**Child and Youth Migration in West Africa:**
**Research Progress and Implications for Policy**
Organised by the Development Research Centre on Migration, Globalisation and Poverty, University of
Sussex and Centre for Migration Studies, University of Ghana
9th-10th June 2009, Accra


Summary Report

The *Child and Youth Migration in West Africa: Research Progress and Implications for Policy*
workshop brought together Francophone and Anglophone researchers and child rights
advocates from research institutes, international organisations, government departments
and NGOs working across West Africa.  The conference aimed to exchange information on
existing research and to identify areas for policy intervention.

This summary report highlights the main themes, questions and issues raised by the
presentations, discussions and comments from conference participants.

**CONFERENCE ACTIVITIES**

Day 1 was devoted to papers summarising current research findings in a selection of
different kinds of child and youth migration in West Africa.[1] Presentations were followed by
comments from an expert discussant, after which participants raised questions and
comments.  The day closed with a plenary session in which the floor was opened to
participating policymakers and practitioners to present their views on the day's events, share
experiences and raise further questions.

The key papers drew on a number of empirical studies and covered:

- Children's And Young People's  Management of their Mobility Trajectories in Benin:
A Study of  their Tactics and Strategies
- The state of our knowledge about Child Rural-Rural Migration in West Africa
- (In)visible young female migrant workers in West Africa: 'little domestics' in Abidjan.
- Work opportunities and practices of Mobile Youth with little formal education:.
- Key challenges and issues raised by young West African mobile children and youth:
Findings from the West Africa Mobilities Project[2].

Day 2 opened with a presentation from representatives of The African Movement of Children
and Young Workers (MAEJT) outlining the findings of their study exploring the perspectives
of child migrants. The presentation was followed by questions and discussion. A panel of
representatives from FAO, the General Agricultural Workers Union in Ghana, and ILO then
reflected on their work with child migrants as rural workers.

Participants then divided into small breakout groups to discuss the following questions:

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[1] Full working papers are available on the DRC migration website in both French and English.
[2] The West Africa Mobilities Project brings together a group of leading organisations – ILO, ENDA, MAJET, IOM,
Save the Children – Sweden, Terre des Hommes, UNICEF Regional Office – to study the mobility of children and
youth in West Africa

- What are the main issues raised for policymakers and practitioners by working teenagers?
    - What are the key priorities for action:
    - In the short to medium term?
    - In the longer term?

Feedback from the breakout group session was followed by a Panel on coordinating support for migrant children. This panel included representatives from Terres des Hommes, Winrock and the Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research (University of Ghana).

## KEY THEMES AND QUESTIONS RAISED

Overall discussions emphasised the need to contextualise child migration. A key theme was the need to differentiate between different kinds of child and youth migration. There was concern that there is a tendency to subsume all forms and experiences of migration under the label 'trafficking' and to characterise migration of youth as predominantly harmful. At the same time it is important not to lose sight of, and address when and how migration experiences are harmful to children.

A number of recurring themes and issues emerged during presentations and discussions:

- **Can and should we aim to stop migration?**

Participants discussed whether it is possible to stop migration, and whether this should be the priority for policy makers. Some participants argued that it is not possible to stop young people migrating, and that policies should aim rather to make migration safer.

This debate has important policy implications. If the aim is to stop migration policies might include:

- Increasing education and employment opportunities in home areas (see the Winrock programme offering training in cocoa farming programme, for example)
- Sensitisation about the dangers of migration
- Preventing and intercepting movement (such as current anti-trafficking measures)

If the aim is to make migration safer, policies may include:

- Sensitization so that risks can be mitigated
- Enforcing labour regulations and supporting young people to claim payments etc.
- Developing existing social protection mechanisms

- **What are the drivers of migration among children and youth?**

In particular the debate about whether poverty is the main driver of migration. Under-development and lack of opportunities in home areas are important – but some commentators emphasised the influence of peers and the aspirations associated with

successful migrants as important drivers. Material gain, either for oneself (e.g.to buy a bike) or for one's family or community (e.g.to pay for a roof), is another important motive for migration.

- **How do we support young migrants and stop migration going 'sour'?**

This was a key question, especially among those who tool a pragmatic view of the inevitability of children's migration. It was noted that how a child fares in migration depends on the actions and attitudes of employers, recruiters and intermediaries. Discussions gave rise to a number of policy implications including;

- o The role of recruiters and intermediaries.
- o Supporting child and youth associations to help themselves, including training young people to use the media and advocacy skills to represent themselves.
- o Providing education about the risks of migration.
- o Understanding actions and interactions with the police and law enforcers.

- **What is the role of intermediaries?**

A more complex understanding of the different kinds and roles of intermediaries is needed. There is a tendency to see all intermediaries as negative: however, sometimes intermediaries play an important protective role.

- **What is the role of instruments of children's rights?**

Some participants felt it was important to draw attention to children's rights as enshrined in international and national conventions. Others felt that these instruments are not as important because they do not reflect the reality experienced on the ground. How to enforce national legislation aimed at protecting working children was a key question.

- **How are we defining 'child'?**

There was substantial discussion of the need for a more complex understanding of age and to differentiate between different types of migration undertaken by different age groups. Participants noted that while international conventions define a child as anyone under the age of 18, domestic law in (for example) Ghana sets the legal working age for a young person at 15. Others pointed out that perceived maturity and social age were more important and relevant than biological age.

- **Role and attitudes of parents?**

The extent to which parents are responsible for their children's migration and their attitudes towards it was repeatedly raised. The presentations emphasised parental ambivalence towards migration, and noted that it is frequently seen as a legitimate and accepted livelihood strategy. The MAEJT study found that none of the parents were wholly against the migration of their children, but were concerned about the potential outcomes of the migration, and worried when their child was not reaping benefits.

- **What are the particular vulnerabilities of domestic workers?**

This issue highlighted particular concerns such as the ways in which gender impacts migration and the risks of sexual abuse. The particular role of placement agencies in domestic workers is also important, and links to concerns about intermediaries more generally.

- **What kind of contexts to these children move into?**

Several participants requested more information about destination areas. It was pointed out that many children (particularly in the case of domestic workers and agricultural migrants) migrate into households or farmsteads which are they very poor and economically vulnerable.

- **Which forms of child migration are less visible?**

It was noted that some forms of child migration are less visible and therefore neglected by the policy-makers. These include:

- o Domestic workers who might be described as a relative ('niece')
- o Children migrating from rural to rural areas to work in agriculture, particularly those travelling to smaller farmsteads rather than large plantations.
- o Children who choose to leave, sometimes without their parents' consent.

- **It is important to take into account the voices and perspectives of children**

Grassroots efforts should be supported and forums should be developed in which children can express their views.

**WAYS FORWARD AND CLOSE: COMMENTS FROM PANEL AND PLENARY DISCUSSION.**

The final panel consisted of four participants who were asked to sum up their responses to different themes. They emphasised:

- ❖ Importance of how we define different terms such as 'childhood', 'parenting', 'trafficking', 'education', and understanding how they are defined in context.

- ❖ Importance of listening to and hearing what is said in research and advocacy.

- ❖ The agency of th e children and their role in decision making.

- ❖ Differentiating voluntary and involuntary migration and understanding historical and cultural context.

- ❖ The need to have local discussions and understanding to harmonise international and national conventions and laws.

- ❖ Existing frameworks and solutions are not always appropriate and need improvement.