

Digging For Survival

The reality of child mining worldwide

By Patrick Quinn, Chief Technical Adviser of ILO's Child Labour Project

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, pit collapses 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 East Kalimantan many children continue to work in traditional gold mining areas, particularly in Kutai Barat and in Pasir. Many of these children are exposed to danger. It is known that in both West Kutai and Pasir, children are involved in mining. This work may involve panning for gold, diving or other work in mining operations.

The dangers of the sector were vividly illustrated in July 2004 when the International Labour Organisation (ILO) undertook a study on child labour in the two areas. During the visit to Pasir there was an accident at one of the mining units which killed three adult workers.

The study team reported it had rained all day long, causing the wall of a dug out hole at one of the units to collapse and causing three workers to be buried alive by the land side. A major accident in the Kelian Dalam area in 1998 also claimed many lives.

Apart from mine collapses, the use of mercury in gold mining villages represents a serious danger to the immediate users, and also pollutes rivers. This is of particular concern in West Kutai.

Diving is another hazardous occupation in some forms of mining units. The murky river water does not allow the divers to see the falling debris, even collapsing walls. The cramped pit walls, only 2-3 m diameter, do not allow divers to escape collapses. Diving to a depth of 8-10 meters from the river surface can cause bleeding in the divers' noses and ears.

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. 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 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.

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 ensuring 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.

Problems with access to education increase the chances of children spending long hours at work. In the Keliam Dalam area of West Kutai, once children complete elementary school, if they wish to continue education they have a very long journey to make to school, or must move away and live close to the nearest junior secondary school. This can be expensive, and for many families is not an option.

To try to tackle this problem, the ILO's International Programme for the Elimination of Child Labour (ILO-IPEC), in collaboration with a local NGO, has worked with local Ministry of Education to establish an Open Junior High School in the village. Based in the elementary school, in the afternoons older children now have the opportunity to continue their education.

In Pasir, the ILO is also working with teachers, local government and NGOs to find ways of strengthening education, and improving the family economic situation so that families do not need to have children working.

The pilot projects undertaken by the ILO-IPEC 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 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.

This year's World Day Against Child Labour, June 12th 2005, will focus on the plight of child miners world-wide.