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**Work in African childhoods**

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## **Work in African Childhoods**

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### **Values and empirical research**

For the past three years, I have been reading and writing about children's work, trying to persuade people that generally, and apart from extreme cases, it is not in children's interests to stop them from working. In particular, standards based on the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Minimum Age Convention (138 of 1973), which prohibits "employment or work in any occupation" below the minimum age, and the campaign against "child labour" based on these standards, have more to do with the ILO's agenda dictated by its mandate (in 1919) than any serious study of children's interests. A substantial work in which I and colleagues have argued for policy to be based on more accurate assessments of children's work is due from Rutgers University Press in November (Bourdillon *et al.* 2010), but shorter related arguments are already available (Bourdillon 2009a; 2009b; 2010).

We can return to these issues in the discussion if participants wish, but for the purpose of my presentation, I wish to take the following points as given.

- An important mechanism of cognitive development comes from imitation and participation in social activities, including work (see Rogoff 1990).
- Work is a fundamental part of human life, as acknowledged in the right to work that appears in article 23 (1) of the 1948 Universal declaration of Human Rights.
- Therefore we should take appropriate work as a normal activity of children. (As a corollary to this point, romantic notions of childhood as being free of care and responsibility were a useful foil to certain abuses of children particularly in parts 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, but are not necessarily a sound basis for bringing up children and all circumstances.)

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- A further pragmatic point is that children cannot always rely on adult support, particularly in societies devastated by poverty, AIDS, and war.
- Finally, there is nothing wrong with paying children for the work they do.

However, children are in early stages of human development and require special protection as a matter of right. This was pointed out in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (both of 1966) and confirmed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989. While this special state of children is evident, romantic notions of childhood can foster an unrealistic dichotomy between the worlds of children and adults (see O'Connell Davidson 2005). Children are growing and learning in the same world as that in which adults live; they are developing ways of living in the same world; and the exploitation of children is often closely linked to the abuse and exploitation of adults, in which case it is misleading to treat child exploitation separately.

The special state of childhood means that governments and civil society should be concerned with abuse of children, including abuse in their work. This applies not only to abuse by employers, but also to abuse in unpaid work in the home, which for many children in South Africa is the greater problem – indeed paid employment can be a positive experience against this (see Clacherty 2002; Lehohla 2001, 25, 29, 30, tables 2.6, 2.10, 2.11; Bourdillon 2009a, 30-31). I argue that protection from abuse does not necessarily mean stopping children from working: in some circumstances removing children from their work can be as damaging and as traumatic as the original abuse.

I would like to take this discussion forwards to an area in which I am looking for help. One of the colleagues with whom I have been working closely is Bill Myers, an expert in child protection, who has in the past worked for both the ILO and UNICEF. Very recently, he has started stirring his colleagues to consider the tensions that arise between values on the one hand, and empirical investigations into the interests of children on the other. I am coming to this problem primarily from my reading and experience with children's work, but this experience provides an example of a broader issue.

At the time of writing, I am directing an Institute of CODESRIA (Council for the Development of Social Research in Africa) in Dakar, on The Place of Work in African

Childhoods. The presentations at this Institute are not remarkable in relation to the general literature on children's work in Africa (documented well in Bass 2004; see also Kielland and Tovo 2006). I use some of the presentations as a very contemporary African platform for considering tensions between values and empirical research.

### **Work as bad**

Although the call for applications for the institute pointed to the tension between international discourse of "child labour" and the more positive understanding of children's work in many African cultures, I was surprised at how widespread among over 100 applicants was the assumption that the issue was one of stopping child labour. Even among the selected participants, several appeared simply to assume that international standards and the laws they inspire define what is best for children. One commented early in the discussions that her country had laws so the problem is simply a matter of enforcement. Several spoke of the need to sensitize parents on what is best for children. The bulk of the presentations considered forms of work that are clearly problematic. The assumptions were that school is good; work (or at least paid work) is bad; the two are incompatible; and where parents and children judge differently for their particular context, they must be wrong and need to be sensitized.

### *Weavers in Addis Ababa*

One of the studies, by Seleshi Zeleke, looked at boys from the remote Gurage district in Ethiopia, who travelled to Addis Ababa at the age of around 9 to 11, in order to learn the traditional craft of weaving, with which their ethnic group is associated. Generally, the children were apprenticed to a member of their ethnic group – sometimes a close kinsman, at whose workshop they worked for a pittance and learned the trade. Eventually, many of them expected themselves to earn a good living by employing other children in the trade. The children on the whole wanted to remain working in Addis Ababa, and appreciated what they were learning, as well as the degree of independence they acquired and their social life on days off. Their work fits the ethnic pattern of involving children in work to learn life skills, but travel to the markets in Addis resulted in more intensive work and separation from

families, whom they were able to visit only very rarely on account of the distance and expense of travel. Some of them talked about missing their parents.

The children were deprived of schooling. But only one of the nine in the study had received any schooling before he left home, although they had heard that schools had since been built there and that they might have gone to school had they not left home to work. Some had among their motives of travelling to Addis the chance of schooling, and four out the nine interviewed did go to school for a year or two, but found that the work was too intensive and could not be combined with school. Occasionally, a child might acquire some schooling when his apprenticeship was complete, using his earnings for the purpose. So the children learn a useful trade and acquire access to markets in which to exercise it profitably, and they had the chance to travel and see a world beyond their remote home; but there was a price to pay. The author commented that children are aware of both the advantages and disadvantages of their travel and work.

On the one hand, Zeleki cited Ethiopian academics (Minaye 2007; Teklu 2007) who have pointed to the need to respect local culture about bringing up children and in particular the place of work in the training of children; Minaye in particular bemoaned the negative picture often unjustly painted of Ethiopian child-rearing practices. On the other hand, the discussion was initially presented in terms of “child labour” and “trafficking” as problem activities that should be eliminated. The author initially stated his own assessment that the disadvantages were more numerous than advantages: he did not consider whether the work might remain advantageous in a modified form. It appears that at the back of his initial discussion was a concept of an ideal form of childhood, dominated by effective schooling, an ideal that lies behind much discussion about children’s rights. The question remains as to whether the work and travel should simply be stopped in accordance with such a concept of childhood, or whether it is possible to conceive of the work and the travel as having some developmental – even educational – value, which needs to be supplemented by appropriate formal schooling. The question is whether the work should be eliminated, or the conditions attended to.

### *School and work in Kenya*

Gladwell Wambiri studied children working in agriculture and in the market place in Kenya. She pointed out that two thirds of her sample did not attend school at all, although many had completed primary school. Reasons for dropping out were mostly financial; 69 percent of the children out of school commented that they needed to work to help their parents provide for their households. A large majority of both pupils and parents stated preference for a regime that would allow a combination of school and work. These points mirror findings of many studies throughout the world. There is no evident reason why this preference should be denied on the basis of abstract ideals of schooling and childhood, especially when we consider that adequate nutrition is a prerequisite for full cognitive development.

### *Cultural institutions*

A greater conflict between cultural values and a common interpretation of children's rights appeared in Cina Gueye's account of the lives and work of *Talibes* in Senegal. These children, usually from poor and illiterate families, are committed to live with a Muslim teacher at an early age to study the Koran. They have to gain an income by begging on his behalf, as well as working in his home. Although the children do gain certain competences through this work, and they do enjoy the supportive company of peers and some leisure, she talked about the exploitation of the children being legitimated by the religious culture of Senegal. Many parents see it is valuable to dedicate one of their children to religion in this way, although it is true that most *talibes* come from poor and families with parents who are illiterate or barely literate.

It appears that the institution has acquired a particularly exploitative form in Senegal, where some teachers (not all) have little concern for the wellbeing of the children in their charge. In other places, such as Mali, the children frequently work as apprentices in a trade rather than collecting income by begging. So it is possible to practice the institution in a developmental way.

Some cultural practices appear totally unredeemable. Slavery, in which persons, including children, are bought and sold as chattels, still exists in some places in Africa (see Bass 2004, 149-152 for some examples). Certain religious practices appear as bad. In the

Trokosi tradition of southern Ghana, thousands of girls as young as four may be betrothed to fetish gods to atone for transgressions of a family member, when families are unable to raise money to buy the necessary cattle to atone for the offense. The Trokosi girls are deprived of freedom and education, suffer inhumane and degrading treatment, have to work for the priests as cooks, farmhands, cleaners, and mistresses (Quashigah 1998; Bass 2004, 151-2)

The question nevertheless remains about how legitimate it is to impose global concepts of childhood on people who have a different religious and cultural tradition. In some such cases, people may argue that the rights of individual children are subordinate to the interests of their families and communities, linking into the broader issue of how we assess the individual rights of children in a social context where societal interests are seen to be more important than those of individuals.

### **Values in extreme circumstances**

The situation becomes even more difficult when considering children in very difficult circumstances. It has been argued that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is postulated on ideal childhoods, and does not readily apply to such children as those on the streets, for whom stated rights to free education, housing, health care, and even nutrition are meaningless (Ennew 2000; Burr 2006, 74, 149).

Eve Musvosvi described the work of “survival bands” of children in the rural area of Chiweshe, Zimbabwe, which like the rest of the country is ravaged by AIDS and a collapsed national economy. The productive work ranged from gathering edible insects at a very young age, hunting for small animals, illegal mining, watching for law-enforcements agencies, trading, and even pimping (the children called themselves pimps and received considerable payments for finding sexual partners for men in the community). Musvosvi showed how the groups open up spaces for children to negotiate, challenge, and subvert gender, age, and spatial restrictions that hamper their attempts for survival. She further shows how children comprise crucial elements in family and local economies. In this kind of situation, the initiatives and imagination of the children are striking; discussion of their children's rights seems irrelevant. Indeed, a complaint of the children was that they are not treated as people. They cannot make their own mining claims and work for themselves: they are forced to depend on adults. When adults are not able or willing to support children, is there any

reason for discrimination against children who are trying to support themselves – and particularly for denying them the fundamental human right to work?

This complaint parallels the disadvantages that children regularly experience when they work. Because of attempts to protect children according to a particular interpretation of their rights, working children are regularly denied rights normal to workers. Attempted protection from work regularly results in working children being denied the right to join or form associations for their protection in workplaces. Attempted protection from exploitation has on occasion denied children the right to wages for work done, on the grounds that the work was illegal. Attempted protection from work denies working children protection from unjust or arbitrary dismissal. Indeed, their pretending protectors often initiate such dismissal.

The problem with protection hindering opportunity for particularly deprived children is well illustrated in the case of child domestic workers (see Bourdillon 2009c). The practice of employing children from poor areas to help with the housekeeping in wealthy families is widespread in Africa. Superficially, it seems a benign way for children from poor communities to acquire an improved standard of living, and sometimes schooling, by performing in the home of a more wealthy relative the work they would otherwise do at home. Sometimes kinship terms are adopted between the employer and the worker, disguising the fact that the situation is one of employment.

In practice, and particularly when children live in the homes of their employers, child domestic workers are notoriously vulnerable to various kinds of abuse. Being permanently on call is common, leading to very long working hours with inadequate leisure. Child domestic workers are widely subjected to physical abuse, including corporal punishment, inadequate living quarters, and inadequate health care and nourishment. They frequently have little contact with peers and sometimes have little contact with family or kin. Sexual abuse is widespread. Several studies have pointed to evidence of psychological damage to such children (for one such in Africa, see Bwibo and Onyango 1987). For these reasons, many people argue for the abolition of this kind of employment as a “matter of child protection”.

Yet some children from poor backgrounds are able to improve their situation with this kind of work, and see it as their only chance to better their lives. Even children who complain at the way they are treated do often do not want to return to the poverty from

which they came (Bourdillon 2006, 13-14; Sommerfelt 2003, 26, 33). I cite one case that serves to challenge a simple abolitionist approach. At an international conference on *Urban Childhoods*, held in Trondheim in 1997, representatives of working children were invited to speak at the session on “child labour”. A 13-year-old girl from Senegal had essentially this to say, in a short speech which reduced the hall to an awkward silence.

“Do you understand how you insult me, when you talk of ‘combatting’ and ‘abolishing’ the work that I do?

“I have worked as a domestic servant since I was eight. Because of doing this work, I have been able to go to school (which my parents in the village could not afford); I help my parents with the money I earn. I am very proud of the work I do!”<sup>1</sup>

Is it a matter of child protection to prevent her from doing this, or to denigrate her efforts in any way?

Even when the situation is particularly bad, the young people may see the alternatives as worse. Perhaps Soraya Kola can tell us more about the domestic workers she met in Mozambique. In spite of the abuse these girls suffered, including sexual abuse and physical violence, they did not want anything done to remove them from their work, which was their means of survival.

I am largely in agreement with the ILO Convention on “The Worst Forms of Child Labour” (182 of 1999), which need to be attended to as matter of urgency and with the full force of criminal law where appropriate. Although some hazardous work situations can be improved rather than simply eliminated, there have been, and are, extreme situations where potential harm to children is so great and so immediate that their removal is urgent and consideration of alternatives may have to come later. Examples I have come across include camel jockeys in Saudi Arabia (Asghar *et al.* 2005), children in certain glass factories in Ferozabad, India (Wal 2006, 52-62 – from which adults should also be removed), and most forms of bonded labour (e.g., Gulrajani 2000, 57-5).

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<sup>1</sup> As recalled in translation by Ben White and Bill Myers, who were present.

How bad does a situation have to be to be unconditionally intolerable, irrespective of available alternatives? And to whom is it unconditionally intolerable? Is it ever legitimate to interfere in the lives of others without being sure that an improvement is available?

### **Promoting and protecting the interests of children who work: a case in Egypt**

I leave these questions for discussion, and return to less extreme situations of children's work. Does attention to children's rights necessarily involve imposing on them characteristics of a supposedly "ideal childhood", by prohibiting work above a bare minimum, and compelling them to attend school, whatever its quality or usefulness? There are other approaches, as the following example illustrates.

It was noticed that project's promoting small business through micro-credit in Egypt resulted in more work for children, mostly within their family projects, but sometimes in employment with outsiders. It should not be a surprise, but was for some, that a project designed precisely to create employment also provided employment for children. The Egyptian Association for Community Initiatives and Development established a Project for Promoting and Protecting the Interests of Children who Work {see Bourdillon, 2010 #912, 318–330}. This project espoused a practical interpretation of the rights of children who work, including at least basic schooling, but also finding ways to protect them from unsafe conditions, abusive treatment, and gender discrimination.

At the heart of the project was the idea that the rights of working children could be promoted through sensitive use of micro-finance institutions, by convincing and enabling employers to invest in business changes to improve the safety of children in their workplaces and to ensure that the children would receive an education. Rather than remove children from work, the project would try to make the workplace a safe, supportive, and developmental place for children. And it would do this from the bottom up by changing employer practices voluntarily through education and incentives, rather than from the top down through fiat and law enforcement. The aim was that this improvement in conditions for children should not weaken economic development.

As well as working with the business owners, the project organized consultation with children over their needs and the problems they faced. A code of ethics was developed by

and for businesses employing children. Costs of educational and other services were met out of the interest on the loans in the micro-credit scheme.

This project started with the current situation of the children and their community, and looked for ways of improving their lives within this context. It started by talking to the people involved. It did not, as so many projects do, start with ideals developed in and for very different situations and try to impose from above rules based on these ideals.

### **Is there a way forwards?**

Does this last case suggest a way of avoiding the conflict between values and empirical experience? Not completely. Consultation with the children and the decision to approach employers concerning the welfare of child workers reflected values from the outside world that were not fully articulated within the community. Both children and adults recognized the value of this approach when it was initiated by outsiders, but the whole project was instigated by values and ideals that were at best dormant in the community and had to be aroused from outside. The approach relied on a sense of universal values of what is appropriate for children – universal children's rights.

Some years ago Melanie Jacquemin (2006) questioned the appropriateness of a particular interpretation of children's rights in Abidjan, Ivory Coast. She described an organisation that was effectively providing support for child domestic workers. However, its policy was that in accordance with regulations and international standards, any child below the age of 15 should be removed from work. The result in practice was that young girls who wished to continue to work for whatever reason avoided the organisation, and these surely were the girls that most needed its support.

There are many ways to think about rights; here I contrast two viewpoints. One regards rights primarily as social ends that are ultimate expressions of human dignity and respect for individual worth and autonomy. In this view, rights stand as goals that societies should aspire to, and texts about rights, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, are considered to be imbued with moral authority beyond question or challenge. They are treated as categorical mandates whose rules are expected to apply uniformly everywhere.

A quite different approach understands rights documents primarily as means rather than ends. In this view, they are helpful but imperfect instruments intended to improve life and they are open to question and evaluation according to how well they meet that objective. Instead of following rules beyond debate, this approach actively assesses the rules and standards of rights according to their consequences. What doesn't work can be modified or discarded. Rights as tools are open to continuous change in order to improve their effectiveness. There is no pretension to absolute moral authority, and international rights documents are valued primarily for their political ability to mobilize broadly based support and promote change.

The difference between the approach of the Egyptian project and that of eliminating child labour is that the Egyptian project recognized values as abstract principles that guide action based on empirical examination of what is required in particular contexts. The child labour approach takes a particular interpretation of values about childhood derived in a particular context and mistakes this interpretation for a fundamental moral principle.

Here we move into the fields of rights and ethics, of law and philosophy. That is where I stop, and probably where the discussion should begin.

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