



# Covid-19 and Home learning: The case of Meru County Kenya

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## ABSTRACT

*The main purpose of the study was to find out whether children are learning now that schools closed due to covid, and does involving children, in child work/child employment and or child labour deny them a chance to engage in online learning activities. The objectives of the study, was to find out whether children of below 12 years are involved in child work/child employment and or child labour. Find out the types of child work/child employment and or child labour children below the age of 12 years are engaged in at home and in the neighborhood in this covid-19 period. The study used a survey design. The target population was working children in Nyambene, Igembe and South Imenti regions of Meru County. The researcher used questionnaire for the parents or guardian while observation schedule was used to establish different types of work children below 12 years were engaged in. The sample size of the study was 684 children and 684 parents or guardians. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics that then presented using frequency distribution tables and percentages. The findings of the study reveal that children below 12 years of age are engaged in different forms of child work/child employment and or child labour. It also showed that income earned by majority of the parents or guardians (54%) of children engaged in child work/child employment and or child labour were of age's 17-35years and 50% of these parents earned between Ksh2500 to 4000 a month. The findings also established the kind of activities children do to support their families and documents children reported reasons as to why they have to work.*

**Key terms:** Covid-19, Child labor, Schools re-opening, Parental Income, Online learning, Children activities, Community-based learning.

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## INTRODUCTION

Corona virus disease (Covid 19) is a contagious disease that is spread through droplets generated when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or exhales. In Kenya Covid-19 cases are on the increase. As a measure of flattening the virus curve the Kenya government closed its gates to the schools in mid-march of this year, Ministry of Education 2020. Owing to Covid-19 infection rates, you can be infected by breathing in the virus if you are within close proximity of someone who has COVID-19, or by touching a contaminated surface and then your eyes, nose or mouth. Closing schools was a noble idea. It is scary to imagine schools re-opening and then an infected person person coughs or sneezes without a tissue or handkerchief to cover their nose and mouth. Tiny droplets containing the virus or bacteria travel through the air and can infect a person who is close (less than a meter away) Jayaweera et.al., (2020).

This means that an infected person who has the virus or bacteria on their hands after wiping their eyes or nose, coughing, or sneezing touches another person's hand or an object. The virus or bacteria may then be left behind and can infect the next person when that person touches their eyes, nose, or mouth. Viruses and bacteria remain on surfaces like doorknobs, faucets, telephones, and toys for many hours and thereby infecting people who touch such surfaces this is confirmed by a research publication by rational use of personal protective equipment for corona virus disease (COVID-19) 2020. We also know that People working with groups of children assist them with using or disposing of tissues, this is true, especially for the young children. When the tissue is contaminated with the nose and throat secretions of an infected child, the virus or bacteria is readily transmitted to the hands of the staff member when they touch the tissue. The big question is how the guidelines on prevention will be implemented successfully

when schools re-open. Schools closed to save our children and allow time to be Covid-19 compliant. With kids at home plans to ensure learning continues arrangements for TV classes and online classes among other arrangements were rolled out. No child is supposed to be left out of the learning process. The big question is, are our children learning at home or they are working to support the family food basket?

Children who are exposed to heavy work are enslaved and detached from their families thus exposing them to severe hazards and illness (Abramsky 2010). When children are working, no learning takes place. Not only learning is affected but children's feelings of security are interfered with. When the world in which they play and grow is not predictable and not stimulating. Children are happier when they consistently interact with familiar things and when they follow familiar routines and schedules. When they go out to work the work environment is not familiar to them and they can also feel intimidated by those supervising and paying them. To ensure adequate social-emotional health and development, the world in which children play and grow should be stable, consistent, friendly and free from threatening and harmful objects and situations. When children work, away from home and from those who love them, it should also be important to realize that children may be emotionally stressed by the following situations; Child abuse/ domestic violence, separation from familiar people, Exposure to unfamiliar environment such as new chores in house, or in the neighborhood, Poverty (socio-economic problems).

It should be normal for children to do chores at home to make sure they are not idle. We should make a clear distinction between friendly chores and child work/child employment or child labour. This means that not all activities done by young children should be treated as child work/child employment and or child labour to be targeted for elimination or considered as child abuse. Young children's participation in work that does not negatively impact on their health and development or interfere with home learning/schooling is largely viewed as doing something acceptable. Helping with house chores, impacts positively, to holistic development of young children. Such work enables young children gain life skills and expertise in order to be independent people in the community and their future life (Sislin, Murphy, & National Research Council, 2009). But, when the chores become work and can be used to earn some little money after hard work then that is not child friendly chores.

In Africa there is increased awareness on the matter of child work/child employment and or child labour among the scholars and professionals (African development review, 2002). With regard to the incidence of children involved in economic activity, sub-Saharan Africa registered the highest rate of 26.4 percent in 2004 (Schneider and Enste, 2013). Estimates display that the number of below age children working in Africa will be approximately 100 million in the next 10-15 years. Currently the prevalence rate of child work/child employment and or child labour in Africa is approximately 40 percent (Heymann & McNeill, 2013). In some African countries like Zimbabwe, child work/child employment and or child labour is approximately thirteen percent. This therefore poses severe challenges to policy makers in Africa. According to UNICEF (2020), high incidences of child labour in sub Saharan African could be as a result of poverty, illiteracy, undeveloped agricultural sectors, and high population.

In Kenya, child work/child employment and or child labour is a main worry for the government. However statistics about the extent and nature of child work/child employment and or child labour at the country levels are insufficient (Piketty & Goldhammer, 2017). Approximately one million young children aged between 4 -16 or 10% of the total number of children in that age bracket are involved in labour denying them valued education, healthy living and other necessary essential needs ( Kenya child work/child employment and or child labour baseline survey report, 2016). Kenyan government has put in place a comprehensive legal and policy framework which is response to the undesirable situation of the child work/child employment and or child labour and child rights in general (Murungi, 2012)b. Especially, for children who are involved in activities like street trading, selling in kiosks, carrying water to hotels others are involved in farming activities like tea plucking, Miraa picking, which may take up all the time meant to be engaging online with other children and the facilitators. These activities are also said to compromise such children's development, health, morals and safety (UNICEF, 2020).

## **OBJECTIVES**

This study sought to:

1. Find out whether children of below 12 years are involved in child work/child employment and or child labour.
2. Find out the types of child work/child employment and or child labour children below the age of 12 years are engaged in at home and in the neighborhood in this covid-19 period.

## **Research questions**

1. Are children aged below 12 years involved in child work/child employment and or child labour?

2. What forms of child work/child employment and or child labour activities are children below 12 years engaged in at home and in the neighborhood, during this covid period?

This study offers important insights to education policy makers who may use the findings to amend and implement policies concerning child work/child employment and or child labour. The policies may further insist on the desire to stop child work/child employment and or child labour among families in Kenya, or to come up with strategies to support such families.

Child work/child employment and or child labour means job that is done by young children under the age of 14 years which hampers or harms their physical, emotional, intellectual, social or spiritual growth of children (UNICEF, 2020). Child work/child employment and or child labour has negative effects which continue with the person and with society for far longer than the years of childhood. Child work/child employment and or child labour truly impacts negatively on child development and there is need to make clear investigation on the matter then solutions to the issue are proposed.

According to the research children in households that experienced hunger were more likely to be engaged in child work/child employment and or child labour activities. Children from low-income families are less likely to pursue the online learning activities by KICD through TV channels since they have to work and feed for the family, if they do not families will go hungry. The opposite is also true that the more family income the more the desire for quality and better education classes, pay for tutorials and do all that they can to ensure their children are still learning and are not deprived of any need.

In Africa, more than 200 million people survive in abject poverty. The profile of rural poverty is in such a way that rural people live in poor households where labour is the primary source of income. This has compromised the rights of the children. Among the rights affected are, right to education, play, association, non-discriminating role of parents in protecting the child and health care UNICEF (2020). Lucy & Murungi, (2018), acknowledge that many children miss out of school education and are not able to do homework assignments from schools since they have to work immediately they leave school. This demonstrates the magnitude of how children from low income families are affected, and now mostly more by Covid-19 crisis, there is a high likelihood that they will be engaged in home child work/child employment and or child labour and miss out on home learning activities that are provided by different providers. Even in normal circumstances, despite the Covid-19 situation, people living in poverty have always relied on upon child work/child employment and or child labour in order to improve their chances of attaining basic necessities. Covid-19 pandemic poses a great risk and exposes children to child labor UNICEF (2020). To be able to prevent child labor activities, there is need to take action to mitigate the tolls of Covid-19 to children and families UNICEF, 2020.

The fact that schools were closed and children have been at home due to COVID-19 across the world and Kenya not excluded, people have been looking for ways to survive lockdowns, salary deductions and layoffs. The impact of this to children and families led to a crisis whereby for people to cope and fair on everyone has to do something to support the family budgets. Children have not been left behind. They have been working and earning money to buy food. Most parents argued they had paid schools money for lunch and in boarding schools all meals were paid for, and coming home abruptly for both parents and children put the parents off balance. Kenyan national government has been supporting the needy families but clearly the need is in dire situation and the public budget is straining to keep up.

According to UN statistics (2012) more than one fourth of the world people live in extreme poverty. Poor children and their families may rely upon child work/child employment and or child labour in order to improve their chances of attaining basic necessities. The intensified poverty causes many children, therefore, to become child work/child employment and or child labourers. There is great need for parents to be educated about the adverse effects of child work/child employment and or child labour on child development (Murungi, C.G., 2012)b. As poverty is one of the major root causes of child work/child employment and or child labour, it is hoped that smaller family size, parental education and family income enhancement would reduce for votes during the elections pressure on parents to engage their children in labour activities, even though we know politicians prefer large families and will advocate for such so that they can have numbers. While campaigns to produce and promises of free maternity and free education are given to families. There is need for the government and other stakeholders of education to enhance policies that will protect the children. When this is not done families will continue to engage children in some form of labour to supplement the families' food basket and income

## **METHOD AND PROCEDURE**

The study used a survey design. The target population of the study was children aged below 12 years doing some form of child work in Nyambene and south Imenti regions. The study was conducted in Meru County, in the months of April to June in the year 2020. The study purposively selected typical rural setups in the county where children work for payment. This sample selection

was based on the location of the researcher during the Kenyan lockdown and curfew times. Meru County was accessible to the researcher based on her location at the time of study. The study was carried out during the day and all the covid-19 procedures and guidelines were observed and followed. This included the Kenyan government curfew hours, wearing masks, social distancing and sanitizing our hands in every contact the researcher met with a subject. A total of 684 children of below 12 years that were found working between April and June in Nyambene and Igembe Miraa plantations and South Imenti tea and coffee picking regions participated in the study. For each child working the parent or guardian was asked to respond to few questions. I further asked the farmers where children were working whether actually the young children worked for payment.

Three research instruments used included: Questionnaires and observation schedule. The observation schedule was filled by the researcher based on observations made. This provided information on the type of work children of below 12 years were involved in doing and a probing question was asked directly to the child on whether they are forced to do the work or they do so willingly. A questionnaire was also administered to parents, where by the researcher read the question, translated it in Kimeru language for the parent and or guardians of the children involved in the work activities. This was done since illiteracy levels in the region are high. It was also observed that most of the children were living with a guardian since the young parent went to earn a living away from home or is an addict of either Miraa chewing, Bhang, local brew, cigarettes or a combination of them all. Others were found to be high on what was described as hard drugs by the locals. Their responses were keyed in by the researcher.

**FINDINGS**

The findings confirm that many parents 54% of children involved in child work/child employment and or child labour were of age’s 17-35years. Then followed by parents aged 36-40 and represents 24% of the totals. The 12% fall in the age bracket of 41-50 and 10%, fall that of 51-65. The results further indicate that 54% of parents were males while 46% were females. The study observed that, the older parents were the biological parents of the children while the younger parents had left their children under the custody of a grandparent or relative (guardian). Among the parents and guardians interviewed, 50% earned between 2500-4000 per month, 33% earned between 4500- 7,000 and 10% earned between 8,000- 12,000 and 17% earned income of 13,000 and above. The results based on education level showed that 30% of parents never went to school, 60% reached primary level, 10% reached secondary level and none of them attained university degree.

To establish the demographics of Children, the researcher observed their gender and asked their age. The demographic characteristics of the children are presented in figure 1.

**Figure: 1 Demographic characteristic for Children**

<b>Characteristics of Children</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Age</b>		
5-6	33	5 %
7-8	180	26%
9-10	200	29%
11-12	271	40 %
<b>Totals</b>	<b>684</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	300	44%
Female	384	56%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>684</b>	<b>100</b>

Figure 1, shows that 40% of children fall in the age bracket of 11 – 12 years while 5% were of age’s between 5-6 years. The results further showed that 56% of children selected were males while 44% were females.

**Objective one sought to establish:**

Whether, children of below 12 years are involved in child work/child employment and or child labour.

From the objective, the following research question was stated.

Are children aged below 12 years involved in child work/child employment and or child labour?

To establish whether children less than 12 years are involved in child work/child employment and or child labour. The researcher first sought the opinion of the potential employers on whether indeed they acknowledge that child work/child employment and or child labour was prevalent in the region. The farmers of Miraa and tea where these children were found working among other places were asked whether they agreed or disagreed on the existence of child work/child employment and or child labour in the farms. Figure 2 presents the findings for this exploration question.

**Figure 1: Farmers/potential employers’ opinion on the availability of Child work/child employment and or child labour**

<b>Availability of Child work/child employment and or child labour</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Agreed	280	73 %
Undecided	4	1 %
Disagreed	100	26 %
<b>Total farmers</b>	<b>384</b>	<b>100</b>

Figure 2, shows that 73% of farmers / potential employers agreed that child work/child employment and or child labour exist in the farms, 26% disagreed while 1% was undecided. The results therefore revealed that majority of the farmers agree that children below 12 years are involved in child work/child employment and or child labour in the area farms. These results correlate to what Lou Gutheil (2019) and ILO (2017)a found out. Additionally, ILO (2017)b, revealed that approximately 3 million Kenyan children worked to earn a living and also projected that the figures could be much higher since domestic and informal child workers are largely invisible due to privacy. The findings of this study further concurs with ILO (2017)b who found out that high percentage of children in Kenya are involved in child work/child employment and or child labour in the farms. The results of this study agree with the two researches that most children are involved in child work/child employment and or child labour.

**OBJECTIVE TWO SOUGHT TO ESTABLISH**

The types of child work/child employment and or child labour children below 12 the age of 12 years are engaged in at home and in the neighborhood in this covid-19 period

From this objective the following research question was formulated;

What forms of child work/child employment and or child labour activities are children below 12 years engaged in at home and in the neighborhood, during this covid period?

To establish the nature of work children are doing while at home during this covid era, since all children in this study were found working, the researcher asked children to indicate the types of work they do. And at what time do they do online studies as per the government advice by following KICD timetable on TV and Radio. Figure 3, presents subsequent findings.

**Figure 3: Distribution of work done by children**

<b>Nature of work the children said they were involved with</b>	<b>Frequency obtained from the 684 children</b>	<b>Percentage obtained from the 684 children</b>
Miraa (Khat) plucking	550	80%
Fetching firewood	620	91%
Tea picking	350	51%
Coffee picking	150	22%

Part-time working as a house boy	200 (out of 300 boys)	66% (Out of 300 boys)
Running errands at the work farms	400	58%
Household chores	600	88%
Part-time working as a house girl	200 (Out of 384 girls)	52% (Out of 384 girls)
Sell water to nearby kiosks and hotels	200	29%
Baby sitting younger siblings	300	44%

Figure 3 show that 91% of the children had a responsibility of fetching firewood for the family use. When asked what time they do this activity, they said in the evening after they finished working for their bosses or employers. 88% of these children admitted that they have to do house chores, washing utensils, sweeping the house, feeding family animals and fetching fonder for them. When probed on when the activities are done, the children said in the morning before they go out to the bosses or employers to look for work to do.80% of the children admitted that they plucked Miraa (khat) on a regular basis on the farms where they are employed. They told the researcher that the farmers preferred using them especially where the Miraa (khat) plants are grown to some height that cannot be reached from a ground level, and someone has to climb. Because of their feather weight that will not break the Miraa (khat) branches they are the most preferred for the job. More than half of the boys and girls respectively, tried multitasking activities from working as a part-timer house help to deliver, milk to the buyers of their bosses, buy groceries and keep watch at the employers homestead when employers need their hand. 51 % of the children picked tea and carried the tea to the weighing centers, at the centers they sorted the leaves and waited and watched their bosses’ tea until the time it was weighed and recorded then they carry the tea baskets back to their bosses home, get there pay and head home to do chores. The deliveries to the weighing centers were done twice in a day over lunch hour and in the evening. Other duties are as recorded in the table.

These findings agree with what ILO, (2017)a & (Murungi, C.G., 2012)b that was conducted in Kenya and concluded that, children who are engaged in domestic labour miss on the learning activities in schools. The current study has shown that the six hundred and eighty four children who participated in this study from Nyambene, Igembe and south Imenti regions of Meru County had their days parked with activities that they did not have time to catch up with books as well as the scheduled learning. They therefore missed out and will continue to miss out as long as the family economy remains the same. Further UNICEF 2020, explains that exposing children to child work/child employment and or child labour deprives them an opportunity to attend school and learn, they end up dropping out of school. The UNICEF study is line with the current study, where by both findings agree that children involved in such activities will miss out from the scheduled learning. Whether, the learning is supposed to take place in the school set-up, or from a home set up. The results further concurred with Picketty & Goldhammer (2014) who states that child work/child employment and or child labour hinders children from valued education. As a matter of fact the findings of this study demonstrates a normal day workload for such children and reveals a fulltime work timetable that these children have to follow to make ends meet, sadly they work from early in the morning to late in the evening such that there is no time left during the day for them to learn from the given and scheduled programs by KICD over the radio and over the TV or even just to enjoy being children.

The researcher further asked children to indicate reasons for engaging in work and not the scheduled learning activities via radio and TV programs. Figure 4 presents their responses.

**Figure 4, Children's Responses on why they were working and not learning.**

Reasons for engaging children in work	Frequency derived from the 684 participants	Percentage derived from the 684 participants
To substitute or contribute the family economy	500	73%

To help their parents and guardians in food provision	600	88%
To support self and siblings as secondary bread winner	400	58%
To help parents/guardians with house Chores	200	29%
To save and buy a TV so that they can watch at night in case the classes offered during the day are repeated they can watch	600	88%
<b>Total</b>	<b>684</b>	<b>100</b>

Figure 4, shows that most of the children over 400 of the 684 children that participated in the study did so not because they wanted to but because they did not have a choice and help at home from them was needed, if they chose not to help the situation at home worsened, so they chose to be of help. 88% (600 children) confessed that they worked in order to help their parents and guardians in food provision. Another 600 children (88%) said they were working to save and buy a TV so that they can watch at night in case the classes offered during the day are repeated they can watch and learn like their other classmates and schoolmates from well to do families. 73% (500 children) said they were working to substitute or contribute the family economy and a whopping 58% (400) support self and siblings as secondary bread winner This finding was interesting because it meant, this child must work, even when schools open they cannot afford not to work otherwise they have no support system and their younger siblings depended on them fully. On further probing as to whether it has to be that way, the researcher realized that some of the guardians were too old to work to support the children, others were jigger infested and could not even walk properly because legs were already deformed and also hands were a mess, other parents were found to have left home and never send financial support to their children or even visit them to see how they are progressing, children with one parent who is a father, it was observed that most of these fathers were drunkards ad drug addict and could not think straight leave alone support their own children. So the burden was on the slightly older child to feed the other siblings. In summary parents are not adequately meeting their children’s basic needs. This contradicts UNICEF (2020),which states that parents and guardians should support and care for children. Further to this, the Kenyan laws provide for the protection of children's rights as contained in Children Act Cap I41, which clearly states that every child is entitled to quality education, health services, food, clothing, and shelter among others.

The findings of this study implies that with such large numbers of children missing out on the learning activities their education and lifelong learning is hindered and interfered with which is against the child rights protocol under which Kenya is a signatory. As a signatory, Kenya agreed to support children with basic rights, education being one Kenya Law Reform Commission (2020). In addition the right to protection is also neglected. So whether learning at is to take place at home or at a school set up such working children are deprived of the entitlement and in addition are exposed to doing child work/child employment and or child labour hence are less likely to develop holistically. The right to protection is also included in the ILO (2017) which states that any work that is dangerous and harmful to children may interfere with their mental, physical, social, emotional and moral well- being.

To establish the number of children that attempted attending the online learning via any digital mode. All the 684 children said they did not participate in the learning activities.

**CONCLUSION**

The following conclusions have been drawn based on the research objectives:

The first objective was to find out whether children of below 12 years are involved in child work/child employment and or child labour. The findings revealed that 73% (200 from the 384 respondents) of potential employers agreed to the fact that yes there are children below 12 years who worked for payment. In addition to this it was also observed that there were more girls (384) 56%, in child work activities slightly more than the boys who stood at (300) 44%. This confirms the hard truth that children from poor families are not learning as per the KICD guidelines given.

The second objective sought to find out the types of child work/child employment and or child labour children below the age of 12 years are engaged in at home and in the neighborhood in this covid-19 period. The results show that these children were involved in a number of activities to supplement their families' food basket and budget. The activities ranged from; (Khat) plucking commonly known as miraa by the Kenyan communities, Fetching of firewood for employers and own use, tea picking, coffee plucking, boys worked as part-time house helps, running errands at the work farms, household chores for employers and also in their own homesteads, girls worked as part-time house helps, they also sold water to nearby kiosks while others were given work to fetch and supply water, they also were used to babysit their siblings and also keep their employers young ones company as well as watch them. It is evident that, the children had to multitask on a number of activities to get something that could at least buy food to eat for the day. From this finding, the many activities children engaged in reveals that parents seem to have failed in their role to protect and provide for their own children.

Finally, it came out that all children that were found working in the farms, their parents and or guardians earned a meager salary, and by that they fall in the category of the low socio-economic status. These families therefore need help to make ends meet. Currently the government is issuing the covid funds to support needy families, and those adversely affected by covid-19, and even though that, was not part of the study, it cannot be ignored either. The researcher makes an observation that, if that money would get into the hands of these families could be the children working in the farms may find relief and might have time to now participate in the proposed community based learning when its actualized.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Based on the findings obtained, the researcher makes the following recommendations to stop child work/child employment and or child labour.

- (a) To stop child work/child employment and or child labour, policy makers should formulate and enhance policies that prohibit the act completely. Perpetrators should be given tough penalties. Further, policies on child protection should be enforced or formulated. The policies should ensure that every parent takes the responsibility over their children and provides all the needs, food shelter clothing, and healthcare services when they fall sick (Murungi, 2012)a & (Murungi, 2012)b together with this education needs should be strictly given. Education is the only sure way of breaking the poverty cycle such children are faced with (Murungi, 2012)b.
- (b) Since parents in the County engage their children in various forms of child work/child employment and or child labour, Stakeholders like Ministry of Education (MoE), Ministry of Health (MoH) and County government should work hand in hand to conduct campaigns to create awareness on child work/child employment and or child labour. Parents and guardians need to understand the consequences of child work/child employment and or child labour on their children clearly.

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