Experiences of orphan care in Amach, Uganda: assessing policy implications

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ABSTRACT

Uganda is estimated to have around two million orphans constituting approximately 19% of all the children in the country. This paper presents findings from a study on the experiences of orphan care among Langi people of Amach sub-county in Lira District, northern Uganda, and discusses their policy implications. The study utilised the following methods in data collection: eight months of ethnographic fieldwork; 21 in-depth interviews with community leaders; 45 with heads of households caring for orphans; 35 with orphans; and five focus group discussions. The findings revealed that the Langi people have an inherently problematic orphan concept, which contribute toward discriminatory attitudes and practices against orphans. The clan based decision-making to care for orphans, the category of kin a particular orphan ends up living with, the sex and age of the orphan, as well as the cessation of the 'widow-inheritance' custom emerged as prominent factors which impact on orphan care. Thus there is the need to draw upon such local knowledge in policy making and intervention planning for orphans. The paper concludes with a discussion of potential approaches to alleviating the current orphan challenges among the Langi people.

Key words: Orphan, HIV/AIDS, Uganda, extended family, widow, policy implications

RÉSUMÉ

L'Ouganda a environ deux millions d'orphelins qui représentent plus ou moins 19% du total des enfants du pays. Premièrement, cette communication présente un résumé d'une étude des expériences de soins d'orphelins parmi le peuple Langi d'Amach, sous pays dans la région de Lira, au nord de l'Ouganda. Ensuite, elle aborde les implications de leur politique. Afin de rassembler des données, cette étude a employé les méthodes suivantes: le travail de terrain ethnographique (8 mois), des interviews détaillées auprès des chefs de la communauté (21), les chefs des familles qui accueillent des orphelins (45), les orphelins (35) et les discussions en groupes de foyer (5). Les résultats démontrent que le peuple Langi a un concept naturellement problématique des orphelins. La décision du clan par rapport à l'accueil des orphelins, la relation familiale de celui qui accueille l'orphelin ainsi que l'interruption de la coutume «*veuve – héritage*» ont ressorti comme des facteurs principaux qui ont un impact sur le soin des orphelins. Cette communication a pour but d'attire l'attention vers le besoin de puiser dans des savoirs locaux lors de la formulation d'une politique et lorsqu'on fait les préparatifs d'une intervention auprès des orphelins. La dernière partie de cette communication expose des approches potentielles qui mettront à terme les défis actuels des orphelins parmi le peuple Langi.

Mots clés: Orphelin, VIH/SIDA, Ouganda, famille étendue, veuve, implications d'une politique.

INTRODUCTION

There has been a dramatic increase in the number of orphans in sub-Saharan Africa. The frightening scale of orphaned children has particularly been linked to the HIV/AIDS epidemic that has devastated the continent since the late 1980s (UNAIDS, UNICEF, & USAID, 2004). Despite the fact that antiretroviral drugs are finally entering the African continent, we are still far from seeing the peak of the orphan challenge. UNAIDS estimates that the number of children

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orphaned by AIDS, the large majority of whom will be in developing countries, will continue to rise throughout the next decade (UNAIDS, UNICEF, & USAID, 2004). This raises considerable concern regarding the challenges facing traditional support systems, which are under severe pressure due to the enormous burden of orphaned children. It has been documented that extended families are, or soon will be, overwhelmed and in great need of external support if they are to serve as part of the solution to the mass orphanhood. There is today an urgent need to design and implement effective policies and programmes that seek to support households caring for orphans (Foster & Williamson, 2000; UNAIDS, UNICEF, & USAID, 2004).

Confronting such an enormous challenge of both scale and complexity naturally calls for broad policies and programmes that target different societal levels. This paper draws on a study of the orphan challenge carried out at national, community and household level, with a prime focus on Amach sub-county, Lira District in northern Uganda. An orphan in the context of this paper, and as commonly understood in Uganda, is a child below the age of 18 years who has lost one or both parents. A brief review of the existing national programmes and policies of relevance to orphans will be outlined. Particular emphasis will however be placed on the ways in which the orphan challenge manifests itself and calls for diverse action at micro- and meso-level. We argue that for a response to the orphan problem to be effective, it should draw upon local knowledge and resources in design and implementation.

Orphaned children are vulnerable for a number of reasons, but the degree to which they suffer and the ways in which they suffer have often been hidden in grand generalising statements, such as, "African orphans are absorbed and cared for within extended families" or "orphans are enrolled in schools on an equal scale to non-orphans". The emphasis on local context for developing policy for orphans is obviously not a novel one. Williamson (2004) and others have argued that an effective response to the orphan challenge needs to consider the day-to-day influence of local customs and practices from which children learn the roles and expectations of the community to which they belong. Few studies have however attempted to address the consequence of such a 'bottom up' approach, by assessing its implications in concrete time and space. We shall in this paper try to give a brief outline of what emerged as particular risks and resources implied in local concepts, institutions and practices with relevance in an orphan context, and discuss how these can be productively addressed in the case of Amach. Despite the complexity of the issue, we nonetheless hope to demonstrate the significance of directing increased attention to locally grounded experience and knowledge in policy and programme development.

The orphan challenge in Uganda
According to Wakhweya *et al.* (2002), Uganda alone is estimated to have around two million orphans, constituting approximately 19% of all children in the country. As a landmark development towards the protection of the rights of children, Uganda enacted comprehensive childcare legislation, "The Children Statute', in 1996 (Government of Uganda, 1996). This legislation incorporates the African Union Charter and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and locates the responsibility for care and protection of children with parents and communities. "The Children Statute" stipulates that children's rights and their welfare shall be the guiding principle in the making of any decision relating to a child, whether before a court of law, person or any authority. The Statute emphasises that it is the duty of a parent, guardian or any person having custody of a child to maintain that child, and to ensure the child's right to education and guidance, immunisation, adequate diet, clothing, shelter and medical attention. It further says that it is the duty of any person having custody of a child to protect the child from discrimination, violence, abuse and neglect.

There are a number of policies and plans of action of relevance beyond the "The Children Statute". The government's "Poverty Eradication Action Plan" (PEAP), which operationalises Uganda's National Vision 2025, provides the framework for national planning which directly or indirectly affects the welfare of children. In line with PEAP, several governmental sectoral policies and programmes are in place that relate to the welfare of children – for example the Uganda National Programme of Action for Children (UNPAC), the National Youth Policy, the National Gender Policy, the Universal Primary Education Policy, the Basic Education Policy for Disadvantaged Groups, and the Plan for Modernisation of Agriculture.

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Although government policies and action programmes are invaluable in providing an ideological and administrative framework under which concrete projects may be developed, the Ugandan government has little to offer by way of funding and project implementation. Initiatives from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community based organisations (CBOs) as well as faith-based organisations, continue to make up the prime response to the needs of orphans and their caregivers in Uganda. The most well known national NGOs supporting orphans in Uganda are UWESO (Uganda Women's Effort to Save Orphans) and NACWOLA (the National Committee of Women Living with HIV/AIDS). Both are women's organisations working for the care and support of orphans. UWESO has over 7 500 women members across Uganda who voluntarily foster orphans and/or monitor orphans in their villages. NACWOLA addresses bereavement as a neglected issue in orphan support programmes, and works to break the silence on HIV/AIDS in parent/child relationships through a "memory book" approach. The approach aims to prepare children for the death of their parent through dialogue, while fostering a sense of family and personal history and identity. The memory book has been recognised as a particularly useful tool in bereavement processes, as it encourages communication during the period of sickness and provides something tangible for orphans to hold on to after the death of their parent(s).

While the number of orphan relevant initiatives may appear to be substantial in Uganda (Mukasa, 2003), the magnitude of the challenge is so enormous that the felt impact of the responses is in practice very limited. In a survey of 326 households caring for orphans in Uganda carried out in 2001, 84% indicated that they had not received assistance from any agency, neither private nor governmental (Wakhweya et al., 2002). Hence, in spite of the fact that there are many governmental policies and programmes, as well as a great number of NGO- and CBO based initiatives focusing on vulnerable children in Uganda, the interventions are limited in coverage, scope, impact, comprehensiveness and coordination (MGLSD, 2003; Mukasa, 2003; Wakhweya et al., 2002).

With this review of national orphan related initiatives and their shortcomings, we turn to the challenges related to orphan care as experienced at community and household level in Amach, and discuss their implications for policy.

Study site

The study on which this article is based was carried out at diverse administrative levels, but with a prime emphasis on community and household level in Amach sub-county in Lira District, northern Uganda. Amach is a rural area located 18 kilometres south of Lira town and has a population of 41 457 people (Uganda Bureau of Statistics, 2001). The large majority of the inhabitants are Langi of Luo ethnic origin. Their main occupation is peasant farming of cassava, maize, potatoes, millet, beans, peas, sunflower and cotton, combined with the rearing of some livestock, particularly cattle, goats and poultry. Northern Uganda has experienced continued political unrest and violent outbursts over the past 30 years.

METHODS

At the community level the study combined ethnographic fieldwork with in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

Ethnographic fieldwork: The first author of this paper lived in the study area during the eight months of data collection, as well as during the subsequent follow up trips. Information was gathered through discussion of experiences with orphan care in a context of rapidly increasing numbers of orphans with a number of different people in a large variety of settings. Home visits, community meetings, markets and other social gatherings were the most common arenas for discussion. Indirect observations were made in households caring for orphans and in schools throughout the fieldwork period. The information from discussion and observation was recorded in the form of detailed field notes and memos continuously reviewed by the researcher, his assistant and other members of the research team.

In-depth interviews: Systematic in-depth interviews were conducted with three categories of informants namely: community leaders comprising of teachers at primary schools, local council chairpersons, elders, and women (21); heads of households caring for orphans (45), and orphans aged ten years and older (35). Each interview was conducted individually using an interview guide for each of the three categories of informants. The interview guides were designed in

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English and translated into the local language. All the interviews were conducted in Luo, the local language spoken by the informants. Tape recording of the interviews was not feasible, but the researcher and his assistant made detailed notes during all interview sessions. The informants were asked to repeat key utterances to allow for proper recording. The notes were discussed and unrecorded details were added as soon after the interview sessions as possible.

Focus group discussions (FGD): were conducted with five separate groups of informants; women, men, community leaders, female orphans and male orphans. Each focus group had between 6 and 12 members, and the discussions lasted an average of one and half hours. The researcher facilitated discussions in each group using a FGD guide while the research assistant took notes.

All the informants in the qualitative interviews and focus group discussions were purposely sampled. The community leaders were interviewed because the orphan challenge is considered a social problem with political dimensions, while heads of households fostering orphans and the orphans were interviewed, as they are the ones directly affected by the problem. All interviewees were identified and recruited with the assistance of local leaders with substantial knowledge of the inhabitants who lived in their area.

At national level in-depth interviews were conducted with informants in the government ministries of Gender, Labour and Social Development (3), Finance Planning and Economic Development (2), Education and Sports (2), Health (3) and Local Government (2). An extensive review of research based literature and official programme documents was also carried out.

Data analysis: The qualitative data was analysed using the conceptual frames of Kvale (1996) and the practical steps adopted from Burnard (1991). The aim of this analytical framework is to code, categorise and label major emerging themes and issues covered in the interviews and field-notes in a systematic manner, and to present the themes under reasonably exhaustive categories.

The Norwegian Committee on Ethics in Research and the Uganda National Research Council approved the study. Ethical principles of anonymity,

confidentiality and rights of withdrawal were shared with all potential study participants, and verbal informed consent was obtained from all who participated in the study.

Experiences of the orphan challenge in Amach
The deprived Langi orphan

Langi informants readily referred to the appalling care of many orphans. Many examples were cited by orphans themselves or by various categories of adults working with or caring for orphaned children of how orphans were neither wanted, cared for nor loved by their care takers. The most manifest sign of this lack of care and attention was seen in many orphans' relatively heavy workloads, inadequate feeding, dress and shelter and limited rest compared to other children in the household. It was observed that orphans were engaged working in the fields, herding, cleaning, collecting water and firewood, preparation of family meals, etc. to a far greater extent and more often than the natal children of the household. Orphans 'digging' in the fields appeared time and again in people's accounts, and was moreover readily observed during the field work period.

The substantial burden of work was noted to have consequences for schooling; teachers stated that albeit their good enrolment rates, orphans tended to report late to school, to perform poorly and to drop out of school more often than other pupils. Inadequate feeding, dress/uniform and lack of scholastic materials were brought up as further strains put on the educational opportunities of orphans. Teachers interviewed drew attention to the very visible orphan scenario in schools by pointing out pupils without school uniforms. We should hasten to say that the study revealed that not every orphan was equally deprived, and informants would refer to stark variations in living conditions for orphans. We shall return to the varying vulnerability of orphans below.

A challenging orphan concept (atin kic)

The deprived Langi orphan, and the apparent acceptance of scenarios of somewhat deprived life conditions for orphans, cannot be properly comprehended without reference to the Langi orphan concept *atin kic* or rather to notions of orphanhood (*kic kic*). In the present study orphans were not integrated into foster households on equal terms with natal children of the household. The position of an *atin*

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kic in a foster home was recognised to imply hard work, and a relative lack of privileges regarding food, dress, rest etc. What was more, it was not uncommon to address an orphaned child by the term '*atin kic*' rather than by his/her personal name, implying a constant reminder of the child's inferior position in the home. The relatively underprivileged life situation of orphans was simply explained by a number of informants by the absence of parental care, and was linked to a concern "to prepare orphaned children for the difficult challenges that lie ahead of them".

Implications of Langi patrilinear kinship system on orphan care

Decision making processes: The orphan concept alone however cannot account for the substantial hardships encountered by many Langi orphans. The Langi follow a patrilineal system where married women and children belong to the husband's clan. This has a number of implications in an orphan context. The first issue of relevance is the decision making process regarding who is to take care of newly orphaned children. Customarily, Langi women are recognised as the prime care-providers for children. Nonetheless women were commonly not involved in the decision-making about care for orphans, despite the fact that the well-being of the children greatly depends on the willingness of the female caregiver to care for them. The lack of a female voice in the decision-making creates situations in which orphans sometimes end up in households where the woman is neither ready nor willing to care for them. Informants held that women who are given the responsibility for a group of orphans might perceive the orphans as an unnecessary burden imposed on her, a situation that predisposes orphans to the risk of discrimination, deprivation of care and/or outright abuse.

Vulnerability linked to care for orphans by matri-/patrikin: The relative vulnerability of Langi orphans was found to vary considerably with the category of kin the orphan/s ended up living with. The patrilineal kinship system followed by the Langi implies that prime responsibility for care of orphans resides with paternal kin. This system of care has been seen as protective of children's rights to safety, support, belonging and inheritance. However, orphans cared for by paternal kin – including widowed fathers – often reported very poor care, relatively heavier workloads and greater neglect of their basic needs than orphans cared for by

maternal kin. "When we cry nobody bothers', one young orphan said in one of our discussions. Both his parents had died from AIDS, and a paternal uncle and his wife, in accordance with the patrilinear kinship ideology, cared for the boy and his younger siblings. The problem was that he had been transferred to a family where the prime male caregiver was largely absent from the household during the day, as is the case with most men, and the prime female caregiver had neither the resources nor any wish to take on the burden of care for additional children at a stage in life where she was concerned with caring for her own offspring on meagre resources.

Care by stepmothers: When the father heads the household where his children reside, it is commonly a stepmother who provides the daily care of the orphans. A stepmother, among the Langi, is referred to as *nyek toti* literally meaning "jealous of your mother". This term is derived from the Langi experience that it is difficult to achieve peaceful co-existence among co-wives in a polygamous household. Informants observed that the inherently strained relationship between co-wives was often transmitted to a deceased co-wife's children, i.e. to the orphans. A stepmother may also, according to Langi patrilinear ideology, with good reason, perceive orphans as competitors with her own children regarding inheritance – particularly if the orphans are older than her own children.

Care by widowed mothers: Orphans cared for by widows or other matrikin were commonly said to face a very different kind of hardship, namely that linked to prevailing poverty. Poverty is clearly not only a challenge for orphans living with matrikin, but the dramatic impoverisation of widows linked to the rapid cessation of the "widow inheritance" institution (*laku*) was pointed out as a particular problem by every category of informant. This institution, which requires that a husband's brother takes over the social and economic responsibility in return for wife/spouse related rights, has been discouraged in an HIV/AIDS context, because of its risk in spreading the virus. With the rapid discontinuation of the institution, widows are no longer remarried or "inherited" by their late husband's kin, and are left to fend for themselves both socially and economically. Even though single widows in most cases have access to their deceased husband's land, the lack of support from an adult male implies a number of difficulties in securing an income; for

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example as seen in the challenges linked to clearing and ploughing of fields. As mentioned above, poverty was moreover found to be associated with social tension over inheritance and land ownership.

Orphans living with their mothers and maternal aunts or grandmothers nonetheless reported fewer hardships and were more often cared for by people whom they felt were genuinely concerned for their well-being. Although economic hardships were reported as being comparatively greater among orphans residing with maternal kin, the orphans' experience of compassion, care, involvement in the household affairs and of being a part of the family were central in their responses. Grandparents on both sides however stood out as an exception from the emerging paternal/maternal divide, and were generally described as good and loving caregivers.

Gendered vulnerability

The study found that female orphans, particularly those aged between five and twelve, were at greater risk of being excluded from education than male orphans, as they are in particular high demand as domestic servants. Families with young children, especially urban families, often take in female orphans as child minders (*apidi*) or as general domestic servants. Informants observed that those caring for orphans were often inclined to "give away" young female orphans, particularly to relatives in the towns in need of domestic assistance.

Langi cultural norms strictly prohibit and sanction sexual relations among patrikin. Indeed "daughters of the clan" are ultimately expected to bring bride-wealth to the lineage, and are thus protected from sexual exploitation by their paternal relatives. The risk of sexual exploitation of female orphans was however reported as being far greater for girls who resided with maternal kin. Such girls were no longer perceived as "daughters of the clan". Sexual abuse of female orphans was not the least reported to occur in contexts of utter poverty where the orphan carer turned a blind eye to sexual exploitation of girls for economic benefit.

As briefly mentioned above, unease and conflicts over property rights primarily affect male orphans residing with paternal kin, and in particular those who live with paternal uncles. In the present situation, where the number of orphans is reaching new heights, and land is becoming scarce, male orphans were said to face increasing difficulties when claiming property that customarily belongs to them, such as their own fathers' land. Orphans who have nobody to protect their interests are particularly vulnerable to so-called 'property grabbing' and exploitation from close paternal relatives.

Age-based vulnerability

Degree and kinds of vulnerability of orphans were not surprisingly found to vary with the orphan's age. Younger maternal orphans for example appeared to be particularly vulnerable to hunger and starvation. Young orphans were commonly left at home more often than their foster mother's biological children when their care-providers spent their days in the fields. Informants indeed observed that many very young orphans roamed from homestead to homestead in search of food and for other children to play with. Older orphans also reported hunger, not least during school hours due to inadequate breakfast and lunch. They were moreover found to provide domestic labour in other people's homes in return for food. Older orphans were, however, as stated at the onset of this section, at substantial risk of being overworked. The workload of orphans above the age of seven often increases tremendously as they are regarded as old enough to cope with long working hours in the fields, with severe consequences for schooling.

Young maternal orphans lacking close attention and care were increasingly said to suffer from a phenomenon Langi refer to as *bedo conne*, a term for children who are deprived to the extent that they will not be able to take part in any ongoing social interaction in the homestead and will fail to respond properly when engaged.

Willingness to care for orphans

Despite the fact that the extended family in Amach is under severe pressure, and examples of discrimination and deprivation of orphans were brought up by every study informant, it is important to emphasise the amazing continued willingness to absorb orphans into extended families when calamity strikes. Even in the face of severe impoverisation, families continue to accept the care for orphaned children. It should moreover be re-stated that the orphan situation in Amach is highly complex and does not produce one

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single profile of vulnerability but very many; hence, it is possible to encounter orphans well and lovingly cared for by step mothers, or deprived or even abused orphans cared for by maternal kin.

In the final section we shall draw upon the above study findings to indicate policy and intervention of relevance for orphans and their caregivers in Amach, Uganda.

Policy implications

The orphan situation encountered was complex and ambiguous, and thus could produce neither clear-cut categories with particular vulnerabilities, nor clear-cut categories in need of particular assistance. The scenario drawn above can merely indicate tendencies within the group. Implications for policy and intervention thus have to be as varied and multi-dimensional as the problems addressed; levels and scale of intervention, target groups, kinds of approach and content of interventions will have to be as diverse as the problem itself.

A key challenge when designing appropriate interventions is two fold; firstly, for proposals not to remain mere dreams they need to be realistic in financial terms. In a context where the challenge emerges as overwhelming, the temptation and danger of designing too costly measures is immediate. In this context, the necessity of targeting assistance to categories and individuals who are in most dire need becomes very evident. From this point however follows the second challenge: the problem of reaching the ones who need it the most, without adding further burdens of shame, stigma, or jealousy to already vulnerable persons or households. These are hardly programme dilemmas related merely to this particular problem, but they become acute in contexts where we are dealing with such a vast challenge and when the assistance is targeting children with little or no adult support.

Our approach can be summarised as resting upon the following pillars:
- Community based programmes aimed at alleviating orphans' unacceptable workloads
- Community based programmes aimed at improving orphans' school attendance and performance
- Community based sensitisation programmes aimed at improving orphan care

These points could be drawn from any programme document, and gain in value only when applied or adjusted to local context.

We would like to state at the onset that it is the third point, community sensitisation, which in our opinion is by far the most important, and which creates the foundation on which all other activity would be based. Words without very visible action, and which do not aim at doing something concrete about the situation will have very limited potential. We therefore start out addressing a couple of areas that for community members will emerge as most immediately meaningful and relevant.

Reducing the burden of work of orphans
As noted above, the most visibly manifest aspect of many orphan's vulnerability was their immense workloads. This was the aspect immediately pointed out by every category of informants, with or without links to the Langi orphan *atin kic* concept. Ways of reducing the undue burden placed on children appear to be vital, as the enormous workloads have severe consequences for diverse aspects of children's lives.

Like most of the themes brought up in an orphan context, the issue of the high workloads among children is highly complex. Hardships regarding long and strenuous working hours are commonly linked to quite extreme economic marginalisation and, in the last instance, of family survival. The steadily increasing daily monetary demand on economically marginalised households caring for orphans has exacerbated the demand for children's labour. Many sources point to the fact that the majority of orphans in sub-Saharan Africa are cared for within a weakened extended family system (Ankrah, 1993; Drew, Makufa, & Foster, 1998; Hunter, 2000; Mrumbi, 2000; Mukiza-Gapere & Ntozi, 1995; Nyambedha, Wandibba, & Aagaard-Hansen, 2003; Rutayuga, 1992; Shetty & Powell, 2003), and adult family members, who are often destitute themselves, step in to assist orphans because there is simply no other option provided by society or the state (Shanti, Van Oudenhoven, & Wazir, 2003). The majority of those caring for orphans in the present study lived on less than half a US dollar per day.

A number of different small-scale ventures have been attempted in response to the linked challenges of poverty and child labour. Cash contributions have

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rarely been successful. The initiative that to us emerges as most promising in terms of costs and sustainability is linked to a strengthening of households' agricultural capability. This proposal was raised by our informants, and is promoted in general terms by UNAIDS (1999). Being a former pastoral area, there appears to be particular potential in confronting orphans' excessive 'digging' through the promotion of oxen for cultivation. Ploughing is not a new cultivation technique among Langi, but is a custom that largely vanished with the de-stocking of cattle in northern Uganda in the late 1980s.

Providing households caring for orphans with assistance in the form of one cow, two oxen and a plough for cultivation would, we believe, have substantial spin-off benefits. It would help reduce the demand for children's labour in cultivation, it would increase food and cash-crop production, and as the numbers of animals increase it would provide milk and meat for consumption, thereby improving the household's nutritional status and health. These factors would in turn create the potential for greater school attendance and performance. This kind of support to 'households caring for orphans' would, in our informants' view, not pose a challenge regarding stigma. With close monitoring and with sufficient funds, such schemes should also reach other households with vulnerable children.

There is obviously no guarantee that the provision of cows and oxen would ultimately limit orphan's digging and enhance their nutritional status, but the immediate demand for manual labour would be greatly reduced, with all the potential benefits in this context.

Improving orphans' educational opportunities
Although questions are continuously raised as to the relevance and the efficiency of schooling for children, it remains increasingly clear that education provides the basis for gaining important life skills and is the basic premise for upward social mobility. The need to improve orphan educational opportunities appeared vital to all categories of informants in the present study, not least to the orphans themselves. The Universal Primary Education (UPE) initiative has clearly had a dramatic effect on general school enrolment, but formal enrolment in and by itself hardly guarantees proper school attendance and school performance. Experience indicates that assistance to

individual families/children to enhance school attendance and performance among orphans is extremely challenging, as it may easily generate scenarios dominated by envy and stigma. In a school context generalised/non-targeted programmes confronting locally experienced challenges may more fruitfully be opted for, albeit obviously targeting experienced needs.

The Ministry of Education and Sports in Uganda is providing primary schools textbooks, but there is an acute need to ensure that other school-related costs, such as costs of uniforms and scholastic materials, are entirely covered. To complement government efforts, it is vital to generate funds to ensure that all scholastic requirements are provided free of charge, so that children are not held back from school due to a lack of equipment. At a rural primary school in Lira District, the cost of scholastic materials (pens, exercise books, mathematical set and school uniforms) necessary to maintain a pupil at school for one year would most likely not go beyond US 15 dollars. Yet, this is much more than the total monthly income of the great majority of rural households caring for orphans in Lira District. Completely free primary schooling would, we believe, act as a powerful signal and incentive to adults taking care of children.

The problem of hunger among orphaned school and pre-school children was another major finding of the study, and is a challenge that needs to be urgently addressed to improve equity, quality and quantity of education in Uganda. Other studies have also pointed out the challenges related to inadequate food for pupils. Nyambedha, Wandibba & Aagaard-Hansen (2001) found in their study from western Kenya that orphaned children who go hungry shy away from school because they do not manage to face rigorous academic demands. A study carried out in Luwero and Tororo Districts of Uganda describes older orphans who report not getting enough to eat several times per week (Population Council Inc., 2001, p. 19).

Food support can often more easily be monitored (to ensure an equitable distribution) when provided to schools rather than to households. We believe that as an immediate measure, school authorities in collaboration with parents could fruitfully design schemes in which parents contribute dry food items such as beans and maize from which the schools can prepare one meal a

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day for the children. Since not all parents may be in a position to contribute, the government in collaboration with NGOs and CBOs should devise ways of "topping up" parent's contributions as an effort to maximise the benefits of the initiative. Such a school-based meal programme could moreover act as an additional incentive for sending children to school.

Community sensitisation
The suffering and deprivation indicated in numerous cases and reports among Langi informants were found within the context of insufficient understanding of what is often labelled "the extended family". A vital starting point from which to approach the orphan challenge among the Langi is fundamental knowledge of the many and diverse implications of the ways in which patrilineal ideology shapes particular patterns of care for orphans. The young boy who stated "when we cry, nobody bothers", along with other children in the same situation in Amach sub-county, figure in the statistics as being absorbed by "the safety net" of "the extended family"; the patriclan. His suffering was nonetheless very real and very tangible.

As pointed out above, the patrilinear ideology has a number of practical outcomes of utmost importance for orphans' well-being, such as the imposition of children upon disinterested or unwilling female care takers, patterns of exploitation and care among matri- and patri-kin, particularities of inheritance rules/property grabbing, particularities of sexual abuse etc. However culturally relevant, one cannot design efficient programmes targeting matri- households where sexual exploitation is likely to take place, households where excessive workloads are likely to be placed upon children by step mothers, or households where neglect and abuse are taking place to the extent that young orphans 'withdraw' in *beddo conne* like conditions. Such specified program initiatives simply cannot be implemented without creating suspicion in and around particular households, and without facing the risk of adding increased burden to already suffering children.

What can and should be established however, are locally based sensitization programs to address the particularities of risks and resources inherent in Langi culture and society. We strongly believe in community-based initiatives, driven not by outsiders, but by respected adults and elders, community health workers

and by articulate orphans. These individuals would not only have a fundamental understanding of the challenges facing orphaned children in general, but would, due to their knowledge of people and places, be in positions to recognise the relative vulnerability of particular homes and individuals. The prime mandate of such community-based groups should be to address obstacles to children's well-being in general in smaller and larger village based meetings. Beyond information and education, their mandate should include identification of key challenges in particular households caring for vulnerable children, counselling at individual, family and community levels, and monitoring of homes identified as most vulnerable. Backed by more information and skills, such local groups could develop into community-based institutions that could be in unique positions to link vulnerable households and vulnerable children to safety nets and potential organisations for support.

We believe that a comprehensive community sensitisation programme must be located at the heart of any attempt to address the challenges highlighted in this study. Because, despite the apparent readiness to absorb orphans within their extended families, Langi communities operate with attitudes and practices that are increasingly problematic in an orphan context. The Langi orphanhood concept (*kic kic*) for example condones an inherently underprivileged life situation and contributes to further deprivation of orphans. To discuss notions that allow an orphan to live a different life from the rest of the children of a household can raise questions as to how justifiable it is to deem such notions as 'normal' or as a strategy of 'preparing orphans for future hardships'.

Another fundamental issue to be discussed by community sensitisation programmes is the problematic aspects of the customary kinship system. A Langi orphan who is being taken care of by paternal kin should, in principle, be in a relatively favourable position, as Langi kinship ideology implies rights to protection and resources. However, a number of structural tensions appear to threaten this base. Ever increasing competition for scarce resources within the household and the clan, amplified by the ever-increasing numbers of adult deaths and numbers of orphans, are producing situations where orphans are at risk of becoming victims rather than beneficiaries of the extended family. In their situation analysis of

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orphans in Uganda, Wakhweya *et al.* (2002) indicate that 20% of the orphans lose their property due to "property grabbing" by close relatives.

The gendered imbalance in decision-making processes with regards to care for orphans is another issue located at the crux of the Langi orphan challenge. Ntozi *et al.* (1999), in their study on the role of extended family in orphan care in northern Uganda, similarly note that male clan members made most of the care decisions in connection with paternal and double orphans. Women were rarely allowed to make decisions when there were male relatives to do so. As the main care providers, women are located at "the heart of the matter", and need to play a decisive role in making decisions on who should care for orphans. Imposing children upon unwilling care takers is bound to be a tragedy for both adults and children, and this underlines the significance of participation of potential care givers in the processes. In the case of orphan care among Langi, a concerted effort to mobilise and sensitise Langi clan leaders to the significance of women's engagement in these decision-making processes is essential.

Beyond the vulnerability of the child him/herself, the multiple challenges produced by the transition of orphan care to matrikin combined with the discontinuation of the customary 'widow inheritance' practice need to be central topics in future sensitisation efforts. While acknowledging the discouragement of the practice in an HIV prevention context (and possibly also in a larger and long term women's emancipation scenario), members of the patri-clan who use the discontinuation of the practice as a pretext for abandoning customary obligations to provide care and support for widows and orphans must be questioned. Again we are dealing with a problem of such proportions that it threatens the well-being of Langi women and children at large. It is these and other culturally grounded issues that a locally constituted team of resource individuals can address, discuss and question with far more insight, authority and impact than any outside driven effort to bring about change.

Concluding remarks

According to the government of Uganda policy, as outlined in the "Children Statute", the responsibility for care of orphans resides within the community and the family (Government of Uganda, 1996). This study moreover found that in spite of considerable challenges there is continued willingness to absorb and care for orphans within extended families. It is therefore local communities and extended families that in the foreseeable future will remain the major asset to be drawn upon in handling the challenges of caring for orphans. This is indeed the case not only in Amach, but also in most parts of sub-Saharan Africa.

The article has highlighted the importance of drawing upon ethnographic material to inform policy development and intervention planning. One of the principal points we have tried to make is the importance of designing interventions in collaboration with those who daily experience the diversity and the particularities of problems linked to the ever increasing masses of orphaned children. The study on which this article is based has generated knowledge of specific factors that contribute to differing degrees and kinds of vulnerability in different categories of orphans. This implies that diverse categories of children will require different kinds of attention and follow-up.

It is our belief that any shortcut to addressing the orphan challenge may fail if it does not recognise that childcare is culturally constituted in ways that will affect how orphaned children are ultimately perceived and cared for. This knowledge is vital, lest time and resources of orphan support schemes are wasted while children and communities continue to suffer. Serious attention needs to be paid to what Emma Guest (2003, p.11) points to in '*Children of AIDS: Africa's orphan crisis*': namely that "orphans are not particularly organized or vocal lobbyists". If serious attempts at alleviating the most important sources of suffering for orphaned children are to be made, it is the responsibility of the policy makers and intervention planners to identify the very real challenges and resources inherent in diverse socio-cultural settings, and to draw upon such local knowledge in policy development and programming that leads to the experience of improvements in the lives of orphans.

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APPENDIX

Interview guide for Heads of households fostering orphans

1. Can you please tell me about the people who live in this household?
   a) Adults, number and ages
   b) Children, number and ages
   c) Relationship between the different family members.

2. Can you please tell me a little bit more about the orphans you are taking of?
   a) How many
   b) Their ages and sex
   c) Duration of their stay in the household
   d) Information about the orphan's deceased parent(s)
   e) Relationship with the orphans

3. Can you please tell me about the education of children in this household?
   a) Who is schooling and who is not and why
   b) Who pays for the cost of schooling
   c) Performance in school
   d) Interest in education
   e) Any other problems with the children's education

4. Can you tell me about the various domestic activities that the children perform?
   a) Cultivation
   b) Petty trade
   c) Herding livestock
   d) Preparing family meals
   e) Fetching water and wood fuel
   f) Leisure activities

5. What are your major experiences in caring for the children?
   a) Availability of adequate food
   b) Medical care
   c) Accommodation
   d) Clothing
   e) Support from other people
   f) Other unmet needs

6. Can you please tell me what you do to earn a living?
   a) Main source of income
   b) Children's involvement in the activities to earn a living
   c) About how much money do you get in a day, week or month

7. What was the main occupation of the deceased parent(s) of the orphans?
   a) Was there any property left for the orphans
   b) Who takes care of such property if any
   c) Do the orphans use such property

8. Do you have any concern that you would like to tell us relating to the orphans?

Thank you very much for kindly agreeing to talk to me. We have come to the end of our discussion for now, but in case I remember anything else, I might still come back to you for more information. Thank you.

Interview guide for orphans

1. Can you please tell me about the people you stay with in the family?
   a) Children in the household
   b) Relationship amongst them
   c) Relationship (kinship) with the adults
   d) Neighbours
   e) How long you have lived with the family

2. Please tell me about how it is to live in the family?
   a) Friends
   b) Playtime
   c) Food, clothing, accommodation etc.
   d) Feeling of happiness, enjoyment, sadness, worries etc.
   e) Views about how the adults treat children in the household
   f) Talk freely about anything you feel like

3. Please tell me about what kind of work you mainly do when you are at home?

4. Do you go to school?
   a) If yes, what class are you in
   b) How do you see your performance in school
   c) Who pays the cost

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Interview guide for Heads of households fostering orphans (cont)

d) Do you have all the scholastic materials (books, pens uniform, etc)

e) Do you eat something before going to school in the morning

f) Do you take anything to eat while at school

g) Do you work in the fields before going to school in the morning

If you do not go to school, why?

5. (For orphans who do not live with a surviving parent) Do you remember what happened before you came to live with this family?
   a) Knowledge of cause of death of the parent
   b) Any property left for the children by the deceased parent
   c) Whether the siblings have been separated to different families

6. Are there any other things that you would like to tell me or know from me?

Thank you for agreeing to talk to me

Interview guide for community leaders

1. Could you tell me some background information about this area/community?
   a) people
   b) services
   c) major activities
   d) people's main concern

2. Is orphans an issue in this community?
   a) personal view
   b) view as a leader
   c) view of the others in his community

3. If orphans is an issue, when did it start being felt

4. Who is caring for the orphans in this community?

5. What do you see as being the major concern about orphans?

6. Is there any organisation or group of people who support orphans of households caring for orphans in this area?

7. Are there local policies that protect orphans?

8. As a leader, what do you think should be done to improve the lives of orphans in this community?
   a) Who should do it?

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