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POLICY BRIEF

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Local safety nets help people cope with shocks and stressors and prevent the deepening of poverty and vulnerability

Vulnerability, coping and adaptation within the context of climate change and HIV/AIDS in South Africa: Investigating strategies to strengthen livelihoods and food security and build resilience

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This policy brief draws on three sources of data from a study undertaken in Lesseyton in Lukanji Local Municipality and Willowvale in Mbashe Local Municipality, in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. The aim was to understand the vulnerability context of households in the two sites and how they coped with multiple shocks and stresses, with an emphasis on various types of safety nets. Methods included a survey that specifically targeted vulnerable households, data from several community workshops and in-depth life history interviews.

THE CONTEXT

The Eastern Cape, with a population of approximately seven million, is the poorest province in South Africa and is seen as one of the most vulnerable to climate change, as well as being seriously affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Climate change in the Eastern Cape is expected to lead to more intense rainfall events, with longer dry periods in between (Peterson and Holness, 2011). This is likely to compound the current challenges the province faces, such as by further damaging ecosystems, as well as putting additional strain on water management, agriculture, health and food security (Drimie and Gillespie, 2010). The AIDS pandemic has had a devastating impact on people in the Eastern Cape, with AIDS related deaths estimated at 41.9% in 2009 (Makiwane and Chimere-Dan, 2010). Life expectancy dropped to 47 years for men and 49 years for woman in 2010 (Quinn et al., 2011).

The communal areas of the province, including the sites where we worked, still suffer from the legacy of apartheid. They are characterised by a long history of inequality, discrimination and under-development which continue to have impacts today. Households in the area are facing a greater frequency of short term shocks such as climate extremes, death and illness in the household, job loss, violence and crime. These often arise as a consequence of longer term 'background' change, which, we argue, is fundamentally altering local social-ecological systems and rural ways of life. Examples of these background stressors and changes include the systemic effects of HIV/AIDS on household structure and assets, land and resource degradation, deagrarianisation, increasing crime and changes in demographics and values. Rural households have limited options to turn to when affected by these shocks and stressors, and are often forced to draw on a set of 'safety nets' as a coping mechanism. Here we consider some of these safety nets and their role in assisting households to cope.

DEFINITIONS

Coping: Refers to using existing resources to achieve desired goals immediately after unusual or adverse conditions (Agrawal et al. 2009). Coping generally refers to a short term response to deteriorating conditions, whereas adaptation is a longer term response and usually involves more extensive livelihood changes (IDRC project proposal, 2010).

Adaptation: "An innate and ongoing process of finding ways to respond to stresses that reduce or combat negative impacts and harness potential benefits of change" (Ziervogel and Taylor 2008).

Shock: A sudden event that has a significantly negative impact on household livelihoods, such as a drought, flood or disease. Shocks add to the ongoing challenges that households often face.

Stresses/ Stressor: Stresses are typically continuous and cumulative pressures that adversely affect well-being, with stressors being the name for the specific stress that adversely affects well-being, such as low wage rates or loss of soil fertility.

Safety nets: These are commonly understood to be government interventions that support the poor, such as the provision of social grants, free health care, free access to basic water and sanitation. However the definition can be broadened to include the use of natural and cultivated resources to support households after they are affected by a shock, as well as drawing on social capital through seeking assistance from relatives, friends and other non-state organisations. Safety nets all serve the function of providing fall back options when households experience shocks and stresses.

Vulnerability: Vulnerability or livelihood insecurity emerges when poor people as individuals or social units have to face such harmful threats or shocks with inadequate capacity to respond effectively.

KEY POLICY MESSAGES

- **Multiple shocks create the need for multiple safety nets**

Social protection and especially grants are insufficient to help lift poor, vulnerable households out of poverty. A better appreciation of the value of endogenous (non state) safety nets will help build more effective and developmental social protection policies.

- **An awareness about, and the protection of local natural resource safety nets is vital in broader rural development policies, programmes and strategies**

Access to land is of critical importance to poor/vulnerable households. Access to cultivated land and farmed products provide additional safety nets. In time of stress and shocks, households rely on natural resources for both home use, as well as for providing a cash income. Rural development policies need to ensure that access to both land for own household production and natural resource harvesting is taken into account when land is considered for new purposes, avoiding enclosure of the commons. Effective natural resource management is important to ensure sustainability of supplies into the future.

- **Community based organisations (CBOs) are vital to support vulnerable households**

Local CBO's, including church organisations, are in a good position to assess and support the needs of the most vulnerable individuals and households in a community. Ensuring that these organisations are equipped in terms of training, basic equipment and able to communicate with local authorities will go a long way to ensuring communities are better able to deal with shocks and stressors.

- **Existing social networks need to be supported**

The use of social networks for mutual support is an important strategy used by individuals and households to access help during times of need. However, social networks can become eroded over time, with less people being able to help one another after exposure to common stressors such as climate change. It is therefore vital to support the maintenance and development of social networks, such as by actively involving community members in dealing with challenges they face, supporting collective action, and ensuring good communication between the local authorities and community members. As well as functioning as safety nets, strong social networks can help facilitate innovation and effective responses to problems faced.

- **Local government planning processes especially in relation to risk management need to include local leaders and community representatives**

Municipal planning processes are required to include public participation, but often it is not easy for individuals from rural areas to attend the public meetings that are called. There needs to be more directed communication and opportunities for rural communities to share their own locally developed responses to risks and their ideas where government can build on these and assist with coping and adaptation.

KEY FINDINGS AND SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

1. Widespread experience of shocks

All surveyed households mentioned that they had experienced more than one shock in a two year period prior to the survey. Fifty percent had experienced a death in the household in Lesseyton and 36% in Willowvale. 56% mentioned injury or illness in Lesseyton and 61% in Willowvale. Other shocks included drought, fires, livestock disease and crop failure (Table I).

Table 1. Common shocks and stressors (adapted from Clarke, 2012).

Common shocks and stressors	Lesseyton %	Willowvale %
Drought	87	98
Floods	71	93
Fires	18	91
Strong winds	92	100
Water shortages	96	96
Family illness/injury	56	61
Family death	50	36
Breadwinner death	36	28
Loss of job	20	11
Did not receive grant/pension/remittance	87	98
Expensive event	71	93
Theft	18	91
Look after orphans	92	100
Rainfall variability	96	96

In terms of coping with these shocks, many of the environmental challenges identified were viewed as being the most difficult to recover from, for example households mentioned water shortages, strong winds and drought as the hardest shocks to recover from in both sites.

Table 2. Shocks experienced ranked in order of difficulty to recover from (Clarke, 2012).

Hardest shocks and stressors to recover from
Water shortages
Strong winds
Drought
Floods
Crop failure
Death of a family member
Death of main breadwinner
Livestock disease
Expensive event
Fires
Human illness/injury
Crop pests

2. Longer term changes were also seen as stressors and contributors to vulnerability

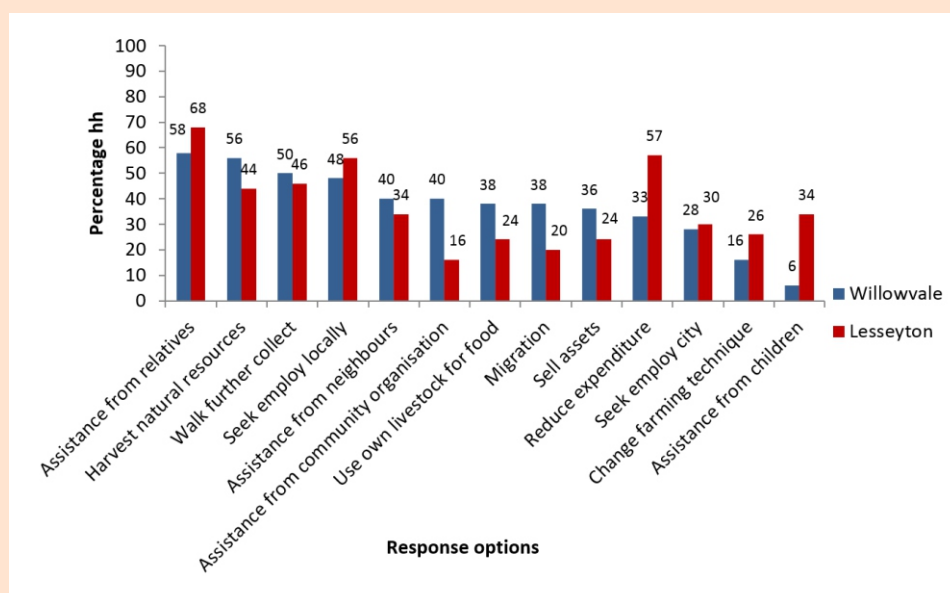
People in the communities understood vulnerability to be related to a wide range of issues such as a lack of education, HIV/AIDS and crime (Table 3). An issue that was repeatedly mentioned related to concern about the youth and future generations. The vulnerability of woman to gender based violence was also highlighted.

Table 3. Local understandings of vulnerability and stressors (Clarke, 2013)

Lesseyton	Willowvale
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dependency on others • Lack of skills • No parental care • Drought (livestock death and crop disease) • Relying on remittances and other unreliable income sources • Breadwinner dies • Crime 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unemployment and poverty • Lack of education and no skills • No parental care • Climate change • Substance abuse • HIV/AIDS and infidelity • Rape and crime

3. Cash is insufficient as a safety net in response to shocks and stresses

Financial assets were generally not sufficient to provide a safety net after households suffered a shock. On average cash



Perceptions on support available	Lesseyton % (n=50)	Willowvale % (n=50)
Easy to get help	72	72
Community willingness to help HIV affected	70	82
HIV education	62	54
Talk about HIV	60	40
Member of a community support group	42	28

These responses limit the danger that a household will fall deeper into poverty and vulnerability.

REFERENCES

Assistance given to others	Lesseyton % (n=50)	Willowvale % (n=50)
Financial	52	16
Time/labour	6	32
Food	22	26
None	40	38

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Responses made when contributions are lost from an ill or deceased household member	Lesseyton % (n=50)	Willowvale % (n=50)
Assistance from family or relatives	80	52
Harvest more natural resources	70	42
Reduce consumption	66	12
Walk/travel further to collect natural resources	48	30
Seek employment in city	46	24
Assistance from neighbours	46	46
Seek employment locally	40	46
Sell natural resources	36	18
Assistance from community organisation	30	40
Change farming technique	30	4
Reduce expenditure	28	24

International Development and Research Council (IDRC) project proposal, 2010. Vulnerability, coping and adaptation within the context of climate change and HIV/AIDS in South Africa: Investigating strategies and practices to strengthen livelihoods and food security, improve health, and build resilience. IDRC Proposal, Rhodes University.

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FURTHER READING

- Several studies have shown the importance of local social and natural resource safety nets in building local level capacity to enable communities to become the agents of their own change. Please refer to the following:
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