

International Conference on Child Labour

CHILD LABOUR: WHAT IS TO BE DONE

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I should like first of all to extend a very warm welcome to all of you who have come from all over the world to attend this Conference. Alongside the Conferences of Amsterdam, Arusha and Cartagena, this Conference is one of the most important international events this year; it brings together high level policy-makers, leaders from workers' and employers' organizations, and child rights groups in a common endeavour to fight child labour, as is reflected in the draft Agenda for Action which we are hoping to adopt at the end of this meeting. We are most pleased and honoured to have been invited by the Government of Norway to collaborate along with our sister organization, UNICEF, in the organization of this Conference.

Allow me to start with one bold statement: the war against child labour is being won and it can be won in all countries in the coming 15 years.

Why do I say this?

To begin with, governments, employers' and workers' organizations, as well as civil society, have changed their perception of child labour. Child labour is no longer condoned in silence. In fact, it is at the top of the global agenda. The struggle against child labour has been given an added boost by the growing involvement of UNICEF and the NGOs thus transforming it from a fledging local concern into a formidable worldwide movement. Indeed, there has been a radical shift in attitude, with both rich and developing countries sharing a common concern about child labour and a common conviction that children play a key role in development.

Consequently, the last few years have witnessed a growing commitment on the part of governments to take direct action against child labour. A large and growing number of countries are now seeking assistance from the ILO's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC). Some 10 years ago, there was hardly a country which had an explicit policy or national programme of action against child labour. Today, many countries covered by IPEC, in all regions of the world, have introduced legislative reforms, and adopted national policies and programmes of action.

At the international level, there has been growing collaboration between the ILO and UNICEF to combat child labour. We have recently concluded a Memorandum of Understanding committing our two organizations to full-scale cooperation. And in this regard, I am pleased to inform you that we are collaborating in a wide range of areas such as research, policy and programme development, public-awareness raising, and action programmes in many countries. I would like to assure you that we are committed to deepening this exemplary cooperation between our two organizations.

We have also made considerable progress in our understanding of the child labour problem. Some five years ago, there was hardly a country which had carried out a survey of child labour. This is no longer the case. Thanks to the pioneering work of the ILO, surveys have now been carried out in Cambodia, Ghana, Indonesia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Senegal, Thailand and Turkey. The impact and value of these statistical surveys have been immediate and tangible. They have contributed to identifying priorities for action. They have served as an important tool for advocacy on behalf of working children.

Yes, our understanding has improved, and we now know that the problem is much larger and more severe than we thought. The latest ILO estimates of child labour are worrying. As many as 250 million children are toiling in the huts, villages, towns and cities around the world, struggling simply to survive or to overcome poverty. Some combine work with schooling. Most, however, would have neither the time nor the opportunity to have any schooling at all. Defenseless, they are and will remain illiterate all their lives if nothing is done to help them. Millions are sold or forcefully sent across borders, for work in industry, for domestic service, or for sex. Both the victims and the perpetrators are of every nationality and colour.

Child labour is simply the single most important cause of child exploitation and child abuse in the world today. This must stop, but the question is how? Four strategies seem to me to be necessary.

First, political will. All Member States of the United Nations should commit themselves to the ultimate objective of the effective and total abolition of child labour. While it may appear self-evident to many, this must be said again and again. All too often, the cruel and genuine deprivation of childhood is trivialized by debating doctrinal questions, such as whether the child who sells newspapers before or after school should be exempted from child labour legislation. The condition of children trapped in bonded labour, toiling in heavy construction, or abused in domestic service or prostitution, belong to a world quite unlike that of a child who works intermittently to earn pocket money. We should, therefore, re-echo the call in the ILO's Minimum Age Convention (No. 138) and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that we will put a stop to the economic exploitation of children.

Second, such a commitment should be backed up by a time-bound programme of action, which would aim at ending child labour within an explicitly defined period of time. Priority must be given to the immediate suppression of all extreme forms of child labour. To this end, the provision of protection and rehabilitation schemes is 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 priority to preventive measures, especially the provision of free, universal and compulsory education.

It is encouraging to note that the ILO's International programme on the Elimination of Child Labour, IPEC, which I mentioned earlier, is expanding its assistance in this area. Since its inception in 1992, with a generous initial contribution from the Government of Germany, IPEC has grown to embrace hundreds of action programmes in over 50 countries in Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America. IPEC is promoting partnership between governments, employers' and workers' organizations, non-governmental organizations and other sectors of civil society to combat child labour through prevention, removal and rehabilitation programmes. The Programme is inspiring, guiding and supporting national initiatives by strengthening national capabilities in such areas as policy-making, legislative reform, statistics, research, awareness-raising, and programme development. In response to the demand for assistance with data collection to support programme development, the Statistical Information and Monitoring Programme on Child Labour (SIMPOC) has been launched to reinforce the ILO's efforts in this area. I would like to place on record,

Mr. President, our appreciation to those countries which are supporting IPEC's operations - Germany and Spain, the two biggest donors, as well as Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States. I should point out however that the demands from developing countries for IPEC technical assistance are quite enormous and I therefore appeal to the donor community to expand its support to IPEC, which as you know is the only global programme of its kind.

Third, the time has come to strengthen the international legal framework by adopting an international Convention to suppress all extreme forms of child labour. As you may know, the ILO has decided to prepare a draft Convention on this subject which will be examined in a first discussion at the International Labour Conference in June 1998 and which will, we hope, result in the adoption of a Convention and a Recommendation at the following Conference. The draft text, in the form of Proposed

Conclusions, has been prepared on the basis of replies from a record number of 108 governments, and an almost equal number of employers' and workers' organizations, to an ILO questionnaire. Pending conclusion of the official report to the Conference, we are making the text of the Proposed Conclusions available immediately on the Internet. This should facilitate discussions in preparation for the Conference. The interest that this project has raised reflects the commitment of the entire international community. It gives us hope that the new Convention will be widely ratified once it has been adopted and that, consequently, Member States will be obliged to take effective measures to suppress immediately all extreme forms of child labour including: all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, forced or compulsory labour, debt bondage and serfdom; the use of children in illegal activities, for prostitution, production of pornography or pornographic performances; and the engagement of children in any other type of work which is likely to jeopardize their health, safety or morals.

Fourth, growing concern worldwide about extreme forms of child labour needs to be translated into a programme for international cooperation in the field of economic and social policy. The situation of children cannot be improved without action to combat world poverty. Laws and schools are important, and necessary. But they will fail if they are not supported by a commitment and a programme of action to deal with the poverty of nations, communities and families. The challenge is two-fold: for governments of developing countries to address the needs of their poor, and for governments of rich countries to provide for increased resources to attack world poverty.

And this brings me to my final point. At the international level, it is important that we remove the ambiguity that surrounds the debate on world action against child labour. The subject has become central in the context of the liberalization of world trade and the debate surrounding the Social Clause. This debate has been rather heated with charges and counter charges of social dumping on the one hand and protectionism on the other. It is important that the struggle against child labour is not compromised by protectionist forces or perceived to be a Trojan horse for protectionism or domination. Ours should be a principled position that mankind owes to the child the best it has to give; that global action against child labour is based not on unilateral action and trade sanctions, but on multilateral voluntary action and moral pressure; on cooperation rather than confrontation. The globalization and liberalization of world trade must be accompanied by observance of fundamental rights of workers, including the prohibition of child labour. This is important in order to create a world community that is based on what is morally right, and a world environment that encourages the establishment of a common set of values.

In conclusion, let me summarize the four strategies I have proposed to you:

1. A political commitment to the effective and total abolition of child labour;
2. Backing this political commitment with a time-bound programme of action against child labour, encompassing prevention, removal and rehabilitation;
3. The adoption of an international Convention to suppress all extreme forms of child labour;
4. A global compact of international cooperation and mutual assistance to allocate more resources to fight world poverty and child labour and to combat the international aspects of the problem, such as the sale and trafficking of children and child sex tourism.

Thank you.