

Child labour is more than a children's issue

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The world community has consistently called for an end to the persistent exploitation of children. We at the Global March Against Child Labour have demonstrated our capacity to mobilise world-wide efforts and support to protect and promote the rights of millions of children.

The Global March is not just only about eliminating child labour. If one were to follow a service delivery model, perhaps it would be meaningful to talk of numbers--the number of children that get out of a child-labour status every year. The Global March seeks to eliminate child labour by questioning, attacking and changing the very systems that compel children to work at the global, regional and national levels.

Without changing these systems and without attacking them at their very roots, the existing numbers will decline but there will be new entrants to the child labour force almost daily. This underscores the importance of addressing the root causes of child labour and the poor quality and access to education within a broader poverty alleviation strategy.

Talking about international commitment, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which is unanimously ratified by almost all countries, brings together civil and political as well as economic, social and cultural rights of children in one instrument. Article 32 on protecting children from exploitative and harmful work is applicable to all children in all situations.

ILO Convention 138 on the Minimum Age of Employment calls for the elimination of child labour up to age of the completion of compulsory education and Convention 182 (1999) on the Worst Forms of Child Labour calls for immediate elimination of child labour in the worst forms such as children who are forced into bondage and slavery, hazardous occupations, armed conflict, trafficking and illegal activities.

The World Education Forum held in Dakar, Senegal, in April 2000 adopted six major goals for education, covering the attainment of Universal Primary Education (UPE) and gender equality, improving literacy and educational quality and increasing life-skills and expanding early childhood education programmes. These are to be achieved within 15 years ending 2015.

In September 2000, 189 heads of state and governments made a passionate commitment to meet the Millennium Development goals that include eradicating extreme poverty and

hunger, achieving universal primary education, promoting gender equality and empowering women, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensuring environmental sustainability, and developing a global partnership for development.

During September 1999, the World Bank group and the IMF came out with the initiative of nationally-owned participatory poverty reduction strategies to provide the basis of all World Bank and IMF concessional lending and for debt relief. This approach, building on the principles of the Comprehensive Development Framework, will be reflected in the development of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers by country authorities. There is the Fast Track Initiative by the World Bank following this.

All these recent developments provide a favourable climate for realising the rights of children. But in spite of this the latest estimate on global magnitude of child labour during May 2002 found that 246 million children – one in every six children aged 5-17 -- is involved in child labour; One in every eight children in the world – some 179 million children aged 5-17 – is still exposed to the worst forms of child labour, which endangers the child's physical, mental or moral well being. Of these 111 million are under 15 years of age and of these 8.4 million children are caught in unconditional worst forms of child labour including slavery, trafficking, debt bondage and other forms of forced labour, forced recruitment for armed conflict, prostitution, pornography and other illicit activities.

The three key processes affecting the future of the world, in particular our children, are the elimination of child labour, education For all and poverty alleviation.

It has been witnessed that in poor countries the affects of poverty and unemployment are dramatic. The child's very right to survival may be threatened by the parents' unemployment.

In addition to suffering severe economic hardships, families are disintegrating. The outcome includes increased child labour, rising drop-out rates and even juvenile delinquency. These issues are not fully captured in the poverty alleviation strategies.

The education sector has a great potential to contribute to the prevention and elimination of child labour, which should be an integral part of education policies worldwide. In addition to preventing child labour, the education sector can provide special measures to reintegrate children withdrawn from hazardous work into schools. Still, policies that focus exclusively on the education system without accounting for the economic environment of households and the general state of the labour market will not be sufficient to reduce child labour and achieve education for all over long run.

An anti-poverty, child-friendly strategy must pay greater attention to converge with other policies on education and the elimination of child labour. Education For All and the elimination of child labour should find a prominent focus in poverty alleviation programmes.

A multi-dimensional approach consisting of awareness building and consciousness raising, community participation, alternative and viable social economic rehabilitation, and enforcement of national and international legal instruments in relation to children and other similar plans is needed for linking the elimination of child labour with the overall poverty alleviation and education strategies. There is need for a synergy in policy planning and programmes that addresses these three vital issues that affect the lives of millions of children for a sustainable development.

The focus will also be to promote a better cooperation and understanding between policy planners, children and advocacy groups working on children's behalf. We adults have a commitment to provide all children of this world with an environment for their full and harmonious development to lead a life in the spirit of peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity.

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