

# From Exploitation to Education: Action against Child Labour: The Importance of Free and Universal Primary Education

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Worldwide, there is a growing consensus that all children need to be educated to become productive adults and that child labour jeopardizes their development. Consensus is also growing that education plays a key role in economic development, and that investment in education, in particular primary education and education for girls, gives a high return. Since 1919 the International Labour Organization (ILO) has sought to put an end to child labour by adopting international labour standards to set minimum ages for different types of work by children, and to regulate the nature and duration of children's work.

No fewer than 250 million children aged between 5 and 14 are working worldwide. At least 120 million of them are working full time and close to 80 million are in hazardous work. They are the children who either have no education at all or have had very little education. These figures are staggering, but very much supported by UNESCO's statistics on education.

- 145 million of the world's children aged 6-11 are out of school, (**85 million girls**, 60 million boys).
- 283 million children aged 12-17 are out of school, (**151 million girls**, 132 million boys).

There are many reasons why children are not in school but in the workplace: basic education in most countries is not free and in most developing countries schooling is not available for all children; where schools are available, the quality of education is often poor and the content is not relevant; in situations where education is not affordable or parents see no value in education, families send children to work, rather than to school. This particularly affects children in poverty and those belonging to the culturally and socially disadvantaged and excluded groups. As a result, they easily become victims of child labour exploitation.

## International instruments on child labour and education

Providing children with education was clearly seen as one of the objectives of ILO child labour policy from the very start. As early as 1921, Convention No. 10 established the link between child labour and education:

Children under the age of fourteen years may not be employed or work in any public or private agricultural undertaking, or in any branch thereof, save outside the hours fixed for school attendance. If they are employed outside the hours of school attendance, the employment shall not be such as to prejudice their attendance at school. (Article 1)

**Everyone**, says the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, has the right to education. ILO calls for action against child labour because it believes that children should be at school and not in the workplace, and that they should be given opportunities to enter gainful skilled employment on attaining employable age. In this perspective, eliminating child labour is not only an end to itself, it is a crucial element in reaching the ILO's basic goal of **decent work**.

The most comprehensive international labour standard on child labour is the **ILO Minimum Age Convention 1973 (No. 138)**. The principal commitments for ratifying States are: (1) to pursue a national policy to ensure the effective abolition of child labour and (2) to raise progressively the minimum age for admission to employment or work. Convention No. 138, while setting the general level of the minimum age at 15 years, lays down the principle that school age children should not be employed or work, requiring the minimum age for employment or work to be not less than the age for completion of compulsory schooling.

Convention 138 allows light work for children 13 - 15 years of age (12 - 14 in developing countries) and it is part of the definition of light work that it should not in any way jeopardize the child's possibilities to benefit from education (schooling and/or vocational training). Likewise, the almost universally adopted UN Convention on the Rights of the Child states that children must be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to interfere with education, or is harmful to a child's health or well-being.

The new ILO Convention on **Worst Forms of Child Labour** (No. 182 - 1999) emphasises the importance of education in rehabilitation, as follows:

Article 7.1

Each Member shall, taking into account the **importance of education in eliminating child labour**, take effective and time-bound measures to:

(...)

(C) ensure access to free basic education, and, wherever possible and appropriate, vocational training, for all children removed from the worst forms of child labour.

In the Preamble, it acknowledges the role of education in preventing child labour:

Considering that the effective elimination of the worst forms of child labour requires immediate and comprehensive action, **taking into account the importance of free basic education**.

It also points out the importance of international solidarity, and sees education as a global responsibility:

Article 8

Members shall take appropriate steps to assist one another in giving effect to the provisions of this Convention through enhanced international cooperation and/or assistance including support for social and economic development, poverty eradication programmes and universal education

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## **Education and training as one of the keys to eliminating child labour**

The international Conference on Child Labour, Oslo October 1997, reiterated that education, in particular basic education, is one of the principal means of preventing and eliminating child labour and called for initiatives that would increase social awareness by informing, educating, and sensitising parents and children, teachers, communities and society in general with

regard to the rights of the child, especially the right to basic education and to protection from economic exploitation.

In all IPEC participating countries, across the regions educational interventions have been implemented as one of the most effective instruments for the prevention of child labour and the withdrawal of children from hazardous work. Experience shows that children in school are less likely to be in full time employment. On the contrary children with no access to education, have little alternative but to enter the labour market and often perform work that is dangerous and exploitative.

For education to be effective in the elimination of child labour, countries must make a major effort to develop integrated policy and programmes of action for the provision of quality education that is relevant, accessible and free for all children, and that open up the access to decent work opportunities.

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## **What is needed?**

**First**, primary education must be accessible to all children:

- Schools need to be available where children live
- Schools must be of good quality and have the necessary resources
- The private cost of primary education must be very low, or off-set by special support to poor families

**Second**, education for all must be supported by all:

- Parents and children must see education as a meaningful investment of time
- Influential groups, especially teachers and education administrators, must believe in the value of educating the whole population, including the children of the poor.

There are many examples that low quality or lack of relevance in education discourages parents and makes the threshold for removing them from school and sending them to work lower. There are examples of resistance in higher social strata against excessive or inappropriate education for the poor, on the grounds that this could disrupt existing social arrangement. Improving quality and relevance is obviously important, but there is also a need for campaigning, awareness-raising and social mobilisation to change attitudes negative to education.

**Third**, the education system needs to take into account the factors that tend to keep girls in particular away from school. UNESCO figures show clearly that many more girls are out of school than boys. There is a wide range of reasons, including lack of female teachers, need for girls to work in the family household, and cultural perceptions that make education boys more valuable than educating girls.

**Fourth**, for some groups positive incentives will be needed. ILO/IPEC experience shows that even in countries where substantial progress has been made and average school enrolment ratios are high, there are still pockets of children who do not benefit from this progress. This suggests that apart from general improvements in the education system, special short-term measures are often necessary for children who are more difficult to reach and are at high risk of being exploited. Many countries have very positive experiences with providing school meals as an extra incentive to come to school and stay in school. Other attractive incentives could be health care, stipends, access to vocational training, and extracurricular activities

including sport. The provision of targeted community based early education services can have an extensive impact.

**Fifth**, good education is not possible without good teachers. In this context the conclusions of the Joint *Meeting on the Impact of Structural Adjustment on Education Personnel* should be borne in mind, especially the first paragraph which warns against “cuts in teachers training and qualification levels, their employment and salaries, and the conditions for quality teaching and learning,....” and the chapter on Teacher education and training. Note should also be taken of the **Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers** (1966) and the recommendations of the joint ILO/UNESCO committee on its application (CEART).

**Sixth**, once the system is in place, so that it is actually possible for every child to go to school, primary education (or ideally education up to the minimum age for employment) should be made compulsory and the students attendance monitored. It is far easier to monitor school attendance than it is to control child labour through workplace monitoring. And since the majority of children working are found in the informal sector or working in private homes, child labour inspection is not the solution to the child labour problem in general, even if it has proved very effective in specific sectors.

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### **What is the cost?**

In *The State of the World's Children 1999*, UNICEF estimates that an annual expenditure of 6.9 billion US\$ is needed to provide for all the children who at the moment do not have it, access to primary education. This estimate is for recurrent cost and does not include the investment needed for new buildings, though it is argued that 10 % of recurrent cost is needed for investment. Also, the cost of improving quality is not included.

The ILO has an on-going research programme to assess the cost of eliminating child labour. This obviously includes the cost of free and universal primary education. A draft report from 1997 presents a cost of US\$ 14 billion per annum for education children at present assumed to be out of school. Different estimates arrive at approximately the same cost. A current project, *Towards Global Estimates of the Cost of Ending Child Labour*, has developed a methodology, but a number of country studies is necessary to proceed. Donor support for these country studies is not available at the moment. The cost estimated by this project will include all the elements listed under *What is needed?* above, as well as the considerable cost of rehabilitation of children liberated from the worst forms of child labour.

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### **Education, development and decent work**

To build a credible education policy that can truly provide education for all and contribute to the elimination of child labour, it is necessary to examine critically all elements of the education system, from the performance of teachers in the classroom to national priorities given to the financing of education, in particular primary education. Education policy must be closely linked with development policy and employment policy. Education should lead to decent work. In too many countries people are educated into unemployment. This undermines parents' faith in education as a life strategy. This is one vicious circle that needs to be broken.

The other vicious circle is the lack of consideration for the children of the poor. Population groups that have been excluded from education for generations, and then have to enter into the modern and globalized economy, have few opportunities to contribute to their own

development, let alone that of their country. This undermines growth in general, and increases and cements the difference between the rich and the poor.

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## **How to build national and international support ?**

The ILO project “**Action against child labour through education and training**” is testing out a model strategy in nine countries. In this model three component work together to improve education as a tool against child labour, and build a strong national alliance to support it.

The first component focuses on the mobilization of teachers and their organizations as well as society in general to launch campaigns against child labour at local and national levels. The campaigns are expected to increase awareness on the subject and emphasize the need for increased resources to provide universal, free, relevant and compulsory education with special attention to those at high risk of child labour. They will also highlight the importance of an improved status and working conditions of teachers in order to achieve these goals.

The second component of the Project will be chiefly devoted to capacity building and concrete action programmes aimed at testing and replicating education practices in both formal and non-formal education systems that are able to prevent child labour and attract/ retain (ex-)working children. Action programmes will test and put into practice educational practices that:

- (i) incorporate awareness raising activities on child labour into primary education;
- (ii) strengthen the quantity and quality of formal education systems to reach out to working children and children at high risk;
- (iii) improve the quality and structure of non-formal education for (ex-) working children and ensuring linkages with and mainstreaming into formal education or training;
- (iv) provide practical skills training for younger children; and
- (v) provide older children and youth with employable skills and entry points into skilled and gainful jobs.

An important part of this work will be to build links between workers in non-formal and formal education. Joint activities, including joint training, would be most welcome. Experiments within the formal school system should be taken as far as possible, though we are aware that in some countries, there are restrictions that create limits to what is possible. When for this reason it is necessary to win the experience outside the formal school system, ways and means should be found to make these experiences known and used within the formal system.

Equally important will be the need to ensure that the lessons emerging from these activities are reflected in future policies and programmes on child labour and education. The third component of the Project will therefore focus on activities to strengthening national policy on education by advocating for increased resources on basic education; harmonizing legislation on child labour and education; and building alliances and political commitment to implement national policies geared at providing universal and quality education to children, with special attention to those at high risk of child labour.

The three components should be fully integrated in each other. To achieve this, is important to build networks that include key actors, in particular:

- education authorities, from the Ministry of Education to local school boards
- teacher training colleges and other higher institutions

- teachers' organisations
- workers ' and employers' organisations
- NGOs active in the field of non-formal education
- UNESCO and UNICEF at the national level

Political will is the key to change. Political will is necessary at the national level ,but also at the international level. As more and more countries ratify ILO Convention No. 182 (1999) on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, they also enter into a family of nations committed to helping each other reach the goal of eliminating child labour, for which universal and free primary education is one of the most important tools. While sustainable solutions depend on economic development, a lot also depends on political will. This will be boosted world-wide by the campaign for the ratification and implementation of Convention 182. In the words of the Director-General of the ILO:"In a world where it is so difficult to come up with a cause that can unite hearts and minds, let's make the eradication of the worst forms of child labour a cause that we all can share".

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