CHAPTER 20

The Demand for Labour within the Household: Child Labour in Togo

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Child labour in rural areas is often regarded as something so natural that few people are angered by it, few studies are made, few questions asked. With the help of surveys carried out in Togo between 1984 and 1989, we wish to show that there is nothing 'natural' about the use of children's work, but that it belongs to a frame of relations specifically geared towards production and domination. It is alive and thriving thanks to a combination of the development of monetarist economics, the ever increasing demands of state officials occupying posts in rural areas and state cuts in social spending which shift the burden of infrastructure building and maintenance on to rural communities.

Recognizing Child Labour

If child labour is often ignored or underrated in rural areas, it is because it is so deeply entrenched in local customs and regarded by rural communities and state-controlled authorities alike as a natural and legitimate practice; it is also because of the common belief that it is relatively rare and has no real impact on labour management, nor even on a child's development. It may be said that children from a farming background have always been involved in production work and that this is to some extent a functional part of their education, their socialization.

In actual fact, the socializing aspect of work is something of a smokescreen, concealing the reality of the children's working conditions and their economic role. It makes one wonder what lies behind representations depicting child labour first in a negative light – as exploitation – and then in a more positive (or neutral) light – as a factor of socialization and apprenticeship. Children's farming or domestic work should be considered as stemming not from a 'natural', but an established social order.[1] In rural societies, such work can range from light, relatively undemanding jobs through to heavier labour incorporating the very youngest of children into the production system. Here is where the first distinguishing feature appears; for if boys may be excused from work, every single community studied imposes domestic chores on girls

from a very early age. Indeed, the child's role is viewed in terms not just of the notion of childhood itself,[2] but also of social representations regarding age and gender. The notion of 'labour' for its part arrived with the birth of capitalism when, to begin with, it referred exclusively to waged labour.

These notions and representations are used to conceal the existence of child labour as a social fact; notwithstanding the increasing degree of recognition conventional economic analysis may be granting domestic labour,[3] it almost always takes account of productive labour alone and continues to ignore the drudgery children are forced to endure. Clearly, the non-recognition of child labour means children are more and more in demand. Unless it is seen for what it really is (and stops being passed off as a form of assistance, training, initiation, or even a child's duty towards an adult, a sign of respect), it will remain hidden. Then, the labour power of children will cease to be considered as belonging to their parents and other groups will be free to step into their shoes and assume the duty of training them or the right to their respect.

The first major distinction with regard to how various activities are hived off to children hinges on whether or not they are attending school. Children not going to school are above all used by the family group, while those that are find adults competing for the use of their spare time after school: members of the family, functionaries (teachers, customs officials, soldiers) or rural development firms looking to assemble a large force of obedient and well-managed labourers (numbers of whom vary according to school sizes). The second distinction resides in the child's gender: girls supply a larger, and more underrated, amount of labour than boys (references to training for future mothers, to duty and helping other female members of the family are omnipresent).

By pinpointing the main activities children are compelled to perform at the behest of their families, prominent members of the community or functionaries, we should be able to measure the amount of work time extorted from them, identify the beneficiaries and, finally, shed light on the 'invisible' work concealed by the façade of pseudo-socialization.[4] The struggle to gain control of their labour power gives rise to often bitter fighting, which seems to suggest just how important children's work is to the various groups involved as well as how specific and irreplaceable it is within the current socio-economic and political climate.

Work within the Family

As mentioned, childpower is used in a wide variety of different ways. Children may be required to perform domestic tasks (fetching water from the well, cleaning the house, preparing meals) or productive work (farming, sales, services).

In order to measure the workload of children within the family, we spent

five years observing thirty farms in the southern Togo region of Moyen-Mono. Our qualitative and longitudinal approach enabled us to highlight the family strategies governing child labour and measure the children's workload in productive and domestic labour alike; in polygamous households with large numbers of offspring, the head of the family derives his wealth from the work of his children and the surface area of farmed land varies according to the number of wives and (unschooled) children fit and able to work the fields.

In the years 1985–90, Moyen-Mono underwent remarkable economic changes: farm sizes grew thanks, on the one hand, to the appropriation of new lands and, on the other, to the increase in available hands. Although partly due to the return of youths from Nigeria and numbers of wage-earners and unemployed people from Lomé, undeniably the biggest factor behind the growth in the work force was the large-scale withdrawal or withholding of children and adolescents from school (Lange 1987). Moyen-Mono was the region worst hit by falling Togolese school attendance rates (Lange 1991a and b, 1993).[5] The huge number of children joining the work force has played a major role in expanding the areas being cultivated, thus contributing to a significant rise in farmers' earnings.

Division of labour adheres to a few basic rules. Boys must remain confined to working their fathers' fields and require his permission to assist their mothers. Girls must work with their mothers. Women, by the way, are given free rein to manage the female work force; hence, small girls are 'passed around' between the women of a family as a means of offsetting demographic fluctuations so that no woman might find herself working her farm alone. Husbands must never farm their wives' fields. The only allowable exceptions are when a woman needs her husband's help to build a corn loft or plough the land, both of which are regarded as men's work; elderly men abstain from this as a 'point of honour', delegating it to their sons, while young married men often work their land together with their wives. Women are duty-bound to assist their husbands in just two specific activities: sowing (though they actually just drop the seeds into holes dug by the men) and harvesting. The latter can be heavy work, especially when the crop in question is cotton. Finally, the women, aided by their daughters, are in charge of collecting water and firewood and preparing the meals.

Since the rules governing the division of labour are relatively securely fixed, household tension chiefly arises over the work allotted to the young girls within the family. Their versatility means they are in far greater demand than boys. And city-based relatives add to this by requesting their services as baby-sitters and home helps. If it is in the fathers' interests to lend out their daughters (and accumulate favours owed), mothers – being, as seen, highly dependent upon young girls – are generally opposed to it. The schooling of children in polygamous households, another cause of often bitter domestic wrangling, highlights the contradictions in the arguments and representations revolving around child labour, not to mention the economic stakes. If one

of the wives manages to enroll her child at a school, the others want the same for their children and polygamous husbands often end up refusing to allow any of their children access to the education system. So beyond all the talk about how positive it is for children to work in the fields, we see that partially escaping it by going to school is actually a hotly contested privilege.

Similarly, the rules regarding inheritance provide a telling statement on the value of child labour since they distinguish between children who have been to school and those who have not and who have therefore worked from a very early age in the fathers' fields. Indeed, the latter are regarded in a preferential light when it comes to distributing possessions, in recognition for their contribution to building up the paternal estate. The most violent conflicts flare up over the use of income earned from perennial crops[6] (with annual crop-related earnings going without question to those who have worked the particular plot). Cutting palm trees to make *sodabi* (distilled palm wine) guarantees the farmer a stable income, for *sodabi* is always highly in demand; as this usually represents a good deal of money (often half the farm's financial yield), the stakes are high in the struggle for control over the palms.[7]

This raises questions as to whether or not child labour within the framework of the family farm corresponds to exploitation. Child farm labourers are directly responsible for increasing the wealth of the family head (they seed over 50 per cent of the land), but since this is eventually left to them in their father's will, it is something of a 'return on investment' for the work put in during childhood or adolescence. Meanwhile, farmers offer incentives to encourage children to work in the fields or to dissuade them from going to school;[8] if the production and sale of cotton, for example, has gone well, the best producers will be given a bicycle. It would therefore seem difficult to talk of exploitation within the family in cases such as these. Nowadays, however, the production and sale of agricultural commodities are never sufficient to meet a family's most basic needs without the contribution of child labour. Far from a matter of merely lending a hand or being a training/socializing tool, child labour is an absolute necessity for survival in rural areas. And this is where we find all the ambiguity of school reforms which, in imposing compulsory education for every child,[9] repudiate the vital contribution child labour makes to the country's economy, leaving us to suppose that parents' resistance to school must be motivated on grounds of a strictly cultural or religious order. The economic reasons for rejecting school have much more to do with loss of earnings (due to the loss of children's labour power) than the extra expenses incurred by sending a child to school.[10]

Labour Extorted by Functionaries: Domestic and Productive Chores

In a practice harking back to colonial times, functionaries occupying posts in rural areas systematically call on young schoolchildren to work for them.

Teachers tend to be the main beneficiaries of their labour because they have more immediate access to them; but all functionaries as a whole 'cash in' on this 'captive' work force.

Teachers in rural areas often send their pupils to fetch water and wood for their own personal use or, if they are lodging with a pupil's family, make them clean out their rooms. (In such cases, by the way, rent arrears can be become something of a problem as the father hardly dares ask for settlement for fear of the repercussions on his child's marks at school.) However, few people object to these practices, particularly when the teachers are believed to be capable and examination results are satisfactory. But other practices, such as teachers capitalizing on the mix-up between school fields and private fields and putting their pupils to work in their own fields, create discontent. The management of earnings from the school field is unclear. Moreover, farming tasks have increased since the development of cotton crops, which offer teachers good extra earnings as they do not have to pay for the labour used.[11] If working the teacher's field in some sense belongs to the prevailing customs as long as its purpose is to supply him with the produce he needs for food, it is often felt to be unacceptable as soon as he attempts to sell any of the yield from child labour.

The other functionaries in question mainly include soldiers, customs officials, forestry wardens or even farming supervisors. In fact, virtually every civil servant occupying a rural post assumes the right to do what he wishes with the children's time. Generally it involves domestic chores, for these types of functionaries do not stay in the same job long enough to be able to cultivate land. And groups of functionaries with no wives, children or servants of their own at hand call on the nearest child to run and fetch them water, wood and sometimes even food, tasks that no self-respecting well-to-do man would condescend to perform for himself.

The chores rural schoolchildren are forced to undertake correspond to the domination state officials maintain over farmers. The ongoing process of democratization in Africa may well be bringing increasing pressure to bear to curtail such practices, but a good deal of inertia remains because they are not seen for what they really are: child labour. They are regarded as favours that young people are duty-bound to do for their elders, or that rural communities have to do for functionaries.

'Political' Duties

In Togo, as in any country governed by an authoritarian regime, the political role of school is asserted at several levels: nation-state building, coercion and control of schoolchildren, personality cult. Playing on patriotism, the conditioning occurs on a day-to-day basis: ceremonial respect for the national flag, recitals and songs to the glory of the president or party ... (Lange 1991b). There are also regular pro-government rallies, guards of honour

along the roadside to greet the president, a prefect or visiting dignitary; group activities, a wide variety of political events (women's day, green revolution day, tree day). If children not attending school sometimes manage to escape such duties, those in the classroom are practically held hostage and may be expelled at the least sign of a lack of enthusiasm. Political activities in Togo are sometimes more time-consuming than regular school work. During the 1986–87 academic year, for example, four whole months were lost to preparations for the festivities surrounding a Franco-African summit held in Lomé, followed by celebrations to mark the regime's twentieth year in power; primary and secondary school pupils and university students were requisitioned from September 1986 through to February 1987. Although it may well have been an unusually eventful year, schoolchildren are regularly called up for a succession of official visits (the pope, various heads of state).

Referring to the views of the teaching body and parents, E. Floriani (1987) considers that such activities 'disrupt school life and significantly diminish the time devoted to studies [...] They are partly to blame for falling education standards.' In the course of 1986–87, discontent among schoolchildren, teachers and parents alike (although not voiced openly) was such that when the usual methods of restraint had failed to achieve their desired ends, the authorities were forced to resort to handing out cash: examination pass rates that year were the best of the decade, which caused much disturbance among the very young.[12]

The children, however, did not take this lying down. Rebellious acts, though covert, became frequent. From the stolen rope preventing a school flag from being raised through to the adulterated lyrics of official slogans (Toulabor 1986) via the ransacked school field, resistance grew increasingly bolder, culminating in the 'explosion' of the 1990s.

School, in fact, is actually where children are treated to a foretaste of the techniques of economic exploitation and political submissiveness. Be it economic, political or simply pedagogical, violence in schools (Toulabor 1982; Lange 1991b) is just a pale reflection of army or police tactics (Toulabor 1986; Merlet 1987) and the embezzlement of public funds by high-ranking government officials; the fate reserved for children is not detached from that of their parents – it is a direct sequel. School, like training within the family in the name of socialization, can only reproduce the prevailing societal patterns even if it does, at times, also offer the means to go beyond alienation.

Community Labour: From 'Traditions' to Modern Forms of Exploitation

State disengagement, as prescribed by the structural adjustment programmes, compels rural communities to take on the burden of local infrastructures (building and maintenance of schools, clinics, roads); being closer to the public domain, urban communities manage to avoid these constraints. The

same cannot be said for the countryside. For it is often only by resorting to the (meeker and more manageable) labour of children that village communities can complete such tasks.

Children and young people living in the countryside are therefore called upon to undertake a whole range of public works: repairing paths after the rainy season, building and maintaining wells, schools, clinics. Schoolchildren are responsible for building new shelters to serve as classrooms when the old ones have been destroyed by the rains. As it takes them about three weeks to put up a straw hut, the entire first month of the academic year may need to be devoted to preparing the school facilities. Furthermore, shortages of materials (benches, desks, blackboards, chalk, books) and generally dilapidated conditions oblige teachers to use earnings from the produce of the school fields in order to ensure they have the strict minimum necessary for running the school. Again, however, state spending cuts have forced schools wishing to remain open to transform themselves into production sites, to the detriment of the basic education that a primary school is meant to provide (reading, writing, arithmetic). Underlying country people's refusal of school is their refusal to see schools turned into production sites and ceasing to be places where their children are supposed to learn recorded knowledge.

Village community labour stems from a long tradition and was first harnessed by NGOs as a means of promoting local, or 'self-centred', development while at the same time 'raising the awareness' of the population. Despite the fact that they have very often been based on a mythical vision of a sort of African community egalitarianism, some projects underpinned by principles such as these have managed to bear fruit in certain areas.

Next came the turn of the international agencies which recommended these practices within the framework of structural adjustment as an effective means of easing the financial burden on the state. After starting out as a matter of building and maintaining social infrastructures, the ban imposed by structural adjustment on public sector recruitment very soon led to rural communities themselves having to hire and pay their own teachers; and, in the majority of cases, children have once again had to be put to work in the school fields in order to pay supply teachers' wages.[13]

Conclusion

In these times of economic hardship, competition between the various different prescribers is growing, often at the expense of the children. State officials use children within the framework of a dominatory relationship that they themselves have established. Akin to racketeering or plunder, their confiscation of the children's time for their own ends is among the methods used to control and exploit rural communities. The fall in school attendance rates affects rural areas in particular (Lange 1991a, 1993) and is both cause and effect of the premature employment of country children. This process

of withdrawing children from school is serving to widen the gap between city children, who continue to enjoy the benefits of state and family investment (being sent to the best public sector or private schools, even in Europe), and country children, who remain confined to the educational sphere of the family or religion.

Far from being a mere training or socializing tool, child labour within the framework of family farms is first and foremost a vital necessity for the family's very survival. Economic pressures represent the real reason why children cannot be released from work. The role of cash crops shows the impact of commodity market prices on their schooling. Whereas the coffee- and cocoa-producing regions have managed to keep the vast majority of children out of productive labour and in the classroom, the opposite is true of the cotton-growing regions where children have had to be taken from school in order to keep the production system going.[14]

On a more general level, this chapter sets out the problem of the links between employment, exploitation and proletarianization. The title of this book may seem to suggest that the three conditions are interdependent. But as we have just seen, children who are put to work are not necessarily exploited; and if they are, it does not necessarily mean that they are proletarianized. In addition to productive labour, the concept of extorted labour must also cover the domestic chores forced upon them (fetching water, wood, etc.) as well as how they are used politically, because even if the time thus confiscated does not correspond with economic exploitation, all these practices are part and parcel of the domination-based relations imposed upon rural communities by the representatives of the state. This is at any rate true of the time extorted from children at the expense of their training, their future integration into society.

Child labour should therefore be defined as the extortion by clearly identified beneficiaries of a child's time to the detriment of his or her study and leisure-time activities. The sometimes brutal responses with which the children oppose practices that they consider abusive suggests that the labour demanded of them may, or may not, be perceived as legitimate. Analysis of the various ways in which parents and children alike regard the work may thus help to produce a sharper definition of the concept of labour and exploitation.

Notes

1. According to Durkheim's basic rule suggesting that a social fact may not be explained by recourse to 'nature' or psychology.

2. The notion of childhood or adolescence varies according to the times and civilization; see Ariès (1973).

3. See Marcoux (1994).

4. This notion has not escaped the notice of researchers and the example of some of the conference papers that link work within the family almost entirely to its socializing

role shows the enduring nature of the approach involving the opposition between 'positive' labour within the family and 'negative' labour in other social spheres.

5. Prefecture of Haho: primary schoolchildren 1980–81 = 15,302; 1984–85 = 11,985; secondary school 1980–81 = 3,857; 1984–85 = 1776.

6. Oil palms are among the chief perennial crops in the region. Perennial crops in general are regarded by farmers as a kind of safety net to protect the family from life's ups and downs. It should be noted that in other coffee- and cocoa-producing regions the question of sharing out inherited perennial crop commodities also opposes former schoolchildren with those excluded from school.

7. As we have found (Lange 1987), the safety net can be assured in one of two ways: either the farmer cuts the palm, distils and sells the *sodabi*, putting money aside as he goes along, or he sells the palm trees whole for a modest lump sum. The second solution, while enabling him quickly to receive a not inconsiderable amount of money, often brings him into conflict with his brothers, because those working as wage-earners in the city often need a lot of money to survive there, and also because it gives the seller control over the proceeds from the sale of the trees.

8. That, at least, is what we were told by the schoolteachers interviewed at the height of the school attendance crisis when classrooms were becoming deserted before their very eyes. When the cotton had been sold, farmers would give presents to the most productive children; among them the famous bicycles which the teachers cited as being the reason why their former pupils had dropped out.

9. See the 1975 reform of the Togo education system which, as in most other African nations, called for universal schooling.

10. In the regions opposed to school, bearing in mind that coercive measures do not remain very effective for very long, the only incentive for sending children to school which has always produced positive results, in every region and country concerned, is free school dinners. The fact that the child is given a daily meal is enough to ease pressure on the family purse and, indeed, allows him or her to be released from productive labour.

11. One schools inspector, noticing how some of these teachers were becoming wealthy by growing cotton, decided to borrow a plot of land in the hope of making substantial profits. In fact, he managed only to break even because, unlike the teachers, he did not have access to free labour and ended up having to take on hired hands. He came to the conclusion that, given the production and marketing conditions, growing cotton can only ever be financially worthwhile if one has 'a pack of slaves' at one's disposal.

12. A 76 per cent pass rate. But this had negative repercussions in that it tarnished the schools' image, earning them the reputation of being as 'corrupt' as any other state institution. Moreover, such a huge wave of primary pupils then swept into secondary education that, in order to regain control over student flows, the authorities were obliged to sanction those taking examinations the following year; success rates subsequently fell to their lowest level ever: 26 per cent.

13. Around 15 per cent of schoolteachers in Togo are now paid by the parents; in Chad, this percentage stands at around 50 per cent and concerns only the most deprived rural areas; although no figures are available for Mali, we do know that more and more primary teachers are being paid by parents. 'Community' schools – set up and financed by parents – are in rapid expansion in most of the French-speaking countries of Africa as a response to the withdrawal of state funding.

14. In the hilly coffee- and cocoa-producing plateau region, around 90 per cent of indigenous rural six- to fourteen-year-olds are attending school – a higher percentage than

in the majority of the Togolese cities; migrants' children are generally less well educated than indigenous children, albeit better so than children from the same ethnic groups that have not migrated. In this region, therefore, the children of even the most deprived groups have managed to leave the sphere of production, contrary to those in the cotton-growing belt drafted in to ensure the development of cotton production (Lange 1987).

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