

Child Labour

Child labour and the worst forms of child labour, as defined by International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions, damage children's health, threaten their education and lead to further exploitation and abuse. UNICEF does not oppose work that children may perform at home, on the family farm or for a family business – as long as that work is not a danger to their health and well-being, and if it doesn't prevent them from going to school and enjoying childhood activities.

FACTS AND FIGURES

- Worldwide, an estimated 246 million children are engaged in child labour.¹
- Some 180 million children aged 5–17 (or 73 per cent of all child labourers) are believed to be engaged in the worst forms of child labour.
- Of these children, 5.7 million are forced into debt bondage or other forms of slavery, 1.8 million are forced into prostitution or pornography and 600,000 are engaged in other illicit activities.
- Children working in the home of a third party or 'employer' are extremely vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. ILO estimates that more girls under age 16 are in domestic service than in any other category of work or child labour.²

BUILDING A PROTECTIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR CHILDREN

Government commitment and capacity

Providing all children with access to education is every government's responsibility, as well as a practical response to preventing child labour. Free, compulsory, relevant and good-quality education services are essential.

Legislation and enforcement

Laws and regulations against child labour must be in place and rigorously enforced by governments.

HUMAN RIGHTS

International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions 138 (1973) and **182** (1999) define child labourers as all children younger than 12 working in any economic activities, children 12–14 years old engaged in more than light work, and all children engaged in the **worst forms of child labour** – in which they are enslaved, forcibly recruited, prostituted, trafficked, forced into illegal activities or exposed to hazards.

Article 32(1) of the **Convention on the Rights of the Child** (1989) calls for the recognition of the right of children to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with their education, or to be harmful to their health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.

By March 2006, 143 countries had ratified Convention No. 138, setting minimum ages for general, light or hazardous work and 158 countries had ratified ILO Convention No. 182 on the worst forms of child labour.

Time-bound national plans of action, as required by ILO Convention No. 182 on the worst forms of child labour, are crucial.

Attitudes, customs and practices

Girls are particularly at risk of being sent to work instead of going to school. Parental and community understanding of the benefits of education, along with strong social disapproval of exploitative employers, will help diminish this hazard.

Open discussion

Civil society and media engagement can change attitudes that condone child labour. Raising awareness of its harmful effects on health and development will help alleviate children's vulnerability to abuse.

Children's life skills, knowledge and participation

Through active participation and communication with their parents, employers and other adults, children can be agents of change. Relevant school curricula and vocational training programmes can be adapted to students' circumstances – and will increase their school attendance.

Capacity of families and communities

Social programmes to support families in need and help them find alternative income to replace their child's employment will help prevent child labour. Such support is also needed for child-headed households, orphans and children made vulnerable by HIV/AIDS. Representatives from schools, churches, labour unions and non-governmental organizations can be trained to assess the reasons why children work and to devise ways of making sure they get into school.

Essential services, including prevention, recovery and reintegration

Flexible school hours can accommodate the needs of working children. Non-formal education programmes can prepare former child labourers for return to full-time education, and vocational training provides skills for a productive adulthood.

MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Child labour is both a cause and consequence of poverty and squanders a nation's human capital. It can impede the education of children, particularly girls. Any of the worst forms of child labour – including prostitution and trafficking – are a cause and consequence of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Therefore, eliminating child labour is particularly relevant to achieving MDG 1 (eradicate extreme poverty and hunger), MDG 2 (ensuring that all boys and girls complete primary schooling) and MDG 6 (combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases). Achieving MDG 7, which seeks to reverse the loss of environmental resources, would help reduce environmental disasters – which devastate households and significantly increase conditions that foster child labour.

Monitoring, reporting and oversight

How many children are engaged in labour? What type of work do they perform? To monitor protective measures, ensure employer compliance with relevant laws and administer legal action if necessary, governments, social services and all agencies that work with children need to have this information.

EXAMPLES OF UNICEF IN ACTION

In **India**, UNICEF and its partners worked to reduce child labour rates by reducing the debt burden among families through the formation of self help groups and increasing school enrolment. Life-skills education was provided to adolescent girls and child labourers in Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. The documentation of these and other positive experiences led to more effective advocacy with State partners and non-governmental organizations and to increased government budget allocations and donor support.

In **Morocco**, UNICEF and its partners are working to reduce the number of children working in the handicrafts sector in Fez. At the beginning of the 2005 school year, the number of children under 12 who were withdrawn from work exceeded 600; of these 80 per cent were girls working in the carpet-weaving industry.

In **Senegal**, a debt-cancellation agreement between the Italian and Senegalese governments signed in 2005 will provide funding for poverty reduction strategies, in particular towards the elimination of child labour. Part of the funds available will allow the Senegalese Government to contribute to a UNICEF-supported project for the elimination of child labour. The agreement is partly the result of UNICEF's advocacy efforts to mainstream child protection into national poverty reduction strategy papers.

Notes

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, International Labour Organization, *A Future without Child Labour*, ILO, Geneva, March 2002, p. 18.

² International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour, *Helping Hands or Shackled Lives? Understanding child domestic labour and responses to it*, ILO, Geneva, 2004, p. III.

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