

THE INTERNATIONAL LABOR  
ORGANIZATION'S POLICY ON CHILD  
LABOR:  
A CRITICAL REVIEW

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### **Abbreviations:**

ILO	International Labor Organization
IMWC	International Movement of Working Children
IPEC	International Program for the Elimination of Child Labor
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
UN(O)	United Nations (Organization)

## **I. Introduction**

As the main international organization concerned with labor issues in general, the ILO has, since its creation and especially in the last 30 to 40 years, inevitably also been focused on child labor questions. With its two main conventions on this subject and various other policies, the ILO lobbies for a complete and unconditional ban on child labor. This policy has provoked many critiques from various areas. They focus on the fact that abolishing child labor is not always the best means to achieve the goal of increased social justice. Other problems such as poverty, discrimination, the lack of social security and cultural differences are intimately linked and solutions are not easily found. There are also concerns that international child labor policies may be unjustly dominated by Western values and ideas at the expense of more representative worldviews (Myers, 2001: 38).

Before turning to these more controversial issues, I shall give a quick overview of the ILO, tracing its foundation, structure, goals, policies and its creativity in adjusting to the many changes that have taken place during its almost centenary existence.

In a later stage, I will stress the ILO policy on child labor. After reviewing the current situation of working children throughout the world, I shall deal with the two ILO conventions handling child labor, namely the Minimum Age Convention of 1973 and the Worst Form of Child Labor Convention of 1999. In analyzing these rather different conventions, we will observe an important shift in the policies concerning child labor. This is due to the evolution of the international consensus concerning children's rights and childhood in general, triggered by the newly created and vastly ratified UNCRC of 1989. These new developments have pushed the ILO to rethink its policy on child labor. It does so with the establishment of a new program concentrating exclusively on child labor issues: the IPEC Program.

Even though the ILO has been quick in adapting to exogenous changes, there still are many critical points raised by various people concerning its policies and actions on child labor. I will mention the difficulties to reconcile the theory (reflected in the Conventions) with the practice on the ground, the dangers of an unconditional ban on child labor, and finally, portray some of the views and arguments of working children's movements.

## **II. The ILO: What it is and what it does**

### **1. Foundation, Structure, Primary Goals and Policies**

Since its creation under the League of Nations in 1919, the ILO pursues “a vision based on the premise that universal, lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon decent treatment of working people”.<sup>1</sup> The ILO is an international organization which is devoted to advancing opportunities for working people to perform work in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity. Following its conviction that labor peace is essential to prosperity, the ILO promotes social justice and international human and labor rights.

The ILO is composed of 181 Member States<sup>2</sup> and is the only tripartite UN agency bringing together not only governments, but also employers and workers of its member states in common action to promote decent work throughout the world. Every state sends out four representatives: two government delegates, one employer representative and one worker representative. They gather in the General Conference which is the supreme deliberative organ and which defines and ratifies international standards of work either through conventions submitted by the member states to their respective authorities, or through recommendations providing the states with detailed guidelines in legislative matters.<sup>3</sup>

The ILO develops standards which affect child labor, disabled workers, discrimination in the work space, equality of treatment, freedom of association, human rights, social protection, pensions and the abolition of forced labor. Furthermore, the ILO controls the enforcement of existing conventions already transcribed into national legislation and provides technical assistance to member states in order to facilitate the adoption and application of international labor standards. The employer organizations and trade unions, as well as the governments of the member states, have the right to lodge formal complaints to the ILO.

As the ILO is concerned with labor conditions in general, it also became the main actor in tackling the issue of child labor on an international level.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.ilo.org/global/About\\_the\\_ILO/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/About_the_ILO/lang--en/index.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Status in December 2007

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.ilo.org/global/About\\_the\\_ILO/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/About_the_ILO/lang--en/index.htm)

## 2. Historical Development and Adjustments

*“If there is one lesson from eight decades of ILO history, it is that renewal, change and adaptation have been vital to its success. Born at a fleeting moment of hope, it has lived through the Depression and survived war” (ILO, 2006: 3).*

The ILO has indeed been able to adapt itself throughout history. It is the only international organization created after the First World War which has survived the Second World War and has continued its work under the newly established United Nations Organization. Conceived by and for the industrial countries in 1919, the ILO moved rapidly and creatively to accommodate an enormous increase in membership in the decades following World War II (see ILO, 2006). With a growing number of member states, triggered by the rapid process of decolonization, the ILO quickly grew into a universal organization.

Whereas originally, the standards focused on working conditions (8-hour day and 48-hour week, social security etc.), the conventions after World War II focalized on human rights (freedom of association, progressive elimination of forced labor and discrimination) and on more technical labor questions (see ILO, 2006). Regarding child labor issues, the ILO has taken up a new strategy in the struggle against it (after the Cold War and influenced by the UNCRC) through its IPEC Program. Moreover, in 1998, the Conference has adopted the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work advocating for the elimination of forced labor and discrimination, for freedom of association, and for the abolition of child labor. In order to put the latter goal into practice, the Conference has passed a new Convention on the prohibition and immediate elimination of the worst forms of child labor only one year later. We will discuss this Convention and the ILO policies on child labor in more detail in the following chapter.

### **III. ILO Policy on Child Labor**

#### **1. Working Children in the World: A quick Overview**

In its Global Report on Child Labor of 2006, the ILO estimates that there were about 317 million economically active children<sup>4</sup> aged 5 to 17 in the year 2004, of whom 218 million could be regarded as child laborers.<sup>5</sup> Of the latter, 126 million were engaged in hazardous work.<sup>6</sup> The corresponding figures for the narrower age group of 5 to 14 year-olds are 191 million economically active children, 166 million child laborers, and 74 million children in hazardous work. Nevertheless, as a result of the narrow ILO definitions and the incomplete data, we can assume that these figures only encompass a fraction of the working children in the world (see Liebel, 2007: 103).

In the course of this chapter, I will analyze the two core ILO Conventions referring to child labor and the influence of the UNCRC, before turning to the ILO-IPEC Program.

#### **2. The Two Core ILO Conventions on Child Labor and the UNCRC**

International political action against child labor is closely linked to international conventions, which are a form of treaty which is becoming legally binding for signing and ratifying nations and which is patronized by the UN system. As Myers explains, international conventions which deal with social matters (such as those of the type dealing with children's rights and child labor) are usually negotiated by professional bureaucrats and diplomats instead of experts, and they again balance the agendas of the different interested groups and institutions according to their relative power. Consequently, they incline towards being instruments of political rather than technical consensus, advised more by opinion than research, and thus, being more sensitive to interests rather than experience. As it is, they imply what states say they agree to do, but not necessarily what they are truly willing to do or what qualified experts would imagine should be done. Moreover, accession to social conventions is merely voluntary

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<sup>4</sup> "Economic activity" is a broad concept encompassing most productive activities undertaken by children, whether for the market or not, paid or unpaid, for a few hours or full time, on a casual or regular basis, legal or illegal, but it excludes chores undertaken in the child's own household and schooling (ILO, 2006: 6).

<sup>5</sup> "Child labor" is a narrow concept, excluding all those children aged 12 years and older who are working only a few hours a week in permitted light work and those aged 15 years and above whose work is not classified as "hazardous". This concept is based on the ILO Minimum Age Convention of 1973 (ILO, 2006: 6).

<sup>6</sup> "Hazardous work" is any activity or occupation that, by its nature or type, has or leads to adverse effects on the child's safety, physical or mental health and moral development (ILO, 2006: 6).

and there is no enforcement mechanism to oblige states to behave according to their engagements. “Countries can, and frequently do, pay little or no attention to high-minded conventions” (Myers, 2001: 44). This said, and even though social conventions may seem weak due to their lack of enforcement mechanisms, they have a powerful influence on policy by forming reference points for international debate and action.

As we have seen, the ILO is not primarily concerned with children’s rights and child labor. Nevertheless, the issue of child labor has become a major concern in the course of its history. One important goal on its agenda is the effective elimination of all forms of child labor, and this, on a global level (ILO, 2006). In this regard, two Conventions are of importance to us: The Minimum Age Convention for Admission to Employment (n° 138) of 1973 and the Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention (n° 182) of 1999. Furthermore, the UNCRC has also become a main global reference point for national and international policy regarding child labor. Together, these three conventions reflect competing and progressively changing notions of childhood and the role of work for children.

Let us review them and examine their provisions and the childhood models and values they embody.

### The ILO Minimum Age Convention (1973)

As Myers suggests, we have to keep in mind that the Minimum Age Convention was not intended to be just about children and to serve only their interests, but was also meant to protect labor markets and adult economic interests. Consequently, Convention n° 138 prohibits children from engaging in any economic activity (which is felt to be an exclusively adult domain) below certain specified minimum ages. A general minimum age for admission to employment is set at 15 and should in no case be below the age for finishing compulsory schooling.<sup>7</sup> There are possible exceptions for developing countries, which may, under certain conditions, temporarily set the minimum age at 14.<sup>8</sup> The minimum age for admission to any employment or work which is likely to jeopardize children’s health, safety or morals should not be done by anyone under the age of 18<sup>9</sup>, although those at least aged 16 may do so if properly protected and instructed.<sup>10</sup> Children between the ages of 13 and 15<sup>11</sup> (or in

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<sup>7</sup> Article 2§3, ILO Minimum Age Convention

<sup>8</sup> Article 2§4, *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Article 3§1, *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Article 3§3, *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Article 7§1, *ibid.*

developing countries between 12 and 14<sup>12</sup>) years old may do light work, as long as it does not threaten their health and safety, or hinder their education or vocational orientation and training.

The convention suggests a rather traditional view of children as helpless or potential victims needing adults to intervene on their behalf and not giving children a say in what happens to them (see Myers, 2001). As a result, this convention has met many resistances<sup>13</sup> within societies that have very different child-raising values (such as introducing children to work at an early age rather than excluding them from economic activities).

### The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)

The UNCRC was clearly conceived along the lines of Western notions of childhood, but is nevertheless more accommodating for diversity (see Boyden, 1997). It articulates principles and objectives rather than prescribing details, leaving more room for implementation in a way that is appropriate to the various member states' situations. In its article 32, the UNCRC prescribes that the government should protect children from work that is dangerous or might harm their health or their education, but does not prohibit parents from expecting their children to help out at home in ways that are safe and appropriate to their age. "By targeting only work that is detrimental to children, this approach fits poorer societies that are mostly agricultural [...], and in which children often must help secure the family's survival, much better than does the ILO blanket prohibition on children working" (Myers, 2001: 48). At the same time, in prohibiting work that is harmful to children, the UNCRC sets a realistic objective that can be reached even in the context of poverty.

While some provisions imply a more Western view of children needing close adult direction, others see children as more active and capable of independent initiative, needing adult partnership more than imposed supervision (Myers, 2001: 50).

In conclusion, we can say that the UNCRC adopts a more child-centered approach, leaving room for diversity. As a result, it has been widely and extensively ratified by 193 states<sup>14</sup> (the entire world's countries but two, Somalia and the United States of America).

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<sup>12</sup> Article 7§4, op. cit.

<sup>13</sup> In fact, for its first quarter-century, the Convention languished with fewer than 50 ratifications. However, by the end of the 1990's, the ratifications had almost doubled and today, it has been ratified by 150 states. The reason for this sudden rush may be that the ILO's IPEC Program insists on the states' beginning the ratification process of Convention n° 138 in order to receive its financial and technical assistance.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/ratification/11.htm>



### The ILO Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention (1999)

With the more attractive and more widely accepted UNCRC, the ILO stood to lose its international leadership on child labor issues. As a result, it initiated a new convention focusing the world attention with priority on the most intolerable forms of child labor. Convention n° 182 urges ratifying countries to “take immediate and effective measures to secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labor as a matter of urgency”<sup>15</sup>, targeting all forms of slavery, child prostitution, and the use of children in other illicit activities (such as the drug trade) and work that “is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children”.<sup>16</sup> This convention has come closer to expressing a genuinely global consensus on child labor than have Convention n° 138 and the UNCRC. As Ben White argues, it “appears [...] to represent an attempt to incorporate relativist principles in a global standard-setting exercise, and therefore perhaps to have side-stepped the issue of cultural relativism” (White, 1999: 141).

With 165 ratifications in only 9 years, Convention n° 182 has produced a broad international consensus on this issue and is widely accepted as such. The provisions leave ample room for various societies to work toward its implementation within their own concepts of childhood and child-raising views (see Myers, 2001: 52).

### **3. The International Program for the Elimination of Child Labor**

During the 1990’s, a “new strategy” emerged in ILO politics which is no longer limited to establish and propagate international legal norms on child labor, but also develops “scheduled action programs” in direct cooperation with the governments of selected countries (Lieber, 2001: 87). In this context, the ILO places special hopes in the IPEC Program which was established in 1992 with the “overall goal of the progressive elimination of child labor, which was to be achieved through strengthening the capacity of countries to deal with the problem and promoting a worldwide movement to combat child labor”.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Article 1, ILO Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention

<sup>16</sup> Article 3§d, *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.ilo.org/ipec/programme/lang--en/index.htm>

IPEC is the ILO's biggest single technical cooperation program with around 30 donors and operations in currently 88 countries.<sup>18</sup> It stimulates and facilitates practical action on the ground by its many in-country partners and also supports direct interventions. The number of its partners has grown over the years and "now includes employers' and workers' organizations, other international and government agencies, private businesses, community-based organizations, NGOs, the media, parliamentarians, the judiciary, universities, religious groups and, of course, children and their families".<sup>19</sup> There is a wide range of approaches applied to address child labor: advocacy, social mobilization, education and training, social protection and welfare, rescue and rehabilitation, monitoring and enforcement (ILO, 2002: xiii). They do research and consulting combining prevention, rescue and rehabilitation.

The elimination of child labor is IPEC's ultimate goal. It is believed that "child labor not only prevents children from acquiring the skills and education they need for a better future, it also perpetuates poverty and affects national economies through losses in competitiveness, productivity and potential income. Withdrawing children from child labor, providing them with education and assisting their families with training and employment opportunities contribute directly to creating decent work for adults".<sup>20</sup> While the goal remains the unconditional prevention and abolition of all forms child labor, more attention is now paid to the conditions of working children and the priority targets for immediate action are the worst forms of child labor defined in Convention n° 182.

To conclude, we gather that the ILO has come a long way and that it has been very creative in adapting to the new international settings. Its latest convention on child labor has met a global consensus and is widely supported today. The ILO now emphasizes more clearly that "poverty is the greatest single force which creates the flow of children into the workplace" (ILO, 1996c, n° 34 quoted in Liebel, 2001: 89) and aims at "a more equitable distribution of income and the development of human resources" (ILO, 1996c, n° 60 quoted in Liebel, 2001: 89). The organization now realizes that there is an urgent need for viable economic alternatives for families to be in place before children are withdrawn from labor. Efforts to combat child labor must be embedded in overall national economic and social policy frameworks. At present, the ILO also recognizes that the problems of child labor have no technical solution, that they must be resolved by agreement rather than formula and that they

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

must reflect the realities and cultural values of a given country (ILO, 1996c, n° 57 quoted in Liebel, 2001: 89).

Nevertheless, policy inconsistencies remain and the theory, no matter how well intended, may meet resistances and difficulties when put into practice. Let us now consider some critical voices on this subject.

#### **IV. Critique of the ILO Policy on Child Labor**

Despite all the efforts and the apparent international consensus that child labor needs to be eliminated, the fact remains that a very large number of children throughout the world continue to work and that many countries are having great difficulty in eliminating child labor. Children not only work in the Global South, but also increasingly in the Global North, albeit for very different reasons and under very different conditions (see Liebel, 2007).

The problem is that it is frequently, and mistakenly, assumed that all work performed by children is bad by nature. This view is often based on an idyllic, bourgeois model of childhood which originated in the European context of 19th century industrial revolution and which is often not suitable to other cultures and contexts. The causes of child labor are complex and simplifications have never brought adequate solutions.

Let us look at a few critical perspectives and views such as the gap between theory and the reality on the grass root level, the dangers of a complete ban on child labor, before concluding with the views and arguments of working children's movements on this issue.

##### **1. Theory of a Ban on Child Labor confronts Reality on the Ground**

The ILO was mandated to achieve “the abolition of child labor and the imposition of such limitations on the labor of young persons as shall permit the continuation of their education and assure their proper physical development” (quoted in Cunningham, 1999: 10). Consequently, the successive ILO conventions regulating the work of children did have a fundamentally Western perspective, regarding child labor in predominantly urban and industrial terms, and looking to the state for remedies (see Myers, 2001). This mostly European focus worked out fairly well during the first three or four decades of the ILO's existence, but became problematic with the entry of many developing countries into the

organization in the course of decolonization. Its legalistic approach seems anachronistic in most of today's developing countries where children are overwhelmingly employed in the agricultural sector, where social welfare laws have little or no impact on the everyday life of the poor, where labor inspection services have the tendency to be shaky and corrupt, and where it is extremely difficult to extend full primary education coverage to the rural and urban periphery areas where most working children live (see Myers, 2001).

Child labor plays an important role in the survival strategies of poor families. The decision to send your children to work is quickly made if the only alternative is starvation.

The elimination of child labor cannot be achieved in isolation but must be embedded in policies that back poor families and that guarantee good quality education for all children. As Anker suggests, "improving child development by eliminating child labor depends on the existence of viable options to non-hazardous work for children, and in particular on the availability of quality schools. In the absence of quality schools, it is questionable whether no work is better than non hazardous work for children's development, since non-hazardous work might provide children with some valuable life skills whereas idleness would not" (Anker, 2001: 89). Thus, we should bear in mind that under-resourced, poor quality education systems also play an important role in perpetuating child labor.

Nevertheless, education alone cannot solve the problem and poverty is the main, but not the only cause of child labor. Often, the origins are deeply rooted in the social and economic structures of a society or community. In many traditional African societies for instance, idle children who do not work are considered to be victims of parental neglect (see Myers, 2001). A combination of school and work activities for children is a possible and sometimes even desirable solution for many societies. Yet even though various studies have shown that the dominant form of school today is entirely alien to the experience of life and needs of working children and poor families (UNICEF, 1997: 58 quoted in Anker, 2001: 98), the ILO continues to cling to the idea of the overall beneficial effects of compulsory schooling.

Another important problem faced on the ground are policy inconsistencies, such as the existence of a gap between the school-leaving age and the minimum age for employment. Many children in rural areas in developing countries finish their primary education at the age of 10 or 11, well before even the reduced standard would give them a right to work.

We gather from this that rapid solutions and the well-intended patchwork measures, such as uncompromisingly banning child labor and introduce compulsory schooling, can, and frequently do, backfire if they are not embedded in overall measures which grant families with more options in their survival strategies.

## 2. Dangers of Banning Child Labor

*“I never saw ILO, but I’ve heard of them, and I felt the impact of their intervention in Bangladesh. It’s basically all the girl children who are working in the garment exporting factories. Because of the ILO intervention, thousands of girls have been forced to be sacked overnight and they have to end up in the street. Many of them were forced to enlist in prostitution in the open street and their conditions have been inhuman, sub-human. So the ILO intervention has worsened the situation in Bangladesh.”<sup>21</sup>*

An important and frequently overlooked danger of uncompromisingly eliminating child labor is that it pushes the work of children into a grey zone of illegality or injustice, with devastating consequences for the children themselves who become victims even more easily than before. A well documented case is the garment industry in Bangladesh where thousands of children were summarily dismissed from their jobs after the US Congress considered legislation prohibiting the importation of products made with the involvement of workers under the age of 15. Surprisingly, the fired children did not return to school. Instead, they moved from comparatively safe, well-paid garment factory employment into less remunerative and more dangerous forms of work (Boyden and Myers, 1995). Again, there is a strong need for follow-up measures and support for poor families in countries with no social protection mechanisms. The consequences of simplistically applying rich-country assumptions and remedies to poor-country situations without adequate attention to differences of social and economic context can have devastating effects. As Myers suggests, the “[...] effective protection of children from workplace abuse often depends less on preventing them from working, per the European and American solution unilaterally imposed on Bangladesh, than on protecting them in their work and creating more alternatives for economic and social advancement” (Myers, 2001: 42).

Let us now consider some views and arguments given by working children’s movements. After all, working children are the ultimate beneficiaries, or victims, of the measures decided upon on an international or national level and it might be enlightening to listen to some of their arguments in order to find appropriate solutions.

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<sup>21</sup> Comment by Salah Uddin, [www.pronats.de/fileadmin/pronats/documents/position\\_paper\\_child\\_work.doc](http://www.pronats.de/fileadmin/pronats/documents/position_paper_child_work.doc)

### 3. Working Children's Movements and their Arguments

*“The Government conducts raids on our work places as a part of its Child Labor Eradication Program and ‘rounds up’ working children like stray dogs. We are pulled out of work, taken away against our wishes and illegally confined. The actual raid experience is very traumatic for us. No one talks to us before hand to ask us if we need to be rescued. No one talks to us after the raid about what the next steps will be. [...] We are constantly told that we have to stop working and start going to school. But they do not realise that in our given situation of poverty and deprivation, work is a necessity. [...] In the raid process we the concerned children are not at all consulted. Our needs are not taken into consideration. The alternatives forced on us by the Government actually make our situations worse than before. [...]”<sup>22</sup>*

According to the ILO, there is a “growing consensus that children should be viewed as active partners in the worldwide movement against child labor” (ILO, 2006: xiii). This is the theory, but how does it look in practice?

As we listen to the voices of various working children's movements throughout the world, we witness a rather paternalistic pattern of thought which does not seem to take children's views into account nor treat them as individuals. Working children's movements demand the recognition of child workers and to be treated as valuable economical and social subjects.

They fight for child work in dignified and good conditions, to be respected and protected by the national laws and codes and not to be discriminated nor exploited for being done by children.<sup>23</sup> As mentioned in the Berlin Declaration of the IMWC, working children “expect from international child-rights and labor organisations, including ILO [...], to rethink their policies that promote the abolition of children's work. Such a position does not take into consideration the realities of working children and the viable alternatives to exploitative labor.”<sup>24</sup>

The critique is that the ILO Conventions on child labor maintain a negative view of work as something harmful and unacceptable for children. As a result of this perspective, working

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<sup>22</sup> Alternative Report by the National Movement of Working Children (NMWC) in India submitted to the Committee on the Rights of the Child in July 2003: <http://www.workingchild.org/protal2.htm>

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Dakar Declaration, Prep-com meeting of the IMWC, 1998 : [www.pronats.de/fileadmin/pronats/documents/position\\_paper\\_child\\_work.doc](http://www.pronats.de/fileadmin/pronats/documents/position_paper_child_work.doc)

children are regarded as outlaws or anti-social delinquents who need to be rehabilitated and reintegrated into society. They feel stigmatized and misunderstood. As Myers explains, “[...] the institutionalization of a particular Western model of childhood as the basis for global rights disenfranchises poor and working-class children – by far the world’s majority – by making their lives seem deviant, inferior or even pathological just for departing from an inappropriately imposed culture-biased norm” (Myers, 2001: 40).

Working children have the impression that participation only plays a marginal role or has a decorative function (Anker, 2001: 101), that there is no real dialogue and that the problems of working children are most often misunderstood or ignored. They want to be recognised as working children which they consider is the first step towards solving their problems. If their identity as working children is denied, then nothing will be done to solve the real problems that force them to work.

They also point to the positive effects of work, such as a means to meeting their survival needs and helping to support their families. They acquire valuable skills and training as well as profit from solidarity, pride and independence.<sup>25</sup> Work is a central element of many developing-country childhoods as well as an important means of teaching and socializing children (see Myers, 2001). Work can and does have very different impacts on children’s lives and development depending on how society constructs the meaning and value of the work in question. Even children in difficult and stressful work situations have been found to thrive surprisingly when they and the work they do are esteemed by family and community, and children in far less difficult and stressful work situations may become more vulnerable when they and their work are denigrated by others (see Boyden et al. 1998).

Again, we note that the child labor problematic is very complex. The ILO’s ultimate goal is increased social justice for all. Yet we have seen that decisions taken without consulting all the stakeholders can have the exact opposite effects. It seems to me that the only solution is an active dialogue with all concerned parties, including children.

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<sup>25</sup> Katmandu Declaration 2005, from the South and Central Asian Convergence of Working Children, 2005 : [www.pronats.de/fileadmin/pronats/documents/position\\_paper\\_child\\_work.doc](http://www.pronats.de/fileadmin/pronats/documents/position_paper_child_work.doc)

## V. Conclusion

The great difficulty of an organization such as the ILO which claims to be universal remains that many states adhere in theory to the conventions but then find it very difficult to implement them in practice. We have seen that trying to eliminate child labor without consulting all the concerned parties and without appropriate alternatives is not a viable solution. Governments have to ensure available and accessible options before passing legislation abolishing child labor. Effective child labor programs and projects need to assist poor families economically through income transfers, appropriate income generating schemes for adults and school stipends. There is also an urgent need for more flexibility in finding realistic solutions, such as combining school and work.

The ILO gives the impression to have learned from its past and has been very inventive in finding a common, realistic and desirable goal: the effective abolition of the worst forms of child labor. Nevertheless, the organization has set the goal to abolish all forms of child labor in the coming future. As we have seen, many critical voices have been raised in this regard. An unconditional ban on child labor is not a viable solution for many families throughout the world. Many children, for instance, have to work in order to be able to go to school and pay for their books, uniforms or transportation.

Education is essential and no child in the world should be denied its right to it, but the inflexibility of school hours and the miserable quality of schools frequently exacerbate the children's situation instead of improving it.

Moreover, countries in the Global South often reject Northern-influenced international child labor standards because the views of children and childhood implicit in such do not adequately fit with the realities of developing countries (see Boyden et al. 1998; White 1994, 1996; Woodhead 1998). Northern societies tend to rigorously separate childhood from adulthood (by keeping children dependent through adolescence and discouraging their participation in certain adult concerns such as economic maintenance of the family) whereas many Southern societies give more importance to family unity and solidarity (equipping their children to play mature roles by adolescence and including children in contributing to the family livelihood). The ILO's view of child labor as something ultimately bad and which should be eradicated as quickly as possible overlooks the fact that work, if carried out reasonably (no long hours, giving children enough time to rest and go to school and not



hazardous or jeopardizing their health, safety and morals), can also have positive effects on the development of children, teaching them valuable life skills.

In this context, we also witness an important (even though still marginal) movement of working children who speak up to say that they need or want to work. They want to have a say in matters that affect them; they claim better conditions and more options instead of inflexible measures that are not thought through and which oftentimes lead to the worsening of their already difficult situation.

Instead of ready-made and quick solutions, a continuous dialogue between all stake holders, including working children, is urgently needed in order to find the right answers to such a complex issue as child labor.

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