

The majority of children in sub-Saharan Africa are engaged in some form of work, whether paid or unpaid (ACPF 2013). In Ethiopia, evidence from Young Lives shows that 90 per cent of 8 year olds undertook some form of work (Woldehanna et al. 2011). Understanding how work affects children's development and well-being, including their schooling, is critical for designing more effective child protection policies. We examine how work impacts on children's opportunities to learn, physical health and subjective well-being.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has recognised the importance of research and the need to enhance the knowledge base on child work/labour. This Brief draws on research presented at an East African Regional Symposium on Child Work/Child Labour hosted by Young Lives and Save the Children, with the support of the African Child Policy Forum (ACPF), in Addis Ababa. The symposium was funded by the Oak Foundation and opened by the Chair of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. It brought together researchers, policymakers and practitioners from across Africa to share findings on children's work and to stimulate regional action towards the development of better policies and practices for child protection.



Children and Work: Key Findings

- Children face competing pressures on their time from working and attending school. Working may be essential to pay for school related costs but repeated absence often leads to children dropping out.
- Work can have both positive and negative impacts on children's well-being and children take pride in being able to contribute to their families' livelihoods.
- Poverty, shocks and adverse events, such as illness or death of caregivers, are common causes of child work.
- Promoting children's well-being and development requires an integrated approach which addresses the broader social and economic context. Key is child-sensitive social protection, which targets the age- and gender-specific risks and vulnerabilities of children and avoids adverse impacts.

In this Brief we start by exploring the relationship between work and school. The Day of the African Child 2014 has as its theme: “A child-friendly, quality, free and compulsory education for all children in Africa”. “Child labour” is cited as a factor that marginalises children from education; however our research demonstrates how the indirect costs of education, such as school materials, uniforms and transport fees lead to children working, and that the money earned enables them to access schooling. We also examine the impact of work on children’s physical health and subjective well-being, highlighting both the danger of injury but also opportunities to learn skills and support families, which children themselves view as important.

Across sub-Saharan Africa, we find that poverty and shocks or adverse events, including illness or death in the family, are primary reasons why children work, with the poorest families more prone to shocks. In 2014 the World Day Against Child Labour is focused on the role of social protection in tackling household vulnerabilities and child-sensitive social protection schemes have been found to reduce child labour (ACPF 2013; ILO 2013). To inform these debates we conclude by examining what we can learn from research and develop some key principles to inform policy and practice.

Defining children’s work

- Both the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) require states to protect children “from all forms of economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral, or social development.”
- The ACRWC also states that children have responsibilities, including working for the family and assisting them when they need as well as “to serve his national community by placing his physical and intellectual abilities at its service”. Thus children have the duty to make their own contributions through work as far as the latter does not undermine their education and health and do not amount to exploitation (Fisseha).
- Save the Children (2013) views child work as part of a continuum which ranges from decent work which does not negatively affect children’s well-being and where children’s rights are respected, to harmful and exploitative work, which jeopardises children’s mental, physical and emotional well-being.
- A rights-based approach to children’s work means understanding what is in the best interests of children with greater clarity on what work is harmful and what forms of work can enhance the well-being and development of children.

CHALLENGES OF BALANCING WORK AND SCHOOL

Primary school enrolment has risen rapidly in sub-Saharan Africa, with net enrolment increasing by 20 percentage points between 1999 and 2010 (UNESCO 2012). Despite this impressive progress, in the context of poverty children face competing pressures on their time. As children grow up they are often required to work longer hours, which can reduce the amount of time available for attending school or studying at home.

The following case studies of four Ethiopian children illustrate how children's pathways diverge over time. A combination of multiple adverse events and the difficulties of keeping up with their studies, including as a result of injuries while working, can lead to children dropping out of school, as illustrated by the examples of Haymanot and Defar.ⁱ Yet this is not the case for all children. Mulatwa's case demonstrates that some children can combine school and work successfully and that working is essential for her to continue with her studies. But even where schooling is free, hidden costs, such as school materials, uniforms and transport costs can act as a barrier to children's education. Bereket's case highlights the different challenges faced by children, including problems in the school environment, what they learn in school or whether it will lead to employment (Tafere). While some children report being admired for their work, other children feel stigmatised on account of their poverty and need to work.

	Age 13	Age 14	Age 17
Haymanot: rural Tigray	Was studying in Grade 5 and lived with her aunt.	Dropped out of school and returned home to care for her sick mother by working in the local stone crushing factory.	Stopped working and married at 16. She hoped to return to school.
Bereket: urban Addis Ababa	Orphaned and living with his grand-mother. Worked washing cars so often missed school.	Worked in a garage and injured his hand, missed examination period at school but later returned to school.	Continued to work and gained skills as a mechanic and wanted to start a car business. Still enrolled in school but thought that work was more likely to change his life. Felt stigmatised at school as did not have good clothes.
Mulatwa: rural Amhara	Her father died. Was attending school and worked sorting haricot beans for pay.	Continued haricot bean picking but had health problems due to exhaustion. Continued to do well at school.	Still working but has finished primary school and now in Grade 9. Was hopeful of continuing to university and wanted to become a doctor.
Defar: rural Amhara	Was in school in Grade 2 but also worked selling stone with his father.	Attended school and undertook casual paid work selling stone.	Dropped out as family could not afford school materials and started work. Wanted to return to school at the start of next year.

While some children, such as Mulatwa manage to combine school and work, for other children repeated or prolonged absences can affect their learning and progression through school. Research from Kenya and Ethiopia found that different characteristics of work (such as whether work is seasonal or if the hours clash with school) and of school (flexibility, allowing children to return if they have been absent and the half-day shift system) shape the extent to which children are able to combine work and school (Orkin 2013; Wambiri).

UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN’S EXPERIENCES OF WORK

Work is often portrayed as either ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for children, whereas as the realities of children’s lives mean it is often both. The following table highlights positive and negative aspects of work, identified by children working as weavers in Addis Ababa (Zelege).

Positive	Negative
<p><i>Learning weaving skills:</i> “Although I started weaving when I was with my family, I was doing very simple tasks there. I have acquired several skills after I came here.” (Boy, 15)</p>	<p><i>No schooling:</i> “My employer took me to school and got me registered for evening classes. But he tore up my exercise books and threw them away after just a week and I stopped school after that.” (Boy, 14)</p>
<p><i>Relative independence though the wage is nominal:</i> “At present, I don’t expect to get anything from anyone, not even from my parents. Relatively, I am independent. I am living without help from anyone.” (Boy, 15)</p>	<p><i>Missing parents:</i> Sometimes I miss my family very much. However, even when I decide to go and visit them with my employer’s permission, I could not afford the transportation expenses. The fare is beyond my income and savings. (Boy, 14)</p>
<p><i>Improved outlook/maturity:</i> “Had I been in my home village, I would never get the chances I have here. I also think better now than before.” (Boy, 14)</p>	<p><i>Sometimes face exploitation:</i> “I have to weave for a long time without rest and I cannot choose when to weave and when to take rest.” (Boy, 15)</p>

Children take pride in being able to support their families and view it as a key part of their roles and responsibilities to the household. Research with children, aged between 5 and 17 years, working on private coffee farms and in market places in Central Kenya found that children reported a sense of responsibility and self-worth in being able to support their families (Wambiri). For example, Tidi, aged 13, lived alone with his physically disabled father. He worked part-time on a local farm. He explained: “My father is very happy with me. He tells many people about my work. He is happy because we are able to eat even when he is not lucky to get much money from begging” adding: “my neighbours tell me I’m very good.”

However, children also report exhaustion, injuries and difficulties with managing working alongside going to school. In Ethiopia, children from poor households are significantly more likely to be injured while working than children from less-poor households (Morrow et al. 2013). Injuries are often exacerbated by delays in seeking medical treatment. Boys are at risk of injury, often as a consequence of physical labour such as stone-crushing or farm work that involves the use of pesticides and sharp equipment. Yet girls are subject to more hidden abuse, particularly while working as domestic servants (Erulkar and Mekbib; Ibrahim). The situation of child domestic workers is an area in need of further research.

WHY DO CHILDREN WORK?

Poverty, shocks (like drought, conflict or displacement) and adverse events, such as family illness are common causes of children working. Children's work and care activities are often essential to household survival and a key part of managing risks. While the underlying causes may be similar, the types of activities children undertake vary by age, gender, sibling composition, location and season (Crivello et al.). In Ethiopia, oldest girls typically have the heaviest work burden compared to younger brothers or sisters (Heissler and Porter 2013).

Children may be asked to work by their families, but often initiate such actions themselves, recognising the constraints facing the household. A study of children working on the streets of Addis Ababa found that the children, aged between 8 and 16, were working to support their families and themselves:

Interviewer: When you come back from school, do you ask your mother if she has something for dinner?

Answer: Yes. But I usually meet her as she brings the children from home. And I ask her then. If she doesn't have food I take one birr for the bus and go to work. My sister also tells me if there is food at home, because she goes to home for lunch. I don't. If she tells me there is nothing, I send my exercise books with her and rush to the market to work (Zeberga, age 12). (Mulugeta)

Despite economic growth in many African countries, poor families tend to live in the areas most at risk from environmental hazards and so repeatedly experience the same shocks, which deplete their economic and social resources. This is often exacerbated by family illness, meaning children have to take over working roles and responsibilities.

Maregey lives in rural Tigray, Ethiopia. When he was 7, his father became ill and lost his job. As the family's income declined Maregey's older brother went to work in the stone-crushing factory and so Maregey was required to take over herding the cattle and did not start school. The household had also experienced repeated droughts which destroyed the crops used to feed the cattle. By the time Maregey was 10, he had still not started school. His father had died of tuberculosis and pneumonia, which had a profound impact on Maregey. He said, 'I planned to get registered but I changed my mind again.' He later adds that he changed his mind 'because of my father's death' so preferring to work to support the family. Although he has friends who like school, Maregey was worried about going because 'I see my friends being beaten by their teachers and as a result, their legs are swollen.' (Ogando Portela and Pells 2014)

Even when working in hazardous conditions, such as the mining industry in Burkina Faso, children and parents are aware of the risks involved, yet have no alternative due to extreme poverty and lack of quality services, notably in health, education and social protection (Wouango). Where social protection schemes exist there is a need for them to become more child-sensitive to avoid adverse impacts, such as children substituting for adults around the home, while adults join public work schemes (Tafere and Woldehanna 2012).

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Many sub-Saharan countries are in the process of designing or implementing National Action Plans to eliminate the worst forms of child labour. While it is imperative to eradicate the worst forms, it is also important to understand the contexts in which children are working and how this impacts on children's well-being. Based on the evidence presented in the regional meeting, there are several key policy implications to inform more effective policies and programmes related to children's work.

Policies need to start with the reality of children's lives and how they are shaped by the broader social and economic context. This requires taking a systemic approach, which tackles the underlying causes of why children often work (poverty, shocks and poor quality services) and recognizes the key role that children play within the household in managing risk. Banning children working without building social protection systems risks further impoverishing families and putting other aspects of children's well-being at risk (such as from malnutrition due to loss of earnings or loss of access to education and health services due to inability to pay the direct and/or indirect costs). This requires national action to establish "social protection floors" which provide basic income security, protect households against shocks and ensure access to health care and other services (ILO 2013: xvi).

Involving communities in identifying solutions: Child labour free zones in Uganda

The African Network for the Prevention and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN) in Uganda used community conversations to bring adults and children together to discuss the underlying causes of child labour and to generate local solutions. This enabled ANPPCAN to understand what work was considered harmful and to find ways to work together to ensure that all children could attend school regularly and full-time. Bridge schools were established for children withdrawn from work but who had never been to school to enable them to transition to the mainstream system later. Older children were assisted to find technical training or decent work. Over 1,600 children aged between 5 and 14 who had either never been to school or had dropped out were enrolled and provided with school materials and uniforms. It was also important to work with schools to develop a safe learning environment to ensure retention. To ensure that the model was both locally owned and sustainable, community members were trained in micro-credit management, developed and implemented income-generating activities and continued to save their earnings through associations (Wandega).

Building an integrated approach

Save the Children (2013) identifies six pillars which are essential in building a systemic approach to children and work, which promotes children's well-being by addressing the broader social and economic context. Gender needs to be a cross-cutting consideration, taking into account the different risks faced by boys and girls and the specific support needed.

- **Supporting livelihood security and child-sensitive social protection** by building households' resilience to shocks and economic capacities (e.g. training, employment, improving access to credit, and entrepreneurship opportunities). Key principles of child-sensitive social protection include: avoiding adverse impacts on children, early intervention, taking age, gender, vulnerability and intra-household dynamics into account, and including children's opinions in scheme design (ILO 2013: 61).
- **Influencing social norms** by understanding local conceptions of what is considered harmful to children and working with forces for social change within communities (including religious and customary leaders) to build consensus.
- **Strengthening child protection systems** which are context specific and adapted to the needs of children, so protecting children from the worst forms of labour without criminalising all forms of work and stigmatising working children. Aspects include strengthening: laws and policies; government coordination; community support networks; a trained workforce; monitoring; and participation.
- **Mainstreaming children's participation and empowerment** to understand children's experiences and create opportunities for children to influence policy and programmes.
- **Improving access to quality services**, particularly in health and education, assisting with hidden costs (uniforms, materials etc.), eradicating violence in schools and ensuring that

education is relevant to children in their particular context.

- **Support youth employment by ensuring access to safe and decent work**, including vocational training, apprenticeship and job placement and creation.

Children Lead the Way: Influencing national policy processes in Kenya

Children Lead the Way (CLW) is a five-country Save the Children programme. In Kenya CLW supports groups of working children to share their concerns with their communities and decision-makers, as well as to access quality and relevant education and decent work. This has enabled working children to influence the design of Kenya's Child Labour Policy by submitting a memorandum to the Government's technical committee. The list of types of hazardous work was developed with children's input and the key principles of children's participation, best interests of the child and decent work were incorporated in the policy which is currently awaiting Cabinet approval. This has resulted in a more child-centred protection approach, which aims to balance children's protection with the economic and social pressures faced by many families (Muoki).

Work itself is not necessarily harmful and can be a source of psychosocial and skill development. Children take pride in being able to support their families. However, certain activities can harm children's physical health, such as working with heavy machinery or dangerous substances. Starting with a child well-being perspective enables policy makers to act in the best interests of children by ensuring that efforts to protect children do not inadvertently put other areas of children's well-being at risk.

ⁱ All the names used in this Brief are pseudonyms

Presentations

T. Abebe: [Reframing Children's Work in Ethiopia Using the Lens of Political Economy Perspective](#).

M. Bourdillon: *Child Work in Africa: Distinctive Features*.

G. Crivello, A. Pankhurst and A. Tiumelissan: [Comparisons of Case Studies of Child Work in Young Lives Sites in Ethiopia](#).

L. Fisseha: [Child Labour: A Legal and Human Rights Perspective](#).

I.S. Ibrahim: [Child Labor in Sudan: Factors and Repercussions](#).

E. Mulugeta: *Children Sustaining Families: A Look into the Lives of Working Children in Addis Ababa*.

F. Muramutsa: [Protection of Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children Working in Tea Production: Best Practices of Winrock International](#).

M.W. Muoki: [Policy and Practice on Child Labour in Kenya](#).

E.A. Ochen: [Forced Child Labour during Armed Conflict in Northern Uganda: Implications for Post-conflict Reintegration](#).

Y. Tafere: [Child Work and Education: Examples from Young Lives Sites in Ethiopia](#).

G.N. Wambiri: [Compatibility of Work and School: Informal School-Work Arrangements in Central Kenya](#).

A. Wandega: [Emerging Good Practices on Involving Children in Implementing Child Labor Free Zones in Uganda](#).

J. Wouango: [Children's Perspectives on their Working Lives and on Public Action against Child Labour in Burkina Faso](#).

S. Zeleke: [Child Work as Viewed by Children Themselves: Positive and Negative Features](#).

References and Further Reading

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