

The end of child labour:

Millions of voices, one common hope

The past decade has seen an unprecedented convergence of thought and action within the worldwide movement against child labour. In the 15th year of the ILO's International Programme for the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), World of Work looks at its achievements and its vision for future action. Alec Fyfe, IPEC Senior Child Labour Specialist, contributed to this article.

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GENEVA – When hundreds of children taking part in the Global March against child labour mounted the stage at the International Labour Conference on 2 June 1998 after an arduous journey that had crossed more than 100 countries, little did they know that within less than a decade the sounds of their voices would be heard around the world.

Less than ten years on, more than 90 per cent of the ILO's 181 member States have ratified Convention No. 82 against the worst forms of child labour – the fastest ratification rate in the ILO's 88-year history. What is more, the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) is today the ILO's largest technical cooperation programme, working in 88 countries, with 190 active field projects in 55 of them, an annual expenditure of US\$60 million and 450 staff, 90 per cent of them in the field.

"The voices of those children echoed throughout the debate that began in 1998 and resulted in Convention No. 182 in 1999," says Michele Jankanish, IPEC Director and one of the key actors in the development of Convention No. 182 back then. "Those children also set a tremendous precedent, speaking to delegates who would decide on a standard that would alter not only their lives, but those of millions of their peers."

'We're hurting and you can help us' was their message," she said in a recent interview for this special issue of World of Work. "It made us all realize who we were working for and what we had to do."

The standing ovation afforded the marchers that day by thousands of tripartite delegates has had its own echoes in the years since then. Acting to eliminate what Global March organizer Kailash Satyarthi called a "black spot on the face of humanity, one that must be removed", governments, workers and employers have united to fight the worst forms of child labour worldwide.

Since 1999, the ILO has seen:

- More than 160 of its member States ratify Convention No. 182;
- The emergence of a worldwide movement against child labour that has achieved an unprecedented consensus that globalization should not be fuelled by children making cheap goods that find their way into the retail stores of rich countries;
- The near universal acknowledgement that the existence of child labour – especially in its worst forms – is not an economic advantage but a waste of precious human resources and a dam blocking the realization of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs);
- The launch of Time Bound Programmes for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child labour in 23 countries with the goal of eliminating the worst forms of child labour by the year 2016.

One million voices, one common concern

How did this remarkable movement come into being? Twenty years ago these developments would have been unimaginable. At the end of the 1980s, the ILO had only one dedicated official and one field project dealing with child labour. The International Year of the Child (IYC) in 1979 stimulated interest in the child labour problem; the take-up of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) injected a new perspective into international debates, and by the late 1990s the tide had turned. At conferences in the Netherlands, Colombia and Norway in 1997, government, labour, employer and civil society leaders raised the volume of calls for an end to child labour, and other UN agencies, UNICEF and the World Bank embraced this consensus.

Those voices – and the chants and slogans of the children at the International Labour Conference in 1998 – began to be heard worldwide. More than a million children have been removed from child labour, either by their families, their governments, or the agreement of trade unions and employers and found a new life going to school.

But according to ILO estimates published in 2006, more than 200 million child labourers aged 5-17 years are still working. The number in hazardous work, which accounts for the bulk of the worst forms of child labour, is estimated at 126 million. Most working children (69 per cent) are involved in agriculture, compared with only 9 per cent in industry. Globally, the Asian-Pacific region accounts for the largest number of child workers – 122 million in total, followed by sub-Saharan Africa (49.3 million) and Latin America and the Caribbean (5.7 million).

However, for the first time the ILO has also noted a positive trend with 20 million fewer working children in the 5-14 year core age group from 2000 to 2004 and a particular reduction of children's involvement in hazardous work. Overall, Latin America and the Caribbean saw the greatest decline in children's work. Though child labour persists on a very large scale, this is welcome news.

A convergence of thought and strategic action

Indeed, the past decade has seen an unprecedented convergence of thought and action within the worldwide movement against child labour. In the new millennium, the elimination of child labour is increasingly being viewed as one of the more fundamental global commitments to tackling poverty and promoting universal human rights.

Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour has catalysed much needed focus and strategic action. It pulled the previous modern ILO Minimum Age Convention – No. 138 of 1973 – along in its wake. Since 1999, ratifications of the two fundamental ILO Conventions on child labour have moved up in tandem, with Convention No. 182 surpassing within a few short years the Minimum Age Convention that is 25 years its senior.

Today, this emerging global consensus embraces the need to:

- Prioritize the worst forms
- Respond to the especially vulnerable, including girls
- Recognize the importance of poverty as a causal factor but not as an excuse for inaction
- Mainstream child labour into global development and human rights frameworks, particularly Education for All (EFA)
- Prioritize Africa as the greatest development challenge

This consensus has seen greater activism from an ever-expanding set of actors at all levels. Moreover, the donor community has provided increased resources, particularly for the ILO. The ILO, through IPEC, has had unprecedented resources and developed a range of technical tools to support its constituents in their child labour efforts.

Still, many challenges lie ahead. The worldwide movement today is too diffuse and fragmented, risking duplication and conflicting objectives. While each World Day Against Child Labour reveals an enormous outpouring in countries around the world, there is a sense that the global momentum generated at the end of the 1990s has not been sustained. Ten years after the Oslo Conference it is time to take stock and refocus on a renewed global strategy and a more integrated international effort.

The way ahead

A number of initiatives are pointing the way towards greater inter-agency cooperation. The launch in 2000 of the Understanding Children's Work (UCW) project, in which the ILO plays a key role alongside UNICEF and the World Bank, paved the way for stronger inter-agency collaboration and the development of common perspectives on data collection. Following from this the Global Task Force (GTF) on Child Labour and

Education for All (EFA) has, since 2005, brought together ILO, UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, UNDP, Education International and the Global March with government representation as well to promote greater coherence between these linked twin goals. There are other opportunities to apply this emerging model to other areas such as agriculture and health.

Employers' and workers' organizations are indispensable to the success of the worldwide movement, as constituents of the ILO, and as mass membership organizations that link the local with the global and act as pressure groups – lobbying governments to live up to their obligations under international law (see sidebar on page 7). However, both employers' and workers' organizations face critical challenges in realizing their full potential as part of the worldwide movement, not least how to penetrate the informal economy where most child labour is found. There is still much work to be done by the social partners to develop and put in place coherent strategies that respond to their comparative advantages and avoid duplication with other actors, such as NGOs. Forming alliances with other like-minded civil society actors remains a considerable challenge for both employers' and workers' organizations.

The challenge in the coming years will be to revive the momentum of the worldwide movement around a common vision, goals and strategies. Developments making for consensus, set out above, provide a framework and grounds for optimism that the challenge can be met. However, this will not be achieved through “business as usual” – particularly given the ambitious target set by the Organization of eliminating all the worst forms of child labour by 2016 – but will require accelerated progress.

“The marchers in 1998 held so much promise and hope,” says Ms. Jankanish. “A lot has happened since then, but now is the time to redouble our efforts. The last 10 per cent – the last part of our own ILO march to abolish child labour – will undoubtedly be the hardest part.”

“Employers, workers and child labour

“The ILO’s tripartite constituency are natural leaders in sustaining consciousness of child labour, keeping it on the agenda, and building alliances for its elimination, nationally and globally.”

– ILO Director-General Juan Somavia, speaking at the International Labour Conference, 9 June 2006

A critical role

“...since the founding of the ILO, employers' and workers' organizations have been the historic pioneers in promoting the fundamental principles, including that related to child labour... the Employers continue to play a critical role in national and global efforts to combat child labour. Employers' organizations can, on the one hand, help to ensure that their member enterprises are aware of and understand their obligations as regards child labour. On the other hand, national employers' organizations have the potential to help in the collection of data on the incidence of this type of labour in the various industrial sectors, and to influence the development of appropriate national policies on child labour elimination. Finally, they can also partner with trade unions and other natural partners in the design of relevant responses, particularly vocational skills and training for working children, and to promote public awareness on the harmful effects of child labour and the rights of children...”

“...over 70 per cent of all working children are in the agricultural and mining sectors. Because of this, these two sectors should now become the focus of the fight against child labour in the future.”

– Mr. Ashraf W. Tabani, Employer, Pakistan, speaking on behalf of the Employers' group at the International Labour Conference, 9 June 2006

“...this is the most profound and definitive, the most focused range of action so far taken by the international tripartite community and its social partners.”

– Mr. J.W.B. Botha, Employers' delegate, South Africa; Employer Vice-Chairperson of the Committee on Child Labour, speaking at the International Labour Conference in 1999 on the adoption of the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (No. 182)

Keeping our promises

“Convention No. 182 is a shining product of the ILO’s tripartism and mandate. True, we’ve had constantly to reaffirm that it complements, not replaces, Convention No. 138 on minimum age – indeed, refocusing the debate massively increased the latter’s ratification rate too. Now the holistic approach carries increasing consensus: the two Conventions together, indivisibly linked with universal basic education, in an integrated whole of fundamental rights underpinning Decent Work.

“Sir Leroy Trotman, Workers’ spokesperson in 1998/1999, now Workers’ Group Chair, said then that trade unions must not sit back, believing the job was finished with adoption of the Convention – everyone bore further responsibilities. Indeed, Global Unions are ever clearer: we must campaign for implementation of the Conventions and do what only we can: organize better in the sectors where child labour persists.

“IPEC Director Michele Jankanish and I reminisced recently about a decade’s cooperation: in developing Convention No. 182; our efforts to promote ratification and implementation; the work of the Global March against Child Labour – the world’s largest trade union/NGO alliance, which marched in Geneva in 1998 with hundreds of children demanding absolute priority for the elimination of the worst forms of child labour. Tim Noonan (ICFTU), Ros Noonan (Education International) and I represented the Workers in the Convention drafting committee. Today, I’m our IPEC spokesperson and ITUC representative in the Global March Council. Michele and I agreed: no achievement in our working lives quite matches Convention No. 182 – a sentiment undoubtedly shared by many ILO officials and tripartite delegates involved.

“Though proud of what has been achieved, we still have far to go to reach our goal: every child in school and every adult in decent work. As we negotiate UN reform, we remember it was tripartite social dialogue that won those gains. And we must never forget: the world’s children expect us to keep our promises.”

– *Mr. Simon Steyne, ILO Governing Body Workers’ Group Spokesperson, IPEC International Steering Committee; ITUC Representative, International Council of the Global March against Child Labour; Senior International Officer, Trades Union Congress, written statement November 2007*

Moving fast: A moral imperative

GENEVA – As the 90th anniversary of the ILO approaches, so does the 10th of the adoption of Convention No. 182 on the worst forms of child labour. Child labour has always been a primary issue for the ILO, but only in the past 15 years or so has it become one of the biggest, and most successful campaigns of the Organization. World of Work asked Michele Jankanish, Director of the International Programme for the Elimination of Child Labour and one of the key actors in developing Convention No. 182, about IPEC’s vision for the future.

We say that we are within a decade of eliminating child labour in its worst forms. How realistic is this expectation?

Michele Jankanish: First, it is a moral imperative that we move as fast as we can. If you think about it, 2016 is an unbearable amount of time for the millions of children who are risking life and limb and losing out on the education that will provide them and their families with a decent future.

When the International Labour Conference adopted Convention No. 182 in 1999, it said that the exploitation of children in the worst forms of child labour was intolerable. It required immediate measures as a matter of urgency to put a stop to it. Setting a target keeps a focus on the urgency of this commitment.

“Realism” is of course relative. The most ambitious objectives have proven to be entirely feasible when pursued with single-minded determination. On the other hand, the most modest goals can be unrealistic if they are not taken seriously. The question often boils down to whether the political muscle can be put behind the objective, which is a function of how hard one tries.

In addition, the trends we identified in the Global Report in 2006 indicated optimism for a 2016 target. A lot has to happen, of course, and it will be more difficult in some places than others. A strategy for each region, taking account of its special challenges, must be followed. There is a special focus on sub-Saharan Africa given its slow progress and the impact of HIV and AIDS and countries emerging from conflict.

When working toward the target, we also count on the fact that the necessary knowledge and tools are largely available. As to the resources required, ILO studies have shown that eliminating child labour is a hugely beneficial investment, with benefits that exceed costs severalfold. Most of the costs would be for providing educational opportunities, which the international community already pledged at the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000. The additional resources required to pursue the no-worst-forms-of-child-labour-by-2016 goal are modest by comparison and Article 8 of Convention No. 182 says countries that ratify will help each other. There is no good reason any more for procrastination, if there ever was one. It can be done; so let's do it.

What is needed to make universal ratification of Convention No. 182 a reality, which would be a first in the history of the ILO, and what does it say about the international view on this issue?

Michele Jankanish: Oslo brought international attention and commitment, followed soon thereafter by adoption of Convention No. 182 on the worst forms of child labour. The momentum continued as country after country ratified Convention No. 182, showing a fast-paced response to the ratification campaign. We have reached 165 ratifications, but now must walk that last difficult mile. The Governing Body has not wavered since adoption of Convention No. 182 in directing us to work toward universal ratification. We call upon ILO constituents to continue their advocacy and assistance for universal ratification.

The Convention said to the world that all those who ratified it were not only concerned with protecting their own children from the worst forms of child labour, but that no child in any country, no matter the level of development, should be subject to this scourge. Having said that, the reality of continuing extreme poverty, exclusion and discrimination, and lack of access to quality education, made it clear that desire alone was not enough. Countries needed to be assisted so that the burden of lack of sufficient policies, resources and political will would not be borne by the world's children.

In fact, Article 8 is the concrete expression of this international solidarity where member States commit themselves to assist each other in making this a child-labour-free world – especially the urgent elimination of the worst forms of child labour. Assistance can be support for social and economic development, poverty eradication programmes, universal education, mobilizing resources, targeted interventions and providing technical and mutual legal assistance.

In general, we can cite many accomplishments in terms of ratifications and so forth. Do you believe, however, that our work has in fact created the kind of social attitudes and changing cultures required to make child labour a thing of the past?

Michele Jankanish: We have come a long way. Fortunately, we have moved from the days of denial, diversion and derision. Such attitudes have thankfully been replaced by and large by a more open and engaged world view. There are still pockets of ignorance about the true impact of generations of young people caught in the trap of child labour and the resulting underutilization of the precious human resource. Even some parents don't appreciate or distinguish between work that could be normal for children (helping out, learning, preparing for adulthood) and activity that is a denial of the basic rights of the child and the right to be free from exploitation.

When we look at the events on World Day Against Child Labour each year, for example, we can see the enormous outpouring in communities around the world against child labour and testimony to changing attitudes and cultural norms regarding child labour. As I travel, I witness first hand this changing awareness and hear and see story after story of new awareness and appreciation for the need to act against child labour. The work of the ILO and others on the ground is making a difference every day in taking children out of child labour and in getting them the education that they deserve. Children themselves tell me their new dreams that now seem within their reach. The stories are heartwarming and heartwrenching.

The formal commitment to changing attitudes and cultures is also seen in the on-going adoption of policies and legislation to eliminate child labour. This is critical to secure the foundation for the elimination of child labour even when individuals may waver.