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Chapter 10

Protecting Children or Pandering to Politics? A Critical Analysis of Anti- Child Trafficking Discourse, Policy and Practice

Neil Howard

Introduction

Though child labor had long been a focus of international attention, child trafficking began to emerge as *the* major child protection issue across the Majority World at the start of the last decade (Castle and Diarra 2003; Hashim 2003; Thorsen 2007; Huijsmans and Baker 2012; O'Connell Davidson 2011). This was no more apparent than in Benin, where two high-profile events saw child trafficking catapulted to the status of Number One social policy challenge. The first of these was the interception of a Nigerian trawler bringing? Beninese adolescents to work in Gabon. The second was the high-profile 'rescue' of Beninese teenage labor migrants working in the artisanal quarries of Abeokuta, Nigeria. Both episodes saw young workers identified as 'slaves', and both led to Benin's being tarred as the new 'epicenter' of the international traffic in children (Feneyrol and Terre des Hommes 2005; Alber 2011; Morganti 2007, 2011; Howard 2011, 2012).

It was in this context that I first arrived in Benin, in 2005, as a young intern for a nationally-prominent Child Rights NGO. Throughout previously aware of Benin's child 'trafficking problem', my subsequent work with young labor migrants defined by child protection actors such as UNICEF as 'trafficked' quickly revealed the disjuncture between dominant representations of child trafficking and the lived realities of those migrants represented as trafficked. This disjuncture seemed paralleled in policy terms, as many early anti-child trafficking efforts focused on pre-emptively preventing youth labor migration, even as migrant youth labor migrants experienced their migration as un-problematic (Alber 2003, 2011; Morganti 2011).

It was in order to explore these tensions that I began my research in 2007. First, I wished to ascertain whether anti- child trafficking discourse and policy were really as problematic as they had initially appeared. Second, I wished to delve *inside* the anti-child trafficking field in order to understand why exactly this was the case. For the purposes of this research, I defined 'the anti-child trafficking field' as all those institutional actors involved in the creation and spread of anti- child trafficking discourse and policy. These institutions included UNICEF and the ILO, from among the core UN agencies, the US Department of Labor and its Agency for International Development, Danish Aid, the EU and France, from the donor community, the Family and Justice Ministries, from within the Beninese government, and a collection of national and international NGOs. I decided that the most sensible strategy would be to conduct fieldwork which would allow me to access both those upon whom discourse and policy (attempt to) act and those responsible for the constitution of this discourse and policy. This meant working not only with young migrants (constructed by the anti- child trafficking and child protection community as 'victims of trafficking') and their communities, but also with discourse and policy-makers in each of the various institutions central to anti- child trafficking in Benin.

In terms of the former, I decided to examine what had been widely depicted within national and international media as one of the Benin's most notorious examples of child trafficking - that of (mainly male) teenagers moving from the Zou region in the South of the country to the artisanal quarries of Abeokuta, Nigeria. In concert with my research assistant, who was from the Zou and had previously worked for an NGO engaged in the anti- child trafficking field, I selected four case study villages from the Zou 'sending region', and in these villages I purposively sampled current and former migrants to the quarries, those involved in the migrant labor network linking the region to the quarries, and village authorities. I chose these villages because they had experienced significant anti- child trafficking interventions and were known to my research assistant. This research took place over six months, between February and July 2010. It was later buttressed by a short period

of targeted fieldwork in February 2012, during which I spent time in and around the 'receiving region' of Abeokuta's quarries, in Nigeria. This fieldwork involved (1) observing the living and working conditions in the quarries, and (2) interviewing 18 representatives of the key actors engaged in the quarry economy, including labor leaders, gravel purchasers, traders and transporters, landowners, and twenty Beninese adolescent migrant quarry-workers from villages across the Zou region, including two which formed my original case studies.

In terms of those responsible for discourse and policy - in other words, the anti- child trafficking field - I focused specifically on those bodies named above that are most active in forming and implementing anti- child trafficking policy in Benin and internationally. I identified these actors in a number of ways. First, I drew on my pre-existing contacts in the field and snowballed relevant information and interviewees across it. Second, I examined publicly available funding records to see which bodies provided funding for anti- child trafficking efforts. Third, I engaged in extensive participant observation with one UN agency and one significant international NGO active in the fileld, in order to further develop both an 'insider's perspective' and an overview of precisely which bodies were important actors in the field. Importantly, I paid attention both to the internal and external dynamics of the relevant institutions, interviewing actors placed at different levels within each bureaucratic hierarchy. I interviewed over 100 anti- child trafficking actors.

In total, I spent almost a year engaged with these institutions throughout 2009 and 2010. This included an extended period of participant observation in the Headquarters of one UN agency and in the Field Office of one major INGO. It also involved gathering a wide variety of relevant internal and published documentation and interviews with over 100 people at almost all levels of the institutional chain - ranging from donor politicians to local NGO staff active in my case study villages.

The rest of this paper is divided into three parts. In the first, I offer an overview of dominant anti- child trafficking discourse and policy as it manifests in Benin within the

institutional settings named above. In the second, I contrast the heavy anti-migratory emphasis prevalent in these with the empirics I have gathered with young labor migrants from Benin to Nigeria. In the paper's third and final segment, I turn my lens inside the policy system in order to offer the beginnings of an account for why the difference between official narrative and ground-level experience manifests and persists. This chapter captures the experiences of adolescents who engage in outmigration, circular and return migration, independently of the adult members of their families, as they transition from childhood to adulthood and their juxtaposition with local and global discourses of migration, mobility, trafficking and childhood.

Discourse and Policy

Discourse

The nature of the dominant discourse around trafficking in Benin is well captured in the following *Agence France Press* article extract.

Benin's Child Slaves Working Nigeria's Quarries

Irenee, a skinny Beninese girl of 15, points to three mounds of earth*: the graves of her friends who died of exhaustion* here in the gravel quarries of Abeokuta, in south-western Nigeria.

UNICEF says about 5,000 children from neighboring Benin are laboring here, eight hours a day, six days a week.

In the sweltering heat and in the lashing rain, Irenee crushes chunks of granite rock, naked to the waist, *her skin coated in a thick layer of grime. Failure to produce her quota, whatever the weather conditions, brings with it the risk of being beaten up.*

In September 2003, when she was just 11, Irenee and 260 other children were freed by the Nigerian police and sent home, after a dispute between two rival trafficking gangs. *But their parents sold them again to traffickers* and they ended up back in Abeokuta, some 100 kilometers (62 miles) north of Lagos.

The idea is that the child is *sold into bonded labor for a fixed term* - normally two or three years. At the end of the term he gets a bicycle and 100 or 200 dollars (68 to 136 euros). If he completes three terms his master may build a new hut for the child's family.

Many of the families who sell their children into slavery are unapologetic. "How do you expect me to keep 37 children here when I have no income?" shrugged Luc Gbogbohoundada, an octogenarian with eight wives. Gbogbohoundada lives in Za-Kpota, a village across the border in Benin about 150 kilometres from Abeokuta. *Za-Kpota is notorious as the child-trafficking capital of the region.*

The land here can no longer support the huge families that have sprung up from generations of polygamous marriages. In spite of the children who bring home bicycles and money to smarten up huts Za'Kpota looks just as wretched as any other poor village.

Child trafficking in Benin has risen sharply in the past few years. A law cracking down on the practice was voted in January 2006 but has never been promulgated. *'Clearly, as long as this law is not put into practice, some villages carry on with this trafficking without fear,'* said Philipe Duhamelle, the head of UNICEF, the United Nations Children's Fund, in Benin... UNICEF estimates that some 7,000 children from Benin are currently working in Nigeria after being sold. Of that number, 5,000 are estimated to be in the quarries of Abeokuta.

> Statistics published in June by the Juvenile Protection Police of Cotonou indicate that more than 10,000 children *destined to be sold* outside the country are intercepted and turned back every year at Benin's borders'.[1]

This extract focuses on the work of Beninese 'child slaves' in Abeokuta. It features a number of characteristic tropes including the concept of 'slavery', the sale of children, and their violent exploitation at the workplace. It is notable that the piece draws on respected UN and police sources to build its narrative, and in doing so it reflects the way that the media, state and supra-state actors intertwine in their shared depiction of the migration-trafficking phenomenon in Benin. Significantly, as has been the case elsewhere, the labor migratory departure from the family home is cast here as somehow 'pathological', representing the consequence of un-willed, extraneous cause-factors such as poverty, criminal trickery, parental naivety or profligacy (Howard 2008, 2011, 2012; see also Hashim 2003; see Riisøen et al. 2004; O'Connell Davidson and Farrow 2007; De Lange 2007; Whitehead et al. 2007; and Huijsmans and Baker 2012). As the italicized text makes clear, the narrative of 'child sale' permeates this piece. It is paralleled by the depiction of working conditions as brutal, exhausting and exploitative. Clearly, within this understanding, the Benin-Abeokuta migrant flow is a clear context of child trafficking, as is underlined by UNICEF's spokesperson. This picture should be borne in mind when we return below to Abeokuta's quarries.

Policy

In light of the prevailing discourse such as that documented above, it should come as little surprise that anti- child trafficking policy as pursued by the Beninese state and its international partners works fundamentally to protect children by keeping them 'at home' and away from the 'slavery-like' work such as that depicted above The dominant line of force running across the Beninese anti- child trafficking spectrum is, therefore, firmly anti the

independent mobility of minors, with emphasis placed on ‘pre-emptive protection’ through sedentarization (see Howard 2012b and 2013 for a detailed discussion).

This can be illustrated most clearly by discussing the three major elements of the Beninese anti- child trafficking framework, as formulated and operationalized by the Beninese state, its partners and the donor agencies so central to their work. The first of these is the National Anti- Child Trafficking Law (LOI Nº 2006-04), the second is the Memorandum of Understanding with Nigeria regarding anti- child trafficking strategy, and the third are the widely-hailed ‘Village Anti- Child Trafficking Committees’. I will discuss each in turn.

Benin’s anti- child trafficking law is formally entitled the ‘Law Regulating the Movement of Minors and Suppressing the Traffic in Children’. Building on the ILO’s global anti- child labor framework, it defines children as all those under 18 and makes illegal all work seen to harm their ‘health, safety or morals’, including anything in sectors such as mining, quarrying, building, commercial agriculture or transport. As the law’s title suggests, however, it does not merely outlaw certain kinds of work or the ‘trafficking’ seen to equate therewith; rather, it also regulates the conditions under which minors may legally migrate. What does this regulation entail?

Article 7 establishes that children cannot legally be displaced within the borders of the country unless accompanied either by a direct parent or guardian or with the consent of a local government official. The law thus empowers state agents to directly implicate themselves in personal and familial labor mobility decisions. The law and its related decrees go on to explain that state consent for that (labor) mobility will only be forthcoming if a number of conditions are met. First, a family ‘placing’ a child must have all the child’s papers in order. Second, they must have enough money to pay for the child’s return. And third, they must be able to demonstrate that the child’s relocation is for the purpose of school attendance or for an official apprenticeship in a state-sanctioned sector, rather than work.

Article 4 establishes that relocation for labor 'exploitation' constitutes trafficking and is thus illegal, irrespective of any consent offered. When I asked Deg, a senior government official, whether this law could be considered a little heavy-handed, he replied that it was, but that that was its purpose, since 'you cannot tell the difference between placement, movement and trafficking' and thus you need 'to ban it all' (Interview, 10th March 2010).

Intricately related to the promulgation of the anti- child trafficking law was the signing and operationalizing of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Benin and Nigeria. Phil, at the time Country Representative for one of the UN agencies central to Benin's anti- child trafficking field, explained:

> Nigeria was a big issue for us, because we realized that Nigeria was the major destination for Beninese kids. We therefore needed to establish a partnership with them. Our agency convinced both governments to get together and have regular meetings on trafficking. We wanted to develop an MoU on the issue, which we eventually did... It is a very good document, stating the multi-level cooperation that is to take place between the countries, from police, to border officials to NAPTIP and the BPM.[2] Each country also developed concrete joint and separate plans of action, including border sensitization... Ministers and our staff go to border villages in the Zou and tell people that the law has changed and that behavior must therefore also change [i.e. that child (under 18 years) mobility must stop]. They tell people that there are severe punishments for transgression, including 25 years in jail if they are found accompanying any [non-kin] kids to Nigeria. Some people have in fact now been arrested' (Interview, 9th November 2011).

Further interviews and documentary analysis confirm this picture. Indeed, one explained that the MoU is precisely about harmonizing institutional responses at the political level, providing support for the expansion of national border controls and persuading border

communities to desist from the teenage (labor) mobility that the discourse constructs as so problematic.

This is paralleled in the final component of Beninese anti- child trafficking policy to be discussed here - the Village Committees. These were developed shortly after trafficking exploded as an issue in Benin by UNICEF, a collection of donors and the Child and Family Ministry, to be the state's arm at the village level (Interviews, 10th March 2010 and 7th April 2010). Though state officials claim a wide variety of tasks performed, and goals worked for, by the village committees, interviews with their founders, with committee members in my case study villages, and myriad unpublished material including internal committee documentation and UN agency reports relating to their work suggest otherwise. Indeed, it seems that their major objective is to preemptively protect minors by thwarting their movement. For instance, an important, confidential UN document I obtained reveals that the emphasis in activities is squarely placed on 'community surveillance [regarding movement]' (p.3), while the consultant's report into the work of the committees offered precisely the same conclusion, arguing that most of the work they do is 'anti-movement' (Botte and UNICEF 2015: 16). Such an assessment is echoed in one report documenting committee plans of action. In this publication, we learn that committee goals are to 'watch over suspicious movements', to 'denounce and dissuade', and to provide 'social surveillance' (MFPSS and UNICEF Benin 2006), all actions confirmed as important by committee members interviewed in my case study villages.

Youth Labour Mobility

In this section, I will contrast the dominant discursive and political paradigm around child trafficking in Benin with empirical data gathered from current and former youth labor migrants involved in what the *Agence France Presse* newspaper article identified as trafficking - the migrant labour of teenage boys from Za-Kpota to the artisanal gravel pits of Abeokuta, Nigeria. This section will dispute that claim. It will do so, first, by describing the

nature of life and work in Abeokuta's gravel pits, as witnessed as part of my research and recounted to me by those working in this environment. Subsequently it will address the importance of money and social transition in the conscious choices young migrants make to move to Nigeria. Finally, the section will offer brief reflections on the alternative policies young migrants and their communities would like to see pursued *instead of* anti-child migratory efforts.

Work in Abeokuta

The Abeokutan quarry economy is a well organized social and economic world that is highly structured along class lines. First, absentee Nigerian landlords own and rent out patches of land rich in the gravel that is ideal for use in the construction industry. Second, female Nigerian gravel dealers lease this land from those landlords and have contracts with them which date back two or three generations. They have come together to form a gravel dealers union and contract with a third class - lorry owners/drivers, who themselves operate under the auspices of a union - in order to have the extracted gravel transported to a fourth class, the gravel purchasers in Lagos. Gravel prices and prices for the services rendered by each of the links in this chain are predominantly set through negotiation between the unions representing these latter three classes. The gravel dealers also contract with a fifth group, however - Beninese 'bosses' who provide the (migrant) labor used to extract that gravel. These bosses are all men from Benin's Zou region encompassing my case study 'sending region'. They have themselves all worked six-year 'apprenticeships' under their own bosses until eventually they were 'liberated' and given freedom by the hierarchy of the Beninese expatriate community providing and managing the labor-force in Abeokuta to hire their own gangs of laborers, for whom the task is to work according to the directions of these bosses in extracting the gravel.

The teenage migrant laborers identified as 'trafficked' in the *Agence France Presse* piece and in anti- child trafficking documentation from my case study region are precisely the

young men who constitute these gangs of laborers. Each individual is hired on a two-year contract, and is expected to work six days a week for his *patron*, who in return houses, clothes and feeds the young worker and ultimately pays him 140,000 FCFA (about $250) or an equivalent sum in material terms (for instance a motorbike) on completion of the contract. The boys are free to work on their own account on their day off or when they have already loaded the lorry that is their day's work for their boss.

Though the work is hard, they work in groups of three, with the biggest and strongest pick-axing the ground, the second biggest and strongest shoveling the gravel and the smallest sifting it through a filter. They rest when they need to, share the load of work between them and are often helped by the *patron* who is in many ways dependent on them. This dependence is not only intrinsic to the employer-employee relationship, however; it is also reflected in the fact that each *patron* relies on his reputation as a good employer in order to attract the laborers whose surplus he will ultimately extract, such that he has an interest in treating each of his charges sufficiently well that they will not tarnish his image when they return to Benin.

Image 1: Teenagers Working in Abeokuta

(Image Source: Author)

It is notable that, of the 20 quarry-working adolescents I interviewed, only one claimed that his work was too difficult or that he had been lied to regarding the nature of the work he was to expect. This was Placide, who said that he had originally been told that he would be working in a shop in Nigeria, only to find later that he was to work in the quarries (Interview, 10th May 2010). For the majority, however, Jack's experience and his assessment were representative. When I met him in Abeokuta, Jack was 15 years old. He is from a village on the border between Za-Kpota *commune* and the *commune* of Bohicon, in Benin. He came to Abeokuta a year before we met and planned to stay to work in the quarries for a further year, in order to complete the standard two-year contract. In return for his labor, he was to be bought a motorbike at the end of his two years, which was the price agreed between him, his parents and his *patron*. On top of this, Jack also worked in his free time and 'on his own account'. He said that he was able to earn around 2000 Naira (about $12) every week by doing this. His relationship with his boss was also always very good – he was never mistreated, was 'never shouted at' and was consistently 'well fed'.

Jack was saving his money week by week and aiming to return to Benin in order to set himself up in a trade. When I asked him why he came to Nigeria, he was very clear and explained simply that his goal was 'to earn money'. 'Work here is much better than it is at home', he stated, because in Abeokuta he 'can earn a lot and also keep' what he earns. Though the work can be difficult, Jack contended, the fact that he earns makes it all worthwhile. He was also very clear that *working on the family farm is much more physically demanding than work in the gravel pits*, even though the former is legal while the latter is not. Jack stated that he strongly opposed any laws which say that young people such as him should not be able to migrate to Nigeria for this kind of work (Interview, 4th February 2012).

'We Move For the Money'

Though the trafficking discourse in Benin has predominantly constructed labor mobility to places like Abeokuta as an un-willed and highly exploitative experience, my research with

current and former teenage labor migrants to Abeokuta's quarries suggests otherwise. For most migrants, as for their wider communities, the chance or need to access the money that is essential to any life project in Benin represents *the* major motivation for moving and mobility's major justification.

This was underlined consistently across the interviews I conducted in Abeokuta and with those in Benin who have returned from Abeokuta. Zeze is an illustrative example of this (Interview, 2nd February 2012). Zeze is 17. He is from a village in the heartland of Benin's Zou region and first came to Abeokuta with relatives after his parents passed away. This was when he was 11. Zeze has since completed two and is now finishing his third consecutive two-year labor contracts. After the first two years, he earned enough money to return and build himself a dwelling in his home village. His earnings from the second two years gave him enough money to equip that house. Now, with the money he earns from this third contract, he intends to buy a motorbike.

For Zeze, work in Abeoluta is not a challenge. 'I grew up working in the fields', he explained, which more than prepares you for the lesser rigors of life in the gravel pits. Since he will soon have performed the six years necessary to finish with his 'apprenticeship', he will soon be 'free' either to work entirely for himself and 'on his own account', or to hire other young laborers to work under him. His plan, however, is to return to Benin to see whether he can set himself up in business, although he is very frank that if he is unsuccessful, *he will simply keep returning to Abeokuta to earn money*. Money is, for Zeze, the single primary motivation for his work. When I asked him why people come to Abeokuta, '*akwe'*, or 'money', was his simple, one word answer. When I asked him what he made of the anti-migratory anti- child trafficking message, he was very disdainful. 'If you want to make something of your life', he says, 'move to Abeokuta'.

Relationships and Transitions

Though earning money is crucial and underpins all labor migration to Abeokuta, we should not see that labor migration as a one-dimensional, money-only phenomenon. In my interviews with current or former youth labor migrants to the quarries, a number of other socially important factors emerged. One of these involved young males fulfilling their social responsibilities by providing for their families. This was underlined particularly clearly in the refrain, 'I went to Abeokuta in order to put a roof on my father's house', as young migrants returned from their two-year contracts to give their fathers their money.

Individual social transitions, however, are also significant. These transitions can involve acquiring respect and status, or acquiring the material resources necessary to marry. In terms of social respect, it is significant that one of the major motifs I heard when reflecting with interviewees on the value of migration was that, if successful, it can offer the chance for an individual to become 'considered'. To be 'considered' (or 'known') in this part of Southern Benin means to be well thought-of, respected, seen as an important or successful person. It is an essential goal for many people, and successful migration is a principal means of achieving it. Numerous interviewees in fact explained that returning from Abeokuta with material goods such as a motorbike, clothes or a generator represented evidence of an individual's successful migration and thus constituted a material path to their being 'considered' by those around them upon their return.

This is of course related to social manhood and to the marriage that this is seen to inevitably prefigure. My village interviews revealed that the understanding predominant in this region of when and how one transitions from the status of 'boy' or 'youth' to 'man' is neither fixed, nor universally attributed to biological age, but contingent upon the attainment of economic independence. In one group interview with a collection of adolescents in one of my Zou commune case study villages, for instance, an adolescent explained with the agreement of his peers that one is a man in his community when 'he works and eats without

the help of his parents (Interview, 14th May 20110), while his assessment was echoed by a further young man, who declared that to be a man in his village is ‘to farm, to have a big harvest, and to be able to sell your crops’ (Interview, 10th May 2010). As many youth lamented to me, however, this transition and the related transition to marriage is now more difficult than ever. Where being self-sufficient through successfully farming lots of land had, historically, been the major indicator that one was a ‘man’, with declining soil fertility, the decreasing size of landholdings as a result of titling and population growth, and the increasing importance of the monetized economy, more and more teenage boys are finding their path to the material independence that underpins one’s status as a man – and thus as a potential husband – blocked. In Sommers’ (2012) terms, these youth are ‘stuck’ (2012), and thus need new strategies for self-articulation. Crucially, as is increasingly the case across the region (Thorsen 2007; De Lange 2007; Imorou 2008), it is often independent labor migration which represents their go-to strategy.

What Should Be Done?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the kinds of policies that young migrants and their communities would like to see deployed in an effort to ‘protect’ them or to improve their living conditions differ radically from those adopted as part of dominant anti- child trafficking strategy. Indeed, when I asked people what they would want to see, two clear trends emerged in the responses I received. The first can be summarized as the provision of economic alternatives to labor migration. ‘Give us jobs’, ‘promote development’, ‘bring industry here’, ‘pay us more for our crops’, ‘give us what you have’ and ‘train us in skills’ were all refrains I heard. The second major trend was similarly widespread and is summarized in the phrase ‘improve our working conditions’. Since very few see quarry work as exploitative, it is extremely rare to find anyone who would like to see that work illegalized. At best, people desire improved labor relations, with ‘pay us more wages’ representing the central demand. Importantly, since these alternatives are not pursued as part of mainstream anti- child trafficking strategy, the young migrants I interviewed and their communities admitted that they treat anti- child

trafficking initiatives as little more than an obstacle to be navigated, like any ordinary border guard. The dominant village analysis of anti- child trafficking strategy (and, by implication, its success) can thus be summarized in the following exchange I had with two elder women in one of my case study villages:

> **Neil**: What do you think of the message that young people shouldn't leave the village?
>
> **Woman 1**: Those who tell us this are those who hold back the development of the village! It is a terrible message! And they give us nothing in return. They come here but they bring nothing with them!
>
> **Neil**: Why do NGOs and the government do this and say these things?
>
> **Woman 2**: They don't want people to leave the village because they don't want to see us go and develop elsewhere instead of here. That's fair enough, but their words are useless to us, because they bring us nothing'. (Interview, 28th April 2010)

Why The Divergence?

The contrast between the ground-level realities of the youth labor migrants I have researched and the official anti- child trafficking discourse and policy as presented above could not be more apparent. In light of this, the question which necessarily poses itself, and which my research has largely been designed to answer, is why? What factors prevent the anti-child trafficking field from better representing and responding to phenomena such as the labor migration of young males to Nigeria? Which forces underpin this state of affairs? In this section, the chapter will draw on data gathered from *inside* the anti-child trafficking system in order to offer tentative explanatory answers to these questions.

Lack of Understanding

At the most basic, yet highly significant, level, my data suggest that a major factor explaining the divergence between the world of discourse and policy and the world of youth labor migration in Benin is the sheer lack of understanding predominating within the former. In this regard, it should be noted that in my Beninese 'sending communities', I was applauded for being the first person ever to ask villagers how they understood the labor migration that has so often been depicted as trafficking. When I related this experience to the more senior Benin-based anti- child trafficking actors I subsequently interviewed, in particular those in head offices in Cotonou, none were surprised, as none had *ever* visited their 'field sites'.

This is paralleled by the insignificant role that detailed qualitative research seems to play in the formation of discourse and policy. Abidi[1], for instance, is a UN employee who was central to the early evolution of the anti- child trafficking field in Benin. When I questioned him on the information gap and the role of research, he declared: 'We didn't have to work too hard to have a good idea of what was going on before establishing our interventions in Benin' (Interview, 12th January 2010). Mitch and Yaya, who have responsibility for designing and implementing researcg projects at the headquarters of their UN agency, explained similarly with reference to their organization's work on trafficking: 'With mining/quarrying kids, it doesn't matter if they've been trafficked or not, we know they shouldn't be there, so we just take them out before research even begins' (Interview, 3rd June 2009). Likewise, when I asked Carl, a senior figure responsible for donor relations and project financing for a UN agency, whether research plays a role in his organization's project and policy work, he simply replied, 'It never really happens that way. This isn't a ground-up thing' (Interview, 9th June 2009). Similarly with Martin, an international NGO employee who used to occupy a senior position within the donor hierarchy of one powerful donor government, I had the following exchange:

[1] All names have been changed to protect the identity of research participants.

> **Neil**: Did your new approach take a long while to develop?
>
> **Martin**: Yes. Most people don't have an in-depth understanding of what we're dealing with. There's a lack of conceptual clarity as well as information sharing. There are huge battles between various organizations over intelligence. We need a better understanding across the board and we need some coordination in what we do.
>
> **Neil**: Do people have on-the-ground understandings?
>
> **Martin**: No. Zero. There is a major problem, data-wise, with where people get their information in this field. Look at the example of the *Global Report on Human Trafficking*. It's awful but people believe it because "the UN says so".'
>
> (Interview, 8th June 2009)

What this informational gap leads to is a perpetuation of received understandings. Anti- child trafficking discourse and anti- child trafficking policy tend to feed on themselves, failing to break the cycle of misinformation with genuine empirics.

The Politics of Silence

The lack of ground-level understanding that I experienced in my fieldwork is not, however, the whole story. Indeed, my interviews, participant observation and documentary analysis suggest that other serious factors plague this field. The first is what I term *the politics of silence*. What do I mean by this? In Benin, though poverty is frequently decried as *the* underlying 'cause' of child trafficking (see, for instance, MFE and ILO 2008:13), engagement with what causes that poverty is almost non-existent. Indeed, in all my work and research with(in) Benin's anti-child trafficking field, never have I come across any single instance of an

individual or an agency addressing or even mentioning the political economic causation of poverty[2]. Why the silence?

Sometimes this silence is *self-imposed*. When I asked one UN employee working at organizational headquarters and with ample responsibility, for instance, whether she had the freedom to speak out over things like EU trade tariffs or US cotton subsidies (which studies suggest affect Beninese peasant income in areas such as those in which I conducted my research; OXFAM 2002, Minot and Daniels 2005, Sumner 2007) she said, after a long pause:

> Look, it depends. Generally speaking, of course you can say what you want, but you'll be blasted left and right and bullied by countries if you do. Some people criticize us for not being critical enough...but we take a long-term view because we don't want to endanger longer-term collaboration and cooperation with the states. (Interview, 24th September 2009)

Another UN employee said:

> In our agency, you have to be diplomatic. Often that's just an organizational culture thing, where there isn't always even any direct political pressure. It can often just be staff over-compensating and trying not to alienate states by saying things they think they won't want to hear. (Interview, 6th June 2009)

Sometimes, however, this silence is *imposed from above*. As part of my research, I interviewed various people within the US Trafficking in Persons hierarchy and I asked them whether they, at the top of the anti-child trafficking tree, could bring issues like subsidies into the trafficking debate, given the understanding that trafficking is caused by poverty and poverty in Benin is arguably related to Minority World subsidies. These were two of the responses I received:

[2] For a truly classic example of the failure to engage in any political economic thinking, see the representative ILO and Beninese Child and Family Ministry 'National Child Trafficking Study' (MFE and ILO 2008).

> No way could I mention this! We're constrained by US interests and that means we're restricted to corridor discussions. (Interview, 29th October 2009)

> Listen, I can try and raise this in our meetings, but the chances of success or of public discussion are slim-to-none, because there are very big interests to fight. (Interview, 16th September 2009)

Even more telling were the words of two EU officials I spoke to in Benin's *de facto* capital, Cotonou. We had previously discussed political economy and had even privately reflected on the role that EU or US policies play in perpetuating global conditions of poverty. I therefore asked whether they could consider including, if not in their policies, then at least in their discourse, mention of things like subsidies. These were their responses:

> We can take account of the effects of these things at ground level - people being poor in Benin and such. But we can't talk about the top level. Our last reference is the national level, the Beninese government. *The Westerners who work here know that their policies cause poverty and trafficking. Many of them would even like to change it, but they can't.* (Interview, 17th February 2010)

> We simply cannot talk about this, Neil. This is a national structure, it's a national delegation. *We structurally cannot go beyond borders*. If we want to do something like this regarding EU or US subsidies, we need to have a formal political position sent down to us from Brussels. *Otherwise we can't mention it.* (Interview, 2nd April 2010)

The Politics of Representation

The politics of silence ties in to what I argue is the overarching and highly problematic *politics of representation*. What do I mean by this? As has been documented in a number of similar contexts (Olivier de Sardan 1998, 2008; Lecomte and Naudet 2000; Easterley 2002;

Bierschenk 2008), most of the agencies active in the anti- child trafficking field depend on funding for their operations, be that from donor governments, international bodies or multilateral institutions. This funding is almost always conditional upon recipients being able to report on 'successes', to demonstrate 'outputs', and to show that limited resources have been well spent. It is also conditional upon recipients refraining from stepping outside of the boundaries of what it is acceptable to their donors for them to say or do. Thus, as Alexia, an INGO operative working in Benin, explained to me: 'Neil, in child protection, you have to be fashionable to attract funding' (Interview, 2nd September 2007). Or, in the words of Nina, a UN agency employee who had worked on trafficking projects for the better part of a decade: 'It's all about being "sexy", trafficking is sexy, so trafficking is the way we have to go. Plus, you must remember that suffering sells in Africa' (Interview, 28th May 2009).

Instead of engaging the political economy of poverty-causation as part of anti- child trafficking discourse- and policy-making, and instead of addressing the murky reality that working conditions might be poor, but better than nothing, institutions involved in this field must necessarily reproduce the simplistic stories featured in the newspaper article above and the reductive projects which focus attention on 'slavery', since nothing else will be politically acceptable.

Moreover, since donor pressure to produce representable 'outputs' is severe, anti-child trafficking actors must perpetuate problematic policies and simplistic narratives even when they aware of their problems, simply because 'the money needs to get spent'. Indeed, should they stop doing so, donor money - and with it their jobs, livelihoods, and the wages on which their families depend - will dry up. As one former OSCE Special Representative on Trafficking tellingly admitted:

> The reality [in this field] is that not much happens; people just produce papers - they cut and paste, cut and paste, cut and paste. Or, it's seminar, seminar, seminar, conference. *We have to do something to justify our money.*

> *Otherwise, the gravy-train will stop rolling*. (Interview, 23rd September 2009; emphasis added)

In like fashion, Martin, himself a former donor government employee, complained:

> The problem is that [we] have to demonstrate results and this creates issues for project work. The results-driven framework is one of the reasons why there are so many conferences and workshops - *people have to do something to show some form of tangible outcome.* (Interview, 8th June 2009)

Conclusion

The research underpinning this paper began with a desire to explore the tension between representation and reality when it came to 'child trafficking' in Benin. It expanded to examine the anti-child trafficking field itself and sought to use this examination to formulate explanations for the existence and persistence of this tension. The data now presented offer clear insights into that tension and into what underpins it.

First, as was initially suspected, the data suggest that anti- child trafficking discourse and policy are indeed fundamentally flawed. Where, in the case of discourse, the language of 'slavery', 'coercion' and 'abuse' is current, for those young migrant laborers putatively identified as 'victims' of coercion or abuse, labor migration to places like Abeokuta seems to represent a conscious, purposive response to life's immediate circumstances. Anti-child trafficking discourse would appear, therefore, to be intrinsically reductive and misrepresentative.

What of policy? While its major emphasis lies in pre-emptively protecting those young migrants who, upon migration, are assumed to inevitably end up in situations of exploitation and trafficking, little evidence suggests that this is appropriate with respect to the cases represented in my research. Indeed, among the current or former young labor migrants documented here, only one was tricked and the rest either consented to or sought out their

migrant labor opportunities. What this implies of course is that a policy predicated on preventing them from accessing those opportunities through migration runs directly contrary to their interests as they perceive them.

Why this disjuncture? The latter third of this paper has advanced two major explanatory hypotheses. The first is that many actors in the anti-child trafficking field (and thus constituting the major part of anti- child trafficking discourse and policy) remain so divorced from ground-level empirics that they formulate discourse and policy on the shoddiest of empirical foundations. They therefore often reproduce received ideas without critical empirical challenge.

The second hypothesis is, perhaps, even more troubling. It points to a deeply anti-political core at the heart of the anti-child trafficking field. As has also been made painfully clear by the literature on the politics of development and the ethnography of aid (Shore and Wright 1997, Lecomte and Naudet 2000, Mosse 2005, Mosse and Lewis 2005) it suggests that discourse and policy are molded more by the contours of donor desire and financial pressure than by the interests of those vulnerable migrants whose welfare nominally justifies their existence. Pandering to politics, therefore, seems to trump protecting young people. The question, of course, is with what consequences?

Notes

[1] <http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5h8Vu3tVLkIcdHpsijQk5Rw2sBRw?docId=071212062322.2dtxazkfandindex=2>

[2] The Nigerian Anti-trafficking Agency and Benin’s special child police unit, the *Brigade de Protection des Mineurs*.

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