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Education and Mitigation of Child Labour in Kenya

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Introduction

Throughout the world, children are engaged in various activities that are described differently as play, child training, child work, child labour, earning activities, exploitative labour and so on. In the year 2000, the international labour organisation estimated that 352 million children aged between 5-17 years were economically active in the world. Out of this number 245 million were subjected to what can be defined as child labour, while about 170 million were estimated to work under hazardous conditions. The estimates show that most children involved in child labour are in developing countries. Available literature also indicates that child labour discussions have focused on Asia, Africa and Latin America.

Admittedly, the understanding of child labour is problematic, owing to the complexity of the activities the children engage in, and the fact that these activities, like the case of the Kenyan pastoralist communities, are deeply engrained in social and cultural systems. Thus, generalisation and lump sum labelling of activities as child labour is the correct approach. Rather, it has been proposed that we understand child labour within social and cultural contexts, and consult local perspectives and seeking means of intervention.

Much commentary has attempted to differentiate between *child work* and *child labour*, by use of parameters such as age, lightness of task the child engages in, whether the child is paid or not and if the child attends school. However, critics of this categorisation have argued that children should not be viewed in isolation when assessing their involvement in work, as they have links with families and within communities that describe the social context of their work as well as their identities. In this context, the traditional view that adults exploit children has widely been challenged. Indeed, the decision to engage in labour could be the parent's, but children are also capable of rationalizing situations, and making their own decisions. Since children benefit from work in various ways, a cautious analysis of the engagement taking into consideration the

economic (supporting household survival); the social (belongingness in an adult-dominated labour markets and assertiveness); and the psychological (developing a sense of autonomy, self esteem and self worth), has been proposed.

Relating Education to Child Labour

Education and child labour are intertwined in a relationship that is both positive and negative. On one hand, child labour has acted as support to education. For example, in situations where a child works part-time to cater for school costs, or works full time to support the education of siblings. On the other hand, child labour is a detriment to schooling, and indeed a hindrance to greater human capital development. The engagement of the child in earning activities does affect the time input to schooling. Even in cases where a child is able to combine schooling and work, it becomes challenging to achieve optimally in education.

From another perspective, the school is a supplier to child labour. There are various school conditions that push children out, ranging from the factor of financial cost, to psychological and social factors. When children drop out, they are left with few other alternatives than to engage in child labour.

The Decision For or Against Schooling and Child Labour

Engagement in school or in child labour is subject to a series of decisions by the child, by the parents, peers and other persons significant to the child's life. These decisions are rationalised against certain criteria. One criterion is the Perceived Educational Returns (PER). In the Kenyan context, labour returns are visible and immediate (a child brings a packet of flour after a day's work), while education returns are long-term and un-guaranteed. Children may choose to (or not to) engage in child labour, and parents may prefer sending their children to school or to work, based on such rationalisations and nature of their needs.

Consequently, the possibility of combining schooling and work depends largely on the intensiveness of engagement on either side. The modern-day school leaves little time for engagement in income earning activities. Hence even when the schooling child may want to stay on, and get some time to work after school or during recess, this time may not be meaningful. Likewise, research has established that time-intensive activities conflict most with school attendance. Such activities include work in the domestic and agricultural sectors. Besides, child labour like any other earning activity carries with it the temptation to always work to earn more. A child who is working part-time is most likely to engage in full-time work as a means of maximising returns.

Outlawing child labour and making education compulsory

In the experience of many countries, abolishing child labour has not eliminated it. In India for example, there is caution that outlawing child labour without addressing underlying conditions may have pushed child labour to the back scene, exposing children to even worse exploitation. Conversely, making education compulsory seems to have greater effects. Children in all societies which have introduced compulsory education have combined schooling with work, but the priority has been education first and work later, and not the other way round.

In the experience of Sri Lanka, making education compulsory halved the number of working children. The second crucial factor in the mitigation of child labour is the expansion of the education sector. In the state of Kerala in India, even though the government had made no special effort to fight child labour, a spin-off effect was achieved through expansion of the school system, rather than enforcement of labour legislation.

In many societies in the world, expanding education, improving education quality and making schooling compulsory has born higher returns in mitigation of child labour, than enactment of child labour laws and labour inspection.

Education and Child Labour in Kenya

During the pre-colonial epoch in Kenya, the child was constantly involved in activities, which were difficult to fit in today's definitions of training, child work, child labour and so on. The separation between training and work was thin, since the two were deeply part of each other. Indeed there was hardly any training without real-life engagement, and every engagement had a lesson to draw out of it. It is believed that the origin of child labour in Kenya could be traced to the colonial era, with the introduction of formal schooling, commercialisation of agriculture, imposition of tax, confinement of family heads to concentration camps, emergence of urban societies and creation of the unemployed class.

Nonetheless, various circumstances have shaped the present-day situation in regard to education and child

labour since independence in 1963. At the time, it was thought that making education free would boost access, and this was promised in the manifesto of the ruling party, the Kenya African National Union (KANU). Consequently and for decades, the Kenyan government has made numerous attempts to make education accessible, including four (4) presidential decrees on 'free education'. Nevertheless, the growing levels of unemployment and diminishing per capita and household earnings have challenged the full commitment of children to schooling, against engagement in activities that complement family incomes.

Subsequently, the magnitude of out-of-school children has grown immensely over the last four decades, influenced by such factors such as the structural adjustment programmes and HIV and AIDS. The worst scenario peaked around 2001 when the country experienced the largest number of out-schools children ever. In a bid to correct the situation, the government achieved an 18% boost to enrolment in January 2003, with the introduction of free primary education (FPE). Experts have ascertained that this move had an impact on child labour, since a considerable number of working children re-enrolled.

However, the free primary education of 2003, like the earlier attempts of 1971, 1973 and 1978, has been met with many challenges. Due to lack of prior planning and preparation, the schools were overcrowded, facilities overstretched and teachers overwhelmed by the large number of pupils. This dramatically affected quality of education in the public schools, which in return pushed a considerable number of children out of school. A study by UNESCO (2005) established that there was a 5% decline in enrolment by 2004, and this trend persists to date.

Policy Issues and Recommendations

It is unquestionable that the free primary education has made positive impact in the reduction of out of school children and in the withdrawal of certain categories of children from child labour. However, for this impact to be optimised and sustained, certain issues need to be addressed.

FPE and child labour policies

The FPE policy is narrow in that it seeks to make primary education 'free', rather than expanding the education sector to enhance affordability and reduce disparities. Consequently, the notion of 'free' has born many undesired effects. Parents and communities have neglected their responsibility to the Government. In the same note, it is a fact to admit that Kenya has many pressing developmental needs, and the expansion of funding at the primary school level has caused a disproportionate budgetary effect not only in the education sector, but also in the entire economy. The extent to which this proportion can be maintained is questionable. In addition, there is need to stamp out the element of free, and instead tap available community resources to support certain quality aspects to better the entire education system.

Recommendations

- **First**, the urgent policy requirement is to make education compulsory, at least up to class 8, with the possibility of eventually raising basic education to encompass the secondary level. This should be done as early as January 2007.
- **Second**, the FPE policy guidelines need to be explicit on the role of parents and communities in education funding. These guidelines need to define specific ways through which the school should partner with the community in terms of funding.
- **Third**, there is need to establish scholarships for the needy children, not just at the elementary level, but through to tertiary education. To subsidise public expenditure, the government should, as a matter of policy, give incentives (such as tax exemption) to local initiatives funding education.
- **Fourth**, the draft policy on child labour is categorical on the role of the school in mitigating child labour. This policy needs to be finalised. However, the policy needs to reflect the roles of the Ministries of Education, Labour, Planning, Finance and Home Affairs in implementing the statutes, as well as how the child labour policy relates to the Children Act and the Education Act, statutes that are again under review.
- **Fifth**, education policies (taking the cases of the National Action Plan, the Sessional Paper No. 1 of 2005, KESSP) have somehow shied off from taking child labour head on. It is the experience in Kenya that child labour is among the worst challenges to schooling, and future education policies must directly point at the role of educational institutions in both attraction of working children, and in cutting supply to child labour. The recommendations of the Koech Commission on flexible schools and curricula to accommodate certain categories of working children need to be reflected in policy.

The bottleneck to post primary education

The rapid expansion of primary education has created a serious bottleneck to post-primary education. The transition rates from primary to secondary are now lower than ever before. More than 50% of all children graduating from primary school have no opportunity for entry into secondary school. One would then raise the question, *does the free primary education mitigate child labour, or does it just delay entry?* Expansion of the secondary and higher education sectors is something we must urgently consider, if the effects of free primary education have to be maintained. The Kenya Education Sector Support Programme (KESSP) aims at achieving a 70% transition rate by 2008, doubling the enrolment in secondary schools by 2010, and tripling it by 2015. However, within the prevailing conditions, it is questionable if this objective is achievable.

Recommendations

To achieve the KESSP implementation aim without constraining the public kitty or compromising quality, we

must seek strategic partnerships with all sectors of our economy.

- **First** is the private sector, which harbours a lot of potential in terms of giving scholarships to needy children and improving the school infrastructure.
- **Second** the community resources need to be exploited, in both material and non-material forms.

The indirect and opportunity costs

It is deceptive to proclaim education as free, since there are other hidden costs like uniforms, stationery, furniture, transport and so on. Secondly, the opportunity costs in schooling, in a country where close to 60% of the population are living below the poverty line, and more than 40% are unemployed, are quite high. As a result, a considerable number of children from poor families are out of school, either because of the indirect costs of schooling, or because they have made the decision to work rather than to go to school.

Recommendations

- **First**, instead of straining resources catering for costs of children even from well-up backgrounds, it might be better to utilise the same resources to create a welfare system for the marginalised. In this case, parents who can afford would be given the opportunity to pay, while the public resources are directed to the pockets of poverty like the urban slums, the arid and semi arid lands and other poor parts of the country.
- **Second**, the devolved funds should be depoliticised as much as that is possible, to ensure that it is the really needy who receive bursaries and other grants. There are claims that such funds are awarded on merit of political correctness in some parts of the country, and the Ministry of Education must move swiftly to correct this.

Quality of education and child labour

Research has shown that the conditions at school have a great influence in the supply to child labour. In our Kenyan situation, children continue to drop out due to poor conditions at school: overcrowding, understaffing, overstretched infrastructure and depleted resources. Nevertheless, the efforts being made by the government to employ more teachers, construct more rooms through devolved funds and improve the infrastructure through KESSP are commendable. However, it is clear that there is need to step up these efforts, if quality education is to be achieved.

Recommendations

- **First**, to better the quality of education, the government needs to mobilise more resources in a sustainable way from the private sector, the community and other partners. Such resources should be utilised to hire more teachers, build capacities of teachers and support staff and expand the infrastructure.



- **Second** and in addition, there is need to develop public education programmes to create awareness on the value of education, and the limitations of child labour. This implies a strategic partnership between the Ministry of Education and the Media.

The school and non-intellectual needs of children

In our Kenyan society, the full-day school has pushed the nurturing role of parents to the periphery. In this case, children spend most of their time in school, making the school the focal point in catering for children's needs. However, it is unfortunate that academic competition through examinations and ranking are the central driving forces. In this environment of competition, little attention is accorded to non-academic and non-cognitive needs of children. This is causing unimaginable wastage. Even with free primary education, magnitudes of children fall out due to physical, economic, social and psychological needs that are not accommodated.

Recommendation

- The school, in partnership with the community, needs to offer complementally services like feeding and counselling. In problematic areas like the urban slums,

the school must seek linkage with the community, like through having a social worker attached to the school, to offer advisory to parents and assist the school in community mobilisation and support.

Coupling theory and practice

In the current situation, there is poor linkage between theory and practice. On one hand, experts are engaged on ad hoc basis, as members of commissions, whose recommendations are hardly implemented. On the other hand, universities and research institutions are constantly involved in research, whose findings hardly enjoy influence beyond the university libraries. Such findings and recommendations made by these are never disseminated, and hence never find way into improvement of practice.

Recommendations

First, there is need to seek more ways of coupling theory and practice in our Kenyan education scene. The university needs to link up more with the policy level, and also with the school level for experimentation.

Second, researchers should make it an obligation to disseminate findings to the relevant audiences, so that such knowledge may infuse into practice.

Third, creation of meaningful partnerships between professional/research institutions and schools, rather than limiting educational development to ad hoc political decisions, may also help.

Conclusion

The relationship between education and child labour is a complex one, and needs to be looked at from various dimensions. In the context of prevailing global and national conditions, elimination of child labour may be seen as both unachievable and unrealistic. Rather, emphasis should be laid on mitigating the negative effects of the engagement in exploitative activities, and in tasks that could hinder optimal human capital development.

In the experience of Kenya, education and child labour are in a dual relationship. Making education free has helped to mitigate child labour, and making it compulsory may even boost the impact. However, child labour is a symptom of structural weaknesses in three main systems: the economic-political system, the cultural system, and the education system. Fighting child labour, without genuinely addressing the weaknesses in these systems, is bound to be an effort in vain.

IDS Policy Briefs

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Institute for Development Studies

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