

## Labour Migration A Child and Youth Issue

Considerable policy effort has been made to eliminate child labour and is currently being directed towards job-creation for youth. Most programmatic solutions are premised on education being a key component of childhood and education deficits a major impediment to youth employment. Long-term difficulties of finding work at the end of schooling or vocational training are addressed only as ill-suited curricula and economic barriers preventing youth's entrepreneurship. Children's work (below 18 years) is contentious per se, whilst youth's labour migration receive no attention in the most recent Swedish and Danish Africa strategies.

### Introduction

#### *Notions of childhood and work*

Policy views on children's work lean heavily on universal ideas of what characterises a 'good childhood', especially regarding care-giving, education and play. Although Sida position papers on social welfare (2008) and education, democracy and human rights (2005) acknowledge that contexts differ enormously, childhood becomes structured around schooling and not around learning other skills by helping adults and combining work and play. Children's work is hardly given any attention, apart from hampering education or in connection with trafficking in human beings. The focus is thus on negative aspects and risks facing children, while overlooking positive outcomes such as learning trades.

These biases bring to light two key concerns. Firstly, that this normative conceptualisation of childhood fails to distinguish between children of different ages and capabilities and ignores that girls' and boys' life courses take dissimilar forms depending on cultural and social dynamics in the setting(s) where they grow up. Secondly, the lack of attention to children working outside their family inhibits apposite policy measures to improve their employment situation through labour market regulations.

#### *Migrant youth workers – invisible in development policies*

Working youth, on the contrary, do not receive much attention – unemployed youth do, especially at the Africa Commission's *Youth and Employment* conference (2008). They are seen as security threats in fragile states and when attempting to enter Europe as irregular migrants. These foci have eclipsed the large numbers of youth who are underemployed, get by in unstable employment or run tiny informal businesses.

Although conscious strategies to create more viable livelihoods for youth are crucial to address poverty and security

By bringing together policy discussions on child labour and your unemployment – usually separated and dealt with by different organisations – this Policy Notes highlights a series of questions for consideration in contextualised policy-making. It argues that

- The strong focus on formal education makes working children and the skills they learn outside school invisible.
- The focus on technical/vocational training as a means to bring youth into work ignores rural-urban inequalities, as well as how African labour markets work.

issues, it is however important also to look at the choices young people make even in dire circumstances. Not everyone can afford to be unemployed: most migrants need to meet their basic needs and often engage in intermittent work, whereas youth living with their parents can choose otherwise. Nor does everyone become a youth or adult at the same point in life. The age at which young women and men marry or take on responsibilities for children born outside marriage differs, as do their opportunities to find good employment or to migrate, depending on their family situation, education, wealth and maturity. A sole focus on vocational training carries the risk of making invisible those learning the skills of trading or working in low-skilled occupations.

#### *Perceptions of work*

The separation of child and youth issues is reflected in universal perceptions emerging from rights-based approaches to development. Children's work on the family farm, in family businesses or helping their mother is accepted, whilst the position on work for others is generally negative. Youth, on the other hand, are perceived to have the right to employment outside the family, assuming that this is required for their transition into adulthood. Both views are premised on a complete separation of waged work from social relations and obligations.

- Qualitative research in West Africa highlights the blurred boundaries between family relations and the informal labour market.

#### *Family versus wage labour*

Family labour in the African context resonates with a much broader set of people than a nuclear family. Long-established practices of child fostering induce mobility as

children are sent to, or requested by, members of the extended family to do the same kind of work as they would have done at home. These practices have sometimes been vilified in child rights advocacy because of common assumptions about urban kin recruiting free child labour from poor rural relatives. At other times, they have been hailed as security mechanisms, assuming that relatives would never harm a child.

Evidence from several studies in West Africa shows that family relations across multiple locations are ambivalent, whether they are described as fostering arrangements or not. Economic and social changes have resulted in more urban women engaging in the informal economy, diversifying their activities and working longer hours and more children attending school. Few labour-substituting technologies are used in domestic work hence there is a need to fill the labour gap. Girls are commonly recruited for this type of work but their age plays an important role. Women, whose activities are close to home, prefer young girls that can be formed but need closer supervision, while women, who are absent much of the day, take in older girls with cooking skills and a sense of responsibility. These differences and the demand for girls' labour have affected recruitment mechanisms.

#### *Girl domestic workers in Abidjan*

Rural girl migrants are recruited directly by an aunt for whom they work, by an aunt who places them with an employer but manages their wages, or experienced girls find work through agencies. In the former case, girls are perceived as family labour while in the latter two, they are workers. However, the boundary is blurred. Some aunts are closely related and know the girls, while others are distant relatives belonging to the same lineage. In addition, all girls expect some level of remuneration and the expectations rise as they mature, the main difference being that in family relationships the remuneration is not negotiated openly but handed over when the girls return home.

The practice of aunts placing girls aims to protect them against exploitation and ill-treatment but the safety mechanism has been abused by certain women to earn money from recruiting rural girls. In turn, this has caused other changes: rural parents increasingly prefer arrangements with close relatives to ensure their daughters' safety, and the girls themselves leave unsatisfactory placements to find work through agencies.

An increasing commoditisation of adult worlds is mirrored in children's work. Changes may, or may not, lead to increased exploitation of their labour. But they also trigger increased attention to child migrants' welfare, as well as new socially accepted employment possibilities through which older girls gain more control of their earnings. Finally, children's mobility is not only an outcome of adults' decisions. They, and especially the older ones (over 15 years), make decisions to improve their situation under the given circumstances.

#### *Informal employment*

Waged work is embedded in social relations and obligations shaping the employment relationship and sometimes also the recruitment process. West African practices for unskilled children and youth reveal much about the social and negotiated nature of informal employment.

#### *Burkinabé migrants in Ouagadougou and Abidjan*

Boys and male youth are taken on to work for older migrants in small restaurants, trade, brick-making and horticulture, usually only once they are physically strong enough to do the required work. While youngsters present the relationship as employment, established migrants see it as a family obligation on their part. They feel responsible for teaching young migrants to work hard and become conscientious migrants remitting to the rural family. Accordingly, they recruit young workers because of their position in social networks rather than because of their actual skills. Youngsters will learn by doing.

Informal employment relations cannot be described as clear-cut wage labour but rather as part of a low-level patronage system. The employer assumes a parental role, provides (some) meals, money for medical expenses and sometimes accommodation, while the employee must be deferential and comply with advice and orders given by the boss. Often this dynamic involves employees' presence at the workplace during long hours, even when no tasks need to be done.

Not everyone follows these unspoken rules, but in a labour market entrenched in social relations of kinship and friendship, they are obliged to conform to a certain degree. Employers deviate from their responsibilities by appealing to children and youth's comprehension of poverty and unforeseen expenses to defer payment of wages or savings young employees have left in their safekeeping. Overdue payments may push children and youth to steal from the employer little by little or in a swift clearing of the cash drawer. Or they leave the job.

An indignant employer will talk about theft and feed into globally popular images of children and youth as prone to delinquency. However, in theoretical terms, actions of pilfering, theft and voting with the feet are labelled everyday resistance to abusive power hierarchies, which in this case is also about negotiations over being family-like labour or waged workers.

Development policies focusing on adapting skills-training to private sector needs have not yet addressed differences in the ways that formal and informal labour markets operate. Youth with the right skills may not find employment if recruitment is rooted in social networks. Youth, be they skilled or unskilled, may not be able to pursue their own choice of occupation because they depend on others' arbitration. Hence, it is important to address the issue of recruitment and examine the functioning of job agencies in different locations. Furthermore, it is important to sensitise employers and

employees to gradually regularise working conditions and payment.

### What children and youth gain from migration

The importance ascribed to formal education in the Convention of the Rights of the Child and supported in Swedish and Danish development strategies renders invisible other forms of learning and ignores linkages between poverty, migration and education: Children either quit school to engage in paid work or never get to school because they work. Youth are unemployed because of inadequate skills.

These assumptions are contradictory. The fact that children of school age find employment or small services from which they earn an income despite their low level of skills, suggests that youth unemployment has more causes than educational deficits.

- Qualitative research in West Africa brings to light children and youth's perspectives on their opportunities and aspirations.

### Migrating to pursue formal education

Child-centred research shows that rather than dropping out of school to work, older children engage in temporary labour migration to continue school. Exclusion from certain types of jobs motivates others to enrol in evening school.

### Secondary students from north-eastern Ghana

When rural parents are unable to meet education-related expenses, adolescents seek to contribute themselves either with cash earned as labour migrants in the Kumasi region or by working for migrant siblings or relatives who instil hope in the children of having their school fees covered. Often girls obtain their parents' approval to pursue this strategy more easily than boys, who are needed in farming.

Not all succeed in pursuing their educational dreams by migrating. Frequently promises are made by relatives or parents to incite children to migrate but once at the destination they are not enrolled in school, or they are burdened with domestic tasks that impede school work. This evidently causes disappointment but also a shift towards other strategies, one of which is vocational training, usually in informal apprenticeships.

Across West Africa apprenticeships have increasingly become something which has to be paid for. Young trainees must pay a fee at the beginning of their apprenticeship or in instalments during their training. Fees can be avoided if the child or youth is taken in by a relative or arrangements are made within the social network by an adult acting as intermediary.

### Informal apprenticeships in Senegal

Apprentices are completely dependent on their employer. Not only is remuneration discretionary and habitually in terms of food, cigarettes and small gifts, it also fluctuates with the production. The duration of an apprenticeship may be drawn out because the employer needs cheap labour in his workshop or fears

competition, or because the apprentice has not had adequate training.

The increased emphasis on education makes artisans take in more apprentices than they need and can support, not least because they nurse social networks like everyone else. This has an immediate effect on apprentices' learning and a long-term effect on their ability to find work or viably set up independent workshops because of growing competition within a narrow range of professions.

Although the Africa Commission seeks to balance the urgent need for vocational training against the risk of low quality education and exploitation in informal apprenticeships, some key issues remain unquestioned.

Firstly, differences in the availability of training between rural and urban areas are not discussed, despite the fact that village children often need to migrate to rural towns or urban areas to learn skills other than farming, forging, making pottery and other traditional skills. This implies that they live with relatives, the employer or in rented accommodation, while urban children can stay at home.

Secondly, rural children usually depend on urban relatives or linkages between rural parents and urban artisans to enter apprenticeships without fees. Such linkages may be weak and less attention paid to the quality of their formation, which in turn may result in abandoning the training before completion.

Finally, not all children and youth may be able – or willing – to forego a predictable income for three to five years, the common length of informal apprenticeships.

### Child and youth migrants' work

Much media and NGO attention has been paid to children working in the small-scale mining sector, boys working in cocoa plantations and girls in domestic service. These stories document abuse and serious exploitation of children's labour and have fed into trafficking discourses. But they generalise individual cases without having a broader empirical base to explore the extent of abuse, children's own views on their situation and how they landed in this work. The possibility of positive outcomes of migrant work thus becomes overshadowed, as does work in urban informal sectors despite the fact that these sectors generate a large proportion of waged jobs.

### Learning-by-doing in Ouagadougou

Young male migrants aged 14-24 years learn a range of skills and work attitudes through frequent job changes to get better jobs and earn more. For young children, their first job is often dishwashing or itinerant vending of cold drinks on a fixed contractual basis. While they earn well doing this type of work during the hot season, they usually move to other occupations when sales slacken unless they return home. As they mature, they gradually move on to take physically harder work,

requiring new skills to be learned and responsibility and bringing in higher wages. Often they triple their income over a period of three-four years, though it remains well below the formal minimum wage.

Additionally, young migrants describe a process of maturation during which they become worldly, notice differences between rural and urban practices and learn the necessity of working to eat every day and meet their basic needs. They also learn from negative experiences such as being cheated of their wages or having them reduced for minor mistakes. Due to the informal nature of employment and low wage levels, they rarely use formal complaints systems. This is because they are afraid of being accused falsely of theft from the employer and because potentially reclaimed wages do not cover informal outlays to open a case or loss of income during the days spent pursuing a complaint.

Despite laying emphasis on children and youth's participation, Swedish policy documents stress influence on schooling in terms of pupil councils while Danish documents touch upon collective youth involvement in peace-building and reconstruction. Individual strategies of finding alternative ways to pursue formal education by taking on what in policies are considered adult responsibilities are disregarded. More could be done to flexibly enable migrant children and youth to combine work and school education. When addressing youth employment, it is also important to take into account labour market practices. Youth's distrust in employers as a result of being cheated pushes them away from seeking employment and towards starting tiny businesses on their own.

### Conclusion - meaningful employment

In recent policy-thinking, the idea of 'meaningful employment' recurs. What constitutes meaningful employment is not set in stone but varies from one context to another and between persons. Nevertheless, it is valuable to bear in mind that individual choice and notions of self-realisation are not easily applicable in increasingly informalised economies in Africa, where employment is embedded in social relations.

In this context, it is appropriate to distinguish between children and youth, since youth have more leeway to make decisions and are better able to negotiate their cases. Although the Swedish and Danish policies stress the need to tackle gender inequalities, this view does not yet include scrutinising social categories. Studies of female market head porters and domestic workers reveal that distinctions are rarely made between girls as children and girls as youth, despite the fact that many female youth migrate independently

well into their twenties. There is a need therefore to address female youth employment specifically, with a high awareness of adolescent girls and female youth's aspirations to the future and the constraints they experience when making decisions.

Narrow conceptualisations of who carries out what work also affect boys and male youth. Those working in domestic service doing laundry, ironing and cleaning are completely invisible, even if this type of employment ranks high in status because it is positioned between manual work requiring physical stamina and white-collar work. For those with some education but without competitive certificates, domestic work in elite families and customer service in various businesses are attractive for exactly this reason.

Parents, who have invested in their children's secondary education and who are economically capable of doing so, may support children's employment aspirations and thus accept providing for them, even if they are of an age where they are usually responsible for their own upkeep. Rural parents are also prepared to support their children by providing land to farm and marriage partners so they can move on socially. However, youth of both genders often have aspirations to urban life styles and to earning higher incomes than what is possible through farming. This makes their migration and work meaningful, even when they experience hardship and marginalisation.

### SUGGESTED READING

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