

Child Labour in Musoli-Parish – A Study of Child Workers in Eastern Uganda

Executive Summary

The study on child labour in Musoli Parish was conducted over a six-week period during May and June 2009. The objective was to provide quantitative data on the types of child labour and characteristics of the workers and their families. This data was then analysed to highlight the main causes of child work.

The study involved interviews with 76 child workers, 30 parents, and 10 community leaders. An additional sample of employers was also consulted, as well as school administrators in the three primary schools and one secondary school in the Parish.

Key Findings

90% of working children in Musoli Parish perform their labour in one of three industries: sugarcane cutting, fishing, and stone mining. The majority of this work fits the definition of the worst forms of child labour, due to the long hours involved and the hazards faced in the workplace. For example, female sugarcane cutters work on average 12 hours a day, while males work 10.5 hours. 66% of all workers have experienced a serious injury whilst at work, such as cuts to the hands and feet from machetes (in sugarcane cutting) or hammers (in the stone quarry).

Only 13% of child workers are currently attending school on a full-time basis. When asked the primary reason for leaving school, 76% indicated that difficulty in paying for school-related costs was the cause. The median wage for children is only 1000 Ug. Shs. a day. This low wage makes it nearly impossible for children to save enough to afford the 12,000 Ug. Shs. each term required to cover schooling expenses, given that two-thirds of children spend all of their money on meeting basic needs such as food and clothing.

The fact that the majority of the children are working to fund their basic survival can be traced to the lack of financial support offered by their parents/guardians. The average income for the household head is a mere 1000 Ug. Shs. a day, the same as the children they are trying to support. Most household heads are uneducated themselves and lack employable skills, with 23% lacking any schooling whatsoever, and a further 27% not having progressed past Primary 3.

The situation is complicated by the fact that the vast majority of working children do not receive support from both parents, as only 18% of children have two living parents, and more than half are living with someone who is not their mother or father. Often these caregivers are overburdened and cannot provide adequately for all children in their care.

40% of children found their employment through a parent/family member, and 62% stated that the head of their household was supportive of their work. When household heads themselves were asked this question, 90% reported that they wish their children did not have to work, but due to poverty there was no other choice.

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Despite these findings illustrating the severity of child labour in Musoli Parish, there are currently no programs designed to address the problem in the area.

Recommendations

Given the links between orphanhood and child labour, preventative action should be taken to target those most likely to become involved, such as providing financial and social support to vulnerable children and families.

Authorities on the local, parish, district, and sub-county should also be given the authority and resources to enforce existing labour and child protection laws. At the moment, there are few if any workplace and/or community checks that are being undertaken by officials, and there are no cases of fines or other penalties being administered for breaches of the existing laws. Employers who are using children in the worst forms of child labour should be targeted in the first instance.

Schools in Musoli Parish must receive greater funding in order to reduce the fees that they charge each term. Although under UPE, primary education should theoretically be free, schools end up charging 'development' fees that can amount to at least 8,000 Ug. Shs. each term. When coupled with the cost of school books and uniforms, the cost of attendance is too great for the many families living below the poverty line, particularly those with many children to support. To rectify this, greater UPE funding needs to be allocated to this area.

For those children currently employed in the worst forms of child labour, immediate intervention is required to assist the transition from work back to school or vocational training. This can include psycho-social support, medical care, and emergency shelter. Remedial education should be offered to all who have missed more than one year of classes, as reintegration into school life can be challenging for these individuals.