



Policy Note: Child Labor, Education and MDGs

The MDGs and child labor are intimately linked...but what is in the United Nations Millennium Declaration for 246 million child laborers including the 182 million working in worst forms?

The UN Millennium Declaration was agreed by 191 governments at the September 2000. UN Millennium Summit, where 147 heads of government turned out for the largest-ever gathering of world leaders. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) embody the universal commitment to improving the lot of humanity at the dawn of the new millennium. They constitute a framework that guides the developmental efforts of many countries. International assistance too is increasingly aligned with the MDGs and their timetable. The poverty reduction strategy paper (PRSP) is commonly viewed as the roadmap towards the MDGs: while the latter sets the destination, the former elaborates the strategies, policies and programmes to get there. The UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), issued by the UN Secretary General in 2001, are a “road map” for implementing the Millennium Declaration. The MDGs comprise eight goals supplemented by 18 numerical and time-bound targets and 48 indicators intended to improve living conditions and remedy key global imbalances by 2015. Goal 1 to 3 calls for fighting extreme poverty, achieving universal primary education, promote gender equality and women's empowerment by achieving gender parity in education and Goal 6 calls for combating HIV/AIDS.

Poverty has often been considered the key reason for perpetuation of child labor. However child labor is the primary cause of poverty, as it pushes children early to premature work thereby denying children the opportunity to acquire the education and skills they need to obtain decent work and incomes as adults. The elimination of child labor is an essential prerequisite to eradication of extreme poverty and hunger (MDG 1). The MDGs and child labor are intimately linked. The links are mostly straightforward and tend to run both ways. Poverty and lack of education provision constitute the principal common grounds. Indeed, it is poverty associated with social injustice and social exclusion that is most closely related to child labor. Even in countries or regions of countries which are not rich there are examples of governments which have made the political decision to invest above all in the key public services of health and education ensuring education for all.

Lack of education provision and child labor are indeed closely related. The most common reason for decrying the scourge of child labor is that it comes at the cost of human development. Achieving universal primary education (MDG 2) is contingent on freedom from labor to allow children to attend school and perform well. This logic underlies the insistence in several international instruments, including the ILO's 1973 Minimum Age Convention No 138, on the need for compulsory education up until children reach official working age. Indeed, aiming for universal primary education also constitutes a giant step towards the elimination of child labor as it draws children into schools. There is also a gender equality dimension (MDG 3) to child labor, in view of the discriminatory practices that disproportionately deprive many girls of appropriate education and add to their burdens through excessive household chores. The education of girls future mothers plays a crucial role in reducing child mortality (MDG 4) and improving maternal health (MDG 5), just as it does in favouring schooling of children over work in the next generation. Combating HIV/AIDS (MDG 6), too, bears on child labor since AIDS orphans are among children most at risk and since this disempowerment of women and girls increases the risk that they themselves may become infected.

The link between child labor and environmental sustainability (MDG 7) may appear more distant but it exists nonetheless. Lack of water and proper sanitation facilities in schools for girls and boys is a factor in children dropping out or not enrolling at all. In many countries collecting water takes a major part of daily activity of many girl children. Improving living conditions in slums also plays a significant role, as does improving agricultural technology in impoverished rural areas to spare children being used as cheap and expendable labor.

Lastly, the development of a global partnership for development (MDG 8), including the promotion of decent work for youth, can only be helped by a reduction in child labor, as it is an indispensable component of a worldwide effort to eliminate child labor.

In view of the above, it may seem somewhat striking that child labor did not figure among the eight MDGs, the 18 associated targets or the 48 monitoring indicators that were formulated by the UN Secretariat after the adoption of the Millennium Declaration in September 2000. The case for the inclusion of child labor was evidently strong but the timing was quite fortunate too. Just over a year earlier, in 1999, the international community had unanimously adopted the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, of which the effective abolition of child labor was a major pillar. A year later in 1999, the ILO had adopted the Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention, again unanimously. This Convention obligates ratifying member States to “take immediate and effective measures to secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labor as a matter of urgency” [Article 1]. No specific time horizon was identified, but it was clearly intended that this objective should receive priority of the highest order. In an unprecedented affirmation of international community's commitment to the elimination of child labor, this Convention has registered one of the highest and most rapid ratification rate of any ILO Convention, pulling along as well the other main ILO instrument on child labor, the 1973 Minimum Age Convention. The world clearly wanted and still wants to rid itself of all child labor, and first and foremost of its worst forms.

The absence of child labor from the MDG framework is a regrettable omission that needs to be corrected with a sense of urgency if the intent is to achieve the MDGs. It is important to recognise that the strategies, policies and programmes that are being put in place in the context of the MDGs and the PRSPs are so designed as to have most impact, directly or indirectly, in reducing the demand for and the supply of child labor and expanding educational opportunities for all children. As roadmaps to MDGs, the PRSPs comprise, at least in principle, fundamental elements of any effort to reduce child labor. The emphasis on poverty reduction itself is of course foremost among them, as is the reform of the education system to expand facilities and improve quality. The stress on agriculture and rural development in many PRSPs is encouraging too, for most child labor is rural. The same goes for the priority accorded the health sector, given the widespread hazards child laborers face, and the increased chances of social exclusion faced by unhealthy children in impoverished communities. The World Commission on the Social Dimensions of Globalization expressed the need for coherence within the UN family and the international financial institutions in support of the fundamental principles on right to work provided by the ILO freedom of association, the right to collective bargaining, freedom from forced labor, discrimination and child labor. That coherence is required also in the implementation of the MDGs and if they are to contribute consistently and effectively to the elimination of child labor.

Most important, though, is the participatory process in the context of which the PRSP objectives and policies are defined. This process offers a superb opportunity for child labor stakeholders to influence priorities, policy makers and institutions, as has happened in some countries, for example Kenya, Nepal and the United Republic of Tanzania. To back that up, the relevant strategies and policies need to be subjected to rigorous analysis from the perspective of their impact on child labor.

The liberated child laborers who have come to NY are rescued from worst forms of child labor and possess very intense personal life experiences. These children are joined by a select panel of world leaders in solidarity. The members of the reference group of the Children's World Congress, the child slaves themselves have come to NY during the MDG Plus Five Summit with the key demand to the international community represented by various national governments both in the Southern world, the donor governments and UN agencies that elimination of child labor is critical and central to the realization of the Dakar goals of achieving education for all by 2015 and as the key to the success of the MDG's. Their demand is to declare child labor elimination to be the ninth MDG.