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Dreaming of school

THE PATH FROM THE VILLAGE SCHOOL LEADS DOWN ACROSS THE CREEK FROM WHICH the local crocodile emerges at night. As 11-year-old Salamatu approaches her home — a compound of thatched huts in the Bissa region of Burkina Faso in West Africa — she bursts into an enthusiastic recitation of a poem she has learned in school. With her satchel swinging behind her and her eyes bright, Salamatu radiates enthusiasm for learning.

Back home is her half-sister Rasmatu, just a few months younger, whose response to school was entirely different. For weeks she left home with her satchel as though she were going to school, but in fact she hid in the bush all day to avoid it. Eventually the school expelled her, and she now spends her days engaged in the everyday tasks of the household — fetching water, pounding grain, gathering firewood.

The stories of these half-sisters capture both the potential and the limitations of education as a safeguard against child labour. Child labour is the main focus of UNICEF's *The State of the World's Children 1997* report.

Children who do not attend school, either because they choose not to or because they are not permitted to attend, will work instead, in low-paying, dead-end jobs that offer them nothing on which to build their lives as adults and parents. Such childhood employment perpetuates the cycle of poverty into which so many are born.

Keeping children in school is difficult, however, when the education available may cost the family dearly and be irrelevant and of poor quality. For every Salamatu who can be inspired by education despite the crowded classroom — her class numbers 64 children — and the lack of books and learning materials, there is a Rasmatu, who finds school forbidding, alienating and unconnected with the realities of her life.

"Education has become part of the problem," says the report. "It has to be reborn as part of the solution."

In developing countries, at present, there are 140 million children aged 6-11 who do not attend school, and perhaps an equal number who drop out of school early. If all those under 18 are included, the number of children out of

school surpasses 400 million. Many of these children work in jobs that are disabling and dangerous. Millions more are trying hard to balance the demands of work and schooling on their time and energy, and this juggling act is a particular problem for girls.

According to UNICEF's report, education is underfunded and the quality of schooling is in decline. "Governments must rededicate themselves to ensuring that all children receive high-quality primary education, regardless of race, gender or economic status," says the report.

Many of the problems stem from skewed national priorities that pump money into the military. In addition, many developing countries incurred large debts in the 1980s. To comply with structural adjustment programmes and thus qualify for new loans from international lending agencies, countries made deep cuts in social spending.

"Sub-Saharan Africa pays more than $12 billion in debt-service charges annually and owes approximately $8 billion more that it cannot pay. In comparison, just about 10 per cent of that total would provide the extra educational resources needed each year to give all the region's children a place in school," says the report. It notes the World Bank's current view that primary education is the largest single contributor to the economic growth rates of the high-performing Asian economies. "Giving priority to education is not only a way of combating child labour, it is a sound economic investment."

Teachers' wages and status are too low to keep talented, educated people in the profession. Many teachers have been forced to take jobs or pursue businesses outside school simply to survive. The report makes a number of suggestions on improving teacher training within the confines of existing national budgets. It cites the example of the Zimbabwe Integrated National Teacher Education Course, a four-year course in which only the first and last terms involve college attendance; the rest is spent at work in schools. ZINTEC has been successful in combining quality with low cost; training a teacher this way can be done for less than half the expense of conventional training.

Money is not the only problem, however. To attract and keep students, educational systems must change. Schools in developing countries frequently pursue courses that are irrelevant to the needs of the local community. All too often they do not teach students in their mother tongue, but use the foreign language of the former colonial power, as was the case with Salamatu's school in Burkina Faso. Neither are school schedules flexible enough to accommodate the children who try to combine school with work.

What working children themselves have to say about school is very telling. The 50 girls and boys, aged 10-17, enrolled in the Namma Shale alternative education project for working children in the south Indian state of Karnataka described the abuse, discrimination and frustrations they had encountered in the formal system.

"In school, teachers would not teach well," says 11-year-old Sudhir. "If we asked them to teach us alphabets, they would beat us. They would sleep in the class. If we asked them about a small doubt, they would beat us and send us out. Even if we did not understand, they would not teach us. So I dropped out of school."

Narayan, a boy of 15, complained: "The teachers would not beat the chil-

dren of the important people but only beat the children of the poor. The children who could not read would be made to sit on the back benches. We would not understand the lessons they taught."

Distance and time can pose enormous burdens to children, as one child explained: "The school is far away from home and the bus facilities are not good. The class would start at eight in the morning but there was no bus at that time." "Schools have to move towards children," says the report, "particularly in rural areas. Small multigrade classes can bring education within easy walking distance."

UNICEF studies in Bhutan, Burkina Faso, Myanmar, Uganda and Viet Nam showed the costs to families of supplying uniforms, textbooks, school building funds and parent-teacher association contributions were so high — 10-20 per cent of per capita income — that they discouraged school attendance. And those figures do not reflect payment of any tuition fees. "When I was promoted from the fifth to the sixth standard," says Ganesh, "I had no money to buy the books, so I left school."

Informal education programmes are providing viable if limited alternatives. The Karnataka children are happy with the Namma Shale programme, which adapts its schedule and subject matter to the needs of the local community and aims to foster creativity, independence and equality.

As in a number of such projects, the mix of basic education subjects with relevant vocational training such as weaving, agriculture and carpentry appeals to the children. The life of Tangraj from Indiranagar, for example, has been altogether changed by the programme: "[I] enrolled for the training in construction.... I have also learnt to read and write. Now I am employed and am working. I have work at hand. I have the confidence to construct a house at a low price. I look after my family members."

Nevertheless, the children know that attendance at government schools is necessary for some qualifications. Hema, who is 16, said, "If we need certificates, we should go to the formal schools. To make use of any of the facilities of the Government, certificates are essential."

The challenge is to make the existing education system more flexible and responsive, learning from the non-formal programmes to develop schools that will cater for the rights and needs of all children.

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Millions of children at risk from hazardous labour

MORE THAN GLASS GOES INTO MAKING THE BEAUTIFUL BANGLES OF FIROZABAD (INDIA). They contain the labour of children, working under conditions of great stress and hazard.

The factories employ 200,000 people, including 50,000 children who are paid less than $0.40 a day. The Government has prohibited the employment of children in such factories, but they are hired nevertheless. They work alongside adults in front of furnaces where the glass bangles are baked, with temperatures ranging from 1,500 to 1,800 degrees centigrade.

Sliding the sheets of bangles into and out of the ovens, children are exposed not only to extreme heat but also to the asbestos from which the baking sheets are made. Those children assigned to press the bangles against a whirling wheel, in order to cut patterns into the glass, often suffer serious cuts and gashes. No first-aid treatment is available, nor is care provided for the diseases of the skin, respiratory tract or the eye, which commonly result from the work.

Millions of children endure hazardous work such as this, according to *The State of the World's Children 1997* report. One of the reasons is that societies, systems and individuals have closed off other options for the poor. The need for a relatively small amount of cash can spell disaster for all the members of a poor family, when illness occurs or a crop is lost and credit or a loan is refused. Their extreme circumstances coinciding with the extreme greed of employers and moneylenders, together with a lack of opportunities and alternatives, produce what is one of the most abhorrent of practices — bonded labour. Bonded children are handed over to employers by impoverished parents in exchange for small sums of money. Indistinguishable from slavery, bondage plunges children into some of the worst abuse, exploited for years because the loans are never deemed repaid.

An intermediary will, for instance, pay poor rural families an advance sum for the children or accept them in repayment for a debt; the children may be resold at large profit to business people who use them as a captive workforce. Their lifelong servitude never succeeds in even reducing the debt, says the report.

Bonded labour is usually associated with India, Nepal and Pakistan, but some examples of forced labour have also been found, according to the UNICEF report, in Brazil, Mauritania and Myanmar. And a recent report published by the Kamalayan Development Foundation in the Philippines describes the situation of children in a country not normally associated with bonded or slave labour: "The child workers are treated like animals. They are caged and padlocked inside jail-like structures when they are not at work... They are assigned to living quarters that are congested, unventilated, filthy and smelly and that are not fit for human beings."

The arrestingly evident hazards of work such as bangle-making and bonded labour should not blind people to the less obvious hazards that many millions of working children may be exposed to around the world. According to *The State of the World's Children 1997* report, all forms of labour detrimental to the minds, bodies, spirits and futures of millions of children must be exposed and understood as hazardous in order to eliminate such labour by the end of the decade.

Children all over the world work for their families, hauling water and collecting firewood or undertaking a range of household tasks. They work in the fields of family farms and on commercial plantations. They labour in the streets and in markets, on construction sites and in mines.

Not all their work is hazardous. But much of it is. Children are exposed to chemicals, pesticides and dangerous equipment on farms and factories. They endure repeated infections and long hours of work so physically arduous that their growth is stunted and their mental development stalled. Forced to become adults before they have finished being children, they bear burdens and responsibilities beyond their strength and years.

When children cannot go to school because of work, that work is hazardous to their development. School is often sacrificed by poor children and their families because of the costs and the time lost from chores, condemning children to a lifetime of unskilled and poorly remunerated labour.

And many working children who do enrol in school drop out, because there are no textbooks or because what they are taught has little or nothing to do with their lives or struggles and offers them no alternative and no hope of better futures.

Urging the world to take a close look at the work done by children in their homes, communities and societies, the report spells out the many ways in which work can be harmful to children. Children engaged in full-time work at too early an age and those spending too many hours a day working are at risk. Labour that exerts undue physical, social or psychological stress, is inadequately paid and carries too much responsibility, or hampers a child's access to education, is hazardous. Any and all "work that undermines a child's dignity and self-esteem" or "is detrimental to full social and psychological development" is hazardous, the report argues.

The report also explains that because the problem is complex, approaches to solving it must be comprehensive and complementary.

Education is an essential component of the solution, and some progress is slowly being made. In Firozabad, for example, a small project known as Disha ('Direction') is working with 150 children of the estimated 50,000 children involved in the glass-bangle industry.

Rajrani, 13 years old, is one of those enrolled. Despite initial resistance from her mother, who was worried about the loss of income to the family, Rajrani was enrolled in Disha's non-formal education centre. She has changed since entering the centre's programme; she is happier and more confident. At the school's last annual function, she won three prizes. This year she has been admitted to a formal school. Her success has persuaded her parents that schooling is important, and her brothers have also been enrolled.

Non-governmental organizations and international agencies are working on the issue. So too are governments, especially those that have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child and are legally obligated to afford protection to their children from hazardous and exploitative labour. In New Delhi in 1995, for example, labour ministers of the Non-Aligned Movement condemned exploitative child labour as "a moral outrage" and resolved to make its "total and de facto elimination" an "immediate priority."

UNICEF also urges its immediate elimination, so that by the end of the decade the world will be free of this crime. For so many of the world's children, it cannot happen soon enough.

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Exploding the myths about child labour

VITOR, A 12-YEAR-OLD BOY, WAS ELECTROCUTED WHILE WORKING ON A BUILDING SITE with his father. He was killed by a high-voltage shock from a live cable he inadvertently touched while operating a cement mixer.

Vitor might have been one of the many millions of child labourers who work in developing countries in hazardous conditions. But he wasn't. He lived in Portugal and worked for his father's construction company.

Child labour, as UNICEF's *The State of the World's Children 1997* report explains, is a complex, often misunderstood problem. The myths that surround it impede solutions, and the report examines those myths to help dispel them.

One myth is that children work only in poor countries. In fact, children work all over the world, in both industrialized and developing countries, although it is in the developing world that most child labour takes place.

Not all labour, however, is hazardous. It is the nature of the work children do and the conditions in which they labour — not the fact that they work — that determines how they are affected.

In the industrialized world, children of ethnic minorities or immigrant groups are those most likely to do hazardous work, the report points out. In the United States, for example, a high proportion of children working in agriculture come from immigrant or ethnic-minority families. A 1990 survey of Mexican-American children working in the farms of New York state showed that almost half had worked in fields still wet with pesticides and over a third had themselves been sprayed.

Refuting another myth, the report argues that the elimination of hazardous child labour does not have to wait until poverty is eliminated, even though poverty — particularly the exploitation of poverty — is an important contributing factor. "However poor their families may be, children would not be harmed by work if there were not people prepared and able to exploit them," the report says.

There are a number of measures that can be taken immediately to reduce the impact of poverty that will help protect children and families from exploitation. Income-generating and credit schemes can alleviate some of the greatest pressures on poor people, as can the provision of basic services such as safe water, health care and education. In fact, education is key to keeping children out of hazardous labour.

Also distorting the picture of child labour is the perception that children in developing countries work primarily to produce consumer goods such as clothing and toys for consumers in rich countries. In fact, only a tiny minority of children work in the export sector. A great many more are doing the kind of work in which 10-year-old Maria is engaged as she weaves between the traffic in downtown Lima, Peru, selling chewing-gum to whoever will buy.

Like Maria, children are involved in a wide range of different jobs outside the export sector. A 1995 study in Bangladesh identified 300 such jobs, ranging from brick-making to stone-breaking, street-hawking to rag-picking. The vast majority of children work for their families or in agriculture or hidden away in houses, far from the reach of the official labour inspectors.

"If we allow the notion that the most exploited child workers are **all** in the industrial export sector to take hold, we would do a grave disservice to that great majority of children who labour in virtual invisibility," says the report.

Connected to this notion is another myth: that the only way to counter child labour is through government sanctions and consumer boycotts initiated in developed countries. Such sweeping measures would affect export production only, one of the smallest parts of the child labour problem.

Sanctions and boycotts are blunt instruments that can do more harm than good, when they simply throw children out of work without simultaneously offering them and their families other ways to survive and improve their lives. The report looks at the impact that the mere threat of one such measure, the Harkin Bill in the US, had on the thousands of children involved in the garment industry in Bangladesh, who were immediately let go by their employers.

UNICEF advocates a comprehensive strategy against hazardous child labour, including compulsory education for children and employment for parents.

Although much remains to be done, much has already been accomplished to eliminate hazardous child labour and the damage it does to children. Projeto Axé in Brazil, for example, is an imaginative programme that offers literacy and skills training to children living and working on the streets in the town of Salvador. "The most important thing," says Axé's founder Cesare de Florio La Rocca, "is to stimulate the child to dream and wish, and to offer a number of concrete opportunities to help the child realize those dreams."

The Child Labour Abolition Support Scheme (CLASS) is grappling with the exploitation of children in the *beedi* (tobacco) rolling industry in India's Tamil Nadu state. Most children begin working in that industry to pay their parents' debts, so CLASS has concentrated on providing new and less rapacious sources of credit for poor families. In addition, project staff have recognized that the best alternative to child labour is to offer high-quality, relevant schooling to children, something very much missing in many countries. So CLASS has pioneered the retraining of elementary teachers to be more participative and enthusiastic in their techniques, using a simple approach called 'joyful learning'.

There are also projects aimed specifically at encouraging and educating the media about child labour. Since 1989, for example, a media advocacy group called PRESSHOPE has been working in the Philippines to involve both television and print media in child protection. The group is building on the success of a community organization that used an imaginative campaign to put the question of child prostitution in Pagsanjan on the national and international agendas.