

The long walk

burden of child water collection



David Hemson

When we hear statistics like an estimated three million children in South Africa are involved in exploitative labour, we think of wage labour. Millions of children however are involved in heavy domestic chores.

David Hemson examines the extent and effect of the labour done by South Africa's child water bearers.

Jabu Dlamini is nine years old and often carries water for long periods during school hours. She doesn't have a birth certificate and so her mother can't apply for a child grant. She says that her mother, who lives in another rural area, feels she cannot cope with all her children and so passed her on to relatives. In this home she takes the main responsibility for collecting water. She comments that when she collects water she feels unsafe, lonely and unhappy. Along with this work she has other

household chores and so she is often late for school or misses school for the day.

Children collecting water is a common sight in South Africa's rural areas. There are many photographs of smiling girls with 25 litre containers on their heads walking along paths against a landscape of grassy hills and groups of traditional huts. These are scenes of happy rural life with children making an essential contribution to their households. But do children pay a price?

CHILDREN ARE MAIN WATER BEARERS

The Human Sciences Research Council researched this question on request from the International Labour Organisation (ILO). The research project aimed to better understand child work in order to prioritise water delivery to households in deep rural areas. These homes are furthest away from safe sources of water and are also likely to have the greatest number of children.

The survey looked at four villages (two in KwaZulu Natal and two in Limpopo) where there were no water schemes. The study interviewed 1 052 children in 366 households.

In these villages the children felt the burden of household work.

The surprising conclusion of the research is that children are involved to a greater extent than

women in the collection of water. The research established that in these communities 81% of children had collected water in the previous seven days. The task of water collection falls mostly on the shoulders of children although adult women, who also collect water, are often more visible. This is because children tend to collect water before school or late in the afternoon.

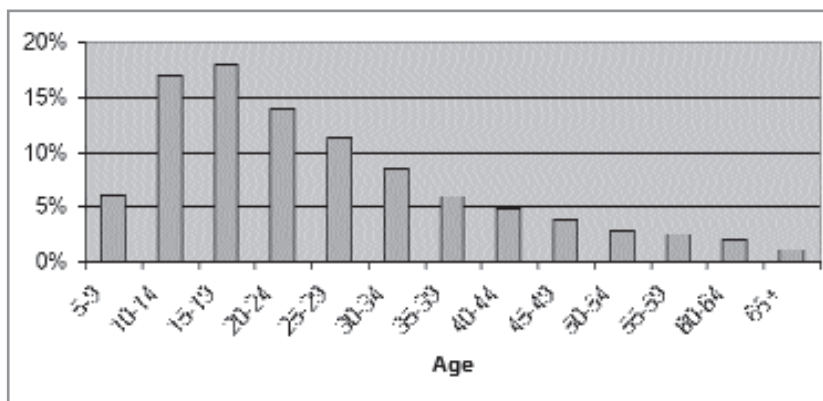
A possible explanation for children being the main collectors is that they are more available for this activity in rural communities. Adult women give priority to overall domestic management rather than carrying out all the activities themselves. The long distances to water sources makes it difficult for adult women to spend enough time on other essential domestic activities so they depend on children to collect water.

The greater involvement of children rather than adults in collecting water is shown in national statistics. In Table 1 on page 27 the participation of child water collectors rises up to the age of 19 at which point the 15-19 age group contributes 18% of the total number of people collecting water. After this point the percentages decline steadily.

CHILDREN TAKE THE BURDEN

The research found that children are contributing willingly to their families but, for many there is a

TABLE 1: PERCENT OF TOTAL COLLECTING



Source: General Household Survey, 2005

hidden cost. For those children where communities have no water scheme to lessen the distance to water, there is a considerable burden. Here collecting water becomes more than a short-term essential chore, and becomes work. It also becomes a burden which affects schooling and can affect health.

Many children rise early before school, stand in a water queue for some time, and scoop up water cup by cup until the container is full. At some of the sites the water was brown and was shared with the cattle which often turned the waterhole into a muddy pool. At other sites there were better sources of water and it was not so far to walk.

The children were keen to talk about their experiences. One school pupil said, "If we do not fetch water in the afternoon, we must do it in the morning otherwise we won't wash, clean or even eat." It was clear too that children who stay with their grandparents work the hardest as they have to do the entire task. Said one parent, "There is no one to help them unlike those with younger mothers who can help them."

These children are involved in collecting water for periods ranging from a few hours a week to more

than 40 hours a week, with an average of 16 hours. This amounts to over two thirds of the time spent by these children in household chores over a week. In addition many children are involved in economic activities, unpaid or paid, on behalf of their households.

Most children (61%), are involved in less than 21 hours a week in all chores. A substantial minority (21%), however, are involved for more than 28 hours a week in all domestic chores, a number of hours which could be considered a working week.

Children who collect water are also involved in other domestic chores such as collecting firewood and housekeeping. Although collecting water involves the longest hours, there is also considerable time taken in these additional activities. Those involved for 35 hours or more a week in all chores average approximately four and a half hours collecting wood, two hours in housekeeping activities such as washing, ironing and cooking, and more than 30 hours collecting water per week.

"This is the toughest of the household chores, it takes most of our time and is very tiring."

(Learner, Malokela, Limpopo)

This is equal to a full working week.

EFFECTS ON CHILD DEVELOPMENT

In the four sites where there is a high involvement of all children in collecting water, girls are more involved than boys. Boys do shorter trips and often make more use of wheelbarrows.

The survey found that a large proportion of children involved in long hours collecting water complained of often being late for school, being unable to concentrate in class, having poor morale, and needing to leave school as early as possible to collect water. This was confirmed by educators.

Although many children had no ill-effects, those who were most involved in collecting water showed the greatest problems. Their progress through schooling at the 'appropriate' age, for instance, is hampered. This means that these children are generally older than the average for their class.

While not all children collecting water complain of health problems, there is an important minority who do. The children involved in a great deal of water collection complain



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of tiredness and rate their health worse than children who are not collecting. Water containers weigh 25 kgs and children can carry water from 1 to 8 kms. When they arrive at the water source they then often have to dig for water. One trip can take as much two hours.

Of children collecting water more than once a day 74% mentioned fatigue. The percentage of children stating their health was worse than other children's rises with longer hours and a greater number of trips.

This analysis points to the uneven effects of collecting water. While the health of many children is unaffected by collecting water, for some children the activity seems to have a negative impact. The survey investigated the characteristics of those children mentioning their health 'is worse' because of collecting water. In Table 2 below these links are presented.

There are slightly more girls than boys in this group reporting 'worse' health who also come from larger households. More than half (57%) have sought medical attention for ailments 'from the beginning of the year' and 75% reported fatigue.

The ill health links to collecting water are clear. Amongst the group whose health has worsened, 81% are involved in two or more trips a day and 77% involved for 14 hours or more a week. Very many children stated that collecting water is very tiring, that they have either a sore neck or back, and that their health had worsened by collecting water. A high proportion (41%) report being often late at school.

SCHOOL ADDS TO BURDEN

Unfortunately the school itself is not necessarily a haven from further chores. Rural schools are often poorly equipped with water and sanitation. Educators either have to accept there is no water for essential activities, such as cooking the school meal, making tea, or washing hands, or instruct the children to collect water as well as help in the maintenance of the premises.

In these ways, schools add to the burden. Children who have been collecting water and are late for school may also be punished. Girls in Grades 4, 5 and 6 are sent to the river to collect water to clean the school.

Teachers accept that water

collecting is inevitable. Said one teacher, "Yes, children are expected to fetch water especially now that the Jo-Jo tanks are empty, but it is rather too much for the children fetching water at home and at school. Some of the kids come to school without washing and you don't ask why because you know the plight of the children in this area."

These research conclusions provide a guide to government to prioritise delivery of water to such households. The goal is to reduce the extremely long periods spent by children collecting water, to release greater time for schooling and other activities, and to reduce the hazards to which they are exposed. An acceleration of delivery to these communities would see children first and thereafter women, the family, and the community as a whole benefiting by the reduction in time spent in fetching water.

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CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILDREN WHOSE HEALTH HAD WORSENERD		
	PERCENTAGE	NUMBER
Collecting water is tiring	96%	107
Sore neck or back	96%	106
Health worsened by collecting water	87%	109
Two or more trips per day	81%	98
Size of household > six	78%	111
14 hours or more per week collecting water	77%	98
Report fatigue	75%	111
Sought medical attention	57%	111
Gender, Female	54%	107
Often late at school	41%	111



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Children carry 25kg water containers