CHILD LABOUR: A POTENTIAL CHALLENGE TO VOCATIONAL SKILLS ACQUISITION

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Abstract

Over the years, several efforts have been made all over the world, especially in Africa to eradicate child labour. Despite these efforts, the challenge seems to be growing rather than ameliorating. This paper critically examines the issue of child labour with a view to bringing to lime lights the challenges it portends to the future of both the individual child involved in it and the society at large. The paper also explores various ways in which child labour adversely affects education of the child and its consequent effects on vocational skills acquisition by the child who is the object of child labour. Using available literature and research reports on child labour and its attendant challenges, the study observes that child labour has remained an insurmountable challenge especially in the African continent. This limitation is evident in the high rates of school drop outs and children of schooling ages roaming the streets all over. The study concludes that helping these children acquire vocational skills will go a long way in saving them from becoming public nuisance and threat to the societies' security both now and in the nearest future. This implies ensuring practicable policies and measures to rehabilitate these children back to normal ways of life. This is with a view to working towards recreating a society that is devoid of child abuse, and the resultant insecurity.

Keywords: Child labour, education, vocational skills, child abuse, society, school drop outs.

Introduction

Child labour is a social aberration worldwide. Labour itself is an inevitable essential of social life. Child labour, therefore, could be seen as a necessary evil. Joblessness breeds poverty, poverty is a social virus that has negative effects on all
aspects of a family’s or a person’s life. There is no doubt that poverty is a major factor encouraging child labour. Togbolo (2009) argues that child labour is synonymous with poverty and that the eradication of poverty will lead to the extinction of child labour. Both poverty and child labour are depleting factors against child education. Children engaging in child labour are either not going to school at all or not attending school regularly or learning any craft from where they could acquire vocational skills. Consequently, such children grow up to become public nuisance aiding and abetting crimes at adulthood age. Just as child labour hinders children from acquiring good and proper education so also it hinders them from acquiring relevant vocational skills that could make them functional in vocational, technical and technological related jobs and professions.

If all efforts – governmental and non-governmental – fail (as the case seems now) to bring back on track those children detailed from acquiring basic education due to the scourge of child labour, no effort should be spared in making them acquire technical and or vocational skills. The experiences that children who engage in child labour gain in the process will not suffice for them to cope with emerging socio-economic responsibilities in the adulthood age. Thus, it becomes highly imperative and germane to fashion proactive measures that will encourage and make children who are victims of child labour to train and acquire vocational and technical skills with a view to ensuring their employability in labour market in their adulthood.

**Conceptual Framework**

The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines a child as a young human being of either sex from birth to the completion of physical development, a boy or girl from the time of birth until he or she is an adult. An adult is defined as a fully grown up person especially, a person over an age stated by law, usually 18 or 21. Laws of many nations, including Nigeria, from the perspective of chronological age considers an adult as someone from 18 years and above. Below this age bracket, children are not held fully responsible for their actions. Labour, on the other hand, is defined by the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English as practical work especially that which involves physical effort. Labour is also said to be effort or work, especially tiring physical work. Combining the two terms together – child labour – means engagement in any physical and tiring work with a view to earning a living by a boy or girl below the age 18.

International labour Organization (ILO) (2013) defines the term ‘Child labour’ as work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development. UNICEF Nigeria (2007) defines child labour as work that is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children and deprives them of opportunities for schooling and development. Mutie (2007) defined child labour as both paid and unpaid work and activities that are mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children. According to Brown (2011), Child labour is the
new slavery of the modern age. Bordoloi (2010) believes that child labour, in
general, means the employment of children in any work with or without payment.
Bordoloi (2010) reiterates that child labour means any work by children that
interferes with the full physical development, the opportunities for a desirable
minimum education and for their needed recreation. Togbolo (2009) considers
child labour as any act that is capable of depriving an individual child of acquiring
better education, and good livelihood at its tender age of dependency.
According to ILO (2013) child labour refers to work that:

i. Is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to
children;

ii. Interferes with their schooling by depriving them of the opportunity to
attend school, obliging them to leave school permanently, or requiring
them to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long
and heavy work.

The ILO laments that child labour in its most extreme forms, involves children
being enslaved, separated from their families, exposed to serious hazards and
illness and/or left to fend for themselves on the streets of large cities often at a very
early age. To re-emphasize the above, the worst forms of child labour as contained
in Article 3 of ILO Convention No. 182 are:

(a) All forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and
trafficking of children, debt bondage and servitude and forced or
compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children
for use in armed conflict;
(b) The use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production
of pornography or for pornographic performances;
(c) The use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for
the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in the relevant
international treaties;
(d) Work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is
likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.

The ILO (2013) is of the view that any labour that jeopardises the physical,
mental or moral well-being of a child, either because of its nature or because of the
conditions in which it is carried out, is known as “hazardous work”. Child labour
manifests itself in various dimensions ranging from, according to UNICEF Nigeria
(2007), street vendors, beggars or 'stick boys/girls' to beggars (as Falola, 2013
called them), car washers or watchers, shoe shiners or menders, bus conductors,
domestic servants and farm hands, waiters in restaurants, baby soldiers, child
trafficking among others (Bordoloi, 2010). All the above forms of child labour
become detrimental to the proper education of children because they shift the
attention and concentration of children away from acquiring education to
beneficial and functional levels.
Causes of Child Labour

UNICEF Nigeria, (2007), Mutie (2007), Cardoso and Verner (2006) identified widespread poverty, rapid urbanization, breakdown in extended family affiliations, high school dropout rates, and lack of enforcement of legal instruments meant to protect children. Over population, parental illiteracy, lack of proper education, availability of cheap child labour, parental ignorance, orphanage, children born out of wedlock with no responsible parents or relatives, willingness to exploit children as possible causes of child labour. Cardoso and Verner (2006) say that extreme poverty is a factor lowering school attendance, as children who have suffered hunger at some point in their lives are less likely to attend school. To this end, Adu-Yeboah (2013) considers school dropout as another major cause of child labour. He exemplifies characteristics of school dropouts as having average age of between 12 and 15 years is over 50%. About 82% dropouts before junior secondary school and about 18% in junior secondary school. According to AduYeboah (2013), child labour with 31.5% ranked highest among other factors such as poverty, the death of a parent, parents’ lack of interest in education, fosterage, poor performance, blame on teachers, sickness, pregnancy among others. The above stance was corroborated by UNICEF (2008) when it states that the prevalence of child labour can be directly correlated to children not attending school at all, or dropping out of school before they complete their basic education. UNICEF (2008) laments that “needless to say, child labour robs children of their childhood. But another saddening feature of child labour is that although it often arises because of poverty, it serves only to perpetuate the poverty trap by keeping children away from school”.

Other causes of child labour are death of parents and/or ill health resulting from HIV/AIDS pandemic, lack of opportunities, family violence, socialization patterns, and poor quality of schools/inadequate school facilities, declining economy, and rapid rural-to-urban migration. The tendency of the adults to have children for cheap labour is another cause of child labour. Adults engage children to work partly because of their gullibility, vulnerability and inadequate negotiating skills and therefore easy to exploit (Mutie, 2007). Brown (2011) says because children who face restricted opportunities for education will receive lower wages as adults, child labour is one of the most powerful motors transmitting poverty across generations. Brown (2011) emphasizes that failure in education policy can increase the number of children drawn into labour markets. Education is part of the cycle of deprivation facing child labourers. Excessive involvement in the world of work traps millions of children into a cycle of poverty, vulnerability and diminished opportunity (Brown, 2011).

Child Labour as a Challenge to Vocational Skills Acquisition

Adverse effects of child labour are not only on education but also on vocational skills acquisition. Sim, Suryahadi and Suryadama (2012) identify both negative and positive effects of child labour on education. Mutie (2007) believes
that where parents are abjectly poor, child labour becomes one of the feasible means of supplementing family incomes. Thus, Sim, Suryahadi and Suryadama (2012) believe that increase in household income and making food, books: healthcare and schooling more affordable are positive effects of child labour. Mutie (2007) regrets that although child labour may increase households' income and probability of survival in the short-run; it perpetuates household poverty by lowering human capital in the long-run. The question however is: should these temporary and seemingly benefits be allowed to ruin the long-run and the later life of the innocent children? Not so. The negative effects of child labour, no doubt outweigh these identified positive effects. Sim et al (2012) mention abandonment of schooling for menial jobs, and resultant ill health as possible negative effects of child labour on both the educational pursuits and destinies of these culpable children. Other devastating consequences of child labour include becoming public nuisance at adulthood, lack of vocational and technical skills that could earn the individual a paid job whose proceeds could be sufficient to cope with emerging socio-economic responsibilities.

Regrettably, most children who engage in child labour do not learn any trade or vocation since what they are after at that point in time is getting 'daily meal', not thinking and minding the future. In the process, they neither acquire good education nor acquire employable vocational skills. According to Mutie (2007), after becoming a child labourer, it becomes more difficult to go back to school. Many children seek jobs because of harsh conditions at home (Mutie, 2007). Hence, the consequences will be high rate of the jobless people and perpetrators of crimes which constitute both at the short-run and at the long-run insecurity in the society. Thus, child labour can result to high rate of unemployment, crimes and insecurity worldwide.

**Solutions to Challenge of Skills Acquisition caused by Child Labour**

Brown (2011) says that there is no silver-bullet solution to child labour. According to him, every country faces different challenges – and within each country there are many faces of child labour. He laments that efforts to combat child labour are failing in the face of inertia, indifference and an indefensible willingness on the part of too many governments, international agencies, and aid donors. According to him, statistics alone can never capture the suffering, the fear and the loss of human potential that comes with child labour. Brown (2011) therefore recommends that policy responses have to be tailored to these circumstances. Mutie (2007) and Bordoloi (2010) identify the following approaches to combating child labour:

i. **Prevention:** this is mainly undertaken through awareness creation

ii. **Rehabilitation**

iii. **Elimination of poverty**

iv. **Free and compulsory education.**

Adopting the 'tailor-made-policy' approach of Brown (2011), the best ways
to realizing the above approaches are by preventing children involving in child labour grow up to adulthood without vocational skills; rehabilitating them into learning and acquisition of trades and vocational skills. Elimination of poverty is easier said than done. The most viable way to eliminate poverty brought about by child labour is by equipping these children with employable skills that will guarantee the employment and their capability to be self reliant. Free and compulsory education has always been agitated and called for; it is high time we called for free and compulsory vocational training and skill acquisition. After all, most children engaging in child labour seem to be more familiar to labour than schooling. So, if it becomes difficult getting them back to school, they should be helped to acquire relevant vocational skills that will make them functional and productive members of society in their adulthood.

Adams (2011) says that referring to the preparation of youth and adults for employment brings about a subtle shift in language from talking about education to talking about skills. According to him, skills refer to activities influencing employment and earnings. Sim, Suryahadi and Suryadama (2012) view that skills make up the crucial ingredients that determine an individual’s future earning capability. Mutie (2007) argues that by extension, vocational training can be seen as a right for those children who cannot access formal education. Vocational training differs from conventional training in its emphasis on practical rather than theoretical training (Mutie, 2007). Thus, vocational training is a viable approach in the eradication of child labour. According to Mutie (2007) vocational training can be defined as educational services aimed at equipping a person with skills to make him/her increasingly self-sufficient and also to help such persons to enter and remain in the job market.

Mutie (2007) lists the following as ways through which vocational training can address child labour:

i. Occupational orientation: i.e. preparing children to take up responsibilities as grown-ups in future, enhancement of self-reliance in adult life, exposing latent talents which may never be developed if they stayed in child labour, enabling children to access basic necessities like food, shelter, clothing, health care facilities, and physical security among others.

ii. Rehabilitation of children who need support after withdrawal from hazardous and exploitative work.

iii. Rescuing children from underpayment and other forms of mistreatment and restoring human dignity.

iv. Introducing children to legitimate income generating activities which can assist them and their families.

v. Imparting psychotherapeutic value in children.

vi. Rescuing children from negative influences such as drugs, juvenile delinquency, child prostitution and diseases like HIV/AIDS
At the special schools in India, the children rescued from hazardous occupations are provided with bridge education, vocational training, and nutrition among others. According Bordoloi (2010), it is childhood which determines a child's future, his/her life and their worthy contributions to the world. UNICEF (1999) says education can offer an open future, a chance for improved health and safety and, above all, economic opportunity. It goes on to emphasize that education can counter today's horrendous conditions of domestic servitude, cruel and hazardous labour and outright trafficking by creating alternatives that offer children and their families real choices. It suggests equivalent out-of-school education programmes and other services for children working on the streets. The best equivalent out-of-school education is no doubt, vocational education.

Conclusion

In conclusion, no efforts should be spared in eradicating child labour. However, such efforts need to be practical and be proactive rather than the usual anemic policy statements that do not see the light of any meaningful implementation. Education is good and even better for all. But a practicable way out for children enmeshed in the plague of child labour is to be made to acquire vocational education.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are therefore made. Governments at all levels should embark immediately on rehabilitation of children engaging in child labour for vocational education with a view to making them acquire constructive and productively-directed vocational skills. Also, governments at all levels should subsidize and support children in learning and acquiring vocational skills by giving them stipends for their up-keep and settle them after their training in their respective trades/vocations. Appropriate sanctions as stipulated by law should be meted out on any culprit engaging children in child labour and abuse. Children below the age of 18 found wandering about and engaging in menial jobs should be arrested with a view to rehabilitating ('en-skilled') them but not prosecute them.

References


