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Child labour or skills training? A rights-based analysis of children's contributions to household survival in Ghana

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Abstract

The high incidence of poverty in Africa means that households explore multiple survival strategies, one of which is heavy reliance on the productivity of their children. This issue has generated a lot of debate, with one school of thought viewing it as unacceptable child labour while others perceive it either as a method of socialisation for children or an informal apprenticeship. However, within the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, children's contribution to household survival could be said to represent both an enhancement and infringement of child rights. Therefore, this paper seeks to examine children's contribution to household survival in the context of child rights, child labour and skill training. Using a qualitative approach, this paper draws on 323 interviews and 31 focus group discussions conducted with children, parents and key informants in eight (8) communities from two (2) ecological zones in Ghana as part of a larger research project on Children Mobility and Transport in Sub-Saharan Africa. The results showed that child portage and selling are the commonest activities children engage in to generate income to support their families. While some parents and children see children's work as a contribution to the survival of their households, others see it as part of children's upbringing and socialisation, both of which have accompanying negative and positive impacts on rights of the child. The study recommends that in the context of high poverty, children's involvement in income-generating activities can be substantially reduced if parents are economically empowered.

Key Words: Child labour, skills training, children's contributions, household, portage, Ghana

Introduction

The high incidence of poverty in Africa means that households explore multiple survival strategies. One strategy adopted by many households is heavy reliance on the productivity of their children. Thus, household poverty pushes children into the labour market to earn money to supplement family income or even as a sole means of survival. According to ILO estimates “there were some 211 million children aged from 5 to 14 at work in economic activity in the world in 2000. About 73 million of these working children are less than 10 years old” (ILO, 2002). The issue of child labour is sometimes debated on the basis of a cultural framework, whereby children’s activities are perceived either as a method of socialisation for children or an informal apprenticeship (Ballet et al, n. d.). Proponents of this view assert that rarely do households who engage their children in income-generating activities see it as exploitation. Thus, children’s activities are often regarded as skill training that will usher them into successful and productive adulthood. To such households, children’s livelihood activities are seen as a way of preparing children to take care of themselves and other family members when they grow up. In contributing to the argument that child work can be a form of skill training, the Department of Labour of the US Government noted: “The general perception in Asia is that children should work to develop a sense of responsibility and develop a career.... It is argued that child employment apparently teaches children of the poor to acquire moral and ethical attitudes and work habits at an early age” (US Department of Labour 1994: 24).

Even though social change, urbanisation, technology and even the growth of the service sector have changed a lot of the socialisation process of children whose parents/guardians work in the formal sector, there are still parents or guardians in the traditional/informal sector such as farming, trading, fishing, food vending etc (both in rural and urban areas) who expect their children to help them in the household’s work as part of the learning process the child goes through when growing up. In other words, while economic development and the spread of education may have put an end to full-time child employment in some sectors of some countries, it has not removed children from the world of work, or from labour markets. For instance, the majority of children in developed countries such as the UK, the Netherlands and the USA have some experience of regular involvement in part-time or seasonal labour markets before they reach the age of sixteen (White, 2009).

Internationally, there are two main views dominating the debate regarding children’s work. The abolitionist perspective claims child labour should be ended, while others argue that excluding children from work also excludes them from

assuming positions as productive agents in society (Schultz, 2009). Liebel (2004) takes a clear position that work provides important social recognition as well as economic support that is a critical part of children's development as subjects. Liebel argues that children's work should be recognized as an essential activity and at that point, it will be possible to end exploitative child labour. He suggests that work can be "a free expression of life for children" (p. 9). On the other hand, Marie-France (2000) argues that the socialising aspect of work is something of a smokescreen, concealing the reality of children's working conditions and their economic role. She contends that it makes one wonder what lies behind representations depicting child labour first in a negative light – as exploitation – and then in a more positive (or neutral) light – as a factor of socialisation and apprenticeship.

There are a number of factors that necessitate children's contribution to household survival, of which household non-labour income and farm assets (Orazem and Gunnarsson, 2003) are particularly relevant for this study. Most children who work are engaged in household enterprise activities, whether it is a farm, a home-based manufacturing operation, or a retail enterprise. These productive assets can have mixed impacts on the children involved. On the one hand, they may raise a child's opportunity cost of time in school because the child is productive in labour activities. On the other hand, adults in the household may also be more productive, so the household can better afford allocating child time to schooling activities, instead of working to support the family.

The most common form of child work in most developing countries remains unpaid work on a peasant farm or other family-based enterprises. According to Raynolds (1991 cited in White, 2009), where anthropologists have studied time budgets in farm households, they have sometimes found children contributing more than half of all household productive labour. Bourdillon (2006a) and Jacquemin (2004) also note that paid domestic work in urban areas has been one of the most common destinations of child migrants, and one of the last forms of child work to be regulated. White (2009) asserts that, like adults, child workers have historically been involved in a huge variety of work relations. These range from various forms of unfree labour (slavery, tributary, bonded, or indentured labour) to family-based petty commodity production and wage work. While these were no doubt exploitative, there is evidence that children themselves often opted for wage work in preference to unpaid work as helpers in patriarchal peasant farms or other family enterprises (Grier, 2006).

Nevertheless, the adverse consequences of child labour may differ according to whether they are oriented toward market or home production, as well as whether

they are inside or outside the home. Although children's decision-making is constrained by the structure of the household and its more powerful members, linking children's work to a household strategy allows us to consider children as actors who actively contribute to the welfare of the household (Bass, 2003). In addition, within the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, children's contribution to household survival could be said to represent both an enhancement and infringement of their rights. Thus, children's work might provide incomes for their education and health needs, but at the same time might negatively affect school attendance and performance. It is against this background that this paper seeks to examine children's contribution to household survival in the context of child rights, child labour and skill training. Specifically, the study examines the children's activities that contribute income to the household, children's and parents' view on such contributions, as well as the effects of these activities on children's health and education. This study focuses mainly on children's activities that generate income, directly or indirectly, for their households (for domestic/non-income generating activities of children in the household, see our paper on work and happiness, in this volume).

Significance of the study

The study is important for three reasons: first, it contributes to the on-going debate on children's work as a way of ensuring household survival, and the tensions between work as part of socialisation versus potential child exploitation. Secondly, the study highlights a paradox implicit in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child. Finally, the study has policy implications for child labour regulation and poverty alleviation in Ghana, where many children from poor households contribute to the economic sustenance of their family.

Context and methods

Children contribute to both social stability and social change through a process of interpretive reproduction. They are inventive and resourceful social participants in the preservation (reproduction), interpretation, and formation of their social world as they actively interpret the social world by constructing the meaning of social messages (Corsaro, 1997). This view of the child's active interpretation of the social world, termed interpretive reproduction, conceptualises children as research participants and social individuals (Baker-Sperry, 2007). However, as several commentators have pointed out, this is not as straightforward as it may seem, and many attempts to elicit and integrate 'children's voices' and children's knowledge have been criticised for being tokenistic (James, 2007). There are contrasting perspectives on children and childhood that underpin current research and understandings of the nature and

value of children's knowledge (Porter et al, 2010a; 2010c; Robson et al, 2009; Hampshire et al, 2012 forthcoming). One strand, which is relatively new and relevant to this study, extends the recognition of children's subjectivities to see children as social actors in their own right, rather than merely dependent on other social institutions (the family, school, etc.): 'Children are seen to act, take part in, change and become changed by the social and cultural world they live in' (Christensen and Prout, 2002: 481). According to Anderson (2000: 151) 'children are the primary source of knowledge about their views and experiences'.

Strategies of narrative inquiry were employed for the study. Narrative enquiry focuses on individuals' personal experiences, and the ways in which those experienced are re-told as 'stories' to the individuals themselves and others (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000 cited in Obeng, 2002). Children's stories helped to reveal their experiences from their own point of view (Polkinghorne, 1988). These experiences, although personal, help us to understand respondents' social world.

This paper draws on data collected in Ghana as part of a large multi-country research project: *Children, Transport and Mobility in Sub-Saharan Africa* (www.dur.ac.uk/child.mobility), designed and led by Durham University (UK), in collaboration with the University of Cape Coast (Ghana), the University of Malawi and CSIR (South Africa). Details of the project study design, methodology and analysis (where this relates to Ghana) can be found in Porter et al (this volume); (see also Porter et al 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2010d, 2011 in press; Robson et al, 2009). Briefly, the Child Mobility project was conducted in 24 field-sites across three countries in Africa: Ghana, Malawi and South Africa. In each field-site, qualitative and quantitative research methods were used to gather data on children's mobility in relation to education, health, livelihoods, transport and migration. In this paper, we draw on the material collected in the Ghana field-sites.

In Ghana, data were gathered from children, parents, teachers and key informants in eight communities from two ecological zones in Ghana (Forest and Coastal Zones). In each zone, four study sites were purposively selected for the study: one urban, one peri-urban, one rural with basic services and one remote rural. In each site, a wide range of issues on children's transport and mobility relating to their education, health and activities were explored using qualitative research methods, including individual interviews, focus groups and accompanied walks (Porter et al, 2010a) with children (aged 8-18 years), parents, teachers and community leaders. In all, 323 interviews and 31 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted. Data were recorded and analysed based on

their broad thematic areas. Following analysis of the qualitative data, a questionnaire survey was conducted with 1005 children and young people aged 8-18 years¹. Another component of the project involved training children to conduct research on mobility issues among their peers. In this paper, however, we draw primarily on the qualitative material collected by adult researchers.

Results

Three prominent themes emerged in relation to children's income-generating work, which are considered in turn here: (1) children's contributions to household survival, (2) children's and parents' view on such contributions, and (3) the effects of these activities on children's health and education. This enables us to analyse children's activities within the social and economic context of child socialisation, training and household survival strategies.

Children's contribution to household survival

Children's work can provide income for the household, and varying levels of training for the child worker (Bass, 2003). Many children in Ghana involve themselves in income-generating activities, often under the instruction and supervision of their parents or guardian. Children's contributions to household survival in Ghana can be seen in the following cases, reported by the children themselves:

I sell charcoal, eggs and sugarcane to help my mother. I sell the charcoal and sugar cane in Cape Coast but sell the eggs only in village
[16 year old girl, rural].

I sell charcoal by hawking in Cape Coast. I started selling at the age of about 10 or 11 years. It is a difficult task. I hawk in the sun for a long time. My mother asked me to sell. The charcoal I carry to sell is heavy
[14 year old girl, urban].

Head portage represents a very common way of carrying items in Ghana (as opposed to some part of Asia where loads are mostly carried on the shoulder or the back). Head portage is common among people coming from farm or going to the market. As well as those who carry loads for their parents, there are a

¹ We use the terms 'children' and 'young people' interchangeably to refer to study participants, who were aged 8-18 years.

number of children who have resorted to load carrying as a means of earning income to support themselves or their households (Porter, Blaufuss and Acheampong 2007; Porter, et al. 2011, in press; Porter et al., forthcoming).

I sell kenkey (a local food made from maize) after school. I carry the Kenkey on my head and move from one place to the other. I do this every day after classes from mostly from 2pm to 5pm. I started selling the Kenkey more than two years ago and make an average sales of GH¢1.50 (about US\$ 1) daily. I give the money to my mother to expand the business. Part of the proceeds is also used to buy clothes for me and my siblings.

[15 year old boy, urban]

Other children operate their own 'businesses' and therefore provide direct financial support to the household on a regular basis. In such instances, the children may be out of school as in the case of a 17 year-old truck pusher from the Coastal zone of Ghana.

The only work I do regularly is pushing my truck. Yes I am paid for every truckload of goods I carry. I buy clothes for myself and all other things I need, keep some as my pocket money and give my mother some to help take care of us. I can't measure it but I bring my mother food-stuff and money.

[17 year old boy, urban]

Children's views on their contributions to the household survival

How do children view their activities that contribute to family survival? It was found that some of the children were happy to know that they are contributing their quota to the household through selling, carrying food items to the market and weeding for money. Others also see their contribution as the only way to help the parents or guardians to take care of them (children) as well as other members of the household. The following excerpts from the interview and FGD with the children are illustrative.

I am self sponsoring my education. Sometimes when I get a contract to weed, I estimate the size of the land and charge accordingly. I use the money to buy books, shoes and clothes for school and other clothes for wearing at home. I sometimes use the money to buy food. My grandmother does not have money so sometimes I use the money I get to buy food in school.

[16 year old boy, peri-urban]

My mother sells rice so when I come back from school I usually take some to sell for her. Sometimes when sales are good my mother buys thing for me; sometimes I get shoes or a ball or minerals (soft drinks) when I come back from selling.

[17 year old boy, urban]

I used the money that I earned from carrying loads to cater for my needs. I sometimes give some to my younger sister.

[17 year old boy in an FGD, peri-urban]

Some of the children see their ‘commercial’ activities as part of their upbringing and socialisation. They regard participation in household survivorship as a right and duty, rather than exploitation, as indicated by this 15-year boy:

I assist my grandmother in the selling of bush meat. I have to support her; after all that is where I think we get our daily bread aside the subsistence farming. I have also learnt the skills of bargaining in buying and selling. So if my grandmother is not there, I can take over the business.

[15 year old boy, rural]

In an interview with a 24 year old teacher, this is what he said about the views of some children on their contribution to their households:

Some of the children say they must reciprocate the kind gesture of their parents by selling to make money to support them. To them their parents buy them school uniforms, books and feed them and they in turn can show appreciation by making small sales to help them run the family. Others say they trade to support themselves in school and also to acquire extra things their parents cannot afford to give them.

[24-year old teacher, peri-urban]

Parents’ views on children’s contribution to family survival

While children’s contribution in the family is often seen as part of the household’ “survival strategy”, access to unpaid labour of women and children can also be a first step towards expansion and accumulation in small-scale enterprises, known as “endo-familial accumulation”, which if successful may be followed by the hiring in of labour and the partial withdrawal of family members (White, 2009). The study found that parents acknowledge the contribution of their children towards household survival in Ghana. This is what

a 48-year old man had to say about his 14-year old son who has completed Junior High School:

My son contributes so much to the welfare of my life and the household. If I am to pay it would be in millions and I would not even get the money to pay. He virtually does everything for me. He is like a wife, a child, a business partner, everything.

[48-year-old man, rural]

A similar story came up in the coastal urban settlement as indicated by a 40-year old shop keeper.

Children's work actually helps the parent to make a little more time and money to take care of the family. When they come back from school the youngest goes to sell for their mother and the elder comes to help me in the shop. On weekends they go to the farm to work and when they come back the younger boy helps their mother to sell and the older helps me in the shop.

[40-year-old man, urban]

Parents are also generally of the view that although children's contribution is important for the survival of the household, the children also benefit from such activities as it constitutes part of their overall training and upbringing. The following excerpts are illustrative:

Yes it does benefit them when they do small carrying like my children. They help the family and they start getting an idea about trading. But if they do heavy loads, yes the children get money to help in their up keep but their health suffers.

[40-year-old man, urban]

Children carry cassava, fuel wood, water and charcoal. It forms part of their normal schedules. They have to assist their parents in the farm and in other activities to enable the parents take proper care of the children.

[35-year-old man, peri-urban]

Effects of children's activities on their health

Many children recognise that some of their activities, especially carrying heavy loads can have negative effects on their health; they nonetheless continue to carry loads because of the income they get from such activities.

I have suffered neck pains, headaches and cough from head portorage. There are times I force myself to carry some loads beyond my strength and these are the days I suffer the pains.

[16 year girl, remote-rural]

I carry firewood, cassava and plantain. I often carry firewood. But the heaviest of all is the cassava. The distance to farm is about 2.5km. Usually, I feel pains in my neck and feet. My uncle gives me rob at times to massage the neck and feet if I feel pains.

[14-year old girl, remote rural]

Parents recognise the effects of head portorage on children's health as the following excerpts illustrate:

I think children naturally should carry loads that are not above their strength but sometimes we the parents are compelled to give them loads due to our circumstances. For example, if we go to farm of about 2km and have to carry some foodstuffs to the house for domestic consumption and sell the excess, we will have no option than to share the load with the children. After all, we use the proceeds on their welfare. However, I am of the view that some parents overload their children with loads to the extent that the child falls ill in no time.

[50-year old man, remote rural]

My son carries a lot of foodstuffs....; some for sale and others for household consumption..... By the time we get home every one of us would be tired. Everyone complains of all kind of pains; knee, waist, back and neck. We do not have the money to go to hospital. In this case, we use drugs bought from hawkers. The pains then subside temporarily only to resurface at another time. Thus for some of us it is chronic.

[50-year old man, remote rural]

However, other parents played down and ignored such concerns, and even considered children who complain of work-related illness or pain as lazy. An excerpt from an interview with a 32 year old woman is illustrative of this phenomenon:

Sandra (13 year old daughter) often carries things on her head. During market days, we go to the farm and bring some cassava for

sale. She carries about half of standard load (25-30kg) for a distance of some 3km. It is the norm that she complains of pains either in the neck, back or the body attributable to the load carried. I just ignore it and do not give her any medication [32 year old woman, remote rural].

Several children reported experiencing pains from head-loading that are so bad they resort to medication (tablets, capsules or ointments). Sometimes these are administered by parents; other child self-medicate:

I often carry things such as plantain, cocoa, and palm nuts from the farm to the house. Since they are for sale, the volumes are big and often times, I have to go on several trips (usually 3 times). For a trip I carry things around 30kg. Most times the weight of the load gives me bodily pains, headaches and pains in the neck. When I tell my mother, she buys me painkiller and I take them and it stops. [14 year old girl, remote-rural]

I carry cassava, maize, firewood charcoal and oil palm fruits from farm to the house. I carry great quantities of those for longer distances often about 2km. As a result, I sometime wake up with pains my neck or my back. I complain to my grandma, and she buys a local analgesic (Nyenko Oye), smears the affected part and sometimes uses a black thread to tie my neck loosely. After some days the pains subsided. [16 year old boy, rural]

Effect of children's contribution on school attendance

One major potential problem of children working is that it might conflict with schooling. As noted above, for some children in the developing world, working might be seen as an alternative form of livelihood training to formal schooling. Some of the activities performed by school-going children (especially before going to school) appeared to affect the school attendance and subsequently academic performance of such children. As one teacher commented when she was asked whether or not children's activities affect school performance:

Yes, it impacts a lot on their studies. They do not make time to do their homework or study on their own. When in school, they find it difficult concentrating because they keep thinking about when they would have to go home and sell to make money. After classes, some complain when they are asked to stay on in school for one

reason or the other because if they do not sell, they will have nothing to eat at home. I have a girl in my class who sells cereals. She therefore rushes to the market straight from school in her school uniform and changes over to her house attire at the market. She goes home late when the day's work is over.

[29 year old teacher, peri-urban]

Similar observations were also made by other children. For example, in a focus group discussion, one boy commented:

The children who sell always think about the strategies to be adopted in the selling, how to maximise returns and what have you. They therefore lose concentration in class even when a teacher is in the class teaching. They will just be thinking about what to sell after school and this, to me, affects learning.

[14 -year old boy in an FGD, peri-urban]

Again, when an 18-year old dropout (urban) was asked to comment on the punctuality of his younger sister in school, he said:

She is sometimes late for school, especially when she is on the afternoon shift. This is because, my grandmother is a farmer and sometimes, brings some foodstuffs from the farm home so that my younger sister can sell and make some money for the family. She goes to hawk around in the morning before going to school in the afternoon. She usually ends up late for school.

[18-year old dropout, urban]

Discussion

Children remain involved in many different forms of work, and work relations can vary from complete subordination (whether in family, bonded or wage relations) to relative autonomy (Liebel, 2004). Oftentimes, children become workers who contribute labour to aid the household, especially in poorer households. Thus, children's work often represents a family strategy for economic survival. The concept of a household adaptive strategy is useful in this case because children's households can be viewed as actively securing what they need to survive (Bass, 2003). Children who engage in income-generating activities for their own upkeep contribute indirectly to household survival by reducing the stress on household financial resources. This is because the items bought by the children themselves would otherwise need to be provided by their parents or guardians. In such instances, parents or guardians can instead use their

financial resources on other pressing household needs. The study revealed that many children see their 'commercial' activities as part of their upbringing and right to participate in the household survival rather than exploitation.

The income-generating activities performed by children were found to have potentially negative effects on their formal education and health. Children's activities often interfere with school attendance, as some children have to miss school in order to work for money to take care of themselves and other members of their household. Though children's activities, such as selling in the market after school, do not necessarily adversely affect school attendance per se, it can make children get so tired that they find it difficult to study in the evenings or do their homework. This phenomenon has the potential of affecting their academic performance negatively, which can eventually lead to children dropping out of school (Porter et al. in press). Poor academic performance has been found to constitute one of the major factors leading to school dropout (Boateng, 2003). This link is based on the fact that poor academic performance leads to decreased interest in school activities and eventually dropout.

Similarly, head portering as a commercial activity has the potential to affect children's health; many complain of headaches and neck, back and waist pains after carrying heavy loads. Many resorted to self-medicating with pain-killers and for some, work-related pains / illnesses constitute serious threats to well-being (points further discussed in Porter, Blaufuss and Acheampong 2007; Porter et al. in press; Porter et al. forthcoming). Indeed, the WHO (1987) indicates that child labour can lead to increased muscular and skeletal disorders.

However, it is argued in this paper that income generated from these activities can also facilitate education and health-seeking opportunities for children. As many children said, without the income earned from this work, many could not afford to continue going to school (Porter et al. 2011 in press), and several children also reported using money they had earned to purchase healthcare (Hampshire et al, 2011, forthcoming).

Therefore, within the framework of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, this study posits that children's involvement in income-generating activities to support themselves and their households does not present a black and white picture. Some children's work activities appear to infringe upon certain rights while, at the same time, these same activities have the potential to enhance rights. For example, it could be argued that parents' involvement of their children in their economic activities as a way of training them to become responsible adults enhances their right to appropriate education, as stated in the Article 29(1a): *education of the child shall be directed to*

development of the child's personality, talents and physical and mental abilities to their fullest potential. Involving children in parents' economic activities could help to develop talents of children, which are likely to be important for their future livelihoods (see also Esia-Donkoh and Mariwah, this volume). Similarly, such activities can help to ensure the survival of the child's household, which will further enhance the child's wellbeing (including the rights to life and health; Article 24). If children were not to work, survival of their entire family could be at stake. In other words, child labour can be beneficial to the child, not only in terms of the preparation for the tasks of adulthood, but also in terms of direct improvement of education and health conditions. Since children's work adds to the household income, it might also add to the nutritional intake of the young worker, and the morbidity levels of the working child may even be lower than the levels prevailing among comparable counterparts (Lieten, 2001).

However, activities like head portorage that can affect child's health; other activities, which hamper children's school attendance and subsequently their academic performance, infringe on their rights to education. Even here, though, the picture is not straightforward: incomes generated from head portorage can be used to offset educational and health expenditure of the working child and other household members.

Conclusions and policy implications

In the context of substantial poverty and inequality, children's labour will sometimes have to be relied upon to supplement household resources to ensure the survival of its members. Children's involvement in income-generating activities can contribute to the survival of their households while preparing them for a responsible and successful adulthood, and can also help fund their education and healthcare. At the same time, some of these activities might be dangerous to the health and education of the child. Therefore, strategies that seek to limit children's activities in the households should consider that households need income that would replace that from the children in order to survive, and that to do this, parents or guardians should be economically empowered. Thus, policies concerning child labour and children's involvement in commercial activities must go hand-in-hand with wider poverty-reduction measures.

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