

World Day Against Child Labour 12th June 2005

Digging For Survival

The reality of child mining worldwide

Somewhere in the world at this very moment, in a mine or a quarry, a child is hard at work. They may be labouring underground in stifling heat and darkness. They might be carrying loads of coal and ore too heavy for their backs. They could be breaking stones in a quarry using only a hammer or be exposed to dangerous chemicals, explosives or other hazards. The money that they earn is crucial to ensuring that they and their families can afford even the basics of life. There are over one million of these children worldwide. They are the *Child Miners* and they are *digging for survival*.

While all forms of child labour are harmful to children, those who work in the mining sector are in particular danger, labouring in conditions that pose a serious risk to their health and well being, exposing them to serious injury or even death on a daily basis. In the absence of proper medical care, injuries and health problems sustained in the course of their work will have a life long effect. In the Mererani gem mines in

Tanzania, for example, children as young as eight or nine descend 30 metres underground to spend seven or eight hours a day digging through narrow passages without ventilation or proper lighting. Tunnel collapse is an ever present danger. Sometimes the boys hide in the mine tunnels deep underground during blasting hoping to be first to find exposed gems. The 'bonuses' they get for these finds are their only hope of pay. Because of the risks they take, many of these children suffer serious injury or lose their lives.

Despite ongoing efforts in many countries to eliminate the practice, child miners can still be found all over the world. Child labour is most commonly found in small-scale underground and open cast mines and quarries in many countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. There, children work in the extraction and processing of many types of ore and minerals, including gold, silver, iron, tin, emeralds, coal, chrome, marble and stone. Most of today's child miners are not working directly for big mining companies. They may work for a small local mining or quarrying concern or may work with their own families on small concessions near bigger mines. They may also work in mines abandoned by multi-national companies when large-scale mining became unprofitable.

Because the income these children earn is crucial to the survival of the whole family unit, education is not an option for many child miners. In Nepal, girls as well as boys work long hours in quarries. Sudha began work as a stone crusher when she was just 12 years old, hoping to raise some extra money for her family. Her wages, though small, are now an important part of her family's income, supplementing their small earnings from farming livestock. Sometimes Sudha's brother, sister and her parents also work as stone crushers in an effort to supplement their meagre earnings from farming. Their combined efforts earn them 1400 rupees (US\$20 or €15) a week.

Although the local school is only a short



Mine entrance, Komambangou, Niger

(I. Balla Souley)

walk from her home Sudha does not consider education an option for her. Even though she would prefer to be at school, she simply says that it's too late for her to start now. Asked why she continues to do this back-breaking and dangerous work Sudha sighs and stares at the sky. "There is no alternative", she says. For her, this is her destiny, her pre-ordained role in life.

There are some however who believe that, for Sudha and hundreds of thousands of children like her, life can be better. Through its International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), the International Labour Organization (ILO) is working worldwide to ensure that no child has to toil in a quarry or a mine.

But bringing about change demands an understanding of the complex nature of the problem. Most child miners are employed in small-scale enterprises which are unregulated and often undocumented. Without accurate information about the scale of the problem, it is difficult to put in place effective measures to deal with it. Also, many mining enterprises are family run, with the money from mining often key to the family's survival. Children cannot be withdrawn from labour in the mining sector without adequate alternative sources of support for their family being put in place. Children who leave mining must then have access to good quality education with real prospects of meaningful employment when they leave school. This is the only real way of breaking the cycle of poverty which afflicts their communities.

Pilot projects undertaken by ILO-IPEC in Mongolia, Niger, Tanzania and the

Andean countries of South America have shown that the best way to assist child miners is to work with the children's own communities. Mining and quarrying communities have been helped to organise co-operatives and to improve their productivity by acquiring machinery, thus eliminating or reducing the need for child labour. They have also been assisted in developing essential services such as schools, clean water and sanitation systems.

While projects on the ground can assist child-miners in a direct and practical way, only worldwide awareness of the problem can mobilise the international effort that is needed to end the practice for good.

In the meantime, all around the world, thousands of children are still hard at work, digging for survival.



Children exposed to gold ore with toxic mercury in Peru

(E. Gianotti)



(P. Lissac)

Child coal miner in Colombia

A Load too Heavy... Child Labour in Mining & Quarrying

Children mine gems in tunnels only as wide as their bodies

Children haul loads of coal that weigh more than they do

Children sit for hours in the sun pounding boulders into road gravel

Children use their hands and toxic mercury to work gold out of rock

Children squat the whole day in water patiently sifting sand for gold

World Day Against Child Labour – Events

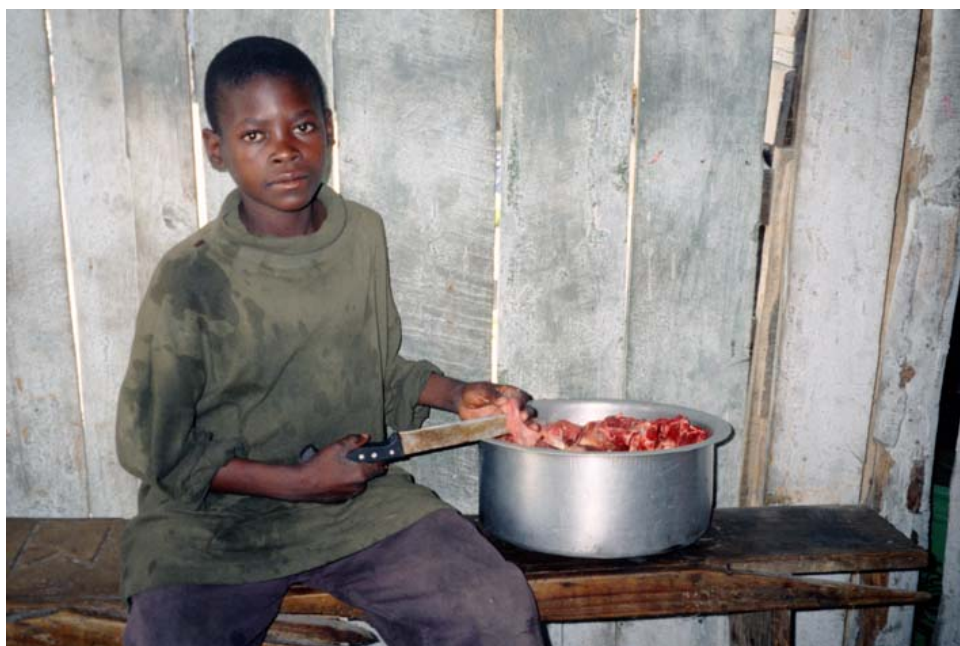
- "A Call to Action" 13:15hr in Room XVII, Palais des Nations
- Global partners and tripartite national delegations express their commitment to work with the ILO to eliminate all child labour in mines and quarries within a set period of time.
- Photographs of children working in mines and quarries: Salle des Pas Perdus and in the gallery between Rooms XIX and XX
- Banners created by schoolchildren
Hanging in the Salle des Pas Perdus, Palais des Nations

Tanzanian society moves to break the cycle of poverty and child labour

An innovative pilot project is underway across Tanzania that is aiming to tackle the worse forms of child labour head on. Its goal is to take 30,000 children out of the workplace and get them back into school and every sector of society is being mobilized to achieve it.

In Tanzania, up to 3.4 million children work, many engaged in some of the worse forms of child labour such as mining, commercial agriculture, domestic services and prostitution. Widespread poverty, a deteriorating education system and the destructive onslaught of HIV/AIDS are all responsible. Not only are these children vulnerable to exploitation and dangerous working conditions, they are also losing any hope of an education and many will face a life ahead of extreme poverty. Breaking this vicious cycle is a daunting challenge for which there are no simple answers.

Ratifying the ILO Convention on the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour was a significant first step for the Government. But now it has thrown its full weight behind the ILO "Time Bound Project" to develop a comprehensive and integrated approach that will tackle the problem on all sides. Ministries, NGOs, companies, trade unions and village communities are all involved in helping to identify individual children most at risk, removing them from the workplace, helping the children rehabilitate and putting them back into education or training. As part of the scheme, the families, most of whom live in abject poverty and depend on their children's wages, will be provided with real income-generating alternatives.



A child cook in Tanzania

The targets set are ambitious – to cut the number of children working in some of the worse forms of child labour by 75% in just five years. The success of the project will be dependent upon changing attitudes from Government down to village and family level and tapping

into the energy and commitment of the community and civil society at large. Central to the message will be that eliminating child labour is not just a social and moral imperative, it is also central to the entire development challenge.

Who is a "typical" working child in mining?

A "typical" child worker in small-scale mining is a boy or a girl aged 10-15, mainly working above ground, in a family group, digging, crushing or grinding ore, or transporting it in sacks weighing 10-25 kg over distance up to 600 meters. He/she uses adult-size tools (bar, pick, hammer, shovel) and is most unlikely to use any proper protective equipment. He/she receives no direct pay, rather he/she contributes to the expanded earnings of his/her family. If he/she goes to school (unlikely if he/she is over 12 years old) he/she works two to three hours a day after school and all day at the weekends and during vacations. If he/she does not go to school he/she is more likely to work independently of his/her family, doing whatever he/she is told to do with little or no concession to his/her age. If he/she is involved in the processing of gold-bearing ore, he/she is likely to show signs of mercury poisoning. He/she is likely to have respiratory problems, skin disorders and musculo-skeletal problems no matter what sort of mining he/she is involved in.



(A. Khemka)

Young girls working in an open air quarry

Safety and health problems for child labourers in mining

Tunnel collapses, fires and excessive dust are just some of the dangers facing child miners

Some children start working in mines and quarries at an early age, often alongside their older family members. Like adults, they can face many kinds of dangers to their own safety and health from working in such environments, but the effects of injuries and ill-health on children can be even greater than those on adults.

Children may not realize the dangers they face because of their lack of emotional as well as physical maturity and general work experience. They may be under pressure to work harder than they are physically capable of doing. Working in mines or quarries above ground, they face dangers from such tasks as:

- carrying heavy loads of rocks and stones – leading to back pain, spinal deformity and other musculo-skeletal disorders, quite apart from sheer tiredness,
- breaking up rocks and stones in quarries using chisels and hammers – leading to eye injuries and cuts to and hardening of the hands and forearms,
- using toxic chemicals such as mercury to extract gold from rock, and
- working near machinery and site vehicles, leading to potentially severe injuries or fatalities.

These workplaces are often in remote and inhospitable environments where there is poor sanitation and no access to clean drinking water, and it is necessary to

work long hours in the open with little protection from the sun. Moreover, there are often no first aid or medical facilities nearby to help stem the effects of any injuries that do occur.

Working in underground mines, on the other hand, can mean being winched down long vertical shafts on single ropes, crawling along tunnels not much wider than the body and working in cramped conditions in poor air quality. Children in underground mines face specific dangers such as:

- tunnel collapses or rock falls – and children have less strength compared to adults to break themselves free,
- fire and explosion, especially from coalmines, and
- excessive amounts of dust, such as silica, resulting in chronic breathing problems and eventually in lung diseases such as silicosis.

Mines and quarries are hostile environments and working in them is dangerous, especially for children.



International Labour Organization
Organisation internationale du Travail
Organización Internacional del Trabajo

For more information on *Child Labour in Mining & Quarrying* :
<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/ipcc/wdacl/2005/index.htm>