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Orphans in Africa

Anne Case, Christina Paxson, and Joseph Ableidinger

“In at least one important dimension — school enrollment — orphans are significantly disadvantaged... Although poorer children in Africa are less likely to attend school, the lower enrollment of orphans is not accounted for solely by their lower wealth. Instead, our results suggest that the special disadvantage orphans face is primarily due to their living arrangements. Across a large number of sub-Saharan African countries we find that the degree of relatedness between orphans and their adult caregivers is highly predictive of children’s outcomes.”

In the midst of the AIDS epidemic, nations struggling to find a cure for the disease must also find a way to mitigate its widespread effects. In sub-Saharan Africa, where AIDS is most prevalent, this means providing care for a growing population of orphans left in the wake of many AIDS deaths. Because orphans tend to live in poorer households and have less schooling than their non-orphans counterparts, the growth of the orphan population could have a lasting, detrimental impact on the demographic outlook of many African countries. Governments wishing to ameliorate this situation may implement policies targeted toward orphans. But which policy tools would prove most effective? Will transfers of income to households caring for orphans be enough to solve this problem? In “Orphans in Africa” (RPDS working paper No. 217), authors Anne Case, Christina Paxson and Joseph Ableidinger recognize the magnitude of the orphan problem, analyze the conditions under which orphans currently live and explore policy options, including why income transfers may not be the most effective solution.

The orphan population is large and growing. Data from 19 Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) collected between 1992 and 2000 show that, in many African countries, nearly 15% of children under the age of 15 have lost one or both parents. In all of the countries analyzed, the orphan rate is nine percent or more and, within these countries, the orphan rate seems to be correlated with the presence of AIDS. For example, in the western African countries of Ghana and Niger, where the AIDS rate is lower, the orphan rate is likewise lower.

A common characteristic across all countries studied is that orphan rates increase with age, so that school-age children are at higher risk of orphanage than younger children. In Mozambique (1997), Uganda (2000), Zambia (1996), and Zimbabwe (1999), a quarter or more of 14-year-olds had lost one or both parents. In many countries, children are more likely to be paternal orphans. In Kenya, Namibia, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe, for example, the fraction of children who have lost a father is markedly larger than the fraction who have lost a mother.

Case, Paxson, and Ableidinger use data from the DHS surveys to address how parental deaths affect the living arrangements and the schooling opportunities of children in sub-Saharan Africa. The ten countries studied account for 27% of the children living in sub-Saharan Africa and 50% of all AIDS orphans.

In their analysis, Case, Paxson and Ableidinger consider orphans as a group as well as in three mutually exclusive categories: paternal orphans, children who have lost a father but not a mother; maternal orphans, who have lost a mother but not a father, and double orphans, who have lost both parents.

The authors find that, on average, orphans live in poorer households than non-orphans. When this tendency is examined for each mutually exclusive type of orphan, the authors find that paternal orphans are significantly more likely to live in poor households relative to non-orphans, while double orphans are not.

Case, Paxson and Ableidinger also find that, as a group, orphans are less likely to be enrolled in school than non-orphans. However, contrary to recent reports from the World Bank and UNAIDS, the lower school enrollment rate of orphans can not be accounted for solely by their poverty. In fact, it is not the poorest group—paternal orphans—who are the least likely to attend to school. Rather, it is double orphans, who are no poorer on average than non-orphans, who are the least likely to go to school. These authors find that even between children living in the same household, and thus living with the same level of household resources, orphans are less likely to go to school than are the non-orphaned children in their households. Double orphans, for example, are on average 15.7 percentage points less likely to go to school than are the non-orphaned children with whom they live. This tendency does not diminish even in relatively wealthy households.

These authors also examine whether girls who are orphaned face a greater risk of not attending school than do boys who have lost a parent. Recent World Bank and UNAIDS publications suggest that girl orphans are more likely to be pulled out of school to care for a dying family member and that when household resources contract with illness and death, girls' schooling is more likely to suffer. However, Case, Paxson and Ableidinger find no significant difference in school enrollment among girl and boy orphans in 18 of the 19 country-years they analyze.

If poverty does not explain the lower school enrollment of orphans, what does? The authors find that the lower school enrollment of orphans is largely accounted for by the nature of the relationship between the orphan and the decision-making adult in the household. Children who live in households headed by their parents or grandparents are more likely to attend school than are children who live in households headed by other, more distant, relatives. Moreover, children who live with non-relatives are even less likely to go to school than are those living with distant relatives. Orphans are at risk not because they are poor, but because they are more likely to live with adults with whom they are not closely related. This evidence supports the idea that household decision-makers allocate resources towards children with whom they have closer relationships, and discriminate against children whose ties are more distant.

Given that the DHS data point to a difference in household resource allocation, in the form of lower investments in schooling for orphans, and that this difference does not depend solely on household income, government transfers of income to households caring for orphans would not necessarily increase school enrollment of orphans. Case, Paxson and Ableidinger propose that governments may employ a more effective policy tool of providing non-transferable goods such as school vouchers or medical care for orphans if they want to improve orphans' living conditions.