Globalization and Human Security of Child Labors in Liberia in the Case of Firestone

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Abstrak


Kata-kata Kunci: Globalisasi, Perusahaan multinasional, Pekerja anak, keamanan manusia, pendidikan dasar

Globalization brings both positive effect and negative effect to the world. One of negative effect is the unequal profit division within world economy. Some people get huge profit from world integration, but some are exploited and disregarded by the world. MNC, one of the big creature of globalization is sometimes more powerful than a state in terms of economic scale and MNC can threat human security in their profit seeking operation in the world. Under globalization, the idea of security has been changed. The focus became shifted to human security rather than a state’s security. With regard to the world economy and human security under globalization, child labor in MNC’s operation in the case of Firestone’s rubber plantation in Liberia will be discussed in this paper.

Key words: globalization, MNC, child labor, human security, fundamental education
Globalization & MNC

Human societies have had relationship each other across the state border for ages. Changes in communication and development of transportation and computer technology let the world more integrated and interdependent. State borders are not anymore non-accessible in economic activities, instead it became barrier-free in some areas such as within EU or within ASEAN. Not only flows of money, goods and information beyond the border, but also people’s movement across the border became easier and faster. Global integration today occurs ‘dramatically’ faster than ever (Global Policy Forum).

According to Amartya Sen (2002b), globalization is neither of new movement nor Westernization. For thousands years globalization has contributed to the world development through spread of cultures and knowledge, travels, transactions and migration. Interactions between some countries or regions had occurred all over the world, not only within European countries. Thus regarding globalization as Western imperialism is not correct since the flow of information and goods is not only one way from Europe to other areas, although there are some people who insist that globalization is European countries influences to the world. The important thing about globalization is how we can take advantage of economical interchange and technological development effectively with regard to the interest of citizen people, according to Sen. Expansion of market is usually the main concern of people in global capitalism rather than establishing democracy, making good education system or improving social opportunity to all citizens. But problem lies in unequal framework of global system and phenomenon caused by it, which is unfair distribution of profit from global trade.

Globalization closely related to world economic activity. Economic activities beyond states borders expanded and allowed multinational corporations (hereafter MNC) to operate in many countries. MNC bring money, new technology and employments to the country with themselves. But do MNC bring only positive aspects to host countries? The answer is no. Since most of MNC are interested in expansion of market for own profit rather than social benefit, the interests of local people are not into considered by MNC in their operation. Wealth gaps between parties who enjoy profit of MNC operation and who work for MNC in host countries become bigger by MNC operation. Or even there are some cases of human rights abuse in the economic activities of MNC.
especially in developing countries.

**Definition of Human Security**

The 2005 World Summit Outcome of UN (2005) mentioned about human security as follows, ‘We stress the right of people to live in freedom and dignity, free from poverty and despair. We recognize that all individuals, in particular vulnerable people, are entitled to freedom from fear and freedom from want, with an equal opportunity to enjoy all their rights and fully develop their human potential.’ Sakiko Fukuda-Parr and Carol Messineo (2012) stated that ‘security becomes an all-encompassing condition in which individual citizens live in freedom, peace and safety and participate fully in the process of governance. They enjoy the protection of fundamental rights, have access to resources and the basic necessities of life, including health and education, and inhabit an environment that is not injurious to their health and well-being.’ After these explanations of human security, its definition by Amartya Sen (2002a) shall be introduced. He defined human security as protecting and maintaining human existence and living to avoid several kinds of sufferings which harm and insult your life. In addition, he continued that fundamental education is requisite for human security because of following reasons. First, the lack of ability in reading, writing and counting threatens your life. Second, fundamental education is required to get a high salary job. Third, you cannot understand or exercise the privilege if you cannot read or write. And last, political voices of social victims who are unable to read or write will not come out and that fact let those victims’ fear grows. Sen stated that since fundamental education cannot be left to ensure human security, government should give all citizens fundamental education in order to realize their human security.

**State’s Role in State’s Security and Human Security**

Final report of UN Commission on Human Security, which was co-chaired by Sadako Ogata and Amartya Sen, released on May 2003 explained the importance of a new paradigm of security. Current idea about security is very different from the idea of how it used to be. Security was regarded as the responsibility of each state to protect own state and then the people within a state. For example, the final report stated that in 17th century ‘the state would monopolize the rights and
means to protect its citizens. State power and state security would be established and expanded to sustain order and peace. However, in the 21st century, ‘both the challenges to security and its protectors have become more complex. The state remains the fundamental purveyor of security. Yet it often fails to fulfill its security obligations—and at times has even become a source of threat to its own people. That is why attention must now shift from the security of the state to the security of the people— to human security’ (UNOCHA 2003).

According to UN Commission on Human Security, nowadays under the era of highly integrated world, human security needs to be more focused than states’ security because in some cases citizen security is not ensured by anyone or anything. For example, when climate change threatens security of people, who shall be in charge of that matter? A state needs to be in charge of the citizen’s security, but only if one state cannot find a real solution to tackle climate change. There is a limit to what states can handle to some kinds of matter. International organizations are required to deal with the matter and to protect human security. When MNCs threaten local people’s security in host country, sometimes the government does not have a power to protect their people because of corruption in the government or the state’s complicated relations with the MNC, or even the government’s reluctance to solve the problem due to their own interests. Although states are still in charge of ensuring human security, world society also plays an important role in ensuring security of all people in the world.

**MNC & Child Labor**

As world goes global, many factors such as development of global networks and transportation enable companies to operate more than one country. Since not many companies can obtain several kinds of enough resources in own country, companies want to operate in countries with rich of natural resources and low cost human resources for cost reduction and effective performance. MNCs bring host countries both positive and negative impacts. For example, MNCs may have more power than the government of host country in the economy, and it causes unequal contract between MNC and the country or MNC and
local subsidiaries/workers. MNC want to get some materials from host country as cheap as possible in order to make a profit. As a result, a local subsidiary or a factory that takes a part of the MNC’s supply chain may start to exploit local workers so that they can supply materials to the MNC with cheap price.

Sometimes child labors are found in the operation of MNC or local factories related to MNC in host countries in order to reduce the labor cost. Children normally contribute to the work which does not require skills or knowledge, in most cases they engage in works in agricultural area such as cacao firm, coffee firm, rubber plantation or so. Child labor must be prohibited because of two main reasons. First of all, working during daytime prevents children to go to school, and second, children may get hurt physically or mentally from the work.

In some cases, MNC’s headquarters does not know, or possibly does not want to know, about the fact of child labor in host countries due to complicated supply chain system. Usually children who forced to work for a company are not employed by the headquarter. Even if the headquarters wants to solve this matter which happened within their own company or subsidiaries in a host country, it takes time to do it.

**Firestone’s Child Labor Case**

There was an actual case of child labor in Firestone’s rubber plantation in Liberia. Since 1926 the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, which is based in the U.S., has had operate in Liberia at the largest rubber plantation in the world that Firestone leased from Liberian government for 99 years (Green America) (Assata Shakur Forum 2008). In 1988, Firestone was purchased by Bridgestone Corporation and this acquisition made Bridgestone the largest tire and rubber company in the world. Firestone had operated in U.S. named Bridgestone/Firestone, Inc. (Firestone) ever since.

Firestone leased more than 1 million acre of rubber plantation in Liberia. Workers have to tap rubber trees to extract latex for making rubber every day. Each family of workers was assigned about 650 rubber trees to extract latex and everyday they must tap all of those trees. If they couldn’t meet their quota, their payment of the day would be cut by the
company. Since the assignment to the rubber tappers was a huge amount, even Firestone’s CEO Dan Adomitis admitted that it would take more than 21 hours to finish daily quota, rubber tappers normally bring their wives and children to the work (International Labor Rights Forum). After they extract latex, they pour latex into buckets. Tappers, including children, carry two buckets, each of which weighs ±30 kg, on their shoulders for miles. Tappers’ children often work for at least 10 hours per day, and as a result they do not have time for school. Tappers live in a part of plantation with their family. They are isolated from the society and depend on Firestone for housing, food and medicine. Educational and health facilities provided to them are lack of staffs and located too far from where they live. Most of the shacks that constructed in 1926 by Firestone had no running water or indoor toilets. Although working condition isn’t good, workers cannot resign from their job as there are only small chance to get unskilled job in Liberia because of civil war which finished in 2003 (Tim Newman and Roxanne Lawson 2006).

New coalition against Firestone was organized by some organizations to support the rubber tappers of Firestone. Save My Future Foundation, which is Liberian civil organization, produced a report entitled “Firestone: The Mark of Slavery” to expose that fact to the world in May 2005. Following the report, Liberian and U.S. based human rights organizations formed Stop Firestone Coalition to stop the exploitation and child labor. International Labor Rights Fund sued the company on behalf of former and current 35 Firestone child labors for illegal child labors, who were six to 16 years old, with miserable working and living condition in November 2005. At the same year, regardless of the civil movement to condemn Firestone’s inhuman treatment of their workers, Firestone made a new agreement with the government of Liberia to lease the plantation in 2005. The following year, United Nations Mission in Liberia also reported unpleasant conditions of Firestone workers (Tim Newman and Roxanne Lawson 2006). International Labor Rights Fund loses against Firestone because of following reasons: Claims about Firestone are not positively proved; Firestone has ‘zero-tolerance policy against child labor’ (L.A. Times 2008) and does not employ anyone under 18 years old; workers in the plantation usually work eight to ten hours a day; Firestone promised to ensure employees’ health and welfare; employees received larger salary per month than average Liberian (L.A. Times 2008). According to Courthouse News Service (2011), Firestone’s employees earn 1,559 USD per year, while GDP per capita in Liberia was 218 USD. Firestone insisted that each employee can
hire adults if they couldn’t meet their daily quota alone (Courthouse News Service 2011).

**Conventions**

Child labor has been discussed globally, and world leaders had concluded several conventions against child labor. Well known conventions are those within the International Labour Organization’s (hereafter ILO) Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. One of them is the Convention and the Recommendation concerning Minimum Age for Admission to Employment (No. 138) adopted in 1973. Article 1 of this convention said, ‘Each Member for which this Convention is in force undertakes to pursue a national policy designed to ensure the effective abolition of child labor and to raise progressively the minimum age for admission to employment or work to a level consistent with the fullest physical and mental development of young persons.’ The Convention determined that the minimum age of employment is 15 years old. And the other is Convention concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labor (No. 182) adopted in 1999 in Geneva. This Convention is enforced to complement the Convention and the Recommendation concerning Minimum Age for Admission to Employment (ILO). The principle of the ILO’s Declaration mentioned above was adopted by the UN as one of the UN Global Compact’s ten principles (UNGCJN).

Nevertheless of international agreements such as two conventions of ILO, there is no official authority to force companies to stop child labors. Sometimes the government of the host country does not have an ability to monitor MNCs activities in their own territory.

**Analysis**

In the case of child labor in Firestone’s Liberia rubber plantation, children work every day instead of going to school. Since they did not well educated, they would hardly get a job with proper salary and good condition. Better future cannot be expected for them because of lack of education. Tappers have to work for their lives with their whole family from morning to evening almost every day. Their children have to help
their father by working in the rubber plantation instead of going to school, or workers norms cannot be finished within a day. Whether tappers want to bring their children to the plantation for work or not, they seem to have no choice. In my opinion, it is threatening human security of both parents and children that parents fail to consider about their children’s future and even they have to force children to work. Children need education to gain a secure live in the future. Several bad influences of lack of education that Sen mentioned about with regard to the importance of fundamental education to human security are applied to the case of Firestone workers. First of all, Firestone workers at plantation are very unlikely to get a job with good salary and condition because they haven’t had access to fundamental education. Second, Firestone workers needed civil organizations’ help to sue the company as workers are lack of education. And at last, before some civil organizations started taking actions to help them, their voice did not come out to society and they probably did not have hopes for their future.

In regard to the state’s role, the Liberian government hasn’t had power to solve this problem or protect citizens’ human security. As Save My Future Foundation disclosed the unacceptable working condition of plantation workers in their report and even sued Firestone in 2005, Firestone’s human rights abuse in their operation should be well-known among Liberian people, at least to Liberian public officers. Nevertheless, whether the government knew the fact of child labor in Firestone’s operation or not, they extended Firestone’s land lease contract for another 37 years in 2005 (Assata Shakur Forum 2008). UN Commission on Human Security report which insisted that the present day human security needs to be more concerned about the world rather than states’ security is very convincing after the case of Firestone’s Liberian child labor (UNOCHA 2003). The Liberian government could not do anything to protect their human rights and security of life, but they extended the company’s land lease.

Although international organizations trying to protect child labors’ human rights lost in court, at least they took care of the condition of child labors in the plantation. MNC operations abroad are sometimes too far physically and mentally from the headquarters so they cannot find out what exactly is going on in the field. There are some criticism about what Firestone stated about their policy and the condition of their employees in Liberia. L.A. Times (2008) mentioned about Firestone zero-tolerance policy against child labor that “no one doubts that this is
official policy” and this “isn't worth the paper it's printed on”. Since child labors are not directly employed by Firestone, it was hard to prove the company’s responsibility in illegal child exploitation. Employees’ average working hours in Liberia based on the statement of Firestone was also estimated in the office in the U.S. and it was not easy to deny it with evidence in the court. (Courthouse News Service 2011). Although conventions show the fundamental principles and give the clear guidance of prohibition against employment of adolescents under 15 years old to the world, conventions could not directly protect victims of child labor in MNC’s operation either.

Conclusion

Under globalization, the world is integrated and interdependent. Globalization and global economic activities are linked to each other and then MNC appeared. Many problems of the world have become complicated and hard to solve. So does problems related to MNC, which influence is quite big and wide nowadays, since there are many stakeholders on one issue. According to Amartya Sen (2002a), global economy now does not provide equal profit for every actor. One of the examples of inequality within economic activities can be an unfair contract, for example between MNC and a factory in a host country, between MNC and the government of the host country, or between local workers and a local subsidiary that caused child labors in the case of Firestone. The world concluded conventions against child labor after discussions over this issue. This is because child labor threatens victims’ human security owe children of having lack of access to education apart from apparent human rights abuse. Children have a right to go to school, in fact, it is very important for children to get fundamental education for their future, as Amartya Sen (2002a) focused in his theory. So far some grassroots movements by many organizations, both international and local, have supported victims by lobbying the stakeholders, and suing the company. Globalization could ensure human security of people around the world, yet the global economy is not ready to reduce global inequality. In my opinion, people awareness towards children’s human security will start change the situation. Though child labor happens far from where you are, people need to be aware of that matter. And again, fundamental education for children is very important to protect themselves, their future and the world future.
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