

Monitoring hazardous child labour in Tajikistan

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DUSHANBE, Tajikistan (ILO Online) – On 1 September, Tajik schools will open their doors wide for almost 1.7 million children in the country. But the teachers who will welcome them in their classes know too well that many of their pupils will quit school at the age of 13 or even earlier to work in various hazardous sectors, including local markets, cotton and tobacco fields.

According to estimates of the ILO's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (ILO-IPEC), there are almost 200,000 working children in Tajikistan, and 10 per cent of them have never attended school. What's more, working children are becoming younger. Today it is no longer a surprise to see working children aged five or six.

Like 98 per cent of these working children, 12-year-old Safar works in agriculture. He is a herd in his home kishlak (village) 50 km outside the capital city of Dushanbe. His is responsible for all cattle in more than 160 households in his village. Every day, whatever the weather, he runs his cattle to the mountain pasture (one and a half hours one way) and stays there for 7 hours. Needless to say that with such a work schedule Safar has dropped out of school. His mother does not object at all: "Our school is small and understaffed, and classes last only two hours a day instead of six. What's the point for my son to go there?"

"I'd better work and support my family", Safar says "We are six, and without my salary we will simply not survive". Meanwhile his salary is miserable, even by Tajikistan's standards, and there is always a risk that one of the animals gets lost or gets injured. In that case Safar will have to reimburse the owner up to USD 100.

Safar took over this job from his elder brother after he had fallen from a mountain scarp and broke his legs. He was lying there helpless until he was rescued by his home-folks who were alarmed when the cattle did not return to the village. Now Safar's brother is disabled and can only sell vegetables at the local bazaar. "I pray nothing like that happens to me up in the mountains", Safar says.

Safar became the main breadwinner for the family a year ago when his father went to work in Russia and completely abandoned his family back home. This is the tragedy of many broken families in today's Tajikistan, where the number of external migrants is estimated between 500,000 and 800,000 people – in a country with a population of 7 million.

"80 per cent of working children come from a one-parent family or from a family where the father is a migrant worker", explains Muhayo Khosabekova, national coordinator of the German-funded ILO-IPEC project "*Combating Child Labour in Central Asia – Commitment Becomes Action.*"

Migration drives hazardous child labour

Besides its positive effect on poverty reduction in Tajikistan, labour migration of men had a serious impact in terms of increased numbers of child labourers. In the absence of men who work abroad, children have to take responsibility over their family income.

Even with his miserable salary Safar holds on to this job. There are no jobs in the villages, and many rural children like him have to move to town in search of work. There they are employed at informal workplaces to wash cars, to transport, load and unload goods and baggage at local bazaars, they work as conductors at shuttle buses, and perform any other subsidiary work.

These days one can easily find these children in every city in Tajikistan. In the city of Khudzhand hundreds of them stand every morning at an informal labour exchange near the local bazaar, ready to take any job. For these children that is the only way to earn a living, and for their adult employers they are just a cheap labour force. "I have been standing here for ten days now, and have hardly earned money to pay for food, and I still have to pay for shelter," complains 13-year-old Ibrahim, lorry-carrier.

Hazardous working conditions, physically demanding work, inadequate rest, malnutrition, unsanitary working conditions, inevitably affect the children's health. According to ILO-IPEC, the daily load carried by one child worker may reach 800 kg.

To monitor the situation of working children involved in the worst forms of child labour, the ILO-IPEC project in Tajikistan helped to establish in 2009 a Child Labour Monitoring System within the National Center for Adult Education under the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection. A Child Labour Monitoring System provides a national/local framework within which a variety of partners can work together to gather and share information on the identification, monitoring, referral, withdrawal and rehabilitation of child workers.

Whilst this was initially a new concept in Tajikistan, in the period since several multi-disciplinary teams of monitors have been established. These include school teachers, labour inspectors, and community members. Such teams have conducted monitoring visits to target areas to identify children involved in hazardous work as well as those who are at risk of entering such work. Once identified, they are removed and referred to services, such as formal and non-formal education, vocational training or life skills courses corresponding to their needs.

The ILO project is continuing to work with partners to support the institutionalization of the monitoring system in agriculture and in the urban informal sector of Tajikistan. Children like Safar and Ibrahim will now get a chance for a decent childhood, education and later employment.