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Compassion had used an arbitrary age-eligibility rule when they underwent a major worldwide expansion during the 1980s. When one of Compassion's programs entered a new village, typically only children who were 12 and younger were eligible for sponsorship.

With that, our strategy for identifying the causal impacts of the program became clear. We would obtain early enrollment lists from different village projects introduced during the 1980s, and track down the families of those who were first sponsored in these projects. Then we would obtain information on the life outcomes of these formerly sponsored children—now adults—and compare them to their adult siblings who had been slightly too old to be sponsored when the program arrived in their village. In this way we would be able to control for genetics, family environment, and a host of other factors that the siblings held in common. The only difference that could affect adult life outcomes across the sample would be the fact that Providence had allowed some of these siblings and not others to be age-eligible for child sponsorship.

THE RESULTS

Chu found a partner for her research project: Laine Rutledge, now a doctoral student in economics at the University of Washington. The two graduate students spent the summer of 2008 in Uganda, where they obtained data on 809 individuals, including 188 who were sponsored as children. The students had a number of adventures in the field, including a run-in with a wild dog that took a bite out of Rutledge's leg. A couple of months after they returned, Chu and Rutledge stopped by to share the results. A nervous excitement quickly filled my small office.

We loaded the data onto my computer from Rutledge's flash drive, and I rattled off some code to replicate their estimations. I was looking at the results of Compassion's impact on educational outcomes in Uganda—I stared at the statistics on my screen to make sure I was seeing correctly.

"This is... amazing," was all I could mutter. We tried slicing the data different ways, but each showed significant educational improvements. You could beat this data senseless, and it was incapable of showing anything other than extremely large and statistically significant impacts on educational outcomes for sponsored children.

A few months later, I presented the Uganda findings in the weekly development economics seminar at UC–Berkeley. The Berkeley seminar was familiar turf, but not a place to suffer fools gladly. We received a number of constructive comments, but the consensus was that the underlying methodology was sound. What was obvious was that the study needed external validity. Uganda was one country. Compassion was one organization. We would try to expand the study to multiple organizations and countries.

Vanderhart flew out to San Francisco to talk about expanding the study. This was our first in-person meeting. Vanderhart is a big, conservative man with a lumberjack beard who instantly reminded me of Merlin Olsen from Little House on the Prairie reruns I watch with my kids. I wondered how he felt about trusting a bunch of San Francisco academics with the public credibility of his organization. We strategized about expanding the study to include other major child-sponsorship organizations. But those organizations weren't interested. So with Compassion remaining as the only organization amenable to the project, we drew up a plan to carry out the study in six countries: Uganda, Guatemala, the Philippines, India, Kenya, and Bolivia—two countries on each of the three continents that make up the developing world. They represented Compassion's work worldwide.

But to expand the project, we needed grant money. Based on the preliminary results in Uganda, we were able to obtain USAID funding through NABIS, a development economics research network based at the University of California at Davis. Rutledge coordinated the fieldwork in the remaining five countries. By August 2010, we had obtained data on 10,144 individuals over an array of variables: primary, secondary, and tertiary education; type and quality of adult employment; community leadership; church leadership; assets owned as adults; and a number of other variables that would measure that slippery word that economists love, development.

We presented the results at a
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number of universities and research institutions: Stanford, the World Bank, UC-Davis, Georgia Tech, the University of Southern California, the University of Washington, and Cornell, among others. I had asked Paul Glewwe, an expert on the economics of schooling and children's issues in developing countries, to join the project. I met Glewwe, a professor at the University of Minnesota and former economist at the World Bank, through the Association of Christian Economists. I knew he would bring additional expertise in program analysis and economics (a bunch of statistics for testing economic hypotheses) to the larger research project.

The results in our other five countries confirm the positive impact of Compass's child-sponsorship program in Uganda. In all six countries, we find that sponsorship results in better educational outcomes for children. Overall, sponsorship makes children 27 to 40 percent more likely to complete secondary school, and 50 to 80 percent more likely to complete a university education. Child sponsorship also appears to be the great equalizer in education: In areas where outcomes are worse, such as sub-Saharan Africa, impacts are bigger. In countries where existing outcomes aren’t as bad, like in India and the Philippines, impacts are significant but smaller. In countries where existing outcomes are higher among boys, the impact on girls is larger; in countries where the existing education outcomes are higher for girls, the impact on boys is larger. Even across countries, we find evidence that spillover effects on the unprivileged younger siblings of sponsored children.

To put it simply, the educational impacts of sponsorship are large—roughly equal to the substantial effects of the Rozier and Banks Schools program that from 1931–13 educated blacks in the Jim Crow South. They are roughly double those of Opportunity Zones, the celebrated conditional-cash-transfer program that gives cash to mothers in Mexico for keeping their children in school. It’s so successful it has been replicated in dozens of developing countries around the world with financial incentives from the World Bank.

Compass’s results extend beyond school attendance. We found that child sponsorship means that when the child grows up, he is 14–18 percent more likely to obtain a salaried job, and 35 percent more likely to obtain a white-collar job. Many of the Compass-sponsored children became teachers as adults instead of remaining jobless or working in menial agri-cultural labor. We found some evidence that they are more likely to grow up to be both community leaders and church leaders.

The academic paper containing the full methodology and results of our study appears in the current issue of the Journal of Political Economy. The rev, edited by the department of economics at the University of Chicago, is comparable to, say, The New England Journal of Medicine for medical researchers, accepting only a small fraction of submitted papers whose results are often pertinent to the general population.

Compass inquired politely: Do we think we could remove the anonymity clause?

The Hope Hypothesis

Compass asked me to visit Colorado Springs to present the results of our research. I had an appointment with Wes Stafford, then president of Compass, a man I had always respected from a distance but now had a chance to meet. His secretary ushered me into his office, where a large wooden skipper’s wheel was mounted on the rear wall. It was a big ship to pilot: Compass sponsors nearly 1.3 million children in 26 countries.

Stafford greeted me with a warm handshake and ushered me into a comfortable chair in front of his desk.

“Your program works,” I said.

“I know,” he smiled.

“But I am analyzing this data as a dispassionate scientist, not as an advocate of Compass like yourself,” I replied. “We’re not just finding positive correlations, but substantial causal effects from the program—in every country—especially Africa. I’m wondering what is happening here. You’re a former academic. I think there is something deeper going on in the program that would interest the greater development community. I need some leads.”

“Try hope,” he said.

I raised my eyebrows. “Hope?”

Hope is a fuzzy concept for economists. I squinted my eyes. He explained:

For my dissertation, I asked a bunch of kids what they wanted to be when they grew up. Some were Compass kids, some were un-sponsored. There was a little bit of a difference between the
two groups. But then I asked them later what they realistically expected to be when they grew up. Here, there was a big difference between the sponsored kids and the other kids. You see, poverty causes children to have very low self-esteem, low aspirations. The big difference that sponsorship makes is that it expands children's views about their own possibilities. Many of these children don't think they are capable of much. We help them realize that they are each given special gifts from God to benefit their communities, and we try to help them develop aspirations for their future.

PORTraits OF CHANGE

Stafford's story brought to mind another one I had heard in the field from Compassion workers in Kenya. A pilot from Kenya Airways had visited a number of Compassion projects to talk about his job. The children were fascinated to meet someone who flew the planes they saw zooming across the sky. They had never met such an amazing and interesting person, and after his visit, most of them wanted to be pilots.

Whatever it was, something that Compassion was doing was working, and we wanted to explore the mysterious black box of poverty and child psychology. To test the hope hypothesis, we carried out a follow-up study on currently sponsored children. Did sponsored children have higher aspirations than nonsponsored children who were just like them in other ways? If there were no statistical differences in aspirations between sponsored and nonsponsored children, we could rule out the hope hypothesis and explore something else.

We carried out three studies—in Bolivia, Kenya, and Indonesia—with 1,382 children. The sample included sponsored children, their unsponsored siblings, and other unsponsored children from the same communities. In each of the studies, we found that sponsored children consistently had significantly higher expectations for their own schooling than unsponsored children, even when controlling for family and other factors. They also generally had higher expectations for adult employment. (Years later, a disproportionate number of Kenyan kids still wanted to be pilots.) Many of these findings came close to mirroring the adult differences we measured between formerly sponsored children and nonsponsored children.

In Indonesia, my graduate students carried out a unique experiment with 540 children living in the slums in Jakarta (see above). Of these 540 children, 288 were sponsored and the rest were either siblings of sponsored children, children on the waitlist to be spon-

Finding the Silver Lining

Both Compassion-sponsored and nonsponsored children in Jakarta were asked to draw a self-portrait set in the rain in order to assess their psychological health. The drawing on the left was done by an unsponsored 5-year-old boy and shows several indicators of poor emotional development: using a single color is a potential sign of low self-esteem and feelings of hopelessness; the body language and facial expression signify unhappiness. The boy was ranked in the 17th percentile in the psychometric happiness index. Additionally, it indicates a low view of self-efficacy (only 23rd percentile) as the boy is not sheltered from the rain.

The drawing on the right was created by a sponsored 13-year-old girl. The use of multiple colors and bright colors correlates with a sense of hope and optimism. Her answers to the survey questions and drawing characteristics ranked her in the 70th percentile in the happiness index. She is smiling and holding an umbrella, which is associated with a higher degree of self-efficacy (94th percentile)—the rain is bouncing off the top of the umbrella, making her safe and secure underneath. Note the sun peeking out from behind the rain clouds.

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Finding the Silver Lining

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The drawing on the right was created by a sponsored 15-year-old girl. The use of multiple colors and bright colors correlates with a sense of hope and optimism. Her answers to the survey questions and drawing characteristics ranked her in the 79th percentile in the happiness index. She is smiling and holding an umbrella, which is associated with a higher degree of self-efficacy (64th percentile)—the rain is bouncing off the top of the umbrella, making her safe and secure underneath. Note the sun peeking out from behind the rain clouds.

Child sponsorship appears to get under the hood of human beings to instill aspirations, character formation, and spiritual direction. In short, it trains people to be givers instead of receivers.

In Indonesia, my graduate students carried out a unique experiment with 540 children living in the slums in Jakarta (see above). Of these 540 children, 268 were sponsored and the rest were either siblings of sponsored children, children on the waitlist to be sponsored, or siblings of children on the waitlist. We sat each child at a desk with a blank piece of paper and a fresh box of 24 colored pencils. We asked each to "draw a picture of yourself in the rain."

Children psychologists have demonstrated that self-portrait drawings reveal a consensual information about the psychological health of children. Different facets of children's drawings have been empirically correlated with various emotional disorders: missing facial features correlate with sadness; a tiny figure, with insecurity; big teeth and monster figures, with aggression; choice of dark colors over light colors, with depression. In self-portraits set in the rain, drawing yourself holding an umbrella could indicate an enhanced view of self-efficacy—dealing with a challenging situation proactively rather than being a victim of it.

One of my graduate students, Teddy Adler, spent dozens of hours coding these drawings with us and it is to account for 20 different features for each drawing. What the self-portraits revealed was remarkable. Compassion children were 12 percentage points more likely to choose light colors to draw pictures of themselves than non-sponsored children. They were 13 percentage points less likely to draw themselves as a tiny figure, 6 percentage points less likely to draw themselves as a monster, and 9 percentage points more likely to draw themselves holding an umbrella. Overall, when we combined these characteristics into aggregated psychometric indices, controlling for other factors, we found that Compassion children's drawings displayed significantly lower levels of hopelessness, higher levels of optimism and self-efficacy, and higher levels of overall happiness.

We can't yet establish a clear causal link between the increased levels of hopefulness and aspirations among sponsored children and their improved adult lives. But the puzzle pieces are beginning to fall into place: the patient nurturing of self-worth, self-expectations, dreams, and aspirations may be a critical part of helping children escape poverty. It is a holistic approach that secular anti-poverty initiatives have largely downsized, but an approach that Christian development groups have championed for decades.

Creating Givers

The traditional approach to development work has been to provide things for people. If people lack education, we build them schools. If they are unhealthy, we build them hospitals and provide doctors, or we drill a freshwater well. If their small businesses are stagnant, we provide microloans so they can borrow. While each of these interventions can be helpful in the right context, mere provision fails to address the root of poverty: the behaviors, social systems, and mindset that are created by poverty. The key to ending poverty resides in the capacity of human beings—and their view of their own capacity—to facilitate positive change.

Indeed, every time we provide something for someone else in need, we send a subtle message to them that we believe they are incapable of providing for themselves. While some interventions are necessary, especially in the area of health, they come at a cost of reinforcing an inferiority complex among the poor. Good development organizations understand this.

Along with providing some basic resources that allow children to progress further in school, the child-development approach advocated by Compassion appears to get under the hood of human beings to instill aspirations, character formation, and spiritual direction. In short, it trains people to be givers instead of receivers.

When someone asks us what an ordinary person can do to help the poor in developing countries, I tell them about our research. The most common response is, "That's good to know. I always wondered if all that was a scam." At this point we can confidently state that it is not.

Bruce Wydick is professor of economics and international studies at the University of San Francisco. His novel about coffee growers in Guatemala is forthcoming from Thomas Nelson.