Grandparents as parents: Skipped-generation households coping with poverty and HIV in rural Zambia
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Citation for published version (APA):

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Summary

This study is based on 14 months of qualitative and quantitative data collection in Misangwa, a small rural community in the Zambian Copperbelt Province. The focus of this work is on skipped-generation households, which are households where the younger generation and their older guardian(s), mostly grandparents, live together without any members of the middle generation. The phenomenon of grandparents raising grandchildren is not new. What is new is the scale on which this is taking place, the proportion of children and young people being cared for by older people, and the lack of support for these older people by relatives and the extended family. Whereas in the past, the care given by grandparents was voluntary and beneficial to all involved, today the situation can best be described as crisis driven, a fostering solution brought about by a lack of any real alternatives.

The changes in the dependencies between the young and the old are the result of high mortality among middle-aged adults, the majority of which can be attributed to HIV. As families have seen the number of orphans and vulnerable children (OVCs) created by HIV rise, they have been forced to come up with new types of caring solutions, including new types of households. The aim of this study is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the changing dependency between OVCs and their older caregivers in skipped-generation households in rural Zambia. In this summary, I will briefly discuss the eight chapters that comprise this study.

Chapter One serves as an introduction to the impact of HIV on children and young people, older people, and Zambian society in general. The HIV epidemic in Zambia first appeared in the mid-1980s. It was a generalised epidemic that spread quickly throughout the population, transmitted predominantly through heterosexual contact. Over the last three decades, it has impacted individuals, families, households and communities. In 2004, there were approximately 75,000 deaths in Zambia due to HIV-related illnesses; in 2011, this figure was estimated at 31,000. Cumulatively, more than 1.25 million people have died of HIV-related causes in Zambia since 1990. It is estimated that approximately 1.3 million children (about one in five) have lost one or both parents, at least half of which can be attributed to HIV-related causes.

A generally accepted definition of a skipped-generation household is a household “where an older person, often a grandparent, becomes the primary caretaker for a child who has lost one or both parents, or whose parents are absent for a
long period of time” (Samuels and Wells 2009: 1). The number of older people and OVCs living in skipped-generation households varies across sub-Saharan Africa and for most countries the exact numbers are not known. Data from across the sub-Saharan African region suggest that many of these households are found in rural areas. In the region, poverty rates in rural areas are high, much higher than in urban areas. The impact of this on skipped-generation households is particularly heavy since members of such households have little or no access to financial means and they often lack the human capital required for productive labour.

In Chapter Two, the research methodology, the practical aspects of conducting the research and the theoretical framework are presented. This study used Bronfenbrenner’s Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model as a framework for data collection and analysis, to study the well-being of the children and young people and the older generation living in skipped-generation households in Misangwa. The definition of well-being used was derived from a broad body of literature and research on well-being conducted in various developing countries. Data collection was both qualitative and quantitative, and was built on methods from the fields of human geography, demography and anthropology, including (participant) observation, household surveys, interviews and focus group discussions. As part of an earlier study that I conducted in 2001 for my Master’s degree, I spent several months in Misangwa researching the urban-to-rural migration of OVCs. The household survey I conducted in 2009 for this current research is comparable to the household survey I conducted in 2001, and this has provided longitudinal data covering this eight year period.

In Chapter Three, some notable differences in terms of the composition of the population and the makeup of households in Misangwa, revealed through the 2001 and 2009 household surveys, are elucidated. Over this time period, the proportion of OVCs increased, as did their absolute number. In 2009, one in every three children was found to be an OVC, compared to one in four in 2001. The nature of the young people’s orphanhood also changed. The proportion of paternal orphans increased, but most striking was the increase in the proportion of double orphans; in 2001, 7% of all children and young peoplesurveyed were double orphans, but this had risen to 18% in 2009. The proportion of households headed by elderly people was large in both years, with grandparents being the largest category of guardians for OVCs; in 2001, 48% of all OVCs lived with grandparents, and in 2009 this was 53%. The proportion of skipped-generation households increased, however in 2009, 10% of all households that included children were skipped-generation households compared to 5.9% in 2001.

Chapter Four consists of three brief case studies of skipped-generation households in Misangwa. This chapter sets the scene and gives the reader a sense
of what such households look like, how they function, and the differences and similarities between various skipped-generation households. It also provides a glimpse at the lives of those who live in them.

As part of this study, 65 skipped-generation households were studied intensively. The characteristics of these households, including the makeup, living conditions and income-generating strategies they pursue, are described in Chapter Five. Overall, these households were found to be poorer than other types of households in the area, and several problems are common among them. For one thing, the older people are often physically frail and thus unable to work or perform all the tasks related to childcare. They are also socially isolated, which means that they bring few social contacts to the household, have little access to news and information, and as a result often suffer from loneliness.

Another common problem among skipped-generation households is the lack of facilities to store farm produce, particularly maize, which means that households are forced to sell the produce that they cannot store. Thus even households that produce sufficient food to see them through the year are forced to sell part of their produce at harvest time, only to have to buy food later on in the year at a much higher price. The economic ramifications of this create a poverty trap that recurs yearly, and keeps many people poor no matter how hard they work. For various reasons, this impacts skipped-generation households in particular.

In Chapter Six, the focus lies on the older generation living in skipped-generation households. The analysis begins with the reconstruction of their life histories. Their stories begin with them as young people, getting married and becoming parents. They expected their children’s generation to be more successful than their own, since they had much better access to education: many had completed secondary school or even vocational training. Yet this anticipated success never materialised, as their children started falling ill and dying in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As the HIV epidemic became further entrenched, the older generation found themselves losing many of their middle-aged children and slowly having to take on the responsibility of being the primary caregiver for their grandchildren.

The realities of the lives of the older generation in skipped-generation households are bleak. The respondents talked of many problems in their daily lives at the individual, household and community levels. One of the biggest issues is that their expectations of old age – of living in a multi-generational household where they are supported, valued, and able to enjoy their last years of life – have not materialised. Furthermore, the physical problems associated with old age make their lives extremely difficult, and this has resulted in a dependence on the younger generation for income generation, food production and childcare. The relationships between the older and younger generation are often far from easy,
and intergenerational conflict was found to be common. Older guardians often felt that their authority is not respected by the younger generation. One common way that older guardians deal with their problems is through alcohol. But while it may be an easy way to temporarily escape their problems, alcohol consumption has very negative consequences for the relationships between the old and the young, as well as on the household budget.

In Chapter Seven, the focus lies on the children and young people living in skipped-generation households. Their life histories reveal how they have experienced sudden and traumatic changes in their lives, going from a relatively stable and predictable life with their parents and siblings to living in new contexts and households with new guardians. Their difficulties often began even before the death of their parents, as many of them acted as their parents’ primary caregiver during their illness. A common theme in the stories of these younger people was the need to adjust to new people, places and prospects. Upon joining a skipped-generation household, however, few of the respondents believed that their lives would once again become stable; they all anticipated further changes, especially because they knew that their grandparents were old and would not live forever.

In the second part of the chapter, the focus lies on the various elements of Bronfenbrenner’s PPCT model. Exploration of the social contexts of the younger generation reveals that, more than children in other settings, those in skipped-generation households have less contact with adults in the community. This is primarily due to the fact that their older guardians have fewer relationships with others outside the household. This provides these younger people with a relatively high degree of freedom and anonymity, since there is little interference in their lives once they are outside of their homes. As a result, these children and young people must be personally responsible for the communication between the various settings in which their lives take place (such as at home, at school, in their income generating activities, etc.). This means, for instance, that if a child has a problem at school, it is up to the child to tell his or her guardian about the problem, since there is no contact between the guardian and the teacher. In this chapter, I focus extensively on what it means for these children and young people to be the ‘messengers of their own development’. In particular, I highlight how, despite the fact that this responsibility and freedom could be abused, in fact the majority were more likely to use the opportunity to improve their own situation and that of their household.

Another finding revealed that when these children and young people need help or advice, or if they run into issues that they cannot solve, many feel that they are unlikely to get the support they need from their older guardians. Rather, they are forced to search for help from others. The children and young people who do this were found to be exemplary cases of ‘positive deviance’. Their past experiences,
especially for those who had acted as primary caregiver for their dying parents, mean that they have had to make decisions that many adults have never had to make. This has made them stronger and more independent. Perhaps to them, positive deviance is something that they acquired early on in life and has grown on them.

In Chapter Eight, the most important conclusions are discussed. Two conclusions are drawn at the household level. The first is that skipped-generation households often go unnoticed, both in the communities where they exist and in the policies of individuals and organisations who are trying to mitigate the impacts of HIV. The second is that the formation of skipped-generation households is crisis driven and has little to do with preferences or altruism on the part of those living in these households.

In relation to the older generation, several conclusions are drawn. These are related to older people’s unmet expectations, the hardships they experience, and the problems they face in caring for themselves and the young people living with them. In terms of the younger generation, the conclusions are related to the poverty that they grow up in, the associated impact on their school enrolment (which is lower than for other children in the community), the lack of close parenting, the large degree of freedom and anonymity that they experience, and the responsibilities they bear for their own well-being and development as well as for the well-being of those they live with.

The third section of the final chapter is about how the conclusions relate to the chosen theoretical framework. Bronfenbrenner’s PPCT model has brought to light the ‘social shopping’ that some of the children and young people in skipped-generation households display. They know whom to approach for help and advice, and seek contact and establish relationships with adults who can be useful to their development and well-being. As such, they can be seen as acting as the ‘messengers of their own development’, and in so doing, they also contribute to the well-being of their household. The approach to well-being selected for this study has also shown that while basic human needs (such as for food and shelter) are important, the young respondents nevertheless weigh these needs in relation to their social and emotional needs. Love and nurturing matter to the young people, and they often said that they would choose to be with specific people from whom they would receive it, even if this meant a trade-off in terms of material well-being.

In the penultimate section, I attempt to shed some light on the possible future scenarios for these households. It is not known what happens to the members of the younger generation when their older guardians die. Given that I did not come across child-headed households in Misangwa (either in 2001 or 2009), it seems unlikely that children take over from their older guardians to head the household.
Perhaps another older person steps in, perhaps the household disintegrates, or maybe the household transitions into a ‘regular’ household headed by a young adult (previously a member of the younger generation). What exactly happens is unknown, but it does require further study.

In the final pages of this work, recommendations for improving the well-being of skipped-generation households are provided related to farming, social welfare and social protection.