

International Conference on Child Labour

CHILD LABOUR: WHAT IS TO BE DONE

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Excellencies,

Let me first begin by telling you that I consider it a great honour to be invited to participate and initiate this technical session of the Oslo International Conference on Child Labour. But I am humbled by this opportunity: The subject of my presentation is vast and the time available all too understandably too little. So where to begin and what to cover?

There is also the fact that we have here a truly global audience representing the world of work and civil society: Policy makers, employers, workers, academics, child rights advocates, and men and women engaged on a day-to-day basis in work that does make a difference in the lives of working children. This is certainly a very rich galaxy. But its heterogeneity makes one wonder as where to pitch one's presentation.

I shall do two things: I will be eclectic and deliberately selective; and secondly I will base my presentation by building on the commonalities that characterize this audience. Let me begin with the latter by making some assumptions about what you and I know.

First, I don't need to tell you about the problem. You know that it is a vast problem affecting millions of children throughout the world; that these children are of all colours and nationalities, and are found in Moscow and Cairo, in Mongolia and Mexico, in Beijing and New York, in Brazil and Mauritania and in the Philippines and Portugal.

Nor do I need to tell you about the abuse and exploitation to which working children are subjected. The great injury, even deliberate cruelty, which adults inflict on many working children, and the all-too-frequent fact that they get away with it, is a cruel mockery of the concern for humanity underpinning much religious thought; it is an affront to the sincerity, political will and collective undertaking of both developing and rich societies alike which profess giving a first call to children, which claim to put people at the centre of development, and which insist on respect for human rights as a unifying, though sometimes contentious, principle among all nations of the world. We do condemn that. And therefore we are all here for a common cause, and we dream the same dream, of a world where children are at school and not at work, doing home work and not building homes, and on the playing fields and not in mines. In other words, we are committed to the goal of the total and eventual elimination of child labour. We are united in saying: No to child labour; and No to the causes of child labour.

The challenge then is the perennial problem of how to narrow the gap between aspirations and reality, and how to deal with the classic challenge of the gap between law and practice. I quite agree with a number of child rights advocates that there are many governments which are recalcitrant, indifferent and even lacking in compassion. But our experience in recent years is that most governments are genuinely interested in doing something about the problem. They are however faced with serious constraints. There is, to begin with, the poverty of their country, the poverty of communities, the poverty

of families. There is also the fact that they are faced with problems of capacity - capacity to deliver services, capacity to enforce the law. There is moreover the political reality that governments cannot easily or radically switch budgetary allocations from one priority to another; entitlements are difficult to give, and once done they are difficult to stop, however desirable that may be. There are, therefore, political rigidities which constrain governments. Change can only be gradual - a hard bitter truth that should guide our action and approach. Given this then, what can and should be done to bring about the eventual elimination of child labour?

I should make one other observation before addressing that question. As Mme Minister pointed out, there is no one single model of intervention to attack the problem of child labour. There can be and are different roads to Rome, as the saying goes, and so also towards the goal of eliminating child labour. The road you take depends on the nature and scale of the problem you are faced with, your resource and institutional capacity, and so on. Some could take a macro approach relying on regional or nationwide actions encompassing universal compulsory education, legislation and other social/economic policies. Others could start more modestly focusing on a small group of child workers, in the knowledge that small though they may be, they could have a catalytic and multiplier effect, that they would help to draw attention to their problem and mobilize public opinion. So where we start and what action we take would very much depend on where we are in terms of the problem and capacity.

This said, I will speak on the assumption that we are dealing with a country, which corresponds in varying degree to the configuration shown in the table on "Child Labour Indicators".

We are dealing with a country:

- which has a significant child labour problem;
- where the problem could be broken down into three categories:
 - children who combine work with schooling;
 - children who do not go to school at all;
 - children who work in dangerous occupations and industries or under dangerous conditions;
- which has the will and interest to act.

These assumptions are not unrealistic. Nor is my assumption about the interest and will of governments to act unduly optimistic. There is, as has our experience with the IPEC programme shown, considerable interest on the part of governments to take action and seek international assistance. Indeed, there are reasons for optimism about the direction of change and the possibilities for action. The world we now know is quite different from that of even 5 or 10 years ago. It offers a favourable climate and hitherto unknown opportunities and possibilities that should enable us to make a final assault on child labour. This, therefore, calls for a number of steps to be taken by governments and the international community. I propose nine important steps.

First, as noted in the draft Oslo Agenda for Action, the time has come for member States which are for the most part signatories to all the major ILO Conventions on child labour and forced labour, as well as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to rise to their commitments and utterances by **adopting a time-bound programme of action to eliminate child labour**. Economic development has been accelerating at a rate of as high as 8-12 per cent a year in many Asian and Latin American countries, and is predicted to reach respectable rates in many African countries as well. Therefore, given the much higher living standards achieved in many developing countries, governments can and should put a relatively quick end to child labour by adopting a time-bound programme of action in the same way that they have achieved rapid growth rates and increased per capita income within the compass of time-bound development plans.

Clearly the problem is quite enormous and there is an urgent need for action. But where does one begin? Not all countries are institutionally or financially equipped to attack all forms of child labour at once. Choices must be made about where to concentrate available human and material resources. The most

logical and humane strategy would therefore be to focus scarce resources first on the most intolerable forms of child labour such as work in hazardous occupations and industries, slavery, debt bondage, and child prostitution.

Targeting the intolerable: What is to be done

1. Time-bound programme for action to eliminate child labour.
2. Immediate suppression of extreme forms of child labour.
3. Prohibition of work for the very young (under 12 or 13 years) and special protection for girls.
4. Rehabilitation to ensure permanent removal from hazardous work.
5. Preventive measures.
6. Designation of national authority responsible for child labour.
7. Making crime against a child anywhere a crime everywhere.
8. A new Convention on child labour.
9. Increased financial aid to fight against child labour.

Third, special attention must be devoted to those children who are subject to even greater exploitation and abuse because of their special vulnerabilities. These include the very young and girls. Many children are put to work at a very early age, in particular in rural areas where they may begin to work as soon as they are 5 or 6 years old. The proportion of child workers under the age of 10 in the total is far from negligible; it may be up to 20 per cent in some countries. The employment of very young children is an alarming problem; the younger the child, the more vulnerable he or she is to physical, chemical and other hazards at the workplace and, of course, to the economic exploitation of his or her labour. Girls, for example, are often more hidden, denied access to education, and suffer from detrimental cultural practices. Once sexually exploited, they can end up as social outcasts with little chance of reintegration into their communities. Therefore another area for action is the complete prohibition of work by children under 12 or 13 years of age and the protection of girls.

Four, national programmes of action against forced and hazardous work should heed the well-known admonition that the best can be the enemy of the good. We need to ensure that action against hazardous child labour in one sector does not drive it underground or lead to its resurgence in other sectors which are just as, or even more hazardous. Any action against hazardous child labour, therefore, should have a strong rehabilitative component, one that provides a credible alternative.

Five, as with health, here too prevention is cheaper and easier than cure. The task facing the international community is the immediate suppression of all extreme forms of child labour. To this end, the provision of protection and rehabilitation schemes are absolutely essential. Nevertheless, the problem can be attacked on a lasting basis only if short-term action is conceived within the framework of a national policy that gives primacy to preventive measures including the provision of free, universal, compulsory education, community mobilization, and other supportive measures.

Six, along with deciding the main approaches to be utilized in combatting child labour, it is essential to indicate the most important actors who must be involved in the effort. In almost all countries, this would include a cross-section of society. It is important that we involve and harness the growing interest of employers' and workers' organizations, and of course of NGOs, to help in the campaign against child labour. Even so, government and government alone has the capability to exert a powerful influence on national values and opinion, mobilize the financial resources and institutional instruments required to make an impact on the problem. Yet, all too often this potential influence has been thwarted by the absence of a clear mechanism to promote, monitor and effect action because of the proliferation of

government agencies: child labour is everybody's problem and nobody's problem. If, therefore, we are to give impetus for effective action, the laissez-faire attitude characterizing many governments should be replaced by one whereby a national authority with considerable power and influence is designated with the mandate and responsibility for the elimination of child labour.

Seven, concerted action and international cooperation is needed to successfully suppress all extreme forms of child labour, especially those that involve cross-border movements. The trafficking and exploitation of children in hazardous and forced work, and prostitution and pornography have an international dimension and therefore can be stopped only with concerted international effort; these should be a crime in every country of the world. And a crime committed against a child anywhere should be considered a crime everywhere.

As you know, following the express interest of its member States, employers and workers, the ILO is preparing a new Convention on the most intolerable forms of child labour. This Convention will first be debated by the International Labour Conference in Geneva in June 1998, for adoption in 1999. As the draft Oslo Agenda for Action recommends, the world community should reflect its anger at the very intolerable conditions of child workers and its commitment to act in solidarity by supporting this proposed international Convention which would forbid all extreme forms of child labour. Such a Convention would fill in the gaps in current international legal instruments dealing with children and their rights, and set clear priorities for national and international action.

Last, but not least, is the action against world poverty. Poverty should not be an excuse for inaction, but it must nonetheless be addressed by governments if we are to deal with the problem of child labour on a sustained basis. The problem is primarily a national responsibility, and national governments must design policies and programmes aimed at providing productive employment attacking poverty. But it is also a world responsibility. Efforts must be made at the international level to see in what way the world community could be mobilized in a sustained attack on world poverty.

From here in Oslo, the Agenda for Action, let the word go that child labour is a one-world problem, and that we are united in words and deeds in saying No to child labour and No to the causes of child labour.

Thank you.