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Is combining child labour and school education the right approach? Investigating the Cambodian case

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ABSTRACT

The paper considers whether letting children combine work and school is a valid and effective approach in Cambodia. Policy makers' suggestions that child labour should be allowed to some extent due to household poverty appear ungrounded as no significant relation between children's work and household poverty is found while arranging school timetables flexibly in order to accommodate households' perceived need for children's labour may increase problems of insufficient teaching hours if schools conduct their timetables unreliably. Considering these issues, the paper suggests the need for a more diversified approach to dealing with the impact of child labour on their school education.

1. Introduction

Defining 'child labour' is difficult as there is more than one definition of the term. While few proscribe 'child labour' *per se*, most definitions provide some indication of the kinds of work that are unacceptable for children to undertake if it might adversely affect their well being and development, for example by interfering with their school attendance. However, most of the criteria proposed to define what is 'acceptable' are often vague, and fail to provide useful standards for evaluating many real-world cases. For instance, the Cambodian Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (MOLVT) defines child labour as the opposite concept of child work (MOLVT, 2004b: 20). Thus

> ... *child labour* as work done by a child below 18 years old, either paid or unpaid, that *inimically affects* the mental, physical, social or moral progress of the child and prevents his/her education. Work which helps to educate, or train the child for future occupation, and is part of social and family functions, is termed as *child work* and does not constitute child labour or the WFCL [Worst Forms of Child Labour].[1]

In the above definition, 'inimically affects' does not provide any concrete definition of what 'inimically' means in evaluating cases of child labour. Likewise, the criteria and standards needed to determine which types of work may help educate or train a child for future occupations are not provided. As a result, the definition presumes a common understanding of the criteria about child labour among readers which may not exist.

One of the broadest definitions of child labour, and one which is often used in survey-based measurements, is to include any form of children's economic activity that takes place for at least 1 h during the reference week (Betcherman et al., 2004). On this basis 'economic' activities are usually defined as the most productive activities, whether undertaken for the market or not, paid or unpaid, legal or illegal, and excludes those chores undertaken in a child's own household (ILO, 2006). But, child labour is often perceived to be a narrower problem by policy-makers than simply reducing the numbers of all 'economically active children'. For example ILO (2002) defined 'child labourers' as all economically active children below the age of 12, all children aged between 12–14 working more than 14 h a week, and all children below the age of 18 in the worst forms of child labour. However, the problem with this definition is, if it is thought that some cases of work that do not exceed 14 h per week could still inhibit a child's school attendance or achievement or their broader development in some other ways, that determining the point where a child's 'work' becomes a child's 'labour' solely by reference to the weekly number of hours worked does not always seem to be the most appropriate approach.

Related to these definitional ambiguities is the question of whether and when to intervene in order to restrict or prevent child labour. Hence, in the context of many developing countries, it is often assumed that child labour should be tolerated because severe

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[1] The ILO Convention No. 182 (1999) defines the term *the worst forms of child labour* as comprising: (a) all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict; (b) the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances; (c) the use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in the relevant international treaties; (d) work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children (article 3).

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household poverty drives children into work. Under this view child labour which is 'not acceptable' *by definition* does not always translate into work that is always unacceptable *in practice*. However, this argument loses its force if poverty is not the main reason why most children work at the expense of their education and, if so, its validity needs to be reconsidered. If it is not the case, and if child labour is defined as work which is unacceptable for children, policies that allow it to be combined with schooling are, at best, misguided or, at worse, illogical, since the work that would be accepted should not have been defined as child labour in the first place. It is against the background of these questions that this paper seeks to examine whether child labour should be tolerated because poverty makes it inevitable, focusing, in particular, on the question of the extent to which it should be combined with children's school attendance.

In relation to this debate, Kabeer (2003) identifies two positions in the literature on the relationship between child labour and their school attendance: an 'idealist' one that believes allowing children to combine work and education, for instance by providing non-formal forms of education, merely perpetuates child labour and wider social inequalities since it offers inferior forms of education to the children of the poor; and a 'realistic' approach that argues that forcing parents and children to choose between work and schooling simply leads to the impoverishment of both. This paper attempts to evaluate how 'realistic' this 'realistic' approach is (i.e., to see whether it is based on real-world evidence), using recent data from Cambodia. Hence, if many Cambodian children do not work because of poverty, policies that claim to be 'realistic' by allowing them to combine their school education with work are not being realistic about reality.

2. The empirical data used in the research

The Cambodian empirical data analysed in this paper were collected in early 2005. It included interviews with policy makers, a review of official policy documents and the collation and analysis of national statistics on the extent and profile of child labour and 'basic' school education in Cambodia, with the latter defined as that of the primary and lower secondary levels (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2003). The statistical data were drawn from two national household surveys conducted by the National Institute of Statistics, the Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey (CSES) 2004 and the Cambodia Child Labour Survey (CCLS) 2001.[2] The CSES 2004 included a nationwide representative sample of 12,000 households within 900 sampling units (villages) and targeted all individuals aged 5 years old and older. Likewise, the CCLS 2001 also included a nationwide representative sample of 12,000 households within 600 sampling units and targeted children aged between 5 and 17 years old. For this paper, these data were analysed for children aged between 6 and 14 (i.e., the period of 'basic' education defined above).

The policy makers, who were selected according to the extent of their involvement in the formulation of Cambodian education and child labour policies, included government officials and the representatives of major international agencies active in the education and child labour sectors in Cambodia (such as UN agencies) and NGOs. However, because the research focused on education policy-makers' views as to the appropriate balance between a child's labour and their schooling, the 51 interviewees (of whom 33 were Cambodians and 18 were foreign-nationals) included 39 people from the education sector, seven people from the child labour sector and five people whose responsibilities spanned both. Representatives of the latter two groups were included, first, to help identify the background debates concerning child labour and, second, to compare their attitudes to those held by the education sector policy-makers. The first policy-maker interview was conducted on 10 February 2005 and the last took place on 26 May 2005.

The interviews were transcribed verbatim. After coding the transcripts, using a list of codes that were developed over time based on a literature review and further information gathered and analysed during the fieldwork, thematic analysis was then applied to the codes to find any patterns within and relationships across them. In analysing the statistical materials, SPSS windows version 13 was used. It should be noted that in this paper, more extracts are quoted from the interviews with the foreign national policy makers than those from Cambodians. In part, this is because the foreign nationals were often more direct and articulate in expressing their opinions and presented clearer examples to quote in a relatively short paper. But it is also to show that the approaches taken by policy makers in Cambodia were not confined to the Cambodians but were shared by the foreign development professionals. To keep the interviewees' identities anonymous, the exact interview dates are not given in this paper.

3. Common beliefs about the causes of child labour

As was noted above, child labour is often tolerated because it is seen as inevitable due to household poverty. However, studies looking at the relationship between rates of child labour and household poverty, often measured using household income, show contrasting results both across and within countries: while some find a positive relationship (e.g., Cartwright, 1999; Patrinos and Psacharapoulos, 1995), others find a negative or insignificant relationship between child labour and poverty rates (Patrinos and Psacharapoulos, 1997; Ray, 2000; Rosati and Tzannatos, 2006). As a result a consensus appears to be emerging that child labour rates may not have a significant relationship with household poverty (Bhalotra and Tzannatos, 2003) or that there is little evidence to support the claim that such poverty is a major cause of child labour (Canagarajah and Nielsen, 1999). Indeed, in the case of Cambodia, a recent World Bank (2005) study, found children from households in the top three wealth quintiles began working earlier than those from households in the lowest two quintiles as well as a positive correlation between children's work rates and their households land ownership.

Another common, though misleading, assumption about child labour is that it is mainly associated with industrialisation and urbanisation. However, a distinct majority of economically active children in many developing countries are involved in agricultural work. For instance, in Cambodia according to the national household surveys, around 90% of working children were defined as 'unpaid family workers' in both 2001 and 2004 (see Table 1) with, in 2004, some 80% of these being in various types of agricultural work (see Table 2, combined percentages for the first four industry groups).

Because of these misconceptions, Bhalotra and Tzannatos (2003) note many policy discourses on child labour do not recognise the predominance of family employment among most child workers, as they are largely influenced by media coverage of child labour in export sectors such as carpets, garments and sports equipment industries. Likewise, Tomasevski (2003) observes the dominant trend of conceiving children's work as employment in the formal sector fails to provide a promising background to meet the challenge of child labour. While most child labourers are found

[2] The CSES 2004 indicates data collected during 12 months in 2004 from the CSES 2003–2004 that included data over 15 months including 3 months in 2003. Twelve months data in 2004 of the CSES 2003–04 as the CSES 2004 is more often used for statistical analyses especially when seasonality is potentially important.