A Better Approach

To Child Work
A better approach to child work

Edward van Daalen and Mohammed Al-Rozzi (Eds.)

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2021 was the UN International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour, but that was never going to happen. Not last year, not by 2025 as stipulated by the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and probably not ever. There are simply too many children in this world with compelling reasons to work for that to be, or to have ever been, a reasonable goal. Bans on child labour may reduce numbers in some areas or push child workers deeper into the shadows in others. But they cannot eliminate them from the world once and for all.

But if bans don’t work, what does? And if elimination cannot be the goal, what should be? We submit the motto of ‘empower and protect, rather than prohibit’ as a better approach to child work. To understand what this might mean in practice, we’ve asked our contributors – researchers, practitioners, NGO staff, and working children – to reflect on the strategies, initiatives, programmes and frameworks currently used to mitigate the hardship many working children experience. We’ve then asked them to explore ways that practitioners and policymakers might build on these lessons to structurally help working children improve their lives.

What do we mean when we say child labour?

But first, we need to make clear what we talk about when we talk about child labour.

‘Child labour’ is generally portrayed as one of the few remaining ‘social evils’ that continues to haunt the world, and in particular the Global South. Type the two words into any online search engine and an array of very young, Brown and Black children working in dangerous and denigrating places, such as mines, brick kilns and garbage dumps, meets the eye. Over the last three decades, international organisations like the International Labour Organization (ILO), UNICEF and the Global March Against Child Labour have carefully cultivated, mainstreamed, and transformed this one-dimensional narrative into support for the ‘total abolition’ of child labour. However, what legally and empirically lies behind the catch-all concept of ‘child labour’ is much more complex and nuanced than this narrow and sensationalist representation suggests.

Following the ILO’s Minimum Age Convention, which sets the international standards on child labour that ratifying countries must follow, what is generally prohibited is:

- any form of work done by children under the age of 12
- any form of work done by children of 12 and 13 years that is not considered ‘light work’, or which interferes with schooling
- unprotected hazardous work done by children under the age of 18 years

Said otherwise, in most cases the ILO allows children to enter into full-time, non-hazardous work the day they turn 14. And so the elimination of child labour certainly does not mean all work done by children. At the same time, an 11-year-old child who helps their family for an hour per week, be it on the farm or at the market, has already done enough work for the ILO to include them among the 160 million children it estimated to be in child labour at the start of 2020. These legal categorisations of what is and what is not considered ‘child labour’ can often feel counterintuitive and out-of-
sync with one's own assumptions and experiences. That cognitive stumble should be enough to make people realise that, even legally speaking, child labour isn't as straightforward as one might think.

The nuances multiply rapidly when we dig into research on the empirical realities of children's experience in work. A wealth of data from numerous researchers and practitioners shows that the international campaign against child labour has been built on a number of inaccurate assumptions, in large part because they ignore the heterogeneous experiences of working children and turn a blind eye to individual context.

One of the primary assumptions of this campaign is that work and education are mutually exclusive. Some abolitionists even go as far as to claim that a child who is not enrolled in school is de facto in child labour. However, even the ILO's own figures on child labour refute this trope by showing that the vast majority of working children combine work and school. It is also widely acknowledged that work itself holds educational potential, and child advocates have argued repeatedly that formal enrolment in school is not a sufficient metric for capturing where, what, or how much children learn.

Another assumption is that work is intrinsically harmful to children's health and morale. While some children certainly work under harmful conditions and steps should be taken to minimise this, the ILO's global estimates suggest that most work done by children is not hazardous. And non-hazardous work can have beneficial effects on children's psychological and professional development. Take, for example, Fadi, 14-year-old boy whom one of the authors of this piece met in Rafah, Palestine several years ago. He worked as an assistant to a mechanic in a workshop after school. He was doing this work as a form of apprenticeship, and he was paid only what was sufficient to cover his daily expenses. After completing his school education, at the age of 17, Fadi used his work experience to get job as a lead mechanic in another workshop. Fadi's job today is essential for the survival of his family.

A third commonly held assumption is that children undertake work against their will. As with harmful working conditions this, in some cases, certainly happens. But by and large, working children have told researchers that they are there for a variety of legitimate reasons, be it economic, cultural, social, or emotional. They have furthermore told them in no uncertain terms that they have a voice, and they want to participate in research, policy and law-making that affects them. Those are not the demands of 'slaves', but of citizens who have rights and wish to exercise them.

It is irresponsible to ignore these realities in order to pursue the unrealistic goal of eliminating all forms of child labour. It is also dangerous, as research has shown that prohibiting children from working can exacerbate their already precarious situations and those of their families and communities. Instead, interventions and campaigns should be evidence-based, locally adapted, informed by working children's own experiences, and should consider well-being holistically. This means that they must attend to the overall well-being and development of the children – physical, mental, social and spiritual – as stipulated by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (articles 17, 23, 27, 32).

The volume
This collection address a wide range of issues at the centre of the debate on children, work, and education. Its objective is to start an inclusive conversation on how best to support children in realising their aspirations.

We hope that these pieces contribute to the many debates on children's work that are happening at different levels around the world. They contain a wealth of ideas on how to think about and engage with child workers differently. If they are engaged with in good faith, readers just might find themselves on a path to taking both the beneficial and the damaging effects of child work seriously.

Working children will thank you for it.
To be an Afghan child worker in Iran

Sahar Mousavi and Ghazaal Bozorgmehr

“We must have the right to work!” a boy shouted when, at an introductory course on children’s rights, the teacher asked her students to think about the rights they need. This was several years ago, and the child who shouted was one of the many working migrant children learning to read and write at our centre near the Grand Bazaar in Tehran. At the time his remark came as a surprise to the teacher and to all of us at the Nasserkhosro Child House. We all imagined that the most important thing for these children is to quit working and start living like other kids do. Yet after interacting with them for several years, we now realise that there is more to their story than we believed.

Iran is a popular destination for immigration in the region, particularly from Afghanistan. There are no reliable official figures, but the 2017 census found upwards of 1.2 million Afghan migrants in the country and NGO data suggest the real figure is more than twice this. A great part of this population consists of boys under 18. They come to work, but also to learn to read and write. Afghan girls of the same age or even older are not allowed to travel on their own. That is why all the children at the Child House are boys.

They cross the border into Iran without their parents and with the help of smugglers. They can be as young as seven years old, and are usually accompanied by an adolescent relative or friend. This is a very dangerous trip that can easily get them killed. And, since they are undocumented on both sides, if they get shot at the border there will likely be no record of their deaths. Why do they take this risk?

Boys looking for options

The children who come can be divided into two main groups. One comes from small villages near the border where, they say, they are deprived of basic necessities such as clean water, electricity, medical services, education, and safety. They chiefly earn income by keeping animals and selling their products, or by keeping animals for people who are better off.

Apart from difficult living conditions, the high rate of unemployment is another reason for these children to migrate to Iran: they come to find a job and to save their families from starvation. For many of them the right to work is equal to the right to live.

For the second, smaller group life has not been so hard. Their families have some land and decent livelihoods. Still these boys find a way to get to Tehran. When asked for the reason, they mostly reply that they find urban life charming and feel independent away from their families. They especially like their ability to earn their own income.

And, of course, fleeing conflict in Afghanistan is a reason for immigration that is common to both groups. Iran is a safe place, but its border villages do not offer enough job opportunities for migrants. That is why many make their way to larger cities such as the capital, Tehran.

Finding their own way forward

It will surprise some to learn that many of these children arrange employment in established Afghan communities in Iran before they leave. They mostly sleep where they work, or in a rented room with several other boys of similar age and an older one who is ‘in charge’. They form a type of household, and share the chores amongst themselves to maintain it.
Living and sleeping in a shared space without parental supervision can expose these boys to some dangers, such as being bullied by older children or sexual harassment. At the same time, distance from family and new responsibilities give them a sense of independence that, especially older ones, would like to retain.

Since these children do not possess the skills required in the job market, they mostly take jobs that are not complicated but require physical strength. These are, at times, hazardous to their health. We have occasionally encountered children who have been hit by motorbikes while carrying goods, or those who suffer from deformed spines because of moving heavy loads in warehouses.

These children are mostly illiterate. But, since they are undocumented, they are not allowed to go to school. The formal system in Iran would also not make it easy to do so, since school time and work time overlap. They are also deprived of the right to access free health care or medical insurance. They cannot open bank accounts and, if they get robbed, they cannot go to the police for fear of deportation.

Child House: a place to learn, relax and grow
Our NGO attempts to provide these children with basic services: education, social work and health care.

At the centre students learn reading, writing, basic math skills, sports, the ‘ten essential life skills’ designed by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, and children’s rights with a focus on the Convention of the Rights of the Child.

They have very limited time (about two hours) in the morning to spend on learning. That’s not much, but the rewards are high. Literacy gives the children the opportunity to find less dangerous work, while basic calculation skills help them get promoted in
their job from carrying heavy things to recording prices and preparing bills. The Child House also has a big football field which provides the children with a space to do a sport they love. As the children themselves have said, within the walls of this centre they have found a safe haven to socialise and relax without the fear of being arrested and deported.

The boys at the Child House can also enrol in vocational skills courses to help them move into different sorts of work – for instance mobile phone or car repair. Not all children choose to attend such courses. They require a full-time commitment of at least one month, and some cannot afford to stop work and lose income for that long. But those that do, have successfully managed to find jobs in those areas upon completion.

Unfortnately the Child House does not reach everybody. Many working children live in Iran with no support from non-governmental organisations. NGOs have limited resources, authority, and access to children. For this sort of support to become widespread we need the state to take the reins. If the government would at least cover the basic needs of these children, such as access to free healthcare, medical services, and education, and if the Ministries of Education and Labor would cooperate to reconcile educational with vocational needs, children would at last have the opportunity to choose between working during school years or studying first and entering the market later. Only when they are given this choice will we be able to figure out what these children really wish for!

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The Society for Protecting the Rights of the Child in Tehran, Iran was established by several lawyers in 1994, immediately after the Convention of the Rights of the Child was signed by Iranian government. Its primary mission is the promotion of the convention in Iran. This NGO has several field projects in order to stay in touch with children and their problems. Nasserkhosro Child House is one of these projects located in the Bazaar area of Tehran, which offers education, social work and healthcare to underprivileged children (Afghan migrants and Iranians) who reside near the Grand Bazaar of Tehran.
Common solutions to the ‘problem’ of child labour pursue narrow, punitive policies. They either boycott products made by children, or remove children from work that is considered exploitative or that interferes with schooling. The International Labour Organisation, even though it once supported efforts to regulate children’s work, now encourages these sorts of strategies. It is firmly in favour of the complete abolition of child work and is currently spearheading a global initiative to eliminate all forms of child labour by 2025.

Yet abolition policy, which is based on an idealised conception of childhood as exclusively a time of play and learning, misses out on societal contexts and the structural reasons why children work. It is wilfully blind to how work can improve children’s lives, and thus struggles to resonate in the local contexts where child labour-related interventions usually take place.

I would argue that, rather than seeking to impose an ideal by force on far from ideal circumstances, international efforts to improve working children’s lives should instead focus on the political-economic forces and structural inequalities that produce childhood poverty. I give some strategies on how to do this below. Decision makers would stand a chance of enhancing working children’s wellbeing if they chose to follow them, but if they insist on continuing their present course they are likely to accomplish little more than punishing the people they’re claiming to protect.

**My life as a ‘child labourer’**

I grew up in Ethiopia as a ‘child labourer’, if that is the correct term for the millions of children who contribute to familial livelihoods across the world. Every day I fetched water from a river, and every weekend I carried firewood home from distant places. When I wasn’t attending shift school I sold home-cooked food in daily markets and worked as a manual labourer in local construction sites to generate income. I did numerous household chores. I took cereals to flour mills, ran errands, cooked, washed clothes, cared for my siblings, and collaborated with them to find paid work outside the home.

I do not romanticise poverty or my labour. But I do not doubt the utility of work for overcoming life’s everyday problems, such as buying food or paying for stationery materials. Millions of working children sustain themselves by generating income that supplements family livelihoods. They assist with their households’ chores, farming, and trading so that the adults have enough time and space to perform the specialised activities that only they can do. These circumstances of life – obtaining life-sustaining resources and diversifying livelihood strategies in order to ensure collective existence – are far too often ignored whenever the conversation turns to improving the wellbeing of working children.

My experience on what it means to be a working child resonates with studies that show how children’s contributions are valued by and valuable for families and communities. Involvement in work from an early age is a central feature of parenting in low-income societies. Far from being neglectful or abusive, this mode of childrearing deliberately seeks to integrate children into society and prepare them for the responsibilities of life. Work therefore not only has an educational value, but also makes children more resilient to adversity both now and later on in adulthood.
At the crossroads of work, poverty and culture
I have researched children found on the margins of Ethiopian society – those working in the coffee economy, street beggars, migrant traders, hawkers, carers, domestic servants, etc. – for over 15 years now. With many of them I have had the opportunity to follow their livelihood strategies as they have changed over time. I have studied why they work as well as the broader systems that they must navigate to make ends meet. And, above all else, the two issues that characterise these children’s lives are the intersection of work and poverty, and the familial and cultural context that shapes their work. However, these aspects of political economy are usually underestimated or neglected by policymakers and practitioners when they seek to address child labour.

An example of how political economy affects child poverty is documented in my research on the coffee sector in Ethiopia. The coffee economy accounts for 60% of Ethiopia’s foreign revenue, employing over 20 million people. However, coffee revenues are unstable due to the volatile global market and climate change. In particular, the income of coffee growers has declined considerably over the past decade. The cause for this has been, first of all, the liberalisation of the coffee market. Following the collapse of the International Coffee Association in 1989, coffee roasting companies – not coffee producers or consumers – began to dictate the price of coffee in the world market. In addition to this, coffee growers cannot add value to their products to increase their share of the profit. They can only sell only raw coffee at a low price. This is the “coffee paradox” in the value chain, whereby there is a big difference in price between raw coffee sold as a commodity and roasted coffee sold as a final product to consumers. These trade problems – combined with the ever-increasing costs of production inputs like labour, fertilisers, pesticides, insecticides, etc. – mean that farmers achieve only meagre incomes from their produce. This not only makes coffee-producing families poorer, but also negatively affects the income earned by children employed in picking berries.

Income reduction at the household and national levels means there are fewer resources available for feeding children or paying for their education and healthcare. This is the reality, and it has been created largely by global economic processes rather than local factors.

My research documents how the coffee crisis has intensified the jobs children must undertake to increase their household’s capacity to survive. As poverty has deepened household responsibilities have been reallocated, leading to a phenomenon where children act as shock absorbers. They put more hours into unpaid or low-paid activities, such as producing food or caring for their siblings, so that adult men and women can take on income-generating activities or migrate for work.

The breadth of their activities has also expanded. Some have, for example, taken up doing piece work in nearby towns or working as daily labourers in the transportation terminals. Others have chosen to migrate as well in search of work. The lesson here is that these aren’t isolated incidents. Exploitation of child labour is a systemic problem, and it can only be addressed by focusing on its structural or political-economic causes.

Child labour is also connected to intergenerational poverty and the increasing feminisation of survival. The number of rural and urban families relying primarily on female breadwinners around the world has been growing, and one consequence of this has been that child work gets deployed, once again, as a shock absorber for livelihood insecurity. Boys and girls shoulder the responsibility of domestic work to alleviate the burden on the female head of the household.

And, like the coffee crisis, this is happening in large part due to factors outside of individual families’ control. Research indicates that increased care work by children, especially by girls, is inseparable from reduced government spending on health and hospital care, both of which increase women’s poverty and home-based caring tasks. It is, therefore, also necessary to understand how (gendered) familial liveli-
hoods intersect with political economy to influence the dynamics of labour relations, including the value that child labour generates.

**Acknowledge and adapt**

We can neither reduce childhood poverty nor improve the situation of child labourers without attending to the question of political economy. This is the key takeaway. Political economy reveals the dynamics shaping children’s work and those pushing that work into exploitation. It explains the interplay between material practices and cultural ideas. And it exposes questions around access to and utilisation of resources. As the example from the coffee sector shows, the material contexts shaping children’s work and the economic processes creating those material conditions are inseparable. When the price of raw coffee declines, coffee-growing peasants suffer from a loss of income that increases not only household poverty but also children’s involvement in efforts to secure additional income. The only way out of this is to challenge the social and economic structures that impoverish working children, not children’s work itself.

Political economy matters now more than ever. The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the income-earning possibilities of both children and adults in the informal sector. It displaced migrant and working children, making their livelihoods more precarious. The adverse consequences of social distancing measures are not just loss of livelihoods. They have completely eroded household assets in ways that will make it difficult for many children to return to regular everyday activities such as school. The inability of poor governments to provide financial support has also meant that many children must fend for themselves. Deepening poverty not only shows the hyper-precarity that Covid-19 has wrought but also begs interventions that focus on inequality and the redistribution of resources. With 25% of the world’s population vaccinated and only 1% in poor countries, the pandemic not only provides new insights into how and why we need to attend to global inequalities – it also makes those inequalities starkly clear.

The working children I have spoken with for my research have repeatedly said they need social protection programmes that support their care and wellbeing. This demand is in line with Articles 19 and 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, yet in many low-resource contexts such programmes are non-existent, insufficient, or ineffective. One practical step that stakeholders, including governments, the private sector, and non-governmental organisations, could take is to focus on bolstering and improving these social protection programmes.

Children who beg on the streets or work in the informal economy are clear that their reasons for work are not limited to a lack of food or clothing. They cite other social deprivations as well, such as a lack of access to housing or disability care. They ask for decision makers to prioritise access to quality education, skills-training, and seed capital for small businesses. Many highlight the need for flexible schooling, and an important policy strategy that governments can adopt to increase working children’s school attendance is to make the school calendar more compatible with community work cycles.

Cash transfer schemes have also been found to effectively support working children and their families, and there is plenty of potential for scaling such programmes up. Governments could focus on redistributing wealth and reducing social inequalities, on regulating inflation levels for essentials like food, water, electricity, and health care, and on building social security schemes to assist households with disabled members. Child workers say they need decent and affordable housing, and housing policies should ensure access to shelter in cities where most low-income households find it increasingly hard to keep up with rent.

These solutions might sound expensive or disen- gaging in the short term, but they are precisely the kind of approaches that bring lasting impact and empower working children.
Banning child labour jeopardises working children’s right to survive

Kavita Ratna

About nine months before Covid-19 swept into our countries, in July 2019, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution declaring 2021 the International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour. Its text says that member states should take immediate and effective measures to end child labour in all its forms by 2025, as stipulated by Target 8.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals. The International Labour Organization is to lead the charge.

Such international goal-setting exercises take place in a domain that is far removed from the daily social, political, and economic dynamics of our countries. These are, in the recent past, most often in a downward spiral. It is absurd that countries and agencies commit to development goals which all parties are aware are impossible to meet, yet it is increasingly the norm.

It is also indefensible. Setting unreachable targets at the global level and thrusting them downwards is not only ineffectual and misleading. It is also, in many situations, counterproductive. The target of eliminating all forms of child labour is no exception. The concrete policy and budgetary decisions that are implemented in its pursuit are gravely detrimental to the wellbeing of children, while the project as a whole grossly ignores the rights and needs of millions of children and young people.

Fighting for the rights of child workers in India

Even without COVID, the child labour-related goals set by UN were unrealistic. Bhima Sangha, a union of working children in India, and civil society organisations that support them like ours have been shouting ‘Let anti-child labour not be anti-child!’ for decades. Our plea has largely fallen on deaf ears, yet the dangers are real. Most state responses to child labour, which treat children as criminals instead of survivors in an inequitable society, force working children to become invisible. This immediately puts them at higher risk of exploitation. At the same time, working adolescents and children usually belong to marginalised communities. Their families and their communities have to do all they can to stay afloat, including at times taking on work that is exploitative, underpaid, and incompatible with going to school. Making this survival strategy more difficult – and it is a survival strategy in the most literal sense – puts these children’s lives at risk.

The 1990s saw the growth of several working children’s movements like Bhima Sangha. Despite the challenges they conducted their own research and advocated for their own rights in local, state, national and international forums. They challenged societal prejudices and stereotypical notions about working children, and even fundamental ideas of what constitutes ‘childhood’. They faced up to the ILO and demanded to be heard during policy formulations. They highlighted the value that they found in work – which they clearly distinguished from exploitative labour – and demanded that their rights as workers and children be upheld. And they called for the root causes of child labour be addressed comprehensively.

However, in the years that followed and especially after 1998, when the ILO adopted the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (No. 182), ‘ban and boycott child labour’ consolidated into a key political obstacle.
project on the world stage. ‘Raid and institutionalise’ protocols were implemented at the national level in many South Asian countries, and from that point onwards it became very difficult for children and young people to identify publicly as working children or adolescents. Working children’s unions stepped back from visibility and hesitated to stand at the forefront of their own struggles and negotiations. Organising continued in some places at the local level, but mass mobilisation was hard to sustain.

The situation is slowly changing again. India’s child labour legislation was amended in 2016 to allow ‘safe work for adolescents,’ which fostered greater acceptance and allowed some older children to step out of the shadows. Yet major challenges remain. One is that not all ‘safe work’ warrants the name, and many adolescents are brazenly exploited under the guise of ‘safe work.’ The second is that labour rights are under the axe the world over, and even more so in South Asia. Collective bargaining has been curtailed like never before and the fear of losing jobs places all workers and their unions, including those of working adolescents, in very precarious situations.

Local governments, which are closest to children’s realities, have the potential to offer support but in practice they are often restricted in terms of autonomy, resources and agility. Right now, some of the more impoverished communities are seeing a high rise in the number of under-age marriages and in trafficking of children for work, yet local officials are struggling to respond adequately to these developments.

Across the levels of government India certainly has some officials and agencies with the integrity and courage to look at the realities head-on and commit to addressing the immediate concerns of children, but they are too few in number. They are also limited by their geographic or sectorial jurisdictions, and when they try to think beyond these boundaries they inevitably come up against other restrictions.

Covid has made a bad situation worse

The experiences of children in exploitative labour have turned even more alarming with the Covid pandemic, as even the minimal safety nets children had access to have been unravelling. In normal times they could at least rely on support from certain childcare institutions and open shelters, but such services have been shuttered for months. The government’s response meanwhile has been to categorise ‘vulnerable communities’ into different boxes and provide them with certain forms of emergency support. Working children and adolescents, as always, were excluded from this process. For instance, during the lockdown the Indian government decided to provide midday meals and free sanitary napkins to school-going children, while working children were left out without a thought!

In countries all around the world health, education, and livelihood systems are bursting at their seams. Government mechanisms are pressed beyond their capacities. When even the middle and upper-middle classes are feeling upheaval, the situation of those without any buffers is not hard to

“Strategies to end exploitative child labour must be designed with a keen eye for each child and context while respecting the right of adolescents to survive with dignity and agency.”
imagine. The numbers of working adolescents and children have undoubtedly gone up as parents have lost jobs. Even children who were attending school full-time have now started working to supplement family incomes. And, even when the schools reopen, even conservative estimates suggest that globally almost 10 million children may not return to school. These communities are bang in the middle of a whirlwind which has stripped them of whatever positive developmental strides have achieved so far. Their future is nothing but precarious.

Working children and adolescents have done their best to call attention to their present struggle and, at least in India, to demand that the Indian government respect their rights as citizens. Last April eight child worker unions in the country, with a combined membership of some 3000 working children, met to discuss the situation at an event titled ‘Children Ambassadors of Change’. The statement they issued afterwards was released on 30 April – the day before Labour Day, which Bhima Sangha declared Child Labour Day in 1990 – because, as the children write, it was “the day to uphold our rights”. Anybody who genuinely wants to support these children would do well to read it. The children explain the problems they face and list dozens of practical issues (and solutions) that need to be addressed. There are worse places to start than there.

Perhaps the worst starting place of all is the grandiloquent global rhetoric about eliminating child labour in its entirety. It has feet of clay, and it has failed our children over and over again. Strategies to end exploitative child labour must be designed with a keen eye for each child and context while respecting the right of adolescents to survive with dignity and agency. We need to listen to young people and assess their realities. We need to empower local governments to respond speedily and with empathy. And we need to re-deploy funds and programmatic support with transparency and accountability, most of all to the children themselves.
My childhood as a child worker in Malawi

Mavuto Banda

Growing up in a remote village in southern Malawi’s district of Chikwawa, where the next meal would come from was always a nightmare. I was raised by a single mother, and my six siblings and I knew from a tender age that if we did not work for food, we would not have food. By extension, we knew that we wouldn’t have clothes and other necessities, including learning materials. We owned our survival and destinies, and it became ‘normal’ for us to work for food and any other needs and wants of our youth.

Yet the jobs that were available in the village nearly all involved piece work, locally known as ganyu, and were mostly done in exchange for food. There were very few opportunities for cash work available, and those were jealously guarded by the adult labourers of the village. So, in our sixth year of primary school (age 11), my peers and I journeyed to neighbouring Mozambique in search of seasonal agricultural work. My goal was to get enough cash to buy a school uniform, clothes for my younger siblings and myself, and learning materials for the next school term. This break from school had short-term effects on my performance, but the long-term benefit was that it allowed me to focus on my studies for the next two years. This gave me time to prepare for the national primary school leaving examinations, which I did using the learning materials I had bought for myself during my absence.

Although I missed one of three terms that year, the school uniform and learning materials made it possible for me to complete my primary education. And, because I did well in the national primary school exam, I was given a place at a government boarding secondary school. That led to a government loan that funded my university education. I am now an NGO worker and PhD researcher. Looking back, I can say that if I had not been able to find work when I needed it, I would never have received the education that has had such a positive impact on my life and the lives of my family members.

The dominant discourse on children’s growth and development questions the compatibility of children’s work with education. My personal childhood proves they can be symbiotic. While all child workers, current and former, have their own unique stories and experiences, my experience shows how sacrifice at a tender age can change a whole family for generations.

“For children in excruciating poverty, education is, without opportunities for paid work, usually a far-fetched dream.”
Governments and development partners: seeing only what they expect

I have worked as a development practitioner in Malawi for over 12 years, and I’ve learned that there is a gap between funders and implementing organisations in terms of how the issues being tackled are understood. Take a recent project that aimed at keeping children in school in a remote village in southern Malawi. The focus was on changing parents’ and guardians’ mindsets on the importance of sending their children to school, and the concrete plan was to have village heads punish the parents or guardians of any school-age child found roaming the village during school time.

One day, a member of the project’s staff asked some children he found playing in the village ground why they were not in class although they were in uniform. One replied that, due to a shortage of teachers, only one lesson was taught per day. That day’s lesson had already taken place, and they saw no reason to remain on the school’s premises when they knew that nothing more would happen until tomorrow. The staffer related the story to the rest of the team, but was told to stick to the plan. The project scope could not change to address the actual challenges hindering access to quality education. It needed to respond to what funders believed was the main problem: parents’ negligence in sending their children to school.

Donors funding child labour programmes should have flexible funding conditions that empower local staff to involve communities at every stage.

There are many versions of this story. In some schools it might be the absence of potable water or toilets that prompts kids to do something other than show up for class. In others, it might be an uncomfortable classroom where everyone must sit on an uneven, worn out floor. Some issues are common to all schools, while certain locations have ad-
ditional hurdles to overcome. But the lesson is that school attendance can be unattractive for many reasons. Project funders, designers and implementers must adapt to and address the problems found on the ground, even when they don't conform to expectations, if they want to change anything.

Perhaps the greatest reason of all why school must sometimes take a back seat is poverty. It was certainly the main push factor in my case, and the same is likely true for many other resource-poor households. For children in excruciating poverty now, education is also, without opportunities for paid work, usually a far-fetched dream. I would never have met my needs and gained my education if both Mozambique and Malawi were strict on banning children from having paid work in agriculture.

**Necessary, but not necessarily easy**

It is a fact that many children are abused in the course of working to support their families. When a family is in poverty, the community and the family expect children to contribute to the family's basic needs, including food, through their work. Children who do so are highly respected by both. Unfortunately, the same can't always be said about the employers. During my time as a young migrant worker, I heard many stories of child workers who had suffered at the hands of the families employing them. Some had even refused to pay the children after a full season working in their fields. These are the kinds of vulnerabilities working children face, and it should be the interest of every stakeholder to ensure that working children are protected against them.

I am of the view that the international organisations and donors funding child labour programmes should have flexible funding conditions that empower local staff to involve communities at every stage of the project: from conceptualisation and design straight through to implementation and review. This would require them to accept that programmes around child work wouldn’t necessarily try to eliminate it. That would be a challenge for them. But doing so would ultimately save funds and make programmes far more impactful in communities because they would tackle the root causes of children’s vulnerabilities rather than fiddle with surface-level issues.

As we reflect on the International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour, we should appreciate the fact that children around the world are faced with complex and unique human rights challenges that require specific, well-thought-out interventions. These interventions should be centred on empowering children and their families. The National Action Plan on child labour elimination in Malawi, introduced in 2009 and supported by the International Labour Organization, is, I believe, an approach that empowers working children rather than withdraws them from work without providing them with alternatives. Under what is known as the SNAP programme, working children, including girls employed as household help, are enrolled on a part-time basis in skills development centres. There they acquire skills such as tailoring, brick laying, welding and carpentry, which will empower them for decent employment without being asked to give up today’s income in exchange.

**Conclusion**

Children in resource poor countries face numerous challenges that may hinder their growth and development. Exploitative work is certainly one of them. But responses to these challenges should focus on factors that lead children to work and empower working children so that they can earn a living in safe environments. I believe that focusing on household and community push factors is as good as strengthening institutions in the fight against the abuse of working children. This requires funders and international organisations from the Global North to understand the prevailing context in which programmes are implemented, to be flexible, and to incorporate ideas and suggestions from the communities in which they seek to intervene. It is possible to create safe environment for working children.
Children’s work and labour is a complex and multi-faceted issue, and understanding and responding effectively to it isn’t easy. There is evidence to show that children’s work can be both a means to, and a violation of, children’s rights to survival, development, protection and participation. For many working children, positive and negative aspects co-exist. Recognising this and the diversity of children’s work is where any serious conversation on addressing this topic must begin.

Such conversations must engage thoroughly with children and caregivers to inform the design of relevant interventions. They are the key actors who know their realities best, and it is crucial for policymakers and practitioners to understand their specific socio-cultural, economic and political contexts before they act. Working children have important things to share about their motivations and reasons to work, their experiences of work (many of which are gendered), and their suggestions for services, policies and practices that would improve their lives. They must be heard.

We, as researchers heard the views of hundreds of working children’s representatives from 29 Children’s Advisory Committees (CACs) who organised their own research and advocacy initiatives in 2018 and 2019 across 18 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe and the Middle East. Supported by local NGOs, the CACs were part of the global project “It’s Time to Talk!” that was initiated by German NGOs Kindernothilfe and Terre des Hommes in 2016 to support meaningful participation of working children in practice and policy developments that concern them. This article draws upon the insights and lessons learned from these initiatives.

Key messages from working children’s advisory committees based on analysis of local advocacy initiatives planned and implemented by 29 CACs.

1. Protect us from labour exploitation, harsh conditions and risks, and allow children to do suitable dignified work
2. Prevent and protect working children from violence and discrimination
3. Address poverty; provide decent jobs for our parents; and ensure that our basic needs are met
4. Take our education seriously and provide quality education and skill training
5. Listen to us, understand us, and implement laws that respect our rights
6. Protect us from labour exploitation, harsh conditions, and risks, and allow children to do suitable and dignified work

Many CACs called for protection from labour exploitation and harsh conditions of work. Some emphasised the need for dignified and suitable work. Children do not want to do work that is too heavy or harmful, and they do not want to work in harsh or risky conditions. They do not want to be exploited by working long hours or by being underpaid.

Yet all of this frequently happens. In some countries, boys face increased risks of heavy work, and girls face increased risks of doing unpaid household work for long hours.
However, many working children emphasised that they do not want to stop all forms of work. CAC members from different regions explained that they want to do work that is suitable to their age and capacity in order to contribute to their families, to learn skills, to earn money, and to solve problems. Children described how they are proud to help their families, and they want their work to be valued. CACs that are part of organised movements in Latin America especially emphasised the value of dignified work.

Address poverty; provide decent jobs for our parents; and ensure that basic needs are met

The children participating in the CACs underlined the structural issues that deprive children of decent food, healthcare, and education. They listed household poverty and violence in schools, households, and workplaces as push factors for children to drop out of school, to engage in work, and to migrate.

In each region, children described how the lack of decent jobs for parents and caregivers in rural, remote, and urban settings prevents their caregivers from earning sufficient wages to meet their family members’ basic needs. Children discussed the need to address poverty through a multi-pronged approach that ensures access to livelihood programmes, decent housing, land rights, improved quality education, and access to clean drinking water and sanitation.

These issues have all become more acute with the Covid-19 pandemic and the confinement measures that have gone along with it. Families have experienced heightened job loss, reduced income, and food insecurity. In response, working children have amplified their call for decent livelihoods and income for family members, as well as food security schemes.

Prevent and protect working children from violence and discrimination

The children have emphasised the negative impact of violence, and called for an end to violence and discrimination in families, schools, communities, and workplaces. CAC members highlighted that certain groups of children face higher risks of sexual abuse, harassment, discrimination, and other forms of violence due to their gender, disability, and status as a refugee or migrant worker.

Take our education seriously and provide quality education and skill training

Many children struggle to balance work and studies, particularly when they work long hours before or after school. Some manage to combine the two, especially if their caregivers prioritise their education. And, importantly, many children work in order to continue their education.

Before Covid-19 many families were already struggling to pay tuition fees and school materials. The pandemic has adversely affected children’s access to education, and school closures have made the digital divide more evident. Many children lack access to the internet, computers or smartphones, or struggle to pay for their costs. This has further increased school dropouts.

Some CACs highlighted the importance of access to quality and relevant education and skill training. Children called for the education system to be more flexible around the diverse realities and needs of working children, rather than pushing working children to choose between attending school or keeping their work (a choice that may be driven by the need to meet their family’s basic needs). Furthermore, CAC members called for inclusive education for all children whatever their age, ability, refugee status, geographic location or family income.

Listen to us, understand us, and implement laws that respect our rights

CACs are advocating for their views, feelings, and suggestions to be heard, valued, and taken seriously by policy makers, practitioners, caregivers, employers, teachers, and police. When working children’s views are ignored their rights to participation are violated, and they face increased risks of exploitation and abuse. Likewise, when children can speak up individually and collectively they are more able to defend their rights.
Working children want to participate and represent themselves in decision-making processes at the family, school, local and national levels. They also want a seat at the table in regional and global policy forums that concern them. Many CACs organised interactions with local government officials and other influential stakeholders to present and discuss their priority concerns and grievances, and to advocate for improvements to service provision, policies, and budget allocations that would better respond to their needs and rights. Working children also want their associations and networks to be recognised and engaged with as partners to navigate the best way forwards.

**Working children are ready to talk. Are you?**

“**It’s Time to Talk!**” is now being followed by the project “**Dialogue Works**”. This will run from 2020 to 2024. Its goal is to expand the spaces for dialogue among working children and duty bearers, from local to global levels, and to promote sustainable platforms for children’s participation in societal and political processes.

The complexities of children’s work and labour reveal the importance of approaching children as actors in the wider context of their families and societies. Only this will ensure a holistic, inter-sectoral response that will fulfil children’s indivisible rights. Recognising children’s agency and listening to their insights not only challenges existing pre-conceived notions of childhood, but forces powerful members of adult institutions to recognise the macro-economic trends that perpetuate local and global inequalities. Listening and responding to children’s suggestions would enhance efforts to address underlying structural issues (inequality, poverty, violence) that prevent children and their families from accessing quality education and other basic services, food security, and dignified work.

Despite 30 years of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, there has been least progress in realising children’s civil rights to freedom of expression, to access information, to form associations and assemble peacefully, and to be heard in decisions that affect them. Governments, UN agencies, and civil society organisations must strengthen their strategies, plans, and budget allocations to ensure fulfilment of children’s civil rights. This necessitates:

- capacity building and sensitisation of adults (policy makers, local officials, teachers, caregivers, etc.) to recognise children’s capacities and to listen deeply to children in order to develop, refine, and monitor practice and policy developments informed by children’s views and best interests;

- an expansion of platforms and spaces for working children’s participation and representation in existing structures, including school governance, local governance, and policy forums on child labour, decent work, quality education, child protection and social protection.

Cultural, political, economic, and institutional barriers to children’s participation and representation must be dismantled so that working children’s views and demands have influence and weight in policy making processes.
My name is Wilfried Essomba Onguene and I grew up in Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon. At a certain point in my childhood, my parents experienced many problems. My father was no longer regularly at home and it became difficult for my mother to care for us. I decided to take charge and support the household by providing for food.

This is how I started to work as a child. Today, I have a degree in monitoring and evaluation. I’ve worked for several associations over the years, and I’m currently the monitoring and evaluation officer for Enda Jeunesse Action, an NGO supporting the African Movement of Working Children and Youth. My experience of transitioning from a child worker ‘victim’ to an actor who has realised many of his life goals and projects is a driving force behind the work I do now. I feel compelled to talk about children and young people in work situations, and to support them to organise themselves.

My experience as a child worker
My mother was a hairdresser and my father an accountant. I began to feel pressure to work once their troubles began, and it eventually grew so strong that I could no longer continue school. Despite the fact that I was enrolled, I had to stop. I found work at the local Essos market, and I worked the whole day in order to go home with some food, clothes and other basic necessities.

At the market I had many jobs. I emptied bins, cleaned tables and washed dishes in the restaurant. I carried luggage, worked in the bookstore, and even collected rocks to sell during the rainy season. In the beginning it was difficult, especially the work as a porter. We children had many customers because people knew we could be paid less for carrying heavy loads. It was hard but I had no choice. I had to take care of myself and my family.

Some days I was beaten. Perhaps I had bumped into someone with the luggage carrier, or got accused of theft, or the customer did not want to respect the contract. Whatever the problem was, in the eyes of the grown-ups I was always in the wrong. My bosses also found excuses to cut my salary. I had no one to defend me. I was left alone to face these problems.

The secret to realising my life plans
One day some young people noticed me with a group of friends, and they listened to us as we talked about our daily life, the reasons why we had ended up in work, and the difficult working conditions we were experiencing.

For the first time we had the opportunity to talk freely about our lives, the things we were not happy about, and what we wanted to change. For the first time somebody was listening to our concerns. These children, it turned out, were from the African Movement of Working Children and Youth (AM-WCY). With their help we realised that we should organise ourselves to change these things, and that we should have a group of people dedicated to making us respected in the market.

This was a great motivation for us. We understood that we were not obliged to work under bad conditions, and that together we had the power to change things. We understood that we had rights, and that our precarious situation did not give people the right to hit us, to take our money, to snatch our goods, or to cut our wages. And we understood we should be allowed to rest, to play, and to participate in other activities with groups like ours. We began
to invite other children from the market to join us. We started holding meetings on Sundays, during which we talked about our week and planned activities to promote respect and consideration for the children of the market.

At the market we were always mistaken for thieves, so with the help of the AMWCY we had shirts made that identified us as workers. When one of us had problems with our boss, our group was present and ready to intervene. We did our best to ensure that he or she was not harassed or abused, and that his or her rights were respected. We did the same when it came to problems with customers or conflicts over contracts.

All these activities and dynamics reduced our vulnerability and improved our working conditions. We secured a right to rest. We had fun, and participated in larger activities with other groups of children. People in the neighbourhood started to respect us. They stopped treating us badly because of the power of our group and because we knew our rights.

Our organised group of working children became our daily and permanent protection.

As an active member of my group, we did a lot of child protection activities with other groups of working children and people from the AMWCY. We also held discussion sessions about our personal projects. Mine was to go back to school, so I left the market for a job selling sand. This allowed me to work during the day and to go to school in the evening without being too exhausted. I had changed my dream from having a large luggage rack to finishing my studies by doing a light and limited job. Gradually I returned to the normal school course, only this time adapted to accommodate the work I was doing. I became a leader in my neighbourhood and in the market. Above all, I became a role model for the other children.

Don't leave us to fend for ourselves
Being a working child in Cameroon, either in the city or village, is like having a defect. It effectively disqualifies you from basic social services, community consideration, and participation in community affairs. This exclusion is not because state services and structures are explicitly unwilling to take care of working children, but because the access requirements do not take into account the specific situation of working children.

For example, friends of ours who lived in the same neighbourhood, but who went to school, received books and leaflets on children's rights. We children in the market and in other workplaces received nothing, even though our rights were the ones being violated by our bosses and our customers. Indeed, it's unlikely they were even aware that we had rights to violate. This de facto exclusion happens a lot with projects involving children.

For many children, work is not a choice. It is an obligation to provide for precious and urgent needs, or even for survival. When I was a child worker, having the opportunity to go to school and having access to schoolbooks and bags was not the right solution for my situation. In that moment my overriding need was to provide food to support our household, and to do that I had to give up this form of classical schooling that was not adequate for me. The same is true for many other children in Cameroon and around the world. Work plays a huge role in the survival of the family and the future of the child. Rather than ignoring that reality, it is important to include working children within our protection strategies and provide adequate solutions to their situations.

Supporting groups of organised working children is a vital strategy for increasing their protection. These groups offer working children a space for daily dialogue, reflection, and for building their future. They also make it more likely that their members and their rights will be respected. Under the right conditions, the permanent protection offered by a group even makes it possible for working children to grow.

Translated out of French by Edward van Daalen.
"Action" is the buzzword for the International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour. But which actions bring progress and improve the lives of children who work? Which actually make things worse? These questions are intensely debated in both academic and policy spaces, and positions range from supporting the abolition of 'child labour' to fostering 'child work.'

I have engaged with grassroots organisations for over 15 years as well as worked with a large international child rights NGO. In this time I have come to the conclusion that we must look at children's work from a rights perspective if we really want to design programmes that work for working children.

What does this mean in practice? To start, it means acknowledging that child work is an activity that is already strongly enshrined in a rights framework administered by the United Nations and the International Labour Organization. Its main building blocks are, in chronological order, the ILO Minimum Age Convention (1973), the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), and the ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (1999).

This rights-based framework is important, but it is not internally harmonious. Tensions arise in interpretation and application whenever all three conventions are considered together.

For example, the protective rights and the participatory rights found in these documents often come into conflict whenever working children enter the conversation. The two ILO conventions focus on protection and emphasise rights like the right to not experience violence and exploitation. The UN convention, meanwhile, details children's rights to participation, to education, and to having their indigenous and traditional practices protected. These don't necessarily have to conflict, but in practice the socio-economic circumstances of most working children and the regulatory landscapes of most countries make it impossible for all of these rights to be simultaneously realised.

Many children have to work in order to afford school as they live in unequal societies that do not guarantee free quality education. Moreover, many societies traditionally include children in work from a young age as part of their upbringing, as a key means of imparting cultural values and essential knowledge and skills (such as agricultural ones), and plenty of young people choose to participate in economic life. However, children often cannot find work that does not involve exploitation of some kind. Or their work, regardless of what it is, is considered illegal because of their age. So the question of which parts of the framework get prioritised has a direct impact on the selection of rights working children experience as real.

The current push by the ILO to eliminate all forms of child labour globally is broadly in line with the priorities of its own conventions, but it's important to recognise that this comes at the expense of other recognised children's rights. This is highly problematic considering that human rights are indivisible and interdependent, which means that each and every right is equally important and cannot be fully enjoyed in separation from the others. In other words, to truly uphold children's rights, a response to the issue of child labour cannot prioritise one sets of rights over another.

While it is worth remembering that rights themselves remain the representation of the power (im)balances of a time, and as such should be continuously re-evaluated, I still believe that the rights' framework can lead us to progress for working chil-
With all its flaws, this is the framework we have to work with. It has solidified over years. The ILO has dedicated significant resources to getting its conventions widely ratified and the UN convention has, by this point, been ratified by every country save the USA. As practitioners in this field, we work within the authority of this dominant but problematic framework. So what should our programming look like?

**A child rights approach to programming around child work**

One proposition that I support is to apply a solid child rights analysis in all programmes and responses directed at protecting working children. This implies an understanding of work within a two-dimensional continuum of realisation of rights (benefits) and violation of rights (harms).

In practice this requires stakeholders to conduct a Child Rights Assessment (CRA) to see how each right contained in the UN convention (life, education, play, health, participation, association, respect of Indigenous culture, and so on) is fulfilled or violated by the particular work being targeted for intervention. A CRA enables us to tailor a response that will address violations while enhancing the potential benefits of that work, rather than simply trying to ban it because we see problems. The intervention itself must also be continually assessed to measure impact and ensure accountability to children.

In order to be relevant, the assessment must account for children’s lived experiences by ensuring that the voices of working children are included – both girls and boys in all their diversities. The *Time to Talk* project is a good place to turn to for help here. It has experience in supporting working children, and has developed useful tools to aid practitioners in understanding and evaluating their situation as workers. A good CRA must also involve all other relevant stakeholders in the target communities: parents, local civil society organisations, businesses (big and small), public and private services providers, and government officials (local and national). Once data gathering is complete, it needs to be evaluated at both the national and local levels in order to identify both shared systemic violations and the nuances of local contexts.

Ideally, this consultative process would be further supported by a nationally integrated system, whereby the government (the primary duty bearer) ensures that all relevant services for children have effective coordination mechanisms across sectors (education, protection, health, employment, leisure and sport) to support a child-centred, holistic response. Unfortunately, such mechanisms are often lacking and, in general, there is little accountability at the national level to deliver on children’s rights.

**The partiality of good intentions**

Child labour programming to date has been really good at demonstrating rights violations within work. Some of these violations are: being a barrier to formal education; violence and exploitation, including sexual exploitation; lack of time for play and leisure; and harmful working conditions negatively impacting the health of the child. These same programmes have not, however, shown nearly as much interest in understanding the good that might come out of this same work. Serious attempts to analyse the evidence on the benefits of child work – and indeed, to build up an evidence base around this at all – is lacking. This must change.

Programmes also remain shockingly unaccountable to working children. There are many examples of past interventions that led to working children being pushed into worse situations. Today we are still witnessing interventions that attack children’s right to dignity when campaigns and programmes...
employ language that stigmatises and/or criminalises them. The negative impacts of stigmatisation during childhood, particularly in the context of Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) children, have been widely documented, and the effects on their mental, spiritual, moral, and social development can be dramatic. Organised working children have repeatedly expressed how unfair it is to target them as if they were the problem, rather than the inequalities at the root of their conditions. Yet, programmes that explicitly or inadvertently encourage stigmatisation of child workers have never been brought to account for doing so.

Denying children their right to participation is another shortcoming of mainstream responses to child labour. There is an urgent need to embrace the political and civic rights of children: from the design of local programmes to providing the space for children to meaningfully contribute to public policy on all child-related policies, including regarding child labour.

For these and many other reasons, the core of child rights analysis must be a comprehensive monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning framework that measures children’s well-being as a whole. The goal must be to capture the realisation of all their rights rather than cherry-picking a few with a one-sided analysis.

**Change is possible**

Addressing child work through a true, rights-based perspective requires a shift. Those who are responsible for “actions to eliminate child labour” – governments, international organisations (particularly ILO and UNICEF), and civil society (particularly INGOs) – must begin to recognise children as active subjects of rights rather than as solely objects of protection. Understanding children’s active role in building resilient communities, including through their work, is a key part of that shift.

So too is recognising the damage that can be (and has been) done in the name of ‘protection’. As the proverb says, “the road to hell is paved with good intentions”. Without emancipation and agency, terrible crimes can be committed using the language of protection.

Changing attitudes with regard to working children is especially pertinent now, as the development community reflects on the broader shockwave provoked by Black Lives Matter on anti-racism and decolonisation as well as on the application of the Grand Bargain and its localisation agenda (a strategy in humanitarian and development circles that puts local knowledge and capacities at the forefront in interventions and hence transfers resources and power to local actors). Now, more than ever, there are no excuses to deny children their social and political rights, or to deliver action without accountability to their well-being. The International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour should be a year for thinking about how to effectively and meaningfully uphold children’s rights rather than for rallying behind harmful slogans. We, collectively and individually, have a responsibility to make this change.
Leather production is a global, billion-dollar industry and Bangladesh’s second most profitable export sector after ready-made garments. It also has a problem with child labour. As our report for the Child Labour Action Research Programme (CLARISSA) at the Institute of Development Studies shows, there is a startlingly high prevalence of the worst forms of child labour across the country’s entire leather supply chain. These forms are not always obvious, and without better understanding of where, why, and how they happen exploitation and abuse of children in this sector will continue in Bangladesh and around the globe.

The year 2021 has been declared the International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour, with the ultimate goal of ending child labour by 2025. In principle we support this drive, yet we must also be realistic about where we are. Faced with the reality of a worsening economic situation as a direct result of the global pandemic, the situation of many working children is getting worse, not better. New children have joined their ranks, and many have been forced into even more perilous work. For these reasons, our report argues that we must prioritise improving the conditions of those working in the worst forms of child labour over trying to end child labour in its entirety.

Global brands, the visible parts of their supply chains, and governments are usually the focus of any conversation on how to address child labour. Comparatively ignored are the thousands of small businesses which exist unregulated in the shadows of the leather economy. They deserve far more attention. One of our key findings is that while the formal production of branded leather goods in Bangladesh has become better regulated, the informal leather sector continues to use child labour at every stage. And while much of this production is sold in domestic and regional markets, some inevitably feeds into the formal, branded leather goods sector.

The leather business in the informal sector of Dhaka’s slums

These informal businesses are in slums and neighbouring areas around Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. Most have less than 10 workers, including the children, and operate in a working space of less than 200 square feet (19 square metres). Our survey of eight slums in Dhaka found that 34.6% of all children living in slums are engaged in the worst forms of child labour as defined by the International Labour Organization, and well over half of those children are in some way linked with the global supply chain of leather and garment products.

Almost all these small businesses are either sub-contractors to large and medium industries or producers for local markets. To make their leather products they must perform many dangerous processes – including preserving raw hides, glue-making, tanning, dyeing, etc. – and our researchers found that children as young as seven take part in these tasks. Indeed, they were involved in nearly every process of the supply chain (96%) of the ‘hidden’ informal leather industry. This statement is based on observations of over 150 children working 12-to-14-hour days, six days a week.

The work that goes into these processes is varied, but all come with their hazards. From mixing chemicals and carrying heavy products to using different types of acid and operating heavy machinery, the children’s physical health is constantly at risk by their work.

The dangerous lives of Dhaka’s child leather workers

A.K.M. Maksud
What do the children say?

Our researchers work with many of the children to create their life stories and share their experiences within Bangladesh's leather sector. Many highlighted that one or both parents were unable to provide for the family, either because they simply weren't present or because they were sick or disabled. Others cited their family’s debts to microcredit NGOs and informal money lenders for why they work. Yet, while most of the children expressed sadness at not going to school and playing with their friends, many were proud to support their families. Positive and negative drivers like these are complex and persistent, and it is their interaction that often leave children caught up in the worst forms of child labour.

Kutubuddin*, for example, is a 17-year-old boy living on the outskirts of Dhaka. Some years ago, he fell off the roof at his workplace whilst spreading out fish feed to dry. He suffered a head injury and since then experiences memory loss, fainting spells, and an inability to answer questions. He still works, now at a glove factory cutting and folding pieces from dawn till dusk for which he receives no fixed salary. His employer pays him a sporadic wage depending on his mood. The employer claims it is a kindness to employ a disabled boy. Kutubuddin’s mother is a street beggar, and his father is a rickshaw puller.

Kutubuddin and many other children reported the immediate dangers of working in these environments while also noting the broader impact, such as missing out on an education. Yet despite all of this the policy response should not be to simply to ban these types of work. That would only exacerbate their situations. Many children like Kutubuddin explained that they have no other choice – they need to provide for their families. Taking away the work, however dangerous or exploitative, would not resolve this.

In the shadow of the pandemic, the leather sector is now facing huge difficulties and more children are ending up working in the sector than ever. Lockdowns caused the closure of most leather supply chain factories and workplaces for three months in 2020 and overall demand dropped, yet there was still pressure on factories to maintain production. To cut costs, factory managers laid off adult workers and hired children at lower wages to replace them. This pushed families into crisis. Their overall reduced income impacted their ability to buy food and pay rent, and many children faced the stark choice of undertake dangerous work or starve.

However, simplistic responses like shutting down informal businesses can, like it or not, expose children to even worse harm. Children only do this work because they have no other choice if they and their families are to eat. To take away their leather work would be to leave them and their families with even less income and less options, which would only force them to work in other sectors of the informal economy. That displaces the worst forms of child labour, solving nothing.

Harm reduction as leitmotif

In the context of calls to ‘eliminate child labour in all its forms by 2025’ we risk diluting our effort in countries with a significant problem by not focusing on where the worst forms of child labour exist. To have the maximum impact in terms of reducing immediate harm to children, we must have a very strong focus on children in the worst forms of child labour, typically in small and medium enterprises, especially in the informal, unregulated sectors. Dealing with the unregulated informal sector is a far more complex challenge than engaging with a handful of large exporters, yet it is essential as the informal sector is where the most exploitative and dangerous forms of child labour are found. This is much harder than talking to governments and large companies, but it is where the most immediate change needs to happen. To do this we have to engage directly with these small businesses.

* Kutubuddin is a pseudonym
I would like to be able to support the idea that school creates a barrier to child labour, and perhaps is even the solution to eliminating it. This common, widespread perception is surely a source of hope for anyone dismayed by the prevalence of working children in the world today. But it does not stand up to empirical evidence.

At first glance, school or work can seem to be a question of either/or. In West Africa, for example, the majority of working children are not in formal school, and the majority of children fully enrolled in formal school are not working on the side. But if you look closer at the lives of working children, you find a more complex relationship at work. On the one hand, it is clear that school in itself is not enough to protect children from being put to work. And, on the other, for many young people working is essential for the continuation of their education, and not only in financial terms.

This text offers readers a chance to take seriously what working children and adolescents in West Africa tell us. Where are they with school and education, and what could be done today to support their education and integration into society? Their answers show us how reductive it is to still think of school and work as two (strictly) separate realms.

The voices drawn on for this article come from socio-ethnographic surveys conducted in Senegal between 2015 and 2020 in various sectors of the urban informal economy: in total, some 60 adolescents – girls and boys, mostly aged between 12 and 20 – were interviewed. They are petty traders, cart pushers, touts, baggage handlers, shoe shiners in markets or train stations, all-purpose workers in small restaurants, domestic servants (salaried or unpaid family helpers), apprentices in sewing, welding, carpentry, mechanics workshops, and apprentice drivers.

Their accounts show a great diversity of work experiences, either one-off or long-lasting, but rarely linear, and sometimes starting from the age of nine or ten years old. These surveys complement other socio-ethnographic research that has been carried out over the past 20 years with child workers in West Africa. By listening to these voices, we can better understand the situations of working children, better protect them, and perhaps finally imagine the conditions of a world in which harmful child labour cannot thrive.

Knowledge without opportunity
Let there be no mistake: few families today, and especially few children, fail to understand the importance of schooling. For girls and boys alike, learning is a necessary ingredient in any projection towards a (better) future. Yet, in Senegal in 2013, more than 47% of school-age children (6-16 years) were not in school.

This disconnect cannot be explained by reasons of economic scarcity alone. Multiple factors are intertwined: economic, certainly, but also socio-cultural, socio-demographic, linguistic, health, psycho-pedagogical and political. When we listen to them, the children describe the difficulties and contradictions of the school system as it exists today. They find it at times strongly distanced from their personal or family aspirations and obligations, but they also find in its functioning and malfunctioning a near-certain path to upward social mobility.
Lamine, for example, spent five years at school because both he and his mother wished for him to be there. At the age of 13, however, he realised that he was still struggling to express himself in French beyond the usual greetings. This didn’t seem good enough given the annual enrolment fee was worth two bags of rice, which enabled his mother to feed his three younger siblings for two months, so he explained to her that it would surely be preferable for him to look for another path to professional integration and a better future. As Lamine’s story shows, even if working children’s discourse on work and school appears contradictory at times, there is often a lucid accuracy about it in contexts where the welfare state is reduced to a trickle.

Working children say that every child should learn, but they understand that access to education is conditioned by the duties, roles and status that children occupy within the family. In order to both honour these duties and pursue a course they hope will be educational, some children and adolescents choose to leave school and pursue a different course.

The COVID pandemic, which led to the closure of schools for several weeks in many countries in the Global South, has increased the perception that school is only one of several educational options. Studies are underway to document the multiple adaptations that are taking place as the COVID crisis becomes protracted. Among the alternative pathways that children and families seek out and take, child labour is likely to be central, a hypothesis that early evidence seems to confirm.

What is striking when listening to girls and boys at work is the strong link they draw between the work they do, often in harsh conditions and without social protection, and an educational project they are striving to pursue. This link is particularly salient in at least two types of cases. One case regards pupils, often as young as 10, working during the school holidays. However meagre their earnings, the money they receive helps to pay for school fees and supplies.

That’s the economic benefit, but there are crucial social benefits as well. Working during the holidays, they say, demonstrates their physical and moral commitment to accessing additional resources and building their future. This ensures their

“By showing that they are willing to work in order to learn, children increase the likelihood of having the opportunity to do so.”

Working to continue education

There is not enough data to say whether, at a macro level, it is leaving school that pushes children into work, or if children are leaving school so that they can start work. But micro-level data has proliferated over the past 20 years, and it rigorously documents how child labour gives rise to a continuum of situations in practice.

At one end is the abuse and violence that we read about in the papers. The other end, which is far less acknowledged, are processes of socialisation, contract-type relationships, and educational or even professional pathways. We can only understand what leads to the intolerable, and what could move more working children toward the second pole, by asking the children to explain the dynamics guiding their decisions.
social status and that of their family, which in turn strengthens their parents’ and relatives’ support for their schooling. In short, by showing that they are willing to work in order to learn, they increase the likelihood of having the opportunity to do so.

The other case concerns apprentices, both girls and boys, undergoing unpaid vocational training in informal workshops for a long period, sometimes for as long as six years. Such apprenticeships are usually done alongside other familial obligations, particularly for girls who are expected to take part in domestic work. Trying to meet both sets of obligations can make for very long days for the children, especially for girls. Yet, aware of how limited the opportunities for training are, and of how important such training is for having a profession in the future, many adolescents agree to take on the burden. Once again, their willingness to work creates a position of support – social, economic, symbolic – from both employers and family for their educational and life project.

Listening to working children as real social actors: forging an educational path for all

What can be done today to support the education of all children, including working children? Working children and adolescents express specific needs, and putting them in series allows us to highlight some of their concrete proposals. Taken together, they form two major lines of action which working children do not wish to separate: both educational conditions and working conditions must be improved.

To improve their working conditions, the children we spoke with emphasised the importance of establishing a ‘contract of terms’ (even an oral one) with the person who hires them. For this to carry weight they say the presence of a socially accredited witness is required, for example a neighbourhood chief, a religious leader, an association, etc. The most important points of the contract to be specified (and then respected) are: the scope of the work (hours, tasks), remuneration, sanctions or recourse in case of deviance, and how to resolve problems or conflict. Let us note here the maturity of these very young workers, whose demands directly echo the most common demands of adult workers’ unions. An arguably more innovative desire is access to very low-cost savings banks from the age of 10 so that they can more securely possess money and mitigate the risks of theft or loss.

The children distinguished between pupils who “go on holiday to work” and those who have dropped out of school to become apprentices in informal urban workshops when recommending ways to improve educational conditions. With regard to the former, the children noted the social inequality that forms between pupils who work over the school holidays and those who instead attend private courses to reinforce their schooling. To mitigate this, they would like to see quality tutoring made available at very low cost, or even free, to working pupils.

Apprentices experience wildly differing conditions depending on their sector and location. They would like to find a way to ensure that the quality, duration and working conditions of apprenticeships are no longer just a matter of luck, but that follow certain standards of practice. Their question: how can good practices be disseminated so that apprenticeships in informal workshops are no longer rife with the exploitation of children and adolescents?

The voices of working children overlap to show us that they are committed to building their future, which they actualise by articulating various educational paths between school, apprenticeship and work in the informal economy. The needs they have expressed above are not spectacular. They are achievable. Shall we?
We asked the Concerned for Working Children, an NGO in India, to put together a small collection of first-person testimonies from children working in India today. We wanted readers to hear their stories in their own words (albeit translated into English).

These testimonies were originally gathered at an April 2021 event titled 'Children: Ambassadors of Change'.* Speaking from New Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Karnataka, working children highlighted how Covid-19 has aggravated their situations. And, if matters are not resolved with the urgency they deserve, how they will suffer as a result.

I am Rohith Sakthi, a Vidiyal Child Rights Movement member in Madurai, Tamil Nadu. Covid-19 and lockdown forced us into desperation and poverty. Before the pandemic, I was doing a part-time job, but I took up a full-time job to support the family's income. When I see a child under 14 working in hazardous occupations, I report it to ChildLine, which helps children by providing suitable rehabilitative solutions. If a child must work to support their family, we ensure that the child is in a safe environment and gets adequate wages by involving a facilitating organisation.

I want my children's movement to support both education and work. There should be a balance between both, so that the child can earn and support their family while continuing their education. The government must provide education for all children below the age of 18. Poverty is the root cause for many children taking up jobs, so the government should design programmes to eliminate poverty for children. This would help them to continue their education.

The government should create awareness in schools, the community, and the larger society to make them understand children's rights. If people understand children's rights, they will be able to protect children.

I am Arti Meghwal, from Rajasthan, a student pursuing a bachelor of arts. I lost my father seven years ago. My mother is a daily wage labourer and it was very tough for her to meet the household expenses. I was 14 years when I started working. I'm part of a girls' collective called Khushi Baal Samuh. It is not only a safe space, but also a place where we can discuss a lot of things among ourselves. There we can support other girls in any matter of need, such as menstrual health.

It is the responsibility of the government to support girls across the country. It should support them to pursue their interests and take up jobs. Girls should be able to learn vocational skills that match their interests, and the government should provide vocational programmes inside schools so they don't need to go to separate institutions for training.

I am Kishan from Noida, New Delhi. I am 17 years old, studying in Grade 10. I am the leader of Badhte Kadam federation and a reporter for Balaknama, a newspaper for street and working children. Due to this pandemic I had to stay at home and nobody in my family has a job. Street and working children are facing many difficulties. The government should work for the street and working children, especially during this pandemic. Street children get involved.
in addiction and work, and the government must help them continue their education.

I am Asmita from Tarun Sena, Gujarat. During the lockdowns children face a lot of difficulties, especially young working girls. Girls from my area go to work at the diamond polishing unit. They used to meet their friends there and share their difficulties, but since they have been confined inside they have not been able to talk to anyone. I experienced a lot of pressure from my family members at home, and at one point I wanted to commit suicide. However, I was able to talk to someone from Shaishav (a child rights organisation), and they were able to help me. Schemes and policies for youth development must be implemented immediately.

I am Fathima from Nandihalli village, Huvinahadagali Taluk, Bellary District, Karnataka. I speak as a representative of the working children's union Bhima Sangha, and on the behalf of working children all over Karnataka. Ever since Covid-19, the country-wide lockdown has caused problems in rural areas. Very few children have stayed in the villages to work in the fields. Most working children have migrated to cities to work, which exposes them to new risks.

Children do not have protection at work. Even when we do the same work as adults, our wages are lower. Sometimes, the child is the breadwinner of the family. We must provide for our whole family with the low income and wages we receive. We want to write letters to the local and the state government and create awareness through television, newspapers, and videos about the issues faced by working children. Children who go to school...
and receive formal education are prioritised while working children are ignored. We want to identify working children and get them together.

I am Mahfouz, a part of Azad Jugnu Club (for children’s rights) in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. I started working at a very young age as my parents do not get sufficient income. When there is no money at home, we feel the need to support our families. I had to work to repay my mother’s debt. I am the only one in our Agariya community who has studied. But now I don’t know when school will start, and whether I will be able to study now or not. Our school has begun online studies and I started working to save money for a mobile. I decided to work at the petrol pump. I go scrap-picking once in a while, but the police recognise us as belonging to a de-notified tribe and beat us badly. Earning and eating is more important than the law.

Younger girls who were in schools are doing household work. In some places, children are going out to beg as they bring in more empathy. My father is unwell. He works as a cobbler, but no one is getting their shoes repaired. How much can my mother manage: household work, earn for the family, and provide for the doctor’s fees? Her monthly purchase of medicines is quite expensive. She used to work as a domestic worker and she suffers from depression.

The main problem is unemployment and low wages for adults. These need to be dealt with immediately and consistently. Once the problem of regular payment for parents is solved, children will not be under pressure to start working from a very young age to support the family.

I am Pritam Mondal, 14 years old, studying in 9th grade, from Murshidabad, West Bengal. In the pandemic, our condition has deteriorated. Due to less income, we have less food like fish, vegetables, etc. We could not afford necessities during the lockdown. Since the school is shut, I feel unmotivated with my studies. School has arranged online classes, but we can’t afford mobile phones or data balances. The government must provide these so we can attend the online classes.

I am Prathamesh Kale, Mumbai, Maharashtra, studying in 12th grade. My family’s condition during the Covid-19 pandemic was very bad and I’ve been working since then. The government should protect children working under 18. I needed to work to support my family. In our community of Mawani, most people are daily wage earners. They are labourers. The government should do its duty in protecting all of us.

We do a lot of activities in the community where we talk about children’s rights. We do street plays, we help each child to understand their rights. There should be equality and equal participation. There should be no exploitation, child abuse or any protection issues with children.

The Movement of Working Children, Children of Christian Laborers (MANTHOC) was founded in Peru in 1976 by working children who wanted to fight poverty. That mission has grown over the years to meet the concerns of its members as they have arisen, and today it is a multipurpose, solidaric space in which working children gather, learn, and organise to pursue their interests. Children run the organisation. The leadership is elected annually by their peers, as are the adult facilitators who assist with logistical and authority-based tasks. I studied MANTHOC in 2018 as a graduate researcher from Rutgers University. During my time with them I took a particular interest in the girl members, their lives as working children, and their roles inside the organisation.

MANTHOCas, as the girls of the social movement are known, consider themselves proud working children and want to be heard on all matters that concern them, from their legitimacy as workers to the disappearance of drinking water. Yet in many ways they face more adversity than their male peers. Their gender largely relegates them to domestic and care work, and Peru’s history of social conservatism has forestalled changes to sexual and reproductive education, such as removing gender ‘ideology’ from the national curriculum, which has fundamentally altered their lives. At the same time, girls and women continue to fall prey to femicide with little to no repercussions for the male murderers. The more experienced children at MANTHOC try to teach members to break away from such thinking and create change where they want to see it, but the girls continue to face a hard life outside its doors.

I found that girls’ entry into the movement was not solely for concrete benefits like getting tutored, receiving a hot meal, or being in a safe space. It was also a way to access nonmaterial resources like play, friendship, and a sense of belonging. Community is important in MANTHOC, and relying on it for support is one of the ways the girls overcome difficulties in the broader patriarchal society.

Solidarity in work, solidarity in life
Allow me to tell a story of an initiative that demonstrates how inter-generational solidarity at MANTHOC works in practice, even when it seemingly falls short. At one point during 2018, MANTHOCas decided to visit a public secondary school to educate the students on the meaning of World Water Day. They were concerned that people were wasting dwindling drinking water, and the girls wanted to reach out to their community and move the issue to the forefront of their minds.

The action did not go as planned. They were allowed into the classroom but the students refused to give them a hearing. They looked disgusted when they returned and averted their eyes when Alexandra, the 14-year-old who had coordinated the initiative, encouraged them to reflect on what had just happened. “We have already done the action, it’s time for evaluation,” she said. “What things have been done well? What things can be better?” The girls sat across from her in silence. Stepping in to assist, their adult collaborator Susana adapted Alexandra’s words to encourage the girls:

“If we don’t evaluate and ask, ‘how did it go in the activity?’ we will never know if we are truly doing it right. ‘Will this cost us anything?’ ‘What did we look like?’ ‘What happened [there]?’ ‘What is our suggestion [for next time]?’ So that in the following activity, we recall all of [these questions] and do it [differently].”

Where is the solidarity for working girls?

Janice Stiglich
As an adult collaborator, Susana was in charge of the daily functioning of this particular group of girls. She fulfilled many jobs in the social movement, including, as she did here, bolstering the child leader’s position when necessary. As an adult woman, she was also able to offer the group the benefit of her experience, and the girls respected her because she deferred to their knowledge in return. Adult reinforcement for MANTHOC comes in many forms, including volunteering in or collaborating with the organisation, offering them financial support, or speaking up in support of them and working children as a whole. At this moment, it came through Susana uplifting the spirits of the girls who appeared sullen and dejected after a difficult set of public presentations.

Susana informed the MANTHOCas that no matter how effective or ineffective an activity is, there is always room for improvement. “The point is not to say, ‘you have done it wrong,’ she said. “Instead, [ask] ‘how did this go for us?’, ‘how did we feel about it?’” The girls began to nod. Susana continued:

“We express ourselves here. But maybe, in other spaces with friends in other groups, who may be older than us…some of us perhaps sacrifice expression. I know it. But here, we want to be able to have the capacity to say how we feel, so that our meaning is fulfilled.”

Rasa, 11, was the first to speak. She said she felt embarrassed because the classroom students had been conversing while she spoke. Sayuri, 13, and Mia, 11, spoke of frustration, disrespect, and nervousness after being introduced to the class. Esperanza, 12, chuckled about how the teacher was not even aware that it was World Water Day. She said she felt vindicated knowing more than him. The girls began to feel better.

It’s time to take working children seriously
The MANTHOCas’ activity on World Water Day did not turn out as they had anticipated. However, their capacity to struggle and evaluate themselves grew, which is important to their overall development as participants in society. As Susana boosted the MANTHOCas’ spirits, adults in broader society must consider how they too can assist working girls. Right now, with growing poverty and an ongoing pandemic, it is important for members of adult society to assist them by acknowledging their work and supporting them in it. Whether it concerns potable drinking water, reporting gender-based violence, or allowing dignified work under the age of 12, we have a collective responsibility to do what the secondary school teachers and students on World Water Day did not do: Listen.
What’s wrong with the Global Estimates on Child Labour?

Edward Van Daalen

It is difficult to overstate how important the Global Estimates on Child Labour are for the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) campaign against child labour. For more than two decades they have stood at the centre of both mainstream discourse and the global policy agenda on this topic. It’s easy to understand why: the headline number is enormous. The declaration that 160 million, or around one in 10, children were working in 2020 is a powerful tool for mobilising political will and resources. But the ways in which the global estimates are acquired, presented and instrumentalised unfortunately mislead at least as much as they enlighten. The picture they present is warped. Here’s why.

The allure of outrage

The first publicly promoted estimates of child labour, produced by the ILO in 1996, were substantially higher than they are today. Part of the report ‘Targeting the Intolerable’, they put the figure at a quarter billion. They were also produced for a purpose, namely to help provide a rationale for the adoption of the 1999 Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (C182). C182 qualifies practices such as child slavery, bondage, trafficking, soldiering, and prostitution as the worst forms of child labour and prioritises action against them.

To bring this ‘dry’ number of 250 million to life, campaigners also released shocking images and narratives of children in these kinds of work. The result was a hugely effective media campaign. As Frans Röselaeers, the director of the ILO’s International Programme on Child Labour (IPEC) at the time, noted:

| The number drew international attention to the magnitude and scope of the child labour problem worldwide. It was widely publicised; hardly any article on child labour failed to mention it. |

The strategy hasn’t changed since. The ILO publishes new numbers approximately every four years: 211 million in 2002, a number which gradually dropped to 152 million in 2017, before rising again to 160 million in 2021. It has also doubled down on its global advocacy campaign. Kailash Satyarthi of the Global March Against Child Labour (now a Nobel Peace Prize laureate) was recruited to be the public face and voice of this campaign. His focus on child slavery, servitude, and sexual abuse has been instrumental in shaping how the public now understands and speaks about child labour. For instance, during his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, he spoke of child labour in the following terms:

Twenty years ago, in the foothills of the Himalayas, I met a small, skinny child labourer. He asked me: “Is the world so poor that it cannot give me a toy and a book, instead of forcing me to take a gun or a tool?” I met with a Sudanese child-soldier he was kidnapped by an extremist militia. As his first training lesson, he was forced to kill his friends and family. He asked me: “What is my fault?” Twelve years ago, a child-mother from the streets of Colombia – trafficked, raped, enslaved – asked me this: “I have never had a dream. Can my child have one?”

These are the kind of situations the ILO and other campaigners against child labour want the public to think of when we try to wrap our heads around the mind-boggling global estimates, be it 250 or 160 million children.

Is the egregious also representative?

Seemingly clear-cut statistics as well as heart-wrench-
ing vignettes both serve the same function: they collapse a huge diversity of experiences into a few quick takeaways. This makes the story being told around child labour easy to digest, but it also makes it severely incomplete. If we allow that diversity back in, we see that the situation many ‘child labourers’ face is more complex and often much less dramatic than the ILO makes it out to be.

The data underpinning the global estimates is based on national household surveys that question families about the work children do during a particular reference week (usually the week before the survey). Children are considered to be in child labour when:

- They are aged 5-11 years and have worked for one hour or more in any form of work except for unpaid household activities.
- They are aged 12-14 years and have worked for 14 hours or more, including after school or during holidays.
- They are aged 12-17 years and have worked for one hour or more in predefined hazardous industries or hazardous occupations (e.g., mining, quarrying, construction).
- They are 15-17 years and have worked 43 hours or more per week.

This means that an 11-year-old child that goes to school full-time but has helped their parents at the market or in the fields after school or on the weekend for an hour or two, in that reference week, is considered to be one of the 160 million child labourers whose work needs to be eradicated. Needless to say, this is far removed from the images and stories of children stuck in slave-like conditions that accompany the global estimates in media and advocacy campaigns.

Ironically, the global estimates do not actually provide us with any data on child slavery, bondage, trafficking, soldiering, or prostitution. These practices go beyond the scope of the information that can be collected through standard household surveys. In short, the global estimates are instrumentalised to forward a narrow representation of child labour that shocks and ‘sells’, but that representation isn’t found in the data being gathered. On the contrary, the numbers aren’t even attempting to capture it.

A second major problem is that the numbers themselves are highly unreliable. Numerous studies have shown that much of the national data underpinning the global estimates is biased and inaccurate. This has much to do with who we ask, how we ask, and when we ask about child labour.

Who we ask has shown to be crucial. While ideally the ILO wants children themselves to be asked, in practice this almost never happens. Parents or other household members are the ones answering questions about the work children do. A study conducted in Tanzania suggests that prevalence of child labour increases by 35% to 65% when children are asked themselves. Research in Ethiopia shows a gender dimension in the collection of data as well. The work of girls in agriculture is systematically underreported by adult male proxy respondents when compared to the reporting by girls themselves.

The same study shows that when households are asked about child labour greatly affects survey outcomes as well. Numbers vary 45% to 75% depending on the season (harvest or rainy) during which the survey is taken. As does how we ask. A study from the Ivory Coast shows that asking questions indirectly makes farmers feel less compelled to give a socially desirable response, and as a result the number reporting that they engage children actually doubles.

For all these reasons we need to remember that the global estimates are no more than that: estimates. And for that matter, they are estimates that are highly prone to bias and inaccuracy. In this sense, not much has changed since Francis Blanchard, the former director-general of the ILO, wrote in 1983:
Global figures purporting to demonstrate the extent of child labour are not very meaningful. They may have dramatic effects but they do not offer a basis for policy. In view of these reservations, I hesitate even to advance any figures. In themselves, they tell us nothing about the nature of the work children are doing or the circumstances and conditions under which it is being done.

The ILO has done exactly that which Blanchard had warned against ever since it tasted the success of its 1996 global estimates. It has fully exploited the dramatic effect of pairing huge overall numbers with a narrow representation of working children as victims of modern slavery and other worst forms. The result is a loss of all shades of grey, as well as the assumption that when we’re talking about a working child, we are in all likelihood talking about somebody who is living through their own worst nightmare. The data does not back this up.

Inadequate data, inadequate conclusions
Perhaps most worrying is the way that the estimates (and their steady decline) are used as evidence for the effectiveness of the ILO’s ‘abolition through legal prohibition’ approach. This is a prime example of how the estimates are treated as more than they really are. Remember: these numbers are highly speculative, and it is impossible to control for factors such as economic policies, educational programmes, environmental changes, etc. This makes them a poor measure of progress, as much as the policymakers pursuing Target 8.7 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which requires UN member states to “end child labour in all its forms” by 2025, would like them to be.

To sum up, the global estimates are used: to sell a certain idea of child labour based on narrow representations of working children as victims of modern slavery; as proof that the abolition-through-legislation approach works; and as the prime indicator of progress towards the goal of eradicating all forms of child labour. In other words, they are a central component in the global advocacy and policy machines that affect millions of families and children worldwide, despite their unreliable nature and the fact that, to use Blanchard’s words again, “they tell us nothing about the nature of the work children are doing or the circumstances and conditions under which it is being done.”

Instead of spending its scarce resources on extrapolating and promoting global estimates to legitimise a global regime that revolves around an idealistic, unrealistic and potentially harmful goal, the ILO would be better off funding national programmes to improve the overall quality and nuance of the data they are working with. Only a full and balanced picture of what any particular country is dealing with will lead to realistic and relevant programmes adapted to local circumstances and the needs of working children.
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Sahar Mousavi has an MA in Gender Studies from Central European University (2013) and an MA in Women Studies (2011) from Tehran University. Since the age of 18 she has been an activist for youth, women and children's rights. She started volunteering in Nasserkhosro Child-House, a project of the Society for Protecting the Rights of the Child, in 2009. From 2014 until 2017 she was the head of the Nasserkhosro project and she is still cooperating with them as one of the members of the coordinating council.

Claire O’Kane is a child rights practitioner and researcher. She is a qualified social worker with a Masters in Applied Social Studies, and a post-graduate diploma in social research and evaluation from UK universities. Claire learned about children's rights and participation from organised working children in India in the 1990s and she has more than 25 years of international experience supporting child rights and participation work in diverse contexts. Claire has been a consultant supporting the Dialogue Works and Time to Talk participatory research and advocacy initiatives since 2015.

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The Concerned For Working Children is an NGO advocating for children's rights in India.

Edward Van Daalen is a socio-legal researcher specialised in children's rights and social movements. He holds a PhD in law from the University of Geneva, for which he studied the role of organised working children in the development of international child labour law. He published various articles in leading human rights journals, including the International Journal of Human Rights and the International Journal of Children's Rights. He is an organising member of the Children and Work Network.