



African Journal of Social Work
 Afri. j. soc. work
 © National Association of Social Workers-Zimbabwe/Autor(s)
 ISSN Print 1563-3934
 ISSN Online 2409-5605

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Indexed & Accredited with: African Journals Online (AJOL) | University of Zimbabwe Accredited Journals (UZAJ) | SCOPUS (Elsevier's abstract and citation database) | Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) | Society of African Journal Editors (SAJE) | Asian Digital Library (ADL) | African Social Work Network (ASWNet) | Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) - South Africa | SJR | CNKI - China | Journal Publishing Practices and Standards (JPPS) | EBSCO | DOI

The role of orphans and vulnerable children programme in addressing household food insecurity in Botswana

Boineelo Pearl LEFADOLA and Poloko Nuggert NTSHWARANG

ABSTRACT

Among the total population, orphans and vulnerable children are more susceptible to food insecurity than their counterparts. To address this challenge, the government of Botswana introduced the Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC)'s Programme. This article discusses the role of the OVC Programme in addressing food insecurity within their households in Botswana. It emphasizes that OVC programme has an important role in addressing food insecurity among OVC households. Challenges that hinder ensuring food security among OVC households are discussed. The article offers recommendations on how challenges of the OVC programme can be addressed such as the need to re-structure government and administrative systems for effective and efficient service delivery. The suggested recommendations can be utilized by policymakers when reviewing the OVC programme guidelines.

KEY TERMS: food insecurity, social protection system, social safety net, orphans, vulnerable children, Botswana

KEY DATES

Received: May 2023

Revised: July 2023

Accepted: July 2023

Published: August 2023

Funding: None

Conflict of Interest: None

Permission: None

Ethics approval: Not applicable

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Current and previous volumes are available at:

<https://ajsw.africasocialwork.net>



How to reference using ASWNet style:

Lefadola, B. P. & Ntshwarang, P. N. (2023). The role of orphans and vulnerable children programme in addressing household food insecurity in Botswana. *African Journal of Social Work*, 13(4), 188-196. <https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/ajsw.v13i4.2>

INTRODUCTION

Despite being highlighted as one of the priority issues under the Sustainable Development Goals framework, food insecurity and poor nutrition remains an important public health concern in the developing world. Botswana is one of the countries that has been hit hard by the problem of food insecurity. The severity of food insecurity varies from one population to another, with children especially the orphans and vulnerable children mostly affected. To address this problem and fulfil the basic human needs of the marginalized, the government of Botswana introduced the Orphans and Vulnerable Children's Programme which has a food component (in cash transfer). This provision has the potential to address food insecurity within orphan and vulnerable children's households. While a number of studies have assessed the effectiveness of social safety nets, there is limited research exploring the role of social safety nets in addressing household food insecurity in the specific context of Botswana. To address this gap, the current study explored the role played by the Orphans and Vulnerable Children's Programme in addressing household food insecurity in Botswana.

BACKGROUND

The meaning of food insecurity

The understanding and conceptualisation of the term food (in)security has significantly evolved over the past 50 years (High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE), 2020). Food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (Barrett, 2010). This definition was reviewed in 2001 and the term 'social' was incorporated in the definition (Burchi et al., 2016). Food insecurity therefore is defined as the consistent lack of physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets every member of the household's dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. According to Coates et al. (2007) and Tarasuk et al. (2014), the experience of food insecurity can range from concerns about running out of food before there is some means to get some, to eating a limited variety of food, to going hungry, skipping meals, and in extreme cases, not eating for a whole day because of a lack of food and money for food. From this definition, four dimensions of food security (or food insecurity) surface, and these are food availability, food access, food utilization and stability (Guine et al., 2021; HLPE, 2020). In line with the need to transform food systems in the direction needed to meet the SDGs, two dimensions were incorporated to the definition of food security. These are agency and sustainability (HLPE, 2020). The six dimensions of food insecurity in its current form are agency, stability, sustainability, access, availability, and utilisation (HLPE, 2020).

Food security is therefore defined as "a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (HLPE, 2020). The article acknowledges that a social protection programme that effectively addresses food insecurity should be able to satisfy all the six dimensions for its beneficiaries to be food secure. For this study, only three dimensions of food security were investigated which are availability, access, and utilization since the nature of the programme predominantly focuses on these. Food availability refers to the physical existence of food of appropriate quality in sufficient quantities and on consistent basis (Burchi et al., 2016). Food access is accessibility as the physical and economic capacity of households to access food (Burchi et al., 2016). Food utilization reflects differences in the allocation of food within households, the nutritional quality of that food and variation in the extent to which the nutrients in food can be absorbed and metabolized by individuals (Carletto, et al., 2013).

The prevalence of food insecurity in Botswana

The global prevalence of moderate or severe food insecurity has been on the rise since 2014, with nearly one in three people not having access to adequate food in 2020 (Food and Agriculture Organisation for the United Nations, 2021). There is evidence that the magnitude of household food insecurity in the context of Botswana is relatively high. A recent report by Statistics Botswana (2023) shows that the percentage of people who experienced moderate or severe food insecurity in Botswana is estimated at 53.3% in the year 2021/2023, with 26.2% of the population experiencing severe food insecurity. This is a relatively high number, compared to South Africa for example which had a prevalence of 21% severe or moderate food insecurity in 2021 (Statistics South Africa, 2023), 21.4% in Nigeria. Additionally, a recent study conducted by Nnyepi et al. (2023) shows that 87.6% of children who participated in their study experienced food insecurity. The state of food insecurity in Botswana clearly indicates a challenge in addressing the second of the 17 SDGs, Goal 2 that aims to end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition.

Food insecurity among orphans and vulnerable children

Research on food insecurity among orphans and vulnerable children has been investigated to a lesser extent. The few studies conducted clearly indicate that orphaned and vulnerable children are more likely to experience different levels of food insecurity. A study conducted by Kimani-Murage et al. (2011) shows that orphans in Nairobi, Kenya are more vulnerable than their non-orphan counterparts in relation to food security and have poorer nutritional status. In a study commissioned by Charles et al., (2017) at South-East Nigeria, it is indicated that nearly all orphan and vulnerable households (96% in Anambra, and 94.4% in Imo) did not provide enough food to meet their household nutritional requirements. Another study conducted by Bamgboye et al. (2020) concluded that a significant number of OVC households experienced severe hunger. In the context of Botswana, it appears that the extent of food insecurity among orphans and vulnerable children is not yet researched. However, a study carried out by Miller et al. (2014) found out that when looking at malnutrition which is an indicator of food insecurity, orphaned children aged 0–4 are 49% more likely to be underweight than non-orphans. Given the documented severity of food insecurity among orphans and vulnerable children, the authors found it fit to investigate the role of the programme targeting OVCs in Botswana; the Orphans and Vulnerable Children Programme, in addressing food insecurity within their households.

The orphans and vulnerable children's (OVC) programme in Botswana

To eradicate hunger and food insecurity various formal and informal social safety nets have been implemented to address the issue among different population groups. During the pre-colonial era, the local people's needs including food needs were fulfilled through indigenous social welfare services including family and kin obligations, community support networks such as *mafisa* and *majako* (Mushunje, 2014; Rankopo et al., 2021). The *mafisa* is a system whereby destitute persons looked after rich households' livestock thus giving them access to milk the livestock and use it for transportation. In this way, destitute persons gained access to food (Mupedziswa & Ntseane, 2013). The *majako* system on the other hand, allowed poor people to work in the fields of the rich, in return for a share of the harvest (Mupedziswa & Ntseane, 2013). Besides community support systems, traditional leaders or chiefs redistributed surplus food and cattle, to the poor during drought periods (Mupedziswa & Ntseane, 2013).

Post-independence, the government of Botswana gradually initiated and introduced formal social safety nets to improve the livelihoods of poor and vulnerable people. Formal child welfare focused programmes are documented from the late 1970s, with focus on orphaned and vulnerable children (Ramabu, 2020). A comprehensive child welfare system was developed with the escalating HIV/AIDS among OVC (Botswana National Plan of Action for OVC, 2010–2016). Despite the increasing pressure in the public budget, a considerable amount of funds is allocated to the OVC programme. In the year 2018/19, 10% of the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development's budget went to the OVC programme (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Botswana, 2018). The mandate of the OVC programme is to support orphans and vulnerable children with general welfare, psychosocial, emotional, and physical needs. Any child below the age of 18 who has lost one or both biological or adoptive parents is termed an orphan child (Ministry of Local Government, 2008). Vulnerable children are defined as children aged 18 or below who are at high risk of lacking adequate care and protection (Ministry of Local Government, 2008). In the context of Botswana, this includes for example, children living in abusive environments, poverty-stricken families, child-headed households, HIV infected and or living with a disability. A considerable number of children in Botswana are orphaned and vulnerable. Based on the estimates from the household survey, approximately 35% of children in Botswana are orphans or vulnerable children (Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (MLGRD), 2019). The situational analysis by MLGRD further shows that dietary diversity scores are considerably lower in households with an orphan and/or vulnerable child present, compared to those with no OVC (MLGRD, 2019). Similarly, households with orphans and/or vulnerable children have much higher proportions experiencing moderate and severe hunger than those with no OVC (MLGRD, 2019). This demonstrates the need to investigate and address food insecurity amongst this population group.

The OVC programme in Botswana follows a holistic approach that ensures that all needs of orphans and vulnerable children are addressed. The following are examples of safety net instruments provided under the OVC programme, which may directly influence the food security status of OVC's household:

Cash transfer or food coupons

Beneficiaries of the OVC programme are given coupons, which enable them to purchase food and toiletry from local retailers identified as suppliers for beneficiaries (Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, 2019).

Social assistance or non-contributory benefits

The government of Botswana provides orphans and vulnerable children with non-contributory benefits, such as provision of school uniform and private clothing, exemption from payment of school fees including school development fees, tuition fees and school trips, exemption from payment of medical fees at government hospitals, provision of transport fares for school travel as well as provision of housing benefits where need arise (Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, 2019).

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research approach was used for this study. Similar to previous research (Chigevenga, 2022; Tusasiirwe, 2022) in social sciences in the African context, the study followed a reflexive approach. Researchers advocate for the importance of reflexivity as a methodological approach that help readers to understand complex issues through the lived experiences of the researchers. The perspective on this study was informed by the authors' fieldwork experience, having worked in the Department of Social and Community Development as well as implementing the Orphans and Vulnerable Children's programme. We have lived part of our lives in poor backgrounds that allowed interaction with beneficiaries of the OVC programmes. Additionally, we have taught courses at university level that required the interpretation and interrogation of the OVC programme. The research was carried out and findings interpreted through the lens of these multiple identities.

FINDINGS

As part of the broader social protection agenda, social safety nets aim to protect vulnerable households and individuals against risky livelihoods and maintain the general welfare of beneficiaries. In Botswana, the orphans and vulnerable children's programme support the welfare of orphans and vulnerable children. In the context of food and nutrition, the orphans and vulnerable children's programme may have the potential to maintain an adequate level of food consumption and improve food security. The findings of the study show that the OVC programme play an important role in addressing food insecurity among beneficiaries' households. However, there are some factors that hinder successful eradication of food insecurity within households with OVCs.

The role of the orphans and vulnerable children programme in addressing household food insecurity in Botswana

Food availability

The orphans and vulnerable children's programme provide beneficiaries with monthly food rations through a cash component. Nearly all eligible orphans and vulnerable children are reached with food baskets through cash transfer which ensures food availability to some extent. The amount of cash transfer received depends on whether they are urban, semi-urban, rural or semi-rural. From a professional practice standpoint, if it is discovered when there are other needy individuals in the household, they are assessed in their own right and if eligible, registered and offered cash transfer for food rations. Further to that, in practice, policy implementers employ other initiatives alongside the OVC programme, including engaging unemployed and poverty-stricken caregivers in economic empowerment projects and encouraging food production through backyard gardening which can increase household food production hence ensure food availability. Experience from fieldwork also showed that cash transfers through this programme appear to be allowing OVC households to have a diverse diet as they can purchase a variety of food as opposed to when a prescribed food basket was given. The integration of the OVC programme with other support systems including the Early Childhood Care and Education, and school-based programs is an important component of the program. In practice, through the OVC program social workers ensured that beneficiaries are assisted to attend school right from day care center. For beneficiaries of pre-school age, social workers often liaise with home economists to request for admission at preschools as part of social responsibility from the aspect of the day care centers. Benefiting orphans and vulnerable children therefore benefit from the feeding program available through schools.

Food access

Evidence from fieldwork experience and programme review reports shows that the orphans and vulnerable children's programme has the potential to guarantee both physical and economical access of food. The cash component (BWP500-850) received gives households the financial power to purchase food items. During home visits and office consultations, caregivers commended the programme mentioning that the cash component helps supplement their income and, in this way, helps ensure access to the required food. The use of the coupon system across a wide range of local shops enabled beneficiaries to easily access and acquire food supplies.

Food utilization

Through fieldwork experience it has been established that as part of the OVC programme, the government assists beneficiaries to have access to clean and safe drinking water through exemption from payment of water connections and monthly water bills. Additionally, through the OVC programme, special arrangement can be made to provide OVC's households with basic equipment deemed necessary for food preparation. From a practice standpoint, social workers in local councils across Botswana identify caregivers of malnourished OVCs and refer them for nutrition training by Centres for Child and Adolescent Nutrition. In this way, caregivers gain nutrition knowledge that they can possibly apply to ensure optimal nutrition for their children. Home Economists in local councils also provide nutrition and food preparation knowledge to caregivers. Additionally, malnourished OVCs are identified by Social Workers and Home Economists and referred to Centres for Child and Adolescent Nutrition and health practitioners for management of malnutrition and other infections (if any). The OVC programme has provision for amendment of the usual package should health practitioners recommend a special diet for the beneficiary.

Challenges that hinder ensuring food security among OVC households

A reflection on the OVC programme showed that despite the positive role played by the programme, there are some challenges that hinder the programme from addressing all indicators under the different levels of food security. The findings on these challenges are presented under this section.

Food availability

During fieldwork experience it was observed and reported (by caregivers) that in some instances, older children benefiting from the programme use the coupons or smart cards by themselves to purchase food on their own. In some cases, caregivers exchanged food for alcohol and own clothes. On meal composition, it appeared that diets of some beneficiaries lack diversity, they were composed mostly of starchy staples, with few or no animal products, and few fruits and vegetables. It was also reported that some of the orphans and vulnerable children had 1-2 meals only per day. Even though cash transfers through the OVC programme avails food, in some instances the money is credited late which gives a period without food. It was further observed that lack of land especially in urban areas limited food production through such initiatives as backyard gardening.

Food access

One of the challenges observed during fieldwork experience is that the OVC programme does not regularly adjust cash transfers in line with food price inflations and food price seasonality. Some households reported that the food they purchased with cash transfers was not enough to last a month. In some instances, the cash transfer was credited late which gave a period without food. Additionally, a report of cases showed that OVCs experienced unequal distribution of food within their households.

Food utilisation

From fieldwork experience it was observed that in some instances households with OVCs lacked some kitchen equipment such as cooking appliances and food storage equipment necessary for proper preparation of food and for extending the shelf life of food. Observations from fieldwork experience revealed that OVC households relying on outdoor fire for cooking at times had to skip some meals on days when harsh weather conditions did not allow for outdoor cooking. The experience from fieldwork also showed that there was a poor linkage between Social and Community Development (S&CD) Department, being the department in custody of OVCs, and the health care system and as such the referral system between these stakeholders is somewhat poor which affected the health of beneficiaries and somewhat contributed to food insecurity.

DISCUSSION

The orphans and vulnerable children's programme play a key role in Botswana to protect the beneficiaries from their vulnerability and improve food security. In this study, the cash component received from the OVC programme above BWP 500 has the potential to improve food security. The finding is similar with that of Asma et al. (2023), indicating that social cash transfers may significantly reduce food insecurity among the food deficit households. In agreement to the findings of the study, Jimu and Msilimba (2018) showed that cash transfers give beneficiaries the purchasing power for food supplies thereby improving food availability within their households. The use of the cash transfer (coupon system) instead of food distribution in kind (which was formerly used across local councils in Botswana) allows families to buy the type of foodstuff that they like and to buy fresh foodstuff at time intervals that suit them (Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, 2016). This appears to be an effective strategy for increasing households' food availability at all times. However, there is need for good planning on food procurement from the part of the caregiver. The findings further indicated that where social workers arranged for the OVCs to be accommodated in the early childhood care and education centres (a service offered at a cost in Botswana), children benefited through the school feeding programme as they were provided free meals offered at school, which shows the importance of schools as part of social protection strategies especially concerning food insecurity (Tevera & Simelane, 2014). Consistent to the findings of the study, Mokwena (2016) showed that having a backyard garden means that a household can increase their access to food by planting vegetable and other basic food. We found that cash transfers through the OVC programme contributed to diet quality as evidenced by improved diet diversity and the number of meals consumed per day. Similarly, Burchi et al. (2016) indicated that cash transfers have a positive impact on household diet diversity as evidenced by OVC programmes in Malawi and Kenya. In line with this, a study conducted by Pace et al. (2022) in Zimbabwe showed cash transfers influence consumption and diet diversity by relaxing the household's budget constraints. In addition, the study showed that referring malnourished OVCs to Centres for Child and Adolescent Nutrition for treatment and supplementary feeding improved food security. In line with this, Asma et al. (2023) indicated that an additional food supplementary program is an effective means to increase the intake of food for malnourished children.

The study showed that deserving OVC beneficiaries are exempted from water connection and consumption payments; this ensures access to clean and safe drinking water that is needed for food preparation as well as to help avoid water-borne infections that may interfere with optimal nutrients utilization. In support of this, Burchi et al. (2018) noted that promoting food security requires addressing people's access to items other than food, such as health services, drinkable water, and sanitation. Where need arise and resources allowing, other necessities such as housing and household items including kitchen equipment are given to beneficiaries who are in need. According to Oakley et al. (2015), this is a critical strategy as availability of household kitchen utensils and equipment is important for facilitating in-home food preparation hence ensuring food security. However, it is not always possible to make such a provision and this arrangement may vary from one local council to another. Another important aspect of food security is nutritional knowledge and practices. Consistent to the findings, Burchi et al. (2018) showed that knowledge of nutritional issues and cooking methods, as well as hygienic and healthy practices is important in addressing the food utilisation dimension of food security.

Despite the positive contribution of the OVC programme on food security among beneficiaries, the findings presented in the previous section also point to the challenges of the OVC programme on different indicators of means for food security and access to food. Some households reported that the cash transfer did not allow them to purchase foods enough for a month. Similarly, a study by Ndlovu et al. (2021) have shown that the cash received by the poor households in some parts of Zimbabwe hardly cushioned their month food needs and this was worsened by an increase in food prices. The low value cash transfers resulted in fewer meals with less variety consumed per day (Ndlovu et al., 2021). Irregular or late distributions of cash transfers hindered the effectiveness of the programme in alleviating food insecurity. Ndlovu et al. (2021) argued that the frequency and regularity of payments play a critical role in the effectiveness of cash transfers in alleviating food insecurity. Unequal intra-household food distribution among households with OVCs appears to be a problem that can threaten household food insecurity. In Botswana it is a common food cultural practice to give priority to the household heads, especially males, in food distribution. According to the review report by Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (2016) OVCs often experience unfair food distribution, with caregivers giving priority to their own children when distributing food. A study by Agada and Igbokwe (2016) indicates that giving priority to certain individuals over others in household food distribution increases the probability of household food insecurity.

Another key factor hampering the effectiveness of the OVC programme in addressing food insecurity is whereby some beneficiaries irresponsibly spend cash transfers on items other than food, which do not address the objectives of the programme nor the needs of the beneficiaries. In support of this, Devereux and Vincent (2010) demonstrated that some beneficiaries or guardians of beneficiaries inappropriately used cash transfers and squandered it on alcohol. Lastly, the study showed that the lack of facilities to store and prepare food can hinder food security. In agreement with the findings, Oakley and colleagues (2015) argue that availability of household

kitchen utensils and equipment is important for facilitating in-home food storage and preparation hence ensuring food security. According to Selepe et al. (2015) there is a positive relationship between ownership of proper food storage facilities and food security as it extends the shelf life of food. Households without storage facilities like refrigerators, face food loss and waste due to spoilage of food which decreases their food supply.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the beneficiaries should be offered half cash transfer and half food ration (in kind) to protect them against soaring food prices and try to always ascertain food availability. According to Devereux and Vincent (2010) this approach has been applied in the Swaziland's Emergency Drought Response (EDR) programme and worked well in protecting household food security when food prices are fluctuating. It is also important to strengthen OVC caregivers' knowledge on nutrition; food purchasing and food preparation by conducting training for them that target those key areas. According to the High Level of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (2012), food and nutrition training can help address food security by ensuring that food is utilized effectively in safe and wholesome diets for nutritional health and wellbeing. Additionally, OVC families need to be trained on appropriate food storage as well as food preservation methods that will enable them to keep food for a prolonged supply without spoiling. The training offered to caregivers by the Centre for Child and Adolescent Nutrition does not reach a lot of caregivers because the center operates only in Gaborone and Francistown. It is therefore recommended that Home Economists and Nutritionists in local districts should be mandated with nutrition and food preparation training of caregivers.

It is also important to build strong linkages with all stakeholders and sectors relevant to the food security aspect of OVCs – agriculture, lands and housing, education, health, nutrition –and to ensure that eligible OVCs are offered justifiable benefits that can enable them to be food secure. This may include for example; (a) assistance with food production and promotion of backyard gardening by the Ministry of Agriculture (b) economic empowerment and stabilizing income of OVC caregivers through such programmes as the *Ipelegeng* (public works), and poverty eradication programme which are run by the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development (c) facilitation of land and housing ownership rights by OVCs through Ministry of Lands and Housing (d) the education system that supports the food and nutrition needs of children through the school feeding programme (e) the Centre for Child and Adolescent Nutrition needs to intensify efforts to address issues of malnutrition, growth monitoring and nutrition counseling, nutritional supplementation and de-worming especially among OVC's, an approach which has been shown to be effective in Kenya (Chesire et al., 2012), (f) promotion of environmental sanitation by the Environmental Health Department and consistent provision of clean water supplies by Water Utilities Corporation.

CONCLUSION

The paper discussed the role of the Orphans and Vulnerable Children Programme in addressing household food insecurity in Botswana and calls for the examination of factors that account for differences in food security in the orphans and vulnerable children's households. While the article provides preliminary information on the role of the OVC programme in addressing household food insecurity and the underlying constraints of the programme, there is a need to further conduct a quantitative study that assesses the level of household hunger and food insecurity and its associated factors among households with OVCs. Additionally, the impact of the OVC programme on food security needs to be evaluated. The discussion of the paper is limited to only three dimensions of food (in)security. Further studies should therefore consider investigating the role of the OVC programme in Botswana in addressing other dimensions of food security including stability, agency, and sustainability. Despite the challenges encountered by the OVC programme to address food insecurity as highlighted in the paper, to some extent it plays a pivotal role in addressing food insecurity in households with OVCs.

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