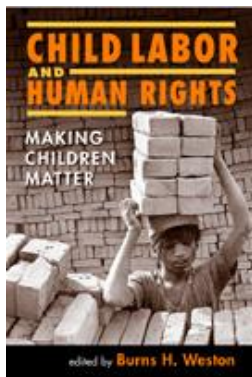


## **Child Labor and Human Rights: Making Children Matter**

*Burns H. Weston, editor*



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2005/568 Pages

ISBN: 1-58826-324-X HC \$65.00

ISBN: 1-58826-349-5 PB \$27.50

"A great read and a fresh perspective! This book not only covers the historical and practical realities of working children, but also offers strong theoretical frameworks for discussing the most difficult issues —and most important, gives guidance on what should be done next." —Martha Nelems, Former Senior Policy Analyst, Children's Rights, CIDA

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The International Labor Organization estimated in 2000 that, of the approximately 246 million children engaged in labor worldwide, 171 million were working in situations harmful to their development. *Child Labor and Human Rights* provides a comprehensive overview of the phenomenon of child labor from a human rights perspective.

The authors consider the connections between human rights and abusive child labor, the pros and cons of a rights-based approach to the problem, and specific strategies for effecting change. They make an indispensable contribution to the

growing effort to abolish abusive and exploitive child labor practices.

**Burns H. Weston** is Bessie Dutton Murray Distinguished Professor of Law Emeritus at the University of Iowa and senior scholar at the university's Center for Human Rights. His numerous books in the field of human rights include *Human Rights in the World Community: Issues and Action* and *The Future of International Human Rights*; he is also coeditor of the award-winning *International Law and World Order: A Problem-Oriented Coursebook*.

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## WORKING CHILDREN AS CHANGE-MAKERS

### Perspectives from the South

Victor P. Karunan

#### Introduction

The central thesis of this paper is that mainstream approaches and interventions on child labor in the South are premised on a dominant Western conception of childhood and child development that is primarily aimed at identifying and eliminating specific forms of hazardous and exploitative work done by children, but in practice, tends to generally "criminalize" work performed by children of poor families and communities and, in most cases, failed to provide lasting and sustainable solutions to address this problem in the world today. Partly as a response to this, but also with the increasing trend towards a rights-orientation in development, a human rights approach to working children and child labor puts the child at the center of its approach and actions, and in keeping with the best interests of the child, promotes their active involvement in the defence of their basic rights. What has come to be known as a "child-centered approach to child labor" has emerged from this rights-orientation – specifically inspired by the spirit and the key principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – this alternative approach has come to increasingly influence the vision and actions of a range of social actors, primarily in civil society in the developing world. Another critical factor influencing this shift is the fact that working children have become organized and working children's movements have developed for over two decades in many parts of the world – today working children have become effective advocates for this new approach to child labor. These perspectives and actions – most often at the grassroots level in the countries of the South – not only pose new challenges for mainstream orientation and programs against child labor, but are beginning to show in practice, very relevant and effective alternatives to addressing the complex problem of child labor.

The approach and experience that has contributed to the central thesis of this paper is based on many years of re-interpreting and re-analyzing the societal context in which child labor exists in the South, and the perceptions and actions towards progressive change pioneered by NGOs and civil society organizations – including the organizations and movements of working children in developing countries – especially in Asia. Moreover, it is derived from paying serious attention to working children's own perceptions and views of their everyday experiences of work and labor, as well as their hopes, aspirations and dreams for

the future. These perceptions and views have significantly impacted upon the child-centered approach as it has evolved in the countries of the South, and Asia in particular. The salient principles and features of this alternative approach are discussed below which, hopefully, will argue the case that, at present, this is perhaps the most effective way of applying a rights-approach to the problem of child labor and work in the lives of children today. The fact that the largest numbers of working children are to be found in poor countries and in poor districts and regions of these countries makes it imperative that we based our perceptions, analysis and actions on the reality and experience of working children in these countries of the South. It is such an approach that characterizes this paper and informs its analysis and conclusions.

This paper is divided into four main parts: in the first part, I will argue the case for using a rights-approach to child labor and point out the implications for policy and actions. The second part reviews the new thinking and perceptions that have developed in our understanding of “child work” and “child labor” based on the concrete everyday experiences of working children and their supportive NGOs and civil society organizations. The third part presents what has come to be known as the child-centered approach to working children – an approach that guides and inspires the processes of progressive change and interventions on child labor in many countries of the developing world. Three key elements of this approach are briefly discussed – viz, the need for a radical paradigm-shift in our view of children and childhood, the resilience of working children and meaningful working children’s participation. The last part of this paper considers the implications of these alternative perceptions and approaches to progressive change in the world of child labor and the lives of working children. Here some key factors that are influencing current progressive change initiatives on child labor in the South are discussed, including the call for a new sociology of childhood, addressing the structural context, focusing on inter-generational poverty, taking a cultural approach and recognizing organized working children as social actors in their own right.

## 1. Towards a Rights Approach to working children and child labor

### 1.1. Conventional Approaches to Child Labor

Child Labor is a complex social problem in the countries of the South that needs to be viewed and acted upon in the context of local attitudes, beliefs and practices towards children and work, against the backdrop of the macro-economic and social context of development of these societies. Child labor is rooted in poverty – it is the clearest and worst manifestation of how “poverty has a child’s face”. Child labor is also a cross-border issue requiring cross-border agreements, legislation and inter-country cooperation for effective measures to combat especially the worst forms in countries and regions. Child labor is a sensitive issue especially in its worst forms, as it is often hidden, illegal and clandestine linked to criminality, cross-border trafficking, illegal

drug trade and armed conflict. Child labor is a de-humanizing issue that “harms children’s bodies and minds, their spirits and future...a prison that withers both capabilities and potential”. In short, child labor is a phenomenon that needs to be understood and acted upon in all its complexities – no simple or unilateral approaches or solutions that are primarily confined to the area of employment or the labor market will lead to its elimination. It is this challenge that confronts us, especially in the application of ILO Convention 182 and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in the field of child labor – including, and especially, in its worst forms.

Conventional approaches and interventions on child labor are based on a labor market premise and ideology that is primarily aimed at keeping children away from the labor market and back in schools. In this perspective, children’s work is viewed narrowly as labor exploitation which must be abolished. This approach has dominated the child labor discourse for a very long time and continues to inspire mainstream policies and programming for working children. With the adoption of the ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labor, a new focus on identifying and eliminating the unacceptable and intolerable forms of work that children are subject to, became evident. While this is indeed a step forward in the struggle to combat the detrimental affects of hazardous and exploitative work on children, by and large, policies and programs put in place have failed to make a significant impact in eliminating these worst forms. The reasons for this are many – salient among them are the following:

- (a) most of these worst forms are hidden, clandestine and illegal, largely inaccessible to policy makers (including governments) and field workers in international agencies
- (b) policies and program interventions against the worst forms have not taken into account the general world of work in the lives of children and the cultural, social and economic conditions and factors that compel children to earn a livelihood through engagement with labor
- (c) failure to address the root causes and structural conditions that perpetrate hazardous and exploitative child labor – in the context of rapid globalization and international trade
- (d) too narrow a focus on removal and rescue operations of children in bondage and servitude in the worst forms of child labor – too little attention paid and resources invested in providing sustainable alternative livelihoods for rescued children as well as supplementing family resources, income-generation and in improving the quality, relevance and accessibility of education and the schooling system.

The prevalence of the worst forms of child labor in developing countries of the South appears inevitable in a situation where abject poverty exists and parents lack the necessary income and livelihood to meet basic needs, the labor market requires cheap and docile and bonded labor for certain services, unscrupulous

employers and middle-men exploit children for illegal activities, the system of education is inaccessible, expensive and irrelevant, and the special local economic, social and cultural traditions and practices encourage – and in some cases even endorse – the worst forms of child labor. The problem of child labor is therefore contextual and based on a set of complex factors that are structural to the societies in which it exists. Our approach therefore needs to take into account these complexities.

Another is the approach taken by adults and society as a whole towards child labor. The fact that children are involved in the worst forms of work is a reflection of the mainstream attitudes of adults towards children rooted in traditional, social, cultural, as well as modern practices that “commodifies children” vis-à-vis the labor market. Adults attitudes as to why children are often more preferable and conducive to perform tasks and services in the worst forms is well summed-up by the statement below from an Indian District Government Official:

“(For the employers), it’s very easy to work...with children, you don’t have any problem at all, you can just make them work all day, and they will not protest...you can really terrorize them (and) you will be paying much, much less than you will normally pay for an adult”.

As a starting point, it is important to question this narrow view of work performed by children and challenge the premises on which it is based. With the adoption of the CRC as the universal guide to child rights and the fact that a rights-approach is increasingly gaining prominence in tackling child labor, we have a firmer basis to take a broader view of work in the lives of children. As Myers and Boyden note “it will also be necessary to replace a narrow view of child work as a labor exploitation issue with a broader appreciation of it as a critical influence on the growth and development of perhaps the most of the world’s children”.

## 1.2. The “Rights-Approach” to Child Labor

It is only recently that a rights approach to the problem of child labor has become prominent in global and local perceptions and actions. Conventionally child labor programs have adopted a stereo-typed “triple-R” (removal, rescue, rehabilitation) strategy that was too often based on needs rather than rights. Today the rights-approach enables us to understand and analyze “situations, not just in terms of needs, or areas for development, but in terms of the obligation to respond to the rights of individuals. This has empowered people to demand justice as a right, and not as charity”.

Irrespective of the kind of work that children do, they often forfeit their right to education and healthy development. Viewed from this perspective, child labor cannot be confined to a labor market concern – it becomes a child right’s issue.



It is this fact which reinforces the need to take a rights-approach to child labor. Working children have time and again articulated their concern and plea for a rights-approach to combating child labor – as exemplified in the statement below presented to the 87th Session of the International Labor Conference which adopted the ILO Convention 182 in Geneva by Joan Ranoy from the Philippines, a 17-year old girl who worked for 5 years as a child domestic worker:

“We, as working children – boys and girls – are below 18 years of age, and in keeping with the spirit of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 32), we have the right to be protected from exploitation and hazardous work and abuse”.

The key to discerning child labor that is harmful to the overall development of the child is the nature and extent of exploitation. Exploitation is the benchmark that helps us distinguish between work and labor. Article 32 of the CRC provides for children to be protected from economic exploitation that any work that will be detrimental to the growth and well-being of the child. It is this centrality of exploitation through work done by children that is often ignored in discourses on child labor as well as in programming interventions and actions. A rights-approach helps us to address this centrality and identify the conditions and factors that contribute to these forms of work that prevail in society. Moreover, a rights-approach takes us beyond economic rights and helps us to address the range of rights. The programmatic implications of such a rights-approach implies coordinated and multi-sectoral interventions in a variety of fields related to the effects of hazardous and exploitative work on children – viz, education, health, nutrition, rest and relaxation, play, social security and responsibilities of parents.

A rights-approach to child labor implies the need to re-define the concept of work and labor in the lives of children. This re-definition needs to take into account the specific social, cultural and economic context of the societies in which this problem prevails – primarily in the developing world, or the South. Using a rights-approach also means that we listen to and incorporate children’s views and opinions – their perceptions and experiences of work, hazardous and exploitative labor, work and school, etc. Furthermore this approach urges us to actively involve children in our approach to and interpretation of the circumstances and conditions of their work, the design of policies and strategies to identify and eliminate the intolerable forms of work on children and in shaping our interventions in seeking solutions to these problems. Finally, a rights-approach means safeguarding the best interests of children and their rights (as rights-bearers), but also holding families, adults, governments (as duty-bearers) accountable and responsible for promoting and protecting children’s rights.

A rights-approach seeks to view the problem of child labor in two ways

– firstly, as a fundamental right of children to be protected from economic exploitation, and secondly, as a fundamental obligation of parents, adults, communities and governments towards the well-being and development of children. Child rights therefore generates obligations and responsibilities on both sides that must be honored and respected. From this perspective, using a rights-approach to combat child labor in its worst forms implies the building of strategic partnerships among children and between adults and children to jointly confront this problem. It means empowering children to participate actively in the improvement of their situation and developing solutions to their problems and needs, while at the same time, empowering adults to fulfill their responsibilities and obligations to protect the rights of children.

Rights are based on entitlements that are provided to both children and adults in society as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other key international instruments. These entitlements are not just an abstract recognition in law and policies – which are nevertheless important to safeguard and protect rights – but they have real practical implications that hold governments accountable and shape behavior and practice in society. Entitlements have a number of key implications as follows:

- (a) creating the conditions in which children will effectively enjoy their rights
- (b) benefiting from the actions of others – governments, family, community – to make these rights a reality in the lives of children
- (c) recognizing the increasing capacity of children to exercise their rights and to make valid claims on them
- (d) imposing a general duty and responsibility on everyone, including the state, to respect those rights and to refrain from any action that will prevent their enjoyment or violate them in any way.

The family is the first line of protection for the child. It is the primary environment where children are introduced to the values, culture and norms of society. It is also the first opportunity for the child to experience tolerance, mutual respect and solidarity. A rights-approach recognizes this importance place and role of the family in the lives of children. It calls upon the state to render appropriate support and assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing duties and responsibilities, thus ensuring that the capacity of the family to protect the rights of children is enhanced. At the same time, a rights approach also means holding parents, guardians and families responsible and accountable for actions that harm their children through their induction, coercion or sale for employment or services in the worst forms.

The rights-approach is gaining recognition and beginning to challenge mainstream approaches and actions on child labor. The ILO acknowledges this in a recent report: “After the CRC was adopted, international NGOs began to reconsider their work with children to bring about a change from an essentially



welfare-based, adult-focused, charitable approach to a more child-centered, rights-based approach”. While this approach and its application are primarily spearheaded by NGOs and civil society organizations in developing countries, it is beginning to influence key donors and international agencies. It is time that the same re-thinking and reconsideration that NGOs and civil society organizations experienced after adoption of the CRC is undertaken by UN agencies and other key players in the field of child labor.

## 2. The “world of work” of children – towards a re-definition

Using a rights-approach to understand the world of work of children and the conditions that pressurize or coerce them into undertaking this work enables us to view work and labor from a radically different perspective. The first point to be made here is that participation in the labor market as child labor is – to start with – often against their own free will and choice. Children do not undertake hazardous or exploitative work voluntarily, but are often forced into it by circumstances that are shaped by adults and which are beyond their control.

“I really hate this work. But I have to do it because I need the money. Sometimes I really don’t like the client, but I have to sleep with him even if I don’t like him. I don’t think about myself. I don’t really have an idea about the future. I just want to earn money to help my mother and my family”.

It is important to recognize that the problem of child labor – defined as exploitative, hazardous and abusive work - is not the creation of children, but of adults. It is not an option that children make as part of their childhood and their growth and development, but rather a situation that is imposed by society on them. Prostitution, trafficking, bonded labor, commercial sex and involvement in armed conflict, for example, are forms of work that are intolerable for adults and even more so for children. And yet, in the adult world, these are often recognized by society as work tasks, services, duties and roles) – even if not legal in most situations – thereby providing it a sense of official or unofficial legitimacy.

Work is an essential part of the growth and development of children in all societies. It is work, besides play, learning and education, that provides the growing child – especially in the developing world - the opportunity to increase his/her knowledge, develop skills and capabilities to deal with society and grow into an adult. The problem is that many children are involved in work that is hazardous, exploitative and abusive of children – denying children the right to healthy growth, education and development (child labor). The key factor here is exploitation that has a detrimental effect and adverse consequences on the lives of children. The fact that children are involved in such hazardous and exploitative work is deplorable and should be eliminated on an urgent footing. But in order to do that we need to, first of all, understand the world of work in the lives of children in these societies and be able to target the root causes and

circumstances that result in children being subjected to these forms of exploitation and abuse. At the same time we need to safeguard their best interests and protect their fundamental rights as children as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The work undertaken by children today is predominantly defined in terms of economic activity that can be measured and counted in a labor market framework. The danger with the concept of child work is that a certain part of this essential human activity is separated out as undesirable, intolerable and to be abolished. When children undertake the same work that adults do in society, this work is then viewed differently. Why is this so?

For a long time, the mainstream thinking and analysis of child labor has been dominated by separating children from economic activity. In the North, as noted by Judith Ennew, children have been banned by law from the labor force and their economic contribution to society is not accounted for in national budgets, in spite of the fact that many of them are workers. The implication is that they are working for pocket money or in order to learn good working habits. Ennew notes that this perception is wholly inappropriate for many Southern contexts in which “children have economic and other responsibilities to fulfill within families and communities; are not the sentimental core of nucleus families but rather part of an inter-generational system of interchange and mutual responsibilities; and (in recent history at least) have often been important political protagonists”.

From a Southern child’s perspective, work is learning – where the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behavior of living and interacting in society are nurtured and developed – closely tied with the family and community. If work is learning, then it becomes an integral part of the educational and developmental process of the child and the family’s obligation towards child rearing and upbringing. A distinction is often made between work that facilitates and work that is detrimental to child development. Children and families in the South see a clear difference between a child working in the fields side by side with his father or mother to learn the skills of the trade, and a child doing repetitive work in a factory setting or forced into a situation of hazardous work or abuse in the industrial or commercial sector. These two conceptions of work come from two different traditions that influence the way society tends to view work and labor. This difference is also in the terms of the price of this work performed by children – in the latter situation, children become commodities that could be bought and sold, traded, trafficked and bonded in servitude for economic purposes. The fact that the concept of labor is linked to the market is significant as it often determines how we define work and labor. The problem here is whether this work or labor is in or out of the market sector, and whether it is formal or informal.

Children’s own perceptions of their work provides some useful insights into the

relationship between them as children and the world of work and labor. Children therefore are an important source of information and evidence on how work affects their lives and the harm it can cause to their development. The Save the Children-Sweden study in South Asia and Central America in 1996-1997 on children's perceptions of work revealed that while many children may not be aware of certain detrimental effects of work on their lives, they may be acutely aware of others. The main findings of this study provide us a comprehensive insight into the world of work as lived and experienced by working children themselves. The following is a summary of the views and opinions of these children on their working lives:

- A few children felt they had been forced to work, but many felt they had made the choice to work within the constraints of their circumstances
- Children believe they must work to help their families
- Working children feel strongly accountable to their families
- Children describe their early initiation to work – for many work is not unnatural...it is part of their family life style, they are valued for it, and they are initiated at a very early age.
- Work is an important part of many children's self-respect – “we are helping our parents' work even though we are young. We are not just another mouth to feed. We are helping the family survive”.
- Child workers are aware of many of the physical hazards of work
- Child workers are aware of their vulnerability to exploitation
- Working children are very sensitive about being stigmatized for their work
- Gender has a strong influence on children's experience of work
- Children don't think their work is all bad
- Children value many aspects of school
- School can be a bad experience for working children
- Most children see combining work with school as the best solution
- Children's views vary according to their particular working situation
- Faced with new regulations preventing them from working, most groups would defy or evade the law
- Context-insensitive interventions may deny children access to the occupations they value most highly.

In contrast to the above, Northern perceptions and attitudes towards work often involves a separation between learning which is confined to schools and classrooms, and work or labor which involves skills and earnings (wages) which occur in workplaces. This distinction is not only misleading but detrimental to the best interests of children. Based on this logic, an artificial distinction is often made between learning and education and work and employment. As Antony & Gayathri note in the Indian context, "what is intriguing in an analysis of children's work is that those who are enrolled or attending the school are not considered for their involvement in activities, which are otherwise counted as work for out of school children. This omission,

basically due to the dominant dichotomous framework of work/education in children's lives, has allowed for various misconstructions. First of all, it corroborates the class based construct of a childhood, in which education is a prerogative of some and work is a destined vocation for some others". The reality in the developing world show clearly that these constructions or distinctions are false and misleading – in the given social, cultural and economic context of these societies they, in fact, blend into one and interface with each other in the daily lives of children, their families and communities.

### 3. The “Child-centered Approach” to Child Labor

This approach developed as a response to mainstream thinking and interventions on child labor that were driven by a labor market framework and top-down programming that often resulted in criminalizing children and seeking quick-fix solutions to complex problems. Myers and Boyden discuss three key factors that have contributed to the development of a child-centered approach to child work issues – “the growing influence of the CRC on both national and international ideas about protecting children”, “the expanding quantity and quality of empirical information about child work and working children”, and “working children themselves are a quickly growing influence on thinking about child work”.

Using the Convention on the Rights of the Child as its starting-point and the best interests of the child as paramount, this approach seeks to restore the centrality of the child – their situation, needs, problems, capabilities and roles – in the discourse on child labor.

“The holistic approach of the Convention addresses human rights while placing the child at the center of its considerations. This child-focused perspective guides its call for action and progress towards the realization of all the rights of the child, and stresses that the best interests of the child should always be a guiding reference”.

Three key elements characterize the child-centered approach to working children : (1) a radical paradigm-shift in our view of children and childhood, (2) resilience of working children and (3) working children’s participation. Each of these elements are briefly discussed below.

#### 3.1. Paradigm-shift in our view of children and childhood

The child-centered approach believes that children’s knowledge and perspectives are shaped by the given socio-economic, historical and cultural conditions of the family and community which implies their active involvement and participation in all matters that affects their lives and well-being. It challenges us to make a mind-shift in the way we look at and relate to children in our daily lives. This has implications on how we perceive childhood and

child development. Mainstream perceptions of childhood are based on a Western stereotype where “play, learning and schooling are staple topics, while work is rarely mentioned...(this) childhood masquerade as scientific knowledge about children’s ‘nature’, their ‘normal’ development and their ‘universal’ needs”. In non-western societies, on the other hand, the transition from childhood to adulthood is more fluid and less traumatic, where “the child’s world and the adult’s world were not separate and was characterized by greater inter-generational reciprocity. Play and work were also not such sharply delineated activities and mingled together in a manner that often it was difficult to distinguish the two. More importantly, the child is not viewed as separate from the larger unit, be it family, tribe, clan, etc.” It is therefore important that we recognize there are different cultural traditions and concepts of childhood and no one universal model that is applicable in all situations or which can be universally imposed. At the same time, we must be aware of those elements in our cultures and traditions that do not serve the best interests of the child. We need to be careful not to endorse discrimination and exploitation while harnessing the potentials in these cultures and traditions for promoting the rights of children.

The concept of childhood, and by implication, how children are viewed in society and their relationship to work and labor is also constantly changing keeping pace with the rapid development of society. Hence, our own culturally-determined concepts and perceptions of children, their childhood and their capabilities and roles will need to change accordingly. We need to begin to question our own assumptions and attitudes towards children. As adults, we need to make a mind-shift from traditional notions and values that we cherish about children as vulnerable and non-productive, to a child-centered approach that is rights-based that views children positively and as contributors to social development. We need to challenge traditional notions of childhood and child development that have become everyday cultural norms and practices in society. This is no easy task as it entails a paradigm shift that will fundamentally alter our (adults) status, power and control over children. For such a paradigm shift to take place in society, there is the urgent need for a new sociology of childhood (discussed below) that is based on a human (child) rights framework and located in the context of the given social and cultural conditions prevailing in our society today.

Finally, a child-centered approach seeks to view working children as change-makers. It locates children at the center of our perceptions, approaches and actions. Its starting-point is to view children differently – not just as innocent, vulnerable and susceptible beings, but as active social actors who can make a positive contribution as children to social development and change. Children contribute based on their own abilities and capacities (“evolving capacities”) which is constantly developing.

### 3.2. Resilience of working children

One of the significant outcomes of using the child-centered approach to an analysis of children and work has been the recognition of the resilience of many working children, initially based on work and experience with street and working children primarily in Latin America where the coping mechanisms of these children were identified and their competencies documented. In the Philippines, interest in resilience as a key concept in working with children came from the context of dealing with children in especially difficult circumstances. The UP-CIDS PSCT conducted a child-centered study on understanding resilience among abused and exploited children which was aimed at understanding this concept from the experience and perspective of the children and their caregivers. This pioneering study entitled “Working with Abused Children: From the Lenses of Resilience and Contextualization” involved the participation of 25 children from six NGOs who had suffered physical, emotional, sexual and labor abuses. The findings of the study based on narratives of the children’s experiences and life histories were grouped into fourteen themes as follows:

- acceptance of difficulty and adjustment to the demands of difficult situations
- competent functioning in the presence of major life problems
- learning from life’s adversities
- capacity to be self-reliant and self-governing
- forbearance and not making a big deal of problems
- finding happiness amidst difficulties
- ability to make sanity in the face of traumatic experience
- good and wholesome character despite of deprivation
- a firm sense of what is right and wrong
- recovering from past wounds – moving on with life
- therapeutic construction of reality
- ability to be other-centered
- ability to see situations as temporary
- ability to resist temptation

This research also identified concrete guidelines that can help to identify and promote resilience among abused and exploited children. The four categories are as follows:

- (a) “I Have” – the child’s external supports and resources that endorse resilience. In most cases this refers to the child’s access to survival and development services – food, clothing, etc.
- (b) “I Can” – the child’s social and inter-personal skills – for example, communication, problem solving, managing feelings and impulses, seeking trusted relationships, etc.
- (c) “I Am” – the child’s internal, personal strengths – such as feelings, attitudes and beliefs.



- (d) “I Will” – the child’s willingness, capacity and commitment to do or to participate in matters affecting him or her.

Increasing knowledge and understanding of resilience among working children reinforced the need to pay attention to children’s abilities and potentials to deal with their situation and contribute towards change. This has informed and developed the child-centered approach to working children based on pioneering research as indicated above as well as many years of grassroots experience and lessons learnt by NGOs and child labor organizations and networks – primarily in the South.

### 3.3. Working Children’s Participation:

“We as working children and our parents and communities, know best what is good and relevant for us. In many countries in Asia, we are being actively supported and assisted by NGOs, community and civil society organizations that have promoted our best interests and protected us from abuse and exploitation. It is therefore imperative that working children themselves, families and communities, NGOs and civil society organizations are seen as active partners and collaborators in the national plans of action on the new Convention”.

Working children have today entered the public stage of discourse on child labor with their organizations and networks and have increasingly come to be recognized as key social actors to be taken into account in policies and interventions on child labor. As Per Miltejeg notes, “In fact, it could be claimed that the public appearance of working children and youth has helped to give child labor ‘a face’ and contributed to a more nuanced and diversified understanding of what ‘child labor’ is”.

A child-centered approach to working children is based on the principle of respecting children’s views and opinions and involving them as active partners in seeking solutions to their problems. After all, children are the most directly affected by the worst forms of work and child labor – it is they who have direct experience of hazardous work and exploitation. Hence, it is only imperative that they should be in the first line of participation and involved in efforts to address these issues and seek solutions. To do this, there are four key principles or approaches that are essential:

- (a) Children have a right to be heard about matters that affect them,
- (b) Children are not affected passively by their work – they are for the most part intelligent, active contributors to their social world, trying in their own way to make sense of their circumstances, the constraints and the opportunities available to them,
- (c) Children are capable of expressing their feelings, concerns and aspirations within a context that respects their abilities and is adapted to their interests and style of communication,

(d) Children are an important source of evidence on how work may harm their development, in the particular economic, family, community and cultural context.

Participation is also a learning experience for the child. “In participation, children learn to express their own needs, consider those of others, and develop skills of cooperation, negotiation and problem-solving. In short, their participation provides children the opportunity to learn, develop and enhance skills that they would need to lead better lives”.

In addition to the above, child respondents from the Philippines and Ethiopia identified the following three characteristics of participation of working children:

- Participation is both a right and a responsibility – all children must be given the opportunity to express themselves. At the same time, it also implies taking responsibility for their actions.
- Participation is an expression of capability – of the children’s capacity to stand up for what they believe in and accomplish what they intend to do. Children are active agents of change.
- Participation is a process of growth – through participation, children become more aware of their own capacities and limitations. They can also acquire and develop skills and knowledge.

There is a general tendency in mainstream approaches to view working children’s participation as merely “taking into consideration children’s views and opinions” . While this is an important step forward in promoting children’s participation concerning their working conditions and experiences, it falls short of another key element of meaningful participation – which is to involve children in all actions that affects their lives. As this chapter points out, there is sufficient experience among NGOs and civil society organizations of meaningfully involving working children in programming and interventions at the ground level to prove the case for involving them more directly in policy formulation and programme interventions. Moreover, working children themselves have begun to proactively advocate for their involvement in all decisions and actions concerning their lives and future – supported by strong working children’s organizations and movements that have developed in the regions of the South today – which is discussed further below.

#### 4. Implications for progressive change

##### 4.1. A new “sociology of childhood”?

It is time that we develop a “new sociology of childhood” in the South to guide our understanding and interventions on child labor that is based on the principles and spirit of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Such a new

discipline must necessarily adopt a rights-based approach to children and child labor. It must be a sociology that “takes children seriously as they experience their lives in the here and now as children”. This new discipline needs to take a holistic view of children. It needs to be inter-disciplinary that draws on various academic and practice-based knowledge and research in the field – with a special emphasis on taking into account and integrating working children’s own perceptions and experiences of child labor and child development. The subject-matter of this new discipline should be, among others, children in the context of their family and community – viewed from a child-centered perspective that puts their best interests first. It should recognize the positive contributions that children can make to the society around them and encourages their active participation in shaping and determining their own lives. Such a new sociology of childhood is critical as a foundational base to the child-centered and rights-based approach to working children.

#### 4.2. Addressing Structural Conditions and Factors

Although today we probably know much more about the numbers of children working, about their working conditions and environment, their experiences of exploitation and abuse, and their perspectives on alternatives; we know less about the structural conditions and factors that promote and maintain exploitation of working children. Mainstream approaches and interventions to exploitative child labor have generally failed to take these structural conditions and factors into account, nor made efforts to address them frontally and remedy these macro and micro conditions. An important gap in the discourse on child labor today is the macro-economic context and globalization and its direct or indirect influence on child labor in developing countries. If child labor is socially reproduced, then it seems even more important for a focus on the structural context and factors that enable this reproduction. Unfortunately, however, in spite of many decades of investment and interventions at national and international levels by a number of key actors, the structural context and macro influencing factors have remained largely unchallenged and unaltered.

The macro-economic paradigm today in most countries of the South is characterized by stagnation in agriculture, handicrafts and local industries; rapid erosion of the control over land and its resources by the mass of peasantry, artisans and fisherfolk and escalating commercialization of the entire economy that is wiping out small producers and self-sufficient farmers. It is this context and the unequal relationship between rich and poor countries in international trade and commerce, that is missing from this discourse. The international campaign against child labor is largely focused on the manufacturing, commercial and small-scale informal sector – and not agriculture, where most of the child labor is in the countries of the South – where the majority of labor is poor women and children drawn from poor districts and regions in the country. The World Bank acknowledges this direct connection between agriculture and child labor the best ‘predictor’ of child labor seems related to the structure of

production: the higher the share of agriculture in GDP, the higher the incidence of child labor”. The backward and forward relationship in economic development has a directly bearing on the incidence of child labor. As Vasanthi Raman notes: “The focus on child labor in these sectors tends to ignore the structural linkages both backwards (i.e., stagnating agriculture, etc. which ensures a steady supply of child laborers) and forwards (i.e., linkages with the international system)”.

Another structural determinant of child labor is inequality. A comparative study of child labor and child schooling in Nepal and Pakistan showed clearly this relationship: "First, high inequality provides demand for child labor from the more affluent households. Second, such inequality offers a pool of child labor supply from among children in the less affluent households. Third, high inequality implies that credit is siphoned off to the more affluent leaving the less affluent households to rely on child labor to smooth their income fluctuations".

Macro-economic factors and structural changes directly impact on child labor. The so-called “Asian” economic crisis of 1997 clearly showed this relationship. Thailand experienced massive “reversal migration” during the crisis in 1997-98 from urban to rural areas. During that period, there were about 0.8 to 1.1 million children aged between 11 to 14 years who were child laborers, representing about 3 per cent of the total 32 million labor force in the country. In 1998 it was estimated that there were over 110,000 new entrants to the labor force from primary school grades 6 and secondary grade 9 – among them over 80 per cent were primary school students. In the Philippines, the crisis contributed to an increase in the number of children working away from their homes, younger children working on agricultural farms, and an increase in the number of invisible children who work as child domestic workers.

#### 4.3. Addressing poverty and child labor

Poverty is often viewed as the primary causes of child labor. A number of other key factors also determine the supply of children’s labor – including vulnerability, poor educational services, lack of social security mechanisms, gender and age-specific characteristics of some labor markets, consumerist pressures and increasing population. Another key factor that pertains to the export sector – but has increasingly come to dominate the entire macro-economic context of poor countries - is international trade and the internationalization of production which specifically affects the developing world and creates demand for unskilled and cheap labor – often including that of children.

In the developing world, it is not income-poverty alone that is the direct cause of child labor. Poverty in the South is a complex phenomenon that has social, cultural and political ramifications – in addition to its direct economic ones. Working children in this context are confronted with a situation that drives

them to the labor market or take up work to earn an income to support themselves and their families and keeps them away from school. This paradox is well illustrated in the Indian context as follows:

“In our country, economic poverty locks firmly with social poverty, political poverty and environmental poverty and drives children out of schools. The education system is driven by class and caste biases, and does not equip children to respond to other forms of poverty that play out in their lives. Schools defeat their own purpose. Reading and writing do not help when entire forest-based livelihoods get wiped away, or when teachers harass students for their lower-caste allegiances... Given such a situation, a child’s decision to work for the family rather than go to school is the most appropriate choice he can make”.

Not just in India, but in most parts of the developing world, the culture of poverty that prevails is characterized by a combination of very important factors that define and determine the lives of children and families in these situations. Briefly put, economic poverty is just one important element of this combination - and when it is combined with discrimination, vulnerability, and deprivation - it can be an insurmountable barrier for change. It is this challenge that confronts the problem of child labor and thwarts attempts to address or eliminate it.

#### 4.4. A “cultural approach” to working children

As we have discussed above, working children tend to fall outside the dominant paradigm of a Western conception of childhood and child development that predominates current perceptions and interventions on child labor. It is not often acknowledged that the mainstream conceptions of childhood and child development - including child labor - are based on decades of tradition and custom and complex in today’s reality. A cultural approach to childhood and child development would seek to understand and interpret the specific context in the given cultural environment (values, beliefs and practices) of working children and their families/communities and will be able to arrive at a more relevant definition of child labor and support interventions that are more sustainable. As Martin Woodhead reminds us, “we need to recognize that children’s needs, and their process of meeting those needs, as well as protecting children from harmful influence, is profoundly shaped by beliefs and practices through which children are incorporated into their families and communities and which gradually become part of their own identity and self-esteem”.

An interesting angle to a cultural approach to child labor is provided by Olga Nieuwenhuys in her discussion of child labor and anthropology. Her main thesis is that modern society sets children apart ideologically as "a category of persons excluded from the production of value". Taking this approach it can be argued that given mainstream thinking of equating work and employment (viz, paid work), any work that is performed outside this equation is not considered work at all - and therefore work done by children produce no value. For this reason,

"the disassociation of childhood from the performance of valued work has been increasingly considered a yardstick of modernity". In developing countries, especially in poorer regions and provinces where the incidence of child labor is often higher, we know little about the production of value and the role of children in it. As Olga rightly points out, there is need for more information and research which will uncover "how the need of poor children to realize self-esteem through paid work impinges upon the moral condemnation of child labor as one of the fundamental principles of modernity".

Cultural traditions and practices have a strong influence on child-rearing and child development in the countries of the South. It determines how children are brought up and particularly, what roles they play in the family, community and society. In addition to economic necessity, culture also plays a key role in the choices parents and children make in engaging with the labor market. Cultural norms, values and practices influence how child work is viewed in societies of the South and, as in the case of caste factors in South Asia, also tend to endorse exploitation and abuse in some cases. A cultural approach to child labor would need to identify such harmful traditions and practices which endorse child exploitation and address the factors that perpetuate them. This is perhaps one of the most challenging tasks for action against the worst forms of child labor as it directly addresses the culturally sensitive attitudes, beliefs and practices in families and communities of the South.

A cultural approach therefore needs to evolve culturally-sensitive strategies that facilitate working children's participation and developing interventions that are based on local conditions. As Per Miljeteig notes "it is important to look for cultural and traditional experience that can ease the introduction of a concept that often feels alien in many societies, non-western and western, alike. Here it is a need to draw on local expertise on cultural practices and local understandings of childhood and children's role in society".

#### 4.5. Organized Working Children as "social actors"

We need to value the positive contribution of children to their family, community and society, their resilience and capacity to contribute to change. It is no longer tenable to view children as "just innocent, vulnerable and susceptible" but as "active social actors who can make a positive contribution as children to social development". Time and again, children have shown in countries of the South that notwithstanding the conditions of poverty and vulnerability and the hazards of child labor exploitation, they reaffirm their role as social actors and display potentials that can be harnessed by society for development. As a study on child labor in rural Philippines noted:

"Rural children are active participants in the development process. They contribute in their own small way to the economy...(this study)...showed the reality that the children, although very vulnerable and exposed to the hazards of



rural childhood, have a role to play in rural development. They are not simply dependents and are not necessarily better off than their urban counterparts. They should be more active participants in development, if only for the reason that the future belongs to them and thus, even now, has a stake on current development initiatives”.

Working children have also begun to organize themselves in order to defend their rights for better conditions and services. A comprehensive study of working children’s organizations in the world published by Save the Children in 1999 which surveyed selected organizations of street and working children in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Swift observed that “the children’s movements are leading exponents of the participation and organization of children. Most came into being because of the lack of concerted action by the state; or anyone else, to provide the most basic protection or development opportunities to the children of poor neighborhoods. What the movements have done is build on children’s ability to help protect themselves against the physical and psychological traumas that poverty and social exclusion expose them to. They have gone further, enabling children in varying degrees to become protagonists for their rights and for social change rather than victims of poverty”.

An excellent example of a local and indigenous working children’s movement is Bhima Sangha in southern India, which is an independent organization of working children launched in 1990. It has a membership of over 13,000 working children. The organization seeks to reach out to other working children to inform them of their rights, of the means to change the situations and the power of the union. “Members of Bhima Sangha feel that they are their own first line of defence and so have the right to organize themselves. They also believe that they are protagonists and can impact on social, political and economic structures in order to mould the society closer to their vision”.

The first-ever world movement of working children was launched in India in 1996 when working children from 32 countries in Asia, Latin America and Africa met for the first International Meeting of Working Children in Kundapur and adopted the Kundapur Declaration. The 10 points of this declaration laid down the perspective and demands of working children that is relevant even today:

1. We want recognition of our problems, our initiatives, proposals and our process of organization
2. We are against the boycott of products made by children
3. We want respect and security for ourselves and the work that we do
4. We want an education system whose methodology and content are adapted to our reality
5. We want professional training adapted to our reality and capabilities
6. We want access to good health care for working children
7. We want to be consulted in all decisions concerning us, at local, national

and international level

8. We want the root causes of our situation, primarily poverty, to be addressed and tackled

9. We want more activities in rural areas and decentralization in decision making, so that children will no longer be forced to migrate

10. We are against exploitation at work but we are for work with dignity with hours adapted so that we have time for education and leisure.

In March 1998 working children representatives from Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean (except Brazil) met in Dakar, Senegal, and formed the International Committee of Working Children's Movements. Although unable to participate in the ILO Conference in June of that year – in spite of making the request – the Committee issued the following statement:

- Urging that working children's movements are consulted before processes concerning them are launched
- Declaring their opposition to such 'intolerable forms of child labor' as prostitution, drug-trafficking and slavery but identifying them as crimes rather than forms of work
- Asserting that one day (when the causes that compel children to work have been tackled) children should have the choice of whether to work or not
- Stating that the work children do should depend not on their age but on their development and capabilities
- Explaining that their movements did not support the 'Global March Against Child Labor' because they could not 'march against their own jobs' and were not taken account of in the planning phase of the march.

With the rapid growth of organizations of working children in many other countries in the developing world and their successful efforts at international networking, advocacy and influencing major international events and conference in the past few years, many international agencies and NGOs have today come to accept that working children have begun to exercise their right to form associations and networks to protect their interests and advocate for their rights. The International Save the Children Alliance, for example, in its recent Position Paper on Children and Work reiterates this: "Working children's organizations help to achieve children's right to participate and associate, and can help children to achieve their right to be free from harmful work. They can serve a variety of functions, including whistle-blowing, monitoring work places, providing mutual support and protection, and advocating for policy change. Girls and boys have the right to participation and association, and such organizations are to be encouraged".

Notwithstanding the few pioneering studies on working children's organizations and networks that have been undertaken so far, there still seems to be a lack of in-depth understanding and rigorous research on working children's participation and its impact on societal change. Per Miltejeg notes that this lack

of understanding is particularly related to what participation means if it is to be taken to its fullest meaning, in a way that respects the capacities and integrity of children and is culturally sensitive. He proposes a research agenda that could address this gap, which includes the following key issues and questions:

- ☐ Children's capacity for 'participation' and 'partnership', their competence, resilience and other aspects of development that are relevant,
- ☐ Results and impact of working children's participation
- ☐ How working children and youth perceive their roles and strategies when involved in programs or other activities related to child labor,
- ☐ Mechanisms that facilitate and complicate (or obstruct) children's participation,
- ☐ Local understandings and traditions that can be conducive to children's participation and respect their contribution to family and society,
- ☐ To what extent are programs that include working children actively more effective and sustainable, and what makes such programs replicable,
- ☐ Relationships and roles between children of different ages as well as between 'children' and 'adults', how to establish non-intrusive working relations between children of various ages and adults,
- ☐ The role of adults involved – how do they balance their efforts to make a difference against the respect for children's integrity? How do they most effectively support the children without making them dependent on their constant presence?

## 5. Conclusion

The problem we are faced with today is that work in itself is not an issue for children – the major issue is, in fact, their continued abuse and exploitation. As Ben White puts it “the problem is therefore best understood not as a problem of ‘work’ as such, but as an issue of the exploitation and abuse of children's capacity to work”. It is thus, essentially, a question of the rights of the children and how their economic exploitation is a violation of their fundamental rights. Child labor exploitation prevents children from being recognized as legal subjects or rights holders and denies them their work-related rights. Some have even argued that it only until these work-related rights are recognized that children will become legal subjects as rights holders. A rights-approach to child labor may therefore imply, first of all, to acknowledge that children have working rights and as such they are legal subjects whose rights needs to be defended and promoted. As this chapter has argued, working children have been able to exercise their rights and prove they are change-makers - with or without the aid of international legal instruments. Evidence also shows - both from Bhima Sangha in Asia and Ninos y Adolescentes Trabajadores (NATs) in Latin America that the first step towards successful protagonism of working children was the reassertion of their self-identity as legal subjects and rights holders.

Some analysts have pointed out to the danger of a polarized discourse in the child labor debate, putting "child-centered" advocates (primarily NGOs and civil society organizations) at one end, and the "traditionalists" (primarily trade unions and the ILO) at the other. Alec Fyfe argues that this polarization in the current discourse on child labor leads to false choices: "child-centered vs traditional paternalism; work vs education; public vs private; local vs global". While this may be true given the fact that the child labor arena has become so competitive and evokes passionate, emotional and political sentiments among institutions and activists alike, there is enough evidence – some of which has been reviewed and discussed in this chapter – to suggest that today we are witnessing a comprehensive challenge to mainstream approaches and actions, coming not only from grassroots civil society but working children themselves. In such a situation, I would argue that the real polarization is, in fact, between adults vs. children, institutions vs. movements, top-down vs. bottom-up, North vs. South, which is reflected in the ideological and strategic positions taken in the current discourse on child labor.

For too long working children have been viewed as a "default category". It is time not only that they are recognized, but their voices are heard and they are actively engaged as partners in the fight to combat the worst forms of child labor. This is a fundamental right of working children which needs to be guaranteed and promoted.

At the same time, we need to ensure that our policies and actions are strategic in terms of its results and outcomes guided by the spirit and provisions of the CRC and ILO Convention 182. A blanket "abolitionist approach" to child labor is untenable with a rights-approach and mitigates against protecting and promoting the rights of children. Moreover, "an unqualified ban on child labor, without ensuring children's right, can easily result in the eradication of the children itself".

The challenges we face in this complex area can be surmounted only by building a broad-based social movement to combat the economic exploitation of children and especially the worst forms of child labor – a bottom-up social mobilization process that is effectively able to identify, act upon and eliminate the worst forms of exploitation of children by addressing root causes and structural conditions that perpetrate this situation. A rights-approach could enable us to meet this challenge - to address the structural factors and spearhead a broad social movement involving a strategic alliance of partners - with the working children and their movements as its center.

Kathy, a 16 year old girl from Barbados well summed up the problematic of child labor and the challenges ahead in her contribution to a global discussion on children and work on Voices of Youth, with the following words:

"The exploitation of child workers is a vicious global disease running rampant and unimpeded in our world today. Its monstrous tentacles know no boundaries, no limits. It snakes its way into every society regardless of race, religion or ethnicity leaving behind a gaping hole in the blanket of our humanity revealing the horror and terror; the abuse and agony that its victims must bear. I wish the answers were simple...to a child they are...Tell me someone please what can YOU do when the kids who are exploited can look you in the eye and say 'there is no other way, bills have to be paid, my brothers and sisters must eat, I have NO CHOICE'... Sadly the only solution I can find is to never stop, never stop trying to fight child exploitation even when all seems lost, never stop. FIGHT TO THE BITTER END , for to give up would mean the destruction of humanity itself".

10 January 2004

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### NOTES

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