

CHILD LABOUR AND ITS CONSEQUENCES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

A large family was a hallmark of the Nigerian society until very recently when many people began to get concerned about coping with the continuously rising cost of having large numbers of children. This is no longer feasible or fashionable as many families are unable to cope even with the basic task of feeding, clothing and educating their children. What many have done is to, reduce their standard of living which is often by reducing the family's food intake in terms of quantity and quality and providing only the minimum bare essentials, limiting the number of children they educate while encouraging the rest to get into the labour market at very tender ages. Either to support the family or to aurgument their own education. In other words, poverty is a major reason why many parents "encourage" their children to earn incomes even when they are evidently too young to be so saddled. This paper extensively discussed the nature and patterns of child labour in Nigeria and sought to highlight its consequences on the child, the family, and society.

Introduction

All through human history, work had been and continues to be a very vital aspect of life in all known societies. The reason for this is quite evident. It is an indispensable activity that must take place if life is to continue to exist. It is no surprise then that no known society has been able to do away with it entirely, no matter how repugnant it may have been or regarded. Karl Marx underscored the crucial importance of work when,he pointed out that work is not only the basic condition for all human existence, but also an activity which creates man himself. One important aspect of work, which although has existed through the centuries but which has now become the focus of a great deal of attention among scholars, governments, non-governmental organisations, international agencies, etc. is the involvement of children in the world of work. It. is generally acknowledged that in most societies of the world, developed and developing alike, most children work in one sense or the other. What is however significant is that such work is regarded as part of the socialization process through which children are prepared for adult roles.

In Africa, it is a tradition for children to perform family errands. This they do according to their ability. Girls would, for example do on a small scale, what their mothers did. Boys were expected to follow in their fathers footsteps (Onyango, 1994). There were cases where children were sent to lend helping hands to their relatives, especially grand parents, uncles and aunts. Just like parents, relatives made sure that the societal expectations and norms regarding work done by children were strictly adhered to. Members of the society worked together to enable children acquire skills that they would need when they reached adulthood. This enhanced a child's health and entire psychosocial development.

In other words in most traditional African societies, children participated in work roles for two main reasons. To acquire skills which they would find useful when they become adults and to teach them responsibility to others, perseverance and moral values (Kayongo-Male and Walji, 1984). The same observation of course could be made of other societies of the world today, although in the industrialised countries there is a general disapproval of formal labour force participation of school age children. However, even in such countries, participation in various types of economic activities from an early age is considered as an essential part of socialization (Naidu, 1985).

It is noteworthy that in most societies, therefore, most types of child work take place mostly within the family context and is largely regarded as desirable and socially approved. What is however problematic and generally regarded as not so desirable is when this work takes children away from the home environment into a different environment entirely-into the work place and when the possibility of the exploitation and maltreatment of these children exist. It is in this connection that the phenomenon - 'child labour' becomes salient and for analytical purposes quite distinct from 'child work' child labour is

described by Bonnet (1993) as including all activities performed by children except attendance at school and occupations activities which children themselves describe as games, regardless of the status assigned to them in their social environment. This definition is considered adequate here because child labour includes not only work activities in some form where wages are paid but also those where no wages are paid. Thus, included as child labourers are children who are engaged as apprentices to master craftsmen and who pay to acquire certain skills rather than being paid for their labour.

It is this phenomenon of child labour in Nigeria that forms the primary concern of the participation of children still at school in child labour, and participation of those who no longer attend school but more or less working to earn a living. Furthermore, regional variations in the pattern of child labour will also be taken into consideration. Approached from whatever perspective, what is important is that child labour has long term negative implications not only for the development and well being of the children concerned, but also for the entire society.

Nature Of Child Labour

There is some confusion among scholars and other interested parties about a 'child's . For instance, while the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the child lays down eighteen years as the upper limit of childhood, the Nigerian labour decree of 1974 considers a child any person below fifteen years of age. This latter stipulation of who a child is conforms to that adopted by the Dakar Declaration on Child Labour. Thus child labour for the purpose of this paper refers to the employment of persons under the fifteen years of age in work places where they may or may not be paid for their services. Another area of controversy is the numerical strength of working children. There is no consensus on the exact number of children working worldwide. According to the ILO (1992), no one knows for sure how many children are working. Statistics are difficult to come by. Most of these children are unpaid family workers, in the informal sector, or working illegally and invisible to the collectors of labour force statistics. But the total number is certainly in millions. What is evident however is that it is developing nations which account for most of the children found in premature employment. The Guardian Newspaper (1992) reported that Asia and Africa alone account for well over 90 percent of the total child labour population. The problem is especially serious in Africa where far more than 50 percent of the children in several countries are not enrolled in school and could be working. The OAU (1992) concluded that Africa has 40 million children in employment and 16 million street children.

In Nigeria, there is no documented statistical estimate of the number of working children. The statistics quoted by most studies are at best educated guesses. For instance, ILO (1992) observed that in Nigeria, an estimated 12 million children participate in various categories of work. This is almost surely an under-estimation of the number of working children in Nigeria, especially when the steady deterioration of the educational system and the economy in general is taken into consideration. What is evident is that quite a large number of children of school age are working in Nigeria and from all indications, this number is still growing rather rapidly.

Children are incorporated into a range of different types of working relationships across the country, that is child labour takes a variety of forms. These various forms of child labour, however, also vary with regard to the place of residence of the children concerned - urban or rural. It is in the urban areas where child labour appears in its most clear manifestations. Children are involved in the following areas of labour: apprenticeships in the various trades and crafts; domestic service, where they are engaged by outside households to provide such services as cleaning, cooking, child care; marginal economic activities such as street trading, newspaper vending, car washing, hawking, kiosk operation, attendants at shops, restaurants and hotels; prostitution, begging and, finally, a comparatively smaller number of children are employed in factories and offices as messengers, attendants and factory hands.

A look at the existing literature on child labour in Nigeria shows a preponderance of attention on its occurrence in the urban centres. However, a great deal of child labour also takes place in the rural areas. From all available evidence, child labour is a very important form of work in the rural areas, the rapid out - migration of many school leavers to the urban centres leaves behind in most

rural communities mainly old people and the very young. The implication of this is that children tend to be pressed into the world of adult work (especially farming) very early in life in order to complement the diminishing effort of the old people and the very young.

Pattern Of Child Labour In Nigeria By Zone			
South East	South West	North West	North East
Street trading	Apprenticeship	Begging	Begging
Apprenticeship	Street trading	Herding	Herding
Domestic attendants	Bus conducting	Farming	Kiosk operation
Hotel attendants	Hawking	Shoe shining	Farming
Vending	Vending	Garage boys	Shoe shining
Car washing	Farming	Street trading	Street trading
Prostitution	Shoe shining	Hawking	Hawking
Hawking	Portage		
Factory work	Car washing		
Farming	Factory work		
Portage	Prostitution		

Source: Status of Adolescents and Young Adults in Nigeria: CHESTRAD (Isamah, 1997).
 Portage: The act of carrying: the cost of carrying by the children.
 Garage: Boys: Children who hang around motor-parks; soliciting passengers for commercial vehicles as well as carrying out other menial jobs (touts).

Why Children Are Made To Work

Because of the great interest that has been paid to child labour numerous reasons have been advanced to explain the incidence persistence and expansion of the phenomenon. A careful look at the existing literature, indicates that perhaps the most cited cause of child labour is poverty. There is more or less consensus among scholars that as a society's economy deteriorates and standard of living of a sizeable proportion of the population drops, an increasing number of parents find it quite convenient to sent out their children to work. Put differently, the argument is that the poorer a society, the more the number of children put to work for remuneration. In fact, a number of studies have indicated that socio-economic development is inversely related to the incidence of child labour. As Bonnet (1993) opined, poverty does not affect all families in the same way, nor does it work its way into families according to a standard pattern. The poorer the family is, the more vulnerable it is to events, whether the event is natural (such as a plague of locusts), social (such as war), personal (such as the loss of relative), or seasonal (such as the arrival of the dry season). The economic environment offers neither the stability nor the flexibility needed to overcome such difficulties: the children must be put to work.

Since the early 1980s, Nigeria's economy has been declining steadily. A combination of internal (including corruption, mismanagement of public funds, inappropriate economic policies, etc.) and external factors (for example, the world economic recession, the collapse of oil prices and the debt burden) have been responsible for this steady deterioration of the economy culminating in the adoption in 1985 of a Structural Adjustment Programme. This ushered in inflation and unemployment which has now attained frightening proportions all over the country with the results that standards of living have generally fallen.

Many rural dwellers especially those with large families find it difficult to cater for the basic needs of family members. For instance, due to the very high inflationary situation in the country, the cost of educating children has gone up astronomically. Thus, for children to continue schooling, parents must be able to meet the cost of books, uniforms, school fees and other materials needed by the children. Where the family is just managing to survive, other means of adaptation to the prevailing situation have to be sought. One option which many families are increasingly resorting to is to put the children out to work for money either on full time basis or as a part time activity after school.

One other effect of poverty is the deterioration of schools nationwide and the loss of confidence in the educational system by all involved. Related to the deterioration of school facilities is the loss of confidence of both the children and their parents in the educational system as a means of catering for their future. Thus, the need to send their children or wards to places of employment

where they can acquire some useful skills while at the same time making some contribution to the family income. Finally, the accelerated breakdown of the family system in Nigeria has also contributed to child labour in the country. Increasing modernization, urbanization and especially the dismal economic situation have culminated in the gradual disintegration of the family as an important mechanism of social insurance and childcare.

According to Diaz (1986), when the family unit breaks down as a unit, it loses its role as a protective buffer. It no longer stands between society as a whole and the child. Integration into the society and individual development are processes which no longer take place within the family, which is increasingly drained of its meaning and content. Much more, the family whose social role has been destroyed is bound to have something of a similar effect on the child who is no longer seen as a value in his own right but as a "spare wheel". The child is handed over to his exploiters, and the family, willy-nilly, honestly or dishonestly, with premeditation or unconsciously, is an accomplice in the exploitation of the child through child labour. Diaz (1986) is essentially correct in his argument. There can be no questioning the fact that in Nigeria today, the family as a social unit has increasingly failed to perform many of its traditional roles.

The answer to the question of why children work in contemporary Nigeria is that their work has both social and economic functions. Socially, because, many of such children in the process of working acquire useful skills which would help them adjust better as adults. In other words, child work in this sense forms part of the socialisation process for adult roles. Their work also has economic functions which is the crux of the issue at hand. Many children, given the prevailing economic conditions in the country today, support not only themselves but also other members of their family in the rural areas. Such children, as breadwinners make important contributions to family survival in the harsh socio-economic situation they have found themselves. Thus, proceeds of the child labour in the community serves as a dependable source of income for the domestic unit.

Consequences Of Child Labour

Having established that child labour exist and in fact continues to expand because it serves some important social functions, it is important to examine the cost of work to these children and the communities from which they are wrested from. The African Centre for Applied Research and Training in Social Developments (ACARTSOD, 1992) reported that a substantial number of children of school age are not in school. Instead they are swelling the ranks of the unemployed or the so-called lumpen proletariat in most urban centres. In the process they are being exploited by ruthless employers who find it cheaper to employ child labour. Some of these children are engaged in heavy jobs for their age as well other socially unethical and deviant activities. These activities have far-reaching negative effects on the physical, health, mental and social well being of the affected children especially when placed into the overall context of human resources development.

Working children in the urban areas face some serious hazards and dangers. The manner of their economic involvement, nature of work and conditions under which they are often employed subject them to severe health and safety hazards. However, perhaps the greatest consequence of child labour on the child is the loss of childhood. They are usually denied the opportunity of play and recreation, factors, which are very important in a child's development.

Another important effect of child labour is in the area of the child's schooling, this occurs in two forms: of having the child drop out of school completely to fend for himself based on his brawn's and not brains; and there are those who have to combine work with schooling, such work affects performance in school as well as attendance. The end result is that these children are continuously disadvantaged and liable to drop out.

The exploitation of these children is another consequence to be considered. There is hardly any government supervision of the informal sector where the greatest proportion of child workers are employed and unfair labour practices targeted at children tend to take place quite openly. This sector is that of fast growing economic activities of various forms such as hawking, employment in small business as sales person, shop attendants waiters and waitresses and domestic attendants (househelp). This has been one noticeable feature of the Nigerian economy in the past two decades. The significant aspects of employment in this sector is the low wages, often irregular, little or no job security and the further exploitation of these young workers through random deductions from their wages for alleged misdemeanors, or termination of their employment in the middle of the month and refusing to pay any

severance fees. The availability of thousands of desperate job seekers ensures that these workers are effortlessly replaced. This sector was directly encouraged by the government through its campaign for self-employment. Law is the yardstick by which government's commitment to any policy can be measured.

The last of the main thrust of this write up is to examine the effect of these various forms of exploitation on the rural communities. There is increasing evidence to suggest that deprivation among rural communities enhance low self-evaluation and this tends to keep aspirations low. Understanding the motivation of the people in a development area must, therefore, begin with a careful analysis of the socio-economic situation of the individual as he experiences and interprets it. Prior judgements on the inferiority of the value system and style of the life of the rural poor have little utility and may actually interfere with sincere development efforts to improve their well being. The concept of human motivation process hinges explicitly or implicitly on issues of development. Human motivation process as stated by Abramson (1996), is conceived of both as the initiating and sustaining force of behaviour which constitutes the sources of human energy, and as the way in which this energy is directed towards achieving objects, situations, or conditions which provide gratification and avoiding those which are painful, unpleasant, or frightening. In a simplified form the process can be said to be in part that people tend to select those goals and means which are perceived as appropriate to their own self evaluation and status within the group which provide their standard of comparison. As stated earlier plans for rural development must deal with the current self-image of the rural poor (a basic sense of inferiority which comes from the low value placed on their efforts in the society) as well as with the objective situation.

Given the aforementioned reasons, the general level of education is consistently low in the rural areas and it has been found that the lower the educational level of the labour force in an area, the more limited are the potentialities for economic and social development. Other things being equal, the economy and potentials of an area appears to hinge on the educational status of the population. A high proportion of functional illiterates is generally characteristic of slow-growing areas, which our rural areas are. This illiterate group records the lowest income. Prevalence of illiteracy, therefore is a very real barrier to growth and development of the rural areas.

Technological changes can increase productivity in agriculture as well as production and employment in other sectors. Factors such as education, health, nutrition, age, gender of the family members and rural infrastructure play important roles in determining the direction and magnitude of changes in labour use that are prompted by technological change. In various literature it has been found that households that have adopted the highest level of technology use more family labour than households that have adopted lowest which translate into higher yield and all things being equal better economic power. The presence of children affects labour positively. Work performed by each adult member of household complements rather than substitutes the work performed by children. This goes to state that cooperation among family member is not only possible, it is necessary. Cooperation apparently helps integrate farm work with the market and stimulates the development of activities that achieve a high return of each hour of labour performed. This goes to show that farm work in which the rural children are involved in, are actual agricultural activities such as weeding, making of beds and ridges, protecting crops from birds and animals, animal herding, fetching water, etc. which are of great economic importance.

Conclusion

Child labour in the final analysis, though a very important mechanism of survival for many families in a very harsh socio-economic environment is condemnable. In spite of its social and economic functions, it however has some deleterious consequences on the health and development of the child involved, as well as stripping the communities from which these children are gotten of strategic human resources. Though these areas tend to have high birth rates and consequently larger families the same fate usually befall even the unborn ones. The question then is, what is to be done about this seeming dilemma of a phenomenon that is socially and economically functional and at the same time undesirable because of its consequences on those involved? Can child labour be abolished in Nigeria? No matter how desirable the need to solve the problem is, its abolition is a very difficult task precisely because many families and even a large proportion of the children involved depend on it for their subsistence and survival. What is, therefore, required would be measures to protect and

rehabilitate the children involved in the absence of broad-based poverty alleviation strategies of which the development of our rural communities is fundamental, being our food basket.

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