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POLICY BRIEFS



Child Labour in Micro and Small Enterprises

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Introduction

There are several reasons why child labour persists in most countries, including Kenya. In Kenya, poverty tops the list mostly because over half of the Kenyan population lives below the poverty line. This is mainly the result of skewed resource distribution leading to marginalization or virtual exclusion of a majority of the population by an immensely wealthy and politically powerful political class. As the majority continues to be excluded from sharing in the benefits of economic growth, social inequalities increase and the rich-poor gap expands. In this bizarre scenario, rural households continue to register higher incidences of poverty relative to their urban counterparts. Remunerated child labour is therefore viewed as one means of survival and sustenance for poor families. Other than domestic labour which is the commonest form of child labour engagement, micro and small enterprises (MSEs) constitute the other major employer of child labour in Kenya providing the much needed cash reprieve in terms of remittances.

A second reason for the persistence of child labour is labour migration which explains much of the rural-urban drift in search of employment. The existence of a higher concentration of labour in rural areas acts as a push factor while monetary remuneration in the urban areas acts as an incentive or pull factor. Thirdly,

child labour may be seen as a means of diversifying household incomes as well as livelihoods in an effort to achieve sustainability. Fourthly and lastly, child labour may be explained from the perspective of entrepreneurship and poverty reduction. This is more the case in MSEs such as shoe shining, car wash, newspaper and polythene bag vending, scrap metal recycling and apprenticeship training (carpentry, metal work, car and tyre repairs).

In most of the MSEs, children between ages 12-17 are employed as workers. While bird scaring in distant farms and grazing of livestock may be regarded as the traditional responsibilities and normal mentoring and socialization of any growing child (male or female) in the African rural family setting, housekeeping, baby-sitting, and hawking of simple farm production of roasted groundnuts, boiled maize cobs, and an assortment of manufactured merchandise top the list of predatory urban-based economies that exploit child labour. Larger economies such as quarrying and sand harvesting are major culprits in employing child labour.

Thus, traditional etiquette and the urge to meet the cash needs of the modern household are both perpetrators of the exploitation of child labour in Kenya. These appear to thrive unabated against a backdrop of the need to eliminate child labour and

policy commitments by the government as evidenced in signature to international conventions prohibiting child labour.

This Policy brief attempts to highlight the major causes of child labour in micro and small enterprises (MSEs) and the types of MSE that employ child labour in Kenya. It also examines some of the difficulties faced by government and other stakeholders in combating child labour in this sector. It then suggests a few policy recommendations in line with already documented "good practices" that could be adopted for effective stemming of child labour.

Child Labour in MSEs in Kenya

The exact number of children working in MSEs in Kenya today is difficult to ascertain in precise terms and it is feared the real figures could amount to tens of thousands. Across the world the numbers are likely to be increasing as the global population grows and as poverty and urbanization continue unabated. A phenomenon rarely appreciated is that many children in child labour are not necessarily orphans; they work on the streets to augment household income. However, many others have run away from home, often in response to psychological, physical and sexual abuse.

In Kenya, the number of children working in the streets of Nairobi numbers in the thousands. A growing number of children between the ages of 10-17 years work in the streets of urban towns in Kenya doing various odd jobs. They are found in a diverse universe of MSEs and income generating activities such as selling newspapers, shoe shining, maize, yam and sweet potato roasting, washing cars, vending food, fruits, drinks and other consumables. It is a common thing to see many school-age children walk up and down the streets of many urban centres selling all manner of goods. These children start work very early and sometimes can be seen working late into the night. In recent times, the vending of roasted groundnuts, sweets, biscuits and other groceries has become the in-thing in Kenya's urban centres. In

the course of hawking such wares, children end up in places where the law proscribes their entry such as bars. In such situations, they are inevitably exposed to occupational hazards which include sleeping where they work such as in market stalls or on street pavements; dirty and unhygienic conditions; and vagaries of the weather such as severe rain and cold especially at night mainly because they are usually badly clothed and under-nourished.

They are also exposed to nightlife dangers of sexual harassment especially for girls. Almost always, they face the danger of being knocked down by speeding or careless motorists and inhaling of toxic exhaust fumes for longer periods; and also the risk of arbitrary police arrest and/or confinement or detention. Most of their jobs are carried out in crowded places where they are exposed to the risk of bodily injury and/or disability arising from motor accidents and assaults. In terms of remuneration, it has been indicated in that a good number of the working children do not receive any pay. Such is the case in apprenticeship schemes found in micro and small enterprises or informal sector settings where payment is often commuted to the training they receive.

Studies argue that majority of Kenyan children work principally on the basis of cultural values and community expectations of children; inadequate implementation of existing government policies to curb CL; lack of awareness of the importance of education and training; parental negligence; and high levels of poverty which has been identified as one of the major causes of child labour. In addition, increase in rural-urban migration has also led to increase in urban poverty and consequently a growing number of working children in the urban areas. According to ILO, the incidence of child labour in the country has risen partly because of the deterioration of the school system in Kenya, itself a result of economic decline, poor infrastructure, low teacher morale, and the introduction of school fees under Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) which contributed significantly to high school drop-out and truancy rates.

Past Policy Initiatives

The Kenya government has also formulated policies that are intended to protect all children, particularly those in Need of Special Protection (CNSP). CNSP recognizes child labour as being particularly harmful to the country's long-term development especially its industrialization prospects. The government, in collaboration with development partners, has made efforts in combating child labour through rehabilitative and preventive programmes and through protective legislation. Rehabilitative programs have given working children support by withdrawing them from hazardous and exploitative work and providing them with suitable alternatives such as sponsoring their education, imparting skills to them through vocational training, non-formal rehabilitation and rescue centres, among others (ILO, 2006; Omosa *et al*, 2004; ILO/IPEC, 2004; GoK, 2001).

Despite these efforts by the government, child labour in Kenya remains a widespread phenomenon and many children work in extremely dangerous, exploitative and abusive conditions. Although in Kenya child slavery or recruitment of children for use in armed conflict has not been reported, a government (2001) survey found out that some of the worst forms of child labour existed mainly as a result of poor conditions under which children worked. Such conditions include long working hours; underpayment and employment in hazardous and risky activities such as are found in many micro and small enterprises across the major towns and cities in the country, among others.

Conclusions

While considerable research may have been done on child labour, the nature and exact magnitude of child labour in micro and small enterprises in Kenya and Africa as a whole has not been researched except in some countries like Nigeria where a few studies have been conducted. Child labour in the MSEs sub-sector remains widespread and a growing phenomenon with the increasing popularity of MSEs as income earners, and the increasing levels of

poverty and urbanization in many countries across the world. Urbanization has led to increased rural-urban migration which in turn has increased urban poverty. With increased poverty in both rural and urban areas, levels of child labour are expected to rise correspondingly and this may be played out more spectacularly in MSEs especially those whose activities are latent, camouflaged or out rightly invisible ones such as commercial sex, quarrying and mining, and workshop-based apprenticeships.

At the moment, without adequate and updated data or information on the nature, causes and magnitude of child labour in micro and small enterprises, it would be highly presumptuous and speculative to comment or contribute authoritatively on how to effectively tackle child labour from this sub-sector. Two things are therefore imperative: research to find out the actual situation in order to formulate meaningful and realistic policies and strategies that can effectively combat child labour, and carry out sustained and innovative policy advocacy from all feasible angles especially to create awareness among current and prospective employers of child labour in MSEs.

Areas for Policy Intervention

- Enhance capacity of Federation of Kenya Employers (FKE) to effectively monitor and take appropriate action on MSEs employing child labour.
- Raising awareness of employers on child labour issues. Use civic education forums to reach employers. Make use of vernacular radio stations and print media, public barazas, youth organizations etc.
- Provide guidelines to employers on matters of child labour.
- Compel the MSEs to document (such as in newsletters or pamphlets) their policies on child labour and show commitment to its elimination. Also develop slogans against child labour and have child labour coordinators and/or child labour committees.



- As part of their corporate social responsibility, MSEs need to support schooling and not child labour for children. Sponsor or contribute to campaigns against child labour and recruit “champions of child labour” who talk about the issue on various occasions and network and reinforce the efforts of other stakeholders fighting child labour.
- As part of staff welfare programmes, MSEs could support pre-primary and primary school facilities for their employees’ children and/or provide bursaries for secondary schooling for bright students. They could also support vocational training for those children who do not make it to secondary or university in polytechnics and other vocational training centres.
- MSEs should take part in identifying and discouraging worst forms of child labour and dissuade their counterparts from employing child labour.
- While most micro enterprises may lack the capacity, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) should provide social amenities that are essential for holistic child development.
- MSMEs should facilitate formation and functioning of SACCOs for their employees to help them mobilize savings and invest in IGAs and also be able to send their children to school
- Spearhead anti-HIV/AIDS campaigns in their work places to ensure sustainability of adult labour and less cases of orphaned children and hence child labour.
- MSEs need to join existing child labour committees that are currently operating at district and divisional levels.

IDS Policy Briefs

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