



## **Child labour and its effect on children' wellbeing: An analysis of global debates**

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### **Abstract**

Child labour or work has been a subject of serious debate among scholars, politicians and individuals. This debate has more been on its effects on child development and academic achievement than on its contribution to social and economic well-being of children and their families. This article combines findings from a study on the Copperbelt Province of Zambia and available relevant literature. It discusses children's work, rights and the two dichotomies of its supporters and opponents. It further argues that work or labour does not necessarily impede children's development or academic achievements but rather compliments to this cause. The main conclusion is that work for children should exist but must be well regulated to protect children from hurtful situations.

**Keywords:** child labour, child development, social economic wellbeing

### **Introduction**

Discourses on Children's work have continued to receive a wealth of attention from players of various spheres (Bourdillon, 2006; Boyden & Mann, 2005; Punch, 2002) [7, 8, 25]. In the global south for example, politicians, scholars and in the media have strongly joined the discourse that was earlier unspoken of as 'child labour' but was seen as training children for a better society (Chant & Jones, 2003) [10]. There is also a growing body of related literature on children's work or labour in most Sub-Saharan countries including South America, Asia, the Caribbean Islands and other low-income countries around the world (Hart, 2008; Iversen, 2002) [16, 18]. The Global North's notion of protecting children from harmful work by keeping them out of employment below a certain age was unsupported in the Global South (Chi, 2010). As Bourdillon (2006: 1201) [7] aptly suggests, "[it is a shock even a surprise to some] when this view is seriously challenged and the topic often elicits intense emotional responses rather than precise analysis of the issues".

We arrived at this discourse through contact with children schools as well as those at home who engaged in work ranging from household, school and a somewhat commercial labour. Among these are children living in the mining region of the Copperbelt in North-Western Zambia. Children in these mining towns get involved in different kinds of labour or work at a very tender age -some of them as young as 8 years old. We too join Bourdillon (2006: 1201) [7] in his group of colleagues "who argue that children have a right to the benefits arising from work appropriate to their age (whether paid or unpaid), and that vulnerable children are often harmed rather than protected by being prevented from working, and particularly from earning money".

The reasons for this argument will be advanced later in this article in detail. It is vital to state that this article bases its

arguments on two schools of thought. One approach being - seeing children as persons who need to be cared for by adults, ensuring that they are free from harm, spending most of their time playing and learning (Ennew *et al*, 2005) [15]. This means that children should be far away from the economic world of adults and employment or even volunteer work that is would give them an income or not. This notion is Western view that presents childhood as moment of pleasure, care and schooling without any other seemingly disturbance to such goals (Mwinsa, 2013).

The second approach is one advance by Bourdillon (2006) [7] that presents children as individuals with different backgrounds, conceptions of childhood, needing varying material and cultural conditions and with varying ages, capabilities and gender. Important to mention is the fact that this view does not in any way subtract the protection and support that children deserve an adult dominated world (Abebe, 2008) [2]. This is the more reason why the children under study fit very well in this approach as they are of varying socio-economic backgrounds. Most of them managing lives on the margins of poverty and survival. This makes their work normal and important not only for immediate survival but also for training to fit in a world managed by adults requiring survival of the fittest (Punch, 2002).

In this article, children are those who are eighteen years or younger as defined by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (Nieuwenhuys, 2006) [23]. This is also true of Zambian tradition that recognises children as those still living at home and by law those below the age of eighteen even though for some it can attained earlier. In view of the foregoing, reference to children in this discourse will by and large be a fluid discussion.

### **Children and work**

Whether the activities that children engage in are work or

not is a huge debate in the global south than it is in the global north (Punch, 2002). In most communities in Zambia, it is not uncommon for one to see several children early in the morning going round the homes selling vegetables and other merchandize. In the region under study, children were seen buying and selling on a daily basis. It is this kind of engagement in income generating ventures that scholars have time and again referred to constitute work for children (Abebe, 2008) <sup>[2]</sup>. Whether this is child labour or not is another debate that requires a lot of research and studies (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2005).

Children around the world have been said to be involved in almost all activities that adults are engaged in day in day out (Ansell, 2005) <sup>[5]</sup>. However, children are the most affected in this regard with regard to difficult situations they go through. This is due to their youthfulness and especially, their lack of social power that adults wield over them (Boyden & Mann, 2005) <sup>[8]</sup>. This has led to many international treaties and understandings to come and protect children facing extreme situations. Such treaty is the UNCRC that is binding to almost all countries around the globe except a few who have not signed up to it for various political reasons. The UNCRC provides a comprehensive global framework for supporting children in both long-lasting and intermittent conditions of trauma. Many governments have drawn up laws that show and apply rights of children in difficult circumstances and help uplift their health and well-being (Ennew *et al*, 2005) <sup>[15]</sup>. The biggest demand that the UNCRC makes is the need for state parties to recognise that on every matter or decision made regarding children, 'the best interest of the child' is key.

O'Connell Davidson (1966: 317-18) argues that liberal ideas of a society in which social relations are conceived in contractual terms are in tension with the more permanent and emotional commitment embedded in sexual relation. Provided we insist on the innocence, dependancy, helplessness, and asexuality of children, who are excluded from market forces, they can serve as repositories for sentiments such as altruism, care and long-term commitment. In this perspective, children appear as passive victims who must submit to the decisions of adults caring for them (Bourdillon, 2006) <sup>[7]</sup>. These adults are the parents, teachers, caregivers and state parties that make the laws governing this kind of support to children. In this regard, dichotomizing children from the adult world provides a mythological structure for a system of value but it obscures the understanding of what happens in the lives of children (Ibid). Since this kind of treatment for children can be traced to the romantic era, dwelling on it sentimentally is as erroneous as it to be silent about it. This is the more reason why modern scholars advance the need to promote children's rights that are practical and caring without causing further harm to children in difficult situations (Ennew *et al*, 2005; Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2005; Hart, 2008) <sup>[15, 16]</sup>.

Montgomery's (2001) account of perspective of children involved in the sex trade, who are differentiated in the control they have over their lives. Some children engaged in the sex trade do not always feel exploited, and have made conscious decisions, sometimes with family support, to enter the sex trade in order to improve their family livelihood. Her argument is that judging these children using morality are not always helpful in ensuring lives improve for such affected children. Instead, she encourages scholars

and other concerned persons to try by all means to come up with reasons that satisfy the need to enter into such dangerous livelihoods of sex trade. This argument elucidates well with what a Chi (2010) argues, that it is better for children to be found in the farms picking berries than for them to be in dangerous jobs such as mining, prostitution among others. The reasons for engaging in this work would be to raise funds for school fees, uniforms, clothes and even supporting the homestead with daily provisions of food and paying of bills (Ansell, 2005) <sup>[5]</sup>. In the case of rural children, they support the family's economy by engaging in farm work, tendering for animals and picking firewood (Ansell & van Blerk, 2002) <sup>[5]</sup>.

It therefore, becomes extremely cardinal for scholars to look beyond dual categories to see the complexities in the situations of children of different ages (Bourdillon, 2005) <sup>[7]</sup>. This requires all to understand children as subjects and agents in their own right than seeing them as objects. According to Ansell (2005) <sup>[5]</sup>, children make choices that often points to the harshness of their lives. There is a strong connection between their world and the world of adults who control their lives. The problems that children face on the copperbelt of looking for school fees, money for food, clothes among others are not rare to them only but also affect the adult population. It therefore, becomes difficult to postulate that children's engagements in various activities constitutes child labour when their needs are equally the same as adults.

Categorizations is fundamental to knowledge but it is a step towards understanding, not the end product. When data are forced into preconceived categories that determines our responses, these become stereotypes, impeding understanding rather than contribution to it. Categories should arise from experience and be refined by new data. The argument for defending the discourse of child labour can be more adult-centric than it can be child-centric. This is because adults find themselves competing for the same job or work with children. Since the young ones are more tender and easier to be controlled, employers of those with means of production opt to engage children than adults in the work industry – a good example of children picking berries in South African farms as opposed to adults whose hands are not as tender as the children's' hands are. This attractiveness, however, relates to ease of adult thinking and protecting adult myths rather than with serving the interest of children (Bourdillon, 2005) <sup>[7]</sup>.

Child labour policies based on dualist thinking are difficult to apply. Lack of political will is often blamed, but sometimes the difficulties arise from perceptions that standards applied under international pressure are not appropriate for the children concerned (see Myers, 2001b:47) <sup>[15]</sup>. The children themselves, in both developed and developing countries resist such policies, preferring to avail themselves of the benefits of work (Bourdillon, 2005: 144, 146; Hujsmans, 2004) <sup>[7]</sup>.

"Those who work close to children of different ages generally find a dichotomy between adulthood and childhood inadequate to analyse the lives of children" (Bourdillon, 2006: 1205) <sup>[7]</sup>. It is very difficult to draw a line between the two dichotomies as both works to meet their personal and familial needs. Some cultures have initiation rites that support to allow individuals to equal their status of adulthood while others do not (Ibid). In fact, most modern cultures have been diluted to extents of only practicing them

at annual festivals than applying them in their daily lives. In practice, such structures order society cognitively but do not determine the behaviour of young people, who act rather according to their physical age and maturity. In modern legal system the dichotomy is maintained by a specified age: a child is no longer a child the day he or she becomes eighteen (Ennew *et al*, 2005) <sup>[15]</sup>. In terms of employment, the magic age is fifteen (or fourteen in some countries, or sixteen according to the ideal of the ILO).

A number of recent literatures agree with the view of childhood (fully referring to anyone under the age of eighteen) as radically different from adulthood (Punch, 2001; Ansell, 2005; Bourdillon, 2006) <sup>[26, 5, 7]</sup>. According to Stegeman, 'childhood as experienced by children in the developed countries serves as a model that all societies strive to achieve', depicted as a period of growth and development, in which children should attend school, be provided for and be sheltered from the adult world of work (Stegeman, 2004: 53). Apart from the dichotomy created between childhood and adulthood, Cunningham & Stromquist point to a rather different view, this view fits easily into the modernisation perspective, which places western society as the ideal that others should follow. Such a perspective does not capture historical change with respect to child labour either in the west or developing countries making it even more difficult to apply in the global south such as Copperbelt Province of Zambia (Cunningham and Stromquist, 2005: 56-7) <sup>[11]</sup>.

Even in situations where western childhood vs adulthood have been seen as two different dichotomies, applying that philosophy in the south especially sub-Saharan Africa has been challenged at many occasions (Abebe, 2007) <sup>[2]</sup>. Societies like ours in the global south have diverse social economic and physical environment which leads to different childhoods experiences by children in different societies. For example, within Zambian communities, children born in areas that have rivers and lakes are more likely to grow up swimmers and fishermen including trading in fish and fish products while those born in a city like Kitwe or Solwezi are more likely to join the mining industry and speak the language of the mines. These different childhoods require different approaches for survival and well-being.

Others however, insist on a universal normative concept of childhood, opposing cultural relativism and the idea that childhoods are socially constructed in different ways in different cultures (Ansell & van Blerk, 2004) <sup>[3]</sup>. They claim that the experiences of children in poor environments are constrained by their circumstances but their ideals remain those of 'western' childhood (Bourdillon, 2006) <sup>[7]</sup>. They thus agree that actual childhoods differ, but insist on a single concept to cover those different childhoods. As shown in the United Nations report on human development, in the least developed countries, 42 percent of the population are younger than 15 in 2003 compared with 18 percent in higher-economic countries (UNDP, 2006). Whereas developed countries have around 3 adults in the productive age range per child (defined as anyone under eighteen), in developing countries there are more children than adults. In less developed countries like Zambia, besides the greater burden imposed by the many children per household, it is more difficult for adults to access good and reliable incomes which affects both the ability to care for children and the tax base for government services. In such countries one cannot expect the same level of adult care for children as are

expected in developed countries. Indeed, Nieuwenhuys (2005) <sup>[22]</sup> argues that the exploitation of poor families involving paid and unpaid work of children, subsidised and makes possible a childhood free from work in richer families. The situation in developing countries is worsened when the most productive age group is taken by AIDS (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2005). Many children find themselves heading households and taking roles traditionally assigned to adults as was the case in Malawi where children migrated to rural areas after the death of their parents only to suffer more than they would in the city due to lack of economically capable adult care (Ansell & van Blerk, 2004).

### 'Children's Work' or harmful work

Weston defines 'child labour' (children's work) as work done by children that is harmful to them or otherwise contrary to their best interests (Weston, 2005: 15) <sup>[6]</sup>. This definition has been supported by a wide range of scholars such as Boyden & Mann (2005) <sup>[8]</sup>, and Chant & Jones (2003) <sup>[10]</sup>. This does not mean that children should be exempted from any meaningful work. However, it is difficult to categorise meaningful work and dangerous work or unmeaningful work. In the case of low-income families on the copperbelt and other mining towns in Zambia. It would be extremely difficult for them to cope with large family obligations without the support of children. This therefore, calls for removing of harm from employment or areas of work for children as much as adults so that all in employment are very safe. It then means that no one should boycott buying of goods produced by children no even food stuffs sold by children as that would make their lives even worse.

There are so many other things that are harmful to children than just work. For example, children can be harmed by sporting activities, but these are not abolished when their benefits appear to outweigh their dangers (Bourdillon, 2006) <sup>[7]</sup>. Furthermore, school itself can be harmful when teachers are abusive, or the work is excessive, or competition and examinations cause excessive stress: in these situations, we address the specific problems rather than categorizing school as harmful (Chant & Jones, 2003) <sup>[10]</sup>. If school children take up employment that damages their school performance, this can be judged as harmful and to be abolished: if on the other hand a child would otherwise have to give up schooling, or would be damaged more from short-age of food, the same work is beneficial or at worst ambiguous (Punch, 2001) <sup>[26]</sup>. If he or she has to spend the same amount of time and attention, with the same detriment to school performance, caring for a sick parent, the work is harmful, but the discourse of abolition becomes clearly inappropriate: the child's work is respected and some other form of intervention is needed (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2005). Additionally, the paybacks or harm of work to a child, whether at home or outside, sometimes depend on relations with controllers and others at the work place, and the child's prior character, rather than on the specific work undertaken (Mortimer, 2003: 170-3, 159; Zelizer, 2005: 195).

These different scenarios reflect a more systematic way of chanting the way for elimination of work that seems dangerous to children. It does not however, look at how to make work better so that children can equally participate in formal employment without causing any harm to themselves

and their immediate society. In this case, the harm that is in each type of job is assumed and is not presented with concrete evidence. It for reason that this article has continued arguing that children work and they must work to earn a living or indeed to subsidise what adults cannot offer them. This is why Bourdillon (2006) <sup>[7]</sup> argues that words normally convey meaning not by some definition we choose to give them, but through the way they are generally used and the associations they acquire through use. For example, one cannot change the way people use words by defining them differently. The argument is that there is no clear distinction between 'labour' and 'work'. 'Labour' carries the connotation of being strenuous, but not necessarily harmful. In a variety of contexts, both terms can carry connotations of paid employment, while in other contexts both terms can refer to work more broadly. In practice, 'child labour' usually carries the connotation of paid employment, and when [scholars] try to redefine the term as 'harmful work', they create an association between employment and harm. This kind of characterization works contrary to the interests of children who need an income for various needful items. It is more useful to see work situation of children as a variety, comprising detrimental and valuable effects (Ansell, 2005) <sup>[5]</sup>. In this view, work is no essentially unlike from other activities such as games or even school, which can also hurt children, but which give undoubted benefits to those who practice them. This therefore, requires scholars to listen to children's perspectives, to assess both sides of this equation in order to determine appropriate interventions on behalf of the children (Boyden & Mann, 2005) <sup>[8]</sup>. As Chant & Jones (2003) <sup>[10]</sup> argue, in situations where the hurtful effect so outweighs the benefit, it will be necessary to provide protection by removing the children from work or a particular sport or school situation and the opposite would be most obvious. In any case, children have a right to protection by removing or mitigating harm, without denying them the benefits of a salaried job (Ennew *et al*, 2005) <sup>[15]</sup>.

### School as a form of work

It is well agreed by a wider society that there is nothing wrong with children helping out in home, provided the work is not extreme. I also agreement that some children need protection from work that prevent them from education or is otherwise harmful. But there is disagreement between these scenarios; some argue that employment hinders schoolwork and precipitate children into the adult world before they are ready, while others argue that work is important preparation for adult life (Bourdillon, 2006) <sup>[5]</sup>.

According to Chant & Jones (2003) <sup>[10]</sup>, there a broad statistical inverse correlation between school performance or attendance and work or hours of work. The two argue that that up to ten hours of outside work a week does not affect the performance of children at school: the data on larger amounts of time are inconclusive. Ansell does not support the common assumption that work outside school takes children's time and energy away from school (Ansell, 2005) <sup>[5]</sup>. The argument is that time spent in paid employment was generally taken from passive activities, such as watching television or 'hanging around' rather than from schoolwork or social activities. Studies elsewhere have also shown that work and school are not always in direct competition for time: improving school attendance can have a relatively small impact on employment, taking time rather from leisure and other activities (Punch, 2003) <sup>[26]</sup>.

Studies that have paid attention to intervening variables, such as poverty and education of parents, indicate that the link between part-time work and school outcomes is not strong and not precisely identifiable in terms of cause and effect (Guarcello *et al.*, 2005: 57). What relationship there is between work inside and outside school depends on the general social context, as well as the kind of work and the relationships within it (Bourdillon, 2006) <sup>[7]</sup>. In studies of in employment, children had positive attitudes to school and what they learned there and as such spent a wealth of time looking for money to pay for their education requirements (Katz, 2004) <sup>[19]</sup>.

On the Copperbelt Province of Zambia, children of poor families are disadvantaged both in the quality of schools they attend and the way they are treated. In certain parts of the world, it has been shown that formal schooling often times contributes to reproducing stratified social relations in which children from poor or marginalized communities are at a disadvantage (Katz, 2004: 117) <sup>[19]</sup>.

Children have a right to education, which is often a means of reducing poverty and inequality (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2005). This does not necessarily mean that children have an obligation to attend available formal schools. Nor does the right to education have over-riding priority when it comes into conflict with other rights, such as the right to food and livelihood of inadequately supported children (Bourdillon, 2006) <sup>[7]</sup>. If these children are compelled by their circumstances to engage in economic activities, they still have a right to appropriate education (Mumba, 2002). Talib (2003) shows how schools can be flexible to allow children to continue with necessary work for their families and still receive an education.

Informal education also has dangers, as illustrated by evening schools to accommodate working children in Bolivia (van den Berge, 2004: 111-16). The facilities of these schools were poor, teachers did not always attend, and they did not always respect the children. The concept was ill-considered: the schools were supposed to cover the standard school syllabus, although children only attended for two hours an evening. Besides, many of the children repeatedly missed classes on account of their work. This alternative education was simply inferior education.

Studies throughout the world show that education is widely valued, even in the poorest communities, both for its instrumental capability of helping children to obtain better employment and for the way it empowers people through knowledge (Katz, 2004; Ansell, 2005; Bourdillon, 2006) <sup>[19]</sup>. It is nevertheless possible to exaggerate the material and non-material benefits of formal education, especially where the quality of schools is poor. The knowledge provided by formal schooling is sometimes inferior to the more practical and environmental knowledge learned in the home and on the farm, as illustrated by Katz's study of children's knowledge in Sudanese village: indeed, even in New York children can sometimes lose social and cultural skills in a poor school environment (Katz, 2004: 116-17, 174) <sup>[19]</sup>.

### Poverty and work

The Copperbelt region of Zambia is by far the richest region in terms of its natural resource endowment. It is the home of almost 70% of Zambia's economic wealth coming from the copper mines. It houses some of the biggest mines in the global south and employs hundreds of thousands of people. However, its larger populace lives below the poverty line.

Many children are out of school due to poverty and other uncontrolled factors while those in schools live on the margins of work and schooling to manage the school requirements and needs. This paper therefore agrees with Katz who argues that poverty is usually the main reason why children work instead of going to school (Katz, 2004) <sup>[19]</sup>.

While the incidence of children working is generally greater in poorer countries than in richer ones, other variables are also influential. Other types of disadvantage, such as overcrowded classrooms, early marriages, unwanted pregnancies, child headed homes, HIV and AIDS among others can also push more children into work. In some cases, the local demand for labour affects the incidence, as does the supply. At the household level, children to work if the household has some resources such as land are more likely (Serpell, 1993). Among the poor, irregular incomes often result in the withdrawal of children from school to work: this might be because the family income is seasonal and uncertain, or more broadly because of some family crisis such as the loss of the household head (Punch, 2001; Punch, 2003; Ansell, 2002; Mumba, 2002) <sup>[26, 4]</sup>.

In Zambia, like other parts of the world, the desire for schooling for children is widespread, and failure to attend school is usually due to poverty rather than cultural values (Katz, 2004; Nieuwenhuys, 2005) <sup>[19, 22]</sup>. In most African societies, parents have realised the need for education and its education at all cost. This is the reason why the whole family would get engaged in employment to ensure that at least one child gets educated as this is seen as the key to a better livelihood not only for the educated but for the entire family (Serpell, 1993). These sacrifices have been seen in many parents including poor ones in the global south.

Since the need of income for the family-sometimes even for education is often the reason why children seek employment (Chakraborty & Lieten, 2004) <sup>[28]</sup>, overcoming this need often results in improved school attendance and performance. Several interventions have shown how school attendance can be substantially improved by providing cash to compensate for the lost income of families (Punch, 2003; Katz, 2004) <sup>[26, 19]</sup>. It is important to ask whether absolute free education in Zambia can actually improve school attendance and ultimately remove children from employment.

### Conclusion

The two schools of thought argue on whether child labour or child work should be abolished completely or indeed improve environments were children work. The relationship between work and children's education as well as their rights is a fluid discourse that leaves scholars without a proper agreement and it becomes more complex with time as the debate continues (Nieuwenhuys, 2005) <sup>[22]</sup>. However, great progress has been made as most people working with children have shown increasing support for children's needs and welfare. Such progress needs salutation on all state parties that have ratified and implemented the UNCRC in their respective countries (Kjorholt, 2004).

There is growing evidence that appropriate part-time work does not generally adversely affect school performance, and that such work can provide a variety of economic and social benefits for children and their families, but convincing data

remain rare (Bourdillon, 2006) <sup>[7]</sup>. There is need for more long-term and detailed studies in different settings, and incorporating the perspectives of the children, on the place and effects of work in their lives, and on the effects of preventing children from working (Chant & Jones, 2003) <sup>[10]</sup>. In particular, both positive and negative effects of minimum age legislation need to be assessed. Such studies might enable policies and interventions that are acutely sensitive to the needs of the most vulnerable children. It would help to sharpen the focus of the interventions if society listened to the children and if the language focused on the children, rather than on a particular category of activities. I agree with Bourdillon (2006: 1222) <sup>[7]</sup> that "no one disagrees with our obligation to protect and support working children". This kind of discourse encourages attention to the situations of particular children, and the expansion of possibilities open to these children, thereby improving their chances in life (Nieuwenhuys, 2005; Katz, 2004) <sup>[22]</sup>. The lives of the poor are more likely to be improved by access to more and better options, rather than by removing their chosen option for improving their situation (Bourdillon, 2006) <sup>[7]</sup>.

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