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QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Making Progress Combating Child Labour In Asia

Despite declines both in the child population and in the number of economically active children, the ILO estimates that Asia has the largest number of child workers in the 5-14 age group – some 122 million. Here are some FAQs on child labour compiled by ILO Online.

1. What is child labour?

Child labour refers to work undertaken by children below the legal minimum working age. The ILO's Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No.138) stipulates that ratifying member States fix a minimum age for admission to employment or work. The minimum age for admission to work is generally 15 (14 for developing countries); light work may be allowed from the age of 13 (12 for developing countries); and 18 years is the minimum age for work considered to be hazardous for health, safety and morals.

2. What are the worst forms of child labour?

The ILO's Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No.182), Article 3 defines the worst forms of child labour as:

- a) All forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom, as well as forced or compulsory labour, including recruitment of children in armed conflict;
- b) Using, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances;
- c) The use, procurement or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in relevant international treaties; and
- d) Work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children, the types of harmful work are to be determined by national authorities.

The ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No.182) has seen the most ratifications in the shortest time for any Convention in ILO history – 159 ratifications in only seven years.

While national authorities have some discretion in nominating the categories of work that fall under Article 3 (d), there is no discretion whatsoever in Articles 3 (a), (b), (c) – these categories are considered 'unconditional' and are absolutely prohibited for all children under the age of 18, without exception or exemption.

3. What is hazardous child labour?

"Hazardous work" refers to particularly dangerous and unhealthy work from which all girls and boys under 18 should be protected. It is work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.

4. What are the root causes of child labour?

The root causes of child labour are not simply economic, poverty is just one factor. Other causes include inequality, lack of educational opportunities, lack of decent work for adults, economies strongly dependant on agriculture, slow demographic transition, consumerism, and the impact of tradition and culture. In some cases the problem is aggravated by rapid migration from rural to urban areas and from poorer countries to more advanced economies. The role of the child within the family, parental and community attitudes to the child, and especially the role of girls in the family, manipulation of the market by unscrupulous employers – all these contribute to child labour, as do factors that increase a child's vulnerability to exploitation, such as armed conflicts or natural disasters.

Age, gender, ethnicity, social class and deprivation all interact to affect the type and intensity of work that children perform, as well as whether they work or not. Lack of adequate policies in the country – in particular the absence of good quality, free basic education – is also an important factor.

5. What is the nature of child labour in the region?

Although children have long been – and continue to be – exploited in sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing and domestic service, many worst forms of child labour are a problem in the region, including child trafficking, commercial sexual exploitation, bonded child labour, hazardous child labour and the recruitment and use of children for armed conflict or drug trafficking.

6. What are the costs and benefits of preventing and eliminating child labour?

The ILO's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) carried out a survey to calculate the likely financial burden that countries face as they move to eliminate child labour completely and the economic impact that could be expected as a result. Globally, the benefits of eliminating child labour were estimated to exceed costs by a ratio of 6.7 to 1 – equivalent to a return of 43.8 per cent on the 'investment'. In Asia, the ratio is even greater, at 7.2 to 1.

7. What impact do crises have on child labour?

The vulnerability of children to exploitation increases when family and social protection networks break down and where economic and community structures are disrupted. A high tolerance for child labour combined with political volatility and conflicts in certain countries (e.g. Afghanistan, Nepal, Indonesia and Sri Lanka) exacerbates the problem and can hinder action against it. When conflicts prevent adults from working, or they are called up to fight, child labour may also be used to replace them. Natural disasters such as tsunamis or earthquakes also leave children more vulnerable to child labour.

8. How can Asian countries make progress in combating child labour?

The examples of Malaysia, the Republic of Korea, Thailand and China show that political commitment to reducing poverty and expanding free and quality education has had an important bearing on child labour elimination. An important factor accounting for the steady decline in child labour in Thailand was the firm commitment in 1992 by the first democratically elected Prime Minister to ending child labour and sexual exploitation. In the last 25 years China has taken more people out of poverty and enrolled more children in school than any other country. There is strong evidence that this has also had a dramatic impact on child labour in China. Within a generation of independence in 1945, the Republic of Korea went from being an exceedingly poor country with low levels of school enrolment to implementing a mass education system. Malaysia has managed to reduce poverty drastically and achieve universal education.

In July 2006, an ILO Regional Tripartite Seminar in Jakarta gathering 12 countries from East and Southeast Asia discussed follow-up actions against child labour, including setting a time frame for the elimination of the worst forms of child labour. Some of the countries, including Cambodia, Indonesia, Mongolia, the Philippines and Viet Nam have already set concrete deadlines.

The meeting drew up a list of priorities for action. These include increasing efforts to combat poverty and expand education, allocating more money to combat child labour, setting national targets to end the worst forms of child labour as

soon as possible, paying special attention to vulnerable groups such as minorities and migrants, and completing ratification of the ILO fundamental conventions.

9. How does child labour link to other development issues?

Child labour is clearly linked to efforts to promote decent work, since by its very nature it deprives children and young people of the preparation they need to obtain safe and productive work once they have reached employment age, while also depriving adults of the opportunity for decent work. It perpetuates irregularities in the labour market, contributes to exploitative conditions of employment and undercuts efforts to regulate conditions. It allows unscrupulous employers to prosper and profits to be made on the back of corruption and deprivation.

While poverty is an underlying cause of child labour, child labour also contributes to sustaining poverty and hinders development. It is encouraging, therefore, that there have been increasing efforts to take child labour into consideration in the preparation of national poverty reduction strategies and in strategies for human resource development.