

Children's Work in African Agriculture: Ways Forward

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We sat down to draft this final chapter in the run up to Easter 2022, at a moment when shops across the UK were promoting a bewildering variety of seasonal chocolate eggs – small and large; solid and hollow; white, milk and dark; economy and top-of-the-line. At this same time, *The Observer* newspaper ran a story about an upcoming Channel 4 *Dispatches* programme¹ with the headline: ‘Cadbury faces fresh accusations of child labour on cocoa farms in Ghana. A new TV documentary alleges that children as young as 10 are using machetes to harvest pods.’² And on Saturday 16th (the last day before Easter to buy chocolate eggs), *The Guardian* newspaper carried a full-page advertisement for *Tony's Chocolonely* – a self-proclaimed ‘100% slave free’ chocolate producer – with a vivid, colourful accusation to readers, spanning two-thirds of the page, that ‘there’s child labour in your Easter chocolate.’

The beat goes on, and there is little sign that the debate around children, work, school, harm and agriculture in rural Africa will be disappearing anytime soon.

Despite children's work in African agriculture most often being portrayed as a ‘bad’, pure and simple, the preceding chapters confirm the fact that there is nothing simple or straightforward about this longstanding conundrum. Understandings of harm are not universal, but contingent – international norms and definitions can be irrelevant, if not harmful, at the local level. Complex definitions and assumptions about what is hazardous and/or harmful obscure the fact that there is little evidence that large numbers of children actually experience harm from work. School versus work is a false choice: many children work in order to go to school, and they work as part of the school day. Girls and boys can experience harm at home and in school, as well as when working; and through work children can learn, earn

and increase their social status and self-esteem. The relationship between poverty and children's work is highly complex, such that well-intentioned interventions can negatively affect children. The governance mechanisms within domestic agricultural value chains offer few opportunities to address harm, while results from interventions in global value chains are at best mixed.

None of this is meant to downplay or dismiss the need to be cognizant of and address harm experienced by children in rural Africa, wherever it arises. Rather, it is to highlight the need to think again about how this might be accomplished.

A critical insight is that the experience of work-based harm by children in rural SSA is embedded in deeply entwined economic, political and socio-cultural systems that interact across multiple scales. The implication is clear: addressing children's harmful work as essentially an agriculture sector problem, or a poverty problem, or a school-quality problem, or a cultural problem, will certainly fail.

In this light, we need to think again about the existing framework of international conventions, instruments and organizational mandates, and how it can be made more reflective of and relevant to national and local worldviews, traditions, norms and circumstances. Specifically, the challenge here is to reimagine and reinvigorate global social policy around child labour and children's work (and childhood more generally) so that it is characterized by bottom-up inclusivity rather than top-down hegemony. This is about institutional power, and decolonization.

We need to think again about the framing of policy and public debate relating to children and work. Language – child labour, acceptable work, hazardous and harmful work, trafficking, slavery – matters, as does the portrayal of working children as helpless victims (or unconstrained free agents) of local communities as backward and so on. This is about discursive power.

We need to think again about the re-shaping of agrarian relations and livelihoods that is on-going in Africa. How will these changes affect gendered access to land, gendered engagement in local, national and international agricultural value chains, and ways that these chains are governed? Will they increase the influence of African producers and the returns to agriculture – for larger land owners, for male and female small-scale producers, or for male and female farm labourers? This is about economic power.

We need to think again about economic and political geography and specifically the left-behind rural areas and the poor quality of rural services – including education – with which their populations live. The focus here must be on policy priorities, policy processes and the dynamics of electoral politics, and how they maintain – and could potentially address – gendered deficits of economic opportunity, in agriculture and beyond, in rural areas. This is about political power.

We need to think again about broader shifts in state-society relations in SSA, about citizenship and meaningful political participation. Only then will the rallying cry of working children's movements – 'nothing about us without us' – begin to come to life for children (disabled and able-bodied), for parents, and for all rural people. This is about people power.

And we need to think again about how all of these complex relations manifest themselves in children's gendered experience – and their families' and the broader rural population's gendered understandings – of the trade-offs around work, school and potential harm. Of particular interest here are views about the costs and benefits (broadly conceived) of various interventions, from enforced prohibition through to price premiums and local monitoring committees. This is about the power of voice.

It should be clear that the continued existence of children's harmful work in African agriculture is an expression of multiple, interacting forms of power. As such, we can expect little from policies, strategies and interventions that are not rooted in a systemic understanding, and that do not focus in on, disrupt and re-align these power relations and their resulting inequalities. For example, what benefit will arise from improving the quality of rural schools if local farmers (and parents) – whether producing for international or local markets (and probably both) – don't have enough income to pay school fees? What will be the benefit of community-based child labour monitoring committees if local views on the importance and value of children's work are subordinated to universal definitions of child labour developed in Geneva or New York? Or, what will be the benefit of a cash transfer intervention if continual pressure to squeeze cost from the value chains keeps returns to agricultural labour artificially low?

Is this to say that addressing children's harmful work in African agriculture is just too complicated? Is it to suggest that for African children, harm arising from work in agriculture is the unfortunate but acceptable price of living with poverty in rural areas?

Absolutely not!

Rather, it is to insist that the time has now come for fundamental change in the organizations, frameworks, strategies, programmes and interventions that seek to tackle children's harmful work. Such change must certainly include:

- Grounding analysis of children's harmful work in a critical perspective on power in its various forms – economic, social, political, inter-generational, discursive, market and so on. All of these forms affect the room to manoeuvre available to communities, households and children in rural SSA, and are therefore integral to the forms, prevalence and experience of work-related harm. Interventions to address children's harmful work are also power-laden, and must be evaluated as such.

- Taking the variety of local understandings of childhood much more seriously, including traditions and practices that highlight the importance of children learning to work. These understandings, traditions and practices should not be lost to the seductive power of universal, decontextualized concepts and approaches.
- Problematizing the notion of harm so that associated terms like risk, hazard, hazardous, harmful and harmed have enhanced analytical purchase. Insights are on offer from multiple academic disciplines, but the challenge is to integrate these with the gendered and grounded perspectives of children, parents and others (including, for example, religious and political authorities).
- Foregrounding the critically important distinction between work and harmful work. This implies loosening the stranglehold of ‘child labour’ discourse on policy, research, corporate branding and marketing, the media and public debate. This will surely be a struggle, as interests are deeply entrenched, but without movement on this front there will be limited opportunity for progress.
- Bringing the notion of trade-off to centre stage as a way to interrogate simplistic assumptions that, for example, school is always better (and safer) than work, or that education and work are always antithetical.
- Finding a realistic middle ground between the trope of working children as helpless victims in need of protection and rescue, and the trope of children as economic and social agents who are in control of their lives. Children’s agency is real, but its reification represents a significant retrograde step. Child-centred theories must give ground to relational understandings of the positionality of children in connection to both structure and voice.
- Reimagining research methods beyond the quantitative–qualitative divide. Further progress in the development and use of innovative, mixed-methods and participatory approaches will be particularly important, especially as regards the experiences and perspectives of children and their families, and how they understand and navigate complex trade-offs. Non-traditional sources of data (for example, data generated through certification schemes and child labour monitoring schemes) also have much to offer, but their inherent bias toward particular commodities and value chains must be clearly acknowledged.
- Bringing the state back in as the essential actor in addressing children’s harmful work across all commodities and agricultural value chains – simple or complex, local, national or global. Responsibility for the wellbeing of African children should no longer be off-shored to the US Congress, northern consumers, global food corporations, certification agencies and international advocacy groups. Neither can the artificial split between global commodities and value chains on the one hand, and crops and

livestock for domestic consumption on the other, be sustained. The state has a vital role to play, but its willingness and ability to play this role brings us right back to the top of this list, where an analysis of power takes centre stage.

There is much to be done.

Notes

¹ 'Cadbury Exposed' aired on 4 April 2022 (<https://www.channel4.com/programmes/cadbury-exposed-dispatches>)

² <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2022/apr/03/cadbury-faces-fresh-accusations-of-child-labour-on-cocoa-farms-in-ghana>