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understanding risk, decision-making and
child health in a food crisis.

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Saving lives, preserving livelihoods: Understanding risk, decision-making and child health in a food crisis

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyse household decision-making regarding resource allocation in the aftermath of a food crisis in rural Niger. International attention had resulted in humanitarian agencies launching emergency nutrition programmes to alleviate persistently high levels of acute child malnutrition. We conducted participant observation, 93 in-depth interviews, 15 focus groups, 44 feeding and illness histories for children under 5, and debriefing sessions with local humanitarian staff. The impetus for this study came from observations of marked intra-household differences in child growth and health status, despite the caregivers' ethos of treating children equally. Egalitarian input, however, does not always result in equal outcomes: vulnerable children become "victims of non-discrimination" through a form of benign neglect engendered by pervasive poverty. The ethos and practices of equal investment in children are rooted in a

need to balance the perceived risks to children with the preservation of long-term livelihoods. We discuss the mismatch of views between external interventions, which focus on saving individual children's lives, and local priorities, aimed at spreading risk. This mismatch is rooted in the different ways in which humanitarian agencies and local communities weigh up risks and vulnerabilities in matters of child health.



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Keywords

Intervention; Child health; Famine; Risk; Vulnerability; Intra-household allocation; Humanitarian aid; Poverty; Niger

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