

Adolescence, food crisis and migration

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Adolescents who migrate because of food crises face distinct risks. Specific strategies are needed to prevent and respond to this phenomenon.

At times of crisis related to drought and ensuing food shortages, most child-focused actors have looked primarily at the youngest children, and specifically at the problems of widespread malnutrition, high infant mortality rates and the large number of drop-outs from primary school. Little attention has been paid to older children, and in particular to the dynamics of labour, migration and

affected by food crisis who rely predominantly on agriculture for food and for income are forced to find alternative sources of revenue when harvests fail. Adolescents are often called upon to support their families in these times of crisis. In Burkina Faso, 81% of boys and 58% of girls reported that they had to undertake work due to the food crisis compared to 75% of boys and 42% of girls before the food crisis. In Niger, the percentage of adolescents reporting undertaking work during the crisis almost doubled compared to levels before the crisis – from 31% to 60%. Furthermore, whereas before the food crisis many children would have been involved in agricultural work close to home, the onset of crisis pushes families to send adolescents outside their communities to find paid work.



Plan International/Shona Hamilton

Niger

violence that affect this group. Adolescent children – those between the ages of 10 and 18 – are more at risk of becoming separated from their families and being exposed to violence, exploitation and abuse, often in connection with migration from affected areas in order to look for work. However, in spite of this there has been little consideration of the impact and the specific measures needed to reach adolescent children.

In order to find out more about the experiences of adolescent children affected by food crisis, Plan International in West Africa recently conducted research on the impact of food crises on the protection of adolescent girls and boys in Burkina Faso and Niger.¹

A major finding concerned the pressure on adolescents – and especially boys – to migrate or travel in order to find work. Families

In Burkina Faso, 17% of adolescent boys and 10% of adolescent girls reported that they had been obliged to move due to the food crisis. In both countries, adolescent boys moved to larger towns and even abroad to seek jobs as manual labourers or street vendors. Boys also sought work on mining sites. Working on a mining site did not necessarily require children to migrate but rather to travel back and forth periodically, with boys especially likely to spend nights at mining sites. Girls were more likely to stay within the community, undertaking a greater share of unpaid domestic labour, including gathering food or caring for younger children.

Migration and movement for work also appeared to go hand in hand with exposure to violence as adolescents moved without adults to protect them. In Burkina Faso, 26% of adolescent boys interviewed, compared to just 2% of girls, declared they had been a victim of violence at least once due to the impact of the food crisis. In discussions, it was found that this related primarily to exposure to violence on mining sites, where adolescents

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could be attacked by older miners looking to steal their findings. In addition to exposure to violence, the work itself could often be dangerous and hard. While fewer children who worked in cities or abroad were present during the study, the accounts of their parents and peers echo other studies that suggest that these children too are more likely to be exposed to violence and exploitation.²

The feeling of marginalisation amongst these children was emphasised. Children who had moved to towns and cities or abroad were reported to face significant difficulties, often working illegally in countries and cities with different cultures and values to their own, thus exposing them to violence, harassment and exploitation. Adolescents and their communities in this survey were also not aware of any initiatives in their communities or at their destinations aimed at preventing and responding to violence resulting from the food crisis.

The increase in children engaging in work was, not surprisingly, accompanied by a decrease in children going to school. However, the contributions made by adolescents at times of crisis are considered very important and essential for the survival of families. Adolescents themselves did not dwell on their future or their own situations or problems but seemed to accept the need to take on additional responsibilities as part of the natural order of things. On the whole, the role of adolescents as breadwinners did not appear to be enforced by adults. As one adolescent girl remarked, simply, "We're aware that there's nothing to eat if we don't work."

Interestingly, the fact that food crises impelled many adolescents to take up new roles in the family as breadwinners in some cases afforded them a greater say in family and community decision-making – for many girls and boys, the onset of a food crisis means an abrupt end to their childhood. The pressure on adolescents is significant and has consequences for their physical and psychological development; many boys and girls interviewed over the course of the study

spoke of their desperation and hardships due simply to the fact that they were facing extreme poverty and hunger. The darker side of the new responsibilities of adolescents was also reported in increases in risky behaviour – in particular, exposure to prostitution and drugs.

Dearth of responses

In spite of the significant and specific impact of food crises on adolescents, there appear to be few if any programmes designed to respond to their needs. The participation of adolescents in humanitarian assistance programmes designed for adults also did not appear to respond to their specific needs. Food for work and cash for work programmes in the areas assessed in this study were also reported to have had little effect in preventing adolescent migration. In particular, since adolescents under 16 are not allowed to participate in these projects, migration for work was one of the only viable strategies for them to increase family income.

Discussions of food crises in the humanitarian world seem to revolve these days around the concept of resilience. Yet within this debate little place is given to issues of migration, protection and education. Furthermore, humanitarian responses to slow-onset food crises have typically not invested in preventing and responding to the specific issues affecting adolescents, including the pressures on adolescents to migrate out of their communities to find work. In addition to the negative impacts this has on individual children in terms of their exposure to violence and the consequences on their mental and physical health and development, there are also long-term consequences for community development in areas vulnerable to food crises. The pressure on adolescents to take up low-skilled work as a short-term coping strategy traps communities in a vicious cycle of poverty as children are unable to complete basic education or access opportunities for skilled employment.

Future efforts to build resilience in areas vulnerable to food crisis need to consider initiatives that not only aim to reduce the vulnerability of household livelihoods but

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also proactively support adolescents as key actors in their households and communities in times of crisis. For example, supporting adolescent children to develop skills in diverse income-generating activities such as poultry farming or vegetable gardening that can be maintained alongside school attendance could not only encourage parents to send children to school but also reduce the pressures on children to migrate to find work.

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1. The research consisted of a literature review and data collection in 54 food crisis-affected communities in Burkina Faso and Niger. Unpublished report (January 2013) for 'In Double Jeopardy: Adolescent Girls and Disasters', Plan International (2013) <http://tinyurl.com/Plan-InDoubleJeopardy2013>
2. Daniella Reale (2008) 'Away from Home: Protecting and Supporting Children on the Move', Save the Children.