

Briefing paper No. 3

# Children Working in the Urban Informal Economy

*Evidence from  
West and Central  
Africa*

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[http://www.unicef.org/wcaro/english/overview\\_6585.html](http://www.unicef.org/wcaro/english/overview_6585.html)

## Acronyms and abbreviations

ANPPCAN	African Network for the Prevention and Protection Against Child Abuse and Neglect
CFA	Communauté Financière Africaine (African Financial Community)
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
ENDA	Environnement et Développement du Tiers Monde
ICI	International Cocoa Initiative
ILO	International Labour Organization
ILO-IPEC	ILO International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour
LUTRENA	Lutte contre le Trafic des Enfants en Afrique de l'Ouest et du Centre
MAEJT	Mouvement Africain des Enfants et Jeunes Travailleurs
UCW	Understanding Children's Work
WACAP	West Africa Cocoa Agriculture Project

## Preface

A third of all children in West and Central Africa are estimated to work full- or part-time, paid or unpaid. Many of children are involved in hazardous and harmful economic activities, such as working in mines. Some are also exploited for sex and trafficked. Even if the work itself is not hazardous, many working children do not have access to education or drop out of school due to the opportunity costs for parents of keeping children in school and out of work. However, some children do combine work and school and earning an income may enable children to continue their schooling. Where the quality of education is poor or children are exposed to violence in schools, some children may prefer work to school. In some contexts, children derive a sense of meaning and responsibility from their work and the contributions they make to the family. To take them away from work without replacing the meaning and status they may receive can result in worse outcomes.

The prevention and response to child labour and exploitation in the region has fallen short in terms of quality, impact and scale. Over the past decade, much has been learned about what works and what doesn't in relation to child labour, exploitation and trafficking. Internationally, Understanding Children's Work (UCW) has done much to strengthen the evidence base. Many other organizations and researchers from different academic perspectives have contributed to a more differentiated analysis of children's work and of prevention and response efforts (e.g. Bourdillon, Myers, White, Boyden, Liebel, Woodhead).

Reviews and evaluations of anti-trafficking efforts have highlighted the need to distinguish between child migration and child trafficking and to avoid labelling all forms of child movement as child trafficking. These evaluations also emphasise the need for a better understanding of child mobility and the cultural, social and economic foundations of children's work in a broader context of social and economic mobility. A regional child mobility initiative was launched in 2008 to improve understanding of the cultural foundations of 'child labour', 'child migration' and 'child trafficking' and the role children's work and mobility plays in children's socialisation. The work done by the child mobility initiative is an important effort to rethink and redevelop prevention and responses to child labour that take social and cultural concepts of child development and education, social mobility and social protection into account. From this perspective, children and migration are linked to transitions within the life course and to rites of passage, whereby migration is part of becoming an adult, to earn cash and to get married. This perspective complements, and to some extent challenges, other approaches to child labour that focus more narrowly on poverty reduction, human resource development, or the application of international labour standards.

Five thematic briefing papers have been developed for types of child labour that have particular relevance for children in West and Central Africa. The focus is on the most pressing forms of child labour in the region, types of work that are receiving the greatest level of attention and have seen most resistance to change: Children in artisanal quarries and mines; Talibé children (Qur'ānic school pupils who are begging) in Sahelian countries; Children in commercial agriculture; Children in the informal urban sector; and Child domestic workers.

The purpose of the child labour briefing papers is to synthesise the empirical evidence of effective approaches to child labour and exploitation and identify approaches that have not worked or are unlikely to work with the current levels of human and financial resources. The briefing papers are aimed towards professionals working on child protection, education and social policy in countries in West and Central Africa. Each briefing paper presents evidence on the following aspects: description of the phenomenon, situation, trends, scale, impact on children; effective approaches to preventing child labour and exploitation.

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## Introduction

This briefing paper focuses on boys and girls working in the urban informal economy<sup>1</sup>, some of whom grew up in the city while others have migrated from rural areas in search of work and education. In the past, children's work was considered a rural phenomenon in Africa,<sup>[17]</sup> but economic crises and structural adjustment programmes since the beginning of the 1980s have had pervasive consequences for labour and income in urban economies. As a result, livelihood strategies and labour markets have become more diversified. Most people, irrespective of their economic standing, increase their earnings by stretching income-generation across several formal and informal activities.<sup>[16, 18, 38, 53, 87]</sup>

Activities in the informal economy are often labelled as self-employment, small-scale businesses that depend on unpaid family labour or as illegal activities. However, the flow of capital from formal employment into informal activities has led to stratification among the actors operating in the urban informal economy and to the emergence of casual work and waged employment.<sup>[33, 50]</sup> Statistics of urban employment in seven ECOWAS countries between 2001 and 2003 document that of all workers 76 per cent found jobs in the informal economy.<sup>[89]</sup> Economic difficulties and competition encourage employers to choose cheaper, low qualified labour.<sup>[44]</sup> The informal economy constitutes a labour market for child workers with fluctuations in labour demand. In 2005, 13 per cent of all children aged ten to fourteen in five West African capitals were economically active.<sup>[41]</sup> In Cameroon, for example, 10.7 per cent of urban children worked in the informal sector.<sup>[39]</sup>

Children engage in a wide range of occupations, primarily in trade, services, handicraft and entertainment. The 'informal sector' is frequently mentioned in connection with the worst forms of child labour but apart from migrant girls' involvement in head portering<sup>[1, 4, 49]</sup> and in domestic service, little is known about children's experiences of such work and about the labour market for young people. This paper is based on a review of a broad range of literature spanning from conference papers, to reports of commissioned research, to Master and Doctoral theses, and to peer reviewed academic publications. Some of this literature contains detailed information on children's work in the informal sector but lacks depth in the analysis, in which case the empirical findings are compared with other studies. The diversity in occupations and employment situations requires a focus on recruitment practices, the potential for developing skills to engage in other types of work and the motivations behind children's trajectories within the urban informal economy in order to identify how these children can best be supported.

## Situational Analysis in the 2000s

The sheer variety of occupations within the urban informal economy rules out describing a typical worker. Both boys and girls work for relatives, employers or for themselves, but not necessarily in the same occupations. Children of all ages work but the very young are more likely to be working with a parent or a grandparent, while adolescents may have started small businesses on their own account or work for a wage.

The trade activities in which children are involved comprise itinerant hawking of beverages, food and smaller items that can easily be carried, as well as trade from fixed places in markets, streets and shops.<sup>[2, 58, 62 cited in 64, 70, 83]</sup> The delivery of services involve occupations ranging from itinerant work, such as shoe-shining, feet-washing, portering and bus touting, and place-bound work washing cars or windscreens, waiting and dishwashing in small restaurants and bars.<sup>[2, 58, 70, 80, 83]</sup> Work in cottage industries is often linked with

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<sup>1</sup> Excluded from the discussion of this briefing paper are children living in the street, sexually exploited children, child domestic workers and children begging as part of their Qur'anic school education. The situation of the two latter categories of working children is addressed in separate papers. The paper also does not address criminal activities, in which some children may engage, for the simple reason that little information is available on the topic.

non-formal apprenticeships whether in artisan production as silversmiths, blacksmiths, and cobblers, sculpture-making, basket-weaving and pot-making, or in workshops specialised in carpentry, bricklaying, mechanics, electrical repairs, plumbing, vulcanisation, tailoring, catering, and hairdressing.<sup>[2, 58]</sup> Finally and rarely considered, in some places children work as dancers and singers in the entertainment industry.<sup>[15]</sup>

### Reasons Why Children Work in the Urban Informal Economy

Poverty is the most important reason for children of school-going age to work but they do not necessarily drop out of school to do so. Many combine part-time work with formal education and those working full-time may have begun to do so because they have dropped out of school or never were enrolled.<sup>[18, 55, 61, 77]</sup> Other reasons for not being at school include the low quality of teaching and irrelevant curriculum, corporal punishment and other practices that demotivate children, the low value given to formal education by adults and children, and the value ascribed to other forms of learning, such as learning informally from established traders, by working alongside older peers, doing an apprenticeship or pursuing Islamic education.

Children of the urban poor are likely to work alongside family members but a large number of them work outside school hours and only a minority work full-time, suggesting that schooling and work can be combined.<sup>[63, 64]</sup> Although large variations exist between countries with regard to school enrolment rates<sup>2</sup>, street work does not necessarily preclude enrolment in school, indeed, for some children such work may be a precondition for pursuing formal education. Working children's achievements in school vary too much to draw general conclusions about the potentially negative or positive impact of work on their education.<sup>[13]</sup> Across urban West Africa, children whose parents work exclusively in the informal economy are more likely also to engage in activities in this arena, whereas children of formal sector workers are less likely to work in the informal economy.<sup>[22]</sup> In Cameroon, around one quarter of the children working in the informal economy are engaged in the same occupation as their father.<sup>[89]</sup> Another set of children working in the urban informal economy are independent child migrants. Many pupils in towns and cities combine school and work on a daily basis while others find work in bars and restaurants or engage in trade during school holidays.<sup>[32]</sup>

**Nigeria.** In south-west Nigeria, a questionnaire conducted with the parents of 260 children working primarily as street vendors and shop assistants reveals that 58% of the children worked with their parents and 42% on their own. Only 15% of them worked all day, while 45% worked in the evenings and weekends only.<sup>[63, p. 306]</sup>

An earlier study in Lagos examined links between children's schooling and street hawking. This study documents that only 10% of the children aged 9-15 years who engaged in street hawking had never been to school, and 80% of those in school were engaged in street trade.<sup>[61]</sup>

Children's motives for working in the urban informal economy may be linked to the pursuit of formal education. Another motive for both urban and rural out-of-school children is to enter non-formal apprenticeships to learn trades that will help them earn a living in the future. Moreover, children may be motivated by wanting to earn money for themselves. Here the residence of origin plays a role. If children from rural areas migrate independently, they are able to expand the time they work for themselves compared to at home where they are obliged to work for their seniors.<sup>[32, 77, 92]</sup> Children's ability to earn money depends on whether adults around them perceive them as unpaid family labour or whether they are encouraged to engage in independent activities.<sup>[29, 63, 79, 80]</sup> Finally, material gains are not the only incentives for children to work in the urban informal economy. Some children may be motivated to do itinerant street work rather than place-bound work to have some liberty to explore the city (for the case of child migrants, see <sup>77</sup>), others become involved in the entertainment industry as dancers dreaming of celebrity, prestige, and travels but also living out their passion for dance.<sup>[15]</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Such differences may derive from uneven levels of urbanisation combined with processes of marginalisation within individual countries which result in limited access to social services in rural areas. They may also be linked with the range of issues discussed above relating to how schools are run and the probability of achieving a better standard of living than those who have not received formal education.

Adult motives for using child workers are equally complex. On the one hand, young children are central to women's and men's economic activities because they constitute cheap labour as unpaid family labour or lowly-paid employees<sup>[6, 87]</sup> but also because they can enter gendered spaces of both men and women when they run errands or sell goods in the street. For example, young girls can carry food or sell things to male customers in public spaces where adult women would not be able to go without losing social status, and young boys can go into courtyards and houses where adult men would not be permitted. This is particularly important in areas where women's mobility is constrained, as, for example, in northern Nigeria where many women observe *pardah*.<sup>[71, 72]</sup> On the other hand, the objective of putting children to work in the informal economy is not only to allow their businesses to flourish. Young children, below the age of ten or eleven years, tend to work for their mother or another woman who has taken them in as a foster child with a view to provide guidance about how to do various tasks. Informal learning is thus an important aspect of children's work in the urban informal economy.

### Ways in Which Children Become Workers in the Urban Informal Economy

Working alongside a parent or relative is a common way to enter the urban informal economy. Children's work depends on their age, gender and local concepts of age- and gender-appropriate work. Children's introduction to trade, for example, reflects gendered spheres of the market.<sup>[5, 23]</sup> Although girls often work with their mother or another female relative and boys with their father or a male relative, it is important to keep in mind that social dynamics change and an exploration of how skills are passed on across genders may reveal how existing gender patterns are maintained as well as how new divisions of labour emerge. The informal transfer of skills may also be a result of pragmatic approaches to how best to teach a child a particular skill.

Many children of rural origin and some of urban origin work with relatives. In the literature, such arrangements are often explained in terms of fostering where urban residents return to their place of origin to request a child or rural residents send a child to urban-based relatives. However, there is cause to examine the dynamics in greater detail. Firstly, some of those labelled as child domestic workers may spend considerable time hawking in the streets or working in a relative's restaurant,<sup>[5, 42, 70]</sup> and apprentices may do domestic chores for their patron.<sup>[30]</sup> The distinction between different occupations is thus blurred. Girls appear to be labelled as domestic workers even when most of their tasks are related to hawking, whereas boys mostly are referred to as street hawkers despite the fact that they also do domestic chores, such as collecting water, sweeping the court yard, feeding livestock and running errands. Such representations uncritically support gender myths related to the spaces in which girls and boys are located. It is important to examine whether attempts to categorise children working in the urban informal economy conceal more than they reveal by not fully appreciating the complexity of work in the informal economy.

Secondly, the notion of fostering tends to draw attention to adult strategies and overlook children's own role in striking up relationships with relatives. Children are not just being placed but actively take part in establishing relationships with older relatives as well as with siblings or cousins of a similar age. As a way of requesting assistance from a senior relative, children talk with relatives about their wish to pursue formal

**Senegal.** Children's work in Tilène Market, Dakar reveals some of the rationales behind encouraging a child to enter different work spheres: The father of a thirteen-year-old boy asked him to sell dried fish – a trade that is dominated by women – to learn the trade from the women. The father was a wholesale vendor of dried fish and wanted his son to know the trade well and to be known by the retail traders before taking a key role in the business.<sup>[5, p. 21]</sup>

Aged four Awa began to go to the market on a daily basis, flattered by small gifts offered by her grandmother. Gradually she began to help collecting water, sweeping her grandmother's space, watching the business if her grandmother needed to go somewhere, and, at the age of eight years Awa began as an itinerant hawker of vegetables under the watchful eye of her grandmother and together with girls of a similar age. By the age of fifteen, she began to go to other markets to buy things to resell at Tilène market, at first with her grandmother who introduced her to the traders, then on her own. Her grandmother thus initiated her into trade.<sup>[23, p. 161]</sup>

education, learn a trade or work in the place where the relative lives.<sup>[32, 59, 79, 80]</sup> They explore possibilities in urban areas with peers of a similar age, whether they grew up in the city or have come as migrants,<sup>[11, 54, 80]</sup> and, finally, some children exploit the fact that kinship relations are imbued with social responsibilities which oblige seniors to accommodate children who turn up on their doorstep.<sup>[32, 81]</sup> That children initiate relationships with relatives does not mean that they can freely choose what they would like to do; rather it obliges them to accept the position of a junior family member and to engage in the work proposed by their relative or to quickly find work themselves to reduce the risk of being labelled as lazy.<sup>[19, 24, 70, 79]</sup>

Whether pushed by relatives or by their own quest for an income or a particular type of work, children find employment through three mechanisms: they walk from door-to-door asking for work, friends or relatives mediate the contact between a child and a potential employer, or they replace an employee during his or her absence. Lowly paid jobs that require few skills, such as street hawking, dish-washing and making mud-bricks can be found easily and do not require the involvement of others. Yet, their physical stature and age may affect children's employability if potential employers find a child too small to do the work.<sup>[9]</sup> Although such norms protect children against harmful physical work, they also limit children's job options and earning potential.

Children who work as dancers for music groups follow a similar pattern in that they approach dancing groups themselves and subsequently go through an informal application and training procedure before they join the stage dancers. Their entry into work differs from many other types of work in the urban informal economy because they need to have some level of dancing skills to be engaged in the group,<sup>[15]</sup> whereas children in other types of work are expected to learn the work as they go along.

The difficulties of finding urban employment compel children to accept their relatives' mediation of employment, whether they aspire to do that kind of work or not. Children's low position in the social hierarchy exacerbates their dependence, but the socio-economic position of their family and their age, gender and ethnicity generate diversity among working children.<sup>[5]</sup> If their relatives are small-scale operators in the urban informal economy children may be put to work in their enterprise. Otherwise, parents and relatives mediate employment with people in their social network or introduce children to low-paid work or assist them in starting their own micro-business.<sup>[48, 70]</sup> The thick social relations that engender friendships, reciprocities and some level of responsibilities stretch beyond the family and are key to finding better paid and more secure jobs and thus to upward social mobility.<sup>[56]</sup>

The third mechanism is the use of stand-ins during leave of absence. An employee wishing to visit rural relatives, for example, introduces a stand-in to his or her employer in the hope of being granted leave. This practice creates some vulnerability for child workers. Although an opening to employment for those who become a stand-in, they never know for how long they have the job, as employees expect their stand-in to relinquish the job as soon as they return. On the other hand, absentees cannot be sure that they still have the job upon return, since employers may sack a stand-in if they are dissatisfied with his or her work. Nonetheless, for the stand-in this practice is an entry to employment and for employees it is a way of keeping their options open.<sup>[80]</sup>

**Burkina Faso.** The relationship that an independent child migrant has with relatives, employers and other members of their household shapes the seniors' ability to make claims on the child's unpaid labour, and the willingness of the child to carry out such work.

At the age of fifteen Paul befriended Karim, a relatively young established migrant, and believed his migration came about through this friendship. Karim, on the other hand, explained that, despite the fact that he already had employed another boy, he accepted to let Paul work with him, since Paul was his mother's sister's son. The arrangement created tensions because Karim and Paul interpreted its implications differently. While Karim focused on Paul's labour input and found him lazy compared to the other boy, Paul expected to work in the same manner as he was used to in the village, with small breaks whenever he felt tired. Yet, he also expected to be paid for his work.<sup>[80]</sup>



Children also enter into the informal urban economy as marginal independent actors. In Accra and Kumasi, girls from the northern regions of Ghana often become head-porters and boys truck-pushers in markets and bus stations.<sup>[4]</sup> However, gender differences exist with respect to the age at which girls and boys enter into this type of work. Girls are generally younger and at an earlier stage in their migration trajectory whereas boys do other types of work before engaging in work as porters.<sup>[93]</sup> This is linked with the type of portering they do. Girls and young women work independently for customers in markets and bus stations, whereas men in their thirties primarily work in gangs loading and unloading trucks.

In Abidjan both boys and girls below the age of 14 years earn a little money from selling and carrying shopping bags for customers at the market<sup>[70]</sup> and in Ouagadougou, many boys from the Bisa region become itinerant shoe-shiners when they cannot find other jobs.<sup>[76]</sup> Children enter this type of work because it involves only a minimal investment, such as buying a bundle of plastic bags, a stool, brushes and shoe cream, or hiring a large basin or a small cart with which goods can be moved around. Children do not enter these activities completely on their own account. Most are initiated into the work by friends or relatives bringing about the creation of occupational niches related to ethnicity or place of origin.<sup>[80]</sup>

**Ghana.** A survey of porters in four sites in central Accra highlights gender differences:

	Women	Men
<b>11-20 years</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>13%</b>
21-30 years	24%	16%
31-40 years	17%	62%

Almost half of the female porters had stayed in Accra between 6 months and one year, whereas all male porters had been in the capital more than three years and the vast majority more than 10 years.<sup>[93]</sup>

### Terms of Employment and Working Conditions

Working conditions and remuneration depend on whether children are employed and paid a monthly wage, work on a contractual basis, or engage in independent activities. Whether employees are adult or children, the relationship between the employer and the employee is often defined in ambiguous terms, e.g., employees are portrayed as relatives, helpers, apprentices or as doing one task when they actually engage in several types of work.<sup>[20, 89]</sup> This dynamic has to be examined in connection with children's work because employers may label them as unpaid family labour even if the children do not think of themselves as such.<sup>[79]</sup>

The way in which children have been recruited as employees affects their remuneration. When parents have arranged or consented to a child's employment, they may receive the wages directly from the employer. The children's paid work thus contributes to the household budget, suggesting that their migration for work is part of the household's livelihood security.<sup>[5]</sup> Other children who have found work on their own or through mediators retain keep their wages, hand them over to urban relatives or leave them with their employer for safe keeping.

**Côte d'Ivoire.** Girls hawk various goods on their own account but the trade is difficult. Due to the economic crisis and mounting expenses, it is necessary to hawk many hours while profits are becoming smaller and smaller. Many girls begin the day at 4 am two to three times a week to stock up their goods from wholesalers. Otherwise they normally work from 8 am until 6 pm, earning a small daily profit of around 3,000 CFA francs [US\$ 6]. Nevertheless, many succeed in saving up a little to invest in their business and for clothing and other necessities.<sup>[70]</sup>

Street hawkers working on a contractual basis or on their own account may be motivated to work longer hours in order to earn more, and they may be expected to do so by employers who wish to optimise their profits. In Ouagadougou, for example, children hawking cold drinks on the street were paid a fixed 20 per cent commission of their actual sale. During the hot season they could earn well but the competition between young street hawkers was fierce and as soon as the rains began and temperatures dropped, the sales rapidly declined and pushed them to find other work.<sup>[76]</sup>

Many of the street working children start their work mid-morning but often work until well into the evening.<sup>[70]</sup> Child porters sometimes start at dawn when the markets begin to fill but the majority arrive later when trade

is well underway and they end their working day before nightfall.<sup>[70]</sup> They may however not work continuously all day but take breaks to chat with friends, play or observe what goes on around them during events or festivities. Children who are not under constant adult surveillance gain some freedom to do things with their peers,<sup>[54, 83]</sup> whereas child employees often are required to remain at their workplace, even when business is slow.<sup>[56]</sup>

Children who have been placed in an apprenticeship by their parents or a relative, usually work without pay, at least in the beginning of the apprenticeship. Learning the basic skills of the trade and sometimes a place to sleep and food are perceived as sufficient compensation for their work.<sup>[5, 7]</sup> In coastal West Africa it is common for apprentices to pay a fee to their patron, whereas children in the Sahelian countries tend to rely on their parents' or relatives' social networks to find an apprenticeship.<sup>[7, 30, 55, 90]</sup> This distinction highlights differences in access to apprenticeships based on economic status and social networks. Much negotiation surround both types of apprenticeships and those without fees also exist in the coastal countries.<sup>[7]</sup>

## Risks and Abuses

Children who work in the urban informal economy face several physical and social risks with immediate or long-term effects. Due to the diverse nature of children's work, risks are specific to each occupation.

Because much of the literature on children working in the urban informal economy focuses on street work, little attention has been paid to the kinds of abuse children may experience from their employers. First, the lack of regulation means many children who work in the urban informal economy have their wages cut for various reasons. Employers commonly justify a reduction in pay by the need to replace a broken item, to cover losses due to error when handling money or being late for work if living outside the employer's household.<sup>[32, 76, 80]</sup> Given the importance of the urban informal sector as an arena of employment for children and the unclear employment relationships, this is an area which needs to be explored to provide useful and effective protection of children.

Second, children are subjected to abuse and violence outside their employment. At the institutional level, the way in which the police and other law-enforcing entities hassle street hawkers of all ages - whether they act upon orders of policy-makers, collect irregular fees or both - can be seen as structural violence against poor people, whose livelihoods depend on trading in the urban informal economy. Such practices can have detrimental effects on children's livelihoods if all their goods are seized. Furthermore, they can have psychological effects if children are arrested and mistreated in custody or, as or if they are dumped on the outskirts of the city as part of a campaign to 'clean the streets'.<sup>[14, 43, 87]</sup> Evidence from several countries suggests that children devise strategies to minimise their economic losses and their exposure to physical violence. Yet these very strategies may lock them into a trade with a lower earning potential.<sup>[14]</sup> It is important to bear in mind that not all child workers are harassed by the police. None of the children participating in a study about child street labour in Guatemala City had been arrested.<sup>[60]</sup>

Children are also subject to abuse committed by other people operating in the urban informal economy. Firstly, they may be subject to theft of money or goods.<sup>[cf. 3, 23]</sup> Older street children may collect money from

**Burkina Faso.** In Ouagadougou, children selling recharge cards for mobile phones on busy street corners are occasionally rounded up by the police. They have to pay a fine of 25,000 CFA francs [US\$ 50] in cash or cards to be released. Earning a 5% commission per card, they may earn this amount of money in one or two months but losing such a big sum not only reduces their savings, it may push them out of business entirely, unless they have someone who can help them re-enter the trade.<sup>[94]</sup>

**Senegal.** A 15-year-old girl described her encounter with two thugs at the Thiaroye Gare market in Dakar: 'First, they asked for my money. When I didn't answer, they began to insult me. They were between 15 and 30 years old. I was really scared and tried to escape but they were faster and stronger than me. They wanted my money but when I said I hadn't sold anything, they treated me like a liar and slapped me in the face. Luckily, people heard my cries and came to help me'.<sup>[23, p. 194]</sup>

**Ghana.** Kayayeis often sleep in groups and pay a small sum to a shop owner to be allowed to sleep in front of the shop. Nevertheless, many still feel unsafe and keep a razor blade or a knife close at hand at night.<sup>3, p 14-16]</sup>

girls, young boys in their early teens and sometimes very poor adults under the guise of providing security.<sup>[9]</sup> Additionally, child employees may be accused correctly or incorrectly of theft themselves, or they may fear such accusations if they complain to the police about an employer's failure to pay their wages.<sup>[32]</sup>

Secondly, children may be subject to sexual violence while working. This is particularly the case for girls who experience unsolicited propositions and gifts from male customers who expect them to be easy targets due to their age and economic status.<sup>[23]</sup> Girls working in bars are subject to such advances and are subject to stereotyping in the advocacy and research literature.<sup>[78]</sup> This type of work is frequently linked with prostitution despite the fact that girls may work with an aunt or pursue their aspirations to 'be someone' and build social status through clothing and hairstyles, as well as through assisting in keeping younger siblings in school and supporting their mother.<sup>[65]</sup> This contrast between moral discourses surrounding adolescent girls and their aspirations for upward social mobility needs to be unpacked in order to give equal opportunities for girls over the minimum age for admission into paid employment to earn an income without being subject to abusive judgements or uninvited sexual advancements.

## Long-term implications of Work in the Urban Informal Economy for Children

Due to the broad range of informal urban occupations, it is difficult to generalise about the implications of such work on children and their protection. Policy recommendations emerging from research commissioned to look at a few occupations tend to use long working hours as a measure of exploitation without exploring what the children themselves think about their working hours.<sup>[32]</sup> Furthermore, concerns are raised about children working on their own in public spaces. These concerns tend to be rooted in the perception that children are prone to become involved with the wrong kind of people if they are not under the guidance of an adult.<sup>[cf. 70, 83]</sup> However, this perception is linked with a particular notion of the child as immature and irresponsible without exploring how differences related to age, circumstances and need may shape children's abilities to manage street work. The hazards should not be ignored but the failure to see children as social persons who navigate their circumstances as best they can, for example by working to pay school fees or to start their own business, prevents agencies from identifying the best ways of protecting and supporting these children and their families.

**Senegal.** A study of market traders exposes the rationale behind educational strategies for children. The mother of an eight-year-old girl, who hawked chilli, explained that the girl needed to learn trading well as this was likely to be her occupation later in life, whereas her two brothers were at school and could learn trade later if necessary.<sup>[5, p. 20]</sup>

### Child Development, Education and Learning

It is important to look at local practices of child rearing to understand the underlying ideologies among adults for the expectations they have of boys and girls of different ages but also for understanding the expectations children and young people have of their parents. In poor communities, it is common to diversify children's educational paths by enrolling at least one child in formal education, sending one or more children to a Qur'anic school, arrange apprenticeships, asking some children to work in the family business or on the farm while permitting others to help out relatives or take paid work.<sup>[5, 45, 51, 76]</sup> Insufficient knowledge about these different types of education and learning result in a view that privileges schooling, formal technical training and non-formal apprenticeships in the cottage industry but not apprenticeships in trade, which are most important for girls.

The learning aspect of work is important for children in several ways. Children may learn a particular skill informally when working under the supervision of a parent, relative or employer or in an apprenticeship. Children learn informally by watching those who are already skilled and gradually taking on more complex tasks. Within trade, for example, children watch a grandparent or a parent while playing near the market stall, then they begin to trade small items and often do so in play together with friends and under adult guidance.<sup>[5, 7, 70]</sup> However, children of poor families may be disadvantaged in several respects due the occupational niches they are coached into through the intergenerational transfer of skills, the social networks of retail and

wholesalers to whom they are introduced, and the lack of means to assist them in setting up a small business on their own when they reach a certain age.

Apart from being shaped by material and social endowments, gender ideologies determine the types of education which children are exposed to, whether formal education, non-formal apprenticeships or informal learning while doing the work. Gendered choices can be rooted in a pragmatic reflection of the employability of boys and girls. If boys are more likely to gain formal employment than girls, they may be enrolled in school while girls are taught other skills. However, gendered choices may also be rooted in parents' views on the value of daughters and sons for their security in old age. Some boys may be encouraged to migrate in the hope they will succeed economically.<sup>[81]</sup> Rural boys may be encouraged to stay and farm, while girls are allowed to migrate for work and apprenticeships because they will leave the family upon marriage anyway. Such girls may have a stronger position in their marriage if they bring with them goods they have saved or income-generating skills, such as bread-making, tailoring and hairdressing.<sup>[32]</sup>

The cost of attending technical college excludes children of poor families from pursuing formal vocational training, as does their lack of primary education. The desire for non-formal apprenticeships, as well as the opportunity to join one of the many workshops in the cottage industry has risen dramatically in the past decade.<sup>[19, 24, 32, 46]</sup> The dynamics of non-formal apprenticeships differ tremendously. In the coastal countries of West Africa, for example, it is common to pay fees ranging from Cedi 480,000 – 1,500,000 (US\$ 55-170) in Ghana,<sup>[31]</sup> to 30,000-160,000 CFA franc (US\$ 60-330) in Benin<sup>[19, 90]</sup> and to around 150,000 CFA franc (US\$ 312) in Côte d'Ivoire.<sup>[29]</sup> Yet, not all apprentices pay fees. Some follow the system that is more common in the Sahelian countries, where adolescents are taken in as apprentices by kin, usually a relative who sees him- or herself as a parent of the child, or apprenticeships are mediated by a relative with someone in his or her social network.<sup>[32, 90]</sup> Children's access to non-formal apprenticeships thus depends on their family's economic and social endowment. This has implications for their future opportunities as training broadens the occupational repertoire of boys and girls.<sup>[32]</sup> Yet girls tend to be directed to occupations with a lower revenue and closer to reproductive work.<sup>[34]</sup>

**Senegal.** A study of artisan metal workshops in Kaolack in the early 1980s reveals much about the dynamics in non-formal apprenticeships. Although children learn a broad range of tasks because, the flow of apprentices through a workshop reveals a veritable circulation between workshops, which prevents children from fully acquiring the necessary skills. This is further exacerbated by cyclical opportunities in economic activities following the agricultural seasons as well as economic fluctuations resulting from harvest failure, which impact directly on the demand for goods and services and the supply of labour when children from rural areas migrate to find work.<sup>[55, p. 519]</sup>

Payment or not, the apprenticeships are similar in their informal arrangement and resemblance of a socialisation process or an initiation rather than professional training.<sup>[19, 24, 30, 56]</sup> Patrons in the cottage industry are sometimes accused of failing to transfer their skills or of keeping the apprentices longer than necessary to exploit their cheap labour.<sup>[19, 67]</sup> However, in the coastal countries the payment of fees has created implicit standards for the length of an apprenticeship. In Togo, most apprenticeships last around four years, acquiring the skills to fabricate rattan furniture takes about two years, carpentry around five years and acquiring the skills of a silversmith around six years.<sup>[90]</sup> When patrons are accused of exploiting their apprentices' cheap labour without transferring skills, it is important also to examine whether patrons sometimes take in more apprentices or workers than they need because the recruitment through social relations obliges them to help their friends<sup>[56, 68]</sup> and how children and their parents respond to situations in which skills are not transferred. Another aspect that needs to be explored is the unequal access to vocational training of children growing up in rural and urban areas.

### Work Trajectories and Upward Social Mobility

Work in the urban informal sector is not only about children learning technical skills of trade, services and crafts, it is also about learning to work, to manage money and to get by in an economy characterised by

shifting economic possibilities and reliance on social relations.<sup>[52]</sup> This is most obvious when looking at independent child migrants who often arrive in the city for the first time when they are in their teens. Although they are surrounded by migrants from their region and rarely are left completely to their own devices, they have to learn to navigate the urban context and to appreciate social relations.<sup>[54, 76, 79, 80, 82]</sup>

Young children begin by helping relatives before starting to engage in street hawking and finally becoming traders in their own right. This process is encouraged and supported by adults.<sup>[5, 14, 40, 60, 70]</sup> In order to be successful in trading or in providing services in public spaces, children need to know how and where to find clients, need to have the right kind of demeanour, skills in buying and selling their goods at the right price and skills in advertising goods and services.<sup>[60]</sup> Gradually, children are able to earn slightly higher incomes, putting them on an upward earning path. However, the gendered structures of market places and occupations often put girls at a disadvantage regarding trading in goods of a higher value and of finding employment in better paid occupations.<sup>[14]</sup>

Boys working as brick-makers begin by driving the donkey cart, then gradually taking on the physically harder work of making bricks and delivering them to construction sites. Those who know bricklayers may move on to work on the line handing bricks to the bricklayer and eventually be introduced to the skills of a bricklayer.<sup>[94]</sup>

Few studies address the circumstances in which touts work and their motivations for entering such work. A study of touts in Malawi draws attention to some interesting dynamics in children's careers in the urban informal sector. In Malawi, the government banned the so-called 'callboys' (touts working around bus stations attracting passengers to busses and helping them to find the right bus), thereby removing an important source of income for many people, but also an occupation that was a step up from street trade and farming, which had been the previous occupations of all the callboys aged 12-35 years participating in the study.<sup>[74]</sup>

Generally, more research is needed on the effects of the informal and non-formal learning that takes place in the urban informal economy, especially regarding the links between work experience, human capital accumulation, and subsequent integration into the labour market and the informal economy.<sup>[35]</sup>

## Policy and Programme Initiatives

This paper examines the child protection work implemented to protect children working in the urban informal economy from hazards impacting negatively on their human capital and assesses the effectiveness of programme initiatives. Given the paucity of statistical data on children's work, effectiveness cannot be measured in numbers of working children or children doing hazardous work. Instead a more qualitative assessment is needed of whether policies and programmes are premised on a nuanced understanding of the circumstances in which children work in the informal economy, of local notions of childhood and education and of alternatives to being employed in informal businesses or trading on their own account.

International policy focuses on children's street work and to a lesser extent on children's work in family businesses. This is because children's presence in the streets is assumed to expose children to risks and result from a lack of protection. Advocacy for children's rights and policies to protect children working in the urban informal economy address both the 'supply' and 'demand' side. However, because activities in the informal economy often are perceived as micro-businesses aided by unpaid family labour, i.e., as poor people's income generating activities, the focus on 'supply' and 'demand' in programme responses tend to converge into one. Poor families are perceived as 'suppliers' of children who work instead of sending their children to school because they need extra income. These families are seen as 'demanding' children's cheap labour to maximise profits in their businesses and carve out a livelihood in a highly competitive market.<sup>[33]</sup> So although children's work for their parents is seen as benign as long as it is in accordance with children's age and abilities, it is seen as depriving children of schooling and therefore needs to be eliminated.<sup>[75]</sup> This perception is based on a

globalised notion of childhood according to which children should have a care-free childhood and spend their time in the school environment and in leisure activities.

National policy environments are more ambiguous. On the one hand, much legislation reiterates ILO conventions No. 138 concerning the minimum age for admission to employment and No. 182 concerning the worst forms of child labour. On the other hand, enforcement of child protection legislation tends to be limited and the social services to support the education of children of poor families in unplanned urban settlements are insufficient to meet the needs of all children.

### Preventing children's work in the urban informal sector: pushing for education

Measures aiming to prevent children from working in the urban informal sector are often rooted in a generalised portrayal of street-work as exposing children to violence, drugs, alcohol and sex, in addition to a number of hazards linked more directly with the work children do.<sup>[36]</sup> In consequence, street work is often categorised as a worst form of child labour and thus as something from which all children below eighteen years must be shielded in accordance with ILO Convention No. 182. Based on this line of argument, a ban on child labour must apply to work in the informal economy.

However, it is important to be aware that this portrayal is highly normative. It locates street-working children and independent child migrants as socially being out of place because they are not under the surveillance of adults. Not only does this perspective overlook children's dignity, pride in their work and their sense of responsibility,<sup>[13, 23, 28, 32, 75]</sup> it also prevents policy work from improving the circumstances in which these children work. The problem, argues the international NGO Terre des Hommes, lies not within the ILO Conventions but within their rigid implementation.<sup>[75]</sup> Less focus should be on inflexible categorisations of who can work and who cannot, and more focus on the actual benefits and potential harm for the children doing a particular type of work.<sup>[12, 13, 91]</sup>

Through the creation of social security systems outside formal employment, current policies aim to address family poverty to prevent children's entry into work in the urban informal economy.<sup>[13, 84, 86]</sup> School subsidies, such as the removal of school fees, school feeding programmes and conditional cash transfers aim to increase enrolment and retention rates in primary schools, both to meet the Millennium Development Goals and to keep children out of the worst forms of child labour.<sup>[35]</sup> Two sets of problems arise from these responses. Firstly, social protection based on cash transfers is still in its infancy in West and Central Africa and therefore has limited impact on children of poor families, and especially on children of the working poor who may not be targeted in the programmes.<sup>[73, 86]</sup> Secondly, the focus on children's work for their parents glosses over the normative conceptualisation of the family as a nuclear family consisting of children and their birth parents, which hides the important role of classificatory parents, grandparents and older siblings in the upbringing and socialisation of children. This means that children's work for family members who are not their birth parents may be criticised as harmful.<sup>[32, 77]</sup>

Moreover, it glosses over the growing demand for employees by urban small-scale entrepreneurs, whose children are in school, as well as the supply of rural and urban adolescents who no longer are in school but search for an income, adventure and some independence.<sup>[72, 80]</sup> Many of these children are older than the national minimum age for admission into paid labour and could benefit from a regularisation of employment in

To support and protect working children, the implementation of international treaties need to:

- recognise work as a means of development for children
- recognise the agency children exercise in decisions relating to work
- see children's work and related problems in the broader context
- identify benefits and potential harms of work in a grounded, fact-finding approach
- listen to children, take their views seriously, and promote effective ways for children to exercise voice
- ensure that policy focuses on the welfare and best interests of children
- exercise pressure on national governments, local authorities and other responsible bodies to get serious about "good education."<sup>[13, p. 37]</sup>

the informal economy in accordance with ILO's stated aim of being "for young people working under decent and legal conditions in work that has been freely chosen".<sup>[35]</sup>

Increasingly, 'second chance' education is stressed for children who have left school without qualifications. It can involve bringing younger children back into the formal school system and directing *children*, and especially older children, into vocational and technical training.<sup>[25, 75, 84]</sup> Although the aim of 'second chance' education is to skill disadvantaged children and youth to strengthen their future position in the labour market, international organisations, such as the ILO, UNICEF and the World Bank, acknowledge the difficulties of implementing programmes that hinge on the formal education system and on non-formal apprenticeships. Firstly, the formal education system may not be able to absorb more children. Secondly, older children may find it embarrassing to go back to primary school when they are old enough to be in secondary school and they may not wish to forego an income, since some level of economic independence is a sign of their social position as almost adults.<sup>[57, 77]</sup>

Thirdly, 'second chance' education programmes run by NGOs and sometimes national social services often involve non-formal education in the form of alphabetisation, basic skills training and outreach education to vulnerable children. The latter component draws on work in Latin America,<sup>[8]</sup> where informal street education programmes are common. In Guatemala, for example, street schools take place in the neighbourhoods where children live and work and last maybe twenty minutes at a time, during which the students discuss their homework with the teacher. The curriculum aims to teach working children the same basic skills as they would achieve in the formal education system but based on self-study. To increase the value of the education, exercises are closely linked with the children's everyday experiences and the cultural context in which they live. Although such schools have varying success rates in promoting students to the next class, they provide a learning environment adapted to the living circumstances of the children.<sup>[60]</sup> Documentation of open education programmes run by local NGOs is difficult to access in a desk-based study like this. This may be a sign of the limited duration and sustainability of such programmes, of lack of funding for publishing programme reports or lack of transparency. The international organisations acknowledge that non-formal education may be second-rate and thus not provide the participating children with the necessary skills to compete in the labour market.<sup>[35]</sup>

Another response stresses the combination of work and education and seeks to meet working children's right to education. One aim is to empower children by teaching them about their rights and institutions through which they can find support if they are exploited or otherwise abused. Another aim is to allow them to be reintegrated into the formal education system following evening classes or adapted schools, for example, or learning in alternative education forms.<sup>[13, 69, 75]</sup> In some countries part-time education has been part of national education policies for a long time. In Burkina Faso, for example, two-hour evening classes were set up in Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso in the 1970s to help poor students to complete secondary school. Since then the scheme has spread to most larger rural towns<sup>[66]</sup> as well as to primary education, where it enables a range of poor people - from the most vulnerable children to adults - attain basic literacy.<sup>[47]</sup>

Finally, children have been placed in apprenticeships, often in non-formal apprenticeships in small artisan workshops to prevent children's participation in street-work and to enhance their skills and future employability. This approach faces the challenge of ensuring the transfer of skills within an appropriate period of time and that apprentices who work in the cottage industry do not end up doing hazardous work (cf. risk assessment in <sup>[36, 67]</sup>). To respond to these problems, programmes aim to transform traditional apprenticeships, improve working conditions and reduce the risk of exploitation by ensuring a quicker transfer of skills from patron to apprentice.<sup>3</sup> The main constraint is the limited capacity of small projects to meet the demand for vocational training.<sup>[27, 88, 89, 90]</sup> Another constraint is the bias towards technical skills in the construction industry and in technical services such as mechanics, carpenter, welding, electrician, etc. The range of skilled occupations supported by NGOs tend to follow the existing gender division of labour and primarily provide training opportunities for girls in occupations with lower income earning possibilities, such as catering, knitting and sewing classes.

The skills children learn through street-hawking and market trading have been ignored in most child protection programmes. One exception is the work done by the NGO 'Environnement et Développement du Tiers Monde' (ENDA) and the 'Mouvement Africain des Enfants et Jeunes Travailleurs' (MAEJT) to formalise and regularise training in trade and non-formal apprenticeships. The work to formalise the acquisition of trading skills borrows from similar work done in Latin America and is presented in a booklet about basic marketing skills.<sup>[26]</sup> Apart from using basic business management language and requiring literacy, most of the skills are those that children learn over the years from experienced traders. MAEJT's approach teaches children how to keep written accounts, accessing bank accounts and micro-credit schemes. However, this approach still leaves children short of start capital and dependent on others.

### Child Protection Services

The provision of services to improve the situation of children working in the urban informal sector has primarily focused on children living on the street and children working in domestic service. A recent study from southern Africa shows that drop-in centres were highly valued because they offered a consistent service in contrast to outreach workers who only came occasionally. Furthermore, the drop-in centres had a number of other services attached, such as food hand-outs, access to showers, health advice and emergency shelters, and organised activities for children coming to the centre.<sup>[21]</sup> These services are very similar to the ones advocated in the protection of child domestic workers, which draw on the work of the NGOs 'Shoisab' in Bangladesh and 'Visayan Forum' in the Philippines.<sup>[85]</sup>

While some street-working children may find it easier to visit drop-in centres but have to balance the income foregone during visits against hand-outs, the availability of sanitary facilities and the attraction of the activities on offer, children in employment face a number of challenges: They often are required to be present at their workplace for long hours or, if they engage in street hawking, they are required to sell a certain amount to

**ENDA's work for regularising apprenticeships in Mali** was first seen as an approach to help particularly vulnerable groups of children and youth to learn on the job. The pedagogy is rooted in non-formal apprenticeships and seeks to ensure the transfer of skills within a shorter period of time by overseeing that learning happens, by adding extra skills through workshops (intensive 10-day workshops with groups of apprentices) and internships in industries using a higher level of technology than small workshops at the end of the apprenticeship, alphabetisation and teaching basic business skills.

Apart from ensuring enhanced skills transfers, this regularisation of on-the-job apprenticeships differs from informal apprenticeships by aiding those with weaker social networks to find good apprenticeships and by listening to the child's preferences rather than having parents or guardians choose the work they think the child should do.<sup>[27]</sup>

<sup>3</sup> ILO has just published a comprehensive resource guide to assist programmes to address some of the problems in vocational and technical training in Africa.<sup>[37]</sup> It is outside the scope of this briefing paper to summarise the guide in a meaningful way.



keep their job. Also the costs of transportation might be prohibitive, hence there is a need for numerous drop-in centres, which may not be cost-effective.

In order to identify effective responses it is important to involve children working in the urban informal sector in identifying problematic issues as well as ways to fulfil their aspirations, to solve their day-to-day problems and to have fun. Peer education is very important, as is the knowledge and the skills imparted by parents and other relatives and by patrons to apprentices. Such informal education is focused on the practical, social and cultural skills of how to do a particular job, where to go to find work or do business, how to behave to increase income and to build up a clientele for street hawkers and service providers.<sup>[5, 23, 80]</sup> Social skills “are both a prerequisite for success and an outcome and benefit of working on the street”<sup>[60, p. 115]</sup> and should not be underestimated as means of advancement within the informal economy and of protection from the diverse range of vulnerabilities.

NGOs working with a child-centred approach, such as UNICEF, Save the Children, Terre des Hommes, Plan International, and many national NGOs, acknowledge the value of informal education and see it as a vehicle for strengthening awareness-raising about children’s rights and child protection. They therefore support children’s self-organisation. MAEJT’s work West and Central Africa<sup>4</sup> is a prime example of institutionalised self-organisation, awareness-raising campaigns and advocacy to ameliorate the situation of working children. Supported by ENDA, MAEJT (together with organisations of working children from Peru and India) entered the international scene of standard setting through their 1996 ‘Kundapur Declaration’ which identified how working children felt their work should be viewed and how they could best be supported. They have been able to call attention to the pride many children take in their work and the need to ameliorate their work and education conditions rather than pushing them out of the labour market and criminalising them.<sup>[10, 13]</sup>

Within their local settings, national branches of MAEJT work with a network of neighbourhood-based associations which, through joint activities, bring together small groups of working children to stimulate the exchange of experiences and knowledge, seek to support children working in vulnerable or harmful circumstances, and do outreach work to raise awareness of their rights among more children. Such work internationally and nationally is important but, given the large number of children working in the urban informal economy, it is important to see whether their work reaches children in all types of occupations, children of all ages, children from different backgrounds and both boys and girls.

## Questions that Need Further Investigation

- Do neat categorisations of children’s occupations in the urban informal economy hinder our understanding of the complexity of urban livelihoods and how working children are introduced to, and integrated, in these complexities?
- Are children working for relatives remunerated for their work? Do they feel they should be, and if so, how do they negotiate with the adults they work for?
- What risks do children encounter in their work? Are they linked with the work itself or with the work place?
- Which practices surround the payment or otherwise of children’s wages in a given location? Do differences exist between different occupations?
- How do children and their parents respond to situations in which wages are not paid in full, if at all?

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<sup>4</sup> Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, The Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Togo in West Africa, and Cameroon, Chad and the Democratic Republic of Congo in Central Africa.

- Do artisans sometimes take in more apprentices or workers than they need because the recruitment through social relations obliges them to help their friends?
- How do children and their parents respond to situations in which skills are not transferred?
- What are the long-term effects of the informal and non-formal learning that takes place in the urban informal economy? How does work experience impact on human capital accumulation and on children's integration into the labour market and the informal economy?

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