

The State of Child Labour Today

In 2006, the ILO's second Global Report on Child Labour showed that significant progress was being made in the fight against child labour. Encouraged by the positive trend, the ILO established a visionary target – to eliminate child labour in its worst forms by 2016. Four years on, the third Global Report paints a different picture: child labour continues to decline, albeit at a slower pace. The report warns that if countries carry on with business as usual the 2016 target will not be met. ILO Online spoke to Constance Thomas, Director of the ILO International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), about the state of child labour today.

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What do the new child labour statistics show?

Constance Thomas: A rather mixed picture emerges from the new global estimates on child labour. Child labour continues to decline, but only modestly – a 3% reduction in the four year period covered by the estimates. We have seen the largest reduction among children aged 5-14 where child labour fell by 10%. There are also fewer children in hazardous work, a proxy sometimes used for the worst forms of child labour. In fact, the more harmful the work and the more vulnerable the children involved, the faster the decline, especially for girls. This is welcome news. However, the battle is far from over: 215 million children are still caught in child labour and a staggering 115 million are exposed to hazardous work.

Does that mean that the goal of eliminating the worst forms of child labour by 2016 will not be reached?

Constance Thomas: The new [Global Report](#) provides a strong warning and a call for action. At present, the pace of progress is simply not fast enough to achieve the 2016 target. However, it is not too late to turn things around. The elimination of child labour is possible and affordable if we have the will to fight for it. The ILO has estimated that the global cost of eliminating child labour is outweighed by the economic benefits by a ratio of 6.7 to 1. This is far less than the \$ 10 trillion that were allocated to save banks in the US and UK alone during the current economic crisis. It's just a matter of ambition and political will.

What are the main obstacles to achieving the 2016 target?

Constance Thomas: The report identifies some key challenges in tackling child labour: the alarming scale of the problem in Africa and South Asia, the need for a drive against child labour in agriculture and the need to tackle sometimes "hidden" forms of child labour which are often also among the worst forms. The report also says governments must honour their commitments and accelerate action to tackle child labour.

What does report say about regional trends?

Constance Thomas: This is the first Global Report to include regional trends. The most significant reduction of child labour over the last decade was seen in the Americas, while Africa remains the region with the least progress. Africa is also the region with the highest incidence of children working, with one in four children engaged in child labour. Another region that faces a critical situation is South Asia, home to the greatest numbers of child labourers and where a greater political commitment to the ratification of ILO child labour Conventions is required. Child labour is also still endemic in Central Asia and parts of the Caucasus. As for the Arab region, there are no recent estimates but it is assumed that child labour is a significant problem in some countries and that it is often compounded by poverty, widespread unemployment and the poor quality of education.

What other significant trends does the report point out?

Constance Thomas: The report also breaks out child labour trends by age and gender. For example, in the past four years child labour has been increasing among boys but decreasing among girls. In fact, most of the global decline in child labour has been due to the reduced numbers of girls involved. Alarming, there has been a 20 per cent increase in child labour in the 15-17 years age group – from 52 million to 62 million. The largest sector for child labour remains agriculture, where a large majority of children work as unpaid family members.

Has the global economic crisis had any impact in terms of child labour, especially in jeopardizing the chances of reaching the 2016 target?

Constance Thomas: Last June IPEC issued a report warning that the crisis could push an increasing number of children, especially girls, into child labour. It is still too early to make a realistic assessment of the situation as the impact of the crisis is still unfolding in many parts of the world.

However, judging from previous crises, we could expect to see an increase in child labour in low income countries, especially for poorer households in those countries. For middle income countries, there is some evidence that the impact of falling living standards might be accompanied by reduced employment opportunities for children. Household responses are also likely to depend on the presence of well-functioning social safety nets.

As to the chances of meeting the 2016 target, it depends on whether governments choose to use the crisis as a further excuse for spending cuts in key social areas such as education and foreign aid commitment, or whether they seize the opportunity and mobilize the necessary political will to prioritize the elimination of child labour as a wise investment in future development.

How can governments and others accelerate action against child labour?

Constance Thomas: Mutually reinforcing action is required in the following areas:

- Ensuring all children have access to a quality education until at least the minimum age of employment
- Building a social floor by enhancing social protection policies and programmes that can help poor families to keep their children in school, e.g. through cash transfer programmes and school meals
- Tackling poverty by ensuring that adults have decent work opportunities
- The onus is on governments to ratify and implement the ILO Conventions on child labour – Employers, trade unions and civil society organizations also have an important role to play.

We know that when the right policy choices are made, child labour can be reduced.

Are countries taking account of the ILO's Conventions on child labour?

Constance Thomas: Much progress has been made in the ratification of the Conventions. A decade after adopting Convention 182, we are close to achieving its universal ratification – just 12 of the ILO's 183 Member States have yet to ratify it. At the same time, Convention No. 138 on the minimum age of employment has now been ratified by some 155 Member States. However, impressive as this global picture is, one third of the children of the world still live in countries that have not ratified these fundamental ILO Conventions. At the same time, many countries fail to follow up on the ratification of these Conventions with practical action for implementation.

The report launch coincides with the Global Conference on Child Labour in the Hague. What are the main issues to be considered at the conference?

Constance Thomas: It is more than ten years since the last major Global Conference on Child labour. The initiative of the Dutch government to host this Conference will help re-energise the worldwide campaign against child labour by putting the issue into the global spotlight and asking governments what they can do to tackle the problem and implement their commitments to eliminate the worst forms of child labour. The Conference will also have a particular focus on the challenge of child labour in Africa, as well as action needed in the wake of the global economic crisis.

The Conference is expected to adopt a "roadmap" for action aimed at galvanising support for reaching the 2016 target. The Global Report and a technical companion report produced by the Understanding Children's Work project (an inter agency partnership involving the ILO, World Bank and UNICEF) will be introduced to some 400 participants from around 80 countries.

What is the role of the ILO?

Constance Thomas: The ILO's leadership in keeping up the momentum for the elimination of child labour is critical. The situation calls for a reenergised global campaign against child labour. The tripartite ILO must be a central actor and a powerful advocate in the worldwide movement. We need to extend and reinforce coalitions. Drawing on the ILO's Decent Work Agenda, IPEC needs to continue to support our constituents to integrate child labour in national development agendas.

The report calls for a shift of focus towards knowledge development, and evidence-based analysis of policies and dissemination. The ILO's influence and added value will be linked to quality of insights and knowledge.

Our comparative advantages are our standards, our constituents, our knowledge based on direct project intervention, as well as policy development, research and analysis. At the same time many countries still need ILO assistance to scale up their programmes to achieve necessary impact. International solidarity –including commitment of resources – will continue to be indispensable to allow the ILO's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour to support these efforts. But the ILO cannot do it alone. The report stresses the value of partnerships, such as those between UN agencies, south-south cooperation etc.