

**INTERGENERATIONAL ISSUES AND THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS:  
FAMILIES' USE OF CHILDREN'S TIME**

**Deborah Levison<sup>1</sup>**

**Prepared for the Expert Meeting on Family and Development  
National Research Council—Committee on Population  
Washington, D.C., July 16–17, 1992**

The term “development” resonates with a sense of the future—a better future than the present. It is the children of today’s adults and their children’s children who will, we hope, live their lives under the conditions of that better future. However, it is today’s parents who make decisions which to a large extent determine how healthy, how skilled, and how educated those children will be as adults. Thus, it is today’s parents who play a large role in determining factors which directly affect the productivity of the labor force of the future. It is in this way that the process of development has an inescapable intergenerational component.

**The Framework.** Researchers who go beyond analysis of the individual to consider the family as a decision-making entity face a very complex task. If the behavior of family members is determined jointly—that is, if the family decides on an overall strategy and allocates time of family members and other family resources in accordance with this overall strategy—then we cannot consider the behavior of one family member without taking all or some of the others into consideration as well. For example, whether a child works in the labor force or goes to school may be related to whether the mother has to stay home to nurse a baby, or whether or not older children are generating income, or whether, after all, the mother is working outside the home and someone has to stay home to take care of the baby. These factors are in addition to considerations of how much the child could earn in the labor market and the value of the education that would be foregone. Measuring the strength of the substitutability between different family members for different types of activities is one of the goals of a family-based analysis. This information is useful because knowing how easy or how hard it is for families to make trade-offs between time and

---

<sup>1</sup> Economic Growth Center, Yale University, until August 1, 1992, then Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota. I thank Duncan Thomas for his helpful suggestions.

resource use of family members tells us how easily policies can affect these decisions, as well as suggesting possible unintended side-effects of policy measures.

In practice, of course, we never have enough information to be able to jointly analyze the time and resource use of all family members. Generally, researchers focus on a few interactions that they consider most important for the question at hand. For example, there is a growing literature which relates women's employment, child care use, and the presence of young children in the family but ignores men's employment decisions. Another, perhaps more serious, simplification of family allocation issues is related to how family decisions are made. Much of the statistical analysis of economists, sociologists, and demographers ignores the internal allocation mechanisms of families and focusses on the actual outcomes. For economists, at least, this means assuming that parents are in perfect agreement at all times, or that one parent assumes the role of a "benevolent dictator" who decides how best to allocate family resources and time of family members, taking into account the well-being of the other family members as well as his or her own well-being. This approach clearly has problems; anyone who reads the U.S. popular press has been informed that the two most common sources of contention between spouses are how to spend their money and how to raise their children. The theory and case studies of many types of social scientists have long pointed to the importance of power differentials and bargaining, but only recently have some researchers been able to apply a bargaining framework to statistical analysis. Duncan Thomas and T. Paul Schultz, among others, have begun to quantify the effects of family members' differential control of resources on the use of these family resources and thus on outcomes such as child health and educational attainment. I will pass over these important issues today and confine my discussion to *outcomes* of family decisions which most closely affect the process of development.

**Focus on Two Sets of Issues.** In particular, I will discuss the relationship between the intragenerational allocation of family resources and the development process in the context of two sets of issues. My own work addresses the two overlapping issues of how children's time is spent—in school, in play, in household chores, or in work outside the home—and how care for infants and young children is provided, taking into account how older family members, especially women and school-aged children, spend their time. The examples with which I am most familiar come from Latin America, but the issues are relevant everywhere.

**Activities of School-Aged Children.** First, consider the activities of school-aged children, which I will define here as being 6–14 year olds. School attendance of these children is a precondition to increasing population literacy and skill levels of the next generation to enter the labor force. One of the most self-evident of truths is also the

most powerful factor affecting child schooling: poverty-stricken parents have poverty-stricken children. While many societies permit some degree of intragenerational mobility between economic strata, more often poor children become poor adults with few marketable skills. Case study after case study tells us that Latin American parents do, in general, recognize the valuable long-term benefits of education for their children. Why, in that case, does a substantial proportion of school-aged children stay out of school? Part of the answer lies in supply factors: crowded or distant schools, with poorly-trained and overworked teachers. Part of the answer, however, lies with the family.

In many cases, poor parents make a rational decision to keep children out of school and to use their time for child care, household work, and/or market work. Some children are able to stay in school while working long hours—50 hours per week is not unusual for employed 10–14 year olds in Brazil, for example. Working children, however, are more likely to miss days of school, to drop out mid-year, or to fail end-of-year examinations. Some jobs are completely incompatible with school.

Child labor has many different implications in different contexts, making generalizations difficult. Children working part-time in a family enterprise may learn mathematics by providing change and business skills by observation and participation. Child apprentices learn a trade. Children who work in the street as ambulatory vendors, shoe-shines, or errand-runners learn independence but are also exposed to street violence, including robbery and assault. Children working in agriculture spend long days with little stimulation, often without protection from extremes of weather. Children working as prostitutes are in constant danger from police, pimps, and clients. Children working in carpet factories go blind before reaching adulthood; those in glass and shoe factories inhale toxic chemicals daily. Clearly, children are easier to exploit than are adults, and correspondingly they require greater protection. On the other hand, case studies of working children in Latin America report consistently that many children *want* to work, that they are proud to contribute to their families and happy to feel independent, that they like being able to buy their own clothes and food, and that sometimes their earnings enable them to go to school. In urban Brazil, employed 10–14 year olds earn 19 percent of their families' total earnings, on average, in spite of very low wage rates.

Many working children spend their days in the streets of cities and towns of developing countries. Since the issue of street children is both emotional and distinctive, implying policy measures which may not be appropriate for working children in general, I will make a brief digression on that topic.

*Street Children.* The issue of street children has received quite a bit of attention from the media. For example, the disappearance of street children from central Rio de Janeiro

was remarked upon during the recent environmental World Summit. Where did they go? I suspect that part of the answer has to do with the composition of street children. Case studies show that the great majority of children who spend their days on the street do, in fact, maintain a connection with their families. In the face of a threat from the Brazilian military police, they may have simply stayed home. They are "children *in* the street," whose activities take them away from home and adult supervision. These children often return home to their families at night, may attend school, and may have partial access to health and other social services. In contrast, "children *of* the street" are runaways or abandoned children, generally from families torn apart by alcoholism, drug addiction, abuse, illness, or extreme poverty.<sup>2</sup> These children work and live on the street and have minimal ties with their families. Although children in these extreme conditions clearly require help, the assumption that any raggedy child working on the streets of a developing country is an abandoned child is unwarranted. Experts believe that the numbers of children *of* the street are small compared to the numbers of children *on* the street who still function in the context of the family.<sup>3</sup> My discussion is relevant to this latter group of children.

*Policy Intervention.* There is a very simple formula which can be used to determine if policy intervention in families' allocation of their resources, including the time of family members, can be justified. If either the costs or benefits of a family's particular strategy can be shown to differ greatly from the costs or benefits of that strategy on society, then serving the greater good can be used as the rationale for policy intervention. Philosophically this formula has some problems, since the particular family or some of its members may end up worse off, but it is a fairly generally accepted standard. Both this type of argument and arguments about the moral imperative to protect the dignity of the human person are used, most notably by the United Nations, to promote several types of policies affecting families' use of child labor. The International Labour Office, in a recent summary of child labor law and practice, calls for (i.) the prohibition of child work in hazardous and unsafe activities, (ii.) the protection of the youngest and most vulnerable children under age 12 or 13, and (iii.) universal, compulsory and free education.<sup>4</sup>

Consider the case where compulsory school attendance is enforced without complementary social support policies. If the child's earnings provide a critical part of a subsistence-level diet for the family, and if there is no possible substitute for this child's earnings, then

---

<sup>2</sup> This terminology follows that of UNICEF. See Barker and Knaul (1991) "Exploited Entrepreneurs: Street and Working Children in Developing Countries," CHILDHOPE-USA Working Paper No. 1, for a useful overview of the situation of street children.

<sup>3</sup> The proportions of children in the two groups is likely to change, however, as the prevalence of children orphaned by AIDS increases.

<sup>4</sup> International Labour Office (1991) *Child Labour: Law and Practice, Conditions of Work Digest* 10(1), Geneva: ILO.

even the private-social net cost formula does not provide a clear answer. Who can say if it is better that a family starve today, compared to the society's attainment of higher productivity levels in the future? The common sense answer is that a malnourished child cannot learn well, even if she attends school; this, in turn, suggests a non-interventionist approach to families' use of child labor.

Assefa Bequele of the ILO, however, argues that this poverty argument against child labor and schooling legislation is a fallacy, and that "it is definitely possible, as can be seen from the experience of some developing countries, to bring about significant reductions in the incidence of child labour and extend protection to working children even at low levels of per capita income and development," when such measures are accompanied by increased access to social services by the poor.<sup>5</sup> At low rates of economic growth, this implies a redistribution of resources.

**Child Care and Family Care Providers.** The time use of mothers and of school-aged children in poor families is related to the needs of the family for household tasks and for care for younger children. Considering household work adds another dimension to the complexities of family allocation decisions. Infants and young children add a serious constraint to families' time use decisions, because of their need for constant care and supervision. Although any of a number of family members—plus a bottle and some formula—may substitute for a breastfeeding mother, in general child care is considered the province of women and children. As women's access to the formal labor market increases in developing countries, school-aged children may increasingly become the rational choice for families allocating child care tasks. Conversely, until there are reasonable substitutes for the services which a woman provides her family, including child care, traditional roles will be resistant to change.

**Implications for Development Projects.** Having recognized that families allocate family resources among their members, possibly allocating the time of the younger generation in ways that are not consistent with development goals, how can we take this into account in the planning and evaluation of different kinds of development projects? Speaking very broadly, it is necessary to think of ways to take advantage of different roles and activities of children and adults, while giving adults credit for best allocating resources and tasks given their constraints and information. A number of examples of how this perspective may be applied to project planning and evaluation in a number of areas follows.

---

<sup>5</sup> ILO, *ibid.*

*Health.* Treatment at neighborhood health or family planning clinics may require a local address, or the presence of an adult. Instead, we should recognize that children have roles within the family which may require more independence than is socially acceptable among better-off families. This may take them out of their own neighborhoods, without accompanying adults. *Nutrition.* Free meals or snacks at school can serve multiple purposes. They not only supply nutritional needs—either replacing or supplementing those provided by the family—but they also increase the opportunity cost of keeping children out of school and may thus improve school attendance rates. *Education.* Improving access to free public education and improving its quality would also increase the incentives to keep children in school. Allowing some flexibility in school hours could help keep working children in school by accommodating to their other responsibilities. The association of preschools and daycare centers with schools could provide care for young siblings, substituting for older children who would otherwise be needed at home to babysit.

*Women's Status.* Women are generally considered responsible for children. A side effect of increasing wage labor opportunities for women may be a reallocation of children's time. Older children may be pulled out of school to provide care for younger children. Alternatively, if as in many Latin American countries the normal duration of a school day is only 4 hours, some employed mothers may decide that their children should be employed the rest of time, in order to ensure they receive some degree of adult supervision. The generation of new roles or activities for women does not necessarily imply that women's other roles will disappear; these must be considered as well, from the perspective that women and children may be good substitutes in many kinds of production.

*Technological Change.* Changes in home production processes may be required in order to reduce the value of children's time in household work. For example, if children are used to gather firewood needed for cooking and heating, a major obstacle to school attendance would be removed by the provision of an alternative source of energy or a more efficient stove, at a reasonable price.

*Regulation of the Workplace.* Consider the case of regulation of carpet factories in India. In that case, establishments with more than 20 employees came under scrutiny by the government and were expected to abide by labor and workplace regulations, but establishments with fewer than 20 workers were not regulated. As a result, establishments sub-divided until they had fewer than 20 employees, and child workers continue to be used for the knotting process which destroys their vision. This is just one example of how regulations may provide incentives contrary to their purpose. Unenforceable or unenforced regulations make a mockery of the law. Development policies which aim to change the patterns of children's lives must not only include the creation of appropriate laws and

regulations but must also provide the necessary monitoring and enforcement mechanisms.

Beyond this, policies also may have to provide alternatives for families whose survival strategies depend upon children's work. In so doing, it is important to recognize that families may not benefit from, for example, child education nearly as much as does the society at large. Societies, however, continue to benefit from the critical role that families play as they strive to buffer their members, and especially their children, from economic shocks.