

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Malnutrition, Poverty, and Climate Change are also Human Rights Issues in Child Labor

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Athena Ramos’s paper “Child Labor in Global Tobacco Production: A Human Rights Approach to an Enduring Dilemma” highlights the critical issue of human rights for working children, especially those working in hazardous tobacco farming, where agriculture is intricately connected to global business interests.¹ The author includes an extensive review of the literature on child labor in tobacco farming and the human rights that are ignored in, as she writes, “an almost invisible population,” particularly children who are part of the “invisible underclass, perpetuating the cycle of poverty.”

I would like to highlight two further issues that should be considered in the discussion of child labor in tobacco and other large-scale industrial monocropping: the first is the relationship between child workers’ malnutrition and poverty, and the second is the impact of climate change on agriculture and livelihoods. Focusing the discussion here on Malawi (the case used by Ramos), we see a tobacco-dependent country that is the world’s sixth-largest tobacco producer and that earns 60% of its GDP from tobacco farming—a crop that, in some quarters, is promoted as a solution to poverty.

Around half of Malawi’s 5.6 million children are laborers. Approximately two million children work in agriculture, with an estimated 100,000 of them working on tobacco farms.² Along with the World Health Organization—which warns of the negative impacts of tobacco farming on health and the environment, as well as its counterproductivity in terms of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—the International Labour Organization stresses the risks for child laborers caught in the cycle of poverty, which forces them into precarious work on monocrop plantations, especially tobacco and sugar, where, increasingly, climate change affects the most vulnerable, particularly in low-income countries.³

Children in agriculture, malnutrition, and climate-change-related events

The *Global Hunger Index* reports Malawi’s hunger situation as serious, with 6.5 million (out of a total population of 19 million) unable to meet nutritional requirements.⁴ Thirty-seven percent of children under five are stunted, with malnutrition one of Malawi’s top ten risk factors and causes of child death.⁵ Food insecurity and malnutrition continue to be serious problems, which is why school-feeding and under-five breakfast programs are widespread. In addition to causing impaired cognitive development, malnutrition leaves child farmers susceptible to endemic infectious diseases, including malaria and cholera (aggravated by climate change), and particularly vulnerable when exposed to vector-borne infectious and non-communicable diseases, on top of the threat of “green tobacco sickness.”⁶

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Systematic reviews indicate a significant association between extreme weather events, nutritional status, and infant mortality.⁷ For example, maize crops—one of Malawi’s staple foods—are affected by poor seasonal rains and prolonged dry periods, while environmental shocks such as the 2017 “army worm” plague have resulted in agricultural disaster for countries of eastern Africa, further aggravating food insecurity.

The *Lancet* has declared climate change and its related health effects as the biggest global health threat of this century, with Southern Africa one of the most vulnerable regions, as it is highly dependent on rain-fed agriculture and has a low adaptive capacity.⁸ Ninety-two percent of Malawians rely on rain-fed sources of water, which are heavily affected by floods and droughts. Further, the late onset of rains negatively affects agriculture, which increases food poverty and, in turn, affects children’s nutritional status.⁹ Deforestation—a critical issue in Southern and Eastern Africa—brings its own environmental impacts. For example, clearing for monocropping means less arable land for food crops, and deforestation has been associated with landslide vulnerability and carbon dioxide emissions.¹⁰

The way land is used by the poor in farming is an important consideration in the discussion of climate change and its impact on child labor in agriculture. Tenancy (sharecropping in Ramos’s paper) is an indirect but important reason for child labor. In Malawi, large-scale monocropping in crops such as tobacco and sugar is responsible for changes in land use and in farm size, as well as land fragmentation, thus changing the face of farming. In effect, household and community land is used for commodity crops instead of subsistence farming, leaving families to purchase food that would have previously been self-produced, gathered, or hunted. With crops negatively affected by climate change, and international conglomerates regulating agriculture, family farms are being increasingly converted into farms for commodity crops such as tobacco. Complex land tenure and compounded interest on loans, added to climate unpredictability and fluctuating prices tied to export-focused markets, aggravate the already dire socioeconomic

situation for tenant farmers.

With a clear link to malnutrition, climate change in such scenarios critically affects the livelihood and health of children who are indentured or coopted into agricultural work, whether it be periodic work (such as to see the family through a difficult season) or permanent work. In all, the risk of poor children in Malawi being affected by natural disasters has been estimated as six times greater than for non-poor children, meaning that child laborers are especially vulnerable to and affected by climate change.¹¹

Conclusion

While governments acknowledge climate change realities, in Malawi uncontrolled deforestation continues unchecked, with forests making way for large-scale estates that require water diversion, further affecting subsistence farming and native habitats. Traditional sources of nutrition are depleted as jungles disappear, and subsistence farming, hunting, and fishing are no longer the norm, with, for example, unsustainable fishing techniques destroying fish stocks that are already threatened by global warming.

The issue that must be addressed if child labor is to be eliminated by 2030, as proposed in the SDGs (ninety percent of which have targets linked to international human rights and labor standards), is the complex interaction of poverty, climate change, and big business.

While Ramos has outlined various legal, diplomatic, and civil actions to counteract child labor in tobacco farming, the topic must be considered in a wider context that focuses on health rights and climate change. There are positive signs toward climate change mitigation in Africa, as evidenced by civil society initiatives such as Greening Africa Together, but government and agricultural industry compliance is critical to any international, regional, or national protocol addressing child labor, which will become an even more critical issue as climate change increases.¹² Multinational corporations are key to addressing the situation, especially in low-income countries, and, as Ramos concludes,

agricultural alternatives are necessary. However, it is essential that sustainable, integrated agricultural systems become part of national adaptation plans that address the health and rights of child workers who are facing the growing impacts of climate change.¹³

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