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Child labour, agency and family dynamics: The case of mining in Katanga (DRC)

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Abstract
In the last three decades, the development of the artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) sector has been increasing in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), bringing more and more urban families into this flourishing business sector, and among them, children. This article aims to look at the often unconceivable, and as a result neglected, social agency of children even when they are involved in activities which are, in the international legislation on children’s rights, categorized as one of the worst forms of child labour. To do so, it relies on the results of a socio-anthropological collective research project on children’s mining activities which was carried out in a small locality called La Ruashi in the city of Lubumbashi (Province of Katanga). The article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of these child mining-related activities by looking at different spheres of social relations within which children are embedded. Examining the set of social relations that children have with their families, the broader community and their ‘peers’, several ‘family portraits’ are offered, highlighting a heterogeneity of social interpretations regarding this form of child work. It is shown that for families from a middle-class background, this kind of work is often socially disruptive, at the forefront of intergenerational conflict. As for families from lower classes, social changes induced by children’s mining activities are often better incorporated into the family habitus. Common dynamics, encountered in all families irrespective of class belonging, is also portrayed.

Keywords
Children’s agency, child work in artisanal mining, interdependencies, intergenerational relationships, social differentiation of childhood

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How can one understand the difficult and dangerous activities that children in Sub-Saharan Africa often brave – like artisanal mining? Should one consider children as victims of global capitalism? Or should one see in their trajectories a series of choices that they have made themselves?

This question – whether and how children contribute to the trajectories that lead them into harsh working environments – is especially pertinent in the case of the thousands of children involved in the mining sector of Katanga Province, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). This province holds immense geological potential; as a result, the ups and downs of its local economy are tied to fluctuations in the prices of raw materials on international financial markets (Cuvelier, 2009, 2011; Ferguson, 1999). Katanga, organized around the city of Lubumbashi, was the industrial cornerstone of Congo-Zaïre both during and after the colonial period (Cuvelier, 2011; Rubbers, 2009). The province was deeply marked by the collapse of the Gécamines mining company (Générale des Carrières et des Mines), which saw a stunning drop in production as the DRC was shaken by a period of unprecedented social, political and economic crises in the 1990s (Rubbers, 2006). With the end of the war in 2003 and the return of a fragile political stability under international supervision, Katanga’s mining sector has seen a remarkable economic upswing in the context of worldwide high demand for raw materials, especially in China and India. The increase in production which followed the rise in prices for raw materials contributed to the development of many industrial mines as well as to a surge in artisanal mining, both legal and illegal.

According to different authors (Labazée, 1996; Toto; 1996, Verlet, 2005), children in Sub-Saharan Africa and especially in the DRC (Dibwe, 2001; Petit, 2003) are increasingly obliged to take economic initiatives to provide for the needs of their households. In this perspective, the artisanal mining sector appears as an opportunity for families, children and the young (Okyere, 2012; Wouango, 2012). In the DRC, thousands of them engage in mining-related activities (OCU, 2006). This phenomenon seems all the more important because of very low public investment in education: since 1984, parents’ financial participation in their children’s schooling has become more and more significant (De Herdt, 2011: 115–156; Poncelet et al., 2010). Following the first wave of anthropological studies on childhood, Africanist research highlighted the embeddedness of rural children’s production activities in ‘traditional self-subsistence societies’ (Lallemand, 2002) within a set of reciprocal duties, gifts and responsibilities towards their elders (Fortes, 1978; Goody, 1982; Katz, 1996; Richards, 1939; Schilkrout, 2002 [1978]). Recent studies have stressed that children are not only shaped by their social environment but are also social agents who actively participate in social, economic and political developments (De Boeck and Honwana, 2000; Honwana and De Boeck, 2005), and especially through their growing contribution in economic processes (Reynolds, 1991; Verlet, 2005). In African urban areas (Labazée, 1996; Mor Mbaye and Salam Fall, 1996; Toto, 1996; Verlet, 2005) and especially in the DRC (De Boeck, 2000), children’s economic initiatives occur in a conjuncture of intense restructuring of kinship patterns and family units. New dynamics of gift, reciprocity and exchanges are taking place, affecting the ways in which children and their social roles are locally perceived and seen (De Boeck, 2005; Mor Mbaye and Salam Fall, 1996). In the case of Katanga, some scholars add that children claim to be independent, provoking fears among the elders...
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In the wake of these recent observations, this article studies the work-related activities of children in artisanal heterogenite mines in the Katanga Province, DRC, and analyses their capacity for action by examining whether their labour is contributing to collective dynamics or, on the contrary, is liberating children from these dynamics.

**Child work: Between interdependence and agency**

In order to analyse children’s agency, we have adopted a theoretical point of view and a specific methodology that allow us to account for both collective dynamics and processes of individualization that can structure children’s involvement in mining. Certain kinds of research can be considered as precursors in this desire to reconcile, on one hand, the study of social structures and relations that fashion the experiences of these children and, on the other, these children’s own capacity for action. In studies of child work in essentially agricultural societies, Reynolds (1991) and Nieuwenhuys (1994) show how systems of relations, such as those implied by household or kinship as well as social classes (Nieuwenhuys, 1994), shape children’s work. These authors also emphasize how children, in developing their own strategies for survival in everyday life (Reynolds, 1991: 138), take part in the reproduction of social structures.

Moreover, we took inspiration from research whose analyses are framed in terms of generations (Alber et al., 2008; Cole and Durham, 2007), intergenerational structures and relations (Alanen, 2011; Mayall, 2011) and the notion of family (Invernizzi, 2001), as well as processes by which representations, dispositions and models of identity are transmitted by the older generation and creatively reactivated by the newer generation (André, 2012; Cole, 2004; Willis, 1977). In the same vein, we adopt a ‘dispositionalist’ perspective, as developed by Bourdieu (1972) alongside a contextual approach as developed by Lahire (1995, 2012). Lahire’s sociology combines both the ‘dispositionalism’ of Bourdieu and a ‘contextualism’ that better grasp the past, incorporated (dispositions) and being actualized in a plurality of contexts (Lahire, 2012). In addition, the level of interdependency between social spheres is one of the main interests of Lahire’s work. Social actors in that respect are not defined by one social position in one specific social microcosm but by a plurality of social belongings. This perspective of interdependency appears relevant for grasping African children’s agency as they have started to be perceived as ‘interdependent beings whose daily livelihoods are intricately entwined with and are inseparable from that of the family collective’ (Abebe, 2013: 72). Therefore, children are considered here as social beings who have incorporated schemes of behaviours, perceptions and representations (Bourdieu, 1994) which are then actualized depending on social situations and specific networks of social relations (Lahire, 1995).

Starting from this theoretical orientation, this article interrogates recent anthropological work which, in our view, overlooks social transformations induced by the development of artisanal and small-scale mining (ASM) on local communities and which often considers social spaces of artisanal mining as governed by a specific culture apart from the outside world (Cuvelier, 2011; Grätz, 2003; Herbert, 1993). On the contrary, we suggest looking at the livelihoods of local families who have progressively opted for artisanal mining activities in terms of continuity and ruptures in relation to a pre-existing
social order. Thus, we analyse mining-related activities of children through the lens of other kinds of work and tasks that children have traditionally performed within the household and are still performing outside the mines. By doing this, we hope to contribute to a better understanding of what the international legislation generally categorizes as one of the worst forms of child labour. Several studies have shown that the notion of ‘child labour’ or the categorizations resulting from international legislations related to children’s rights are far from grasping the complexities of the different work activities that children carry out (Bourdillon, 2006: 1204–1205; Jacquemin, 2006: 390; Nieuwenhuys, 1994: 16, 24; Okyere, 2012: 7; Wouango, 2012: 13). More precisely, while international legislation on children’s rights deems child mining activities as ones of the worst forms of child labour, Okyere has shown how they are important strategies by which young people try to pursue the achievement of their survival, their rights and educational trajectories (Okyere, 2012).

Concretely, in order to reconstruct the trajectories of children within and leading to the mines, we conducted comprehensive interviews with them, as well as observations and informal discussions in their places of work and play. Field research was carried out during schools’ summer vacation in 2007. Most school-going children thus had free time and were devoting it to a range of economic activities, including collecting rocks around artisanal mines. Because the new Mining Code ('Code minier') of 2002 privileges foreign investment, many mining sites previously operated by the local population were closed, the rights to use them were sold to international companies, and children and artisanal diggers were expelled. This context was favourable for analysing the discourses by which both parents and children justify previous and more intense child mining-related activities. Besides mining, most children engaged in other types of activities, which we also observed, like creating adobe bricks (bricks made of uncooked clay), selling tomatoes and so on. Alongside this child-centred approach, we employed the method of cross-generational interviews, which seeks to interview members of a single family from different generations. The juxtaposition of these points of view enabled us to establish 21 family portraits which make intergenerational relations evident. The fieldwork was conducted in four ‘mixed teams’ of researchers which included: one Belgian researcher, one Congolese researcher from the Urban Change Observatory and students from the University of Lubumbashi (UNILU). In total, 21 Congolese households took part, including: parents and children’s caregivers, siblings and various members of the extended family (aunts, uncles, fostered children, etc.) generally living on the same plot of land. In the process, 44 interviews were conducted, some of which were collective and others of which were conducted individually with one child or one parent. We also conducted group discussions that included various members of the community (neighbourhood leaders, teachers, school principals) or representatives of the NGO Groupe One, a Belgian association working in partnership with UNICEF to interrupt child mining activities by creating income-generating opportunities for parents and implementing school reintegration programmes.

Finally, this intensive ethnographic fieldwork was conducted in depth in two socio-economically different neighbourhoods of a district of Lubumbashi known as La Ruashi, which developed in the 1950s in response to demographic pressure. The distance between each neighbourhood and the mines helps account for the contrasts between them. In
Matoléo, a central area of La Ruashi which is relatively far from the mines, the population is generally older and more at ease in manipulating urban codes and styles. People there have had direct experience with the wage-based culture of Gécamines or another company, or engaged in occupations that led them to adhere to representations of the nuclear family. The population of Kalukuluku, located closer to the quarries and characterized by hastily built mud residences, is relatively recent, as is its experience of urban codes. It has less cultural and economic capital than Matoléo. While such a contrast between the two neighbourhoods must be relativized given the many variables at the family level (economic and cultural capital, capital of ‘autochthony,’ ‘degree of urbanity’\(^3\)), it nonetheless allows us to analytically distinguish families from lower-class and middle-class backgrounds.

**Child mining in Katanga**

*Social order inside and outside the mines: Children as workforce*

Most of the lower-class families we studied see children as a workforce in the service of the group – at the family or community level – and adhere to a representation that structures children’s trajectories and experiences in artisanal mines. Africanists have shown how ‘traditional self-subsistence societies’ ‘assign children a regular share of work early on’ (Lallemand, 2002: 12; see also Dibwe, 2007) as a form of socialization, construing the child as a non-negligible workforce. Recent studies highlight the persistence of this perception of children (Berry, 1985; Reynolds, 1991; Schildkrout, 2002 [1978]; Wouango, 2012) in various countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, including in the urban contexts (Ngueyap, 1996). Taking these studies into account, our research shows that there is a relative continuum between the social order inside and outside the mine. In fact, the mining-related activities performed by children generally displayed a certain continuity with other tasks like household chores, selling tomatoes or brick making that they undertook in order to help their parents or the larger group (relatives, neighbours, members of the community). As such, tasks were divided along generational lines, just as they are outside the mine: diggers (*batshimba madini*), usually older children or adults, extracted ore from underground mine roads, while young boys gathered it on the ground’s surface (*salakate*). The world of the mine is organized into two parts: that of adults and diggers, on one hand, and that of children, surface gatherers and rock-washers, on the other.

As the example of the Lukonde family shows, we observed that children did not work alone in the mines. In some cases, in a way similar to rural agricultural work that emphasizes social relations of production and socialization, all members of a family worked side by side:

Before the artisanal mining sites were opened, Madame Lukonde sold vegetables in small markets. Her husband had no paying job, but he did his best to bring income to the family. Their four children did not go to school. When the opportunity to work in artisanal mines came up, the father and two oldest sons, ages 10 and 13, went there. The father would work in a team of three to four diggers. He went down into the mine roads and dug, while his two sons searched for and collected material from the backfill. They returned home each day with the material
they had gathered. At dusk, the four children cleaned the rocks they had found in order to sell them later. Sometimes the mother would sell the material her children had gathered herself.

As this family portrait illustrates, children play a crucial role in the performance of the family’s production activities. Moreover, children’s mining-related work is inscribed within a set of social relations with elders and can assume a dimension of socialization. We also observed that some parents encouraged their children to go to work in the mines without working there themselves. In such cases, children learned tasks specific to artisanal mining by working alongside other figures of authority, such as neighbours, relatives, or men from the neighbourhood.

But not all children follow adults to the mine. In fact, many children were led there by the influence of their peers. Even so, as the cases of Beatrice (age 5), Gracia (11), Niota (13) and Monique (14) show, adults do not have to be present in order for children’s mining activities to contribute to collective dynamics within the spheres of family and community:

Beatrice, Gracia, Niota, and Monique are four of Monsieur Donatien and Madame Suzanne’s 10 children. The father is now a trader but has a hard time finding contracts. The mother distills alcohol. Unlike their children, the parents never worked for money during their own childhoods, but, by participating in rural activities with their friends, they did acquire a certain representation of child work, and have transmitted it to their offspring. They feel that their children’s activities are less appreciated than their own were at the same age. Because of economic hard times, the parents are nevertheless obliged to accept money from their children’s work. Because of the school’s importance today, they send some of their kids to school, namely two boys, with help from family obligations that link them to an uncle. Because the family lacks money, the others cannot go to school. Before the artisanal mining sites were opened, the four girls did not really practise any paying work, other than various household chores and helping their mother sell tomatoes. When the artisanal mines opened, three older brothers left to work as diggers. The boys would give half of their earnings to their mother. The sisters went to the mines soon after. A friend told them that there were activities for girls: cleaning ore bags would pay 900 Congolese francs per day. For two weeks, the girls worked without telling their parents, for fear of being scolded. Uneasy in this situation of disobedience and unshared earnings, they ended up telling their parents. Welcoming this news, the parents strongly encouraged the girls to continue working at the mine because this would not only allow them to bring money home, but also to learn a job. The girls counted their money each week and set aside a large part of it to buy food for the family. Thus, with a certain pride, they could plan the family’s meals.

While the four sisters’ experience of the mine was mainly the result of their own initiative, it did not challenge any relations of duty, obligation, or gift towards people around them, namely their parents and brothers. Rather, beneath their experience lay dispositions and representations of work, transmitted by their parents, in which a collective dimension was essential, following the model of agricultural and domestic tasks. Furthermore, earnings were interpreted by the four sisters as a problem when they were not integrated into relations of dependence, duty and gift towards members of the household.

This example also illustrates how the division of work is gendered. While rock-sifting may be performed by both boys and girls, trash collecting (salakate) on mining...
sites is reserved for boys. Digging is essentially the work of older boys and adult men. Since the precolonial period, mining-related tasks have typically been masculine activities in Katanga (Cuvelier, 2011: 36) and in many other areas of Sub-Saharan Africa (Herbert, 1993). Many representations of the connections between mines, gender and death (Cuvelier, 2011: 178) have led societies to bar women and girls from access to mining sites. Women and girls may work near quarries, outside mines, where they perform other tasks such as sifting or crushing rocks and cleaning bags. These activities are less lucrative than those done by men and older boys, and are situated in a relation of subordination to diggers. Alongside small children, girls clean rocks and engage in petty commerce, usually with their mothers. This gendered division of work supports our argument that a continuum exists between the social order inside the mine and outside. Gender and generational relations from outside mining sites are reproduced and play out inside them.

**The school as norm, the ideology of the nuclear family and generational conflict**

Although child work in and around mines includes a collective aspect related to the organization of families and the community, it is decried by adults, especially middle-class parents. But certain ambivalence characterizes their discourse. Since living conditions are extremely difficult, parents feel obliged to accept this additional income. Moreover, when they allow their children to go to artisanal mines, they still try to control their work – at least for a while. The fear of losing control over one’s offspring because of paid work is especially present in middle-class families, which are particularly sensitive to representations of the nuclear family and the school-going child. The following quotation from a former worker at Gécamines illustrates quite well these fears among parents, especially middle-class parents, linked to specific representations of childhood, work and family:

> Before the quarry was opened, all the children attended school. When the mines opened, the situation was disrupted. It was difficult to get children back home. … I disapproved, working in the quarry is supposed to be temporary! That’s not work! And especially for kids, we have other things for children. The only way to get a good position is to study, especially when we, parents, have the money to support it. … and we have the duty to do it.

The Union Minière du Haut-Katanga (UMHK), created during the colonial period and subsequently nationalized as Gécamines, the railway company and, more generally, the colonial administration had a decisive impact on representations of work, masculinity and the family (Cuvelier, 2011). They promoted ideals of the school and the nuclear family, including the image of the head of household charged with the duty of providing for his family through his work (Dibwe, 2001). Although the current context is profoundly challenging this vision, and new strategies for survival are contributing to processes of identity reinvention (Cuvelier, 2011), the norm of the man as breadwinner still has significant force in Katanga, especially among middle-class families. To some extent, middle-class parents and NGOs share similar social representations about family and childhood.
Indeed, the actions of the NGO are based on a ‘sentimental’ vision that sees a child above all as a person that must be physically and morally protected. This conception has been reinforced by a series of specific rights that are attributed to children, distinct from those of adults (Boyden, 1997; Invernizzi, 2003). According to this view, the outside world, in this case the world of the mine, is a stigmatized and stigmatizing space that can only be harmful for the development and well-being of the child. In contrast, the areas of the school and the home are legitimate spaces where the socialization of children can take place. In a childhood seen as legitimate, adults must provide for children’s needs, therefore child labour is not accepted.

In middle-class families, parents deny all responsibility when their children start to work in the mines; they are beset with feelings of guilt, shame and embarrassment. This stance gives rise to intergenerational conflicts:

In the Sylvain family, the parents are school-educated and have always lived around the city of Lubumbashi. They have seven children, of which three have worked in the mines: Prince, the eldest, age 19, and Jerry and Samy, respectively 13 and 14. Compared to other families, the Sylvains are relatively well-off. The father was an employee of the Gécamines until it closed. He remained jobless for a while, before finding a small position as a guard. The mother, for her part, grows crops. Both parents say they did not work as children. Before Monsieur Sylvain lost his job, none of his children worked for money, and all went to school. Once he lost his job, they could no longer go to school. Through other children in the neighbourhood, Samy, Jerry and Prince found out they could work in the mines and earn money for ‘little things’ and ‘to buy candy’. Without telling their parents, they began to go there. Although kids of their age tended to work less difficult jobs, Jerry and Samy, then 11 and 12, would extract ore with a pickaxe and spud bars. They worked in groups of four to five children; the group would share the 3000 Congolese francs it earned each day. The three boys never gave any money to their parents until their job was discovered. They were reprimanded not so much for working in the mines as for earning money without telling the family. The father allowed them to continue working in the mines on the condition that they hand over most of their earnings. Even so, he seemed disheartened that he would need to take money from his children because of his own inability to provide for his family. Prince, unlike his two younger brothers, worked more than two years in the mines and ended up as a digger with an income that could reach, according to him, 20,000 francs per day. Decked out in baggy pants, an imitation-leather jacket, and a baseball cap turned backwards, he drew his style from a certain representation of youthful gangs in American rap. Prince had a reputation among his siblings and parents for being a bit of a rogue because he would contribute only a tiny part of his earnings to the family.

The way children used their pay from the mines differed according to the representations of childhood that dominated in their families. In lower-class families like the Lukondes, children are considered more as producers and have a duty to contribute to the family’s revenue in their own way. This is less the case for families who are more sensitive to representations disseminated during the colonial period, as described above. In middle-class families, children are less aware of having any potential role as producers, or of the obligations that such a representation would imply – such as sharing one’s earnings with the family. In effect, middle-class children, who generally go to school before going to the mine, begin to work there not so much for their parents as for themselves (‘to
kill time’, ‘to buy a few things’). Most of the time, their incomes are not accepted by the household, especially by fathers, who perceive themselves as the main breadwinners thus considering children as dependent and immature:

Former worker at Gécamines: At that time, some parents were begging their children in order to have something from them, but when my kids came with something, I said: ‘Go away, I do not need your money, it’s not your money that is going to help us live. … What I want is for you to go back to school! That was my line when they used to go to the quarry!

This allows us to understand why some children try to acquire skills and knowledge at the mines that do not serve the family dynamic at all. It also allows us to understand why Prince kept his distance from the network of social relations on which he depended and why he used his income as a source of power in the spheres of the family and the local community.

Children’s mining-related activities are not given the same social meaning among Congolese families and vary in regard to family’s social background. However, some similarities across families can be observed when looking at the totality of socializing agents (Lahire, 1995). Indeed, in families of middle-class backgrounds, the father socially transmits work dispositions as well as childhood and family representations in accordance with his own symbolic universe, namely that of the capitalist and industrial mining sector. Concerning the social figure of the mother, women are generally driven by responsibilities for the survival of the family which include providing food. As a result, women bring their children into this specific kind of labour more than men do, albeit within a system of household rights and obligations.

The inversion of roles: Mining as a prestige activity

As we have seen, parents, including middle-class parents, can adopt an attitude that is nuanced or even favourable towards the work of their children in artisanal mines, as long as it contributes to the daily functioning of the household and participates in a dynamic of collective service. Even so, regardless of socioeconomic background, adults are generally afraid for their children to work in mining, especially as diggers. In official discourses, the danger of this task is what especially scares parents. But the significance of the pay and the resulting individualization5 of children also cause parents to keep their offspring away from the mines:

Former worker at Gécamines: At the time the quarry opened, we tried to take them back. But the experience of work in the mines influenced children and young people to leave their households. Children rebelled! It’s a rebellion when they stop going to school without informing their parents.

Adults see the world of the mine as a place whose values are contrary to the social order. Since the 1970s, many studies of miners in Sub-Saharan Africa have shown that miners are considered as a separate group from the rest of society: they receive an income which, over time, threatens individuals and the ability to live together (Cuvelier, 2011: 38). In the case of Katanga, Cuvelier points out that miners respond to these stigmas by
creating a sub-culture, the *kivoyou* style (Cuvelier, 2011: 69), characterized by extravagance, flashiness and an affirmation of autonomy and financial independence from others. Parents, having a very critical view of artisanal mines, especially fear that the bonds of interdependence between neighbourhood families will be broken when mine labour is introduced, since it will offer children new spaces of socialization where they will gradually be separated from exchanges of service within the community.

These fears, which are linked to evolving patterns of kinship and dynamics of gift and exchange, are not entirely unfounded. Indeed, certain children construct a hierarchy of tasks different from that of their elders. As the following portrait shows, mine labour can offer children a kind of social recognition that they could not otherwise access in the domestic sphere or among kin:

Kaoma, aged 12, lived in Zambia before coming to live with his aunt in the Congo when his father died. He had attended school before emigrating. For lack of means, and probably in order to benefit from cheap labour within the home, his aunt did not help him continue his studies\(^6\) – unlike other children in the household, who went to school. Compared to them, he thus had an inferior status and suffered a form of exclusion day in and day out. When Kaoma heard of mining sites from other kids in the neighbourhood, he went there to earn some money for his own needs. Kaoma worked in artisanal mines during the day without sharing his money with the household, but he still managed to perform the domestic tasks that his aunt required.

Children like Kaoma who hold a subservient position in the sphere of the home value their work in artisanal mines by opposing it to activities that groups of children do for their families or the neighbourhood, like carrying bundles or getting water from the well. To express their disdain for such tasks, they refer to children who perform services for others as *katako*, ‘bundle-carriers’, and are themselves referred to as *batshimba madini*, ‘ore-diggers’. They demand this more flattering name since ore is a coveted resource, and its possession and sale are sources of prestige. They feel more generally that doing work in the service of others amounts to being a domestic. They also believe that working to serve others in the family or neighbourhood can create social tensions that may put them in delicate situations. Since child work is inscribed in a set of logics of reciprocity, any instance of breaking a rule is a source of potential conflict. An adult who is dissatisfied with the outcome of a child whom he or she has asked for a favour can complain to the child’s parents, who will then have to assume the debt of a service not rendered. In order to free themselves from the constraints of this logic, some children prefer to be their own bosses by selling their labour at the mine.

Our research shows that while children generally see work in the mines as an opportunity, not all see this activity or the income that it generates in the same way. Many of them work mainly to increase their family’s revenue, to ‘help’ their families and the community. But for some children, mine work represents a source of recognition and an alternative site of identity construction. It includes children like Kaoma who have a particularly devalued status in a relative’s home where they were sent to live. It also includes older boys from families who were better-off socioeconomically in the past, but whose identity models of the breadwinning father and school-going child have been disrupted by changes in living conditions.
Conclusions

This article sought to look at child mining activities in the ASM sector in a small locality in the city of Lubumbashi called La Ruashi (in the Province of Katanga, DRC), mobilizing a theoretical framework which emphasizes the embodiment of the social world. In doing so, we argue that the individualization of children in the DRC through mining-related activities happens through pre-existing social frameworks.

Many children have acquired a decision-making power outside the household sphere that does not always challenge the collective dimensions of duties and obligations valued by the family and the neighbourhood. Some children perform mining activities because it is their ‘duty’ to do so alongside household chores or other small activities, often carried out collectively. Children from lower-class families have often made the decision to go to the mines in order to help their elders – their parents or the community. In fact, the same logic of the child as worker lies beneath both forms of activity, that is, domestic work and work at the mines. These children respect the moral obligation to put their earnings back into the circuit of domestic relations at the same time as they acquire decision-making power in the home – by planning meals, for example. In this case, the work in the mine undertaken by children (even if not encouraged by parents) does not lead to a change in terms of how solidarity is organized. In these family portraits, social forms of continuity with the pre-existing social order of things prevail. However, within these families, some children have chosen to distance themselves from household and community dynamics. For these children and young people who occupy subaltern or profoundly disrupted social positions, the flow of raw materials has overthrown local hierarchies and has given new social status to children who are usually marginalized in their society.

But not all children go to the mines with similar social representations and dispositions. Middle-class families adopt an understanding of child mining activities that is more in line with notions of ‘child labour’ as it is understood and practised by the development agencies. The discourses of middle-class fathers rely mainly on an ideal of social roles (particularly sensitive to ideals of the nuclear family, the breadwinning father and the school-going child) which somehow prevent their households from coping better with these new forms of children’s economic activities. Paradoxically, individualistic social values that were portrayed within middle-class families are pushing some children to go to work in the mines more for themselves than for their parents. Social forms of rupture within these families can therefore be understood in line with the reproduction of specific forms of embodied family or class habitus.

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Notes

1. We mention the available data here as a general indicator. A report commissioned by Group One estimated the number of children active in mining in the DRC at 50,000 in 2006, including 20,000 in Katanga (OCU, 2006).

2. Heterogenite is an ore containing copper and cobalt.

3. In his research on the principles that establish and structure hierarchies, social divisions and legitimacies in African middle towns, Hilgers shows that two factors are at play in addition to cultural and economic capital. The first is ‘degree of urbanity’, that is, the ability to manipulate codes, representations and practices proper to the city (Hilgers, 2009: 135–179). The second is ‘capital of autochthony’, which refers to a set of advantages and networks that benefit groups who claim precedence in a city’s territory (Hilgers, 2011).

4. UMHK was created by the Belgian holding company Société Générale and the British Tanganyika Concessions Limited under Leopold II’s Free State.

5. By individualization, we mean here the processes by which the individual is freed from social constraints related to family and community belonging.

6. The circulation of children as well as practices of foster-parenting in Sub-Saharan Africa have been the subject of remarkable studies (Goody, 1982; Lallemand, 1993). Recent work has shown that such practices can also lead to the exploitation of children as cheap labour in the sphere of the home. See, for example, Jacquemin (2002, 2006).

References


