



## BLUEPRINT for Social Justice

founded in 1948 by  
Louis J. Twomey, S.J.

BLUEPRINT is published  
monthly from September through  
May by the Twomey Center for  
Peace through Justice,  
Loyola University, Box 907  
7214 St. Charles Ave.  
New Orleans, LA 70118  
(504) 861-5736  
FAX (504) 861-5833  
e-mail • [blueprint@loyno.edu](mailto:blueprint@loyno.edu)  
web • [www.loyno.edu/twomey](http://www.loyno.edu/twomey)  
Publisher • Ted Quant  
Editor • Al Alcazar  
Printing • Joe Forte

TO SUBSCRIBE OR  
UNSUBSCRIBE TO THE  
ELECTRONIC VERSION OF  
BLUEPRINT, SEND AN E-MAIL  
TO [BLUEPRINT@LOYNO.EDU](mailto:BLUEPRINT@LOYNO.EDU)

TO CONTACT AL ALCAZAR,  
THE EDITOR OF BLUEPRINT,  
SEND AN E-MAIL TO  
[AALCAZAR@LOYNO.EDU](mailto:AALCAZAR@LOYNO.EDU)

PLEASE SEND CHANGE OF  
ADDRESS NOTICE,  
INCLUDING OLD ADDRESS,  
TO THE ADDRESS  
GIVEN ABOVE.

# BLUEPRINT for Social Justice

VOLUME LXI, NUMBER 5

FALL 2009

## Making Rights Work for Working Children in Africa

BY VACHEL MILLER

Assistant Professor, Appalachian State University

My 7-year-old son is playing in our backyard. Living as we do on an Appalachian hillside, our backyard is rocky and sloped. My son chips away at an exposed lump of quartz, hoping to uncover the precious gems he imagines are hidden inside. His hand slips, and the rock he uses as a hammer hits him on the leg. His leg is scraped and hurting; he cries out. I attend to his scrape with a hug. A few minutes later, recovered, he leaves his stone quarry...for another game, for a snack on the deck. In our backyard in North Carolina, my son breaks rocks for fun. Back where we used to live, in Uganda, children break rocks for food.

From 2005 to 2008, I worked as a staff member on a regional East African child labor project funded by the U.S. Department of Labor. Since returning to the U.S., I often think about the powerful differences in children's experiences there and here, the meaning of children's rights, and the challenges to addressing the exploitation of children's work.

### The context of child labor globally and in Uganda

Globally, gains have been made in the reduction of child labor in recent years. The latest international data from the International Labor Organization (2006) indicates that the percentage of children worldwide involved in exploitative labor has decreased by 11 percent from 2000 to 2004. There were an estimated 166 million children involved in child labor globally in 2004, down from 186 million in 2000. The number of children involved in hazardous labor decreased even more substantially during this period, from 111 million to 74 mil-

lion (ILO, 2006). The greatest reductions in child labor have occurred in Latin America, and the smallest changes have occurred in Africa—the continent where children are most likely to be involved in exploitative labor. In fact, more than 1 in 4 children in sub-Saharan Africa were involved in child labor in 2004. While the percentage of child laborers in Africa has reduced slightly, there are actually more children involved in child labor in 2004 than 2000, due to rapid population growth during the period (ILO, 2006).

In Uganda, the most recent national survey data from 2005–06 indicates that 38 percent of children ages 7–14 are working<sup>1</sup> (Understanding Children's Work Project, 2008). The work they do is predominantly agricultural: hoeing on small plots of land; harvesting rice; tending goats and cows. Children also gather firewood, fetch water, and help prepare meals. When families need additional income to buy food or clothing—or to pay for a school uniform—children often go to work outside home. Working children sell goods in local markets and sell their labor cheaply to whomever is willing to pay. Children can be found laboring in brick kilns, stone quarries, and tea plantations—places where they are vulnerable to injury from fire, sharp tools, pesticides, or simple exhaustion. In urban centers, children work in bars and nightclubs, work sites which (especially for young girls) often expose them to sexual exploitation.

Helping around the home is considered “child work” and is widely understood to be an acceptable practice through which children gain practical skills and contribute to family welfare. But when children work outside the

home for money before they reach the legal working age, when children work for long hours or work under dangerous conditions that damage their health, they are considered according to international labor conventions to be involved in child labor.

In Africa, there is a powerful gender dimension to child labor: girls work more than boys. Traditional gender norms dictate that girls (in preparation for their roles as wives/mothers) shoulder the burden of housekeeping and cooking duties. When family members are sick, girls are kept home to care for them.<sup>2</sup> The analysis of data from Uganda found that at the age of 13, girls work on average more than 30 hours per week, while boys work approximately 23 hours per week (Understanding Children's Work Project, 2008). The burden on girls, relative to boys, grows with age, as girls take on ever greater responsibilities for domestic work. Because domestic work is typically not counted as "child labor," gender differences in the overall work burden that children shoulder are often obscured in official statistics.

### **Combining work and school**

Early in my own engagement with child labor issues in Africa, I imagined that work kept children out of school. But research suggests that, especially for young children, child labor and schooling are not mutually exclusive. Children often work and attend school at the same time. The national report on child labor in Uganda found that 92 percent of working children attend school, although attendance drops in relation to greater number of hours worked (Understanding Children's Work Project, 2008). Children who combine work and school do so by starting work early in the morning before school, and then returning to work late in the evening. At school during the day, they often feel tired and have trouble concentrating in class. And when necessary, they skip school to work, resulting in irregular attendance, impaired achievement, and early drop-out. Overall, working children will spend fewer years in school than non-working counterparts (Understanding Children's Work Project, 2008).

Most parents prefer to see their children in school, rather than selling their labor prematurely. But when educational quality is poor—overcrowded classrooms, no textbooks, apathetic teachers, irrelevant lessons—parents make judgments that the value of schooling is far less than the value of their child's labor. Then their children drop out of school to join the workforce. In sub-Saharan Africa, it is very common for children to leave school after the early primary grades. In Uganda, approximately 50 percent of children reach grade five.

At one level, the trade-off between education and labor is a matter of time horizon. Education has "pay off" in the long term. With every year in school, students have a greater chance of learning basic skills and working in the formal sector (Bass, 2004). But the long-term value of education is hard to see, when families struggle with subsistence needs and see little to gain from schooling in the short-term.

Unlike school, work brings in money at the end of the day. However little, the money comes to buy rice, to buy clothes, to pay rent, to buy medicine—needs that cannot wait until some vague future date when education is rewarded. And that is one of the debilitating aspects of poverty for families, always tilting the scales toward solving today's crises and obscuring the long-term value of investment in children. In the developed world, families experiencing economic crises might seek loans or use credit cards to meet unforeseen expenses. But in Africa, where no such credit is available, shocks to family income are often buffered by the work of children (Grootaert & Patrinos, 1999; Understanding Children's Work, 2008). Although asking children to work is often a last resort for impoverished and marginalized families, it is an option to which they are forced to return, time and again, at the expense of children's education.

### **Child labor and children's rights**

Doing policy development with governments on child labor issues in East Africa, our project used two primary arguments for the elimination of child labor. From one angle, we pointed out that child labor erodes the quality of a country's human capital. Rather than gaining skills for future contributions to the national economy, working children are often denied education and can suffer health problems. This line of argument suggests that eliminating child labor is a priority for economic and social development.

Another line of argument is that child labor is a violation of human rights. The Convention of the Rights of the Child guarantees the right to education as well as protection from dangerous work (Herumin, 2008). When work prevents children from attending school or endangers children's well being, it violates their rights. In this sense, there is a moral urgency to eliminate child labor.

Focusing on child labor as a violation of rights links to an enduring debate about the deeper cultural roots of the conceptualization of human rights. Embedded in human rights thinking is an assumption that all children are "western" children, in that they need nurturing, that they should participate in leisure and educational activities, free of the burden of work (Pedraza-Gomez, 2007). This line of thinking argues that the human rights approach to childhood universalizes a western view and negates diverse cultural meanings of childhood.<sup>3</sup> Outside the mainstream of international agencies advocating that children stop working, some scholars argue that more attention needs to be paid to the meaning of work for children (Hungerland, Liebel, Milne, & Wihstutz, 2007) and children's own perspectives on work, including the possibility that children have a right to work and take pride in being able to earn money and take care of others.

In community workshops our project held about child labor, we heard other local questions about the human rights agenda. Parents and community leaders would occasionally express frustration with a focus on children's rights, to the neglect of children's responsibil-

ities. They felt that rights and responsibilities must always be balanced. Thinking only about their rights would lead children to forget their responsibilities—for contributing to the family and for respecting elders.

## Policy solutions

International experience suggests that there are multiple, complementary pathways to the elimination of child labor. Because poverty is a root cause of child labor, national strategies to reduce poverty form the cornerstone of the effort to eliminate child labor. Improvements in health (especially prevention of HIV/AIDS), improvements in women's education<sup>4</sup>, reductions in family size, increased access to credit through micro-financing—all of these changes can reduce the likelihood, in general, for children to engage in exploitative labor.

But broad poverty-reduction strategies alone may not help the particular circumstances of the most vulnerable children. Broad strategies should be coupled with targeted initiatives to specifically open non-exploitative futures for working children. When children have access to lunch at school (school feeding), for example, they no longer need to work for their daily subsistence. Another support mechanism involves direct cash subsidies to families who keep working children in school, often known as "conditional transfers" (Kielland & Tovo, 2006). In such a program, parents (with preference for mothers) are given a monthly stipend as long as a former working child stays in school (Kielland & Tovo, 2006). Such interventions should be gender-sensitive, with a focus on supporting girls' education to counter-balance traditions that force girls out of school earlier than boys (Grootaert & Patrinos, 1999). Rural children also need greater access to quality vocational training, so that they can gain skills that can provide alternative ways to earn a livelihood than through exploitative labor.

At a family level, a key strategy for reducing dependence on child labor involves building capacity for income generation. Such initiatives typically include a combination of community organization for micro-finance, training, and provision of tools/materials. In our project, one of the more effective examples of income-generating activities came from Ethiopia, where a boy was given a bicycle. He rented the bicycle to neighbors for about \$1/day, and then pooled the income in a community lending fund, which enabled him to buy another bicycle, which he and a friend now take turns renting out. Such entrepreneurship enables his family to support itself without relying on income from child labor.

Raising community awareness of the detrimental consequences of child labor is an important complement to policy strategies. In rural Africa, awareness-raising often involves public events in which community leaders give speeches and children perform songs and skits about child labor. At schools, children often form child rights clubs to learn about human rights and educate their peers and community.

Fundamentally, awareness-raising attempts to shift social norms, so that child labor is no longer natural and acceptable. When communities begin to disapprove of child labor, there is greater social pressure to keep children in school (ILO, 2006). Greater social disapproval of child labor also makes law enforcement more acceptable to local communities because it reduces the gap between traditional practices and legal standards (Kielland and Tovo, 2006).

In their book on child labor in Africa, Kielland and Tovo (2006) highlight a parallel with the international struggle to end slavery: the foundation was a humanistic, anti-slavery movement to change social values; followed by the legal abolition of the slave trade; and then the enforcement of anti-slavery laws. Accordingly, the elimination of child labor involves a foundation of public awareness about its negative consequences, a national policy framework, and enforcement of laws protecting children from exploitative labor.

The development of child labor policies in Africa is gaining momentum. During my time in Uganda, the government adopted a national child labor policy. Our project also assisted the government of Rwanda to draft a similar policy. In Africa, though, adopting a policy doesn't necessarily imply that anything will change on the ground. The frequent criticism is that policies only exist on paper, as governments put little to no investment in implementation. Yet, as Kielland and Tovo (2006) argue, child labor policies can have a powerful moral function, setting a normative standard to which the nation aspires. The existence of strong policy documents at a national level can catalyze the development of further policy mechanisms at a district or community level, and provide a rhetorical foundation for ongoing awareness-raising efforts.

One of the challenges of a policy-driven approach to eliminating child labor is the lack of coordination between ministries of labor and education (Miller, 2009). Because child labor takes place outside schools, it has traditionally fallen outside the domain of education ministries and has not been given significant attention. The international education for all (EFA) movement, however, is encouraging education ministries to work harder to increase access and educational quality for marginalized children. Slowly, child labor is becoming more visible on the educational agenda.

One innovation that helps working children is schools with flexible schedules, so that children who would otherwise not attend school can combine work and schooling. Another innovation involves "second-chance" programs that enable students who dropped out early to gain essential skills needed to re-enter the formal system with their age-mates. In traditional schools, teachers can help keep children out of exploitative labor by simply providing positive emotional support to children: individual care and attention goes a long way for children whose self-worth has been damaged by abusive work environments. Children who stop working and return to school often say

that “I feel like somebody!” indicating how far exploitative work violated their basic dignity.

### **What can we do?**

When we hear about impoverished children in Africa, working in dangerous conditions, denied opportunities for education, concerned people often ask: “what can I do?” It’s an important question, with the implicit awareness of shared stake in the welfare of all the world’s children.

“What can I do?” One possible response might be that we should refuse to buy goods produced by child labor. An effective strategy—but not for child labor in Africa. In Africa, children produce little, if anything, that finds its way to global markets. The bricks they shape and the stones they crush do not find their way to American stores. Public concern about child labor is typically linked to public consumption of goods produced by small hands (Bass, 2004). There is very little direct material connection between child labor in rural Africa and American consumers, making child labor immune to changes in consumption.

“What can I do?” Based on my experience, I’d like to suggest this response: nothing.

### **Nothing?**

Of course, individuals may choose to contribute to international development or child welfare organizations: Catholic Relief, Save the Children, World Vision, and many others. Sponsorship programs can pay schools fees for vulnerable children and help protect them from engaging in exploitative labor. That’s important, but, as with other types of external assistance, questions of dependency and local responsibility ultimately arise. A focus on supporting individual children at a distance can shift attention away from government and community responsibility for addressing child labor.

My experience in Africa taught me that a better question than “what can I do?” is this: what can they do? And how we can support them in doing it? African governments (especially at a local/district level) can do much to reduce child labor. They are fully capable of creating positive change. At a policy level, governments can take steps such as increasing access to vocational education, increasing social/economic support for vulnerable children and HIV/AIDS-affected families, and strengthening laws that prohibit hazardous work for children.<sup>5</sup>

At a local level, government leaders and community groups can conduct small-scale local research, in collaboration with local communities, about the most common forms of child labor and the consequences of hazardous work for local children. With such local knowledge, they can formulate and adopt local by-laws and other civic regulations to stop particular forms of child labor and fine employers who exploit children. Parent groups can make extra efforts to provide food for children at lunch, thereby relieving the hunger that drives children to work. Schools can form child labor and children’s rights clubs,

opening an avenue for children to discuss their rights and “spread the word” about the dangers of child labor to their peers.

The elimination of child labor requires local commitment and local action. In that sense, what we can do, as outsiders, is continue emphasizing to African governments that they have responsibility for protecting children’s rights.<sup>6</sup> What is important here is a shift from child labor being a “foreign” concern to it being rooted in the national development and education agenda. For that to happen takes sustained engagement and partnership between external donors, international agencies, and local advocates of children’s rights. The elimination of child labor also involves broad efforts to expose and change economic inequities—those inequities that perpetuate the economic exploitation of the poor in the developing world (whether by corporate interests or exploitative national leaders). Bass writes:

*In the long run, child labor will remain a problem until sub-Saharan African countries are integrated into the modern global economy as full and equal participants. Inequality perpetuates corrupt governments, war, and the poverty that makes most of child labor a rational and necessary choice of families. (2004, p. 189)*

When I lived in East Africa, my job was to be a good partner to support national and local efforts to eliminate child labor. I learned some things about child labor, but I realize how far I am from knowing it from the inside. No matter how well I could understand differences in child-raising and notions of “childhood” conceptually, I remain a very western, middle-class parent—concerned about nurturing my child’s individuality, vigilant about my child’s safety, protecting my child’s freedom to play. I cannot step outside my “westernness” in raising my own children. Even after living for a time in Africa, I will never be able to appreciate in my brain or in my body the pressures that push African children to work, nor understand the complex ways African children experience their work.

But I continue to believe, that where children are damaged by work, there is something to be done about it.

## Endnotes

- 1 A smaller percentage (approximately 17 percent) do work considered to be “child labor” in relation to the child’s age and working conditions (Understanding Children’s Work, 2008).
- 2 This points to a powerful linkage between HIV/AIDS and child labor. When parents are stricken down by HIV/AIDS, their daughters often drop out of school to care for them. When children are left orphan, engaging in exploitative labor becomes a survival mechanism. For these reasons, the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS for adults often results in children losing opportunities for education and being forced to work.
- 3 Bhukuth (2008) notes that western norms use age (typically 18 or 21 years) to mark the difference between childhood and adulthood, while African cultures traditionally consider participation in rights of passage as the entry point to adulthood.
- 4 In an analysis of household survey data from the Ivory Coast, Columbia, Bolivia, and the Phillipines, researchers found a cross-generational relationship of education and child labor. Parental education was found to be the most important household characteristic influencing children’s work. The more educated the parents, the less likely children were to be found in child labor (Grootaert & Patrinos, 1999).
- 5 Examples of such policy provisions can be found in the National Child Labor policy in Uganda.
- 6 The U.S. is one of only two countries that has not ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child. To gain greater legitimacy on children’s rights issues, the U.S. should begin by ratifying the Convention and renewing its commitment to protect children’s rights at home and abroad.

## References

- Bass, L. E. (2004). *Child labor in sub-saharan Africa*. Boulder: Lynne Reinner Publishers.
- Bhukuth, A. (2008). “Defining child labour: A controversial debate.” *Development in Practice*, 18(3), 385-394.
- Grootaert, C. & Patrinos, H. A. (1999). Policies to reduce child labor. In C. Grootaert and H. A. Patrinos (Eds.), *The policy analysis of child labor: a comparative study* (pp. 151-162). New York: St. Martin’s Press.
- Herumin, W. (2008). *Child labor today: A human rights issue*. Berkeley Heights, NJ: Enslow Publishers.
- Hungerland, B., Liebel, M., Milne, B. & Wihstutz, A. (Eds). (2007). *Working to be someone: Child focused research and practice with working children*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- International Labor Office. (2006). *The end of child labour: Within reach. Global report under the follow-up to the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work*. Geneva: Author.
- Kielland, A. & Tovo, M. (2006). *Children at work: Child labor practices in Africa*. Boulder: Lynne Reinner Publishers.
- Miller, V. W. (2009, May). “Eliminating child labor and educating all children: Notes on the challenges of creating a common agenda.” *Comparative & International Education Society Newsletter*, No. 150, p. 3.
- Pedraza-Gomez, Z. (2007). *Working children and the cultural perception of childhood*. In B. Hungerland, M. Liebel, B. Milne, and A. Wihstutz (Eds), *Working to be someone: Child focused research and practice with working children* (pp. 23-30). London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Understanding Children’s Work Project. (March, 2008). *Understanding children’s work in Uganda: Country report*. Rome: Author.



“What is important here is a shift from child labor being a ‘foreign’ concern to it being rooted in the national development and education agenda. For that to happen takes sustained engagement and partnership between external donors, international agencies, and local advocates of children’s rights.”

— Vachel Miller

e-mail • [blueprint@loyno.edu](mailto:blueprint@loyno.edu) •  
web • [www.loyno.edu/twomey](http://www.loyno.edu/twomey)

(504) 861-5736

Twomey Center for Peace through Justice  
7214 St. Charles Ave., Box 907  
New Orleans, LA 70118

LOYOLA  
UNIVERSITY  
NEW ORLEANS

