

Analysis of Tribal Child Labor and their Traditional Problems – A Sociological Study

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Abstract

Exploitation of children through unacceptable forms of child labour continues to exist in all parts of the world. We know that certain groups of children are in a particularly vulnerable position. We know that school authorities and teachers see certain patterns of children performing poorly and even dropping out of school. We know that many of these children risk ending up in child labour as defined in ILO Minimum Age Convention 138, 1973 and Convention 182 concerning the Prohibition and immediate action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour, 1999. The latter include slavery, debt bondage, trafficking, sexual exploitation, the use of children in the drug trade and in armed conflict together with hazardous work. Identifying particularly vulnerable groups of children and their particular needs is a critical element in eliminating child labour. Article 7 of Convention 182 requires ratifying states to “identify and reach out to children at special risk.” This working paper documents how indigenous and tribal children indeed are often such children at special risk. ILO and its constituents have a long history of addressing the particular needs and rights of indigenous and tribal peoples. The growing number of countries ratifying ILO Convention 169 concerning indigenous and tribal peoples in independent countries testifies to this.

There are indications of high numbers of worst forms of child labour among indigenous peoples in certain countries in South Asia, Southeast Asia and Latin America. Indigenous and tribal children are found to make up a large part of child labourers in certain risk areas, such as debt-bondage in South Asia, migratory agricultural wage labour in Central America and Mexico, and trafficking in Southeast Asia.

In spite of this, indigenous visions of education have only recently begun to be acknowledged in the design of formal education services, curriculum development and teacher training. While it is true that many indigenous children work as an intrinsic part of growing up and learning in their communities, this does not justify the blind acceptance of “cultural” explanations for child labour, whether they are presented by governments, employers or parents. Formal education has been, and in some cases continues to be, a double-edged sword for indigenous peoples

Keywords: Tribal child labour, analysis, criticality, traditionality, problems, menace.

Introduction

A number of technical cooperation programmes also support governments in implementing ILO principles related to indigenous and tribal peoples. This working paper is the result of collaboration between the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) and the INDISCO programme, which supports innovative pilot projects with indigenous and tribal peoples organizations in Asia and Africa. The joint publication is being followed up by technical cooperation activities on the ground to address the particular needs of indigenous and tribal children. This Working Paper aims at stimulating further debate, which addresses central child labour challenges and links these up with ways to secure quality

education for all. The responsibility for opinions expressed in this publication rest solely with the authors and does not imply endorsement by the ILO. What is known about the challenges of child labour and education among indigenous and tribal peoples? What are the common forms of social exclusion they encounter? What are the current experiences, and where are the potential directions for the future? This working paper seeks to address these issues through an overview followed by a discussion of major forms of social exclusion and various types of support interventions and approaches. Finally, the paper presents a number of preliminary conclusions and recommendations for ways forward.

The case of indigenous peoples provides a good example of the need to address the particularities of child labour. For many indigenous peoples, traditional education typically includes learning traditional occupations (ILO 2001a). History shows that learning traditional occupations in the form of light work has been more educative and the formal education system more disruptive – in social, emotional and economic terms. In fact, while traditional attitudes and customs are frequently cited as explanatory causes behind child labour, this is often contradicted by the documentation of communities undergoing profound changes and disruption.

Objective:

Target of this paper is to query sociological and cultural being of old age population. The study also provides the outline of their problems.

Child labor global scenario

In Latin America, it is estimated that indigenous children are twice as likely to work as their peers. The situation in Africa is not well documented. Overall, data remains relatively weak and sporadic, and while available data may indicate high rates of child labour among indigenous peoples, its value is diluted by the relative lack of disaggregated data and consistent documentation. In order to document more systematically the incidences of child labour among indigenous peoples, strengthening assessment tools and providing alternative forms and channels of consultation is necessary. In most countries, educational figures indicate low enrolment rates, poor school performance and high dropout rates among indigenous children, thus identifying them as a particular risk group to be targeted in preventive efforts. This risk is exacerbated by socio-economic marginalization, discrimination and lack of respect for their fundamental rights, leading to the further vulnerability of these children, who face the double marginalization of being both indigenous and children. Are indigenous and tribal children at particular risk of entering into child labour? Can we identify indigenous and tribal children as a particular risk group in terms of school dropout rates and low educational performance? How can we best address the needs of these children? According to recent global estimates, 211 million children between five and 14 are economically active. Of these, approximately 186 million are engaged in child labour.¹ If we include children and youth between 15 and 17, the number of child labourers reaches 246 million (ILO 2002a). The number of indigenous peoples is similarly estimated to be between 250 million and 350 million globally. This working paper responds to the dual mandate of the ILO in taking a lead in the fight against child labour (Conventions No. 138 and 182) and promoting the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples (Conventions No. 107 and 169).

It seeks to review available material and assess the overlap between the two, focusing on child labour and education. Studies indicate that some indigenous, tribal or ethnic minority children are more likely to end up in certain types of child labour than their peers. In South Asia, indigenous peoples predominate among certain forms of debt-bondage. In Thailand, hill tribe

children, including refugees from Burma, are highly vulnerable to trafficking, particularly for commercial sexual exploitation. In Ecuador, nine out of ten indigenous children work, compared to one out of three non-indigenous children (Salazar 1998:6). Another study from Bolivia (Cartwright and Patrinos 1999) points out that Latin American children are twice as likely to work if they are indigenous. The authors conclude that “clearly, children of indigenous groups are prime candidates for targeting in any effort to reduce child labour and increase school attendance (ibid: 127).” Child labour is often recognized as a major issue among ethnic minorities. A recent IPEC study from Romania, for example, showed that 49 percent of working street children interviewed were of Roma origin (Alexandrescu 2002). Although ethnic minority children have many elements in common with indigenous and tribal children, this working paper emphasizes the need to address the specific legal, institutional and cultural .

ILO and child rights

In the 1953 landmark study “Indigenous peoples, living and working conditions of aboriginal populations in independent countries” the ILO listed a number of education challenges linked to child labour as they were perceived around 50 years ago.

Under “Factors contributing to illiteracy,” the working child was emphasized: It has been calculated that more than 10 million children in Latin America, both indigenous and nonindigenous are performing work, which should be done by adults. With regard to Guatemala, one investigator has stated that Indian parents cannot afford the “luxury” of sending their children to school. A survey carried out in 1934 by the American International Institute for the Protection of Childhood showed that the age at which the Indian child begins to work varies between nine and ten, and cases are known in which it has begun at four or five years. In 1943 children under 14 years of age (in some cases eight years of age) were observed by the Joint Bolivian-United States Labour Commission working in certain mines in Bolivia (ILO 1953: 184-185). The understanding of child labour as a practice harmful to child development that should be replaced with universal primary education is a well-established social goal that has its origins in the mid-nineteenth century.

This has put indigenous peoples in somewhat of an awkward position. As Saverio Krätli eloquently describes it for pastoralists: Educationally, pastoralists appear to be a paradox. From the point of view of official education they are a complete failure: in terms of enrolment, attendance, classroom performance, achievement, continuity to higher education and gender balance they regularly score at the bottom of the ladder. However, pastoralists although poor (some of them) are far from being a mass of drifting unskilled under-class as they should be according to the popular understanding of basic education as a fundamental need. On the contrary, as a necessary requirement for their livelihood in the drylands, pastoralists perform every day high levels of individual and social specialization (Krätli 2001:1). Traditional forms of education include engagement in customary livelihoods in fields and forests or on the sea with parents and communities. The basic skills transmitted allow children to grow up and survive in often harsh environments. Practical competencies related to these livelihoods are viewed as a necessity for proper socialization. Indeed, prohibiting these by forcing children to participate in non-adapted schooling may risk removing access to traditional forms of education, ultimately threatening children’s future ability to survive and make a living later on as adults.

International statutes on tribal child labor

It may also provoke intergenerational conflict, particularly as educational services often include built-in discriminatory practices. Examples of indigenous and tribal children “forgetting”. Still, the importance of traditional livelihoods as an indigenous education strategy cannot and should not be neglected. Literacy among indigenous peoples involves being proficient in their own languages, being able to read and navigate in local environments, and being able to communicate with and re-write the surrounding landscape to serve their own well-being and future.

Literacy in the national language alone rarely provides this. Traditional livelihoods can indeed be considered as “light work”, particularly if the formal education system is adapted to the particular needs and visions of indigenous peoples. It should be noted that while indigenous children are very often a vulnerable group, this is not always the case. We cannot assume a simple correlation between the presence of indigenous peoples and high rates of child labour. For example, an IPEC rapid assessment of the flower industry in Ecuador made it clear that indigenous children were only involved to a limited extent and that there was a far greater impact among white and mestizo communities (Castelnuovo et al 2000:12).

Moreover, the study noted that such forms of child labour were perceived as “bad” by indigenous communities and highlighted the role of traditions and worldview in strengthening the ability of indigenous communities to resist socio-cultural changes. In Bolivia, statistical analysis undertaken by Cartwright and Patrinos (1999) showed that speaking an indigenous language was negatively associated with full-time work and that indigenous children were less likely to be working full-time. In Nepal, high-caste children may be more vulnerable than indigenous children for some forms of child labour. This does not necessarily mean that indigenous children are better off. As the literature suggests, it is likely that indigenous children face more difficulties when searching for formal employment, leaving the actual number of working children uncounted for in the informal sector. Indigenous peoples may not dominate national statistics in absolute figures, but they are over-represented in certain cases of the worst forms of child labour. Existing documentation only sporadically provides us with more details in terms of differences within and among different communities. Gender differences are typically left unaccounted for as well.

In Guatemala, for example, certain occupations such as manufacturing and the service sector were found to involve mainly indigenous girls (and non-indigenous boys), while indigenous boys were found to be more engaged in agriculture (Rodríguez 1998). Specific data is crucial if we are to move beyond simply asserting indigenous children as a particularly vulnerable group. The vast majority of indigenous peoples live in rural areas dominated by the informal sector and subsistence-based or mixed economies highly dependent on natural resources. It is also in rural areas that the vast majority of working children are believed to be found (IPEC 2002a). Still, the issue of indigenous children working as rural labourers is not well-documented. With certain exceptions, as in debt-bonded labour in South Asia and in other specific cases in Southeast Asia and Latin America, no substantial documentation has yet been produced. For a number of reasons, researchers and organizations have had difficulties in grasping the issues and complexities at work. Remote locations and language barriers have made it logistically difficult to include indigenous areas in major surveys. Moreover, because child labour in rural areas among indigenous peoples typically covers a range of forms, both exploitative and non-exploitative, it may be difficult to collect accurate information. Finally, even when indigenous peoples are included in surveys, disaggregated data is rarely used to reflect their particular conditions. The predominance of child labour in rural Latin America is often emphasized, although there are rarely specific references to indigenous children. The documentation of child labour in rural sectors has from time to time shed light on indigenous child labour in different countries.

Thus, for example, a study of child labour in tea estates of two districts in Nepal documented the indigenous Santhals as the most-represented ethnic group in the overall workforce (18,9%), without, however, exploring the issue in further detail (Upadhyaya & Gautam 1997). In a statement made to the UN Working Group in 2000, a tribal representative from Assam, India highlighted the presence of child labour in tea estates, noting that children are becoming an economic “asset” (ASECA 2000). In terms of rural child labour on a global scale, two major scenarios are emerging. In the first, increasingly dispossessed and marginalized households are forced to send their children into child labour.

In the second, households engage in cyclical or permanent migration for wage labour elsewhere. In both cases, traditional livelihoods and occupations may no longer respond to basic needs, increasing the risk of child labour.

Rural and semi urban child labor wage mismatch

In Latin America, rural agricultural child labour is mainly found among the indigenous peoples of Mexico, Central America and the Andean Region, where most indigenous peoples are peasant farmers or wage labourers. For example, it is estimated that more than 50 percent of the indigenous agricultural community in Guatemala, Mexico and Peru survive only as wage labourers. In Panama, it has been estimated that the child labour situation is most critical in rural and indigenous areas, particularly among the NgobeBugle community in the west, with more than half of all children in indigenous areas suffering from malnutrition.

Rural child labourers are involved in sugar cane plantations and rice and coffee harvesting, with studies showing more than 40-hour work weeks for indigenous children (Carrasco 1999). In rural areas in Mexico, it is estimated that around 170,000 indigenous children ages six to 14 work for little, if any, wages for their parents, family or neighbours. There is comparatively less information from lowland South America, although various forms of slavery have been documented among indigenous groups in rural areas in Brazil (Anti-Slavery and IWGIA 1997). Among the Guarani inhabiting the Gran Chaco plains in the south of Bolivia, indigenous child labour has been observed among debt-bonded, landless families living on large haciendas.

The few schools available provide only primary courses, tending to reinforce high rates of illiteracy and the bondage system (Ventiades 1997:147). In many cases, indigenous and tribal children in debt-bondage are exploiting resources belonging to land from which their communities have been dispossessed. Although little documented, this has been observed in countries such as Laos, Vietnam (personal communication) and the Philippines (Legaspi et al 1997), where merchant-intermediaries advance food, hunting equipment or basic commodities to labourers, who are often cheated in payment for forest products. As Legaspi et al note regarding the Philippines, because of their indebtedness, indigenous communities are often powerless (ibid: 60). A key characteristic of rural child labour in general and debt-bondage in particular is the high dependence on a landlord, trader or other person for food, clothing and housing.

The provision of these “services” on a regular basis is often what secures the continuation of the relationship, as the child or household often believe there are few other options for obtaining these regularly. While children in particular may become victims, many forms of forced labour represent structural situations of exploitation faced by whole communities or particularly vulnerable households. The Global Report on Forced Labour (ILO 2001b) identified indigenous peoples as a particularly vulnerable group, while simultaneously noting the need for more systematic documentation. Because indigenous and tribal areas are often border areas or home to insurgency movements, militarization is a frequently encountered phenomenon. Despite the limited documentation on the issue, there are indications from some countries that indigenous and tribal children are

recruited as child soldiers or helpers in government operations and counter-insurgency movements. In Latin America, indigenous children in Peru were targeted by Sendero Luminoso and underwent prolonged indoctrination (UNICEF 1996). In Colombia, the militarized and violent situation has had serious impact on children in indigenous communities (OPIAC quoted in Martínez 2000). In the North-East of India, the consequences of armed conflict have been dramatic for the indigenous children (Pinto & Thockchom 2002).

Conclusion

When measured in non-Indigenous terms, the educational outcomes of Indigenous peoples are still far below that of non-Indigenous peoples. This fact exists not because Indigenous peoples are less intelligent, but because educational theories and practices are developed by and controlled by non-Indigenous peoples... this failure is that of the system, not of Indigenous peoples (WIPCE 1999). Indigenous peoples are conceptualising their education vision in terms broader and different than those of existing education services. The Coolangatta statement on indigenous peoples' rights in education, adopted as a core policy outcome of the World Indigenous Peoples Conference on Education (WIPCE) held in Hawaii in 1999, highlights that "'dropout rates and failures'... must be viewed as what they really are – 'rejection rates'." The six-page-long Statement situates indigenous rights to education in its historical context of social exclusion and marginalization. Through a human rights approach, the statement reclaims the right to be indigenous as well as the right to self-determination in general and in the area of education in particular. The sixth WIPCE was held in 2002.

Education International has recently taken the Coolangatta Statement on board, inviting affiliates to endorse it as well as promoting the view "that United Nations' bodies, governments and education trade unions must review, transform and improve policies and practices in this matter, in order to implement the Education For All objectives. The major driving forces behind many social problems encountered by indigenous and tribal children go beyond their immediate needs and are rarely identified by conventional income-based poverty analysis. These include profound changes in terms of self-perception, well-being, cultural identity and social interaction. It is well-acknowledged that assimilation policies and marginalization have had serious impact on levels of social and cultural disruption. An indigenous girl may no longer be spoken to in the indigenous language by siblings and friends, she may not be taught it at school, and she may find life easier rejecting its existence.

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