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Elimination of child labour

One of the basic objectives of the ILO is the elimination of child labour. This applies in particular to any form of labour which is harmful to the

health of children or hinders their development as human beings and members of society. However, the scope of child labour is so great and the practice of taking advantage of the work of children so ingrained in social attitudes in many countries that time will be needed and progressive improvements in social and economic conditions required before this objective can be attained. The interim objective is therefore the adoption of social and legislative measures for the progressive elimination of child labour.

Two activities were launched during the biennium to pursue this objective, namely an interdepartmental project on child labour and the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), which is financed principally by the German Government. The work of the interdepartmental project concentrated on increasing knowledge and awareness of the problem of child labour, identifying practical approaches which can be adopted for dealing with it, disseminating information about these approaches and strengthening the capacity of governments and non-governmental organizations to carry out effective child-labour programmes. The work of IPEC involved the implementation of action programmes in six countries: Brazil, India, Indonesia, Kenya, Thailand and Turkey. Preparatory work was also begun for the implementation of programmes in Egypt, Cameroon and the United Republic of Tanzania, Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Philippines and the countries of Central America. These action programmes added an important new dimension to the ILO's work in this field, which had previously concentrated mainly on standard-setting activities and policy formulation.

Estimates vary as to the actual number of children who work throughout the world. In order to establish the overall scope of the problem, a statistical review was undertaken of the global child-labour problem.¹⁶ However, it was found that many national statistical systems were not designed to measure the magnitude of child labour. To deal with this situation at the national level, alternative survey approaches were developed for use until more adequate statistical systems are available. These combine field survey and non-statistical techniques to extrapolate national estimates based on the situation in smaller economic units.

Survey techniques were also developed and field-tested to analyse the economic significance of child labour to industries in which it is known to be concentrated. They provide powerful new arguments against child labour (see box).

Evaluating the economic significance of child labour

Some employers of child labour have long insisted that if they are denied child workers their industries will not survive. When the industries in question are important sources of employment and foreign exchange, this argument has discouraged the commitment of governments and the public to abolish child labour, even if it is shown that the children work under hazardous or slave-like conditions. The ILO therefore placed high priority on the development of practical methods of economic analysis to determine the real role of child labour and the potential for its elimination. A methodology was developed with the participation of Indian researchers and was field-tested in two major industries in India, namely carpet-weaving and the manufacture of glass bracelets. Using this approach, employers and workers are systematically sampled, models derived of the production and distribution processes and estimates made of labour and non-labour costs for each production stage. Wage costs are further subdivided for the different categories of workers and are shown separately for child and adult labourers. From these data, the contribution of children to the wage bill, to total output and to the final consumer price of the finished product can be calculated. The impact of consumer price changes on market demand and the economic importance of the industry to the local community are also taken into account.

Preliminary analysis of the data from India indicates that the child labour profile varies greatly between industries, but that reliance on child labour may be neither as extensive nor as essential as sometimes believed. In the glass bracelet industry adults already share the same tasks as children, which implies that children have easily replaceable skills. Furthermore, the wage savings of employing children amount to no more than one or two per cent of the final sale price, which casts serious doubt on the indispensability of children. Similarly, in the carpet industry, producers of the highest quality carpets (those which are most finely knotted and intricately patterned) appear to rely to a lesser extent on children. At least one large and very successful company prohibits the employment of children by the producers to whom it subcontracts weaving. This calls into question the frequently advanced claim that only children are good at tying the small knots required for the manufacture of the most expensive carpets.

This kind of economic analysis already promises to be a powerful tool for addressing the issue of child labour. The results will be made available to the ILO's tripartite constituents and to organizations working in the field of child labour.

In order to address some of the most common impediments to effective inspection and the enforcement of child-labour laws, a new approach was developed to the work of labour inspectors in combating child labour and was set out in a training manual.¹⁷ This approach is based on close observation of the local conditions under which children work and the reasons why they work. On the basis of this observation, labour inspectorates can plan action in close coordination with all the other actors concerned, and particularly the education, health and social services. The approach was tested through pilot training programmes, as well as during an interregional seminar held in September 1993, and at the national level in Turkey.

As a background to the provision of policy advice on child labour, case-studies were carried out of emerging approaches to dealing with child-labour problems in Bangladesh, Brazil, India and the Philippines.¹⁸ Studies were also undertaken on how to remove children from hazardous forms of employment.¹⁹ In general, the studies trace a profile of child labour which differs from the conditions of abuse of children at the workplace which traditional legal instruments conceived many years ago were designed to combat. In order to keep up with the changing aspects of the problem, some fundamental concepts and definitions have to be updated and a broader variety of approaches needs to be mobilized to combat child labour. It is clear, for example, that the workplace abuse of children cannot be properly controlled by even the most sophisticated system of legislation and inspection acting in isolation. Additional tools are required. These need to enlist far more family and community responsibility. Care also needs to be taken to ensure that national education and economic policies have the effect of discouraging rather than exacerbating child labour, as is so often the case. By way of illustration, although in most countries the tuition in primary and secondary education is free of charge, the need to pay for school uniforms and materials, such as books, may oblige children to work in order to pay for their education. In this context, the introduction of school fees under structural adjustment programmes, as well as other measures which redistribute income away from the poor, may have the effect of increasing the incidence of child labour.

In order to disseminate this information among policy-makers and the social partners, policy-design seminars were held in Argentina, the United

Republic of Tanzania, Venezuela and Zimbabwe. Subregional seminars were organized for French-speaking Africa and Central America. These seminars brought together representatives of governments, employers' and workers' organizations and non-governmental organizations. They adopted recommendations for action by consensus which are multisectoral and multidisciplinary in their nature and set out approaches to combating child labour which are adapted to the local culture and conditions.

In an effort to raise awareness of the issue of child labour, a number of public information activities were undertaken. Perhaps the most impact was achieved through the film *Shackled children*, which has been widely shown and won third prize in the 1993 "Emmy" award competition for documentaries from outside the United States. The film vividly portrays child labour problems in both developing and industrialized countries. Another product was a book of photographs of child workers, *Children in shadow*, which was also widely distributed, among others to delegates of the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna.

The International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) focuses on the children who are most at risk from their work. The Programme's work is based on the realization that only countries, or rather societies, can eliminate child labour and save individual children from exploitation. The role of the ILO is to help the countries set that goal and accomplish it. For this reason, collaboration between the ILO, governments, employers' and workers' organizations and numerous non-governmental organizations is an important component of the strategy adopted by IPEC to ensure that substantial campaigns are mounted at the national level in the countries covered by the Programme.

The action programmes which are undertaken in the six countries concerned are adapted to the conditions under which children work in those countries. In general, they aim to mobilize public opinion against child labour, take direct action in favour of children working in hazardous occupations in any sector of employment and meet the developmental needs of working children. They also include components to assist governments in the formulation of policies and programmes to combat child labour and to establish or strengthen appropriate institutional structures. The content of the action programmes varies widely, from the provision of education and

health services for working children in specific areas or jobs, to measures to improve their working conditions or to eliminate child labour in specific areas or types of work. The range of activities also includes surveys to deepen understanding of the problem and measures to identify and release bonded child labourers. Many of the awareness-raising activities are concentrated on workers' and employers' organizations and other non-governmental organizations. Others take the form of information dissemination programmes and campaigns against child labour at the national or local levels. The action programmes are designed to be catalytic and replicable. They should be both a symbol and a demonstration of hope that child labour can be tackled if the will exists to act.