 36). Bicego and Kiersten (2003) have conducted a meta-analysis of selected countries in sub-Saharan Africa. They pointed out the importance of considering the individual differences between the countries including the “maturity of the epidemic” (Bicego and Kiersten 2003, 1238). This point was endorsed by Ainsworth and Filmer (2002) who also stated that poverty differentials were more important than orphanhood in its own right. In contrast, a longitudinal study by Evans and Miguel (2007) shows a distinct negative effect on school participation both before and after parental death. A review of literature, published in sub-Saharan Africa, on the impact

*Corresponding author. Email: nyambedha@maseno.ac.ke

of orphanhood on school enrolment shows mixed results. While it is hypothesised that orphans are less likely to be in school than non-orphans, this review commissioned by USAID (see, e.g., Chatterji et al. 2005) shows that the findings of the completed studies do not consistently support this assumption. This implies that orphanhood *per se* might not influence the current level of school enrolment in sub-Saharan Africa (see also Family Health International/Youthnet 2005).

In Zambia, where the government does not provide free primary education to children, studies have been conducted to investigate schooling prospects for orphans and non-orphans both in rural and urban areas (UNICEF/UNAIDS 1999). Given the high poverty level in Zambia, it is argued that parents and guardians find it extremely difficult to meet the needs of schooling for children. Enrolment rates for orphans were observed to be slightly higher in rural areas (48%) as compared to urban areas where only 32% of the orphans attend school (UNICEF/UNAIDS 1999, 17). In a study in Uganda, Barnett and Blaikie (1992, 123) observed that many parents could not afford school levies charged by Parent Teacher Associations (PTA). They observed that while it was a struggle for parented children to stay in school, this struggle seemed much greater for orphans. However, many parents insisted that every child must pay the fee and that commutation for the orphans might create a privileged class of educated orphans. In a similar study in Zimbabwe on child labour and schooling, Bourdillon (2000) underscored the importance of children's work to earn a living and also maintain themselves in school. Children who have worked as street food vendors in Harare have helped to raise a family income for their parents and also paid some of the school levies as well as purchasing schooling requirements. A Tanzanian study which compared the position of orphans, non-orphaned foster children and children living with their parents found similar rates of schooling for all the three categories of children in the younger age range. Interestingly, school enrolment rates for older, non-orphan foster children were similar to those of the orphans (Urassa et al. 1997, quoted in Harber 1999, 60). This is a reminder that all children who are separated from their parents are likely to experience disadvantages with regard to schooling. This view is also supported by a Zimbabwean study which showed that children living in households headed by relatives fare worse than those living with parental heads (Family Health International/Youthnet 2005). Thus, it is necessary to understand the context in which children and their caretakers live and the challenges they face. This may have consequences for the children's schooling, for example, the extent to which children are required to contribute to family income due to poverty.

Earlier studies carried out in the study area (Nyambedha 2000; Nyambedha, Wandibba, and Aagaard-Hansen 2001) have shown that schooling was one of the most serious problems faced by orphaned children. A comparative study of perceived health needs for orphan households (OHH) and non-orphan households (non-OHH) in the same community did not show significant differences in the level of need between OHH and non-OHH. The study instead pointed to general poverty levels in the studied households as the main constraint to the welfare of orphans and non-orphans in this community (Nyambedha and Aagaard-Hansen 2002). Poverty in the study community affected the overall ability of the extended family to assist the orphans (Nyambedha, Wandibba, and Aagaard-Hansen 2001). Under circumstances where the number of orphans increases dramatically, the traditional (and often kinship-based) ways of catering for them are saturated and other unconventional categories take over (Nyambedha, Wandibba, and Aagaard-Hansen 2003a).

The present paper uses ethnographic data obtained from an anthropological study of the challenges that the orphans due to the AIDS pandemic encounter in their efforts to remain in school. The paper uses the ethnographic approach to case analysis to explain the challenges that the orphans face when they attend schools in a rural setting in western Kenya. It shows how the experiences that the orphans of school-going age undergo in western Kenya (due to frequent migratory practices and change of residences as well as poor living conditions in the households) point gaps to the existing policy on free primary education in Kenya.

Study area and population

This study was conducted in Nyang'oma division in Bondo district along the shores of Lake Victoria in western Kenya. The majority of the inhabitants have a Luo ethnic background. The main economic activity of the area is subsistence farming with additional income based on fishing, small-scale gold mining, small-scale trade and migrant work. The dominant religions are Anglican and Roman Catholic though there are a number of minor, syncretic sects and traditional congregations as well. In the area, there are five primary schools of which one is a boarding school for girls run by the local Catholic mission. There is also one secondary boarding school for boys in the study area.

The study population included children dropping out of a local primary school over a two-year period and selected members (caretakers and children) of OHH and non-OHH in the surrounding community.

Methodology

We define an orphan as a person less than 18 years of age who has lost one or both parents. A household is seen as a group of people living in the same house and sharing food from the same kitchen.

The study, which is based on multiple methods, has two main sources of data – a longitudinal, school-based dropout study and a cross-sectional household survey. The longitudinal, school-based study was conducted in a local primary school over a two-year period. A pupil who had missed school for two consecutive weeks was considered a dropout and consequently recruited into the study. However, some of these either resumed later or went to other schools (in which case it could sometimes be difficult to get clear information). In all dropout cases, semi-structured interviews were conducted with regular intervals with the children and their caretakers (if available) as well as with the relevant teachers. Forty-eight primary school dropouts were identified and consequently followed in the year 2000, while in the year 2001 there were 40 pupils. Later on, a follow-up was done to assess how many of the children initially leaving school resumed school and how many remained permanent school dropouts.

The households in the cross-sectional household survey were selected on the basis of a stepwise sampling procedure. Based on a population census in 1997, 465 households were randomly selected for a survey conducted in 1999. This survey led to basic knowledge about household composition and made it possible to classify the households as either OHH or non-OHH. Orphan households were defined as households which had at least orphaned child among its members either as a result of the death of one of the parents within the household itself or because orphans were “accepted”

from outside the households. Non-OHHs were defined as those that did not accommodate any orphaned child. In 2000, a total of 168 households (84 OHHs and 84 non-OHHs) were purposively sampled and matched based on demographic features such as number of children, age of children, sex and age of caretakers in OHHs and non-OHHs. In particular, the similarity of the caretakers and of the pair of "index-children" (one orphan in an OHH and one non-orphan in a non-OHH) was emphasised. Four similar but not identical questionnaires were used. The four questionnaire categories were directed to caretakers of OHHs, caretakers of non-OHHs, orphans (in OHHs) and non-orphans in non-OHHs. The questionnaires were developed in English and later translated into the local language, *Dholuo*, and pilot tested. The first author is a native speaker of *Dholuo*.

The questionnaires had both closed and open-ended questions covering basic socio-demographic information as well as various aspects of livelihood for orphans and non-orphans in the households under study. One of the problem areas (on which this paper is based) was children's schooling. Seventy-four orphans and non-orphans were matched from the two categories of households (OHHs and non-OHHs) for analysis.

Quantitative data were analysed using SPSS version 10.0 to obtain frequencies and cross-tabulations for some selected variables and significance tests were done based on chi-square with Yates Continuity Correction. Qualitative data from school dropout follow-up were analysed through content analysis where various responses were coded and categorised into themes.

Results

The school-based data

An enumeration exercise carried out in the study school in 2002 showed that orphans comprised 133 (28.4%) out of 469 (the entire pupil population in the school at that time). At the community level, a household survey in 2002 showed that 130 (27.0%) out of 482 of all children in the randomly sampled households were orphaned. Of these children, 23 were double orphans (12 females and 11 males) and 107 were single orphans (47 females and 60 males). The ratio of orphans to non-orphans in the community was not significantly different from the ratio in the school (chi-square, $p = 0.34$). Of the orphans in the school, almost half, 61 (45.9%), were double orphans having lost both parents and this proportion was significantly higher than in the community (chi-square, $p = 0.000$). Data on gender balance were not available.

Data from the longitudinal, school-based study are presented in Table 1. During the school years 2000 and 2001, 88 pupils were recorded to have dropped out of the school. Out of the 88 dropouts, 44 (50.0%) were orphans and this proportion is significantly higher than the proportion of orphans in the school population (chi-square, $p = 0.000$). Out of the 44 orphans that dropped out, 33 were single and 11 were double orphans. Later in the year (2002), a follow-up was done to identify the number of pupils who either resumed in the same school or joined other schools. Forty-one pupils were found to have completely gone out of the schooling system during the two years and the majority of these de facto dropouts, 28 (68.3%), were orphans. The proportion of orphan dropouts permanently leaving school as compared to the proportion of orphans in the general school population is highly significant (chi-square, $p = 0.000$). This shows that orphanhood influenced dropout rates for the children who were studied. Of the 28 dropout orphans, eight children were double orphans while 20 were

Table 1. Characteristics of the “school population” and the children dropping out of school from a primary school in the study area.

	Orphans	Non-orphans	Total
Sex	Male = 25 Female = 19	Male = 23 Female = 21	Male = 48 Female = 40
Age mean	14.3	14.5	14.4
Number of dropouts	44 (50%)	44 (50%)	88 (100%)
Out of which single orphans	33	N/A	33
Out of which double orphans	11	N/A	11
De facto dropouts	28 (68 %)	13 (37%)	41 (100%)
Out of which single orphans	20	N/A	20
Out of which double orphans	8	N/A	8

Note: Results from the longitudinal, school-based dropout study (2000–2001).

single orphans. The difference between the proportion of double orphan among the de facto dropouts (8/28) and the school population as such (61/133) was not clearly significant (chi-square, $p = 0.140$).

Table 2 shows the main reasons for the 41 children permanently leaving school. Some of the non-orphans who dropped out of school completely were young girls becoming pregnant while in school or getting married. Cases of indiscipline among the school-going children and lack of emphasis on schooling by their parents were the contributing factors to cases of permanent school dropout as well. Because of lack of resources in the studied households, some parents did not take their children to school, particularly when children showed disinterest in school. Two of the non-orphans who left school completely were born out of wedlock. Their mothers got married elsewhere while the children were left behind with relatives. One of them, a seven-year-old girl staying with a maternal aunt, was taken out of school to become a housemaid with people within the network of her aunt. The other one, whose age was not known to the fostering grandmother, left school because the grandmother could not afford to pay the required levies at school. The reasons for the orphans who completely dropped out of school differed from those of the non-orphans. More orphans than non-orphans mentioned lack of money for school fees and wage labour as causes for dropping out. The two cause categories related to poverty (“lack of money” and “wage labour”)

Table 2. Reasons for permanently dropping out of school.

	Orphans	Non-orphans
Lack of money	14	2
Wage labour	6	1
Getting married/pregnancy	–	6
Indiscipline	5	4
Sickness of parent(s)	1	–
Difficult living conditions	2	–
Total	28	13

Notes: The data are derived from longitudinal school based study. Out of the 88 pupils who left school only 41 permanently remained dropouts. The two first categories are directly related to poverty. The difference between 20 for orphans and three for non-orphans is highly significant (Chi-square, $p = 0.005$).

were mentioned significantly more frequently by the orphans (20) as compared to non-orphans (3) (chi-square, $p = 0.005$). Other problems included lack of food in the households and the associated difficult living conditions. As a headmaster of a local primary school noted during the interview when referring to the situation of a male pupil aged 17 who had dropped out of school:

One day, I met him carrying firewood going to sell in Kabor (local market centre) and then buy food for his family. It is on this day that I realised the boy has a serious problem. Now these problems such as looking for food are stopping him from coming to school.

In some cases, the orphans try on their own to look for income and support themselves to remain in the education system with no success. As one 14-year-old male paternal orphan and a school dropout complained:

I have tried fishing so that I get money to buy some books, but fish is very scarce these days. Sometimes I earn 10 shillings only. I also have a feeling that in case I buy books and go back to school, I will again be sent away when they are filled up.

Our data reveal that for the orphans who drop out, some of the boys go to work for other people as herdsboys after dropping out of school. The girls mentioned going to work as housemaids for other people after leaving school. They mostly do babysitting and general housekeeping and food processing for their masters. In the case of a widow, sickness of the remaining parents made it difficult for her daughter to concentrate on schooling. She was constantly moving with the ailing mother in search of better living places and ended up dropping out of school. Such situations were not reported in the non-OHHs. However, many children, both orphans and non-orphans, keep on changing schools depending on the amount of levies charged in different schools.

The household survey data

Socio-demographic characteristics of the households and caretakers

The characteristics of the 168 heads of households sampled for the cross-sectional survey are presented in Table 3.

The same proportion of the caretakers in OHH and non-OHH (66 (78.6%) and 67 (79.8%) respectively) were females. Almost a fourth, 23 (27.4%), of the 84 household heads interviewed in OHHs were 55 years old or above. This contrasted sharply with the age distribution for household heads in non-OHHs where only eight (9.5%) of the respondents were 55 years old or above (chi-square, $p = 0.005$). Thirty-eight (45.2%) of OHH heads were widowed, but only four (4.8%) of the caretakers in non-OHHs were widowed (chi-square, $p = 0.000$). These were mainly cases where grandparents were staying with their grandchildren whose parents are alive, but for some reasons could not stay with them. In both categories, the majority of the household heads were in a polygynous marital union, 49 (58.3%) in OHHs and 46 (54.8%) in non-OHHs. There were only slight differences in the mean household sizes (5.2 people per household in the OHHs and 5.8 people per household in non-OHHs).

The majority, 81 (96.4%) of the caretakers in OHHs and 80 (95.2%) of the respondents in non-OHHs, depended on subsistence farming for livelihood. These subsistence activities were combined with a number of income-generating activities. In

Table 3. Characteristics of households and caretakers in cross-sectional household survey.

	Orphan households (OHH)	Non-orphan households (non-OHH)
Number of households	84	84
Number of female caretakers	66 (78.6%)	67 (79.8%)
Number of caretakers 55+ years	23 (27.4%)	8 (9.5%)
Widowed household head	38 (45.2%)	4 (4.8%)
Polygynous homestead	49 (58.3%)	46 (54.8%)
Household size average	5.2	5.8
Subsistence farming	81 (96.4%)	80 (95.2%)
Number of children	99	74
Number of orphans	74	N/A
Number of single orphans	52	N/A
Number of double orphans	22	N/A

Note: $N = 84$ within each household category.

some instances, caretakers had started small-scale business within their households, where they sold various commodities alongside engaging in other productive activities. Other income-generating activities could imply making sisal ropes for sale, hair-dressing and making charcoal. Others were brewing and selling illicit brew locally known as *chang'aa*. This was particularly reported in OHHs headed by young widows who also mentioned dealing in fishing products from the nearby beaches of Lake Victoria. Hawking over the counter drugs (mostly anti-malaria and painkillers) was also recorded as a way of income generation in the households studied. Children too help their caretakers in performing these business-related tasks during weekends and also in the evening for those who attend school.

Education, poverty and orphanhood in the household survey

The characteristics of the 148 children (orphans and non-orphans) sampled for the cross-sectional household survey are presented in Table 4. The 74 orphans and 74 non-orphans were from the same households as the 168 household heads. The reduced number (148 instead of 168) was due to incomplete data-sets based on the matching criteria.

Table 4. Comparison of orphans and non-orphans in the household-based survey with regard to gender, education problems involvement in subsistence farming.

	Orphans in orphan households (OHHs)	Non-orphans in non-orphan households (non-OHHs)
Number	74	74
Sex	Male = 36 Female = 38	Male = 41 Female = 33
Educational problems	57 (77.0%)	59 (79.7%)
Children out of school	11 (14.9%)	7 (9.5%)
Engage in subsistence farming	37 (50.0%)	35 (47.3%)

Note: $N = 74$ within each of the household categories.

Table 5. Reasons for being out of school mentioned by the 21 non-school goers from the household survey.

	Orphans	Non- orphans
Lack of school fees	6	3
Wage labour	1	–
Opting for other artisan skills	1	–
Taking care of a sick person	1	1
Lack of interest	3	4
Not known	–	1
Total	12	9

Note: $N = 21$.

Of the two categories of children covered in the survey, orphaned children had a higher proportion, 11 (14.9%), not attending school as compared to seven (9.5%) for non-orphans, though this was not significantly different (chi-square, $p = 0.226$). This is supported by the response to the question whether the children had “educational problems”, where there was no significant difference, 57 (77.0%) and 59 (79.7%) answering “yes” respectively.

The causes given for not attending school are presented in Table 5. Of the orphans who were not attending school at the time of interview, seven out of 12 (61.5%) mentioned lack of school fees or wage labour as the reason for being out of school, whereas the same proportion was three out of nine (33.3%) for the non-orphans. This difference is not significant (chi-square = 0.140) presumably due to the small numbers. Other reasons mentioned included leaving school for other training skills, taking care of sick person, leaving school to do housework and lack of interest in schooling.

Many orphaned children complained of serious difficulties in paying school levies. A 16-year-old female, double orphan stated:

The problem is that of money. Since I was sent out of school, my step-mother is still waiting for the day when my late father’s pension will be released is when I will go back to school. My father was a teacher.

Both orphans and non-orphans were engaged in income-generating activities. In both cases, the children worked in farms of other relatively well off people in the villages. Some of the activities mentioned included fishing, burning charcoal and engaging in small-scale gold mining done within the study area. They also engaged in domestic work as servants. Working as housemaids and herdsboys are more demanding tasks and traditionally require the servants to reside with their masters. In some cases, it requires that the children migrate to an urban area where the prospective employers work and live. This completely eliminates their chances of being in school compared to other vulnerable children who work for other people in the local fields. All of the children who reported that they have once worked as housemaids outside their homes in urban areas were girls. Some of them reported being paid the equivalent of a few US dollars and one of them quoted an amount less than one US dollar in a month (Kshs.60). Children indicated that the money is sent to their mothers who use it in household expenditure. Other tasks such as working in other people’s farms and

engaging in other income-generating activities can be done on part-time, particularly during out of school hours and weekends. This gives such children time to engage in schooling activities.

Occasional working opportunities for children proved helpful especially for children in need. They use their earning to not only buy some household needs but also pay money at school. Some spend the money to purchase schooling requirements, as an 11-year-old female, double orphan, staying with her grandmother explained while being interviewed:

If I go to do casual work and get money, I give it to my grandmother to buy me books.

Due to cases of discrimination at household level, some caretakers subject children to a lot of household chores and this practice reportedly has negative consequences for the children's education. This is particularly the case with the orphans living with non-parental household heads. One orphaned child, a 17-year-old maternal orphan staying with a step-mother, complained that he was assigned a lot of household duties so that he hardly found time to look at his books:

You cannot read, you are always cooking. If you cook is when you eat, the day you don't cook, you cannot eat as well.

The problem of lack of school fees had in some instances pushed the orphaned children to work for others in the community. It was done to raise money for school levies. This is in some cases authorised by the orphan's caretakers. As a 39-year-old disabled widow explained:

The big problem is how to get money for schooling. Personally, I cannot work and it means that if they are sent out of school, they must leave school to look for money before they can go back.

During funeral ceremonies which have become very common in the community during weekends, some close family members were tempted to give promises to the mourners that they would be able to take charge in absence of the dead parents and pay school fees for the orphaned children. Widows were usually disappointed when such promises were not fulfilled and the time for payment was due. As one 40-year-old widow complained:

My younger brother-in-law promised on the burial day that he will assist, but these days, he is just looking at them. There is nothing he has done.

Discussion

The area in which the study was conducted is severely hit by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Furthermore, it is characterised by low income and a high prevalence of orphans (Nyambedha, Wandibba, and Aagaard-Hansen 2001, see also Nyambedha 2006). The study set out to investigate the extent to which poverty in general and/or orphanhood in particular influenced education in a rural area in western Kenya. By the combination of longitudinal, school-based dropout data and cross-sectional

household data, differences in schooling and causes for non-attendance were compared.

Whereas there was no difference between the proportions of orphans in the school population as compared to the community in general, there was a significantly higher proportion of orphans leaving school as compared to non-orphans. This trend was even more pronounced when comparing those who permanently left school (de facto dropouts) to the general school population (Table 1). The equivalent data in the household survey did not show any clear difference (Table 4). Thus, we found no significant difference between the proportion of children not attending school among the orphans and non-orphans. Neither was there any significant difference regarding those who stated that they had "schooling problems". A comparison of the causes for leaving school in the school-based study showed an overwhelmingly higher proportion of orphan dropouts referring to "financial reasons" as compared to the non-orphans (Table 2). The same trend was found in the household survey though the difference was not significant (Table 5). These responses pointed to poverty-related conditions within the families as a contributing factor in children's school dropout. Though there was no difference in the extent to which the children engaged in subsistence farming (Table 4), many of the statements from the semi-structured interviews indicated that especially the orphans worked in order to earn money for various school necessities. These findings point to a combined negative impact of orphanhood and poverty on schooling, which is in harmony with the conclusion of Bicego and Kiersten (2003) as well as Evans and Miguel (2007). Our study did not allow us to estimate the relative importance of the two factors.

Disaggregation of the data according to whether the orphans were single or double orphans did not show any differences. Thus, the proportion of double orphans was higher in the school than in the community in general. Other studies have reached the same conclusion (Evans and Miguel 2007; Nyamukapa, Foster, and Gregson 2003), whereas some scholars take a different position (Bicego and Kiersten 2003; UNICEF 2003; Chatterji et al. 2005).

The different demographic compositions of the OHH and non-OHH point to different access to resources. Hence, there were significantly more widows and household heads 55 years of age or above among the orphan caretakers as compared to the ones in non-OHH (Table 3). We contend that the relatively old age of caretakers in OHH is a disadvantage to these households' access to resources (see also Nyambedha, Wandibba, and Aagaard-Hansen 2003b). This finding is in accordance with the study by Nyamukapa, Foster, and Gregson (2003).

The issue of orphanhood and poverty is closely linked to the debate about child labour. Children's work should be seen in contexts (Kayongo-Male and Walji 1986; Nyambedha 2000; World Food Programme 2002). As has been shown in our study and other studies, the demand for children's contribution to family income is greater in OHH than in non-OHH. This puts many children (particularly the orphans) at risk of never completing basic schooling because of resource limitations (Family Health International/Youthnet 2005; Hunter and Williamson 1998; Nalwanga and Sengendo 1987; UNICEF 1999). However, in some places in sub-Saharan Africa, children's work has enabled them to meet schooling needs (Bourdillon 2000; Nyambedha 2000; Nyambedha and Aagaard-Hansen 2003; Nyambedha, Wandibba, and Aagaard-Hansen 2003a; UNICEF 2001). This means that putting an instant stop to children's work in order to promote their schooling may not be an appropriate option in these circumstances. This is because many families with scarce resources rely on the income

children bring home for meeting both schooling and household expenses (Nyambetha 2000; UNICEF 2001).

Our study did not find any differences between genders with regard to schooling. This is in accordance with other studies (Ainsworth and Filmer 2002; Evans and Miguel 2007).

The importance of the demographic and epidemiological trends over time should be borne in mind when exploring the complex links between orphanhood, poverty and schooling (Ainsworth and Filmer 2002; Bicego and Kiersten 2003; Evans and Miguel 2007). The prevalence of HIV/AIDS, later adult mortality due to AIDS and subsequent level of orphanhood in a given community develop over time and are likely to reach thresholds where sudden changes may occur (UNICEF 2003, 8). Furthermore, a number of local factors such as urban–rural distribution, dependency ratios and even the harvest outcome from one year to another may influence the school attendance rate. Thus, it is possible that for instance the high and counter-intuitive prevalence of double orphans in the school population may decrease just a few years later. The finding of the present study that the proportion of orphans among the de facto drop outs is higher than for non-orphans could point in that direction.

The study was conducted before the introduction of the universal primary education in Kenya in 2003 whereby the cost of primary education was reduced significantly though not eliminated (for instance, school uniforms and books still had to be bought by the parents). Nevertheless, we contend that the study findings are still relevant because the trends may still prevail in Kenya in spite of the change. Furthermore, we contend that there are similarities to many other parts of Africa where primary education is still relatively expensive.

Conclusion

The study which was conducted in rural, western Kenya aimed to assess to what extent orphanhood *per se* contributed to reduced access to education as compared to the general poverty in the community. The study showed mixed results. Non-attendance and school dropout was a problem in the community irrespective of orphanhood – a phenomenon which we mainly ascribe to general poverty. Nevertheless, a higher proportion of orphans dropped out of school which indicates that orphanhood *per se* contributes. Furthermore, it was characteristic that the orphans leaving school prematurely did so mainly due to “financial reasons”. Thus, the general conclusion is that poverty and orphanhood are separate but interrelated factors contributing to poor schooling. The fact that there was no significant difference between single and double orphans as a contributing factor to school dropout points to the general importance of poverty as well.

The close interrelation between poverty and orphanhood leads to two general recommendations. Partly, it is important that policy interventions addressing orphanhood be designed in such a way that they encompass the general, pertinent problems of the community (including non-orphans) in a holistic manner and not solely single out orphans as a target group. Partly, research dealing with orphans and other vulnerable children should apply a broad scope where several issues are taken into consideration simultaneously. However, there is a need for policies aimed at promoting education to put into consideration, specific circumstances that influence schooling for the orphans in addition to considering the broader picture.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to DBL – Centre for Health Research and Development (formerly the Danish Bilharziasis Laboratory), Faculty of Life Sciences, University of Copenhagen, for funding this project. Thanks to the Institute of African Studies (IAS) at the University of Nairobi for valuable support. Profound thanks to Dr Henry Madsen for statistical support. Last but not the least, we are grateful to the staff of the Nyang’oma Research Training Site (NRTS) for facilitating the study and to the people of Nyang’oma for sharing their lives and time with us.

Notes on contributors

Erick Otieno Nyambedha is head of Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Maseno University, Kenya. He received his Ph.D. degree from University of Copenhagen in 2006. He has 10 years of experience with research on orphans and vulnerable children in western Kenya.

Jens Aagaard-Hansen formerly senior researcher in DBL le– Centre for Health Research and Development in the Faculty of Life Sciences at Copenhagen University is currently a team leader for health social sciences at Steno Diabetes Health Promotion Center in Copenhagen Denmark.

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