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POLICY BRIEFS

ADDRESSING CHILD LABOUR THROUGH VOCATIONAL TRAINING

The Kenyan Experience

By

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Introduction

Child labour is a common phenomenon, particularly in the developing world. It can be defined as both paid and unpaid work and activities that are mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children (Haspels and Jankanish, 2000:4). The ILO Minimum Age Convention (C. 138) and Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (C. 182) distinguish between *child work* that may contribute to a child's healthy development and unacceptable *child labour*. 'Light work', is defined as work that is 'not likely to be harmful to children's health, does not interfere with their education and is therefore not likely to have a negative impact on their development'.

Child work can be positive, if it refers to an economic activity that enhances children's development without interfering with their schooling, training, recreation or rest. Such work can therefore be carried out after school hours, weekends or during holidays. This kind of work is considered as part of growing up, or as a form of socialization for children to learn the art of survival and production systems.

The issue of child rights is also critical in child labour discourse. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child seeks to protect children from exploitation and abuse. Based on the principles of human rights, it reaffirms that children are vulnerable and therefore need special protection. By extension, vocational training can be seen as a right for those children who cannot access formal education. In Kenya, it is estimated that about 2.2 million children are currently out of school despite the free primary education. Studies done in Sub-Saharan Africa suggest that child labour is most prevalent in rural areas (Bass, 2004).

The Causes of Child Labour

The reasons for child labour are manifold and depend on the context. Chronic poverty, lack of opportunities, socialization patterns and illiteracy are common causes (see Bass, 2004 and Kamaara 2003). Where parents are abjectly poor, child labour becomes one of the feasible means of supplementing family incomes.

After becoming a child labourer, it becomes more difficult to join school (Bongo, 2005). Bass (2004) argues that even where parents can afford tuition fees, marginal costs like school uniform and books may keep a child away from school.

Apart from poverty, HIV/AIDS pandemic has also compounded the prevalence of child labour. In many rural areas and urban slums, child orphans have been forced to fend for themselves after the demise of their parents. Ignorance is also a contributing factor.

Many people, particularly in the developing world, are ignorant of how child labour manifests itself and the extent to which the practice is harmful and hazardous to children's life and society in general (Wazir, 2002). In Kenya, child labour has also been associated with family violence, inadequate school facilities, poor quality of schools, a declining economy, and rapid rural-to-urban migration.

Intra-ethnic violence, cattle rustling and banditry have also led to an exodus of children from rural areas into towns (Kippira, 2003). Besides the factors identified above, it is important to note that children may 'choose' to work for their own personal reasons. These may include the urge for self-assertion or self-emancipation.

Challenges posed by Child Labour

As shown above, there is a direct correlation between levels of poverty and incidences of child labour. This means that it is difficult to envisage a situation where child labour can be eliminated without eradicating poverty. This complicates the situation in many African countries. In Kenya, for instance, the Human Development Report (2007) indicates that in 2006, about 50% of the population was living below the poverty line. In such an environment, it is difficult to give child labour the attention it deserves although poverty should not be used as an excuse.

In the developing world, child labour largely manifests itself as a necessary evil. On the one hand, are the glaring dangers, risks and opportunity costs the children face while on the other are the compelling cultural, social, economic and political factors that create a fertile ground upon which child labour blossoms. Unfortunately, although child labour may increase households' income and probability of survival in the short-run, in the long-run, it perpetuates household poverty through lower human capital.

To the extent that children compete with unskilled adults for the same jobs, child workers affect adult employment or depress adult wages depending on the setting. In Kenya's agricultural plantations for instance, adult workers are often denied menial jobs as the managers tend to prefer child labourers who are likely to work longer, earn less and make fewer demands. Few care to observe regulations that stipulate that 16 year olds should be paid like adults but work for a maximum of six hours per day. Although the Child Labour Report (2001) stated that there were no reported cases of child slavery or child recruitment for armed conflict¹ in Kenya, it admitted that there were WFCL which include, extremely poor wages, long working hours, inhuman work conditions, cramped living spaces and poor nutrition.

Adults engage children to work partly because of their gullibility, vulnerability and inadequate negotiating skills and therefore easy to exploit. Many children seek jobs because of harsh conditions at home. Girls face more risks because they constitute the most domestic workers (Mutie and Muasya, 2006).

Many governments and international organizations led by the ILO-IPEC strive to eliminate child labour. Governments however, have responded differently to this challenge. For instance, despite the fact that Kenya ratified the ILO C. 138 in 1979 and C. 182 in 2001, the child labour policy paper is yet to be

approved by the Cabinet. Lack of a substantive policy partly explains why there are many isolated and uncoordinated legislations and activities on child labour.

Approaches used to combat child labour

A UNICEF Report² notes that Child labour is not a new problem, and that there is a long history of international efforts to combat it. The report notes further that as early as 1919, the International Labour Organization (ILO) developed the first Minimum Age Convention that regulated the age at which children could work. In 1973, a more comprehensive Minimum Age Convention, No. 138, was adopted, and it remains the fundamental standard.

The numerous approaches used to address the problem of child labour basically fit two categories - prevention and rehabilitation. Prevention is mainly undertaken through awareness creation. In Kenya, a wide range of organizations like ILO/IPEC, UNICEF, ANNPCAN, CLARION, The Association of Media Women in Kenya (AMWIK) as well as the government conduct awareness campaigns on child labour through community forums as well as through the print and electronic media.

Awareness creation programmes face a number of hurdles. These include remoteness, illiteracy and lack of follow-up. Poverty has also been a major stumbling block. In situations where children are the breadwinners and there are no viable alternatives, awareness creation has not yielded much. Preventive, and even rehabilitative measures, have also been ineffective in situations where child labour is a lucrative undertaking; for example, in drug peddling, in the *miraa* growing areas of Meru districts and the mining zones in Migori.

The government of Kenya provides direct support to working children by withdrawing them from hazardous and exploitative work and providing them with suitable alternatives such as sponsoring their education, imparting skills to them through vocational training and also by setting up rescue centres. In addition, disadvantaged families and households are sometimes assisted directly to set up their own income generating activities. There are also help-desks at the national level in the Ministry of Home Affairs and other centres in collaboration with other service providers, e.g. ILO/IPEC and Federation of Kenya Employers (FKE).

The Kenya government has tried to prevent and punish perpetrators of child labour through legislation. In the

Children's Act (2003), there are specified penalties for parents and guardians who do not send their children to school. Unfortunately, Kenya lacks the infrastructure, resources and the will to withdraw large numbers of children and rehabilitate them. Kippra correctly notes that, "elimination of child labour makes economic sense but is initially a costly endeavour" (2003:13).

Vocational training and child labour

Vocational training (VT) can be defined as educational services aimed at equipping a person with skills to make him/her increasingly self-sufficient and also to help such persons to enter and remain in the job market. VT differs from conventional training in its emphasis on practical rather than just theoretical training. From this definition, it is clear that VT is a viable approach in the elimination of child labour.

Conventionally, vocational training is viewed as institutionalized training and an alternative to formal schooling. But there are a number of contentious issues; for instance, does VT encourage child labour? And to what extent does those working influence those in school to join them? The idea of treating child labour as apprenticeship or vocational training introduces a controversial dimension. Obviously, if the hazards in VT and apprenticeships outweigh the benefits, then this ceases to be training but child labour.

Generally, vocational training can address child labour in a number of ways, which include occupational orientation, i.e., preparing children to take up responsibilities as grown ups in future, enhancement of self-reliance in adult life, exposing latent talents which may never be developed if they stayed in child labour, enabling children to access basic necessities like food, shelter, clothing, health care facilities, physical security etc., rehabilitation of children who need support after withdrawal from hazardous and exploitative work, rescuing children from underpayment and other forms of mistreatment and restoring human dignity. VT also introduces children to income generating activities (IGAs) which can assist them and their families, imparts psychotherapeutic value in children, and rescues children from negative influences such as drugs, juvenile delinquency, child prostitution and diseases like HIV/AIDS.

Critical Assessment of Vocational Training as a Mitigation Measure

Evidence from Kenya clearly suggests that vocational training is not a panacea for the problem of child labour. In any case, vocational training institutions recruit those who have already gone through the basic school curriculum. This means that if a child labourer withdrawn from exploitative work had never been to school, she/he would first be taken to school before joining a vocational training centre. Some of the controversy regarding relevance of vocational training has to do with its history; the fact that it was tailored to absorb school dropouts or those who did not transit to secondary schools. It was therefore not tailored for child labourers who may have no education at all. On the positive side, most VT appears to target low income populations. Besides, the training can break the vicious circle of poverty common among families dependent on child labour. As ANPPCAN (2005) notes, despite the many problems facing VT, it is the predominant educational system available and accessible to majority of the children in marginalised communities such as slums, and the arid and semi-arid areas in Kenya. Unfortunately, like many other projects meant for the poor, VT limited funding undermines the effectiveness and image of vocational institutions. Worse still, the Sessional Paper No. 1 (2005) is silent on those children who may drop out of school before completing primary education or those who may not join school at all.

Vocational training appears to address certain streams of child labour and not others. For instance, older children, e.g., those aged 13 and above and have never been to school might resist joining a formal school for basic literacy skills before admission into a VT centre. Moreover, orphans who fend for themselves and look after their young siblings may resist attempts to withdraw them from gainful employment. Besides, given alternatives, child labourers may prefer or excel in other fields like entrepreneurship, sports, art or entertainment. Therefore, the root causes, the circumstances surrounding child labour and personality characteristics will determine which mitigation measure should apply. In other words, viable solutions to the problem of child labour have to be triangulated to address the different scenarios.

The Way forward

Vocational training is just one of the many ways of eradicating child labour. If vocational training is to be seen as a viable way of mitigating the burden of child labour in Kenya, it has to be restructured. To begin with, there is need of an intensive campaign to conscientize Kenyans on child labour and its effects and how vocational training can mitigate the effects of child labour. It is important to give communities the broader picture or long-term effects of what may appear as short term gains that accrue from child labour.

There is need for a deeper examination of the root causes of child labour. The CL phenomenon is well known and but its causes are often taken for granted. It is important to recognize that the root causes of child labour may determine whether a child labourer can be rehabilitated through vocational training or not. Children withdrawn from child labour may have certain historical, social, emotional and economic needs that cannot be addressed by sending them to the nearest

village youth polytechnic.

A very critical issue is the status of vocational training. First, there is an urgent need to entrench basic VT, e.g., village polytechnics in the TIVET policy as pointed out by ANPPCAN (2005). Secondly, there is need to elevate TIVET to a level where it is just as popular as mainstream formal education. As of now, vocational training is largely perceived as subordinate to, and far less prestigious than schooling. It is often considered as an option when 'all others fail'. There is need to transform the image and perception of vocational or technical training and pursue it as an effective mechanism to alleviate poverty and realize the Millennium Development Goals. For this to happen, the sector requires heavy investments and restructuring.

The huge number of quacks in Kenya's agricultural, manufacturing, construction, masonry, welding and tailoring, among others, calls for urgent revitalization and regulation of the vocational training sector. Currently, quacks construct your house, fix your TV, radio and fridge, carry out plumbing work or even repair your car. Kenyans hardly care to know whether such people are qualified to provide technical services or not. This calls for a stringent policy to regulate the provision of these services. It should also be a requirement for all service providers to have accreditation certificates and testimonials which consumers can verify.

VT should be streamlined to make it relevant and in tandem with market or global trends in technology. Some of the training institutions use obsolete equipment and tools for their training. The measures outlined above would elevate the status of vocational training and give it new impetus. Consequently, there would be heightened demand for such training particularly among child labourers and their parents or guardians.

Lastly, it is critical to enhance democracy and good governance, stimulate economic growth, revamp infrastructure, enhance security and eradicate corruption; for the ultimate solution to the problem of child labour largely lies in wealth creation and equitable distribution of resources.

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