

Child Labor Abroad: Five Policy Recommendations

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Child labor is a topic that evokes deep emotions and a growing international concern. Most recent estimates show that some 211 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 are engaged in some form of economic activity, and 119 million of them are engaged in hazardous work. Moreover, child labor has a tendency to carry from one generation to another. The low-paid, uneducated adult laborer may well have been a child who sacrificed his education to years of child labor. That same adult in all likelihood earns an income insufficient to provide for his family, forcing his children to work. The vicious cycle thereby continues.

In Western liberal democracies, child labor is morally condemned, legally forbidden, and virtually non-existent. This has not always been the case. During the Industrial Revolution, child labor was as widespread in Europe and the United States as it is nowadays in India and Bangladesh. Current debates on child labor within Western societies are closely linked to the increasing importance of globalization and its effects on national governments. One element of globalization is the increasing permeability of national, legal, and political borders. The importation of commodities produced by child labor into Western states refers to practices outside their territories, which nevertheless conflict with their prevailing norms and values.

One finds a near consensus in Western liberal democracies that child labor is a deplorable practice that should be abandoned. What, if anything, should governments of affluent societies do to combat child

labor? Rejecting child labor on moral terms is one thing; fighting it, however, is quite another matter. Not every policy against child labor is by default in the best interest of the children involved, as shown by an already notorious example. In 1995 the US Congress considered the Child Labor Deterrence Bill (that came to be known as Harkin's bill, after Tom Harkin (Democratic Senator from Iowa), one of the sponsors of the bill), which would forbid the importation of

products made with the involvement of workers under the age of 15. Those in favor of the bill hoped and expected that such a boycott would result in these children returning to school.

Though the bill was never passed, it caused shockwaves in some countries that mainly export to the United States. For example, the Bangladeshi Garment Manufacturers and Export Association perceived the discussions in the US Congress as a threat to the export of its products. Nervous factory owners, unwilling to risk access to their most important market, quickly fired about 50,000 children—75% of the total then employed. The expectation in the United States that these children would return to school was not only overly optimistic, it also turned out to be dramatically naïve. Development expert Ben White concluded that:

Not one of the dismissed children had gone back to school. Half of them had found other occupations (mainly in informal-sector and street activities, including domestic service, brick-chipping, selling flowers on the street and prostitution) but with greatly reduced earnings, while the other half were actively seeking work. The children still working in the garment factories had better nutrition and better health care than those who



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had been dismissed.

One lesson to be learned here is that economic boycotts are not the best strategy against child labor and, as the example shows, may have even the opposite effects from those intended. Boycotts only affect businesses that export goods, and these only employ 5% of working children. Therefore, trade sanctions against products produced by child labor are unlikely to have a significant effect on child labor. More generally, the lesson is that Western policies towards child labor applied to developing countries should not be based on impulse, emotion, or good intentions but instead should rely on careful analysis and research. Since such policies aim to combat practices in another country, policy makers should be aware of the many pitfalls risked by intervention in the complex interactions of family choices and market structures. Moreover, such policies need to recognize the forces that give rise to child labor in the first place, forces likely to resist attempts to intervene.

Two Differences

There exist two differences between Western countries and developing countries that must be taken into account if Western governments are to successfully enact policies against child labor abroad. One cannot emphasize too strongly the importance of socioeconomic differences and cultural differences among developed and developing nations. For one thing, it should be acknowledged that the socioeconomic, political, and infrastructural situation in Bangladesh or India is very different from that in the US or European countries. Policies such as boycotts focus only on the effects of child labor—its products—but typically fail to investigate the structural reasons for the occurrence of child labor, namely poverty.

Prohibition of child labor is a prudent policy only in the presence of alternative ways to provide for, or increase, the family income. Even poor parents do not like to send their children to work if they can prevent it. Indeed, development scholar Kaushik Basu argues that in very poor regions the alternative to child labor may be very harsh—acute hunger or even starvation. Boycotts such as proposed in Harkin's bill are counterproductive: children that work in the "export industry" usually work in comparatively good conditions. If they lose their jobs, and if the reasons why they work are not addressed, they may be forced into worse, more dangerous, and less well paid jobs. Moreover, an important assumption justifying Harkin's bill was that if children do not work, they would automatically return to school. On what information was this assumption based? For example, what if there are no schools, or only at a two hours' walking distance? White's finding that none of the dismissed children had gone back to

school provides a quite sobering conclusion.

In short, Western policies towards child labor abroad must take account of the many differences between Western and developing countries, and not concoct simple analogies of the effects such policies would have in Western societies. Such policies should be based on good knowledge of the socioeconomic, infrastructural, and political characteristics of the society involved.

A second issue concerns cultural differences between Western countries and developing countries that undercut the appropriateness of policies based on Western values applied to non-Western societies. I will focus on one example that is central in this debate: ideas about childhood and the role of work and education.

The conception of childhood is the subject of fierce and continuing discussions. On one hand, one finds general agreement that childhood can be described as a biologically-driven natural phenomenon characterized by physical and mental growth stages. On the other hand, childhood is a social construct, and it is interpreted very differently in various cultural con-

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texts. The Western conception can be characterized in terms of a strict separation of childhood from adulthood. Childhood is seen as a "mythic walled garden" of play and study, marked by special dress and literature. It is inspired by the "myth of childhood innocence" where children are happy and separated from the wicked adult world. It is assumed that growing up requires an extended period of socialization and formalized education in schools. Children are therefore discouraged from participation in adult concerns such as economic maintenance.

However, this Western conception of childhood is atypical. Child work in any form has always been part of a wider set of childhood activities; in fact, child work is the norm in most of the world. It is barred in Western society only as a consequence of harsh work conditions and maltreatment resulting from the Industrial Revolution. The Western conception has changed dramatically since then and is therefore unique in historical context, as much as it is unique in comparison to other non-Western societies.

In non-industrialized societies, much work is organized in small workshops or family-owned businesses, not in large-scale and impersonal factories. The important consequence is that often there is no need for for-

mal education or employment licenses for children—a child simply succeeds his or her parents in a family-owned business. Children learn by doing. In fact, in many societies work is seen as an important means of teaching and socializing children, revealing a less categorical distinction between childhood and adulthood than is made in Western societies. Children's acting in the role of adults is seen as an important element in education in such contexts. Moreover, it is taken as an expression of family unity and solidarity—as it was in Western societies prior to the Industrial Revolution. In such situations it is not in the best interest of children

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to be kept away in the mythic walled garden of childhood. Instead, these children need to be integrated in their parents' world to become able to function in their society.

Under specific conditions work can be beneficial for children in some societies. Therefore, we must distinguish *child work*, which is an essential and meaningful part of education and socialization, from *child labor*, which is harmful because it prevents children from receiving an education, or hinders their physical, psychological, social, or emotional development. Of course, it is easier to conceptually distinguish both than to give policy recommendations on where to draw the line. We can identify the extremes, but borders can only be drawn in specific situations. However, any successful policy against child labor should bite this bullet. After all, the alternative strategy of not recognizing the distinction between child work and child labor undermines the plausibility of the struggle against child labor—why would one try to abolish necessary sources of socialization and education? Moreover, given the scarcity of energy and means, it is better to set priorities and start fighting the worst forms of child labor.

Let me return to the Western policies against child labor abroad. I have emphasized some important considerations: the difference in socioeconomic and infrastructural situations, different conceptions about childhood, and the distinction between child work and child labor. Harkin's bill had such unfortunate effects because it was based on overly idealistic and impractical assumptions. I suggest that Western policy makers consider five recommendations that would avoid such pitfalls as those found in Harkin's bill.

Five Recommendations

Act collectively. Child labor is a global problem, and thus can only be fought on a global scale. Policies against child labor can only be successful if they result from international cooperation. Even large countries such as the United States cannot achieve much on their own. Governments should work together in international and supranational organizations such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the International Labor Organization (ILO). They should cooperate with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that have experience in the field, and support promising projects, such as those addressing poverty relief and education. Policies also must encourage multinational corporations to formulate codes of conduct.

Act contextually. There is no single simple policy measure that can end child labor. Policies that have been very successful in one context did not work in another context, or even had contrary effects. Before proposing a specific policy, policy makers should be aware of the socioeconomic and infrastructural characteristics of the society involved. Since there exists an emerging body of empirical literature on the effects of different policies against child labor in developing countries, policies should be based on the available information, instead of on intuition or good faith.

Policies should be based on an inclusive conception of childhood. Although the Western idea of childhood is very atypical, it has been used as a universal model in many conventions, such as those of the ILO. As such, this biased conception has dominated most international discussions on child labor and children's rights. The fight against child labor would be strengthened if conventions and policies were based on a more inclusive conception of childhood, including non-Western ideas on the balance between work and education in socialization. Moreover, one can question whether the romanticized ideal of childhood underlying international conventions is still valid even for

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Western societies. Do we really think that delivering newspapers after school is an intolerable infringement on childhood? More sensitivity to culture and the way it mediates the effects of experience on children is not the same as defending cultural relativism, or discouraging international action against child labor. Instead, defending a more inclusive conception of childhood as

the basis of policies against child labor takes into account a broader representation of human experience than those found in Euro-American values currently in use.

Do not propose a global ban on all child labor. Some abolitionist groups argue that all child labor should be banned globally, and that we have succeeded only if all children in the world receive full-time formal education. However, such policy goals are entirely unrealistic, strategically counterproductive and, as a result, more harmful than helpful. There are more than 200 million child laborers today, and the practice has persisted for more than two centuries. This is a huge and complex problem that cannot be solved overnight. Instead of an abolitionist approach,

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Western governments should embrace a gradualist approach, ranking several forms of child labor on the basis of harmfulness, making a priority the banning of the worst forms, and proposing different policies for different kinds of child labor.

We must first distinguish child work, which is part of education and socialization, from child labor, which is harmful for children. Next, the category of child labor should be divided into the unconditionally worst form of child labor and other forms of child labor. The unconditionally worst form of child labor includes work that hinders the physical, psychological, and social development of children. Work in unhealthy and dangerous environments, full-time work for young children and working too many hours a day also are among the worst forms of child labor. Most attention should be given to an outright ban of these worst forms of child labor. Although such a ban might have negative effects on the poorest families in the short run, it seems pointless to allow dangerous labor for children who cannot properly assess the long-term damage these jobs can cause (and whose parents also may be unable to make such an assessment). Governments should take collective action to single out these worst forms and create, implement, and monitor internationally accepted norms to abolish them. A good example is ILO Convention 182 (1999) that defines and prohibits *the worst forms of child labor*. The change in terminology is evident: from a rhetorical notion such as the “total abolition of child labor” in the earlier conventions to a limitation of, and focus on, the worst forms thereof.

Distinguishing the unconditionally worst form of child labor from less harmful forms implies that the latter, at least for the near future, may have to be tolerated. Toleration does not imply indifference, but a sense of realism. If we cannot ban all child labor, we should make a priority the elimination of the worst forms. Moreover, a ban is not the only policy available. Not rigidly insisting on a ban enables policymakers to consider alternatives, for example policies that improve working conditions, or policies that combine part-time work and part-time education.

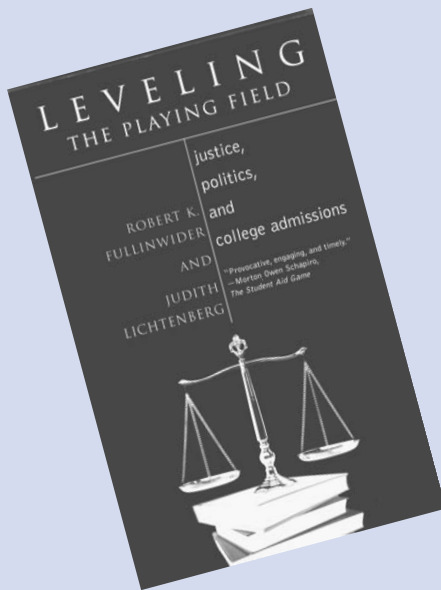
Do not focus only on legal coercive measures, but also consider collaborative measures. Most policies against child labor take the form of coercive measures intended to forbid child labor legally. Harkin’s bill, for example, proposed a legal prohibition of the importation of commodities made by child labor. Coercive measures are important but have to be used carefully; they should be applied only against the worst forms of child labor. Besides legal measures, Western governments could also engage in collaborative initiatives. Such initiatives should be designed to alter the (economic) environment of decision makers (parents and employers), rendering them more willing to let children not seek work and to spend more time on schooling and other activities. These measures do not necessarily need a legislative backup. Collaborative measures are more appropriate for those forms of child labor that are less urgent. Since parents typically want to keep their children out of the workplace and in school, collaborative measures are more successful than legal bans on child labor. Empirical research on such interventions shows that the most effective policies are those that fight poverty and those that offer rewards for school attendance by, for example, offering monetary awards to parents or providing free school meals. However, such policies might not be feasible for governments of developing countries, with little money for such incentives. Western governments hoping to curb child labor would do well to support collaborative measures financially by, for instance, fighting poverty, raising the income of parents so that children do not have to work, supporting policies that keep children in schools, and building schools, among many other initiatives.

Child labor today is not an isolated phenomenon in developing countries because, as a result of globalization, all states in the contemporary world are connected in one global economy. Child labor is a symptom of current global inequality, and Western nations are not innocent bystanders. The fight against child labor should not be separated from the issue of global inequality. Any action by Western governments against child labor is futile, implausible, and not reciprocal if that action does not also reflect their own responsibility in creating and sustaining child labor.

Western governments should accept that child labor is a complex issue and set as a priority the elimination of its worst forms. At the same time, however, Western governments must focus not only on legal coercive measures, but they must also embrace collaborative measures. Indeed, increasing development assistance is among the best policy options to successfully end child labor.

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Sources: Kaushik Basu, "Child Labor: Cause, Consequence, and Cure, with Remarks on International Labor Standards," *Journal of Economic Literature* XXXVII (1999); Kaushik Basu and Zafiris Tzannatos, "The Global Child Labor Problem: What Do We Know and What Can We Do?" *The World Bank Economic Review*, vol. 17 (2) (2003); *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, edited by A. James and A. Prout (Falmer Press, 1997); Alec Fyfe, *Child Labor* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1997); Christiaan Grootaert, *The Policy Analysis of Child Labor: A Comparative Study* (London: Macmillan Press, 1999); Jane Humphries, "Child Labor: Lessons from the Historical Experience of Today's Industrial Economies," *The World Bank Economic Review*, vol. 17 (2003); William E. Myers, "The Right Rights? Child Labor in a Globalizing World," *Annals* 575 (May 2001); Debra Satz, "Child Labor: A Normative Perspective," *The World Bank Economic Review*, vol. 17 (2003); Ben White, "Globalization and the Child Labor Problem," *Journal of International Development*, vol. 8 (1996).



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