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About us

The Understanding Children's Work (UCW) project is an inter-agency research cooperation initiative involving the International Labour Organisation (ILO), UNICEF and the World Bank.

The Project is guided by the Agenda for Action adopted at the 1997 Oslo International Conference on Child Labour. The Oslo Agenda identified the need to improve data and information on child labour, and called for stronger international co-operation in efforts towards child labour elimination.

UCW research activities are designed to inform policies that impact upon the lives of child labourers in countries where they are prominent. Research efforts help provide a common understanding of child labour in specific national contexts, and a common basis for action against it. For further information on UCW, see the Project website at www.ucw-project.org.

Featured research

Special feature: Child labour and Education for All (EFA)

The Norwegian Government will host an Education for All (EFA) High-Level Group meeting in Oslo, 16-18 December 2008. This special Newsletter feature presents the results of a two-day workshop organized by Fafo in collaboration with UCW and Global March as an input to the High-Level Group meeting.

The two-day workshop (*Child Labour and the EFA initiative: the challenge of including the "hard-to-reach" children*, Oslo, October 2008) explored the twin challenges of achieving EFA and the progressive elimination of child labour. It provided an occasion to discuss what has been learned since the first Oslo child labour conference in 1997, and what relevance such new knowledge may have for the EFA process. The workshop brought together leading child labour researchers, civil society and policy makers for an exchange of experience, views and advice.

The workshop first highlighted that international community's efforts to achieve Education For All (EFA) and the progressive elimination of child labour are closely linked. Education - and, in particular, education of good quality up to the minimum age for entering into employment - is a key element in the prevention of child labour. With no access to quality education, millions of children are left to work, often in dangerous and exploitative conditions. At the same time, child labour is one of the main obstacles to EFA, as involvement in child labour is generally at a cost to children's ability to attend and perform in school.

Other general conclusions emerging from the workshop discussions are summarised below.

(a) *Factors contributing to school exclusion and child labour are multiple and overlapping.*

Parents may involve their children in work rather than schooling because the school is inaccessible, or is of poor quality and therefore not seen as being worth the investment of their children's time. There are numerous specific school-related barriers to households sending their children to school. These include "quality" barriers such as

inexperienced or poorly-trained teachers, overcrowded classrooms, inadequate school facilities and curricula ill-suited to the realities outside the classroom. They also include “access” barriers such as long travel distances to school and high out-of-pocket school costs.

Classroom practices that exclude children with special learning needs, or that violate the dignity and rights of children, can also act as barriers. The incompatibility of academic calendars and daily school schedules with the exigencies of family agricultural work can be an important barrier to schooling for rural children. A disconnect between schools and the families/communities that they ostensibly serve is another common schooling barrier in many contexts.

But the causes of school exclusion and child labour extend well beyond the confines of the education system. Poverty can play a crucial role – children are often forced to work rather than attend school because their survival and that of their families depends on it. Child labour may form part of a household’s strategy for dealing with risk, making them less vulnerable to losses of income arising from shocks. The role of child labour as a household safety mechanism during shocks is particularly relevant in light of the recent unprecedented hike in world food prices and of the unfolding global financial crisis.

Other, less tangible, contributing factors include ethnic- and religious-based discrimination; traditional gender roles and gender attitudes; harmful cultural practices enforced by customary law; cultural acceptance of child labour as “normal”; (lack of) societal awareness of the importance of education; and (lack of) societal mobilisation against child labour.

(b) The complexity of the twin challenges of child labour and school exclusion necessitates a policy response that is comprehensive and cross-sectoral in nature.

School exclusion and child labour are phenomena that cut across policy boundaries – education, health, labour markets, social security, basic services, income distribution, household wealth, social attitudes, formal and customary law, cultural practices and values, *inter alia*, all can play a role. Following from this, a response focused on the education system alone is unlikely to be effective.

Rather, there is a need to “mainstream” child labour and EFA concerns into overall national development agendas and plans, including Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) processes, and into decisions concerning budgetary resource allocations. There is also a need to extend efforts against school exclusion and child labour to include a wide variety of social partners outside government. Mobilising civil society, labour unions, employers’ associations and industry groups is particularly important in this context. Mobilising and empowering children themselves as agents of change is also critical.

A comprehensive response to child labour and school exclusion should address the full range of school-related, socio-cultural, economic and institutional barriers keeping children from school and in work in an integrated fashion. While the precise nature of such a response will necessarily be context-specific, research evidence and past policy experience point to a number of possible measures and approaches.

Within the education sector, policy measures that have proved relevant to overcoming barriers to schooling in different contexts include: recruitment of female teachers; school calendars harmonised with the agricultural calendar; locally-adapted curricula; school fee abolition; mother-tongue instruction for indigenous children; community schools to extend schooling to remote areas unreached by the formal system; non-formal “bridging” education for former child labourers to smooth their transition into the formal schooling system; remedial education

for working children and children with special learning needs; community and parental school governance committees; expanded early childhood development services; and “second chance” education and vocational training for older, out-of-school children.

Beyond the school system, general policy approaches include strengthening and extending social safety nets, in response to evidence suggesting the child labour is frequently used to mitigate social risk. Extending access to water networks and to other basic services helps reduce the value of children’s time outside the classroom. Conditional cash transfers and other school attendance incentive schemes have also proved effective in a variety of contexts in reducing the opportunity costs of schooling.

Public awareness campaigns using traditional and non-traditional communication channels are important to addressing entrenched social norms and cultural attitudes underlying child labour and school exclusion. Adult literacy and lifelong learning is also important in this context, as evidence suggests educated parents are more likely to send their children to school. Coordination and information-exchange mechanisms are needed to ensure that the array of concerned actors work together effectively and avoid duplicating each others’ efforts.

- (c) *Efforts towards EFA and progressive child labour elimination must place particular emphasis on hard-to-reach children.*

Some of the worst-off categories of hard-to-reach children include: trafficked children; child victims of early marriage and other forms of slavery or bondage; child soldiers; refugee and internally-displaced children; street children; indigenous children; children working outside their own country; children affected by HIV/AIDS; child (urban) migrants; and children living in conflict-affected or “fragile” states. These groups require urgent measures to ensure their rights to schooling and to protection from exploitation. The “face of exclusion” is context-specific, and priority groups of hard-to-reach children must therefore be identified locally. Many groups of hard-to-reach children are not captured by standard household surveys, meaning that other, specialised research methods are needed.

- (d) *There remain a number of important knowledge gaps impeding policy formulation and effective targeting of interventions against school exclusion and child labour.*

There is an urgent need for better quantitative and qualitative information on hard-to-reach groups of children and the factors underlying their exclusion. Generating evidence on the socio-cultural “unobservables” that appear to play a central role in school exclusion and child labour is especially important in this context. Further research is also needed to fill knowledge gaps relating to, *inter alia*: the link between school quality and child labour, and, in particular the elements of school quality most relevant to getting children into school and out of work; the impact of policies promoting school attendance on child labour; the impact of delivery of services within other sectors on bringing child labourers and other hard-to-reach children into school (e.g. social protection, water provision and health services); and how school drop-out and child labour impact upon the labour market outcomes of youth.

Project news and events

1. Building capacity in child labour and youth employment data collection and analysis (*Ulaanbaatar, 26-30 January 2009*). The upcoming five-day training programme for counterparts from the Ministry of Social Welfare and Labour will form part of the broader programme of research cooperation in Mongolia. The training will focus on the analysis and application of child labour and youth employment data. The field mission for the training will also provide an occasion to present the final draft of the Inter-agency report on child labour and youth employment in Mongolia, and discuss it with the counterparts.

2. Summit on the Global Agenda (*Dubai, 7-9 November 2008*). The UCW Project Coordinator, as member of the World Economic Forum (WEF) Global Agenda Council on Child Welfare, participated in the augural Summit on the Global Agenda in Dubai. The inaugural summit, held in partnership with the Government of Dubai, aimed to advance solutions to the current financial and economic crisis. The discussions within the Council of Child Welfare underscored the importance of placing children, youth and families at the heart of the Global Agenda. The Project Coordinator emphasised the need to address two recent developments that threaten to halt or even to reverse global progress against child labour: the sharp increase in world food prices and the unfolding global financial crisis.

3. Field missions to Mali and Senegal (*Bamako and Dakar, 15-19 December 2008*). The UCW field missions to Bamako and Dakar provided an occasion to discuss draft inter-agency reports on child labour with local representatives from ILO, World Bank and UNICEF as well as other local partners. The discussions yielded important feedback for finalization of the reports prior to their formal presentation to government and their official release. The inter-agency reports will feed into broader efforts towards effective policy responses to child labour at the country level.

4. Promoting Youth Employability Across Middle East and North Africa (*Amman, 18-19 January*). A UCW representative will participate in a two-day consultative meeting on youth employability across Middle East and North Africa. The meeting, organized by the International Youth Foundation (IYF) in partnership with the Arab Urban Development Institute and the MENA Child Protection Initiative, will be an opportunity to share and discuss UCW research in the area of youth employment as part of the World Bank Global Partnership to Promote Youth Employment and Employability.

5. Uganda report launched (*Kampala, 22 October 2008*). The *Understanding Children's Work in Uganda* report was launched by the Minister of State for Labour, Employment and Industrial Relation of the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD). A press conference took place on 21 October 2008 with wide coverage in the local media.

References

Child Labour and the EFA initiative: the challenge of including the "hard-to-reach" children. Information and presentations are available at <http://ucw-project.org/>