INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON CHILD LABOUR

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Practical Action to Eliminate Child Labour
Issues paper

INTERNATIONAL LABOUR OFFICE GENEVA
**Background**

Since the beginning of the 1990s, matters relating to child labour have been the focus of increasing attention. As a result, practical action against child labour in the form of policies, programmes and projects has been building up at an unprecedented scale. There are three factors contributing to this development: First, a general realization that the exploitation of child labour has become more serious and could well continue to do so in several parts of the world. Second, an increasingly vehement concern that, by employing children at an age and in conditions that do not conform to universally accepted standards, some countries might gain a comparative advantage in international trade over those that are more strictly applying such standards. Lastly, a stronger commitment of public opinion than in the past to the cause of human rights and rights of children in particular.

The struggle against child labour has gained momentum and a wide variety of actors have joined in, including governments, NGOs, religious groups, trade unions, employers’ organizations, and international organizations, to name just a few. As activities at national and international levels increased, important lessons could be learned, particularly in the framework of the ILO’s International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC). The experience gained provides valuable guidelines for policy formulation and the development of further programmes and projects targeting child labour particularly in its most extreme forms.

**Lessons learnt**

1. **Action is needed on various fronts but sequencing and coordination are important.** For many years, activities in the field of child labour were rather experimental in nature. Numerous small-scale projects were undertaken under a variety of different, often unconnected programmes. It is now important to move from scattered experimental approaches to strategic action geared to the mainstreaming of child labour issues in a coherent national policy and plan of action. An essential start towards this end should be the development of national time-bound programmes of action which should aim at eliminating the most intolerable forms of child labour within a clearly set time-frame.

2. **Reliable data on the nature and magnitude of the child labour problem are essential.** Data collection and situation analysis may not seem very action-oriented tasks. But the availability of timely and reliable data, broken down as detailed as possible by region,
sector, industry, gender, etc, is of crucial importance to the analysis of causes, forms and consequences of child labour and to the programming of activities. It is a vital tool for establishing priorities, for determining who and where the target groups for priority action are, for fixing clear objectives, for drawing up realistic programmes that correspond to real needs in order to attain those objectives and for measuring progress towards their attainment.

3. **Actors need to take concerted action.** Governments alone cannot solve the child labour problem. In order to be able to take effective action a broad social alliance, based on the concept of creating synergies and complementarities, is essential to the success of interventions. In general actors should include governments, NGOs, workers' and employers' organizations, research institutions, teachers and educators, religious leaders, the media as well as directly involved local communities and working children. The capacities and commitments of the various actors will inevitably vary from country to country. It is therefore important to build up institutional capacity within the different actors and an institutional mechanism to coordinate and guide the various activities. This is a long-term task which opens up a particularly wide scope for international cooperation. IPEC experience in this regard is worth noting. In IPEC countries broad-based National Steering Committees on Child Labour have been set up which are the stepping stones towards an institutional mechanism allowing the exchange of views and experiences, the coordination of activities and the securing of a large base of support for policy and programme implementation.

4. **Prevention, removal and rehabilitation are the cornerstones of a multi-pronged strategy.** The removal of children from work and the subsequent rehabilitation and provision of alternatives are important tasks. Many projects focus on this aspect, often encouraged by international attention, in particular in export-oriented sectors. Yet, important as these interventions are, they are often very difficult and costly measures. It is increasingly being realized that in order to eliminate child labour, prevention is not only as, but in many cases even more important than rehabilitation. An approach that gives emphasis to prevention would be likely to achieve the objective of the effective elimination of child labour much faster than one that merely rescues and rehabilitates children already at work. In the long run, prevention is the most economical method. Affordable and accessible education of good quality, relevant to the needs of children and their families, should be the centerpiece of any preventive strategy.

5. **Elimination of the most intolerable forms of child labour should be the priority.** The effective elimination of child labour will take time. Priorities should therefore be set with a view to concentrate first on the worst forms of child labour such as the persistent
exploitation of children in slave-like and bonded conditions; in prostitution, pornography and the drugs trade; and in any type of work which is hazardous or seriously endangers the physical or psychological development of a child.

6. **Economic incentives work but should be part of a larger strategy.** Many interventions provide economic incentives to compensate children and their parents for loss of income once the children have been removed from work. Incentive schemes exist in various forms, ranging from cash stipends to in-kind incentives such as free school meals and health care. In many cases, incentive-based action has been met with success. However, as with any welfare-oriented approach which is largely based on hand-outs, sustainability proves to be a problem. If child labour is to be eradicated, parents and the community must be convinced of the benefits of education and the damaging effects of child labour. They should certainly not be paid for what should be a natural parental ambition and duty. A number of incentive schemes have therefore been combined with employment and income-generation activities for the parents, with a goal of reducing the parents’ dependence on their children’s contribution to household income. ILO experience suggests that child labour programmes which are embedded in larger development programmes to uplift the socio-economic position of marginalized groups stand a higher chance of success.

7. **Sectoral projects should be backed up by regional or area-wide efforts.** A number of projects have been designed for children in specific industries or occupations, such as the carpet-weaving or match producing. However, many children do not permanently work in this or that sector. Concentrating too much attention on industry-specific child labour could push working children into other industries or occupations which might even be more hazardous or exploitative. This is why specific target-group oriented projects should be part of a larger programme addressing all exploitative and hazardous child labour in a specific geographical area by targeting both children who are already working and those at risk of becoming child workers.

8. **Awareness-raising should be at the basis at all efforts.** Once parents, the children themselves, their employers and communities are convinced that children should not be involved in hazardous or exploitative work, the most important condition for finding long-lasting solutions to child labour problems has been fulfilled. Experience has shown that the wide dissemination of information on child labour and its harmful consequences as well as other forms of awareness-raising, particularly through making hitherto invisible child labour visible, can lead to remarkable changes in attitude which in turn encourage policy reform and facilitate programmes and projects.
9. **International assistance is vital.** While child labour is essentially a national problem, assistance of the international community in the form of technical and other cooperation is crucial to the success of national efforts. Many of the national actors neither have the technical capacity nor the financial resources to effectively address a problem of such a magnitude. Countries should benefit from each others' experiences and international assistance can be an important facilitator of such information exchanges. Most if not all countries have gone through phases of child labour in their history. Today's rich countries therefore have valuable experience to share and should be committed to assist in eradicating this scourge on humanity. In addition, with the ever-decreasing relevance of national borders, child labour, especially in such areas as domestic work, prostitution, etc is rapidly becoming a transnational phenomenon. It can only be solved by effective international cooperation.

**Issues for discussion**

1. What should be the explicit objectives and elements of national policies for the effective elimination of child labour?

2. What should be done to encourage governments to adopt national programmes of action aimed at bringing about the elimination of child labour within a defined timeframe? What should be the basic elements to be covered by such national programmes of action?

3. What are the types of institutional arrangements needed to implement such programmes of action?

4. What are the types of measures required to mobilize increased resources and international cooperation to support national action and international initiatives, such as IPEC?

5. What should be done in order to effectively address the need for more information, statistical data and empirical research for the assessment of trends and the development of policies and programmes in the field of child labour?

6. What would be the comparative advantages and respective roles of the various actors such as governments, employers' and workers' organizations, and NGOs, in the fight against child labour, and how could synergetic effects be accomplished?
What could be done to promote the increased ratification and application of ILO Standards, in particular Convention No. 138 on Minimum Age and Convention No. 29 on Forced Labour and the active participation from all countries in the preparation of the new international standard on the elimination of the most intolerable forms of child labour?