Article

Exploring the causes of child labour series

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Serial 1: Economic poverty and child labour

Preamble: Child labour is a problem we all either know much of or have heard much about. Many are daily working on it – some trying to help eradicate it while others are making money (directly or indirectly) from it. Our failures to significantly affect the incidence and prevalence of this social cancer are not due to poor trials, but primarily due to application of wrong principles based on faulty theories of causation. We can only succeed in managing this crisis if we first and foremost identify the true causes and decide consciously to ameliorate them.

In this presentation, I will be discussing things that you know but from a different angle. To enjoy it, you must disabuse your mind and flow with the line of reasoning. Take away all previously conceived ideas and reason along with me. Are you not tired of excuses? Welcome to a new beginning.

Introduction:

The 5 cultures of child labour

Over the years, everyone that has said anything (I mean anything on child abuse), particularly child labour, has directly or indirectly linked the prevalence of this problem to economic poverty. Poverty is more or less blamed for this worldwide scourge. It is claimed that it is poverty that makes parents/guardians send their children to the streets to hawk, it is poverty that makes parents send out their children to prostitute, it is poverty that makes the elders sell their children for child trafficking, it is poverty that makes parents allow their children to be employed into formal and informal sectors for daily or monthly pay, it is poverty that makes parents deny their children education and allow them to wallow in dirt and unhygienic conditions in the name of working. In fact, every form of child exploitation is linked to poverty. You too may have either joined in developing this line of thought or bought it hook, line and sinker. Is this true?

We all know that children are found in all nooks and crannies of the world. Similarly, economic poverty (although at different levels and percentages) is found in all states, nations and peoples of the world. No given society has 100% rich citizens. But child labour – hawking, bus conducting, begging on the streets, working in large factories, etc – is not universal. This is a pointer to the fact that there is more to child labour that mere economic poverty.

Studies have shown that in several parts of the world there are many families which are epitomes of economic poverty, but have no children in the streets (while meeting all their needs according to their levels), and others that may not be classified as economically poor where almost all children are involved in one form of child labour or the other. These findings are stimulants of my assertion that child labour is not a product of economic poverty.

Furthermore, many economically poor counties have over the years developed innovative and creative programmes to tackle poverty – believing that this will help tackle (and if possible eradicate) most social vices like child labour, prostitution, armed robbery, etc. But these programmes have failed (and woefully too), especially in Nigeria and other African states. Some have blamed the failure of these programmes on poor policy formulation, others on inadequate infrastructures or poor implementation, while yet others on the absence of proper policy evaluation and monitoring. In as much as these may all contribute to the, these failure may be a pointer to some underlying facts which none has been bold enough to either identify or tackle. I make bold to say that it is these underlying facts that both perpetuate economic poverty and other social vices in these countries.
These underlying factors, which are the true causes of child labour in Africa, are what I call the Five (5) Cultures of Child Labour. In this presentation, I will address these cultures one after the other. I hope that this will stimulate interesting discussions from the network.

The Culture of Poverty:

The first is not ‘poverty’ but ‘the culture of poverty. You may ask, ‘what is the difference?’ There is a world of difference between ‘economic poverty’ and ‘the culture of poverty’. While poverty refers to a situation where a person or group of persons exist at a level below the globally accepted subsistence level of 1 dollar/day/person ($1) or now $2/day/person, the culture of poverty refers to a situation where parents (or adults) are programmed to believe that they are poor (a state of mental poverty), and thus incapable of meeting their needs. They believe that they cannot help themselves and always look for an external force, factor or person to blame for their predicaments. They claim that if they have/had good education, better government, better relations, rich parents, stronger foundations, encouraging brothers, etc they would have been better. They never allow anyone to blame them for their present position (they may even fight you if you suggest their accomplice). They thus look for external helps to mediate their problems. These they find in their innocent children, who they may even blame for their problems or for compounding their problems. (Permit me to say that a similar mental poverty is found widely in African leaders who always blame their inadequacies on colonial rule and slave trade, and have internationalized begging from all ‘developed’ nations of the world. To them, unless there is money from outside either as grants, loans or donations, no project is carried out).

Such adults’ ends up leaving their destinies unexplored and live on others as either parasites or unnecessary burdens. They refuse to think and live, grabbing on others as their sole ticket to life. It is not surprising to see them on the road sides begging using their innocent fragile children as ‘compassion stimulators’ when they can do something better with their time and energy. They claim there are no jobs when all around Africa many farmlands remain uncultivated. They claim there is no money when everywhere both natural and human resources lie unexplored and unexploited. They claim there are poor governments when all governments are usually drawn from people with similar complaints. They have ‘good’ reasons for their failures and therefore see no reason why they should do anything about it. These are the culturally poor people, the foundation of child labour.

They use developing children for financial gains – some may even sell the not too strong ones or give them out for loans. God given heritages become their sole source of survival (as if they would have died if they never had children!).

Most times they blackmail these children into believing that they are doing what they are doing either as the only solution or just for themselves. But we all know that this is not true. They thus belittle themselves and loose confidence in their abilities to make ends meet and to get out of the trap of poverty, they transfer their duties and depend on innocent children to do what they, the adults, have failed to do. They thus deny these children normal childhood and the chance to develop themselves through proper formal or informal education. They become devastating models to the children, socializing them into what they (the parents) are and bringing them up to believe that these are the only way out of hunger.

This is not economic poverty, but a culture of poverty. A culture that accepts the wrong and justifies it. A culture that perpetuates bondage and smiles at it. A culture that accepts defeats and celebrates it. This is the fundamental cause of child labour not poverty.

Culture of Comparism:

Many children are today abused by their parents or caregivers primarily because they are daily compared with the wrong section of their peers. Parents and guardians are good at telling children to see other children like Okechukwu, Chikodi, Tunji, Abubakar, Boma, etc who are involved in all manner of child labour and the impact their activities are having on their families finances, while failing (deliberately) to compare them with Charity, Ebele, Halima, Emeka, Aminu, etc who are in schools and doing very well with their studies. A case of selective amnesia you will agree.

Children in these families are made to feel guilty if they are not working like their so-called contemporaries and sometimes starved because they could not meet up with the parental targets. Many abusive parents are victims of this culture in many towns of Africa. They see their children not as who they are but as what they want them to be–looking at them from the eyes of the public, seeing them the way other mentally poor parents see their children. They want their children to help make more money for the families, they want to belong where other families belong, they want to do what other families are doing and they want to obtain what other families are obtaining. They think it is right. They may even think it is the only way out. They may think they have no other option. So they do it.

There are communities where all families have children in one form of child labour or the other primarily due to this cultural coloring, not because of economic poverty. Studies have shown that children of traders are more likely to be found in the streets hawking (sometimes the same commodities their parents are selling in the market). This happens not because they are poor, but more importantly because other traders are doing the same. It may even surprise you to hear some parents or guardians saying, “What is wrong with it, after all other child-
ren are doing it," a common answer to the question, "Why allow your children to walk the streets selling things when they should be going to school?" Thus the children are in the streets not because their parents are poor, but because they do not see anything wrong with it and others are doing the same. But even the holy bible condemns comparism. It says "For we dare not make ourselves by ourselves, and comparing ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise." (2 Corinthians 10:12). Thus although the practice is an evidence of foolishness, many caregivers are victims of it. Many get involved when they discuss with other parents whose children are seen in all manner of child labour. They try to rationalize their actions with, "what can man do?" Some even totally transfer their duties to these unfortunate children while they relax at home eating and drinking from the blood of these children. This is wrong. Just because this has gone on for a very long time, and with recent urbanization is becoming more widely spread, many people have accepted it as a norm. Many now think it is right and some blame it on economic poverty. But this is not true. Let's call a spade a spade. The culture of comparism is destroying the destinies of our children. Something must be done about it.

Culture of Laziness:

This is one culture that is very prevalent in most African states. Many adults look up to others to solve their problems, demand others to feed them while they waste their time doing things that are not meaningful. A typical African adult wakes up late, talks or chats most of the day, does minimal work in the day time, sleeps early when there are no visitors to talk with or no film to watch, but eats like a horse. In offices, they work at their own pace. The jobless are less perturbed as long as there is food on the table.

Even economic poverty is a product of laziness! Having lost interest in doing any meaningful job, they depend on their children to provide for the whole families. Children are allowed to work in the streets as hawkers, street beggars, bus conductors or barrow pushers while their lazy parents sit somewhere collecting the monies they make and feeding fat on them. This again is wrong. It is a cultural practice that has been accepted by many ethnic groups in Africa. Some go all the way accepting and identifying with this wrong way of life, while a large proportion do minimal jobs while the children do the major works. Many children are blackmailed into these jobs by parents who claim that having brought the child into the world and taken care of him/her while an infant, it is now time for the growing child to repay all the expenses and devotion the parents gave to him/her. No matter how you look at it, it is wrong. Nevertheless, this culture is the major cause of more than 10 percent of the prevalence of child labour in most African states.

But parental hard work will and in most cases completely eradicates the need for child labour. In families where parents are diligent, children are seen in schools learning and improving themselves. A finding that is completely opposite in families with lazy parents. Therefore families are not poor because they have no job, no money to start a business or no good inheritance, but just because the head of the family is out-rightly lazy (and in most cases will not accept it). A resolution of this culture is one of the vital steps to the eradication of economic poverty in Africa.

Culture of Past Life:

Many abusive parents were products of child abuse. They were victims of child labour, parental negligence and emotional abuse. These childhood experiences makes them either believe that abusing their children is the only way out of their financial predicaments or the only way of child upbringing – being the only experience they have. To them, it is a viable socialization process for the child. In some communities, a child is not properly trained if by ten he/she is not contributing to family income. The more they contribute, the better the training!

Since they hawked for instance and are doing well today, they see nothing wrong in their children hawking. Some of such parent claim that it was while hawking or working as a child that they learned most of the things that has made them what they are today, and therefore find it difficult to see why they should deny their children such 'wonderful' experience. To such parents, child labour is a sine qua none to holistic child socialization process, and cannot be ignored. It is the beginning and end of child training! 'No child can survive without it', they say. But they fail to remember the numerous children that were not so lucky, the millions that died while on the streets, the hundreds of thousands that were kidnapped or ritualized, the several that were handicapped, deformed or infirmed. They forget their age mates that are destitute primarily because of complications that arose from child labour. They only cite the few that made it. This is wrong and must stop!

A man is not a parent because he can father a child, but because he can bring up a child in a most satisfactory way. That you were abused and survived does not make abuse right! However, because this has being going on now for a long time, many have come to accept it as right. It is not right. Neither is it a product of economic poverty, but a mere consequence of culture of past experience.

Culture of Incompetence:

In Nigeria, like in most other third world states, mediocrity is celebrated at the expense of meritocracy. Many people are put in places of authority not because of what they
can do but due to either whom they know or where they come from. This has drastically undermined true development and sustained evil practices – one of which is child labour.

Children are not abused because the nations are economically poor, rather because the leaders make money from them – claiming that Africa is poor and citing their rehabilitation as a basis for asking for grants, loans and donations. They front them in public as evidence of the economic despondency and make the world believe that without them working; their parents cannot feed them nor train them. These are leaders without vision and lack any good mind of their own. It is a similar incompetence in offices (both public and private), industries and government quarters that has ruined our economy and wasted our resources, hampering enduring development. Our children are not therefore in the streets because the countries are economically poor, but just because the nations of Africa have over the years glorified mediocrity and celebrated it.

Understanding these principle causes of child labour is what Africa needs to be in a position to tackle the hydra-headed monster called child labour.

Join me next week as we talk on the True Poverties of Child Labour.

REFERENCES
