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# Questions and Answers on Child Labour

International Labour Organization

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# Questions and Answers on Child Labour

## **Abstract**

Questions and Answers on Child Labour, compiled by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2005.

## **Keywords**

abolition, action, activism, association, bonded, campaign, catherwood, child, children, codes, code, conduct, cornell, education, elimination, employment, enforcement, forced, freedom, global, globalization, government, ilr, inspection, international, ipec, labor, labour, law, legislation, lobbying, monitoring, ngo, nondiscrimination, organization, organisation, portal, report, sanctions, slave, standards, stories, university, work, workers, workplace

## **Comments**

InFocus Programme on Promoting the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON CHILD LABOUR

### **Q: When does children's work become child labour?**

Children's work is a broad term that includes both worst forms of child labour at one extreme and beneficial work contributing to the child's development at the other. All work performed by children under the age of 18 is not necessarily child labour. Millions of young people undertake work, paid or unpaid, that is appropriate for their age and maturity. By doing so, they learn to take responsibility, gain skills, add to their family's or their own income and well-being, and contribute to their countries' economy.

Child labour is the unacceptable form of child work. It is work that exposes children to harm or exploitation. Two core ILO conventions focus on the elimination of child labour, and place boundaries between child labour and child work. Basically, the child labour slated for abolition falls into three categories:

1. **hazardous work**, or labour which jeopardizes the physical, mental or moral well-being of a child, either because of its nature or the conditions under which it is carried out. Hazardous work is defined by national legislation. (Convention 182);
2. other, "**unconditional**" **worst forms** of child labour are internationally defined as slavery, trafficking, debt bondage and other forms of forced labour; forced recruitment for use in armed conflict; prostitution and pornography; and illicit activities; (Convention 182)
3. labour performed by a child who is **under a certain age** specified for that kind of work and is thus likely to impede the child's education and full development. (Convention 138)

The ILO conventions help to focus attention on forms of child labour that have to be approached with particular urgency. The welfare of the child and the respect of his/her rights as a child is key in this.

### **Q: Where is it a problem?**

Child labour is often perceived as a problem faced only by developing countries. While the vast majority of children engaged in child labour are indeed working in developing countries, it exists in industrialised and transition countries as well. The ILO's new 2002 estimates indicate that nearly 3% of children in the 10-14 year group in developed economies are economically active, and just over 4% in transition economies.

The scale and depth of the problem is most critical in developing countries. There are 127.3 million children working in Asia and the Pacific, constituting 16% of the child population and 60% of existing child workers worldwide. Sub-Saharan Africa follows with 48 million child labourers, 29% of its child population.

## **In which sectors of the economy does it exist?**

Contrary to the focus of public attention on children working in export-oriented manufacturing and in sex tourism, only 5% of children work in the formal export-related economy and commercial sexual exploitation is dominated by local rather than foreign customers. The vast majority (70%) of children who work in developing countries are engaged in agriculture, fishing, hunting and forestry. Under 9% are involved in manufacturing and a similar number work in wholesale and retail trade, restaurants and hotels. This is followed by community, social and personal services, including domestic work (6.5%) and transport, storage and communication (4%). Around three percent of children are involved in construction, mining and quarrying combined.

## **How many children are involved in child labour?**

New global estimates for the year 2002 indicate that some 352 million children work. Of these, 246 million children are involved in child labour for abolition and 187 million of whom are between 5-14 years of age. A staggering 180 million are working in the worst forms of child labour, with at least 8 million in worst forms such as child prostitution, forced labour and armed conflict.

## **Why does it exist? What are the causes of child labour?**

Child labour is both a cause and consequence of poverty. Household poverty pushes children into the labour market to earn money to supplement family income or even as a means of survival. The existence of child labour perpetuates household poverty across generations, slowing economic growth and social development. It prevents children from gaining an education and skills that will lead to an adulthood of decent work opportunities.

However, poverty is far from being the only factor at play. Inequality, lack of education, high dependence on agriculture in the economy as a whole, slow demographic transition, consumerism, as well as traditions and cultural expectation are among factors that play a role in the occurrence of child labour. Age, sex, ethnicity, social class and deprivation appear to interact to affect the type and intensity of work that children perform, as well as whether they work or not.

Family decisions concerning child labour are also influenced by the size and structure of the family (e.g. number, sex, age, spacing and birth order of children, presence of elderly or disabled family members, number of adults of working age). Furthermore, the increased numbers of children- and grandparent- headed households (primarily linked to HIV/AIDS and armed conflict) means increased pressure on children to work.

There are many inter-linked explanations for child labour. No single factor can fully explain its persistence or growth. Child labour is a matter of opportunity. A child from an impoverished family may not have the option of going to school. A girl may be denied that opportunity because of cultural expectations that she work at home. It is the way in which different causes, at different levels, interact with each other that ultimately determines whether or not an individual child becomes a child labourer.

Experience shows that a combination of economic growth, respect for labour standards, universal education and social protection, together with a better understanding of the needs and rights of children, help to bring a reversal to these different causes.

## **What is the ILO doing to combat child labour?**

Action to combat child labour by the Organization is rooted in the international labour standards of the ILO (primarily Conventions Nos 138 and 182), strengthened by the framework provided by the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work.

Promoting child labour standards and supervising their application in countries that ratified them was, for many years, the predominant ILO approach to the problem. Reflecting this work, the legislation of most countries now prohibits certain types of work for persons not having attained a minimum age. The ILO's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) was founded in 1992. By December 2001, it was operational in 75 countries, had 25 donors and managed a portfolio of active and planned projects in excess of \$200 million. Annual expenditure on technical cooperation projects reached over \$33 million in 2001. The number and range of IPEC's partners has also expanded over the years, and now includes government agencies, employers' and workers' organisations, private businesses, community-based organisations, NGOs, the media, parliamentarians, the judiciary, religious groups and, of course, children and their families. Almost 150 NGOs across the world have been working with IPEC through Action Programmes. It is the biggest single operational programme of the ILO.

IPEC's approach includes: determining the nature and extent of child labour; devising national policies and protective legislation; setting up mechanisms to provide in-country ownership and operation of national programmes of action; and creating awareness in communities and workplaces.

Having accumulated experience with comprehensive projects on a national or regional scale, the next step in the evolution of IPEC action takes the form of Time-Bound Programmes, which combines sectoral, thematic and area-based approaches, linking action against child labour into national development strategies, particularly those addressing poverty reduction, education and employment promotion

## **Who else is involved in efforts to combat child labour?**

The elimination of child labour has become an important concern to many international organisations over the past decade. Aside from work within the ILO's tripartite system, both Worker and Employer organisations have taken their own action concerning child labour. UN organisations such as UNICEF have their own child labour programme while organisations such as the WHO, IOM, UNESCO, UNFPA and UNDCCP involve themselves in projects which directly impact on child labour through their various specialisations.

Many other partners also have an important contribution to make in the fight against child labour: children and their families; international and national non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations, the media, universities and religious groups. NGOs are particularly active in the field, both on the local level, often in collaborative projects with IPEC and internationally through their vital role in advocacy.