

Distress Migration and the new Form of Child Labour – A Case Study in Ghana



“Unregulated casual labour market centres in the central business and commercial districts of cities in southern Ghana with migrant workers from northern Ghana including children, holding hoes and machetes waiting for prospective employers to engage them casually on a daily basis”.

By Joseph N Nabin

Pledge Ghana

December 2014

Introduction

Even though the term “child labour” does not encompass all economic activities undertaken by children, it refers to employment or work carried out by children that neither conforms to the provisions of national legislation, such as the Children’s Act, 1998 (Act 560), nor the provisions of international instruments such as ILO Convention Nos. 138 and 182. It is a fact that agricultural workforce as a whole is shrinking and there is increasing use of migrant labour including trafficked children in agricultural employments.

Efforts towards eliminating child labour in Ghana has been commendable, however, it remains a fact that achievements are still below the threshold required for maximum results; and child labour gets more organized in its new forms and also more migratory. In recent times, unregulated casual labour market centres spring up in the central business and commercial districts of cities in southern Ghana with migrant workers from northern Ghana including children, holding hoes and machetes waiting for prospective employers to engage them casually on a daily basis.



Key Issues and Problems

In Ghana, the indication is that over one million children are still affected by the child labour menace. According to the Ghana Living Standards Survey Round Six (GLSS6) the Upper West region had the highest proportion (92.4%) of children engaged in agricultural activities. In all the ecological zones surveyed, the private informal sector engaged the largest proportion of children, with rural savannah recording the highest (88.5%). The rural forest had the highest proportion of working children engaged in agri-business (30.5%).

The tree northern regions are faced with a situation of severe loss of tree cover, with more than 70% forest areas degraded. This has caused soil erosion, rapid water runoff. Soil erosion and land degradation have also reduced the water retention capacity of the soil and contribute to the loss of productivity. Poor management of the land and water resources has influenced high rates of soil and water runoff during the rainy periods, resulting in annual water shortages and a steady decline in soil fertility. Both factors have contributed to poor and uncertain returns on rain-fed agriculture.

Search for survival opportunities forces them to migrate to far off places. After barely surviving the migration period lasting between 6 to 8 months, the migrants return to their village only to get sucked into the same vicious cycle. With no savings to bank upon, some depend on loans taken at exorbitant rates of interest and in order to pay back the loans and survive, they are forced time and again to migrate out of the villages.

Another significant factor that makes the area particularly vulnerable to frequent drought is the absence of traditional irrigation systems. These three regions in Ghana could be home to a unique system of traditional irrigation and water harvesting which are suitable for the topography of the area. The system would also guarantee that the excess run off from the upper structures flowed in to the lower ones and together they capture the maximum quantity of water that would be used during the dry months.

Usually migration is the result of a combination of factors generally classified as economic, social, political and or environmental. These three regions' fortunes rise and fall in accordance with the periods and contrasting extreme weather conditions. Residents live a fragile unstable existence withstanding heat waves, drought and rural poverty. Recurring droughts manifest in cycles and lead to large scale distress migration in which poor and vulnerable people mainly from the marginalized families in these regions are exploited endlessly. According to the IOM in its (2009) country profile on migration in Ghana, internal migration, especially North-South migration, has been an important direction of flow. Creating employment opportunities and arresting the phenomenon of distress migration including alternative credit mechanisms needs to be strengthened so that the stranglehold of poverty can be loosened.



This has repercussions for the home communities. Those departing are more prone to take risks in the process, such as accepting illegal travel financing arrangements, bondage and slavery like conditions or accepting jobs not suitable for children. In extreme cases, migrant children from these particularly disadvantaged regions consent to exploitative working conditions. According to the IOM (2009), the majority of Victims of Trafficking (VoT) were internally trafficked for labour exploitation with two-thirds of the VoTs being males. Distress migration and indebtedness go hand in hand and leads to interlocked modes of exploitation.

Towards a Redress

Interventions on the ground need to centrally focus on reducing distress migration and migrant child labour by regulating migrant labour conditions in the south and leveraging employment possibilities in the three regions with a focus on education and livelihood options. The overarching expectation is that, a combination of migrant work regulation in the south and locally available employment options in the 3 northern regions will reduce distress out-migrations to the south. By utilizing community structures to undertake land and watershed resource management, the regions will begin to have communally and individually owned agricultural assets, and programs in agriculture will enable these communities to obtain significantly high returns from all sectors.

There is clearly the need for employment opportunities to be created in the villages themselves. Not only do these opportunities need to be created, they have to be in place before the peak migration period starts in October. Further, these employment opportunities also need to be seen as reliable for the local people to have confidence in them as real alternatives to their distress situations. In addition, there is obvious need for and access to flexible credit loans.