

Report on  
**Sub-regional Conference on**  
**“Business against Child Labour: Tools for Action”**

**Executive Summary**

On 7-8 October 2008 a sub-regional Conference on “Business against Child Labour, Tools for Action” was held in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The Conference was organized by the ILO in collaboration with the IOE and the Unión Industrial Argentina (UIA), and funded by the Norwegian Government. The Conference brought together more than 70 participants among whom were representatives from employers’ organizations from 17 different countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, individual companies, academics and government representatives.

**Brief overview**

Ten years ago, most of Latin America and the Caribbean countries did not consider child labour among their public agenda priorities, there was a lack of statistical information concerning the characteristics and nature of the problem, and most of the countries had not ratified the ILO Conventions on child labour. Today the scenario has changed. Child labour is part of the public agenda, there is more public awareness of the problem, the actors who engage in its prevention and eradication are many and varied, significant regulatory progress has been made, and surveys have been conducted to allow better understand the extent and evolution of the problem.

In statistical terms, there has been very sharp reduction in the rate of child labour in the region, from 16.1% in 2000 to 5.1% in 2004 (according to information provided by the ILO’s Global Reports). However, this is no time to relent in the effort. These data do not consider the number of adolescents engaged in harmful and risky activities or that in many countries in the region child labour rates are much higher. In addition, the potential impact of the current international financial crisis that could exacerbate the problem.

**Main deliberations of the Conference**

Child labour must be addressed in a coordinated manner between the public and private sectors. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) is not sufficient to deal with it, as it is an issue that should be subject of public policy. Specifically, it has to do with the existence of effective social safety nets, the generation of decent and productive employment opportunities for adults, and a better and larger coverage of the education system.

Enterprises action cannot, and should not, replace Government action. Companies’ conduct is primarily focused on complying with existing legislation, conducting themselves responsibly in respect of their own practices, and, as far as possible, preventing and eliminating child labour in their own value chain.

In the course of discussions, the Conference identified the following challenges for the region:

- a) The need to strengthen National Commissions responsible for promoting eradication of child labour and the need to include child labour in the macro policies at national levels (plans of development, decent work, and poverty reduction). In this regard, the active participation of business representatives in those Commissions is very important.
- b) The need to promote CSR policies and practices aimed at eliminating child labour, identify and promote good business practices, primarily within sectors.
- c) The need to generate more proactive action in combating child labour in the supply chain, since in general large companies are not directly involved with child labour, and this is a problem closely linked to the informal sector.
- d) Finding an answer to the paradox regarding that, in some cases, doing what is considered "correct" is not always a the best solution. For example, suspending the contract with a supplier that uses child labour can in some instances cause greater damage for those who are victims by restricting income of extremely poor families. There are no simple solutions.
- e) Overcoming government's shortcomings on implementation of national law, often as a result of the lack of necessary resources. Neither individual public action nor CSR action carried out by enterprises will be enough, unless these actions are supported by a comprehensive social protection framework and adequate job offer of decent and productive employment for adults.
- f) Managing the growing pressure/expectations of interest groups that promote actions to combat child labour, particularly those promoted by consumer organizations that may encourage the purchase of products that "in theory" guarantee not to have been produced with child labour.
- g) Placing the issue of child labour not only in the public debate, but also (and mostly), in public budgets of governments to ensure the effective protection of children. This would imply significant contributions to improve coverage and quality of the education system, plans for better nutrition and achieving better awareness of children rights.

Faced with these challenges, companies and organizations not only have an important role to play in implementing projects aimed at preventing and/ or eradicating child labour, but also may take an active role in promoting public policies aimed at generating policies that provide for social safety nets, policies that generate decent and productive jobs for adults, and pressuring governments to allocate sufficient resources in national budgets for the eradication of child labour.

Most of the experiences presented during the Conference referred to community-oriented projects, developed by a company or group/association of businesses. Some common denominators were:

- In general, the approach favoured by these initiatives raises the need to work from multiple perspectives, including actions aimed not only at the children, but also to their family and community environment.
- Highlighted the need of having adequate diagnosis of the community in which child labour occurs and will be addressed, since the problem of child labour can be very different, depending the region or economical sector in which it occurs.
- With regard to which actions are the most effective, education takes centre stage in the fight against child labour, including support for the continuation of schooling, performance improvement, or to help school re-entry of children that have dropped out of the system.
- Partnerships with NGOs for the development of projects, as these can hold certain know-how regarding the problem and how to deal with it. However, some experiences warned about the difficulties in achieving a "good understanding" between business and social organizations.
- In many cases, ILO advice in the formulation and implementation of the cases presented was highlighted and appreciated.
- Finally, the need for better "success" indicators to evaluate child labour programs was raised. Traditional "success" indicators are very limited as they only show for the number of beneficiaries served (coverage).

The Conference agreed that it was important to highlight the experience of the "Argentinean Business Network against Child Labour". This experience shows how private initiatives, which emerge spontaneously within the private sector (and are not imposed from outside), have the potential to sustain themselves over time and generate effective actions. In the Argentinean case, the Business Network has been supported by Government bodies dealing with child labour and has received advice from organizations dealing with these matters (such as the ILO). This kind of partnership can have significant impact on how child labour issues are dealt with within the legal framework. Such partnerships can also promote certain policies linked to the prevention and eradication of child labour and deploy joint actions with other potential allies, such as the media.

The discussions at the Conference also outlined the following actions that the ILO could undertake in the future collaboration with employers' organizations in combating child labour:

- Develop and disseminate outreach and awareness materials on this issue (such as the Guides), to be used by companies domestically, with their suppliers or initiatives link with the community in which they operate.
- Develop methodologies, guidelines and/or tools to help companies in conduct diagnoses or surveys of their supply chains. Such guidelines could prove useful for enterprises when establishing relationships with major suppliers (first lines).

- Inform and train employers' organizations regarding the ILO supervisory mechanisms, in particular, with regard to procedures at their disposal to comment on reports sent in by their governments on ratified conventions.

The Conference confirmed the business sector commitment in Latin America and the Caribbean to eliminate child labour. Employer constituents of the ILO have repeatedly expressed their full support for initiatives to combat child labour by promoting viable alternatives in the field of education and especially by promoting decent and productive work for their parents.