



International
Labour
Office

Marking progress against child labour

Global estimates and trends 2000-2012

Executive summary



Governance and Tripartism Department

International
Programme on
the Elimination
of Child Labour
(IPEC)

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Executive summary



Since the year 2000, the ILO has been taking stock and measuring global progress on the reduction of child labour. Since 2006, it has undertaken this analysis in light of the target set by the International Labour Organization of eliminating all the worst forms of child labour by 2016. This report follows the Global Report series on child labour under the follow up to the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. Its focus is on the presentation of the new fourth round of child labour estimates for 2012 and to identify the trends from 2000 to 2012. The estimates are based on refined estimation techniques fully comparable with the ones for 2000, 2004 and 2008 rounds.

The Report is divided into four parts. Chapter 1 presents the main results of the newest estimates and trends as well as a brief overview of the driving action behind the results. Chapter 2 provides the details on the newest estimates for the year 2012. Chapter 3 presents a dynamic global picture updating the trends for the period 2000-2012. Chapter 4 sets out some pointers on the way forward. The publication of this Report is timed to provide input into the III Global Conference on Child Labour being held in Brasilia in October 2013.

In contrast to the results reported in the 2010 Global Report, which were published before the Global Conference on Child Labour held in The Hague in May 2010, the newest estimates show

that real advances have been made in the fight against child labour, particularly over the last four years. This means governments, workers and employers organisations, and civil society are on the right track and moving in the right direction. The investment, experience and attention paid to the elimination of child labour, with priority given to its worst forms, are clearly paying off.

However good this news is, it has to be accompanied with an immediate reminder that success in this field can only be relative. As the assessment of the previous Global Report underlined, the progress is still too slow and its pace needs to pick up if the world community is going to come anywhere near to meeting the 2016 goal which it aims to achieve.

The new estimates presented in this Report indicate that **168 million children** worldwide are in child labour, accounting for almost 11 per cent of the child population as a whole. Children in hazardous work that directly endangers their health, safety and moral development make up more than half of all child labourers, numbering 85 million in absolute terms. The largest absolute number of child labourers is found in the Asia and the Pacific region but Sub-Saharan Africa continues to be the region with the highest incidence of child labour with more than one in five children in child labour.

For the 12-year period beginning in 2000, the dynamic picture is one of significant progress.

There were almost 78 million fewer child labourers at the end of this period than at the beginning, a reduction of almost one-third. The fall in girls in child labour was particularly pronounced – there was a reduction of 40 per cent in the number of girls in child labour as compared to 25 per cent for boys. The total number of children in hazardous work, which comprises by far the largest share of those in the worst forms of child labour, declined by over half. Also progress was especially pronounced among younger children, with child labour for this group falling by over one-third between 2000 and 2012.

The decline in child labour was greatest during the most recent four-year period (2008-2012). The Asia and the Pacific region registered by far the largest absolute decline in child labour among 5-17 year-olds for the 2008-2012.

This recent progress is very welcome news, as there were fears that the social hardship caused by the global economic crisis of 2008-2009 and its aftermath could result in an increase in the number of families resorting to child labour in order to make ends meet. The Report suggests reasons why this has not occurred and cautions that close attention must be paid to the risk of child labour among older children when the global economy starts to recover. In many countries the progress that has been achieved is fragile and must be monitored and strengthened to ensure sustainability.

For the first time, global estimates of child labour are presented for different levels of national income. The incidence of child labour is not surprisingly highest in poorer countries. However when seen in absolute terms middle-income countries are host to the largest numbers of child labourers. Therefore the fight against child labour is by no means limited to the poorest countries. The same general pattern holds true across households within countries – child labour is much more common in poorer households but is not limited to poor households.

The new global estimates also provide an update on the sectors where child labourers are

found. Agriculture is by far the most important sector, but the numbers of child labourers in services and industry are by no means negligible. This means that while addressing child labour in the agriculture sector remains an important priority, it is clear that child labour elimination efforts must also focus on the growing share of children in services and in manufacturing – mostly found in the informal economy.

How has this progress over the last 12 years occurred? The decline in child labour has taken place against the backdrop of a sustained global movement against child labour involving a multiplicity of actors and efforts at a variety of levels. The report identifies a number of actions that have driven progress, including political commitment of governments, increasing number of ratifications of the ILO Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour and the parallel surge of the ILO Convention No. 138 on the Minimum Age for Admission to Employment, the two principal legal pillars for the global fight against child labour, sound policy choices, as well as solid legislative frameworks.

No one can take sole credit for this result, but many – including ILO and IPEC – have helped draw attention to the negative impacts of child labour on growth, on the future of the societies in which they live, and on the rights of these children. And many actors have contributed to building alternatives to child labour. The ILO's role in leading the fight against child labour through the combination of international labour standards and its supervisory system, technical advisory assistance, support of direct action pilots, capacity building projects, as well as helping to craft global and national frameworks deserves special mention.

We have argued in the Global Reports on child labour that while economic growth is important, policy choices can matter even more. Never has this been more apparent than in the most recent (2008-2012) period covered by the Report, which saw continued progress against child labour despite the global economic crisis and its



aftermath. Increased attention, commitment and ownership by governments are evident. Policy choices and accompanying investments that have been made in education and social protection appear particularly relevant to the decline in child labour.

The significant progress that has been made demonstrates that the overall strategy as set out in the ILO action plans including The Hague Roadmap appears to be sound and producing positive results in terms of strategic policy direction. The integration of action being taken in legislation and enforcement, education, social protection and promotion of decent work opportunities at the national and community levels appears to be a formula for success. Supporting the direct action on the ground with this upstream policy development, implementation and monitoring must remain a high priority for governments and organizations of workers and employers as well as for the donors and other supporting partners.

The key question looking forward is whether we are moving fast enough and targeting action where it is most needed and effective. Clearly the 2016 target date for the elimination of worst forms will not be met. We have warned in previous Global Reports against the danger of complacency and these results add further credence to this warning. Though significant progress has been made, ending the scourge of child labour in the foreseeable future is going to require a substantial acceleration of efforts at all levels. There are 168 million good reasons to do so.

Past experience and evidence from research highlight the particular need to continue to reinforce actions in the four broad policy areas mentioned above: legislation and enforcement mechanisms on minimum age and prohibited work for children, accessible, relevant, and meaningful education and skill development, social protection floors and expanded decent work opportunities for youth above the minimum age for admission to employment and parents.

The Report also identifies the need to reinforce action in relation to age and gender specific responses to child labour, a continued focus on Africa, a continued focus on agriculture and a new focus on manufacturing and services in the informal economy and strengthening national action on monitoring and evaluation of the impact of policies and actions taken on child labour. We must all continue to learn by doing as well as to be innovative and bold in tackling the root causes of child labour.

Another set of suggestions focus on continuing to build the knowledge base, strengthening statistics where they exist and establishing national statistical data sets in all countries. Insufficient information cannot be a justification for failure to act. But at the same time, improving information on child labour is critical to strengthening policy responses and to making certain that resources go to where the need is greatest.

The main message of this Report will hopefully foster hope and determination to stay the course, accelerate the pace and reinforce action. Our work in the elimination of child labour is not near done, but the results of the fourth round of estimates shows clearly that it can be done.

