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GLOBALIZATION AND THE CHILD LABOUR PROBLEM

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GLOBALIZATION AND THE CHILD LABOUR PROBLEM¹

Abstract

Globalization has many implications for children's lives, their involvement in work, and the ways in which we think about these issues. This paper considers in turn the implications of globalization of lifestyles, of adult ideas about childhood, of enforcement of standards, and of ideas about children's rights. It notes the growing divergence between views deriving from conceptions of children's rights and "orthodox" policies and campaigns on the child labour issue, and the need to look for common ground. The overriding aim should be to combat the exploitation of children, rather than to exclude them from the labour market.

1 INTRODUCTION

The 1990s have been an interesting and challenging, but also a confusing time for those working in the field of child labour. It is said that child labour is on the increase in the world; in some countries (particularly the former socialist countries, and others most severely hit by structural adjustment) this may be the case, in others it may be more that the nature of child labour is changing, and child labour becomes more visible as it moves out of homes and family enterprises into wage-employment and onto the streets. It is also a time in which ideas about child labour itself are changing. The results of recent, in-depth research challenge

¹This essay is based on earlier versions presented at the International Working Group on Child Labour Resource Persons Meeting, Copenhagen, March 1995; the ILO-IPEC National Programme Coordinator's Meeting, Geneva, September 1995; the Child Workers in Asia 4th Regional Consultation, Bangkok, October 1995 and the Seminar on Social Responsibility and Protectionism, The Hague, March 1996. Thanks to Mike Edwards for helpful comments on this version.

received wisdom about the employment of children, in both the South and the North.² There are new ideas on children's rights, and new proposals for action and intervention, some of them highly controversial. At the same time international pressures and NGO ideas often seem to be going in opposite directions: NGOs tell us (as does the UN Convention on Children's Rights) to listen to children, and may go further to tell us to appreciate the work that children do and to support their efforts for better working conditions, moving away from 'simple' solutions like banning children's employment. Meanwhile, international pressures tell us to do just that, and threaten countries with the loss of export markets unless they remove children from the labour market.

This makes it very difficult for those who work in the field. What does a national trade union activist, used to campaigning for no-compromise enforcement of prohibitions on children's employment, do when confronted by a local NGO activist trying to unionize working children, or when confronted by the idea -- increasingly common among NGOs -- that children's economic contribution to society should not be condemned but rather be appreciated and supported? What does a national or international campaigning organization, trying to promote trade sanctions and consumer boycotts of child-labour products in the export sector, do when confronted with evidence that the export sector is a preferred sector for children's employment, that it offers better wages, work conditions and possibilities of improvement than other available jobs?

This essay looks at the problem of child labour, and various attempts to address it, in global perspective. When we talk of globalization in relation to child labour, we normally think of children in the South producing for export to the North -- South Asian children making carpets, children all over the world making garments, etc. -- and the attempts of various campaigns and lobbies to put a stop to this through trade sanctions, boycotts or other pressures. Although I will discuss this issue later, globalization has many other implications for children's lives and their involvement in work, and the ways in which we think about these issues. Four main aspects of globalization are discussed in turn.

2 GLOBALIZATION AND LIFESTYLES

This aspect is the one that is least often mentioned, and the least studied. The globalization of mass media and lifestyles is turning the world's children (as well as the world's adults) into a new generation of consumers (or would-be consumers) of a wide range of ideas,

²For example Reynolds (1991) on Zimbabwe, Nieuwenhuys (1994) on south India, Johnson et al. (1995) on Nepal, Neve & Renooy (1987) on the Netherlands, Lavalette et al. (1995) on Britain.

products and life styles. As a precondition of their survival and expansion, free-market based strategies of economic growth require not only new forms of production and producers, but also new forms of consumption and consumers, and the world's children and youth are an important part of both sides of this process. How many of the world's children have never heard of Coca Cola, Barbie, Michael Jackson, Nike shoes, the Sony Walkman, Marlboro cigarettes or Macdonalds, or some national product modelled on these?

Ideas on life styles now travel around the world very quickly, reaching not just the metropolitan cities and élites, but also the villages and shanty-towns of the world's poor. All over the world, media and peer pressures make it increasingly important for children not just to have sufficient food and clothing, time for recreation etc. but to have certain (non-traditional) kinds of clothes, ornaments and other possessions, to consume certain kinds of foods and beverages, and to engage in certain kinds of recreational activity which are considered to be the attributes of 'proper' people. The majority of the world's children, of course, do not have access to all of these things, but this does not mean that they are not aware of them or that they are free of the need for cash to buy them. Through globalization the children of the relatively poor in all societies are being made acutely conscious of their "relative poverty", that is, the desire of the relatively poor to consume goods or to share lifestyles that are generally the attributes of the relatively better-off. This is in turn one important and growing (but not of course the only) cause of the decision of children, with or without their parents' approval or consent, to enter the labour market, in search of cash (White 1994: 868f.). We can thus speak of a new kind of child labour: alongside the cases that are better known and publicized -- of children forced into labour by parents or by unscrupulous labour recruiters -- there are many children, all over the world, who simply decide that they need to earn money.

These developments have many implications, both analytical and practical. Analytically, they undermine the explanatory models of child labour underlying much conventional policy discourse on child labour, based on the outdated assumption that "the household allocates the child's time" (for example, between domestic and market work, between work and school) so as to maximize the perceived gain (private return) to the household (Grootaert & Kanbur 1995: 191, 196). The discussion of child labour in the World Bank's latest World Development Report [1995: 72-3] repeats the same, flawed analysis. Practically, these developments mean that the world of child labour is becoming a more complex and heterogeneous one, and in turn that simple solutions are unlikely to succeed. They also mean that the issue and problem of child labour may change, but will not disappear; and indeed it has not disappeared, even in countries where access to education up to age 15 or so is virtually universal and where virtually no children can be described as "absolutely" poor.

3 THE GLOBALIZATION OF ADULT IDEAS ABOUT CHILDHOOD

Globalization also involves a certain degree of homogenization of adult ideas about what a proper childhood should be like, what kinds of activity children should be encouraged to undertake or compelled to undertake on the one hand, and discouraged or prohibited from undertaking on the other. This is what Boyden (1990) has called the "globalization of childhood" itself. This process of course began a long time ago; specifically concerning the employment of children, it is reflected in the well-known ILO Convention (No 5 of 1919) on the Minimum Age for Admission of Children to Industrial Employment. Since that Convention, for the last 75 years child labour legislation in most countries has generally been a response not to local conditions and pressures, but to international pressures and global standard-setting. Through this and subsequent conventions and recommendations, there has become enshrined an idea of childhood in which -- whatever else they may be doing with their time -- children up to the age of 15 or so should not be "employed" (not necessarily that they should not "work"), and that they should be obliged to attend school full-time. Compulsory full-time education, and the banning of children from the labour market, have thus become a sort of fixed double pillar and standard rallying-cry for campaigns of many kinds by Trade Unions, many (but not all) NGOs, and some academics (e.g. Weiner and Noman 1995). However, it is becoming increasingly clear that these notions are out of tune with the realities of life.

First, they are out of tune with the realities of history. Even with the achievement of near-universal school enrolment in many European countries in the early part of this century, child employment was not 'eradicated' but rather was transformed, so that large numbers of children were combining school attendance with part-time employment, as they do today. In the Netherlands, for example, in the late 1980s three-quarters of all schoolchildren aged 13 and above were found to be regularly employed in the commercial sector, with an average working-week of 17.5 hours (Neve & Renooy 1987); in the United Kingdom recent studies also confirm that regular, paid employment outside the family is part of the experience of the majority of children by the time they are 14-15 years old; one-fifth of them had entered paid employment at age 10 or younger, and 90 percent had never obtained the work permit which legislation requires (Lavalette et al. 1995).

Secondly, they are out of tune with the realities of life in the countries of the South today. When so many children have to work in order to afford to go to school (whether 'compulsory' or not); when so many others find existing formal education so uninteresting, so remote from their needs, and so inadequate in opening better opportunities in the labour market; when children are used to supporting themselves and others; when others are eager to enter labour markets at an early age, given the obvious and widespread youth underemployment which they see around them, or simply because the whole world is telling

them to adopt global lifestyles -- the vision of rigidly enforced prohibition on employment and rigidly enforced compulsory full-time education is simply unrealistic as a goal, even if some may think it desirable.

Of course, this gap between 'vision' and 'reality' did not matter very much in the old days when most countries made little or no efforts to enforce child labour legislation (or if they did, only in certain limited sectors) and certainly did not put pressure on each other to do so. The whole picture has changed, however, with the emergence of what we may call the international lobby campaigning against child labour.

4 GLOBALIZATION OF THE ENFORCEMENT OF STANDARDS

In recent years, powerful lobbying organizations have been promoting various forms of trade sanctions or consumer boycotts against the import of products made with child labour: through the GATT and its much-debated 'social clause', through regional interest organizations such as the European Union or the NAFTA, through the Harkin Bill in the USA, and through campaigns supported by trade unions and NGOs to boycott specific products (such as South Asian carpets) unless they are certified 'child labour free'. These efforts focus exclusively on child labour in the export sector, which represents a very small percentage of child employment in most countries, and with some exceptions (the South Asian carpet industry may be one) is not the sector in which the worst working conditions and abuse of children are to be found. There has been so much attention to these issues recently it is necessary to remind ourselves of some basic facts about child labour.

What is the most common form of child labour in the world? Although we read in the media mainly about children working under conditions approaching slavery in workshops and factories producing for export markets, the most common form of children's work, world-wide, is not in the 'commercial' sector at all, but the unpaid labour of children working for their parents, whether in housework, the family farm or some other family enterprise. This form of child labour is scarcely touched by international or national child labour regulations, but it is often to escape this form of unpaid work that children enter the labour 'market'.

This is a good example of the way in which children's views about work are different from the views of 'society' as expressed in national legislation, international conventions and other interventions aiming to combat 'child labour', which assume that working for one's parents, at home, without pay is more acceptable than working for others, outside the home, for money; and also that work in small-scale enterprises (like family businesses or peasant farms) is less harmful than work in large-scale enterprises (like factories or plantations). For many children however, working in a factory or other large-scale enterprise comes high on

the list of preferred kinds of work, while working at home occupies a very low place. This is often particularly important for girls, in societies which in varying degrees and in various ways confine girls much more than boys to a secluded life at home. The recent experience of children in Bangladesh's export garment industries provides an important example of these contradictions: the kinds of children's work which intervention agencies define as the 'problem' represent a solution to other important problems children face, particularly girls.

"Please do not dismiss us": child workers in the garment export industry of Bangladesh³

In the early 1990s Bangladesh's export garment industries employed about 750,000 persons, about 10 percent of whom were under 14 years of age; more than 70 percent of both adult and child workers were female. Girls began work generally at 11 years of age, and worked not in the sewing or ironing sections but in 'lighter' tasks such as cutting loose threads from finished garments, turning collars and passing garment parts from one operator to another. Although economic necessity was obviously one important reason for seeking factory work, it was not the only one; the children, especially girls, were eager to learn a skill that would facilitate secure employment in adulthood, and regarded work in the garment factories as a unique way to gain experience and income with relative safety and social acceptability; they considered factory work to be far more useful, productive and prestigious than the drudgery of work within the home.

In early 1993, many garment manufacturers began mass and abrupt dismissals of their child workers, under pressure from the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association which feared international boycott of their products (and in particular, a bilateral boycott by the USA) if they did not conform with the Bangladesh Factories Act which prohibits employment below the age of 15; it is estimated that up to 55,000 children lost their jobs in this way. An ILO-UNICEF follow-up study of several hundred of these children has shown quite clearly the negative consequences of their dismissal. Not one of the dismissed children had gone back to school; half of them had found other occupations (mainly in informal-sector and street activities, including domestic service, brick-chipping, selling flowers on the streets and prostitution) but with greatly reduced earnings, while the other half were actively seeking work. The children still working in garment factories had better nutrition and better health care than those who had been dismissed.

³ Information in this section is taken from Boyden & Myers (1994).

In 1994, about 100 child garment workers published a petition pleading their employers not to dismiss them, but instead "to allow us to continue our light work for 5-6 hours a day and give us an opportunity to attend school for 2-3 hours a day". The fact (although it may be an uncomfortable one for many people) is that working in the export garment industry is not at all the worst thing that can happen to a Bangladeshi child. For girls, the expulsion from factory labour is particularly disastrous; in the absence of adequate basic education or any formal skill-training opportunities, both children and their parents regard garment factory work as a viable form of apprenticeship, offering the possibility of comparatively secure and high-status employment; girls and women have had to fight social stigma to enter the labour market in the first place.⁴

5 GLOBALIZATION OF IDEAS OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

What is the importance of the 1989 UN Convention on Children's Rights (which many more countries have ratified than ILO Convention 138 on Child Labour) in relation to the problem of child labour? As Ennew (1995: 23-4) reminds us:

The crucial and novel aspect is not Article 32 which is designed to protect children from economic exploitation, but Articles such as 12 and 15 [those establishing the rights of children to freedom of expression and association, BW] which add ... participation to the range of children's rights. Thus children ... are redefined as capable social actors, rather than deficient pre-adults with rights to provision and protection. This ... opens the possibility for their voice to be heard.

In fact of course, many governments which have signed the Convention do not give rights to free expression and association in law and/or practice to their adult citizens, let alone to children. But it is not only in government circles that the voice of children is not yet very much heard. Most other circles concerning themselves with child labour issues (including international organizations, trade unions and NGOs) behave similarly. There are of course some important exceptions. ACTIONAID's study Listening to Smaller Voices is built on the

⁴The subsequent (1995) agreement between the BGMEA, ILO and UNICEF for a new programme which will offer up to 40,000 children a cash allowance and free schooling for leaving the factories, even if it can be implemented only solves part of the problem; nowhere in the agreement is it specified that children will, after enrolling in school until the age at which they may legally be employed, be either re-admitted to the factory jobs which they had been persuaded to leave or assisted in finding alternative employment.

idea that "development initiatives should build on the capacities and strengths of boys and girls, rather than focusing on their weaknesses", and that "children should be involved in planning, implementing and evaluating actions taken for their welfare" (Johnson et al. 1995: 65). These views (based on a detailed, "child-centred" study in Nepal) are reflected in a more general way in the new journal NATS: Working Children and Adolescents International Review which announces its basic principle as "to enforce the growing active participation of children in society ... as active instead of passive partners" (Cussianovich et al. 1995: 7).

These views are on the one hand exciting and encouraging (and I think basically correct, though some may see them as over-idealistic), but at the same time highlight one disturbing aspect and unresolved problem on the child labour front: the growing divergence between these views (which derive from a conception of children's rights) and 'official' or 'orthodox' policies, whether ILO Conventions or Trade Union policies and campaigns. One side resolutely insists on the removal of children from work; the other, adopting the children's-rights approach, aims to combat the exploitation of children rather than excluding them from the labour market, and thus argues for the 'empowerment' of children in the workplace and society 'from below', supported by protective measures 'from above'. Here, there is clearly a need to look for some common ground. Where to begin?

6 COMBATTING THE EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN

The Bangladeshi children's petition offers a useful pointer to all those concerned with child-labour issues. The overriding aim of local and international efforts should be to combat the exploitation of children, rather than to exclude them from the labour market. Such a starting-point implies that we should not support international, bilateral or consumer boycotts and sanctions against products made with child labour, so long as the target of such campaigns is to remove children from employment rather than supporting efforts to improve their conditions of work.

This is not a question of being against boycotts, sanctions or social clauses as such, or on principle (for example on the grounds that one must not interfere with the workings of the 'free market'). On the contrary: questions of labour conditions, labour relations and labour rights (of both children and adults), like all human rights questions, are much too important to be left to the free market, and should be the objects of active intervention as a necessary condition for progress towards a just labour market. It is another necessary aspect of globalization that consumers should have the right to know about the conditions under which goods are produced (whether in their own country, or at the other end of the world) and to make informed choices based on that knowledge. But any boycott actions or international sanctions must first, select the right target; and second, ensure that the objective is one with

which the 'target group' (in this case, exploited working children) can agree.

What is the target of the sanctions and consumer actions now being proposed? Most demand that products should be certified completely 'free of child labour'. This is the case, for example, in the 'Rugmark' campaign initiated recently by the South Asian Coalition on Child Servitude in collaboration with various European and American NGOs and Trade Union Federations, and with the support of various international organizations; only carpets made without the use of child labour will be eligible for the Rugmark. Similarly with efforts towards bilateral or multilateral trade sanctions; Senator Harkin in the USA has campaigned for many years to ban the import of products made with child labour, and the European Parliament will be asked to approve a similar measure.

The target of such campaigns, then, is not the bonded labour of children, or other forms of near-slavery; it is not to reduce children's working hours, to ensure that they are not engaged in dangerous work, or to provide them with better pay, with access to education, with the rights to associate and organize (if these were the targets, it might make good sense to support such campaigns). The target is the complete removal of children from the labour market, generally up to the age of 15 years. Even if this were possible (which is doubtful), it is not necessarily desirable, nor is it a goal which children themselves share.

Not surprisingly, many organizations with a history of struggle against child labour do not support these actions. Anti-Slavery International, while supporting product-labelling that identifies items confirmed to be "free of child labour" and supporting the Rugmark campaign with some reservations, has resisted calls for trade sanctions and warns that "implementing trade sanctions may salve the conscience of consumers in the 'North', but ultimately may not be in the best interests of the children involved" (1995: 3). The South Asia Regional Office of Save the Children-UK also argues in a briefing paper that "the current efforts by NGOs, governments and industry to make some cosmetic changes like fixing 'child labour free' labels on carpets and garments ... without doing anything to improve the overall well-being of children at work, will be a great mistake. Is the ban on child labour likely to benefit the children? It is more likely that children dismissed from work will, in fact, look for work elsewhere, instead of going to school, for their first concern will be to find an alternative source of income" (Poudyal 1994: 13-14); and the ILO took a similar position in its testimony before the US Department of Labour: "a picture is emerging which would warn against ... taking action without paying due regard to the cultural, social and economic context in which the problem is embedded, and its likely effects on the children concerned. Unless these factors are taken into account when designing child labour programmes, the risk is that hardship for poor families and their children could be increased" (Stoikov 1993: 3). This is of course what happened in the case of the Bangladesh export garment industry described above. There are better ways to improve the conditions of working children's lives.

in ways that are acceptable to children, which can be campaigned for by children themselves, by local communities and organizations, and by external efforts at national and international level.

7 CHILD WORK - CHILD LABOUR REVISITED

All these ideas may be interesting and comfortable for intellectuals or idealists, but what about the equally compulsive argument that there are, certainly, cases of child labour so abusive that the children simply need to be removed from work: bonded, kidnapped or enslaved children in forced labour, children in prostitution, etc. While the rescue and rehabilitation of children in these intolerable situations is a priority, such efforts should go much further. Since most of these situations involve the violation of numerous laws other than minimum-age legislation -- slavery, kidnapping, debt-bondage, physical and sexual abuse of children are criminal offences in most or all countries, and not only for children -- these are instances where investigative journalists, politicians and NGOs can usefully give the case wide publicity, to force communities, government and police into action and to ensure that those responsible go to jail.

But what about the rest, the kinds of work in which probably 95 percent of the world's working children are involved? Here we come to my last point, which concerns the need to develop a more differentiated approach to child labour problems, capable of addressing many different kinds of problems associated with the employment of children. Although many are rightly tired of the 'child labour/child work' issue, the failure of agencies (including the ILO) to confront it squarely continues to be an obstacle to effective action. It is impossible to draw a clear and unambiguous line between 'child work' (the more acceptable forms of children's work, which are relatively unharmed and in cases may even be beneficial) and 'child labour', the unacceptable, exploitative and harmful forms of children's work, a 'social evil'.⁵ Most attempts to draw such a line are either too general, vague and circular to be of use, or if they try to be concrete and specific, are contradictory and illogical, and out of line with the views of children. The term 'child labour' itself has over the years become laden with such emotional connotations, and with such a long institutional history, that it might be best to scrap it completely from future discussions.⁶

⁵Helpful discussions here are Ennew (1994: Ch. 2) and Bequele and Myers (1995: Ch. 1).

⁶The case for abandoning the term 'child labour' is strengthened by the fact that 'child labour' and 'child work' as distinct terms in English language are simply untranslatable into most of the world's languages.

Any attempt to make a simple dichotomy between neutral 'work' and detrimental 'labour' -- whether for children or adults -- is likely to be too crude. More useful perhaps is to think of a continuum of child work situations, from 'worst' to 'best', from the least to the most tolerable forms of work. Such a continuum would begin at one end with 'intolerable' forms of child work -- those which in any circumstances cannot be tolerated, which are not susceptible to efforts at 'humanization' and improvement, and for which the only solution is the removal or 'rescue' of the children involved. Next are forms of child work which in their present form are hazardous and detrimental, but which can potentially be made safer and less harmful through efforts 'from above' (e.g. legislation) and 'from below' (popular pressure), can potentially be combined with school or continuing education. Then come 'neutral' kinds of work which in themselves are neither particularly harmful, nor particularly beneficial to children; and finally a category of 'positive' or 'beneficial' forms of children's work.

This does not of course solve any problems in itself, but it does help us to think more carefully what is that makes certain kinds of work more or less problematic for children, and in turn whether there is a feasible possibility to address and overcome those problems. Is it, for example: the physical nature of the work itself, which makes it unhealthy or dangerous? Or what is foregone as a result of work -- for example because of long working hours which bar children from access to (or sufficient) education, recreation and social life? Or the work relationship, which makes it 'unfree' and/or exploitative? Or, as often happens, a combination of more than one of these?

It is probably not possible to develop a set of clear, objective and unambiguous global criteria by which to distinguish between 'intolerable', 'detrimental', 'neutral' and 'positive' forms of children's work. This may cause problems at the international level (for example, in discussions on minimum standards for incorporation in social clauses) but in practice it can be achieved more easily at local level, as Bequele and Myers have recently argued:

Experience shows that questions of this sort have no purely technical solution What is important is that concrete, feasible decisions be made about which child work problems require the most urgent attention, and that these decisions enjoy at least a modicum of social credibility and legitimacy. Fortunately, the task of designating children at high risk usually turns out to be easier in practice than in theory ... it is a question more successfully lived through in practice than intellectually agonized over beforehand (Bequele & Myers 1995: 26-7)

In conclusion, then: efforts to combat the exploitation of children, world-wide, require a combination of steps. There are some cases of severely dangerous work, or abuse and exploitation of children (nearly always involving some degree of forced labour) where removal and rehabilitation is the only feasible solution -- where (for those who find the terms still useful) there is no possibility of transforming 'child labour' into 'child work'. For the

great majority of child workers, however, the priority should not be to 'remove' but to 'improve': to transform children's employment from more to less detrimental, from full-time (or in many cases, over-time) to part-time, from harmful to neutral or even to beneficial. New roles in the labour market may need to be promoted for children (or, as in the case of the garment industry, defended); this may mean making it easier, not harder, for children (particularly girls) to have access to paid work outside the household. Since many children who wish to enter or continue school must also work to support themselves or their families, or to pay school costs, efforts are needed to adapt school hours to the needs of children who work, and likewise to adapt working-hours to allow the combination of work with formal or informal education: better work opportunities for those in school, and better school for those who work. Girls will continue to suffer discrimination both in education and in the labour market until societies place greater value on the kinds of work that women and girls do. Children in the labour market must be incorporated in efforts to achieve better working conditions, and trade unions should support these efforts rather than insisting that they should not be working. Children should have at least the same rights as adults, and maybe additional rights too. Paradoxically, it will probably be much easier to achieve such improvements for children in formal-sector employment and in the commercial sector generally (those kinds of juvenile employment which are banned in most labour laws), than for those working in informal-sector occupations and particularly those in the isolated conditions of domestic work (whether in their own homes or as domestic servants). These 'hidden' forms of child labour, in the end, represent the most difficult challenge of all.



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