

Blurred Definitions and Imprecise Indicators: Rethinking Social Assistance for Children's Work

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Introduction

Children's work, and more specifically child labour, has received increasing attention over the last two decades. This has been due in large part to the rise in global commitments to children's rights, but also to the heightened concerns of consumers from the Global North informed by western imaginaries of childhood (Sabates-Wheeler and Sumberg, 2022). In this view, childhood should be all about home (family) and school (learning). Children working long hours for little reward is not part of this version of childhood.

Historically, most policy responses and actions to stop children working have been punitive in nature. But given the many structural constraints that families face, and the fact that the majority of children's work takes place away from the public eye, these responses have had limited effect (Hanson et al, 2015; Bourdillon and Carothers, 2019; Chapters 2 and 8, this volume). This has given rise to alternative and more supportive policy initiatives, including social protection¹: instead of punishing children or families, these schemes provide incentives to make the 'right' choices. They are often linked to education and include reduction or elimination of school fees and scholarship programmes: the assumption being that cheaper or more accessible education will shift preferences. Social assistance initiatives – a subset of social protection – such as school feeding and cash or asset transfers have also become increasingly popular, based on the idea that they will reduce

household poverty and thus reduce the need for children to contribute to family income through work.

There is increasing evidence to suggest that social assistance has the potential to reduce children's engagement with work (de Hoop and Rosati, 2014; Dammert et al, 2018). However, we know very little about its impact on children's engagement with harmful work. The potential for social assistance to reduce harmful and exploitative forms of children's work may be limited given the importance of social norms, labour relations and other structural and socio-political factors that attach value to children's work, and in contexts where income opportunities are limited (Thompson, 2012). In addition, evaluations generally do not pick up on the nuances beyond whether a child engages with paid or unpaid work, missing information on the why, how and when of the work. A prime reason for this is because in many evaluations children's engagement with work is often only a secondary interest (Chapter 3, this volume).

We believe that children everywhere are entitled to a childhood where they are able to learn and do not need to engage in harmful work. However, the trade-off between the benefits and harms from the work that children do is seldom clear cut. Is all hazardous (potentially harmful) work to be avoided under all circumstances? The nexus between school, work and home is fluid and complex (Chapter 4, this volume). The spheres of activity are not exclusive and do not trade-off in equal measure against each other, nor are they either inherently good or bad in nature. In fact, the spheres of activity frequently complement rather than substitute for each other, especially in poor households and where decisions are constrained by limited income and other opportunities.

This chapter argues that the design and delivery of social assistance does not take adequate account of the nuanced role of work in children's lives, and that current interventions are therefore ill-equipped to tackle children's harmful work. Based on a comprehensive review of evaluations of social assistance schemes across low and middle-income countries (LMICs), we find a lack of engagement with the complex role of children's work in the lives of children and families, with the theories of change underpinning such interventions often rendering *any* and *all* work as undesirable. Few studies look beyond prevalence or intensity of work, resulting in a substantial knowledge gap about the extent to which, and how, social assistance may reduce harm through work, if at all. We propose an alternative way of understanding benefits and harms of children's work.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, we outline the debate on harms and benefits of children's work. Second, we provide an overview of the behavioural model that underpins the majority of social assistance provisioning. Next, we review evaluations of interventions in LMICs over the last decade in reference to their impact on children's engagement with

work and the definitions and indicators used to track such impacts. We conclude by framing children's work in relation to hazardscapes that cut across children's spheres of activity and propose social assistance as one of several policy levers to address children's harmful work.

The harms and benefits of children's work

There is broad social and political consensus around the need to eliminate children's harmful work, not least because it can have life-long negative and irreversible impacts (ILO, 2011; Burgard and Lin, 2013). This consensus is made explicit in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which seek to eliminate all forms of child labour by 2030, with its worst forms² targeted for eradication by 2025 (Target 8.7).

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has an international mandate to establish definitions and guidelines for what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable work. In relation to children, the two key conventions are 138 and 182, the *Minimum Age* and *Worst Forms of Child Labour* conventions respectively (ILO, 1973, 1999). These are supplemented by Recommendation 190 (ILO, 1999). As reported in Chapter 2 (this volume) these three texts, plus the ILO's many clarifying publications, break children's economic activity down into four categories: (1) children's work; (2) child labour; (3) the worst forms of child labour; and (4) hazardous child labour, with the distinction between the first two categories representing the line between what is considered acceptable versus harmful.

According to ILO, *children's work* is a 'a non-technical term for economic activities of children', where these activities are acceptable because they fall outside any of the following detrimental categories (for example, ILO-IPEC, 2012, p 31). *Child labour* is 'work which may affect their [children's] health, safety, morals, or which might interfere with their schooling' (p 31). The distinction between children's work and labour is classified by age, with legitimate activities for younger children including 'helping their parents around the home, assisting in a family business or earning pocket money outside school hours and during school holidays' (ILO, n.d.). *The worst forms* and *hazardous child labour* comprise work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children (ILO-IPEC, 2012, p 32).

It is clear from the definitions previously discussed, and the supporting documentation, that what differentiates work and labour are the notions of hazard and harm. Conventions, policies and programmes that aim to address the range of issues associated with work and labour are embedded in assumptions about what is and is not harmful. However, as argued in Chapter 2 (this volume), to date no coherent theory or definition of harm exists among the institutions working on child labour. The vagueness in

the definition of children's work has meant that the focus on eliminating harm has increased pressure to more precisely define child labour, allowing the scope of child labour to expand and become almost synonymous with children's work. This fuzziness in boundaries frequently translates into an objective of eliminating all work done by children, not just harmful work.

A case in point has been the appropriation of the term child labour by the ILO's Statistical Information and Monitoring Programme on Child Labour (SIMPOC) following the Minimum Age Convention (138 of 1973). SIMPOC extends the concept to include: (1) all economic activity by children under the age of 12 (including unpaid contributions to family enterprises), (2) more than 14 hours per week in economic work by children aged 12–14 and (3) more than 27 hours per week of household chores by children aged 7–15 (ILO and UNICEF, 2021).

These standards and monitoring criteria are used to guide both global and national policy on children's work as well as private sector standards and interventions on child labour. The key assumption is that work for children is a 'bad' that is frequently trading off against 'goods' such as schooling, play and home-time. However, as convincingly established through extensive empirical work by Bourdillon et al (2010), these standards do not correlate well with whether work is harmful or beneficial to children. What is absent is an acknowledgement that not all forms of work are undesirable and that a combination of engaging in school and work may be preferred by, and beneficial for, children (and their families).

There are many reasonable explanations for why children continue to work, even when the work is hazardous or harmful. Economic reasons include the need for income or in-kind contributions from children's work to support subsistence needs or to help overcome financial barriers to education and health (for example transport, books or a uniform, see Admassie, 2003). So, in this sense, work and school are complementary. In cases where work and school cannot be combined, the temporal trade-off means that families and children have to balance short-term gains of work against potential long-term benefits of schooling (Orkin, 2012), with poverty tipping the balance in favour of short term gains. There may also be educational reasons for children's work such as building skills and gaining experience, which can be superior to benefits accrued from formal schooling if quality of provision is low. Work experience can also complement and augment schooling, for example with business, technical and life skills. Social and cultural reasons for children's work include psycho-social factors, with research showing that children acquire status, autonomy and a sense of achievement by contributing to the family economy. Cultural and social norms may support an expectation that children work (Abebe and Bessell, 2011), which may push children toward work even when family income increases.

This does not mean that the work is necessarily 'good', in fact it can be hazardous, exhausting and interfere with school. Nevertheless, the loss of household income from insisting the child does not work will leave the child and family worse off. Bourdillon and colleagues have shown that on the limited occasions when holistic outcomes in children's lives are investigated in relation to a specific child labour intervention, 'many children are shown to be worse off, often ending up in more exploitative or hazardous work, particularly when their livelihood and education depend on their work' (Bourdillon et al, 2010, pp 1–6; 181–92). In other words, there are real life-changing trade-offs to consider when designing policy that modifies the work–school–life balance of poor households. Insistence on the elimination of child labour might leave children in a worse position. However, interventions that provide income support, such as cash transfers or microfinance, can positively affect these trade-offs such that children may be able to reduce their hours of work and increase hours in school (de Hoop and Rosati, 2014).

An increasing body of literature has questioned the idea of a simple trade-off between school and work, and the notion that school is always good and work always bad. Dominant narratives that focus on the negative aspects of work not only overlook its potential educational and social benefits, they also feed a rigid form of policymaking that can put children at risk of even greater harm (Aufseeser et al, 2018; Bourdillon and Carothers, 2019). Pitting school against work offers limited theoretical or practical traction. A better framing is to consider the total burden of work and potential for harm across the multiple spheres of a child's life – in school, at home and in the workplace. As argued in Chapter 4 (this volume), children's work takes place within a negotiated space of three interdependent arenas; schools (embedded within education systems), households (with their multiple family and community configurations) and workplaces (in multiple locations including family and commercial farms and enterprises). This school–home–work nexus further sits within, and is influenced by, the wider economic, social, temporal and spatial contexts. The tensions and choices that occur as children and their families navigate this nexus illustrate the paucity of the standard behavioural model and of the classically posed binary trade-off between children's work and school.

Is it any wonder, then, that so many interventions have failed in their efforts to tackle harmful forms of work? The lack of attention to the harm–benefit trade-offs facing children and their families has not only created a policy environment that does not adequately represent or serve the interests of children and their families, but has meant that most interventions and evaluations that have been rolled out employ (1) ineffective criteria for defining and identifying children's work, and (2) inadequate indicators for monitoring and evaluating whether the intervention is fit for purpose. Social assistance is a case in point.

The behavioural model underpinning social assistance provision

Social protection, particularly in the various forms of publicly financed social assistance such as cash transfers, school subsidies, school feeding and pensions, is a classic way in which policy relies on programmes to leverage behaviour change. Cash transfers, for instance, work through two mechanisms to incentivize change. First, the provision of extra income is supposed to create an 'income effect' whereby the household is able to purchase more of a good or service (food, education, health).³ Second, if social assistance is made conditional on uptake of a service like education or health, or if it is provided in-kind as a food or education subsidy, this will change the relative price of goods and services leading to a substitution effect. In addition, soft conditions, such as nutrition or education messaging and sensitization campaigns, are sometimes used to influence the balance of choice between 'goods' and 'bads'.

Singh and McLeish (2013) describe these effects in relation to the ways that social assistance can reduce or avoid children's work. First, by improving a household's economic position, thereby increasing resilience to shocks, the need for children to work to contribute to family income (either over the long-term or as a short-term coping mechanism) is reduced. Second, by creating positive incentives to get and keep children in school and away from work, such as through the provision of school meals and making the receipt of cash transfers conditional upon school attendance.

The first represents the income effect. For a household that, before the social assistance, had been underinvesting in children's education due to lack of income, the cash transfer is expected to enable them to increase investment in children's education, with the assumption that it would reduce the need for the child to work. A similar outcome can be achieved through the provision of an education subsidy. For those households who were not previously sending the child to school due to lack of income, the subsidy will now change the cost-benefit ratio of schooling – the substitution effect. The family will weigh up the pros and cons of sending the child to school, and if schooling is a normal good (that is as income increases more of the good is consumed) then the policy change should lead to an increase in schooling. The assumption is that social assistance would change the price of education relative to other activities, such as work on or off-farm, or in the home. For a household without an income constraint that is already investing in their child's education, a cash transfer or education subsidy would be the equivalent of a pure income effect to the household. It would not affect education choices but would be extra money for other goods and services, or investment.

However, unlike what is portrayed in the virtuous hypotheses previously discussed, the net effect is far from straightforward as it will depend on whether the income or the substitution effect dominates. This depends, first, on the magnitude of the price change: if the transfer or subsidy is not large enough then the poorest household may not be able or 'persuaded' to change their preference for education over work. Second, it depends on the nature of the good. The assumption is that, for children, education is a normal good and work is an inferior good, meaning that an increase in income will lead to an increase in education and a reduction in work. However, as will be discussed later, in some cultures work is seen as positive, even for children, and can attribute status. Third, it depends on the relation of one good to another – for example, children's work (due to the income received) can actually complement rather than substitute their education, in the sense of allowing them to go to school.

Furthermore, in the case of a household, as opposed to an individual decision-making model, there will be other substitution effects. If the opportunity cost of an adult staying at home increases (for instance, if a public works programme is introduced), then the adult might choose to go to work. However, any care responsibilities the adult had might be transferred to an older child, causing her/him to leave school. Indeed, research in Rwanda found that women struggled to balance their participation in a public works programme with other household work and care responsibilities, sometimes relying on children to take on these tasks (Roelen et al, 2017). Research on the public works programme in India also suggests that the added work burden has negative effects on children (Zaidi et al, 2017).

Moreover, if gender quotas or conditions are attached to cash transfers, such that only one child in the household is able to benefit from the assistance, there may be a substitution *between* children in the same household (that is between those attending school and those remaining at home or going out to work). In relation to the conditional cash transfer (CCT) programme PROGRESA in Mexico, for example, the condition that younger children must go to school was found to push older children into paid work or increase the intensity of their work to compensate for the loss of income (Bastagli et al, 2016). Conditionality, quotas and different social protection instruments can have both intended and unintended impacts.

More generally, gender matters, with positive impacts from social assistance often being larger for boys than they are for girls. This is explained by boys being more likely, on average, to be engaged in paid work, and the income effect of cash transfers therefore playing out more strongly for boys. In turn, the fact that girls are more commonly involved in household and unpaid work means that public works programmes are more likely to negatively

affect them (de Hoop and Rosati 2014). Evaluation findings from the public works component of the Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP) in Ethiopia indicate that while the programme reduced engagement in work for all children, it increased engagement in household work among young girls (Hoddinott et al, 2010; Zibagwe et al, 2013).

The behavioural model underlying the expected change in work decisions through social assistance is predicated on a simple division between work, school and leisure, thereby overlooking the conditions of work. As elaborated previously, whether work is harmful depends on the amount of time spent on work activities but crucially, on the nature and intensity of work. Covarrubias et al (2012) show that the Malawi Social Cash Transfer Scheme (MSCTS) led to higher investment in productive assets and livestock, but adult participation in on-farm work or self-employment in household enterprises did not change. However, while children's involvement in work outside the home declined, their participation in within-household tasks increased (no increase in leisure, more chores and more participation in family farm/non-farm business activities). Efforts that aim to reduce children's engagement with harmful work should, therefore, move beyond a consideration of whether children engage in work and for how long, towards a fuller understanding of the type of work, the spheres in which the work takes place and the working conditions.

Fundamentally, the results of the provision of social assistance – in the form of cash or food transfers, public works and so on – are highly contingent. Common assumptions about the effects of assistance on children's work, based on standard theory, are overly simplistic. For this reason, the basic behavioural model, that underpins the theory of change for many social assistance interventions, is not able to deal with the complexities of choices and constraints faced by poor children and their families. Crucially, it makes no distinction between acceptable or harmful forms of work, nor does it take account of children or families' own preferences in weighing up potential benefits and harms. While the principle of 'do no harm' is an important element of social assistance, there has generally been insufficient understanding of the impacts of interventions on children's engagement with work to guarantee against additional or greater harm.

What is known about social assistance and children's harmful work

To gain a better understanding of the role of social assistance in addressing children's harmful work, this section reviews studies that include the reduction of child labour or children's work as a programme objective and/or where child labour or work are included as an outcome indicator. The review focuses on social assistance only and is restricted to articles

and reports from 2010 onwards when social assistance started expanding rapidly across LMICs. As we are interested in both the effect of social assistance on children's engagement with work as well as how this effect was conceptualized in intervention design, the review is limited to studies that make mention of children's work or child labour as one of the outcome variables of interest.

Based on these criteria, 22 studies are included (Appendix, Table 7.2). Most studies that evaluate the effect on children's work refer to unconditional cash transfers (UCTs) and CCTs. Very few studies of other types of interventions, such as public work programmes (PWs), consider the effect on children's work. Most studies focus primarily on prevalence and intensity of children's work, considering any reduction in these indicators to be desirable. Only 5 of the 22 studies address whether or not the work was harmful.

The majority of studies unpack children's engagement in work by distinguishing between types of work. Categories commonly include domestic work and household chores; working in family business; and working outside of the home. Edmonds and Schady (2012), for example, analyse the effect of the *Bono de Desarrollo Humano* (BDH) programme in Ecuador on time allocation of children, distinguishing between paid economic activity, economic activity on the family farm or business and unpaid household services. Exceptions include Gee's (2010) study of *Red de Protección Social* (RPS) in Nicaragua that employs a blanket category of 'work' without further specification. Similarly, the study of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) in India by Das and Mukherjee (2019) does not specify the type of work in which children engaged, although it does distinguish between low and high intensity of child labour based on numbers of working hours per day. Within the remit of these categorizations, studies focus on whether children participate in work or not and often also include information on intensity of work.

In the majority of studies, children's engagement with work is approached from the perspective that it is undesirable and should be reduced. This objective is often phrased in conjunction with desired improvements in education, based on the rationale that improved school enrolment or attendance is in conflict with children's engagement with work, and that engagement with education constitutes an investment in human capital, while engagement in work does not. For example, Miller and Tsoka's (2012) study on the Social Cash Transfer Programme (SCTP) in Malawi ask whether the receipt of a monthly cash transfer would lead households to 'invest in their children's human-capacity development by prioritizing child education and reducing child labour outside the home' (p 500). In their study of the Child Grants Programme (CGP) in Lesotho, Sebastian et al (2019) consider time spent on household chores and farm activities vis-à-vis time spent on educational activities. Similarly, for an evaluation of the Ghana

School Feeding Programme, [Aurino et al \(2018\)](#) consider children's time use spent on housework, farm work and other types of labour vis-à-vis time spent in school, studying or on leisure, as a mechanism for understanding programme effects on educational outcomes. [Brauwer et al \(2012\)](#) hypothesize that *Bolsa Familia*'s positive effects on girls' grade progression in Brazil may be explained by reductions in time spent on domestic work. However, they indicate that this was speculative only as they had no information about time spent studying.

Work outside of the household is frequently deemed less desirable and more disruptive to children's education than domestic chores or work in a family business. [Edmonds and Schady \(2012\)](#) note that 'paid employment is difficult to combine with schooling because of constraints in the minimum number of hours required to work' (p 118), while schooling and engagement in unpaid work or household chores is often combined. Various studies specifically sought to test negative behaviours associated with paid work outside of the household. In a mixed methods evaluation of the South African Child Support Grant (CSG) ([DSD et al, 2012](#)), for example, participation in work outside the home is correlated with risky adolescent behaviours such as substance abuse and criminal activities. However, no such analysis is undertaken in relation to potential positive outcomes of paid work such as social capital investment or relational wellbeing.

Most studies do not differentiate between types of work in terms of desired effect. Engagement in domestic chores and care work is commonly referred to as child labour with predominantly negative connotations. In reference to the impact of UCTs in Malawi, [Covarrubias et al \(2012\)](#) state 'concern arose that households were relying on child labour to intensify their agricultural activities. This appears to be true ... children increased participation in household tasks such as chores and caring for household members' (p 72). In their assessment of a UCT in Lesotho, [Sebastian et al \(2019\)](#) consider children's increased time allocation to domestic chores or farm activities to undermine 'child investment behaviour'. In a study of the Cash Transfer for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC-CT) programme in Kenya, both engagement with wage labour and own farm labour is labelled as child labour and considered equally undesirable ([Asfaw et al 2014](#)). Similarly, a reduction in children's work as a result of the *Jefas* programme in Argentina is considered a beneficial impact ([Juras, 2014](#)).

Only a minority of studies take a more nuanced view of children's work. A study of UCTs in Malawi and Zambia, acknowledge that '[a]t low levels of intensity, child engagement in common economic activities and household chores may be innocuous or beneficial to children' ([de Hoop et al, 2019](#), p 20), while [Del Carpio et al \(2016\)](#) consider differential effects on undesirable and more desirable types of work in their evaluation of Nicaragua's CCT

programme. Specifically, they distinguish between physical labour such as farm work, and skill-forming labour including work in commerce and manufacturing. While acknowledging that skills can be gained from both, they argue that physical labour would not support social mobility in the same way as skill-forming labour. [De Hoop et al \(2019\)](#) find that the Pantawid programme in the Philippines incentivized both school enrolment and participation in paid work but note that without having any information about the nature of children's work, it is not possible to comment on overall welfare effects.

Finally, a few studies consider hazardous forms of work. In relation to UCTs in Malawi and Zambia, [de Hoop et al \(2019\)](#) consider impacts on excessive working hours (based on ILO recommendations) and whether children carry heavy loads, work with dangerous tools or are exposed to hazards such as fumes or extreme cold (in Malawi only). Similarly, in their evaluation of Tanzania's Productive Social Safety Net (PSSN), [de Hoop et al \(2020\)](#) adopt definitions of hazardous work and excessive hours in line with the Tanzania Mainland National Child Labour Survey 2014 (based on Tanzania legislation and ILO recommendations), collecting information about prevalence and intensity of different types of work as well as hazardous working conditions. This study also presents a rare example of unpacking differences in programme impacts on child labour versus children's work.

In their review of the effect of cash transfers on child labour, [de Hoop and Rosati \(2014\)](#) note that child labour affects children in different ways depending on type of work, working conditions and length of exposure to hazardous conditions, among others. They acknowledge that these complexities cannot be captured in a single indicator and that detailed information is required to gain full insight into the ramifications of children's engagement with work, and therefore into the impact of programmes such as cash transfers. Nevertheless, data constraints mean that – in practice – most evaluations are limited to considering participation in different types of work. This is echoed by individual studies, such as [Sebastian et al \(2019\)](#).

Impact of social assistance on children's engagement with work

A small number of studies provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of social assistance on children's harmful work. None of the studies on public works, feeding programmes or social pensions record impacts relating to children's exposure to hazards or experience of harm, or on their wellbeing. Two studies of UCT interventions investigate impact, but because neither of these explicitly examine the nature of these impacts

they provide limited insights. The first analyses the productive impacts of the SCTP in Malawi (Covarrubias et al, 2012). From the limited analysis of exposure to hazards and harm, one impact that could be seen was that child labour changed from taking place outside the household to work in family enterprises or household chores.⁴ De Hoop et al (2019) explicitly identify impacts on children's wellbeing and their exposure to harm and hazards in their comparison of Malawi's SCTP and the Multiple Category Targeted Programme (MCTP) in Zambia. In Malawi, for those children in households that were beneficiaries of the programme there was a four percentage point increase in the likelihood of risk of exposure to hazards such as 'carrying heavy loads, working with dangerous tools, exposure to dust, fumes or gas, and exposure to extreme cold, heat or humidity' (p 23).⁵ In the case of Zambia, a five to six percentage point increase in 'excessive' engagement in economic activities and household chores was observed for children across all age-groups in beneficiary households, which the authors argue could be detrimental to children's wellbeing.

There were three studies of CCTs that noted impacts on children's exposure to hazards and harm, or on their wellbeing (two related to the CSG in South Africa and one to Pantawid in the Philippines). De Hoop et al (2020) note three impacts of the CSG: (1) fewer children working in roles outside the household, (2) more children working within their own household, and (3) a reduction in the percentage of children involved in casual or seasonal labour. The authors consider the reduction in casual labour to lower children's exposure to hazards such as exploitation by an employer. They also suggest that less casual labour would give children more opportunity for rest. However, the same study also finds a significant increase in the probability that beneficiary children would work at night and in bars, hotels and places of entertainment. An earlier study of the CSG found a potential indirect impact on adolescents' exposure to harm and hazards: in households that had started receiving the CSG when children were of a younger age, adolescents' participation in work outside the home was reduced, in particular for girls (DSD et al, 2012). Conversely, de Hoop et al (2019) find that in the Philippines, children in households that received the grant were five percentage points more likely to be working for pay outside the household than children in households that did not receive the grant.

Our review shows that evaluations that consider the impact of social assistance schemes on children's engagement with work provide ambiguous evidence and lack any critical reflection regarding the harms or benefits of engagement with work. Complex realities of work are bypassed by deeming any and all work to be undesirable, and judging the effectiveness of social assistance by its ability to reduce the time spent working and increase the time spent in formal education. Lack of critical engagement is evidenced

by many studies using the terms 'child labour' and 'children's work' interchangeably, often without reference to ILO or national definitions of child labour. To our knowledge, no studies proposed alternative understandings of what constitutes harmful or potentially beneficial types or conditions of work.

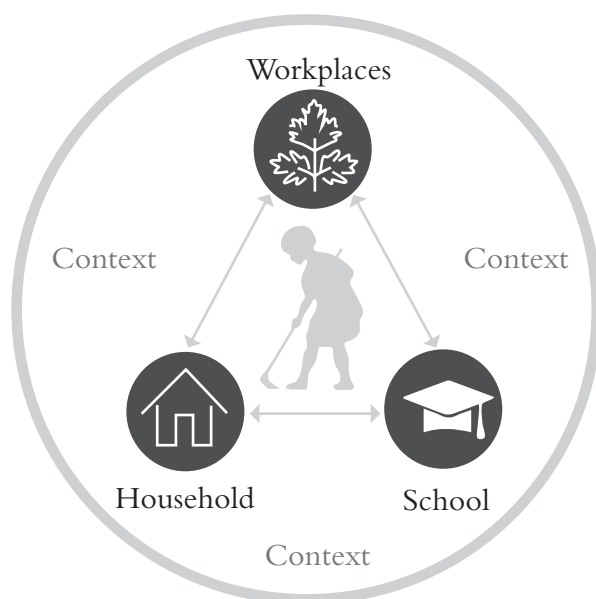
In the next section, we develop the idea of hazardscapes to support a more nuanced understanding of children's engagement with work and situate social assistance as one of the policy levers to improve wellbeing for children.

Hazardscapes, incentives and policy levers

As noted previously, the notion of, and assumptions related to, harm drives the way in which social and political actors address children's work. We have seen that the ILO formally defines child labour as work that is mentally, physically, socially or morally harmful to children. It also includes in this category work that interferes with children's schooling because this is understood as harmful to future economic prospects. The problem with this definition is that harm is a contested and contingent concept, which makes it extremely difficult to develop a 'global' definition that is precise enough to be used in field research and that will be meaningful to different stakeholders in different contexts ([Chapter 2](#), this volume). Embedded within narratives of harm are concepts of hazards and risks. Hazard might be physical, chemical, biological, environmental, ergonomic, social and so on: according to the ILO, hazard is anything with the potential to cause harm. It follows that harm is the realization of a hazard (also see [Sabates-Wheeler and Sumberg, 2022](#)).

We use the term 'hazardscape' to describe the main hazards facing children in any given situation, and their relative importance. The likelihood or probability that hazards will result in harm varies enormously. For example, a child, who through her work is regularly exposed to toxic chemicals, is more likely to experience serious harm than one who must carry loads that are only marginally too heavy. Using the notion of a home-school-workplace nexus ([Chapter 4](#), this volume) ([Figure 7.1](#)), with all three spheres characterized to varying degrees by both work and hazards (and thus potential harm), it becomes clear that children navigate a complex, multi-layered hazardscape that extends well beyond what is generally considered child labour and children's work.

The potential for harm arises from a complex combination of factors, including: (1) the situational context, (2) the specific nature of the work and (3) the conditions that surround the work. The actual experience of harm will be influenced by the presence of any hazard management initiatives or structures, such as labour regulations, training, safeguarding measures, social norms and so on. For example, the use of protective equipment for

Figure 7.1: The nexus where children's work takes place

Source: Dunne, Humphreys and Szyp (Chapter 4, this volume)

the application of an agricultural chemical may change both the perception of the hazard and the likelihood that it will result in harm.

At home, children's work often includes cooking, collecting water and/or firewood, caring for other family members or working on the family farm. Some work might be supervised, some done independently (Admassie 2003; Dinku et al 2019; Robson 2004). The home environment *may be* more benign, but children will still be exposed to hazards and potential harm. Participation in household chores has been found to be associated with less time spent in school and corresponding lower academic achievements (Dinku et al, 2019; Kassouf et al, 2020), and an analysis of Young Lives data from Ethiopia found that 4+ hours per day of household chores had a large negative effect on children's body mass index (BMI) (Dinku et al, 2019).

Many children living in poor communities also work at school, including cleaning, weeding the school garden, tending small animals and assisting with school feeding programmes (Chapter 4, this volume). Some teachers use students as unpaid workers on their own farms or in their homes (Berlan, 2004; Hashim, 2004; Odonkor, 2007; Alhassan and Adzahlie-Mensah, 2010; Ananga, 2011; Casely-Hayford et al, 2013; Maconachie and Hilson, 2016). Hazards may be similar to the ones faced in other workplaces but may also include violence or/and abuse (Antonowicz, 2010; Shumba and Abosi, 2011; Humphreys et al, 2015). Work at school is predominantly carried

out by girls and younger children, and girls are more likely to be targeted for abuse (Jones and Norton, 2007; Antonowicz, 2010).

By combining the notions of hazardscape and the work–school–home nexus it becomes clear that just because hazard and harm might be reduced in one sphere of the nexus, these reductions do not necessarily trade-off against higher benefits in another sphere. Reduced involvement in work at home or in a workplace might simply expose a child to new hazards and potential harms at school. Similarly, an increase in exposure to hazard and potential harm while working away from the home might lead to benefits in another sphere, such as more food or increased ability to pay school expenses. In other words, the way that harm and benefits are realized in different parts of the nexus will mean that the overall *a priori* net effect of work across the nexus will most often be ambiguous.

Gaining an understanding of the interaction between hazard, harm and benefit across these spheres is vital as children's and their family's decisions about work will be influenced by weighing up hazard and harm against benefits. As outlined in Table 7.1, within each sphere of the home–workplace–school nexus there are potential policy levers with which the hazardscape might be managed. All interventions are about changing the structure and nature of the hazardscape, which will in turn modify the potential for harm (that is, the harmscape). Many forms of work will likely remain unchanged, but the likelihood of them translating to harm will be mediated by changes in the hazardscape.

A focus on the hazardscape is particularly useful in the workplace sphere as it moves the duty of care to an institutional level – government, employers and labour unions – making it their responsibility to ensure that hazards are managed to reduce the likelihood of harm. Legislation around workplace safety, health insurance provision and provision of protective gear among others, should reduce the likelihood of hazards resulting in harm. The limitation is that such provisions are unlikely to touch the informal workplaces within which most paid work by children in Africa is situated.

In addition to legislation and accountability structures, the table shows that across the three spheres behaviour modifiers can take the form of social protection. Interventions can include conditional or unconditional social transfers (cash, food or assets), child grants, social pensions, school feeding and any poverty-targeted intervention, such as public works, that increases income and nudges households to reallocate labour across the portfolio of activities it is engaged with. Other 'soft' interventions that augment income or food transfers include training and awareness raising initiatives. Policy levers at the household level often take the form of poverty-targeted income transfers (either direct or indirect through a conditional cash transfer). These interventions aim to change the choices that households make in relation to hours spent in school and work, and will likely shift the balance of activity across the three spheres. At the school level, policy levers that

Table 7.1: Policy levers by sphere across the school–work–home nexus

Sphere	Primary policy levers	Purpose
Workplace	• Hazardscape management • Legislation • Guidance and codes of conduct • Workspace regulations (health and safety) • Accountability structures • Monitoring • Information and sensitization; training • Health insurance provision	Actions to modify risk profile of work environment; reduce likelihoods of hazard presenting as harm
Household	• Incentive based ‘nudging’ • Social transfers: cash, food or assets • Social pensions • Child grants • Any ‘income’ transfer to the household • Information and training about harms and benefits of work–school–home • School feeding	Initiatives to change households and children’s choices about engagement across the work–school–home nexus
School	• School based and incentive based • Subsidies for school attendance • Universal Primary Education (UPE) • School grants targeted to specific groups • School feeding or take-home rations • Improve quality of school and teaching	School-conditional initiatives to ‘pull’ children into education

Source: Authors

influence the allocation of children’s time and nature of engagement across the three spheres include education grants and subsidies, school feeding and other education-specific interventions.

Importantly, mapping out the hazardscapes and possible interventions across the three spheres highlights the way in which an intervention resulting in behavioural change in one sphere may impact another sphere, thus changing the balance and the trade-offs of harm and benefits from work (or school). Policy interventions therefore need to provide (1) modifiers to the hazardscape, (2) incentives to influence household and children’s choices across the work–school–home nexus, and (3) information and training to allow people to make informed choices about hazards and potential harms.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have used a social assistance lens to open up and question the assumptions underpinning the common suite of policy actions used to

incentivize 'good' behaviour in relation to children's work. We develop two lines of argument. First, we argue that most social assistance interventions aimed at shifting the balance between children's work and education are premised on a simple binary that work is always bad and education is always good, and that reduced engagement in any kind of work therefore constitutes programme success. This is despite an established and growing body of work that shows this to be a false binary, and that a combination of certain types of work and school might be most beneficial for children. Second, the definitions applied and indicators used to measure and locate children's work vary by organization, country and programme, resulting in huge challenges in being able to say anything useful about how policy interacts with children's work. As a result, making clear-cut recommendations about design and implementation of interventions is virtually impossible. What is needed is a contextualized understanding of the conditions within which children's work takes place, how it is experienced by children and families, and how policy interventions can serve to reduce harm experienced through work.

A more nuanced understanding of children's work, and which types of work may lead to harm and why, is vital for social assistance to tackle harmful children's work. By moving away from a simple binary of reducing work and increasing schooling towards the objective of reducing harmful work, various forms of complementary support could help parents and their children to consider alternative options. If social assistance is combined with forms of behaviour change communication (BCC) or sensitization about immediate and long-term harms associated with certain types of work or work situations, parents and children may choose for children to forego this work or adjust in order to reduce the potential for harm. This is even more important given the role of social norms, labour relations and other more structural issues in determining harmful and exploitative forms of children's work, suggesting that social assistance that is primarily predicated on achieving an income effect will have limited success in reducing harmful children's work (Thompson, 2012).

There is need for much greater precision and clarity when using the terms 'child labour' or 'children's work'. Evaluation studies often use these terms in a loose manner, sometimes interchangeably, with limited reference to ILO guidelines or formal definitions. Studies may refer to the impact of programmes on child labour when in fact they only consider intensity or prevalence of paid or unpaid work. This creates confused messaging about the actual programme impacts. A more precise use of language and indicators in reference to children's work is not an issue of semantics or ideology but can fundamentally shift design and implementation social protection programmes with real effects on children's lives.

Appendix

Table 7.2: Reviews included within our analysis

Programme and country	Review	Definition (or description) of child labour/work	Indicators used	Impacts (harm, hazards and wellbeing)
Unconditional cash transfers (UCTs)				
Malawi Social Cash Transfer Scheme (MSCT)	Miller and Tsoka (2012)	No explicit definition	Prevalence (engagement in household chores, other family work, and income-generating activities outside the household for money)	None
	Covarrubias et al (2012)*	No explicit definition	Prevalence (engagement in paid and unpaid domestic work outside the house, within-household tasks, and family farm/non-farm business activities)	Child labour activities changed from work outside the household to family-based work in family enterprises or in household chores
	de Hoop, Groppo and Handa (2019)*	Careful discussion of child work versus child labour and hazardous forms of work	Prevalence (engagement in farm work for the household, caring for livestock owned by the household, work in the nonfarm household business, paid work outside the household, and household chores) Intensity (engagement in farm work for the household, caring for livestock owned by the household, work in the nonfarm household business, paid work outside the household, and household chores)	Increase in the risk of exposure to hazards such as 'carrying heavy loads, working with dangerous tools, exposure to dust, fumes or gas, and exposure to extreme cold, heat or humidity'.

(continued)

Table 7.2: Reviews included within our analysis (continued)

Programme and country	Review	Definition (or description) of child labour/work	Indicators used	Impacts (harm, hazards and wellbeing)
Multiple Category Targeted Programme, Zambia	de Hoop, Groppo and Handa (2019) ★	Careful discussion of children's work versus child labour and hazardous forms of work	Working conditions (exposure to hazards including carrying heavy loads, working with dangerous tools, exposure to dust fumes or gas or to heat, cold or humidity; ill or injured in the 2 weeks or 12 months before interview) Prevalence (engagement in any economic activities classified as farm work for the household, caring for livestock owned by the household, work in the nonfarm household business, and paid work outside the household; and household chores encompassing collecting water or firewood; taking care of children, cooking, or cleaning; and taking care of elderly or sick household member)	None
Child Grants Programme, Lesotho	Oxford Policy Management (2014)	No explicit definition	Prevalence (engagement in any labour activity, own non-farm business activities, own crop/livestock production activities, paid work outside the household)	None

Table 7.2: Reviews included within our analysis (continued)

Programme and country	Review	Definition (or description) of child labour/work	Indicators used	Impacts (harm, hazards and wellbeing)
Orphans and Vulnerable Children Cash Transfer (CT-OVC), Kenya			Intensity (hours spent on a typical school day helping at home with household tasks, completing tasks on family farm, herding or other family business, activities for pay (cash or kind) outside the household)	
	Sebastian et al (2019)	No explicit definition	Prevalence (engagement in own crop or livestock production)	None
			Intensity (days worked in last week on own crop or livestock production)	
	Asfaw et al (2014)	Acknowledgement that data is insufficient to provide detailed picture of child labour according to international definitions	Prevalence (engagement in agricultural and non-agricultural wage labour or own-farm labour)	None

(continued)

Table 7.2: Reviews included within our analysis (continued)

Programme and country	Review	Definition (or description) of child labour/work	Indicators used	Impacts (harm, hazards and wellbeing)
Bono de Desarrollo Humano, Ecuador	Edmonds and Schady (2012)	No explicit definition	Prevalence (engagement in paid employment and unpaid economic activity in the family farm or business and unpaid household-based work) Intensity (hours spent on paid employment and unpaid economic activity in the family farm or business and unpaid household-based work)	None
Child Support Grant (CSG), South Africa	DSD et al (2012) *	No explicit definition; types of work differentiated by age group	Prevalence (engagement in household chores, helping with family business, working for pay outside the household for 10-year olds or engagement in paid or unpaid work inside or outside the home for 15–17-year olds) Intensity (hours spent on work inside the home and in work outside the home for 15–17-year olds)	15–17-year olds: receipt of the CSG at a younger age reduces participation in work outside the home, particularly in girls.

Table 7.2: Reviews included within our analysis (continued)

Programme and country	Review	Definition (or description) of child labour/work	Indicators used	Impacts (harm, hazards and wellbeing)
Conditional cash transfers (CCTs)				
Productive Social Safety Net (PSSN), Tanzania	Rosas and Ngowi (2019)	Programme theory of change includes reduction of number of hours spent on work; differentiation by age group	Prevalence (engagement in paid or unpaid work either outside or inside the household for 5–14-year olds and 14–19-year olds) Intensity (hours spent on work in paid or unpaid work either outside or inside the household for 5–14-year olds and 14–19-year olds)	None
	de Hoop et al (2020)★	Careful discussion of child work versus child labour and hazardous forms of work	Prevalence (engagement in paid work outside the home, in hazardous activities or in excessive hours in economic activity for 3–15-year olds at baseline and 5–17-year olds at endline) Intensity (engagement in farm work for the household, caring for livestock owned by the household, work in the nonfarm household business, paid work outside the household) Working conditions (exposure to hazards including carrying heavy loads, working with dangerous tools, exposure to dust fumes or gas; to heat, cold or humidity; loud noise or vibration)	Fewer children working in roles outside the household, and instead working within their own household Reduction in percentage of children involved in casual or seasonal labour, and therefore lower exposure to hazards associated with casual labour Significant increase in the probability that children worked at night and worked in bars, hotels and places of entertainment

(continued)

Table 7.2: Reviews included within our analysis (continued)

Programme and country	Review	Definition (or description) of child labour/work	Indicators used	Impacts (harm, hazards and wellbeing)
Bolsa Familia, Brazil	Brauwer et al (2012)	No explicit definition	Prevalence (engagement in 'any work') Intensity (hours spent in typical week on domestic work)	None
Red de Protección Social, Nicaragua	Gee (2010)	No explicit definition	Prevalence (engagement in 'work') Intensity (hours spent on 'work')	None
Atención a Crisis, Nicaragua	Del Carpio et al (2016)	No explicit definition; distinction between physical and skill-forming child labour	Prevalence (engagement in economic agriculture and commerce activities and in non-economic household chores) Intensity (days and hours per week spent on economic agriculture and commerce activities and in non-economic household chores)	None
PROGRESA / Oportunidades, Mexico	Behrman et al (2011)	No explicit definition	Prevalence (engagement in agricultural and non-agricultural work)	None

Table 7.2: Reviews included within our analysis (continued)

Programme and country	Review	Definition (or description) of child labour/work	Indicators used	Impacts (harm, hazards and wellbeing)
Pantawid, the Philippines	De Hoop et al (2019)*	No explicit definition; acknowledgement that desired programme effect depends on type of work	Prevalence (engagement in paid work outside the home, unpaid work inside or outside the household, paid work inside the household) Intensity (days year and hours per week spent paid work outside the home, unpaid work inside or outside the household, paid work inside the household)	Compared to control group, there was a 5 percentage point increase in children working for pay outside the household
Feeding programmes				
Take Home Rations, Burkina Faso	Kazianga et al (2012)	No explicit definition	Prevalence (engagement in farm work, non-farm work and livestock herding, and domestic work including fetching water, fetching firewood, tending for younger siblings and household chores)	None
School Meals, Burkina Faso				None
School meals, Ghana	Aurino et al (2018)	No explicit definition	Intensity (average time spent on a typical day at school, doing housework, doing farm work or other types of labour)	None
Public works				
Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP), Ethiopia	Hoddinott et al (2010)	No explicit definition	Intensity (hours spent in last week on farm work or domestic tasks)	None

(continued)

Table 7.2: Reviews included within our analysis (continued)

Programme and country	Review	Definition (or description) of child labour/work	Indicators used	Impacts (harm, hazards and wellbeing)
PSSN, Tanzania (see previously in CCT)				
MGNREGS, India	Das and Mukherjee (2019)	No explicit definition	Intensity (hours spent per day on work; 1–4 hours is low intensity and 4–8 hours is high intensity)	None
	Shah and Steinberg (2019)	No explicit definition; differentiation by age group	Intensity (hours spent on work at home, work outside home, domestic work)	None
Programa Jefes y Jefas de Hogar Desocupados, Argentina	Juras (2014)	No explicit definition; text refers to child work only	Prevalence (engagement in work for pay)	None
Social pensions				
Social Pension, Brazil	de Carvalho Filho (2012)	No explicit definition	Prevalence (engagement in work for pay) Children 10–14 participation in wage economy School enrolment boys/girls	None

Notes: 'None' means that no description or analysis of impact on harm hazards or wellbeing is provided in the article. * Indicates inclusion of 'harm' within impacts.

Notes

- ¹ Social protection is commonly described as comprising three elements: *social assistance*; *social insurance*; and *labour market programmes*. *Social services* are increasingly accepted as a further element. Social assistance includes social transfers (cash, food or assets), public works programmes, fee waivers and subsidies.
- ² The worst forms of child labour as defined by Article 3 of ILO Convention No. 182: all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict; the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances; the use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in the relevant international treaties; work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.
- ³ The *income effect* is the change in demand for a good or service caused by a change in a consumer's purchasing power resulting from a change in real *income* (in this case through the provision of cash).
- ⁴ This could be a positive impact under the assumption that work outside of the household is frequently deemed less desirable and more disruptive to children's education.
- ⁵ This finding appears to contradict the findings described previously, but this is likely due to the inconsistency in indicators used. Corravubias [et al] look only at children's time allocation: there were no indicators in [the] Covarrubias [et al] study to see whether or not the increase in children's involvement in within household tasks corresponded to increased exposure to harm, which is why [we] [considered] it as a potentially indirect impact.

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