

Children's Agency in Responding to Shocks and Adverse Events in Ethiopia

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Contents

Summary	ii
The Author	ii
Acknowledgements	ii
1. Introduction	1
Children's agency in the context of shocks and adverse events	2
Shocks in Ethiopia	3
2. Study context, data and methods	4
3. Results	5
Descriptive statistics	5
Shocks and differential outcomes	7
4. The agency of children in coping with the impacts of shocks	13
5. Sustainability? Agency as short-term trade-offs	16
6. Summary and conclusions	17
References	19

Summary

This paper focuses on children’s experiences of shocks and adverse events and their agency in dealing with the impacts of such events in Ethiopia, using survey and qualitative data collected from individuals and groups of children and young people. It draws on Young Lives data, including data from two qualitative sub-studies carried out in 2009 and 2010. It finds out that children have their own experiences of shocks, different from the experiences of adults or of the household as a whole, and that some of the shocks have long-term consequences for children’s well-being. The paper also argues that during difficult circumstances or crises, children are active social agents. Their agency is primarily reflected in their decisions to take on paid work and subsidise their families’ incomes and their own basic needs during crises. However, it also spells out that some of their coping mechanisms are so informal and fragile that they are only applicable in specific situations and then do not necessarily bring about sustainable change. In some situations, children are seen resorting to unfavourable coping mechanisms which later give rise to other shocks with long-term developmental and health consequences for them. Finally, the paper suggests that agency of children can be described as constrained and ‘thin’, cautioning that it is necessary to consider contexts and to acknowledge children’s agency as active while at the same time offering protection, in case children’s decisions lead to other vulnerabilities in the future.

The Author

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About Young Lives

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'I save the money I earn for two or three months and buy maize for my family.'

1. Introduction

The notion of a 'shock' or adverse event remains hard to pin down as it stands. Its applicability to different disciplines also depends on the context. In economics, 'shock' is broadly understood as an adverse event that is part of the common experience of chronic poverty and that leads to a reduction in household income, consumption and/or productive assets and is likely to reinforce the poverty cycle (Baulch 2011; Dornan 2010). Hence it is a sudden and violent blow that can produce significant change in a household's economic circumstances.

In sociology and anthropology, a shock is a state of bewilderment and distress experienced by an individual who is exposed to a new, strange or foreign culture. However, my attention to shocks in this paper revolves around a sudden and upsetting event or experience that may expose children to adversity and to other threats in life. These include one-off events and endemic adversities¹ that often have an influence that persists long after the event. The shocks I analyse are short-term events with long-term consequences for a child's work, schooling and health. Though shocks are a routine part of the precarious existence of the children in the Young Lives sample, these children still consider them sudden and upsetting events that will have a significant effect on their lives. Whether the shock is the debilitating illness of a parent, rising food prices or drought, which seem common events in their communities, for the children, each shock is an upsetting event that can have long-term impacts.

Even if shock is a routine part of the existence of many children, poorer children are disproportionately affected and experience slightly different and greater impacts (Alderman 2011). Children, especially those growing up in poverty, experience risks as part of their everyday life (see Ogando Portela and Pells 2014). Hence they are vulnerable to certain types of crises and even short periods of crisis can impact their long-term development.

Thus the paper is about children's experiences of shocks, the agency of poor children in coping with the impacts of shocks, and the sustainability of children's decisions in responding to these shocks in five communities in Ethiopia. It argues that children have their own experiences of shocks, different from the experiences of adults or of the household as a whole, and play a role in managing the impacts of these shocks (even if only in the short term). In most cases, children are more affected by shocks than adults within the household, with one shock leading to another. For example, the Young Lives study in Andhra Pradesh in India noted that price rises brought about shortages of good-quality food and increased household expenditure on food, which resulted in children taking on paid work and working more within the household (Vennam et al. 2010).

In effect, a lot has been said about household-level shocks and how households respond to shocks, mainly in economics, and much has been left out regarding how poor children experience and respond to shocks differently from poor adults. Thus, the interest of this paper is to explore the impacts of shocks on children and children's active role in managing

¹ For example, drought, flooding, shortage of food, rising food prices and hunger. Table 1 gives full details of the shocks considered.

such impacts at different levels. The paper draws on Young Lives data gathered in five Ethiopian communities.

Children's agency in the context of shocks and adverse events

Researchers and scholars working across a range of scholarly approaches conceptualise the agency of young people and children in various ways. Some describe the agency of young people and children as 'constrained' (Panelli et al. 2007), others, 'thin' (Klocker 2007) or 'tactical' (Honwana 2005). However in general terms, 'agency is understood as an individual's own capacities, competencies, and activities through which they navigate the contexts and positions of their lifeworlds, fulfilling many economic, social, and cultural expectations' (Robson et al. 2007: 135). There are cultural differences between how 'westernised' and 'non-westernised' societies perceive children's competency and agency (Chen and French 2008; Mosier and Rogoff 2003). These differences in the constructions of child agency may also emanate from young people's experiences of agency, which are dependent upon what the young people are doing, who they are with and where they are (Robson et al. 2007). In their study of children's accounts of their migration to Accra, Ghana, Mizen and Ofosu-Kusi (2013) argue that social terms that are embedded in children's narratives about the situation of their families and communities account for children's agency. According to Bordonaro and Payne (2012) even though children and young people are driven by forces that account for their agency, on the contrary, they are indicated to possess 'ambiguous agency' and identified as 'social problems' when deviating from social norms.

No matter how the agency of children is conceptualised in different contexts, the primary concern in this paper is to show how poor children subject to major shocks and adverse events are not simply passive. The fact that children are still young and are often only studied as dependent learners being inducted into the social and cultural worlds of adults has caused them to be viewed as passive agents who are shaped by overarching structures and contexts. However, they must be seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social life (James and Prout 1997; James et al. 1998), as 'doers' and 'thinkers' rather than as 'social becomings' (Valentine 1996, cited by Robson et al. 2007). Hence, it should be noted that poor children, though most affected by crisis, also have their own responding mechanisms, even when anticipating crisis. They are capable social actors who shape their difficult circumstances, as well as being shaped by them. Despite their inability to bring about structural changes, children nevertheless employ a variety of strategies to make their situations more bearable (Lieten 2008: 116).

In the paper, I discuss poor children's agency from two angles. Firstly I argue that poor children trying to cope with the impacts of shocks are also active social agents. Secondly, even though children are active social agents, that the strategies they employ sometimes often only enable them to escape a situation and do not lead to long-term solutions, thus sometimes leading to other vulnerabilities. Here it is advisable to note that poor children in vulnerable situations are not only victims and passive subjects. Robson et al. (2007) remind us about the need for avoiding portrayals of young people simply as victims of their situations when conceptualising children's agency. Hence this paper denotes the agency of poor children in mitigating and reducing the impacts of shocks as primarily a response to social and economic expectations in difficult circumstances.

In the next section, I discuss shocks in Ethiopia. In the subsequent sections, I will describe the communities within which the Young Lives study was undertaken, elaborating some of their basic features, and describing the data sources and methods the study has employed.

Following that I present descriptive statistics on the percentages of households affected by shocks. The subsequent sections present children's experiences of shocks and their agency in coping with the impacts of shocks. I then discuss to what extent children's coping measures are sustainable and whether the short-term trade-offs they make lead to longer-term vulnerability. The paper ends by presenting some concrete conclusions that contribute to policy and practice in child protection.

Shocks in Ethiopia

Despite its recent impressive economic growth and the reduction in the headcount poverty rate, which fell from 38.7 per cent in 2004/5 to 29.6 per cent in 2010/11 (MOFED 2012), Ethiopia remains amongst the world's poorest nations. The incidence of absolute poverty is higher in rural areas (30 per cent) than in urban areas (26 per cent), although rural poverty is declining faster than urban poverty (MOFED 2008; MOFED 2012). Like poverty, shock is a common occurrence in the country. About 80 per cent of Ethiopia's households obtain their livelihood from traditional low-productivity agricultural activities, which are vulnerable to recurrent droughts. The loss of such livelihoods through shocks continues to generate considerable poverty.

Besides, poverty is exacerbating the number of shocks children experience, making the magnitude higher among rural households (*ibid.*). Failure of crops, the unavailability of food and the loss of livestock are pertinent events for very poor households. Unpredictable weather; harvest failure as a result of recurrent drought, pests or frost; output price fluctuations; and the death of family members and/or livestock are among the many shocks Ethiopian households face (Dercon 2002). Due to these and other facts, Ethiopia is thought to have a high concentration of risk. Households in the Young Lives study are reporting being affected by same type of shock in different years (Dornan 2010), with environmental and economic shocks occurring frequently.

The country experiences area-wide shocks, such as drought and crop failure, as well as household-level shocks, such as the illness and death of household members (Woldehanna 2010). Though area-wide shocks are widespread, shocks at the household level are of significant concern for poor households and their children, with the latter being the more badly affected. Shocks can cause children's poverty to persist, with negative consequences for their futures. In Ethiopia, more importantly, household-level shocks may have long-term consequences for child welfare as none of the social assistance government and non-government programmes address them (*ibid.*). Generally, therefore, shocks have long-lasting consequences for schooling outcomes, children's health and the economic well-being (employment prospects and productivity) of young people (Dercon and Hoddinott 2003).

Poverty reduction strategies have been high on the agenda of the country for two decades. The Government adopted a programme called the 'Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Programme' in 2002 (CSA 2004). With respect to addressing the food insecurity which emanates from different crises, the Government, often in collaboration with donors and non-governmental organisations, has introduced some social protection programmes.² Thus, governments and donor organisations in Ethiopia are concerned to mitigate such poverty-exacerbating shocks (Woldehanna 2009).

² For example, the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) was introduced in 2005 to strengthen the emergency-relief-based Employment Generation Scheme in order to address poverty and vulnerability in Ethiopia.

2. Study context, data and methods

The paper uses data from Young Lives, a longitudinal study of childhood poverty. It is based mainly on data gathered in 2009 from a qualitative sub-study on the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) (see footnote 3) in three rural communities and another qualitative sub-study on Orphanhood and Vulnerability carried out in 2010 in two urban sites and one rural site. In addition, three rounds of qualitative data, generated in 2007, 2008 and 2011, are used to supplement to the data from these sub-studies. Data are coded by theme, using Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software. Across both sub-studies, data from individual interviews with children and caregivers and from focus group discussions are used.

As a study of childhood poverty, Young Lives focuses on children living in poor communities and households. So far there have been three rounds of the quantitative survey (2002, 2006 and 2009), focused on a sample of 2,000 children born in 2001 (the Younger Cohort) and a sample of 1,000 children born in 1994/5 (the Older Cohort). Children were selected randomly within 20 sentinel sites. Descriptive statistics from the last two survey rounds (2006 and 2009) are used to provide background information on the types of shocks that affected the households in which the Young Lives children were living. More than 72 per cent of the households in the sample lived below the poverty line at the time of the Round 2 survey.³ The Younger Cohort children were between 7 and 8 years old during the Round 3 household survey and the PSNP sub-study in 2009, and Older Cohort children were aged 14 to 15. When we carried out the Orphanhood and Vulnerability sub-study in 2010, they were aged between 9 and 10, and 16 and 17 respectively. The paper tries to allow for the analysis of context-based impacts of shocks along age and gender lines and pays particular attention to the differences between urban and rural households and children.

The first urban community studied is in the capital city, Addis Ababa, and the second is in Hawassa, the capital of Southern Nations, Nationalities and People’s region (SNNPR), while the rural communities are in the Amhara, Oromia and Tigray regions. The sites are named Bertukan, Leku, Tach-meret, Leki and Zeytuni respectively.⁴

The first urban site, Bertukan, is a very poor neighbourhood, where the main means of subsistence are petty trade and daily labour. It is located in the centre of Addis Ababa and poverty is widespread. There are many problems, mainly related to housing conditions, sanitation and hygiene and poor families have little access to the private schools and healthcare services of the city centre, accessing government schools and services instead.

Leku is the oldest neighbourhood of Hawassa, populated primarily by the Wolayita and Sidama ethnic groups. Most of the people in the community are very poor and engage in petty trading, daily labour, street vending or self-employment. Children are also more involved in such activities. As the area is densely populated, households are very crowded, with some of them accommodating 15–20 members. There are private and NGO-run schools

3 Households below the poverty line were considered those who were unable to consume a minimum of 2,200 kilocalories per day plus essential non-food items (MOFED 2008).

4 All the names of research sites and respondents are pseudonyms, in order to preserve anonymity.

in the area but poor families are less likely to send their children to those schools, so most attend the government schools.

The three rural communities have similar characteristics, agriculture being their main means of livelihood. Zeytuni and Tach-meret are food-insecure areas, the former being highly dependent on government support. The PSNP is the most important source of income for the poor people in these communities. Subsistence farming, working on irrigated land, fishing and animal husbandry are the main means of livelihood in Leki. The involvement of children as wage earners in various income-generating schemes is a common trend across these communities.

Thus using data generated from the sub-studies on the PSNP (2009) and Orphanhood and Vulnerability (2010) as main data sources, I examine children's experiences of shocks and their coping mechanisms. Individual interviews with both children and caregivers, as well as focus group discussions with the same, are employed. In group discussions with children and their caregivers and individual interviews the following questions were asked: *What are the strong strategies used by children to respond to shocks? Or How do children who have experienced different shocks respond to shocks? What types of shocks/risks have you encountered in your life that you remember? And what have you done to respond to the risks you encountered?*

3. Results

Descriptive statistics

In this section of the paper I present survey results on the adverse events or shocks experienced by households (see Table 1) and this will be followed by the percentages of households affected by shocks (see Table 2). In the sections following this, I present the findings from qualitative data with thematic interpretations.

During the Round 2 and Round 3 surveys, Young Lives documented the types of shocks affecting households' and children's welfare. These are grouped into three categories: economic shocks, environmental shocks and family-related shocks.

Table 1. *Economic, environmental and family shocks that affected Young Lives and households in Round 2 (2006) and Round 3 (2009)*

Economic	Environmental	Family events
Large increase in input prices	Drought	Death of child's father
Large decrease in output prices	Too much rain or flooding	Death of child's mother
Increase in the price of food bought (only asked in Round 3)	Erosion, cracks or landslides	Death of another person in the household
Livestock died	Frost or hailstorm	Illness of child's father
Loss of job /source of income/ family enterprise	Pests or diseases that affected crops before they were harvested	Illness of child's mother
Dispute with neighbours/ other Peasant Association members regarding land or assets	Crops failed	Illness of other household member
	Pests or diseases that led to storage losses	Divorce, separation or abandonment
	Pests or diseases that affected livestock	Birth/new household members
		Having to pay school fees because of child's school enrolment

Source: Round 3 Country Report (Woldehanna et al. 2011)

Using the survey results from Rounds 1, 2 and 3, Young Lives has assessed what proportion of households were affected by shocks. Though there is no similar survey done with children, it is also possible to see how children within households were impacted by household shocks. Both area-wide shocks that affect the larger community and household-level shocks are very common among these households (see Table 2).

Table 2. *Households affected by economic, environmental and family event shocks (%)*

	Economic			Environmental			Family events		
	R1	R2	R3	R1	R2	R3	R1	R2	R3
Location									
Urban	43.8	39.6	97.1	8.4	10.4	16.1	43.4	53.4	55.8
Rural	66.5	60.1	94.2	66.0	71.4	76.8	31.5	60.8	60.1
Region									
Addis Ababa	40.9	25.7	95.9	1.7	1.7	2.2	42.1	54.0	53.8
Amhara	53.1	51.9	97.7	42.2	61.4	60.0	36.6	56.0	61.4
Oromia	69.5	52.2	90.6	58.3	48.2	53.5	35.2	53.9	50.1
SNNPR	57.3	68.2	96.2	44.8	52.4	55.4	38.8	70.0	74.7
Tigray	65.7	50.1	96.6	66.4	57.6	75.8	27.6	51.5	47.3
Average	58.3	51.9	95.4	45.1	47.1	52.4	35.8	57.9	58.4
Total no. obs	2,853	2,853	2,853	2,853	2,853	2,853	2,853	2,853	2,853

Source: Round 3 country report (Woldehanna et al. 2011)

Economic shocks across the three rounds increased each round (from 58 per cent in Round 1 to 95 per cent in Round 3). These shocks affected both rural and urban households, though the incidence was higher for the rural households. The occurrence of drought in 2009, inflation since 2006 (especially local and global food price inflation), and economic factors are some of the causes (Woldehanna et al. 2011). After the global financial crisis in 2007, especially in the two rounds of the qualitative survey that followed it (2008 and 2011), and in the other two sub-studies, poor children across the study areas repeatedly reported economic shocks. Even during the Orphanhood and Vulnerability sub-study, which focused mainly on parental death, children reported economic shocks as being among the major sources of their vulnerabilities although environmental and household-level shocks were the dominant types of shocks they experienced.

The rate of occurrence for family-related adverse events increased to 58 per cent in 2006 and remained constant in 2009. Household-level shocks such as abandonment by parents, parental illness, child illness (some are recurrent illnesses), household members’ deaths and accidents/injury were among children’s major shock experiences during the qualitative studies. According to the children, these types of shocks are temporary yet their impacts lead to other crises with long-term consequences. Accidents or injuries to the children, were reported to be mainly work-related. Accidents of various sorts contributed to children’s health shocks and the majority of them happened as a result of children undertaking work that was ‘hazardous’ such as making bread over an open fire. Boys reported more work injuries than girls, and children in poor households were at greater risk than the ones from better-off households (Morrow et al. 2013: 8). Bereket, a 16-year-old boy from Bertukan, said that the injury he suffered while working in a garage was a bad experience. It kept him out of school and in hospital for two months.

For many of these children, injuries are not just mere episodes of sickness. For those like Bereket, they are also adversities that hamper children's future prospects. Bereket indicated having stopped working for four months, so that his livelihood was affected. He says, "When I was away from my work for a total of four months, my grandmother used to pay for my expenses." Besides, the 'hazardous' nature of the work and the working environments, such as working in a garage and weeding/ploughing in the sun, were also reported to have negative impacts on children's health.

When these children engage in either household tasks or work for cash, they often endure injuries such as bruises, broken bones, scars (some of which are permanent and have a long-term impact on their health).

There are differences among children with regard to their experiences and exposure to shocks. Drought and lack of rainfall, death of livestock and low agricultural production are typical shocks rural children bear. Though these events seem pervasive and endemic, children still describe them as having long-term impacts.

Shocks and differential outcomes

Shocks result in different outcomes, which may be temporary or permanent. Some of the outcomes revolve around children's well-being, schooling and work. One category of shock can also lead to another. When the health of caregivers is impacted, there is a negative correlation with children's schooling and work. In the following section, I analyse the types of shock children experience and the effects these can have on them. I discuss family adverse events first, then environmental and economic shocks.

Parental ill health, absence, death and divorce and children's health shocks

Most of children's shock experiences entwine with unmet material and emotional needs. Shocks like the death or debilitating illness of parents or caregivers are of concern when it comes to the fulfilment of basic needs for clothing, education, food and recreation. Adult death and ill health have a direct impact on the household income, which limits the purchasing power for child services, such as health or education. During the Orphanhood and Vulnerability study, children reflected on the impacts of parental death and sickness. Teje was a 9-year-old girl attending school in Grade 3 and living in a large family in Leku. Her father's sudden illness had a devastating impact on the whole family. The family had to spend a lot of money on his treatment. At the same time, he was unable to work, which reduced the household income considerably and pushed them into poverty. The family members decreased their food intake due to economic problems. It was hard for them to sustain a living within the context of soaring prices. This shock has affected Teje's education. She recounted that she was forced to use a single exercise book and felt unequal to children of her age in terms of clothing.

Interviewer: You said the income of your family has decreased as a result of your father's sickness and what did you lose as a result?

Teje: I am short of exercise books now. I am writing all subjects on one exercise book.

Interviewer: Were you writing each subject on separate exercise books?

Teje: Yes.

Interviewer: What else are you short of?

Teje: Clothes.

Interviewer: Are you not getting what you were getting before?

Teje: Yes.

Interviewer: What do you feel? Were you playing with your friends?

Teje: Loneliness as I am short of clothes.

Parental illnesses give rise to other shocks which have a direct impact on children's well-being. These can force children to take difficult decisions. We see this happen to 15-year-old Haymanot in Zeytuni, whose father had left the family. She was living at her aunt's house in the local town, where she was attending school and was in Grade 5. After her mother had a heart attack, Haymanot had to return home. She decided to drop out of school in order to assist her mother and two siblings. She got a job at a private stone-crusher plant, where she continued to work even after injuring her hand. She said the work at the stone-crusher plant was difficult but she was happy that she was able to support her mother and her siblings, who were going to school.

The illnesses of Teje's father and Haymanot's mother had a negative correlation with the education of both girls though Teje did not have to leave school. Unlike Teje, who lacked necessary materials for her schooling, Haymanot's case was more severe. Though Haymanot's mother wanted her daughter to continue her education, necessity forced her to quit. This is a common trend among children who are unable to combine school and work specifically due to these types of shocks.

For many children, parental death goes beyond personal loss and has a profound impact on their material circumstances. The death of 16-year-old Yordi's father forced Yordi and her siblings to move to a school with poor-quality education. More importantly, the household struggled a lot to cover basic needs due to lack of income.

The absence of a balanced diet or having fewer meals is also often caused by the death of a parent or caregiver, which means that children's basic needs are not met. Thus death of an important family member can have economic repercussions on children that may still be visible some time after the tragedy.

Kudus experienced the separation of his mother from his father when he was only 8. When interviewed for the Orphanhood and Vulnerability sub-study, Kudus was 9 years of age and was in Grade 2 at school in Leku. For him, such an experience was shocking and psychologically harmful, causing his educational performance to deteriorate. Thus the impacts of divorce on children like Kudus are immense and are reflected through various negative life outcomes.

Parental health and presence/absence strongly influence children's perceptions of well-being. During Round 3 of the qualitative research, children, in their explanations of what a 'good life' was, stated that orphaned children and children whose parents were divorced were 'not doing well'. In the majority of these communities, children referred to unmet material needs due either to the sickness or death of parents as their primary marker of ill-being. Meeting material needs is very important if children are to attend 'good' schools and stay in school longer, regardless of shocks.

Apart from what children experience as shocks due to the death, absence or illness of parents, children recount how their own ill health is also perceived as a shock. According to them, this can have devastating impacts on their well-being and contributes to their 'bad'

experiences of shocks. The abrupt feeling of an ache in the head, back or abdomen, and long-lasting illnesses, contribute to the burden children bear. More importantly, work-related injuries are significant contributors to the ill health of children. Rural children in particular reported suffering from working for long hours in sunny and windy weather conditions.

For younger children in the study, short-term injuries due to accidents, illnesses of various types, death of or abandonment by household members, especially the household head, are sources of their health shocks. Though we cannot measure the correlation between poor health and underachievement, we for sure know that poor health in children is often a marker of poverty and poverty impacts on learning through chronic and acute ill health (Fleisch 2008).

Thus shocks have compound impacts on children in various ways and prolong the cycle of poverty. Severe shocks are likely to affect children through worsening their nutrition, hampering their school performance, causing them to leave school or damaging their health.

Extra responsibilities for children as a result of shocks

There are many reasons why children work: child, household and community-level factors all play a part. In addition, cultural understandings of childhood and children's roles in the family play a critical role (Hindman 2009). With more than 80 per cent of the Ethiopian population living in rural areas and working in subsistence agriculture,⁵ it is no surprise to see children routinely contributing to their households. Work is simply part of growing up responsibly for the majority of children in Ethiopia (Tafere and Camfield 2009; Poluha 2007; Abebe 2007). Between the ages of 6 and 11, they learn how to assume different responsibilities both at home and outside the home. Whether the type of activity is housework or income generation, children in many regards see it as essential. It is the way in which they gain skills needed for their later lives and also means of survival (for those engaged in paid work).

Irrespective of their age and gender, children in all the study communities undertake household chores such as making coffee, washing clothes, caring for younger siblings, acting as a messenger, doing dishes, fetching water and collecting firewood. And activities such as tending cattle, guarding a farm against wild beasts, fishing and other on-farm activities are mainly carried out by rural boys. Car washing, animal husbandry, quarry work (especially related to stone crushing, stone excavating and partially to stone carving), haricot bean picking, shop keeping, working on irrigation schemes, public work and working as porters are the other categories of work children do for pay.

As indicated above, children resort to doing more work in the house and taking on paid work not only to assist their family but also to overcome the impact of household-level and area-wide shocks. In times of crisis such as drought or death or absence of the breadwinner in the family, children are expected to supplement to the household income.

Although child work is considered important and normal, in some cases it hampers the future prospects of children. In the first place, it adds a burden to the children within the household, making them take over adults' responsibilities in the case of illness and death. In the second place, in situations where children are unable to combine work and schooling, they may tend to leave school in order to contribute to the household's livelihood. Thus, mainly poorer

5 <http://www.fao.org/ag/AGP/AGPC/doc/counprof/ethiopia/ethiopia.htm>

households tend to respond to shocks by increasing their use of child labour and disrupting their children's schooling (Beegle et al. 2006).

Parents' or caregivers' sickness worries children not only because it denies them their material needs. It also makes them contribute to the needs of other household members by engaging in paid work that takes up the time they would have spent on school and study. Mulu was a 16-year-old girl and lived with her mother and siblings in Tach-meret. Since her family was not included in the PSNP, family members had to find other paid work to earn a living. Mulu said she worked for five hours a day during school days and for 10 hours each weekend. As much of her time was taken up by this work, there were days she missed classes. This made her get poor grades at school, since she followed lessons inconsistently. Compared with Mulu, Mehari a 16-year-old boy who lived with his parents and five siblings in Tach-Meret, bore similar responsibilities within his household following his mother's sickness. He had to undertake jobs his mother used to do at home on top of farming activities, which consumed his study time. Haymanot was also disappointed that she had so much responsibility at home and at work (in stone-crusher plants) when her mother got ill. She explained: "My mother used to bake *injera* [traditional flatbread] and fetch water. Now, it is me doing that ... I wash clothes and fetch firewood. I used to fetch water seldom and currently I have to do that every day."

Thus, though children did these kinds of work to ease the impacts of shocks, they, at the same time, were made to shoulder additional responsibilities that consumed their time for school and study. Apart from taking children's study time, parental illness shocks can also cause children to drop out of school.

Environmental and economic shocks

This sub-section looks at shocks that are by and large different from those that occur at the household level. Shocks presented in this section are area-wide shocks related to the environment and economy, which affect the whole community because of their endemic nature. It is common that any category of shocks can affect any part of society, yet their magnitude and degree of influence varies across settings and people. Even within a household, there is no uniformity regarding the impact of shocks. Adult women are more often adversely affected than adult men. Amongst adult women, daughters of the household head are more vulnerable than other women (Dercon and Hoddinott 2003: 17). Similarly children's geographical location and level of poverty are some of the prevailing factors that also contribute to the shocks they face. Across location, rural children are more vulnerable to shocks (especially economic and environmental shocks) than urban children (Woldehanna 2010; Boyden 2009; Ogando Portela and Pells 2014). Biritu, a 16-year-old girl from Leki, described the impact of drought in her community and said who were most vulnerable:

Interviewer: Concerning your community in general, what problem has happened in Leki?

Biritu: For example, last time the poor has suffered from hunger. There was someone who died of food shortage.

Interviewer: Do you know one?

Biritu: Yes. There were children who suffered from the same problem, in that regard, they don't give them aid. We were not given enough and as a result our baby was sick.

Interviewer: For example, I think it was two years ago, there was no rain and drought struck your village. How did that influence the community?

Biritu: Well, there was a severe consequence. They [the poorest] suffered much. Those who do not have cattle and money were starving to death. If those who have something had not shared with others for God's sake, the poor would have nothing to eat. I remember one quintal [100kg] of maize being purchased for 700 birr [USD 38]. That was how the community was affected.

In a similar way, the qualitative evidence I examine here shows that although many households and children in both urban and rural areas had been affected by increased food prices, the effects were more severe for those in the rural areas. Unlike those in urban areas, rural households and children had not had strong government or non-governmental support mechanisms to fall back on. The PSNP was designed as a short-term coping mechanism in the rural areas but not all poor households benefited from it.

The increase in the cost of living has had an impact on urban households and children too. Miki's grandmother in Bertukan testified to the economic severity of the times, and said that hard work was indispensable. She said, "These are very expensive times. Unless you strive, you may not fulfil everything. You may afford water, but you cannot get the soap." Higher food prices were accompanied by prolonged drought, which has led to a decline in agricultural production. In the context of chronic poverty, this exacerbated the magnitude of the problem in the rural areas. A caregiver from Leki says:

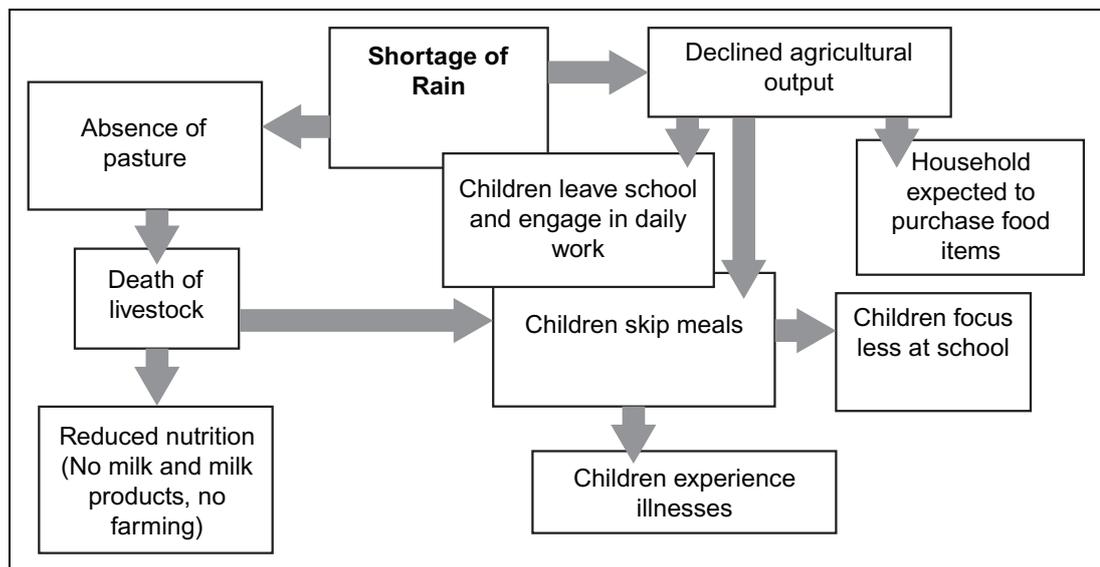
"In the past what we cultivated used to produce good yield. Now, the production has greatly reduced. There were good rains. Now, the weather has significantly changed. The rain [begins] late and [stops] early. This has negative impact on the production."

Shortage of rain not only reduces agricultural output. According to families in the rural areas, livestock have been reported dying due to absence of pasture, caused by drought.

Cattle are an important means of survival in rural areas. Although the local people depend on subsistence farming, they still heavily rely on purchasing cereals and other food items in exchange for cattle. Cereals are one of the staple food items for which inflation was particularly high and poor households fared particularly badly during the period of high food prices (Alem and Söderbom 2010). When the family of Beletch, a 16-year-old double orphan girl from Leki, experienced an increase in the cost of commodities in 2009, they sold one of their oxen to buy maize and paired the other ox with a neighbour's for farming. The value of cattle goes far beyond its economic value. Firstly, it is a marker of wealth and an indicator of a child's well-being. Families who own cattle consider it a great asset that is no less significant than farmland. The other value is its practical contribution to children's health, and to the family's wealth and farming. With a cow in the household, children's nutrition is greatly improved as they can feed on the milk and its products. In addition to its food value, a cow augments the wealth of a household by reproducing. Likewise, oxen in rural households have similar value. If oxen happen to die, households might be forced to stop cultivating their farmland as there would be scarcity of farm oxen that could be paired to plough. And this means decreased production and increased ill health in children. As cattle provide a wide spectrum of benefits, especially in rural areas, it is likely that when households experience the death of cattle, they feel it as a shock, which is not really the case for urban households. Losses of such main sources of livelihood trap poor people in poverty and thus perpetuate the cycle of vulnerability.

Shocks that come as a result of a sudden natural calamity not only destroy human and physical capital but directly lower households' productive capacity and incomes, usually with disproportionate effects on the poor. Such shocks also result in poor psychosocial development of children (Alderman 2011). Figure 1 depicts how one shock leads to others, taking one example of an area-wide shock. It indicates how a shortage of rain leads to other types of shocks, with cumulative impacts on children.

Figure 1. Trends of shock leading to other shocks



Source: Caregiver and children's focus group discussions for sub-studies on orphanhood and vulnerability and on the Productive Safety Net Programme.

The above diagram is also illustrative of what Shashitu in Leki experienced during drought in her village. Following the 2007–8 drought in her village, she indicated that there was a decline in agricultural production, which made her family experience food shortage. This in turn led her to suffer from ill health. She was unable to pay attention at school due to hunger. As a result, she was forced to leave school and engage in paid work. The impact of hunger was considerable as it also made her sister leave school.

Interviewer: What was the impact of last year's drought on your life?

Shashitu: My body weight has greatly declined due to lack of sufficient food. This was followed by malaria which was again intensified by hunger. Our neighbours helped us in making others contribute money for my medication. They asked the teachers in the school and the teachers raised some money for me and as a result they saved my life.

Interviewer: What was the cause of the malaria?

Shashitu: It might be due to strong sun when I do daily labour or physical weakness due to food shortage.

Interviewer: What other problems did you face?

Shashitu: We couldn't get breakfast last year; we used to go to school without eating anything. We could not follow lessons properly due to hunger, and this contributed to the drop-out of my sister and myself.

Most children in the study experience multiple shocks whereby some of the shocks lead to other kinds of shocks. The children know the economic and environmental shocks are of different origin yet bring more cumulative impacts than household-level ones. In the next section, I will discuss what great efforts children showed in managing the aforementioned impacts of shocks.

4. The agency of children in coping with the impacts of shocks

In a nutshell, households' mechanisms of solidarity in coping with shocks rely on informal support from families and friends and in some cases from NGOs. Informal networks include extended families, neighbours and *iddirs* (informal burial associations) and among formal ones are NGOs and the PSNP (in rural areas). Working abroad to send remittances, selling cattle to buy food, undertaking farm work for families with no labour and consuming seed stock kept for the next season are some of the informal coping mechanisms apparent in the rural areas. However the majority of the informal support mechanisms are so irregular that the family continue to suffer when the support stops. Even some of the aid from NGOs is reported to be arriving late and to be insufficient. As a result, in times of difficulty or emergency, the majority of households have to rely primarily on themselves. In this section, I present the ways children can cope with the shocks as well as their planned coping mechanisms for future shocks.

As members of the household, children, like women, are 'shock absorbers' in times of crisis. Despite their age, the qualitative studies have shown that the children responded well to the shocks through doing paid work, fishing, growing vegetables, doing public works, selling firewood and planting seedlings. Repeatedly, they have underlined the importance of hard work to overcome challenges. Apparently, the main contribution children make is through their work, whether paid or unpaid. This is important, given that work is generally conceptualised in the 'adversity literature' as a serious risk to the young (Boyden 2009: 16).

Child work isn't just a coping mechanism but is also a means to supplement household income and children feel proud when contributing to the family economy (Bourdillon et al. 2010; Lieten 2008; Yilma 2009). Some children are observed to be intensively involved in paid daily labour on top of the work they do for their family at home. For example, Shashitu, a double orphan girl from Leki, recalls the worst years she spent continually working in daily labour following crop failure in 2009, at the time of the PSNP sub-study. She mentions spending her income from such work on buying food crops for the family. She says: "Once, I remember buying a quintal of maize. I save the money I earn for two or three months and buy maize for the household. I also bought clothes for myself." Ayu's mother in Leki also confirms: "Ayu, after involving in daily labour, came home with some amount of money. The money helped us subsidise some of the household expenses. She also helped herself buying her personal items and education materials with the rest money."

Ayu and Shashitu, apart from contributing to family income, helped their families recover from shortages of food due to an absence of rain in the area. The phenomenon of children working can thus be seen as a form of agency: through their work, which involves their own volition, they help to ease the economic poverty of their family (Lieten 2008: 118).

Children not only devise ways of coping with shocks when they occur but can also be observed making plans for future shocks. This holds true for Fatuma, a 16-year-old girl from Bertukan. Fatuma was a paternal orphan and was in Grade 10 at school. Her mother often fell ill and her father died when she was too young to remember him. She lived with her mother in rented accommodation belonging to her mother's aunt. She feared that she might fail the National Examination at the end of Grade 10 and become a burden to her family. Hence, she indicated that she had already made herself ready by learning other necessary skills like embroidery and sewing that would help her earn a living. Fatuma was not totally relying on her formal education. She had been learning how to sew at the local mosque for past six to seven months in case she needed that to fall back on.

Apart from showing Fatuma's resilience, her story is a good example of the types of strategies poor people adopt and how they are influenced by their contexts. According to Rakodi (2002), the assets which poor people possess or have access to, the livelihoods they desire and the strategies they adopt are influenced by the contexts within which they live. It seems from this fact that Fatuma's future coping strategies are being devised ahead of anticipated shocks. Fatuma still has various alternatives on which she will fall back on in case others do not work. She says that if she is unable to get work with the skill she has already gained in sewing, she will do other types of work during the day and study at night. She is also thinking of migrating and working abroad in Arab States if all her strategies of survival fall through. Miki, like Fatuma, was 16 years of age, lived in Bertukan and tried to gain some work skills after his father had had a severe car accident. He said he could handle his situation by doing paid work, even in some future uncertainties. In addition to learning how to become a professional football player, he was already working as a taxi driver. Though he suffered a lot after his father's injury in many ways, he did not allow his problems to discourage him. He knew that he should give attention to his education even though he had no one to help him pursue it. He said: "I have convinced myself that if there is no one who is ready to cover my school fees, I will work during the day and learn in the evening."

Skills and work not only help children survive in times of crisis, they also help them develop their confidence. According to Bereket, because he had gained necessary life skills he saw himself as strong, regardless of his poor background. He said: "I am equal to my friends of my age ... I can do what they are able to do." This means that, for children like Bereket, the skills and abilities they had in life were parameters of their strength or weakness. When children failed to handle life matters on their own, they were considered weak and are not self-confident. Bereket is a good example of a poor child who had devised good ways out of the shocks his family were experiencing. Bereket no longer mourned the death of his mother; rather her death seems to have contributed to the person he had become in some ways. Initially, the death of his mother was a shock to him but as he got older he realised that it was irreversible and that he had to adjust. Interestingly, the death of his mother meant learning new ways of overcoming difficulties in life. "I prefer living with my grandmother. Had I been with my *enate* [mother], I could not have acquired any skills." Similarly, during focus group discussions, children indicated that smart and stronger children worked hard and supported themselves and moved out of problems.

Miki, also 16 years old, lived in Bertukan with his paternal grandmother and ailing father. He attended school in Grade 9 and had no siblings. His mother left his father when Miki was 8 and father was involved in a car accident when Miki was 12. His grandmother earned a living from traditional physiotherapy, which brought in very little, and there was no other source of income for the family. However Miki did not see all this as a serious shock. He felt capable of

supporting himself doing paid work on top of the support he got from family members, i.e. his uncle and his grandmother. Defar, who lived in Tach-meret, also underlined the importance of hard work. He said that his family had lost two cattle due to accident and the household's livelihood was threatened by drought. He said: "We are hungry mostly at winter time. When we are hungry, I and my grandmother sell eucalyptus leaves and survive." Hence, for Defar, engaging in such work was a way to overcome his problems.

Whether positive or negative, children and young people portray some strategies as mechanisms of resilience and survival (Seymour 2012). The above reflections of children's ways of dealing with shocks tell us how children in these communities are active social agents in dealing with their problems. By becoming involved in different income-generating schemes, together with hard work at home, children have done all in their power either to move out of poverty or maintain the family livelihoods. In order to do so, we have seen that they do not necessarily need to fall back on adults as their 'mentors'. We see they go beyond this and play a pivotal role within their community and family guiding adults. The qualitative study in Ethiopia indicates that nowadays socialisation has become a 'two-way' process whereby children have started to teach and advise their parents about health and education (Tafere 2013). In addition Heinonen (2011), in her study *Youth Gangs and Street Children: Culture, Nurture and Masculinity in Ethiopia*, witnessed children's reversed action of socialising and advising parents while doing street businesses. She says that 'street children often assume the adult role of homemakers and their mothers' mentors' (Heinonen 2011: 83). Similarly, in the contexts of overcoming the impacts of shocks, rural children were observed playing advisory roles when their communities were short of rain. Biritu's role in this regard is vital:

Interviewer: What else did you do when the drought struck your village?

Biritu: I advised my parents to plant trees and they did plant eucalyptus trees along the river bank.

Interviewer: Oh really?

Biritu: Yes ... and even the community in Leki planted trees under the Safety Net [PSNP] project and the rain returned to us.

During discussions, others, like Beletch and Shashitu, have also said that they prayed to God to return them the rain and they were successful. Poluha (2004: 21) argues:

Whatever children do is never a complete repetition of what their peers, parents and other adults have done. Neither can any individual's acts ever be the same, since each occasion is new with a change of, for example, context, person or purpose.

Thus, for both shocks happening at the household level and the wider level, children in both urban and rural areas have their own coping mechanisms though these may also mean dropping out of school or having fewer meals. Although these children are disproportionately at risk on many fronts, especially when confronted with crisis, it is a mistake to consider them only as 'victims'. They can also be extraordinarily resilient in the face of shocks.

5. Sustainability? Agency as short-term trade-offs

In earlier discussions I have tried to indicate how children affected by shocks are resilient and display creative coping strategies for surviving in difficult life circumstances. They have shown that they have a variety of mechanisms to cope with shocks and in some cases are seen making plans for future shocks. For some, their capacity to deal with problems increases. Yet the way children make decisions about their family situations and also their own life has a lasting effect. For example, short-term school drop-out has long-term consequences due to its irreversibility. And we know that these situations are very sensitive and inconsistent in the way they influence poor children’s lives. It is not only the sometimes unpredictable nature of the environment that contributes to the severity of a crisis but also the fact that children’s coping strategies can be fragile. Thus this means that children need more protection as crisis can impact their long-term development.

Firstly, due to being less equipped for aggregate shocks, poor people continue to suffer from the effects of crises. Or else, some of their coping strategies are either ineffective or create harmful consequences, especially for children (UNICEF 2009). For example, when drought struck her family and there was no food at home, Shashitu from Leki was forced to skip her breakfast so that there was enough food for the whole family. As a result, she lost a lot of weight and was unable to concentrate at school. “The days I go to school without eating breakfast; I cannot concentrate. I just think about my parents, as the result, I cannot understand my lessons.”

Some households and children, like Shashitu, reported having skipped their meals or eating less nutritious foods. This in turn is seen having a negative return on children’s health (Dornan 2010). For example, rationing food and eating less could have serious consequences for children’s health, with potentially long-lasting effects. Children were struggling to eat enough and it was common for households to subsist on a single meal a day.

The synergistic and cumulative effects of such physical health and educational problems can affect children’s future prospects on all fronts. When children’s health is compromised by absence of food or having fewer meals, they are more likely to suffer long-term damage from extreme events and worsening conditions. When Birtu had to do heavy work to earn money to fulfil her educational needs and contribute to the family needs following the drought that destroyed the family’s food crops, she incurred physical harm. She said, “I usually do not do heavy work since I cannot. But that time, I decided to help my family and did some heavy work to get money. And it bought an effect on my health.” She further explained the headache she had today had started that moment and was very severe. “I fear that next year when I prepare for the National Examination, my headache will persist and be an obstacle to my studies.”

Children’s capacity to cope well in these difficult situations has been related to their own active engagement and constructive attitude. Yet children may be pulled from school to work and at times forced to have a single meal and take risky measures while trying to maintain the stability of the household.

The other point to note is most of children's coping mechanisms are informal risk-coping arrangements and strategies which might work well only for certain types of risks, i.e. household-level risks. Thus in such instances children's self-sufficiency may not take them further for the reason that their forms of mechanisms are very informal and limited to certain situations. During two separate focus group discussions with children and caregivers it was explained that because agricultural outputs are dependent upon the vagaries of nature, which are likely to cause fluctuations in the weather conditions and damage to agricultural food crops and flooding, children's coping roles are very limited. Thus, some forms of crisis may account for limitations in children's resilience and thus make children's agency 'thin' (Klocker 2007). Hence, children's agency is not comprehensive because it can only apply in certain types of crises.

6. Summary and conclusions

The paper, using survey and qualitative data, contributes to the existing literature on shocks from three angles. It spells out how children, as individuals, are impacted by shocks; shows children's resilience in managing such shocks; and asks whether the short-term trade-offs they make through their agency can lead to sustainable beneficial change in the longer term. It emphasises children's active agency in dealing with shocks but advises caution on whether changes are sustainable.

Both rural and urban children were affected by economic, environmental and family-related shocks. Environmental shocks affected rural children more, as much of their families' livelihoods depended on climatic conditions. Shocks that were related to family events affected children in both locations more equally.

The paper concludes by making three major points. First, it indicates that children's experience of shocks is a threat to their well-being and education. Protection mechanisms need to consider how children experience shocks, not just how households experience them. Instead of treating the whole unit as one, it is good to see how single individuals within a group are shock 'victims' as the degree of its impact varies according to age, gender and location.

Second, it is important to take children's agency into account: the paper notes that poor children subject to major shocks are not simply passive. As seen in the findings, children used a variety of coping strategies not only to mitigate the effects of such shocks but also to contribute to the livelihoods of their families, even in difficult circumstances. Some of their coping mechanisms are also devised in a way to accommodate future hardships. In so many instances, paid work, accompanied by hard work in the household, is what the majority in the study resorted to. Child labourers are accepted in informal sector jobs: garage work, work in stone-crusher plants, fishing, irrigation scheme activities and embroidery. These strategies show how poor children, despite their age, high susceptibility to shocks and lack of power, are active social agents, even in difficult circumstances. For some children, these challenging encounters have turned into opportunities to make themselves self-reliant, courageous and confident. Caregivers also note that the role of children in managing such risks is significant. In fact children who experienced parental illnesses of various sorts exhibited strong agency (Ogando Portela and Pells 2014).

Though shocks seem to have prolonged impacts on the future prospects of the children, their short-term coping strategies were real solutions, making children act as 'shock absorbers'. Even in insurmountable conditions of area-wide shocks, which needed the support of an external body, rural children felt they had a responsibility to their community. Hence, social protection mechanisms have to consider these temporary ways of responding by children, as they are vital for the children at that specific moment. Social interventions must embrace 'everyday agency' and start with children and young people's own perspective, as Payne (2012: 408) puts it.

Third, children's agency in coping with the impacts of shocks may be fragile. The children's evidence shows that there is an important distinction to be made between pervasive, area-wide shocks and less pervasive, household-level shocks, as far as children's agency is concerned. In situations where environmental shocks were experienced, children did not opt to engage in diverse income-generating activities like they did for the household-level shocks. Though both types of shocks triggered decline in the well-being of the children, children affected by environmental shocks needed to rely on additional coping strategies, apart from hard work.

Regardless of their active role in 'absorbing shocks', children are seen resorting to unfavourable coping mechanisms. Making quick decisions to leave school and engage in risky and hard paid work have perpetuated their vulnerability, with long-term consequences. Thus, some coping mechanisms are harmful to children as they may leave school to save the household money and increase income through child labour. Since some of the short-term responding mechanisms bring irreversible consequences, protection programmes should consider expanding counter-cyclically during times of crisis and employing mechanisms such as a more responsive application process and a shorter timeframe for when people can reapply.

Children are involved in many initiatives defining their problems and seeking solutions to them, yet some of their active choices may pose unperceived risks. Hence measures should be put in place which should ideally enhance the capacity of the household during periods of shock with minimal upset for children. Protection strategies should be designed without compromising the well-being of children.

In general, there is limited experience with programmes and interventions that protect children during crises, especially in developing countries. Intervention programmes to protect children from shocks need to consider contexts in order to be effective. Social protection systems should comprise a large set of formal and informal mechanisms to manage risks. These can include various mechanisms aimed at reducing risks, mitigating risks, helping households cope with risks and reducing/reversing the impacts of shocks. Formal training programmes on skills can be targeted at children since they help them reduce the impacts of risks and make them less vulnerable. This would help reduce the impact of future adverse shocks, which might otherwise perpetuate the cycle of vulnerability.

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Children's Agency in Responding to Shocks and Adverse Events in Ethiopia

This paper focuses on children's experiences of shocks and adverse events and their agency in dealing with the impacts of such events in Ethiopia, using survey and qualitative data collected from individuals and groups of children and young people. It draws on Young Lives data, including data from two qualitative sub-studies carried out in 2009 and 2010. It finds out that children have their own experiences of shocks, different from the experiences of adults or of the household as a whole, and that some of the shocks have long-term consequences for children's well-being. The paper also argues that during difficult circumstances or crises, children are active social agents. Their agency is primarily reflected in their decisions to take on paid work and subsidise their families' incomes and their own basic needs during crises. However, it also spells out that some of their coping mechanisms are so informal and fragile that they are only applicable in specific situations and then do not necessarily bring about sustainable change. In some situations, children are seen resorting to unfavourable coping mechanisms which later give rise to other shocks with long-term developmental and health consequences for them. Finally, the paper suggests that agency of children can be described as constrained and 'thin', cautioning that it is necessary to consider contexts and to acknowledge children's agency as active while at the same time offering protection, in case children's decisions lead to other vulnerabilities in the future.

About Young Lives

Young Lives is an international study of childhood poverty, involving 12,000 children in 4 countries over 15 years. It is led by a team in the Department of International Development at the University of Oxford in association with research and policy partners in the 4 study countries: Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam.

Through researching different aspects of children's lives, we seek to improve policies and programmes for children.

Young Lives Partners

Young Lives is coordinated by a small team based at the University of Oxford, led by Professor Jo Boyden.

- *Ethiopian Development Research Institute, Ethiopia*
- *Pankhurst Development Research and Consulting plc*
- *Save the Children (Ethiopia programme)*
- *Centre for Economic and Social Sciences, Andhra Pradesh, India*
- *Save the Children India*
- *Sri Padmavathi Mahila Visvavidyalayam (Women's University), Andhra Pradesh, India*
- *Grupo de Análisis para el Desarrollo (GRADE), Peru*
- *Instituto de Investigación Nutricional, Peru*
- *Centre for Analysis and Forecasting, Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences, Vietnam*
- *General Statistics Office, Vietnam*
- *University of Oxford, UK*

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