

## Research Article

# ASSESSMENT OF CHILD LABOUR AND ITS RELATED DANGERS AND HAZARDS ON CHILDREN IN COCOA PRODUCING COMMUNITIES IN MALEMA CHIEFDOM, EASTERN SIERRA LEONE

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### ABSTRACT

Poverty is real and is found in every community of the world. It is considered to be the most important cause of child labour both in rural and urban communities. Child labour deprives children of many opportunities ranging from schooling to acquisition of functional technical/vocational skills. Children grow as unskilled workers on cocoa farms and earn low wages in adulthood and therefore poverty and other hazards persist on them entangling them in the vicious cycle of poverty. Child labour trap is evident in cocoa communities in Malema Chiefdom as children as young as 9 years (boys & girls) were involved in all activities on cocoa farms. It was discovered that child labour on cocoa farms in the selected communities was high although some respondents decided to take indecisive posture because they were afraid of being prosecuted. Activities such as nursing of cocoa seedlings, transplanting, under brushing were engaged in by children which were not commensurate to their ages. Various dangers and hazards encountered by children working in the cocoa farms ranged from minor/severe wounds from machetes, chisels, etc. to headache, pains on the neck and sometimes deformities from carrying heavy loads. With all the enforcement of ILO Conventions on the Rights of Children and Elimination of all forms of Child Labour coupled with national laws on child rights and against child labour, the practice is still carried out on cocoa farms.

**Keywords:** Hazards, Danger, Convention, ILO, labour.

### INTRODUCTION

In rural agricultural (cocoa farm) communities in Kailahun District, Eastern Sierra Leone, a person is considered to be a child in the case of boys when he has not been initiated in to the Poro (a secret society for males), not capable of harvesting palm fruits, not capable of cultivating farmland, not capable of creating a family/home and feeds from the same pot of his parents etc. For a girl, she is regarded a child when she is not an initiate of the Bondo/Sande (a secret society for females), not capable of managing a home, not ashamed of going about half naked etc. The Sierra Leone citizenship Act (1973) regards a person to be a child if he/she is under the age of twenty-one (21) years. On the contrary, section 31 of the 1991 Constitution of Sierra Leone stipulates the voting age as eighteen (18) which means that, at age eighteen (18) an individual is an adult in Sierra Leone. In line with the voting age as enshrined in the constitution, the Education Act (2004), Cap 10 regards a Sierra Leonean to be a child if he/she is under the age of eighteen (18). Child labour is common in Sierra Leonean communities regardless their age differentials. According to Braggs (2019) Sierra Leone views child labour as work that harms children mentally, physically and deprives them of their childhood. Child labour is illegal in Sierra Leone like many other countries in West Africa but some have found loopholes in their frameworks which enables the use of children in some of the toughest work environments such as the agricultural and mining sectors. The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines child labour as work that is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and interferes with their schooling by depriving them of the opportunity to attend school; by obliging them to leave school prematurely; or by requiring them to attempt to combine school

attendance with excessively long and heavy work (ILO, 2004). It should be borne in mind that not all work that children do is regarded as child labour but rather works that are detrimental to their health, development or schooling is beneficial as it allows them develop skills, gain experience and prepare them for future positions. Sierra Leone has a weak national policy and social programmes on child labour. This is evident in the report of (U.S Department of Labour, 2019) which illustrated that 35% of children in Sierra Leone are subjected to child labour in various forms particularly in mining sector (through sexual exploitation) and agricultural sector (through carrying heavy loads and sustaining wounds from machetes). In Sierra Leone, cocoa is the most important cash crop export largely produced in Kailahun District. It farming involves various stages and each of the stages involves the use of child labour. From nursery to transportation of dry seeds to the market children are used and they realize little or no benefits from the sales. Labour requirement for cocoa farming in Sierra Leone is seasonal as dictated by the weather and intensive nature of the work. This is supported by the work of Abenyega and Gockwoski (2002), who suggested that labour requirements on cocoa farms are seasonal and intensive particularly at the time of land clearing and harvesting and therefore sharecropping is common and is engaged in by community and migrant families. Child labour has been frowned at by the government of Sierra Leone and made efforts to eliminate it in all sectors especially mining and agricultural sectors. This is evident in the various ratifications made by the Sierra Leone Government including the International Labour Organization (ILO) minimum Age Convention (1973), Worst Forms of child Labour Convention (1999), Optional Protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (2000 & 2002) and Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (2000 & 2002) and United Nations Protocol on Armed Conflict (2000 & 2002). In rural agricultural communities in Sierra Leone, families are poor and therefore send their children to relatives or close friends in urban settlements for better educational opportunities. But many a time they said children hardly complete

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schooling as they are subjected to various forms of child labour such as prostitution, street trading etc. Others may return to their parents to assist them on their farms over burdening the cycle of poverty in their families. A similar situation was identified and outlined in the work of United States Department of Labour (2019) in Sierra Leone which further suggested that children given to care givers in urban communities in Sierra Leone are subjected to forced labour including domestic work, mining, agriculture, street hawking and scrapping for metal. Child labour on cocoa farms in rural communities mostly happens within the family cycle. This does not mean that they are not exposed to danger and hazards but rather beyond these situations they are engaged in illegal exploitations.

## COCOA PRODUCTION IN SIERRA LEONE

In Sierra Leone, cocoa is grown in many parts such as Bo, Moyamba, and Pujehun districts in the south but the most favourable districts and widely grown areas are Kenema, Kono and Kailahun in the east where soils and climate conditions are suitable. Cocoa production occupies 235,749 ha of land in Sierra Leone and Kailahun had the highest area under cocoa cultivation (114,125 ha), Kenema (58,086 ha), Kono (43,232 ha) with Bo taking the distant fourth position with (11,715 ha); (Statistics Sierra Leone 2017). This shows that the eastern region has the highest land area cultivated for cocoa production. Labour needed for cocoa cultivation is now left in the hands of children due to the fact that most cocoa farm owners are old and the young adults have left for urban communities for more rewarding jobs such as street trading, bike riding etc. These children form gang groups to work on the farms with little or no wages. The children are exposed to hard labour of under brushing, carrying heavy loads etc. which exposes them to hazards. Sierra Leone having ratified various protocols and policies on child labour has not been able to minimize child labour on cocoa farms. Therefore the situation warrants urgent attention if children from these communities are to live free from hard labour, danger and hazards as with their compatriots in urban communities in Sierra Leone. On this backdrop, the objective of this research were to assess child labour and its related hazards on children in cocoa producing communities in Malema Chiefdom, Eastern Sierra Leone.

## METHOD AND MATERIALS

### MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STUDY AREA

Malema Chiefdom is found in Kailahun District Eastern Sierra Leone. Kailahun District lies between latitude 8° 16'48.792" N and 10° 34' 18.512" W. Malema Chiefdom has a population of 37, 095 people with a density of 52.46/sq.km according to the 2015 Population and Housing Census. The chiefdom has a total land area of 707.1sqkm. (Statistics Sierra Leone Population and Housing census, 2015). The climate in the wet season is warm, oppressive and overcast while the dry season is hot, muggy and partly cloudy. The hot period lasts for 2.6 months with an average daily high temperature above 89°F and the hottest day is March 21<sup>st</sup> with an average high of 92°F and low 72°F. The cool season lasts 2.8 months with an average temperature below 83°F and the cool day is January 1<sup>st</sup> with an average low of 64°F and high of 87°F. Kailahun experiences extreme seasonal variation in monthly rainfall. The rainy period of the year lasts for ten (10) months with a sliding thirty-day rainfall of at least 0.5 inch and at most 17.7 inches. The chiefdom is one of the forested regions in the country and therefore favours cocoa production. . The soil is largely loamy with some pockets of sandstones and clay. Loamy soil is rich in organic matter and highly permeable and therefore supports cacao cultivation. Cacao needs such soil as is rich in nutrient, retains water and has good drainage. A good number of the cocoa farmers are old

and therefore depend on their children to undertake the cultivation. The support provided by the Gola Rain Forest Programme to cocoa farmers in the chiefdom has increased the number of people engaged in cocoa production.

## METHODOLOGY

This study is an exploratory research as it is conducted about a research problem when there are few or no earlier studies to refer to or rely upon to predict the outcome. The main focus is on gaining insight and familiarity for later investigation undertaken when research problems are in a preliminary stage of investigation. The main disadvantage of exploratory research design is that it provides qualitative data and interpretation of such data can be judgmental or biased. Due to the fact that an exploratory research design involves smaller samples, the result cannot be generalized for a large population. However, it has an advantage in that it is flexible and therefore can address research questions of all types and above all it helps determine the appropriate data collection methods and selection of respondents. The study was conducted among major cocoa farm communities in Malema Chiefdom, Kailahun District. Two (2) sampling methods were used to collect data from the respondents. Purposive sampling was the first procedure used to select six (6) study communities because cocoa production is the major activity of people in the communities and children were highly involved in its cultivation. The selected communities included Geima, Gbageima, Bandajuma, Jabama, Takpoima, and Taninawahun. Simple random sampling was used to select the respondents (children) and composed of fifty (50) boys and ten (10) girls. Ten (10) respondents (children) were selected from each selected community making it sixty (60). However, ten (10) adult cocoa farmers were selected to form the focus group discussion. The focus group discussion group composed of the following; four (4) cocoa dealers (buying agents), Two (2) youth leaders, and two (2) parents/guardians with the largest cocoa farms and two (2) police personnel attached to the Family Support Unit (FSU) and Criminal Investigation Units stationed in the chiefdom headquarters, Jojioma. One major method used was field work which employed questionnaires, and interview schedules to obtain primary data from relevant respondents. Data analyzes was done by the use of descriptive statistics such as frequency tables and percentages to present the characteristics of the respondents.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### GENDER AND AGE STRUCTURE OF RESPONDENTS

VARIABLES	FREQUENCY (N=60)	PERCENTAGE (%)
<b>GENDER</b>		
Male	50	83
Female	10	17
<b>Age Bracket (years)</b>		
09-13	15	25
14-18	45	75

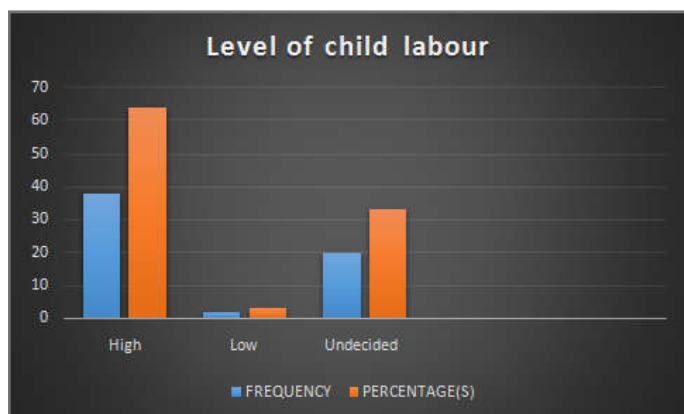
SOURCE: Field Survey, 2021.

Table one: Gender and age structure of respondents.

Table one presents gender composition and age bracket of sixty (60) respondents (children) working on cocoa farms in the selected communities. Male respondents made up (75%, n= 45) as compared to (25%, n=15) females as shown in table one. More males were selected because they were engaged in various labour activities on cocoa farms than females from pre-planting operations to marketing.

This situation is not only akin to cocoa farms in the selected communities in Malema Chiefdom but also in other cocoa plantations in West Africa particularly Ghana) as stated by Twum-Baah, K.A (2005) that the largest proportion (62.5%) of working children of both sexes aged 5-17 is engaged in agricultural work to some degree and the greater proportion of them are rural children. Children on cocoa farms are more economically active than others in the non-agricultural sectors in Kailahun District. During discussions, it was discovered that a child's work day in rural cocoa farm communities actually begins at six (6) in the morning and ends in the evening hours.

**LEVEL OF CHILD LABOUR ON COCOA FARMS IN SLECTED COMMUNITIES IN MALEMA CHIEFDOM.**



SOURCE: Field Survey, 2021.

Figure one: Level of child labour on cocoa farms in the selected communities.

The above figure shows responses from sixty (60) respondents which includes fifty (50) males and ten (10) females selected from the study communities who were directly involved in cocoa farming. According to the data gathered from the study communities, 64% of the respondents claimed that the level of child labour on cocoa farms was high. This came out clearly during the focus group discussion that all cocoa farm owners used their children on the farms in all the activities without paying for the labour. It was not considered hazardous by them as it was done as part of their livelihood activities regardless the volume and hazardous nature of the activities. It was also discovered that families without cocoa farms used their children on their neighbor's cocoa farms for meagre payments. This goes in line with ILO (2007) report which stated that there are problems related to agricultural child labour particularly in Sub-Sahara Africa where nearly 30% of all children under the age of fifteen (15) are working. High rate of child labour on cocoa farms is not only akin to Kailahun District in Eastern Sierra Leone, but also in cocoa producing countries of Côte D'Ivoire and Ghana as presented in the country-specific data on agricultural households in cocoa growing areas; 38% of the children in Côte D'Ivoire and 55% of children in Ghana were engaged in child labour in cocoa production <https://www.norc.org/Research/Projects>. However, 33% of the respondents stated that they were undecided as to whether child labour was ongoing on their cocoa farms while 3% stated that it was in existence in the study communities but was comparatively low. During discussions it was discovered that those who claimed to take undecided posture where those who had children out of school and were working on cocoa farms in labour gangs. They were afraid of accepting the fact that the use of their children on cocoa farms was a crime and feared prosecution. There were more children in Jabama and Bandajuma who were working in labour gangs on cocoa farms and their large number was also attributed to artisanal diamond mining around the villages as cocoa farming was seasonal.

**RELATED HAZARDS OF CHILD LABOUR ON COCOA FARMS IN SELECTED COMMUNITIES IN MALEMA CHIEFDOM, KAILAHUN DISTRICT.**

IDENTIFIED HAZARDOUS CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES ON COCOA FARMS (CHILD LABOUR).	HAZARDS ENVISAGED
Nursery of seeds and transplanting	-Cuts from planting tools such as machetes, chisels, etc. -Pricks from thorns, -Bodily injuries from carrying heavy loads not commensurate to their ages for long distances
Under brushing of cocoa farms	-Mycosis (fungus infection) -Cut from machetes, axes -Snake bites, bites from wasps(Hymenoptera).
Harvesting of ripe pods	-Injuries of the eyes, head and neck from falling pods -Bites from snakes, wasps (Hymenoptera) -Cut from harvesting objects like machetes, short hook blade mounted on long stick etc.
Breaking harvested pods to remove seeds	-Cuts on hands, lacerations
Transportation of beans to fermentation stores/sites	-Exhaustion from long day transportation of beans
Transportation of beans to drying areas, spreading the beans and steering the beans to dry	-Pains on head, neck etc. -Sometimes deformities from carrying heavy loads -Spending much time in the sun leads to clouding of eyes (causes cataracts)
Gathering seeds for bagging, and transportation of seeds to market for sales.	-Headache, pains on the neck and sometimes deformities from carrying heavy loads -Inhaling dust and other harmful particles and eye injuries from dust. -Exhaustion from carrying heavy loads for long distances

SOURCE: Field Survey, 2021.

Table two: Identified child labour activities and its related hazards in the selected study communities. Sierra Leone upholds the International Conventions that promote child rights and those that outlaw child labour practices. Therefore, it should be borne in mind that not all work done by children is classified as child labour such as carrying out light, non-hazardous tasks on family cocoa farms for limited time under supervision and without given up their schooling for such activity. In fact, such activities are not only necessary but contribute to children's development that provides them skills and experiences that prepare them better for their adult life. Various activities were identified in which children were engaged on cocoa farms in the selected study communities. Each of the selected activities was examined based on the Worst forms of Child Labour Convention (1999), Convention No.182 which is mainly concerned with the worst forms of child labour, which by the nature or circumstance in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children to ascertain the hazards it had on children working on various cocoa farms in the selected study communities. During discussions, it was discovered that children engaged in nursing and transplanting of young cocoa plants from nursery sites to the farms were exposed to various hazards such as cuts from planting tools such as machetes, thorns and chisels etc. Bodily injuries were also reported by children as a result of carrying loads that were not commensurate to their ages. This is in line with the work

of Abednego *et al.*, (2003) as it was reported that 32% of rural children in Ghana or Western Ghana have experienced a work related injury or illness. Children sustaining injuries from had jobs (child labour) is not only akin to cocoa farms in the study communities and by extension West Africa cocoa farms but similar situations exist on farms in the United states as postulated by (Myers J.R and Hendricks K.J., (2001). They stated that an estimated thirty-three thousand (33000), children under the age of twenty (2% of the population in the same age range) were injured on farms. Children also suffered from snake bites and wounds from machetes during under brushing in all the study communities. Children claimed that they were in labour gangs on hired basis and monies received from the labour were presented to their parents as a means of support for the families' livelihood. Discussions with Police Officers attached to the Family Support Unit in Jojioma stated that no report of child hard labour was on their desk but rather they were aware of children working on farms such as cocoa in gangs and often fight for their wages after work with their peers. It was also discovered during discussions with large cocoa farm owners and dealers/buying agents that during under brushing many children working on the farms faced hazards such as cuts from machetes, snake bites etc. which prevented them from continuing schooling. During the harvest season according to youth leaders and cocoa dealers/buying agents experience high incidence of hazards for children on the farm as they are often caught thieving and severely beaten/ tortured, neck and back aches mainly from carrying heavy loads not commensurate to their ages etc. It was discovered during discussions that most of the children working on cocoa farms in the selected communities were from poor homes with no biological parents or single parent households or polygamous homes. The work of Huebler (2008) is in line with the category of children engaged in child labour in the study communities as his study postulated that children from poor homes, the fatherless are subjected to psychological aggression and physical punishment and are often engaged in hard labour and often out of school. The bulk of the work done by children on cocoa farms in the study communities was hazardous. This is in line with ILO (2010) global report which pointed out that agriculture is one of the three sectors in terms of work related fatalities, non-fatal accidents and occupational diseases. The report therefore pointed out that about 59% of all children in hazardous work aged 5-17 are in agriculture. It was also discovered that children between the ages of 9-13 had injuries from cutting objects ranging from minor to severe cuts during under brushing and harvesting, hit by cocoa pods, long period of sun exposure which may result to skin cancer in the near future during drying of seeds, had long working hours lifting and carrying heavy loads which were stressful and suppressed their immune systems etc. This was against Article 7, Convention 138 of the ILO which clearly states that national laws or regulations may permit the work of persons 13-15 years of age on light work which is not likely to be harmful to their health or development; and does not affect their attendance at school, their participation in vocational orientation or training programmes approved by the competent authority or their capacity to benefit from the instruction received. 25% of the children with glaring hazards as a result of child labour in cocoa farms in the study communities were between the ages of 9-13 years.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

A critical assessment and evaluation of the very reason why farmers continuously use children as labourers on their cocoa farms is necessary to government and partners wishing to eliminate child labour in cocoa farms in Sierra Leone. Understanding their very reluctance to admit that children are used as child labourers on their farms is crucial as it will serve as a formidable spring board in the formulation of effective policies on elimination of child labour in

agricultural communities. Similarly, ignorance of parents/guardians in differentiating child activities on cocoa farms as child labourer not still plays a leading contribution to its prevalence in the study communities. Therefore, community education on children's roles, duties, rights and responsibilities should be carried out in the study communities by child protection organizations, government agencies protecting children' law enforcement agencies etc. In the same way Family Support Unit (FSU) attached to the police post at Jojioma should be proactive in prosecuting cases reported to them on child labour with all seriousness without compromise.

## CONCLUSION

Children working in cocoa farms at all levels in the study communities regardless the nature of work and labour which were not commensurate to their ages were exposed to dangers and incurred hazards without adequate treatment, training or use of protective gears. If this situation is not handled and addressed with immediate positive response, there would be potential short and long term adverse repercussions.

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