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CHILDREN'S RIGHTS AND CHILDREN'S LABOUR

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CHILDREN'S RIGHTS AND CHILDREN'S LABOUR:¹

Michael Bourdillon

Introduction

In this paper, I look at some of the issues raised by the current international campaign against child labour. Using material from Zimbabwe, I argue that the issue is more complex than many people perceive, and that to stop the employment of children is not necessarily to the benefit of the children concerned and should not be equated with asserting the rights of children.

I began to take seriously the issue of child labour after attending the international conference on the subject in Oslo in 1997. Although everyone at the conference expressed their concern for the welfare of working children, there were fundamental differences on how this welfare was to be achieved. Many politicians and leaders of the International Labour Organisation favoured a ban on child labour. Representatives of non-governmental organisations, and representatives of working children, pointed out that children need work in order to survive and improve their position in society. Some people denied that children have a right to work, but no one denied that they have a right to survive. And so most people agreed that it is not right to prevent children from working when their survival depends on it.

In Zimbabwe, public concern about child labour has been growing. I find the issue problematic. On the one hand, I do not wish to be associated with the die-hards of the 19th century who defended the employment of children. On the other hand, I know of situations in which children work for wages, and where local communities praised the institutions that made such work possible while academics condemned them. I am also aware that at home and in school, children are made to work for no pay. Some class work in school has no use or interest for some of the children, and yet such work receives less criticism than paid employment, where at least children get some returns for their work. It is not clear that employment is the most serious problem that children face. In order to discuss the issue of child labour usefully, we need to know more about working children, the situations from which they come and the place of work in their lives.

I had the opportunity of studying working children in tea estates, in a situation where I had some hope of influencing their conditions for the better. I have encouraged colleagues and students to write about working children in different contexts. I was able to convene a workshop on working children in Zimbabwe in January 2000, at which we discussed many of the issues and possible ways forwards. That is the background to this paper.

Concepts of child labour

Historical overview

In subsistence economies throughout the world and throughout the ages, children have contributed their labour to the family livelihood insofar as they have been able. In agricultural societies, children are expected to help in the fields as soon as they are able. Children are involved in herding domestic animals at a young age. Young children care for even younger ones, freeing older people for productive work. Where families have specific skills, such as music or healing or some craft,² children start to learn the skills and participate in the work as soon as they are physically able. Children, especially girls, are expected to spend many hours a day in domestic work.³ Although the roles of children change as societies move into a monetary economy and a formal system of schooling, many of these expectations persist. Where we find small family businesses, children are often expected to help, serving the customers of a family enterprise.

There is logic to this approach: adults have to work in order to survive and prosper, and so it make sense that children are introduced to work gradually as they grow. So even the youngest do some work as soon as they are able, and older children do much more.

The pressures of the contemporary world pose problems for such a gradual and early introduction of children into the world of work. The more complex educational system, and the need to develop specialised skills in a complex society, makes other demands on children's time. Moreover, even in traditional settings, children's work for their families is not always benign. Work in agriculture and with animals can entail health hazards and other dangers. Long hours of work can interfere with children's education and development. Nevertheless, the way we think about children and work depends on our social context. Conceptions of the role of children developed in first world countries, together with

definitions of childhood based on age, do not necessarily apply to all societies and all social situations.

In Europe, child labour became a visible problem in the nineteenth century, when children working long hours in harsh conditions provided manufacturers with cheap labour and large profits. Although child labour became more visible in the factories of the industrial revolution, in fact the introduction of machinery was reducing the demand for child workers, and their situation was already improving. In Britain, voices were raised against child labour early in the 19th century. But working class people needed the incomes from the children and manufacturers claimed they needed the labour for profitability. Consequently, no serious attempt was made to stop child labour until the end of the century: the *Factory Act* of 1833, however, had an effect on the age at which children could start to work and the conditions under which they worked. In Europe generally, legislation was introduced towards the end of the century to curtail child labour, but was not fully effective and was often ignored by manufacturers, and by the children and their families.

The supply of child labour was effectively reduced in the twentieth century in Europe and North America by, on the one hand, rising family incomes which made incomes from children largely unnecessary for family livelihood, together with, on the other hand, increased mechanisation making child work largely unnecessary for industry. This reduction in the need for child labour was related to decreasing family size, as children became an economic cost rather than a source of income. Universal schooling led to a switch from full-time to part-time work for children. The reasons for the reduction of child labour were multiple and complex.⁴

The spread of education also led to changing perceptions of childhood. When children are placed in a separate institution, and divided into groups based on age, they become cut off from the adult world of work and production.⁵ People idealise childhood in the school situation of learning and play, under skilled adult supervision and care. The way children manipulate institutions and their rules, and do things on their own initiative outside the environment of the school falls outside this ideal. People either ignore this side of childhood or commit it to some dark world of deviance.

In rich countries, much child labour takes place in this independent world, outside the control of parents and teachers, and it is this kind of work that receives the attention of legislation.⁶ Laws rarely pay attention to the hours or types of work that children may do in

their homes under the control of appropriate adults. But in the latter half of the twentieth century, the laws in rich countries became stricter about employing children outside the home for wages, and the minimum ages were raised. These changes partly reflected changes that had taken place in society, but perhaps they also reflected concern about the ability children to acquire economic independence from adults.

Now many countries have tight legislation protecting children from employment, or harmful types of employment. Such laws are not very effective: when changes occur, there are usually other reasons.⁷ In the Netherlands, it appears that a majority of children in the 14-16 age range, and many younger children, are in fact breaking the laws that are supposed to protect them.⁸ In Britain, the procedures for employing children legally are generally ignored.⁹ If so many children break the laws, clearly the children do not perceive the laws as protecting children's interests. It appears that even in first world countries, such laws represent unrealistic political ideals of certain adults, rather than what children and their communities accept as normal practice. It is absurd that people from such countries try to impose their unrealistic ideals on poorer, developing countries.

Although the laws have not stopped the employment of children, they do have an effect on what people are prepared to say openly about child labour, and it helps to create a climate in which people react emotionally to something illegal. Laws and international conventions influence our language about values. And so people talk unreflectively about the "evil of child labour" and the need to abolish it, forgetting its role in the socialisation of children in many societies. We are uncomfortable with a suggestion that child labour might be acceptable, and the existence of child labour in our society makes us feel morally inferior to other societies. Those countries that are affluent enough to prohibit their children from earning money portray this ability as moral superiority by condemning as inhumane those who encourage children to do productive work. Perhaps it is time to turn the argument on its head and say openly that a ban on child labour inhibits the proper socialisation of children.

Nevertheless, the phenomenon of child labour poses problems. In the modern world, where workers are poor and powerless, children are liable to receive low pay for hard work. Particularly where poor people become indebted to wealthy entrepreneurs, labourers and their families are not free to stop work. In such situations, children are particularly vulnerable. A recent report on the gemstone industry in India reports children as young as 12 years old

living in the factories, working 12 hours a day, and being paid at rates very much less than what adults would earn for the same work.¹⁰ We cannot feel comfortable when children have to live like that.

In Zimbabwe people sometimes smugly note that we do not have that kind of sweat-shop. But there are instances of exploitative child labour. We found living among small-scale farmers a child of 11 years old, who had to be at the fields from dawn to dusk seven days a week. He had to help with weeding and other agricultural tasks, and when these were done, he had to stay and guard the fields from goats. For this work, he received simple board and his parents were paid Z\$100 a month (13% of the legal minimum wage for adults), from which the employers deducted money for clothes that they bought for the boy. He dreamed of saving enough money to go back to school, but this was unlikely to happen.¹¹

Child labour and child work

Most children are expected to work in some way as part of their socialisation. This might involve domestic work at home or help on family fields. In school, children are expected to work at their lessons. An idle child is perceived as a bad child. In the light of such perceptions, some people distinguish between child labour, which is bad, from child work, which is good.

According to this distinction, work is not termed child labour when it does not detract from other essential activities of children, such as leisure and education. Child labour is work that impairs the health and development of children, particularly when it interferes with the schooling of a child.¹² In practice, light work after school or legitimate apprenticeship opportunities are not usually called 'child labour'. Neither do people call it 'child labour' when children help out in a family business, with household chores, or on a family farm.

The question remains why it is acceptable for children to help their parents at home and on the family farm, but not to help a parent working for money. When women earn their living through informal vending, it is common for children, and particularly daughters, to help them. The help moves naturally into trading on their own account.¹³ Women who contract to pick tea and coffee on a commercial estate are sometimes helped by their children in order to increase their pickings and consequently their pay.¹⁴ If this is not acceptable, why

can they not help their parents in this way? If it is acceptable, why is it worse for children to be paid directly for their work?

Unfortunately, even work in the home can involve long hours, can deprive children of education, and particularly in agriculture, family work can expose children to chemical and other hazards.¹⁵ When children care for sick or elderly relatives, this is not normally considered child labour; yet children in such work can work long hours, have little social life, have their education disrupted, and their health may be endangered. In Zimbabwe, very often in response to AIDS in the family, some children have no choice but to work full-time caring for an adult in the family. Such work has all the ingredients of the more intolerable forms of child labour, and yet is of great benefit to the families, and the children themselves speak of the benefits they accrue from caring for an old person.¹⁶ Such children need support as much as any child labourer.

A problem with the distinction between child labour and child work is that it focuses attention on abstract definitions, and distracts people from the activities of children in practice, and from the situations in which these activities are performed.¹⁷ Once something is classified as 'child labour', it is identified as something bad, which must be abolished, and evokes an emotional reaction rather than a careful consideration for the situation of children. Unless we look at children in their contexts, we are liable to make mistakes.

Let me give an example. It is generally agreed that when children work on their family fields, this is acceptable child work. At one school, teachers cited cases where children were already dressed for school but had to stay away when their father demanded that they help with urgent work in the fields.¹⁸ In other cases, children are made to work several hours before school, and arrive late. Is this acceptable? Perhaps if the family is desperate for food, they have no choice. If the wheat harvest has to be brought in quickly to prevent it rotting or getting wet, this is more important to the family, and to the children, than a single day at school. On the other hand, if the father has simply decided that the children should work so that he can go off for a drink, we do not find this an acceptable reason for keeping the children away from school. It is the context that determines whether particular demands on children are acceptable, and not some predetermined classification of the work.

There is a further problem with a formal classification of child labour in that some extreme forms of labour are not easily visible. This is especially the case with when young

workers are given kinship titles and appear to outsiders to be members of the household. The young agricultural worker I mentioned was called “*muzukuru*” (sister’s son or grandson). Child labour can easily be exploited in situations of fostering, even when kinship ties are real but not close. Such children are often employed in unpaid domestic work, which can be more of a problem than formal employment outside the home. Indeed children employed in domestic work are not easily visible to the outside world, and are vulnerable to a variety of abuse.¹⁹

On the other side of the coin, full-time employment is generally classified as labour and considered unacceptable for children. Yet we have come across many cases, in both formal and informal sectors, where the employment of children allows them to continue their schooling, or to return to school after having withdrawn, even while the paid work makes their attention to school work more difficult.²⁰ Is it unacceptable for children to work for their school fees, when they have no other way of obtaining these fees?

As humans, we like to control the world we experience by dividing it into neat categories. We like clear definitions of such concepts as child labour and child work. Such mental activity is the basis of all human knowledge. It is also the basis of stereotyping and prejudice. If we find criteria for deciding in advance whether a particular activity of children is to be classified as child labour or child work, we are deciding whether the activity should be permitted before examining its advantages and disadvantages for the children in question. A more fruitful procedure would be to examine the advantages and disadvantages of the activities for the children, in the context of the general situation of the children. We could then hope to minimise the disadvantages without losing the advantages. We can only decide whether a particular activity promotes or impairs the development of a child when we have examined that activity in the context of the child’s life, and particularly against realistic alternatives.

We certainly need to consider what is acceptable and what is unacceptable in children’s work. A group of children in India produced a document entitled *Work we can and cannot do*.²¹ They looked primarily at tasks around the home and farm, and pointed out that some tasks in the home can even be performed by a three-year old out while others are too hard for fifteen-year olds. They also pointed out that older children can spend longer on chores than can young children. Children at school have less time for chores than others have. Children

productive adults to care for all the children. According to the same survey, around 35 000 households were headed by persons under 20, roughly one in 70 households nation-wide. Of these over 3 000 were headed by persons under 15.²⁵ Other studies suggest that these figures were under-estimates: they miss households in which an older person is present but is too old or too ill to act as household head.²⁶ The numbers are certainly greater now. On the one hand we want to encourage government and other people to provide social and economic support for such young people. On the other hand, while the situation remains as it is, the young people need support in securing income for their families.

Whatever our ideal might be for childhood, there are children in many developing countries who need to earn an income for their own survival and for the survival and education of their younger siblings.

Stopping child labour

There are two main reasons for trying to stop child labour. One is a concern for the welfare of children. The children are unable to receive normal education when they are working. Children are unable to engage in recreational activities, which are a normal part of a child's social development. In extreme cases, child labour impairs not only the social development of children, but their physical health as well. Work can involve contact with harmful chemicals, or be performed in unhygienic or unsafe conditions, or involve the use of dangerous equipment. There is evidence that excessive work impedes the physical growth of children,²⁷ but this does not necessarily result in permanent damage, and must in many cases be weighed against the effects of inadequate nutrition if the children do not work. In these cases, it is not so much labour as such that is condemned, but rather the conditions and hours of work that must be improved.

A second reason for trying to stop child labour is that by providing cheap labour, children take jobs away from adults, who need the work in order to support their families. The argument is that the children would benefit in the long term if the work were given to their parents, and for better remuneration.²⁸ Against this, children sometimes receive for their work as much as adults. Some adults pay insufficient attention to children in their care: there is no guarantee that better incomes for adults will result in better lives for the children. In many

see the nuances of work in different situations and for different children, in a way that adults sometimes miss. In most cases, they do not consider the work as bad, nor is the issue whether or not they get paid for it; but they do consider what is reasonable to expect of boys and girls of different ages and abilities.

If we worry too much about an accurate definition of ‘child labour’, we will not pay sufficient attention to how children are affected by their work, or how they would be affected if the work stopped. A. Vittachi pointed out in 1989:

The real issue . . . is not whether children use their energies at home, in school or at work, but whether their energies are employed in any of these places in a way that is beneficial to them — or only to the benefit of someone else.²²

The contexts of work

Whatever are our ideals of what childhood should be, the material world we live in dictates what is possible. One material factor is poverty. I have mentioned the fact that sometimes children depend on income from their work for school fees. In many cases, the livelihood of families depends on inputs from children, whether in the form of direct work in a family enterprise (such as farming) or in the form of income from paid work. In the current economic climate in Zimbabwe, the number of children forced to work in such circumstances is likely to increase.

Another factor in the equation is the structure of the population. In Zimbabwe, we have long had a high population growth rate. We have not had an economic growth rate to match it, which means that on average people are getting poorer and resources are being stretched. In a recent small survey of secondary school children in the Chipinge District, the average number of siblings of the same father was more than eight.²³ In many areas, there was not enough land to go round for their parents, let alone all the children. While the re-allocation of land and the development of irrigation schemes might partially resolve the problem for one generation, the next generation will again face scarcity of resources, and impoverished families will again be depending partly on their children for their livelihood.

The situation is exasperated by the death of so many in the productive age group from AIDS. According to Zimbabwe’s inter-census survey of 1997, 43% of the population were under the age of 15 and 56% were under 20.²⁴ In some groups, there are not enough

In Pakistan, many women and children stitched footballs on a piecework basis in their homes. Neither children nor their parents like the work. Although some of the parents see work as necessary for keeping idle children out of trouble, most would like the children to be free to play, as are children in wealthier families. International pressure has persuaded some employers to set up factories, where conditions and remuneration are better than in home-based industries. As a result, poorest families lose the incomes of their women and children – and the incomes of children on average constitute 23% of family incomes.³¹

Generally, international campaigns to stop child labour have not resulted in children going back to school and improving their situation. The more likely result is that they are forced into work that is more poorly paid and more dangerous than what they were doing before.³²

In Zimbabwe, management in one tea company decided to phase out their *earn-and-learn* schools at the primary level and for all children under the age of sixteen: these were schools in which children attended under contract to work long hours on the estates.³³ The decision was in response to pressure from foreign markets. In practice it will mean that some children will not complete their primary education and that those children who depend on the system will now have to wait till they are 16 before they can enter secondary school. When business concerns bow to international pressure and stop employing children, they are concerned for their profits rather than for the welfare of the children.³⁴ This means that we must be sure that the welfare of the children is protected before we apply such pressure.

Another problem with international pressure against child labour is that it is likely to affect only children in formal employment, where the hours and conditions of work can be inspected and controlled. Such pressure is unlikely to reach the small-scale tea farms, where children work much longer hours for lower wages, posing as relatives of the owners. A successful ban on child labour on the large estates is likely to drive more children to the more exploitative types of labour on smallholdings. Indeed, at the workshop on working children, children were asking to be allowed to work on large mines (from which they have been effectively banned) in order to escape the long hours and poor working conditions of the small-scale miners who hired the children.

I have argued that a blanket ban on child labour is likely to hurt many of the children it is trying to protect. This is partly acknowledged in the decision that the recent ILO convention

cases in Zimbabwe, there are no adults able or willing to take over the responsibility of earning for the children.

I have suggested that a more hidden reason for opposing child labour is a fear of the independence it gives to children. Certainly we fear older children who take control through the violence of gangs, and occasionally even of war. Children do not have a long experience of life and have not yet proved they can or will fit into the regular social patterns around which we order our lives. If children are given too much independence to make their own decisions, we feel uneasy, perhaps afraid. This is not a rational reason for banning child labour, but it might explain some of the vehemence with which people readily reject the idea of children earning money.

There are also more selfish reasons for wishing to ban child labour. Some countries see their industries threatened by cheaper production elsewhere. Some employers see their markets threatened if they project the wrong image. These considerations ignore the interests of the children.

Whatever the reasons, most of us agree that we would like to see working children having less work and more time for education and recreation. The simplest way of achieving this is a campaign against all child labour. The trouble with simple solutions to problems is that they can have disastrous side effects.

An international movement against child labour has succeeded in stopping children from working in some instances, particularly by boycotting goods made by the children. Zilama's study in Morocco²⁹ pointed out that some of the reasons for young girls working in the clothing industry had to do with discrimination against girls who were taken out of school to help the family. But there were also positive reasons for working, including access to skills, financial independence and respect within their families. She describes the stress, in both emotional and material terms, for themselves and for their families, when girls were dismissed from their work because international pressure deemed them too young. The result was that some of the girls so dismissed were forced into more exploitative forms of employment, including prostitution. Studies in India and Bangladesh³⁰ have shown how the children can suffer both materially and socially when deprived of their jobs as a result of international pressure against child labour.

182 should demand only the elimination of the worst forms of child labour, involving forms of slavery and bonding, the sex trade, illegal activities such as drug trafficking, and any work that might harm the health or morals of the child.

Recently a meeting of the World Trade Organisation was disrupted, and one of the issues raised was a ban on child labour. There is a grave danger that the livelihood of working children is being manipulated by people who are ignorant of the contexts in which the children are working, and whose interests are dominated by first world economics. While many developing countries need to improve their labour practices and address grave issues such as child labour, the World Trade Organisation cannot be allowed to become the custodian of human and children's rights. If it were so allowed, it is likely that many of our children will be further marginalised and impoverished.³⁵

Costs and benefits of work

Instead of focusing on definitions and what should or should not be banned, and who should be covered by such bans, I propose that we focus on what children do and the situation in which they do it (following McKechnie and Hobbs).³⁶ In this approach we can try to judge what factors work for the benefit of the children, and how we can strengthen these. At the same time, we can look at factors that work to the detriment of the children. We can look for ways to protect children from such impediments to their development, or at least to reduce the effects of such impediments.

McKechnie and Hobbs' Balance Model (slightly modified)	
Costs "bad"	Benefits "Good"
Health and safety compromised	Promotes autonomy
Limits free time	Encourages self reliance
Negative effect on education	Pays for education
Instrumentalism	Work experience
Less parent and peer contact	Economic and business training
	Responsibility within the family

Costs

Where the work of children is damaging or endangering their health and safety, this situation is unacceptable and needs to be addressed. Such risks could result from dangerous work (particularly the sex trade), exposure to chemicals (particularly in agriculture), being out and unprotected late at night, inadequate sleep and so on. Also we need to ensure that children have some free time for recreation and social development.

There is an evident cost when work interferes with education, by preventing children from giving adequate time to school work, or tiring them out excessively, or making them late for school and missing it occasionally, or worse, forcing them to drop out of school altogether. We should note, however, that in a country that does not provide free education for all, it is often precisely the work that makes education possible at the secondary level. So although the work may interfere with schoolwork, the combination is still preferable to no school at all. We also need to look at the nature of schoolwork itself, and consider how useful is the education currently given to poor children.

One problem with allowing children to work is that they can be viewed as mere instruments in the family livelihood. When the labour becomes the main means for poor families to recover from hunger, parents and families can be involved in negotiations and disputes over the control of the labour of their children.³⁷ The economic value of children can take attention away from a long-term perspective of the child's development.

Finally, when children work, they have less time particularly with their parents. We have cases in Zimbabwe in which fairly young children are unable to visit their parents for more than four weeks in a year.

Benefits

These costs must be weighed against the benefits of work. We were probably all told as children that it is good to work and idleness is bad. Even in first world countries, it is probably a majority of children who undertake, with their parents' approval, some paid employment before they are sixteen, in unskilled, under-paid and unprotected jobs.³⁸ Many people regard this as part of the normal process of socialisation, teaching children to deal with the economic world, and providing them with a sense of independence and responsibility.³⁹

Paid employment teaches children to be autonomous and self-reliant. This is particularly evident among street children, whose only source of self-respect is that they have learnt to care for themselves. More generally, if children from well-off homes can earn a little money for luxuries, is there anything against children from poorer homes earning money for necessities?

The work experience is a part of adult life, for which children are being prepared. Some people will argue that it is good for children to have some such experience while they are growing up. This could train children in a useful work ethic, or, on the more cynical side, how to manipulate the work situation.⁴⁰ Some children use employment in the informal sector to acquire business skills that they expect to utilise long into their lives. Some child work operates as a kind of apprenticeship in which children acquire skills for later in life. While we acknowledge this to be the case, we should be aware that this argument can be used by employers to justify the hiring of cheap child labour, while the children learn little that will be useful to them later: indeed “training centres” can be a guise for cheap child labour.⁴¹

Domestic work can help to incorporate children into a family, and to reinforce an extended family structure, which provides some security to impoverished families. This is particularly the case when children become responsible for caring for sick members of the extended family, sometimes as full-time work.

So we can see that work can result in benefits for children, as well as in serious costs. We need to find methods of weighing these against each other, as indeed the children do when they are the ones who decide to work.

Perceptions of childhood

I have pointed out that it is difficult to define labour with respect to children. There is also a problem of defining childhood. The ILO convention 138 defines a child as anyone below the age of sixteen. It then makes a concession to the fact that this definition by age is not suitable for all social and economic contexts by conceding that where appropriate, children may be employed at the age twelve. The more recent convention 182 of 1999 defines a child as anyone under the age of 18. Defining childhood in terms of a specified physical age is a convenient criterion developed in the Western legal system. Legal definitions may provide rough guides, but they cannot dictate how any individual will behave and how he or

she will relate to others in society. In many African societies, girls become women when they reach puberty and boys officially become men when they go through some initiation rite. Even these ritual transitions do not determine how people behave: in practice, children mature into adults gradually over time, and at different rates. The kinds of work children are expected to do changes with perceptions of their capabilities.

There are also different views on what a child is. In one perspective, childhood is contrasted with adult life and adult responsibilities. Children are cared for by others, and have no responsibilities of their own. Others make decisions on their behalf. Childhood is a time of ignorance and innocence, a time of passive learning from adults, who are assumed to know. Childhood is a time of freedom and play. Children work for learning, but not for food. In this view, children are peripheral to the adult world of economics and politics.

I have mentioned how schools in Europe have helped to create a perception of childhood that is radically cut off from the adult world. Schools mean that children become separated from adults for much of their lives and in many activities. This encourages us to think of children as radically different from adults. The need to control children means that people emphasise adult responsibility in decision-making. The idea of incompetent childhood seems to have spread from middle class families to all people in the school system.

Even the smallest infant has some say in the way its life becomes ordered: parents have to adapt to the screaming demands of infants. In many cultures, people are very lenient about the behaviour of infants, who know no better. But as children grow older, we expect them to learn to submit to their elders. We start paying more attention to how they submit to expected patterns of behaviour, and correspondingly less attention to their whims. It is easy to start to ignore their perceptions and wishes. Surprisingly, we sometimes pay more attention to the observations of younger children than to those of slightly older children, who are perceived as incapable of speaking for themselves.⁴² In our desire to control and to teach them, we can forget that they are gaining in knowledge and a variety of abilities. While their experience is short and there is much that they cannot understand, children develop competencies in other fields. They are learning to judge the situations they find themselves in and to have more sophisticated concepts about their needs. By the time they are teen-agers, they are often making decisions independently of adults.

If one extreme perception holds children to be in need of care and unable to make their own decisions, the other extreme treats children as people to be manipulated and exploited like any others who are in a position of weakness. A researcher in India reported her impression “that parents believed children were born to serve and support them and saw nothing wrong in their not being in school or not being able to play”.⁴³ While this is not the dominant perspective in Zimbabwe, we have come across parents who take for granted that their children can work hard for a couple of hours on a family enterprise before going to school, and many cases of children missing days of school for work at home. On the other hand, we have met parents who say that children should not work unless this is absolutely necessary. One of the results of globalisation is that we find at home the range of views and perceptions that can be found in the world at large.

In practice, children do not belong to some ethereal world of carefree play. They belong to the same world of politics and economics that adults belong to, and have interests that sometimes coincide and sometimes compete with those of adults. We find children being given responsibility for looking after family wealth and business from an early age, even while they are deemed not competent to contribute to important decisions about the family economy. Young children are given the responsibility of looking after even younger brothers and sisters. Children are not simply passive receivers of life and culture: they make decisions and respond to the social world in which they grow. They acquire gradually competence in different areas. In practice, we have street children, who have to look after themselves to survive: they may be lacking competence in schoolwork and in middle-class social skills, but they develop a variety of skills for survival.⁴⁴ We have mentioned the growing number of children who have become heads of their households. Whatever their limitations, children are sometimes forced to take on serious responsibilities, and often execute them successfully. Children are able to grow in competencies that are ignored or denied by adults.⁴⁵

With responsibility comes power to decide. In practice, adults and children negotiate the types of work that is appropriate for them to do and the amounts of work that is appropriate at different ages. Although children may be the weaker partners in such negotiations, it is rare that they simply passively do what they are told, without taking any initiatives of their own.

Children's voices

In order to learn about the issues that most affect children, we need to hear from the children themselves. Article 12 of the Convention of the Rights of the Child insists that children have a say in decisions that affect their lives. It is easy to say the right words about listening to children. It is not so easy for us, mature adults, to take the opinions of children seriously, especially when their opinions conflict with our own. We all know how angry we get when politicians insist that they have the best information and know what is best for us all, and assume that anyone who disagrees with them is some kind of malevolent troublemaker. Perhaps we all behave like that towards those we regard as below us in status, and particularly towards children. A child who challenges our assumptions is a troublesome child.

In the past, academic studies of communities usually focused on men. The scholars, who were mostly men, assumed that men could speak for and about women as well as themselves. Now women insist on presenting their point of view themselves. They point out that women sometimes have different interests from those of men, and have a right to defend these interests. It is now widely recognised that if women were simply to let men speak for them and govern their lives, the interests of women would suffer.

We have a parallel situation regarding children. In the past, social researchers rarely bothered to consult with children. They either ignored children or wrote through the perceptions of adults. Now we are beginning to realise that children have a right to speak for themselves. We are also becoming aware that children sometimes have interests in conflict with those of adults. Providing material aid to adults does not always benefit the children. If we recognise this, we must accept that children should have a say in all things that affect their lives, including projects offering support for children or community development.

If we pay attention to the fact that children have knowledge and skills that are often not acknowledged by adults, we have to allow them to speak for themselves when we are studying them. They have their own perceptions and interpretations of the world they live in, and have to respond to it as they try to shape their own lives. If we want to understand their place in society, we have to listen to how they perceive this place and how they want it to change and develop.⁴⁶

The parallel between women and children is not exact. A person is normally a woman for life, but childhood is a transitory stage in the lives of us all, and it ranges from the total dependence of infants to merge into independent adulthood. Women can speak for themselves in academic debates and political forums. By the time children are able to take part fully in such debate, they are no longer children. Those older children that acquire competence in debate are not necessarily the best persons to speak for younger children, or for marginalised children who have no such competence. It is difficult for children to represent themselves.

On the other hand, we have all been through childhood, and assume our knowledge with hindsight supersedes their own limited understanding of the world. We sometimes forget that the world is changing fast and the contemporary world of their childhood is not the same as the childhood we experienced in the past.

There are good reasons why adults think they know best. Adults generally have a broader and longer experience of life than children. Children, with their shorter life span, find it more difficult to take a long-term perspective. Teachers and parents know of the frustration of trying to persuade children to forego immediate fun for long-term gains (not that this particular form of short-sightedness is confined to children).

Childhood is a relatively small portion of a person's life. Much of what we do for children is precisely to prepare them for adult life. Children cannot be expected to know best how to prepare themselves for a life of which they have no experience. There is a sense in which childhood must always remain a subsidiary interest.

Children are limited in their experience of different situations of different children. Due to longer experience, adults often have better knowledge of such differences than do children. A child of a particular age or background does not necessarily represent children of other ages and other backgrounds. Older children often assume that they represent younger children, even while the younger children may regard the older ones as significantly part of their problem. Adults may be best able to represent children who have been marginalised by the peers. What children say about their situation has to be subject to scrutiny, as do the opinions of any adult. Before we can scrutinise the opinions of children, we must first hear them.

We need to pay attention to the precise areas in which adults can be expected to know more, and distinguish them from those areas in which children know more about their

situation. We are talking about children's work. It is the children, and not us adults, who know best what it feels like to be working as a child, what it feels like to be contributing the family livelihood, what it feels like to be responsible for younger brothers and sisters, what it feels like to have little time for leisure, what it feels like to have schooling disrupted (not always a bad feeling). Children know why they are working, what problems are solved, at least in part, by their work, and the sense of pride they sometimes find in it. The children know the areas in which they most feel abused or degraded or simply neglected. Children often see how their friends are mistreated, when such mistreatment is kept hidden from adults or remains unnoticed by them.⁴⁷ They also often have some good ideas about what should be done, if only they could get any adult to listen. They know where they most intensively feel the need for change. If we are going to devise strategies to improve their situation, we need first to listen to them and acquire some of their knowledge.

This is not a simple task. Children are reluctant to speak in contexts in which habitually they are not taken seriously. Child representatives in adult committees rarely have the confidence to speak out openly, and rarely have the competence to engage in the political manoeuvring that so often accompanies committee work. Contexts have to be found in which children feel comfortable in expressing their views. Children have to learn to listen to each other and do develop qualities of leadership and accountability to their peers if they are to be taken seriously.

Conclusion

I am not arguing in favour of child labour, nor for abrogating our responsibility as adults for looking after children. Where we find children working for long hours out of necessity, this is a symptom of serious problems in society. But it is a symptom, not the problem: for the children, work is usually a solution to greater problems. I have argued that in our approach to child labour, we have to be careful not to apply cultural values to situations in which they are not appropriate. We should examine the social contexts of working children and ensure that we do not make their situation worse. And in anything we plan for children, we should allow the children themselves to have a say.

¹ This paper is adapted from the "Introduction" to *Earning a Life: working children in Zimbabwe* (ed.) M.F.C. Bourdillon. Harare: Weaver Press, 2000, 1-24. The book provides

much of the ethnography on which my argument here is based. Paper presented in the Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, 4 May 2000

² For an account of the roles of children in traditional healing in Zimbabwe, see Pamela Reynolds, *Traditional Healers and Childhood in Zimbabwe*. Athens, Ohio University Press, 1996, 1-25.

³ The only detailed study of child work in rural communities in Zimbabwe is Pamela Reynolds, *Dance Civet Cat: Child labour in the Zambezi valley* London: Zed books, 1991. But on the Sukuma, see Corlien Varkevisser, *Socialisation in a Changing Society: Sukuma Childhood in Rural and Urban Mwanza, Tanzania*, Den Haag, CESO, 1973, 229-238. Benjamin White's study in Java reveals similar patterns: "The economic importance of children in a Javanese village." In *Youth in a Changing World: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Adolescence* (ed.) Estelle Fuchs, The Hague, Mouton, 1976, 187-206

⁴ See Clark Nardinelli, *Child Labour and the Industrial Revolution*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, 153-4. Also Hugh Cunningham and Pier P. Viazzo (ed.) *Child Labour in Historical Perspective – 1800-1985: Case studies from Europe, Japan and Colombia*. Florence: UNICEF, 1996.

⁵ This was part of the argument of Philippe Ariès. See *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. Translated from the French by Robert Baldick. London: Jonathan Cape, 1962, e.g., p. 336

⁶ Olga Nieuwenhuis pointed this out to me in discussion.

⁷ I believe A. Fyfe and M. Jankanish are simply wrong when they claim that historically legislation is the most important response to child labour. *Trade Unions and Child Labour: A guide to Action*. Geneva: ILO, 1997, p. 17. For an account of the removal of child labour from the jute industry in Calcutta, see Arjan de Haan, "Towards a single male earner: The decline of child and female employment in an Indian industry." *Economic and Social History in the Netherlands*, 6 (1994), 145-167

⁸ White, B. "Children, Work and Child Labour: Changing responses to the Employment of Children." *Development and Change* 25 (1994), 4, 854-61.

⁹ Jim McKechnie and Sandy Hobbes, "Child labour: The view from the North." *Childhood*, 6 (1999), 1, p. 94.

¹⁰ *Precious lives: Children Labour and Other Labour Rights in the Diamond and Gemstone Industry*. Report by International Conference of Free Trade Unions, Universal Alliance of Diamond Workers, and International Federation of Commercial, Clerical, Professional and Technical Employees. October 1997.

¹¹ Y. Chirwa and M.F.C. Bourdillon, "Small-Scale Commercial Farming: Working Children in Nyanyadzi Irrigation Scheme." In *Earning a Life: working children in Zimbabwe* (ed.) M.F.C. Bourdillon. Harare: Weaver Press, 2000, 134-137.

¹² See A. Fyfe, *Child Labour*. Polity Press, Cambridge, 1989, p.4

¹³ V. Mapedzahama and M.F.C. Bourdillon, "Street Workers in a Harare Suburb" (25-44); V.N. Muzvidziwa, "Child Vendors in the Streets of Masvingo" (59-74) and M. Mutisi and M.F.C. Bourdillon, "Child vendors at a Rural Growth Point" (75-94). In *Earning a Life: working children in Zimbabwe* (ed.) M.F.C. Bourdillon. Harare: Weaver Press, 2000.

¹⁴ M.F.C. Bourdillon, "Children at Work on Tea and Coffee Estates." In *Earning a Life: working children in Zimbabwe* (ed.) M.F.C. Bourdillon. Harare: Weaver Press, 2000, 156.

¹⁵ See, for example, A. Fyfe, 'Child labour in agriculture'. In *Protecting Children in the World of Work*. ILO, Labour Education 1997/3, no. 108, 48-50. See also Nieuwenhuys' point that work within the family is not morally neutral: Olga Nieuwenhuys, *Children's Lifeworlds: Gender, Welfare and Labour in the Developing World*. London: Routledge, 1992, 203-4.

¹⁶ Elsbeth Robson, "Invisible carers: young people in Zimbabwe's home-based health care." *Area* 32 (2000), 1, 50-69. Also in *Earning a Life: working children in Zimbabwe* (ed.) M.F.C. Bourdillon. Harare: Weaver Press, 2000, 109-126.

¹⁷ Jim McKechnie and Sandy Hobbs, *Working Children: Reconsidering the Debate*. Report of International Working Group on Child Labour. Defence For Children International and International Society for the Defence of Child Abuse and Neglect, Amsterdam, 1998.

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- ¹⁸ M. Mutisi *et al.*, "Child vendors . . ."
- ¹⁹ L. Dube, "Child Domestic Work." In *Earning a Life: working children in Zimbabwe* (ed.) M.F.C. Bourdillon. Harare: Weaver Press, 2000, 95-108.
- ²⁰ V. Mapedzahama *et al.*, "Street Workers in a Harare suburb," 29-38, and M.F.C. Bourdillon, "Children at Work on Tea and Coffee Estates," 160-167.
- ²¹ Children of Balkur Panchayat, *Work We Can Do and Cannot Do*. Bangalore: The Concerned for Working Children, 1999. They want to go on to examine what is good and bad at school and what is good and bad about parents.
- ²² A. Vittachi *Stolen Childhood: In Search of the Rights of the Child*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989, p. 101.
- ²³ See Bourdillon, M.F.C., "Child labour and education: a case study from south-eastern Zimbabwe." *Journal of Social Development in Africa* 15 (2000), 2, 24-25.
- ²⁴ Government of Zimbabwe, *Inter-Census Demographic Survey, 1997*. Harare: Central Statistics Office, 1998. Calculated from Table 2.3a.
- ²⁵ Extracted from *id.* table 5.7.
- ²⁶ G. Foster, C. Makufa, R. Drew and E. Kralovec, "Factors leading to the establishment of child-headed households – the case of Zimbabwe". *Health Transitions Review* 7 (Suppl 2) (1997), 157-170
- ²⁷ A study in two Nagpur (India) slums showed that there was no significant difference in calorie intake between child workers and a matched control group of children, but the control group of boys were heavier from the age of 12 and taller from the age of 14. Workers were slower in the genetic development. The authors do not, however, discuss the long-term effects of these differences. See Ambadekar, N.N., *et al.*, "Effect of child labour on growth of children." *Public Health* 113 (1999), 303-306.
- ²⁸ This is assumed, for example in Institute of Industrial Relations, "Child labour in the Philippines: Wood-based and clothing industries." In *Combating Child Labour* (ed.) A. Bequele and J. Boyden. Geneva: International Labour Office, 1988, p. 90. But it is not clear that jobs are interchangeable and that less child labour means better incomes for adults: for a theoretical discussion of this point see C. Diamond and T. Fayed, "Evidence on substitutability of adult and child labour." *Journal of Development Studies*, 34 (1998), 3, 62-70.
- ²⁹ Fatima Badry Zalami, *Forgotten on the Pyjama Trail: A Case Study of Garment Workers in Méknès (Morocco) Dismissed from their Jobs Following Foreign Media Attention*. International Working Group on Child Labour, 1998, especially 29-30.
- ³⁰ See Ben White, "Globalisation and the Child Labour Problem." *Journal of International Development*, 8 (1996), 6, 833-834. P.J. Lolichen and Kavita Ratna, *Harming Children by ignoring their Voices: Experiences from Bangladesh, India and Morocco*. (Draft Dossier) Bangalore: The Centre for Applied Research and Documentation, The Concerned for Working Children, 1997.
- ³¹ Save the Children Fund, *Stitching Footballs: Voices of Children in Sialkot, Pakistan*. London, 1997.
- ³² See Jo Boyden,, Birgitta Ling and William Myers, *What Works for Working Children*. Stockholm: Rädda Barnen & UNICEF, 1998, 288-297. Also J.Boyden and W.Myers, "Exploring alternative approaches to combatting child labour: Case studies from developing countries", *Innocenti Occasional Papers*, CRS 5. Florence: UNICEF, 1995.
- ³³ M.F.C. Bourdillon, "Earn-and-learn: work for education in the Eastern Highlands of Zimbabwe." In *The Condition of the Child in Southern Africa*. Ed. N. Bhebe and A. Mlambo. In preparation. Also M.F.C. Bourdillon, "Child labour and education. . ."
- ³⁴ Jayanti Durai, *Helping Business to Help Stop Child Labour*. A report by Anti-Slavery International, 1997, p.52.
- ³⁵ A Call to all Agencies to put children first in the WTO debate. Circulated by e-mail 23/12/1999.
- ³⁶ *Working Children . . .*, especially p. 41.

³⁷ See the report on research in the Eastern Province of Zambia by Drs Hazel Barret and Angela Browne of Coventry University. *Tropical Doctor* 1999, January, 57-58.

³⁸ See Nieuwenhuys, Olga *Children's Lifeworlds: Gender, Welfare and Labour in the Developing World*. London: Routledge, 1994. P.12. Jim McKechnie and Sandy Hobbs, "Work by the Young: The Economic Activity of School Aged Children." Paper presented at the Johann Jacobs Foundation Conference on Youth in the Cities: Successful Mediators of Normative Development, Marbach, Germany, October 22-25th, 1998. Ben White, "Children, work and 'child labour' . . .", p.860.

³⁹ For a contrary view, see Michael Lavalette, *Child Employment in the Capitalist Labour Market*. Aldershot etc, Avebury, 1994. The author points out that work designated as suitable for children in first-world countries is usually under-paid and exploitative.

⁴⁰ *Id.*, pp.17f.

⁴¹ Neera Burra points this out with respect to the Indian carpet industry: *Born to Work: Child Labour in India*. Oxford, etc.: Oxford University Press, 1995, p.194.

⁴² In a study of the treatment of illnesses of 6-11 year-old children in Copenhagen, young children were treated as more competent in describing their symptoms than the older ones. Young children were encouraged to describe their symptoms: parents tended to interject and speak for older children. See Pia H. Christensen, "Difference and similarity: how children's competence is constituted in illness and its treatment." In *Children and Social Competence: Arenas of Action* (ed.) Ian Hutchling and Jo Moran-Ellis. London: Falmer Press, 1998, 187-201.

⁴³ Neera Burra, *Born to Work: Child Labour in India*. Oxford, etc., Oxford University Press, 1995, p.170.

⁴⁴ Y. Chirwa and M. Wakatama, "Working Street Children in Harare." In *Earning a Life: working children in Zimbabwe* (ed.) M.F.C. Bourdillon. Harare: Weaver Press, 2000, 45-58.

⁴⁵ For a variety of studies on this theme, see I. Hutchby and J. Moran-Ellis (ed.) *Children and Social Competence: Arenas of Action*. London: Falmer Press, 1998.

⁴⁶ Pamela Reynolds points out that in order to understand childhood, we need an ethnography that recognises children as part of the political arena and pays attention to them as informants about their lives. See *Traditional Healers and Childhood* . . . , p. xxxiii.

⁴⁷ See Philista Onyango's observation that a higher percentage of children than of adults said that they had seen child workers being abused. "Child labour policies and programmes in Kenya," in *Combating Child Labour* (ed.) A. Bequele and J. Boyden. Geneva: International Labour Office, 1988, p. 169.

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