

Child Employment, a Controversial Issue; Analysis in Two Touristic Destinations

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Abstract

Low-skilled employment is one of the noteworthy features of tourism activity in emerging and sometimes even consolidated destinations. As for child employment, such a situation is widely observed throughout several tourist destinations in Mexico. In this context, the general objective was to analyze the influence of tourism on child labor in Playa del Carmen and Cozumel, the two main tourist destinations in Quintana Roo. The following were determined as factors that foster or inhibit any practice that violates the rights of minors: tourism reputation, legal deficiencies, poverty situation. Outcomes will allow the design of better public policies against child labor in tourist destinations.

Keywords: tourism, child employment, policies, Cozumel, Playa del Carmen.

Introduction

Tourism represents an efficient growth strategy aimed at boosting employment, paying special attention to regions with scarce economic development, which is why the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) promotes this activity as a poverty alleviation measure (WTO, 2004). This argument is also evident in the scientific literature, especially in relation to the service industries of the host communities. Nonetheless, when it comes to vulnerable social groups, in particular children and young people, labor opportunities could become a factor that adversely affects the personal and social development of the host tourist communities.

Child labor, as defined by the International Labor Organization (ILO), is an activity that deprives or limits the childhood, capacity and dignity of children, thus affecting their physical and mental development (ILO, 2004). Similarly, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989) establishes the right to protection of children against economic exploitation and from activities or duties that are likely to be dangerous or to adversely affect “the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development” (Article 32).

On the other hand, the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (ILO, 1998) states that child labor is an impediment to economic and social development, as it entails that the next generation of workers will have fewer skills and be less educated than the one today. Using a similar argument, the World Bank asserts that child labor is a devastating consequence of poverty, as it consolidates the cycle of dependency as it attempts to accumulate capital from a very early age but determines very low subsequent productivity (Fallon & Tzannatos, 1998).

It is worth underscoring that the virtuous circle of poverty is illustrated in tourist destinations where cases of child labor are prevalent; nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that this phenomenon is not caused by tourism, rather a multiplier of social causes, which has been recognized by UNWTO (2001) as an international social problem, that has promoted policies and strategies to prevent child labor and exploitation in tourist areas.

In Mexico, child and youth labor practices are widespread in vast areas of the country, among them tourist destinations, constituting regional development poles and stimulating regional migration, with the associated problems, such as the violation of the rights of weaker social groups, as is the case with children.

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Within the state of Quintana Roo there are 22,621 minors employed who are below the minimum age (Anonymous, 2017), spread throughout the various municipalities, as a result of rural poverty, urban rural migration, food insecurity, and so forth (Minujin, Vandemoortele & Delamonica, 2002). Studies on this social problem are scarce in the scientific literature (Small, 2008; Poria & Timothy, 2014); similarly, there is no analysis of its influence on the behavior of tourists and the perception of the destinations where this labor offer takes place.

In order to evaluate the international problem of child labor, the following two of Quintana Roo's main tourist destinations were selected as part of an exploratory study, Playa del Carmen and Cozumel, with the general objective of analyzing the influence of tourism on child labor from the perspective of entrepreneurs, public welfare institutions, employees and teachers, so as to establish intervention strategies to benefit minors working in tourism-related activities. The research question was: how does tourism influence labor practices among children and young people in host communities? As such, this study contributes to knowledge, in which there is a notorious deficit of knowledge and research on the subject.

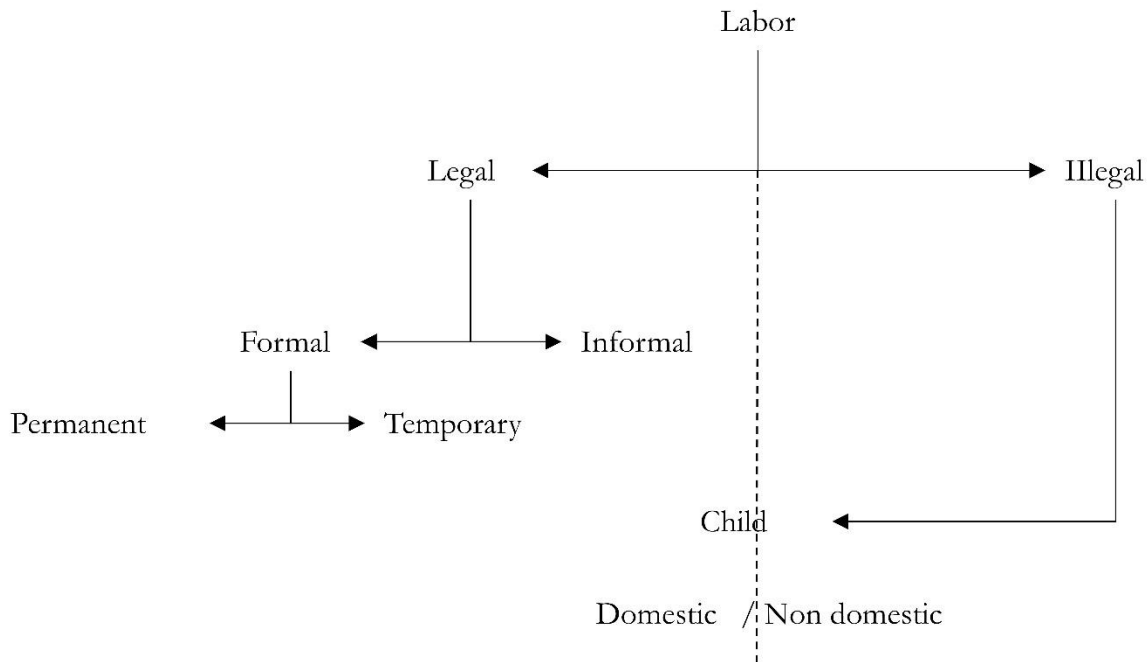
Child labor

In the present document, the term child or childhood comes from the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF, 1989), that defines a child as an individual under the age of 18. A child or young person is considered a 'worker' if he or she is 'economically active' (Ashagrie, 1993), that is, if he or she provides a service or product for the market and receives regular remuneration (Basu, 1999). On the other hand, child, youth and adolescent are understood as social and historical constructs that group one same age category with a legal referent (Post, 2002). This same international treaty gives priority to the education of the child over any other economic or social interest and establishes in concrete terms the governmental responsibility to protect children from any form of labor exploitation or economic activities at the expense of their education.

For the purposes of this document, "labor", "work" and "employment" are used indistinctly to designate children's activities pursuant to the definition in the international recommendations (1989, UNICEF), which also establish prohibited child occupation, understood as "the set of economic activities performed by boys, girls and adolescents that are not permitted; put their health at risk, affect their development or else, are carried out under the minimal permitted age to work" (UNICEF, 1989: Art 32).

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) reckons that children and young people are entitled to rights, but as a passive instrument of adults, making the latter individuals with responsibilities towards the former, given the inequalities of power, as a way of avoiding exploitation or situations of risk. Other entitlements of children and young people include education and adequate development, for which the State is given responsibility for effective implementation.

When it comes to work that disrupts or jeopardizes children's education, children should not be the productive agents of their own future, rather society is the active actor that is to ensure individual and social well-being, although parents may manifest their own interests so as to prompt children to work (Stadum, 1995), given opportunities and needs. Furthermore, it is customary for parents to have the best interest of their children and the moral authority of the State is limited in determining that an activity is appropriate or inappropriate for children and young people (Post, 2002), whether for paid or unpaid labor, domestic or non-domestic (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Labor categories

Source: adapted from Castree et al., 2004.

In the rural sector, child labor is more widespread than in the city (Ahmed, 1999), an issue conveyed to tourist destinations as a result of migration and economic opportunities. Moreover, the cultural standards of the rural sector might endorse child labor because of the environment in which it is performed (López-Calva, 2001). Social rationale in favor of child labor rests on the comprehensive shaping of human development, the need for scarcity, the developing of personal capacities for greater social adaptation, the achievement of social experiences, the resolution of problems and survival, as a family strategy or historical materialism, besides the fact that no work is harmful to human beings (Post, 2002). Aside from this, child labor entails multidimensional physical, psychological and intellectual implications.

Being a social phenomenon, it is interpreted theoretically on several levels, albeit scientific publications are largely empirical, descriptive and lacking a common theoretical basis. Yet, two trends are observed: 1) economic theory, which pervades the literature on the grounds that child labor is a domestic problem linked to poverty; 2) moral theory, which advocates education and law enforcement so as to prevent this situation (Nieuwenhuys, 1996).

In line with Bronfenbrenner (1987), child behavior that falls outside accepted social standards is to be analyzed in light of the characteristics of the environment in which it occurs: likewise, interactions of cultural, economic, social and psychological factors are to be considered, all of which combine to constitute different hierarchies of analysis for a common object of study. The ecological model (Heise, 1998) stresses that any individual is the result of multiple interrelations with the environment, in its micro-system (family), meso-system (neighbors, poverty, migration, among others) and macro-system (society, culture, laws, ideology, among others) environments in an integrated system of multidimensional characteristics.

The model thus constituted examines the individuals undergoing interaction starting from the base of the balance at each level of the system, while the imbalance arises from the absence or diminution of resources or processes at any level, thus stimulating deviant or anomalous behaviors or norms as per the agreed social standard, which is recognized by a series of individual or social situations, independent or connected (Flake, 2005). As such, child labor becomes a social problem with numerous factors originating individually or systemically, at the micro or macro level, in various times and spaces, in which children interact with adults as an inflection of social reality.

There is ample documentation in the scientific literature concerning the negative impacts of tourism in the social and economic spheres, as evidenced by the analysis of adults (e.g. King, Pizam & Milman, 1993; Deery, Jago & Fredline, 2012; García, Balbuena & Cortés, 2015; Tosun, 2002; Brunt & Courtney, 1999; Wilson, 2008).

The linkages between tourism and children have mainly been examined in terms of capitalism, for example with Kim and Lehto (2013), Tirasattayapitak, Chaayasain & Beeton (2015) and Cullingford (1995) or from a sexual perspective (e.g. Beyer, 2000; Davidson, 2004). Nonetheless, child labor related to tourism has been consistently overlooked and the topic is scantily acknowledged (Canosa & Graham, 2016).

Yet another significant challenge in child labor research is that the object of study encompasses a socially constructed phenomenon, associated with the cultures, ideologies and imaginaries of each society (Buckley, 2003). Poria & Timothy (2014) discuss the level of training that interviewers require for children, the complexity of these studies, as well as parental permission and the corresponding ethics body.

It is argued by Small (2008) that tourism publications concerning children are limited but classifies the existing scientific production on the theme of tourism and children on the basis of consumption criteria or market niche: 1) children's influence on the decision of parents to travel, 2) children's influence on the experiences of tourism, 3) children's importance being a tourism niche. It is noteworthy the inexistence of studies showing the impacts of tourist travels on children (Poria & Timothy, 2014), the moral dimensions of child labor in tourist destinations, as well as the neglect of the effects on children who live in tourist destinations or communities, be it as passive hosts or as direct or indirect workers in tourist services.

As stated by Gössling et al. (2004), two categories of child labor in tourist destinations may be identified: 1) street children living with parents at home and 2) street children living on the street. The latter categorization excludes child labor that could be performed in tourism enterprises or services. However, child labor converts them into the victims of adult exploitation and of the direct and indirect tourism market, and often creates or reinforces the perpetual cycle of poverty that results from child labor in destinations by diverting time from education to work, leaving children or their parents with no understanding of the real consequences of this decision (Post, 2002).

In this regard, the postmodern paradigm that highlights the person and his or her experiences as an object and perspective of social study (Carr, 2011) must also be interested in children as persons with rights and needs, and not merely in adults as consumers or formers of experiences. It is not only social research that is expected to explain social problems, but also to generate knowledge for modeling the desired future.

Method

For the purposes of the general research objective, there was a qualitative method determined, based on observation and semi-structured interviews (triangulation). Given the complexity of obtaining trustworthy statistical data because of illicit or domestic activity patterns, along with evidence that members of target populations lack the same level of information, it was not feasible to make a random choice since the assumption of similarity among informants was not fulfilled. Thus, in order to choose the key informants, a convenience sampling was conducted, given the object of study and the possibility of providing binding information.

Data was collected from two popular tourist destinations in Mexico: 1) Playa del Carmen, the largest tourist destination in the Riviera Maya, located in the Mexican Caribbean. This is a tourist city characterized by an economic activity sustained by accommodation and food services. Its main tourist attractions are the natural resources of beaches, cenotes and also the cultural resources featuring archeological zones, which collectively drew an annual influx of 4,790,056 visitors in 2016 (SEDETUR, 2017). Among its most popular tourist sites, the Quinta Avenida and nearby public beaches stand out; 2) Cozumel, a Mexican Caribbean island focused on tourist services, whose main attractions are coral reefs and Mayan culture. In 2016 it hosted 719,046 tourists, 3,637,321 cruise ship passengers (SEDETUR, 2017) and 1,889,599 ferry visitors (API Quintana Roo, 2017). For both cases, tourism represents the main economic and social activity, being one of the reasons why there is a regular requirement for unskilled labor, along with intra-regional migration linked to tourism and labor activities.

Faced with the scarce possibility of direct access to the groups of interest of children, an indirect approach was set up through the appropriate social agents associated with children and adolescents. Thus, the respondents in each tourist destination were teachers from public primary (7) and secondary (9) institutions who were willing to participate as respondents. In addition, interviews were carried out with members of the community with direct connections to social or labor welfare: former employees of Conciliation and Arbitration Boards [Juntas de Conciliación y Arbitraje] (2), head of Social Development [Desarrollo Social] (1), employees of the Family Integration Directorate [Dirección de Integración Familiar] (3), and others.

There were 22 interviews in total conducted in both tourist destinations. From March to August 2018, the authors of this study performed each interview. The questions concerned personal circumstances, experiences, observation, information, related to child labor in tourist destinations in both municipalities, along with the description of events and related insights. Regarding ethical aspects, anonymity and confidentiality were assured so as not to affect the emotional, psychological or physical well-being of the respondents. The length of each interview was broadly varied, ranging in some cases from 20 to 25 minutes, while in others it reached an average of one hour.

Principles of inclusion were determined by: 1) frequency or time of exposure to subjects of interest, 2) understanding of the topic and subjects of interest, 3) association with ethnic or racial groups or social organizations having distinctive profiles. Data were collected on age, gender, origin, type of work performed, reason for working, work setting, benefits obtained, educational achievements, compliance with labor laws, tourist image.

The information was digitally captured on the researcher's recorders, then transcribed, openly coded at first, classified and then categorized. Axial coding was then done so as to establish patterns, similarities, gaps and contradictions. Emerging themes were verified for confirmation of common patterns or trends and the refinement of relevant concepts and categories. As a complement to and contrast with the information, field observations were conducted at tourist sites frequented by tourists and areas surrounding tourist spaces, both on weekdays and weekends, in the morning, afternoon and evening.

Results

Statistics available only at the State level suggest that the number of employed children under the age of 5 to 14 is 6,433, while young people aged 15 to 17 are 13,598; 53% of children and young people work in the tertiary sector, tied either directly or indirectly to tourism, in the main tourist cities (Anonymous, 2017).

It was found from the 22 interviews that the social perception in both destinations (Cozumel and Playa del Carmen) is that there is a prevalence of child workers in the informal sector, mainly in public spaces, and that this situation exists as a result of intra-state migration from the states of Chiapas and Tabasco, not far from the tourist destinations in question. The ages vary between 5 and 17 years, where there are families generally of Mayan origin and severe poverty, parents who do not have much education, and the children provide family support for economic reasons.

In the opinion of the respondents, work in tourism is considered "mild" or "an activity without much effort", thus allowing children to study and work in parallel. Furthermore, tourists empathize more with them and tip them in dollars, which is widely motivating for children and their parents. Moreover, working in tourism activities is preferable to working in agriculture or construction, respondents said.

Children and young people devote themselves to the ambulant sale of products, in particular handicrafts and food. In a smaller proportion, it is observed that they promote tourist services ("jaladores" in jargon), that is to say that they invite tourists to visit a certain tourist service, something that is not legally considered an employment, given that the remuneration is by commission; Some young people, in groups or on their own, perform artistic activities such as "breakin" or rap, to collect tips from tourists. In the most extreme cases, some children ask for money in avenues, either with their parents or accompanied by them. At both destinations, the job of "taking care of cars" in parking lots is common.

In this way, gender is a determining factor in the activities performed. In public spaces, children and young people work mainly looking out for cars, as street vendors or jaladores, while in private spaces they are employed for gastronomic assistance, such as dishwashers or cleaners. Girls are almost exclusively involved in the sale of handicrafts in public spaces. Showing a lifestyle or "being trendy" may encourage some young women to engage in prostitution ("escorts") in complicity with some hotel employees.

On both destinations, Cozumel and Playa del Carmen, child labor is precarious, having irregular working hours of three to four hours a day, intermittent rest days, scarce wages. Nonetheless, work activities can be classified as "light" as they do not interfere with school hours because they are parallel to schooling. As part of economic production strategies, it was noted that tourist activity has a direct influence on employability, given that most of the observed cases —of children or young workers— were dedicated to the tourist sector, but not as a substitute for adult work, but as a complement.

Perceived leisure, enjoyability, pleasant experience and association with luxuries and comforts are what make tourist work attractive to children and young people in comparison to other jobs. In the cases in which services are promoted, children do not need any training, moreover they might obtain a daily commission equal to 10-labor days in the rural zones where they come from. Contrary to the construction sector, which is the labor standard for most children and young people, in tourism work the physical effort is lower and payment higher.

As for education, the majority of those interviewed are in agreement with the fact that children and young people attend school on a permanent basis, primarily as a result of control by municipal authorities. Only a few cases exist where young people have dropped out of school for reasons of family survival. Municipal supervision is in place in order to oversee school attendance so as to ensure the students' progress in school. Therefore, although some respondents agree that there is child labor, they also state that parents consider convenient for their children to work due to various reasons.

Labor laws, particularly regarding the perception of tourism, prevent children and young people from working directly providing services to tourists. In that regard, almost all the respondents identified tourism as the economic driver which motivates and prevents the participation of children and young people in work activities, as it would convey a negative "tourist image", in other words, it would create a bad impression for visitors. For the same reason, there are also random checks by the police in order to prevent children from working or approaching tourist areas as vendors.

In the opinion of some employers and workers, organizations exist that focus on recruiting young workers and adults from other states in order to exploit them commercially. If there were no tourism, children and young people would still work, albeit with greater effort and dedication, in the most vulnerable segments of the tourism service chain, which are micro-entrepreneurs and tourism service providers, where non-compliance with labor laws and the hiring of minors is more common, thus lowering wage costs and reducing the price of tourism services.

There are four possible motivations for children and young people to work: 1) economic reasons, in order to support parents, 2) cultural: as a result of a family tradition, 3) lifestyle, as a result of the consumer capitalist influence, 4) formative: so as to avoid vices, bad habits and other problems associated with age. In either of these options, all the interviewees concurred that there is an impact on children and young people's personal and emotional development, as they experience adult life, along with some certainty in ensuring livelihood. Nevertheless, they also resent the fact that they do not benefit from recreational and educational conditions such as those of their social reference group.

Discussion

Of 19 out of 22 interviews conducted, child labor or child employment has been a controversial theme, due to the right to individual self-determination, social and cultural differences - which become more pronounced in tourist areas, challenges in defining the concepts of "work" and "child" (according to Bhukuth, 2008) and understanding how poverty manifests itself. This is exacerbated by the variety of conditions and activities that tourism has, as well as by the legitimacy that comes with social acceptance of the phenomenon, which makes it difficult to enforce laws.

While it may be contradictory, tourism activity that enables and drives the economic and social growth of host communities through direct and indirect job creation also leads to gaps of permissiveness or opportunity for child employment, which in the long term has negative impacts on children and young hosts who lack adequate income and their prospective future could be severely problematic, along with a greater inclination to generate chronic social problems. The key finding is a social construct associated with tourist destinations, whereby child labor should not be permitted or tolerated, on the grounds of "tourist image", not for legal or human rights concerns. Likely, some of the explanation may be represented in regional habits and traditions of visitor attention.

The assumption that because of the economic conditions and the uncertainty regarding the guarantees provided by formal education to ensure an adequate future is reasonable (difficult to prove), parents try to increase the opportunities for their children as much as possible, exploiting formal education and at the same time promoting inclusion in the economic structure. In other words, they try to maximize their children's personal development strategies so as to reduce the disadvantages imposed by the dominant social structure, through the strengthening of social networks and experiential learning.

This research supports a result similar to that presented by Beyer (2000) suggesting a possible cause of child labor: poverty. Also, the research of Green (1990) and Post (2002) offer partial results similar to those obtained herein, given that it concludes that parents promote child labor so as to achieve a positive work ethic and develop social experiences. Bachman's (2000) argument holds true as well: children and young people are more flexible to working conditions and are better off in low-productivity situations. Nonetheless, this research differs in reporting the tourist image as a cause or hindrance of child labor, a result not previously reported in the scientific literature. Furthermore, the argument of economic support for the household encourages some parents to urge their children to work to obtain potential benefits from tourism, not because of a stringent economic need.

There was no model upon which this result can be based, albeit the theory of social exchange could imply a partial explanation, given that the social groups analyzed are aware of the existence of a long-term individual and social impact, however the immediate benefits obtained are a priority for them. It is noteworthy that there is a lack of studies that fully analyze the tourist impacts on children and young people in the host communities. The reason for this situation lies in the difficulty to obtain valid and reliable data, making it impossible to provide a theoretical frame of reference to satisfactorily justify the issue. It is imperative that future studies identify the social mechanisms that have an influence on this social conduct of child labor, given that the families of working children have an important contribution to make in this regard.

While certain forms of child labor are clearly inappropriate both legally and legitimately, as they can affect the future well-being of children and young people, as well as their human rights, ideological considerations permeate any analysis of this issue. In an ideal scenario, children should dedicate themselves to studying, but child employment is a complex issue and given that the economic growth generated by tourism encourages migration, it will take time to significantly reduce this social problem; therefore, social action by the State directly with the affected families is called for, though this implies long-term strategies, while the prevailing economic system demands immediate results.

Interviews imply a broad social and psychological perception of child labor, both for hosts and visitors, that has negative traits, not merely as a tourist perception of the destination, but also as a concern about the grim future of human beings from disadvantaged social groups; yet these observations are based on perceptions, rather than concrete facts or statistics. Which age should be ideal to start working in tourism? Which employment should be the most suitable for each age? Does tourism work positively influence the future performance of children and young people? Do cultural interrelationships arising from tourist contact influence children's performance? It is a series of open-ended questions that require in-depth studies.

Conclusion

As a general conclusion, child labor in popular tourist destinations is complementary to schooling, while necessity constitutes one of several motivating factors of the phenomenon, which requires analysis in the broad socioeconomic context of personal, social, cultural and economic relationships, along with ideological factors that condone or promote this situation, bearing in mind that it does not compromise the child's physical or moral development and may be a beneficial experience in several respects. Tourism is a major contributor to the economic growth of cities by means of the generation of jobs, a factor that can generate a lower —but parallel— demand for child labor in order to compensate for the labor activities of adults, characterized by precariousness but not affecting their schooling. There is controversy regarding the personal and social benefits of this phenomenon in the short and long term.

While the results submitted by the authors of this research do not support child labor, they recognize that some "light" activities are educational and scarcely questionable in terms of law and morals in force in the study area. Due to the scarcity of scientific literature on child labor in tourist destinations and field research, particularly in areas where poverty still represents a common factor in host societies, no other conclusions can be drawn.

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