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Wearing eyeglasses improves the educational performance of near-sighted children in rural China

IAMO Policy Brief 23 expounds on strategies to improve vision care

Halle (Saale), 22 November 2015 – More than 20 per cent of children who live in rural Chinese areas and children who migrated with their parents from the countryside to the city suffer from near-sightedness. Although wearing glasses easily corrects this visual defect in most cases, over 60 per cent of Chinese children in rural areas who experience refractive errors do not have glasses or do not wear them. Aside from poverty, misinformation and lack of knowledge about near-sightedness are the main reasons for the fact that these children do not wear glasses. Many children, parents, and teachers believe that wearing glasses has adverse effects on the eyesight of the children and that traditional eye exercises protect vision and slow the deterioration of their eyesight. As part of the research project 'Rural Education Action Program' (REAP), the IAMO studied how the children's ability to see affects their performance at school and suggested ways to implement vision care.

So far, the 'Rural Education Action Program' (REAP) has carried out the largest empirical vision care project ever conducted in China. For the first time, a comprehensive picture about the vision care for Chinese children in rural areas emerges. More than 20,000 children in various Chinese regions participated in this study. After a vision exam, almost 5,000 near-sighted children received glasses. The research project yields valuable insights into the impact of wearing glasses on the children's success at school and leads to strategies for the treatment of defective vision.

In their studies, the scientists noticed the positive effects of wearing glasses on near-sighted children. They started to perform better at school and their psychic wellbeing and confidence increased. It should be emphasised that wearing glasses does not impair the children's eyes and does not cause a faster deterioration of their eyesight. On the contrary, wearing glasses regularly will significantly slow the progression of near-sightedness. This does not apply to eye exercises, which could not be shown to delay

the onset or slow the progression of near-sightedness. The study also showed a significant increase in the use of glasses when teachers have incentives to encourage children to wear glasses. Teachers play a key role in the daily experiences of pupils. Therefore, teachers accepting glasses and encouraging children to wear them will strongly boost measures to lower learning barriers.

IAMO director Professor Thomas Glauben points out: "Overall, we found that uncorrected visual defects are prevalent in Chinese rural areas and in settlements of migrant workers from rural areas. Vision care is limited in these areas. This calls for improved methods to detect and treat visual defects. Based on these project results, our researchers currently collaborate with municipal administrators in rural China on improving vision treatments as part of public healthcare."

This study was supported by the Stiftung Auge, World Bank and World Health Organization. You find detailed information on the project 'Rural Education Action Program' (REAP) here: www.iamo.de/en/research/projects/details/reap/.

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Further information

IAMO Policy Brief 23 'Seeing is learning: Vision care for rural and migrant children in China' is available to read and download free of charge on the IAMO webpage: www.iamo.de/policybrief-23-en.

IAMO Policy Briefs

IAMO conducts research on important agricultural policies. In our IAMO Policy Briefs we share our take on the researched issues. In this series of publications, we elaborate briefly and in comprehensive language on various topics, which are relevant for today's society. We hope to involve the interested public in these topics as well as decision makers in politics, the economy and the media. Since 2011, we offered IAMO Policy Briefs without regular schedule.

About IAMO

The Leibniz Institute of Agricultural Development in Transition Economies (IAMO) analyses economic, social and political processes of change in the agricultural and food sector, and in rural areas. The geographic focus covers the enlarging EU, transition regions of Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe, as well as Central and Eastern Asia. IAMO works to enhance the understanding of institutional, structural and technological changes. Moreover, IAMO studies the resulting impacts on the agricultural and food sector as well as the living conditions of rural populations. The outcomes of our work are used to derive and analyse strategies and options for enterprises, agricultural markets and politics. Since its founding in 1994, IAMO has been part of the Leibniz Association, a German community of independent research institutes.

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