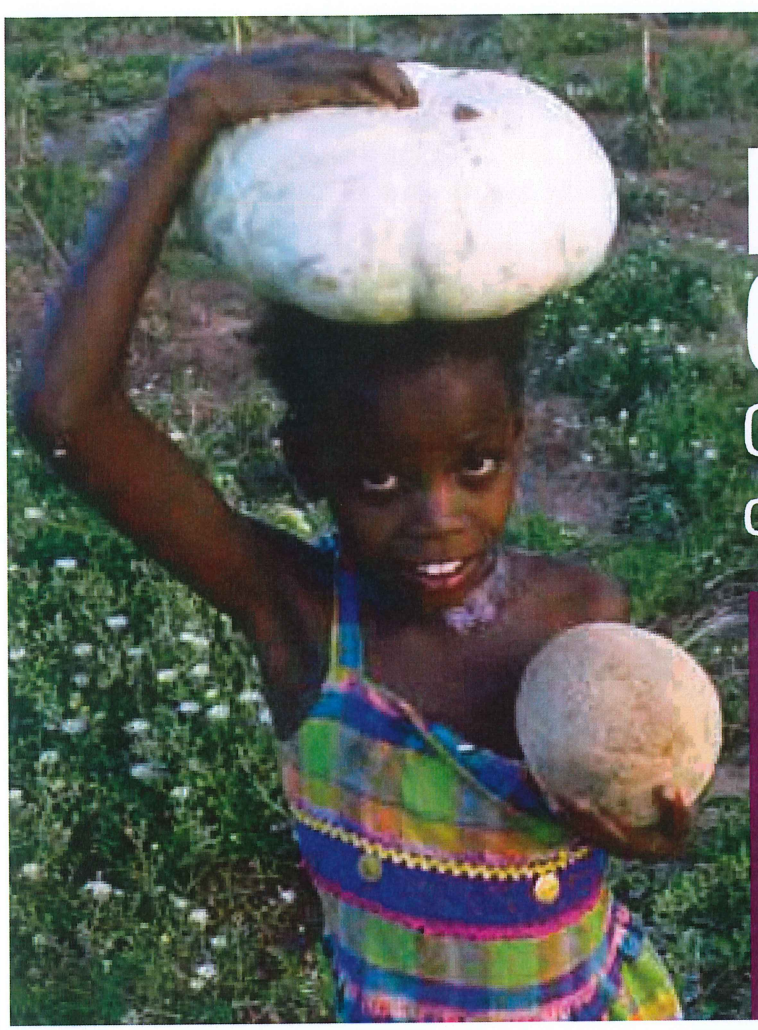


HARVESTING CHILDHOOD:

Causes, nature and impact of child agricultural labour

The 1999 survey of activities of young people in South Africa, conducted by Statistics South Africa, found agriculture to be the third largest employer of children and the nature of employment in commercial agriculture to be high-risk labour. JUDITH STREAK shares new research conducted on child agricultural work and labour in three selected sites in South Africa.

THE STUDY, funded by the International Labour Organisation through the Towards the Elimination of Child Labour (TECL) Programme, investigated agricultural work and labour of all types – subsistence, privately-owned commercial, and community-owned commercial land. It also studied non-agricultural work activities of an economic and domestic kind among children in the age group 12–16.

The three study sites were:

- The Rawsonville area in the Worcester municipality of the Western Cape, dominated by the production of grapes for export and winemaking.
- The Msinga/Weenen border area in uThkela and uMzinyathi district municipalities of KwaZulu-Natal, characterised by mixed commercial farming on community-owned (mainly black) and privately-owned (mainly white) farms, as well as subsistence farming.
- The area north-east of Malelane in Mpumalanga, characterised by commercial farming, mainly citrus, bananas, mangoes and litchi, as well as subsistence agriculture, commercial farms mainly owned privately by white farmers, with black community-owned commercial farms on the increase.

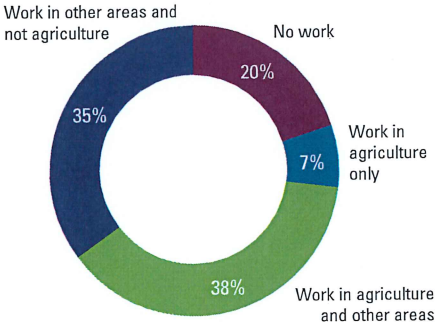
The South African government has ratified the leading international child-rights instruments relating to child work and labour. The Constitution affords all children the right not to work and a comprehensive set of justifiable socio-economic rights. In other words, cases that are capable of being decided by a court have been put in place.

The primary legislation governing child work and prohibiting child labour is the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA) (No.75 of 1997). This prohibits the employment of children until the last school day of the year in which they turn 15, or if they have already completed grade 9 (and have turned 15). Government is obliged to implement a strategy to protect the rights of legally working children and eliminate child labour. A draft strategy, the Child Labour Programme of Action (CLPA) has been developed (led by the department of labour) and is being considered by cabinet.

Child work was defined for the purposes of the study to include paid or unpaid employment in agriculture and other sectors as well as domestic activities. It refers to child activities that are not in breach of the law and policy, do not involve hazardous conditions and are not detrimental to child well-being. Child labour, on the other hand, was defined as work that is in breach of the law (children working under the legal age) and policy, and activities that are hazardous and/or detrimental to child well-being.

The study method involved administering a questionnaire to around 1 300 children age 12–16 in 12 schools, focus groups with children and adults and interviews with adult stakeholders. A class questionnaire sample of 1 033 children was used in analysis.

Figure 1: *Work activities of children: Agriculture and other*



CHILD WORK IN AGRICULTURE

The findings on the incidence and nature of child agricultural work were as follows:

- Incidence emerged as high: 45% of the total class questionnaire sample worked in agriculture in the past year, of which 50% worked in subsistence only, 15% in commercial only, and 35% in commercial and subsistence.
- Incidence and types of work varied across sites. In the Western Cape site, 17% of children worked in agriculture (privately-owned commercial); in the KwaZulu-Natal site, 91% (54% in subsistence and commercial, and 42% only in subsistence); and in the Mpumalanga site, 59% worked in agriculture (19% in subsistence and commercial, and 77% only in subsistence).
- Boys emerged as more likely than girls to work in commercial agriculture.
- Boys and girls emerged as equally likely to work in subsistence agriculture.
- Work in subsistence agriculture was found to occur mainly before school, after school, over weekends and during school holidays.
- The timing of child work in commercial agriculture was found to be similar, but peak season work emerged as more common.
- The study showed the difficulty of establishing reliable estimates of the average number of hours worked by children. It found work in private commercial agriculture to be haphazard but intensive.

The findings on the incidence and nature of non-agricultural child work activities were as follows:

- Children working in agriculture were found to carry a high burden of non-agricultural work activities – economic (such as washing cars and selling sweets) and domestic. Domestic work in own homes was found to be extremely common but the study also revealed high incidence of domestic work in other peoples homes (60% of sample).
- Work in school gardens is common.
- Girls emerged as more likely than boys to do domestic work and boys more likely to do economic work.

The dominant cause of child work in agriculture was poverty. Children working in agriculture were found to have fewer assets, more hunger, higher parental unemployment and lower education status than children not working at all. Children working in commercial and subsistence agriculture were found to have fewer assets, more hunger, lower parental education status and to be less likely to have both parents alive than those working in commercial agriculture or subsistence agriculture.

What children say about causes

'We don't' have enough money for food and clothes... Some of us give all our money to our mothers for food when we work' (Boy, Western Cape site).

'Because we are suffering and we need money, we go and work on a farm, but it is not a nice job' (Youth, Mpumalanga site).

'I help with the vegetable garden and after harvesting we sell and eat some of the veggies' (Girl, Mpumalanga site).

What adults say about causes

'Most children do some kind of work...They are helping their families and gaining skills...It is a way to help the family survive'

(Teacher, KwaZulu-Natal site).

'They are learning but they are also helping us...They are taught respect'

(Farmer and parent, KwaZulu-Natal site).

'The problem is that parents are drinking'

(Principal, Western Cape site).

Additional causes of child work in agriculture were the duty to help family; the need to learn important skills for their future, parental interest in keeping children 'busy'; and parental alcohol abuse (most notable in the Western Cape site).

CHILD LABOUR IN AGRICULTURE

The analysis of child labour included the consideration of numbers of children younger than 15 working in agriculture, indicators of hazardous conditions (13) and indicators of negative impact on well-being (health and school). We found the following:

- Large numbers of children younger than 15 were found to be working in commercial and subsistence agriculture (boys at higher risk than girls).
- The extent of child labour, measured as a report of any one of the other indicators, emerged as very high, in both subsistence and commercial agriculture.
- Hazards were more commonly reported for both types of agricultural work than the negative impact on school or health.
- The negative impact on school and health was reported by large numbers of children working in subsistence and commercial agriculture.
- Children working in commercial agriculture were found to be at a higher risk for exposure to hazards than children working in subsistence agriculture.
- A handful of common hazards were found in both agriculture types: working when it is too hot; working when thirsty; working for too many hours; working when tired; working before sunset or after sunset.
- Additional hazards common in commercial agriculture were: fear of abuse (physical and verbal by fellow workers or farmer); and transport difficulties accessing work.
- Children working in agriculture were found to have higher levels of anxiety and depression than those not working at all.
- Children working in subsistence agriculture only were found to have lower levels of anxiety and to be less likely to suffer depression than those working only in commercial agriculture or both types.

A paradox is that the study highlighted the high value that children and adults place on child agricultural work in spite of the hazards and negative impact on well-being. This is explained by the critical role such work plays in supporting livelihoods and meeting basic needs. In the words of one child: 'We are able to support our families...brothers and sisters' (Girl, KwaZulu-Natal site).

What law enforcement can prevent commercial agriculture work by under-age children? The general consensus from focus groups was that the employment of children under the legal age has decreased over time. The reduction was seen to be partly due to better enforcement of new policies and laws prohibiting young children from working, the enforcement of the minimum wage law, ▶

and a reduction in general demand for agricultural labour.

Adult research participants argued that the conditions of work for children on commercial farms have improved.

Six recommendations, mostly in line with the CLPA, followed from the study:

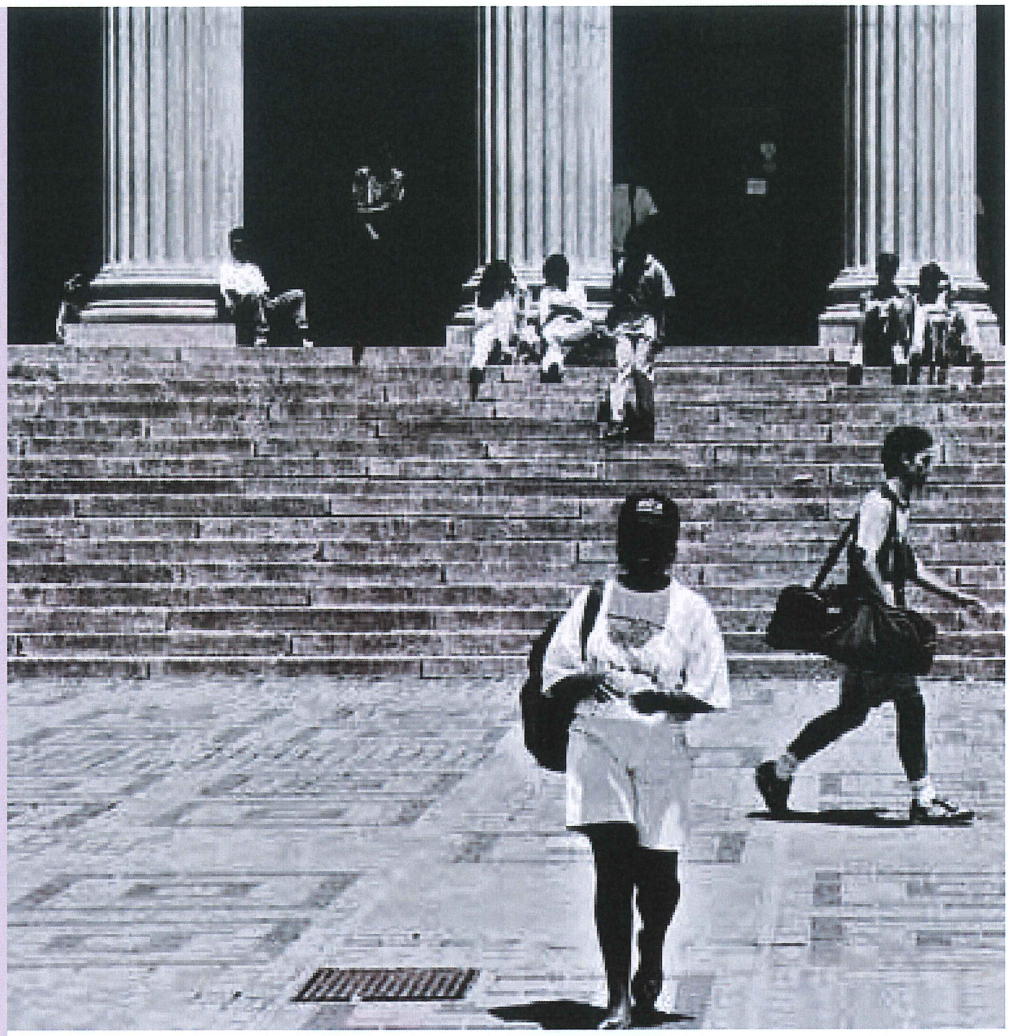
- **More effective poverty reduction and alleviation measures:** These are most important. The study flags options to explore.
- **Better law enforcement measures:** More resources are required to enforce the law preventing children under the legal age from working in commercial agriculture and to ensure payment of the minimum wage. The former must be linked to more effective poverty measures. If it isn't, children will simply trade the right to a minimum income for the right not to work.
- **Awareness raising measures:** These are required to educate caregivers of children working in subsistence agriculture as well as legal employers of children working in commercial agriculture about the common hazards and negative impact on well-being and how to avoid them.
- **Measures to reduce the risk of exposure to negative influences and anti-social behaviour:** Programmes and facilities are urgently required to occupy children in poorly resourced communities when they are not in school.
- **Measures to address alcohol dependence amongst child caregivers.**
- **Measures to link children to local income-earning opportunities:** For example, adjustments to school curricula in rural areas should be explored to better link learners leaving school with local development needs and employment opportunities. ●

***Last words:** A child's view about what is required*

'If the government would give support grants…or open job opportunities for our parents… we would not need to work'

(Girl, Mpumalanga site).

Judith Streak is a senior research manager in the Child, Youth, Family and Social Development (CYFSD) research programme. The final report will be available on the HSRC website soon.



Why students leave:

The problem of high university drop-out rates

The socio-economic status of families of students who do not complete their university qualifications played a significant role in the students' ability to persevere in their studies, concludes MOEKETSI LETSEKA, project leader of a groundbreaking new study on the question of why students leave prematurely.

In the study we avoided using the tern 'dropouts' to describe students who leave the universities without completing their qualifications. Our assumption is that university students do not drop out. They withdraw from their studies for numerous reasons: personal, social, economic, cultural, political and others. They take up jobs, join the army, get married, take a year off, but they often either return to their studies via contact-mode institutions or via distance education, and transfer their accumulated credits to the institution where they re-register.

THE HSRC'S STUDENT PATHWAYS STUDY traces a 2000–2002 cohort of students who left ('non-completers') the institution without completing their studies, as well as those students who graduated in seven selected public higher education institutions (HEIs), namely, the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), the University of Stellenbosch (US), the University of Fort Hare (UFH), the University of Limpopo (UL), the University of the Western Cape

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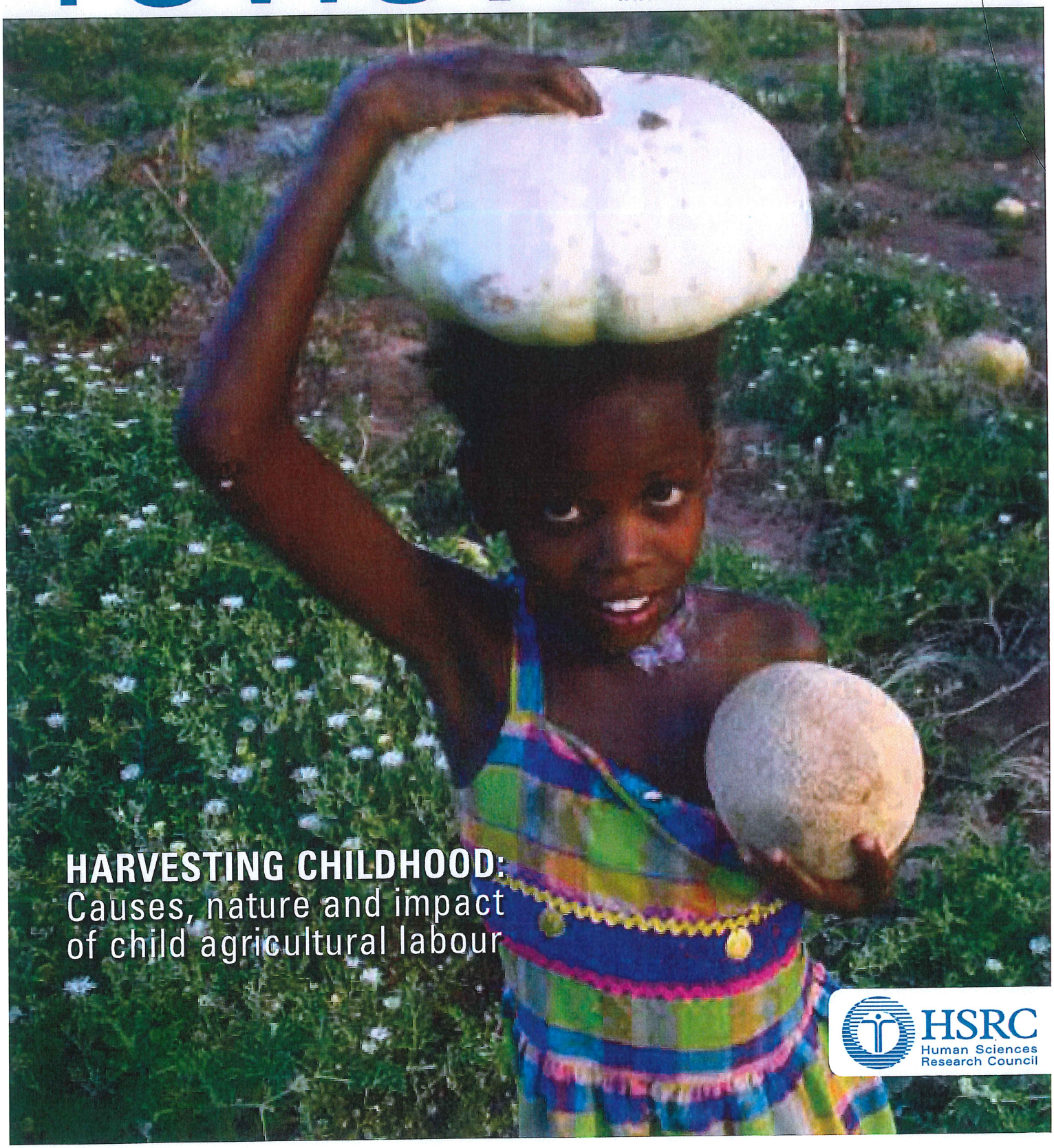

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