

The role of community leaders and impact of culture in eliminating child labour

Paper for the National Conference in
Eliminating Child labour in Agriculture

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ABSTRACT

Culture plays a critical role in regulating community affairs for the maintenance of peace, stability and preparation to live an independent life. Generally it has a bearing on the economic and social life of the communities. Children learn cultural values through interaction with parents and the community in general.

Child labour has been practised for a long time. This paper will attempt to address cultural factors and practices that encourage child labour and the role of community leaders in the fight to reduce or eliminate child labour.

Table of Contents

1.0 INTRODUCTION.....	4
2.0 POVERTY	5
3.0 HUNGER.....	5
4.0 IGNORANCE	5
5.0 NEGLIGENCE	6
6.0 GENDER AND CULTURE.....	6
7.0 HIV AND AIDS.....	6
8.0 CONCLUSION	7
9.0 REFERENCES.....	8

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The nature of household chores that children are taught are mostly agricultural related in most developing countries like Malawi. These include handling of agricultural equipment, drawing water from wells, cooking and washing of food utensils, looking after young family's siblings, cultivating in the field, fetching firewood etc. It is culturally believed that children need to learn skills that will assist them in the future. It is believed that male children are supposed to learn skills that are considered appropriate for males while girls are supposed to learn their appropriate skills so that they can effectively manage their womanhood especially when they get married.

The significance and magnitude of initiation ceremonies in some cultures also put children at risk of losing interest in education. This results in the children seeking employment, forced into marriage and early pregnancies. The belief in having big families also impacts significantly on child labour as poor families are unable to take care of their children.

In Malawi local setting, child labour is encouraged by poverty, hunger, negligence, inadequate policies, inadequate enforcement of laws, HIV and AIDS, gender, culture up bring of boy/child girl, inadequate schools and learning materials, large family size etc.

ILO conventions in its definition of various terms acknowledge that children need to work as part of socialization process thus child work/domestic work entails "acceptable work undertaken by a child of any age that does not interfere with the child's schooling and his or her physical, moral, emotional or psychological development. It enables children to learn the roles they are expected to take in adulthood". Child labour entails "any activity that employ a child below the age of 14 or that engages a child between the age of 14 and 17 and prevents him or her from attending school or concentrating on school or negatively impacts on the health, social, cultural, psychological moral religion life of the child".

Although the two definitions above are quite clear and simple to understand, it is differently understood within the rural setting. Culturally it is believed that children need to be exposed to hard work if they are to manage their adulthood. Secondly, the belief of having large families also puts children at risk of being pushed into child labour because of lack of resources for family upkeep. Thirdly, initiation ceremonies in some cultures also put children at risk of losing interest in education and instead seek employment, marry early and contract HIV/ AIDS.

The fight against child labour therefore requires combined effort of all local leaders and other stakeholders which include religious leaders, political leaders, community based organizations, area development committees, village development committees, chiefs, child labour committees, parents, teachers, school committees etc. This implies the importance of community participation in the fight against child labour. The participation will build the capacity of the communities to enforce effective measures in combating child labour at a local level.

Therefore the conference will provide an opportunity for community leaders to learn best practices in eliminating child labour in agriculture, fisheries, forestry, sugar, tea,

coffee, etc. Children live in communities with the community leaders who can monitor their movements and the work they do. This therefore calls for proper sensitization of community leaders so that they are well versed with child labour issues. In turn they will closely work with child labour structures at community level. Community leaders are also better placed to handle cultural issues that have a bearing on child labour, introduce bye laws and effective implementation mechanism with other stakeholders.

2.0 POVERTY

Sometimes poor families send children to work to supplement households' needs. This can be done through bonding or forcing children into sex trade or allow/force children to marry early or go for employment.

Community leaders need to identify and engage such families in income generating activities (IGAs). Community leaders must ensure that interventions by government, donors and civil societies benefit the poorest e.g. fertilizer subsidy program, donations from relief agencies, non- governmental organizations etc. Community leaders must therefore lobby with government and other agencies for appropriate interventions and encourage or engage participation of vulnerable groups in activities that reduce poverty.

3.0 HUNGER

Hunger forces families to engage in activities which otherwise they would not do to earn a livelihood. Parents are compelled to send their children to work to earn money or food for their family and to ease pressure on food budget when children leave home. Causes of hunger have been associated with land limitations, inadequate availability of inputs, effect of climate change, poor production technologies among others. Food insecurity can lead to malnutrition for children in the household. A malnourished child does not perform well in school, consequently education becomes less attractive. This results in high level of school dropout.

It is therefore the responsibility of community leaders to ensure that all people in the villages have land for production, ensure proper land ownership and inheritance system, and advocate household food security programmes.

4.0 IGNORANCE

Many people including some community leaders are not aware and do not fully understand child labour issues. The issues include occupational safety at work and hazardous work, child work, decent working environment are not properly understood. Officials must provide civic education to community leaders and their

subjects on issues of child labour and formulate proper bye-laws and enforcement mechanisms.

5.0 NEGLIGENCE

Some parents are so negligent that they do not follow what their children are doing. They take less care of their children as such the children are forced to start fending for themselves at an early age.

There are also unscrupulous people who move from district to district to recruit children for labour under deceitful means. They lure parents to surrender their children by promising them good things in turn.

Community leaders must develop mechanisms and guidelines at Village Development Committee level to deal with parents who let their children go into child labour or those that deliberately force children into child labour.

6.0 GENDER AND CULTURE

A major deterrent in girl child education in most rural communities is a

fundamental cultural bias in favour of boy child. The widespread operation of patriarchal systems of social organizations, customary early marriages, heavier domestic and subsistence duties of females, a generally lower regard for the value of female life, all combine to adversely affect the participation of girls and women in formal education. These factors may be overcome by a profound change of attitude on the part of influential males. This may not happen without grass root and community based approach initiated by the very community and supported by NGOs.

Boy children are encouraged to herd livestock in preference to elderly people. This also has an effect on their education.

7.0 HIV AND AIDS

HIV/AIDS is contributing significantly to the increasing number of orphans and child headed households. This results in children or elderly people taking additional responsibility for caring for their siblings and grand children respectively. In addition, the pandemic adds a new dimension to the problem of child labour. This is because many orphaned children cared for by grandparents or other relatives may have to work to help provide income for guardians' and siblings. This results in children dropping out of school.

Addressing social and cultural perceptions or misconceptions that contribute to the spread of HIV and AIDS would contribute significantly to the reduction of children exposed to child labour. Some of the practices that need to be checked through proper education and practices include polygamy, local traditional birth attendants, wife inheritance among others.

Therefore, the local leaders and relevant stakeholders have the responsibility to educate, change and reduce the risk associated with the above practices. Community sensitization would reduce cases of HIV and AIDS and its effect on child labour at household and community level.

8.0 CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that community leaders play an important role in the management of community affairs. In collaboration with community members, community leaders are also better placed to assist in the fight against child labour.

Therefore, below are some of the recommended enforcement measures that community leaders and community members should put in place to combat child labour:-

- a) Any parent/guardian who does not send his/her child to school for no reason at all shall pay a fine of a goat
- b) A village headman who does not take action when a child in his/her village is not at school for no reason shall also pay a fine of a goat.
- c) Initiation ceremonies shall be restricted to persons aged 18 years and above.
- d) Any initiation counsellor who forcibly or otherwise takes a child aged below 18 years to initiation ceremony shall be fined. The same applies to any parent/guardian. The village headman where such a child comes from shall also be fined.
- e) Every community leader must mainstream HIV and AIDS, gender and child labour issues/activities and ensure maximum collaboration with all stakeholders in the fight against child labour. Zero tolerance to child labour.

9.0 REFERENCES

- 1) Practical Guide to ILO Convention 182 “Eliminating Worst Forms of Child Labour”
- 2) ILO “Emerging Good Practices on Action To Combat Domestic Child Labour”
- 3) Ministry of Women and Child Development “Resource Kit on Child Protection Manual”