

# Small Bodies, Large Contribution: Children's Work in the Tobacco Plantations of Lombok, Indonesia

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*Children contribute substantially to the workforce needed to produce tobacco in Indonesia. Drawing on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork, I discuss the reasons behind children's economic involvement in tobacco cultivation in the eastern region of the island of Lombok in eastern Indonesia. I explore children's paid work in the plantations by looking at the three dimensions of their economic lives: the local economy, their households and their individual lives. I address the tension between children's agency and the systems that constrain it.*

*Keywords:* Children; Indonesia; Work; Tobacco growing; Ethnography; Agency; Households

Fendi, a 13-year-old boy from a village in Central Lombok, Indonesia, came to the village where I was conducting fieldwork just after the tobacco harvest. Fendi, who moved in with his grandfather, a tobacco farmer, knew there was a lot of work available in the village at this time of the year. His intention was to work as a *stoker*, a task many boys of his age take on. This involves supervising the brazier of the tobacco kiln while the leaves are being dried out. Fendi also knew that if he did the job well, he would be paid a reasonable amount at the end of the season and would be able to send some money to his mother, because the living conditions in his village were much more arduous. He was, however, quite forward in telling me he also had hopes to make some money for himself. He wanted to buy a bicycle and start saving for a trip to Malaysia in a year or two, just as thousands of other men on the island who dream of making money in the neighbouring country.

Fendi's story is representative of the impact commercial tobacco cultivation has on the local economy. Tobacco has affected the economy of the region as a whole, but also household economies and the economic lives of individuals. I open the

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discussion through these three levels of analysis to explore the impact of tobacco cultivation on the economic lives of children in rural Lombok. My purpose in exploring children's economic roles at these three levels is to contribute to a broader understanding of the factors leading to and shaping children's involvement in the market. Although the economic significance of children and their economic autonomy in both wealthy and poor regions of the world is increasingly being acknowledged, discussed and reconceptualised (e.g. Liebel 2004; Hengst 2005; Nieuwenhuys 2005; Zelizer 2005; Bourdillon 2006; Hungerland, Liebel, Milne, & Wihstutz 2007), there are still few examples that describe how children's economic behaviour is both triggered and moulded by the setting and their circumstances, beginning with their households and going as far as the global markets in which they participate. Drawing on ethnographic data gathered during a year and a half of fieldwork in Indonesia from 2002 until 2004, I use the example of children's involvement in tobacco cultivation to explore the interrelation of factors that provide a context for children's paid work.

### **Producing Tobacco: A Labour-Intensive Enterprise**

Worldwide, the commercial cultivation of tobacco is dominated by a few multinational companies and represents the bulk of agricultural exports and foreign income for many poor countries. Across all stages of tobacco production, there are currently approximately 100 million tobacco workers, ninety million of whom are in developing countries. Tobacco cultivation is a very long, strenuous, time-consuming, labour-intensive and risky activity. Ironically, although there have been extensive antitobacco campaigns designed to raise awareness of the adverse health effects of smoking in recent years, the harsh conditions of tobacco cultivation remain mostly hidden. As the world's seventh biggest producer of tobacco, Indonesia provides an interesting setting in which to explore the relationships that underlie cultivation of the crop.

Tobacco was introduced into Java by Europeans in the early seventeenth century and it quickly became established throughout the Indonesian archipelago. Tobacco cultivation expanded during the eighteenth century, both through independent smallholders and under the Dutch colonial cultivation system. Because returns per hectare could be high and the amount of labour required significant, the use of hired labour was common during colonial times (Boomgaard 1999). This enormous demand for labour was met in the past by using forced labour or *coolies* (e.g. Houben & Lindblad 1999) or cheap labour, including that of children (Tjandraningsih & Anarita 2002; White 2002).

Conditions on the island of Lombok, to the east of Bali in the Indonesian archipelago, are favourable for the cultivation of tobacco. By the second half of the eighteenth century, tobacco was the second largest export after rice and, by the 1890s, it provided the second highest revenue from trade (Van der Kraan 1980). Unfortunately, there are no historical data describing how the crop was cultivated

outside Java and Sumatra. However, it is well known that intensive exploitation of labour and agricultural production during the Dutch colonial period resulted in severe poverty, an increased concentration of land ownership and food shortages among the Sasak of Lombok. Until recently, the island remained an underdeveloped region, with mainly subsistence agriculture and few signs of local entrepreneurship.

The cultivation of tobacco as both a cash crop and for self-consumption seems to have survived on the island after independence, if only on a small scale (Krulfeld 1974; Judd 1984). From the 1970s, the expansion of a cash economy intensified after the introduction of high-yielding rice varieties and a concomitant need for wage labour. At this time, first domestic and then multinational private tobacco corporations established themselves on the island. It was during this decade that Judd (1984) noticed big changes in the structure of employment and labour relations. For example, she observed that farmers started using small, organised groups of labourers whose leader negotiated labour contracts directly with the farmer. This pattern of recruitment—also observed in Java during the same period (Collier 1973; Stoler 1977)—is still prevalent in the recruitment of labour in Lombok. Furthermore, children are often part of these groups.

Since the expansion of the cash economy, seasonality and a shortage of paid work and low returns for labour have been a feature of Lombok's agricultural production. These factors are a recurring topic of research on the island (Krulfeld 1974; Judd 1984; Patrick 2004) and relevant to my own research because they partly account for children's involvement in paid work. As Judd puts it, 'the low returns for labour make it necessary for every able-bodied household member, man, woman, and child, to work' (Judd 1984, p. 42).

Since the late 1980s, in line with widespread agricultural transformations induced by liberalisation, contract farming (a contract between individual farmers and the tobacco company) has become the dominant way of producing tobacco in many areas across the world (Simmons, Winters, & Patrick 2005). The tobacco corporations provide credit, technology, on-going instruction and supervision for individual smallholders so that they—and their labourers—produce the crop in a certain way to sell back to the company at the end of the season at a predetermined price. As Simmons et al. (2005) have argued, contract farming allows companies to minimise transaction costs while providing farmers with access to markets, credit and technology, among other benefits. However, the net effect of contract farming on smallholders has been controversial, in part because the farmers bear more of the risk. According to Patrick (2004), Lombok has become a particularly propitious setting for contract farming. As landholdings get smaller, subsistence-level agriculture intensifies, leaving a mass of landless labourers with very limited opportunities for non-agricultural work. And, as smallholders start looking for options to escape the subsistence cycle, the landless have become a cheap local labour pool.

## **Tobacco in East Lombok**

In East Lombok, one of the three regencies on the island, tobacco cultivation has been increasing since the early 1990s. Today, the region is the main producer of Virginia Tobacco—the variety used in commercial cigarettes and introduced on the island by the tobacco companies—in the entire province of Nusa Tenggara Barat (which includes Lombok and Sumbawa). During the past decade, two large tobacco corporations with warehouses in the area—Philip Morris and PT Sadhana Arifnusa—started recruiting farmers willing to take up contracts. Many farmers with small and medium-sized landholdings, as well as those with no land but access to credit to rent it, were tempted by the possibility of a big income in an increasingly consumer society. Farmers obtain the seeds, fertilisers and even a small cash loan from the tobacco company and these costs are deducted from the proceeds when they sell the tobacco (subtracted before the farmer gets paid). As suggested above, individual farmers who enter into contractual agreements hire, manage and pay for the labour they need independently of the tobacco companies. In most cases, the workforce is recruited from within the village where the farmer lives. Relatives, neighbours and sometimes a farmer's own children become part of this paid labour force. Tobacco cultivation is highly regulated by the firms and extends to supervision and instruction of the farm labourers. The firms not only fix the price for the tobacco every year, but they also establish a range for a day labourer's pay.

The availability of cash and paid work during the tobacco season, which coincides with the dry season from April to October, is a significant feature of the industry. However, so are dependence on a cash economy and the increased engagement in market-based consumption. Lack of work and money characterise the rest of the year, when landholding households rely on rice cultivation for subsistence and petty trading for cash, while landless households survive on the meagre and sporadic income they get as labourers in the rice fields or in other small-scale economic activities, such as sand mining. Tobacco farming has improved the living standards of entrepreneurial smallholders, but not those of the poor and landless. Undeniably, tobacco cultivation has deeply penetrated the economy of the island and some areas of East Lombok have become highly dependent on the crop. One such is the village of Dasan Paok, which is used as the case study in the present paper.

Cultivation of Virginia tobacco requires specific soil, weather and handling conditions. More importantly, it requires the coordination of an enormous labour force for the 6-month period from the time the tobacco germinates until the cured tobacco is pressed into a bale for sale. There are eight stages involved in production: germinating seeds in special seedbeds; transplanting seedlings; caring for the plant, which includes spreading fertilisers and daily hoeing; harvesting; curing the leaves by tying them to poles that are then stacked in the kilns; drying; sorting the leaves according to quality; and compressing the leaves into bales. There is no mechanisation because tobacco leaves are easily bruised and the price of tobacco, usually calculated per kilogram, is highly dependent on quality.

To meet the very high demand for labour, opportunities for paid work have expanded exponentially since the introduction of the crop. However, the volatility of the business for farmers has meant that remuneration for labour tends to be very low and child labour has come to represent a substantial proportion of this labour. This has also been observed in other tobacco-growing areas across the world (Loker 2005). The following is a description of how the labour force is organised in Dasan Paok.

In Dasan Paok a farmer needs a minimum of two hectares of land—usually owned, but occasionally rented—to enter into a contract with the tobacco company. My calculations suggest that each tobacco kiln, which caters for the processing of tobacco from two hectares of land, requires the labour of twenty-eight individuals when in full use. Therefore, the eighteen kilns in the village would require the labour of 504 individuals. These figures, of course, are approximate and certainly overstate the labour requirements because not all kilns are used to full capacity. In addition, cultivation can be staggered so that labourers work for more than one farmer on different days. However, the approximate calculation supports the claim that the labour demand of tobacco cultivation can only be met if the active population of the village, which totals 336 (including all children over the age of six), is fully employed during the 6 months of the dry season. It is important to note that the structure of the population in the village—broadly calculated because most people are uncertain of their age or that of their children—is such that 67 per cent are under 30 years of age and 35 per cent are under 15 years of age. It is a very young population by Indonesian standards—with high fertility and mortality rates—which is very relevant in the context of the present article because the adult population alone is not large enough to satisfy the high demand for labour.

As is common in other sectors of Indonesian rural economies (Saptari 1995; Alexander & Alexander 2000), the complex task of tobacco cultivation and processing is made up of a series of subtasks completed by a labour force structured according to age and gender. In local culture, strength and risk taking are the traits of men's work, whereas patience and carefulness are the skills that characterise jobs taken by women and children. The reasons, repeated consistently by labourers when I asked why the division of labour had taken this particular shape, are clearly the result of power relations and hierarchies rather than of actual abilities related to age and gender. The 'nimble fingers' argument that claims that children's and women's special skills—acquired through prior socialisation—and channels them into particular kinds of jobs has been critiqued in the feminist and child labour literature (Elson & Pearson 1981; Levison 1991): it is not just women's and children's special skills, but their lessened negotiating power that accounts for the types of jobs they undertake.

According to the division of labour described above, men are in charge of transplanting the tobacco seedlings, hoeing, stacking poles inside the kiln and compressing the leaves after they have been cured. Women water the seedlings, spray the fertilisers, harvest the leaves at the right time and sort the leaves according to their colour after drying. Children plant the seeds in the seedbeds, water and spray fertilisers alongside the women, tie the harvested leaves to poles (*gelanting*), untie

them once they have been cured and supervise the kiln's brazier (a highly sought after task for boys and young men).

The *gelanting* workers tie tobacco leaves to the long bamboo poles that are placed inside the kiln for drying and untie them after they are taken out. This job, in addition to being badly paid, is boring and strenuous. The workers need to squat for several hours. Although they can take breaks because payment is based on the number of pieces/poles, the kiln owners expect all harvested leaves to be bound on the same day. *Gelanting* workers are almost exclusively children,<sup>1</sup> except for a few old women who are too old to work as harvesters and a few new mothers who are not available for harvesting. It is the worst paid job in tobacco cultivation. Labourers are paid Rp 4,000<sup>2</sup> per 100 poles and most need a full working day of approximately 8–10 hours to achieve this. During school days, most children work only in the afternoons, therefore earning a maximum of Rp 2,000. Untying (*buka gelanting*) can be completed more quickly and is paid at half these rates. Perhaps the only good thing about these tasks is that workers are paid on the same day.

If assessed on pay rates, the attributes of strength and facing danger are more highly valued than patience and carefulness; the jobs associated with men, such as hoeing and compressing the leaves, are paid at a substantially higher rate than the women's and children's tasks. For an equal number of working hours, men are paid 40 per cent more than women and 120 per cent more than children. For example, on the same day and for the same amount of working time, a man hoeing earns Rp 10,000, a woman harvesting tobacco earns Rp 6,000 and a child tying up leaves earns Rp 4,000. These pay differentials are not a matter of labour supply and demand because there appears to be a shortage of all types of labour during the tobacco season. Instead, they reflect the subaltern position of women and children in Indonesian society. Gender and seniority ideologies are cultural constructions ingrained in the collective mind, which, as Elson and Pearson (1981, p. 42) put it, 'are also material processes which go on "not just in our heads, but in our practices"'.

I calculated that each tobacco kiln in full use requires a labour force of ten men, six women and twelve children. There are eighteen kilns in the village, which suggests a requirement for a total labour force of approximately 180 men, 108 women and 216 children, totalling 504 individuals. The proportion of this labour provided by children between 6 and 14 years of age is very significant. Taking into account the differences in the types of work they do (e.g. the total amount of hours to complete some tasks compared to others), I estimated the proportion of child labour in production to be approximately 35 per cent (see Table 1). Based on the task structure, 216 children would be required if kilns were fully utilised; however, there are only 85 children between 6 and 14 years of age living in the hamlet. These figures give an indication of why so many children work in the tobacco plantations. The only way of producing tobacco with limited resources, in terms of both credit and labour, is to make use of the entire work force available at minimum cost. Children—who make up a substantial proportion of the population and are cheaper to hire—take up paid employment when the demand for labour is very high, during the 6 months of the

**Table 1** Estimated number of workers and work hours needed to produce tobacco for one minimal unit of production (two hectares of land and one kiln)

Activity	Hours worked per type of worker		
	Children (12)	Adult women (10)	Adult men (6)
Planting seeds in seedlings	720	–	–
Watering seedlings	–	1200	–
Transplanting seedlings	–	–	1440
Hoeing the land	–	–	2880
Watering and fertilizing	720	600	–
Harvesting tobacco leaves	–	3600	–
Tying up tobacco leaves to poles	4800	–	–
Stacking leaves in kiln	–	–	1440
Supervising the kiln's brazier	480	–	–
Untying tobacco leaves from the poles	600	–	–
Sorting out leaves	–	1200	–
Compressing leaves	–	–	1080
<b>Total hours worked</b>	<b>7320</b>	<b>6600</b>	<b>6840</b>
<b>Percentage of total hours worked</b>	<b>35.2</b>	<b>31.8</b>	<b>33</b>

*Note:* The calculation of the amount of hours needed to complete an activity is based on thorough observations and interviews with labourers throughout the tobacco season. As an example, the estimation that 4800 child work hours are needed to complete the task of tying up tobacco leaves for one kiln was based on considering that on average each kiln employs 12 children who work an average of 4 hours a day (after school) during 100 days (the span of time needed to harvest all tobacco leaves from the plant).

dry season. In addition, most children work fewer hours than adults do—especially those of primary school age, because the vast majority combine employment with schooling—therefore more child hours are needed to complete the tasks assigned to children (for the situation in Java, see Tjandraningsih & Anarita 2002).

Bearing in mind the vulnerability of the tobacco business and the small profit margin for farmers,<sup>3</sup> it is necessary to employ labour that accepts poor wages. Children (followed by women) are assigned to the tasks with the lowest pay. However, there are no 'women's wages' or 'children's wages'. As Bass (2004) emphasised in her study of child labour in Africa, in rural Lombok hierarchical structures of power based on seniority and gender channel children into the least desirable and lowest-paid work. But the level of return on this labour is set outside the village, not within it: under the guise of instructing the farmers in tobacco cultivation, the tobacco companies set the wages for each task. Therefore, children's cheap labour is the result of sociocultural factors combined with poverty, cash dependency and availability of paid work.<sup>4</sup>

Children are employed in the tobacco economy because their contribution is necessary. Tobacco is also part of a local economy that rests on household economies, which engage in both subsistence and market production. In the next section, I explore the implications and repercussions of children's work in other areas of the economy.

## **Tobacco, Children and Household Economies**

In economic anthropology, it has been common to treat the household as if it were a single economic actor, even to the extent of writing unselfconsciously of 'household strategies'. Many scholars have referred to the imperative of linking economic functions within the household to those outside it; that is, household economics with the labour market or the supply of the workforce with the demand. This relatively uncomplicated view of the household could not survive the neoliberal revolution in the social sciences. As White (1989) points out, it is misleading to take the household as the unit of analysis:

Long used as a kind of catch-all minimal social economic unit, it is now becoming increasingly recognized that we should really think more in terms of separately and carefully defined (and only partly overlapping) units of production, consumption, accumulation, etc., sometimes to the extent of abandoning the concept of 'household' altogether. (White 1989, p. 22)

Dwyer (1993) also notes that most households are changing entities formed by unstable bonds of kinship, marriage, neighbourhood, membership and friendship. In the Indonesian context, Diane Wolfe (1992) has put this revisionist view of the household very strongly. In investigating the increasing involvement of young rural Javanese women in factory work, Wolf (1992) argues that 'household strategies' is too simplistic a notion to account for the complexity of economic decisions made by household members. She argues that Javanese households are not units, but 'congeries', split by rebellion and held together by coercion. Saptari's (1995) study of workers in a Javanese cigarette factory sets out a nuanced account. In her view, which I share, it is individuals, not households, who develop strategies. But these strategies are not unidirectional and governed solely by immediate self-interest: household members may strategise their work for the 'common good' as well as for 'self-enhancing' purposes. Saptari (1995) also notes (consistent with my own findings) that this distinction between opposed motivations may be blurred in practice because intention and result do not always coincide. Increasing individualism in Lombok (e.g. Krulfeld 1974) and elsewhere means that individual and household goals tend to diverge and therefore the household cannot be considered a homogeneous unit with a common strategy (see de Haan & Zoomers 2005). To understand the economic decisions made by various household members, it is necessary to explore power relations within the domestic unit. As Nieuwenhuys shows in her study of working children in Kerala in India, there are two aspects of the family as an institution that provide a framework for understanding children's economic roles in household economies, namely a households' survival strategies and the laws of seniority and gender that govern those households (Nieuwenhuys 1994, 2000).

Tobacco cultivation in rural East Lombok provoked socioeconomic changes both outside and within the household. The availability of wage employment and the dependence on cash intensified the stratification of households in the village, but also



put more pressure on household members to bring in money, intensifying the tension between the need for economic independence and the obligation to strategise for the common good. Although the availability of cash has fed the individual desire to acquire consumer goods, it has also made family units more dependent on cash, making it imperative that all members bring in cash. Children, for example, are expected to contribute towards the costs of schooling with their paid work. Children's economic roles in household economies must be understood within this framework. Following Nieuwenhuys's (1994, 2000) and Saptari's (1995) arguments, it is imperative to look at the power differentials among the members of the household to understand how children manage the tension between working for self-enhancing purposes and for the common good of their domestic units. In rural East Lombok, cultural norms on socialisation, economic necessity and division of labour patterns in the family defined by seniority and gender have long emphasised children's economic roles within the household. Around the age of 5 or 6 years, when a child is old enough to communicate well and get around the village independently, he or she is expected to become an active contributor to the household's material reproduction: children are involved in both household work (such as minding siblings, doing the laundry or cooking) and agricultural work. Girls carry a heavier burden: they are expected to complete much of the housework and to earn cash. Boys are also expected to bring in money, but their contribution to household maintenance work is minimal unless there are no daughters in their family. Far from these expectations being an imposition, I discovered that children are very conscious of the expense they represent for their family and are hence willing to work. The following examples illustrate the commitment children feel towards the economic wellbeing of their families, but also indicate the children's eagerness to keep some cash for themselves.

During the tobacco season, Atuna, a girl of around 12 years of age from a comparatively well off family of four, works binding tobacco leaves almost every day. I saw how tired she would get and how dirty her hands would be after a few hours of work. 'Do your parents ask you to go and tie up tobacco leaves?' I asked. 'Not at all,' she said, 'when I get home my father asks me where have I been, and I tell him I went to bind tobacco leaves; I then give some of that money to my mother to buy clothes for me, and I keep a bit for buying snacks.'

Of course, the situation is different for different families. For the poorest (usually the families that have no resources other than the labour force of its members), the cash children bring into the household has become crucial for survival. Such is the case of Marriuni, a girl of around 11 years of age, who comes from one of the poorest families in the village. Her father deserted the family when she was about 2 years old and Marriuni's mother was left alone to head this landless household with seven children. The availability of paid employment during the tobacco season is, in some way, a relief for families such as Marriuni's because the cash that each member brings home is pooled to make ends meet. I had the following dialogue with her:

M: My father never gives us money. He is extremely stingy. When he divorced my mother, she went crazy, really crazy because we were seven children and we had no money. One of my little brothers died.

MFA: But you can earn money by yourself.

M: I work. I tie up leaves. I like to help my mother. I feel happy when I can give her money.

MFA: Do you give her all the money you earn?

M: When I get money I take a couple of hundred rupiahs and I give the rest to her. If I get Rp 3,000 from binding leaves, I take Rp 200 to buy snacks and I give the rest to her. We need that money to buy rice.

What is common to both examples is children's sense of responsibility towards the household economy and their commitment to contribute to the household income. In one way or another, children's involvement in the tobacco plantations is economically meaningful in almost all households. Although some families are clearly much better off than others, only a handful of families are not preoccupied with economic survival and money. Even when children work to buy goods for themselves and are able to manage their own money, this is an important contribution to the household economy because it relieves pressure on parents to buy the goods children need or want.

Other factors are pertinent to a more comprehensive understanding of children's economic roles in households. The expansion of a wage-based economy and the importance of children's cash contribution must to be viewed in combination with certain structural processes that also affect relationships and roles within the household. Although Indonesian families now have fewer children than in the past, children have become a financial burden for even the relatively prosperous families in the village due to the costs associated with schooling, clothing and other consumer goods. Households need more resources than in the past to meet the cost of educating their children, even to the end of primary school. Cash is needed to satisfy new consumption patterns and as living standards and the costs of living rise. Furthermore, children's contribution in cash is crucial when a member of the household, usually the father or an older brother, goes to Malaysia as a labour migrant for 1 or 2 years. In most of these cases, the burden of maintaining the household during their absence rests upon the mother and her children. Reduced fertility, migration, formal education and consumption are all external pressures affecting the financial dynamics of the household in tobacco-growing areas of East Lombok. Without economic assistance from children, the strain to survive would be extreme.

Verlet (2000, p. 67) has coined the term 'domestic deregulation' to refer to the break up of family units or the increasing fragility and destabilisation of households as a result of global economic processes, such as the expansion of multinationals and

their demand for local labour, or the mobility to earn a higher income away from home. He sees a correlation between the deregulation of markets, domestic deregulation and the spread of child labour. Similarly, and also referring to domestic units, de Haan and Zoomers (2005) note how intrahousehold power differentials, the tendency towards individualisation and the diversity and multilocality of income-generating activities impact on the ways poor people organise their survival and make decisions about it. Although children's involvement in productive activities for the household has always been a pattern in household economies in rural Indonesia, the intensification of wage employment introduced by the commercial production of tobacco has reformulated the patterns of children's roles in household economies.

In addition to working to sustain the local economy, children in rural East Lombok work in tobacco plantations because, along with their mothers, fathers and siblings, they are aware of the difficulties of making a living in their setting and feel committed to contributing to the economic wellbeing of their households. Sociocultural and circumstantial forces have shaped the economic roles children perform for their domestic units. In particular, children are aware that their households need cash and that they can help obtain it by working in the plantations. Children aim to attain respect in their households. However, as I demonstrate in the next section, children not only work for their families, but also for themselves.

### **Tobacco Money and Children's Economic Agency**

Although the theoretical importance of a focus on agency has increasingly been acknowledged in the literature on children (James & Prout 1990; Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta, & Wintersberger 1994; Stephens 1995; James, Chris, & Prout 1998), it has had little impact on economic models of the household. As Boyden and Levison (2000) note:

... economic models of the household either completely disregard children, subsume them under households, or construct worlds that in no way approximate children's realities ... Yet this directly contradicts a basic premise of economic reasoning: that of the utility-maximizing individual. Economists need to consider children as agents with preferences, upon which they act to the extent possible given adult restrictions. (Boyden & Levison 2000, p. 46)

The availability of paid work for children in tobacco production has given some of them a sort of emancipation that did not exist before.<sup>5</sup> Although the bulk of the money children earn is usually given to a parent or older sibling to help mitigate costs, most children, even the poorest, make decisions to obtain economic benefit for themselves. The context in which children make such decisions is paramount to understanding them.

Children are eager consumers determined to obtain a proper income, because earning their own money gives them the right to consume (Zelizer 1985, 2002; White 1996). Many are also keen on formal education and will work, or even migrate, to

afford school (Hashim 2007). Recent studies have concluded that, despite their differential access to power and their position as subordinates in the household, children do implement their own strategies to get the most for themselves out of the circumstances into which they find themselves. For example, Punch (1998, 2001) shows how, in rural Bolivia, children use different tactics to either avoid household chores they regard as boring and tiring or to make them less stressful (like getting a younger sibling to do it or asking a friend to help). Reynolds (1991) demonstrates that Tonga children in Zimbabwe have substantial autonomy in establishing kinship alliances and in their residential choices, whereas Iversen (2002) has examined children's autonomy in making decisions to migrate for work in rural Karnataka in India. Although there are as yet few comprehensive studies, the main point seems clear: children must be researched as active economic agents and the extent to which they are autonomous must be the subject of research rather than simply assumed.

### Chasing and Handling Tobacco Money

Paid work in rural East Lombok has given children the opportunity to participate in consumption. All children love the snacks (usually *kerupuk*,<sup>6</sup> peanuts and lollies) that are widely available in the village and these are their most frequent purchases. In addition, children like to gather outside school before it starts and to buy a light breakfast with their own money. But at the end of the tobacco season, many children have sufficient savings to buy new clothes, a bicycle, a stereo or books for school. In most cases, it is parents, usually mothers or perhaps an older sibling, who buy these goods when they go to the market in the village of Pomotong, some 3 kilometres away.

The data I gathered during my fieldwork suggest children seek jobs when they begin to feel uncomfortable asking for money from their parents, especially if they are told that there is no money. Contrary to what one would expect, most children anxiously await the paid jobs that become available at the beginning of the tobacco season and miss this time of the year when it's over. As one of my young informants commented:

There is no work now, I cannot look for money. I miss the tobacco season. I like to save money for buying clothes and snacks. We want to earn money to help out our parents. When we need to spend money, we can spend our own money and not ask for it from our parents. (Atuna)

Another illustrative case is that of Ir, a 10 year old, who works as a *stoker* helping supervise a kiln's brazier at night. Every *stoker* I talked to stressed how tiring it is, especially for someone attending school, because they sleep by the kiln and have to get up several times to check the fuel. Ir's unusual abilities are evidently recognised by adults because he has been working as a part-time *stoker* for the past 3 years. He seemed very committed to his job and happy to have it. But once, when I asked him if he likes the task, he answered with a laconic 'yes' while gesturing with his fingers and

insinuating that it is the money he likes. At the end of the 2004 tobacco season, Ir was paid Rp 125,000. He gave Rp 100,000 to his mother to buy clothes for him for the upcoming Lebaran, kept Rp 5,000 to buy snacks for the weeks ahead and saved the rest with his school teacher.<sup>7</sup>

Children's economic agency is not only manifested through work. Ir's example also shows children's autonomy in relation to the way they allocate their earnings. All village children are very aware of what can be done with money and they yearn for it in a similar way to adults. Money is difficult to get, but very easy to spend; thus, knowing how to handle it correctly is a vital skill to learn. The children make economic decisions: how to save money and spend it. As I discovered, they also make up their own minds about whether to lend money (sometimes even to their parents) or to borrow money (from parents, siblings or even friends). The descriptive tags applied to individual children often reflect their voracity for and ability to handle money: *teliti* ('responsible'), *melak* ('greedy') and *boros* ('wasteful') are common Sasak terms. And their implications are well understood by children. *Teliti* children are diligent (*rajin*) with respect to work and careful in their handling of money.

Most cash earnings are saved, at least temporarily. Children have a variety of ways of saving and moneyboxes are common. Some are homemade from clay or bamboo and, especially during the tobacco season, children try to fill them so that they have a substantial amount when the season is over. Some money is saved for specific purposes, but often savings are seen as goods in themselves. When I asked Roh, a very hard working 11-year-old girl, when she would break open her moneybox, she replied that it would be when she needs money for school or new clothes or if her siblings or grandmother want to borrow money from her. As in the case of Ir, some children also 'bank' money with their schoolteacher. Others decide to keep it as secret as possible. A 10-year-old boy called Rodi decided to hide his savings from *gelanting* in the crack of a bamboo pole inside a kiln. According to Ir, his friend, people only discovered his savings when he fell from the pole and was knocked unconscious. 'He hid this money there so that no one would know and his parents would not ask him for the money', Ir commented. Another example of even more premeditated saving comes from an *arisan*<sup>8</sup> Atuna and eight of her classmates organised. The group of six girls and two boys, all in the first year of junior high school, agreed to contribute Rp 200 each day, then one member would get Rp 1,400 each week. Children sometimes see giving money to their parents or older siblings as a form of saving that avoids the temptation of wasting it on frivolous things like snacks. For instance, after a working day, Atuna earned Rp 3,300, gave Rp 2,000 to her mother and kept Rp 1,300 for herself. 'Mother, keep this money for me until I need to buy clothes or books,' she told her mother.

These examples indicate how children make decisions, bargain and manipulate people or situations in order to obtain economic benefits. Paid work is a means by which children can channel some of their intentions and desires. As Hengst (2005, p. 29) put it succinctly in his essay on children as our contemporaries in the global

consumer society, 'children of the present are buyers, multipliers, (sometimes) shareholders, very often savers and sometimes debtors'.

## Conclusion

Widespread tobacco cultivation has instigated radical changes in the economy of East Lombok and generated transformations in the mode of production, as well as in consumption patterns. Individual households have had to reformulate their structure in order to survive in this new context, defined by the imperative of having access to cash, sending children to school and coping with the temporary but long-term absence of family members working overseas. Children's economic roles have altered in accordance with these new modes of production and consumption. As Qvortrup (1991, p. 14) notes, children belong to society, but not 'in the trivial sense of simply being there, nor as a reduced form of raw material to be moulded, nor as the possession of the society or the state'. Children's activities are constructive, integrated with adults' activities and are also used instrumentally by adult society.

For various historical and sociocultural reasons, children's work, specifically paid work, has been censured as shameful and undesirable. As Nieuwenhuys notes 'the notion of child labour in its purest form condemns all work by those who are socially "children", irrespective of individual inclinations, interests and talent' (Nieuwenhuys 2000, p. 90).<sup>9</sup> This condemnation can only be sustained if children are not placed in their cultural contexts, or economic realities, or if we do not consider the global trends that put pressure on children to consume, attend school or take on low-paid jobs to help support their families or to satisfy local demand for labour often linked to global markets.

Governments, intergovernmental and governmental organisations, as well as human rights activists, have played an important role in conveying child labour as an objectionable feature of children's lives. This view is partly the result of differential global power relations between wealthy and poor nations, where the views of the more affluent (and presumably better educated) overshadow those of the disadvantaged, without a proper appreciation of their radically different realities. As Morrow (2007) notes, in the North (or wealthier world) childhood has become increasingly institutionalised with a very sharp school-work divide. In rich countries, the ways in which children are dependent on their parents are very different from those in poor areas of the world. These Western models of childhood have powerfully infiltrated the universal discourse on children and reinforced a romanticised ideal in which children should remain protégés of both their parents and the state. The adult-centredness of this model is also apparent, showing again the differentials in power relations and leaving children 'as pawns in a game in which they are quite peripheral' (Bessell 1999, pp. 370–1). As White points out, 'the history of discussion and concern on child employment (or the lack of it) tells us much about the specific and changing interests that adults had in children' (White 2002, p. 78).

Tobacco cultivation has triggered changes in many aspects of the social and economic lives of children in rural Lombok. However, conceiving young tobacco labourers as helpless victims of the greed of capitalism is a mistake: it is a paternalistic attitude that ignores children's own economic understanding and their self-sufficiency. These child labourers have remarkably clear knowledge of the local economy and equally remarkable autonomy in making economic decisions, decisions that are grounded in a culture that stresses their obligations and responsibilities to their households. Paid work enables children to help themselves financially, but it also opens the possibility of helping their families. These children are as aware of the difficulties of making a living in their locality as they are of the expense they represent for their households. My question is, if it is 'natural' for parents to provide for their children, why should it be 'unnatural' for children to assist their parents and siblings?

Children are agents; however, agents act within social structures. Because of children's subordinate position, these structures may be more constraining than they are for adults. In the first place, children are embedded in families; as (Levison 2000, p. 131) asks herself, 'can we accurately consider children's standpoints and agency without placing them in the context of the family?' Certainly not. Similarly, Nieuwenhuys (1996, p. 247) acknowledges the need to explore 'the ways children devise, create and negotiate the value of their work and how they invade structures of constraint based on seniority'. Children's motivations, decisions and actions are both triggered and constrained by a series of institutions (the family and the kinship system, schooling, religion) and systems (the sociocultural system, the socioeconomic system). While acknowledging these constraints, it is equally important to investigate children's active role in the reproduction and transformation of these structural conditions. In doing so, it is also crucial to take into account the value children's paid work has for them, their families and their communities in a context of cash dependency and consumerism.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research who supported this project through a dissertation fieldwork grant and the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sydney who also supported this research through the Carlyle Greenwell Research Fund.

### Notes

- [1] 'Children' in the area where I conducted my fieldwork are considered to be only those individuals who have not undergone puberty. Individuals are considered to be adults after puberty.
- [2] During the time of the research (2003–4) Rp 5,000 was equivalent to Au\$1.
- [3] If a tobacco unit were run as a strictly commercial proposition on rented land, the total costs for one season would be Rp 31 million, not counting the cost of the kiln. Farmers are attracted to tobacco cultivation by the apparent possibility of a profit (*uang bersih*) of Rp 20 million for 6 month's use of two hectares of land. It was these gross figures that were used to

encourage new cultivators and that farmers themselves talked about. However, when all costs, including borrowing costs and depreciation on the kiln, are included, the potential profit on the average revenue of Rp 50 million is probably closer to Rp 10 million. When pressed, farmers also agreed that this was a realistic expectation for a good season.

- [4] Interestingly, there is little debate or bargaining among labourers—both adult and children—about the pay they receive. This is partly due to the lack of alternative sources of paid work during the dry season, but also because all farmers pay roughly similar rates for similar jobs (as stipulated by the tobacco companies) and, given the low profit margin, they could hardly afford to pay more. Protests or striking against employers were unheard of during the fieldwork. The fact that labourers are usually the kin or neighbours of their employers could be a reason for this; however, this would require further investigation. Similarly, there were no signs at the time of the fieldwork that farmers and labourers intended to bargain with the tobacco companies for the price they got for the produce. This could change in the future but, so far, the limited experience farmers have in dealing with big corporations or with labour mobilisations could explain in part their compliance with the terms set by the companies.
- [5] The idea of paid work as emancipation is also a prevalent notion in women's studies. Interestingly, child labour and female labour appear to have much in common and studies on child labour seem to be at the same point women's studies were in the 1970s and 1980s. Much of their work is unrecognised and unpaid. The relatively poorer salaries women receive also apply to children, and it is significant that both women and children are employed not only because they are a cheaper labour force, but also because they are seen as more obedient and submissive. Furthermore, usually both women and children must combine their jobs with other time-consuming occupations. Finally, the positive feature common to both groups is that remunerated work can be a means of emancipation.
- [6] Chips made of flour flavoured with fish or shrimp.
- [7] There is an informal system in the local primary school that allows children to give their savings to their teacher, who keeps their money until they want it. Not all teachers participate and, in Dasan Paok's primary school, only the sixth grade teacher has agreed to look after the children's money. While I was conducting my fieldwork, more than half the children in his class had given him savings ranging from Rp 2,000 to Rp 30,000. The teacher keeps a written record of all the money in a book and the children have ready access to their savings.
- [8] The *arisan* is a typical Indonesian saving strategy in which a group gets together on a regular basis and its members contribute the same amount of money to a common fund. They then take turns at withdrawing the aggregate sum of money.
- [9] For a recent discussion of the term 'child labour', see Bourdillon (2006).

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