

What role for the private sector in preventing, identifying and remedying child labour?

Of all the issues covered by labour codes, child labour is probably the best-known and the subject of most concern to consumers. Yet for a variety of reasons child labour is difficult to detect. Moreover, even when it has been effectively detected, identifying and implementing solutions that have positive, long-term benefits for the children and their families is a real challenge. This workshop aimed to explore the role of companies in preventing, identifying and remedying child labour, and to provide concrete examples of what companies are doing. It describes the experiences of the Peace Trust¹² (India), the All Pakistan Federation of Labour, Gunteks Tekstil (Turkey) and the International Programme for the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), ILO.

11.1 Definition of child labour

Child labour refers to any work by a child or young person younger than the age(s) specified in the definitions below, which does not comply with the provisions of the relevant ILO standards, or is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's or young person's education, or to be harmful to the child's or young person's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.

Child: Any person less than 15 years of age unless local minimum age law stipulates a higher age for work or mandatory schooling, in which case the higher age shall apply. If however, local minimum age law is set at 14 years of age in accordance with developing country exceptions under ILO Convention No. 138, the lower will apply.

Young person: Any worker over the age of a child as defined above and under the age of 18.

11.2 Where is child labour found?

Child labour is widespread. In Pakistan alone, the International Programme for the Elimination of Child Labour (ILO-IPEC) estimated that in 1996 there were 3.3 million

12. The Peace Trust is an NGO based in Tamil Nadu, India, and works to improve labour and environmental standards and to promote the elimination of child labour.

children involved in child labour. One UK retailer estimates that half a million children work for their suppliers' subcontractors.

Since child labour became an international concern in the early 1990s, efforts have been made to address the problem. Often, as in the case of Pakistan, these efforts have had some success in reducing the presence of child labour in the organised (that is, unionised) sector, particularly in the first tier of the supply chain. However, these initiatives have tended to have little impact on the presence of child labour in sub-contracted levels of the supply chain and in small industries that do not attract the law or code enforcement. Rather than being reduced, child labour appears to be moving further down the supply chain to less secure and less regulated areas of employment.

11.3 Why does child labour continue to be pervasive?

Child labour is both a result of and a contributing factor to the cycle of poverty. Because employers can pay children less than adults, and because children are less likely to complain about poor conditions, employing children can be an attractive proposition for many employers. Often this can have the effect of reducing employment opportunities for adults. In many cases, work can prevent the children from going to school and gaining the skills they need to secure better employment as adults.

Conversely, poverty is also a root cause of child labour. Low adult wages, high unemployment and ill health often give parents little choice but to send their children to work rather than to school.

11.4 The challenges of identifying child labour

For sourcing companies and other external organisations, identifying child labour in many developing countries can be problematic. For a start, in many societies, people may not know their exact age. Moreover, employers and workers are generally aware that auditors will be looking for child labour, as both national law and company codes tend to emphasise this issue. Since both employers and child workers themselves may want to protect their jobs, they can become quite adept at concealing the issue. For child workers, practices such as using fake identity cards or those belonging to elder siblings are not uncommon.

Many sourcing companies have therefore found that identifying child labour effectively requires the co-operation of local trade unions and NGOs. The latter, however, are often hesitant to provide sourcing companies with information that might result in negative consequences, such as the cancellation of orders resulting in lost employment.

11.5 The challenges of remedying child labour

The experience of sourcing companies has highlighted the risks of poorly thought-out strategies to eliminate child labour. As mentioned above, efforts targeted at removing child labour from the first tier of the supply chain have often simply led the children to seek and gain employment further down the chain. Worse still, there are examples of children removed from work at factories or farms ending up working as prostitutes.

To prevent these problems and achieve real benefits for ex-child workers requires long-term commitment and co-operation with a wide range of local stakeholders, from

government departments and trade unions to schools and community groups. This poses a real challenge for sourcing companies and suppliers alike, but the examples in the following section show that it can be done.

11.6 Companies' experience of tackling child labour

11.6.1 Case study 1: Gunteks Tekstil, Turkey

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Gunteks manufactures jackets, trousers and skirts, and supplies on a sub-contractor basis to Levi Strauss & Co. Turkish law allows for children aged 14 or above to work as trainees or apprentices, provided that they earn at least one third of the minimum wage and are registered at an apprentice school and attend school at least one day a week. In accordance with this legislation, Gunteks employs a number of apprentices and pays them over half the minimum wage.

When they started supplying Levi Strauss & Co, Gunteks were asked to comply with the company's 'Terms of Engagement', which specify that workers should 'not be under 15 years of age and not younger than the compulsory age for schooling'. Gunteks found that they had three apprentices who were aged 14, and therefore not in compliance with the Terms of Engagement.

Gunteks adopted the following strategy, as suggested by Levi Strauss & Co:

- ensured that the children attended school at least until they completed mandatory schooling;
- carried on paying their normal wages during this period;
- gave each of the children a letter guaranteeing that they would have a job at Gunteks when they completed their schooling;
- set up a system to ensure that they do not employ children under 15 years in the future.

Gunteks have also been promoting this and other responsible business approaches through the business relationships with their own service providers, for instance maintenance, catering and security companies.

11.6.2 Case Study 2: Indiska initiative in Tamil Nadu, India

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Indiska is a Swedish company that has been purchasing garments from India for more than 100 years. It has its own code of conduct which includes a clause on child labour. In 1996, Indiska joined forces with the Peace Trust (India) to launch a five-year programme in the Veda sandur region of Tamil Nadu. This programme aimed to remove 100 child workers (50 boys and 50 girls) from 60 spinning mills, out of a total of 3,000–4,000 children employed in these factories.

The support provided by the programme to these children included:

- counselling services;
- enrollment at local government schools;
- establishment of a semi-boarded centre which provides extra tuition, support and confidence building to the ex-child workers;
- provision of nutritious food, school uniforms and stationery, bus fares to attend school, and payment of school fees and a cash stipend to compensate for lost family income;
- support and encouragement to take part in various child labour campaign events, including street plays;
- support for a training institute that provides vocational training to ex-child workers and other rural youth from the textile producing regions (for example, skills in computers, electrical work, garment making).

Case study 2: continued

While recognising that the impact has been limited to a selected group of ex-child workers, the Peace Trust feels that the benefits have nevertheless been substantial. The programme has helped to:

- boost the confidence and motivation of the children directly involved in the programme, with many becoming strong speakers for child workers;
- spread the message that child labour should not be used – the mills are now much more aware of this;
- win community acceptance of the importance of education in the development of their children. Communities are now supporting anti-child labour campaigns.

11.7 Moving ahead

Workshop speakers and participants came up with a wide range of suggestions on how to move forward in addressing child labour. Participants felt that all those involved in code implementation can help to improve the child labour situation in the long run by:

- **Investing in an holistic analysis** of factors resulting in continued child labour. Without a proper understanding of the underlying causes of child labour in any given situation, initiatives will at best be ineffectual and at worst damaging.
- **Applying pressure on national governments to make primary education compulsory**, improve the quality of education and provide more schools.
- **Applying pressure on national governments to introduce and enforce relevant legislation**, in particular legislation to meet their obligations under the ILO conventions on child labour, through labour inspectorates and trade ministries.
- **Contributing to building effective partnerships** throughout the supply chain, including links with local agencies, to build long-term sustainable solutions.

11.7.1 What suppliers can do

Workshop speakers suggested that a supplier's response to child labour needs to incorporate a range of elements, including:

- setting up systems to verify the age of workers on recruitment and to monitor the situation on a regular basis;
- removing underage children from work, and supporting their rehabilitation through the provision of education, counselling and other social support, and the provision of alternative income-earning opportunities for the children's families;
- providing young workers aged 14–18 with vocational training and a commitment to continued employment on completion of training;
- exerting influence on the supplier's own contractors and sub-contractors to address child labour;
- providing adult workers with secure employment, decent wages and conditions, and the freedom to organise;
- supporting health and nutrition programmes and adult education in communities;
- applying national labour law and regulations.

11.7.2 What sourcing companies can do

Participants identified the following strategies for sourcing companies:

- **Sourcing companies need to be bold.** Many companies are concerned that acknowledging child labour will result in negative publicity and a damaged reputation. However, participants challenged companies to be bold and acknowledge that child labour exists within the various levels of their supply chains, and to make a public commitment to address the issue. Measures to reduce child labour can also result in positive publicity and promotion.
- **Map their supply chain and be committed to identifying child labour at sub-contracted levels.** By monitoring workplace conditions only at the first tier, companies are supporting a double standard. Addressing child labour throughout the supply chain requires a long-term commitment from sourcing companies to support suppliers through a period of transition.
- **Address purchasing practices** which result in the continued use of child labour (see Chapter 9).

Further information

Presentation slides and papers for the All Pakistan Federation of Labour, IPEC, Gunteks Tekstil and the Peace Trust are available from the ETI Secretariat.

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