

Amsterdam Foundation for International Research on Working Children

Child Rights Centre

www.childlabour.net

Cruquiusweg 68-70

0031 (0)20 4651763

1919 AT Amsterdam, Netherlands

irewoc@childlabour.net

Working Children: Unionisation and Participation

Research Proposal

Principal objectives

An analysis of the approach taken under the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), in particular its Article 12 (*Participation*) and Article 15 (*Freedom of association*), as regards the right of children to establish and to join trade unions.

An analysis of how working children in selected developing countries have been organised, and how, by their participation/non-participation in organised movements, they have effected changes in their working circumstances, in their self-esteem and in changing perspectives for the future.

These positive outcomes have been claimed by child labour unions and by their protagonists. Independent research will have to establish whether the lofty ideals are realized, and whether or not such unions contribute to condoning child labour.

The answers will be informed by realities on the ground, and by facts and expectations from below rather than by assumptions.

The research will focus on:

- the ways in which children are organised,
- the objectives,
- the outcome in terms of organisational aims,
- the outcome in terms of changes effected in the lives of the children (working circumstances, self-esteem, empowerment, resilience and perspective for the future),
- and the impact on the children (and families) in the wider community.

Background and justification

Child labour is a reality in many regions of the world, particularly in the Third World. Estimates on their numbers vary enormously. ILO has put the number of children for whom work is the primary occupation at 120 million. Many of them will be working on the family farm or in an artisanal occupation at home. A significant number of children, however, are involved in work and under circumstances that have been identified as 'worst forms', and as requiring an immediate and effective action for their prevention and eradication. Both forms of child labour cannot possibly become the subject of organisation. The former is too thinly spread over vast areas (and usually in family enterprises); the latter may under no circumstances be condoned.

For millions of other child labourers, and street children, the argument is of a different nature. There are many ethical, social and economic reasons for them to go to school full-time rather than work, and efforts to eliminate child labour should continue. However, the stark reality is that many millions of children do work and for a considerable time will continue to work.

Many child labour specialists and especially academics, possibly even an increasing number of the latter (William Myers, Jo Boyden, Ben White, Olga Nieuwenhuys, Per Miljeteig, Manfred Liebel amongst others), have therefore argued that the focus should be on ameliorating the circumstances under which children are made to work. They have taken a stand against the abolitionists (see in Myers and Boyden 1998 and in Lieten and White 2001).

Ameliorating the working conditions involves an organised effort. One could imagine civil society organisations, including trade unions and employers' organisations, taking up this challenge and in the process working towards the abolition of child labour altogether.

This, however, is objected to by one section in child labour activism, namely by those who have taken such concepts as 'participation' and 'self-liberation' to their extreme consequence: children have to be organised in labour unions exclusively for children and (ideally) by children.

A number of working children have organised themselves accordingly in major cities in Mali, Senegal, India, Peru, Nicaragua, Philippines and South Africa, as well as in other countries.

A movement that is particularly pronounced in Latin America is the protagonismo movement, which claims to have been successful in Chile, Peru and Nicaragua. A characteristic feature of these organisations is their autonomous existence, unrelated to the traditional trade union organisations.

Data on the scope of activities and the number of children involved are quite limited in most countries. While there has been a flurry of focus on similar initiatives, there has been very little analysis. The very few studies that have come out (Liebel 1999, Swift 1997, 1999, Torres 1994, 1999, Tolfree 1998) have been an uncritical eulogy of such organisations. They not uncommonly have worked with the assumption that working children are better off under the care of their own organisations rather than under the umbrella of adult organisations like unions and civic committees. Some of the authors have moreover taken the stance that children have a right to labour and that child labour unions help them to realize that right.c

It is proposed that the research would cover:

Either Peru and Meso-America and/or India and Bangladesh and/or Kenya en Senegal

Substantive issues to be covered

The research will give a partial answer to the general question as to which strategies and measures are conducive to ensuring the best interests of child workers. It intends to give an informed answer as to whether child labour unions have more value than a self-sustaining argument for child participation protagonists.

It is an under-researched area, with nevertheless far-reaching implications for the labour movement, for the implementation of the ILO conventions on child labour and the application of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

The ILO Conventions on child labour and the CRC provide the normative basis underlying this research. Particularly important questions in this regard are whether or not the organizations under discussion are helping to:

- Promote the implementation of the international standards on child labour, or whether they are helping to circumvent it.
- Increase the level of participation and empowerment of the children involved, or whether they reinforce conditions of marginalization.
- Heighten the levels of awareness and self-esteem, or whether they help to reinforce delusion and the myth of the romantic child.
- Help to prepare these children for an adulthood of full citizenship, or whether they specifically close that option.
-

Methodology

These issues will be taken up with a research methodology that is basically anthropological. In the areas to be studied, the structure and activities of the organization will be investigated, but the major focus will be on the impact on the children themselves, on their families and on the labour conditions. The problems, priorities and expectations of the working children and their families will serve as the general reference framework for subsidiary questions.

This will be achieved by a general survey (studying overall conditions and overall impact) and by in-depth case studies of a limited selection of working children.

Qualitative methods will be used with individual boys and girls and in focus group discussions.

In order to isolate the impact of the child labour organization from other influences, a control group of non-organised child labour in the same geographical area will be included in the sample.

Studies are envisaged in two countries to start with, and can then be extended to other countries. The list, in order of preference, could look as follows: Peru, India, Senegal South, Africa, Nicaragua

The overall supervision will be the responsibility of G.K. Lieten, professor in Child Labour Studies at the University of Amsterdam and executive secretary of IREWOC. He will coordinate the research and shall write the final report in association with the Research Associates. Research associates may be selected on the basis of their disciplinary qualifications and familiarity with local culture and language. If available, in each country a well-known research institution can be hired to carry out the research or to assist in the research.

Expected outcome

The various country reports can be put to different uses. In any case, they shall feed into the final report, which, after peer review, shall be published as a book, and in articles.

An international workshop of researchers and policy-makers is planned at the end of the research project.

The expertise to be developed and the research findings are expected to take forward the advocacy and policy-dialogue with international child-centered organizations, NGOs and governments on ways of dealing with child labour.

Timing and funding

Work will take place simultaneously in 2 countries (or 3 countries if more finances can be provided), and will be conducted by 2 research associates, of one will be Spanish-speaking. Country reports will take 9 months to complete. Additional funds may be found to extend the study with other country case studies. The final report will be ready after 19 months.

Literature

Boyden, J., Ling, B. & Myers, W. (1998). What works for working children, UNICEF Italy and Radda Barnen Sweden.

Hart, R. A. (1992). Children's participation: From tokenism to citizenship. Florence: UNICEF International Child Development Centre Innocenti Essay No 4

International Working Group on Child Labour (1998). Working Children: Reconsidering the Debates, Report of the International Working Group on Child Labour. Amsterdam: Defence for Children International.

Lieten, G.K. and B. White, eds. (2001). Child Labour. Policy Options. Amsterdam: Aksant.

Manfred Liebel et al. (1999). Was Kinder Könn(t)en. Handlungsperspektiven von und mit arbeitenden Kindern. Frankfurt: IKO.

Miljeteig, P. (2000). Creating partnerships with working children and youth. Washington, DC: The World Bank.

Myers, W. and J. Boyden (1998). Child Labour: Promoting the Best Interests of Working Children. London: Save the Children Alliance.

Swift, A. (1997). Children for Social Change: Education for Citizenship of Street and Working Children in Brazil. Nottingham: Educational Heretics Press.

Swift, A. (1999). Working Children Get Organised(ed.) An introduction to working children's organisations. London: International Save the Children Alliance

Tolfree, D. (1998). Old enough to work, old enough to have a say. Stockholm: Radda Barnen.

Torres, N. (1994). 'Working children, leading the struggle to obtain and defend their own rights', in E. Verhellen and F. Spiesschaert (eds.): Children's Rights: Monitoring Issues. Gent: Mys & Breesch Publishers

Woodhead, Michael (1998). Children's Perspectives on their Working Lives: a participatory study in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, The Philippines, Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua. Stockholm: Radda Barnen.