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Working children: Current trends¹ and policy responses¹

Assefa BEQUELE * and Jo BOYDEN **

I. The scale and nature of child employment

Types of employment and the risks involved

Children are employed in many different types of jobs, and the employment relations governing their work vary accordingly. They may be wage labourers in factories or mines or self-employed workers engaged in street trades. Some are out-workers and others are seasonal migrant workers. Many are engaged in work that is the final link in a long chain of subcontracting. Some receive part of their wage in kind and some are paid on a piece-rate basis. Many are unpaid and work for their families in the home or on the land. Even if it is not itself "productive", children's work may release others for productive employment. Salazar shows that by performing domestic chores and taking care of younger children in the home, for instance, children free adults for wage labour, while Abdalla shows that child labour can facilitate adult migration to areas of high employment. Child employment may also be full time or part time. A high proportion of child workers attend school too and are therefore recorded in official statistics as pupils and not as labourers.

Most child workers are found in unregistered and undercapitalised enterprises operating in a competitive and often highly volatile or seasonal market. These face stiff competition from larger, more mechanised companies and are forced to sell their products in a depressed market. In such circumstances it is more advantageous to employ children than adults: they can be easily laid off when business is slack; they cost less; and they have no rights as workers and cannot join trade unions.

Child labour then is, more often than not, casual labour. The Institute of Industrial Relations (IIR) of the University of the Philippines found that virtually all establishments employing children in the wood and garment industries were small and unregistered, using a casual labour force paid on a piece-rate basis. Abdalla shows that children in the leather-tanning industry in Cairo constitute the most transient element in the labour force. The

* International Labour Office. ** Children in Development, Oxford.

leather market is unstable, production is seasonal and employers are unable to maintain a permanent supply of adult labour. Variations in demand can be especially marked for enterprises producing for foreign markets: hence the concentration of child labour in export industries such as carpet manufacturing in India and garment making in the Philippines. Despite the high turnover rates which help employers to absorb fluctuations in production, children are less likely than adults to change jobs of their own volition, for reasons that will be seen later.

There is also evidence that child workers account for a considerable share of migrant labour. In areas where there is a large labour surplus, both children and adults may be forced to migrate in search of employment. In some countries migrant labour constitutes an important proportion of the workforce. Obviously migrant labour takes many different forms. It may be seasonal, as in the gold industry in the Peruvian jungle, or more or less permanent, as in carpet manufacturing in Varanasi (India). While some children migrate with members of their family, others migrate alone. Clearly migrant children may face a number of special problems and be in special need of community services. They may become extremely isolated from their family and community and suffer consequent deficiencies in health and nutrition, quite apart from emotional deprivation. Being cut off from sources of protection they are also exposed to abuse.

It is generally believed that the most dramatic forms of exploitation of working children are associated with wage labour.² The development of industry and allied activities has been accompanied by a radical transformation in the nature of work, the working environment, employment relations and the conditions under which work is carried out. Wage labour is considered to be qualitatively different from work performed in the home or in a family enterprise. While children's work in rural areas has traditionally been part of household production, in industry and related sectors it is generally performed under an employer-employee relationship. Here the vulnerability of children, deprived of the parental protection they enjoy in agrarian societies, is accentuated.

True, work in agriculture is also characterised by certain hazards specific to rural settings, particularly when advanced farming practices, new technologies and chemicals have been introduced. The high cost, in safety, health and even life, associated with work in commercial and plantation agriculture has been documented by numerous studies. But the hazards are much greater and far more numerous in industry. The work may be very arduous, both physically and psychologically; it may be highly mechanised and the pace extremely fast; it may be monotonous; it may involve the use of sharp and dangerous objects and toxic substances; it may be carried out in conditions of extreme heat, dust and noise. The list of dangerous types of work and working conditions is seemingly endless.

The physical vulnerability of working children also means that they have very different capacities and needs from adults – something that is seldom

taken into account by employers. Children cannot undertake as much heavy work as adults and the same amount of work can have worse consequences for them. They are more liable to suffer occupational injuries due to inattention, fatigue, poor judgement or insufficient knowledge of work processes and also to the fact that the equipment, machinery, tools and layout of most workplaces are designed for adults.³ Studies also show that children react to the working environment differently from adults and have far more serious health problems, even where both groups are exposed to the same working environment.³

In addition, large numbers of child labourers are at risk because of the very early age at which they begin to work. Salazar found that the majority of children in quarrying and brick making in Bogotá started to work even before the age of 8. The labour standards of many countries define these two occupations as hazardous and therefore prohibit them not only for young children but also for most adolescents. Children's participation in work at a very early age – and in work that may even be dangerous for older workers – is also confirmed in the reports by Kanbargi, Oosterhout and the IIR.

There is a great demand for children in some activities because their particular attributes offer advantages to employers. This is especially true in industries where techniques are simple and production labour-intensive. Carpet weaving, for example, is seen by many people as an occupation better suited to children than to adults because they are faster and more agile and have sharper eyesight. However, such work can be very harmful to their health in the long run, as the studies by the IIR and Kanbargi show.

The incidence of malnutrition and other health-related problems can be especially high among children who work on the streets. Frequently sleeping on the streets as well, they are exposed to various social and physical risks. They are widely exploited at work and frequently subjected to harassment by adults and other children, as Myers points out. Because their work is poorly organised and badly paid, they have to work very long hours merely to survive. This also interferes with their education and hence thwarts their future prospects. Although a surprising number do go to school, many more do not. Even among those who do, attendance is so intermittent that few become literate. Moreover, many engage in illegal activities such as crime and prostitution, often under the control of organised adult criminal and anti-social groups. Many street children work and live under the constant threat of violence, even from the public authorities. A survey of street children in Brazil, for example, showed that they feared violence more than anything else in their lives. It is almost inevitable that children growing up in such an environment will be permanently damaged psychologically and emotionally.

Work and income

Children work because their employment has a social and economic function. Yet there is a general failure to give full social recognition to

children's work, and a marked tendency to undervalue child labour economically. Children rarely receive an income even remotely approaching the minimum wage, and their earnings are consistently lower than those of adults, even where the two groups are engaged in the same tasks. What is more, they receive no fringe benefits or insurance or social security protection – another saving for the employer. Nor do their earnings bear any relationship to the number of hours worked. As many of the ILO studies show, children work the longest hours but are among the lowest paid, if they are paid at all.

The low wages paid to children give employers a competitive advantage not only in national markets but also abroad. Hence it is not only the need for casual labour that prompts employers to hire children, but also considerations of cost. Indeed, Kanbargi and Abdalla find that some exporters claim they would rather stop trading than hire adult labour in place of children because of the serious cut in profits they would suffer. The IIR study of the Philippine garment industry confirms the extremely low cost of child labour as a proportion of net profits.

It is very difficult to obtain precise data on levels of remuneration among child labourers, partly because employers and sometimes the children themselves are reluctant to disclose such information. As a rule, too, children's wages vary greatly, and in many cases consist of a combination of cash and kind. In many industries payment is made on completion of a specified task or period and is very often subject to deductions for defects in the product, late delivery, labour time lost through sickness and other reasons. The conditions and amounts of these deductions are of course always set by the employer. Oosterhout describes how payment in the Muro-Ami fishing operations is based not on wages but on a share system and the earnings of the fishermen vary according to the total value of the catch. This widespread form of payment, to say the least, is a source of great insecurity since employees do not know how much they will receive until the end of the operation. The mode of payment may be even more exploitative: in both the Peruvian gold industry and the Muro-Ami fishing operations deductions for medicines, meals and lost working days may be such that by the end of his contract the worker is in debt to the employer. This is one way in which employers manage to retain their labour force despite harsh working conditions. Perhaps the starkest example of this practice is the bond system whereby parents pledge their child's labour in return for an advance payment from the employer. Children may be committed to work for the same employer for life under this system.

Work, training and schooling

The ILO studies give little reason to believe that working children are gaining valuable skills and experience. The vast majority receive little or no preparation for the work they are given and consequently child labour tends

to be concentrated in unskilled, simple jobs that offer little opportunity for moving to other, better paid, safer or more interesting occupations. This situation can be further aggravated where discrimination by sex, caste or other criteria is common. There are many reports of girls being assigned to tasks that are more tedious or arduous than those assigned to boys, that are more harmful to their education, that are paid less and that entail much longer working hours. Guillen notes that in the Peruvian gold industry girls are subject to much worse exploitation than boys. And Kanbargi shows that caste membership is also a major determinant in the choice of juvenile employment, the scheduled castes being forced into the more menial and lower-paid occupations.

Despite the strenuous tasks they perform and the long hours they toil, many working children also attend school. This was the case of half of the children in Abdalla's sample, for instance, and of half of those in Bogotá's quarries. The seasonality of employment in some industries facilitates school attendance. Most young gold miners in the Peruvian jungle, for example, work mainly during the school vacations. In other instances school attendance may be combined with employment by means of part-time classes organised in shifts. As Salazar suggests, there is often a particularly high correlation between enrolment in evening classes and child labour. But because work is carried on outside school hours, the long hours of activity expose such children to fatigue. Grossly overworked, the children are found to be less alert, less industrious and less regular in school attendance, and consequently are at a constant disadvantage throughout their school years and even later.⁴

For many child labourers, however, school attendance is not feasible. Even in countries where education is free or where books, uniforms and midday meals are provided, as in some Indian states, attendance may still be low. This is because one of the major indirect costs associated with schooling is the loss of the child's earnings. Moreover, in many poor communities school attendance is seen to have no significant impact on employment prospects and consequently parents will opt to place their children on the labour market.

However, the relationship between education and work cannot be reduced simply to a question of economic choice: the reality is far more complex. Abdalla observes that school enrolment among working children is directly linked to the educational background of their parents. In the end, adult perceptions of the short- and long-term benefits of education are one of the main determinants of both school attendance and labour force participation among children. This is why, for example, school enrolment rates in many countries are much lower and drop-out rates much higher for girls than for boys. Parents expect girls to marry young and to be supported by their husbands and hence see little point in investing in their education. Thus social values may hinder schooling and encourage work. As Salazar notes, occupational status may also affect school participation rates among working

children. In Bogotá brick making is viewed as a dirty and inferior occupation and the young brickmakers are socially ostracised at school. In countries where women are confined to the home children may have to participate in the labour force as intermediaries between women producers and consumers.⁵ In others traditional family child-care arrangements influence the children's chances of schooling. For example, in some Latin American and African countries a child's right to schooling is related to birth order: older siblings receive preference for schooling and parents invest heavily in their education, though in some cases a "sibling educational chain" may be established.⁶ In other countries it is the older siblings who have to take care of the younger ones.

Child workers and their rights

The ILO case studies show that employers exercise considerable power and control over their under-age employees and that child workers frequently are deprived of any representation or rights. Employers openly flout labour laws, confident that labour inspectors will be unable to cope with the countless illegal or unregistered enterprises that exist in the back streets and alleys of mushrooming cities, in isolated areas in the countryside, or even on the high seas. Because there is no one to represent them and their work is illegal, children are unable to take their grievances to the authorities. Guillén's study of the Peruvian gold industry makes it abundantly clear that employers take advantage of the inability of under-age workers to organise themselves and fight for better conditions of employment.

But law enforcement is only one side of the problem. Many children are obliged to work: the survival of their family often depends on their earnings, and this overriding responsibility leaves them no choice. Frequently, too, there are no alternative sources of employment available, which strengthens the employers' hold over them. Children are nearly always excluded from the more modern and mechanised industries. Moreover, as brought out by Salazar in her study of the Bogotá quarries and brick-making concerns and by the IIR in its study of the Philippine garment and wood industries, technological innovations may reduce employment opportunities for minors and force them into self-employment on the streets. This trend is particularly noticeable in Latin America, where street work is often the only labour option open to urban children.

The constraints on labour mobility among children and the powerful hold their employers exercise over them are also largely a result of the pre-capitalist forms of recruitment used and the very personal links they have with their employers: child workers are not always free to make their own decisions; their recruitment responds more to social obligations than to market forces. Children usually work in industries near their home and frequently follow the footsteps of their parents as far as employment is concerned. Many work with their parents, for other relatives or for people

from their own community. The brick kilns of Bogotá, for example, are small family concerns, and in most of these children work with their kin. But labour relations involving minors are very often part of an extensive system of patronage which can be extremely oppressive. This is a common feature of child labour in India, Colombia, Peru and the Philippines, as the country case studies show. Employers in Muro-Ami fishing, for example, have many links in the communities where they obtain their recruits, supplying credit to the parents in time of difficulty, for instance, and paying for major festive events. In these circumstances young workers become more or less trapped in their jobs. The way in which child labour is embedded in the social fabric constitutes a serious obstacle to its abolition and even to the introduction of protective measures.

Ultimately, then, children have very little say in choosing their occupation; more often than not, the decision is taken by their parents. Salazar has found that children are frequently surprised to be asked such questions as whether or not they enjoy their work. Their opinion on this and other matters concerning their employment would not normally be taken into account. We have already seen what motivates employers to hire children – and evidently they do not always have the best interests of their young workers at heart. But for parents the issue is more complex since they often depend on the child's earnings. Kanbargi shows, for example, that children from families with little or no land are more likely to be in the labour market than those from landed families. And the IIR study shows that children with parents whose employment is irregular or uncertain are more likely to work than those whose parents have steady jobs.

Also, many parents favour the early introduction of their children to skills on the ground that this will improve their employment prospects as adults. The mothers of young out-workers in the Philippine garment industry argue that this is a very suitable occupation for children because it enables them to earn money within the safe environment of the home. On the other hand, young boys are also encouraged to join their fathers in the far more dangerous Muro-Ami fishing operations, in this case on the ground that fishing is one of the few good sources of income that are available locally. In other words, parents must continually weigh the various advantages and disadvantages of child labour and often they are obliged to put their children to work even though they know that it may adversely affect their education or their health.

II. Policies on child labour and working children

Many of the characteristics of child labour outlined in the preceding section have become major legislative and policy issues for governments. It is precisely problems such as the special vulnerability of children, the prevalence of discrimination, the lack of protection, damage to education, health

child labour, and, perhaps worst of all, the participation of children in hazardous and dangerous work, that have prompted changes in legislation and in the awareness of the need to recognise the rights of children, especially working children, the realisation that they are involved in perhaps larger numbers than ever before in work outside the household economy, and the recognition that they are increasingly exposed to forms of employment and social environments that may be dangerous to both their physical and their moral development.

It is also increasingly acknowledged that because of widespread poverty and a formidable array of institutional constraints facing governments the immediate abolition of child labour will not be possible in many cases. These obstacles have, as we shall see, led to a reassessment of the traditional approach to child labour and to striking developments in public policy, which no longer relies exclusively on legislation and law enforcement but encompasses short- and long-term measures in such areas as community services, protection of working children and promotion of their rights as workers. Moreover, this shift in attitude and approach is not confined to governments: a crucial development is the increasingly important role played by non-governmental organisations in the campaign against child labour and in the protection of working children.

Legislation

Historically, the problem of child labour has been tackled mainly through legislation. Almost all countries have adopted laws or regulations prohibiting the employment of children below a certain age and specifying the conditions under which minors may work where they are legally allowed to do so.

The age threshold and the scope of child labour legislation, however, vary considerably. For example, while the basic minimum age for entry to employment (excepting hazardous work) is 12 in Egypt, it is 14 in the Philippines and 15 in Hong Kong. Further, whereas in these three cases a single minimum age applies across the board to all economic sectors, in Brazil and Peru the age threshold varies according to the sector and the activity. In Peru, for example, the minimum age ranges between 14 and 18 years (14 in agriculture, 15 in industry, 16 in deep-sea fishing and 18 for work in ports and seafaring). In India, on the other hand, the minimum age of 14 applies solely to certain specific occupations, processes or sectors generally known to be unsafe and hazardous.

Most child labour laws have two major features in common. First, work in family undertakings and educational and training institutions is nearly always excluded from their scope. Many countries go further and exempt domestic service and agriculture as well. Second, many laws make allowance for the fact that the nature of the work in which children are engaged can

have a significant impact on their safety, health and overall development. Hence the age for employment in light work is usually lower than that for hazardous work. In many countries the minimum age for light work is around 12. The minimum age for hazardous work usually ranges from 16 to 18; in Kenya and Hong Kong it varies between 16 and 18 depending on the sector, in Egypt it is 17, and in Brazil, Peru and the Philippines 18.

Of course it is not always easy to define what is dangerous or hazardous. In some countries the definition of hazardous work is very narrow. In Colombia, for example, hazardous work is limited to underground work, industrial painting and work involving the use of white lead and lead sulphate or work as a trimmer or stoker at sea. In Brazil the scope is perhaps even narrower, and the occupations defined as hazardous are those considered to be prejudicial to the worker's moral well-being, such as work in places of entertainment and the sale of alcoholic beverages. In India the scope is somewhat broader and the most recent child labour legislation covers various occupations connected with transport, workshops where certain types of industrial processes are carried out, and factories and plantations. Philippine legislation gives a very comprehensive list of occupations, processes and industries considered to be hazardous and unsafe for children. In general, however, the industries or activities listed in national laws and regulations are: underground and underwater work; work on construction sites; work involving machinery in motion; work involving the manufacture, preparation or handling of chemicals; and work in places of public entertainment such as bars and nightclubs.

Since children may be allowed to engage in light work or to take jobs in certain sectors which for one reason or another fall outside the scope of national legislation, many countries have also specified the conditions under which they may work. The focus is usually on the level of their remuneration and the duration and pattern of working time; the legislation sets a limit on the daily hours of work, for example, or prohibits overtime and night work.

The adoption of legislation specifying a minimum age of entry to employment, prohibiting child employment in certain occupations or activities and regulating it where it is legally permitted responds to obvious but none the less vital needs. It helps to establish certain labour norms and standards which society can aspire to and which can serve both as a framework for policy and as a yardstick for evaluating performance and progress. Furthermore, it is a means of moving towards a common set of universal standards and ensuring that certain principles laid down in international instruments with regard to human dignity and human rights, including the rights of children, are observed and respected.⁷

The gap between law and practice

Yet a common conclusion of child labour research, which is borne out by the ILO case studies, is that there is a wide gap between law and practice.

Child labour seems to be effectively abolished in what is generally referred to as the formal sector, characterised by large enterprises using highly mechanised or capital-intensive technologies. Even here, it is not clear whether this is due to a strict enforcement of child labour legislation or to the fact that child workers are of little use and uneconomical in a production system which uses advanced technology and less labour input. As Boyden and Salazar point out, the development of capital-intensive production has the effect of displacing child labour, and this may occur quite independently of any legislative intervention. In any case, it is clear that child labour continues to be widespread in the unorganised sectors of agriculture, industry and services in much of the developing world, despite national legislation prohibiting it.

There are many factors that account for the poor enforcement of existing legislation. Some of these should be briefly mentioned if only because they shed light on the underlying reasons for current shifts in national policy.

It is clear that problems in the availability and quality of education act as a brake on the effectiveness of national legislation in many developing countries. Although some countries, such as Kenya, the United Republic of Tanzania and Sri Lanka, have been able, even at low levels of development, to provide almost universal primary education, many others have not yet reached the point where every urban neighbourhood, much less every village, has a school. And where there has been an impressive advance in primary schooling, there is often a serious shortfall in secondary education.

But it is not just a question of the availability of education; its quality is also a contributory factor, as is the poverty of the families of school-age children. Kanbargi argues that one of the most serious problems in many countries is the inadequacy and very low standard of education. Frequently teachers are poorly trained, ill prepared for their jobs and overworked; many schools do not have an adequate infrastructure; the curriculum may have little to do with local needs and aspirations; and schooling may be completely at variance with the resource and skill requirements of the labour market. All of this results in a very high school drop-out rate, presents major problems for school-leavers and undermines parents' expectations concerning the benefits of schooling. These weaknesses in education can act as an additional incentive for parents to send their children to work rather than to school, especially since the costs of schooling can be extremely high.

Even if these problems could be successfully resolved, governments would still need effective enforcement machinery to monitor regulations and standards governing child labour. Such machinery is seriously deficient in most developing countries. There are two major problems. On the one hand, the inspectorate system is in general greatly understaffed and therefore unable to cope with child labour even in the formal sector, let alone children employed in the countless informal enterprises in both urban and rural areas. In the Philippines, for example, there are fewer than 200 labour inspectors nationwide for almost 400,000 employers; as the study by the Bureau of Women and Young Workers (BWYW) notes, with a ratio of one inspector to

1,938 establishments, the enforcement division cannot effectively monitor compliance with labour standards. Another serious obstacle is that the enforcement division is often outside the direct authority of the body responsible for the formulation and implementation of child labour policy and legislation. Many countries or areas, for example Colombia, Peru, India, Hong Kong and the Philippines, have a special bureau or unit responsible for child labour. Yet with few exceptions these bureaux do not have an enforcement mechanism of their own. Nor does enforcement cover rural areas.

As noted in the ILO studies, the adoption of child labour legislation has in some instances led to an anomalous and unintended development that poses another significant policy problem. According to Kanbargi, for example, the introduction in India of the Factory Act of 1948, which regulated working conditions and prohibited child employment in factories, resulted in a radical reorganisation of production and work in the carpet industry. Work that was previously carried out in factories was now subcontracted to small firms or cottage industries excluded from the scope of the legislation. This, he says, may account for the proliferation of small family enterprises and the continued illegal employment of child labour in this industry. The point here is not so much whether or not this pattern of work organisation was due to the introduction of legislation *per se* as the fact that laws intended to protect child workers can, and sometimes do, have the opposite effect. Legislation can result in forcing children to work clandestinely in unregulated sectors of the economy where it is impossible either to detect or to protect them. The unintended but pervasive influence of the law can be such that it even impedes research, as the authors of several of the case studies note. Children are often excluded from labour force statistics because what is not supposed to exist according to the law cannot be reflected in official figures or because some governments are reluctant to admit the true extent of children's participation in the economy.

But perhaps worse still is the fact that some governments view legislation on child labour more or less as an end in itself, forgetting that it is only a means, among others, of attaining the larger objective of abolishing child labour and protecting working children. In such cases, legislative action can have the effect of inducing a false sense of achievement – even complacency. On the other hand, there are also cases where governments have hesitated to formulate and implement a realistic set of policies and programmes for fear of condoning an illegal situation. The Indian experience is illustrative of the rather anomalous and difficult situation in which a government may find itself when implementing programmes of protection for working children.⁸

The situation in Hong Kong stands in sharp contrast. Pong has identified a number of important elements in the control of illegal child labour here. The first is the regular and thorough inspections carried out by the Women and Young Persons Division of the Labour Department. In 1985 alone a total of 246,078 inspections were carried out in both industrial and commercial establishments. A second element is the launching each year of

special campaigns for detecting child employment. A third is the spread of education. In 1971 the Government introduced free primary education. This was followed in 1978 by a phased programme of secondary education, and in 1980 schooling became compulsory for all children under 15. Fourthly, the Government required all young workers to carry identity cards bearing their photograph, which has no doubt facilitated enforcement. Finally, the introduction of social security contributions in respect of young workers has reduced employers' reliance on child labour.

In short, labour legislation must be accompanied by a wide range of measures covering employment and income generation and by a reform and expansion of education if the problem of child labour is to be fully dealt with. As we shall see, many such measures are now being incorporated into child labour policies and programmes.

Recent developments in policy

Among the major developments in the field of child labour in recent years are the reorientation of public policy along comprehensive and pragmatic lines and the search by policy-makers for new and practical ways of providing protection for working children.

This emerging trend, although far from universal, is reflected in varying degrees in the ILO studies on Brazil, Colombia, India and the Philippines. Salazar reports the operation, since 1982, of a General Directorate for Child Labourers in the Ministry of Labour in Colombia and the launching, in co-operation with the National University, of a pioneer project for child workers engaged in building and related activities. The studies by Oosterhout and the BWYW show that there has been a spate of activity in the Philippines, including an in-depth reappraisal of policy and the formulation of programmes for child workers in deep-sea fishing, young scavengers in the dump sites of metropolitan Manila, and street children.

But perhaps the boldest and most comprehensive attempts so far are those which are now under way in India and Brazil. In India the thrust of governmental action consisted of three complementary sets of measures. First, action was taken to remove the legal hurdles obstructing practical action by the Government, resulting in the passing of the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986. This law prohibits the employment of children under the age of 14 in occupations and processes commonly recognised to be hazardous, regulates the conditions of work in activities permitted by law, and provides for a Child Labour Technical Advisory Committee to review and advise on hazardous occupations and processes. What this Act has done, in effect, is to provide a legal launching pad for government intervention in priority areas and underpin government action in the design and implementation of programmes for working children.

Secondly, a national policy on child labour was formulated to deal with some of its socio-economic causes and to provide a framework for program-

ming. As Bordia notes, an extensive system of non-formal education is to be developed, under which by 1990 all children reaching the age of 11 will have received five years of schooling (or its equivalent in non-formal education) and by 1995 all children will receive a free and compulsory education up to the age of 14.⁹ The policy also provides for an intensification of employment- and income-generating schemes in areas with a high incidence of child labour.

Thirdly, industry- and area-specific pilot projects are to be carried out as the basis for a nationwide programme of action. The projects are to be implemented in ten industries and areas that, in addition to having a high incidence of child labour, are notorious for the dangerous conditions under which children work. As described in detail by Narayan, the idea is to implement model programmes comprising a number of key elements, which include stricter enforcement of the legislation prohibiting child labour, inclusion of families of child labourers in income- and employment-generating schemes, expansion of formal and non-formal education, and promotion of school enrolment through various inducements (such as the payment of a cash allowance for children withdrawn from prohibited employments). Machinery is to be established at both the national and the state level to facilitate implementation. An additional feature is the important role assigned to non-governmental organisations in providing welfare services and non-formal education and in raising public awareness.

In Brazil, one of the world's most rapidly industrialising countries, there are millions of children working and living on the street. Generally regarded as young delinquents, these children in the past were often treated as a public safety problem and so periodically swept off the streets by the police and placed in reform or social assistance institutions. The vast majority of street children were in fact neither homeless nor delinquent but were simply looking for work to support themselves and their families. The problem was that no protection was provided for children working under difficult and exploitative conditions. Moreover, despite the impressive amount and range of activities carried out under non-governmental programmes, most of them were working in isolation without any support from each other or from the Government. The need for a change in government policy was gradually recognised, especially the need for building on local experiments and, far more importantly, for developing institutional capacity to deal with the issue in both the public and the private sector.

Consequently the Government adopted a programme of action based on two strategies departing substantially from the traditional approach. First, it deliberately created what Myers has called "a policy dissonance, instituting within the public sector a counterweight to its own existing policies and programmes in order to challenge and change them". This approach stemmed from the recognition of built-in resistance to change within the Government and hence of the need to "institutionalise" the pressure for change within it. The second strategy was to "debureaucratise" the issue of

street children in order to make it a subject of public concern rather than the almost exclusive province of state action. This community-based strategy aimed at creating a strong network of local initiatives that would lead the way and through which the Government could provide technical support. The Government therefore launched measures to develop the manpower base of community programmes and bring together in training workshops practitioners from various organisations involved with street children. In order to maintain political pressure for continuing action, the Government also encouraged the establishment of local volunteer committees to protect street children. By 1986 such committees were found in virtually all the major urban areas. They were able to mobilise community-based resources, to mount vigorous campaigns for the recognition of children's rights and, through their national association, to influence decisions at the national level concerning street children.

These developments in Brazil, Colombia, India and the Philippines are encouraging both because of the promise they hold for national action and because of the lessons they can provide for other countries. As governments become more conscious of the scale and nature of child labour and the problem it poses for young people's health and development, it is likely that more and more countries will be led to complement legislative action with policies and programmes concerned with welfare and protection.

III. Operational programmes dealing with child labour and working children

Types of programmes

One of the most interesting and promising developments in the field of child labour in recent years is the growth of grass-roots initiatives and public sector projects focusing on child workers. Almost all of the programmes of this kind were started in the late 1970s or early 1980s. Some of these are described elsewhere¹⁰ and give an idea of the perceived priorities and concerns of both governmental and non-governmental organisations involved in this area and of their response to the problem. They also provide insights into the obstacles encountered and the type of support needed, particularly from the government, to stimulate and promote widespread initiatives for the protection of working children.

Such programmes reflect a wide diversity of orientation. The role of the government in this field also varies quite significantly among the countries covered by the case studies. In India, notwithstanding a fairly long history of vigorous non-governmental involvement in social change, the Government plays a leading role in initiating and supporting the work of non-governmental organisations and also mounts programmes itself. The Ministry of Labour, for example, finances up to 75 per cent of the cost of some non-governmental

schemes. Furthermore, as we have seen, the Indian Government will also be launching pilot programmes focusing on specific industries or areas, financed entirely from its own budget. In the Philippines, too, the Government is becoming increasingly involved both in the implementation of operational programmes and in supporting those carried out by non-governmental bodies. In Brazil government policy has now come to concentrate on promoting community schemes and increased public awareness. The Government has deliberately refrained from financing or subsidising child welfare services itself so that the assistance programmes remain independent. Instead it has aimed at developing, through an extensive programme of training and networking, local capacity to deal effectively with child labour problems, while at the same time promoting "dissonance" or countervailing influences in government policy-making bodies in order to build up and consolidate an institutional framework for change. The situation in countries such as Kenya and Peru is somewhat different. In both cases government intervention in the field of child labour is mainly confined to regulation of the formal sector.

As can be seen from the country reports by Boyden, BWYW, Myers, Narayan, Onyango and Salazar, the target groups include children engaged in rural work, match and fireworks production, carpet making, construction, rag-picking, collection and recycling of assorted waste products, and work in cemeteries. They also include sexually abused children, migrant children, shoeshine boys, and self-employed girls. The programmes vary in terms of their objectives or the type of activities undertaken. Some provide a range of welfare services such as meals and health care to alleviate hardships at work. Others develop skills and organisational ability with a view to providing children with protected forms of employment and helping them to obtain recognition of their rights as workers. Still others promote schooling by providing special support for children from poor families, such as cash allowances and food, and some use public information campaigns and other measures to combat child employment in highly exploitative and hazardous conditions.

Lessons

With the exception of certain programmes carried out in Colombia, India and the Philippines, most of the non-governmental schemes described in the case studies arose from the initiatives of individuals or of very small organisations. As a result many are carried out on a very small scale and a shoestring budget. Indeed, when compared with the sheer scale of child labour, the number who actually benefit from these programmes is so small that it is tempting to dismiss them as being practically worthless. Yet they do give an idea of feasible down-to-earth activities and the direction in which public policy can and should move.

These activities of non-governmental agencies show that it is possible to provide effective non-formal education for child labourers. The projects for

related adults. In the Philippines the BWYW reports the case of the Drop-in Centre, which provided social services and temporary shelter for scavengers, street children and sexually exploited children. The Centre, open each night from 6 p.m. to 8 a.m., was eventually forced to close down because it did not conform with the city ordinance imposing a curfew on children between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m.

A far more serious problem is the shortage of financial and material resources available to non-governmental bodies. Many programmes are very small in scale and operate under extremely difficult financial conditions. Some have even had to be abandoned altogether because the necessary financial support was discontinued. These and other related problems could be solved if there were greater collaboration and complementarity between governments and non-governmental organisations. Given the limited resources of non-governmental organisations engaged in this field, expansion and replication can occur only if there is support from the government and, as the BWYW study notes, an effective partnership is established between the two sectors in the design, development and implementation of programmes.

IV. Conclusion

Children are employed in a great variety of jobs and for many different reasons. There are, however, three especially disturbing aspects of child labour that deserve priority in policy formulation and legislative action. First, a significant number and proportion of children are involved in employment at a very early age. Second, many, such as domestic workers and bonded labourers, are trapped in highly exploitative and abusive employment relationships, while others are employed in such dangerous and hazardous activities as brick making, construction, mining and deep-sea fishing, to mention only a few. Third, many more work excessively long hours, are seldom provided with adequate food, health care or education, and are often paid very low wages.

Children work because they have to – because of poverty and the lack of schools, because of rapid rural-urban migration, and because of social and cultural attitudes. Employers find it advantageous to employ child workers, inter alia, because of their docility, their dexterity and their visual acuity, because of the low wages that can be paid to them, and because of the flexibility they offer in fluctuating or unstable market conditions. Child labour persists in some countries because the political will essential for effective action to counter it is lacking, in many others because regulation and enforcement are constrained by the shortage of qualified inspectors and the inadequacy of logistical support.

Given these difficulties, the problem can be dealt with only through a series of short- and long-term measures or, better still, by doing first things

...being carried out in India show the feasibility of involving ... the mobilisation of ... the identification of children's needs, the mobilisation of ... the development of infrastructure. They also ... the possibility of providing working children with an education ... to that given in state primary schools.

Moreover, they show that it is possible to provide a package of vital welfare services effectively at low cost. The Smoky Mountain Project in Manila is illustrative in this respect. This project is aimed at helping children and their families who are engaged in the collection and recycling of materials at one of the dump sites in metropolitan Manila. It provides non-formal education, primary health care and a scheme for increasing household income. One interesting feature of this project is that it uses parent teachers and resident health care workers (both groups trained by the project) as auxiliaries in the provision of non-formal education and primary health care. Another is that it involves both leaders and residents of the community at all stages of the programme, from planning to implementation.

The evidence emerging from these non-governmental initiatives is that, difficult though it may be, it is possible to make a co-ordinated impact in the field of child labour. The Street School for Street Children project in Manila, launched by the Department of Social Welfare and Development, is one example. It provides mobile schools in tents near the place of work of street children and offers various additional services, including health care and meals. Non-governmental initiatives have also shown that it is possible to raise the incomes of child workers and even remove them from highly exploitative and dangerous working environments by providing them with skill training and helping them to organise themselves.

Certain types of inputs, such as adequate food, not only are important in themselves but can also be a means of promoting other objectives such as school enrolment. Boyden reports, for example, that the provision of subsidised or free meals has been used in Peru as a means both of meeting the nutritional needs of working children and of inducing them to participate in educational and training programmes. Equally interesting is the potential for participation by child workers in the management of projects, including involvement in decisions concerning the use of community funds and facilities, production, prices, wages and other issues vital to their well-being.

Problems

Although many of the operational programmes demonstrate their potential to provide vital services and protection to working children, there are also serious constraints that hamper their operation and growth. Some of these difficulties are the unintended result of legislation. For example, Boyden reports the case of a Peruvian programme providing protected employment to working children which is faced with the threat of being declared illegal because the law prohibits minors from working with non-

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Given these difficulties, the problem can be dealt with only through a series of short- and long-term measures or, better still, by doing first things

first. By far the most important area of priority action is the strict prohibition of child labour in socially and economically exploitative employment relationships and in hazardous occupations and industries. Another is the strict prohibition from employing very young children. The ILO Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138), stipulates a minimum age of 13 (or 12 in certain conditions) for light work. That corresponds to the age at which primary schooling is completed in many countries and should therefore serve as a benchmark below which children would not be allowed to work. Obviously, its implementation requires not only legislative and regulatory action but also a programme of universal compulsory primary education, a measure which has been successfully introduced by some countries even at very low levels of development.

While these are basic and essential concerns that deserve priority, there are other growing trends that public policy needs to cope with. Rapid rural-urban migration, increasing urbanisation and the shortage of employment opportunities frequently make the street the principal school of life and the central element in the work experience of many urban children. The need to protect children who work and live on the street and are exposed to all its social, economic and environmental hazards has become and will continue to be a major social and labour issue. It therefore deserves increased attention in policies and programmes concerned with children in general and child labour in particular.

Another problem is associated with the rapid expansion of schooling and increased enrolment. In some countries, such as the Philippines and Peru, a system of shifts has been introduced in order to make schooling available to more children. A growing phenomenon therefore is the large number of children who combine work with school. This offers the possibility of some education for working children but it also raises difficulties. Having to work long hours and also attending school can have adverse effects on the child's health and school performance. There is no easy answer to the problem, but it needs to be reckoned with in the formulation of educational and labour policy.

The multiple aspects of child labour require a multi-pronged approach to the problem, including not only legislation and law enforcement but also action in such areas as incomes and employment, formal and non-formal education, welfare and the promotion of children's rights. The recent public policy move in this direction observed in some countries is to be welcomed and should set an example for others faced with similar problems. But it is also becoming equally evident, as the case studies show, that policy has to go beyond general formulations. Policy can be made effective only if it is accompanied by direct action focused on children working in specific industries, areas or occupations characterised by a high incidence of child labour or by extreme forms of exploitation and abusive practices. The country reports on policies and programmes provide some illustrations of the various types of initiatives now being taken and confirm the feasibility of

linking action at the national and local levels, of providing vital basic services and protection to working children at low cost, of involving communities in the fight against child labour abuses, and even of helping child workers to mount campaigns and promote their social and economic well-being through their own organisations.

However, with the almost sole exceptions of the efforts made by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) and by the Trades Union Congress (TUC)¹¹ in the United Kingdom, a striking omission in the record of recent actions by non-governmental organisations is the almost total absence of initiatives by national workers' organisations in the campaign against the exploitation of child labour. There are of course reasons for this, especially the fact that child workers are concentrated in the unorganised sectors. Yet, because their exploitation can be a threat to the unions' economic interests and because it is certainly a violation of the rights and dignity for which organised labour has campaigned throughout its history, workers' organisations have a particular obligation to further that campaign.

Finally, a significant point which is often forgotten is the wide scope that exists for complementary action by governments and non-governmental organisations. Each has its strengths and weaknesses; the essential thing is to arrive at a combination suited to national conditions that can reinforce and build on their respective strengths. The work of non-governmental organisations can, for example, be effective in promoting children's rights, organising community action and implementing small local projects. Governments on the other hand can focus on creating a propitious legislative and policy climate, providing universal compulsory education, increasing access to employment and income by poor households, and ensuring strict adherence to certain minimum labour standards such as the prohibition of work in hazardous occupations or activities and of any work before completion of primary school. The respective functions and roles of governments and non-governmental organisations should not be viewed statically; they should develop and evolve within the framework of a partnership if they are to have, as indeed they must, a lasting impact on the status of the world's working children.

Notes

¹¹ This article is a synthesis of case studies to be published in a forthcoming ILO volume entitled *Combating child labour* edited by the authors. The authors of the case studies are: Henk van Oosterhout: "Child labour in the Philippines: The Muro-Ami fishing operation"; Maria Cristina Salazar: "Child labour in Colombia: Bogotá's quarries and brickyards"; Jesús Guillén Marroquín: "Child labour in Peru: Gold panning in Madre de Dios"; Institute of Industrial Relations, University of the Philippines: "Child labour in the Philippines: Wood-based and clothing industries"; Ahmed Abdalla: "Child labour in Egypt: Leather tanning in Cairo";

Ramesh Kanbargi: "Child labour in India: The carpet industry of Varanasi"; William Myers: "Alternative services for street children: A national project in Brazil"; Ashok Narayan: "Child labour policies and programmes: The Indian experience"; Philista P. M. Onyango: "Child labour policies and programmes in Kenya"; Pong Ping-Kwun: "The protection of working children and the abolition of child labour: Hong Kong"; Bureau of Women and Young Workers, Philippines: "Child labour policies and programmes in the Philippines"; Jo Boyden: "National policies and programmes for child workers: Peru"; Maria Cristina Salazar: "Child labour policies and programmes in Colombia". Frequent reference is made to these authors.

² ILO: *Child labour*, Report of the Director-General/Part 1, International Labour Conference, 63rd Session, Geneva, 1983; and idem: *Child labour: A briefing manual* (Geneva, 1986).

³ WHO: *Children at work: Special health risks* (Geneva, 1987).

⁴ E. MacLennan et al.: *Working children* (London, Low Pay Unit, 1985).

⁵ G. Rodgers and G. Standing (eds.): *Child work, poverty and underdevelopment. Issues for research in low-income countries* (Geneva, ILO, 1981). See also R. Pittin: "Documentation and analysis of the invisible world of invisible women: A Nigerian case study", in *International Labour Review*, 1984/4.

⁶ UNESCO: *Nutrition and educational achievement* (Paris, 1984).

⁷ ILO: *Child labour*, op. cit.

⁸ See Bequele and Boyden (eds.): *Combating child labour*, op. cit., Ch. 1.

⁹ A. Bordia: "Child labour in India: Implications for educational planning", in *Proceedings and working papers*, Asian Regional Tripartite Workshop on Practical Measures to Combat Child Labour, Bangkok, 22-28 September 1986 (Geneva, ILO, 1987).

¹⁰ Bequele and Boyden, op. cit.

¹¹ ICFTU: *Breaking down the wall of silence: How to combat child labour* (Brussels, 1986); and TUC: *All work and no play: Child labour today* (London, 1985).

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