

Measuring Child Labor in Oil Palm Production in Sabah, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Can we measure child labor? It may sound simple and a classic question to ask, but scholarly discourse continues to raise doubts about how best to measure it accurately, at what level of measurement, and how to differentiate between child labor and a range of almost similar terms such as children assisting parents and working children. In this article, as part of our longterm research project in oil palm production in Sabah (Malaysia), we attempt to measure child labor focusing on four domains, (i) children's involvement in oil palm activities; (ii) time spent in performing such activities; (iii) types of activities; and (iv) time spent on the learning and undertaking recreational activities. To better understand their involvement in oil palm activities, further analysis is undertaken from four social lenses: gender, age, identity, and education. Our overall findings indicate that while there is a clear conceptual difference and practice between children assisting parents and working children, it is challenging to distinguish between working children and child labor. Instead, most of our child respondents categorized as working children fall within the broader definition of child labor. Given the complex interplay between local contexts and root causes that create conditions of child labor, this article highlights the urgency to refresh scholarly discourse and the way we understand and measure child labor.