

**‘OUR DAILY BREAD COMES FROM ROCKS’:  
THE LIVELIHOOD STRUGGLES OF CHILDREN  
AT A QUARRY IN POKUASE, GHANA.**

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**ABSTRACT**

Children’s economic production has become an important survival strategy for households living below subsistence levels. The literature on child labour tends to portray children as passive and inactive agents in decisions relating to their participation in work. Using data from in-depth interviews, the study examines decisions relating to children’s participation in work, and the role that agency plays in children’s participation in work. The study found that although children are sometimes compelled by adults to work, they are active and strategic agents in labour market activities, as well as in decision making processes involving their participation in work and family welfare. Findings have implications for economic theories explaining child labour, and rights-based approaches to children’s participation in work.

Key words: labour market, economic survival, agency, participation

**RÉSUMÉ**

L'apport des enfants dans la production économique est devenu une stratégie importante pour les foyers vivant au-dessous du seuil de

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subsistance. Les documents sur le travail des enfants ont tendance à présenter les enfants comme des agents passifs et inactifs dans les décisions portant sur leur participation au travail. En utilisant les données provenant d'entrevues détaillées, cette étude présente les décisions relatives à la participation des enfants au travail, et au rôle qu'y joue l'agencité. L'étude révèle que bien que les enfants sont parfois contraints de travailler, ils sont des agents actifs et stratégiques dans le marché du travail, ainsi que dans les processus de prise des décisions concernant leur participation au travail et au bien-être de la famille. Les découvertes de cette étude ont des répercussions sur les théories économiques expliquant le travail des enfants et les approches fondées sur les droits de l'homme traitant la participation des enfants au travail.

### **Introduction**

In many African countries, a large proportion of households live at a minimum level of expenses due to factors such as weak economic base, high rates of unemployment, and inadequate income of parents, resulting in children's economic production becoming an important aspect of economic survival strategies (Togunde, 2006). There is a large body of literature on child labour with polarized viewpoints. One school of thought argues that child labour emanates from the economic conditions facing the household (Basu, 1998; Basu, 1999, A; Mwebaze, 2007; Edmonds and Turk, 2002; Okukpara and Odurukwe, 2006; Togunde and Carter, 2008). They argue that as family incomes fall below subsistence levels, families tend to rely on their children's incomes in order to survive. The other school of thought, asserts that although economic factors contribute to children's participation in the labour market, non-economic factors are equally important (Ray, 2000; Adamassie, 2002; Bhalotra and Heady, 2003; De Groot, 2010). They therefore caution that an overemphasis on economic factors does not help in understanding the reasons for children's involvement in labour market activities. These perspectives, while useful in explaining the demand and supply factors contributing to children's participation in the labour market, tend to portray children as inactive agents who cannot make rational

decisions concerning improvement in their living standards, and as such, are compelled by their parents to participate in economic activities. Grier (2004) attributes the neglect of child workers in African scholarship to the fact that children are perceived as “invisible workers”. James and Prout (1997), cited in Grier (2004:16), argue that when we conceive of children as “naturally passive, incompetent, incomplete, and defenseless”, we foreclose a series of important questions for theory and empirical research. Nurye (2009) opines the above view by stating that children are as much part of the economy as adults, and are affected by economic and social change, and indeed contribute to it as they struggle to make a living for themselves and their dependents.

This article argues that both economic and non-economic factors are equally important in gaining insight into the phenomenon of children’s participation in economic activities, since both factors tend to reinforce each other. The article further argues that children are active and strategic agents in the labour market, taking responsibility for their own wellbeing and that of others. Thus, children work not only because they are told to do so by their parents or adults, but also because they feel responsible to meet their own needs and those of their family. The problem is that although children are active agents in labour market activities, their views have been largely underrepresented in the literature, since they are assumed to be inactive in decisions relating to their participation in the labour market. This article asserts that children are rational and active agents in labour market activities, and therefore their views about work and their contributions to their family’s sustenance, will generate sufficient insights about how the complex socio-cultural norms and values, economic environment, as well as agency on the part of children contribute to their participation in the labour market activities. By arguing that children are rational beings and active participants in labour market activities, this study attempts to incorporate children’s views into the child labour literature, and thus fill the gap which seems to have been overlooked in the literature. The analytical point of departure from previous studies is the availability of data obtained from especially children, thereby giving voice to children whose views on their financial contributions to the family survival strategies have been largely under-reported. This article seeks to address the following:

1. To what extent, if any are children part of the family decision-making structure in relation to their participation in economic activities?
2. What factors underlie children's participation in economic activities?

### **Children's participation in labour market activities in Ghana**

In dominant Western views, childhood has been categorized as a special and precarious phase of life when one needs protection and care if complete and responsible adulthood is to be achieved. This view conceptualizes child work as detrimental to children's education and unhealthy for their physical, cognitive, and emotional development (Cunningham, 2003). According to Liebel (2004), this notion of childhood is widespread in the world today, though by no means universally accepted. In Africa, children have always worked as part of their socialization process, often assuming adult roles through imitating, copying or some sort of apprenticeship (Nukunya, 1969; Agbu, 2004; Mahama, 2004; Feibgen, 2010). The process of socialization often took place within the extended family, underpinned by the notion that a child belonged to the entire community, and not just the nuclear family. As such, the daily lives of children tended to be intertwined with the family collective, where they maintained reciprocal care and support of family members (Abebe, 2012).

According to Abebe and Bessell (2011) it is important to place children's work in specific economic and politico-historical context in order to understand why children participate in labour market activities. They argue that the economic and political transformations, in particular, Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP), imposed in the 1980s by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in several African countries, including Ghana, had direct repercussions on children, and affected them greatly. In their opinion, the privatization of public enterprises for example, led to high unemployment rates among public sector employees. Many families suffering from the effects of SAP were therefore compelled by their poor economic situation to involve their children in work as a strategy to ensure survival of the household.

In many developing countries, including Ghana, children make significant monetary and other contributions to their families' sustenance through their participation in labour market activities (Basu, and Van, 1998; Khanam and Russell, 2005; Zdunnek, 2008). A survey conducted by the Ghana Statistical Service (GSS) found that about 57 per cent of children were engaged in agriculture, forestry and fishing; 21 per cent worked as hawkers and street vendors (selling food, iced water and other items) with the rest in other sectors of the economy (Ghana Statistical Service, 2003). In spite of cultural diversity in Ghanaian societies i.e. difference in language, ethnicity, religion, among others, a common strand is that children are initiated into a form of occupation and self-recognized role-plays in order to become responsible members of the community (Feigben, 2010). It was therefore considered normal for a child to play any role that his/ her mental and physical abilities could support. According to Feigben (2010) a child was considered lazy or having poor upbringing if he/she could not perform basic household chores like fetching water, washing dishes, and sweeping. Among the Anlo Ewe and indeed other ethnic groups in Ghana, children from about ten years of age participated in economic activities by helping their parents, especially on the farm (Nukunya, 1969:149). Child work served as a platform where children, especially boys, were taught to pursue economic activities which gave them some form of income and greatly alleviated their dependence on their parents. According to Afrifa (1992), cited in Adomako (2007:5), traditionally, since child rearing was a communal effort, this "insulated children, youth, and even adults from poverty, hunger, malnutrition, waywardness and some of the emotional and psychological problems that afflicted the individualized and alienated societies of the industrialized world". The gradual disappearance of this cohesion and support, Afrifa argues, is as a result of economic necessity that makes it impossible for parents to give children the care they need. This lack of support can make children vulnerable and enter the labour market to work to support themselves and their families.

### **Theories explaining children's participation in labour market activities**

The literature relating to children's involvement in labour market activities varies in the degree of emphasis on the causal factors. One school of thought stresses that although economic reasons are important in child labour decisions, other factors are equally important. According to Ray (2000), Adamassie (2002) and Odonkor (2008), a growing number of children are put into work obligations due to lack of educational opportunities. Children tend to be available to participate in labour markets when formal education is not available, or when the available form of education does not meet the criteria of affordability, quality and relevance. Some parents may also think that learning by doing could be more valuable than the academic education provided in schools, and thus will not opt for schooling for their children at the expense of liquidity of their immediate income (Adamassie, 2002).

While Ray (2000), Adamassie (2002) and Odonkor (2008) view child labour as emanating from education-related factors, Basu, 1998; Basu and Van, 1998; Blunch and Verner, 2000; Priyambada et al., 2002; Edmonds and Turk, 2002; Togunde and Carter, 2008, emphasize a single causal factor — poverty. These scholars view children's participation in labour market activities essentially as a way out of poverty, especially for households living below subsistence levels. A study conducted by Basu (1998) in Bolivia for example, found that working children contributed as much as one-third of household income among poor families. Masudi et al. (2001) in their study in Tanzania found that economic hardships at the household level contributed to children's engagement in wage work. According to them, the inability of parents to provide basic needs for their children resulted in several children entering labour markets as a survival strategy. Similarly, findings of Ghana Statistical Service (2003) showed that in Ghana 43.9 per cent of parents interviewed reported that household living standards would fall if children stopped working. Generally, the low socio-economic status of parents was a predetermining factor for children's engagement in the labour market (Owurawi 1996, cited in Osiruemu 2007). This view of poverty being the driving force behind children's participation in work has been questioned on the grounds that not all households facing poverty resort to involving their children in the

labour market. Bhalotra and Heady (2003) argue that imperfect labour markets strengthen the incentive to put children to work. They have shown that in some developing countries, for example, Peru and Pakistan, the number of hours that children of a household work, increases with the amount of land possessed by the household. This implies that greater land ownership may contribute to higher child labour because market imperfections mean that owning or controlling land amounts to having the opportunity for more productive use of household's labour, including child labour (Bhalotra and Heady, 2003). Since land is usually strongly correlated to a household's income, this finding challenges the assertion that child labour is caused by poverty.

According to Zdunnek et al. (2008), De Groot (2010) and Darko (2011), although children's participation in the labour market is dictated mainly by the decision of their parents, there are isolated cases where children may decide to work themselves. Thus, children work not only because they are told to do so by their parents, siblings, or some other relative, but because they are rational and aware of their own circumstances and their family's economic conditions. This suggests that children are sometimes active agents in seeking out work. Many children make this choice; given the nature of the labour market as well as the cultural and socio-economic context in which they live, where work may enable them pursue an opportunity to acquire certain luxuries like shoes, clothing, and even mobile phones. Although children are active agents in labour market activities and have been found to make significant contributions to their families' economic situation, their views have been largely underrepresented in the literature, since they are assumed to be inactive in decisions relating to their participation in the labour market. This study adds to the child labour literature because it seeks to incorporate children's views on their participation in labour market activities, and thus generate additional insights about how the complex socio-cultural norms and values, economic environment, as well as agency on the part of children contribute to their participation in the labour market activities.

## Methods

Data for the study was obtained through the use of non-structured questionnaire. The aim of conducting in-depth interviews was to explore respondents' views about decision-making relating to children's participation in work, factors that contribute to their participation in work, and the role that children's agency plays in their participation in labour market activities. The analytical point of departure from previous studies is the availability of data obtained from especially children, thereby giving voice to children whose views on their financial contributions to their family's survival strategies have been largely under-reported. Purposive sampling was relied on to select forty children aged 5-15, comprising 27 males and 13 females working at a quarry. No two children from the same family were interviewed. Twenty (20) parents/guardians, comprising ten males and ten females, working with their children at the quarry were also interviewed. At the beginning of each interview, informants were briefed on the objectives of the research. Permission was sought from parents or guardians before interviewing children. Interviews were conducted in English and Twi.<sup>2</sup> Data was transcribed, translated and analyzed along thematic lines.

### *Study site*

The study was conducted at a quarry in Pokuase, in the Ga-West Municipality of the Greater Accra Region. Pokuase was selected due to the presence of several quarries in the area, as well as media reports about the plight of working children in the area. Pokuase is endowed with several natural resources (agricultural lands, forests, streams, mountains, etc) which serve as sources of livelihood for the inhabitants. Although there are pockets of wealthy people (e.g. ACP Estates) in the area, Pokuase is characterized by high unemployment rates, high illiteracy rates, inadequate sanitation and health facilities, and children's participation in various economic activities. The nature and resources of the area provide several residents of Pokuase with their livelihood, especially those facing worsening

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<sup>2</sup>The researcher interviewed working children in Twi and English as they understood and could express themselves well in both languages. Some parents/ guardians who did not understand Twi were able to express themselves in 'broken' English.



economic situations. The hilly and rocky nature of Pokuase makes it a viable area for sand winning and stone quarrying. Indeed, the widespread mining and quarrying of large deposits of sand and stone materials by large and small-scale operators has contributed to the growth of the construction industry. These quarries serve as a source of livelihood to several people (adults and children) living in the community.

### **Findings**

The literature on children's participation in economic activities is polarized along two schools of thought, one focusing mainly on the economic conditions facing the household, and the other on non-economic factors. These two perspectives, while useful in explaining the factors contributing to children's participation in the labour market activities, tends to portray children as inactive agents who cannot make rational decisions concerning improvement in their living standards, and as such, are compelled by their parents to participate in economic activities. In contrast to the two perspectives, the study found that economic and non-economic factors are interrelated, and significantly contribute to children's participation in the labour market, although economic factors are dominant.

### **Socio-economic background of working children**

Firstly, the socio-demographic background of working children shows that the average age of working children is 12 years. This is consistent with other studies carried out on child labour (Togunde and Carter, 2008).

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) classifies children's engagement in quarrying as a Worst Form of Child Labour (WFCL), due to its potential to negatively affect a child's overall development. The study however found that even at the age of 8 years, some children were already engaged in quarry work. The majority (85%) of working children were found to live with both parents; 7.5% with only a mother and relatives, while none stayed with either a father or on their own. This finding is in contrast to findings from the study by Berge et al. (2008) which stipulated that the majority of the children working in quarries in

Peru belonged to either one-parent households or families in which the father had migrated.

Table-1.1: Distribution of Pokuase working children by sex, age, and education

<b>Sex</b>	Male	Female	Total
Frequency	29	11	40
<b>Percent</b>	<b>72.5</b>	<b>27.5</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Age</b>			
8-10	4	1	5
11-13	15	7	22
12-15	10	3	13
Grand Total	29	11	40
<b>Percent (%)</b>	<b>72.5</b>	<b>27.5</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Education</b>			
Primary I-III	10	2	12
Primary IV-VI	16	6	22
JHS I-III	3	-	3
Dropped out	-	3	3
Grand Total	29	11	40
<b>Percent (%)</b>	<b>72.5</b>	<b>27.5</b>	<b>100.0</b>

*Source:* Author's field work, April-May, 2011

### **Socio-economic characteristics of parents/guardians of working children**

The findings on the socio-economic background of parents or guardians of Pokuase working children revealed that formal education, an important tool for human capital development, was low among parent/guardian respondents. This is consistent with the general findings reported in the literature (Togunde, 2006; Osiruemu, 2007).

Although the majority of parents/guardians were quarry workers, some of the interviewed children mentioned that their parents were masons, mechanics, security-men, petty traders, and in one case, a soldier. According to some of the

parents or guardians, their main occupations had suffered economically, and they had resorted to working at the quarry as a temporary means of earning wages in order to support their families' economically. In several cases, one or both parents of child respondents were unemployed. The concentration of parents/guardians in low-paying jobs is consistent with Oruwari (1996) cited in Osiruemu (2007) who found that, "the socio-economic status of poor parents who subsist at the periphery of the urban economy", made children susceptible to labour market participation.

Table-1.2: *Age and education of interviewed parents/guardians*

Age	Male	Female	Total
20-29	3	3	6
30-39	4	2	6
40-49	2	3	5
50-59	-	1	1
60 & Above	1	1	2
Grand Total	10	10	20
<b>Percentage</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100.0</b>
<b>Education</b>	Male	Female	Total
Primary	1	1	2
JHS	4	2	6
Secondary	3	4	7
Never been to school	2	3	5
Grand Total	10	10	20
<b>Percentage (%)</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>100.0</b>

*Source:* Author's field work, April-May, 2011

### **Organisation of the quarry and activities performed by children**

It is important to examine the peri-urban nature of Pokuase in order to understand the reasons why adults and children work at the quarry. In spite of the fact that there are pockets of wealthy people living in the area (e.g. ACP Estates houses the nouveau riche) Pokuase is characterized by high unemployment rates, high

illiteracy rates, inadequate sanitation and health facilities, and children participate in various economic activities in their effort to provide for themselves and their families' needs. In light of the above, several people facing worsening economic situations make use of the exploitable natural resources (agricultural lands, forests, streams, mountains, etc.) found in Pokuase. The hilly and rocky nature of Pokuase makes it a viable area for sand winning and stone quarrying; and indeed the widespread mining and quarrying of large deposits of sand and stone materials by large and small-scale operators has contributed to the growth of the construction industry in the area and elsewhere within the Accra metropolis. It is interesting to note that in spite of the several hazards involved in quarrying, it is not uncommon to find numerous adults and children working at the quarry. This may be due to the fact that the quarries provide regular and sustainable sources of income compared to other economic activities in the area.

Several visits to the quarry site and interviews with quarry workers revealed that the land they were working on had been bought by private individuals for residential purposes. The uneven nature of the land made it difficult for these individuals to construct their buildings, and therefore the owners went into informal agreement with the quarry workers for the purpose of levelling the land, and also providing them with stone-chippings for construction. Some of the owners of the lands were actually involved in quarrying themselves. It was observed that the workers were not formally organized as a group, and there were no clear leaders in charge of ensuring that members complied with specifications given by landowners. Some of the specifications include not digging below a given level and providing stone chippings for use by landowners. For example, some of the quarry workers had been instructed by a religious body that owned land at the site being exploited not to dig beyond a recommended level, but this had not been complied to. In agreement with the literature, quarrying was found to be a real family activity, involving parents and their children, and grandparents and their grandchildren. There were however cases where some adults engaged the services of other people's children as paid employees at the quarry sites. The study revealed that the activities performed by children were similar to those performed by adult workers, even though some of the physically demanding activities were reserved for male adults. Children working at the quarry were involved in two

work activities. The first involved carrying stones in head pans and gathering them into a pile. This activity involved both boys and girls. The main activity of children working at the quarry involved breaking the stones into small chippings with hammers.

### **Decision-making relating to children's participation in quarry work**

Archard (1993) and Kwarteng (2012) assert that adults mostly make decisions in the family due to unequal power relations existing between adults and children. The above view seems to suggest that the ability of children to take decisions relating to their welfare is constrained by the authority of adults. Although the study found that decisions relating to child and quarry work were sometimes made by parents, their ability to make decisions relating to their children's participation in labour market activities were sometimes curtailed by their low incomes. In such circumstances, the parents negotiated work decisions with their children, instead of compelling them. It must be noted however that, negotiations between parents/adults and children did not imply that working children viewed themselves as autonomous. Evidence from interviews suggest that some children decided on their own to work at the quarry; and indeed totally controlled monies earned, and the specific items they wanted to spend their monies on. These children chose to work, given the socio-economic context in which they live. Although the quarry posed dangers to working children, it served as considerable attraction for many children as it is perceived as a market in which cash can be made quickly and daily.

Some of the statements made by child respondents on decisions-making relating to their participation in quarry work are as follows:

I decided on my own to come and work at the quarry. I do all kinds of work at the quarry, including removing, cracking and loading stones unto vehicles. I earn between GH¢3 and GH¢5. I use the money to buy shoes, clothes and school-related items. It is when I need money that I come to work at the quarry (Prince: 12 year old Class 3 male worker)

My father is unemployed and my mother's income is very low. I decided to work at the quarry to earn some money to support my schooling. I earn about GH¢5 daily and I do not give the money to my parents

(John: 16 year old Class 6 male worker).

I work here because the money I need for clothing and schooling always delays in coming from my parents. So I decided to come and work here in order to provide my needs in time.

(Kinsford: 14 year old JHS 2 male worker)

Some of the children working at the quarry lie to their parents that they are going to school but rather come to the quarry to work. They eventually stop attending school due to monetary influence

(Akweley: 62 year old grandmother of child worker)

From the above statements, children were very much aware of their family's economic situation, and the potential consequences it would have on their welfare. The children thus found the quarry to be an avenue that would allow them improve their financial wellbeing and that of their family. The working children exhibited agency in relation to their ability to identify their family's economic situation, the type of labour market to participate in, control of earnings, and expenditure. Some of the children were involved in various activities at the quarry in order to enhance incomes earned. For example, some were involved in removing stones, cracking them, and loading them onto vehicles. It is interesting to note that some of the children did not even reveal their work to their parents, but rather concealed it under the pretence of attending school. The majority of children were also aware of the importance of their education, and therefore allocated monies earned in purchasing items aimed at facilitating their education.

### **Factors contributing to children's participation in quarry work**

#### *Economic Reasons*

The results of the study revealed that the reasons for children's engagement in quarrying are varied. The majority of working children and parents/guardian

respondents cited economic reasons as the main cause of children's engagement in quarry work. Parents/guardians revealed that remuneration in quarrying sector was low and uncertain, and this compelled them to make use of all their resources including their children; in order to earn additional income to support the family. The economic reasons given by working children and their parents/guardians are consistent findings in the literature on child labour (Basu and Van, 1998; Blunch and Verner, 2000; Edmonds and Turk, 2002; Togunde and Carter, 2008).

Some of the statements made by children and parent/guardian respondents on the economic reasons for children's involvement in quarry work are as follows:

My parents do not have enough money in the house because they do not always get work to do and are unable to take care of me and send me to school. I therefore work at the quarry to earn money to take care of myself and to support the family.

(Juliet: a 14-year old class 6 pupil)

It is because of economic hardship that is why my daughter is working with me at the quarry. Honestly, I do not like it. I would not even work here if it was not because of poverty.

(Divine: 37-year old father who works with his 13 year old daughter)

It is important for my children to help me at the quarry because I cannot break the stones alone. They help me so that we can increase the output of stones produced in order to earn enough money to take care of the home.

(Abigail: 35-year old parent of child worker)

#### *Socio-cultural reasons for children's engagement in quarry work*

The study further revealed that socio-cultural norms and values were an important reason mentioned particularly by parents/guardians for their children's engagement in quarry work. In their view, work was part of children's upbringing, and served as an important platform that prepared children for the difficulties that they would face in life. It was observed that several young children played at the quarry near their siblings and parents, and sometimes attempted to give a helping hand.

Thus, eventually, these very young children would learn the rudiments of the work and join their parents on the job. Some of the parents were of the view that children who were exposed to work at an early stage in their life would be better prepared to survive difficult situations in future. In the view of Sam, 48-year old father of child worker, 'Work inculcates the spirit of hard work into children. This will enable them do any kind of work they find themselves in the future.' Kofi, 33-year old parent of child worker says 'It helps the child learn hard work, and prevents the child from becoming lazy'.

#### *Educational Reasons*

The study also found that several children worked at the quarry in order to earn monies to pay for education-related costs, such as transportation, school fees, feeding and exam-related costs. The responses from the majority of working children revealed that they were working to pay their school fees, examination fees, transportation and exam-related expenses. Similar views were expressed by the Assemblyman and the Queen Mother of Pokuase. They stated that many of the parents they had spoken to complained that the high cost of schooling was among the reasons for involving their children in quarry work.

I talked to some parents working at the quarry to send their children to school, but they complained of the high cost of schooling. The only option for these children is to work at the quarry so that they can earn money to enable them go to school.

(Assemblyman of Pokuase)

Romeo, 15-year old class 6 pupil living with unemployed father has this to say on the matter: 'I am working at the quarry so that I can earn enough money to buy items for school since my father is unemployed and my mother has not got money to pay my fees.'

#### *Children's Agency and labour market participation*

Although economic and non-economic factors play significant roles in decisions to involve children in work, the importance of agency, on the part of children, cannot be downplayed. The study found that children were very much aware of their



economic situation, and thus participated in quarry work as a means of improving their living standards and those of their families. The agency on the part of working children was as a result of the interplay of factors including providing for educational items, supporting their families' economically, as well as working to provide certain luxuries which their parents could not provide for them. Many children made this choice, given the socio-economic context in which they lived, in which work enabled them pursue an opportunity to earn money for a multiplicity of needs. The study found that some of the children working at the quarry were motivated by their desire to acquire certain 'luxuries' which their families could not provide them. It was observed that children sometimes came on their own to work at the quarry. There were instances where the adults told them to leave since there were no jobs available at the quarry, but they simply refused to go. The decision to work at the quarry was not dictated by their parents alone, but by their desire to improve their standards of living and those of their families; they were aware of their parents' precarious financial situation. Children who worked on their own usually had complete control of their earnings. This finding is consistent with other studies on children's participation in economic activities (Adamassie, 2002; Zdunnek et al. 2008; De Groot; 2010).

Some of the statements supporting children's agency in seeking work for their improvement and that of their household are as follows:

My parents do not have enough money in the house because they do not always get work to do, and are unable to take care of me and send me to school. I therefore work at the quarry to earn money to take care of myself and to support the family.

(Juliet: a 14-year old class 6 pupil)

I am working at the quarry so that I can earn enough money to buy items for school since my father is unemployed and my mother has not got money to pay my fees.

(Romeo: 15-year old class 6 pupil living with unemployed father)

My parents always delay with the provision of my school fees and other items for school because they do not have money. I therefore work to pay for these items on my own.

(Sammy: 14-year old JHS 2 pupil)

Jessie, 12-year old class 3 pupil remarks as follows: ‘I came to work at the quarry on my own so that I could earn some money to take care of myself. When I am paid, I use the money to buy my personal items like shoes and clothing.’

Brown, 11-year old class 2 pupil comments thus: ‘If I stop working, it will affect me because I will not get money to buy nice things like clothes and shoes for church.’ And Kwame, a 12 year old class 4 pupil says: ‘Because my father is not alive and my mother cannot take care of the family on her own I have to work to help with my schooling and to support the home financially.’

From the above statements, children were aware that their families’ incomes were low as a result of unemployment, and consciously took the decision to work to provide for their own educational needs and to support their households financially. Some of the children saw in quarry work a strategy to provide for their educational needs; they were aware that if they relied solely on their parents for the provision of educational items their needs would not be met on time and consequently their education would be affected. In certain instances, children were aware that the absence of a parent, usually the head of the family, had the potential to affect their family’s economic situation negatively. In light of this, children participated actively in quarry work to complement incomes earned by the surviving parent, and thus contribute to their own upkeep and that of their families. Some of the children were also aware that their withdrawal from the labour market was going to affect them personally, since it would deprive them of incomes necessary for purchase of luxuries like shoes, soft drinks, mobile phones, etc. Their participation in quarry work was not necessarily dictated by their parents or guardians, but by their perception of the quarry as an avenue for earning money independently.

The decisions taken by children concerning their involvement in work, has implications for rights-based approaches to child work. There is often concern that children’s involvement in work activities affects their overall development, as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

(Woldehanna et al. 2008). The rights-based approach to child work tends to view children as vulnerable, inactive and incompetent agents who do not understand their economic situation, and therefore cannot take rational decisions to improve their living conditions and that of their families. The rights-based approach often views children's involvement in labour market activities as a form of economic exploitation, and it is therefore recommended that such children be withdrawn immediately from participating in economic activities. This approach however, fails to examine the implications of children's withdrawal from labour market activities for their welfare and that of their families.

### **Conclusion**

The dominant perspectives that explain children's participation in economic activities tend to portray children as inactive agents who cannot make rational decisions concerning improvement in their living standards, and as such, are compelled by their parents to participate in economic activities. The study found that the interplay of socio-cultural factors, socio-economic backgrounds of children, economic environments and children's agency contributed to their participation in labour market activities. Children were very much aware of their families' economic condition, and participated in work as means of improving their own welfare and that of their families'. Thus, children are active and strategic agents in the labour market activities, and work not only because they are told to do so by their parents or adults, but also because they felt responsible to meet a multiplicity of needs. This finding has implications for economic theories of child labour, which often portray children as irrational and incapable of making decisions relating to their welfare and that of their families. Economic theories of child labour (see Basu and Van, 1998), tend to portray children as part of the family structure, but inactive, irrational and incapable of making decisions relating to their participation in labour market activities. This view of children as lacking agency forecloses a series of important questions for theory and empirical research.

Rights-based approaches to child work are often concerned with the extent to which children's involvement in work activities hinders their survival, protection

and development, as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Woldehanna et al. 2008). The rights-based approaches often view children's involvement in labour market activities as a form of economic exploitation, and therefore recommend that such children be withdrawn immediately from participating in economic activities. However, the findings of this study show that children are active agents who are capable of taking decisions that improve their living conditions and those of their families. The rights-based approach should incorporate an awareness of context-specific ways of understanding child work, and the diverse livelihood strategies adopted, especially in developing countries, to ensure family survival (Nieuwenhuys, 2001; White, 2002).

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