Child labour or skills training? A rights-based analysis of children's contributions to household survival in Ghana

Extended Abstract

Introduction

The high incidence of poverty in Africa means that households explore multiple survival strategies, one of which is heavy reliance on the productivity of their children. This issue has generated a lot of debate, with one school of thought viewing it as unacceptable child labour while others perceive it either as a method of socialisation for children or an informal apprenticeship. Even though social change, urbanisation, technology and even the growth of the service sector have changed a lot of the socialisation process of children whose parents/guardians work in the formal sector, there are still parents or guardians in the traditional/informal sector such as farming, trading, fishing, food vending etc (both in rural and urban areas) who expect their children to help them in the household's work as part of the learning process the child goes through when growing up. In other words, while economic development and the spread of education may have put an end to full-time child employment in some sectors of some countries, it has not removed children from the world of work, or from labour markets. However, within the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, children's contribution to household survival could be said to represent both an enhancement and infringement of child rights. Therefore, this paper seeks to examine children's contribution to household survival in the context of child rights, child labour and skill training.

Methodology

Children contribute to both social stability and social change through a process of interpretive reproduction. They are inventive and resourceful social participants in the preservation (reproduction), interpretation, and formation of their social world as they actively interpret the social world by constructing the meaning of social messages (Corsaro, 1997). This view of the child's active interpretation of the social world, termed interpretive reproduction, conceptualizes children as research participants and social individuals (Baker-Sperry, 2007). This paper draws on data collected in Ghana as part of a large multi-country research project: *Children, Transport and Mobility in Sub-Saharan Africa* (www.dur.ac.uk/child.mobility), designed and led by Durham University (UK), in collaboration with the University of Cape Coast (Ghana), the University of Malawi and CSIR (South Africa). Briefly, the Child

Mobility project was conducted in 24 field-sites across three countries in Africa: Ghana, Malawi and South Africa. In each field-site, qualitative and quantitative research methods were used to gather data on children's mobility in relation to education, health, livelihoods, transport and migration. In Ghana, data were gathered from children, parents, teachers and key informants in eight communities from two ecological zones in Ghana (Forest and Coastal Zones). In each zone, four study sites were purposively selected for the study: one urban, one peri-urban, one rural with basic services and one remote rural. This paper only presents results from the qualitative data in Ghana, which comprised 323 interviews and 31 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). Data were recorded and analysed based on their broad thematic areas.

Results

Three prominent themes emerged in relation to children's income-generating work, which are considered in turn here: (1) children's contributions to household survival, (2) children's and parents' view on such contributions, and (3) the effects of these activities on children's health and education. This enables us to analyse children's activities within the social and economic context of child socialisation, training and household survival strategies.

The study revealed that many children see their 'commercial' activities as part of their upbringing and right to participate in the household survival rather than exploitation. For others, it is the only way to get money to take care of themselves and other members of their household. However, the income-generating activities performed by children were found to have potentially negative effects on their formal education and health. For instance, children's activities often interfere with school attendance, as some children have to miss school in order to work. Though children's activities, such as selling in the market after school, do not necessarily adversely affect school attendance per se, it can make children get so tired that they find it difficult to study in the evenings or do their homework.

Similarly, head porterage as a commercial activity has the potential to affect children's health; many complain of headaches and neck, back and waist pains after carrying heavy loads. Many resorted to self-medicating with pain-killers and for some, work-related pains / illnesses constitute serious threats to well-being.

Conclusions and recommendations

In the context of substantial poverty and inequality, children's labour will sometimes have to be relied upon to supplement household resources to ensure the survival of its

members. Children's involvement in income-generating activities can contribute to the survival of their households while preparing them for a responsible and successful adulthood, and can also help fund their education and healthcare. Thus, it is argued in this paper that income generated from these activities can also facilitate education and health-seeking opportunities for children. As many children said, without the income earned from this work, many could not afford to continue going to school (Porter et al. 2011 in press), and several children also reported using money they had earned to purchase healthcare (Hampshire et al, 2011, forthcoming). At the same time, some of these activities might be dangerous to the health and education of the child.

The study recommends that in the context of high poverty, children's involvement in income-generating activities can be substantially reduced if parents are economically empowered.