

Field Report
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Looking for Money
while Building New Skills & Knowledge:
Rural Children's Independent Migration in South-Eastern Burkina
Faso

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INTRODUCTION

This report gives a provisional overview of four months' field research carried out in the south-east of Burkina Faso (Province du Boulgou) as well as in the capital, Ouagadougou (Province du Kadiogo) in the period 15 January – 14 May 2005. The research focused on children's independent migration¹ from their village to rural towns and the capital either to go to school, to participate in vocational training or to look for work.

The overall aim of this study is to increase our general understanding of children's migration and work by unpacking:

- Children's incentives to migrate.
- Their multi-faceted experiences – positive and negative - as migrants, be it for formal or vocational education or as workers in the towns and cities.
- The children's links back to their families in the village.
- How children's mobility affects rural livelihoods, as well as the livelihoods of urban-based kin, if they live with kin.

The four months' fieldwork aimed at producing qualitative material on children and parents' perceptions of the skills and opportunities that the children could potentially gain through migrating. Moreover, it aimed at exploring which issues they experienced as advantageous and enjoyable, which they identified as difficult, and how they sought to improve their working and living conditions at the destination.

METHODOLOGY

In brief, I used a range of methods during the fieldwork to produce the primarily qualitative material; in addition to an initial household composition survey I used open-ended, formal and informal interviews and participant observation. Furthermore, I trained twelve children in doing interviews with other children in one particular village.

As a starting point, I began the fieldwork in the village where I have done research since 1997, including my doctoral research in 2001-02. I chose strategically to be very location-specific, at least in the beginning, because the knowledge of this particular village and the friendships with both adults and children would facilitate the new research.

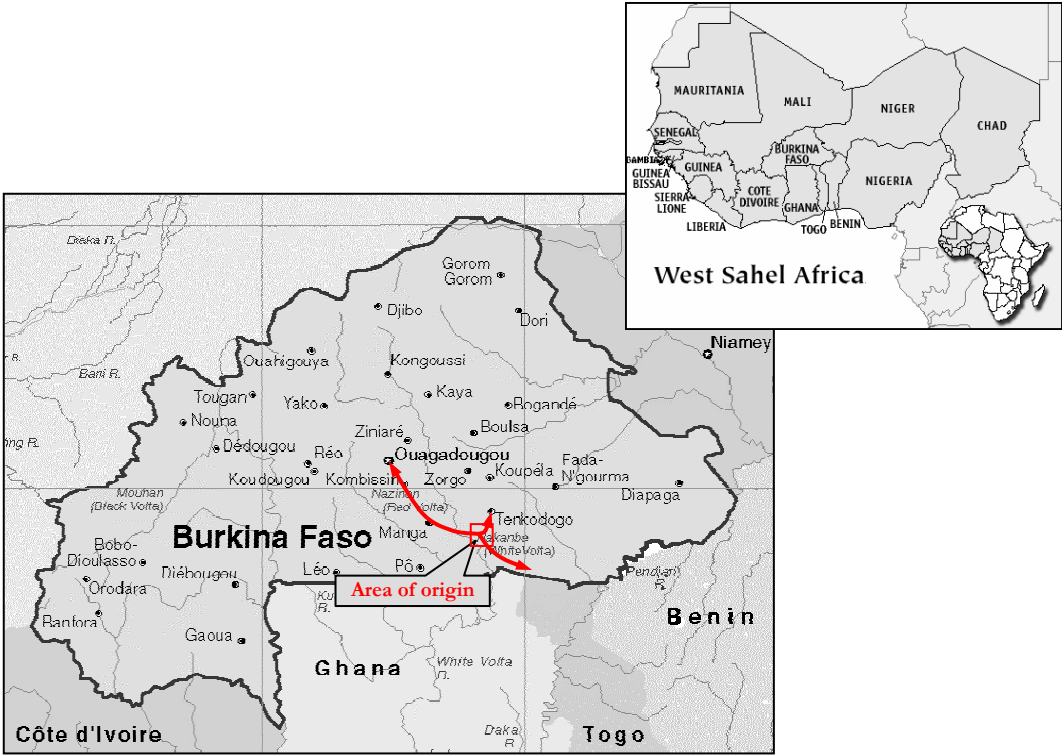
In this village, I employed and trained six boys and six girls aged 14-17 years to become "child researchers" who carried out interviews in pairs with the other children of a similar age in the village. At the beginning of their work, I was present in the village both to oversee that the interviews went well and to give them advice on how to do. During this time, I carried out the household composition survey in the entire village in order to find out whose children were elsewhere,

¹ By independent migration, I mean the situations in which children and adolescents below the age of 18, with or without their parents' mediation, leave their biological or social parents to live elsewhere with kin, friends or employers.

and whether the parents allowed me to visit their children. Once the “child researchers” had shown their understanding of carrying out interviews and knew how to work the technical equipment, my research assistant and I started to trace the children in the rural towns of Tenkodogo and Bittou and in Ouagadougou (Map 1).

During the process of tracking independent child migrants in Ouagadougou, we regularly visited those we had already interviewed. On the one hand, this was a strategy to meet other independent child migrants, since when we met, friends from the same or neighbouring villages often accompanied them. On the other hand, it was a strategy to increase our understanding of their everyday conditions through building rapport and listening to the stories they told at each meeting. In addition, I met other independent child migrants through tracing adult migrants from the region in marketplaces and the neighbourhoods where many of the migrants from the region south-east of Tenkodogo (Pays Bisa) live. After thorough introductions and explanations of the research, I asked the adult migrants to mediate contact with the children they knew. Finally, we chanced on a number of independent child migrants in the street because we screened marketplaces, restaurants and bars for young itinerant traders speaking Bisa.

With the permission of the independent migrants, we went to talk to their parents in their village of origin. For this reason, the last three months of the fieldwork was spent partly in Ouagadougou and partly in the Province du Boulgou, where we traced the migrants’ parents in twelve villages between Loanga and Ounzéogo (in a distance of 5-20 kilometres from Tenkodogo).



Map 1. Common destinations for independent child migrants.

We interviewed both the independent child migrants and their parents about their views on the advantages children created by migrating to rural towns or to the capital, on the difficulties they could endure and on the ways in which migration could perhaps help the children in the future. In total, we interviewed 70 independent child migrants in Ouagadougou, Tenkodogo and Bittou, as well as 45 parents. In addition, the “child researchers” interviewed 24 children and youth, of whom some have never travelled but spoke about their future dreams, while others already had concrete experiences of staying with kin in Ouagadougou and Côte d’Ivoire of which they spoke.

PROVISIONAL FINDINGS

A review of the literature on child labour and migration reveals that in Burkina Faso the studies which have been carried out until date focuses almost exclusively on the mining sector (boys and girls) and on the domestic sector (girls). Little attention has been given to the agricultural sector² and to the informal sector, although children frequently find work in these sectors. My research focused in particular on the independent child migrants working in the informal sector in Ouagadougou.

The picture emerging from the interviews and the repeated meetings with the migrants revealed that:

- Most of the independent child migrants who came from the region south-east of Tenkodogo were boys in the age group 16-23 years. Few girls went to Ouagadougou but apparently many worked as domestics or engaged in petty-trade in the rural towns closer to their home. However, during this fieldwork, we met few girl migrants.
- The children lived either with urban relatives or shared rented accommodation with friends from the same village or neighbouring villages. Of the 48 independent child migrants in Ouagadougou, only one had lived in the street temporarily.
- By far, most of the independent child migrants in Ouagadougou worked in the informal sector: Half of them were shoe-shiners (24 of 48 children), one fourth worked in restaurants and food places where they were dish-washers, cooks or waiters (13 of 48 children), and the rest engaged in petty-trade and various types of work.
- En general, the children’s wages were very low. Many earned between 5-7,000 Fcfa (approx. £ 5-7³) per month although they worked 12-14 hours a day, seven days a week. In contrast, the formal minimum wage in Burkina Faso - for adults and children alike – is 28.811 Fcfa (approx. £ 30) per month according to the Ministry of Work, Labour and Youth.

² This may be because much of the agricultural labour is concentrated on cocoa and coffee plantations in Côte d’Ivoire, though the cotton and rice farms in Burkina are mentioned sporadically. However, to my knowledge, the only research on child labour on these farms is carried out currently by de Lange at the Foundation for International Research on Working Children (IREWOC).

³ The exchange rate is £ 1 = 951 Fcfa.

- A good number of these children had changed job several times because they, due to the low wages, constantly were on the outlook for a better job. Moreover, they commonly experienced not being paid or having the wage reduced because the employer did not have sufficient money to pay the promised salary. This had made several children change to shoe-shining because they had lost confidence in the employers and felt that they could earn more in this way.
- The most common reason for migrating to a rural town or to Ouagadougou was the opportunity to earn a little money during the dry season, first and foremost to buy clothes and later, if the earnings permitted, a bicycle. Several of the independent child migrants spoke about constructing houses for their parents in the future, but their low wages barely permitted them to save up enough money for their own needs and for the small presents they would like to bring back to the village once they returned.
- Another important reason to migrate for the children was to know how life in the town or city was, to get more autonomy and adventure. Both the children and their parents spoke about "being awake" after having lived in a town or city. "Being awake" signified maturing and the understanding the necessity of work if one wanted to eat, the importance of respecting others, and in particular the powerful, and finally the virtue of honesty.
- With a few exceptions, all the fathers and older brothers who headed the rural households had been migrants in Ouagadougou, Ghana or Côte d'Ivoire in the past, and although they rarely told the young migrants, I doubt they had forgotten their own experiences of and aspirations to the first journey away from home. In other words, they often understood why the children wanted to leave on migration.
- Many of the independent child migrants had asked their parents' permission before migrating, and the parents had given them advice regarding how they should behave away from home and explained the importance of putting aside money even if the wage was low. In most cases when a child had run away from home, because he did not think his parents would allow him to migrate, the parents had in fact forgiven his behaviour, and several fathers noted that they would have helped paying the transport for the child, if they had known that he would migrate.