

Ethiopian parents can't make up for effects of life shocks on children by spending more on education

October 7 2019

Ethiopian parents try to level out the life chances of least-advantaged children affected by early life shocks such as famine and low rainfall levels by investing more in their education.

New research from Lancaster University and Heriot-Watt University shows parents in the African nation attempt to compensate disadvantaged children in their family by spending greater sums on school fees and private tuition.

The research, published in the *Journal of Population Economics*, examines how parents respond to differing abilities of primary school-age children in the same family.

The researchers found that just under a quarter of parents in the Ethiopia survey reported paying educational fees, with 15 per cent overall differentiating the levels of investment for each child. However, in the end, the greater investment is relatively small in magnitude, and unable to compensate for the low-ability outcomes later in childhood.

"We found that, on average, parents would provide more investment, in terms of spending on educational fees, to a lower-ability child to try to reduce inequality between children in the household," said co-author Dr. Catherine Porter, of Lancaster University Management School.

"The greater the disparity in ability, the greater the investment by the parents in the lower-ability child, supporting the concept that parents have an aversion to inequality among their children. This contradicts somewhat the hypothesis that, in [poor countries](#), [parents](#) take the approach of investing in the better-off child to maximise the chances of one child getting a good education."

The research focuses on children who suffered a 'shock' to their early life investments due to low rainfall levels in their community before the age of 24 months. In Ethiopia, many rural households are dependent on rain-fed agriculture, so poor rainfall contributes to lower household income and therefore has a negative effect on nutritional investments to the children.

Cognitive ability among the children who were part of the study was based on the results of the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) for both siblings within a [family](#) group. The PPVT measures verbal ability and is a proxy for general cognitive development. The study found that elder siblings, who had no issues with rainfall in their early development, have significantly higher test scores relative to a peer group than their siblings.

"The extra investment cannot make up entirely for the detrimental effects of an early-life shock such as through low levels of rainfall," added Dr. Porter.

Evidence from the research suggests families with educated mothers, smaller household size and higher wealth are more likely to compensate with greater [investment](#) in lower-ability children. This is despite the fact that the study sample comes from the Young Lives cohort survey of poor Ethiopian [children](#).

"The compensatory parental responses appear to be concentrated in

relatively higher socioeconomic status families, even in a poor overall sample," said co-author Wei Fan, of Heriot-Watt University. "Larger families with non-educated mothers and relatively lower wealth did try to compensate, but this was only to a modest degree."

More information: Wei Fan et al, Reinforcement or compensation? Parental responses to children's revealed human capital levels, *Journal of Population Economics* (2019). [DOI: 10.1007/s00148-019-00752-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s00148-019-00752-7)

Provided by Lancaster University

Citation: Ethiopian parents can't make up for effects of life shocks on children by spending more on education (2019, October 7) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-10-ethiopian-parents-effects-life-children.html>

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