

Combating Child Labor in the Philippines¹

Children are indeed among the most vulnerable members of society. Children have weak bargaining power, are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation and, therefore, require special protection from work that is detrimental to their well-being.

Child labor involves any work performed by a child that subjects the child to economic exploitation, or that is likely to be hazardous for the child, or that interferes with the child's education, or that is harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or psychosocial development. Child labor has long-term repercussions as it inhibits the development of a country's human resources, reduces the lifetime earnings of individuals, and lowers the level of labor productivity.

Overall magnitude child labor

Worldwide, it is estimated that there are 352 million economically active children ages 5-17 in 2000. Meanwhile, there are some 211 million children ages 5 to 14 at work in economic activity. They represent less than one-fifth of all children in this age group. About 73 million are less than 10 years old.

In the Philippines, the *National Survey on Children (NSC)* indicated that there were about 4 million economically active children aged 5 to 17 years in 2001, which constitutes 16.2 percent of the total population of children in the same age group. Out of the 4 million child workers, about 60 percent or 2.4 million were exposed to hazardous working environments.

IPEC in the Philippines: lessons learned

Since 1994, the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) has implemented over 60 action programs against child labor through its network of partners and with the support of multilateral and bilateral development agencies. Following the Philippine-ILO Indicative Framework for Action, IPEC's work has consistently been focused on the most hazardous forms of child labor, including child victims of trafficking; children engaged in mining and quarrying; children in home-based enterprises, especially under sub-contracting arrangements; children in domestic service; children in commercial agricultural plantations, including sugar and vegetable production; children in pyrotechnics (fireworks) production; children in deep-sea diving and fishing; and children trapped in prostitution.

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The IPEC partnership in the Philippines works through a broad-based and strongly committed alliance of government, employer, workers, non-government and civil society organizations working towards a common objective of the progressive elimination of child labor, especially its worst forms. Over the past eight years, IPEC has not only striven to build the capacity of its partners to take active part in the battle against child labor, but it has also worked to form innovative partnerships.

- *Legislation and national policy*

The Philippines has achieved considerable progress in terms of legislation and explicit national policies to support the campaign against child labor. Republic Act No. 7610, otherwise known as the “Special Protection of Children Against Child Abuse, Exploitation and Discrimination Act” and its amendatory Republic Act 7658 are considered to be landmark child protection laws. In support of the international conventions that it ratified and the child labor laws enacted by the Philippine Congress, local governments at the provincial, city and municipal levels have also passed laws protecting children from abuse and exploitation. Others have passed ordinances banning the use of children in prostitution (i.e. in Quezon City, 1997) and trafficking and in dangerous occupations such as pyrotechnic production (i.e. Hinigaran, 1995), mining and quarrying.

Despite the presence of laws, regulations and programs, however, issues concerning enforcement have been persistent. The ILO-IPEC have taken the first steps towards addressing these issues through several action programs, including but not limited to: (i) raising awareness of the judicial system and NGO partners on newly passed legislation on child labor; (ii) expanding community surveillance and detection; (iii) specialized training of inspectors on child labor; (iv) providing litigation services to victims of child labor and child economic exploitation; (v) and designing an agenda for policy and legislative reform.

- *Awareness raising and social mobilization*

In the Philippines, public outrage over the plight of working children working under extremely difficult, hazardous, and exploitative conditions, as exposed by the media, provided much of the impetus for the enactment of more stringent legislation against child labor.

Documentary films aired on TV and drawing public attention to the deplorable working conditions of children in such sectors as mining, pyrotechnic production, and in sugar plantations, caught the attention and indignation of a wide audience. The IPEC partners have also utilized popular media forms to widen the reach of advocacy efforts.

- *Involving the community*

Community involvement is another major component of good practice emerging from the country’s experience in grass-roots action on child labor. Programs at the local level cannot succeed when a community is indifferent or even hostile to the objective of preventing children from working. The best approach to community mobilization is one where the elimination of the worst forms of child labor is perceived as just a component of a much broader program to protect the rights and welfare of children. A more comprehensive program that can rally the support of the community is one that includes efforts to curb all forms of abuses against children, child health and nutrition programs, sports and recreation activities, and off-school educational

activities. With the cooperation of school officials and teachers, measures can be agreed upon and undertaken to make schooling more interesting to children and to incorporate practical training in relevant skills in the curriculum.

It is essential that the community itself, including parents, teachers, health professionals, social workers, civil society groups, etc., participate in coming out with solutions. The support of local government officials and agencies is indispensable. Local laws or ordinances on child labor can be enacted providing an alternative route to the inadequacies of national laws and enforcement mechanisms. Local agencies can formulate and implement programs that have a direct or indirect impact on child labor. Building structures such as “child labor committees” or other local community councils, consisting of the key stakeholders in the community, ensures that the program can be sustained.

- *Providing alternatives*

A convergence has also emerged that a more effective approach is one that is comprehensive and preventive and curative rather than punitive. A comprehensive approach is needed because a child’s withdrawal from work must be accompanied by supportive measures for the child and family. Otherwise, action simply cannot be sustained. On the other hand, a punitive approach may only drive child laborers into clandestine occupations that are more exploitative or dangerous.

Employment and income-generating programs for parents and other adults are often a major component of the more successful initiatives. These come in various forms such as the training of adults in relevant skills, micro-finance and other credit schemes, and, in some cases, the establishment of small industries in the community such as basket-weaving, garment manufacturing, food processing, among others. In some cases, children can only be successfully withdrawn from difficult and hazardous work if alternative livelihood opportunities - that are not dangerous or do not interfere with their education - are provided.

- *IPEC experience in education*

IPEC's work to combat child labor through education range from provision of financial support to schools, mostly through educational scholarships; non-formal or alternative learning programmes in order to raise the competencies of former child laborers and to qualify them for re-entry to formal education; remedial lessons to children who have returned to school and/or are combining work with school; to such specialized schemes as the program for child scavengers (where the working children are supported through an allowance scheme, supplemental feeding and remedial learning programs).

The provision of education and training assistance has not been directed at child workers only, but also extended to their families - particularly in the areas of non-formal education and skills training. Such a family-based approach to combating child labor effectively provides the families of child workers with alternatives to strengthen their economic base.

The Philippine Time-Bound Program

The Republic of the Philippines has ratified ILO Convention No. 182 (1999), and it has taken a first, bold step to addressing the problem by according high priority to the elimination of the most intolerable and inhuman forms of child labor. It is the fourth country in the world to develop and implement a national program for the elimination of the worst forms of child labor, and the first country to do so in East Asia. As in El Salvador, Nepal and Tanzania, the Philippine Time-Bound Program Against Child Labor places special emphasis on combining sectoral, thematic, and area-based approaches in combating child labor. Direct action against the worst forms of child labor will thus be closely linked to the national development effort as a whole, to economic and social policies, from macro-economic performance to population dynamics, education and labor market policies.

Anchoring on the established network of implementing partners and building on the good practices that have evolved from the past and ongoing programs of IPEC, IPEC will implement a project in support of the Philippine Time-Bound Program based on two major strategic components – (1) strengthening the enabling environment and (2) direct action for child laborers, their families and communities

Strategic Component 1:

Strengthening the enabling environment for the elimination of the worst forms of child labor

Enhanced knowledge and capacity for policy development and implementation

Enhanced and better enforced legislative framework

National development and social policies include child labor concerns

Enhanced education and training policies that respond to the special needs of working children and those at risk

Attitudes towards child labor have changed among partner agencies

Strategic component 2:

Direct action for child laborers, their families and communities

Local capacity to detect, monitor and manage action against children in the worst forms of child labor

Social safety nets and economic opportunities for the benefit of poor families vulnerable to the worst forms of child labor

Meaningful educational alternatives to children in the worst forms of child labor as well as to those at risk

Local advocacy and social mobilization for the prevention of the worst forms of child labor