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The Effects of Childhood Work on Adult Migration and Occupational Structure in Rural Ethiopia

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Abstract

The rural parts of Ethiopia and its agricultural sector went through dramatic changes in the last decade. However, dwindling farmlands and underdeveloped non-farm sectors coupled with unmatched population growth continued to define its rural areas. Empirical evidence show that rural youth are abandoning agriculture and leaving the rural areas, despite limited gainful employment opportunities are available outside agriculture. In this regard, studies that examine rural out-migrations from the perspectives of spatial and sectoral wage-gaps and expansion in job opportunities fail to provide important insights and guide policy regarding the youth out-migrations witnessed in Ethiopia since early 2000s. In this paper, we argued and provided evidence that rural out-migration might also be driven by childhood conditions and develop over time to adulthood in addition to other observable factors at a point in time.

Using two-wave panel dataset, separated by 15 years, we examined the effects of childhood work and school participation of 4 to 14 years old children in 1999/2000 on their out-migration and occupational structures as of 2015/2016 in rural Ethiopia. The results showed that while village out-migration during this period was dominated by females and younger members, economic (labour) out-migration, in particular, was male oriented. More importantly, children who combined work with schooling were highly likely to out-migrate from the villages. We argued that childhood work when combined with schooling, in consonance with human capital theory of migration, may provide children the opportunity to acquire transferable and marketable skills and build their entrepreneurial spirit leading to aspire to out-migrate and work in non-farm activities. Contrary to the risk and poverty hypotheses of migration, household poverty showed insignificant association with children's migration. The effects, however, were heterogeneous by gender and birth order. The occupational trajectories and earnings revealed that about half of migrants worked in non-farm activities and earned twice as much as non-migrant earnings.

The findings suggest that to ensure labour migration as engine for structural transformation and improve labour market outcomes, policy makers need to link early human capital policies such as child schooling with youth-targeted labour market policies. Moreover, anti-poverty policies alone may not regulate rural out-migrations.

Keywords: Child schooling, childhood work, migration, non-farm works, occupations