

Revisiting Child Labour in the Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mines of Ghana; Assessing Local Perceptions and Attitudes towards Child Labour and Education in Nangodi, Ghana

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Abstract

Several studies have looked into the issue of child labour especially in the artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) sector in Ghana. However, a key issue that such studies have failed to cover relates to local perceptions and attitudes towards child labour in ASM. This paper fills that gap in knowledge. Using a case study approach, the paper assesses local perceptions and attitudes towards child labour and education in Nangodi. It goes further to highlight how children had their education affected as a result of working at mining pits. In light of the findings presented, viable recommendations are offered in order to reduce, if not curb the practice of child labour in ASM.

Keywords: Artisanal and small-scale mining; child labour; child education; ‘galamsey’.

1. Introduction

The issue of child labour in the burgeoning artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) economy of Ghana continues to attract attention both locally and internationally (Hilson, 2008). According to the International Labour Organization, child labour refers to the engagement of young people in any industry that deprives children of their childhood, inhibits their ability to attend regular school, and that is medically, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful (ILO, 2006). However, considerable difference exists between the many kinds of work those children may be engaged in. In this regard, child involvement in domestic work that does not affect their health and personal development or education is generally regarded as being something positive. This includes activities such as household chores home, as well as assisting in a family business outside school hours and during holidays as well. Furthering this argument, Bloeman (2009) indicates that child participation in domestic work invariably contributes to child development and to the welfare of their families. This, Bloeman (2009) attributes to the potential of equipping children with valuable skills and experience; preparing them to be productive members of society in their adult life.

Notwithstanding the positive role children could play towards household livelihood support, it is difficult to establish the threshold of what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable forms of child work. In the year 2000, about 250 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 years performed some sort of labour or service worldwide (UNICEF, 2000). Additionally, the International Labour Organization’s 2006 Global Report estimates that 217 million children aged between 5 and 17 were engaged in child labour worldwide (ILO, 2006). Of these, around 126 million are in the “*worst form of child labour*” category. In Asia and Pacific region particularly, there are approximately 122 million working children, and around 63 million children are currently labouring in Sub-Saharan Africa (ILO, 2006). These statistics not only highlight the extent of child labour, but reveal a deep-lying lack of institutional regulation and monitoring of businesses where child employment serves as a cheaper alternative form of labour compared to hiring skilled labour.

In the artisanal and small-scale (ASM) gold mining sector of Ghana, it is estimated that of the 30,000-50,000 ASM miners in Ghana, 10,000 are children working in hazardous conditions that put their health and survival at risk (Keehn, 2010). Focusing on the issue of child workers in Nangodi, children are employed to climb down 80 metres mine shafts to blow craters with dynamite and to sift gold flecks from rock which has been pounded into dust (AfriKids Ghana, 2007). Aside the health risks associated with this form of work, there is the added effect on education as children spend several hours tilling away at mining pits. With 70% of people in the region living below the poverty line (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014), it is not surprising that illiteracy rates are high, with child education not considered a priority compared to financial survival. It was against this backdrop that this research sought to assess local perceptions of child labour and education, with the view to informing policy and institutional reforms towards improved literacy levels in artisanal and small-scale mining communities in Ghana, particularly Nangodi.

2. Theoretical Review

In this section of the paper, a review of two theories of household decision-making (the poverty theory, and children as household assets) with regard to the employment of children are presented. The paper relies on these theories to provide empirical support to its findings relating to why children engage in paid work at the expense

of their education.

To begin with, the poverty theory indicates that the reason why children do not attend school is that households cannot afford it (Bonnet, 1993). Where the cost of education is too high, parents are not able to afford. The price of schooling is high where either the direct or the indirect costs of schooling are large. Although parental selfishness may play a role, it is equally possible that child labour is fundamentally a by-product of poverty; strongly suggesting that policy should focus on economic development and increasing income (Nardinelli, 1990). Krueger (1996) notes a steep cross-country negative correlation between GDP per capita and the employment rate of 10-14 year olds in 1995. An important implication of the poverty theory is that policies that focus on compelling parents to deviate from their optimizing choices may, in fact, make children worse off.

Although the poverty-child labour link may seem obvious, Baland and Robinson (2000) formalize this idea, thus helping to isolate the precise nature of the mechanism. They take as a point of departure that all families make child-labour decisions to maximize the present discounted value of the household's income. Consequently, in making decisions regarding child involvement in the paid work, parents weigh the present discounted value of the future income of an educated child against the foregone income while the child is in school. In this regard, child labour is only chosen if the return to education is not high enough to compensate families for the lost income of their children. Implicit in the Baland and Robinson (2000) analysis is the fact that child labour serves as an avenue for transferring income from the future into the present. That is, a child who works today at the expense of education will contribute to family income today at the expense of future productivity.

Similar to the poverty explanation, the theory of children as household assets views children in terms of their value as assets. As such, parents must initially choose the number of children they will have and subsequently weigh whether to invest in the quality of the child or to extract current stream of services from them. Becker and Lewis (1973) argue that in the quality-quantity trade-off, parents who choose a large number of children are less likely to invest in the education of their children. That is, the number of children and investment in the human capital of children represent substitutes. Parents may also choose to have a large number of children in order to diversify risk; formally educating some and putting the others to work. However, this is not always the case across contexts. According to Patrinos and Psacharopoulos (1995), the number of children does not affect the level of enrolment or education. In a similar vein, Chernichovsky (1985), studying schooling choice in rural Botswana, actually finds that family size raises educational attainment. Explaining this positive correlation, Levison (1991) suggests that large family sizes generate decreasing returns in household production. That is, with a large number of children available to engage in household work, the opportunity cost of education for any one child may be quite low.

2.1 Perception of Child Labour in ASM

Many child labour practices are rooted in tradition, making their elimination all the more difficult. According to UNICEF (1991), bringing about a change in the ethical climate in which such opinions flourished was, and in many cases still is, the most difficult part of the long struggle for a more just society. Changing societal attitudes to fit today's ethical standards is a difficult task, for the simple fact that people are reluctant to any change, especially when the roots of what is being changed are deep.

First off, traditional African beliefs encourage the persistence of child labour as parents see child work as a form of preparation for their future occupations (Bruscino, 2001). Child labour is also perpetuated by traditional perceptions of the family and the resultant obligations placed on members in that family. In the past, having more children meant having more hands to help on the farm. Beyond tradition, economics also plays a significant role. People just do not have the financial capacity to pay for labour, thus further necessitating the burden placed on children to work for and with their parents.

Moreover, some studies point out that view that the child labour constitutes a mechanism of instilling in children the spirit of hard work (Bass, 2004). Throughout history, children in most part of the developing world especially Africa have contributed in the form of agricultural labour on farms and even at home to help provide household income. Similarly, child involvement in the paid labour force is also perceived as an avenue to instil a sense of responsibility and a way of life in children particularly in rural and subsistence agricultural communities. In rural Pare, of Northern Tanzania, five-year-old children would assist adults in tending crops, with nine year olds carrying fodder for animals and responsibilities scaled with age (Katz, 1996).

Furthermore, there is the perception that child labour especially in ASM keeps children away from social vices. According to Bøås and Hatløy (2006), the number of hours that children spent working in exchange for wages reduces their availability to engage in unacceptable behaviours such as stealing, rape, and smoking, among others. Similarly, in a study conducted by the International Labour Organization in Honduras, it was revealed that thirty-five percent (35%) of parents allowed their children to work because it kept them off the street and away from social vices.

Aside keeping children away from social vices, child labour in ASM is perceived to provide equal rewards towards livelihood support, compared to education (Hilson, 2008). In some cases, working children and their families recognize ASM activities to bring higher returns as compared to child education. In such cases, attaining literacy or education does not constitute a viable option due to the number of years spent in school, as compared to the quick returns that may accrue through engaging in ASM activities. Besides, rural artisanal and small-scale mining communities experience inadequate education and health facilities (Mthembu- Salter, 2009; Hilson, 2010). As such, child labour may be perceived as necessary due to the lack of alternative options, including the opportunity to pursue primary and secondary education.

2.2 The Nexus of Child Labour and Education

Several studies establish a correlation between child labour and education. A look at the Children's Act of Ghana reveals this connection, as the minimum age for child labour is also the same age at which a child is expected to finish secondary school. As both a possible means for improving working conditions and a possible reason for sending to work, education can both be scrutinized as a cause and revered as a solution to problems of child labour in ASM. Although education cannot guarantee socio-economic mobility or even financial stability, it offers a child the possibility of having improved sources of livelihood than his parents had. Ghana recognized the importance of education, with the Education Act of 1961 and the Constitution of 1992, both making provision for free compulsory and universal basic education (FCUBE) (UNICEF, 2000).

Despite the guarantee that comes with FCUBE, parents often justify sending their children to work by saying that their earnings will go toward meeting nutrition and basic school needs (GNCC Ghana, 2000). However, according to Keehn (2010), working has such adverse effects on schooling that there is the need to question how significant education is to the working child. Some children spend too much time working, making school attendance impossible. Of those that do attend, some are so tired from working that they cannot concentrate. The social environment of work often undermines the value children place on education, especially among street children. Additionally, those who are participating in hazardous, exploitative work are sometimes so mistreated that they are traumatized, unable to concentrate in class, and possible becoming disruptive.

Finally, the availability of schools in terms of quality, proximity and costs affect child labour and educational choices made (Brown, 2001). In terms of associated costs, it is possible to elicit household expenditures on child education from surveys. However, measuring the quality of teaching and education in general is extremely difficult. At best, some studies present evidence on the integrity of school structures; whether or not the school is open most days of the week, and other services available to the general community such as running water or electricity (Brown, 2001).

3. Methodology

This paper is based on a study carried out to assess local perceptions of child labour and education in Nangodi, a community in the Nabdam District of Upper East Region Ghana. Since perception is highly subjective, the study was premised on qualitative methods to allow for gathering individual and group opinions. Focused group discussions (FDGs) were held with selected 42 residents of the area (28 men and 14 women). Primary data obtained from FDGs were supplemented with semi-structured interviews conducted with two local government officials (District Assembly) and the Assemblyman of Nangodi. In addition, secondary data obtained through official journal publications from AfriKids Ghana, the Nabdam District Assembly, as well as the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Welfare, further enriched the findings of this study.

With regards to sampling techniques, the study employed stratified sampling as well as purposive sampling. Stratified sampling enabled the researcher to elicit the various sub-groups of residents in Nangodi, on the basis of which 42 respondents (6 focus groups) were selected highlighting the residential patterns in the community. Also, purposive sampling aided the researcher in identifying critical stakeholders of child labour and ASM activities in the study area. In terms of data analysis, qualitative data gathered from semi-structured interviews and focused group discussions will be anchored in the research questions and subsequently be transcribed and triangulated to identify theory related material, as well as recurring themes. Critically, *the use of triangulation ensures the validity of the study findings* (Bryman, 2012, p.633).

4. Summary of Findings

Key empirical findings from the study are presented in this section. Specifically, they cover the views of respondents with regards to local perceptions of child labour, as well as the effect of ASM activities on the education of child workers.

4.1 Local Perceptions of Child Labour

First off, the study sought to corroborate the argument that the local perceptions with regards to what constitutes child labour in mining communities could determine how the issue is approached and the mechanisms put in

place to curtail the practice. In this regard, the researcher found it necessary to ascertain whether local perceptions of child labour played a role in pushing children into working at the ASM mines in the community. Interestingly, data obtained from FDGs and semi-structured interviews pointed to a positive correlation between local perception and the level of acceptability of child labour. That is, where child labour is perceived as beneficial for household livelihood support, the parents/guardians were more likely to encourage their children to seek paid work at mining pits. This highlights the important role local perception plays in pushing children into ASM activities at Nangodi.

Having established that local perception indeed pushed children into seeking paid labour at small-scale mining pits, it was necessary to explore the perception of child labour that respondents hold. Primarily, study participants revealed that child labour at the mining pits of the community and education both represent effective means to economic liberation and livelihood. A member of a FGD explained:

In this area, our land is not good. Sometimes we do not have anything to do to feed our children. So the little that we have it finishes before [the] raining season even begins. When it becomes hard, we let our children do 'galamsey' [small-scale mining] so that they can also get money to buy food for themselves. Even if they go to school, it is the same food they will use money from work to buy, so what is wrong working now?

This highlights a common held perception by residents in Nangodi with regards to child labour. This perception of child labour and education manifests in the low level of literacy in the area. Of the population 11 years and above, 58.4 percent are non-literate (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014). As such, with low literacy rates in the area, parents or guardians offer little in the form of household livelihood support, not to mention educating their children. Artisanal and small-scale mining therefore represents a viable option.

Additionally, during interviews with the Assembly man of the area as well as local government officials, it was perceived that child labour served as a form of initiation into adult roles. According to one respondent, children who started working at a young age at the mines were more likely to continue ASM activities in their adult life due to the attraction of income. Interestingly, the study revealed that working children in Nangodi often comprised the delinquent youth in the area. Underlining this perception, an interviewee explained:

We are happy that our children can work and get money to take care of themselves. But sometimes too, they use the money they get to buy alcoholic drinks, and some even smoke wee [marijuana]. When they do this, they become violent and sometimes even beat us [parents]. It is very difficult to control them and sometimes we have to call the police to arrest them.

Thus, it can only be inferred that despite the positives residents of the area attributed or derived from child labour in ASM, the issue of child delinquency as presented above and many more similar narrations represent a departure from the commonly held perception that child labour in ASM helped keep children away from social vices (Bøås and Hatløy, 2006).

4.2 Changing Perceptions of Child Labour

Having established the influence of local perceptions in pushing children into working at gold mines, the study sought to establish commendable ways of changing the perceptions of residents of Nangodi on child labour practices in ASM. Largely, majority of respondents revealed that public education of residents on the negative implications of child labour on education and development will generate changes in local perceptions. During interviews conducted, respondents highlighted radio and television announcements, community information vans, and print media as viable channels to communicate the message of how perception reinforces child labour, as well as the short and long-term effects on education.

Also, during a personal interview with the Assembly man of the area, it was revealed that local perceptions could be changed through the strengthening of existing local and national government policies and laws against child labour. However, the researcher found it interesting that during FDGs, a good number of interviewees expressed ignorance of such policies and laws against child labour. As such, could it be the case that the 'gap' in awareness of existing legal and policy frameworks by residents of the area actually spurred child labour practices? Again, with low literacy rates in the area, access to information on legal and policy frameworks against child labour by locals could prove a challenge.

Finally, some respondents proposed a change in socio-cultural norms as the way forward in changing the perception of the people of Nangodi on child labour. In one of the focus group discussions conducted, a respondent explained the prevailing socio-cultural norm as follows:

When we were children, our parents always let [encouraged] us follow them to the farm to work. Sometimes

when we refused to go, they told us that we are lazy and that men are supposed to be strong and hardworking. So we grew up with this mind-set, and try to also teach our male children to begin working from a young age so that they can take care of their future family too.

From the above narrative, it is defined that established socio-cultural beliefs and practices play a significant role in shaping the early years of human life in the study area. Culture, representing a way of life of a people, has led to child labour practices in ASM being rationalized as beneficial for child development. It is therefore imperative that a change in socio-cultural practices especially those related to child involvement in paid work, be championed by local stakeholders in order to curb the practice.

4.3 Effects on Child Education

First off, the study sought to establish whether child engagement in paid labour had an effect on their education. Respondents offered insights into how education from basic school to secondary level in the community suffered as a result of gold mining. A general consensus was reached during FGDs that as a result of artisanal and small-scale mining activities, school attendance rates in Nangodi declined.

Further perspectives were offered on how specifically ASM affected child education in the study area. Some of the study participants said that children who engaged in mining activities eventually lost interest in education, as exemplified by the following quotes from one participant:

My brother...it is very difficult sometimes to tell our children to go to school....hmmm [sighs] when they start to get money from working at the mines, they think school is not important again...but a waste of time because they do not get money at school, unlike work.

Thus, with the youthful nature of the population (47.1%) in the study area (Ghana Statistical Service, 2014), it can only be inferred that the attraction of earning ‘quick-money’ from working at mining pits made the pursuit of education by children a forgone alternative. With deep-seated issues of household poverty in Nangodi, in making decisions regarding child involvement in paid labour force, parents may therefore weigh the present discounted value of the future income of an educated child against the foregone income while the child is in school (Baland and Robinson, 2000).

Other perspectives offered by respondents were that child labour consequently led to children scoring poor grades, absenteeism from school, and insubordination to school authorities. These findings resonate those of Keehn (2010) who concluded that working has such adverse effects on schooling that there is the need to question how significant education is to the working child.

5. Conclusion

Local perceptions and attitudes towards child labour practices indeed significantly affect child education. Although different authors have given varying perspectives from studies on child labour, this paper presented a micro-level analysis of child labour as pertained at the mining pits of Nangodi. It was revealed that local perceptions of what constitute child labour as well as acceptable forms of child work, indeed influenced or pushed children into working. The dominant perceptions the study established are: child labour constituted a form of initiation into adult roles; and child labour a viable substitute to education in a community where majority of residents live below the poverty line. With these insights, it is little surprising the pervasive nature of the practice and low educational attainment in Nangodi. In light of the negative effect of child labour on education, the study recommends increased public education and campaign messages across various media to help curb child labour, and in the process boost literacy levels and education in the study area. Finally, it is necessary to strengthen existing legal and policy frameworks on child labour, combined with effective monitoring and regulation of the activities of artisanal and small-scale miners.

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