

The global challenge of child labour: Going for the goal

The global campaign against child labour – especially in its worst forms – is at a crossroads. From an optimistic projection just four years ago that the end of the worst forms of child labour was in sight, the most recent ILO report casts doubt on whether that goal can be reached by the target year of 2016. It calls for urgent steps to accelerate action against child labour. The key messages of the report were delivered at a Global Conference on Child Labour hosted by the Government of the Netherlands on 10–11 May in The Hague. The Conference adopted a new “roadmap” aimed at achieving the goals set in 2006. IPEC Director Constance Thomas examines achievements made and challenges that remain in the fight against child labour.

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coverstory

GENEVA – In 2006, the ILO's second Global Report on child labour reported significant progress 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: although child labour continues to decline, it is at a slower pace. If countries carry on with business as usual the 2016 target will not be met.

The new report (Note 1) says that there was a reduction of just 3 per cent in child labour in the four-year period covered by the global estimates. 215 million children are still caught in child labour and a staggering 115 million are exposed to hazardous work.

We have seen the largest reduction among children aged 5–14 where child labour fell by 10 per cent. There are also fewer children in hazardous work, a proxy sometimes used for the worst forms of child labour. However, child labour has been increasing among boys whilst decreasing among girls. Alarming, there has been a 20 per cent increase in child labour in the 15–17 years age group. These are mainly children who have reached the minimum age of employment but are working in conditions or sectors categorized as hazardous for children.

The new Global Report provides a strong warning and a call for action. Though the pace of progress is simply not sufficient to achieve the 2016 target, 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. The amounts which would need to be spent are far less than what governments recently allocated to save commercial banks during the global financial crisis. It's just a matter of ambition and political will.

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. It is time for governments to honour their commitments and accelerate action to tackle child labour.

Regional trends

For the first time, the ILO's Global Report includes 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 large numbers of child labourers and where a greater political commitment to the ratification of ILO child labour Conventions is required. As for the Arab region, whilst there are no recent estimates past IPEC experience suggests child labour remains a significant problem in some countries and that it is often compounded by poverty, widespread unemployment and the poor quality of education.

Possible impact of the global economic and social crisis

In 2009 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 detailed 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 to justify 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.

Mutually reinforcing action is required in areas such as access to 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, tackling poverty by ensuring that adults have decent work opportunities, and ratification and implementation by governments of ILO Conventions on child labour. Employers, trade unions and civil society organizations also have an important role to play in this context.

We know that when the right policy choices are made, child labour can be reduced. Much progress has been made in the ratification of the Conventions. A decade after adopting Convention No. 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.

ILO leadership in the fight against child labour is critical

The ILO's leadership in keeping up the momentum for the elimination of child labour is critical. The situation calls for a re-energized global campaign against child labour. The tripartite ILO, bringing together governments, employers and workers, 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 ILO constituents to integrate child labour in national development agendas.

We must scale up action and move into a higher gear. The economic downturn cannot become an excuse for diminished ambition and inaction. Instead it offers the opportunity to implement the policy measures that work for people, for recovery and for sustainable development. 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 new report stresses the value of partnerships, such as those between UN agencies and south-south cooperation.

Most child labour is rooted in poverty. The way to tackle the problem is clear. We must ensure that all children have the chance to go to school, we need social protection systems that support vulnerable families – particularly at times of crisis – and we need to ensure that adults have a chance of decent work. These measures, combined with effective enforcement of laws that protect children, provide the way forward.

1 [ILO: Accelerating action against child labour](#), Report of the Director-General, International Labour Conference, 99th Session, International Labour Office, Geneva, 2010.