

Season 2, Episode 1: Purva Gupta and Victor Ochen Interviewed by Dr. Tina Davis

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

Dr. Tina Davis:

Today I wish to warmly welcome Purva Gupta, who's the global coordinator for the Global March to End Child Labor and Victor Ochen, the founder and executive director of African Youth Initiative Network, AYINET, and today we will talk about child labor and I'm very, very pleased to have you here and to be able to learn from your insights. Purva, I'll start by asking you if you can, please give a little background to what your organization do.



Purva Gupta:

Thank you, Tina. It's a pleasure to be here and also thank you for getting Victor and I together. So a little bit about the organizations, the Global March Against Child Labor is an international yet a Southern led organization with our teams based in India and the Netherlands. And our sole purpose is to work towards ending child labor and promote access to good quality education. The way we do this is working with our members, who are civil societies, working in the global south and using tools such as advocacy, lobby, campaigning, research, and on the ground. Interventions. And our current priority focus is addressing child labor in the agriculture sector. So that's an overview of who we are and what we do.

Tina:

And you operate in different geographical areas. Is that correct?

Purva:

That is correct. We have active partners in about 30 countries spanning Latin America, Africa, Francophone, Anglophone. And so this year I am based out of New Delhi. My team works in the Netherlands.

Tina:

Could you tell us a little bit about how COVID -19 has impacted the work of your organization or your members. Please share a little bit about that.

Purva:

Well, one of the most unfortunate yet the most evident impact of COVID-19 is that it has put more children at risk of child labor. So we know now that the problem is bigger. Already, we as many people would know that the STGs have a target towards ending child labor by 2025. And we already had a big number of one 50, 2 million children waiting to be rescued and enrolled into education, or have a chance at a better childhood. But now because of COVID-19 we see more and more number of children being added. And the unfortunate part is that we don't know how big that problem is. We only know. The way it has impacted us and our members and our partners is number one. We all have had to adjust our current projects, adjust our current interventions so that we could focus on the immediate problem at hand, which is ensuring that families have food to survive. They have access to immediate healthcare. They know about the COVID norm. So instead of focusing on child labor, many of our partners have had to resort to relief measures, which only makes sense. Another aspect has been that being a member led organization, how do you work with members and partners when you can't meet them physically and all the work takes place online? So that has been quite challenging. Everyone's also been going through their own personal challenges. So that has been hard for us also to maintain regular contact with our network organizations. Sometimes those in Africa have not had access to internet. So it's also been difficult to be in touch, to communicate with them, support them, uh, advise them on what they can do. So these are some of the ways that our work has been impacted. There is of course that aspect of resources as well, resources meant for child labor are now being directed towards relief and towards health. But I feel all of this is not so bad because while we are in second year of COVID, this year, the 2021 is also the UN International Year for the Elimination of Child Labor. So that in a sense has been something positive for us. It is helping us to put child labor again, back into focus into the spotlight. So that's how I also view it.

Tina:

Thank you. I'll come back to more questions around the impact of COVID-19.

Victor, could you please tell us a little bit about your organization's background, AYINET, and what you do?

Victor Ochen:

My name is Victor Ochen. I am the director of African Youth Initiative Network, which is an organization based in Lira district of Northern Uganda. We started in Uganda 16 years ago, uh, on the big fellows we're living in a conflict zone. Primarily several years of battling, over two decades of conflict. Uh, we saw majority who affected the children and population who are suffering, and this had a much stronger, daunting effect from the young generation. And then what we did, what we came up with, was to mobilize ourselves as people affected by conflict, come together. See how we can utilize our lesson learning for years of living in conflict to bring an end to the suffering, child soldier's recruitment, abduction, the torture, and to the killing of the, you know, the population with more focused on children. So, yes, we are a human rights based organization working to uplift the rights of the victims of conflict or the victims of violation. And that has been for years or help to reach out to the population in need. So yes, that's what we have been doing as an organization, AYINET in Uganda.

Tina:

Victor, can you tell us how child labor manifests in Northern Uganda in your region or how children can be at risk of child labor or being brought into child labor in other parts of the country.

Victor:

In many cases, in many instances, uh, when you talk about child labor, people have mixed feelings about it. Yes. There are definitely situation induced unavoidable circumstance that makes the young grow up to work have to be laborers to be engaged in this situation. And then that situation where are kids exploited in conflict zone, their challenges, where a has no choice, but to exploit his raw talent to survive. And that is on a voluntary basis. And then there's situation where system or situation on the ground exploit the fate of children for their own goods. For their own benefits. I grew up in, in conflict zone. It was a very particular choice. Do I have to work to survive? Do I have to get in labor force to educate myself? And yes, I had to work. I never studied to work as a child was born in conflict. I had to work to study because it would take my effort. Uh uh, you know, engaging labor work in order to raise money, to pay myself in school. Take

that. To feed and feed other people in order for me to be able to avoid making a very expensive choices of picking up the guns to go and fight. So in one way or another, I think it's a very mixed feeling on the fate of children, but there's a concern that a child has got no choice, but to exploit or engage, utilize the energy regardless they are in order for them to achieve something. Yeah. And I grew up seeing kids doing everything it takes to survive. I saw kids being abducted and conscripted as child soldiers to fight and die for the man in power. And of course, looking at it from one angle, it's also been a very deliberative, what can we engage young people right now? And let, let them become agents as laborers or workers for peace in promoting peace. Yes, authorities and international communities, the government, the power to protect the kids, but situation where they cannot afford. It's so difficult. So child labor narrative is such a mixed situation, is a mixed feeling. It's a very unclear predicament when it comes to population for youth on children in armed conflicts.

Tina:

If I understand you correctly, Victor, you're saying that it's a mixed bag and there's no one size fits all. So children have to work to survive, or maybe to also be able to have an education to support their families. Some children are being exploited through work and others are used as slaves or are used in the worst form of child labor, as child soldiers. You talk about the mixed feeling around the narrative. Would you say that the narrative would benefit from a more nuanced way of looking at child labor and sort of seeing it more on the spectrum, maybe, whether you could have different forms of child labor with different types of interventions, rather than thinking that, you know, it's all the same and it needs to be addressed in one way, how would you comment on that.

Victor:

First of all, I agree that that's exactly what I meant when I say it's a very mixed bag of many things to be done in terms of how we should categorize. And before we throw in all the blames, before we saw all the condemnation, we need to understand situation of everyone on the ground. I grew up seeing with missing kids, children were their households. Child mothers and child fathers and child adults, you know, doing everything to take care of their families or a sibling, because there's nobody left to do so. So in one way or another as the world is moving forward, the commitment of international communities should be informed

by the reality on the ground. We can have international policies and frameworks guiding principles on how to eliminate child labor internationally, but we should also be working to ask, engaging in a way that appreciates the struggle of majority of children who are on the ground. I've been lucky to travel around the world. I've been to Europe, I've been to America. I've been to some parts of Asia and many South America and other parts of the continent in Africa. I've seen that situation. How a system, our laws comes in to prohibit situation that is unfortunately unavoidable. And I think that's really where the dilemma come. If we make it sound like it's bad for a child to work, get school fees, to educate, to pay for the medical bill, is for them to go and work in other people's garden. And some may not even eat. So I know it's a controversial situation. Again, as the well as everyone else, we are against child labor. We make sure we create opportunity where every child is protected and is given an opportunity to grow up, develop, flourish in their own system. But of course, we also understand the plight of kids who are caught up in positions of conflict in portion of natural and man-made disasters.

Tina:

Purva, would you like to comment on that?

Purva:

Yes. What Victor said was very, very interesting. And thank you for sharing your thoughts, which I quite agree with the approach. And that is also the global marches approach that whenever we are going into countries are looking at action on the ground, we can't just go just with one set approach. We have to look at the realities on the ground. The interventions has to look at the needs of the people and also the local context, I absolutely agree with you on that. What you mentioned, Victor was interesting about this part of criminalizing child labor, and I understand where you're coming from. And of course my approach or the approach of Global March is that it is not about criminalizing child labor. In the sense it is not about crminalizing the children or their families. The approach,rather, that we have to take is that of a survivor centric approach, the approach of victims and take approach and that of human rights of all children. So that was interesting for me to hear when you were mentioning that how often there is also that understanding that children themselves are also criminalized, because they have to work because of their situations. So thank you for sharing that.

Tina:

Victor, could you please share a little bit about the situation today of the survivors of child soldiers who were abducted and abused as child soldiers during the conflict in Northern Uganda and also possibly their children.

Victor:

I'm happy to say that, over the years, I think. It's been a good learning journey for myself and also growing up in this kind of situation, surviving it and trying to turn your energy of a time to become a force, the international communities or programming as not being in favor of the peace building strategy or the recovery process. And also, most of the programming has been centered around rebuilding and restoration as opposed to human capital. In a way I've seen over time in Northern Uganda, during the war and in the post-conflict community. Most of the programs has been primarily about supporting the system, rebuilding infrastructure development, but not human capital, not mental health, not physical health. So in a way, yes, I've seen majority of people here. Children were born in war to parents who were affected by war. And then that has been generational transfer of trauma from their parents who suffered during that whole time, all their life to raise the children were born in war and then the kids has got no choice, but to embrace the reality, the stark reality of conflict and violence. So I've seen the child affected, you know, affected by war and affected by war, growing up to become adult perpetrators who are creating more children to be born in war. And there been like the vicious cycles of endless misfortunes by the young people. And I say so because as long as international approach or, uh, intervention for recovery and, um, building is not demilitarized, it's not de-conflicted, it's not pro human capital, it will always be a problem because we have seen children were born victims, to become adult perpetrator. And this has been the trend and this has been something I've been trying to work on. Unfortunately, very little effort has been done to appreciate the indigenous local initiatives. People import solutions. People come with a strategy that the fed could at what, somewhere in other parts of the world coming to this. But I think there will be a one size fits all, which has been a problem. You find. that, year in and year out intervention come, resources comes, but not much has changed how it means the same community remains to be seen in Northern Uganda. This is what I think. I see continuing parts of the world. Yes, kids were affected some kids struggle and now they are also, they have a choice to either let go they're used to violence and choose a different life or with a trauma induced

upon them by years of conflict they become perpetrators. Is an area that we'll be working a lot to make sure that we Victor, break that cycle.

Tina:

Victor, so how has children in your region been effected by the pandemic and what risk has it brought upon them?

Victor:

The pandemic came at a point when communities were struggling to recover and yet the communities were not prepared to counter such health hazards in the society. So a lot of children. Uh, in many ways they became victims of war. That does not translate into victim, become the victim of pandemic that has made it extremely difficult for them to not only manage the challenges related to pandemic, but also an environment of fear. And we have something alive, which is life threatening. Something that can be almost considered as an end to the world comes with so many complication. And then, you find, even the lack of strong economic capacity and yet most of the, because of pandemic, everything has gone digital. Education is affected because of the digital divide. So in one way or another, the first point that I can say is, the pandemic reinforced the preexisting inequality as everything has now become digital. So the digital divide in the society, as we enforced there, they pre-existing inequality and children affected the most. And secondly, the pandemic created economic havoc among the population. Normal schooling, schooling are limited only online, which would make, you know, 90% cannot afford to be online. So I see I, while the rest of the world is traveling with the advanced technology for development to continue education, our children in Northern Uganda or children in Africa will remain behind the rest of the world, and for a long time. And, of course, I think mentally majority of the kids are always wondered that if education is the solution, they see PhD holders as the one leading rebellions in the continent, PhD master degree holders are the one leading war. And now you're also wondering what about those who studied so hard, why all this education? So it's more trauma sensitive programming that has been lacking, but also population has not been prepared enough to manage the situation that arises from natural disasters, like the pandemic.

Tina:

Purva, Victor points to different aspects here that they're experiencing as a result of

the pandemic. And I'd like to ask you what gaps do you think in child labor interventions or responses or prevention has the pandemic highlighted?

Purva:

Thank you, Tina. And I would also echo what Victor has said. The The pandemic has in fact reinforced pre-existing inequalities, especially for the vulnerable population, uh, especially for the marginalized communities. Regarding your question on what gaps in child labor interventions has the pandemic highlighted. I would go to the two main root causes of child labor to talk about it. Number one is definitely the lack of social protection or the lack of social safety nets for everyone, especially for the communities working in the informal sector for the people in the villages for the unregulated economy that has just heightened the poverty levels, which has led families to resort to child labor as a coping mechanism. So that's one blatant aspect that one can see that the pandemic has highlighted. And the other one is very much related to what Victor said. It is the lack of school closures and then using technology as a way to make sure that education is accessible to all, but that does not happen on the ground. The situation is quite different. Like Victor said, majority of the children or majority of the families don't have access to gadgets, equipments, or even internet. And last I would also say is the aspect of school needs. Education has been attractive in some communities because it's because of the aspect of having a means at schools, but with disclosure of the schools, because of the pandemic, even that aspect has been affected and all of this will only go on to make children and families more at risk of child labour.

Tina:

Victor, when I asked you if you wanted to participate in this conversation, you said to me only if it focuses on solutions. So I'd like to pose the question to you. What are the solutions, the immediate solutions that you see?

Victor:

Thank you so much, Tina. And I think I also to echo a bit of what Purva talked about, uh, the need to look more into the larger picture. Education is one very important element. So yes to me, from the solution point of view, to be able to work towards prevention of, uh, the circumstance that leads to the, you know, the child labor that creates economic hardships that comes up credit, humanitarian emergencies. I spend the whole last week meeting with the young people in the refugee camps and talking to the kids, talking to the adults, the youth. And to be

honest with you, I have moved around the world, but seeing an environment where. In the last 14 years, 15 years or child mothers, like I've seen in the refugee camps in Uganda right now. I've never seen such a number anywhere. Like what I've seen right now. And it does become in a way, an incentivized environment. Internationally, there's a process where international organization comes with a program and say, we are providing support to every child matters and they give them small phone. They transfer. I think about, uh, twelve dollar, in fact, about \$10 every month to their phone for nine months of their motherhood. And now this has been seen motivation for young people to get pregnant. And that's why there's 14, 15 years old girls. I've never seen that many in any single place than what I've seen last week in the refugee camps in Northern Uganda. Intervention should be locally led, should be locally owned,, should be locally understood. As long as intervention remains internationally, something that is just piloted or helicoptered to the community to not tackle the challenges situation that leads to war situation that may be very difficult for people to prepare, to handle special emergencies, like COVID-19. COVID will always be challenges, but the point is after COVID what humanity will always be exposed to our scientific or biological complication. But what humanity is ability to respond. Until we nurture the spirit of peacebuilding the choices of peace among young people. It will be difficult opportunity we need to take right now, like there's opportunity for us to create an environment where peace building is chosen and peace is by the younger generation. That will be an opportunity for us to end violence that leads to mass displacement that leads to humanitarian emergencies. And this was our opportunity to grow in peace developed and become leaders in that society, but also above all attain the much needed education as well as benefit from the existing health services to help that growth and development. So this is an area that we need to really focus on. Importantly, let's bring intervention and solution to be locally owned, and support the local. Trust in the local power, local potential, local communities, local solution. And of course we have seen that with COVID mobility is affected, but as long as international humanitarian response is still reliant on global mobility. And yet we have seen that we've covered alone when global mobility was affected and now it became a huge catalyst on population that relies on humanitarian assistance. So to me, look at it in a more practical and liberal lens, economic lens, human rights lens, but also culture is important to learn and address and embrace the culture.

Tina:

Purva, I'd like to also, before we wrap up, ask you the same question about solutions, what do you see as a long-term solutions to really shift the situation of child labor?

Purva:

In terms of addressing child labor in the longterm it definitely has to be solutions as Victor said, which are grounded in the community, which are local solutions and, and I would go, and to the extent to also say solutions that empower the community that involved the grassroots organizations, the Southern NGO is not just always the big NGOs, but those were actually working on the ground is number one. I would also say what will really go a long way would be to. help the community and to help the children to empower them so that they themselves can be part of the solution and be the future leaders. Another would also be the multi-stakeholder approach, which would be to also benefit from the fact that there are multiple actors that are involved in the fight against child labor. So to get in the Western governments, as well as the private sector and as well as the civil society, that is very important. And the last, the most important one I would say is, and it's so interesting that Victor is also here. What is needed to address or end child labor in the long term would be to look at all forms of child labor. There is an undue focus on child labor that just economics child labor, but even child soldiering is a worst form of child labor. As well as is child labor in domestic work. But we don't find a lot of priority, a lot of focus, on these aspects of child labor. So if the world has to make progress, has to ensure that all children get their right to the kind of future that they want, have a bright future like you and I have, we have to not just cherry pick some kinds of forms of child labor, but include all of them.

Tina;

Thank you so much to both of you. This has been a really great and insightful conversation. Thanks so much.