

Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development

**RESEARCH INTO THE LIVING CONDITIONS OF CHILDREN
WHO ARE HEADS OF HOUSEHOLDS IN RWANDA**

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I. Objectives of the research

The study was based on the following objectives:

- To increase our understanding about the living conditions of children (under 18 years of age) who are heads of households
- To collect valuable data, which will also be useful to any other agencies which are interested in providing support
- To raise awareness among various actors, including the Government, in order to try and encourage them to get involved
- To build on the results of the research to draw up a programme proposal in support of child-headed households.

II. Current situation

Child-headed households are a new phenomenon in Rwanda. It is one of the many consequences of the tragic events that have shaken Rwanda since the 1990s such as the increasing poverty which has led to greater individualism, and the AIDS pandemic. Currently, 34% of households in Rwanda are headed by single mothers and by children. The research conducted by ACORD across the country, where there are an average of 2 communes per Prefecture, made contacts with child heads of households and with local authorities at field level, and shows that this new phenomenon is extremely complex and growing at a worrying pace.

III. Key outcomes

Figures

- The children included in this study find themselves lone heads of household for different reasons. 17.2% of them had parents who were killed during the genocide; 13.6% of them had parents killed during the massacres, 2.9% have parents who are being detained in prison, and the remaining 56% had parents who died from other so-called 'natural causes' which usually related to AIDS.

The latter rate is by far the highest, and since it is not caused by specific events such as the genocide and massacres, but instead largely by the slow pandemic and its far reaching

effects, this trend is likely to continue and we can expect an increase in the number of deaths, among children in particular¹.

- Of the 24 communes targeted by the research, the total number of households is estimated at 257,539. Out of this number, 13% are households headed by children, which means an average of 4,946 child headed households have been recorded per commune, making 33,480 families in total. The total number of households in Rwanda is estimated at 1,750,000 and if these findings were transposed to a national level there would be 227,500 Child Headed Households nation-wide. 2,411 children heads of families have participated directly to the survey, which has therefore reached 7% of the CHH living in the 24 communes and 1% of the total number of CHH at national level.
- The census conducted in the sample communes shows that the number of boys who are heads of households is slightly higher (51%) than the number of girls (49%). This may be explained by the fact that families prefer to adopt girls because they find them more submissive and willing to perform domestic chores. More girls eventually leave home to get married whilst boys are generally more argumentative and likely to claim their heritage. Moreover, boys are more attached to the land of their parents and eager to keep and perpetuate the names of their family lineage.
- 61.3% of the children interviewed live merely off agriculture. Of those children, 74.4% own less than one hectare of land for their subsistence. 34.3% own less than 0.5 hectares and 25.6% are without land at all, which forces them into working as labourers.
- In 51.9% of households included in the research, the revenue per family barely reaches 1,000 FRw – or £1.59 – a month, while in 18% of households, it ranges from 1,000 to 2,500 FRw – or £1.59 to £4 – a month.
- 93% of the children interviewed have only been to primary school and not beyond, which means that they can barely read and write.
- The number of child heads of households has increased considerably since the 1990s, the beginning of the civil war. From 1980 to 1990, 1.83% of the children interviewed became heads of households, whilst between 1991 and 2000, the percentage rose to 98.16% - an increase of 96.33%.

Not only has the number of children without parents increased dramatically, but also events have resulted in the destruction or redundancy of the coping mechanisms by which people used to be helped by their communities. The increasing level of poverty which affects families in Rwanda, combined with hatred resulting from the genocide are important factors which have affected solidarity within society in Rwanda.

- 77.7% of children interviewed have between 1 and 5 siblings under their care, of which 22.9% - the highest proportion – have only one sibling under their care.
- The primary source of revenue is agriculture: 67.3% of the children interviewed consider themselves farmers and 23.79% students or unemployed. Of the first category, 55.25% are

¹ These figures include only the death of the surviving parent. In the majority of cases, the first parent was killed during the genocide whilst the second died of natural causes. It is one of the reasons why the percentage related to so-called natural death is higher.

girls and 44.75% are boys, while in the second category (students and unemployed) 47.89% are girls against 52.11% boys.

- 72.37% of interviewees own a house, whatever its state, whilst 27.62% do not. The latter rent a place or live with friends. A small number of children, whom we have not been able to interview, are living under plastic sheeting.
- As far as expressions of the most important basic needs are concerned, food comes first with 63.6%, then clothes at 39.7%, health at 39.6%, and shelter and school come equally as the least important, both at 29.2%.

The research also underlined non-material but equally vital needs:

Child-headed households are marginalised and forgotten

- Orphaned children who are heads of households are neglected or abandoned by their relatives. They have no family to turn to whenever they need support, at a social, economic or psychological level.
- These orphans are often in conflict with their neighbours or relatives over the management of assets left by their own parents.
- These children are completely ignored by the rest of the community. They are like ‘non-persons’ – neither children, nor adults.
- Their existing rehabilitation or development programmes do not account for these children. And yet, without assistance, they are unable to meet their most basic needs.
- They have no shared forum through which to express themselves and to build on their strengths as a group and be heard. It is unlikely that children whose parents were killed during the genocide and those whose parents are in prison would join forces with each other.
- These orphans are so overburdened by work that they have no time for leisure or other social activities with their peers.
- Many run away.

Child-heads of households and their dependants are exploited and abused

- Orphans living in child-headed households are regularly affected by rape either as victims or witnesses.
- Orphans living in Girl-headed households are particularly vulnerable and are at the mercy of drunkards, vagrants or any other men who may decide to enter their shelter and force them into sexual relationships. Men even wait for them near the water point where they come to fetch water or near the field where they work all day, only to rape them. They are condemned to silence because no one would defend them – on the contrary, they would endure further ostracism from the community.

These orphans live in a situation of on-going insecurity as individuals and as a group

- Some girls enter prostitution to buy food and pay for school fees or medicines for their younger siblings. Sometimes, they give themselves to older men in order to live under their protection, but this often leads to unwanted pregnancies and/or to AIDS.
- In order to survive, young children hire themselves out as labourers but they are paid half the wages given to adults for equivalent work.

No future prospects for child heads of households

- Girls in particular have little prospects to move on from their situation. They often don't marry for fear of leaving their siblings behind and few men want to marry them and look after their younger brothers or sisters. Conversely, many boys who are heads of households get married and give little consideration to their siblings' suffering.
- Orphans have few ambitions, unable as they are to think about schools, marriage or leisure. Those who have abandoned school have found few opportunities for alternative education, or employment.

Children headed households lack family cohesion

- Despite their status as heads of households, older children, especially girls, lack authority over their younger siblings. Boys, even younger ones, see themselves as 'little chiefs'. In some cases girls turn to drink or drugs and many fall pregnant.
- Within child-headed households, internal conflicts are commonplace. Children argue over the management of resources and each has their own idea about managing the family assets.
- Sometimes the older ones hurry to get married and push their siblings out of the property of their parents, and in some cases it has been reported that older children have been poisoned by younger ones because of their strict style of managing the household.

Child heads of households and their dependants feel frustrated by life, they have lost all self-confidence and feel inferior to others.

- Crushed by poverty, orphans feel inferior to their contemporaries who live with their families, especially those who are at school. They are excluded from all forms of social, community or political life. They find themselves outside both the world of children and that of adults and feel rejected by society as a whole.
- They feel embarrassed because of the state of poverty in which they find themselves and keep away from family or social events such as weddings because they have no decent clothes to wear or present to give.

Child-headed households face huge material problems

Some have no shelter

- Some orphans are homeless either because of the destruction of their parents' house or because of their reluctance to go back to their parents' house due to continuing insecurity.
- Others are unable to repair the damage done to their parents' houses, after five years or more of complete neglect.

- Others who have returned from exile have found themselves homeless and have been forced to find shelter under plastic sheeting.

Orphans lack education

- Child-heads of households have been forced to leave school to find work in order to meet the basic needs of their younger brothers and sisters. However, they make a lot of efforts to ensure their siblings stay at school. Despite some initiatives from the government and NGOs, needs remain great in terms of school fees, school materials, clothes and food.

Orphans have health problems

- In general terms, health care is expensive in Rwanda. It is extremely difficult for child heads of households to find medical care for themselves or for their siblings. And yet, they often fall ill because of malnutrition and overwork. As they grow weaker so does their productive power and so they have no money to pay for medicine. Health problems that affect one member of the family soon affect the whole family, physically and emotionally. Health is seen as an important issue by the children who find themselves without anyone to turn to or anyone to take care of them.

IV. Next steps

1. To organise a feedback meeting in order to share the results of the research.

The following people will be invited:

- Representatives from the Ministry of Local Governance (responsible for social affairs) and Gender and the Ministry of Youth and Sports Movement.
- National and international NGOs interested in this phenomenon.
- Community leaders and representatives of local authorities at Commune level where the study was conducted.
- Representatives of the child heads of households.
- Representatives of Christian organisations who work with the orphans.
- The local press and Rwandan television.

This meeting will also be used as a platform for advocacy on behalf of the child heads of households.

2. To draw up a programme proposal with a view to supporting children under 18 who act as heads of households.
3. To seek funds and implement the programme.