

INCIDENCE OF POVERTY AND CHILD LABOUR PRACTICES IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

With the end of oil boom and the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in the mid-eighties, many families in Nigeria have resorted to various measures to earn their daily bread. The border of catering for large families and also to make ends meet made the addition of meagre supplementary income as supplied by the young attractive to many parents. The engagements of children to work at an early age, made many of them lose their health, denied an education and never experience the joys of childhood.

This paper examines the incidence of poverty and problems of child labour practices in Nigeria. It identifies hawking, begging, industrial works, domestic services, commercial sex trade and farming as categories of labours for which children are engaged. The paper offers policy measures towards reducing the phenomenon of child labour practices in Nigeria.

Key words: child labour; poverty; income; parents; problems

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INTRODUCTION

1 Child labour is a wide spread problem in the contemporary world, especially in the developing countries. A report of the International Labour Organization ILO (2004) confirmed that Africa has the highest incidence of child labour with 40% of all its children aged 5-14 working. Asia is second to Africa with 21%, followed by Latin America with 15-2% of children work. By the United Nation Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates Pakistan records 7.5 million, Thailand, 5 million, Senegal, 500,000 and Nigeria, 12-15 million minor works more as a consequence of abject poverty, hunger and destitution (Osirueiu, 2007).

Poverty in Nigeria has been a long-standing issue since her economic crises which started in 1980's. The severity of poverty manifests in corruption, robbery, prostitution, street life, increased unemployment, living in squalor, shackles, acute malnutrition, high infant mortality, short life expectancy, human degradation (UBA monthly digest, March/April 1996, Ijaiya 2007). The households' poverty situation remained gloomier daily and has thrown many parents into the labour market and left them poorer. The border of catering for large families and also to make ends meet have made the addition of meagre supplementary income as supplied by the young ones attractive to many parents (Ikome 2008, Adejugbe 2009).

Child labour covers all economic activities carried out by children regardless of their occupational status. It has probably been in existence almost as long as the history of mankind. Economic activity is a broad concept that encompasses most productive activities of children. It includes both works that are permissible under the International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions and those which are not (Fetuga et al, 2005). Child labour in Nigeria is found predominantly in the informal sector. Children work for a variety of reason, the most important being poverty and the induced pressure upon them to escape from this plight. Though children are not well paid, they serve as major contribution to family income in Nigeria. Schooling problems also contribute to child labour, whether it be inaccessibility of school or cost of education which spurs parents to enter their children in more profitable pursuits. Traditional factors such as certain cultural values in some societies further limit educational attainment and increase child labour.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The sub-culture of poverty theory is used to guide this discussion. The sub-culture of

poverty theory was advanced by Lewis (1966). Its tenets derive from the impression that child labour is rampant in some societies because of the persistent state of poverty that has reproduced itself from generation to generation. Poverty has been noticed as one of the most outstanding causes of child labour in many families and the society in general. Hobbs (1980) demonstrates the influence of poverty, social deprivation and economic factors on the quality of childcare in the family. Pelton (1985) also observes that children from poor families experience actual shortage of food, clothing and household equipment and are subject to absence of luxuries, holiday treats and suffer from poor nutrition and severe budgeting.

In studying the problems of people living in persistent poverty, Lewis (1966) finds an evidence for a distinct set of values and practices that he calls the culture of poverty by focusing on the traditions and values of the under-privileged classes. Lewis also pictures the culture of the people in the underdeveloped world of Mexico, and New York City and observes cultural characteristics that made them to live in perpetual deprivation from generation to generation (Marvin 1995). Jhingan (2000) has similar view when analyzing obstacles to economic development. He commented that there are circular relationships known as the vicious circle of poverty that tend to perpetuate the low level of development in the underdeveloped countries. The vicious circle of poverty implies circular constellations of forces tending to act and react upon one another in such a way as to keep a poor country in a persistent state of poverty. The other model mentioned above tends to explain child labour as a consequence of one factor or the other, but this model explains child labour as a consequence of long time culture, tagged the culture of poverty as propounded by Lewis (1966).

Applying this model to the persistent existence of child labour in the underdeveloped countries, the simple assertion is that child labour is rampant in some societies because of the persistent state of poverty that has reproduced itself from generation to generation. This model also proposes that the people of the less developed societies have seen abuse of children as an acceptable cultural practice. In a simple analysis, child labour is a common practice in some particular societies because they are poor and abusing children has been the tradition in such cultures. Some parents in this part of the world use their children to work (domestics, begging, hawking, and farming) on the simple fact that their parents did the same thing to them when they

were young and by the virtue of such, they justify their own act.

Generally, what this model is suggesting is that child labour is socially and culturally transmitted from one generation to the other. Proposing solution to the problem of child labour according to this model, therefore, requires the study of the underlying cause of the problem. In this regards, re-orientation and re-education of the parents has to be focused. Corroborating this view, Pelton (1985) observes that for the phenomenon of child labour to be eradicated, the cycle that encourages the perpetual poverty has to be broken through the development of children. Thus, priority needs to be placed on families in “real need”, particularly “problem family” rather than providing universal services that aim to improve the lot of all children and families.

POVERTY AS A CORRELATE OF CHILD LABOUR PRACTICES

One of the most expected but nonetheless contentious determinants of child labour is poverty. The role of poverty has been the cornerstone of much of the thinking about child labour (Ray, 2000; Nagaraj, 2002). Casual empiricism seems to confirm its significance. Even in very poor nations, where child labour is widespread and human beings of all ages are subjects to the same laws, the children of doctors, lawyers, professors, and the middle class in general are not found to be labouring. But this is not so for the less privileged ones. Many governments, when facing economic crisis, do not give priority to areas that would help to alleviate the hardships endured by the poor, such as health care, education, housing, sanitation, income-generating schemes, skills training etc. Life consequently becomes a day-to-day struggle for survival for the poor. Children are therefore forced to take on family responsibilities, either by helping out at home, so that the parents can go to work, or by going out to work themselves to earn money for the family (IPEC and ILO, 1998).

Similarly, Syed (1991) asserts that the most important reason why children work is poverty. Children work to ensure the survival of their family and themselves. Though children are not well paid, they still serve as major contributors. For example, minors in Paraguay contribute almost a quarter of the total family income. Children are often prompted to work by their parents. According to one study, parents represent 62% in employment. Children who make their own decisions to work only represent 8%. In fact, a possible reason why parents in developing countries have many children is because they can be profitable. Children seem to be much less of

an economic burden in developing versus developed countries. Children in developing countries also contribute more time to a household than those of their counterparts in developed countries (Lindert, 1976). Therefore parents in developing countries make use of children ability to work.

Poverty, due to socio-economic inequalities, has resulted to the inability of most parents to fend for their children. Increase in child birth without a corresponding increase or improvement in the economy has led to unemployment of parents as such children are then made to work in order to support the family. For instance, sharp losses in revenue by cocoa farmers in Nigeria, Ghana, Cote D'ivoire and Gabon have actually become an incentive for farmers to take in cheap child labourers to cut cost. The relatively affluent countries such as oil rich Nigeria, Cote D'ivore, and Gabon, remain attractive destinations for parents to send their children to work in the care of intermediaries (ILO, 2000).

Child labour and child poverty in Africa would appear to be aggravated by the relatively recent but explosive phenomenon of orphan hood associated with famine and the spread of HIV/AIDS. So far, most orphans are accommodated by relatives or the extended community. But widespread impoverishment makes these support systems fragile. A further cause of concern is the possibility that altruism of adult cares applies more widely given the practice of child fostering, which has a long history in Africa. Consistent with these recent research findings, some evidence that orphan and foster children are less likely to be enrolled in school than the biological children of their adult careers. This, according to Bhaltra (2003), calls for policy initiatives that should extend and subsidize service provision in the health and education sectors.

Poverty is equally the major determinant of child trafficking as a continuum of child labour. However, in a much as poverty is the most occurring factor as a determinant of child trafficking and child labour, other variables or factors have also been identified. According to Abubakar (2001), child trafficking and child labour are favoured by the high level of poverty, debasement of indigenous cultural values and practices as well as high demand for cheap and submissive labour. Economic pressures alongside persistent poverty in Africa have also been identified as leading to the resurgent child trafficking. The mismanagement of the Nigerian economy has created dive poverty throughout the country such that the average income dropped to as low as ₦5,646,48 per annum in 1996 equivalent of US and 70.6 at N80 per US \$ (United Nation, 2001). Debt and economic decline have also placed millions of people below poverty line thereby

making children and their families more vulnerable to trafficking and other forms of exploitation. The result is that traditional values and family ties are weakened to the breaking point and the prospect of making money abroad becomes an irresistible lure. In addition, the disastrous effect of IMF policies on sub-Saharan Africa is also another factor; many countries including Nigeria spend far more on debt servicing and repayment than they do on health and education of their population, especially their children population.

POVERTY AND CHILD LABOUR PRACTICES IN NIGERIA

Nigeria is the largest black African country with, according to 2006 census, a population of about 150 million people. It said that every fourth African is a Nigeria. There are several ethnic groups, but three major tribes comprise the majority of the people: the Igbo in the East, the Yoruba in the West and the Hausa in the North. Although endowed with rich natural resources and extensive human resources, Nigeria has not developed the necessary technological, industrial, management and political know-how to pull its resources together in a sound economy to take care of the basic needs of its population. As a result, poverty and hard living conditions are prevalent, affecting parents and their children (Obigbo 2003 and Ijaiya 2007).

According to the multiple indicator cluster survey, published by the Federal Office of Statistics (FOS) in 1996, only one in every ten Nigerians can be described as non-poor. The other nine are either 'core poor' or moderately poor (Osiruemi 2007). In addition, the United Nations Development Report (2005), ranked Nigeria 158th out of 177 nations with low human development. Graphically, Nigeria's development index (HDI) value is put at 0.400. Countries with HDI value below 0.5 are considered to be poor and to have low human development (Osiruemu, 2007).

In Nigeria, a report of the ILO (2005) confirmed that about 15 million of children involved in child labour because of the level of poverty. Nigeria is a third world nation characterized by endemic poverty. Generally, the poverty level in Nigeria has been extremely high with about two third of the population living below the poverty line in 1996. Specifically, poverty level went to 50% between 1980 and 1985, from 28.1% to 46.3%. Between 1982 and 1992, there was a drop of about 4 percent. However, by 1996 the level jumped up to 65.6%, an increase of more than

50% of the 1993. The estimated number of the poor therefore rose from 18 million in 1980 to 35 million in 1985, 39 million in 1992 and 69 million in 1996 (Ijaya 2007 and Kpakol 2007).

The above endemic poverty situation in view, is clearly responsible for the phenomenon of child labour that is common among visible working children such as street vendors, young beggars, shoeshine boys, car watchers/washers and touts. The most visible street workers are millions of children of (both genders) engaged in a part or full time street trading in urban and semi-urban areas notably: Lagos, Ibadan, Oshogbo, Aba, Onitsha, Kano, Ilorin, Maiduguri, Kaduna, and others (Oloko, 1990; Olumodeji, 2004). The research carried out in many cities in Nigeria by Oloko, 1990; Mbakogu, 2004; Mudiare 1996 and WIN (1996) revealed that the children from large families are more likely to at work than those from small families, simply because the parents income is quite insufficient to support a large family. Families strained by financial difficulties cannot cope with the increasing demands of their children and sometimes even fail to provide them with adequate nutrition. This appears as one of the main reason children look for their own source of income.

The actual numbers of children involved in economic activities in Nigeria are not known, owing to the wide dispersion of child workers, their employment in the informal sector and in agriculture, which are not monitored by labour inspectors, and limited research in this field. A recent assessment however puts the lower limit at about 12 million (Osiruelu 2007). In this direction, the finding of Ezewu and Tahir (1997) show that in Niger Delta, 84 percent, 78 percent, and 65.5 percent of school aged children in Borno/Audoni, Brass/Calabani as well as in Sagbara and Yenegoa, respectively, were not in school for reasons associated with agricultural works.

Child labour does not occur in the organized private of the Nigeria economy. The labour Act of 1974 (revised in 1990) includes a wide range of provisions prohibiting or regulating various forms of child labour. Section 69 prohibits a child under the age of 12 from all work except where he is employed by his family on "light works of an agricultural, domestic or horticultural character". It allows apprenticeship, from the age of 12 upwards, with the consent of the child's parents, but forbid any child under the age of 15 from working in any industrial undertaking. As a result, large formal sector organization tends not to have any employees who are below the age

of 15. The labour inspectorate system monitors the formal sector, ensuring respect for the provisions of the labour act.

Nonetheless, some of the distributives agents and suppliers of large formal sector companies are known to employ children, and these companies cannot claim ignorance of the fact. Most child labour occurs in agriculture and in the informal sector of the economy where these and other provisions of the labour Act are neither monitored nor enforced. Child work in the agricultural sector is mainly within the household economy and involves helping the family in farming, fishing and cattle herding.

In the towns and cities of developing countries, child labour is increasing steadily as a result of the rapid urbanization of the recent years. Working children are found mainly in trade services. Available statistics suggest that more boys than girls work, it should be borne in the mind however, that the number of working girls is often underestimated by statistical surveys. They do not usually take into account full-time housework performed by many children, majority of who are girls, in order to enable their parents go to work. Girls tend to work longer hours on average than boys do, this is especially true of girls employed as domestic workers, a type of employment in which hours of work are typically long.

Another most vicious trend in child labour in Nigeria is the increasing incidence of human trafficking. The fact that there are about 20,000 Nigerian girls in prostitution in a single European country, namely Italy, including 3,000 in Turin suggests that trafficking has been on for some time, although only recently uncovered (UNICEF, 2005). But within the country the findings of few available studies indicate that child prostitution is common in towns such as Port-Harcourt, Calabar and Owerri in the South East and South geo-political zones, Markudi and Ilorin in the north central zone, Maiduguri in the north East, and Lagos in the South West (UNICEF and FGN, 2001). This phenomenon of commercial sexual exploitation of female children has become a problem in some major cities in view of its role in the spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic which is now ravaging the country. It is particularly worrisome that the national average of HIV prevalence among Commercial Sex Workers (CSW) has risen from 17.5 percent in 1992 to 34.2 percent in 1996 (FGN, 2001).

TACKLING THE PROBLEM OF CHILD LABOUR

Child labour has devastating effects on children, their families, communities in which they live, and generally on national development. The consequences of child labour on child development are obvious. They include health hazard, physical abuse, fatigue, poor school performance, academic wastage, sexual abuse, accident, youth violence among others. Physical and health consequences of child labour include stunting, breathing problems owing to exposure to toxic substances, accident proneness, contamination of cuts and wounds. While cognitive problems include not attending schools, class retention and high drop out rate and achievement deficits, social and physiological consequences include isolation of working children from their families and peer-groups, stigmatization of work by peers, lowering of self-esteem of children and perception of relative deprivation (ILO, 2002 and Oloko, 1999). Actually, children suffer actual injuries while working or fall ill due to their work. These injuries according to Ashagrie (1999) include punctures, broken or complete loss of body parts, burn and skin disease, eye and learning impairment, respiratory and gastro-intestinal illness, fever, and headaches from excessive heat in the factories. A high proportion of these children had no money to consult a doctor.

Furthermore, the effect of child labour is profound in the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS. The World Health Organization sponsored review of studies on social and psychological problems of children work confirmed that HIV/AIDS has a direct impact on children's participation in the workforce (Patel, 1990). The children prostitutes who were sexually abused may be infected with HIV/AIDS thereby boosting the number of people living with HIV/AIDS. Equally, Nwana (2005) says that child labour activities may lead to depletion of the population of this age group since some of them might lose their lives due to accidents and diseases.

At another level, child labour leads to increment in juvenile crime, including drug abuse. Tell (May 2008) reported that three out of every ten criminals apprehended in the cities of Lagos, Ibadan, Kano and Onitsha were under the age of 18 years. The UNDCP (1999) situation report found that drug abuse was alarming among young people, especially street children, orphans and child commercial sex workers. In the age group 10-19 years, 8.2 per cent have used cannabis at some time in their lives. The report also showed a high incidence of non-medical or self medicated use of benzodiazepines, psychotropic substance which are easy to obtain as a result of the non-enforcement of law on their sale and distribution. An earlier UNDCP study (1998) confirms the use of volatile organic solvents, such as petrol, among street children, especially in

the northern part of the country. Kolo (1997) has equally reported the alarming increase in cult-related crime among children in technical colleges and secondary schools during the 1990s.

The following policy options are proposed to stem the menace of child labour in Nigeria.

- i. All existing international conventional on the child should as a matter of urgency be ratified, and implemented by the federal government. In this direction, Nigeria government should establish a National commission for children to serve as a focus for all child related policies.
- ii. The worst forms of child labour should be prohibited by the legislation, and vigorously enforced. This mean a minimum age has to be legislated for engagement in work.
- iii. Ensure full implementation of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) schedule with provision of finance, and compulsory education covering primary, secondary education, as well as rural population, nomadic population, persons in physical isolated settlements, urban slums, adult illiterates, street children, 'almajiri' children, and adolescents with special needs.
- iv. Institute poverty alleviation schemes, so that parents are not compelled by necessity to give their children out as domestics, bus conductors, hawkers, or vendors.
- v. Establish effective zonal and sectoral cooperation to eliminate child trafficking, prostitution, abduction, and other cross border crimes that work against children. In this direction, Nigeria's government should increase the international cooperation, both technical and financial, in the fight against child labour.
- vi. Support the Non-government sector (NGO, Religious bodies), and traditional leaders in its effort to supplement and stimulate government action against child labour.
- vii. Promote awareness in the community with regards to the rights of a child, especially the right to basic education, and to protect children from economic exploitation.
- viii. Sponsor radio and television campaigns to attack the root cause of child labour.
- ix. Parents and guardians should be educated about the problems of child labour, and the consequences of this syndrome to the child, parents, and the society as a whole, and
- x. Reunite street children with their families, and adequate alternatives sources of income should be provided for parents when their working children are withdrawn.

CONCLUSION

The paper has examined the connection between poverty and child labour practices in Nigeria. The discussion above clearly shown that poverty serves as the major factor that is responsible for the phenomenon of child labour in the country. It was equally observed that the harsh economic crisis in the country forced many Nigerian families to engage their children in child labour activities. Hawking, begging, industrial works, domestic services, commercial sex and farming are the categories of labour which children are being engaged. Child labour has negative consequences on child development; it hampers their development and sometimes causing lifelong physical or damage. It is also detrimental to families, communities and to the society as a whole. Besides, it undermines national development by engaging children in work, and keeping them out of school.

Finally, we observed that the parents and the larger society had contravened the right of the child. Based on this, the paper therefore suggests that the war against child labour should be the responsibilities of the government, schools, parents and the entire society.

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