

Catching Money: Understanding the Complexities of Child Labour in the Fisheries Sector in Africa

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“When the canoes land on the beach, the children run out of the classroom and race down to the landing site and the teacher is left standing there”

Fish monger, Abuesi fishing village, Western Region, Ghana

“If you go to sea, you will catch money. If you go to school, you won’t see money”

Chief fisherman, Abuesi village, Western Region, Ghana

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Introduction

Child labour in fishing is widespread around the world, though specific data on its prevalence is scarce. Most of the statistics that include child labour in fisheries and aquaculture get included in the category of agriculture. For example, the Malawi Child Labour Survey (2004) groups work in fisheries together with agriculture, animal husbandry, forestry and hunting. The lack of disaggregated data which could help distinguish between fisheries and other rural enterprises and activities, makes it difficult to assess the extent of the phenomenon as well as the gendered nature of children’s work in the sector. What the data do reveal however is that the majority of child work, particularly in Africa, is in agriculture (69 percent) followed by the service sector (22 percent) and industry (9 percent)(ILO 2006). This paper will examine the socio-economic and cultural context in which child labour takes place to promote a broader understanding of the issue. The wider context in which child labour takes place must be considered in the design of any policy or practical action. Although the paper will bring in examples from around the world, the primary focus will be on fisheries in Africa. Africa has the highest rate of child labour but the vast majority of those at work are in the agricultural sector which includes fisheries and aquaculture. Hilson (2008) notes that while strides have been made to eradicate child labour in Asia, less progress is evident in Africa, in part, he argues, because “perspectives on child labour in the region are far more polarized” (2008: 1235). One group argues that cultural differences in the meaning of child labour are meaningless and that all child labour should be eliminated. The other view maintains that work is a part of childhood in many parts of the world and that it is important for developing children’s ability to be productive members of society (ibid).

Child Labour in Fisheries

From the data available it is impossible to know the extent of child labour in fisheries but in various country studies that have been done, indications are that rates are probably quite high. In Senegal in 2002, for example, a study sponsored by ILO discovered that 28.8 percent of the workforce in the fisheries sector consists of child labourers (under the age of 15). Of those at work, 26.6 percent work as crew on boats, 36.5 percent are involved in boat building, 35.8 percent in outboard motor workshops, 35 percent in fish processing and 41 percent in trade related to fish (O’Riordan 2006: 8).

There is a wide range of work that children perform in the fisheries and aquaculture sector. Children work as crew, repair boats and mend nets, sort fish, off-load fish from boats, carry fish to market, assist in processing and marketing, fish from shore, make and use fish traps, bail out boats, and sometimes dive to untangle nets. There is considerable variation in time spent working, harshness of conditions, dangers and hazards of the work performed, and treatment by employers. Some children work for their families, some for themselves, and some for employers. The nature of child labour in the sector is important to distinguish together with the degree of agency of the children performing it. At the worst end of the spectrum is the well-publicized case of child trafficking in the Lake Volta fishery of Ghana. Since 2002, the International Organization of Migration has rescued 684 children who have been sent by parents or relatives to work with fishermen in the lake (<http://www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/featureArticleAF/cache/offonce/lang/en?entryId=24264> accessed 28 March 2010). Children were sent to work with fishermen in the belief that they would be learning a valuable trade, and would receive adequate food and education. Boys work on the boats and perform dangerous tasks such as diving underwater to untangle nets from submerged trees. Girls are also sent to Lake Volta to work in the sector as cooks and porters. These children are poorly fed, often physically abused and have no access to education.

While the Lake Volta case is an extreme example of exploitation and hazardous work, labour in fisheries can carry numerous risks for children and for adults. These include exposure to dangerous weather conditions in open water, water-borne and water-related diseases, contaminated water, long working hours, seasonal and night work, and handling heavy and sometimes dangerous equipment. In addition, children can be sexually harassed and are vulnerable to sexually-transmitted diseases and HIV in some contexts. In Malawi for example, fishermen come to shore, sell fish, and have ready cash available. In one village along Lake Malawi, fishermen seek out young secondary school girls in the

village who have come to the area for school and are paying for lodging as their homes are too far away for a daily commute. These girls enter into transactional relationships with fishermen to pay for their expenses while away from their family homes.

Defining child labour is not a straightforward task. Some practices can be easily classified as labour such as working in mines or factories, but much of the work done by children in fisheries falls outside of these parameters. While the unconditional worst forms of child labour which includes child prostitution, pornography, forced labour, trafficking, and child-soldiers is clear-cut, defining work in a broader sense presents more of a challenge. For example, ILO states that child labour is "work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential" (ILO 2002: 16). Further characterization is provided by the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which proclaims that children have the right to be "protected from economic exploitation and any work that is likely: to be hazardous; or to interfere with the child's education; or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development" (ILO 2002: 17).

As was indicated in the quote at the beginning of the paper, children's participation in fisheries-related work does often interfere with their education. It may however contribute greatly to their social development. These two points I will discuss in greater detail below but want to highlight them here to suggest that the tasks considered to be harmful to children may be harder to define given the socio-economic context in which children in fishing communities live. At landing sites in the Western Region of Ghana, children of all ages are ever present in substantial numbers and are actively involved in numerous tasks – from sorting fishing, helping straighten out and untangle nets, mending nets, selling fish, carrying fish, smoking and salting fish, and bailing water out of canoes. They carry out these tasks while also playing with each other on the beach and swimming. In Malawi, they perform similar tasks at beach landing sites and also fish with small rods from shore. Boys go out on the lake but their work is generally limited to bailing out water from the canoes. Generally, onshore, boys carry out some of the heavier work around the canoes and nets, but both boys and girls are engaged in processing and selling. Girls also fish from shore in Malawi.

In the study of child labour in Senegalese fisheries, children were found in most fishing and fishing-related activities, but were concentrated in those which did not require greater physical strength. There was a strong division of labour with girls more strictly confined to work in processing and trading. Children work throughout the year (80 percent work the year round) and the average age

of children entering work in the fishery is 10.6 (O’Riordan 2006: 11). They also work long hours, on average just over eight hours a day. Significantly, the study discovered that the main reason children took up fishing was to get out of school. Indeed, some parents indicated that children try to get expelled from school so that they can go fishing. Fishing, and its related activities, are seen as easier ways to acquire money and to learn a career. Another interesting finding from the study was that 16.2 percent of the children reported that they had lost at least one parent, indicating a degree of vulnerability that may have influenced their entry into work in the sector. Children work at night and those going out to sea reported a high frequency of beatings (51.2 percent), harassment (35.2 percent) and other physical abuse (57.4 percent) (O’Riordan 2006: 12).

The observations from Ghana, Malawi and Senegal are not unique to these countries but most likely reflect realities in all fisheries in Africa to greater or lesser degrees. What drives children into fisheries is also quite similar throughout the continent.

Drivers of Child Labour

There are a number of factors which result in child labour around the world: poverty, school costs, and school quality being the most examined (Canagarajah and Neilsen 2001). Many children around the world work to help support their families as well as to provide cash for their own needs and interests (such as school fees and related school costs such as uniforms, paper, clothes, shoes, etc.). Much of the work focusing on poverty as a critical factor in spurring child labour has focused on the poverty of the households in which children live. However, as Bonnet (1993) argues, it is equally important to include the “poor economic and social environment in which families live” (1993: 375) which compels them to send their children to work. He further emphasizes that this is not simply a matter of semantics but rather that “the words are pregnant with consequences for action: how can families be expected to increase their awareness in the absence of a programme for raising their incomes?” (ibid). The economic environment in which many households find themselves throughout the developing world does not provide a secure livelihood that can withstand shocks and risks brought about by a variety of internal and external factors (droughts, floods, death of family members, etc). Changes brought about by neo-liberal structural adjustment policies have resulted in increased vulnerability for poor households as they are unable to pay for schooling and health costs previously subsidized by the state. What Hilson observes about the artisanal mining sector for Ghana holds true for the fishing and agricultural sector as well: “The root of the child labor ‘epidemic’ in Talensi–Nabdam is

the lack of viable economic alternatives for adults, a problem which plagues Ghana as a whole” (2008: 1239).

Children work to contribute to the household by providing valuable and free labour and so assist in producing goods that can help families manage risk. In addition, children work to provide cash to meet their own and their families’ needs. This cash might be used for purchase of food or for school or health related expenses. Families often depend on their children because they cannot afford to hire labour and because they are unable to earn cash in the poor economy in which they find themselves. As Bonnet observes, for 20 years family poverty has grown worse in Africa and life “is becoming more expensive, unemployment is continuing to rise and workers are paid less and less” (Bonnet 1993: 375). Working in fisheries clearly holds considerable attraction for many children as it is perceived as a sector in which cash can be made quickly and often daily and they learn a skill that can be used into and throughout adulthood. Given the number of children who flee school for fisheries related work, clearly both the cost of schools and the perceived benefit of attending them contributes to incidence of child labour.

Structural adjustment policies resulted in the introduction of school fees in many countries that previously had universal free primary education. The costs of fees are often outside of many households’ capabilities. The literature reviewed in Canagarajah et al suggests that there is a correlation between child labour and the costs associated with education such as school fees, transport costs, and other related expenses such as uniforms and materials. But perhaps of greatest relevance to the incidence of child labour is the quality of schooling that children receive. As Bonnet states rather bluntly: “Even to the illiterate, the message of common sense comes across loud and clear: school is a waste of time; why bother to send your children there?” (1993: 379). Throughout much of Africa, there are too few schools to service the population. What schools exist are often far from many households and children have to travel long distances. Once there, there may be no desks, chairs or even proper classrooms for them to learn in. In addition, teachers are often too few, not well qualified, and not interested in teaching. Indeed, in many communities in Africa, teachers show up to work sporadically (Westaway et al 2009). Westaway reports that in fishing communities in Uganda, parents often work hard to come up with the fees necessary for their children to attend school and indeed strive to keep them in school. However, the children themselves expressed frustration with a curriculum that seems ill-suited to their futures, the lack of resources at school, teacher absences, unpaid jobs and sexual

harassment (2009: 81). Given the costs and the quality of school, it is perhaps not surprising that “more than 260 million of the primary and secondary school age children of the world are out of school” (Arat 2002:189). Bonnet argues that dropping out of school and pursuing work opportunities is not driven simply by the need for income; indeed “interviews with working children and their parents show that the reasons for leaving school is that it provides no vocational qualifications or that it may even be seen as an obstacle to obtaining employment” (1993: 377). In many contexts, the school environment is not conducive to child welfare in various ways. Sexual harassment of school girls is not uncommon in Africa, teachers regularly turn to their students for a ready supply of labour for their farms and households, and corporal punishment is common. Many children see school as a more threatening environment than places where they work, such as beach landing sites or markets.

Given that one of the primary reasons to eradicate child labour is that it interferes with or prevents children from attending or performing well in school, the issue of school’s relevance to a child’s future must be examined and incorporated into any policy or programme addressing child labour. Many children fail to come out of primary school able to read and write. The majority of students do not go on to secondary school or university. Those who do still struggle to find employment and those who have only completed primary school are not in a good position to find jobs. By entering work in the fisheries sector at a young age, children learn skills that will enable them to support themselves and their families. Similar kinds of skills are not taught in their schools. A young woman of about 20 years of age, who was one of nine children and the daughter of the queen mother of Half Asini landing site in Western Region Ghana, dropped out of her secondary school and argued “no one who has continued in school in this community is doing any better than I am without finishing my education” (Interview, Half Assini, 20 March 2010). Her mother expressed her disappointment that her child had made the decision to drop out of school as she feels the opportunities in the fishing sector are limited. Her brother, who had limited education, has entered the fish trading business and flies to Mauritania to buy fish and ship them to Ghana. He has two wives and is considered locally to be quite well off. His example of success no doubt encourages others to pursue work in fishing and trading.

The choice to pursue work rather than school is not one made hastily or without significant reason. Most employment in Africa is in the informal sector and while schooling may assist children in developing the skills necessary for employment in the formal sector, opportunities for work in this sector are very limited. If parents are concerned about their child’s welfare and future economic

success, choosing work over school often offers their children better prospects. If inroads into reducing child labour are to be made, policies and practices must address the problems ingrained in the education sector.

The Cultural Construction of Childhood, Work and Leisure

Efforts to minimize or eradicate child labour are rooted in culturally specific notions of what constitutes childhood, work, leisure, and socialization. While most acknowledge that childhood is culturally constructed, the complexities of this construction and their relation to 'work', 'leisure', 'play' and socialization are not well incorporated in much of the literature addressing child labour. In many societies in Africa, the notion of childhood is different in important ways from that of Western societies. These differences are particularly important when it comes to work. In most rural societies in Africa, children are expected to participate in maintaining and supporting the household either in domestic work or in work in the fields, the fishery, or in small-scale trade. In Western societies, childhood is considered a time where children are cared for by others, education is provided for by parents and there is time for leisure and play. There is a separation between work at school and play and leisure. Children are not put to work for either their own economic gain or that of their families and to engage in work is seen as a violation of childhood or, as Bourdillon states a "childhood 'lost' or 'stolen' (2006: 1202). Nieuwenhuys observes that the 'disassociation of childhood from the performance of valued work is a yardstick of modernity'(1996: 237). This view of childhood is apparent in a paper produced for the World Bank on child labour in Africa. The authors state:

This paper will focus on children's welfare, but from a paternalist and modernization point of view. We are fully aware of the fact that going to school may make a large fraction of children more unhappy than most normal work experiences might, reducing self-respect and future work capabilities in the process. Nevertheless, attending school is, in this paper, considered a precondition for preparing the children for working and living in a modern, market economy (Andvig et al 1999).

In rural African communities, work is considered the responsibility of all in the household and is determined by a person's gender and age. In statistics on child labour around the world, it is generally found that boys are employed more often in economic activities. However, if work in the domestic sphere is taken into consideration, the discrepancy between boys and girls evaporates. In Africa, work is normal to a child's development and involves moving along a continuum of tasks that will eventually

result in the child's becoming an adult. Performing tasks associated with one's gender is one way of achieving personhood and social identity. Gailey illustrates this point with an example from the southern African hunter-gatherer San community. She points out that in the past, San boys and girls were often married at the age of 13 and 8 respectively. As husband and wife they were taught their respective roles and encouraged to work and contribute to the well-being of the community as a whole. This early age of marriage was not expected to necessarily involve sexual relations which could be initiated by the children themselves when they wanted. Gailey argues that this early marriage did not reflect coercion or exploitation by adults but rather was a method of socialization that contributed to the community and led these children to develop respect and social authority. In addition, Gailey points out that work and leisure were not conceived of as separate and distinct categories. Indeed, as anyone who has observed children at work in Africa can attest, work (herding livestock, fishing, gathering for jobs at landing sites, working in the fields, even trade, etc) often involves considerable play with one's companions, sitting around playing games with friends, listening to the radio, etc.

Related to conceptual differences surrounding childhood and work are also different ideas concerning appropriate sites for socialization and learning. In Western societies, the family, and in particular the nuclear family, and school are the sites for socialization. In African societies, the division between domestic and public is not so easily demarcated and participation in informal sector activities and residence with kin or even neighbours is acceptable and often valued as an important contribution to a child's socialization. In the study of the fisheries sector in Senegal, child labour was seen as positive by most members of the community who stressed that it prepared children for adulthood and taught them responsibility. Indeed, they viewed labour as an important part of their children's education and socialization (O'Riordan 2006).

The Agency of Children

What often gets left out in discussions of child labour is the acknowledgement that children are sometimes active agents in seeking out work. While it is undeniable that some children are forced into work and indeed are trafficked to work for others, there are also many children, such as those described earlier, who pursue work opportunities themselves and choose to drop out of school. No one is stealing their childhood or coercing them, but they have made the choice, given the socio-economic context in which they live, to pursue an opportunity that appears to hold more promise for their future. The failure to recognize children's agency is linked to the Western notion of children as dependent and

passive (Nieuwenhuys 1996). While children may actively seek out work, this does not mean that their work is valued in the same way that adult labour is. In addition, their work is often not subject to the same laws and they thus often lack basic labour rights that are in place to protect adults.

The children in Ghana who rush out of their classroom and run to the landing site when the fishing boats pull up are not being forced to do so, though their desire to do so is shaped by the cultural and economic context in which they live. In Ghana, landing sites all have a by-law against children being at the beach during school hours. However, many landing sites are unable to enforce this by-law, a fact quite evident in a visit to any beach landing site during school hours. Yet, to acknowledge the agency of some children must not result in ignoring the lack of agency in others who are bonded to fishers such as those in Lake Volta.

Eliminating Child Labour in Fisheries

Some of the extreme forms of exploitation in the fisheries sector are being addressed through awareness campaigns, and, in the case of the trafficking of children in Lake Volta, in rescuing children. Many visible anti child labour campaigns have focused on global commodity chains. In the fishing sector, this has drawn attention to the shrimp industry in which abusive conditions have been recorded in shrimp farming. Campaigns have raised awareness and results in boycotts of particular companies' products and even to bans of exports from specific countries. While this campaign indicates the power of mobilizing consumer action, bans and boycotts do not lead to improvements in the lives of the children employed in the sector. Children who lose the opportunity to work are still vulnerable to exploitation and abuse and still suffer from poverty and lack of access to education. Campaigns can help in raising awareness of the conditions under which children labour and the exploitation and abuse that they experience. These campaigns should be carried out in the countries in which children are suffering as it is possible that some parents and guardians are unaware of the conditions under which their children toil when they send them to work outside of the home. Legislation can help protect the rights of children who do work and push employers to improve their practices. Yet, passing legislation is not the same as enforcing it and many developing countries lack sufficient means to inspect businesses and pursue employer who violate the laws. Passing universal primary education laws mandating that all children must be in school is also difficult to enforce. Many countries have these laws but can do little to force children to stay in school. The UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) of 1989 has made efforts to bring a rights-based focus to efforts to eliminate child labour. It promotes the involvement of

children and their families in finding solutions to child labour. This perspective is important and welcome but does not mean that finding solutions will be straightforward as ultimately the solutions lie outside of the children and their families and are part of a much wider political economic context and global economy.

Removing children from the worst forms of child labour is still essential. While providing protection and legal labour rights to children who do continue to work may be seen as supporting child labour, it could improve the conditions for many children around the world. If children are working, they should have the right to the safety and health regulations that adult workers have. In addition, acknowledging that children work and will continue to do so might enable governments to come up with ways that children can work and get an education or vocational training at the same time.

Ultimately, sustainable solutions to the problem of child labour are beyond the reach of campaigns and legislation. Understanding the reasons why children work indicates that a multi-sectoral approach is necessary to addressing the problem. The problem needs support from a variety of stakeholders who need to come together to design policies and practices that focus on poverty reduction, issues of social exclusion, fisheries governance, and access to social services. The costs, quality and accessibility of schools need to be improved, particularly for poor families. Fishing communities are often in remote areas not accessible by road and so have limited access to education and health facilities. The economic context in which child labour is found presents numerous difficulties. Addressing poverty is not straightforward and efforts to improve access to micro-credit have in some instances had a negative effect on child labour. Hazarika and Sarangi (2008) have found that micro-credit actually raises the probability of child work in households in Malawi as the increase in cash leads to more work to be done. Other efforts to improve school attendance by providing subsidies to parents have sometimes backfired with parents using the money for other household needs. This problem could be addressed by having the subsidy be tied to child attendance.

Below are some actions that might begin to address the problem of child labour in fisheries by involving the relevant sectors and actors.

Ministries in charge of fisheries and national fisheries research organizations can:

- Raise awareness of the need for action on child labour in fisheries, in collaboration with international organizations, ministries of education, and with communities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

- Address ‘hotspots’ of child labour and involve communities in which hazardous work is performed in developing a solution.
- Conduct labour inspections with a special focus on child labour, also to identify and withdraw affected children.
- Support the good governance of labour markets in the sector, build employment opportunities for adults.
- Develop and implement programmes for identifying and eliminating hazards in fisheries; improve health and security in fishing activities. This can include raising awareness about practices to increase working safety and reduce the risks of accidents and acquiring illnesses such as malaria and bilharzia (in inland fisheries).
- Develop plans for poverty reduction in fishery-based households and communities that include reducing children’s work burden.
- Support development of improved technology which can substitute for children’s work.
- At a regional and community level, convene child labour committees for identification and withdrawal of affected children.

Ministries of education can:

- Work to support delivery of a higher quality of education in fishing-dependent communities. As shown by an extensive study in Ghana, providing an improved school infrastructure, school books and teacher training can have strong positive effects on school attendance.¹
- Reduce opportunity costs of school for poor families through school feeding programmes and grants. The provision of free school meals² and the abolition of school fees (e.g. Tanzania) may dramatically bolster school attendance.
- Initiate a dialogue with communities to improve relevance of curricula for fishery-based households. Fisheries-related work is often seasonal where there is frequently a mismatch between household needs and local school schedules. Appropriate educational policies for fishing communities need to be sensitive to seasonal and other variations in the local patterns of demand for boys’ and girls’ labour and also to such variation across age-groups. Programmes have to fit to the situation in fishing communities. In West Africa, fisherfolk are often mobile, which poses a particular challenge to education.
- Build capacity for fishery-related vocational training, fishery colleges and training institutions to ensure young people entering the fishery sector are properly trained
- Provide contact persons for educational rehabilitation of withdrawn children.

Fishing community leaders can:

- Influence the parents’ attitude towards education and child labour.

¹ The World Bank (2004): Books, Buildings and Learning Outcomes – An Impact Evaluation of World Bank Support to Basic Education in Ghana, Washington DC.

² e.g. Ramachandran, V. K. (1990): Wage Labour and Unfreedom in Agriculture: An Indian Case Study. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

- Include children in designing and implementing programmes for elimination of child labour, to increase their effectiveness.
- Use their social influence to make hazardous and worst forms of child labour unacceptable in their society.
- Use their status and authority to request responsible employment of children of employers.
- Develop community-based child labour monitoring schemes.
- Work together with ministries of education to develop education programmes adjusted for the individual situation of the community.
- Work together with ministries of education, communities and parents, to investigate the extent to which fishing households depend critically on children's labour contributions, by helping to administer incentive schemes in educational programmes.

Development actors working with education and children's/human rights can:

- Clarify legal regulations and children's rights for parents, children and employers.
- Raise awareness through dialogue with stakeholders and campaigns.
- Build partnerships with affected stakeholders.
- Conduct programmes/research for identifying children in risk and protect, withdraw and rehabilitate them.
- Improve relevance and quality of formal as well non-formal education.

Development actors working with labour standards, environmental and occupational health (including trade unions, producer organizations, etc.) can:

- Identify , withdraw and rehabilitate children in hazardous working conditions.
- Focus on reduction of hazards in fisheries.
- Train employers on work-place safety.
- Monitor the child labour situation in their subsector (e.g. fishing platforms, shrimp processing, purse-seine fleet, etc.).

Finally, efforts to reduce the exploitation of children in the workplace, need to go hand in hand with efforts to reduce the problems of economic inequality which affect all workers – adults and children alike. The context of poverty which drives children into work also drives adults and so is part of a continuum of social problems. The problem of child labour in fisheries must be placed within broader programmes which address economic development and social inequality. Measures that aim to reduce or eradicate child labour must be designed with communities who practise child labour. Without the buy-in of these communities, success is unlikely. There needs to be caution in the application of Western notions of childhood in the guise of child rights in order to develop realistic solutions to child

labour in societies where children's work is a feature of their place in their community and in their family.

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