



Citation for published version:

Maconachie, R & Hilson, G 2016, 'Re-thinking the child labor "problem" in rural sub-Saharan Africa: the case of Sierra Leone's "half shovels"', *World Development*, vol. 78, pp. 136-147.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2015.10.012>

DOI:

[10.1016/j.worlddev.2015.10.012](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2015.10.012)

Publication date:

2016

Document Version

Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

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Re-thinking the child labor "problem" in rural sub-Saharan Africa: The case of Sierra Leone's "half shovels"

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Abstract

This article contributes to evolving debates on Sierra Leone's post-war 'crisis of youth' by providing an extended analysis of the role that young boys and girls assume in negotiating household poverty and enhancing their livelihood opportunities in small-scale mining communities. Child miners – or 'half shovels' as they are locally known – are both directly and indirectly involved in small-scale gold extraction in Kono District, Sierra Leone's main diamond-producing area. But the implications of their involvement are often far more nuanced and complex than international children's rights advocates understand them to be. Drawing upon recent fieldwork carried out in and around the Kono mining village of Bandafayie, the article argues that children's participation in the rural economy not only generates much-needed household income, but in many cases is the only way in which they can earn the monies needed to attend school. A blind and uncritical acceptance of international codes and agreements on child labour could have an adverse impact on children and, by extension, poor communities in rural Sierra Leone. Western notions of 'progress' and development, as encapsulated in the post-conflict reconstruction programming of international NGOs and donor organizations, often do not match up with the complex realities or competing visions of local people.

Key words: 'crisis of youth', child labour, artisanal and small-scale mining, livelihoods, poverty, Sierra Leone

1. Introduction

Since the formal declaration of peace in 2002, Sierra Leone has successfully completed a demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) program and, with extensive donor support, has made considerable progress rehabilitating its state security, restoring governance and rebuilding infrastructure. Yet, concerns remain that the country's "crisis of youth" could potentially reignite conflict (Peters and Richards, 2011; Mokuwa *et al.*, 2011). Youth constitute the majority of Sierra Leone's population: approximately 42% of its people are below the age of 15, and 34% between the ages of 15 and 35 (GoSL, 2004).¹ Many are illiterate, have few employable skills and are inactive in the labour market (Peeters *et al.*, 2009). According to recent government estimates, 70% of youth are unemployed or underemployed (PRB, 2008). This major development challenge is highlighted in all three of Sierra Leone's post-war Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), and has featured prominently in the election campaign manifestos of the leading political parties in the country's three general elections since 2002.

For many young Sierra Leoneans, the predicament has been compounded by growing up in the “lost decade” of the war, a period when it was not possible to attend school (Betancourt et al., 2008). In recent years, there has been a proliferation of donor-supported programs which have attempted to respond to this, seeking to provide education, employment opportunities and skills training for young people. These initiatives, however, have been funded and driven mostly by international organizations with little contextual understanding of rural life in Sierra Leone. Many have been criticized for pursuing “a certain kind of ‘development’” or imposing their ideas on intended targets (Bolten, 2009, p. 71), and a large share of the country’s new vocational training programs in particular are not in tune with the realities of local households or the aspirations of local youth themselves. Moreover, most livelihood enhancement programs are labor, rather than market, driven, with young people often being steered into short-term, lower-paying jobs that offer little vision or hope for a meaningful future (Peeters et al., 2009).

This article builds on this analysis by engaging with a particularly sensitive and controversial issue: the role that child labor plays in negotiating household poverty in rural Sierra Leone. Drawing upon research carried out in Kono District, a region that was devastated during the civil war and where poverty has become deeply entrenched, the article argues that children’s participation in the rural economy not only generates much-needed household income, but in many cases, is the *only* way in which they can earn the monies needed to attend school. This arguably opens up new possibilities for young boys and girls to bypass the “crisis of youth” as they transition into adulthood. The analysis also adds a new dimension to debates around child labor, within which scholars have frequently taken the position that children’s participation in the workforce is incompatible with school attendance. In doing so, the article contributes to an emerging body of scholarship which warns that a blind and uncritical acceptance of international codes and agreements on child labor could have an adverse impact on poor rural African families (Hilson 2010, 2012). Policymakers and donors often display a poor contextual understanding of how the household and its “delicate familial economic balance” functions in rural Africa (Bolten, 2009).

The investigation centers on one particular sphere in which child labour has become increasingly engrained in Sierra Leone’s rural economy: the artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) sector.² Efforts made by child miners – known locally as “half shovels” – to negotiate poverty and enhance their livelihood opportunities may be best understood as a product of a prevailing pattern of rural livelihood diversification now widespread across sub-Saharan Africa (Banchirigah and Hilson, 2010; Barrett et al., 2001; Bryceson, 1996). In the case of Sierra Leone, however, such labor contributions have been condemned by international agencies and codified in a barrage of international child rights

instruments and discourses that have shaped the process of post-war development (Shaw, 2014). These sentiments began to galvanize following the end of the country's civil war in 2002, when newly elected President Tejan Kabbah – a former United Nations diplomat – took it upon himself to direct the post-conflict reconstruction process through the adoption of a series of key international resolutions designed to ensure universal education, the rights of children, and food security.³ But as Bolten (2009) suggests, indirectly, Kabbah's aim was also to make the country more attractive to donors and to signify the normative direction that he wished to move the country in. While Kabbah's vision undoubtedly boded well for the international community, his actions have also been heavily criticized on the grounds that "he provided neither financial backing nor concrete plans, and his resolutions served only to impose additional burdens on people still struggling to meet basic needs under the livelihood support programs established by donors" (Bolten, 2009: 70).

The article explores the role children play in sustaining the rural economy, and how this is framed by wider debates that concern children at work in the ASM sector, and, more broadly, Sierra Leone's so-called "crisis of youth." In addition to challenging the normative vision, the analysis reflects further on what Bolten (2009) has referred to as the Western notion of "normal" post-war development. In situations where donor-driven post-conflict reconstruction guides the "development" process, it is often the case that a romanticized and idealistic vision of development is aspired to, rather than a return to what was the norm in pre-war life. These largely-Western notions of "progress" and development, which are encapsulated in the programming of international NGOs and donor organizations, however, typically do not match up with the complex realities or competing visions of local people. In the case of Sierra Leone, this has even amounted to criticisms that in the post-conflict period, the international community is "recreating" the pre-conditions for war (Hanlon, 2005).

A critical analysis of the role that children play in the ASM sector challenges received wisdom and speaks to on-going debates that have much wider relevance beyond Sierra Leone. The ILO estimates that more than one million child laborers are actively involved in ASM worldwide, carrying out a wide range of essential direct and indirect jobs (ILO, 2005, p. 14). But while it may be the case that in some situations, young boys and girls are vulnerable, powerless and subjected to deplorable working conditions, it is certainly a big leap to label all cases of children at work in mining communities a "Worst Form of Child Labour."⁴

Before engaging more directly with these debates, some critical insights into how the child labor "problem" has been diagnosed and treated more broadly in the context of sub-Saharan Africa are provided. In doing so, the relationship between poverty, child labour and access to education is briefly reviewed. Section three then contextualizes the youth unemployment problem in Sierra Leone and

introduces the case study area in Kono District. This discussion sets the stage for an extended analysis of the agency of young boys and girls in mining communities, as they seek ways out of poverty through education. Ultimately, as is argued in the conclusion of the paper, the case of the “half shovels” clearly illustrates how universal conventions on child labour fail to capture the complex realities of the situations in which families – and children – are placed. Strict adherence to the international conventions in these contexts is likely to be counter-productive. A more nuanced understanding of the role that children assume in negotiating household poverty in such challenging environments is needed if more meaningful policy responses to the child labour “problem” are to emerge.

2. Child Labour in Rural Sub-Saharan Africa: A Critical Diagnosis

Over the past 15 years, a fairly inflexible policy framework has emerged on the back of the ILO’s *Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour* (C182). Increasingly lost in the dialogue this framework has spawned are the experiences of resilient but ambitious children, such as Sierra Leone’s “half shovels,” many of whom engage in ASM to improve their career prospects in an unforgiving landscape. Policy interventions which are more holistic in outlook than those currently in place are needed if the child labor “problem” now widespread in the rural landscapes of Sierra Leone where ASM occurs is to be brought under control.

(a) Perspectives on Child labour in Rural Sub-Saharan Africa

Cases such as Sierra Leone’s “half-shovels” raise concerns about the amenability of C182 to the particularities of rural sub-Saharan Africa. Although certainly more skilfully crafted than C138, its unpopular predecessor, C182 is also – quite problematically – based largely on Western conceptualizations of “childhood” (Myers, 2001). These surmise “happy” children’s motives to “be the pursuit of emotional attachment and love for their parents,” economic gain to be “strictly and rigidly confined to the world of adults,” and a stepping out of the parameters defining “childhood” to mean that children “no longer have a childhood or have been robbed of it” (Khan, 2010, p. 103). The norms upon which the notion of “a safe, happy and protected childhood” are built, explains Boyden (1997), “are culturally and historically bound to the social preoccupations and priorities of the capitalist countries of Europe and the U.S.” (p. 103).

In the 1990s, it had become clear that donors were growing uneasy with the child labor “problem” in developing countries being assessed predominantly through a Western lens. The publication of UNICEF’s *State of the World’s Children* (UNICEF, 1997) proved to be an important turning point in the dialogue. As Abebe and Bessell (2011) explain, the document, released “at a time of intense international debate on the merits and dangers of using trade sanctions to end child labour” (p. 767), examined child labor “in all its complexity, exploring the common myths and exploring the causes”

(UNICEF, 1997, p. 15). It presented an extremely thorough analysis of the complex issues surrounding children's work.

This dynamic dialogue certainly boded well for sub-Saharan Africa, particularly the region's resident rural families. With an estimated 33% of its boys and girls allegedly engaged in work, sub-Saharan Africa is home to the world's highest concentration of child labor (Bass, 2004). But there is reason to believe that, given the unique circumstances under which a large share of this work takes place, many diagnosed cases of "child labor" are not necessarily exploitative and should therefore not be classified as such. Kielland and Tovo (2006) very importantly reflect on the issue of *context*:

[In sub-Saharan Africa,] going to farm is evoked with a mix of pain and longing...[and] is a joint struggle for survival, giving a strong feeling of belonging and strengthening group solidarity...in some places...[it] is a lifestyle and an important part of what it means to be a family...[p. 26]

Research has also shown that there is often a cultural element underpinning situations such as "going to farm." The ILO – ironically – recognized this nearly four decades ago in its landmark publication, *Child Work, Poverty and Underdevelopment* (Rodgers and Standing, 1981). The document stated, *inter alia*, that "in the household phase the child helps not only in strictly domestic activities – care of younger children, food preparation, maintenance of the living area, obtaining supplies of water and wood, transport of the harvest, and so on – but also in more specialized tasks oriented towards household consumption, such as hunting, fishing, hat construction and sale of produce in the market" (p. 3).

Such is the case throughout sub-Saharan Africa where, explains Agbu (2009), "children have always worked as part of their socialization process, often assuming adult roles through imitating, copying or some sort of apprenticeship" (p. 11), and are "often involved in the work of their parents, and usually inherited the work," tasks which would "not [be] considered child labour" (p. 14). Here, cultural elements seem to drive children's work in subsistence, labor-intensive agriculture, on which an estimated 80% of the region's families depend for their livelihoods. The failure of C138 to recognize these nuances was met with considerable resistance from many rural African societies in which "children at work" has long been integral to the socialization process (Myers, 2001).

This significant shortcoming led to the implementation of C182. Unlike its predecessor, C182 *does* recognize "light work." It also identifies activities which, proponents maintain, "no group or country could credibly defend and that virtually all societies are able to condemn from within their own value systems" (Myers, 2001, p. 51). The convention's high ratification – as of January 2014, 179 of 184 ILO member states – is often interpreted as its conceivers having found common ground for a diverse

group of countries on a very controversial issue. It spawned the International Program on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), now the ILO's largest technical intervention, which boasts support from 30 donors and an annual budget of US\$60 million (ILO, 2010). To date, more than 25 IPEC National Action Plans (NAPs) have been launched in sub-Saharan Africa, each of which – including that of Sierra Leone – is aligned closely with the objectives of C182.

The implementation of C182 and launch of IPEC, however, appears to have stifled the creative “rethink” that was galvanizing in the 1990s. Many donors now seem reluctant to embrace the idea that “childhood, or what it means to be a child” is a Western construct underpinned by “the particularities of a specific sociocultural context” (Bass, 2004, p. 16). This includes the ILO itself:

Many of us possess romantic notions of childhood, a time that is to be reserved for innocence, wonder and discovery. And many others argue from a practical perspective that childhood and the formal transition to work is a modern social construct that takes on different meanings in different cultures. Yet, universally, we agree there's something wrong with the above scenario, be it in a gold mine, a sugarcane field, a garment factory, a timber operation, a construction site or a garbage heap. When we allow children to be placed in such a situation, we surrender a bit of our humanity. [ILO, 2011, p. xv]

A change in perception – and ultimately, a sense that a new course of action was eminent – was detectable almost immediately following the implementation of C182. Abebe and Bessell (2011) reflect on how UNICEF's representation of childhood in its 2004 *State of the World's Children Report* (UNICEF, 2004) “sits uneasily with the more sophisticated analysis in the 1997 report” (p. 767). Rather than calling for further attention to be paid to the cultural underpinnings of child labor in settings such as rural sub-Saharan Africa, it made sweeping claims such as “Childhood is a time for child to be in school and at play, to grow strong and confident with the love and encouragement of their family.”⁵ These ideas, Abebe and Bessell (2011) correctly point out, are – quite inexplicably, given the context in question – now seen by donors and policymakers as being “more representative of the common global depiction of a ‘proper childhood’” (p. 767).

By the time the 2006 *Global Report on Child Labour* (ILO, 2007) was published, it was evident that the permissible “light work” narrative was being used as a marker to help pinpoint examples of “exploitative” child labor. How, then, is the work being undertaken at ASM sites by young children such as Sierra Leone's “half-shovels” interpreted by policy? A comprehensive list of activities considered to be WFCLs has been compiled. It includes ASM, now considered to be a WFCL so much

so that it was the featured theme of the ILO's 2006 World Day Against Child Labor, *A Load too Heavy* (ILO, 2006).

(b) Child Labor and Poverty in Rural Sub-Saharan Africa

Significantly, the ideas underpinning C182 and which ultimately led to ASM's classification as a WFCL appear tenuous at best, in many cases potentially disconnected from the realities on the ground. The move was premised heavily upon the idea that "poverty is inextricably linked to child labour" (ILO, 2002, p. vii). Specifically, the ILO and partners are "convinced that eradicating child labour can be achieved only by eradicating poverty; and that poverty (and thus child labour) can be eradicated only by sustainable economic growth" (Bhukuth, 2008, p. 389). But despite calling for a "Mainstreaming of child labour in poverty reduction strategy papers," the ILO has done very little to align its work, largely undertaken through IPEC, with the goals of country-level and region-wide poverty alleviation programs. This includes efforts to develop pro-poor "farm first" strategies *and* supporting the rural nonfarm activities – including ASM – into which tens of thousands of rural African families, struggling to subsist off of agricultural activities that are no longer supported by the state and are producing devalued cash crops, have moved. Both issues have been covered extensively in *World Development* over the years (Bryceson, 2002; Ellis and Bahiigwa, 2003; Ellis et al., 2003; Hazarika and Sarangi, 2008; Bryceson and Jonsson, 2010; Shimamura and Lastarria-Cornheil, 2010; Porter et al., 2012; Bezu and Holden, 2014).

In much of the academic literature, the link between child labor and poverty has also been well established (Canagarajah and Coulumbe, 1997; Blunch and Verner, 2001; Ray, 2003). Indeed, poverty is usually viewed as a principal cause of child labor in many rural areas of sub-Saharan Africa. As explained by Hilson (2010), the "poverty hypothesis" views child labor as an unavoidable effect of hardship, but also suggests that the income generated by children can make a significant contribution to the household economy, while alleviating economic stress, and enhancing the consumption requirements of impoverished families. Hope (2005: 23) further adds that poverty relegates children to situations where they must work "to provide income to support themselves and possible other family members," but as poverty deepens and becomes entrenched, "more and more children at younger and younger ages have been engaging in paid economic activities."

However, while poverty cannot be ruled out as a major driver of child labor, viewing it as the root cause in all contexts can be problematic. As noted by Blunch and Verner (2001), the child labor–poverty nexus does not appear to be well grounded in empirical studies. Some recent work, they explain, has questioned the validity of this link, claiming that poverty is not a main determinant of child labour (2001:1). In the case of Ghana, for example, Canagarajah and Coulumbe (1997) suggest

that the majority of child labour is unpaid work and takes place within ‘family agricultural enterprise’ (1997: 1). More broadly, across the African continent, Kielland and Tovo (2006: 25) add that these rural economic activities are usually linked to subsistence farming.

The ILO (ILO, 2002) concedes that poverty has “various dimensions,” which, in the context of child labor, “interact with other factors” and “act at all levels from the individual girl or boy to the national economy and even beyond, to determine whether and which children work, go to school, do both or do neither” (p. xii). But ironically, its policies and programs *prevent* formulation of the dynamic solutions needed to tackle this poverty: specifically, interventions that are well-calibrated with national and regional policy objectives and which are in tune with the realities on the ground. The labelling and subsequent policy treatment of both agriculture and ASM as WFCLs has somewhat obscured the details of the stories behind why children engage in what are perceived to be dangerous tasks altogether. By adhering to a policy framework informed by Western conceptualizations of “childhood,” it is unclear how the ILO and partners could, for example, accurately determine whether a situation featuring “endless rows of women and children carrying wood, water, and agricultural products to their homes or the nearest market, often a several-hour walk away, and often in very high temperatures” (Kielland and Tovo, 2006, p. 26) is exploitative or not.

Perhaps more importantly, what tends to be lost in discussions on C182 and IPEC, at least in the case of sub-Saharan African Africa, is the aforementioned symbiosis between farming and ASM, which has important – albeit, largely-ignored – implications for child labor. For example, as observed in recent research conducted in Northern Ghana and Southern Mali (Hilson 2010, 2012), many children engaged in ASM were carrying out activities similar to the chores undertaken on family farms, activities which the ILO would, in other instances, consider “light work”. The list includes fetching water, carrying items and preparing food. A more recent study (André and Godin, 2014) on children’s participation in ASM in the DR Congo reinforces these conclusions:

Some children perform mining activities because it is their ‘duty’ to do so alongside household chores or other small activities often carried out collectively. Children from lower-class families have often made the decision to go to the mines in order to help their elders – their parents or the community. In fact, the same logic of the child as worker lies beneath both forms of activity, that is, domestic work and work at the mines. These children respect the moral obligation to put their earnings back into the circuit of domestic relations at the same time as they acquire decision-making power in the home – by planning meals, for example.

Importantly, these studies, both explicitly and implicitly, link the child labor phenomenon in the region's ASM sector to livelihood diversification, specifically, families "branching out" of agriculture into nonfarm activities (Banchirighah and Hilson, 2010; Kamlongera 2011). In the process, "farm hands" engaging in what is clearly "light work" have become "mine hands."

(C) Child Labor and Education in Rural Sub-Saharan Africa

Reflecting broadly on how the rigors of their environments influence the life choices of many children in rural sub-Saharan Africa, Abebe and Bessell (2011, p. 777) draw attention to the "complex ways in which young people perceive and make use of unconventional livelihood pathways in order to generate an income, including types of work that are now categorised in international policy as worst forms." Much of the same applies to the routes taken by many young boys and girls in rural sub-Saharan Africa in their pursuits of an education: that the circumstances which they face shape their decisions. It appears, however, that the donor community views the issue differently, the tone of its documents and policies projecting a very different image. Many imply that, despite the obvious obstacles, the transition from childhood to adulthood in rural African settings should be straightforward. For groups such as Sierra Leone's "half shovels," this diagnosis is potentially problematic for three reasons.

The first is that C182 and the IPEC framework are underpinned by the notion of "work *or* school," which does not mesh with the realities of many rural African landscapes, including areas of post-conflict Sierra Leone. Since implementation of the *Minimum Age Convention, 1921*, all divisions of the United Nations have strived to protect children's rights to an education and prevent labor which would prejudice school attendance, a position underscored most recently by their commitment to upholding Article 32 of the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (Gibbons et al., 2005). But increasingly, international policy and programs aimed at eradicating child labor are premised on the idea that school attendance is the most appropriate route for children, regardless of the circumstances they may face (Abebe and Bessell, 2011). Since the launch of the WFCL manifesto, this debate has, in the spirit of Western constructs of child labor, been shaped heavily by the idea that young girls and boys in developing countries are being "robbed" of their childhood: that "children should not perform activities that 'impair healthy development,' which in effect [has] meant not engaging in gainful employment or performing economically valued work" (Khan, 2010, p. 103). Officers at the ILO condemn the idea of "work *and* school," concluding that "for those who combine work and school, their educational achievement will suffer and there is a strong tendency for them to drop out of school to go into fulltime employment" (ILO, 2006, p. 5). World Bank officials have voiced similar concerns, acknowledging, on the one hand, that "rural school children tend to combine schoolwork and work,"

but on the other hand, that “in rural conditions, wage labor...is more difficult to combine with school” (Andvig et al., 2001, p. 5, 14).

Such a linear view of child labor and learning, however, precludes any possibility of “work and schooling” being a necessary strategy for not only the survival of a child but also for furthering his/her education. This leads to the second reason, which – and building on points raised earlier about Western conceptualizations of “childhood” – is the rather naïve assumption that in developing countries and sub-Saharan Africa in particular, a child’s progression through to adolescence is seamless. While there is near-universal ratification of the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, which states, *inter alia*, that “primary education should be compulsory and available free to all” and encourages signatories to “make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means,”⁶ it would be premature to assume that signatories, particularly those in sub-Saharan Africa, are capable of fulfilling these objectives, at least in the short term. Widespread endorsement is rather little more than a gauge of global interest in achieving such goals.

The continued condemnation of child labour among signatories in sub-Saharan Africa now offering free primary education is unwarranted: here, even the most fully-functional programs are incapable of facilitating a child’s complete dissociation with work, whether paid or unpaid. Once again, there is a cultural dimension, a more nuanced understanding of which has been stifled by the C182 and IPEC framework. As Kielland and Tovo (2004, p. 57) explain, “most African children start to work at an early age [and that] by the time they are 3 or 4 years old, their contribution in the household is needed and expected, however small it may be,” the notion of “children going to farm” perhaps being the region’s most significant manifestation of this (Bonnet 1993; Hilson 2010). Moreover, it is highly-unrealistic to assume that the increased availability of free education will eliminate children’s needs for disposable income entirely. Bass (2004, p. 99) captures the essence of the challenge facing primary school-going children in rural sub-Saharan Africa, pointing out how “even in situations where children’s families can afford the tuition, it is often the marginal costs – for purchasing books, supplies such as pencils and papers, and uniforms – that make the difference.” This was discovered to be the case in ASM communities in Northern Ghana, where, as Hilson (2010) explains, a major reason why many children choose to engage in (mine) work in what many would consider hazardous conditions is that the wages earned cover school expenses quite comfortably. Again, there is considerable scope for children aged 12-14 to engage in “light work,” namely labor that is not likely to be harmful to their development or health, and which will not necessarily prejudice school attendance. The decision to single out this age group, however, seems rather arbitrary. It likely stems from the naïve belief that before turning 12, children with access to a free primary school and possibly junior secondary education have no need

to engage in paid labor. The ILO continues to draft policies and develop programs grounded in the idea that “publicly funded education is an escape route from poverty” (ILO, 2002, p. 53), which, in many sections of rural sub-Saharan Africa, is simply not the case.

This leads to the final point, which is the quality of the region’s “free” education. While the waiving of fees has certainly increased school enrolment, many educational programs in sub-Saharan Africa remain in a deteriorated state and/or are in dire need of an overhaul, the result of years of neglect (Somerset, 2009; Verspoor, 2008; Lewin, 2007; UNESCO, 2005). In many remote rural settlements, teaching posts remain unfilled because qualified teachers prefer to remain in urban centers where facilities and resources are better. Addressing this poor-quality education comprehensively will require “go[ing] beyond supplying essential inputs” and implementing “both systemic processes, such as continual development of curricula and instructional materials, and systemic capacity to take pilot programs to scale and diffuse ongoing reforms” (Moulton, 2003, p. 9). Priority must be placed on training more teachers, who are in short supply across sub-Saharan Africa. For example, Ethiopia now has 72 pupils per teacher, and another five of the region’s countries (Chad, The Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi and Mozambique) have ratios exceeding 60:1. Even many of its more “advanced” countries are struggling considerably in this area, and must experience phenomenal gains if they are to achieve the ambitious educational objectives they have set for 2015: Ghana, which has 89,000 teachers, will require a workforce of at least 115,000; Nigeria will need to increase its teaching staff from 580,000 to 706,000; and Tanzania will need an injection of an additional 69,000 trained personnel. Despite spending more money on schooling in recent years, most countries in the region invest, on average, only 4% of GDP on education, well below the UN’s recommended target of 9%. It is unlikely that in such settings, which due to a shortage of investment, provide “fundamentally underfunded and substandard educational instruction to children” (Bass, 2004, p. 108), young boys and girls could realistically stop engaging in paid work entirely.

For most policymakers and donors, therefore, “the point for departure for analysing the connection between child labour and education is the availability of education” (Grimsrud, 2003, p. 13): the view that “accessible, good quality educational opportunities can help keep children out of unacceptable forms of work” (ILO, 2002, p. 53). But in sub-Saharan Africa, where “persistent shortages of essential inputs and processes (teachers, textbooks, classrooms, curricula and exam systems) have thwarted efforts to improve the classroom” (Moulton, 2003, p. 9), this is far from being a reality, particularly in its highly-impooverished rural landscapes. While commendable, promoting “Education for All”⁷ in areas where even the ILO concedes that “school curricula are frequently outdated, gender-biased and irrelevant to contemporary needs...[and] vocational training often does not match the needs of the

local labour market, and it is gender-stereotyped, under-resourced and unrealistically long in duration for the poor” (ILO, 2002, p. 53), will take considerable time to have a lasting impact. The prevailing view in the literature (e.g. Brown et al. 2002; Bass 2004; Betcherman et al. 2004) is that the region’s debilitated educational services force rural subsistence families to make calculated decisions on whether to send children to school. It is believed that parents weigh the projected long-term benefits of a child’s education against the short-term financial losses and potential family suffering resulting from the removal of young boys and/or girls from their work – both paid and unpaid. In cases in which children continue to engage in paid and unpaid work despite having access to free education, families often view a child’s continued participation in the workforce to be the most viable strategy socially and economically.

The situation in post-conflict environments such as Sierra Leone, however, is even more complex. Here, skills are in shorter supply, and training programs are woefully lacking. Such settings typically have a burgeoning contingent of unemployed youth, most of whom lack the requisite education, experience and expertise to “kick-start” trades capable of nourishing local economies (after McLeod and Dávalos, 2008). In Sierra Leone, the path to a tertiary education and a well-paid job is consequently less clear-cut than other African countries. As illustrated by the experiences of the country’s “half shovels,” child labor in ASM should not be interpreted as an unwillingness to attend school. It is rather a testament to the resilience of the country’s rural populations, and a sign of how far many young boys and girls are willing to go in order to improve their quality of life. The next section of the paper explains how, calling for a more flexible policy instrument for assessing and tackling child labor in Sierra Leonean ASM communities.

3. Negotiating poverty in post-war Kono District, Sierra Leone

The ILO (ILO, 2013) has argued that “one of the primary reasons why policy-makers worry about child labour is the knowledge that its consequences can extend well beyond childhood” (p. 57). In the case of Sierra Leone, many children themselves see these ramifications as being overwhelmingly positive, and a necessary stepping-stone into youthhood. Findings from fieldwork carried out by the authors suggest that children’s participation in ASM often represents an early attempt to prepare themselves for the challenges that lie ahead. Many child miners – or “half shovels” – interviewed explained that mining activities were the point of departure in their quest to negotiate poverty and enhance their livelihood opportunities, primarily by generating the income needed to attend school. These children were in broad agreement that the possibility of leaving their village and finding a job in the city as a youth was slim. Many were also keenly aware of the difficulties of securing waged employment, even when an education or vocational training had been undertaken.

The youth unemployment problem is a particularly sensitive issue in Sierra Leone, and one that ties into both wider debates concerning the causes of the war and their implications for the country's future development trajectory. The argument that the pre-conditions for the conflict were fomented by unjust patronage politics, which created a socially-excluded under-class of young people, has gained considerable currency in recent years (see Richards, 1996; Peters and Richards, 1998). In the run-up to the war, for the majority of young Sierra Leoneans, a lack of jobs and a debilitated educational system, as well as the failure of the ruling elite to assist vulnerable groups – particularly young people – created great resentment and animosity. Migration to the country's diamond mining areas was one of few ways in which poor young people could escape from a stagnating agricultural sector dominated by elites.

Researchers and policy makers in Sierra Leone have therefore increasingly been concerned with the social, political and economic challenges of providing sustainable youth employment. While recent country-wide World Bank consultations with youth confirm that the majority of young people in Sierra Leone today work in the agricultural sector, it has been noted that more than half do not receive any remuneration for their labor (World Bank/ENCISS, 2004; ENCISS, 2007). The reality is that both youth and children have long made essential unpaid contributions to the household production unit, particularly during times when farming tasks must take place within a very short period during the agricultural cycle. These labor contributions take place alongside work that is required on the domestic front. Here, young people and children are expected to make significant contributions to the running of the household: fetching wood and water, cooking, cleaning, laundering clothes and caring for their siblings. As has been pointed out elsewhere (see e.g. Bass, 2004; Hilson 2012), youth and child labor in rural sub-Saharan Africa has cultural underpinning, but economically, is often essential for the survival and reproduction of the household during times of extreme hardship. This has proved to be the case in Sierra Leone. As Shepler (2004) explains, "Child labour almost defines childhood in Sierra Leone," so much so that "A child who does not work is a bad child" (p. 12).

In this section of the article, an extended analysis of the role that young boys and girls assume in negotiating household poverty in ASM communities in post-war Kono District is presented, adding to an already well-established body of work on child labor in Sierra Leone (e.g. Wessells et. al, 2012; Shepler, 2010; Bøås and Hatløy, 2008; 2006). The findings reported here suggest that a failure to develop more flexible policy instruments capable of responding to the ambitions and drivers of young boys and girls, in this case the "half shovels," runs the risk of creating even more youth unemployment. This, in turn, could equate to the continuation of poorly educated cohorts of youth in Kono District, since the majority of child miners interviewed in this study were mining specifically to generate the

income needed to fund their schooling.

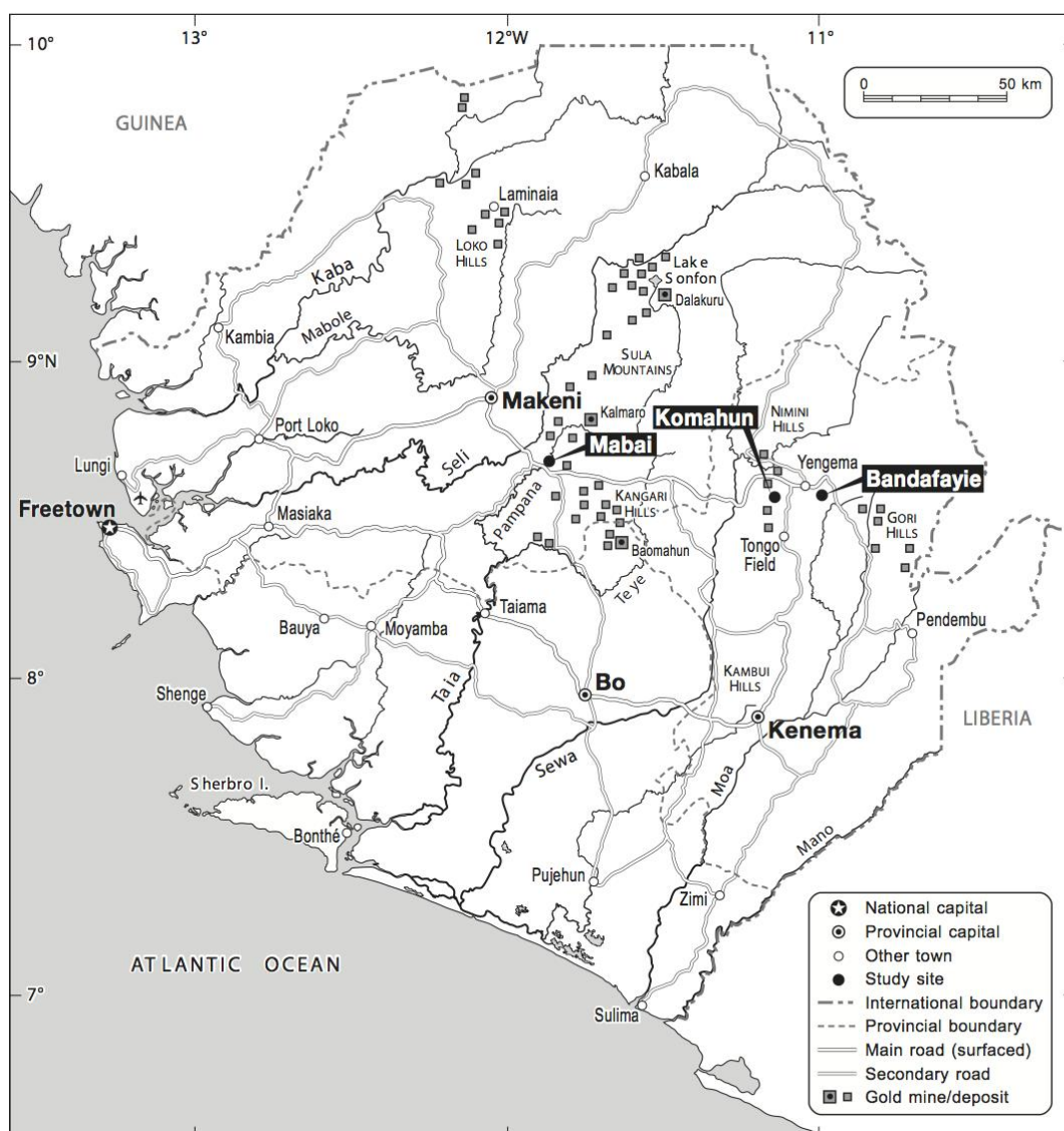
The small mining village of Bandafayie in Kono District, situated eight miles off of the main road from Koidu (see Figure 1), proved to be an ideal study site for exploring the role that children assume in artisanal and small-scale gold mining activities, how this work contributes to their livelihoods and how it features in their plans to secure a better future. Here, in July 2011, semi-structured interviews were carried out with 40 child miners under the age of 15 and, where possible, their parents.⁸ Follow-up interviews were carried out with an additional 20 child miners in January 2013. A purposive sampling frame was most suitable for this study, since the objective was to gain insight from a select population based on unique characteristics. Although purposive sampling has been criticised on the grounds that it can be prone to researcher bias, the target population in this case was relatively homogenous, and selection was based on clear criteria (age and occupation). The sample size was not fixed prior to the commencement of the fieldwork, but was rather dependent on the availability of the target population (child miners) at the time the study was carried out.

Child miners were interviewed on site, and interviews lasted between 30-45 minutes each. No incentives were given to interviewees for their participation in the study and in all cases, informed consent to interview the children was obtained orally from either their parents or guardians. Written consent forms were inappropriate for this research, predominantly because of the high degree of illiteracy in the population. Interviews were carried out in the local Kono language, or in *Krio*, the lingua franca of Sierra Leone, and were recorded on a Dictaphone. The audio transcripts were translated by a research assistant verbatim into English. Local residents, community leaders, school teachers and NGO staff were also consulted to develop a richer picture of the significance of child mining and its role in the local economy. The names of all the children identified in this paper have been changed to protect their identities.

Bandafayie was once a thriving mining settlement of over 10,000 people during Sierra Leone's diamond "boom" of the 1960s and 1970s. But today, with a population of only 3,500 people, it is one of the country's most poverty-stricken areas. Some of the worst fighting during the civil conflict took place around Bandafayie, as warring factions clashed for control of Kono's lucrative diamond fields, leaving a legacy of destruction. According to the *2005 Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper* (IMF, 2005), Kono District – currently home to the largest concentration of artisanal miners in the country – has a far higher incidence of poverty than most surrounding districts, where agriculture is the predominant livelihood activity. Young people are particularly vulnerable.

Since many young miners are migrant “strangers” who lack the social ties and family support needed to sustain themselves in host communities, coping with poverty is particularly challenging. Moreover, according to some Sierra Leonean observers, the old system of patronage is breaking down, in part because patrons can no longer afford to provide jobs for clients or assist them with school fees, marriage costs, children’s naming ceremonies and family funeral expenses.⁹ In short, self-advancement has become much more difficult for young people: they must now increasingly take matters into their own hands as they navigate the difficult environments that constrain them. As is the case throughout many parts of Sierra Leone, in Bandafayie, ASM is one activity that has enabled young people to exercise their agency, helping them become both “social navigators of the present and social generators of individual and collective futures” (Christiansen et al., 2006, p. 21).

Figure 1: Artisanal Gold Mining Study Sites in Sierra Leone



Source: Authors' fieldwork

Discussions with a wide range of community stakeholders in Bandafayie confirmed that there is a long history of mining activities in the area, and their importance to local livelihoods. Bandafayie was a part of the government-owned Sierra Leone Selection Trust (SLST) diamond reserve, but in the 1960s, was taken over by the National Diamond Mining Company (NDMC) which mined the site until 1982. Today, however, the relics of the old NDMC compound, the No. 12 washing plant and a vast area of discarded sand tailings left over from the company's mining activities, remain onsite at Bandafayie. These tailings also contain significant amounts of gold: as soaring global market prices for the metal have made their reprocessing once again economically viable, medium-sized companies, such as Swanfield Mining Ltd., and more recently, the Chinese company Yinhu Group, have occupied the site. But at the same time, the tailings remain vital for local inhabitants, many of whom rely on small-scale gold mining as their primary income generating activity. To date, the Paramount Chief of Nimikoro Chiefdom has been instrumental in negotiating land access with mining companies to ensure that a portion of the tailings are put aside for local residents to mine. He has also installed a care-taker on the site to monitor local mining activities, and to help ensure that ASM operators co-exist harmoniously alongside large-scale operations.

While Bandafayie has always served as a magnet for young diamond miners driven by aspirations of discovering a "winning stone," recent interviews with children onsite reveal that although the returns are small, artisanal gold mining is proving to be a much steadier and more reliable income-earner than diamond mining. As 13 year-old gold miner "Aminatta Turay" put it in an interview:

The diamond work that my uncle does is not always good. There are days when he goes to bed without feeding. But with gold, there is small money coming in every day. And unlike diamond mining, gold pays for day-to-day expenses. With gold you always find your daily bread. [Interview, July 2011]

As previously noted, children in Sierra Leone play an integral role in contributing to the survival of the household, both economically and in terms of ensuring food security. In many respects, small-scale gold mining can, therefore, be seen as an extension of a child's familial duties, as it generates income which helps to ensure that these responsibilities are met. This was confirmed by a number of "half shovels" interviewed in Bandafayie. Most felt quite strongly that it was their obligation to actively contribute to the household economy in difficult times. The case is succinctly described by one child miner:

Life is very hard here. My father was a carpenter, but he can't work because he injured himself. My sisters are too small to come to the mine. We do not have a farm so the money I earn with my mother mining gold is important for the family. My father doesn't like us being here, but without

the income from mining, life would be very difficult. It is my duty to help the family. [“Abdulai Mansaray,” Aged 14, Interview, January 2013]

But such sentiments are often dismissed entirely by intervention agencies. As noted by White (1994), “[t]he prevailing view of childhood itself has seen children as passive victims and appropriate objects of external intervention, rather than as active social subjects or agents of change, capable of both claiming and exercising rights, and of independent social and political action” (p. 852).

Interviews with “half shovels” and their families revealed that unlike other parts of Kono District, where artisanal mining is being undertaken by “sons and daughters of the soil” and is a seasonal activity that dovetails the farming economy (see Maconachie and Binns, 2007), most residents of Bandafayie are migrants to the region who engage in mining full-time. Of the child miners interviewed, the majority (83 percent) reported that they had moved to the area with their families to mine, mostly from other agriculturally-depressed parts of the country, but in some cases, as far as Guinea. This is symptomatic of the wider response of farm families across Sierra Leone to deteriorating economic conditions: difficulties with rejuvenating agricultural production systems in the aftermath of the war have precipitated livelihood diversification. Even though some migrant families have managed to secure small gardens in Bandafayie, most do not have rice or cassava farms and rely exclusively on their mining income to acquire staple foods. The challenges created by this situation were recounted by one 14-year old miner originating from Kabala:

Food is one of our biggest problems. Since we are not from the area, we do not have a farm and rice costs 1000 *Leones* per cup to buy. Although the chief’s wife said she would give our family some swampland to plant, we don’t have enough money to pay for the labour. So part of the money I earn from mining goes towards the family feeding. [“Hawa Kamara,” Aged 14, Interview, July 2011]

The vital role that children play in contributing to household food security – whether providing labor on the farm, or working as part of a family mining unit to generate the income needed to purchase food – was a recurrent theme in interviews. While in most cases, families were observed to mine together as a work unit, with women and children concentrating on gold mining and male household heads engaging in diamond mining, often, children’s labor is hired out at a daily rate under an arrangement called ‘*Kosoboh*’. Labor rates are typically 10,000 *Leones* for a full day’s work, but many children mine after school, on weekends and over the holidays and generally, labor rates are negotiable. In some cases, children have agreements with their parents or relatives that a portion of their earnings will be used for specific expenses, such as attending school.

Many children explained that although they have an obligation to contribute to the household economically, the main reason why they were mining was so that they could attend school, which would not otherwise be possible. As explained by one school-going miner originating from Masingbe in the north of the country:

If I am not able to learn, I will not be able to get a job and I will suffer. Gold mining is paying for my school. I want to be a nurse, and mining is providing me with the means of getting an education and pursuing a better life. ["Maryiama Mansaray," Aged 12, Interview, January 2013]

In a similar vein, 12-year old "Fatimata Turay" described her entry into mining, and its importance for her personal development:

My mother died when we were living in Kabala, so I came here to stay with my aunt. It was my own decision to start gold mining so that I could continue attending school. By hiring out my labor as a washer, I earn between 8,000 and 9,000 Leones per day. I usually only work on weekends, but it is enough to buy pens and books and pay the contribution to the teacher. [Interview, January 2013]

As previously noted, while the ILO and children's rights advocates often condemn the combining of "work *and* school," this position does not take into account the importance of children's work to keep them in education, or the social status that they gain in being able to pay for their own school fees and school-related expenses (Thorsen, 2012). Table 1 summarizes the main contributions that the incomes of interviewed "half shovels" are making to household expenses.

Table 1: Summary of expenses covered by mining income (N=60)

Expense paid for by earnings from gold mining	Mentioned by (% children interviewed)
General contribution to household income	65
School fees	53
Shoes/uniforms/school bags	38
Books/paper/pens for school	33
Food for family	28
Lunch for school	18
'Contribution' to teacher	17
Household necessities (kerosene, candles, sugar, soap, etc.)	15
Pocket money for daily needs	13

Source: Authors' fieldwork

What is perhaps most revealing about Table 1 is that it illustrates the degree to which “half shovels” themselves are working to cover the main expenses of their schooling. While Hilson (2012: 1666) points out that many programs implemented by the major donor organizations are premised upon the notion that schooling is the anecdote to the child labour “problem”, in the case of Bandafayie, many children have found a symbiotic balance between the two activities. In fact, of the child miners interviewed, there was only one child who was not attending school. In this particular case, the child had recently been forced to drop out of school because her parents could not pay the fees. But as she explained in an interview, she had taken it upon herself to start mining in order to try and correct the situation and re-enter school:

I was in Class 5, but I had to drop out because my father was not well and he couldn't pay the school fees. I knew that other children in my class were making money here [at the mining site] and helping to pay for their education. So I came here to do the same. I started by selling cassava and soup to the miners and I could earn about 2,000 Leones per day. But now I am working as an ‘overkicker’ [someone who washes old tailings] and am earning 8,000 Leones daily. I hope it won't be long before I am back in school. [“Maryam Sesay,” Aged 13, Interview, January 2013]

While there has been much debate about the usefulness of Western models of education in rural sub-Saharan Africa where most of the population is employed in the informal sector (e.g. see Gootaert and Kanbur, 1995), as outlined earlier, in the case of Sierra Leone, the perception that all children must be educated has particular salience. Indeed, the right to an education has become a central pillar of current development policy, given the strong “crisis of youth” narrative that has driven post-war development programming. As noted at the outset, during the decade-long conflict, an entire generation of children was “robbed” of the opportunity to attend school, a predicament that has left a legacy of problems for the majority of the population. Significantly, at an early stage, the government recognized the importance of engaging the country's youth through education. It therefore proceeded to abolish school fees, passing the *Free Primary Educational Policy* in 2001. It subsequently implemented the *Education Act* in 2004, which made education compulsory through to Junior Secondary School, a move which would help to stimulate a rise in primary school enrolment, from 660,000 in 2001–2002 to 1.3 million in 2004–2005.

However, in spite of these and other efforts to make education more accessible to all young people, schooling remains far from free. According to the latest estimates, only 69% of children are enrolled in primary school,¹⁰ largely because families are still required to pay community fees, and acquire school uniforms and school supplies; even fewer are enrolled at higher levels. Interviews with various “half shovels” revealed that part of their earnings went to pay a regular 2,000 Leone “contribution” to

their teachers, without which they would refuse to deliver lessons or mark exams. An interview with the Head Teacher of the Supreme Council Primary School in Bandafayie confirmed this practice, but at the same time, shed some light on the difficult context that teachers find themselves in:

The government says there is free education, but there is not. We have volunteer teachers who are not paid by the government, but by the community instead. But the teachers are not paid regularly, so the money has to come from somewhere to keep them working. I know that some teachers are demanding money from the students, but it is a practice that we generally stay silent about. [Head Teacher, Interview, January 2013]

In addition, it was further pointed out that students were often required to provide labor on the farms of their teachers, at times during school hours. Again, teachers justify these practices on the grounds that they are often not paid for months at a time.

In sum, although international policies and programmes aimed at eradicating child labour condemn the combining of work and school, arguing that the two activities are incompatible, the evidence presented in this section clearly suggests otherwise. For the majority of the “half shovels” interviewed in this study, ASM represents one of the few alternative livelihood pathways available, and is a means for negotiating poverty in a difficult rural setting. Not only does the income it generates make a vital contribution to the household economy, but for many children it is the only route to an education.

4. Concluding Remarks

This article has illustrated how children’s participation in ASM in rural Sierra Leone is playing a fundamental role in alleviating household poverty and enhancing their livelihood opportunities. The income they generate not only nourishes other rural activities, including the development of farms and family businesses, but also provides the means for them to negotiate unconventional livelihood pathways. Despite government rhetoric, education in Sierra Leone is still largely unobtainable for many children. Fieldwork carried out in Bandafayie suggests that the mining activities undertaken by these “half shovels” are putting them in an improved position to obtain an education that would not normally be possible. Doing so has opened up new possibilities for their future development as they traverse the difficult road ahead into youthhood. Indeed, this would seem to be an important step in steering youth off of the pathway of “crisis” and towards secure spaces of socialization that allow for the development of meaningful skills and a brighter future.

Policymakers and donors appear adamant on maintaining the *status quo*, fixated on responding to *what* is happening as opposed to understanding *why*. A necessary and obvious starting point is to debate the applicability of the ILO material and its stance, and to recognize that post-conflict settings are unique and are in even less of a position to embrace Western conceptualizations of “childhood”

than most African settings. But quite problematically, Sierra Leone and its policymakers continue to forge ahead with the development visions of international NGOs and donor organizations, many of which fail to acknowledge how nuanced child labor and more broadly, poverty, can be in a post-conflict environment. Bound by such policy narratives, it is not surprising that evidence (e.g. Bøås and Hatløy, 2006) that in Kono, “those who can afford to keep their children in school are unlikely to take them out of school to work full time, even in times of crisis” (Thorsen, 2012), has failed to persuade the ILO and partners that more holistic policy mechanisms are needed which adequately reflect the day-to-day realities of life in impoverished rural settings, such as the environments where ASM takes place. Programs, rather, continue to be founded upon unsubstantiated ideas, such as “The majority of children are trafficked from rural provinces or refugee communities and mining areas” (ILO, 2012, p. 2), despite stories such as those of the “half shovels” painting an entirely different picture of the underpinnings of the country’s child labor “problem.” Reorienting the country’s policy stance on child labor, therefore, promises to be exceedingly challenging.

As this article has shown, the implications of “children at work” in Bandafayie are far more nuanced and complex than international children’s rights advocates understand them to be. In contrast to the ILO position that work and school are incompatible, the case of the “half shovels” clearly demonstrates that the two activities can co-exist symbiotically, when the context warrants such behavior. This analysis also forewarns that a blind and uncritical acceptance of international codes and agreements on child labour could ultimately have an adverse impact on these children, and, by extension, youth in poor rural communities. Western notions of “progress” and development, as encapsulated in the post-conflict reconstruction programming of international NGOs and donor organizations, often do not match up with the complex realities or competing visions of young people in rural Sierra Leone. In short, more holistic policy mechanisms are needed that reflect the difficult realities of life in impoverished rural settings.

Ultimately, a more intricate and contextualized understanding of the role that children assume in ASM is required, as well as how this can help them to navigate the livelihood challenges they face in environments characterized by extreme deprivation and poverty. Rather than instigating a blanket ban on all children’s work at mine sites, more flexible arrangements must be explored that will allow young boys and girls to combine safe part-time income earning options with schooling in a culturally-appropriate manner. A more nuanced understanding of these dynamics is needed if more meaningful policies and programme responses to children working in ASM are to evolve.

Acknowledgements

Financial support for this research was provided by the British Academy under the project, “Youth livelihoods, activism and extractive industry in Sierra Leone” (SG-112077). The authors would also like to thank Sahr Mani for his assistance with the fieldwork, and three anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on the paper.

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¹ Both the generational categories of "youth" and "children" are socially constructed, dynamic, contested and open to cultural interpretation. For the purpose of this paper, the distinction between the two is purely biological: youth represent those in the age cohort between 15 and 35 years, and children are those individuals under the age of 15 years.

² For the purposes of this article, ASM is defined as labor-intensive, low-tech mineral extraction and processing (see Hilson 2012).

³ For President Kabbah's position on universal education and the rights of the child, see for example, 'Speech by H.E. the President, Alhaji Dr. Ahmad Tejan Kabbah at the formal launching of the National Commission for War-Affected Children Freetown, Monday 24th February 2003'. Accessed on 01 June 2015 at: <http://www.sierra-leone.org/Speeches/kabbah-022403.html>. For his position on food security, see 'Statement by the President of Sierra Leone H.E. Alhaji Dr. Ahmad Tejan Kabbah at the World Food Summit, Rome, 11 June 2002'. Accessed on 01 June 2015 at: <http://www.sierra-leone.org/Speeches/kabbah-061102.html>

⁴ A priority for the ILO is to eliminate the worst forms of child labor, as defined by Article 3 of C182. It is defined as labor which jeopardizes the physical, mental or moral wellbeing of a child, either because of its nature or because of the conditions in which it is carried out. See www.ilo.org/ipec/facts/WorstFormsofChildLabour/lang--en/index.htm (Accessed 9 October 2014).

⁵ "Childhood Defined," UNICEF, See www.unicef.org/sowc05/english/childhooddefined.html (Accessed 22 October 2014).

⁶ See Article 28 of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, www.un.org/documents/ga/res/44/a44r025.htm (Accessed 12 September 2014).

⁷ "Education for All" is a global commitment to providing quality basic education to all children, youth and adults. See www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-all/ (Accessed 30 September 2014).

⁸. While the main focus of the research was to explore the voices of child miners in their quest to negotiate poverty, 23 parents were also interviewed during the fieldwork. However, it should be noted that the objective of this research was not explicitly to explore the position that the miners' parents held on child labour. In rural Sierra Leone, because the income generated by children makes a vital contribution to the household economy, child labour is essentially a 'family' issue. Consequently, to inform the researchers' understanding of how the household economy functions, it was therefore deemed beneficial to elicit the views of parents and guardians who were working on site alongside their children. While all the parents who contributed to the study were willing to momentarily stop their mining activities to be interviewed by the researchers, there were a number of parents (and indeed children) who declined to be interviewed. In these cases, they explained that this was because they needed to focus on their mining and couldn't afford to give up their time.

⁹ Personal communication, Gibril Sesay, Special Assistant to the Office of the President, January 2008, Freetown.

¹⁰ "Sierra Leone," World Vision <http://www.worldvision.org/our-impact/country-profiles/sierra-leone> (Accessed 13 October 2014).