Child Labor in Africa: Issues and Challenges

How serious is the issue of child labor in Sub-Saharan Africa? Many African experts consider it to be no problem, while others believe it to be more serious than anywhere else in the world.

A cursory glance at the statistics supports either view. ILO data indicate that more than 40 percent of African children work—almost twice as many as in Asia. On the other hand, household surveys suggest that over 95 percent of child labor takes place in and around private households. African society places a high value on children working at home or the family farm. This is not seen as "harmful" or as a welfare issue—a view opposed by many Western countries.

This article explores the normative and factual basis for the different perceptions of child labor in Africa, and to provide grounds for effective social protection policies. Both welfare economic research and findings of sociological and anthropological studies have been reviewed.

Child labor is defined as

...labor performed by children who are too young in the sense that by doing it they unduly reduce their present economic welfare or their future income earning capabilities, either by shrinking their future external choice sets or through reducing their own future individual productive capabilities.

Existing research

Empirical information on the nature of child labor in Africa—the work environment, the length and timing of work, the allocation of workloads between children of different age and gender—is scarce. And the definitions used in the few existing data sets are inconsistent.

- There is no agreement on how many hours of work denote child "labor";
- The inclusion/exclusion of non-market activities and/or domestic chores seriously affects the extent of girls’ labor force participation vis-à-vis boys; and
- Some studies identify all school-aged children who are not in school as working, ignoring child underemployment or idleness; others count only those who are not in school, ignoring children who both go to school and work.

Two preliminary observations based on national-level data can be made:

- Child labor rates in various African countries show no systematic correlation with the level of poverty (see Figure 1).
Child labor participation rates and GDP US$ (PPP)
A sample of Sub-Saharan African countries (1993)

- Child labor rates positively correlate with the proportion of people who live and work in rural areas.

A classification system

Child labor arrangements in Africa vary greatly. In the study on which this article is based (see end of article) twenty categories of child labor have been identified—differentiated according to production sectors and controlling/managing units. The most common are:

- Domestic child labor performed in one's own household, the household of relatives or of other families;
- Farm work on the family farm or at commercial plantations; and
- Begging, petty sales and services performed by urban children, managed by their own household.

The most important divide is between child labor performed within the context of one's own close family and child labor performed away from home.

Child labor at home: Given a broad definition of child labor, most African children work—rural children more than their urban peers. According to studies carried out in certain countries in West Africa, children perform considerable amounts of work even when they attend formal school. Domestic labor demand is also a major reason for school dropout, as illustrated in Ethiopia. Girls are needed for housework while boys are needed on the family farm. Thus, the decision to send a child to school is not only a matter of expense, but also of substantial indirect costs in terms of unused child labor.

Studies from Zimbabwe, Kenya and Benin indicate that girls work more than boys—which triggers a serious concern for their welfare.

The findings of various studies examined challenge the claim that poverty and child labor are linked. A study from Kenya indicates that child labor increases with the size of the family land holding. Also, in Ghana, the correlation between poverty and child labor is weak.

While most rural children are involved in work activities, quite a few perform hazardous or strenuous labor. Approximately 9 million girls and 2 million boys in Africa are engaged in this kind of labor in and around their own households.

Child labor away from own household: While the share of working children in the more formal labor market is low, the working conditions are often extremely harmful. The reason these children leave home may be household poverty or simply a search for better opportunities. While the former are often "pushed" out, the latter often depart voluntarily.
Around 5 million children engage in paid work in commercial agriculture. The situation is particularly severe during harvest seasons. In Kenya, 30 percent of coffee pickers are children, while 25,000 school children work under hazardous conditions in Tanzanian plantations and mines. Large numbers of boys from Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Ghana, Togo and Benin migrate to work on plantations in Cote d'Ivoire and Nigeria, together with refugee children from Liberia and Sierra Leone.

The sale or contracting out of children is common in several countries, with the latter group being relatively large. Children contracted out or sold mainly work in agriculture or as domestic servants, as also in mining and organized begging activities.

Domestic service is probably the largest child labor market outside the agricultural sector. While an estimated 85 percent of child domestic servants in Africa are girls, boy servants are also common in many countries. Child servants are poorly paid, work long hours and are discriminated against. Mal-treatment and abuse is commonplace and only a few go to school.

Perhaps the most serious cases of child labor include children who work (and sometimes live) on the street. While there are few in the latter category, many urban children work in streets and public places. Child prostitution is less common in Africa than in Asia and Latin America. However, children working in the streets and as domestic servants are practically defenseless to sexual harassment and abuse. Also, children exploited as soldiers roam the streets of Africa's conflict and post conflict countries, representing a seriously traumatized group, harmful both to themselves and to others.

Policy issues

Child labor in Africa is far from being a homogenous phenomenon. Children's work activities and their social and economic context vary greatly between ethnic groups and not all forms of child labor are harmful. Thus, the concern of policy makers should be children's welfare, rather than children's work in itself.

Perhaps due to the strong involvement of the ILO in the fight against international child labor, labor and not the child has often been the focus of advocates and practitioners. Consequently, most strategies target the most harmful types of work. However, better outcomes could result from also targeting the most vulnerable groups of children. Differentiating between children who work in and around family households and children who work away from home would be useful. While both groups tend to work in the same workplaces, those separated from their family are likely to work longer, be more exploited and abused, are much less likely to go to school, and have lesser access to social and legal protection.

The link between household poverty and child labor is not clear in Africa. While poverty reduction remains a general long-term objective, it may not be an effective way to reduce child labor in the short and medium term. Ways to improve the organization and mechanization of the labor-intensive domestic chores and farm work, in particular the low-status jobs, may contribute towards reducing the most common source of child labor demand. Alongside policies aimed at reducing the costs associated with schooling, this can reduce the loss incurred by the household when a child is at school rather than at work.

Operational implications for the World Bank

Lending figures for 2000 indicate that on average more than 600 million US dollars are committed to projects in education, social protection, water, and reconstruction in SSA—all of which can effectively address child labor issues. Other interventions could be implemented by the Bank through its existing lending programs:

Poverty reduction: Poverty-reducing strategies should not only explicitly discuss child labor issues but also incorporate appropriate measures in supporting credits (Poverty Reduction Strategy Credit). In addition, social funds and other community programs which support income-generating activities can indirectly result in lowering the incidence of child labor.

Education: Bank-assisted projects and programs that improve access to schools, delivery of education, and accommodate flexible school hours, as well as school vouchers, special assistance, and school feeding programs result in increased school enrollment and reduced child labor. Literacy classes, non-formal education, and vocational skills training are an effective means of imparting literacy and skills to those who have missed out on school. Also, other human development interventions, e.g., childcare facilities, mother's education/awareness programs and early child development programs, have proved effective in addressing child labor.
Infrastructure: Evidence underscores the important linkages between infrastructure and child labor. Thus, improving rural roads provides easy access to schools and reduces the reliance of parents on children to take goods to the market. Similarly, improvements in water supply can reduce the time taken by girls to fetch water, freeing up time for school.

Post-conflict reconstruction: The Bank’s portfolio in post-conflict countries can play an effective role in addressing the needs of children. For example, many children who have run away or are displaced from home are forced to work and live on the streets (e.g. child soldiers, HIV/AIDS orphans, prostitutes, etc). The provision of rehabilitation centers is important both as places of refuge and learning.

Technical assistance and capacity building: In many parts of SSA, capacity constraints are a significant impediment to the successful implementation of policies and projects. Across the region, state authorities overseeing child welfare programs often lack the requisite technical knowledge and capacity to do so. The Bank has an array of programs which support client countries in terms of technical assistance and capacity building.

Certain forms of highly harmful or exploitative child labor break international law and steps are needed to prohibit these practices and punish transgressors. This also refers to the abuse and the maltreatment of child workers by employers. The enforcement of existing laws and ratified conventions need to be strengthened to eradicate the worst forms of child labor such as child slavery, trafficking, and prostitution. The Bank can provide the appropriate technical assistance.

Conclusion

Child labor in Africa is a complex issue intertwined with a society’s culture and economy. The exact nature of these linkages differs significantly between countries. A clearer understanding of child labor is essential for designing appropriate interventions. Although donor interest and involvement has increased in recent years, more is needed: if child labor continues at the current rate in SSA future economic development and human survival prospects are at risk.

In thinking about how to address child labor in SSA, it is worth highlighting three features that have been critical to successfully end trans-Atlantic slave trafficking. First, the development of a humanistic movement that rejected slavery from a moral perspective. Second, the legal prohibition of slave trafficking. Third, the enforcement of the prohibition. Support for the African child rights movement should be combined with enforced legislation protecting children from economic exploitation, and securing their right to education.

A pragmatic process is needed to address the issue of child labor in Africa. Obviously, the situation cannot change overnight, and drastic short-term measures should only be applied in the most extreme cases. Frequently-proposed measures such as labor market regulations are largely ineffective, since child labor mainly takes place in and around family households. Children should be raised in a way that maximizes their innate potential and their future options. Any sort of exploitation or discrimination is morally unacceptable. With the exception of Somalia, all African countries have ratified the UN Convention for the Rights of the Child (CRC). The normative standards of the CRC should be communicated to children, parents and communities all over Africa to change their attitudes towards child labor.

More importantly, African child labor is an African problem. Effective and sustainable strategies to eradicate its harmful aspects should be developed within the African context. The World Bank, other development organizations and bi-laterals should support the local forces that strive to improve the welfare of African children.