

Child Labour in the Global South: A Review and Critical Commentary

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Abstract

This paper analyzes some of the current debates on child labour in the context of the global South. It explores the ways in which ideologies of childhood – how society constructs what children should do in terms of work and how childhood ought to be – sharpen the debates over what the author identifies as three approaches of child labour: a) discourses on work-free childhoods; b) socio-cultural perspectives on work; and c) the political economy of child labour. By highlighting aspects of children’s work that are underrepresented in the academic literature, as well as international policy circles, the paper suggests a “holistic” approach to child labour. In doing so, it draws analytical attention to shifting forms and relations of children’s work, children’s differentiated perspectives about their working lives, and the importance of grounding their work in complex material social practices of interconnected histories and geographies in which children’s livelihoods continue to unfold.

Introduction

Child labour in the global South is not only a pervasive issue but also a much contested phenomenon. Although children can be seen working, their activities are perceived in a wide variety of ways, resulting in multiple constructions of child labour (Ennew et al. 2005). An appraisal of the literature on children’s work discussed in this paper suggests complex discourses and deep division in terms of whether children should work or not, what kind of work is advantageous or not and the nature of work that is considered appropriate or not. Scholars have also argued that the issue of child labour is contentious not only because many children work illegally,

but also because their work concurrently involves interdependent realities of survival, socialisation, participation, abuse and exploitation (Bequele & Boyden 1988, Invernizzi 2003, Aitken et al. 2006).

Research identifies various strands to theories of how the “problem of child labour” should be tackled, each reflecting particular epistemological viewpoints about children and childhood. Children’s work is linked to the dualistic thinking about their being either competent actors or dependent and vulnerable victims, as well as to their changing economic values (Nieuwenhuys, 1994, Zelizer 1994, James & Prout 1997, Bass 2004, Ansell 2005, Ennew et al. 2005, Bourdillon 2006). Furthermore, the ways in which different constructions of “work” and “labour” are subtly linked to ideologies of childhood – what children should do in terms of work and how childhood ought to be – sharpen these debates.

This paper¹ analyzes current debates and controversies regarding child labour in the global South. Drawing on a review of the relevant academic and policy-oriented literature, it explores: a) the ways in which discourses and ideologies of the work-free childhood construct children’s participation in work as a problem; b) examples of socio-cultural perspectives on children’s work; and c) the political economy of child labour. The paper further examines aspects of child labour that have been underrepresented in current academic and policy circles. In doing so, it draws (methodological and) analytical attention to shifting forms and relations of children’s work and different perspectives of their working lives, as well as emphasising the need to ground these in complex material social practices of interconnected histories and geographies in which their livelihoods continue to unfold. I wish to stress at the outset that this attempt is by no means an exhaustive review of the complex debate over children’s participation in a wide range of productive and reproductive activities. Useful empirical research on the multi-layered contexts in which young people derive their livelihoods and perceive their work experiences in many parts of the global South has emerged recently (see in particular Bass 2004, Ansell 2005, Kielland & Tovo 2006, Weston 2005, Grier 2006, Panelli et al. 2007, Aitken et al. 2008). My intention here is rather to map out important controversies underpinning child labour and shed insight on the ways in which child labour can be conceptualised as a dynamic process of chil-

¹ I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments on an earlier version of this paper.

dren's productive engagement in the light of rapidly transforming socio-cultural and politico-economic contexts.

Ideologies of work-free childhoods

The first of the approaches is framed in different yet interrelated discourses that point directly or indirectly to the conclusion that children should not work. Ennew et al. (2005:28) identifies four distinct constructs of child labour as being influential today. These are the "labour market" discourse which views children's work as a sign of underdevelopment; the "human capital" discourse which presents education before and in opposition to participation in labour and the "social responsibility" discourse which views child labour as an outcome of social exclusion and the "child-centered" discourse which emphasizes children's right to be protected from exploitative labour and/or set the condition under which they *should* work.

Important discourses on work-free childhoods is captured by the policies of international organisations in which interventions are aimed at guaranteeing children's well-being, as well as safeguarding their rights. Consider the definition of "childhood" given by UNICEF Annual Report on the *State of World's Children*:

Childhood is a time for children to be *in school and at play*, to grow strong and confident with the love and encouragement of their family and...*caring adult*. [As such], childhood...is a precious time in which children should live free from fear, safe from violence and *protected* from abuse and exploitation (UNICEF 2004:3, *emphasis added*).

UNICEF's argument resonates with those images of "proper childhood" in the western world that expect that children "should have a care-receiving, safe, secure and happy existence and be raised by caring and responsible adults" (Panter-Brick & Smith 2000:4). As Ennew and Milne (1989:8) asserted long ago, "children in the west go to school rather than work, they are not expected to take on responsibilities;² they have special activities called play and special things called toys to play with". It is believed that

² The notion of responsibility is nuanced and problematised in the literature.

children develop their full potential – specified in terms of outcomes in adulthood such as educational achievement, economic security, healthy attachments and a lack of anti-social habits – in school contexts rather than in work (Burman 1995, Panter-Brick & Smith 2000, Boyden & Levison 2000). This strand views childhood as a period of dependence and vulnerability and emphasises parental responsibility, both morally and economically. Childhood is reserved for learning and leisure outside the market forces of the adult world (Ennew et al. 2005). It conceptualizes child labour as a problem of, among other factors, social exclusion leading to work that exploits, alienates and oppresses children often because they are socially excluded (Ennew et al. 2005). Employment has no place in this view and, although children may work to learn and for own benefits, their involvement for economic gain or for others is deemed inappropriate. This view tends to depict any other kind of contrasting childhood as “abnormal”, “lost” or “stolen” (Punch 2003:277–8, Bourdillon 2006:202).

The above views can also be related to the argument that there is a conflict between the economic “needs” of families for labour on the one hand and the “rights” of children to education on the other. Work and education are seen as incompatible. Children should not be allowed to work until they complete education, which creates a separation that childhood is a preparation for adulthood life which should be devoted to work. Children’s participation in work is also seen as a hindrance to achieving global children’s rights and millennium development goals like ensuring the universal enrolment of children in schools by 2015 (United Nations 2007). In this approach, global legislations stress children’s right to be *protected* from work, while ignoring their right to earn an income (Miljeteig 1999: 7). For example, Article 32³ of the Convention on the Rights of the Child⁴ emphasises the right of children to be prevented from work that interferes with schooling, while Article 28⁵ strongly expresses the conviction that it is one of a child’s rights to be educated and that primary schools should be made free and compulsory for that purpose (Woodhead 1998). What these

³ Article 32 states the right of children to protection from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to interfere with their education, or to be harmful to their health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.

⁴ The UNCRC as well as regional conventions on children’s rights (e.g. the African Charter on the Right and Welfare of the Child which is ratified by all member states of the African Union) are closely tied to policy developments and service delivery in many parts of the global South.

⁵ Article 28 establishes children’s right to education and urges governments to expand free and compulsory education, particularly at the primary level.

Articles suggest is a denigration of work contrasted with an idealization of the potential of schooling (Ansell 2005).

The “global approach” to child labour views children as human beings, with education – though never considered as involving labour at all – being considered decisive in ensuring their evolving capacities. In contrast, work is deemed detrimental to child development, both at present and in the future. This view resonates with the “human capital discourse” (Ennew et al. 2005:29), in which child labour undermines the healthy development, knowledge and skills of children that are needed to contribute to future economic development. It also fits the modernisation perspective, which places the western world as an ideal that the rest of the world should follow. In this perspective, a high incidence of child labour is seen a sign of underdevelopment, whereas the dissonance of childhood from the performance of valued work is a yardstick of modernity (Nieuwenhuys 1996, Ennew et al. 2005). As a result, the employment of children is resisted, even opposed, through international campaigns (e.g. ILO’s global march against child labour in 1990s), and global NGOs network for combating child labour which produce powerful discourses of the merits of work-free childhoods.

Although unequal relations of power ensure that children’s labour is rewarded less than adults’ (Nieuwenhuys 2005), these are used as additional justifications by trade unions who believe that children’s involvement in paid labour negatively affects adult employment (Ansell 2005). Here, tighter approaches like workplace inspection by government agents, the prosecution of legal violations and the exercise of state power in terms of legislating minimum age laws are seen as protective measures (ILO 2002a). Other measures include educational laws that bring children into schools through universal enrolment (Fyfe 1989, Kifle 2002, ILO 2002b). However, ethnographic research reveals that the relationship between children’s schooling and work is rather complex, and that children do not see their choices only in either/or terms (see Boyden 1994, Woodhead 1998, Bourdillon 2001, Kabeer et al. 2003, Ansell 2002, 2004, Poluha 2004, Punch 2002).

Socio-cultural perspectives of work

The second set of arguments posits that children’s work has its own socio-cultural meanings and contexts. This perspective has gained much recogni-

tion in recent decade or so following the growth in literature on the social studies of childhood (James & Prout 1997, James et al. 1998, Grier 2006). The social studies of childhood transform the “natural” category of the child into “socio-cultural” (Jenks 1996). It suggests that children’s work is inseparably linked to the social and cultural context in which it takes place. Bourdillon (2006) and Nieuwenhuys (1994) argue that children’s work needs to be understood in the light of different material and cultural conditions and seen as varying according to the age, gender, capability, birth order, sibling composition etc. of the children involved. Any attempt to prevent children from working is Eurocentric, as their work is an integral part of everyday life and is indispensable to family livelihoods. This approach, while asserting the right of children to protection from exploitation; sees childhood as continuous with the adult world, with children gradually moving into the activities of adults as their competencies develop and as opportunities arise (Bourdillon 2006:1202). Thus work is taken as an initiation into adulthood, and employment is seen as having a growing place in their lives.

An important illustration on the socio-cultural perspective of work is also provided by social historian Ali Muzrui (Bass 2004:16–36) who argues that the Africa’s triple heritage – the indigenous, Islamic, and colonial factors – together explain the historical roots of child labour in sub-Saharan Africa. According to Muzrui, the *indigenous perspective* suggests that children’s work in families is seen as part of household production and as an ongoing process of vocational education and socialization. It also suggests that children’s participation in work is vital to maintain subsistence economies and ensure the continuity of certain cultural skills. The *Islamic perspective*, on the other hand, focuses on the role of children in the maintenance of livelihoods in a context in which women, for example, are secluded from public spaces on religious grounds. Research show how children are used as intermediaries by Muslim women, who are secluded due to the Islamic practices of *pardah*, to participate in trade activities and meet household economic needs (Schildkrout 2002, Robson 2003). The Islamic perspective also presents child labour as a service in exchange for Quranic education (Bass 2004). This is also the case in some Christian societies where children contribute their labour in order to receive a church education from religious leaders (Abebe 2008). In a historical study on the nature of child labour in the former Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, Grier (2006) employs a *colonial perspective*. Throughout the colonial period, white colonizers and employers looked to the state for help

in order to gain access to children's labour, as well as to control and discipline them. This was also the case in Togo, where girls and boys worked alongside adult family members on white-owned commercial farms (Lange 2000). Missionaries also used the labour of African children, often as domestics in their own households and as unpaid worker-pupils on the mission-owned commercial farms. Popular with employers, African children were a cheap source of labour which raised the profit margins of many white mine-owners and of nearly all white farmers (Grier 2006).

These three perspectives, though very useful in understanding the continuity of children's re-productive activities, tend to overlook contemporary structural forces that disrupt the livelihoods of families. They provide insufficient insights into children's changing work patterns which are framed within the context of unequal relations of power and reciprocity both locally and, as I will explain later on, in relation to the international economy that keeps many poor countries in deeply exploitative forms of labour.

Another argument with respect to the socio-cultural perspectives of work is that children have the right to benefits arising from work appropriate to their age (whether paid or unpaid), and poor children are often harmed rather than protected by being prevented from working (Ennew et al. 2005). They benefit from working to earn the resources required to spend on food and clothing (Bass 2004) and, instead of being an obstacle to education; the money they earn is vital to pay for school fees and uniforms (Bourdillon 2006). Also, work and schooling are not necessarily irreconcilable, as many boys and girls in the global South manage to combine them, even when formal education may not be in their best interests (Ansell 2002, 2004). As Nieuwenhuys (1994) argues, the expansion of schooling has not reduced children's work but has simply added to their duties and responsibilities. The prolongation of schooling and its growing prominence, furthermore, has removed them from certain arenas of adult social life and restricted their opportunities to learn essential life skills (Katz 1986, 1991, Porter 1996, Schildkrout 2002, Ansell 2002, 2004).

Working children find friends, skills and lessons on how to look after themselves that school curricula do not teach (Woodhead 1998, Bourdillon 2006). The knowledge they acquire from school may also be inferior to the knowledge they receive through participation in work and everyday life (Katz 1991, Schildkrout 2002, Invernizzi 2003). Furthermore, my study (2008) in southern Ethiopia shows that the school calendar is not compatible with children's agricultural work-cycle, especially with respect to ac-

tivities related to coffee production. Thus compulsory education, which brings children to schools alone, is not enough. What is needed is proper educational policies based on children's needs and realities (Admassie 2003), their protection from exploitation and from being harmed by working (Robson 2004), the provision of better employment opportunities, and adequate welfare for families who cannot support their children (Ennew 1995).

Cross-cultural research documented that children feel pride and a sense of self-reliance, worth and self-respect because of their ability to supplement the family income (Woodhead 1998:59–60, Kabeer et al. 2003). As Folbre notes (1994, cited in Ennew 1995:5), parents in the global South are often satisfied with the level of economic assistance their children provide. Likewise, many parents believe that hard work makes children more resilient as adults (Rwezaura 1998, quoted in Ansell 2005). Children's work is also defended on grounds that it provides apprenticeships and transmits skills, as well as producing socialization into adult roles (Bass 2004), and that culturally bounded notions of responsibility are linked to how children perceive the opportunities and constraints facing them and in making decisions about their work and future life chances (Punch 2002). However, this is not to suggest that there is no exploitation of children. Indeed, exploitation may be more concealed and difficult in family enterprises and contexts where work is less valued as “help”, “training” or “apprenticeship” (Punch 2003, Nieuwenhuys 1996, 2005). I will return to this issue later on.

The view that not all work is bad for children appears to receive certain recognition in international policy, including that of the ILO. The International Program for the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) considers “child labour” as work that is harmful to the physical and mental development of children, depriving them of their childhood, potential and dignity:

Not all work done by children should be classified as child labour that is to be targeted for elimination. Children's or adolescents' participation in work that does not affect their health and personal development or interfere with their schooling is generally regarded as being something positive. This includes activities such as helping their parents around the home, assisting in a family business or earning pocket money outside school hours and during school holidays. These kinds of activities contribute to

children's development and to the welfare of their families; they provide them with skills and experience, and help to prepare them to be productive members of society during their adult life.⁶

Although less rigid compared to its previous official position, the ILO's conceptual distinction between "children's work" which is acceptable and "child labour" which is harmful and exploitative is problematic (Ansell 2005). First, it is not easy to draw a boundary between the two, nor to design policy and program interventions based purely on such a boundary. Secondly, the distinction fails to capture the multiple and complex ways in which children contribute to processes of social reproduction by earning economic resources and performing a range of domestic chores. In other words, it misses out the lives of millions of working children worldwide who are simultaneously engaged in waged labour and reproductive activities inside home or unpaid labour on family farms. Thirdly, the ILO's vision of a childhood free from *exploitative* work is unrealistic at a time when the neo-liberal macro-economic policies being pushed by other international institutions (like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund) are handing women and children the burden of social reproduction resulting from economic restructuring (Robson 2004, Kesby et al. 2006). As Kesby et al. (2006) point out, the paternalism inherent in such a vision actually obscures the capacities and contributions that children make to society in the global South.

The political economy of child labour

Apart from the social and cultural factors, scholars have recently argued that children's work needs to be sufficiently grounded in particular ecological, economic and politico-historical contexts. Much of the argument stems from the works of feminist geographers (and others) who pursue a dialectical approach between the livelihoods of young people and the need to situate these in contemporary market-led development that disadvantage poorer societies (Porter 1996, Ansell 2005, Robson & Ansell 2000, Robson 2004, Katz 2004, Aitken et al. 2008, Panelli et al. 2007).

The economic and political transformations affecting the lives of young people are varied and complex. These include poverty, debt, corrup-

⁶ Accessed on 12.08.2009 from <http://www.ilo.org/ipec/facts/lang--en/index.htm>

tion, war, geo-political conflicts, epidemics, unfair trade, structural adjustment programs (SAP), inappropriate policies and ineffective legislation (Bass 2004, Lund 2007). The macro-economic policy changes imposed by the IMF and the World Bank, which forced poor countries to open up their economies⁷ in response to the “Washington Consensus”, are seen as having devastating impacts on the lives of children even in remote villages (Katz 2004, Honwana & Filip 2005, Christensen et al. 2006). As Jennings argues (1997, in Boyden & Levison 2000), the consequences of SAP are consistent with processes of increasing women’s unpaid work in both the home and the community. And, in general, work that is shifted on to women tends to be shared by children or completely shifted on to children working under women’s supervision. This means children’s local work cannot be detached from material realities but needs to be situated in intersecting geographical scales and contexts (Aitken et al. 2006) within the “global space economy” (Robson 2004:228). The crux of the argument, therefore, is the “articulation between global processes and the localised experiences of individual children...to re-introduce social reproduction as an important (but often missing) aspect of debates around globalization” (Robson 2004:227).

Young people in most parts of the global south face the brunt of marginalisation prompted by global capitalism in multiple ways. In *Growing Up Global*, Cindi Katz (2004) documents some of the adverse impacts of development in rural Sudan. Through a longitudinal study of children over a period of over two decades, she discusses how the incorporation of a village into a state-sponsored irrigation scheme had an enduring impact on three interrelated dimensions of children’s lives in respect of learning, working and play. In brief, first, Katz explores how economic changes altered the *material practices* in which children’s participation in work is both intensified and transformed. These include, among other things, the increased workload they undertake, the diminishing relation between work and play, and the spatial separation between (material) production and (social) reproduction. Secondly, Katz reveals a hidden rupture in the *social aspect* of reproduction, disruptions in the culture, knowledge and skills acquisition that bind processes of production and reproduction. Thirdly, she

⁷ These include first, “stabilization policies”, designed to make certain macro-economic changes as preconditions for rescheduling of the huge debts which many countries had run up; and secondly, “structural adjustment policies”, meant to remove “distortions” in the economy in order to facilitate the functioning of the market and foster “economic recovery” (Boyden and Levison 2000).

shows how disruption in social reproduction is embedded in ecological grounds through the degradation of *the physical environment* in which both material social practices and processes of production and reproduction take place.

Because of altered processes of social reproduction, Katz argues, what and how children learn and play and what they use knowledge for showed discontinuities over space and through time. Consequently children no longer use the skills they have acquired in their childhood when they come of age. Katz calls such disjunctions between what young people learn and what they are likely to need for their world of adulthood as “deskilling”, which is further manifested in the erosion of livelihoods, as well as in the altered trajectories of traditional pathways to adulthood. Children, for example, learn agricultural skills but have no land on which to practice them; they attend school only long enough to learn skills which are inappropriate for non-agricultural employment; or they may learn to work with and use local resources, most of which are fast disappearing (see also Katz 1991, 1994).

Emerging/underrepresented aspects of child labour

Although child labour has been on the academic and political agenda for a long time, certain forms of children’s work are under-represented in the literature. For instance, while there are many studies of waged but often exploitative female child labour, studies of girls’ domestic work are rare, and the very real contribution of their labour frequently goes unnoticed (notable exceptions are Reynolds 1991, Nieuwenhuys 1994, 1996, Blanchet 1996 in Montgomery 2009). Adults associate work with the activities needed to keep a family together and the responsibilities that come with family life (Montgomery 2009). Housework is specifically discounted, and many parents claim that those children who do not work as labourers outside the family are economically unproductive and a drain on the household income rather than an addition (Montgomery 2009). This reality is sufficiently documented in empirical studies of the lives of child domestic workers in Addis Ababa (Kifle 2002), young maids in Abidjan (Jacquemin 2004) and hidden young carers in Harare (Robson 2004).

According to Bradley (1993), who carried out a cross-cultural study of the sexual division of labour between adults and children, women are the primary recipients of the benefits of children’s labour. Although the

gender of the child is the main determinant of children's work assignment, in most societies children of both genders perform women's activities, whereas girls rarely do men's activities in any society. What this and other studies indicate is that, while children are expected to help out, their labour in many ways gives women the power, freedom and time to conduct specialty chores outside the home (Hollos 2002, Porter 1996, Schildkrout 2002), and in some cases to engage in upward social mobility.

Some research has drawn attention to the complex ways in which young people perceive and make use of unconventional livelihood pathways in order to generate an income. Many teenagers in Africa, for example, pursue livelihood strategies which are considered to be "outside" mainstream categories of work, including prostitution (e.g. Tekola 2005, Hoot et al. 2007, van Blerk 2008), begging (e.g. Abebe 2008) and drug-trafficking (e.g. Frankland 2007). Although involvement in such livelihoods requires young people to transgress social, moral and legal boundaries, they enable them to obtain life-sustaining necessities for themselves and their households, also increasing their level of social and economic independence through such work (van Blerk 2008, Staples 2007).

Children who shoulder the responsibility of domestic work due to the spatial separation of economic production and social reproduction constitute an important group (one still emerging in the literature) of child labourers. In the context of cash-crop agriculture, for example, the literature is replete with how export-oriented commercial farming has intensified child labour, social inequalities and economic differentiation, as well as how it has led to the entrenchment of new forms of patriarchy in which economic control of household assets by men is increasing the subordination of women (Grier 2006, Lange 2000). Cash-crop agriculture is also seen as having disrupted complementary gender relations between men and women (Hamer & Hamer 1994). In Ethiopia, where subsistence agriculture has for generations met basic household needs, transformations in the livelihood trajectories of rural communities produced by their adoption of export-oriented agriculture, mainly coffee, is having an enduring impact in reshaping local reproduction patterns (Abebe 2007). This shift has not only disempowered the women by taking land away from the production of a local staple – *enset* – commonly known as the "women's crop", it has often shifted the burden of social reproduction on to children at the expense of their well-being and schooling (Abebe & Kjørholt 2009). The migration of men to seek employment in urban areas or elsewhere has fre-

quently increased the workload of women and children in rural areas in maintaining the household (Abebe 2007, 2008).

In addition, economic development strategies fuelled by globalization (e.g., unfair global trade, the HIV/AIDS epidemic and Structural Adjustment Programs) are seen as having altered children's work patterns, the nature and type of work they participate in and their social relationships within the community (Abebe 2007). The ways in which epidemiology, particularly the HIV/AIDS epidemic, interacts with poverty to have an impact on the working conditions of children needs careful elucidation. Available studies focus on the impact of the epidemic on the schooling of orphans, nutrition or the extended family's ability to provide care and support for the children instead of how orphans themselves meaningfully contribute towards the welfare of households in which they are a part.

Despite being objects of pity and the focus of charity appeals, orphans work for their own survival, as well as to fulfil their social and economic obligations within their households. Few recent studies have documented the material, familial and geographical contexts of orphan's livelihoods (Abebe & Aase 2007, Ansell & van Blerk 2004, Abebe & Skovdal 2009) and how the work these children perform constitutes an unacknowledged dimension of the social reproduction of many rural and urban families (Robson 2000, Robson & Ansell 2000, Skovdal et al. 2009). Robson (2004) highlights the fact that households in Zimbabwe often rely on extended family networks, and that young girls are often sent to the city to care for sick relatives. In their study of children's migration as a household strategy to cope with the impacts of HIV/AIDS, Ansell and van Blerk (2004) further explore how combinations of interdependent factors, such as the sense of obligation to family, the household's needs for resources, the capacities of the children themselves and the children's own preferences, influence the reciprocal relationships between orphans and their care-giving families in southern Africa.

These studies highlight the fact that AIDS-affected children work for survival either independently or as part of the livelihood strategies of extended families of which they form an active part (Abebe 2008, 2009). Like their counterpart children in the context of poverty, they are vital contributors of labour and resources. More research that explores the lives of AIDS-affected children and young people and their dynamic place in daily and generational reproduction in society is necessary. This is not merely because orphans' work is valued and enters into the equation of the care they receive from the extended families that support them: a failure to ac-

knowledge their role in sustaining extended family household livelihoods and how this translates into care grounded in mutuality and interdependence reproduces a stereotype of them as simple burdens (Abebe 2009).

Concluding commentary

This review article has argued that children's work can best be understood holistically, as well as in relation to social, cultural, economic and political factors that are strongly interconnected and must be examined in context. It highlights not only how child labour has its own histories, politics and culture, but also draws attention to the geographical dimensions of children's livelihoods as spanning different and interrelated spatial scales. There is a need to go beyond considering child labour as something one is either in support of or opposed to, and to aim instead at critically understanding the hugely differentiated situations in which children work. As Bourdillon (2006) argues, the central question about child labour is not how to ban it, since there are compelling reasons not to do so. Instead, the question is how to improve the situation for children who are being exploited and ensure that their work is recognised as work and is rewarded materially and socially at all levels. More research should examine the contexts that make children engage in work themselves and the dynamics that may turn work into exploitation. This requires devoting analytical attention to the shifting forms and relations of children's work and the more differentiated perspectives on how its meanings reflect politico-economic and cultural transformations, and reveal social inequalities.

The paper has highlighted that the "value" of child labour is contextual, and that activities undertaken by children vary with household, society and time period, as well as being based on the interplay between intertwined social variables. A "holistic" approach to child labour is necessary in order to understand what it means to be a working child in a globalized world. This approach underpins acknowledgement of and support for children who are involved in both unrecognized forms of work and unconventional livelihood strategies that not only enable them to earn a living in marginal circumstances, but also increase their levels of social and economic independence. The multiple ways in which the HIV/AIDS pandemic and local, regional and international politico-economic transformations shape children's livelihoods cry out for a confrontation with the ex-

tent to which scholars and policy-makers alike superimpose, in historical ways, their own notions of childhood, children's work and child labour.⁸

In conclusion, a holistic perspective on child labour recognizes how work is tied up with processes of development and socio-cultural change, how it is constructed differently geographically, and how it becomes either rewarding or exploitative. Whether children benefit from working or not, the social meaning attached to their labour and their views not only differ from those of adults, they are also shaped differently according to their family circumstances, local cultural norms and economic situations, as well as by differences between rural and urban locations. Therefore, although it is crucial to "listen to what children say", it is necessary to ground their opinions within the complex material social practices of the interconnected histories and geographies in which their livelihoods continue to unfold.

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