

Changes in the Labour Value of Children in the Agrarian Isoko Community of Delta State, Nigeria

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Abstract

The labour value of children has been considered one of the benefits of children especially in agrarian pre-transitional societies. This labour value of children was, among other things, one of the reasons for having large families in these societies. The traditional value of children is undergoing changes with consequences for fertility attitudes and preferences. This paper examines how socio-economic change, especially the advent of schooling, has affected children's participation in agriculture as well as the changing role of children. It is based on information generated from Focus Group Discussions conducted among men and women in two urban and four rural communities in the two Local Government Areas occupied by Isoko people of Delta State, Nigeria. It was observed that schooling has contributed to the decline in the labour value of children in the study area. In parental calculations, this decline and the higher costs of child rearing are counterbalanced by the benefits they would reap from their educated children in future. Adult children's contributions to parents' farming are becoming mainly monetary. They occasionally make remittances to their parents for their upkeep and also for hiring labourers to work on the farm. Farming is perceived by parents as a profession that entails much drudgery and associated with poverty. Rural farmers, therefore, prefer other kinds of job for their children, a situation that has implications for the continuity and sustenance of agriculture in Nigeria. This calls for an intervention programme aimed at changing the attitudes of both parents and children.

Keywords: Value of children, wealth flows, fertility, schooling, old-age support, agriculture

1. Introduction

The labour value of children has been considered one of the benefits of children especially in agrarian pre-transitional societies. This labour value of children was, among other things, one of the reasons for having large families in these societies. Men tended to be polygynous and also had a large number of children in the pretext that the larger the family, the larger the farm and the wealthier the farmer. This is because more labour is available for work in the farm. Children's labour utility was thus a primary determinant of fertility besides other socio-psychological and cultural factors that played significant roles in family size preferences and fertility behaviour (Makinwa-Adebusoye, 1994).

The Isoko society is a typical example of the above. It is predominantly an agricultural community in which children play a very significant role in agriculture (by assisting their parents in the farm) and consequently contributing to the household economy. The economic contributions of children to household economy is classifiable into two broad categories: directly productive activities (including farming, fishing, tending animals and other non-farm activities) and indirectly productive activities (such as cooking, washing, cleaning, marketing, fetching water, collecting firewood, running errands and marketing for household consumption) (Orubuloye, 1987; Edewor, Ademiluyi, & Okosun, 1997; Edewor, 2001a). Our focus in this paper is on the directly productive activities, especially farming. However, it should be added that the participation of children in the indirectly productive activities, sometimes called 'children's jobs', releases adults to participate in the directly productive activities, hence the children are of indirect economic value. We shall, therefore, make reference to these indirectly productive activities in this discourse. This paper is aimed at examining how socioeconomic change, especially the advent of widespread schooling, has affected children's participation in agriculture as well as the changing role of children in agriculture.

2. Theoretical framework: The wealth flows theory

This paper draws its theoretical strength from Caldwell's intergenerational wealth flows theory (Caldwell, 1976). According to this theory, there are only two kinds of society: one in which it is economically rational to have an unlimited number of children and the other in which it is economically rational to have a limited number of children. The first example (pre-transitional), typifies the primitive and traditional societies of the underdeveloped world, while the second (transitional), typifies the developed world. The fundamental issue, Caldwell contends, is the nature, magnitude and direction of intergenerational wealth flows, between children and parents. The net flow of wealth favours parents in the first society, hence, children are assets whose labour is useful to parents and who also serve as a source of old age security for parents at adulthood. In the second society, net flow of wealth favours children and consequently, they are liabilities to parents.

In the pre-transitional societies, the net flow of wealth continues to favour parents until there is what Caldwell calls the great economic divide, the point at which there is a reversal in the direction of the flow of wealth from the direction of children to parents, over to the direction of parents to children and at which high fertility becomes irrational. Caldwell contends that prior to this economic divide, high fertility is rational even in non agricultural urban conditions as long as the net flow of wealth is from the younger to the older generation. Caldwell (1982) has suggested that the spread of mass education produces a decline in fertility by helping to change the direction of wealth flows between generations within families. Thus, education of children is seen as a primary determinant of the direction of wealth flows between generations. This is because a child's schooling reduces his/her potential for work within and outside the family and education also increases the costs of children to parents.

Caldwell's wealth flows theory has received a number of criticisms. In his study of three traditional communities in eastern Paraguay and Southern Peru, Kaplan (1994) came up with findings which contradict the wealth flows theory. He found that even though children were very costly to raise, fertility was high. He therefore concluded that it would not be a surprise to find that under most conditions, humans, like all other known organisms, invest in, rather than exploit, their offsprings, implying that net intergenerational wealth flows is downward in all societies. Also, Olusanya (1988) avers that parents are not necessarily the beneficiaries of the balance of the flows between them and their children in pre-transitional societies because parents' investments in children are substantial; even the occasional remittances (the so called child-parent wealth flows) made by urban-based adult children to their parents are more than offset by the loads of foodstuff these children receive from their parents in return. To Olusanya, what non-African researchers regard as 'child labour' or a 'flow of wealth' to parents is, merely, a child's contribution to the smooth running of the household, which also, is part of the training required by the child (a socialization process) to prepare him or her for adult life. Olusanya, however, fails to realize that most parents often mention children as their means of old-age support when simply asked to mention the sources from which they intend to get financial support at old age (Edewor, *et al*, 1997; Edewor, 2001a; 2001b). Empirical evidence also shows that Nigerian parents who expect old-age support from their children have higher fertility as well as higher ideal and desired family sizes than those who do not (Isiugo-Abanihe, 1994; Edewor, *et al*, 1997). Old-age support is often given as a reason for desiring large family sizes (Edewor, 2006b).

3. The research setting

Isoko people inhabit two of the Local Government Areas in Delta State: Isoko North and Isoko South Local Government Areas. The area is located roughly between longitude $6^{\circ}5'$ and $6^{\circ}25'$ East and Latitude $5^{\circ}15'$ and $5^{\circ}40'$ North in the Delta part of southern Nigeria. To the North of this geographical area are the Kwale (Ndokwa) people, to the East is Ase River, to the West are the Urhobo and to the South, Ijaw people.

There are eleven clans which constitute the Isoko community. They include Aviara, Emevor, Enhwe, Erohwa, Igbide, Iyede, Okpe (Ozoro), Olomoro, Owe, Ume and Uzere (Ikime, 1972). By clan here, we mean a socio-political unit made up of individuals who claim a patrilineal descent to a common ancestor. This is usually the founder of the clan and he sometimes names it after himself. The descendants of this ancestor may, however, presently live in many settlements. According to the results of the 1991 population Census, Isoko North had a total population 133,732, spread across 473 square kilometres with a population density of 282 persons per

square kilometre. Isoko South, on the other hand, had a total population of 142,663, spread across 653 square kilometres with a population density of 218 persons per square kilometre (Imoroa, 1993). The area falls within the ever-green forest belt of Southern Nigeria with a vegetation dominated by oil palm tree.

The major occupation is agriculture, cassava, yam, plantain and maize being the food crops mainly grown. Rubber is also a widely grown cash crop in the area. In addition, the existence of Ase River, together with other numerous streams and creeks makes it possible for Erohwa, Uzere, Aviara and Igbide clans to have fishing as a major seasonal occupation. There are also numerous local fish ponds which are a major source of fish supply in Isokoland. The abundance of oil palm has also made the production of palm oil and palm kernel possible in the area.

The two Local Government Areas occupied by Isoko people are basically rural. With the exception of the Local Government Headquarters (Ozoro and Oleh), all other settlements in the area have a population of less than 20,000 persons each, going by 1991 population census. As a basically farming community, virtually everyone has a farm. Even those who are engaged in other occupations such as teaching, other civil service jobs and trading still supplement their household resources substantially with proceeds from their farms. In other words, those engaged in other activities go to their farms when they close from work on week days and on Saturdays. However, no one is allowed to go to farm on market days, during Christmas and the day a person dies in each of the communities. People are only allowed to go to farm after the corpse has been buried. If the death is by suicide, no one goes to farm within the next seven days. These measures are taken to check some unethical tendencies (such as stealing) in the farm while other farmers are busy with burial or other ceremonies in the village or town. Outside these days, the whole community is usually virtually empty and appears deserted owing to the fact that everyone is normally away to the farm. This is usually the case especially in the villages: Aviara, Olomoro, Oyede and Emevor (Edewor, 2001b; 2006a; 2006b). Agriculture is mainly subsistence with the hoe and cutlass as the major farm implements.

4. Methods

The information on which this paper is based was generated from a series of Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) on parents' perception of the value of children. These FGDs were conducted in six Isoko settlements. Two of these settlements (Oleh and Ozoro) were urban while the remaining four (Aviara, Olomoro, Emevor and Oyede) were rural. Oleh and Ozoro are the Local Government Headquarters and they were purposively selected because they were the only urban areas. Also, farming as an occupation is widespread in these communities as in the smaller settlements. The four other settlements were basically rural and they were randomly selected from the 1991 census locality list for the two Local Government Areas. The settlements and their 1991 census figures (as obtained from the office of the National Population Commission, Oleh, Delta State) were as follows: Aviara (13,837), Olomoro (11,393) (both in Isoko South); Emevor (11,168) and Oyede (13,488) (both in Isoko North). The population size for Oleh was 27,250 while that of Ozoro was 41,743.

Eight focus groups were constituted in each town or village – four for men and four for women – making a total of 48 groups altogether. The groups for men include men ages 20-39 years with primary or less education, men ages 20-39 years with secondary education and above, men ages 40-60 years with primary education or less and men ages 40-60 years with secondary education and above. The groups for women include women ages 15-29 years with primary or less education, women ages 15-29 years with secondary education and above, women ages 30-49 years with primary or less education and, finally, women ages 30-49 years with secondary education and above. Each group was composed of between 6 and 10 persons and each session lasted for about an hour.

The Focus Group Discussion guide contained, amongst others, such topics as the importance of children to parents, parents expectations from children, ideal and desired family size, sex preference, changing perspectives on the education of male and female children, reasons for family size preference, sex preference as well as the types of help normally rendered by male and female children both when young and when they have become adults. Although a lot of information was elicited from participants on the above topics, in this paper, we are primarily concerned with children's contribution to the household economy, especially their role in agriculture

and how socio-economic change, particularly the advent of schooling has brought about changes in the labour value of children and children's role in agriculture.

5. Children's role in agriculture

Among Isoko people, the role of children in agriculture cannot be over emphasized. In traditional times, before the advent of widespread schooling, children assisted their parents on the farm all day. Boys were particularly useful in the clearing of bush, felling of trees and in other land preparation activities such as tilling and making of ridges for planting yams. Boys were expected to assist their fathers in the more rigorous and strenuous aspects of farming. They also tapped rubber, climbed palm trees and harvested palm fruits for the processing of palm oil and production of palm kernel. Girls, on the other hand, together with their mothers did the planting, weeding, harvesting of crops, processing of cassava into *gari* (cassava flour) and marketing of harvested and processed crops. Boys also assisted in harvesting of cassava and yams and sometimes they were also engaged in weeding of farms. Although children are still engaged in these activities at present, certain changes have occurred and these are discussed in the latter part of this paper.

Farmers in Isokoland have numerous but small farm holdings at different locations. Allotment of extended family land is done to children in the family only after they have become married. However, preference is normally given to the male child; the size of farmland allotted to the male child is normally much bigger than that allotted to the female. This is in the pretext that female children belong to other families after marriage. The larger the number of children (especially male children) in the family, the bigger the amount of land the family would have.

The distance between town and farm is very far, especially in Oleh, and in all the studied settlements it ranges between one and twelve kilometres. Owing to the far distance, the use of bicycles as a means of transportation to and fro farms is common place. Bicycles are used to convey farm products from farm to town. Those without bicycles (although majority do) resort to trekking long distances and children are particularly useful in conveying farm products from farm to town or village.

Aside from the participation of children in directly productive farming activities, children also contribute indirectly to household through their participation in other activities which release parents to do other more productive work in the farm. Children (boys particularly) run errands especially to the farm. Girls are particularly useful to their mothers in the performance of household chores such as sweeping, washing, fetching water, cooking, etc. and baby minding. Although these roles are primarily performed by girls, boys also do, especially where there are no girls. However, much depends on the kind of training given to the children irrespective of their sex. Through participating in these activities, children are of indirect economic value to parents in this agrarian community. When children have become adults, their contribution to the household economy is mainly monetary. This point is discussed further under the next sub-section of this paper.

Local ponds and lakes are common in Isokoland and children play a significant role during the dry season when fishing is done in the ponds and lakes. Fishing is mainly a seasonal occupation and boys are particularly useful in bailing out water from the ponds. They are also specialists in the use of hooks and nets for fishing.

6. The advent of schooling and the labour value of children

The advent of schooling is a major socio-economic change which has contributed to the decline in the labour value of children in the study area. Before the advent of schooling, children had all the time to assist their parents in the farm. The number of hours children have to take part in farm work are now dramatically reduced owing to schooling. Each Isoko town or village now has at least two or three schools and at least one secondary school and child schooling has become widespread. Consequently, children only assist their parents in the farm after school hours, on Saturdays and during holidays. But some who are in school or have been to school become reluctant to participate in farm work. Parents were initially skeptical of the value and importance of western education for their children and a lot of them prevented their children (particularly daughters) from going to school in the past. This was because schooling disrupted children's participation in farming. In addition, girls

were not sent to school because it was felt that their education would ultimately benefit their future husbands rather than the parents and their kins. Secondly, a lot of girls got pregnant in school and this led to the termination of their schooling. Consequently, the financial resources spent on the education of such girls became wasted. Things have, however, changed. Both boys and girls are now being sent to school. Parents now struggle to send their children to school because it is now widely believed that the educated child is better equipped to care for parents in their old age. Girls have been found to be more sympathetic and more caring for aged parents than boys. When they are married, boys become saddled with the responsibilities of caring for their wives, children and in-laws as well as with other household obligations. They are, therefore, hardly able to adequately combine these obligations with the care for their aged parents.

Parents are generally concerned about their security at old age. The education of their children is thus considered as a way of investing against the future. In parental calculations, the decline in the labour value of children and the higher costs of childbearing due to schooling are counterbalanced by the benefits they would reap from their educated children in future. It is now generally believed that that girl's schooling is more advantageous and rewarding than that of boys because of the care female children give aged parents. Pregnancy no longer hinders girls' schooling. Pregnancies that are not terminated are carried to term and schooling continues after delivery. However, many now prevent pregnancy through contraception.

When children have become adults (particularly the educated ones), many build houses and/or buy cars for their parents, although the case of buying cars for parents is not as rampant as building houses for parents. Their contributions to parents' farming become mainly monetary. They occasionally make remittances to their parents for their upkeep and also for hiring labourers to work on the farm. However, many prefer to liberate their parents from the drudgery and poverty associated with farming. Farming is perceived by parents as a profession that entails much drudgery and associated with poverty. Consequently, parents do not desire it as a profession for their children. Conversely, they admire and desire urban-based "office work" for their children – a major reason for sending children to school and for heightened parental aspirations for children's education, more so that educated children are better equipped to care for parents' old age. While it is difficult to ascertain who benefits more (children or parents) in net intergenerational wealth flows, it appears that the net flows or wealth is downwards when children are still young but upwards when they have become adults.

Education remains an avenue for social mobility and a way of securing a better future. There are instances in which children whose parents could ill-afford the cost of education struggle to fend for themselves. Boys fall more into this category. Such go to tap rubber in rubber plantations and, in that way, they earn money with which they pay their school fees and also purchase books and uniforms. Many young school leavers (boys particularly) migrate to urban areas in search of white-collar jobs or to pursue higher education or to learn a trade. Those whose performance in school at the lower level was not very satisfactory and who, consequently, learn a trade however remain in the village and continue to farm. But they normally admire or envy those who have migrated and are "making it".

7. Conclusion

A situation in which rural farmers prefer other kinds of job for their children has serious implications for the continuity and sustenance of the farming profession in Nigeria. The general perception of farming by parents and children as a profession associated with drudgery and poverty calls for an intervention programme aimed at changing the attitudes of both parents and children. There is need to make agriculture a more attractive profession through creating a more enabling and conducive environment. The provision of portable water, electricity and access roads in the rural areas would be a step in the right direction in this regard.

The changes in the labour value of children as discussed in this paper are the inevitable concomitant of a modernizing society. Child schooling should necessarily undermine the labour value of children. But there is need to use these changes to advantage. Having acquired the knowledge of farming from their parents through socialization, the introduction of agricultural science as a compulsory subject in both primary and secondary school curricula, with emphasis on modern farming techniques especially mechanized farming might be fruitful. Since drudgery and poverty are the things mostly dreaded in farming, if it could be shown that farming can be

done without drudgery and poverty, more parents and children would be interested in it, thereby ensuring a future food security for Nigeria. But the crucial thing lies in the commitment to demonstrating this to both parents and children. This is an enormous task for agricultural science teachers, agricultural extension workers and government.

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