

The global crisis and rising child labour in Zambia's mining communities: Are we facing a downward decent work spiral?

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Although it has been argued that people living outside the global financial economy, such as those who live in remote, rural areas in Africa, are less likely to experience the effects of the global economic crisis than people in industrialized nations, concerns are mounting over the wider effects of the crisis on poor, marginalized groups in least developed countries. An examination of the impact of the crisis on child labour in Zambia's mining communities indicates that the effects of the crisis are indeed reaching deep into the developing world.

Zambia's mining communities

Zambia's economy is heavily dependent on the copper mining sector. The copper industry and the income it provides were important features of Zambian society at independence in 1964 and have remained so through the nationalization of the mines in the 1970s, and the economic liberalization and structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s and 90s. The industry not only provides jobs to large segments of the population, but is a cornerstone of the social services network, especially in the Copperbelt Province. It provides housing, education and health care to thousands of workers and their families: if workers lost their jobs, they also lost these associated benefits.

Zambia's economy and socio-economic development are therefore inextricably tied to the global economy through its dependence on world market prices for copper in particular, and to a lesser degree, for other minerals. A slump in world market demand and prices has an immediate impact on national revenues and economic activity levels.

When the mines were re-privatized under the economic reform programmes in the 1980s and 90s, the urgent need to make operations profitable through greater productivity and efficiency led to cost-saving measures across the board. The subsequent large scale layoffs increased unemployment in the mining communities – and as mining communities rely almost exclusively on mining and subsistence agriculture, and generally have a poorly developed economic base, when mines (large

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or small) reduce operations or close, workers are left with very few, if any, alternatives.

Over the past 12 months, Zambia's mining industry has once again been downsizing its operations, suspending activities or closing mines. Not only has this increased unemployment and poverty among mine workers and their families, it has also led to a general slowdown in economic activity in the mining communities and, to a lesser degree, elsewhere in the country.

Relatively inefficient small-scale mines that were able to make money while copper prices soared in the middle part of the decade have had to cut back. With nowhere else to go, unemployed miners have been flooding to informal, “artisanal” mineral and gemstone mines to look for work. Many artisanal mines operate outside the regulatory framework, and poor working conditions and the use of child labour are real issues.

As a result a growing number of Zambian households, many of which were already economically disadvantaged, are feeling the effects of the recent slump in the demand for copper.

Child labour in Zambia

According to a recent inter-agency report by the Understanding Children's Work project of the ILO, UNICEF, and World Bank (Understanding Children's Work, 2009), the primary cause of child labour in Zambia is the extreme vulnerability of the (mainly rural) poor and (both rural and urban) low income households to economic shocks. Simply put, child labour is a coping strategy when adult breadwinners die, lose their jobs or fall ill, when natural disaster strikes, or when families are simply unable to make ends meet. With the economic crisis there is a real risk that the number of child labourers will be even higher than the 895,000 children estimated in the 2005 Labour Force survey.

This situation is compounded by the poor quality and coverage of basic social services, especially education, and the insufficient and overstretched social protection mechanisms. The report therefore recommends that immediate attention should be paid to extending coverage of social protection and basic social services as the most effective policy response to child labour. Already a challenge when Zambia was enjoying high growth rates, it will become even more of a challenge with declining national revenues and growth rates in the face of a prolonged economic crisis.

In 2008 a rapid assessment of child labour in non-traditional mining was carried out by the Mining Sector Diversification Programme (funded by the European Commission) in partnership with the ILO's Time Bound Programme Support for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour Project for Zambia (funded by the U.S. Department of Labor) (EC 2008, unpublished). While the assessment is qualitative in nature and cannot be used for statistical generalization and does not cover copper mining or any other large scale formal sector operations, it does provide a clear picture of the nature of child labour in Zambia's small-scale, informal mines for other minerals (zinc and lead) and gems, and in stone crushing (quarrying).

The assessment found that child labour continues to exist in these enterprises and that children are involved in all aspects of the production chain as well as in informal sector stone crushing (quarrying). Children, some as young as seven years, carry out support functions in the mining areas such as fetching water, preparing and selling food, and, in some instances, in the actual mining operation. It provides clear evidence of the hazardous nature of many of the children's tasks; their exposure to toxic substances and extreme heat, lifting heavy loads, working long hours and working at night.

These children are unlikely to benefit from education. They mostly come from poor families, have often lost one or more parents (often due to HIV and AIDS), and live in remote rural areas with poor infrastructure and social service coverage.

The global crisis and child labour in small-scale mines in Zambia: a downward decent work spiral?

Small-mine operators and trade unions such as the Gemstone and Allied Workers Union of Zambia, have reported an influx of workers to the small-scale mines in the wake of downsizing in the large formal mines over the past months. Families who have relied on mining for their income, sometimes for generations, find it hard to switch to other income generating activities, especially in an economic downturn. Add to this the high prevalence of HIV in mining communities¹ and the result is that more and more children are vulnerable to becoming child workers in mining operations or its subsidiary services, and in subsistence agriculture as families draft in more and more family members to help make ends meet.

If the crisis persists and the economic slowdown spreads to other economic sectors, there is a real risk that similar patterns will befall other communities. More child workers does not only mean an immediate risk and violation of rights for the individual children concerned, it will also have a long-term negative effect on Zambia's human resource base. It will deplete Zambia's national development potential and impede its recovery from the economic crisis and its ability to cushion itself against future crises through economic diversification as outlined in the Government's strategic plans. Therefore, immediate action to mitigate the effects of the global crisis and prevent a downward decent work spiral in the form of increasing child labour should be an essential ingredient in the nation's response to the crisis.

The effects of child labour in artisanal mining: a wider impact than is first evident

The negative effects of children working in mines are plentiful. Some are obvious: physical injuries and long-term illnesses from exposure to the hazards of mining operations, and low school attendance because of the long working hours and fatigue (Guarcello, Lyon, and Rosati, 2005). What is less recognised are the broader effects on children's psychological and moral development that comes from growing up in an

¹ National adult prevalence rate is 14% according to the 2007 Demographic and Health Survey (GRZ/CSO: National Demographic and Health Survey, Lusaka 2007)

environment where the dream, and sometimes reality, of “fast cash” through the “big find” is a defining feature.

Small-mine operators and trade unionists alike are extremely concerned about the high prevalence of early marriages in mining communities. It is common for both adolescent boys and girls to marry early to much older adults. Prostitution, including that of very young girls, is very common, and clearly linked to the lack of alternative income earning possibilities, and to the high levels of substance use and abuse, and the “fast money” culture. As a result, HIV exposure and infection levels are high.

Getting children out of artisanal mining areas: What can be done?

Artisanal mining sites are no place for children, even if they do not work in the mining operations. In response to the conclusions of the assessment mentioned above, a broad coalition of actors from Government, social partners, mining sector associations, and NGOs, with support from the ILO, developed a strategic action plan to eliminate child labour from mining in Zambia. The action plan proposes focussing attention on preventing child labour in mining through awareness raising and social mobilization in mining communities and working closely with the local community leadership, (advocating for) extended social service coverage, improving local training opportunities to increase productivity in small scale mines and, above all, focussing on remote, rural areas (especially those with mining communities) in economic diversification and infrastructure development programmes. The plan also covers measures to identify, withdraw and rehabilitate children involved in hazardous mining activities in a community-based manner and through education support, the provision of recreational facilities and alternative income opportunities, and the protection of older children above the minimum age for employment from hazardous tasks, exposures and circumstances.

The Working Group on Child Labour in Mining is currently identifying and mobilizing more resources for additional responses to child labour in mining communities. This is a task that is not made easier – but makes it all the more urgent – by the global economic crisis. The ILO in Zambia is implementing a special pilot initiative in the mining town of Luanshya to mitigate the impact of the global financial crisis, demonstrating clearly the importance of promoting alternative income generation opportunities for young people and adults, combined with awareness raising on decent work and interventions to keep children in schools and out of labour. Breaking the decent work downward spiral is possible, but it requires immediate and concerted attention.

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References

Guarcello, L, Lyon, S and Rosati F.C. 2005. [*Impact of children's work on school attendance and performance: a review of school survey evidence from five countries. A UCW and ILO/IPEC-SIMPOC working paper*](#) (Rome, UCW).

Understanding Children's Work (UCW). 2009. [*Understanding children's work in Zambia: Country report*](#) (Rome, UCW).

Further resources

International Labour Office (ILO), [International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour \(IPEC\)](#) website • [Français](#) • [Español](#)

International Labour Office (ILO), [Resource guide on child labour](#) • [Français](#) • [Español](#)

International Labour Office (ILO), International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour. 2008. [*Combating child labour through education : a resource kit for policy-makers and practitioners*](#) (Geneva, ILO)

International Labour Office (ILO), International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour. 2004. [*Child labour in small-scale mining and quarrying : a thematic evaluation*](#) (Geneva, ILO)

Rau, Bill, International Labour Office (ILO), International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour. 2002. [*Combating child labour and HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa \(pdf 598 KB\)*](#) (Geneva, ILO)

[UCW - Understanding Children's Work](#) website

ILO labour standards on worst forms of child labour:

[C182 Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999](#) • [Français](#) • [Español](#)

[R190 Worst Forms of Child Labour Recommendation, 1999](#) • [Français](#) • [Español](#)