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Child labour in Africa

Michel BONNET*

The purpose of the following pages is to take stock of child labour in Africa and to offer certain methodological reflections on the way to approach it. Research has concentrated chiefly on the French-speaking countries of Africa, although the information available on other parts of the continent suggests that child labour occurs elsewhere under similar conditions.[1]

What work and at what age?

This question could be tackled by starting from applicable legislation, since in each country there are special regulations concerning the protection of children at work. A legal approach would, however, be extremely unlikely to throw much light on the subject, at least in those African countries which concern us. Legislation favours industry, whereas we are dealing with countries which are basically agricultural; it covers the formal sector, where it is fairly unusual to find children at work; it does not apply to so-called "family" businesses or domestic work or even agriculture, where child labour is most common. In other words, the law scarcely takes account of the real-life activities of children in Africa today at all.

Rather than applying a strict, ready-made definition of child labour to survey the situation in Africa and highlighting a number of predetermined phenomena, it seems preferable to define work as including all activities, except attendance at school and occupations which children themselves describe as games, regardless of the status assigned to them in their social environment. When we use the expression "child labour", therefore, we are using it in this broad sense of the term.

We should begin by distinguishing three different age groups:

* International Labour Organization.

[1] This article makes use of the work of the Sub-Regional Seminar (French-speaking countries of Africa) on the Abolition of Child Labour and the Improvement of Working Conditions for Children, held in Dakar from 24 to 28 February 1992. Report and documents: Conditions of Work and Welfare Facilities Branch, ILO, Geneva, 1992.

- *under 12:* these children are usually very much bound to the family, dividing their time between domestic chores or helping their parents, and some form of schooling;
- *between 12 and 13:* these children are beginning to move away, psychologically and physically, from their parents, in order to associate with children of their own age. This shift, often associated with leaving school, migrating to the city and the need to make a living, exposes this age group to feelings of insecurity, psychological instability and susceptibility to outside influences;
- *between 14 and 15:* children of this age have begun to develop set behaviour patterns; they are making contact with young adults or with apprentice-masters; they are gradually learning a trade and more or less earning a living. Their main concern is security of employment.

Can the same word, "work", be used to describe activities at such different stages in life? Does the notion expressed by the word not risk losing its meaning and significance if it is stretched to cover all these concepts? This semantic question is not without importance. Not only are the overwhelming majority of studies on child labour written in "imported" world languages such as English or French, but since studies specifically orientated towards Africa are lacking, they discuss child labour as it has been observed in other continents. The images and historical and cultural references that bring words to life do not originate in Africa. Experts and, subsequently, lawgivers use terms at such a level of abstraction (e.g. labour, employment, training, apprenticeship, remuneration, etc.) that they often speak of realities beyond the experience of the local population. Such terms may allow a particular activity to be described as permitted or forbidden by a labour code. But they are so far removed from the daily family life and language, they are of little use in assessing whether a given activity is a help or a hindrance to a child's development. Yet it is precisely this crucial question which concerns parents and to which they must find an immediate, accurate answer.

The children that concern us are boys or girls under 15 years of age. In this we ignore the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which lays down 18 years as the upper limit of childhood.[2] This question of age conceals matters which should not be taken lightly. There is a serious shortage of documentation due to insufficient study of the activities of young persons under 15. It is as if childhood and schooldays were synonymous, and as if all African children went to school. But what is the life of African schoolchildren really like?

When it comes to programmes of action, it is the problems of young persons over 15 that take precedence. The pressure of unemployment is such

[2] United Nations: *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, General Assembly, Official Documents, 44th Session, Supplement No. 49 (A/44/49), (New York, 1989).

that whenever opportunities are offered to young people – an apprenticeship centre, a youth group or sports club – available places are monopolized by older children. This author visited a number of centres theoretically open to children of 12 and over: in no case was more than 10 per cent of members under 15. Teaching and curricula invariably tend to be geared to the older age group. And this drift is important in theoretical terms. A striking example is to be seen in small street trades which, next to agriculture, account for most child labour. Indeed, demography and urbanization have caused the situation to assume such proportions that the expression "street children" has now been coined and is even used by certain authors as a sociological concept. Yet, here too the word "child" tends indiscriminately to include young people both under and over 15, and discussion of the youngest age-groups is thus adversely affected.

The child's environment

There is no point in trying to analyse the wide variety of activities of African children without paying close attention to the environment in which they take place.

An environment in recession

"The situation of most African children remains critical due to the unique factors of their socio-economic, cultural, traditional and developmental circumstances, natural disasters, armed conflicts, exploitation and hunger." This is not the personal opinion of a single expert, but the preamble of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.[3] The situation is so serious that the Organization of African Unity organized an International Conference on Assistance to African Children.[4] Let us examine some of the indicators of poverty in Africa given in table 1.

According to UNICEF, the mortality rate of children under five (TMM5) is the most significant indicator for assessing the condition of children. African countries are among those with the highest rates. In most cases, their per capita GNP is less than one tenth of average per capita GNP in industrialized countries. The UNDP has worked out the Human Development Index (HDI), which measures development in terms of the growth of opportunities available to the individual. By reference to an

[3] Organization of African Unity: *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child*, 36th Ordinary Session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the OAU, (Addis Ababa, 1990).

[4] See OAU and UNICEF: *Africa's children, Africa's future*: 1. *Human investment priorities for the 1990s*, 2. *Background sectoral papers*, Working Papers for the International Conference on Assistance to African Children, Dakar, 25-27 Nov. 1992, (New York, Addis Ababa, 1992).

Table 1. Indicators of poverty in Africa

Country	TMM5[1] 1990	GNP by inhabitant[1] (in US$)	HDI[2]	Position according to HDI[1]
Eastern Africa				
Ethiopia	220	120	0.173	138
Kenya	108	370	0.366	114
Madagascar	176	230	0.325	115
Mauritius	28	2 250	0.793	48
Somalia	215	150	0.088	151
Sudan	172	420	0.157	145
Tanzania	170	120	0.268	126
Uganda	164	220	0.192	133
Southern Africa				
Botswana	85	2 040	0.534	94
Lesotho	129	470	0.423	107
Malawi	253	200	0.166	141
Mozambique	297	80	0.153	146
Namibia	167	1 030	0.295	122
Zambia	122	420	0.315	117
Zimbabwe	87	640	0.397	108
Central Africa				
Angola	292	610	0.169	139
Burundi	192	210	0.165	142
Cameroon	148	940	0.313	118
Central African Rep.	169	390	0.159	144
Chad	216	190	0.088	150
Congo	110	1 010	0.372	113
Gabon	164	3 220	0.545	91
Rwanda	198	310	0.186	134
Zaire	130	230	0.262	127
Western Africa				
Benin	147	360	0.111	149
Burkina Faso	228	330	0.074	157
Côte d'Ivoire	136	730	0.289	123
Ghana	140	390	0.310	119
Guinea	237	440	0.052	160
Guinea-Bissau	246	180	0.088	152
Liberia	205	450	0.227	131
Mali	284	270	0.081	155
Mauritania	214	500	0.141	148
Niger	221	310	0.078	156
Nigeria	167	290	0.241	128
Senegal	185	710	0.178	136
Sierra Leone	257	240	0.062	159
Togo	147	410	0.218	132

Country	TMM5[1] 1990	GNP by inhabitant[1] (in US$)	HDI[2]	Position according to HDI[1]
Northern Africa				
Algeria	98	2 060	0.533	95
Egypt	85	600	0.385	110
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	112	5 310	0.659	74
Morocco	112	950	0.429	106
Tunisia	62	1 420	0.582	87

Sources: [1] OAU-UNICEF: *Africa's children, Africa's future: Human investment priorities for the 1990s.* [2] UNDP: *World report on human development* (Paris, Economica, 1992).

optimum rate of 1, few African countries score as much as 0.5; and in a list of 160 countries classified in decreasing order of their HDI, most African countries are placed near the bottom. If these indices are to be taken seriously, we must re-evaluate one of the ritual formulae which get in the way of discussions about child labour: "family poverty makes child labour inevitable". It might be better to say that the poor economic and social environment in which families live makes them send children to work. And this is not just a matter of form; the words are pregnant with consequences for action: how can families be expected to increase their awareness in the absence of a programme for raising their incomes?

Let us take a closer look at how poverty influences the relationship between parents and children and leads to them being put to work. Of course, poverty does not affect all families in the same way, nor does it work its way into families according to a standard pattern. The poorer a family is, the more vulnerable it is to events, whether the event be natural, such as a plague of locusts, social, such as a war, personal, such as the loss of a relative, or seasonal, such as the arrival of the dry season. The economic environment offers neither the stability nor the flexibility needed to overcome such difficulties; the children must be put to work. Parents often imagine that they will only be at work for a limited period, until the situation improves. But for 20 years now family poverty has only grown worse. Life is becoming more and more expensive, unemployment is continuing to rise and workers are paid less and less. To send a child out to work is, for a family, an attempt to escape from a situation deteriorating day by day. Studies of child labour seldom fail to condemn the trap of external indebtedness and structural adjustment policies.[5] Governments are scaling down budget allocations that have a direct impact on children, namely, health, education and social protection. Reduction of staff in the civil service is carried out at the expense of services provided to the poorest groups, who feel that they are left to sink or swim.

[5] *Child labour in Tanzania*, (Geneva, ILO, 1992), pp. 16-17; and *Towards action against child labour in Zimbabwe*, (Geneva, ILO, 1992), pp. 53-54.

In some countries financial support from relatives who work abroad is of considerable importance. The present hardening of immigration policies in Europe influences child labour in labour-exporting countries. Not only does this increase the pressure of poverty, but it also strengthens the feeling among the poorest families that they can count only on their own devices to survive. Parents thus conclude that their children must be brought up to think in this way, trained to struggle for life and introduced as soon as possible into family and community solidarity networks; in other words, they must be put to work.

Failure of the school system

School is a crucial element in the child's environment. But the system of school education is bankrupt. In 1990, UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP and the World Bank organized a World Conference on Education for All at Jomtien, in Thailand. Faced with an increasingly alarming situation, it adopted a World Declaration on Education for All and a Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs. An urgent appeal was launched to renew educational systems and structures, including those for children in the age groups covered by this study.[6]

"School" is often taken to mean "an educational system". Let us look at the school in its most concrete sense: a place where teaching is provided. First of all, there are too few schools, both for the number of children in towns and for the scattered nature of rural settlements. Packed classrooms mean that children get pushed out of school; and if the school is too far from home, children simply cannot attend classes and end up going to work anyway. In the working-class districts of towns and in villages, where schools do exist, pupils are poorly seated in cramped, sometimes dilapidated buildings, poorly protected from the elements. They can hardly hear the lesson or read the writing on the blackboard – if blackboard and chalk are available, which is far from being the general rule. Sanitary conditions are even worse, with no latrines and no water supply. How can anyone study for any length of time under such conditions? Can children really be expected to quench their thirst for learning in such a desert? How can they be expected to develop a taste for study – let alone take pleasure in study? It is all a waste of time and energy; it makes more sense to go to work.

The failure of the educational system and its consequences for child labour are reflected in education statistics. Children who have never enrolled in a school, or who have given up attending, are potential child workers because almost all of them come from poor families. They do not drop out of school on a mere whim. Nor do they immediately switch over to full-time

[6] *World Declaration on Education for All and Framework for Action to Meet Basic Learning Needs*, published by the Inter-Agency Commission for the World Conference on Education for All, (New York, UNICEF, 1990).

work. The transition is gradual. School attendance is combined with some economic activity, particularly among the youngest children. The search for an income is not driven by the need for immediate financial support; interviews with working children and their parents show that the reasons for leaving school are that it provides no vocational qualifications or that it may even be seen as an obstacle to obtaining employment, since it prepares children for a way of life unlike the reality they will experience later on. School drop-outs make up an army of potential workers, and school statistics show that this army is huge (table 2). Throughout Africa, with few exceptions, more than half the children in any given age-group fail to attend school regularly. And these are national statistics, which means that school attendance is even lower among disadvantaged social groups, in rural areas, or among girls. This army of potential child workers is growing not only in absolute numbers through demographic growth, but also as a percentage of each age group through the decay of the school system. Attempts are still made to find comfort in the illusion that school enrolment is increasing, by comparing today's figures with those of 1960; but the fact is that this increase has stopped and even reversed in some countries during the last decade; and there are no signs of a recovery in sight. In order to assess the decline in school attendance, it is not enough to analyse statistics; the situation must also be viewed from the point of view of families grappling with a harsh socio-economic environment.

Parents in Africa, like parents all over the world, are concerned with two things when it comes to their children: to give them the best they can and to equip them as well as possible to face the future; in other words, to educate them. In Africa, perhaps more than anywhere else, the child is looked upon as a continuation of its ancestors. Anything that affects the child is the responsibility not only of its parents, but also of the extended family, sometimes so extended as to comprise an entire clan, tribe or village. This form of education was traditionally thought of as an initiation into a way of life and work, into a social history and structure. Children would begin by imitating their parents in household and farm until about 10 years of age. Then, they would move on to other activities, shared among children from 11 to 14 and finish by serving the "elders" through a variety of domestic chores, apprenticeship on the job, and participation in production; the whole process was underpinned by the events and customs of the community. This traditional educational process, however, was shattered by the school system introduced under colonialism. School became a means of obtaining a diploma, and a civil service job its normal outcome. Newly independent countries invested heavily in their educational systems, but followed in the footsteps of the colonisers. What do parents see when they look at the results of so many years of effort? Not only is a diploma increasingly difficult to obtain, but it is no longer a sure way of getting a job. As for the lucky graduates who entered the civil service in the good old days, they now realize that their diploma and seniority will be of little avail in the face of

Table 2. Indicators relating to education in Africa

Countries	Gross rate of attendance at primary school (1986-1989)[1]	Percentage of children who complete primary schooling (1985-1987)[2]	Population aged between 5 and 25 (millions)
Eastern Africa			
Ethiopia	36	50	14.2
Kenya	93	51	7.9
Madagascar	97	48	3.5
Mauritius	105	98	0.2
Somalia	15	33	2.3
Sudan	49	76	7.4
Tanzania	66	71	8.4
Uganda	77	76	5.8
Southern Africa			
Botswana	117	89	0.4
Lesotho	112	52	0.5
Malawi	72	31	2.6
Mozambique	68	34	4.4
Namibia	–	–	0.6
Zambia	97	80	2.5
Zimbabwe	128	74	2.9
South Africa	–	–	8.9
Central Africa			
Angola	93	24	2.9
Burundi	59	87	1.6
Cameroon	111	70	3.5
Central African Rep.	67	56	0.8
Chad	51	78	1.6
Congo	–	71	0.7
Gabon	–	44	0.2
Rwanda	67	46	2.2
Zaire	76	60	10.6
Western Africa			
Benin	63	36	1.4
Burkina Faso	32	68	2.6
Côte d'Ivoire	70	73	3.6
Ghana	73	–	4.3
Guinea	30	43	1.7
Guinea-Bissau	53	19	0.2
Liberia	34	–	0.7
Mali	23	40	2.7
Mauritania	52	78	0.5
Niger	30	75	2.4
Nigeria	66	63	32.7
Senegal	59	85	2.2

Countries	Gross rate of attendance at primary school (1986-1989)[1]	Percentage of children who complete primary schooling (1985-1987)[2]	Population aged between 5 and 25 (millions)
Sierra Leone	53	–	1.1
Togo	101	52	1.1
Northern Africa			
Algeria	96	90	7.7
Egypt	90	95	14.1
Libyan Arab Jamahiriya	–	82	1.4
Morocco	67	67	6.9
Tunisia	113	72	2.2

[1] This rate shows the number of children registered in primary school (regardless of age), expressed as a percentage of the total number of children in the age-group corresponding to this stage of education. [2] Percentage of children entering the first year of primary school who reach the last year of this stage.

Source: OUA-UNICEF: op. cit., pp. 17 and 80.

drastic cuts in its ranks prescribed under structural adjustment programmes. Even to the illiterate, the message of common sense comes across loud and clear: school is a waste of time; why bother to send your children there? And, as many qualitative surveys have shown, this conclusion may easily be reached even by parents who earnestly wish to provide their children with education and training. It is certainly not through irresponsibility or ignorance that so many poor families in Africa take their children out of school and put them to work. On the contrary, given the living conditions thrust upon them, this is at present the most sensible solution for survival and the educational method which offers the best prospects for the future of their children. It is as if African popular wisdom were reminding communities of their traditional educational practices based on children's participation in community life through work. If we really want to know about child labour in Africa, we must take notice of the efforts made by the poorest of the poor – the majority of the population – even if they are confused and miss their target, even if they seldom act consciously.

The informal sector

The economic activities generally described as the so-called informal sector are one of the major social challenges confronting researchers and political decision-makers.[7] It is not just by chance that Africa is where

[7] See C. Maldonado: *Small urban producers in French-speaking Africa* (Geneva, ILO, 1987); and H. Lubell and C. Zarour: "Resilience amidst crisis: The informal sector of Dakar", in *International Labour Review*, Vol. 129, No. 1990/3, p. 387.

research on this subject first began and where it has made most progress. The informal sector is, for African families, the answer to the two main questions raised above: how to survive in an economic environment in which the formal sector can neither promote employment nor produce consumer goods that the poor can afford? How can children be prepared for the bleak future that awaits them, and what are the educational alternatives to the failed school system?

The informal sector offers children much more than just a selection of enterprises providing opportunities for apprenticeship and employment. Children feel at home there, even when their workplace is miles away from their native village. One striking feature of the informal sector is the role played by family relations in the running of small enterprises, especially when it comes to recruiting workers. The logic of the family, as an institution, is based on the development of its members, i.e. their physical strength, knowledge, vocational skills and network of acquaintances. Achievements by one member of the family in any of these areas strengthens relationships between the members of the family and increases opportunities to enhance the family's position within its own environment. In the modern sector of the economy, the enterprise follows a different logic: development of its capital and means of production, and increasing production itself. The development of workers' abilities is a secondary consideration. The informal sector falls between these two logics, though it remains closer to that of the family. In Africa, most families live in rural areas and their way of life is still heavily influenced by traditional values. The informal sector also serves as a stepping-stone from rural to urban areas and from the traditional way of life to the new ways of life that are emerging in towns. To put a child to work is to push it towards the future, because villagers imagine that a job in the city is the way to a better life. From the child's point of view, work in the informal sector is a way of avoiding too sudden a plunge into a wholly different world, while at the same time bidding farewell to a way of life perceived as fossilized. This is not to idealize the informal sector, in which children are sometimes ruthlessly exploited,[8] but simply to point out that the family is an integral part of this sector's structure and activities and therefore plays a part in child labour in this sector as well.

Child employment

Too few studies have been carried out to enable an accurate picture of the African situation to be painted. The available studies are either

[8] P. O. Ebigbo et al.: *Child labour in Africa.* Proceedings of the First International Workshop on Child Abuse in Africa, held at Enugu, Nigeria, 27 Apr.-2 May 1986, (African Network for the Prevention and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect, University of Nigeria Nsukka, 1986).

extremely restricted in geographical terms and inadequate for extrapolation, or are overall employment studies with little mention of children; even so the data they provide are useful.

The formal sector

In general, the formal sector in Africa employs only a tiny fraction of the active population; less than 10 per cent in many countries. Officially, there are no children working in this sector, and there is no apparent reason to doubt this claim, except on plantations. Neither teachers nor activists of non-governmental organizations nor missionaries, who are in direct contact with the poorest social categories, report any cases of child labour in this sector, though exceptions do occur. However, certain danger signs leave no room for complacency and suggest that the present situation may not last. Indeed, enterprises in the formal sector are moving towards subcontracting relations with enterprises in the informal sector and towards the exploitation of widely dispersed homeworkers, paid by the piece or the job. Such practices indirectly encourage the exploitation of child labour. The influence of the formal sector is also reflected in research and analysis and, consequently, in the formulation of policies and programmes. The models and concepts usually applied in dealing with child labour are those used to study the formal sector. Researchers regularly emphasize the extent to which conceptual relevance is important in understanding the informal sector. In particular, this applies to the definitions of "enterprise", "contract", "productivity", "workforce management", etc. This is all the more true in the case of child labour. The fact that child labour is not used in the formal sector partly explains why employers, organizations and trade unions show little interest in this issue. While the former have nothing to fear on this point from legislation or inspection, the latter see no reason to take action over a problem which seems remote from their immediate concerns.

The rural economy

In a rural setting, child labour is directly conditioned by the variety and characteristics of local geography. Thus, in savannah areas, where cattle-raising is predominant, the climate entails a sharp difference in activities as between the rainy season and the dry season. In coastal areas, where the climate is hot and humid and vegetation is dense, agriculture requires the forest to be cleared, entailing a stricter division of labour by sex than elsewhere, both among children and among adults. Such geographical differences are compounded by the multiplicity of ethnic groups, languages and systems of socialization and education. It is this diversity which determines the status of children and their work, somewhere between tradition and progress, between survival and

development. Current research on the subject has failed to devote sufficient attention to such differences.

One common factor that emerges, despite the great differences in the status of children at work and of the work they have to perform, is the harshness of their working conditions. This has nothing to do with the harshness of economic exploitation due to an employer's strategy of cutting labour costs. It simply refers to the arduous nature of work in rural areas. Climatic conditions quickly induce fatigue; there is a constant danger from insects, reptiles and other animals; the ground is hard and tools primitive; distances to be travelled are sometimes very great; working hours are long; and the overall picture can be even worse if the children themselves are not in good health. A good example is provided by one of the most widespread categories of child worker in Africa, namely, herders, one of whose principal tasks is to water their animals. When the well is deep (40 to 50 metres), water must be drawn up with the help of a team of animals. The child must lead the team to the end of the pumping track and then lead it back to the well, often at a run. Assuming a well depth of 40 metres and a container averaging 30 litres, the child has to travel 27 kilometres back and forth in order to water a herd of 200 camels. One of the first effects of such arduous work is that the child is irresistibly attracted by life in the town. In Africa, the scale of migration to towns is directly linked to the severity of working conditions in rural areas. People seek less tiring work, which will if possible guarantee survival at a lower cost. There is food for thought in the failure of all government attempts to send back to rural areas children or young persons who have left for the town. Even after experiencing what many consider unacceptable living conditions in city streets and shantytowns, the children still prefer them to those of the country.

The work assigned to children in rural areas may be divided into three major categories. The first consists of domestic chores, which begin well before school age. Here their chief tasks are to help their mother in all her work and gradually to replace her, thus allowing her to devote herself to activities which are more profitable in economic terms. In this area girls, predictably, play a greater part than boys. The second category is that of farm work, which children sometimes have to perform beyond their physical strength. According to the division of labour by sex, girls work with the women of the village, and boys with the men. Children look after the animals and perform all tasks to do with water. The third category, which is usually overlooked in studies on the subject, is that of work in the informal sector of the rural economy. This includes crafts in the traditional sense and small trades that are essential to village life, especially shopkeeping. It has been a common mistake to equate work in rural areas with work within the family. Indeed, some children are employed in large agricultural enterprises which have nothing to do with family life, particularly in cotton, tea, coffee, cocoa and sisal plantations.

The urban informal sector

As in the formal sector, there is little to suggest that child labour is being ruthlessly exploited in the informal sector. Hard, dangerous and often unacceptable working conditions do exist, but they are not normally the result of direct exploitation. It is not possible to examine the urban informal sector without looking into the issue of child labour, of which there are basically four types: (1) small trades, often called street trades, in which there are few children under 15 (apparently fewer than 10 per cent), although this age group is represented in a wide range of occupations. A survey carried out in Yaoundé (Cameroon) listed 121 different occupations.[9] It is in these small trades that children undergo the apprenticeship discussed in greater detail below. (2) Domestic service, in which more than 90 per cent of the children employed are girls, sometimes as young as seven or eight years old. Their number cannot be calculated precisely, but is known to be considerable. Their working conditions are very harsh, sometimes verging on slavery, often driving them to prostitution. (3) Domestic service in the family, where children are required to look after the youngest members of their family, perform caretaking duties, cleaning, etc. Their activities are an integral part of the informal sector, since without them their parents, especially their mothers, would be unable to devote themselves to income-generating activities. These children are generally in the youngest age-groups (under 11). (4) Begging, for which children are despised and regarded as thieves. These children are the most vulnerable to the dangers and violence of street life. They are often driven to crime in order to survive. A distinction must be drawn between beggars who regularly return to their family or guardian at night, and those who permanently live on the street, cut off from their family, and who generally come from outside the town or even abroad. The pupils of Koranic schools are a special case. While some of them may beg out of necessity, for subsistence, others are forced to do so as a form of exploitation by certain marabouts – local Muslim clerics – in the name of a warped interpretation of the duty to give alms to the poor.[10]

In each of these categories of working children, distinctions must be drawn between permanent workers, who have definitely left school, temporary workers, who combine their activity with sporadic school attendance, and seasonal workers, who come from rural areas during the dry season, returning home when agricultural work resumes. In African towns,

[9] Kengne Fodouop: *Les petits métiers de la rue et l'emploi; le cas de Yaoundé*, (Yaoundé, SOPECAM, 1991), pp. 158-161. See Boureima Tao: *Children and young people on the streets: The tip of the iceberg*, (Ouagadougou, Government of Burkina Faso and UNICEF, 1991). See also the numerous publications of ENDA (a non-governmental organization), Dakar, dealing with street children.

[10] On this subject, see Mamadou Wane: *Le Daara de Malika, 1980-1990, Une expérience au Sénégal d'un projet socio-pédagogique de réhabilitation d'enfants mendiants.* (Abidjan, Inter-African Centre for the Development of Vocational Training, 1990).

there are few abandoned children completely cut off from their families, except foreign children who have emigrated because of some natural disaster or, more often, war. By tradition, parents give their children a good deal of freedom from a very young age; this encourages children to develop their own responses to events and environment, thus helping them to mature quickly. Such freedom is possible because education and child supervision are entrusted to the community. Disappearance from the family circle for several months to seek one's fortune in the city does not have the same implications as in other cultural settings. Furthermore, family links, even if they do not appear as a direct link with the father or mother, exist in various other forms such as a direct relationship with a member of the extended family or tribe, membership of a group of children or young persons from the same area, or work for an employer or apprenticeship-master from the same ethnic group or, at least, known to the parent.

The relation between working children and society in the urban informal sector can be defined on the basis of two criteria, namely, form and place. The form of the relation is reflected in the tasks entrusted to children, which, particularly when they are very young, are mostly services and seldom production tasks. They mostly perform household chores, and their daily existence hinges on obedience to the "master". Alternatively, if their activities are connected with trade, the customer is king. Universal condescension of the adult towards the child is compounded by contempt of the master for the servant, of the rich for the poor. In this context, contempt, harshness and violence are indeed the main ingredients of socialization... Social interaction takes place in the street, where working children carry on most of their activities. To them, city streets are a place of permanent insecurity, since they never know whom they are going to meet, nor how the customer will behave. The main danger, of course, is the police, whose duty is to maintain law and order, i.e. to remove from the street all outlaws – which, by definition, is what children who work in the street are – by intimidating them or shutting them up in a police station or a "prison". The larger the town, the more difficult it is for working children to make contact with the intermediary links which might connect them with the mainstream of society. Municipal services and health and leisure centres are unable – and often unwilling – to reach out to these children; their staff are rarely seen on the street. Finally, this section would be incomplete without mentioning the appalling problem of AIDS and its relation to child labour. Adults who suffer from AIDS, without employment or social protection are entirely dependent on their children for a living. Furthermore, the sexual exploitation of children, which is spreading rapidly in Africa, exposes them to infection, since they have no means of protection and because sexual exploitation is part of their working conditions.[11]

[11] F. Bruce: *The sexual exploitation of children: Field responses*, a study by the International Catholic Child Bureau, (Geneva, ICCB, 1991).

Apprenticeship

It must be remembered that the type of apprenticeship discussed in this article has nothing to do with vocational training centres or apprenticeship systems approved by governments and codified by law; rather, it refers to the traditional training system prevalent in rural areas and in handicrafts, which seems to be gaining ground throughout the informal sector. This type of apprenticeship is one of Africa's resources. It would be impossible to describe it in just a few lines; the following comments are therefore confined to a few characteristics of significance for the child-labour-employment relationship.[12]

This form of apprenticeship is rooted in the child's traditional social environment, especially through the relationship between the employer and the family, which emphasizes protection of the child. The family plays a decisive part in the choice of an occupation and, even more so, that of an employer; it is the family which concludes the contract and exercises a degree of supervision. It is true that the connection between particular occupations and specific castes or ethnic groups is becoming looser and that a number of trades are becoming less traditional; but the fact remains that the family still plays an important and beneficial part in placing its children in apprenticeship.

Another feature of apprenticeship, which is also characteristic of enterprises in the informal sector, is its flexibility. It is adaptable to the needs and working conditions of each enterprise. It can also vary according to changes in socio-economic circumstances. It can thus give each child an opportunity to develop according to its capabilities and, more or less, its preferences. In practice, the apprenticeship-master seldom acts as an instructor (this, by the way, is one of the most criticized aspects of the system), and it is up to the apprentice to make a constant effort to listen, watch and seize every opportunity to learn.

Furthermore, training is carried out in the course of production. The child is thus confronted with real business; he will learn that it is wrong to play with materials, not only because they must not be wasted, but also because their very nature must be respected. The apprentice will also learn that he must respect his tools, which have been developed through the experience of generations of workers, and that initiation into the "secret" of each tool, i.e. its suitability for handling and production, is to share the worker's power over raw material. Indeed, many apprenticeship-masters refuse to hand down to their apprentice certain secrets of the trade, for fear of competition.

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[12] See C. Maldonado: op. cit., Chap. V, "Apprenticeship and assessment of skills". Also F. Fluitman: *Training for work in the informal sector: An agenda item for the 1990s*, Vocational training, Discussion Paper No. 16 (Geneva, ILO, 1989). The author's thoughts on apprenticeship owe much to his colleagues Daniel Bas and Michel Guéry, of the African Institute for Economic and Social Development, Abidjan. He thanks them for their advice.

Finally – and this is perhaps the most important feature of apprenticeship for the purposes of this article – training is as much a process of socialization as a transfer of know-how. To learn a trade is to learn about the various people involved in the operation of the enterprise and to learn where one stands in relation to each one of them. Among these people, there are two crucial categories: the customer, since it is the customer who orders the goods and pays for them, and the employer, since it is the employer who has the power to set up the relationship between a client's requirements and the various factors of production: materials, design, cost, schedule, etc. It takes years to learn how to run a production process through a system of social education. This is why the apprentice must spend a good deal of time following the various workers in the workshops, obeying them, imitating them and finally, replacing them. This partly explains why children must spend so much time serving their elders and performing household chores. Even if they are sometimes overworked, it would be a mistake to think that this is just exploitation of child labour.

This traditional form of apprenticeship can train skilled workers, but also heads of enterprises, as is shown in a number of studies on the informal sector. Thus, a survey of 562 heads of small enterprises carried out in Lomé (Togo) shows that more than 90 per cent of employers in car repairs, tailoring, metalworking, radio and television repairs, bricklaying and leatherwork, learned their trade through this type of apprenticeship.

Although far from perfect, the fact remains that this form of apprenticeship is one of the main resources available in Africa to solve the problem of training the workforce. Those involved, particularly the parents, have no doubts; whenever they can, they turn to apprenticeship as an alternative to the failed school system. At this point it is worth stressing the importance for poor families of a another argument in favour of apprenticeship in the informal sector, namely, its low cost. A study carried out in Cotonou (Benin) in 1990 shows that the total cost of sending a child of about 12 for an apprenticeship lasting three to four years amounts to only half the fees demanded in technical education schools. From a purely financial point of view, no African country today can come up with a training system that can compete with this.

However, putting a child into apprenticeship is not as simple as one might think. Even if there are no written regulations, there are conditions to meet and rules that must be followed; in short, it is not easy to find an employer. As a result, there are two categories of children in small enterprises in the informal sector. First, there are those children with the status of apprentices; these are a minority (between 5 and 10 per cent of the total workforce of these enterprises), although apprentices of all ages usually account for over 50 per cent of the workforce. Secondly, there are children who are simply workers and who are usually classified as "family helpers". The tasks performed by these two groups of child workers differ only slightly since they are both chiefly occupied in tidying up and cleaning the

workplace, tools and machines, moving equipment or serving the employer. Yet the status of apprentice makes a great difference: apprentices have a contract, a guarantee of employment for several years and, ultimately, they acquire know-how and skills.

Policies and programmes

In Africa, there are plenty of examples of harsh exploitation in which children are reduced to the condition of slaves. However, such conditions do not seem to be sufficiently widespread for public opinion, legislators or political decision-makers to react. A dearth of information, lack of thought, inadequate awareness of what is at stake: such factors combine to give the impression that the problem of child labour in Africa is not among the most urgent, if indeed it is regarded as a problem at all.[13]

Legislation

Labour codes exist and contain detailed provisions on child labour. In this particular area, laws are generally respected by the enterprises to which they apply, and the courts seldom have to deal with offenders. Ministries of labour have so far not devoted to child labour the attention the question deserves. The gap between standards and reality is so wide that places where children do work are not even clearly identified. As a result people in humble circumstances, children as well as poor and illiterate parents, enjoy no protection whatsoever.

The development of national legislation or international standards, particularly the numerous ILO Conventions, is like the constant beating of waves on the shore and eventually altering the shape of the coast. This image highlights two features of standard-setting activity. The first is the need for constant improvements in legislation and its application. The economy, social structures and cultural habits are always evolving and call for constant adjustment. There is no single country whose legislation can be described as perfect and can serve as a model. Even if human distress calls for immediate action, attention must not be diverted from this basic legislative process. Then again, if the "waves" do have an impact, it is because they carry forth the full force of the ocean behind them. In the same way, all the international conventions and national legislation must be regarded as the expression of a powerful worldwide movement driving mankind towards ever-increasing respect for the rights of the child. The

[13] This statement requires qualification. Since this article was written, the Labour Commission of the Organization of African Unity meeting in Cairo (19-25 Apr. 1993), has adopted a report by the Secretary-General of the OAU on child labour in Africa, together with a resolution setting out policy guidelines in this field. A conference on child labour in Africa is to be organized.

standard-setting activity of the ILO is both the expression and the instrument of this progress by the international community, which goes far beyond the work of the specialists who draft the texts. ILO Convention No. 138, concerning Minimum Age for Admission to Employment, adopted in 1973, symbolizes and sums up decades of work by thousands of men and women in all countries. In Africa, ratification of this Convention is the exception. It can only be regretted that so many peoples are unable to avail themselves of this instrument to improve the protection of their children.

In Africa today, perhaps it is necessary to break out of the narrow framework of legislation in order to rise to the level of standard setting or ethics. For the mass of people in rural areas and informal sector, the problem is one of survival, rather than development. Any standard, no matter how light, will arouse little interest among these people, unless it can provide them with a life-raft, a better means of coping with basic needs. This is not to imply that certain social categories or economic activities are to be excluded from the control of legal protection. What it does mean, however, is that the various social actors, no matter how poor or illiterate they may be, should be allowed to take part in decision-making regarding the aims to be attained and strategies for attaining them. The first step is to help these people to organize and, together, to seek and find ways of escaping from the harsh living and working conditions which they endure. This is the precondition for any progress towards a "normal" situation, towards the emergence of a standard.

Programmes of action

Many different programmes focus on children in general. Yet, there is no policy dealing with children as workers. Indeed, few programmes or projects focus on child workers as such, addressing their status in enterprises, their position in the production process, their working conditions and pay. The current approach tends to focus on other aspects of children's life: abandoned children, migrants, refugees, illiteracy, malnutrition, sickness, etc. Of course, these programmes do help children and therefore deserve recognition. But their failure to take account of work, a determining factor in the life of these children, amounts to concentrating on effects, not causes; on the ephemeral rather than on underlying structures.

As noted above, the social phenomenon known as "street children" is growing in Africa as in the rest of the world. This category of children is attracting official attention, but there are two inherent risks in this process. First, the importance of work in these children's lives may be underestimated so that remedial programmes might tend to tackle the effects of poverty, rather than those of work. Secondly, since these children do not fit into any normal category (they are not at school, nor with their families; they are seen as dirty, rowdy, etc.), the authorities tend to regard them as delinquents

rather than as workers, and to apply policies of repression that can only make their situation worse.

Families are generally held responsible for child labour, either because they take their children out of school or because they expect them to contribute to the family budget. Public authorities and private associations tend to consider such problems from the point of view of the established order and therefore have difficulty in recognizing the values which underlie the behaviour of many parents. As a result, they hardly ever work out programmes that reinforce these values and enlist the parents' support for their activities.

It seems that, at least for the next few decades, the school system will remain ill-equipped for the struggle against the exploitation of child labour. However, education is still needed – and, it must be emphasized, still wanted – by working children. Programmes often include an educational component in the form of initial vocational training or help for children to enter various channels of apprenticeship. This reflects a fundamental factor shared by all efforts to assist working children since industrialization began, namely: education; that is to say, the meeting of adults and children to enable the latter to discover and to develop their own potential and that of their environment. For the time being, however, the myth that primary schooling is the universal remedy is inhibiting the social actors and hampering the emergence of alternative educational practices based on what Africa has to offer.

It would be a pity if, under the influence of models imported from outside Africa, the problems raised by child labour were tackled through strategies designed for emergencies or disasters, that is to say with expensive ad hoc programmes of action, aimed at very specific target groups (the fashion is to call them "pilot programmes" but it amounts to the same thing). The exploitation of child labour in Africa is evolving less towards exaction of maximum profits or towards violence, than towards a form of servitude in which the main requirement is that the worker should be docile and available. Leaving aside the rise in juvenile delinquency and the spread of AIDS, which stem from the sexual harassment inherent in any form of servitude, the main long-term effect of child labour is likely to be the emergence of a workforce which has no taste for creative work and no respect for vocational skill – only resourcefulness in finding a job and increasing its income. This is what is really at stake in child labour: the training of tomorrow's human resources.