

Updated note for discussion. No citations, please.

Work, labour and the hazards of ‘growing up’ (in artisanal fishing communities) in the developing world

by Dr Vegard Iversen¹

This note is work in progress and as such distinctly sketchy. The note builds on some of the knowledge we have about children’s work (and child labour) in artisanal fishing communities and, having been updated after the workshop, has benefited from some of the workshop discussions. My overall pre-workshop ‘TOR’ included but was not limited to the distinction between child labour and child work (socialization) in artisanal fishing communities. The latter distinction is regularly encountered in the literature and many definitions have been attempted by academics, the ILO and others.

Formal definitions are perhaps the most natural vantage point: in 1999 member countries signed the ILO’s Worst Form of Child Labour Convention, which made the eradication of such forms of child labour a priority for policy. The following landmark international conventions commit signatory governments to the elimination of hazardous and non-hazardous child labour and the provision of free and widely available primary education:

- I. ILO Convention no. 138 (1973) on the Minimum Age for Admission to Employment sets 14 years as age limit in developing countries and 15 years in other countries. For hazardous work, the age limit is set to 18 years.
- II. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted by the United Nations General Assembly 20 November 1989 commits signatories to recognise children’s human rights, including the right to free primary education available to all.
- III. The Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention no. 182 (1999) unanimously adopted by member states, makes worst forms of child labour a policy priority and distinguishes between:
 - a) Unconditional Worst Forms of Child Labour – e.g. child prostitution, pornography, forced labour and child soldiers² - so fundamentally at odds with children’s basic human rights that they are absolutely prohibited.

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² In the literature described as obnoxious markets (Ravi Kanbur (2004): On Obnoxious Markets, in Cullenberg, S. and P. Pattanaik (eds.): *Globalization, Culture and the Limits of the Market: Essays in Economics and Philosophy*, Oxford University Press).

b) Hazardous Child Labour - work that may be conducted in legitimate sectors, but is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.

There is, I think, little disagreement about a). Hazardous child labour is a much less sharply defined term and is, for reasons that will become clear, taken up for more in-depth discussion below. Safety is also, in general, subject to interpretations and the nature of these interpretations is relevant for attempts to evaluate the activities children and young people in artisanal fishing communities engage in. We begin, however, with observing what official documents have to say:

'More specifically, hazardous child labour is work in dangerous or unhealthy conditions that could result in a child being killed, or injured and/or made ill as a consequence of poor safety and health standards and working arrangements. Some injuries or ill health may result in permanent disability. Often health problems caused by working as a child labour may not develop or show up until the child is an adult.'

Hazardous child labour is the largest category of the worst forms of child labour with an estimated 126 million children, aged 5-17, working in dangerous conditions in sectors as diverse as agriculture, mining, construction, manufacturing, service industries, hotels, bars, restaurants, fast food establishments, and domestic service. It is found in both industrialised and developing countries. Girls and boys often start carrying out hazardous work at very early ages (source IPEC website. <http://www.ilo.org/ippec/facts/Hazardouschildlabour/lang--en/index.htm>)

Few will disagree about the worst examples featuring in the above quote. However, given my own and rather detailed knowledge about the work children carry out in sectors specifically mentioned in the quote, my starting point would be that the term hazardous may be less typical and accurate than the impression the para conveys.³

ILO's interpretation of generic child labour (from the same website reads as follows):

The term "child labour" is often defined as work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development.

It refers to work that:

- *is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and*
- *interferes with their schooling by:*
- *depriving them of the opportunity to attend school;*

³ These observations refer mainly but not exclusively to child labour in small South-Indian eating places, in domestic work and when children are labour migrants. For a study of children's agency and a variety of other aspects of work within these sectors, see Vegard Iversen (2002): Autonomy in child labour migrants, *World Development*, 30 (5): 817-834. Another and rather lengthy paper which is more anthropological and covers child labour migration events between 1935 and 2005 is forthcoming in *Modern Asian Studies* and available on request. Interested readers should visit www.migrationdrc.org for more relevant research on child labour migration.

- *obliging them to leave school prematurely; or*
- *requiring them to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work.*

One example of an academic definition of child labour, if somewhat vague, is the following⁴:

Child labor is work performed by children who are too young for the task in the sense that by performing it they unduly reduce their present economic welfare or their future income earning capabilities either by shrinking their future external choice set or reducing their own individual productive capabilities.

Work that would be classified as child labour, according to this definition, would be work that causes direct harm in the short term or has the effect of reducing either future earnings, future productivity (or both). Work that interferes with education would be captured by the definition, as would work that has a long term negative impact on health.⁵ One advantage of the definition is that it does not make a normative distinction between activities that involve earnings and activities that do not. Hence both work for an employer and within the home can be interpreted as child labour. This makes sense: it is after all the impacts of a work activity on short or long term child well being that should take centre stage.

One important limitation is that Andvig's (2000) definition is what social scientists will describe as *deterministic*. In the real world the relationship between work activities and outcomes is typically *probabilistic*: uncertainty or risk enters the frame (This is partly recognized by ILO and specifically in relation to uncertainty about the long term impacts of certain types of child labour on health). What may become particularly challenging and that emerged and was emphasized during the workshop proceedings, is that when addressing children's economic activities in fisheries and fishing communities evaluations of terms like 'riskiness' and 'safety' need to be balanced and contextually informed.

The following paragraphs discuss the balance between safety and acceptable risks and the potential problem posed by an overzealous bureaucrat – a young child may not have the cognitive capacity to deal with a particular type of hazard while an older child does. Such concerns are implicitly built into age rules in ILO conventions but are not, in general, very carefully unpacked. The safety concept is intimately linked to the presence of uncertainty or risk and more generally to the process of growing up. Some of the literature on child labour in fisheries is indeed risk-focused and occasionally displays

⁴ Jens Chr Andvig (2000): An essay on child labour in sub-Saharan Africa – A bargaining approach, mimeo, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, Oslo.

⁵ A new study that sheds light on the long term impacts of child labour on well-being is Kathleen Beegle, Rajiv Deheija and Roberta Gatti (2009): Why Should We Care About Child Labour? The Education, Labor Market and Health Consequences of Child Labor, *Journal of Human Resources*, 44(4): 871-89.

rather intense normative leanings. The following example is not, I believe, atypical: After a rapid assessment in El Salvador, ILO (2002) expressed grave concerns about the health hazards to boys and girls from working in Coastal fisheries, which had been found to involve exposure to risks of “*drowning, getting carried out by strong currents or lost at sea, sunstroke, attacks by sharks or other marine animals, bites and stings from insects and other sea and land animals, respiratory problems, blindness* (ILO 2002; 5)”

While each of these listed concerns undoubtedly are deepfelt, they also convey a propensity to think about childhood and children’s interests in developing and other settings in a rather particular (and I would say peculiar) way: all risks are bad risks, period. Moreover, the bureaucratic perception and interpretation of risk may not be all that accurate (or well-informed).⁶

The statistics on fisheries related child labor suggests that the sector is strongly dominated by boys⁷ who often will be in the (perhaps early) stages of transition to adulthood. Here is a general observation and deliberately bold claim about the process of growing up and the transition to what Satz (2003; 299)⁸ describes as ‘a full person’: Learning to evaluate, handle, or negotiate risks is, it seems to me, a crucial part of a healthy process of growing up: in a number of important instances the learning necessary to foster this transition can only take place by doing – i.e. by carrying out activities (possibly under guidance) or tasks and by interacting with and learning to deal with the environment one is part of.

The following paragraph has been copied from a report on childhood and risk in an industrial country setting and should be read keeping this limitation in mind: I borrowed it because, at least in parts, it provides a sense of the type of argument I shall try to develop:

On the one hand, there is concern at the suffocating health and safety culture (and the public health agenda allied to this), the semblance of a nanny state and a risk averse society, and the fear that we may be overprotecting our children and making them overly cautious and unprepared for challenge. There is a worry that these characteristics will transfer to other spheres of their lives and condemn them to a lifelong lack of a sense of adventure and enterprise. Failing to take risks may mean missing the opportunity to develop and excel positively. Digby Jones, then director general of the CBI, has called for young people to be taught more about risk-taking than their rights³⁹, and says how ‘Giving young people opportunities to experience, judge and manage risk should be an essential component of their education – not so that they can avoid it, but so they can seize opportunities and benefit from them as they mature into the next generation of citizens and wealth creators’. It is only through risk-taking that there is ‘the possibility of discovering that one is adventurous, daring, brave, strong, confident and successful’⁴⁰.

The quote from the Rapid Assessment ILO report smacks of a failure to reflect on what the implications of child overprotection would be. Life is not a hazard free zone for

⁶ The argument is not confined to child labour. The newly appointed health and safety personnel (in response to new regulations) at University of East Anglia (my former employer) became extremely concerned when discovering that academics at the School of Development Studies were in fact traveling to and working in developing countries.

⁷ Vegard Iversen (2006): Children’s Work in Fisheries – A cause for Alarm?, SFLP Working paper. (Admittedly not my best piece of work).

⁸ Debra Satz (2003): Child Labor: A Normative Perspective, *World Bank Economic Review*, 17 (2): 297-309.

anyone – it is clear, moreover, that there are in general more and more severe hazards in countries in the South and for a wide variety of reasons.

In such settings, overprotection, however well-intended, may be a disservice to the child or the evolving young person. The challenge, then, becomes how to strike a sensible balance. Let's start with some overall observations. We learnt during the workshop that being a fisherman is (among) the most dangerous occupations in the world. Mortality is high and the incidence of occupational injuries likewise. On closer probing, the more severe occupational injuries appear to be associated with work on large trawlers which have dangerous equipment. The type of fisheries under discussion here, in contrast, is typically small-scale, simple technology and concentrated in artisanal fishing communities in the developing world. Small boats may be more likely to capsize (but may be safe when the sea is calm) with a profile of occupational injuries very different from those of large, 'industrial' boats.

Consider a young person carrying out a work activity in a fishing community and let us for now set the issue of interfering with schooling aside. It seems to me that only when there is a mismatch between an environmental (or other) risk factor and the child's capacity to assess and maturely deal with that risk factor should one be concerned and make a case for intervention. A next step is to try to give examples (not an exhaustive list) of such a mismatch:

(i) a cognitive capacity constraint on the part of the child (low age, lack of experience) (we know for instance that the ability of young children to interpret traffic is very limited – implying that bicycling on a trafficked street has a very different risk profile for a young and an older child). At the same time cycling on a busy street is never hazard free. Similar and age-related contrasts may be expected in the sphere of work.

(ii) the risk of harm is verifiably and unacceptably high (this may relate to participation in specific activities – e.g. the underwater clearing of fishing nets on Lake Volta – other types of diving – the repeated carrying of heavy and disproportionate loads). Type (ii) should be adequately covered by the definition of unacceptable forms of CL and should simply be banned.

(iii) that a risk is high, but unobservable or unknown to the child: (i) a lack of knowledge of how bilharzia or other similar diseases may be contracted (here it may suffice to spread awareness rather than ban an activity). (ii) a substance used for vessels maintenance is toxic and harmful (it may be easier and better to find substitutes than ban an activity).

(iv) that a risk is high, but only in the long term and the relationship between the activity and long term health is not well understood. e.g. daily inhalation during smoking of fish.

(v) The child may be aware of the risk, but unable to do anything about it because of obnoxious working conditions. (i) Lake Volta examples: (ii): Fishing platform work?

Point (i)-(v) are not exhaustive but each is an attempted and preliminary illustration of what I would think of as bad risks.

Let me turn to what I mean by positive or ‘educational’ risks: these are risks that it seems that it would be good for children in artisanal fishing communities to learn to handle in spite of inevitable and occasional injuries:

‘The Kerala Coast has also been roughly divided in terms of the fishing technologies used in artisanal fisheries: the southern part dominated by *catamarans* that usually belong to a small group of fishermen related through kin. Other areas rely on bigger boats with an owner and a crew of local fisherman, each typically receiving a share of the catch. Nieuwenhuys (1994) looks at Muslim fishermen households in Poomkara, where the latter technique and ownership structure dominates. She notes that households were impoverished and enter into what resembles labour tying arrangements with local boat and gear owners. As within agriculture, tying of labour secures the owner adequate labour supply in the event of bumper fisheries while providing basic security for the members of the fishermen’s households. The fisheries-related work that children do may, according to Nieuwenhuys (1994) be classified into four broad categories: (a) Fishing and Foraging for Subsistence, (b) Small-scale fish vending (c) Rendering services to a boss and its crew during operations on a beach and (d) Work in a shore-seine crew. With the exception of (a) whereby from the age of 7, boys and girls are encouraged to forage for fish during their spare-time, these tasks are distinctly gendered and contain a strong element of “apprenticeship” and the acquisition of what many observers researching child labour would describe as “critical survival skills” as well as providing preparation for a career as either a fish vendor or as crew of one of the local fishing vessels (Iversen 2006).’

The activities under scrutiny are not, it should be emphasized, hazard or risk free – they are not meant to be and might include for instance:

- Angling
- Learning to set fishing nets (on beach or from boat (with guidance/supervision)
- Assistance with pulling the net (on beach or from boat (with guidance/supervision)
- Clearing and cleaning of fishing net
- Cleaning fish
- Fish selling/marketing
- Boat repairs, etc, etc

As noted above, statistics on occupational injuries in fisheries related work suggest a high prevalence – but compared to what type of norm? If the relevant population of child workers/labourers mostly are young boys, the relevant question would be what additional risks the work activity under scrutiny expose them to? Keep in mind that we are talking about rural (or Coastal) settings where the reality of everyday life include, to return to the above quote, potential encounters with wild animals, poisonous snakes, other poisonous

creatures, the sea, and hazardous health environments (poor sanitation, drinking water quality etc, etc). One constructive and positive outcome of the workshop is that there was general agreement about need for better data on the activities children undertake in fishing communities, specifically related to the arduousness and duration of these activities. A similar plea was made for information on injuries (occupational, but also injuries in the general child population to be able to make valid comparisons), on health and disease patterns and on mortality.

The National Child Labour Survey in Bangladesh (2002-03) interprets hazardous child labour exclusively in terms of hours of work, with 43 hours a week representing the present cut-off. This makes any activity a candidate whether it's low intensity or not. Needless to say, such a definition may result in strongly unwanted outcomes in the sense that focus may be distracted from shorter work-hour activities that are very harmful to longer work hour activities that may be more innocuous.

I'm aware, of course, of ILO's mandate, but also concerned about the efficiency of different types of interventions, specifically the importance of improving the quality of schooling complemented by other policies to bolster attendance. This was the topic of my workshop presentation and the interested reader can refer to the short explanation accompanying the ppt presentation.