

Children and family dynamics in sub-Saharan Africa

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Family relationships and the socialization of children in sub-Saharan Africa are highly complex. In many countries of the region, children are cared for via a family network which extends beyond the parental couple. They grow up in a universe of densely interwoven and constantly changing relationships shaped by family ties, diverse forms of conjugal life, rapid population growth and high levels of individual mobility. As a consequence, the care of children and the decisions concerning them are not the sole responsibility of their biological parents. A wide range of people, applying different rationales, are likely to be involved in their upbringing.

Alongside family institutions, new stakeholders are taking an interest in children's lives and contributing to a diversification of models for the socialization and care of children. For example, since the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), international bodies have placed children at the centre of their programmes (Education for all, Millennium Development Goals, Sustainable Development Goals, etc.). At local and national levels, normative references relative to the status of children and the responsibilities of parents are also produced and disseminated via legal frameworks, health and educational structures. These various models are communicated by the media to all sections of the population. More than ever before, individuals are confronted by a multitude of values, norms and institutions affecting the family sphere and shaping the way in which their practices are organized.

In sub-Saharan Africa today, what is the place of children in family dynamics and how is it changing?

Four major themes will be explored.

The first concerns **the complexity and the dynamics of children's family environment**. The aim will be to go beyond an approach centred on the household or the biological parents to consider the multiple contexts and the many players involved in a child's upbringing. These contexts of family socialization will be examined in terms of their internal structure and organization, and in terms of the factors which reshape them or, on the contrary, slow down their evolution.

Contributions on the following topics will be welcome:

- analysis of the family environment from different angles of observation: housing, family economic unit, household, kin network, etc.;
- Geographical dispersal of the family unit (multiple residences, family members living in more than one location, etc.) including transnational families;
- Changes in children's family environment over time, in a longitudinal perspective;
- Impact of demographic changes on the size and composition of children's kin networks;
- Structural changes and temporary adjustments in family configurations, and the corresponding socioeconomic, geographical and cultural differentiations;
- Emerging or atypical family configurations.

The second theme concerns **the influence of family environment on children's situations and outcomes**. How does the family configuration and children's place within it affect their care and their life trajectories, in terms of school enrolment, labour force entry, migration or access to healthcare, for example? What are the factors behind the inequalities of child treatment between families and within families? In the production of these inequalities, can we distinguish between factors linked to the family characteristics (income, composition, etc.) and those linked to the status and agency of the adults who care for the children? To what extent do the dynamics of family recomposition (through child circulation, family division, etc.) offer a means to prevent or limit inequalities between children?

The family environment can be addressed from different angles, depending on the characteristics of the family unit, the place occupied by the children (birth order, relationship to household head, etc.) or the type of adults around them (mother, father, grandparents, etc.). Contributions on the following topics will be welcome:

- Comparison of the situations and outcomes of children in different family environments, from various angles (health, schooling, migration, child labour, etc.);
- Influence of the parents' status and of their entourage on their behaviour towards their own children (for example, does belonging to a large family lengthen the decision-making process for taking children to see a doctor or enrolling them in school? Or, conversely, does it increase capacity for action thanks to a larger social network?), and the question of mothers' degree of independence in caring for young children;
- Similarities and differences of treatment and outcomes among siblings or among children in the same household;
- Influence of conjugal separation and adult migration on child care.

The third theme concerns **normative frameworks and practices linked to parenting and childhood**. This theme focuses on the diversification of reference systems (values, norms, institutions) relative to the family, conjugal and parental spheres, and the way they are interpreted at the individual level. The aim is to discuss changes in the figures of parenthood, either in response to the emergence of new demands or as an ad hoc combination of the various existing normative frameworks. This theme can be developed in a number of ways:

- Changes in paternal and maternal roles and practices, and their link to new forms of urban conjugality (non-cohabiting unions, informal unions, etc.), to the increase in female educational enrolment and labour force participation (work-family balance) or to situations of economic insecurity;
- The recomposition of parental roles and attributions in rural societies marked by increasing migration, and care of children whose parents are absent (children born outside marriage, orphans, migrants' children, fostered children);
- Individual interpretation of codes and norms relative to parenting and family. These codes and norms, whether rooted in local culture or imported more recently (family code, international standards, etc.) can be seen as reservoirs of resources that individuals can draw upon to construct and legitimize their actions, sometimes by misappropriating and reinterpreting certain normative components to their own advantage;
- Contributions focusing on child custody, circulation and rights, and on the customs of kinship and their recomposition (biological, legal, classificatory, elective) will be especially welcome.

Last, **methodological questions** will also be addressed at the meeting, via two main topics:

- Development of data collection strategies for analysing the family environment and the dynamics of relationships between children and family members. We will welcome papers that present original data collection methods, or tools or questions that can be incorporated into standard surveys, that discuss the advantages and drawbacks of approaches that look at the family beyond the household or the parent-child relationship, or that present longitudinal methodologies to capture the dynamics of children's family environment.

- The strengths and shortcoming of the different data sources (surveys, censuses, demographic surveillance systems). This question can be addressed from different viewpoints, notably in terms of the validity of international comparisons, the notion of the household and its usefulness in describing family realities, the quality of self-reported information on kin relationships or parents' vital status, or the impact of data collection categories ("child in lone-parent household", "child not living with parents", etc.) on the production of international indicators of poverty or vulnerability. Papers that address family realities by cross-matching different data sources will be especially welcome.

Papers must cover both children and their family environment. Childhood is defined as the period from birth to pre-adolescence (up to 12-15 years). Authors are encouraged to include a gender perspective in their proposed paper.

The call for papers is open to different disciplines of the social sciences, to empirical research and studies developing a more theoretical approach. The quantitative dimension will occupy a central position at the seminar. We welcome papers that make use of standard statistical data (surveys, censuses), including for international comparison, or based on more atypical observation systems (specific surveys, Health and Demographic surveillance Systems, etc.), as well as research based on qualitative or combined approaches.

Submissions

Proposals should be submitted by e-mail before **31 May 2016 at the latest**, in the form of a short abstract (200 words) and a long abstract (2-4 pages) detailing the research question, the data, the method and the expected results. Authors will be informed in mid-June if their paper has been selected. Written papers must be submitted by 12 October 2016.

The working languages will be English and French.

Participants are invited to find their own funding to cover travel and living expenses. In certain exceptional cases, the Organizing Committee may agree to cover these expenses. However, there are only sufficient funds to cover a small number of participants, and priority will be given to speakers coming from Africa.

Scientific committee: Valérie Delaunay (IRD/LPED, France), Bilampoa Gnoumou Thiombiano (ISSP, Burkina Faso), Véronique Hertrich (Ined, France), Sangeetha Madhavan (Univ. Maryland, United States), Olivia Samuel (UVSQ/Printemps, France), Ann Whitehead (Univ. Sussex, Great Britain).

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