The Cultural Context of Research: Child Labor and Daily Life in Tanzania

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I’d rather sit in the back than in the front seat of the pick-up truck to go from the Iringa Development of Youth, Disabled and Children Care (IDYDC) office where I work to Kidamali, a tobacco-growing area about forty minutes away. I’d rather sit in the back seat because, after a few weeks living in Tanzania, I know the dirt roads are full of holes, and no one seems to have ever heard of speed limits, much less of vehicle check-ups. We’re supposed to leave the office at 8 a.m. By 9:30 a.m. we’re ready: the driver, the translator, a woman who works in the office, and myself. We’re soon in open country, passing by villages of dirt huts with roofs made of leaves, by women wearing kangas (the traditional dress made of a skirt and shawl) and carrying babies on their backs and buckets on their heads, by men on bicycles or on foot, and the occasional dala dala, the daily buses connecting the villages to the town of Iringa. A bus is coming towards us on the narrow road. It is speeding and so are we. Our side mirrors crash. Hakuna matatizo, not a problem, shrugs our driver. Our mirror’s glass is broken, but a little piece is left and that’s all we need. The other bus doesn’t stop and neither do we.

Child Labor and Attempts at Reform

I am a political science and international affairs major with an anthropology minor, and this was the summer between my junior and senior years. I spent nine weeks in Tanzania on a grant to research the policies intended to combat child labor in the region of Iringa, in the country’s Southern Highlands. I loved Iringa, a small town surrounded by mountains where I often went walking. Sitting on the rocks above the town, panoramic views of Iringa and often amazing sunsets spread before me. (Fig. 1) What I heard was not the sound of traffic, as in other cities where I have been, but the voices of people and the sounds of animals.
I stayed at my UNH mentor’s family house, with his mother, sister and her husband, and nieces and nephews. Even though English is one of the two official languages of Tanzania, only about 10% of the population—those who attended secondary school—know it. Most people speak Kiswahili, the other official language, as well as many different tribal languages. Before leaving New Hampshire, I took a few Kiswahili classes and then studied on my own with a book and tape. Of course, I learned only the basics; I was completely unable to communicate when I first arrived. Only two girls in my host family knew English, but almost everyone at the IDYDC office, the local non-governmental organization (NGO) where I worked, did.

That we could all speak English did not eliminate misunderstandings and difficulties in communication, but it helped me understand some of the purposes and actions of the NGO. The mission of IDYDC is to improve the living standard of disadvantaged people in the Iringa region, that is, needy children, youth, widows, widowers and poor people, through rehabilitation and vocational training centers, savings and credit schemes, as well as education on HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, gender, and—my special interests—child labor and the rights of the child.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) of the United Nations, child labor is defined as “work performed by children under eighteen years of age which is exploitative, hazardous or inappropriate for their age, and which is detrimental to their schooling, social, mental, spiritual and moral development.” This is different from “child work in a social context,” such as helping with chores at home, which is considered constructive for the development of the child (2).

Over one—fourth of kids under the age of eighteen are estimated to be employed in the workforce in Tanzania (3.4 million out of 12.1 million) (1). Children work in many different sectors, including plantations, mines, in households (as domestic servants), in the sex industry, and in the informal sector (such as street vending). The Tanzanian government and various international organizations have been trying to reduce the number of minors working there. My research goal was to find the causes of the problem and how different institutions are trying to deal with it.

**Iringa Development of Youth, Disabled and Children Care**

IDYDC operates in Iringa’s urban and rural districts. In town the organization runs a vocational training center, Upendo Centre, where kids, mostly orphans or from families who are unable to support them, receive two years of vocational training in carpentry, tailoring or batik-making. They learn these skills in facilities with no electricity, so that they will be able to find employment when they return to their home villages where electricity is not available. Some of these kids are secondary school dropouts; others have completed primary school, and others have never attended formal school. There is a fee to live and attend courses at Upendo, but most families cannot afford even part of the cost, and the students are admitted for free. IDYDC has branch offices in all the districts of the Iringa region, where local coordinators help find orphans, vulnerable kids, and disadvantaged youths and either bring them to Upendo Centre or support them in their villages. One hundred children in each rural school receive free uniforms. Of those selected for public secondary school, some get help paying for school fees and uniforms.

One of IDYDC’s goals is to provide micro credit loans to the poorest and most disadvantaged people in society. This was presented to me as an indirect way of eliminating child labor: By giving a small amount of capital to poor families, they will be able to expand their small businesses enough to support their children, who will then
not need to work. However, after talking to some of the staff and visiting a few businesses that receive loans, I realized that these loans may actually encourage child labor. The loans do not go to the poorest but to the lower middle class, as the borrower must already have a business in order to receive a loan. Often when these borrowers expand their businesses, they will hire children to work for them. The IDYDC staff is aware of this, but it is very difficult for them to face this issue because many of the kids hired are orphans or have run away from home and need to work.

I spent most of my day in the IDYDC office reading, doing library research and talking to the staff about child labor and related issues. From this research and discussion, I identified the sites where most child labor takes place in the Iringa region and visited them. These were the Mufindi tea plantations and timber land, Mtera dam fishing businesses, Ilula tomato plantation, and the Kidamali tobacco plantation. I also visited some vocational training centers and other places that offer housing and training to street kids and orphans. Finally, I talked to some government officials, such as the regional coordinator of the ILO Time Bound Programme for the Elimination of Child Labor, the regional labor officer, and the regional child labor coordinators in Iringa’s urban and Mufindi districts.

Visiting a Tobacco Plantation

We reach Kidamali, but it is not tobacco growing season; the leaves have already been picked and the fields are almost empty. We see a little boy outside a brick building. He says he and over 100 kids are working in the tobacco packing rooms inside: “The air is not very healthy in there, so they let us come outside for a walk sometimes.” The children are hired daily and work from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. for 300 shillings (30 cents) a day. We go to look for the manager, who is Greek. We sit on the veranda of his beautiful house and, while he smokes his pipe, I introduce myself as a student of agriculture wishing to visit the plantation to learn about growing tobacco.

I had learned from my experiences at the tea plantations that he would not let me in if I told the true reason for my visit. He has to go to town, he says, but another man will show me around. I’ll probably notice, he adds, that the leaves are not the color they’re supposed to be in this season, and there are a few other agricultural irregularities. I guess I would notice these things if agriculture were my field, but the irregularities that I see are quite different.

I walk through a field, where a few people are picking the last leaves, and follow my guide into the brick tobacco packing building, which is divided into many rooms. I enter one—a dark, hot room, full of young children, sitting on the floor tying tobacco leaves together with ropes and hanging them on sticks to dry with hot steam. (Fig. 2) About 100 kids are in the building, many
hidden in side rooms, while a few adults are in the larger rooms. I cannot ask them any questions because I am there to see the tobacco, not the children. But it is not hard to tell they are miserable; they cough continually, and their eyes are red and teary. When we leave, my eyes won’t stop burning. I can’t imagine what it would be like to spend ten hours in there. (Fig. 3)

This is the worst thing I’ve seen so far: worse than Mtera dam, where kids, employed by villagers who receive loans from IDYDC, fish in little wooden boats and risk drowning or snake bites while others wait at the shore to clean the fish, all earning a few fish to sell for two to five cents each. (Fig. 4) Worse than their mothers’ work, which involves sitting on the shore extracting cooking oil from the fish’s intestines to sell. Worse than the backbreaking work of picking tea leaves for twelve hours a day, being paid by the pound. Definitely worse than picking and packing tomatoes or onions and loading them on trucks. And maybe even worse than lifting and moving, without protection, heavy tree trunks to an electric saw, or dipping the timber in chemicals without gloves for protection.

**Policies and Realities—and Being a Foreigner**

Most NGO workers as well as government officials confirmed my impression that the greatest challenge to eliminating child labor comes from the population’s disinterest in the issue and in “the rights of the child,” as these rights are defined by mostly western-minded international organizations. In Tanzanian culture, work is a normal and necessary aspect of the socialization of the child. For children not to attend school is not viewed as a violation of their rights. Particularly in rural areas, the advantages of a western-style formal education are not obvious and are often non-existent. For populations such as the nomadic Masaai tribe, who live in northern Tanzania and southern Kenya, the obligation for children to attend school goes against the nomadic culture and lifestyle they have been practicing for millennia. There is also strong peer pressure among children to work, and many kids from disadvantaged families want to become independent and earn their own money. It is not, however, culturally acceptable for kids to run away from home; therefore, runaways will lie about it. Given these cultural values, the most effective approach to combat child labor is considered to be the “community based” approach, through which awareness is raised among all parties involved, who then are all called on to find alternative ways of life. This method includes meetings with village and ward leaders, parents, teachers, and employers; and counseling the kids, to dissuade them from running away from home and to encourage them to go to school or vocational training.

One of the greatest obstacles to eliminating child labor has to do with money: Employers are financially better off than the government and NGO workers who are trying to implement policies to prevent child labor. For example, the labor officer for the Iringa region has not received any funding from the government for ten years, which means he can’t even afford a bus fare to go and do inspections. The fact that public officials are under funded and underpaid makes them extremely vulnerable to corruption. Plantation owners often donate money to rural schools to restore buildings or buy materials; therefore it becomes very difficult for teachers to speak...
up when these same people hire school children to work on their plantations. Anyone, it seems, can go to
villages and easily find kids to hire as fishing, agricultural or domestic workers as well as for commercial
sex work.

My research was showing a rather discouraging scene, one in which policies to combat child labor, often
developed by non-Africans, were frustrated by the cultural and financial realities of the country. In a somewhat
similar way, I, a foreigner, was feeling frustrated and confused by Tanzanian ways.

I wish I had had a greater cultural as well as linguistic preparation before I set off for Tanzania. Upon arriving, I
read a somewhat helpful paper about the cultural differences between the United States and Tanzania. The
author is a Tanzanian professor in America whose experience of the two countries is significantly different from
mine. As a woman, I found it hard to abide by the cultural rules I needed to follow—from conservative dress to
a submissive attitude towards men. Once I interviewed a government official who answered my questions not
directly to me, but in Kiswahili to the man who was accompanying me. Walking down the street, I was hissed at
and asked for money. I met strangers who offered to show me around or asked for my phone number so they
could call themselves my friend. Being white, I was revered and resented at the same time. Friends and
acquaintances treated me with more care and respect than they showed each other and, at the same time,
constantly asked me for money and gifts. It was almost impossible to make real Tanzanian friends: I felt as if
people wanted a white friend as a status symbol.

The way people interact is extremely different from what I am used to: I did not understand and was frustrated
by their indirect way of communication. A strong sense of reverence and respect towards hierarchy, authority,
and age meant that it was not always appropriate for me to make comments or suggestions to the coordinators
at IDYDC and other organizations. In spite of these differences and difficulties, I was always treated with
respect and often asked for my opinion and advice by the people I worked with.

At Home in Tanzania

When we return to the office from the tobacco plantation, I take a dala dala back to Mkimbizi, the neighborhood where
my host family lives. It’s about twenty minutes from
downtown, and I spend the entire trip standing with my back
bent so my head doesn’t hit the roof, holding on so I don’t fall
out the open door, and trying not to step on the groceries
other passengers put on the floor. People stare at me and
laugh, isn’t it funny to see a mzungu, a white person, on a
bus?! “I want to get off at the tree,” I tell the driver in
Kiswahili, and he stops at a street corner. I walk towards my
host family’s house. Ulia, the fourteen-year-old maid, runs out
of the gate and takes my bag; I must never be allowed to carry anything.

Inside the house Caro, one of the nieces who lives there, comes to greet me. She is in high school, where
English is the language of instruction, so she has become my friend and translator. Bibi, the grandmother, is
sitting cross-legged in front of the house, mashing garlic in a wooden bowl. I bow slightly and greet her,
Shikamoo, a sign of respect. We exchange greetings for a few minutes: How was your day? How was work? How was town? Nzuri sana, very good. She laughs as she does every time I try to speak Kiswahili, then she makes me sit inside and drink tea and eat bread. (Fig. 5) I am served like a queen: Caro comes with a jug and bowl and pours warm water over my hands so I can wash them.

After tea I go to my room in the adjacent house. I greet Mama, the mother, and Maria, the other maid, in the kitchen. They are sitting on little wooden stools, boiling water on the fire for dinner. Caro translates for us so we can have a little conversation. (Fig. 6) Later, I eat dinner in the living room with Baba, the father. First Mama brings us water to wash our hands and then we pray. She brings us plates full of food: ugali, a polenta made of corn flower that we take in our right hands, shape into a ball and dip in meat, beans and vegetables. During dinner, we watch TV, whose words I don’t understand.

I’m starting now to get used to not understanding much of what goes on around me, and to not being understood. Unfortunately, my Kiswahili will never become good enough for full conversations with the family members who do not speak English. Nevertheless, daily contact adds new words to my Kiswahili vocabulary. Despite the limited communication, living with a Tanzanian family is what helps me most understand this very different culture, its people and their ways of life.

Fig. 6 - The family’s kitchen

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REFERENCES

**Author Bio**

Born in Torino, Italy, **Erica Bertolotto** grew up speaking Italian and English. During high school, she spent a year as an exchange student in Rhode Island. The following fall she enrolled at UNH, and this spring she will graduate with a degree in political science and international affairs. A sophomore year program in Costa Rica led to an internship in Nicaragua—and she added Spanish to her list of languages. Next year she will go to England to begin an M.A. program for development studies. After that she would like to work and continue her studies in Nicaragua.

**Mentor Bio**

Professor **Joe Lugalla** has been in the UNH Department of Anthropology for about twelve years. His areas of special interest are medical anthropology and sociology along with the sociology of development. He does research on issues of poverty and development, including HIV/AIDS. When Erica could not pursue her research on child labor in Kenya as originally intended, Professor Lugalla helped her adapt and carry out her project in Tanzania. He has assisted and mentored many previous IROP students. Erica’s experience, he says, made him even more aware of the real difficulties in stamping out child labor: “It’s no good to make rules and regulations prohibiting certain practices without offering viable alternatives to them.”