

Education, Migration and Child Labour: All children are entitled to an education

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In the vast food processing sector of Thailand, a little girl stands with her father, toiling for 12 hours a day, six days a week. For this work she will be paid 800-900 baht (US\$25-30) per week. It is hard work: "I sometimes get tired because I have to stand all day" she says.

For young Noy and thousands of other migrant children in Thailand, working long hours is just part of daily life. Sadly, going to school is not. "I have to help my family earn income so I cannot go to school like other children", she explains.

The problem of child labour is obviously not limited to Thailand. Asia-Pacific enjoys a reputation as a vibrant economic region, but it is also home to more working children than any other region in the world – an estimated 122 million children aged 5 – 14 years are compelled to work for their survival. Some try to balance school with their long hours of work, but millions of these children are not enrolled in school at all.

Today, 12 June, marks World Day Against Child Labour, which annually serves as an international day of action to raise awareness of child labour. This year's theme focuses on education as the right response to child labour and the key to breaking the poverty cycle.

The right to free and compulsory education is enshrined in international human rights law. Through the UN Millennium Development Goals, the international community set itself the targets of achieving universal primary education and eliminating gender disparities in education by 2015. These are important and valid goals. Investing in education makes good economic sense and is one of the best decisions a country can make because it brings both higher economic and social returns. Child labour is also prohibited for the harmful effects it can have on children by two widely ratified key conventions of the International Labour Organization, a specialized UN agency that leads global efforts to combat child labour through its International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour.

In the last 15 years Thailand has been a leader in the region, successful in reducing virtually all forms of child labour amongst Thai children, however the problem has taken a different face. While according to official figures an estimated 140,000 children aged 15-17 years are legally employed, these statistics do not include the many migrant children under 15 who work illegally. Many of them are poor, un-registered or falsely registered children whose families are originally from hill tribe areas, Lao PDR or Myanmar. These children are likely to be exposed to dangerous situations that leave them open to exploitation, such as begging, domestic labour, manufacturing, the fishing industry, agriculture, and entertainment venues.

Throughout the region, migrant families, and especially migrant children, face many difficulties. Living conditions in their communities are often basic and unsanitary – sometimes with contaminated water, no proper toilet or waste disposal facilities. Because many migrant children lack registration documents they cannot access a

range of health services, including post-natal care for newborns, vaccinations, and the prevention and care of HIV/AIDS and other illnesses.

Fortunately, free basic education is a legal right for all children in Thailand. However in practice many migrant children cannot attend fulltime education. The reasons include inadequate facilities and budget allocations for schools in their areas, a distrust of the authorities, fear of deportation, and imbedded negative attitudes towards migrant children among the general public.

Noy has recently been able to attend classes run by the Labour Rights Promotion Network (LPN) on Sundays – her one day off each week. It's no substitute for full-time schooling but Noy is still enthusiastic and grateful for the opportunity that LPN has provided. "One day while I was at home, a teacher walked into the village to tell all the children that there would be a Sunday school to teach Mon, Thai and English languages. I asked my Mom if I could go to the school as I didn't have to work on Sunday. Mom agreed because it did not interfere with my work. One day I want to be a vegetable seller. If I can understand the Thai language and make calculations I will be able to sell vegetables."

Without access to free, compulsory, basic and good quality education, child labourers grow into young people with poor employment prospects. They cannot lift their families out of the poverty trap, cannot become parents who can give their children a better life through education, and cannot contribute effectively to the development of their countries. Noy's aspiration to use her newly learned language and math skills to start her own business selling vegetables may seem like a modest goal, but it is an example of how education can open children's eyes to future possibilities and help them escape an inter-generational cycle of poverty.

Today, on the 2008 World Day Against Child Labour, we ask all those involved to recognize the importance of education in ending child labour, and to focus on helping those children who currently are kept out of the classroom, and in poverty, because they are forced to work for their survival.

The World Day Against Child Labour has been marked as an international day of action by the ILO and its partner organizations since 2000. It commemorates the adoption of ILO Convention 182 - The Worst Forms of Child Labour (1999). Events for 2008 World Day Against Child Labour are being held around the Asia-Pacific region including in Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Fiji, India, Indonesia, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. In Thailand events will be held in Chiang Rai and Tak provinces to highlight the particular plight of migrant children in Thailand.