



BEYOND POVERTY

Factors Influencing Decisions to Use Child Labour in Rural and Urban Afghanistan

A summary of an open discussion at ACBAR

On Wednesday, 11 November 2009, the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR) and the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) presented the second in a lecture/discussion series based on recent and ongoing AREU research findings. This event focused on AREU's child labour study.¹ Presenting was AREU's director, Paula Kantor.

In attendance were about 20 ACBAR members. These notes, in a question-and-answer format, are based on the discussion that followed the presentation.

What is the role of education in relation to child labour? In particular, how did parents perceive education's importance? Did the level of parental education influence the household's decision of whether or not to use child labour?

Parents are aware of what education can bring to their children but education quality greatly influenced decision making. If parents felt children would not learn or were not learning, many decided not to put or keep their children in school.

Levels of parental education had different effects. Often illiterate parents were highly motivated to educate their children, to give them something they felt they lacked—to overcome "blindness" associated with illiteracy. However, a few educated parents, who had not been able to get what they considered appropriate jobs, valued providing their children with skills over formal schooling.

What role did poverty and food security play in household decisions to use child labour? Based on the research, what is AREU's position on providing schoolchildren food aid?

This was a point around which there was some disagreement between the authors of the two main papers from the study. The impact of food aid (in terms of education-related outcomes) can be questioned if it is not provided in a context where other factors support sustainable school attendance. Otherwise, if food aid is withdrawn, attendance ends for most students. Similarly, the study found that the aid (notebooks, pens, etc.) and attention provided by accelerated learning programmes meant some children had great difficulty adjusting to mainstream schools. So, considering how to sustain school enrolment is central to these programmes as well.

¹ This study is described in the following papers, all available for download from www.areu.org.af:
Beyond Poverty: Factors Influencing Decisions to Use Child Labour in Rural And Urban Afghanistan, by Pamela Hunte (June 2009);
Confronting Child Labour in Afghanistan by Amanda Sim (May 2009);
Factors Influencing Decisions to Use Child Labour: A Case Study of Poor Households in Herat, by Amanda Sim and Marie-Louise Hoiland-Carlsen (August 2008);
Factors Influencing Decisions to Use Child Labour: A Case Study of Poor Households in Badakhshan, by Pamela Hunte and Anastasiya Hozyaninva (August 2008);
Factors Influencing Decisions to Use Child Labour: A Case Study of Poor Households in Kabul, by Paula Kantor and Anastasiya Hozyaninva (April 2008).



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Since family planning is not much practiced in Afghanistan, did this—and the relatively large number of children within households—play a role in households' decisions to use child labour?

The study did not ask about this specifically so it provides no direct information on this issue. The only related point was birth order and its effects on risks of having to work; older children may work to support younger children in their studies or to support the growing survival costs of the family.

How would you assess the reliability and validity of the research findings?

AREU's research is in-depth and qualitative; it is not representative so it focuses on a few places. Typically, six to eight weeks are spent in a field site to build relationships and gain trust. Over this time, respondents begin to open up and move beyond the earlier "poverty stories" that may be told. Therefore, the reliability and validity of the results are relatively high.

The presentation concludes with a comment on parents wanting a bright future for their children. What is this "bright future"? Is it only school?

What the study found was that what parents want for their children depends on their own personal experiences, the community in which they live in and its values, the household context, and what education and work opportunities are available. So a "bright future" is not only about school. It may be being a good person, being educated, learning a skill, or learning to be responsible through working and helping to support the family.

Did any parents perceive school to be a dangerous place and not enrol children for this reason?

The study did not come across this as a reason for not enrolling children. Some children experienced abuse and withdrew themselves or were withdrawn from school by parents.

What was MOLSAMD's involvement? How has AREU tried to involve it?

The research team met with the Deputy Minister for Labour and Social Affairs, together with UNICEF, a few times during the study. The Deputy Minister of Social Affairs attended a one-day workshop at which the study's findings were presented and discussed, and also hosted a joint press briefing at the Ministry. The Ministry has been interested in the study because it is seeking advice on how to address the issue of child labour.

How do you think the results may have differed if the study had been done in a one-industry town—say with a coal mine as the main employer?

In some ways the Herat village near the border fits this—where there is one main income source in the village. The outcomes may depend on how the mine is run—if the owner chooses to invest in employee welfare or not. If not, then it might be quite similar to the Islam Qala case, where schooling was marginal compared to the draw of work on the border.

How did parents respond to the risks children face?



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Parents are aware of the risks around children's work, but perceive them differently. For example, some see vending as less risky than an apprenticeship and others have the opposite view. Most parents in the study want to protect their children as much as possible given their own work commitments—for income or in the household. We found examples of parents keeping their children who were working as vendors near their workplace to keep an eye on them, or changing apprenticeships to ensure they could combine work and school and to avoid dangerous work conditions. However, even when parents wanted to change a child's work, sometimes the child pressed to stay.

How to address the challenges around having girls study and how to deal with children whose work is central to household survival—how to get them into school?

On the second point, one issue is working to improve livelihood options for adults, including women, to reduce the need for child labour within the household. Another is to incorporate working children's needs into education policy and planning—NESP did not do so and it is important that NESP 2 does so. The Badakhshan study village is a case in point where the community did this—making school flexible during harvest time and otherwise accommodating some working children's needs.

On girls' education—it is partly about access, the availability of female teachers, and the like, but the long-term need is for changes to attitudes about what is appropriate behaviour for young women and greater emphasis on the positive things education can bring to girls and their families.

Were respondents in the study aware of the risks that girls face in household work?

In our research, families did not really speak about these risks—if they did it was more about the *tandoor* and risks around baking bread. Other heavy household tasks were not discussed in terms of risks and protection.

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is an independent research institute based in Kabul. AREU's mission is to inform and influence policy and practice through conducting high-quality, policy-relevant research and actively disseminating the results, and to promote a culture of research and learning.

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