

CHILD LABOR
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The Problem:

During the last several years, there has been an increased interest in international fora in the problems posed by child labor. Three factors account for this renewed interest:

- (a) A general realization that the exploitation of working children has become more serious in several regions of the world as economic conditions deteriorate, thus hampering social development, especially in the areas of employment and education;
- (b) A growing concern that, by employing children at an age and in conditions that do not conform to universally accepted standards, some countries gain a comparative advantage in international trade over those that are more strict about applying such standards;
- (c) A stronger commitment of public opinion than in the past to the cause of human rights and of the rights of children in particular.

The International Labor Organization (ILO), the lead U.N. agency tracking child labor, states that at the moment it is virtually impossible to quantify the magnitude of the problem, since a global estimate of the number and proportion of economically active children would require reliable and comparable statistics for every country. In reality, many countries do not maintain figures of child workers and, to the extent that statistics are available, they only afford a very partial view of the situation. Generally, the statistics only include children whose work is their principal activity, thereby excluding the many who combine work with their studies, the children engaged as wage-earners, who account for only a small fraction of total child labor, and children between the ages of 10 and 14, which leaves out those under 10 years of age who in certain countries may account for up to 20 percent of the total.

The ILO Bureau of Statistics estimates the number of economically active children between the ages of 5 and 14 as 78.5 million for the year 1990, of whom 70.9 million were between the ages of 10 and 14 (i.e., an activity rate for this age group of 13.7%). Though these figures give only a partial view of the phenomenon (about 40% of the countries, some of which are densely populated, did not reply to the ILO's questionnaire), they confirm that large numbers of children are still engaged in economic activities.

Child labor is prevalent throughout the developed and developing world. In absolute terms, it is highly prevalent in Asia, where over 50 percent of the world's working children are said to exist. In relative terms, Africa comes first, however, with an average of one child out of three engaged in some form of economic activity. In the industrialized countries, although child labor is much less common than in the Third World, recent trends indicate that the phenomenon is growing. In Turkey, the only industrialized country that has conducted a national survey of child labor recently, 986,131 children aged between 6 and 14 (i.e., 8.3%) were economically active in 1994.

The ILO's experimental statistical surveys in Ghana, India, Indonesia and Senegal show that the propensity for children to exercise an economic activity is on average twice as high in rural areas as in urban areas. Yet, with the rapid urbanization of most developing countries, the share of towns and cities in the total volume of child labor is steadily increasing. Nine of ten working children in rural areas are engaged in agricultural or similar activities, whereas in urban areas child labor is found mainly in trade and services (domestic help, especially) and to a lesser extent in the manufacturing sector. In reality, the very great majority of working children are believed to be employed in the informal sector of the economy.

The U.S. Department of Labor's review of child labor practices reveals that some governments have enacted exemplary laws abolishing or at least regulating child labor, while others have created a maze of regulatory schemes governing the employment of children fraught with loopholes and exceptions, too confusing to navigate, or with no intent they be enforced. Some governments choose to deny outright the existence of child labor while others contend that they lack the financial and other resources to successfully battle the exploitation of child labor. Many lack the political will to enforce child labor laws, train labor inspectors, and implement health and safety regulations.

The U.S. Department of Labor reports some progress being achieved through joint efforts between some governments and international organizations such as UNICEF and the ILO in the form of action plans aimed at combatting child labor. In certain cases, such efforts include conducting national surveys, establishing more schools and non-formal education programs for children, and publicizing the hazards of child labor.

Contributing Factors:

Many factors explain the growth and complexities of the problem. Advocates for and against the use of child labor tend to have very divergent views on the subject. Advocates of child labor point to maintain that child labor is a time-honored and inevitable fact of life. They view poverty and survival as the driving forces and envisage a significant reduction in child labor only in the context of industrialization and rapid economic development.

Advocates for children rights and other expert observers often challenge this analysis as too simplistic. They note that economic and social conditions vary by region and country. They argue that poverty is not the only contributing factor, and that other factors must not be overlooked. Depending on the specific country, they point to:

- o Economic self-interest - factory owners who overwork, underpay, and otherwise take advantage of vulnerable child workers.
- o Public indifference - Politicians, media, non-governmental organizations, and other opinion makers who collectively treat child labor as a non-issue.
- o Public Policy - Inadequate resources devoted to primary education and export promotion policies that support firms and industries without regard to their impact on child labor.
- o Government Inadequacies - Labor inspectorate that lack authority, expertise, numbers, and accountability.
- o Government Corruption - Government officials who not only condone but in many cases personally benefit from child labor.
- o Societal Prejudice - Majority groups which consider child labor among less privileged groups part of the natural order.

In certain regions, as in Africa and Latin America, the growth of child labor is attributed to larger issues such as population growth, and stagnating standards of living after the grave economic crisis of the 1980's. Also, the increasingly notorious incapacity of education systems to cater to all children of school age and provide them with a decent education contributes to the problem.

Adding to the complexity of the problem is the notion, supported by research, that children tend to be employed when their labor is less expensive or less troublesome than that of adults, when other labor is scarce, and when they are considered irreplaceable by reason of their size or perceived dexterity.

Social and Economic Consequences:

Many experts assert that poverty and child economic participation are mutually reinforcing, with poverty generating child labor and child labor perpetuating poverty. In this connection, the ILO posits that child labor precludes or seriously handicaps education and upward social mobility thus contributing to poverty, since low educational attainment reduces lifetime

earnings. Additionally, work that impairs the health, safety and socialization of the child also has the same harmful effect. In macroeconomic terms, work that is injurious to the development of children perpetuates poverty and degrading the stock of human capital necessary for economic and social development.

A related argument is that children economic activity contributes to poverty because it increases the unemployment or underemployment of adults. In this connection, the ILO argues that evidence is insufficient to substantiate this assertion as a general rule; such displacement

effects vary with the types of work that children perform. In wage labor, such as in factory work, the substitution of children for adults may indeed have the expected effect of depressing adult employment, wages and other working conditions. In some cases, child labor often facilitates adult employment. For example, adults, especially women, are able to enter the job market because their children assume essential home tasks. Similarly, it is known that many farmers and small entrepreneurs maintain the adult employment viability of their enterprises by relying on unpaid work from their children. Children working on their own account in the informal sector may have little effect on adult employment, filling niches that are not attractive to adult workers - carrying bundles for market shoppers, selling petty goods such as matches, shining shoes, etc. Research also points out that many child maids work for families who could or would not pay an adult salary, and hence would no longer hire maids if this meant hiring adults.

According to the ILO, many researchers and practitioners now believe that most of the negative social effects of child labor derive from specific working conditions that are inimical to the safety and development of the children involved. For that reason, there is growing opinion that national and international efforts need to be more sharply focused on the truly abusive and hazardous forms of child labor, granting them first concern and priority. Perhaps the most telling social argument against child labor is that its effects are highly discriminatory, adding to the burden and disadvantage of individuals and groups already among the socially excluded while benefiting those who are privileged.

Response of Governments, NGOs, International Organizations:

The Developing World, where the vast majority of working children are found, have only recently awakened to the serious social, economic and development implications of child labor. The ILO states that even in countries with progressive child labor legislation, the issue of child labor is treated with a laissez-faire attitude, and regarded as an inevitable companion to poverty.

While many countries recognize that the widespread exploitation of children seriously undermines their economic and social development objectives, and tolerating child labor is inconsistent with the human resource investments that they must make to secure their future in a competitive global economy, only a limited number can be said to have taken actions to date against child labor. Many fall in the category of still questioning what action is most viable and effective in controlling the growth of child labor and even eliminating it.

Since 1983, the ILO has been giving more weight to such activities as public awareness campaigns and the compilation and dissemination of data. These activities received an added impetus with the implementation of an interdepartmental project on child labor in 1992-1993 funded by contributions from ILO member countries. The project is referred to as the International Program for the Elimination of Child Labor (IPEC). Key countries funding the IPEC program are Germany (by far the biggest contributor), Belgium, Spain, Australia, France, Norway and the United States. As part of the ILO's focus on direct technical assistance to member states, IPEC has been utilized as the operational arm of the ILO in the field of child labor. IPEC has focused on the most abusive and exploitative forms of child labor, by

strengthening national capacity to address child labor problems and by creating a worldwide movement to combat child labor. Countries where IPEC has conducted action programs include: Brazil, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Thailand, Turkey, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Tanzania, Cameroon, Colombia, and Egypt. With resources from Norway, IPEC has also begun work on an analysis of successful experience in mobilizing teachers, educators, and their organizations in combating child labor. This work is being done in close cooperation with UNESCO, UNICEF and Education International.

In cooperation with NGOs active in the child labor field, the ILO is currently providing technical assistance to the International Working Group on Child Labor (IWGCL), a 1994-96 project jointly sponsored by the Defense for Children International (DCI) and the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN). The IWGCL is working toward an international NGO strategy for the eradication of child labor, producing a global "bottom-up" perspective on child labor based on field studies of selected child labor problems and interventions in 40 countries. The IWGCL has shared the results of its studies with the ILO and other international organizations.

The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization, and UNESCO appear to be specifically interested in the underlying causes of Child labor including poverty, inadequate economic growth, shortcomings in a country's educational system but it is not clear whether these objectives have been translated in action plan in specific countries.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) is by definition concerned with child labor as part of its global responsibility to improve the situation of children and conducts a number of activities in several countries. At both the central and field levels, the ILO and UNICEF have joined together in a number of situation analyses and training activities. The ILO and UNICEF have also collaborated on research activities coordinated by UNICEF's International Child Development Center in Florence including the development of case-studies focusing on selected developing country approaches to child labor and a survey of the use of subsidy and income-replacement schemes to keep children in school and out of the workplace. UNICEF has also cooperated with the ILO in developing a rapid assessment technique for child labor situation diagnosis and its field testing in Bangladesh. National policy-design seminars on child labor have been jointly organized by two organizations in Argentina (1993) and Ecuador (1994).

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child is responsible for supervising the application of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has been ratified by 178 member states.

The United States, through the U.S. Department of Labor has supported ILO/IPEC efforts aimed at reducing child labor. A \$2.1 million grant was awarded to the ILO on August 7, 1995 to fund programs in Bangladesh (removing children from the workplace and placing them in school), Thailand (strengthening existing programs that seek to prevent children from being lured into exploitative child labor, especially child prostitution), Africa (program to improve working conditions of children on plantations with special emphasis on examining low-cost measures that can reduce the incidence of exploitative child labor), and the Philippines (program to develop and

implement a nation-wide statistical survey on child labor). Funding for the project was provided by Congress in the FY 1995 Labor Department Appropriations.

USAID supports projects in Nepal, which provides assistance to a school that rehabilitates children, and in Bangladesh where we have developed various strategies to eradicate child labor through joint efforts between AFL-CIO/AAFLI and local unions.

Based on its research and technical cooperation activities, the ILO has put forth the following as necessary elements of a national strategy against child labor on a country by country basis:

- o Find out about child labor.
- o Develop rapid assessment techniques similar to those tested in Bangladesh; also, statistical survey methodologies as those tested in Ghana, India, Indonesia, and Senegal.
- o Design a national plan of action against child labor.
- o Create a broad social alliance against child labor.
- o Create an institutional capacity to deal with the child labor problem.
- o Improve child labor legislation and enforcement measures.
- o Extend and improve schooling opportunities for the poor.
- o Establish/apply economic incentives.

Recommendations:

- o International Development Agencies, NGOs and Human Rights Organizations active in the area of child labor should be urged to participate in OECD discussions of child labor and advising donor countries in the formulation of policies aimed at eradicating the problem.
- o Agreement among OECD member countries is necessary for treating child labor as an integral component of future development strategy supported by OECD member countries.
- o Forge a consensus regarding the need for a multi-sectoral strategy that both public and private sector can subscribe to and support among OECD donor countries.