

Côte d'Ivoire's economy dependent on child labour

Our correspondent
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Despite government claims that 30 percent of the budget is spent on education, many children in the former French West African colony Côte d'Ivoire (Ivory Coast) are actually working.

Wielding hammers bigger than their forearms, children as young as four toil in Dickensian conditions to recover scrap metal, making everything from water pipes to kitchen pots for sale in the local markets. Barefoot boys rummage through garbage tips for rusty metal to be sharpened to a razor's edge or melted down in home-made blacksmith's ovens.

Côte d'Ivoire has a population of around 14 million. In a microcosm of its backward economy, 11-year-old Mohammed melts cans in a stove, while Abdul, 15, makes moulds out of dirt, then pours in the liquid metal to make a large cooking pot. The pots they make sell for about \$25. The money goes into a collective fund managed by their fathers, uncles and other elders. Mohammed, whose left arm bears two open burn wounds, said he has never been to school. "The fire burns us, but it's part of the job. Without this we cannot eat," he said.

Hailed as a "success story", contrasting with the instability of most of West Africa, Côte d'Ivoire is one of the continent's fastest growing economies, up by 7 percent over the last three years. Despite a huge debt problem that consumes 60 percent of public revenues, its economy is described by the US State Department as "active, animated and attractive". Officially, 30 percent of public expenditure is allocated to education, but the budget is poorly managed and the overcrowded public schools often turn away students.

Although primary school attendance is compulsory, in practice the authorities do not enforce it. According to the United Nations Children's Fund, only about 55 percent of children of primary school age actually

attend school in Côte d'Ivoire, a rate similar to those of the war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo and devastated Liberia.

"We don't have a real programme that fights against child labour," said Guillaume Lago, an assistant director of family action at Côte d'Ivoire's Ministry of Family Affairs and the Promotion of Women. She explains that it is nearly impossible to verify statistics such as those of the International Labour Organisation that between 20 percent and 30 percent of children are at work. Since many children work for their families it is difficult to determine what qualifies as child labour, she said.

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