

A question of survival

Bob Stanley

In the cities, towns, and villages of the Third World, children seem to be a permanent part of the scene. While their counterparts in the industrialized world are safely locked away in school until at least their mid-teens, most Third World children count themselves fortunate to have the opportunity to attend school, even irregularly, for a few years before the need to earn a living becomes too pressing a priority.

For most families in the Third World, keeping children in school is a luxury they can scarcely afford. In the country there are always crops to be planted or harvested, animals to be tended, fields to be tilled — just to make enough money to live on. In the towns and cities children help run the family business, or earn a little money any way they can, running errands, selling cigarettes, washing cars, shining shoes.

Lacking education or opportunity, few will ever graduate from unskilled labour. Some, unable to find even that, will turn to petty crime for “easy” money.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that in 1975 there were some 52 million children in the work force, and the number is growing. If present trends continue, says the ILO, 4 out of every 10 workers in the developing nations will be under 15 in the year 2000.

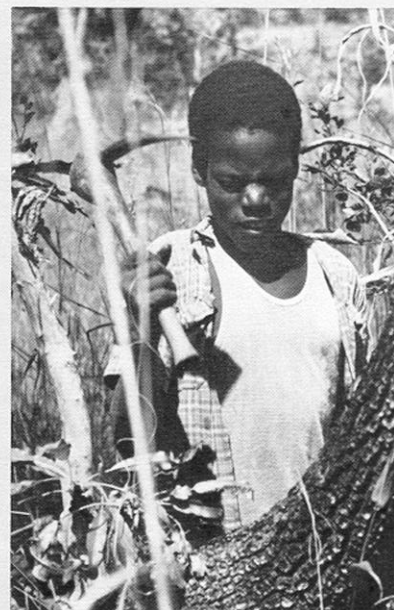
Yet the “problem” of children in the workforce is not an easy one to approach. They are there because they are needed. To remove all those children and place them in schools (even assuming there were enough classrooms and enough teachers to cope with them) could have a disastrous effect on national economies. And the first victims would likely be the children themselves.

The subsistence farmer depends on his family to help run the farm. Take away his children when they are most needed and the crops may fail. And the family will not eat.

Crafts like carpet-weaving must be learned at an early age, before the fingers lose their suppleness. So the child learns a valuable skill, but often the price in terms of health and educational development is high.

The child who is driven by poverty to choose work instead of education is probably already suffering to some extent from the multiple physical and mental effects of years of malnutrition and disease.

The problem does not lend itself to one neat solution — most children at work in the developing countries are trapped in a vicious cycle that no amount of well-intentioned regulations will break. In the long term the only way to break out of the cycle is through development that, by attacking the root causes of the situation, will eliminate the need for child labour.



Right, top: Work on the farm replaces school for this young African, like for many of his counterparts in the Third World. Centre: Looking brightly to a better future. Bottom: Mothering is learnt early — a small girl in Nepal cares for her younger brother.

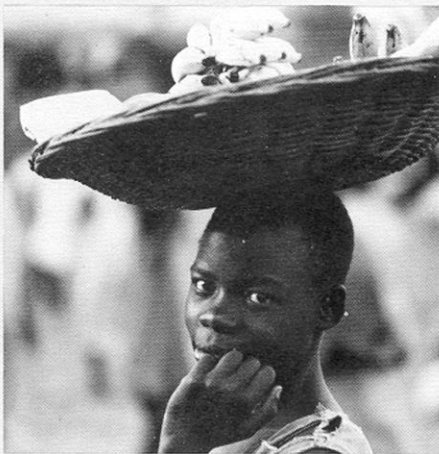


Photo: Neill McKee

Left, top: This young banana vendor may have helped grow the crop as well. Centre: For a few pennies, these Colombian boys will carry your purchases home from market. Bottom: Silversmithing in Indonesia, like many crafts, must be learnt at an early age.

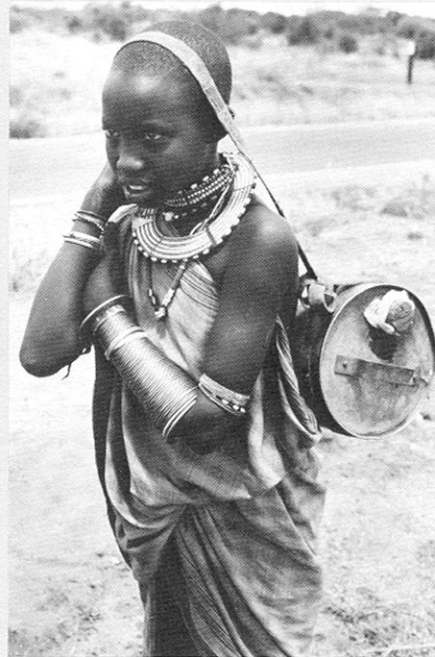


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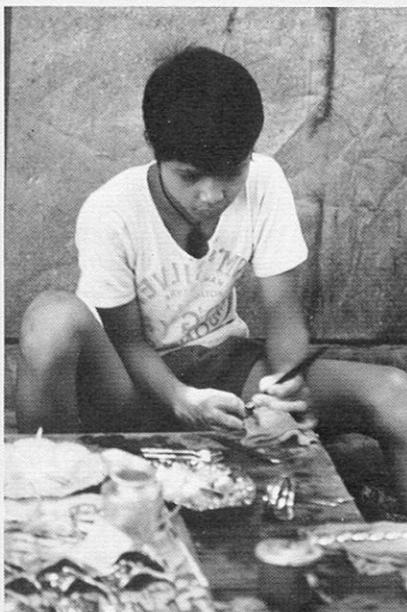


Photo: Michelle Hibler



Photo: Roberta Borg

Above, top: Carrying water is a task reserved for women and children. This Masai girl may have to walk many kilometres to the nearest water source. Bottom: Hawking cigarettes in Jakarta — business is slow.