

Children of seasonal agricultural migrant workers: an African perspective

Moussa Harouna Sambo, African Movement of Working Children and Youth, Dakar, Senegal



MJEJT discussed directly with representatives from their member organisations how seasonal migration of parents affects children.
Image • Courtesy Mouvement Africain des Enfants et Jeunes Travailleurs (MJEJT)

The Mouvement Africain des Enfants et Jeunes Travailleurs (MJEJT) (the African Movement of Working Children and Youth) has member organisations in 22 African countries and almost 20 years of experience in areas such as migration, protection, education and children's rights. This article provides an African perspective on the effects on children of seasonal migration.

Over the years, through various forms of research, the MJEJT have made contact with many children who have differing experiences of mobility. For example, this could be due to fostering, fleeing a crisis, voluntarily migrating alone, migrating with the family, migrating for education, employment or training, and so on. The right to be able to choose to remain in one's village,

rather than having to join an exodus in search of economic opportunities elsewhere, is one of 12 rights that were highlighted at our very first regional assembly of child and youth workers.

When the Bernard van Leer Foundation asked us to contribute an African perspective on the issue of children who migrate seasonally with their families, research into our archives showed that this is not an occurrence we have encountered frequently. The majority of seasonal migrant workers make their journeys alone, leaving their families at home. When children and adolescents migrate seasonally for work, they more commonly do so alone or in groups of friends. They often have a specific goal in mind, such as supporting their family or paying for their education

for the following year – in Agbangnizou, Benin, for example, migrant workers are called the *Houefifovi* or ‘end-of-term kids’.

Many children and young people who have migrated in search of work experience dangers and difficulties, such as employers withholding wages. Our member organisations arrange forums, direct interventions, and information campaigns concerning such risks, as well as training in how to defend oneself. They develop solidarity among children so that they help and protect each other and are better equipped to think of solutions.

Seasonal migration of parents

We discussed directly with representatives from our member organisations how seasonal migration of parents affects children. In general, as noted above, their experience is that parents tend to leave their children behind. Typically, the parents of young children are driven into seasonal work when they find they are unable to support their extra dependents. Being either young adults or still youths themselves, the majority have never migrated before. Many leave after harvest and return before the rainy season.

‘Generally, in Africa, the majority of seasonal migrant workers make their journeys alone, leaving their families at home.’

The experience of the children of these seasonal migrants depends heavily on their migrating parents’ relationship with their extended family in the village, who are left in charge of the children. If the parent is negligent or has a poor relationship with the extended family or neighbours, the child receives less supervision during the parent’s absence, with significant detrimental effects on their education and well-being.

On the other hand, if the migrant is well respected in the village and receives support from the extended family in looking after the children, these effects will

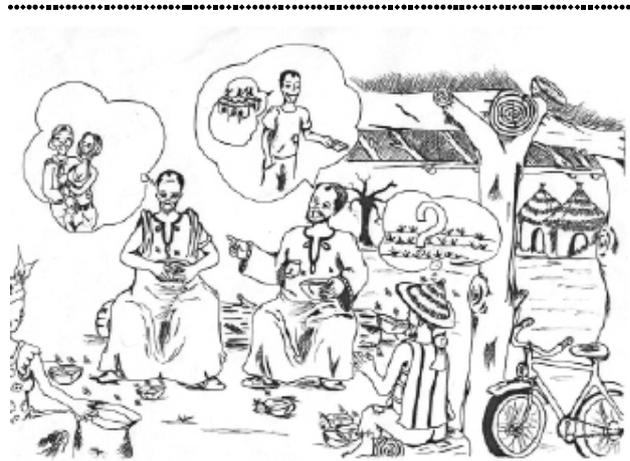


Image • Courtesy *Mouvement Africain des Enfants et Jeunes Travailleurs (MJEJT)*

be greatly lessened – especially if the mother remains with the children and is well integrated in the extended family. Children can even benefit, if parents’ migration exposes them to new ideas about treating children with more consideration and about the importance of education.

Rather than returning every year, sometimes a husband will decide to move around for 2 or 3 years in an attempt to find better economic opportunities. If things work out he may decide to send for his wife and children. However, some end up never being heard from again. In these cases, children are often neglected, as extended families come to regard them as a burden they are no longer obliged to bear. The children may be abandoned entirely if their mother decides to divorce the father and build a new life by remarrying.