Child labour in commercial agriculture in Uganda

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Introduction
Agriculture dominates many African economies as the main source of livelihood. In Uganda, agriculture is the main contributor to the national economy; it contributes over 40% of the GDP, generating 90% of earnings in foreign currency. Out of all households, 86.6% are employed in the agricultural sector.

Child labour in commercial agriculture has become a major concern globally, and in Uganda in particular, especially in consequence of economic transformation and agricultural modernization, which has brought the utilization of agrochemicals and machinery. In Uganda, qualitative studies on child labour have been carried out in various sectors, and agriculture has been identified among the sectors where children are involved in some of the most dangerous and exploitive forms of labour.

At the moment, the exact number of children engaged in work is not known although a recent estimate (UNICEF 2000) indicates that 3.3 million children work in Uganda. In order to establish the situation of children engaged in commercial agriculture in Uganda, a study was commissioned by ILO/IPEC and carried out in eleven districts between January 2002 and May 2002.

Objectives

• To determine the nature and extent of child labour in commercial agriculture in Uganda
• To establish terms and conditions of work for child workers in the eleven districts
• To assess the impact of child labour on the children’s health and safety
• To ascertain the socioeconomic characteristics and distribution of child workers employed in tea, tobacco, rice, coffee, and cocoa enterprises.

Study design
The study was based on a descriptive survey in which information was collected through face-to-face interviews with individuals and groups of respondents. Individual interviews were conducted with children, their parents, guardians, informants, and employers. Group interviews were conducted with men, women, and children separately. The study area was randomly picked across the country, i.e. from north to south and from east to west. In this study, 474 parents and 566 children were interviewed, and 250 participants attended group interviews.

Results

Age
The average age at which a child begins work is 15 years in tea, 11 years in rice and coffee, and 9 years in tobacco enterprises.

Reasons for child labour
There are various reasons why children in Uganda take up employment. These are perceived differently by parents and children, as indicated in the Table 1 (see below).

Activities performed by children in various agricultural enterprises
It is noted that children usually perform more than one of the activities listed in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason: Parents</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Reason: Children</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To buy personal effects</td>
<td>47.1</td>
<td>Cannot afford schooling</td>
<td>72.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To buy school materials</td>
<td>44.7</td>
<td>To earn wages</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To supplement the household income</td>
<td>36.9</td>
<td>To assist in the family enterprise</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To help in the household enterprise</td>
<td>12.6</td>
<td>Failed at school</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To pay outstanding debts</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>To help with household chores</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To earn school fees</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>Disinterested in schooling</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education is not suitable</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>Illness</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get pocket money</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>To work in one’s own business</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school is too far away</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>No suitable school available</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2, depending on the crop. Table 2 shows the percentage of responses mentioning the task in question.

**Working time**

The average working time was found to be 5 hours in coffee, tobacco, and rice enterprises, and 9 hours in the tea enterprises.

**Health and safety**

Of the working children, 39% employed in rice, 54% in tobacco, 48% in coffee and 40% in tea enterprises had experienced physical injuries while at work.

Work-related ailments and complaints, including backaches, dermatitis, eye infections, pneumonia, diarrhoea, anaemia, bilharzia, abdominal pains, chest pain, athletes’ foot, oedema, fever and stiff necks, were noted among 55% of the child workers in tea enterprises and 44% of the child workers in rice enterprises.

17% of working children were exposed to chemical hazards, especially in tobacco enterprises. Other hazards faced by child workers include dew and cold in the mornings, dirty drinking water from rice fields, and stress.

**Effects of child labour**

Child labour has mostly negative effects on the children involved. Among the negative effects that have been noted are stunted growth, pale skin and dermatitis, exhaustion and lost interest in school.

**Conclusions**

- Poverty is the main cause of child labour in Uganda. Any intervention in order to improve the income of the poor will reduce child labour.
- Community sensitization as to the effects of child labour would create awareness and a subsequent reduction in child labour.
- Government subsidies for education, e.g. universal primary education, bursaries and education loan schemes, would reduce child labour through a decline in the dropout rate caused by school fees.
- The Government should develop a clear child labour policy. It should also strengthen the existing employment policy and other associated laws and should ensure compliance with them.