

Understanding Children Assisting Parents, Working Children and Child Labour in the Palm Oil Sector in East Malaysia (Sabah)

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Abstract

Sabah (East Malaysia) has tens of thousands of Indonesian, Filipino and stateless children (i.e., most vulnerable children), many of whom are working informally and/or assisting their parents undertaking oil palm activities. They live in poverty, with poor access to education and national identity. This study explains the various types of children's involvement in oil palm activities, and the risks they face pointing to incidence of child labour. This study applies the time use survey, featured with a 24-hour time diary and a 15-minute time bloc to identify risks of child labour. Findings from the survey are analyzed based on four social lenses namely, gender, life cycle, identity and education. The survey is complemented with semi-structured interview with selected survey's respondents to better understand children's perception and motivation. This study argues that while not all children participation in oil palm activities can be considered as child labour – excessive time spent on site, coupled with hazardous activities, known health implications and the absence of educational opportunity have positioned some segments of children in child labour situation. Given the intricate and systemic nature of children employment and child labour in Sabah, any efforts to prevent and remedy it should address both symptoms and root causes.

Keyword: Children assisting parents; working children; child labour; palm oil; time use survey

Short Biography

Andika Wahab holds a PhD in Anthropology and International Relations from the National University of Malaysia (UKM), and currently a Research Fellow at the Institute of Malaysian & International Studies (IKMAS), UKM. His fields of research include forced and labour migration; corporate respect to human rights; and corporate anthropology which focuses on corporate disclosure, compliance and the politics of sustainability. He is currently a member to the Global Business and Human Rights Scholars Association (GBHRSA) and the alumnus of the Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Right's Asia Human Rights Research Initiative in 2019.

Introduction

Children should be given the opportunity to learn, play and grow healthy, and should be protected from any forms of exploitation, including child labour. In reality, however, children across different cultures, social strata and income levels are participating in various economic activities – both formal and informal. The International Labour Organization (ILO n.d.1) defines child labour as a “work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development”. The term "work" here refers to a work that is "mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and/or interferes with their schooling" (also cited in Janzen 2018). In 2017, the ILO estimated that there were nearly 152 million children aged below 18 years who undertook various income-generating activities that fall within the broader definition of child labour (Burrone & Giannelli 2020). Nearly 70 per cent of them were child labour in agriculture, including in palm oil, rubber, seeds, cocoa, hazelnuts, and a range of other global agricultural commodities.

In Malaysia, palm oil is an important agricultural product; serves as a source of economic growth and development, contributing to Malaysia’s annual export revenue between RM60 billion (US\$15 billion) and RM70 billion (US\$17.5 billion) (Szulczyk 2013). Malaysia is the second largest producer of palm oil (after Indonesia), and a global major exporter (May 2012). Given the nature of oil palm activities and limited technological advancement, the palm oil sector in Malaysia is remained labour-intensive, hiring a half million of workers – the majority of which are migrant workers (Ramli et al. 2011; Azman 2013).

Recently, there has been a growing negative sentiment against the Malaysian palm oil sector at the global commodity market. The production of oil palm in Malaysia (and Indonesia) has been associated with a range of human rights violations, including the use of forced labour and child labour. Recent execution of a withhold released order (WRO) by the United States of America's (USA) Custom and border Protection (CBP) against FGV Holdings Berhad

(FGV) and Sime Darby Plantation in 2020 and 2021 has had significant negative consequences for Malaysian palm oil products to access the wider global market (Surendran 2021). These two national conglomerates are among the top world's producers of palm oil products globally. Beyond access to market, such a state-sanction (e.g., WRO) has significant implications to the livelihood of tens of thousands of small farmers, growers, workers and their children.

East Malaysia (state of Sabah) is among the largest palm oil producing states in Malaysia (see Wan Mohd Jaafar et al. 2020). Unlike in Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah is unique given the fact that migrant workers are allowed to bring their family members under special permit for dependents, including spouse and children to live together with them in the state. Additionally, Malaysian laws, in particular, Sabah Labour Ordinance (Cap. 67), allows children and young person's access to employment under specified conditions. From historical perspective, there is a long and complex migration record of many Indonesians and Filipinos into Sabah. Consequently, the state faces long-standing issues relate to stateless children, children of Filipino's refugees, and undocumented migrant children (Ismail 2008; Jalihah & Hussin 2010; Dzurizah & Jalihah 2013; Abdul Aziz et al. 2017). Existing studies indicate tens of thousands of Indonesian, Filipino and stateless children working "informally" and/or assisting their parents undertaking oil palm related activities (Abdul Aziz et al. 2017; Earthworm Foundation 2019; Wahab 2019). Some children are allegedly involved in undertaking hazardous and heavy activities without appropriate protective equipment and social protection (Puder 2019; Solidar 2019). While some of these activities have immediate health implications to children, others will harm children's physical and mental development in the longer term.

The local perception of children and young persons' participation specifically in agricultural work is often the subject of cultural and social differences (Strauss & Thomas 1995; Kurosaki et al. 2006; Emerson & Souza 2007; Fors 2008). Children working and/or

assisting their parents are perceived as "acceptable", especially in the context of family farming. However, in the case of many vulnerable children in Sabah, the lack of identity and valid documentation causes many children deprived of their right to education, living in poverty and almost no access to social services and welfare (Solidar 2019; Wahab 2020). These indicate strong indicators of child labour.

Malaysia has ratified several international conventions related to the prevention, prohibition and elimination of child labour, including the Minimum Age Convention 1973 [No.138] and the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention 1999 [No.182]. Malaysia is also committed to fight child labour, expressed clearly in its strong commitment to realize Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) No.8.7 (elimination of child labour) and No.16.2 (end child abuse and trafficking of children). However, there is no administrative data and national survey that provides a comprehensive overview of various activities children undertake in employment sector, formally and informally. Policy makers and industry players rely heavily from anecdotal evidence, media exposure and small-scale academic research. While these publications are useful, there has been inadequate reflection of the various types of children activities, their nature and extent; and importantly, the voices of the children on how they perceive, and what motivates their participation in oil palm activities.

Given the knowledge gaps above, this study aims to understand and explain children involvement in oil palm activities, and to ascertain whether such involvement raises risk, otherwise actual incidence of child labour. It is guided by three broad research inquiries. First, do children involve in oil palm activities? Second, what is the nature and extent of their involvement? Third, how children perceive their involvement in oil palm activities? This study employs a mixed-method research, combining both quantitative and qualitative research approaches. Quantitative research derives from the implementation of the time use survey, and qualitative research refers to semi-structured interview conducted among selected survey's

respondents. To help the study better reflect different social context and conditions, findings from time use survey will be analyzed from four social lenses, namely gender, life cycle, identity and education. Important to note that this study reflects various concepts such as working children, children assisting parents, light work, hazardous activities, and child labour. This study does not intend to validate incidence of child labour among children in the palm oil sector in Sabah.

The following section reviews the existing body of knowledge relates to children in employment sector and child labour, globally as well as in the context of palm oil sector in Sabah. It is then followed by an explanation of the research design, including the background of time use survey and semi-structured interview. In the subsequent section, findings on children involvement in oil palm activities are presented, and followed by the children's perception and motivation. The final section provides concluding observations and lessons learned.

Literature Review

International standards make a clear distinction between different categories of children involved in employment, directly and indirectly, as well as in formal and informal economies. These include children assisting parents at home (e.g., undertaking chores activities) and at workplace (e.g., at farm), working children, child labour and worst form of child labour (Bourdillon & Myers 2014; Carter & Roelen 2017). In the context of child labour, there is a range of working terms such as light work and hazardous activities which help identify and validate the actual and potential incidence of child labour. While these categories and working terms are useful in academic and policy research, the reality is far more complex and multifaceted (Fors 2008).

Employment of children has often been associated with child labour, especially in high-risk sectors such as manufacturing, coal and mining, construction, fishery, agriculture and services. In sectors such as agriculture (e.g., coffee, tea and tobacco farms), children as young as 12 years began to work in long hours (e.g., up to 10 hours per day), with very little pay accorded to them (Kifle et al. 2005; Ramos 2018). Existing studies also indicate that children are not provided with protective equipment at work (e.g., safety boots), while others are exposed to risk such as snake and insect bites, thorns, extreme weather conditions, lacerations, chemicals, as well as demanding tasks such heavy lifting and climbing (Kifle et al. 2005; Ramos 2018). For children involved in informal economies (e.g., selling on highway or main road), they are at risk of road accident, skin rashes, coughs and joint aches (Hamenoo et al. 2018).

Children involvement in employment has also been associated with a myriad of factors. These include parents and household poverty, larger family size and parental absence (Kifle et al. 2005; Hamenoo et al. 2018). Other studies link children employment to either lack of educational opportunity, or as a result of dropping out from education system (Strauss & Thomas 1995; Kurosaki et al. 2006; Emerson & Souza 2007; Fors 2008; Tang et al. 2018). Other studies suggest that children employment was the sole desire of the children themselves, and it is argued as a way to exert his/her independence (Abdul Aziz & Iskandar 2013). A study conducted by Bessell (2011) in Indonesia found that employment of girls in factories enables the children to fund themselves (i.e., buying what they wish for) and provides a sense of greater control over their life decision.

Apart from immediate health and safety risks, children performing hazardous activities (mean: child labour) face long-term and severe health implications. These include psychological impacts, mental and behavioural disorders, malnutrition and stunted (Ibrahim & Md Shah 2013). A study conducted in tobacco farms in the United States of America,

Kazakhstan and Malawi found that child workers face serious health implications such as green tobacco sickness, dizziness, continuous headaches, nausea, vomiting, dehydration, anorexia, and insomnia (Ramos 2018).

In Malaysia specifically, there are academic research and public reports exposing children participation in various economic activities and sectors (Rainforest Action Network 2010; Dzurizah & Jalihah 2013; Abdul Aziz et al. 2017; Fair Labor Association 2018; Janzen 2018; Earthworm Foundation 2019; Puder 2019; Solidar 2019; Wahab 2020). Early research by scholars such as Jomo, K.S. (1992) argue that the employment of children had already existed in the 1990s, occurring in both urban and rural areas, affecting various economic sectors including palm oil. Though there is no official statistic of child labour (UPEN Sabah & UNICEF 2015), the latest report published by the Malaysia's Ministry of Plantation Industries and Commodities (MPIC 2018) indicates the presence of both child labour and forced labour indicators in the palm oil sector.

In the state of Sabah specifically, there has been a growing literature studying the employment of children and/or child labour. For instance, a study conducted in Tawau (a district in the east coast of Sabah) found that immigrant children from poor families are commonly employed in various agricultural farms, including in palm oil (Abdul Aziz & Iskandar 2013). The study found that children typically work in long hours, which subsequently denies their right to education. Another study conducted by a group of researchers from University Malaysia Sabah (UMS) found that children of local population and immigrant children are actively assisting parents in various economic sectors such as agriculture and fishing, while other children are involved in informal economies such as selling plastic bags, fish and vegetables, porter and selling cigarettes mainly in urban and peri-urban settings (Ibrahim & Md. Shah 2014).

Apart from academic research, there has also been an increasing fact finding and public reports released by international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that indicate child labour situations, particularly in Sabah. For example, in 2012, the World Vision (2012) exposed involvement of immigrant children in oil palm activities, hired by palm oil companies for very little pay. The report reveals that immigrant children in remote areas in Sabah were asked to carry heavy bunches of palm fruits, and spend excessive working hours but still ended up receiving little compensation. Another report published earlier in 2010 revealed that children in oil palm estates were not given appropriate protective mask while working, and hence heavily exposed to toxic chemicals (Rainforest Action Network 2010).

While the involvement of children in oil palm activities is a concern, the existing studies and public reports do not provide comprehensive account of their involvement, including the nature and extent of child participation. There has also been an inconsistent use of different terms (e.g., working children, light work, children assisting parents, etc.) and confusion between different segments of children that exist in Sabah (e.g., stateless children, undocumented local and undocumented migrant children). The Government of Indonesia estimates that there are at least 60,000 Indonesian children living around plantation areas across Sabah (UNICEF 2015; Earthworm Foundation 2019) and an unknown number of the Filipino children. This further complicates the socio-economic and political landscape of the issue in Sabah. Next section explains the research design used in this study.

Research Design

Conceptually, this study refers the broader definition of child labour (ILO n.d.1) as “a work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development”. It also considers a range of other related concepts such as

child labour in hazardous work, light work and working children. According to ILO Recommendation No. 190, child labour in hazardous work refers to a work which exposes children to physical, psychological or sexual abuse; work with dangerous machinery, equipment and tools, or which involves the manual handling or transport of heavy loads. It also refers to a work under difficult conditions such as long hours or work where the child is unreasonably confined to the premises of the employer (see ILO n.d.2).

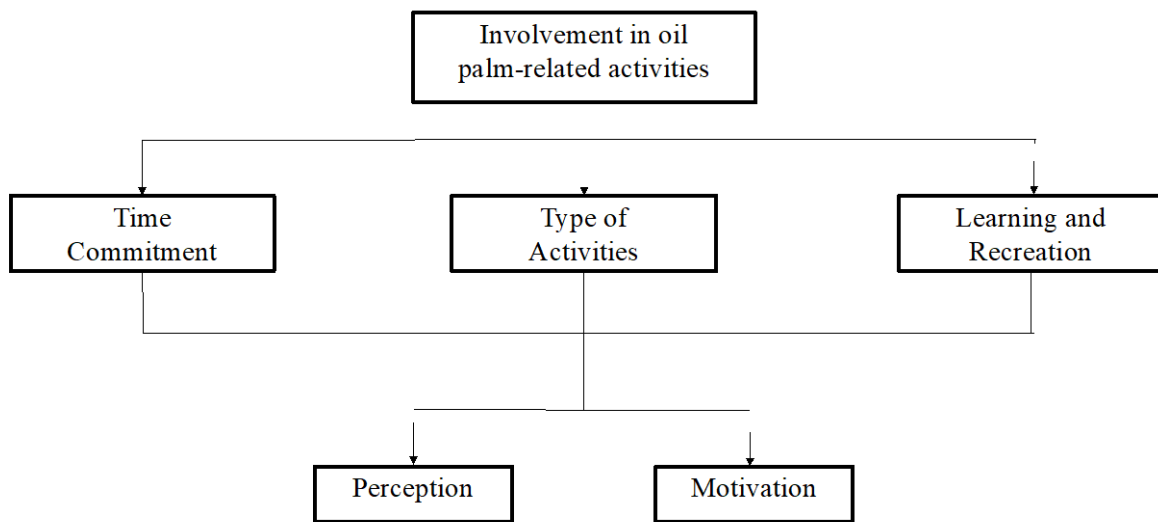
Light work refers to a work that is not harmful to children, and at the same time, does not interfere with a child's education, or her ability to benefit from education. According to ILO Convention No. 138, light work can also be permitted for children from 13 or 12 years of age, as an exception to the general minimum age (ILO 2018). Concept of working children varies from one country to another. In Malaysia, the Malaysia's Ministry of Plantation Industries and Commodities (MPIC 2018) in its official publication classifies "working children" as all children below 18 years of age, engaging in activity to produce goods or to provide services for use by others or for own use. This definition includes volunteer work by children, comprising non-compulsory work performed for others without pay.

Based on the broader definition of child labour (ILO) and consideration of the various concepts above, this study establishes a research design as shown in Figure 1. The research design is grounded on three main research inquiries. First, do children involve in oil palm-related activities? If children involved, how do their involvement look alike (i.e., time commitment, type of activities, and time spent for learning and recreation)? Finally, how do the children feel about their involvement in oil palm-related activities (i.e., perception) and what motivates them to undertake such activities (i.e., motivation)?

This study considers four social lenses of children namely gender, life cycle, identity and education – to help the study to better understand and analyze the different social context and conditions with regards to children involvement in undertaking oil palm activities. The life

cycle is further clustered into two, according to age group. First age group covers child respondents aged between 12 and 14 years, and second group aged between 15 and 17 years. Important to note that the local regulations, including the Sabah Labour Ordinance (Cap. 67) permits children aged between 5 and 14 years to perform light work for a period less than 17 hours a week (MPIC 2018). The survey did not include children aged 11 years and below as it requires them to recollect and express their daily experiences and perception in the survey.

Figure 1 Research Design



Source: Author's designed field research

This study employs a mixed-method research, combining both quantitative and qualitative research approaches. Quantitative research derives from the implementation of the time use survey, and qualitative research refers to the follow-up semi-structured interview conducted among selected survey respondents. Generally, time use survey is often referred to as a diary survey approach that allows researchers to assess the time use pattern and changes in respondents' daily activities. It uses a 24-hour diary system, with certain minute time bloc as the unit of measurement (Bauman, Bittman & Gershuny 2019). Scholars such as Fleming

and Spellerberg (1999) argue that the time use survey is among the best methods to measure unpaid work (e.g., informal economy) and measuring the values behind such unpaid work activities. Time use survey has the ability to integrate a broad range of related information (e.g., type of activities, duration and values), and relating it to demographic and socio-economic data. While the use of time use survey has evolved exponentially in measuring informal economy and unpaid activities, no significant research was undertaken to use it in measuring child labour.

Given the limited knowledge of the children involvement in oil palm activities, this study uses a 24-hour time diary, with a 15-minute time bloc survey to identify time use pattern, collectively as the main unit of measurement. It aims to uncover the three main research inquires as discussed earlier. The time use survey was conducted involving 55 children aged between 12 and 17 years of age, living in three villages in the district of Lahad Datu, Sabah. However, only 43 respondents' data are completed and reliable for the use of this study. Respondents were selected using a purposive sampling. A series of discussions with local community groups were held to help identifying the prospective child respondents. The survey was conducted in two phases, from 21 January 2019 to 23 January 2020. The three villages are located close to each other, in the vicinity of many palm oil estates, plantations and mills. Details of the three villages however are not exposed in this study to avoid potential retaliation and risk facing child respondents, their parents and smallholders.

For the record, Lahad Datu is located at the east coast of Sabah. East coast of Sabah, consist of several districts such as Tawau, Kunak, Semporna and Lahad Datu – is the known entry door for many documented and irregular migrant workers from Indonesia and the Philippines who migrate to Sabah for work. In the palm oil sector, Lahad Datu is among the top three districts recording the highest number of registered independent smallholders (3,616 individuals) with a total of 28,151 hectarage planted areas (Malaysian Palm Oil Board 2017).

The other two top three districts are Kinabatangan (7,094 independent smallholders) and Sugut (6,491 independent smallholders).

Apart from the survey, this study conducted a semi-structured interview session with selected time use survey's respondents. Of the total 43 survey respondents, researcher interviewed 12 of them to better understand the children's perception and motivation of their involvement in oil palm activities. Interview findings are analysed using a deductive thematic analysis technic. This technic enables the study to identify, analyse and interpret patterns of shared-meaning and relate them with key themes in this study. Detailed findings of the semi-structured interview are presented in the next section, complementing the time use survey data. All survey and interview sessions were conducted privately. Children consent was first sought before each session conducted. To maintain confidentiality and avoid unnecessary consequences (e.g., retaliation to children and children's parents as workers), children's personal particulars are not revealed in this study except their age and nationality.

Findings on Children Involvement in Oil Palm Activities

Findings in this section derive from both time use survey and semi-structured interview sessions. Findings are presented in three broad perspectives. First, it presents children involvement in oil palm activities. It is then followed by findings on the average hours spent (daily) by children in assisting parents and/or as working children. Third, it discusses the various types of oil palm activities children do. As mentioned previously, findings reflect four social lenses namely gender, life cycle, identity.

Involvement of Children in Oil Palm-related Activities

As shown in Table 1, child respondents are grouped into three categories namely: (i) children not involved in any oil palm activities; (ii) children assisting parents; and (iii) working

children. Of the total 43 respondents, less than one-third (13 respondents) of them are found not involved in any type of oil palm activities. About 15 respondents (35%) others are classified as children assisting parents, and another 15 respondents (35%) are categorized as working children. In this study, two aspects have been used to identify and validate the status of children between children assisting parents and working children. First is the receipt of compensation. If respondents inform that they receive a compensation directly from the estate management or smallholders (other than their family members and relatives), they are classified as working children. Second is based on the average time spent by children in undertaking oil palm-related activities. This study classifies children those that have spent, at minimum four hours a day as “working children”.

Involvement of children in oil palm activities vary according to four social lenses. On gender lens, it is found that female children are less likely to involve in oil palm activities as compared to male children. Specifically, this study found that six out of 13 female respondents are not involved in any type of oil palm activities. Only two out of 13 female children are categorized as working children, and five others are classified as assisting parents on site. In contrast, more than two-third (23 respondents) of the total 30 male respondents are found involved in assisting parents on site and as working children.

This finding mirrors the global overview of gender role where male children (or boys) outnumber female children (girls) in most economic sectors, including in agricultural sector (Carter & Roelen 2017). Where female children are involved in agricultural-related activities, the types of work they do often differ to male children. For example, male children tend to use sharp tools and undertake chemical spraying (see Carter & Roelen 2017), while female children usually undertake more lighter work such as collecting loose fruits (Dzurizah & Jalihah 2014), and bringing meals and water to their parents (Carter & Roelen 2017). In this study, semi-structured interview with several female respondents reassures that while some female children

are expected to help parents undertaking oil palm-related activities, they are also responsible of helping parents taking care of their younger siblings at home and performing everyday's household chores.

On life cycle, this study found that children aged 12 to 14 years are less likely to involve in oil palm activities as compared to those aged between 15 and 17 years. Of the total 23 children aged between 12 and 14 years, nearly half of them (11 respondents) are found not involved in oil palm activities. Only nine respondents involved in assisting parents on site, and another three child respondents are classified as working children. In contrast, child respondents aged 15 to 17 years are largely found in category of working children (12 out of 20 respondents), followed by children assisting parents (6 out of 20 respondents), and only two out of 20 respondents who are not involved in any oil palm activities. This finding is consistent with several existing studies where children tend to begin working in the agricultural sector (categorised as working children) at the age of 15 years (Gamlin & Hesketh 2007; ILO-IPEC 2008; Carter & Roelen 2017; FAO & UNICEF 2019).

From the lens of identity, this study found that children of non-citizens are more likely to involve in oil palm activities as compared to local children. For example, of the total 30 non-citizen child respondents, 11 of them are categorized as children assisting parents, and another 14 child respondents are considered working children. Remaining five children are not involved in any type of oil palm activities. In contrast, of the total 13 children of Malaysian citizens, four of them are found assisting parents and only one is categorized as the working child. The remaining eight child respondents are not involved at all in any type of oil palm-related activities. This finding is not a new phenomenon in Sabah. Existing studies already indicated the involvement of non-citizen children, including those without proper travel documents in oil palm-related works (Rainforest Action Network 2010; World Vision 2012; Abdul Aziz & Iskandar 2013; Dzurizah & Jalihah 2014; Earthworm Foundation 2019).

However the existing studies are unable to provide clarity on the nature (type of activities the children perform according to children's categories) and the extent of their involvement in oil palm activities (e.g., time spent in undertaking oil palm activities).

From educational lens, this study found that children enrolling in formal education are less likely to involve as working children but may still involve in assisting parents undertaking oil palm activities on site. Of the total 24 children who are enrolling in formal education, 13 of them are not involved in any type of oil palm activities, and another 11 respondents involved in assisting parents on site. No children were found involved as working children. Formal education refers to both government education programme (i.e., government school) and alternative education (e.g., community learning centre). In contrast, of the total 19 child respondents who are not enrolling in formal education, four of them are involved in assisting their parents, while the majority others (15 respondents) are categorized as working children.

Semi-structured interview with several child respondents found that most of them those who are not enrolled informal education are in the age category of 15 and 17 years, citing that they dropped out from formal education programme after completing their primary education. One child respondent claimed that while there is a formal education (alternative learning centre) accessible for non-citizen children at primary education, there is no similar school at secondary level. As a non-citizen, he added that he is not allowed to enrol in government secondary school.

Table 1: Children Involvement in Oil Palm Activities by Social Lenses

Social Lenses		Not involved at all		Assisting Parents		Working Children		Total	
		No.	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Gender	Male	7	53.8	10	66.7	13	86.7	30	69.8
	Female	6	46.2	5	33.3	2	13.3	13	30.2
	Total	13	100	15	100	15	100	43	100
Life Cycle	12-14 years	11	84.6	9	60.0	3	20.0	23	53.5
	15-17 years	2	15.4	6	40.0	12	80.0	20	46.5
	Total	13	100	15	100	15	100	43	100
Identity	Citizen	8	61.5	4	26.7	1	6.7	13	30.2
	Non-Citizen (Indonesian)	5	38.5	11	73.3	14	93.3	30	69.8
	Total	13	100	15	100	15	100.0	43	100
Education	Enrolled in formal education	13	100.0	11	73.3	0	0.	24	55.8
	Not enrolled in formal education	0	0.0	4	26.7	15	100.0	19	44.2
	Total	13	30.0	15	35.0	15	100	43	100.0

Source: Fieldwork 2019-2020, Lahad Datu, Sabah

Time Commitment in Undertaking Oil Palm-related Activities

This sub-section presents the time commitment among child respondents in undertaking oil palm activities. Broadly, this study found that children assisting parents on site spent about 1.8 hours in average per day, while working children spent in average 7.3 hours per day (further see Table 2). This indicates that working children spent more than three times higher than children assisting parents on site. If summed on a weekly basis, children assisting parent spent nearly 13 hours in a week and working children spent about 51.1 hours in a week. While the time commitment performed by children assisting parents is still within the hours allowed by the local regulations (i.e., less than 17 hours per week), it indicates extreme hours committed by the working children and that depicts a strong likelihood of child labour incidence.

When analyzed through respective social lens, some contextual observations can be made. From the gender lens, it is found that male children spent more time in assisting parents on site that is 2.5 hours per day (compared to 2.0 hours for female), and for the working children is 8.5 hours per day (compared to 7.0 hours for female). From the lifecycle perspective, child respondents aged between 15 and 17 years are found spending more time in assisting parents on site that is 2.5 hours per day and the working children spent about 8.5 hours per day. In contrast, children aged between 12 and 14 years spent slightly lower time commitment for both categories (i.e., children assisting parents and working children).

When analysed based on identity, it is found that children of non-citizens spent far more hours in assisting parents on site that is 2.5 hours per day, while working children spent in average 8.5 hours per day. In contrast, local children assisting parents on site only spent less than an hour per day, and for local working children only spent about 7 hours a day. Similarly, when analyzed from the educational lens, children who are not enrolling in formal education

spent more time in assisting parents that is 2.3 hours per day, and as working children that is 8.3 hours per day.

Semi-structured interview with child respondents uncovered some potential reasons explaining the survey results above. First, female children spent more time in helping parents undertaking household chores at home, hence time commitment of assisting parents on site or as working children (outside their house) is less expected. A female child respondent specifically mentioned that she is expected to be a full-time “housewife” in the future (i.e., when she became adult), and that is the reason why she is not expected to work harder outside her house. This partly explains the gender differences in time commitment between male and female children. Second, children in the category of 15-17 years life cycle are deemed to be more mature, independent and have more responsibility compared to children aged 12 to 14 years. With such a social expectation and responsibility, children aged 15 to 17 years are generally prone to work harder, including putting more efforts and time commitment to either assist their parents on site or get compensated as working children.

Third, identity and education are two social lenses that are different in scope but interconnected to each other. For children who are not non-citizens, while it is still possible for them (with valid travel documents) to enrol in government education system, the lack of government schools available in remote areas coupled with expensive school fees imposed to non-citizens often hinder them to enter into government schools. In Sabah, there is a range of alternative learning centres at primary and secondary education available to both Indonesia’s and Filipino’s children. However, learning centres that cater secondary level education are limited (see Earthworm Foundation 2019). Often children upon completion of their primary education are unable to continue their education at secondary level.

An Indonesian child respondent informed that he completed his primary education at an alternative learning centre nearby his village. However, he is unable to continue education

because the only available learning centre at secondary level is located about 70 kilometres away from his village. His parents then encouraged him to start working at the age of 13. He is one of the children that is considered as “working children” in this study as he receives a consistent compensation from the employer with hourly commitment of 8 hours per day, or more.

Table 2: Average Time Spent by Children Assisting Parents and Working Children (Average Hour per Day)

Social Lens		Children assisting parents (average hour / day)	Working Children – (average hour / day)
Gender	Male	2.5	8.5
	Female	2.0	7.0
Life Cycle	12-14 years	1.5	7.5
	15-17 years	2.5	8.3
Identity	Citizen	0.5	7.0
	Non-Citizen (Indonesian)	2.5	8.5
Education	Enrolled in formal education	1.3	4.0
	Not enrolled in formal education	2.3	8.3

Source: Fieldwork 2019-2020, Lahad Datu, Sabah

Note: This table excludes children (#13 respondents) who are found not involved in any type of oil palm-related activities as shown in Table 1.

Children Activities in Oil Palm Sites

This sub-section discusses the different types of activities children undertake in both situations; (i) children assisting parents; and (ii) working children. The aim of this sub-section is to relate activities the children do with the concepts of “light work” and “hazardous activities”. Under the first category that is children assisting parents, it was found that these respondents tend to perform lighter work as compared to their peers who are classified as working children. These activities include collecting loose fruits and manuring (see further in

Table 3). For male respondents, in addition to collecting loose fruits, they also perform other activities such as manuring and slashing, especially those aged between 15 and 17 years. Slashing may be considered as a risky activity as it involves use of sharp tools. In contrast, while female children help in collecting loose fruits, they perform additional activities such as serving foods to parents and taking care of their younger siblings on site. A female respondent informed that she often tasked by her parents to prepare and bring foods from home to oil palm site. Apart from bringing foods, she is also responsible to bring her two younger siblings, aged 5 and 8 years, respectively to site. Once arrived at site, she collects loose fruits while eyeing on her siblings. Sometimes, one of her younger siblings, aged 8 years, assists her in collecting and counting on the loose fruits. She added, her young sibling learns to counts and write (mean: put on record) the loose fruits they collect.

The second category is working children. Child respondents who are classified as working children tend to perform more activities (i.e., variety of tasks), including some typical activities the children assisting parents do. Unlike children assisting parents, the working children perform heavier, risky and hazardous activities. From the survey, for example, it was found that male respondents aged between 15 and 17 years perform activities such as harvesting, loading, spraying and stacking palm fonds. These are among the common activities performed by adult workers in the palm oil sector broadly, including in established estates and plantations. From gender perspective, it was also found that female children (working children) perform other activities such as filling polybags and weeding at nursery. Local and non-citizens children perform almost similar activities. Similarly, children who enrol and left behind from formal education are also performing almost similar oil palm activities.

Table 3: Type of Activities Children Perform while Assisting Parents and as Working Children

Social Lens		Children Assisting Parents	Working Children
Gender	Male	Collecting loose fruits; slashing; manuring	Collecting loose fruits; slashing; manuring; harvesting; FFB loading; spraying; stacking palm fronds
	Female	Collecting loose fruits; bring and serving foods to parents while working; take care of younger siblings on site	Collecting loose fruits; recording and counting of collected fruits; filling polybags; weeding at nursery; spraying
Life Cycle	12-14 years	Collecting loose fruits; bring and serving foods to parents while working; take care of younger siblings on site	Collecting loose fruits; recording and counting of collected fruits; filling polybags; weeding at nursery
	15-17 years	Collecting loose fruits; slashing; manuring	Collecting loose fruits; slashing; manuring; harvesting; FFB loading; spraying; stacking palm frond; spraying
Identity	Citizen	Collecting loose fruits; bring and serving foods to parents while working; take care of younger siblings on site	Collecting loose fruits; recording and counting of collected fruits; filling polybags; weeding at nursery; stacking palm fronds, spraying, slashing; manuring; harvesting; FFB loading;
	Non-Citizen (Indonesian)	Collecting loose fruits; slashing; manuring	
Education	Enrolled in formal education	Collecting loose fruits; bring and serving foods to parents while working; take care of younger siblings on site, slashing and manuring	Collecting loose fruits; slashing; manuring; harvesting; FFB loading; spraying; stacking palm fronds; recording and counting of collected fruits; filling polybags; weeding at nursery; spraying
	Not enrolled in formal education		

Source: Fieldwork 2019-2020, Lahad Datu, Sabah

Time Spent in Learning and Recreational Activities

This sub-section presents the average time spent by child respondents in three aspects namely, (i) formal learning; (ii) informal learning; (iii) recreational and sport activities. Note that formal learning is referred to children's enrolment in formal education – be it in government school system or alternative learning centres. This aspect correlates with one of the four social lenses (i.e., education). Informal learning refers to any form of learning activities the children do outside the formal education system. Based on the survey findings, these informal learning activities include undertaking school homework at home, drawing, painting and counting, book reading, enrolling in private tuition and attending religious classes (e.g., Quran recitation). Child respondents informed that recreation or sport includes activities such as playing football, exercise in playground, and children involvement in common youth or community activities such as *pencak silat* (art of self defense) and fishing. Some child respondents refer playing with their siblings as part of their recreational activities. Important to note that learning in formal and informal education system, as well as recreational and sport activities are not a direct indicator of child labour. However, they may serve as important risk factors to identify the likelihood, or prevalence of a child labour incidence.

From the survey, it is found that male child respondents spent more time in learning (both formal and informal learning) and recreational and sport activities – that is 10.3 hours per day (in average) compared to female children that is 8.1 hours per day (see Table 4). From the life cycle perspective, children aged 15 to 17 years spent more time in learning and recreational activities that is 9.3 hours per day as opposed to children aged 12 to 14 years (8.3 hours per day). From identity lens, children of non-citizens spent more time in learning and recreational activities that is 9.1 hours per day compared to their peers among local children who spent only about 7.9 hours per day for the same activities.

From educational lens, it is found that children enrolled in formal education tend to spend more time in learning and recreational activities that is 8.9 hours per day. In contrast, children who are left behind in accessing formal education only spent about 3.4 hours (in average) per day. The survey data also indicates that the vast majority of child respondents (89%) under this category are of non-citizen children. This indicates two social lenses, namely identity and education (i.e., enrolment in formal education) are two important risk factors that can be linked to children’s involvement in oil palm activities. In other words, lesser time spent in learning and recreational activities leads to more chances for children to spend time in undertaking other activities, including involving in oil palm activities.

Table 4: Average Time Spent in Learning Activities and Recreational Activities (Average Hour per Day)

Social Lens		Formal Learning (average hour / day)	Informal Learning (average hour / day)	Recreation / Sport
Gender	Male	6.0	0.8	3.5
	Female	5.5	1.3	1.3
Life Cycle	12-14 years	4.5	1.0	2.8
	15-17 years	5.5	0.5	3.3
Identity	Citizen	5.3	0.5	3.3
	Non-Citizen (Indonesian)	4.3	0.8	2.8
Education	Enrolled in formal education	5.3	0.8	2.8
	Not enrolled in formal education	N/A	0.5	2.9

Source: Fieldwork 2019-2020, Lahad Datu, Sabah

Children’s Perception and Motivation

This section presents both child respondents’ perception and motivation of their involvement in oil palm activities. Likewise, findings in this sub-section also derive from both time use survey, and complemented by semi-structured interviews with selected child

respondents. Discussion is framed based on key themes emerged from the survey and semi-structured interview data.

First theme relates to their involvement in oil palm activities during public holiday and long school break (including semester break). Child respondents, especially those enrolled in government schools and alternative learning centres, perceive that they need to do something meaningful and helpful during this period (i.e., public holiday and semester break), for themselves and their respective family. A male child respondent aged 13 years informed that he has lengthy time during Saturday and Sunday as there are no school activities. He thinks that helping his parents collecting loose fruits and other oil palm activities during public holiday is his only chance to help his family. He also helps his parents during school day (i.e., Monday to Friday) but limited in hours, and it is not done every day. Sometimes he has extra-curriculum activities after school hours during weekday, he added.

Existing studies indicate that child labour affect children's attendance to school (UNICEF 2015), and that parental characteristics influence children's continuous enrolment in formal education (Fors 2008). In the case of this 13-year child respondent, his involvement in oil palm activities does not affect his attendance in school. Additionally, when asked further about his motivation, the child respondent stressed the importance of education for his future. This is despite his parents' lack of formal educational background. This finding confronts previous literature which argued that parents with higher educational background is likely to influence their children's motivation and enrolment in school (Strauss & Thomas 1995; Emerson & Souza 2007; Kurosaki et al. 2006).

Second theme relates to children perception of their involvement in oil palm activities as a learning and growing (i.e., development) process. Some child respondents reported saying that while assisting parents collecting loose fruits on site, they learn how to count and write. An Indonesian child respondent (aged 12 years) informed that even his younger siblings (no

particular age was mentioned) also involved in collecting loose fruits, and because of that they now know how to count and write simple mathematics and sentences on a piece of paper. He further said that he and his younger sibling are not enrolling in any formal education including alternative learning centre. When asked why, he simply responded that because they are PATI (mean: children of irregular migrant worker).

Another male child respondent aged 13 relates his role in assisting his parents as a sense of responsibility and gratitude. He informed that as a child to a poor-income family, he has the responsibility to not only help his father to collect loose fruits in oil palm estate, but to assist his mother selling vegetables in market. When asked about his motivation, the child respondent claimed that he wants to be a “businessman” when he grows up. By helping his parents both in oil palm estate and the market, he learns how to socialize and bargain with people.

Third theme relates to children’s perception of risk and safety when they are on site. The time use survey does not capture expressive information related to risk, safety and/or hazard when they assist parents, or being hired as working children on site. However, further interview sessions with selected child respondents revealed how children perceive risk and safety. Perception of risk and safety can be explained clearly and distinctly between children assisting parents and working children. For example, respondents classified as children assisting parents perceive risks emerge from the very nature of oil palm sites and the surrounding environment.

A child respondent aged 13 years informed that she is most afraid of wild and venomous animals such as snake, tapir and elephant. She added that previously there were rumours about a group of wild elephants entering their village. Another child respondent aged 16 years relate his previous experience accidentally stepped on sharp objects while assisting his parents slashing weed grass around oil palm trees. When asked whether their respective parents provide any safety equipment while on site, most child respondents said no safety equipment is provided.

One child respondent (aged 13 years), however informed that parents continuously reminded them to be careful while on site, and make sure their siblings are not playing far from the parents' sights.

Slightly different expression of risk and safety brought by working children (respondents). For this category of children, risk and safety are associated around the use of sharp tools such as long knives, oil palm fruits falling on their heads, heavy lifting of fresh fruits bunches, exposure to chemical (for weed control) and long hours of work. One child respondent aged 17 years specifically mentioned the long working hours as a perceived risk to himself, and hinder him to socialize with his peers. When asked further whether they are provided with appropriate safety equipment, some child respondents reported having been given only the basic tools to help them execute their respective tasks such as a long pole to help them harvest oil palm fruits; long knives; and some children cited they are provided a bicycle for them to move around the estate. Note these are all working tools and not necessarily prevent them from injury while working. Another child respondent (aged 16 years) informed that he bought his own hand gloves and working shoes. He however admitted that he barely uses his hand gloves because he does not feel comfortable wearing it, and sweating all time when wearing it.

Next theme relates to children's perception on compensation. Reflection on compensation and the values proposition can be seen differently from both categories of child respondents, namely, children assisting parents and working children. For children assisting parents, they perceive compensation in the form of indirect values or in-kind benefits by helping parents undertaking oil palm activities. A child respondent aged 13 years claimed that though he is not getting paid by his parents, at least he receives what he wishes for. He said that one time he wished to buy a pair of football shoes. After working hard assisting his father

doing some slashing of weed grasses, his father bought him a pair of football shoes. He attributed his involvement in oil palm activities to this indirect benefit to himself.

A slightly different perspective emerged when respondents among the working children relate their active participation in oil palm activities as the result of poverty. For these children, only by working on site and getting paid directly from employers they can help reduce the financial burden their respective parents face. Some respondents reported that they are also being hired and paid directly by “*mandor*” (mean: a worker’s leader with supervisory role). The use of “*mandor*” often relates to private estates and plantations (Wahab 2019). Smallholders with limited amount of land (i.e., hectarages) do not always have “*mandor*” to manage their oil palm activities. This indicates that children are not only hired in oil palm smallholding setting but also in private estates and plantations. When asked whether the salary they receive is reasonable according to their respective workload, most respondents agreed that it is adequate. An Indonesian child respondent aged 17 said he receives about RM20 (US\$5) per day as a harvester. In a regular month, he receives between RM500 (US\$125) and RM600 (US\$150), and it can go up to RM700 (US\$175) during peak season. For him, the salary is far more than enough for him as a youth. When asked, the child was unaware of the minimum salary set by the Malaysian Government that is between RM1,100 (US\$275) and RM1,200 (US\$300) per month, as of 2020.

Fifth theme relates to children perception and motivation on education. This is particularly important as the survey findings indicate that nearly half (44%) of the child respondents are not enrolled in formal education. About 90% of them are also among non-citizen children. Interview with child respondents who are not enrolled in formal education found that most of them had previously enrolled in primary level education at the nearest alternative learning centre. However, they are unable to continue education at secondary level because there is no alternative learning centre near their respective village that provides

secondary education. An Indonesian child, aged 15 years, informed that he always envisioned to further his education. When asked about what he wants to be in future, he said “a teacher”. He added that his parents encourage him to continue study, and willing to spend money for his education. However, it is just unfortunate for him that there is no formal education facility that is available for him in the village. The nearest alternative education centre is located roughly 70 kilometres from his village.

Existing studies claim that employment in younger age has been one of the factors that lead to children dropping out from education system (Abdul Aziz & Iskandar 2017), and that parents often make decision for their children education (Strauss & Thomas 1995; Kurosaki et al. 2006; Emerson & Souza 2007; Fors 2008). This case (i.e., Indonesian child aged 15 years) suggests that employment is not the reason causes him to discontinue education, rather the lack of educational opportunity that leads him to employment sector. In this case, employment is not a factor but a consequence due to lack of educational opportunity.

As claimed by Fors (2008), there is no single factor that contributes to child employment or the phenomenon of working children. Similarly, Abdul Aziz and Iskandar (2017) argue that culture, social fabric, family beliefs and socio-economic conditions contribute to children employment. In several situations (e.g., children performing hazardous work), working children leads to incidence of child labour. This brings this article to discuss another case study involving an Indonesian child respondent, aged 16 years who said that he never enrolled in formal education, including at primary level. As the eldest of his six siblings, he stressed that he needs to help his parents to make a living and ensure his other siblings get enough foods and can go to school (mean: alternative learning centre). He added that sending his other siblings to school is costly. Schools fees are expensive, and there are other school expenditures to cover too. He has been assisting his parents working in oil palm estate since

his six years (old). When he turned 13 years, he decided to work on his own and get paid by an employer (not his parents).

This particular case demonstrates that child employment is closely associated with a range of possible factors such as poverty, family formation and investment in education. This reinforces that issues of children assisting parents and working children are complex, multifaceted and systemic in nature as it involves social dynamics and the role of duty bearer (i.e., government) to ensuring education is attainable to children of all segments.

The last theme, but important to discuss is the children understanding and perception of child labour. Note that the term child labour has not been used directly during the survey and interview sessions. During semi-structured interview sessions, a range of indirect questions were asked. These include children awareness on the limit hours they can be on site, either assisting parents or as working children; the risks they face as a result of their involvement in oil palm activities, including barriers to education; and questions related to receiving direct compensation from employer (including “*mandor*”). From the interview sessions conducted, it was found a greater lack of awareness, understanding and exposure on what the children can or cannot do when they are on site; and the time commitment of their involvement in oil palm activities.

When it comes to risk perception, as already discussed in previous section, while children are able to articulate the immediate risks they face, children are unable and/or unaware of the possible long-term consequences. Existing studies indicate that children performing demanding tasks may cause dehydration and fatigue; and where they work under certain pressures, it can cause headaches, insomnia, dizziness, problem with memory, and may affect their nervous system (see in Earthworm Foundation 2019). When asked about compensation and other risks, some Indonesian working children admitted that they work “irregularly”, and that they can be arrested and sent back to Indonesia (as a consequence).

Briefly, children's perception and motivation of their active involvement in oil palm activities is an aspect worth further discourse. Their different perception and motivation do not only help shape our understanding of the complex and interrelated factors and consequences resulting from their involvement in oil palm activities, but also contribute in understanding the risk and actual incidence of child labour.

Concluding Observation

The aim of this study has been to understand children involvement in oil palm activities, and to ascertain whether such involvement raises risk, otherwise actual incidence of child labour. Though the aim of the study is straightforward, field findings from both time use survey and semi-structured interview prove that the actual scenarios on the ground rather complex. This is even alarming when further analysis is done from four different social lenses, namely, gender, life cycle, identity and educational background of the children. Important to reiterate that though this study has been framed in the context of child labour (e.g., using indicators related to child labour in ascertaining children involvement in oil palm activities), it does not intend to validate incidence of child labour.

In this final section, three broad observations are presented. First, given the complex dynamics of children involvement in oil palm activities, a single concept to refer to their involvement is inadequate to reflect the actual scenarios on the ground. Similarly, a blanket use of the term "child labour" to depict their involvement in oil palm activities needs rethinking, both in scholarly discourse and policy research. Appropriate concept or term should be referred to reflect different scenarios of children involvement in oil palm activities. As for child labour, there are clear indicators can be used to identify the risks of child labour, including

time commitment, type of activities, actual and perceived health implications and barriers to education.

Secondly, it is inadequate for scholarly and policy research to discourse on the actual incidence of child labour without reflecting the environment and social context the children are in. In this study, for example, while the risk indicators are found (e.g., a child works far more than 17 hours a week) but the child who is a non-citizen has no other option because he is unable to attend formal education. In other words, addressing the symptom is insufficient to classify a working child as a child labour without reflecting the root causes (e.g., the child right to attain basic education).

Third, evidently that children involvement in oil palm activities is a cross-sectoral issue that requires cross-disciplinary and multi-stakeholder approach to address it. It is cross-sectoral because their involvement in oil palm activities can be related to their access and ability to enrol in formal education; the need for employment to overcome household poverty and as a means of survival; immediate and long-term health implications to children; and migration historical background and lack of identity. This indicates that any efforts to address the children involvement in oil palm activities must address both the symptoms and root causes.

From methodology perspective, the application of time use survey, complemented by semi-structured interview has been able to help this study to unpack the three research inquires, namely children involvement in oil palm activities; the nature and extent of their involvement (e.g., time commitment); and children's perception and motivation. As this is an exploratory exercise, gaps are found involving the survey design and experiences at fieldwork level. First and foremost, the time use survey does not distinguish between weekday and public holiday. This limits the study to explore the differences of children activities and time spent between weekday and public holiday (or school break).

Secondly, the difference between low and peak season. From the field experience, it was found that children involvement in oil palm activities, including children assisting parents differ between the two seasons. Some children work or assisting parents in longer hours during peak season, compared to low season. The time use survey, by design, does not capture these differences. Third, the survey uses a 15-minute time bloc, and that has higher potential of excluding some simple activities such as going to toilet, eating, watering flowers, etc. Though these activities do not generally consume much time, cumulatively they may influence the overall time spent by children on a daily basis. At the field level, this study found that some children are unable to reflect their daily activities and express it during the survey. Where recollection of memory is difficult, children left the particular time bloc (i.e., 15 minutes) in the survey unanswered.

To conclude, though there has been considerable amount of research on employment of children and child labour in the past years, very little research is done to systematically measure the actual time spent by children undertaking oil palm activities, as well as the children's perception and motivation of doing so. Where studies exist, they tend to describe activities the children do, and present such activities as child labour. While this study adopts the ILO-definition of child labour, it does not position their involvement as such without contemplating the other social factors. It is high time to reflect how scholars should position and argue child labour, and make clear a distinction with other concepts such as working children and children assisting parents. Such a reflection should also consider the complex nature behind their active participation in "*employment*", as well as the systemic nature that compels children to either assist their parents to make a living, or as working children as a means of survival.

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