

# From Exploitation To Education

## Global March Position on Child Labour and Education

*"The Global March Against Child Labour is a movement to mobilise worldwide efforts to protect and promote the rights of all children, especially the right to receive a free, meaningful education and to be free from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be damaging to the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development."*

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### **Every Child's Equal Rights**

No other human rights abuse is as wide spread and long-ignored as child labour. Child labour was recognised as a worldwide problem when the first comprehensive international convention on this issue came into force in 1970s. However, there has been no substantial reduction in the number of children involved in the exploitative work despite all international and national legal provisions since then.

By a wide international consensus and by the definition of one of the most accepted international conventions, **Child labour refers to any work that interferes with the completion of a child's education, or is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children by its nature or circumstances of the work.**

While the definition of child labour usually only involves labelling the types of work and children involved in workplace, child labour has to be understood not only as a problem faced by individual children, but also as a system engraved in society perpetuating poverty, social evil, inequity, and unfair economic and social norms. Often poverty is believed to be the major cause of child labour but the fact that child labour causes and perpetuates poverty is little known. Children are not the cause of child labour but are victims of inadequate public and economic policy and ill-managed social systems that suppress the most vulnerable in society.

Education can give knowledge and skills that empower people economically and socially; on the other hand, a lack of access to education can deepen poverty, widen inequity and take away the opportunity to live. The education system, if it is manipulated as history has seen in some cases, can create a society where only a few with wealth and power benefit, while the rest – the poor and voiceless are left chained at the bottom of social strata. It is not surprising to find a large number of child labourers come from deprived sections of society.

*"From Exploitation To Education"* – this simple but powerful statement has been the underlying motto of the Global March for the last 7 years. For the last half a decade, since the march set out on its journey in 1998, the Global March has built one of the largest worldwide networks in protection of children's rights to education and in the fight against child labour. The Global March has brought together the unlikeliest of partners

on a common platform, including NGOs, trade unions, teachers, children and individuals, across all continents and ensured that they all work towards a common mission.

The linkage between child labour and education, though explicitly defined, has not been applied at a policy level either by the international donors or by the developing countries' governments. Education as a key to ending child labour must come into the centre stage of child labour discussions, mainly because in the past child labour policy has long been based on a biased notion that until unless poverty is eradicated, child labour would prevail, and therefore while poverty exists, the children must be protected in the workplace. This has resulted in certain stakeholders implementing parallel systems of non-formal education, where child labourers are receiving part-time education while they continue to work; or, worse, to supporting the unionisation of child labourers to further deprive them of the rights as children. These approaches differentiate the rights of children of poor families from those of the privileged ones, in the name of their survival. This paper will further argue that such approach is inadequate and contradictory.

Whilst poverty still remains as a reason for children being forced into child labour, recent studies suggest that poverty is not merely a causative factor, but also a result of child labour. Other factors contributing to child labour and more widely to its causes, including failing education system, have to be understood and incorporated in wider approaches in ending child labour. Each and every child, without being pre-labeled as a child labourer, poor, or socially excluded, must enjoy an equal right to be free from economic exploitation and to receive free, formal education of good quality.

### **Quality Education As a Birthright**

Every child is born with equal rights. The rights of each human being are non-negotiable and cannot be altered by economic and social status of individuals. When the right to quality education is genuinely considered a fundamental right, which builds the foundation of one's life, there must not be a debate that any government is too poor to provide education, or to say that some children, who cannot afford education, can be excluded from their obtaining their rights.

Only when national governments and the international community realise that their policy and subsequent actions must be based on the fact that quality education is a fundamental and non-negotiable right of every child, can education be guaranteed for all and be a source of building an equal society. The current policy, which gives space for creating parallel systems of education and deprives currently working or potential child labourers from mainstream education, must be altered to respect equal rights of all children.

### **Frameworks Defining the Actions From Exploitation To Education**

The Global March relies on 3 main international legal instruments as framework of our policy and actions: ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour; ILO Convention 138 on the Minimum Age of Employment; and the Dakar Framework of Action and its Education for All goals.

Convention 182 calls on the signatory countries to take immediate action for eliminating the worst forms of child labour, including, children used in armed conflicts, child trafficking, child prostitution and pornography, children used to commit criminal act such as drug peddling, bonded labour and slavery, and any other work that is likely to harm health, moral and safety of a child by circumstance and nature of work. No child under the age of 18 years old can be involved in work in above categories.

The Global March applauds ILO 138 Minimum Age Convention for its emphasis on the value of education as a concrete factor in the elimination of child labour. The Convention stipulates that the permissible age of entry into employment "shall not be less than the age of completion of compulsory schooling and, in any case, shall not be less than 15 years." (C138, 2.3). The critical link between education for all and the elimination of child labour should be similarly recognised and implemented in all policy and action on either subject.

ILO Convention 138 allows children aged between 13 and 15 to engage in light work, provided that the work is "(a) not likely to be harmful to their health or development; and (b) not such as to prejudice their attendance at school, their participation in vocational orientation or training programmes approved by the competent authority or their capacity to benefit from the instruction received" (C138, 7.1). It should be recognised that child labour in cases described as acceptable by the Convention can still be harmful if it interferes with a child's ability to participate in his or her education to the fullest possible extent. Attendance at school is not the only factor towards ensuring participation in quality education. The international community must act to ensure that every child has the opportunity to perform to his or her full potential. Every child must be able to learn without undue distractions or duress from work.

The Dakar Framework of Action was agreed upon at the World Education Forum in Senegal, in April 2000, by 181 governments to place education as one of the top priorities in the world's political agenda. At Dakar, the global community promised that no country will fail to meet the goal of giving all children education by the end of 2015 due to lack of resources. This commitment is reaffirmed by the Millennium Development Goals and reflected in the Education for All (EFA) goals.

Since the establishment of the EFA goals, there has been slow but steady progress. One of the most significant was the establishment of a Fast Track Initiative (FTI), initiated by the World Bank as part of a Global Initiative – a mechanism to collect and monitor the funding flow for financing EFA goals. Through the FTI, donor countries financially support the developing countries, which have come up with national action plans to implement EFA goals within a set timeframe. Some of the donor countries have already committed to contributing funds for the FTI.

However, the Dakar Framework of Action lacks a specific vision to link strategies to end child labour as an important component, and as a major obstacle, to achieving EFA goals. A better inter-agency cooperation to achieve EFA goals, beyond the mandates of the World Bank and UNESCO, could make sure that the Dakar's goal does not stand on its own and is complimented with specific measures to bring all child labourers and out-of-school children to formal schooling.

These three international instruments give a clear policy framework to the Global March's actions to tackle child labour and to ensure education for all as a key strategy in its elimination. The Global March also supports the principle and spirit of the Convention on the Rights of the Child as an overhauling guideline of the fundamental rights entitled to every child. The Millennium Development Goal also has incorporated the 2015 goal for ensuring primary education for all children and must bring together the elimination of child labour and education for all in an overall poverty reduction strategy.

### **Economics of No Child Labour**

Even from a purely economic point of view, ensuring basic education for all is the most direct and cost-effective way of eliminating child labour; furthermore, the elimination of child labour is a pre-requisite for any country's fast economic development. It has been estimated that if countries in South Asia and Africa had been as successful in raising enrolment rates in basic education, they would have achieved much faster economic growth of 3% per year instead of the actual 1.8% per year in GNP per capita<sup>1</sup>.

Some have argued that child labour is a necessary evil and that some children must be allowed to work to support their poor families. Not only is this directly contradictory to the rights of the child but it also has a negative impact on the country's economy. Often, children are preferred as workers because their docile nature makes it easier for the employers to exploit them and make them work for longer hours, for meagre or no pay. As long as employers are given this 'choice' to employ children for cheaper wages, children will be preferred over adult workers. This is detrimental in a several ways. It depresses the wages of adults and weakens the bargaining power of adult workers to receive their legally guaranteed minimum wage or decent working conditions. Also children, the future generation, being deprived of their time to learn will only slow down the country's development, and reduce the productivity and quality of labour force in the future.

In the view that children must work while poverty exists, some organisations have encouraged child workers to unionise themselves. They have renegotiated the rights of poorer children in the name of survival, and invested a large sum of funds for children to remain in workplace. Such approaches are not in favour of the child's or country's development. Millions of children work as domestic workers, in rural agriculture, and in informal sectors where even the adults are not protected as workers with their rights to freedom of association. We must first recognise and guarantee the rights of adult workers to build a sound economic structure and tackle unemployment. While there are 246 million children working, there are 180 million adults officially recognised as unemployed in the world, and millions more are underemployed or simply do not show up in the statistics<sup>2</sup>. One wonders while looking at these numbers, if there is any other factor besides mere exploitation, which keeps children in child labour.

While child labour has a negative impact on the economy, the investment in basic education aimed at eliminating child labour brings much more positive returns to an overall economic development. A recent report released by ILO has argued that the

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<sup>1</sup> Achieving EFA by 2015, the World Bank, 2002

<sup>2</sup> Global Employment Trends, the International Labour Organisation (ILO), 2003

initiatives to prevent and eliminate all forms of child labour through ensuring education for all have economic return 7 times higher than their investment<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, the socio-economic benefits of such initiatives, ensuring generations of educated and healthy youth, are much greater than it could be quantified.

Individual parents' decision to send their children to school or to work largely depends on the cost and benefit of education. If the school fee is too high or quality of education does not guarantee the better employment, the parents tend to prefer the immediate benefit of the child's income<sup>4</sup>. The governments, then, must increase the opportunity cost of education by making education free for all children and filling the immediate loss of the child's income to the household. This will ensure maximisation of the benefit of investing in a child's education by minimising the parents' burden to send a child to school.

The ILO report further suggests that the average annual cost of ensuring basic education for all aimed at eliminating child labour over the years is much less than the other public expenditure currently spent on military or debt relief (5-6 times less)<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, the choice of investing in the elimination of child labour is not economic but more political.

### **Steps in the Right Direction: Integrating Education and Child Labour Policy**

The lack of an adequate education system is a cause of child labour whilst child labour is one of the biggest obstacles in ensuring education for all children. Necessary actions to end child labour and to ensure basic education are, thus, inextricably linked. However, in reality, the policies regarding education and child labour are not integrated with one another, and their actions, as a result, lack coordination. Furthermore, education and child labour policies must synchronise within a bigger framework on poverty alleviation, such as the Millennium Development Goals, in order to heighten the political will and to maximise the opportunity of concurrent causes and consequences of social services provided by it.

The Global March Against Child Labour therefore calls on all National Governments to:

- Ratify and implement ILO Convention 138 on the Minimum Age of Employment, ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, and the Convention of the Rights of the Child and its two optional protocols, within a timeline;
- Amend national laws, if necessary, to comply with the content of the Conventions above, and ensure that the national laws on the age of completing compulsory education and the minimum age of employment correspond with each other;
- Make quality education compulsory up to the age of 16 years;
- Make quality education free for all, including uniforms, syllabus books, school meals, transportation, and any other hidden cost of education;
- Make first and foremost provisions for incorporating in the national efforts education for all clear strategies to address the child labourers who are out of school. This provision should create opportunity for them also in terms of earmarking necessary financial commitments within the EFA national action plans.

<sup>3</sup> Investing in Every Child, ILO International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), 2004

<sup>4</sup> Harnessing the Globalisation for Children: A Report to UNICEF, Chapter 6 Globalisation and Children, Cigno, Rosati, Guarcello

<sup>5</sup> Investing in Every Child, ILO-IPEC, 2004

- Give a second chance to child labourers and other out-of-school children who have missed out on their opportunities to begin compulsory education at appropriate age, by giving them necessary tuitions to mainstream them back to formal school or giving older children, above the age of compulsory education, necessary vocational training;
- Form a National Committee on Child Labour and Education in order to coordinate efforts to ensure basic education for all and to end child labour, including Ministries of Labour, Education, Finance, Social Welfare and other relevant ministries, law-enforcement agencies, civil society and children;
- Invest, at least 6% of GNP for ensuring basic education for all children.

The Global March calls on Donor Countries and the International Community to:

- Commit their programs and policies to ending child labour;
- Meet the financial commitment made in the Dakar Framework of Action to ensure all children are in primary school by the year 2015;
- Provide debt relief and do away with conditionality on overseas aid, allowing the developing countries with a time-bound and effective national plans to invest more efficiently in their children;
- Invest more than 0.1% of their GNP for the overseas aid aimed directly at benefiting children, especially in ending child labour and ensuring education for all; and
- Form a Global Task Force on Child Labour and Education, inviting all relevant international organisations to coordinate their efforts in ending child labour and ensuring education for all.
- EFA FTI should incorporate as necessary pre-condition strategies to address the child labour situation in the country in their national action plans and strategies.
- Create mechanisms for national governments to address the child labour situation comprehensively within their PRSP's in the overall country assistance strategy submitted to the World Bank/IMF.

Though it is primarily a responsibility of the governments to ensure education for all and to end child labour, civil society actors, including parents and children themselves, must also show their firm commitment to work along side the governments to achieve these goals. Civil society organisation, therefore, must also commit their resources honestly and directly to the benefit of the children, and aimed at most effective ways in ending child labour.

A silent acceptance of the existing system by the ruling class has been the biggest conspiracy against the most vulnerable and voiceless in society. Conditions of exploitation in which our children live today represent the lack of will for a better tomorrow. The world must show the will to bring their words into action, and must begin walking the most direct path to an end to child labour, by educating every child today.

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