



Child Labour: an overview

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This note sets out the scale and nature of the problems associated with child labour and details the current action being taken to try to solve the issues.

Contents

1	Background and definition	2
1.1	Sectors associated with child labour	3
	Agriculture	3
	Armed conflict	4
	Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC)	4
	Domestic Labour	5
	Mining and quarrying	5
	Trafficking of children	6
	Clothing manufacture	7
2	The international response	7
3	International Labour Organisation (ILO) statistics	9
4	International legal standards and limits	11
5	UK Government action	13
6	Progress	14

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1 Background and definition

A textbook on Child Labour by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) offers a definition of what the child labour problem actually means:

Not all work done by children should be classified as child labour that is to be targeted for elimination. Children's or adolescents' participation in work that does not affect their health and personal development or interfere with their schooling, is generally regarded as being something positive. This includes activities such as helping their parents around the home, assisting in a family business or earning pocket money outside school hours and during school holidays. These kinds of activities contribute to children's development and to the welfare of their families; they provide them with skills and experience, and help to prepare them to be productive members of society during their adult life.

The term "child labour" is often defined as work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development. It refers to work that:

- is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and
- interferes with their schooling:
 1. by depriving them of the opportunity to attend school;
 2. by obliging them to leave school prematurely; or
 3. by requiring them to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work.

In its most extreme forms, child labour involves children being enslaved, separated from their families, exposed to serious hazards and illnesses and/or left to fend for themselves on the streets of large cities – often at a very early age.

Whether or not particular forms of "work" can be called "child labour" depends on the child's age, the type and hours of work performed, the conditions under which it is performed and the objectives pursued by individual countries. The answer varies from country to country, as well as among sectors within countries.¹

The children's charity UNICEF defines child labour both by type of work and by hours of work done per week by children of a certain age:

UNICEF defines child labour as work that exceeds a minimum number of hours, depending on the age of a child and on the type of work. Such work is considered harmful to the child and should therefore be eliminated.

Ages 5-11: At least one hour of economic work or 28 hours of domestic work per week.

Ages 12-14: At least 14 hours of economic work or 28 hours of domestic work per week.

Ages 15-17: At least 43 hours of economic or domestic work per week.²

¹ ILO, [Child Labour](#), 2004, p16

² UNICEF website, [Child labour](#) [on 24 November 2008]

An article in the *Observer* from June 2008 provides a summary of some child labour statistics:

- One in six children in the world today is involved in child labour, doing work that is damaging to his or her mental, physical and emotional development.
- Globally, between 210 and 240 million children are child labourers.
- 126 million of these children are engaged in hazardous work.
- Every year, 22,000 children die in work-related accidents.
- 73 million working children are under 10.
- Sub-Saharan Africa has the largest proportion of working children - nearly one-third of children aged 14 and under.
- 5.7 million children are forced into debt bondage or other forms of slavery.
- 70 per cent work in agriculture, fishing or forestry, 8 per cent in factories, wholesale and retail trade, restaurants and hotels.³

1.1 Sectors associated with child labour

The ILO website highlights several sectors where the problem of child labour is prevalent: agriculture; armed conflict (child soldiers); commercial sexual exploitation of children; domestic labour; mining and quarrying; and trafficking of children.⁴

Agriculture

The ILO estimates that the largest child labour sector is agriculture; that seventy per cent of working children are in some form agriculture - over 132 million girls and boys aged 5-14 years old. The website details the problem in agriculture further:

While great progress has been made in many countries in reducing hazardous child labour in other sectors, a number of factors have made agricultural child labour a particularly difficult one to tackle. These are:

Large numbers of children are involved in all types of undertakings ranging from small- and medium-sized family farms, to large farms, plantations, and agro-industrial complexes. Historically, child labour, either as part of “family teams” or as individual workers, has played a significant part in employment in plantations and commercial agriculture around the world. Girl child labour in agriculture forms a significant part of the workforce. Key gender issues include how girls combine work in agriculture with domestic chores, resulting in reduced educational opportunities for them.

Children around the world become farm labourers at an early age. Most statistical surveys only cover child workers aged 10 and above. However, many children begin work at an even earlier age. Rural children, in particular girls, tend to begin work young, at 5, 6 or 7 years of age. In some countries, children under 10 are estimated to account for 20 per cent of child labour in rural areas.

The work that children perform in agriculture is often invisible and unacknowledged because they assist their parents or relatives on the family farm or they undertake

³ “Focus: Child Labour: Born to Lives of Child Labour”, *The Observer*, 22 June 2008

⁴ ILO, [Child labour by sector](#) [on 21 November 2008]

piecework or work under a quota system on larger farms or plantations, often as part of migrant worker families.

Agriculture is historically and traditionally an under-regulated sector in many countries. This means that child labour laws – if they exist – are often less stringent in agricultural industries than in other industries. In some countries, adult and child workers in agriculture are not covered by or are exempt from safety and health laws covering other categories of adult workers. Children, for example, are generally allowed to operate machinery and drive tractors at a younger age in agriculture than in other sectors.⁵

In Parliament, a recent concern about the agricultural sector has focused on the cocoa industry:

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development pursuant to the answer of 18 June 2008, *Official Report*, column 1036W, on cocoa: children, if he will make it his policy to seek a prohibition on the sale in the UK of chocolate made with cocoa farmed by trafficked children. [216359]

Mr. Malik: The Department for International Development (DFID) strongly condemns the use of trafficked labour in the production of cocoa and other industries. However, we believe the best way to raise labour standards is through capacity building and co-operation, and encouragement of business and governments, rather than trying to impose restrictions on trade. Ultimately, it is for individual governments to set and enforce their own labour standards, to protect workers in their own countries and provide a 'level playing field' for companies.

DFID supports a range of initiatives to reduce the vulnerability of children to trafficking and to support fair and ethical supply chains for the chocolate and other industries. This includes promoting the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises which set down the employment standards that the Government expect UK companies to implement in their supply chains. It also includes supporting the Fairtrade Foundation and the Ethical Trading Initiative which requires its corporate members to adopt the ETI Base Code which includes not using child labour.⁶

Armed conflict

The ILO states that the number of children involved in armed conflicts has increased significantly over the past decade. In 2001 it was estimated that 300,000 children were serving with armed units around the world (of which 120,000 in Africa, 120,000 in Asia/Pacific and 30,000 in Latin America and Caribbean). The ILO website explains that while many are older children, aged 15 or more, there has been a sharp trend towards the recruitment of younger children.⁷

Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC)

At the 1st World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (Stockholm, 1996), the commercial sexual exploitation of children was been defined as “a violation of the fundamental rights of girls and boys involving sexual abuse on the part of an adult and the remuneration in funds or in kind both for the child, as well as for a third party.”⁸ The ILO sets out that CSEC can include:

⁵ ILO, [Agriculture](#) [on 21 November 2008]

⁶ HC Deb 9 July 2008 c1719W

⁷ ILO website, [Armed conflict \(child soldiers\)](#) [on 24 November 2008]

⁸ IPEC, [Facts on commercial sexual exploitation of children](#), March 2003

- The use of girls and boys in sexual activities remunerated in cash or in kind (commonly known as child prostitution) in the streets or indoors, in such places as brothels, discotheques, massage parlours, bars, hotels, restaurants, etc.
- The trafficking of girls and boys and adolescents for the sex trade.
- Child sex tourism.
- The production, promotion and distribution of pornography involving children.
- The use of children in sex shows (public or private.)⁹

Although it is difficult to define precisely in numbers the nature of CSEC problems, due to its illegal nature, ILO figures suggest that for the year 2000 there were as many as 1.8 million children exploited in prostitution or pornography worldwide. While the age that a child becomes involved may be quite young, children of 15-17 years old are reportedly the most affected.¹⁰

Domestic Labour

The ILO details that throughout the world, thousands of children are working as domestic helpers, performing tasks such as cleaning, ironing, cooking, minding children and gardening. Many of these forms of labour are seen to be culturally acceptable in particular areas, but the ILO is concerned about particular risks that domestic labour can expose children to, including:

- long and tiring working days;
- use of toxic chemicals;
- carrying heavy loads;
- handling dangerous items, such as knives, axes and hot pans;
- insufficient or inadequate food and accommodation, and
- humiliating or degrading treatment, including physical and verbal violence, and sexual abuse.¹¹

In terms of numbers, the ILO details that approximately 175,000 children under 18 are employed in domestic service in Central America, more than 688,000 in Indonesia, 53,942 under-15 years in South Africa and 38,000 children between 5 and 7 years old in Guatemala.¹²

Mining and quarrying

The ILO sets out some of the dangers of child labour in the mining sector:

It is physically dangerous because of the heavy and awkward loads, the strenuous work, the unstable underground structures, heavy tools and equipment, the toxic and often explosive chemicals, and the exposure to extremes of heat and cold.

⁹ ILO website, [Commercial sexual exploitation of children](#) [on 24 November 2008]

¹⁰ IPEC, [Facts on commercial sexual exploitation of children](#), March 2003

¹¹ ILO website, [Domestic Labour](#) [on 24 November 2008]

¹² ILO website, [Domestic Labour](#) [on 24 November 2008]

It is often can also be morally and psychologically risky given that mining often takes place in remote areas where law, schools, and social services are unknown, where family and community support may not exist, where "boom or bust" conditions foster alcohol abuse, drugs, and prostitution.¹³

A PQ from June 2008 details the scale of the problem worldwide:

Mrs. James: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent estimate he has made of the number of children working in mining in (a) Africa, (b) Asia and (c) South America. [213597]

Mr. Malik: The Department for International Development (DFID) does not make its own estimates of the number of children working in the mining industry. For this we rely on the International Labour Organisation (ILO), which estimates the number of children working in the mining sector to be over 1 million worldwide. DFID supports the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to help countries implement core labour standards that include the elimination of child labour. We are also working with the ILO and civil society organisations to promote efforts to remove children from all hazardous labour. DFID has a £20 million partnership framework for three years (2006-09) with the ILO.

DFID supports and currently chairs the Communities and Small scale Mining (CASM) initiative. This is a network that includes mining communities as well as international experts. It is based in the World Bank HQ in Washington DC and is active in Africa, Asia-Pacific, and South and Central America. As one of the four central themes of its work, Communities and Small-scale Mining (CASM) includes a focus on children working in dangerous and hazardous conditions in small-scale mining. CASM fully recognizes the extent and nature of child labour and is committed to its elimination from the mining industry.¹⁴

Trafficking of children

The 2002 ILO publication *Every child counts: New global estimates on child labour* estimated that 1.2 million children under the age of 18 were trafficked.¹⁵ The ILO website sets out the problem further:

Child trafficking is one of the worst forms of child labour. Although no precise figures exist, an estimated 1.2 million children - both boys and girls - are trafficked each year into exploitative work in agriculture, mining, factories, armed conflict, or commercial sex work.

ILO Convention No.182 (1999) on the Worst Forms of Child Labour classifies trafficking among "forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery" and thereby a WFCL to be eliminated as a matter of urgency, irrespective of the country's level of development.

The trafficking of children, internally in countries, across national borders and across continents is closely interlinked with the demand for cheap malleable and docile labour in sectors and among employers, where the working conditions and the treatment grossly violates the human rights of the children, characterized by environments that are unacceptable (the unconditional worst forms) as well as dangerous to the health and the development of the child (hazardous worst forms). These forms range from bonded labour, camel jockeying, child domestic labour, commercial sexual exploitation

¹³ ILO website, [Mining and quarrying](#) [on 24 November 2008]

¹⁴ HC Deb 30 Jun 2008 c598W

¹⁵ ILO, [Every child counts: New global estimates on child labour](#), 2002, summary

and prostitution, drug couriership, child soldiering and exploitative or slavery-like practices in the informal industrial sector.

Clothing manufacture

In the UK a particular concern with child labour has related to the clothing manufacture and retail sector, as highlighted in a June 2008 PQ:

Mr. MacDougall: To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform what steps his Department is taking to prevent imports of (a) cotton and (b) clothing which have been produced by child labour in Uzbekistan. [203810]

Mr. Thomas [*holding answer 7 May 2008*]: The UK remains concerned, about allegations of the use of child labour in the cotton sector in Uzbekistan. The UK has raised its concerns through the EU and has discussed the issue with the Uzbek Government. The EU welcomed Uzbekistan's signing of the International Labour Organisation Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour earlier this year and has urged Uzbekistan to implement effectively its international obligations in this regard.

The UK Government continue to call on businesses to look at their supply chains and take appropriate action if they find evidence that goods has been produced using child labour.

There is no legal requirement for goods to bear marks indicating its origin. As such, it would be difficult for the Government to establish a blanket ban on imports of Uzbek cotton and clothing. Similarly, products manufactured using Uzbek cotton in a third country would legitimately bear the country of manufacture as the country of origin.¹⁶

2 The international response

The International Labour Organisation's (ILO) International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) was created in 1992 with the overall goal of the progressive elimination of child labour. The aim is to strengthen the capacity of countries to deal with the problem and to promote a worldwide movement to combat child labour.¹⁷ A 2007 report by the ILO summarises the history of the movement against child labour:

The worldwide movement against child labour has its roots in national movements that emerged in the first industrial nations during the early 19th century. Broad social alliances were forged in Britain, Germany, and the USA to campaign against child labour abuses. From the 1860s, the labour movement took up the issue of child labour at the international level, ensuring that it became the centrepiece of the International Labour Organization (ILO) at its inception in 1919.

The work of the ILO in its first 60 years did not lead to a new international movement against child labour. This did not yet represent a conscious objective, and setting standards – the staple work of the ILO – had relatively little impact with regard to child labour. An actual movement, as such, first emerged in the 1980s, when a much broader response to child labour started to develop at *all* levels. New actors, particularly non-governmental organizations (NGOs), began to work with the ILO on this issue. And with them came new perspectives. For the first time, a broad alliance at all levels – local, national, regional, and global – became a real prospect.

This growing movement did not begin to gain momentum until the mid- 1990s. The convergence of concerns with human rights, and child rights as part of that, with

¹⁶ HC Deb 2 Jun 2008 c783W

¹⁷ ILO-IPEC website, [The Programme](#) [on 18 November]

responses to intensified globalization, propelled child labour up the international agenda, bringing it unprecedented attention. A number of indicators pointed to this surge in the worldwide movement:

- There was an explosion in the academic literature on child labour and in mass media coverage of the issue.
- Aside from the ILO, other international institutions, in particular UNICEF, the World Bank, and the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, more vigorously took up the issue.
- The worldwide movement was also grounded by the commitment of thousands of concerned individuals and groups as part of a dynamic civil society response.
- Furthermore, child labour became a focus of consumer groups and the growing corporate social responsibility movement.
- Finally, and most critically, governments in both the North and the South moved from apathy and denial to positive engagement with the problem including through the mobilization of resources to tackle the problem.¹⁸

According to the latest estimates available from the ILO there were 218 million child labourers aged 5-17 years in 2004.¹⁹ The priority target for the IPEC programme is to eliminate, by 2016,²⁰ the “worst forms of child labour”, which is defined in the *ILO Convention on the worst forms of child labour, 1999* (No. 182) as:

- (a) all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict;
- (b) the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances;
- (c) the use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in the relevant international treaties;
- (d) work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.²¹

The IPEC website summarises the scale of the programme’s operation:

IPEC currently has operations in 88 countries, with an annual expenditure on technical cooperation projects that reached over US\$74 million in 2006. It is the largest programme of its kind globally and the biggest single operational programme of the ILO.

The number and range of IPEC’s partners have expanded over the years and now include employers’ and workers’ organizations, other international and government agencies, private businesses, community-based organizations, NGOs, the media,

¹⁸ ILO [Worldwide Movement against Child Labour: Progress and Future Directions](#), 2007, p1-2

¹⁹ ILO, [Worldwide Movement against Child Labour: Progress and Future Directions](#), 2007, p2-3

²⁰ ILO, [IPEC action against child labour 2006-2007: Progress and future priorities](#), February 2008, p9

²¹ ILO, [Convention concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour](#), no 182, article 3

parliamentarians, the judiciary, universities, religious groups and, of course, children and their families.²²

A 2008 ILO report on *Child Labour Statistics* explains how there has been a recent “sea change” in attitudes towards combating child labour problems:

As was pointed out by the Director-General in the ILO’s Global Report on child labour in 2006, there has in recent years been a sea change in attitudes towards child labour. The sense of hopelessness and resignation that previously prevailed on the subject; the feeling that, regrettable though it is, there is little that can be done to prevent or eliminate child labour as it is so deeply rooted in poverty and cultural attitudes: these have been replaced by a worldwide consciousness that it is today not only possible but also urgently necessary to eradicate at least the most unacceptable forms of child labour within a short time frame rather than in some indefinite future, and to set in motion an irreversible process leading to the total elimination of the scourge of all forms of child labour. Programmes of action have been launched in many countries to this end, and the international community has mobilized significant efforts and resources – most notably in the framework of the ILO’s International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) – to support national programmes.²³

Another report examines the “challenges to come” for the ILO in addressing child labour problems:

The challenge for the new millennium is to convert the recent surge in international interest in the problem of child labour into a sustained, coherent, and effective effort on behalf of working children. This report focuses on international action. This is not to imply that national action is unimportant – quite the contrary. The emphasis instead reflects the fact that the greatest deficits in terms of commitment and coherence currently lie at the global level.

What is still lacking is an international climate and architecture conducive to supporting action on behalf of working children and their families at the local and national levels, where it most matters. Of course, the relationship between the international and the national levels of the worldwide movement works both ways – action at the national level informs international policy and action, which in turn helps to support national efforts against child labour. The levels of the movement are interactive, and ought to be mutually reinforcing. The operation of this process remains far from optimal, however, as the report makes clear.²⁴

3 International Labour Organisation (ILO) statistics

The International Labour Organisation statistics are most often quoted by organisations working in this area. The ILO’s International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) collates and publishes the statistics on child labour. The figures do not cover children who provide labour in their own households.²⁵

The ILO published its first global estimate of 250 million child workers in 1996. Since then public opinion worldwide has helped mobilize governments and civil society groups into action against child labour. In 2001, a major research project to provide new global estimates was undertaken by the Statistical Information and Monitoring Programme on Child Labour

²² ILO-IPEC website, [The Programme](#) [on 18 November]

²³ ILO [Report III Child labour statistics](#) prepared for the 18th International Conference of Labour Statisticians, October 2008

²⁴ ILO [Worldwide Movement against Child Labour: Progress and Future Directions](#), 2007, p3-4

²⁵ Bjorne Grimsrud, [Millennium Development Goals and Child Labour](#), October 2003, page 6

(SIMPOC). The results of this research were published in April 2002 in the report *Every child counts – New global estimates on child labour*.²⁶ An IPEC fact sheet summarised these as follows:

ILO estimates of child labour worldwide

According to estimates released in April 2002 in *Every child counts: New global estimates on child labour* (Geneva, ILO), there were some 352 million children aged 5 to 17 engaged in some form of economic activity in the world in 2000, including 211 million in the age group from 5 to 14 years. The Asia-Pacific region has the largest number of child workers in the 5-14 age category at 127.3 million. It is followed by Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean with 48 million and 17.4 million, respectively.

“Economic activity” encompasses most productive activities of children: it includes both work that is permissible under the ILO child labour Conventions and that which is not. “Child labour”, however, is a narrower concept: it excludes the activities of children 12 years and older who are working only a few hours a week in permitted light work and those of children 15 years and above whose work is not classified as “hazardous.” ILO action targets the elimination of child labour as defined in the ILO Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138) and the ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182) and not all economic activities of children. IPEC’s research identified an estimated:

- 246 million children in child labour aged 5 to 17 years, of which 186 million were below the age of 15 and 110 million below the age of 12;
- 171 million child labourers working in hazardous situations or conditions of which 111 million children were below 15 years of age;
- roughly 8.4 million children child labourers involved in the unconditional worst forms of child labour listed in ILO Convention No.182, Article 3, including forced and bonded labour (5.7 million), armed conflict (0.3 million), prostitution and pornography (1.8 million), and illicit activities (0.6 million);
- at least 1.2 million of child labourers were also victims of trafficking.

On average, more boys (132 million) are involved in child labour than girls (113 million) and boys outnumber girls in hazardous work across all age groups. In relative terms, nearly three-quarters of boys in child labour (95.7 million) were in hazardous situations, compared with about two-thirds of girls in child labour (74.8 million).²⁷

A further report published in 2002 entitled *A Future without Child Labour: Global Report under the Follow-up to the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work* stressed the difficulty of gathering comprehensive statistics in this area and outlined that one child in every eight in the world is believed to be engaged in the worst forms of child labour:

Some 180 million children aged 5-17 (or 73 per cent of all child labourers) are now believed to be engaged in the worst forms of child labour, comprising hazardous work and the unconditional worst forms of child labour. This amounts to one child in every eight in the world. Of the some 171 million children engaged in hazardous work, nearly two-thirds are under 15 and therefore require immediate withdrawal from this work and rehabilitation from its effects. While 67 million children in the 5-14 age group are

²⁶ ILO-IPEC *Every Child Counts New Global Estimates on Child Labour*, April 2002

²⁷ ILO-IPEC *Every Child Counts New Global Estimates on Child Labour*, April 2002

engaged in non hazardous child labour that they should not be undertaking by virtue of their age, many more children (111 million) are involved in work that actually jeopardizes their well-being. Among older children aged 15-17 years (who are above the minimum age for employment), the estimates indicate that 59 million are involved in hazardous work. This represents an alarming 42 per cent of all working children in this age group.

Over eight million children worldwide are trapped in the unconditional worst forms of child labour. However, as the Report warns, this figure must be treated with great caution given the extreme difficulty of gathering data on these hidden and illegal activities.

Thus, despite the increasing commitment and efforts by governments, the social partners and civil society to tackle child labour, the problem remains on a massive scale. Phenomena such as trafficking in children and increasing labour migration mean that all countries – developing, transition and developed alike – are affected to a greater or lesser extent by child labour. The figure for children engaged in hazardous work is considerably higher than was previously thought. The Report proposes that the time has come for the number and proportion of child labourers in a country's child population, particularly those engaged in the worst forms of child labour, to be considered as key indicators of economic and social development.²⁸

The latest ILO figures are given in the 2007 report, the *Worldwide Movement against Child Labour: Progress and Future Directions*, which summarises the current scale of the problem:

Scale of the child labour problem. According to new estimates from the ILO published in 2006 there were 218 million child labourers aged 5-17 years in 2004. The number in hazardous work, which accounts for the bulk of the worst forms of child labour (WFCL) was 126 million in 2004. Most working children (69 per cent) are involved in agriculture compared with only 9 per cent in industry. The Asian-Pacific region accounts for the largest number of child workers – 122 million in total, followed by Sub-Saharan Africa (49.3 million) and Latin America and the Caribbean (5.7 million).

However, for the first time the ILO was also able to note a positive trend with 20 million fewer working children in the 5-14 year core age group from 2000 to 2004 and a particular reduction of children's involvement in hazardous work. Overall, Latin America and the Caribbean saw the greatest decline in children's work. Though this is welcome good news, the child labour problem persists on a very large scale.²⁹

4 International legal standards and limits

There are a number of international conventions aimed at combating child labour. A few of the main ones are set out here. For more detailed information about policy and legislative responses to child labour issues in different countries, the ILO report, [Modern policy and legislative responses to child labour](#), December 2007, may be of interest.

The ILO Convention No. 138 on *the Minimum Age for Admission to Employment and Work 1973* sets the age at which children can legally be employed or otherwise work. The UK ratified this convention in 2000. The main principles of this convention are set out in on the IPEC website.³⁰

²⁸ ILO *A future without child labour: Global Report under the Follow-up to the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work*, 2002

²⁹ ILO, [Worldwide Movement against Child Labour: Progress and Future Directions](#), 2007, p2-3

³⁰ ILO-IPEC website, [ILO Conventions on child labour](#) [on 18 November]

	The minimum age at which children can start work.	Possible exceptions for developing countries
<p>Hazardous work</p> <p>Any work which is likely to jeopardize children’s physical, mental or moral health, safety or morals should not be done by anyone under the age of 18.</p>	<p>18</p> <p>(16 under strict conditions)</p>	<p>18</p> <p>(16 under strict conditions)</p>
<p>Basic Minimum Age</p> <p>The minimum age for work should not be below the age for finishing compulsory schooling, which is generally 15.</p>	<p>15</p>	<p>14</p>
<p>Light work</p> <p>Children between the ages of 13 and 15 years old may do light work, as long as it does not threaten their health and safety, or hinder their education or vocational orientation and training.</p>	<p>13-15</p>	<p>12-14</p>

The ILO Convention No. 182 *on the Worst Forms of Child Labour*, 1999 was established to strengthen existing Conventions on child labour. The ILO explains that this convention “helped to focus the international spotlight on the urgency of action to eliminate as a priority, worst forms of child labour without losing the long term goal of the effective elimination of all child labour.”³¹ The UK ratified this convention in 2000.

The United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)* was adopted in 1989 and entered into force in 1990. Article 43 of the CRC provides for the establishment of a Committee on the Rights of the Child to which signatory States report on the measures they have adopted which give effect to the rights of the Convention. The 2007 ILO report explains further:

The CRC affirmed the right of all children to education (Article 28) and to protection from economic exploitation (Article 32). Although the Convention contains little detail on child labour, several other Articles have some relevance to the subject. Article 19 refers to protection from physical or mental violence, injury or abuse; Article 24 to health; Article 30 to minorities; and Article 38 to children in armed conflict. Additionally, there are the “general principles” that inform the Convention, particularly Article 2 regarding non-discrimination; Article 3, on the best interests of the child; Article 6, on the right to life, survival and development; and not least, Article 12, regarding the views of the child. Finally, Article 43 established a Committee on the Rights of the Child to monitor progress made by state Parties in implementing the Convention. UNICEF was given a special role in supporting the work of the Committee.³²

³¹ ILO-IPEC website, [ILO Conventions on child labour](#) [on 18 November]

³² ILO [Worldwide Movement against Child Labour: Progress and Future Directions](#), 2007, p18

A report by a UNESCO organisation called “Right to Education” examined various limits contained in national laws in light of the convention and found that children’s right to education is under threat from early marriage, child labour and imprisonment.³³ States have not adapted their legislation in favour of the right to education, and they do not have agreed standards for the transition from childhood to adulthood either internationally or nationally. In the same country, it is not rare to find that children are legally obliged to go to school until they are 14 or 15 years old but a different law allows them to work at an earlier age or to be married at the age of 12 or to be criminally responsible from the age of 7. With regard to employment the report outlines the following facts, summarised in a UNESCO press release of 20 April 2004:

The report, launched on the occasion of Education for All Week (April 19-25 2004), found that there is no compulsory education in at least 25 States, of which ten are in sub-Saharan Africa, six in East Asia and the Pacific, four in the Arab States, three in South and West Asia and two in Latin America and the Caribbean. Only 45 of 158 nations surveyed have equalized the school-leaving age and the minimum age for employment. In 36 countries, children can be employed full-time while they are still obliged to be in full-time education. At the other end of the scale, children in another 21 countries must wait at least a year, and sometimes three, after completing compulsory education, before they can legally work.

“The goals of universal education and elimination of child labour are inextricably linked,” stresses the report. “Free and compulsory education of good quality secured until the minimum age for entry to employment is a critical factor in the struggle against economic exploitation of children, while child labour is a fundamental obstacle to the development and implementation of compulsory education strategies.”³⁴

The report contains detailed tables of the minimum age thresholds in the laws of different countries for child employment, marriage and criminal responsibility.

5 UK Government action

A PQ from November 2007 sets out action taken by the UK Government to help tackle child labour issues:

Mrs. James: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress his Department has made in helping (a) reduce and (b) prevent child labour in (i) Asia, (ii) Africa and (iii) Latin America. [165150]

Mr. Malik: DFID is helping to reduce and prevent child labour by tackling the underlying poverty that is at the root of the problem. Our support to national governments enables them to create alternative livelihood opportunities for families and increase access to appropriate, good quality education for all children. In addition DFID is supporting a number of targeted programmes through UN bodies and civil society organisations. Examples include:

i. In Asia we have committed over £5 million to the International Labour Organisation’s Elimination of Child Labour Programme in Andhra Pradesh. This is helping children leave work and get into school, along-side supporting new income generating programmes for their parents.

³³ Right to Education, [Removing obstacles in the way of the right to education](#), 2001

³⁴ UNESCO [At what age are school children employed, married and taken to court?](#) 20 April 2004

ii. In Africa we are providing £120 million this year to support the Government of Tanzania's National Strategy for Growth and Poverty Reduction in which child labour has been identified as a key poverty challenge. We are working with UNICEF in 13 countries to support orphans and vulnerable children to access education and to protect them from abuse including harmful child labour. We also supported their work to disarm, demobilise and reintegrate former child soldiers.

iii. In Latin America DFID is supporting the work of non-governmental organisations in the region, including over £400,000 to the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA UK) who are helping to reduce the number of working children in Lima, Peru.³⁵

A PQ from May 2008 details related work to help child poverty:

Mr. Jamie Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps his Department is taking towards achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in respect of the world's poorest children. [203550]

Gillian Merron: The UK Government have committed £8.5 billion for education in developing countries over the 10 years to 2015-16. During the French President Sarkozy's recent visit to London, the UK and France agreed to each help support eight million children in school by 2010.

The UK Government commitment also include £150 million for children affected by HIV/AIDS (2004-07), over £10 million for addressing forced labour and child labour and over £16 million to combat trafficking of women and children.

The Department for International Development (DFID) supports children and young people through direct funding to non-governmental organisations, this includes £3.1 million to Plan UK for the period 2007-11 and £20.7 million to Save the Children for the period 2005-11. DFID has committed £7 million over the period 2006-09 to the 'Young Lives project', which is a 15-year study of child poverty in four countries.

The UK Government's work to enhance economic growth and to address inequality in developing countries also benefits the world's poorest children.³⁶

6 Progress

2000-2004

As part of broader efforts to develop effective and long-term solutions to child labour, ILO, UNICEF and the World Bank launched the interagency research project, *Understanding Children's Work*, in December 2000.³⁷ The website contains the most recent statistics on child labour for different countries, as well as providing access to various reports and surveys. There are also details about research projects which have not yet reported.

An ILO document published in January 2004 gives an update on progress.³⁸ The document gives a useful summary of the situation at that time:

1.1 CHILD LABOUR UPDATE: AN EVOLVING PROBLEM

It is often noted that child labour is both a massive and complex problem. Not only that, but the nature of child labour is in many respects an evolving problem and presents a

³⁵ HC Deb 20 Nov 2007 c686W

³⁶ HC Deb 13 May 2008 c1472W

³⁷ Website: [Understanding Children's Work](#) [on 18 November 2008]

³⁸ *IPEC action against child labour 2002-2003: Progress and future priorities*, January 2004: http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/ipec/publ/download/implementation_2003_en.pdf

formidable challenge, as seen over the last few years. Areas of the world, such as Central and Eastern Europe and some Central Asian countries,³⁹ which in the past were generally not considered to have the problem are now experiencing an upsurge of the worst forms of child labour (WFCL).⁴⁰ In other parts of the world, it has been discovered that hazardous child labour is more common than previously thought. While to some extent this reflects more precise measurement and greater awareness about the issue, it is also the result of evolving socio-economic realities affecting the demand and supply for child labour.

Amongst those involved in the combat against child labour, the critical focus now extends beyond dealing with the demand for cheap, docile child workers to reversing the growth of the worst forms, such as commercial sexual exploitation children, child trafficking, use of children in armed conflicts or drug trafficking, and hazardous child labour. Global information and other networks, which have worked wonders in spreading the message in favour of children's rights and in linking up like-minded activists, policy-makers and researchers, also work to the advantage of traffickers, militia recruiters, and child exploitation rings.

Not only demand, but the supply of young children put to work is also increasing in certain areas of the world. This is being fuelled in part by the global HIV/AIDS epidemic, which has increased the numbers of young people needing to support themselves or their families. It is also caused by continued weaknesses in the world economy and growing income disparities in a number of countries that bring about an increase in children looking for work in the streets. Among the first order of challenges for IPEC will be to stem the tide of the WFCL through the development of better tools and strategies to assess, eliminate, monitor and prevent it.

Figures on child labour released by the International Labour Office (ILO) in June 2002 reaffirmed, on the one hand, the dire situation that millions of children are trapped in worldwide and, on the other hand, the acute necessity to continue all endeavours to end child labour, focusing on its worst forms as a matter of urgency.

2004-2006

In 2006 the ILO published the report [*The end of child labour: Within reach*](#). The report detailed how international political support has been "essential" to the recent reduction in child labour numbers. It also stressed how progress has been made by linking child labour with education goals:

International political support has been essential.

The elimination of child labour was not explicitly included in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set in 2000, but achieving universal primary education was. In addition, one of the MDG targets included a call to develop decent and productive work for youth. Both are important elements of any strategy to eliminate child labour. The global commitment to tackle these challenges in an integrated way was expanded in September 2005, when the World Summit of more than 150 Heads of State and Government stated in the United Nations:

We strongly support fair globalization and resolve to make the goals of full and productive employment and decent work for all, including for women and young

³⁹ IPEC: *Rapid Assessment Survey on Trafficking in children in Romania for labour and sexual exploitation*, (Draft), (Geneva, ILO, 2003); and National Report on the phenomenon of trafficking in children for sexual exploitation and labour in Moldova (Draft), (Geneva, ILO, 2003).

⁴⁰ For types of child labour comprising the worst forms, refer to *International Labour Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour*, 1999 (No. 182).

people, a central objective of our relevant national and international policies as well as our national development strategies, including poverty reduction strategies, as part of our efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. These measures should also encompass the elimination of the worst forms of child labour, as defined in International Labour Organization Convention No. 182, and forced labour. We also resolve to ensure full respect for the fundamental principles and rights at work.

We have made substantial progress in connecting the fight against child labour with education. The international financial institutions and other United Nations agencies are pursuing the link between child labour, poverty reduction and Education For All. After the 2005 World Summit, the link with employment must now become much more of a common priority.

In short, we have witnessed a sea change in the awareness of child labour across the world, and a broad consensus has emerged on the urgency of eradicating this scourge. Countries are taking on the challenge. There is now widespread agreement on the tools that are needed to do the job. The ILO's labour standards and policy advice have been central to this process. They have guided awareness raising and practical action. We must build on this positive evolution in full consciousness that the task ahead is still enormous.⁴¹

The report also summarises the ILO's "action plan" for the next four years:

[...] It proposes that the ILO and its member States continue to pursue the goal of the effective abolition of child labour, committing themselves to the elimination of all the worst forms of child labour by 2016, and that they put in place appropriate time-bound measures by the end of 2008. In pursuit of these targets, over the next four years the ILO will strengthen its efforts to develop coherent and comprehensive approaches to abolishing child labour. The proposed action plan rests on three pillars: supporting national responses to child labour, in particular through effective mainstreaming in national development and policy frameworks; deepening and strengthening the worldwide movement; and promoting further integration of child labour concerns within overall ILO priorities regarding decent work as a global goal. This more focused and strategic approach to global leadership will help ensure that the ILO will make a more effective contribution to making child labour history.⁴²

2006-date

In February 2008 the ILO published [IPEC action against child labour 2006-2007: Progress and future priorities](#). The report summarises recent progress made at regional levels:

At the regional level, progress in **sub-Saharan Africa** towards the elimination of child labour is lagging behind other regions of the world. Political commitment and leadership is critical to enhancing effective action. Since January 2007 and in response to the urgent need to respond to the child labour problem in Africa, IPEC has put in place a special Focus Africa team to plan for an expanded effort in 2008-09. A draft regional action plan for Africa, under discussion with ILO field offices, and a draft Focus Africa work plan will provide the platform for further engagement with constituents, the rest of the ILO and the donor community.

Among **Arab States**, increased public awareness and government commitment have broken the silence surrounding child labour and have also allowed for greater transparency in the analysis of statistics. Arab countries participating in IPEC activities

⁴¹ ILO, [The end of child labour: Within reach](#), 2006, executive summary

⁴² ILO, [The end of child labour: Within reach](#), 2006, executive summary

are increasingly forthcoming in dealing with the phenomenon as evident in the creation of Child Labour Units at Ministries of Labour, the amendment of legislation, the establishment of National Steering Committees and the development of lists of occupations hazardous to children.

The **Asia and Pacific region** faces a number of challenges: it has the largest number of child labourers in the world, and many of its countries are among the least developed economies. However, during the period 2006-07, the IPEC participating countries made slow but steady progress. Many countries in the region have placed child labour as a priority in the national development policy and the decent work agenda at country level. The next biennium (2008-09) will for the first time see IPEC direct interventions in some countries in the Pacific. New child labour estimates cited by the 2006 Global Report suggest a decline in the number of children working in the transition economies in **Europe and Central Asia**. Yet, there are still areas where child labour is endemic. In Central Asia and the Caucasus, many street children fall victim to the worst forms of child labour and many rural children perform hazardous work in agriculture. The high rate of migration plays a role in weakening social support for children. **Latin America and the Caribbean** saw the largest drop in child labour in recent years. But the challenge is by no means over and a redoubling of efforts is necessary to keep the momentum going. The majority of children in child labour work in hazardous conditions in agriculture, but there are also many thousands of girls and boys working in dangerous sectors such as mining, dumpsites, and so on. Mapping child labour, particularly in its worst forms, remains a challenge in the region. Everywhere, awareness raising must continue to ensure sustained advances in law and practice.⁴³

The report estimates that the number of children who have benefited from ILO action during 2006-07 (through either preventive measures or support for removal from child labour situations) amounted to almost half a million direct and over 33 million indirect beneficiaries, surpassing the target for the biennium.⁴⁴ It also looks toward future areas of work:

Today, this emerging global consensus embraces the need to:

- Prioritize the worst forms – while not losing sight of the more encompassing goal to eliminate all forms of child labour;
- Respond to the especially vulnerable, including girls;
- Recognize the importance of poverty as a causal factor but not as an excuse for inaction;
- Mainstream child labour into global development and human rights frameworks, particularly Education for All (EFA);
- Prioritize Africa as the greatest development challenge.

However, many challenges lie ahead. The momentum generated at the end of the 1990s has not been routinely sustained and there is evidence that in recent years the child labour issue has dropped lower on the list of priorities of some key global actors. Ten years after the Oslo Conference it is time to take stock and re-focus on developing a global strategy and a more integrated international effort.

⁴³ ILO, [IPEC action against child labour 2006-2007: Progress and future priorities](#), February 2008, p10

⁴⁴ ILO, [IPEC action against child labour 2006-2007: Progress and future priorities](#), February 2008, p11

The ILO has a key leadership role to play in re-invigorating the worldwide movement. In November 2006, the Governing Body endorsed an Action Plan 2006-2010 setting out how the ILO will strengthen its efforts in support of the global target of eliminating all the worst forms of child labour by 2016.

A key element of the Action Plan is to deepen and strengthen the worldwide movement as a catalyst for national action. In particular, stress is laid on better targeting of advocacy efforts so that child labour is registered within the dominant development frameworks such as the Millennium Development Goals, Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers and Education for All. This requires an outward looking approach calling for increased dialogue and collaboration with the rest of the UN family, the International Financial Institutions and regional institutions, as well as with the ILO's social partners and international NGOs. An important context for this approach will be progress on UN reform – making child labour elimination and decent work part of “One UN” at the country level.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ ILO, [IPEC action against child labour 2006-2007: Progress and future priorities](#), February 2008, p78