

# Community Understandings of Children's Transitions in Ethiopia

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The paper explores the views of caregivers and other adults on the nature and timing of transitions made by children aged 11 to 13 years in five Ethiopian communities, in two remote-rural, one near-rural and two urban locations. The transitions we discuss are school, work and 'early' marriage for girls. These are chosen because both adults and children describe formal transitions into and out of schooling and work as being the most significant at this age. Marriage is a rite of passage that is engaged in alongside work and school transitions and has considerable influence on girl's futures in terms of their education, occupation, decision-making power and status.

## Methodology

The reason for focussing on adults' perspectives is the recognition that children's experiences are partly influenced by their parents' decisions, which are in turn based on parents' perceptions of what constitutes a good transition. As parents' perceptions may be influenced by norms that originate in their community, understanding community contexts helps us understand how children's transitions are constructed and guided, and provides invaluable background for investigating children's experiences. This paper explores: (a) what these three transitions mean for girls and boys in different contexts; (b) what defines a successful transition and what success or failure means for children and their families; (c) what norms relate to these transitions and how they are transferred among and between generations; and (d) what factors are considered to determine whether children make successful transitions. To answer these questions, the paper uses findings from the first qualitative research in 2007 combined with data from the Round 2 household survey in 2006/7, addressing caregivers' aspirations and expectations for their children's futures.

## Findings

### Overall:

- Across the five sites surveyed, the main activities for 11 to 13-year-old children were identified as attending school, performing family work or paid labour, and beginning to have relationships with the opposite sex and/or prepare for marriage.

- All children are expected to attend school and complete at least the first cycle of primary school. At this stage, there is little difference between girls and boys in school enrolment and attendance. Children in rural areas appear to be at a disadvantage because they did not go to kindergarten and tend to start school later.
- In rural areas, children are expected to attend school and to work depending on their age and gender. Girls aged between 6 and 11 years spend a considerable amount of time on household chores, which increases as they grow older. Boys spend time engaged in paid and unpaid work outside the home. None of this work seems to affect time spent at school or studying; only leisure time, although this is not the impression gained from the qualitative data.
- Schools, religious institutions and the community play an important role in children's socialisation, helping them to understand the value of respect and obedience and the consequences of errant behaviour. However, this vision of socialisation becomes complex. For example, sending older girls to school is perceived to be a risky activity – developing relationships with boys may lead to pre-marital sex and the long walk to school in rural areas exposes them to assault or abduction.

## Policy implications

These findings have several implications for policy. First, in order for policy makers to understand the persistence of early marriages (some illegal), it is necessary to understand the rationale underlying adults' attempts to guide children's transitions. Second, policies should be interpreted in relation to the local, grounded experience of communities, rather than being imposed from above. Third, policies and legislation related to work, marriage and schooling need to be supported with appropriate material resources in order to be effective.

