

## FACTSHEET: CHILD LABOUR

### The facts

An estimated 246 million children are engaged in child labour. Nearly 70 per cent (171 million) of these children work in hazardous conditions – including working in mines, working with chemicals and pesticides in agriculture or with dangerous machinery. They are everywhere, but invisible, toiling as domestic servants in homes, labouring behind the walls of workshops, hidden from view in plantations. The vast majority of working children – about 70 per cent – work in the agriculture sector .

Millions of girls work as domestic servants and unpaid household help and are especially vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Millions of others work under horrific circumstances. They may be are trafficked (1.2 million), forced into debt bondage or other forms of slavery (5.7 million), forced into prostitution and/or pornography (1.8 million) or recruited as child soldiers in armed conflict (300,000).

Regional estimates indicate that:

- the Asia and Pacific region harbours the largest number of child workers in the 5 to 14 age group, 127.3 million in total (19 per cent of children are working in the region);
- sub-Saharan Africa has an estimated 48 million child workers. Almost one child in three (29 per cent) below the age of 15 is economically active;
- Latin America and the Caribbean harbours approximately 17.4 million child workers (16 per cent of children in the region are working);
- 15 per cent of children in the Middle East and North Africa are working; approximately 2.5 million and 2.4 million children are working in developed and transition economies respectively.

### Building a protective environment for children

**Education services need to be in place** and they must be free, compulsory, relevant and attractive. All children have the right to education. Children and parents need to see school as a better option than work.

**Governments need to ensure that all children have access to compulsory education** as a front-line response to child labour. They need to commit themselves to international standards such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No.182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, which has been ratified by 132

governments. And they need to make sure that laws are in place to prosecute employers who exploit children.

Resources for this struggle are available. Child labour should be at the top of the agenda of finance ministries, as well as those of the traditional social ministries associated with children's welfare. Developing countries can demonstrate the seriousness of their commitment by allocating more resources to basic social services.

**Attitudes and practices need to change**. Too often there is little objection by families and communities to children working. Frequently it is felt that work is a better and more appropriate activity for girls than going to school. In the case of forced and bonded labour, there may be a misunderstanding of the nature of the agreement that leads to the child being bound to his or her employer. The willingness of landowners and employers to exploit children in such arrangements, and the lack of social disapproval of employers who operate in this way, also fail to provide protection for children.

**Laws that prohibit child labour need to be in place**. And even more importantly, they need to be rigorously enforced.

**Governments and others need to know how many children are working** in the various forms of labour. They also need information on the gender, age and ethnicity of the children to understand what made them vulnerable in the first place and to devise effective responses.

**Children need to be removed immediately from the worst forms of child labour** and provided with care and education.

**Children's views need to be taken into account** in programmes aimed at helping child labourers. If children are going to be provided with real alternatives to hazardous labour, it is essential to make them active partners in identifying these alternatives.

**Donor nations can show their commitment** by increasing the proportion of assistance they allocate to basic social services and by supporting debt forgiveness.

## **UNICEF's response**

The 246 million children who are engaged in child labour are living proof of the world's systemic failure to protect them. They are also the reason why UNICEF's work is focused on building a protective environment for children that safeguards them from exploitation and abuse.

UNICEF's responses to child labour are based on child-centred policies – viewing children as resilient, yet vulnerable, capable yet inexperienced and active rather than passive in their development. This is why a protective environment for children must include strategies aimed at getting and keeping vulnerable children and young people in school. It also aims at:

- preventing all forms of child labour that are detrimental to children;
- using the most ratified human rights instrument in history – the Convention on the Rights of the Child – as a guiding force behind its work;

- supporting other key areas of the child's development, including health, nutrition and sanitation;
- building alliances with other partners;
- working for the ratification and implementation of ILO Convention No.182 to immediately end the worst forms of child labour.

Child labour laws have been strengthened in many countries, and a number of international corporations have adopted **codes of conduct** concerning child labour.

### **UNICEF in action**

In **Bangladesh**, UNICEF, ILO and the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association concluded an agreement to end child labour in the country's garment factories. Freed child workers were given stipends to attend school, through funds provided by the Association, UNICEF and ILO. By 1998, 10,500 children had been removed from work under the programme, and about 80 per cent were enrolled in community-based schools organized by two NGOs. A follow-up agreement was designed to keep these children in school beyond the age of 14.

In **Brazil**, UNICEF and its partners brought working children back to school and introduced activities to complement their education, promote family and community participation and organize courses on citizenship for children, adolescents and families. UNICEF also supported the creation of the Parliamentarian Front for the Rights of Children and Adolescents, which monitors legislation affecting children.

In **Nepal**, UNICEF is working to increase parents' awareness of the harmful effects of child labour through a Parenting Education initiative, and to give children between the ages of three and five a safe, encouraging place to learn and play in community-based child development centres. In 1999, 50,000 parents and caregivers participated in the initiative.

In the **United Republic of Tanzania**, UNICEF and ILO have worked to raise awareness about child labour and support training and mobilization for representatives from trade unions, NGOs and other groups. This has developed the capacities of communities to assess the reasons children are forced to work and to devise ways to get them into school. In addition, birth registration systems have been improved and children's enrolment in school is being monitored.

At the international level, UNICEF supported the adoption of ILO Convention No. 182 to immediately end the worst forms of child labour, and works for its ratification and implementation. UNICEF also works with governments at the national level to develop the time-bound national plans of action that are required by that convention.

## **Definitions**

**Child work:** UNICEF is not opposed to children working. Children's or adolescents' participation in work – economic activity – that does not negatively affect their health and development or interfere with their education, is often positive. Light work (that does not interfere with education) is permitted from the age of 12 years under ILO Convention No.138.

**Child labour:** Child labour is a much narrower concept and refers to children working in contravention of ILO standards contained in Conventions 138 and 182. This means all children below 12 years of age working in any economic activities, those aged between 12 and 14 engaged in more than light work, and all children engaged in the worst forms of child labour.

**Worst forms of child labour:** These involve children being enslaved, forcibly recruited, prostituted, trafficked, forced into illegal activities or exposed to hazards.

## **Relevant article of the Convention on the Rights of the Child**

### **Article 32(1):**

“States Parties recognize the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.”