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Introduction: Children and Youth in the Labour Process

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Among the many problems facing the African continent is that of ensuring that the African child has a meaningful future. But for us to even begin to imagine this future implies the necessity of understanding the plight of children and the youth in Africa today – in particular, in the labour process. Africa is a youthful continent, but so far occupies little policy environment. On the subject matter of children and youth, it is very important to examine the issues from the perspective of the African environment, and in particular, the existential conditions of the children. The social and economic environment of an African child is completely different from that of an European child, for example. In general terms, whereas children are supposed to be sheltered, protected or be in school, in many countries in Africa they are rather exposed to the vagaries of eking out a living in a largely adult world. This is not, however, to say that children do not naturally assist with work or understudy their parents in the process of work in the various societies. An observation is that there have been studies about young people, but not what the young people think of themselves and their role in the labour process. The expectation is that some of the case studies in this volume will bring this into sharp relief.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that around the world, some 250 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 work for a living. Almost half, some 120 million, work full time, every day, all year round. African children constitute 32 per cent of this number, about 80 million, and there could be a surge to over 100 million by the year 2015 as a result of the increasing number of impoverished people and inadequate economic growth in the continent. Also, as many as 70 per cent toil in dangerous environments unsuitable for children. Of the 250 million children concerned, some 50–60 million are between 5 and 11 years old and work, by definition, in hazardous circumstances, considering their age and vulnerability. Many more are hidden from view, exploited in virtual slavery.

Increased awareness of these facts has prompted a global mobilization unlike any seen in recent memory. Many governments, workers, enterprises, religious bodies,

non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and individuals the world over have recognized the need to seek new, more effective ways to combat child labour and to eliminate its most unacceptable manifestations. This is a worldwide phenomenon, but with serious and troubling manifestations in Africa and Asia. It has been shown that child labour occurs mainly in the semi-formal and informal sectors of the economy. Most instances of child labour in Africa are found in the informal sector. Often, children could be observed on the streets as vendors, car washers, touts, scavengers, beggars, head-load carriers, feet-washers and bus conductors. In cottage industries and mechanical workshops, children also work as apprentices in various crafts or as traders such as in weaving, tailoring, catering, hairdressing, vulcanizing and auto repair (Oloko 1997:48).

It is increasingly clear that children and the youth today play significant roles in the labour process in Africa. However, what have not been well interrogated are the theoretical moorings and the dynamic nature of the roles they play, which oftentimes are inhumane, exploitative and degrading for the victims. Generally, it appears that children are forced by the economic needs of their parents to engage in different modes of child labour. The crises associated with economic depression and the character of the capitalist mode of reproduction such as increasing unemployment, rural–urban migration, lack of access to education, poverty and the erosion of the extended family system have singly and collectively made children, who ordinarily should be engaged in learning and/or apprenticeship within family limits, become instruments and commodities in the labour process. Our perspective in this volume draws from both historical and economic analyses in explaining the problem, which in this case points to the fact that children and the youth in Africa are increasingly being forced by economic and other unpleasant circumstances, including political adversities, into becoming human cargo. Indeed, there is a sense in which war could be seen as a continuation of the labour process. When war goes on for a long time, it becomes normal, and children and youth are central to understanding wars in Africa.

The mainstream literature mostly published by international organizations and NGOs, though relevant, needs to be approached with detachment in order to better understand the African situation. The situation of children and the youth in Africa cannot be separated from the poverty and wars that becloud Africa, which create not only refugees but also economic migrants. Often economic migrants including children become part and parcel of a labour process predicated on devising ‘coping mechanisms’ in an era of harsh economic downturns occasioned by the negative dynamics of the global economy. It is therefore important for us to understand the relationship between the youth segment of African societies and the social relations existing at both national and continental levels. This is because existing social relations in society often determine what is produced or trafficked (the commodity), and where, when and how. Note that this process is replicated at two levels: first is at the level of social relations within individual African countries, and second at the level of global relations of production and exchange between the rich and poor countries of the world. Often the rich or dominant elite, together with the ruling

class, determine what is produced or what serves as a commodity, where and when. Of course, they can not do this on their own, but are influenced or forced to act in a particular manner as a result of their linkages to the global capitalist system. It is therefore not surprising that it is the youth from the poor regions of the world that are trafficked to the richer regions for forced or child prostitution, sex tourism and entertainment, pornography and organ harvesting as the case may be. Organ harvesting, sometimes referred to as organ laundering, involves the trafficking of humans for the purpose of selling their organs for money. This shows the barbaric dimension that unbridled globalization and consumerism have attained.

For many African countries, it is a situation in which the ruling elite knowingly or unknowingly falls into the trap of the global dictates of consumerism. State policies that do not recognize or articulate the interests of the youth are usually designed and implemented, with dire consequences for all. It is therefore important that we understand the present character of the political elite in Africa, especially in the context of globalization. Their policy prescriptions under the guise of privatization and deregulation, with embargos on employment and so on, have served to undermine whatever welfarist measures could have modulated youth restiveness, unemployment and exploitation, and therefore the recourse to their becoming global commodities.

It appears that for the elite and supposed elders in the society to create and recreate their material needs, they inadvertently embrace the mantra of globalization without designing innovative ways of ameliorating its negative tendencies. This then creates not just a conducive environment, but equally justifies the exploitation of children and youth in the labour process as indicated in the scope of trafficking of women and children in Africa. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that of the 246 million children presently engaged as child labourers worldwide, about 179 million of these are exposed to the worst forms of exploitation (*CODESRIA Bulletin*, 1&2, 2004). Suffice it to note that public policy also reflects the social relations of production in a particular society. And in a situation in which these policies are neither pro-poor nor do they address the problems of the youth, the result is usually a rise in youth restiveness, social delinquency and outright criminality either as agents or victims. Therefore, in addition to re-examining the post-colonial character of the state in Africa, and the social and psychological dimensions, the fact of globalization should as of necessity be factored into any effort at understanding the contemporary problem of child and youth exploitation in the labour process. It is a labour process largely influenced by the dynamics of the global economy that cares very little for the disadvantaged countries, and hence the disadvantaged masses of Africa, including its children.

Overall, it is our expectation that this volume will contribute to creating more awareness about the problem of children and youth in the labour process, and contribute also to the richness of the discourse concerning the development problems of children and the youth in Africa. Even the concept of the labour process is contestable, especially in view of the fact that the labour process has undergone transformation. Questions have arisen concerning our understanding of the 'site of

labour', because new sites of labour are emerging. We should be able to interrogate inherited conceptual instruments – what, for instance, is the heuristic value of 'child labour' as conceptualized and used by the international organizations? We need to keep an open mind, for us to be able to proffer reasonable suggestions for addressing the problem of children in the labour process. There is an international geo-strategic conception of child labour, of which we must be careful, as social order is constantly in transformation.

The labour process in a sense could be understood as the sum of relationships and activities aimed directly or indirectly at earning a living. This could be at the domestic, community or national level. However, does this mean that activities not involving payment are not child labour? To what extent can children be allowed independence of action? Let us also note that the category of children is not necessarily a homogeneous group. Hence, child labour should be approached from a multi-pronged perspective. One way to intervene should be to enlighten and educate our political elite and decision-makers as to the deficiencies of their economic and social policies, which often do not incorporate the interests of the youths, mainly owing to the fact that they are seldom consulted. Sometimes it is also the case that governments lack the capacity to address the problems of the young. This lack of capacity provides a fertile ground for the proliferation of all sorts of informalization for survival. Again, deference to the dictates of global institutions like the World Bank, the IMF and the World Trade Organization (WTO) on privatization, deregulation and downsizing of the workforce should ideally be given with caution as they often project the interests of the powerful, whose interests may not necessarily coincide with those of the weaker countries. Though sometimes ignorant of the uses to which they have been put, these organizations are by design and ownership fundamentally agents of unbridled globalization whose prescriptions have in the main only contributed to the impoverishment of the African masses and the alienation of African youths. The necessity for innovative state–society partnerships through conscious intervention at ensuring youth empowerment and welfare in Africa cannot therefore be overemphasized.

Generally, there is some theoretical confusion about how to understand and explain the problem of child labour (*CODESRIA Bulletin* 2004:53). It is, however, our expectation that by the time one goes through this book, one would have been able to make some sense out of this from the very many predicaments of children in the labour market and their various implications. While children have always worked in African societies, the increasing poverty in sub-Saharan Africa since the 1970s and the various wars have driven millions of children into types of labour that are exploitative, hazardous and prejudicial to their welfare and development. Poverty, along with certain cultural traits, has resulted in the exploitation of child labour, while middlemen have exploited the desperation and ignorance of parents, particularly in the rural areas, to procure children for commercial trafficking.

Theoretically speaking, no single general picture of child labour can be based on its practice in one particular form alone. It necessarily has to be related to those

shifts or changes in local context and to change over time – technological (how far child labour was useful to the employers); ideological (the rise of domestic ideology and its impact on both ruling and working classes); economic (the organization of labour markets and the need of the family for the child's economic contribution; whether that contribution was in cash, kind or labour); and political (the role of the state intervention through protective legislation and the introduction of compulsory schooling) (Devin 1982:650).

In terms of legislation, the ILO since its inception in 1909 has been in the forefront of designing and encouraging legislation that will help protect children and the youth in the labour process, both globally and nationally. The minimum Age (Industry) Convention (No. 5) and the Night Work of Young Persons (Industry) Convention (No. 6) were the first in a series of what would soon become a substantial list of conventions and resolutions aimed at abolishing child labour and establishing safe working conditions for young workers (Elder & Schmidt 2004:23). Other general legislation includes the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, adopted by the General Assembly on 20 November 1989; the Declaration on the Protection of Women and Children in Emergency and Armed Conflict and ILO Convention 182; the Convention Concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour, Adopted by the Conference at the 87th Session in Geneva on 17 June 1999. For instance, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 32, recognizes 'the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development'. States parties to the convention are required to take legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to ensure the implementation of this right, including enacting provisions for minimum ages for admission to employment, regulation of hours of work and conditions of employment, and penalties and other sanctions to ensure effective enforcement. Also, Article 35, of this convention stated: 'States parties shall take all appropriate national, bilateral and multilateral measures to prevent the abduction of, the sale of or traffic in children for any purpose or in any form'. In short, efforts at curbing child labour and its related dimensions through legislation are not in short supply; the problem has been the tendency for national governments to remain aloof in the implementation of this legislation.

We should note that ILO's prescriptions on child rights have come under criticism, especially from the developing world. Its prescriptions are perceived as embodying the standardization of western notions of childhood and have led to attempts at distinguishing child work from child labour. In spite of the 1999 Convention No. 182 on the Elimination of the Worst Aspects of Child Labour, this problem continue to pose fundamental challenges of definition and distinction. Take, for example, the criticisms relating to the call for a re-examination of the role of children as consumers of economic value and identifying who the beneficiaries of child labour are.

The generally common conclusion that child labour is contextual requires an analytical framework that recognizes specific contexts including the socio-cultural

political contexts. Since socio-cultural environments differ, we should be careful to avoid unnecessary labelling of all children engaged in the labour process as doing 'exploitative work', at least within the African context. Therefore, understanding the social construction of child labour is imperative in responding to the real cases of children involved in an exploitative labour setting. Indeed, the recognition of the contextuality of child labour aids the assessor in distinguishing between the acceptable work that children ordinarily perform and child labour. Perhaps, a strict regime or categorization based on the African experience of what we understand as the exploitation of children in the labour process or of deprived children will help clarify the conceptual quagmire in which we find ourselves. While attention should be paid to the pull factors that give rise to child labour, like the economic benefits derivable from it, the nature and depth of the existing institutional framework also deserves a revisit. In perusing the substantial body of information on this subject, it is important that our definition of the working child in Africa is understood, not necessarily from preconceived notions and experiences of other peoples, but also from the African world-view and the lived experiences of the African child in a globalizing century.

This book therefore aims at understanding the sources, dynamics and consequences of the exploitation of the labour power of children and the youth in contemporary Africa. Participants at the Child and Youth Studies Institute 2004, organized by CODESRIA, which resulted in this book, were encouraged to undertake a critical revisit of the literature that had been produced on children and the youth in the labour process and contribute, in a substantial way, to questioning existing knowledge, creating new knowledge and proffering solutions to the manifestations of child labour based largely on case studies. Since child labour is a universal problem, the solutions will necessarily have some commonalities, but still there will be peculiarities in terms of the understanding and prioritization of the various types of child labour and the possible solutions.

The Institute, directed by myself and Pamela Reynolds of Michigan State University, was indeed able to dissect and expose the grave dimensions of child labour practices in contemporary Africa. Others who contributed to the very lively discussions on the subject included Ibrahim Abdullah, Evariste Tshishimbi and Ijeoma Nwachukwu. The Executive Secretary of CODESRIA, Adebayo Olukoshi, at the inception of the Institute, presented broad, but at the same time incisive, views on the question of children and youth in the labour process in Africa. He highlighted issues of how the labour process has undergone transformation in Africa and its diverse implications for the children and the youth, the site of labour and the transition taking place in Africa, the inherited conceptual instruments that have been popularized by international organizations, the broad socio-cultural contexts in which the labour process takes place and the international geo-strategic dimension of children in the labour process. His views were well received and thus set the tone for the gruelling days ahead that focused on these matters. Within the first two weeks, critical aspects of the subject matter were put under the microscope, namely: the

meaning of the labour process, and who is a child and who is a youth? Child trafficking and women trafficking, child work as against child labour, types of child labour in contemporary Africa, the anthropology of labour/children/youth, conceptual and methodological issues and conflict, and the labour process itself.

The Organisation of the Book

This book is basically designed around identified issues of importance concerning children and youth in the labour process in Africa, beginning with methodological concerns and ending with case studies from different parts of Africa. The case studies come mainly from West, Central and North Africa.

In this first chapter, we review the theme and seek answers concerning the increase in the number of children in the labour process in Africa and why the enacted legislation has not been effective in checking the abusive tendencies inherent in the labour process.

In Chapter 2, the dichotomy between child labour as against domestic work in Africa is discussed and the various types and hazards of child labour outlined, observing that though child labour is global in its manifestation, it is however of serious concern in Africa owing to the kinds of labour that African children engage in, which largely occurs in and around family households, and in informal arrangements.

Mfom Umoren Ekpo-Otu in Chapter 3 carries out a study of child labour in Ikot Ekpene, Nigeria and takes as her point of intervention a historical excursion into the world of child labour in time and space. The study traces the dynamics of child labour and culture in the exploitation of the labour process of children in Ikot Ekpene. Against the background of colonial exploitation, the author posits that the complex social and economic relations occasioned by colonial imperialism effected a systematic exploitation of children's labour power in Nigeria. Not surprisingly, she is interested in knowing what feeds child labour at Ikot Ekpene, a community long associated with giving out children to third parties, and also in tracing the evolution of this phenomenon from colonial to contemporary times.

In examining economic crises and child trafficking in Nigeria, Rasheed Olaniyi in Chapter 4 embarks on a comparative analysis of the child trafficking in Nigeria in the 1930s and 1990s as a way of determining the underlying factors. He argues that the history of child trafficking in Nigeria was intertwined with social insecurity that followed colonial conquest and attained its apogee in the depression of the 1930s. His study interrogates the historical trajectory of child trafficking, and the interface between economic crises and child trafficking within which the economic exploitation of children and the youth occurs. He does this through a comparative historical interrogation of the economic regimes of the 1930s and 1990s.

In Chapter 5, Olu Torimiro offers an empirical exposition on child exploitation in the labour process, using a Nigerian case study. Utilizing various empirical variables in his analysis, he came to the conclusion that almost all the children studied were engaged and exploited in hazardous economic activities in the town of Ile-Ife. He notes that the situation is not likely to stop if the current household economic

condition persists. He believes that the types of exploitation witnessed have implications for the welfare of the children and human capacity-building in that community.

In Chapter 6, Oluwatoyin Oluwaniyi examines internal child trafficking in Nigeria from the perspective of transcending the international legal framework of understanding. Noting that though the problem arose out of the larger context of cultural, political, social and economic conditions, these are problems predominantly caused by adults but disproportionately borne by children. Oluwatoyin focuses her study on internal trafficking of children for domestic work by adults. Based on fieldwork in Nigeria, the author explores the dynamics of international trafficking and puts forward recommendations for the eradication of the problem.

Ludovic Couao-Zotti in his study in Chapter 7 entitled, 'Le Phénomène "Vidomégon": une autre forme de Traffic d'enfants dans la ville de Cotonou', discusses the phenomenon of 'Vidomégon' in Cotonou, Republic of Benin. He studies the characteristics of children who are put under placement in third families, the mechanisms for the placement and the various legislation against child trafficking. He observes that the problem of 'Vi-domégon' (child living with someone else) had for long been ignored in the Benoinoise society, whereas the practice is characterized by transitional tendencies towards international child trafficking. From his study, it is necessary to determine at what point the placement of children in third families as practised in Benin become child exploitation and child trafficking.

Other contributions in this volume come from the Francophone African countries of Congo Brazzaville, Morocco and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Ngodi Etanislak's study in Chapter 8 entitled 'Problématique du Travail des Enfants et les Stratégies de Survie au Congo Brazzaville', examines the problem of child labour and survival strategies in Congo Brazzaville. Hassan Khalouki, in his contribution in Chapter 9, is concerned with child labour in agriculture in the region of Meknes in Morocco. His work is entitled 'Etude sur le Travail des Enfants dans l'Agriculture: Région de Meknès – Tafilalet, Maroc'. Jose Bazonzi's interesting study in Chapter 10, entitled 'Problématique de la Prostitution Infanto-Juvenile à Kinshasa: Cas des "Tshel"', focuses on the problem of child/adolescent prostitution in Kinshasa, popularly referred to as 'Tshel'. It is a phenomenon that is closely associated with poverty in a post-conflict environment. In his contribution in Chapter 11 entitled, 'Enfants et Jeunes dans le Métier de la Danse et du Spectacle Populaires à Kinshasa', another interesting study from a post-conflict situation, Leon Tsambu Bulu examines the increasingly troublesome phenomenon of children and youth being exploited in the music industry in D.R. Congo. The last two studies from D.R. Congo indicate that post-conflict environments often throw up challenging problems of survival for children, the youth and women. New social issues arise that require not only proper identification and understanding by governments, social scientists and civil society including NGOs, but also innovative ways of seeking solutions.

The last chapter is the conclusion, which attempts to make some sense out of the findings from the case studies, firstly, in terms of understanding the underlying factors and dimensions of the problem and, secondly, in presenting possible ways,

depending on circumstances, of addressing some of the problems associated with children and youth in the labour process in Africa.

By and large, the expectation from the presentation of this volume is that by the time readers go through some of these case studies, the situation of children and the youth in the labour process in Africa will become clearer, thereby paving the way for more effective national and global policies aimed at addressing the problem. The findings from the case studies taken from various parts of Africa are the strongest statement being made by this book, and attest to the commonality of the problems facing the African child in the labour process in the twenty-first century.

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