

THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN COMBATING CHILD LABOUR IN AGRICULTURE

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Eliminating Child Labour in Agriculture

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Child labour represents a complex mix of ingredients that go into the development of the Malawi economy. As a backbone of the national economy, the agricultural sector employs 87 per cent of the total work force and accounts for 90 per cent of the nation's foreign exchange earnings. Out of that work force, a 2002 National Child Labour Survey (NCLS) established that 23.3 per cent are children aged between five and 14 years.¹ Meanwhile, the country hopes to eliminate the worst forms of child labour by 2016 through its commitment to local and international conventions.²

The nation thus faces a scenario where one of its most important industries (agriculture) relies on resources (child labour) which the laws are clearly against.

The paper aims to highlight the extent of child labour in the Malawi agricultural sector and what strategies can be employed to reduce, with the aim of eventually eliminating, the practice.

Finally, the paper makes recommendations on what the media can do to further expose cases of child labour with the aim of sensitising the industry and individuals to the dangers of the practice on national economic development. The recommendations also help the media to champion effective strategies aimed at combating the practice.

2.0 NATURE AND EXTENT OF CHILD LABOUR

Children in the five to 14 years age bracket constitute the school going age in Malawi and other countries in the world. The NCLS established that 23 per cent of these, translating into 730,000 are engaged in child labour. Of these children, the majority, 88.9 per cent work in agriculture, 10 per cent in industry and 0.9 in services, according to a project funded by multiple donors called the Child Labour Elimination Actions for Real Change (CLEAR)³

The Government of Malawi has taken a number of significant steps to combat child labour. In 1999, the government ratified the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention and the Minimum Age Convention of 1973. A Child Labour

¹ National Child labour Survey 2002

² Available in National Statistical Office (NSO) documents. Also quoted in background conference document *Executive Summary*, p.1.

³ The CLEAR project running from 2011 to 2015 aims "To contribute to the elimination of hazardous child labour in tobacco growing areas in Malawi within the context of the National Action Plan for the Elimination of Child Labour in Malawi (NAPEC)

Policy was also developed and vetted by the Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs and awaits Parliament approval.⁴

Further, the government developed and launched the National Action Plan (NAP) to Combat Child Labour as recently as 2010. The Ministry of Labour, additionally, developed the Tenancy Bill which awaits Parliament approval. When enacted, the bill will empower government officials to inspect estates to check the working conditions of tenants.⁵ Current practice in the tenancy system compels tenants to use their family members, including school going children, to maximise production targets set by landlords.

3.0 RATIONALE FOR STUDY

In spite of these commendable government efforts, child labour figures have only reduced slightly over the years. A 2006 study, the Multiple Cluster Indicator Survey, showed only a modest drop in child labour⁶

Furthermore, the main causes of child labour in Malawi have not been adequately addressed. According to the ongoing CLEAR project, the following are the main causes of child labour:

- Poverty is the most important driver behind child labour. Living standards appear to be particularly low among tenant farmers and elderly and female headed households;
- Food insecurity pushes families to send children to work to supplement household income;
- The high cost of education and the low quality of education in government schools leads to child labour;
- An estimated 650,000 children are orphaned due to HIV&AIDS. Many can no longer be absorbed into families with adult, able-bodied bread winners and instead grow up in households headed by grandmothers, with little choice than to work for a living;
- Local customs, traditions and beliefs, including gender roles, fuel child labour in Malawi;
- Demand for cheap labour encourages child labour in tobacco-growing areas. 92% of children in tobacco-growing areas are unpaid family labourers;
- A weak legislative system exacerbates some of the causes above.⁷

⁴ Ibid., p.1

⁵ Ibid., p.3

⁶ National Action Plan 2009-2016.

⁷ Summary of causes of child labour in Malawi as presented in Child Labour Elimination Actions for Real Change (CLEAR) document. CLEAR is a project which has been running from to 2011 and is expected to

Clearly, the above causes, the “push and pull factors” which drive children to work on estates, have largely been unmet by the various interventions by government, Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and international cooperating partners.

4.0 THE MEDIA AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

The media has for long been associated with economic development. A World Development Report 2002, titled *Building Institutions for Markets* dedicates a full chapter to the importance of the media to development.⁸

Other scholars have studied the role of the media in terms of its impact on governance issues which have a bearing on development. Stiglitz (2002) has studied the role of the media on government transparency and accountability. Besley and Burgess (2001) and Besley et.al (2002) look at the media and its role in solving citizen-government problems, Spitzer (1993) studied the media’s role in public policy while Dyck and Zingales (2002) examine how the media influences public policy and corporate governance.⁹

Nobel Prize laureate, economist Amartya Sen of India adds weight to the argument for the importance of the media in economic development by connecting the media with the prevention of famines.

Sen (1999) states that the liberal institutions that exist in India, including competitive elections and a free press, have played a major role in preventing famine in that country since independence.¹⁰ Noting that modern famines are sometimes aggravated by misguided economic policies, political design to impoverish or marginalize certain populations, or acts of war, political economists have investigated the political conditions under which famine is prevented. They conclude that societies living in closed political systems are more likely to go hungry than those which live in open societies.¹¹

Building on Sen’s thesis, other scholars further argue that the freer the media, the greater the potential for economic development. Djankov et.al. (2002) analyse the ownership structure of the media and conclude that there is a correlation between state ownership of the media and poverty,¹² meaning free independent media (as opposed to state-controlled media) fosters economic prosperity.

end in 2015. Partners for the project are: Save the Children Federation Malawi, Creative centre for Community Mobilisation (CRECCOM), Total land care (TLC) and Youth Net and Counselling (YONECO).

⁸ <http://www.worldbank.org/wdr/2001/fulltext2002.htm> accessed 12 April 2012

⁹ Coyne, Charles and Peter Leeson (2004). “Read all About It! Understanding the Role of Media in economic Development,” *Kyklos*, Vol. 57: pp. 21 – 44.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid.

While advocating for the importance of the media in economic development, Coyne and Leeson (2004) caution that free media is a necessary but not sufficient condition for such development; other factors come into play in the media's contribution to economic development.

The two conclude their study by stating:

“The existence of a free media does not guarantee economic development. While we have argued that a free media is one key mechanism for...(development), there are other factors which play a role as well - political stability, economic environment outside of the media industry, education, literacy, ideology, interest in politics and the desire to punish politicians who fail to effectively serve, etc. Bulgaria serves to illustrate this, as it has a relatively free media industry but has done poorly in terms of economic development.”¹³

Malawi's agriculture, which employs 88.7 per cent of all workers and brings in 90 per cent of export earnings, is therefore an important national economic development activity.

The media in Malawi can, as argued by the scholars cited above, therefore, play an important role in fostering economic development through its advocacy role by sensitising the agriculture industry and individuals to the dangers of child labour to overall economic development.

5.0 THE MALAWI MEDIA AND CHILD LABOUR

The media in Malawi has provided news coverage on child labour only when issues have arisen. Whenever a child labour issue arises, the news media provide coverage.

One of the country's main daily newspapers, the *Nation* has over the past decade given sustained coverage of child labour. It boasts a library with a section detailing all child labour stories that the paper has covered over the period. A number of news stories, especially about activities of Non Governmental Organisations, government officials and others who deal with child labour issues, have been carried.

In a story written in the year 2000, the Tobacco Association of Malawi (TAMA) acknowledges that the tobacco industry has been thriving on child labour for over 30 years. The organisation calls for a multisectoral approach to combat child labour. At the time, TAMA had no exact figures of children involved in the tobacco industry but acknowledged “it is clear that more and more children” are being recruited to work on estates.¹⁴

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ *Nation* newspaper, 16 November 2000.

The following year, the then minister of labour declared child labour a “national problem.” At the time, government, the United Nations and Trade Unions were working to establish a “programme of prevention, withdrawal, and rehabilitation of child labour victims.”¹⁵

In 2001, the paper reported the formation of an Association for the Elimination of Child Labour by the local tobacco industry. The formation of the group was in reaction to a threat issued by international tobacco buyers to boycott Malawi tobacco because of child labour used in estates. The following year, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and NORAD pledged \$1million support to the Malawi Government to help combat child labour. Norway’s ambassador called child labour “one of the main human rights problems in Malawi.”¹⁶

There was more news coverage of child labour in the year 2003. The *Nation* reported early in the year that the government had no figures on child labour but that the problem was “growing”. Later in the year, 12 companies teamed up to form a group called Together Ensuring Child Security (TECS).¹⁷

The year 2004 started with the announcement in February by the ILO that 246 million children were working in conditions which were hazardous to their mental, physical, and emotional development. The organisation (ILO) later in July acknowledged that it was impossible to eliminate child labour while poverty was high. The World Day Against Child Labour fell on June 13 and was celebrated in July 2004.¹⁸

In 2005, the newspaper quoted a 2002 child labour survey as showing that there were 1.4 million children engaged in child labour in Malawi.¹⁹ This was the first time local figures were given out.

The subsequent years did not provide many child labour stories. In 2006, the paper reported a village head who made symbolic gesture of fighting child labour by stopping his own 11-year old herds boy and sending him to school instead. The Dowa village head demanded that all children in his village must attend school. The paper reported the formation in the same year of Step Kids Awareness (STEKA) an NGO which provides shelter for abused children.²⁰

In 2008 the newspaper revealed shocking pictures of 13 to 18 year-old children working on a sewer pipe removing human waste using bare hands at a Lilongwe restaurant. The case was prosecuted and the perpetrator was charged.²¹

¹⁵ *Nation*, 23 August 2000.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 20 March 2002

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 22 April 2003.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 30 July 2004.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 14 November 2005

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 15 February 2007.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 27 October 2008

A story on specific health risks faced by children working in tobacco appeared in 2009. The paper reported findings which showed that 78,000 child labourers risk disease from exposure to nicotine poisoning by working in tobacco estates. The government responded by promising to fight child labour. Another story in the year depicted the plight of children facing heavy workloads and being underpaid.²²

Among stories covered in 2011 was one where a Mzimba District Labour Officer (DLO) bemoaned the lack of a data bank on child labour as an impediment to fighting against the practice. The DLO explained that having information on child labour is a starting point in knowing the extent of the problem in the district. In the same year, a child rights awareness campaign was conducted by the Ntcheu District Social welfare Office under the sponsorship of UNICEF.²³

Just this year, the newspaper made a bold statement by declaring Malawi as the country “with the highest incidences of child labour in Africa.”²⁴ It was referring to a previous report by another NGO which quoted figures as high as 88.9 per cent of children being involved in agriculture, especially the tobacco industry. The story quotes one of the officials involved in child labour issues as explaining:

“These children (working in estates) barely attend school. The result is the continuation of the tenancy cycle bequeathed by their parents. (They)... are likely to have children who will end up like them. The poverty chain can hardly be broken in this context.”²⁵

6.0 ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Such diverse coverage of the different dimensions of child labour by one of the country’s major newspapers may look sufficient. But given the country’s literacy and poverty, the information may not have reached a sufficient number of stakeholders. Child labour is a phenomenon which is rife among the poorest sections of the society. Newspaper stories are read primarily by the affluent and rich people. The people who can afford to buy and read newspapers would not normally engage their children in child labour.

In spite of their relative affluence, land owners are known to benefit from child labour. Their interests lie in maximising profits through labour intensification on their estates. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that some influential people such as politicians and other high ranking members of society who are estate owners are reluctant to fight child labour and would not give maximum support to initiatives to eliminate the practice.

A private conversation with one of the senior editors of the *Nation* revealed that some estate owners reacted negatively to stories exposing child labour.²⁶

²² Ibid., 25 March 2009.

²³ Ibid., 18 July and 22 August 2011

²⁴ Ibid., 2 April 2012.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Private conversation with *Nation* editor, Edward Chitsulo on 12 April 2012

7.0 CONCLUSION

Although the figures for child labour are not very clearly articulated, the practice is obviously a serious threat to the future of Malawi in terms of human economic development. The cycle of poverty is bound to repeat itself when children are forced by circumstances to work on estates.

The child labour situation is worsened by the health hazards associated with exposure to chemicals used in agriculture. Fertilisers and pesticides have known health effects on humans. Exposure to nicotine poses further health problems for children working in the tobacco industry. Such health risks add to the burden of children in the agricultural sector who, by engaging in child labour, already reduce their opportunities to earn a decent living in adult life.

8.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above observations, there is need for the media to join hands with other stakeholders to do the following in order to eliminate child labour:

- 1. Establish a Dedicated Media Association for Elimination of Child labour:** The Malawi media has over the years participated in national priorities by forming dedicated associations to specifically tackle an issue of national importance. There are associations which address HIV and AIDS, Corruption and Climate Change, among other. Besides routine coverage of news in their areas of interest, such associations hold regular consultations with experts and among themselves to examine priorities of how they can maximise their contribution to fight the problems identified. With the help of donors, journalists could develop one such association to address issues of child labour. It could be named Journalists Against Child Labour (JACL).
- 2. Sensitise Specific Groups on the Dangers of Child Labour:** Some otherwise knowledgeable people are under the impression that they are “rescuing” poor children by employing them either in domestic or estates work. Such groups could be targeted by JACL as well as during ordinary news coverage. The sensitisation will also be extended to the poor families who allow their children to be used as child labourers.
- 3. Encourage Government to Address Causes of Child Labour:** The causes of child labour as outlined above are real and cannot be ignored. Sensitisation alone is necessary but not sufficient to prevent families sending their children to work in farms. Government needs to address all issues of poverty, laws, culture, the

environment and the rest of the “push and pull factors” which make it inevitable for children to end up on farms. The media can work with the government in implementing strategies to get children away from farm work. For example, should government introduce training schemes such as those which were there under the defunct Malawi Young Pioneers (MYP), there will be a need to inform the public through the media the advantages of joining such schemes.

- 4. Create Greater Public Awareness on the Dangers of Child Labour:** It is clear from the observations above that in general, members of the public are not aware of the dangers of child labour. Some people look at the immediate disadvantages the child suffers by not going to school. Issues such as the health dangers of children working in tobacco estates have not been given sufficient exposure. The media can dig deeper to show the public cases depicting the health dangers of exposure to chemicals which are found in tobacco.

- 5. Encourage Specific Action by NGOs Working in Child Labour:** There are many NGOs working in child labour-related issues. From the media reports cited, such NGOs do not appear to be working to complement each other. Each group addresses the issues that are convenient for it to address. The media could “monitor” NGO activities to ensure that they complement each other from one NGO to another. Such activity could best be coordinated by the association. The association could send out proposals to international donors to set up the monitoring mechanisms so that the activities of the NGOs are better coordinated and effective.

9.0 AREAS OF FURTHER RESEARCH

The observations outlined above were based on the coverage of one newspaper, the Nation. Although the paper is one of the largest circulating and that newspaper trends are usually similar, further studies should look at more media. Future research should examine coverage by other newspapers, magazines as well as diversify to the electronic media, radio and television. Such research would yield more representation of the performance of the media.

Furthermore, future research should insist on scientific studies of the performance of the media and how it can be improved to fight child labour. The studies could be in the form of a comparative analysis of media coverage on child labour and how the audience view such coverage.

Another study could examine how messages carried in the media influence behaviour change child labour practices.

Other possible areas of research could be an examination of how government can address the “push and pull factors” which drive children to the estates. The studies could look into

how the media can assist government to come up with priorities which it can address among the “push and pull factors” so as to completely eliminate child labour.

Such studies would need a lot more time and resources. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) might come in to assist or advise on research to enhance the role of the media in child labour.

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