



Social

## **CHILD LABOUR FROM SCHOOL COOPERATIVES IN THE PORO REGION: A CASE STUDY OF SCHOOL COOPERATIVES IN SINEMATIALY (CÔTE D'IVOIRE)**

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### **Abstract**

For more than two decades, we have believed that coffee and cocoa plantations were considered as the best places for children labour in rural work. However, the schools which are supposed to educate them have become places where children labour is manifested through school cooperatives. In fact, the older children whose ages range from 10 to 15 are employed on the cashew and cotton plantations on behalf of these cooperatives which must teach them the spirit of cooperation and associative life. School cooperatives in Sinematialy (northern Côte d'Ivoire) are the examples. Thus, the present study aims to understand the social logics underlying the attitude of the various actors involved in this phenomenon of child labour through school cooperatives, in spite of the national context of fight against child labour. On the methodological level, the study is based on a qualitative approach including interviews with the different categories of actors involved.

**Keywords:** School Cooperative; Child Labour; Sinematialy; Cashew; Cotton.

**Cite This Article:** ETTIEN Ablan Anne-Marie. (2017). "CHILD LABOUR FROM SCHOOL COOPERATIVES IN THE PORO REGION: A CASE STUDY OF SCHOOL COOPERATIVES IN SINEMATIALY (CÔTE D'IVOIRE)." *International Journal of Research - Granthaalayah*, 5(7), 546-553. <https://doi.org/10.29121/granthaalayah.v5.i7.2017.2163>.

### **1. Introduction**

School co-operatives aim to create and develop pupils' spirit of cooperation and solidarity by promoting associative life. As a matter of fact, they help strengthen the social ties between the school, the parents and the players in the education system. School cooperatives are also the environment for the development and learning of the social values. They must therefore teach the students the rules of functioning of their community for their social integration (Freinet, 1998). As a result, these cooperative structures are essential in building the personality of children as well as their social and educational well-being. That is the reason why any State in its definition of educational policy attaches importance to cooperative structures (MENFB, 2008). Such is the case of the Ivorian State, which in its educational policy has enabled the implementation of

several school cooperatives the national territory over, estimated at more than 13,785 cooperatives (MENFT, 2014). Of all these cooperatives, those of Sinematialy namely those of Sine-sogephia 1, Pégnankaha and Sediogo 1 are the objects of this study.

In fact, these school cooperatives have been created in accordance with the objectives defined by the Ivorian State. These objectives are to strengthen the links between the child and his social and educational environment. However, in practice one realizes that these objectives are bypassed. Thus, in Sinematialy, school cooperatives are places of wealth production. They serve as the main fund of the schools through pupils farming labour. This labour encompasses the harvesting of cotton and the collection of cashew nuts. This increasingly frequent phenomenon raises many questions concerning the mode of operation and the educational mission of these school cooperatives. The activities of these cooperatives are more focused on finding financial resources to feed school funds rather than educating students. The pupils are used as labour in the cashew and cotton plantations for a financial compensation for their schools.

Due to the lack of manpower, pupils from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> form aged 10 to 15 years are employed in plantations for the harvesting of cotton or cashew nuts. This practice is a kind of economic exploitation at the expense of children even if this kind of work is originally meant for their education. These teenagers have become a production force for some farmers, with the help of their parents as well as the administrative and educational staff. They sometimes carry out strenuous jobs that damage their physical health.

Considering these above mentioned facts, we may ask the following question: why are the objectives assigned to school cooperatives bypassed in the primary schools of Sinematialy? In other words, what are the social logics underlying the attitude of the teachers and farmers? What are the implications of the activities on children's schooling?

This study aims at analyzing the social logics of the actors involved in this phenomenon of child labour from school cooperatives.

## 2. Methodology

This comprehensive and qualitative study took place from October 23 to November 18, 2015 in Sinematialy. An interview guide was sent to 30 farmers and 12 educational staff (Teachers, Advisors, School Inspectors and Regional Supervisor). Subsequently, 3 focus groups made of 10 students per group were animated at Sine-sogephia 1, Pegnankaha and Sediogo 1 (See Table 1). These tools have helped to examine the categories of actors selected on the basis of their ability to provide information on the functioning of school cooperatives and the activities likely to be practiced by pupils according to their age.

Table 1: Distribution of the surveyed people.

Schools	Students focus	School staff	Farmers
Sine-sogephia1	1	4	10
Pegnankah	1	4	10
Sediogo1	1	4	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>30</b>

Source: Field survey, 2015 (Table obtained on a saturation basis)

After the transcript, the survey data have been grouped into themes. Later on, we have analyzed the content and synthesized it to highlight the key points of the information sought. This methodology has given the results mentioned below.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

#### **3.1. Student Profile and Cooperative Activities**

During the current years, the purchase price per kilogram of cotton has been set at 350 FCFAF against 325 FCFA for the cashew. In spite of these prices, the living conditions of the populations of this department remain difficult, as this farmer puts it: *"Our products are well paid compared to the past. But it is difficult for us because there is an upsurge of prices on the market. As a result, we cannot get through it. Our healthy children are moving toward the south in search of well-being"*. In reality, the departure of these able arms has emphasized the work of the smallest, who are generally attending school. This is due to the lack of labour that is a real problem for the Sinematialy farmers. In such cases, pupils aged 10 to 15 years, most of them in 3<sup>rd</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> form are obliged to work in the farms with their parents. Moreover, parents also resort to school co-operatives. These cooperatives provide them labour force. However, what are really the social logics which contribute to this form of child labour through schools?

#### **3.2. Social Logics Convened by the Actors to Account for their Attitude**

##### **3.2.1. The Stakes and Student Labour in School Cooperatives**

In most cooperatives there is the problem of funding. The lack of funding does not guarantee the proper functioning of these cooperatives. To address this issue, they look for financial resources by taking part in some agricultural activities. Among these activities stand the collection of cashew nuts and the harvesting of cotton. The practice of these profit-making activities by the students allows the cooperatives to get some financial resources in their respective schools.

This practice is growing in size in the department of Sinematialy. In fact, instead of parents, it is the children who work to finance the year-end activities in their schools. In fact, the practice of these activities is a means of avoiding contributions. That is the reason that leads this teacher to say that: *"Since parents ask us to reduce the contributions, our students carry out activities. These activities generate an income. In this way, no more contributions are required from parents"*.

Besides participating in the education of the child, the school co-operative remains a major stake for the school. It supports the operation of the school through the funds it generates. This participation is measured by the purchase of sports equipment and sanitation on behalf of the school as stated by this teacher: *"Before our arrival here, the school did not have balls or jerseys for sports activities. But, under our running, we now have two balls and two sets of jerseys for the sport thanks to the funds of the school cooperative"*.

It also helps to finance socio-cultural activities within the school. In fact, at the end of school years, these funds are used to organize football tournaments and all activities that contribute to

the development of students, as maintained by this teacher: *"We are asked to participate in socio-cultural activities. Yet, these activities require enough money. But the COGES alone cannot manage everything. So we have to get the children to participate with the funds of the school cooperative "*.

As presented, the school cooperative is a source of income for the school. The contribution of students to the functioning of the cooperative contributes to their development. But the activities practiced by school cooperatives do not meet the standards of children's rights. So what about the behaviour of the actors faced with the cooperatives' search for profit?

### **3.2.1.1. The Quest for Profit and Stakeholders' Behaviour towards School Cooperatives**

School cooperatives aim to instill in the child the spirit of community and sharing. As a result, they must develop the values of society in the absolute respect of their rights. Rather than having pupils work to support school cooperatives, they must receive grants, subsidies from decentralized structures or partners of the educational system. However, those of Sinematialy do not have financial autonomy and receive no subsidy. This fact accounts for their unceasing quest for strategic stakes to meet these challenges. They therefore operate from the funds they earn (Vezina, 2002).

Moreover, the activities carried out by students have implications for their physical and mental health. However, the race for financial gain leads parents to forget their basic rights as well as the educational team. This is what the head of a school co-operative argues: *"The demand is high during the cotton harvest and we work on Wednesdays and Saturdays. This activity is an important source of income for the school. For example, during the year 2014-2015 we had a balance of 193, 820 CFAF "*. Thus, most of the managers follow a profit-making logic as confirmed by this school cooperative manager: *"We are in the village and the donations are few. So the only cooperative activity that generates income is the cotton harvest and the collection of the cashew nut. As an illustration, the primary schools of the Sinematialy inspection raised the sum of 2,997,940 CFAF through cooperatives during the year 2014-2015. After having spent 2,222,225 CFAF, there are 774,715 CFAF"*. Despite the painful nature of these activities, they remain the main income-generating activities for the cooperatives of the primary schools of Sinematialy as a put forward by a farmer: *"The cotton harvest is a bit tiring. So as not to tire the children, they are gathered three (3) or four (4) on a furrow of about 50 m. But nevertheless, we pay them the sum of 10,000 CFAF after the completion of the work"*. Considering the economic stakes, the participation of students in the work of cooperatives becomes compulsory, so that in case of unjustified absence, the student must pay a fine of 200 CFAF as corroborated by a student: *"The day we do not take part in the activity of the cooperative, we pay a fine of 200 FCFA on behalf the cooperative. To avoid this situation, we are obliged to attend every day except in case of justified absences"*. The child's obligation to pay a fine because of his unjustified absence is a form of pressure on the child. This pressure is similar to what Crozier and Friedberg (1977) call action on the individual. In addition to the harvesting of cotton and cashew nuts, cooperatives are also involved in the sale of mangoes according to this teacher-tutor from Pegankaha: *"Apart from the cotton harvest, our income also comes from the sale of mangoes. During the year 2014-2015, we had 160,000 CFAF with the cotton crop and 10,000 FCFA with the sale of the mango"*.

This practice has become all the more important in the department of Sinematialy, which raises the question of the involvement of the State in these cooperative structures.

### ***3.2.1.2. Disengagement of the State in the Choice of Activities of School Cooperatives***

Initially, school cooperatives should be subsidized by the State. But in real life, the finding is that the promise of subsidy of these cooperatives is not kept. This is what a respondent says: "They promised us things but until now nothing has been done. Our activities are not subsidized ". However, each cooperative must pay the sum of five thousand francs (5000 FCFA) each year to the Regional Directorate of Education (DREN). This slackening of the State in the funding of cooperatives creates an imbalance between the parties responsible for ensuring their functioning. Teachers and students therefore remain the only stakeholders in the funding of cooperative structures. Another respondent maintains that: *"Our cooperatives are facing a huge problem, namely that of finance. We still have space and we want to do activities like school gardens but there is no funding. Faced with this situation, what can we do but to create activities even if we feel that they are hard for the children "*.

The practice of child labour is prohibited by the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (ILO, 1999). However, the lack of agricultural labour in some regions and the non-subsidization of the activities of school cooperatives, precisely in the Poro region, lead the school's actors to fail to comply with this Convention as confirmed by this teacher: *"For the organization of the end-of-year celebration on behalf of the students, we are the people who fund these cultural days. If we were subsidized there would be no concern but unfortunately this is not the case"*.

In short, the non-subsidy of school cooperatives by the State obliges the actors of the school to use the pupils as agricultural labour. In this perspective, how do parents perceive school cooperatives?

### ***3.2.2. From the Perception of Parents to the Justification of Child Labour in School Cooperatives***

School cooperatives are supports in the performance or execution of certain rural activities according to the parents of the pupils. This way of perceiving these cooperatives determines their relationship with them. As a matter of fact, during the general assembly of the school year, pupils' parents are informed of the existence of cooperatives as well as of the activities that can be carried out by them, namely the collection of cashew nut and the harvesting of cotton. The producer parents appeal to the cooperatives for the harvesting of their products against the sum of 10,000 CFAF.

The identification of the activities of the school cooperatives is defined beforehand by the Korhogo DREN according to the realities of the region. Subsequently, the Inspectorate of Primary Education (IEP) informs the parents of the pupils and the pupils themselves. This reality is backed up by a pupil's parent: *"At the general meeting, the teachers inform us of the existence of the school cooperative. We resort to the school cooperative to help us during our harvests. Children are fast and can harvest a very large area per day. They are paid 10,000 CFAF."* These words are confirmed by a teacher: *"The activities of the cooperative are defined in*



*advance by the official institutions in accordance with the realities of the region. Later on, the documents are sent to the inspection, which in turn lists the activities to be carried out and transmits them to the schools in his constituency".*

Students are an important force in the production, a dynamic and accessible workforce that encourages farmers to attach to school cooperatives. In this way, students are sometimes praised because of their effectiveness at work, which gives them a certain value in society.

From the above mentioned facts, what is the perception of the child in the Senoufo country?

### ***3.2.2.1. Perception of the Child in the Senoufo Country: A Vision that Encourages Child Labor***

In Senoufo society, the child must submit to his parents and to the whole community. He must embody the respect, sincerity and courage that are the values that underpin this society. As a result, the child has no decision about his / her future. His parents are the ones who decide for him. This way of perceiving the child in this community is transferred to the relationships between pupils and actors in the educational system. That is the reason why they do not participate in decision-making related to the activities of the cooperative.

These are designed by the official institutions in agreement with the parents of pupils and but executed by the pupils who are the main actors. This type of relationship can also be seen in the management of funds. Students are not involved in the management of school cooperative funds entrusted to teachers in accordance with applicable legislation (Eduscol, 2006).

Students are not involved in the decision-making and management of school cooperative funds. However, pupils and teachers must interact so that the school cooperative can appear as an institution where relationships of transparency and trust are established and developed (Vezina, Op. Cit.).

### ***3.2.2.2. Student Work through Cooperatives: An Alternative to Academic Failure***

School cooperatives are perceived by the actors as an essential tool dedicated to the initiation of children to the northern culture, especially that of Senoufo. Thus, teachers and parents perceive the school cooperative as a place where children must be introduced to the practice of agriculture through farm work, as argued by this teacher: *"School cooperatives are very good initiatives because they allow the children to get mixed, to familiarize themselves with the farm. I, for example, am senoufo. I've never been in any farm. But thanks to the cooperative, I did it. For a senoufo who does not know the farm, this is serious. We must introduce children to rural work."*

Initiation to rural work is fundamental in Sinematialy. It participates in the construction of the personality of the child and its socialization. A hardworking and courageous child is easily integrated into the Senoufo society where the growing of cotton and cashew are the main commercial products. The activity practiced by the cooperatives depends on the customs of each region. And therefore, introducing students to agricultural practice facilitates their professional integration in the event of failure at school. This is what a respondent says: *"teaching children the practice of farming through rural work can enable their social integration into working life."*

*If the studies do not work, they can more easily integrate social life with what they have learned at school. "*

Ultimately, the cooperative appears as a place of learning farming to facilitate the social integration of the child in case of failure at school. These various perceptions encourage child labour in the cooperatives.

Thus, despite its prohibition, the learning of farming through the school cooperatives according to the populations meets the cultural norms. Culture is defined as what individuals have to learn, a coherent set of human activities common to a group as opposed to biological inheritance. It is transmitted from one generation to another through socialization (Durkheim, 1973). However, this practice has implications on the educational outcomes of children in this department.

### **3.3. Impacts of Child Labour on their School Evolution**

Although the activities of pupils contribute to funding the school cooperatives, they have a negative impact on the life of the pupils. In fact, the holidays of the pupils, namely Wednesdays and Saturdays, are used for the practice of cooperative activities and have merely no resting time. This lack of rest disrupts their physical and mental state and hence his academic performance.

Thus, the student is doubly subject to rural work as he also participates in other rural activities in the family setting on Sundays in order to ensure their social education as claimed by this parent: *"Among the Senoufo we must teach our children to work because it participates in its education. That is why our children must accompany us in the field as we also did with our parents."*

Rural activity becomes a form of inheritance that parents pass on to their offspring. Like parents, students are also obliged to pass on this legacy to future generations (Bourdieu, 1973). The practice of rural work is all the more difficult because the pupils do not have enough time devoted to the studies according to this pupil: *"We are sometimes overwhelmed because of the rural activities, no resting days. Due to this situation, it is difficult to learn our lessons. We want a change of activities within our cooperative and also wish the State to fund our cooperative. Otherwise, it is not easy for us."*

In short, despite its socializing aspect, the practice of rural work has implications on student achievement (Schlemmer, 2005).

## **4. Conclusion**

The cooperatives are initially socialization tools for the school children. As a result, the State has always encouraged their creation in all the schools of the country and especially those of Sinematialy. However, in the practice of cooperative activities, the rights of children are not taken into account for several reasons.

In fact, the perceptions of the actors of the education system show that the practice of cooperative activities is a substitute for parental responsibilities because they are generating

income. Students through school cooperatives are an important workforce to carry out some of the rural work such as cotton and cashew nut harvesting.

Moreover, the relations influenced by the stakes pursued are of two orders, namely the disengagement of the State, which is manifested by the non-subsidization of school cooperatives and the vertical axis observed in decision-making in school cooperatives. What is more, the stakes pursued by the players in the education system through school cooperatives are reflected in the search for profit. The initiation of pupils to the practice of agriculture in school cooperatives is an alternative in case of failure at school. However, this practice sometimes upsets their academic background.

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