

## **'The main change has to happen in peoples' minds': a child labour film programme in Kyrgyzstan**

*The ILO Global Report "Accelerating action against child labour", launched in May 2010 calls for "better targeted advocacy" based on "filling important knowledge gaps and making greater use of the media". This story shows how a small-scale but successful child labour awareness programme in one of the Central Asian countries is putting this kind of advocacy to work.*

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*Kyrgyzstan*

OSH, Kyrgyzstan (ILO Online) – He comes here every day before dawn, in winter frost and summer heat, to rent a pushcart. His name is Umut, and he lives in the city of Osh in southern Kyrgyzstan. Umut is a 'tachkist' – that is what they call people who transport goods to/from bazaars.

At the age of 12, Umut is the only breadwinner for his disabled mother and younger brother and sister. He works a full day without lunch, taking a break just for a quick bite – but always staying near his truck. 'If it is stolen, I'll have to pay for it, and it is a lot of money for me', he explains. For his hard work, Umat earns only 30 to 100 som, or 1 to 3 US dollars per day.

Working children are in high demand in the bazaar: as one customer explained, he prefers to hire children, because 'they charge less for the same amount of work'.

Umut is part of an 'army' of working children in today's Kyrgyzstan: at the First national forum on the status of children in Kyrgyzstan it was said that every fifth child in the country works in the street for 8-12 hours a day. Such exploitative and hazardous forms of child labour is a relatively new phenomenon, associated with the collapse of the socialist model of a planned economy in the early nineties of the last century, and with substantial, sometimes dramatic changes in the social fabric of the society.

The use of child labour at a market began with the emergence and expansion of 'chelnochestvo' (shuttle commerce). A study commissioned by the [ILO International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour \(ILO-IPEC\)](#) showed that in bazaars in the capital city of Bishkek, 26.3 per cent of working children are employed to transport, load and unload goods and baggage. The same situation exists in the Osh bazaar where 38 per cent of children are lorry-carriers.

These boys push heavy lorry pushcarts or balance on their back boxes or bundles that are often at the limit or even beyond their physical capacities. According to ILO-IPEC, the daily load carried by one child worker varies by age: 30-500 kg for 11-12 year-olds, 150-800 kg for 13-14 year-olds, and 250-800 kg for 15-16 year-olds.

The State programme for the elimination of the worst forms of child labour in Kyrgyzstan for 2008-2011 says the medical examination system for working children does not exist in the country. As a result some 40 per cent of the polled children have never passed any medical check at all.

Medical doctors are raising the alarm, they point to the devastating effect this work has on children's health. The most common disorders among lorry-carriers are scoliosis and chest distortion, hernias, as well as serious psychological problems. The IPEC study also shows that 48 per cent of under-age lorry-carriers suffer from headaches, neurosis, fainting and convulsions.

"Am I tired? Of course I am. And at night by back and legs ache", Umut complains. "But mom says work is good for me, it makes me stronger." Umut's mother does not even care that for two years he has not been to school. "Mom says she spoke to my teachers and they promised to give her a school certificate if needed".

Amazing, but many teachers perceive child labour as a mandatory part of children's life and turn a blind eye to their absence at school. "Almost all my pupils are working, and I support this approach. Since their early childhood these kids will learn what it means to earn for a living", says a teacher from one of Osh's schools. IPEC estimates that more than 40 per cent of working children do not attend school and 9 per cent do it only occasionally.

"This approach to children's education, which often sees child labour as a norm for a society, is quite typical for the country", says Amina Kurbanova, ILO-IPEC project coordinator in Kyrgyzstan. "It is often regarded as a privilege of parents to choose this "right upbringing" for their children. To successfully combat child labour, a major change is still to take place in people's minds and perceptions."

Changing people's perceptions of child labour problem through video is the purpose of the ILO-IPEC mini-programme launched in the south of Kyrgyzstan. It will supplement a large-scale ILO-IPEC programme to combat the worst forms of child labour (WFCL) already carried out in the country. Four 15-minute documentaries showing real stories of working children have been produced. These are local boys and girls who work in agriculture, load and unload goods in bazaars, sell small items from portable stands, gather bottles and aluminium. The videos shed light on violations of children's rights by adult citizens, enterprises and companies, and show ways to address the problem. They will be widely shown on TV and in schools.

"The political will to protect children and to combat forced labour is reflected in the commitment made by Kyrgyzstan at the international level (the country has ratified both ILO Conventions 138 and 182), and the legislative and policy measures introduced since independence, says Constance Thomas, Director of the ILO International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC). "But we still need to address weaknesses that hamper appropriate responses to the worst forms of child labour, including the need to increase public awareness of child labour, its implications and consequences. And here successful small-scale awareness initiatives, like the one implemented in southern Kyrgyzstan, may have a large-scale effect".

*Umut's story is the subject of an ILO-IPEC video showing the hazards and dangers of child labour, and what can be done to address them.*