

Setting the terms of the child labour debate

Though child labour has preoccupied the ILO since its first days, the practice remains a problem of immense social and economic proportions throughout much of the world. While there has been progress in reducing child labour over the last decade, the decline was uneven in different world regions and the global pace of reduction slowed between 2004 and 2008.

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But uneven progress is nothing new. Historically, developed nations took several generations to come to grips with their own child labour problem. In the developed world, millions of children once worked in mines, mills, factories, farms and city streets, often in situations strikingly similar to those observed in the developing world today.

In 1890 the fight against child labour was brought to an international level at a diplomatic conference in Berlin, but the First World War ended these efforts temporarily. Then the ILO entered the scene and at the first International Labour Conference in 1919, representatives from 39 nations fixed the minimum age for employment of children in industry at 14 years. In 1920 this minimum age was adopted for maritime work, and in 1921 the same standard was applied to agriculture.

The ratification rate of these Conventions was slow, however, throughout the long period up to 1973 when a new ILO Convention covering the entire economy was adopted, Convention No.138 (1973) on the Minimum Age for Admission to Employment.

Against the background of the growing concern that certain forms of child labour are so grave and inhumane that they can no longer be tolerated, a consensus emerged in the 1990s that the highest priority should be given to eliminating these worst forms of child labour. After two years of deliberation on the exact wording, the *Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182)* was adopted unanimously by the International Labour Conference. This unanimous adoption is a unique feature in ILO history, as is the rate of ratifications, underscoring the importance that member States have given to Convention No. 182. Some 95 per cent of the ILO's member States have now ratified it, while some 85 per cent have ratified Convention No. 138.

An important new feature of today's child labour situation is that a genuine global movement is under way to tackle the problem. With its roots in the histories of the developed nations, the movement picked up steam in 1989 with the adoption of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, gained institutional capacity in 1992 with the creation of the ILO's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), and was strengthened by Conferences in Amsterdam and Oslo during 1997, which gave impetus to the adoption of Convention No. 182.

In the latest global initiative, on 11 May 2010 delegates from some 80 countries met at a Global Conference in The Hague, organized by the Government of the Netherlands. The Conference gave particular attention to the international goal of eliminating the worst forms of child labour by 2016, and agreed a Roadmap for action.

Whilst much progress has been made in the elimination of child labour, much remains to be done. But one clear message of the Hague Conference is that with increased commitment and action, particularly from governments, the campaign against child labour can achieve its historic goal.