

A Relook at African Solidarity – Child Fosterage Systems and Education Buffering in Six sub-Saharan African Countries

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Abstract PAA

The practice of child fosterage is widely believed to buffer educational inequalities among African children. Yet, few studies have quantified the extent of this buffering. While many studies have estimated the prevalence and micro-level effects of fosterage, its macro-level buffering potential depends also on the direction of flows. This study complements previous research by using DHS data to evaluate the extent to which fostered children are systematically reallocated into households with higher volumes of school-aged children. Preliminary results suggest that informal fosterage mechanisms tend to channel children into better endowed households. However, even if fosterage flows remain modest, their macro-level buffering effect can weaken depending on the direction of fosterage flows and the nature of demographic transitions within a country. We study the implications of these findings for development projects and the extent to which project induced gains remain localized or can instead be spread over wider geographic areas.

Background

Extended family systems are often viewed as a reliable social safety net in Africa. In the absence of strong formal systems of social security for children, they are expected to buffer educational inequalities by permitting the fosterage of rural, poor, and orphaned children into better-endowed households. Indeed, data from many sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries indicate that one in every four and sometimes one in every three children live away from their biological parents and that this system has supported the education of many children. In recent years however, new

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questions have emerged about the limits of these support systems in the wake of economic crises, the rising costs of schooling, and the growing competition for urban employment. In particular, the HIV/AIDS pandemic whose burden is disproportionately borne by countries in East and Southern Africa, has exacerbated the orphan problem. UNICEF (2007) estimates that SSA is home to more than three quarters (12 million) of all global AIDS orphans currently estimated at 15.2 million. Within the subcontinent, the highest concentration of orphans is in East and Southern Africa (8.7million) compared to West and Central Africa region (3 million). Compounded with the recent economic transitions after structural adjustment programs in SSA countries, I ask whether the traditional extended family framework continues to suffice as an effective social safety net for orphans in SSA? To address this question, I trace the economic and demographic character of the “destination” homes into which fostered children are absorbed and later raised. Theory leads us to expect that educational outcomes for children are inversely related to family size (Blake, 1981) and that family wealth explains the large gaps in educational attainment and or dropout rates between the rich and the poor (Filmer and Pritchett, 1999) and additionally fostered children often experience inferior educational outcomes compared to biological children of host families (Case and Ardington, 2006). This paper is a macro level empirical evaluation of the living environments of fostered children across six countries (Burkina Faso, Ghana, Kenya, Madagascar, Tanzania, and Zambia) viewed through two or three time periods within one decade. Knowledge of the livelihood status of fostered children is important for scholars and policy makers who aim for inclusion and social justice.

Perspectives on Child Fosterage and Educational Outcomes

More than two decades ago, Uche C. Isiugo-Abanihe’s paper on “ Child Fosterage in West Africa” (1985) noted the high prevalence of fosterage (20% of sampled children) and described five types of fosterage. Recent studies have sought to explain the effectiveness of these fosterage systems. As expected, some have argued that fosterage systems lead to positive educational outcomes for fostered children (Lloyd and Blanc ,1996; Akresh , 2005) and others highlight the declining effectiveness of fosterage systems as key social safety nets in the African context (Case, Paxson and Ableidinger (2004); Case and Ardington (2006); Pilon (1995); Kobiané

(2003), Bicego, Rutstein and Johnson (2003) ,Elondou-Enyegue, Titus and Kandiwa (forthcoming). Our study therefore seeks to quantify, at macro level, the patterns in the distribution of orphans across six countries within one decade. The next section briefly lays out some theoretical perspectives on the relationship between family size, household wealth and educational outcomes for children.

Family Size, Wealth and Educational Attainment

Judith Blake (1981) laid out a theoretical basis and provided empirical evidence to support the dilution argument on the family size and quality of children debate wherein she concludes that, the number of children in a household is inversely related to the quality of those children (in terms of educational outcomes). Others failed to find similar quantity/quality tradeoff, Gomes (1984) due to contextual differences. Recent policies such as the Universal Primary Education (UPE) aimed at improving access to education for all children fail to meet this noble goal because even where tuition is low or free, families still have to cover larger related costs to education (for example see DHS EdData, Zambia, 2002) such that even rural/urban attainment gaps continue to grow (Zhang , 2006). The second theoretical perspective is on the relationship between family wealth and educational attainment. As expected, children who grow up in poorer families drop out of school earlier and subsequently have fewer years of education with serious implications for the reproduction of intergenerational inequality (Filmer and Pritchett, 1999). Overall, this evidence suggests that the distribution of children in household of specific income profiles should not miss our attention as it determines the educational outcomes of children. The knowledge of these distributional patterns is critical for fostered children in general and orphans in particular. The next section outlines the conceptual framework that guides this study.

Conceptual Framework

Our study attempts to contribute to this literature on the limits to macroeconomic buffering from fosterage. We argue that, in addition to social distribution on the basis of kinship ties, the macroeconomic buffering from fosterage will depend on the economic and demographic

distribution of fosterage opportunities. Specifically, whether fosterage is effective as a redistribution mechanism depends in part on whether foster children gets predominantly concentrated into high SES households and households with few biological children and indeed on micro level decisions made within the receiving households. Following Blake (1981) we expect average resources to be diluted depending on number of children in a household and outcomes for children may vary depending on the structure of the family in which they belong (MacLanahan, 2004), or both (Eloundou-Enyegue and Stokes, 2006). Similarly, children in better endowed households are expected to do better, even in countries where universal primary school education policies are in force simply because families still have to pay, out of pocket, for educational materials such as textbooks, transportation, etc.

Data and Methods

We use Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) data to derive indices of demographic concentration of foster children and trace how these indices have changed over time across six sub-Saharan countries. DHS data come from surveys of nationally representative samples carried out at specific intervals. Our data is for Burkina Faso (1992 and 2003); Ghana (1993, 1998, and 2003); Kenya (1993, 1998, 2003); Madagascar (1992, 1997, and 2003); Tanzania (1992, 1996, and 2004) and finally Zambia (1992 and 1996). Our first task is to classify all children within the sampled households into different family types based on family size. Because these data show destination of fostered children, it makes it possible for us to calculate indices of demographic concentration shown by:

$$IC = (O_i - E_i) * \ln(r_i)$$

Where :

IC=index of concentration; i=index group (family size in the case of demographic concentration); E_i = percentage of children expected to be fostered into the group, if children were distributed proportionately according to group importance; Specifically, E is the percentage of biological children in this sibsize group, relative to all biological children; O_i =percentage of

children actually fostered in this group (out of all fostered children); r_i = sibsize ratio; that is, group sibsize divided by average sibsize.

This formula is such that an over-representation of fostered children into low sibsize groups makes a positive contribution. The index itself runs from negative to positive contributions with zero representing no difference between the observed distribution of fostered children compared to what we would expect to see if all children lived with their biological parents. Overall, therefore, high values on this index suggest that foster children are concentrated in the best family environment possible and low values indicate the contrary.

Preliminary Findings and Conclusion

Incidence of fosterage is still great across many African countries. Within the study countries, at least a quarter of the children in each respective survey were fostered. Regarding family size, the greatest proportion of fostered children was growing up in households with at least four other school aged children. If Case and Ardington (2006) were right in stating that orphans often have lower educational attainment than non orphans with whom they live, then the concentration of fostered children larger households indicates the growing precariousness of the livelihoods of fostered children. It demonstrates the limits of the extended family system to nurture and provide for fostered children reduce potential inequalities in educational attainment and quality of life in general. These finding supports the call for more systematic state supported formal safety nets.

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