



The New ILO-Report on Child Labour¹ – a Document of Self-Satisfaction

Philip Meade, ProNATs e.V. – Pro niñas, niños y adolescentes trabajadores

The Second Global Report on Child Labour presented by the International Labour Office (ILO) in May 2006 is titled: “The End of Child Labour: Within Reach”. This astoundingly optimistic scenario refers to the global decline in numbers of child labourers within the past four years by 11 percent and of children in hazardous work by 26 percent. Not only scepticism is appropriate towards these numbers, they also do not pose evidence that an end of child labour could be on its way. The ILO itself expresses in its plan of action the goal to eliminate the “worst forms” of child labour, whilst for other forms of child labour no scheduled targets are set.

One main problem of the ILO Report is that its definition of child labour – as in previous reports and comments – even considering the conducted distinctions, allows only a categorically negative valuation. Children’s work, as it is understood by the ILO, is considered incompatible to (school) education and is seen primarily as a “development obstacle” – particularly for economic growth and poverty reduction. This way, the view is not only limited to focussing on the negative aspects of children’s work, but also many essential activities as well as those accepted by children are not taken into consideration in the statistic data and strategic thoughts of the ILO.

The broadest definition of the ILO refers to the so-called economic activity of children. This to be understood as “productive activities undertaken by children, whether for the market or not, paid or unpaid, for a few hours or full time, on a casual or regular basis, legal or illegal” (page 6 in the English version of the report). A child is considered economically active if she or he works “for at least one hour on any day during a seven-day reference period” (ibid.). Explicitly excluded are domestic and school chores. Even though this definition of economic activity includes work whose outcomes are not intended for the market, all activities which do not serve the ‘economic creation of value’ in terms of the gross national product of a national society are excluded, no matter whether they are vitally important or not (e.g. in context of subsistent production or in context of independent work of children).

From the viewpoint of the ILO, “economic activity” of children is exclusively a “statistical” category which may well be surveyed, but is insignificant for political measures. The ILO only talks about “child labour” which requires political measures in view of activities which are forbidden according to the ILO-Conventions No. 138 (minimum age of working) and No. 182 (definition of the “worst forms” of child labour). Thus, children over 12 years of age who are working only a few hours a week in permitted light work as well as children over 15 years of age whose work is not classified as “hazardous”, do not perform “child labour” or are not

¹ International Labour Office: The End of Child Labour: Within Reach. Global Report under the Follow-up to the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. Geneva 2006.
<http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/relm/ilc/ilc95/pdf/rep-i-b.pdf>

classified as “child workers”. According to the ILO, child labour is a strictly judicial category, thus is defined by political, respectively legal guidelines. These are implicitly assumed to be “sensible” and “in the interest of the children”.

This also applies to children performing so-called hazardous work. The latter being every activity or occupation that, “by its nature or type, has or leads to adverse effects on the child’s safety, health (physical or mental) and moral development. Hazards could also derive from excessive workload, physical conditions of work, and/or work intensity in terms of the duration or hours of work even where the activity or occupation is known to be non-hazardous or ‘safe’” (ibid.). This category also results from the legal guidelines of the ILO-Conventions, especially from Convention No. 182.

On the basis of these categories, the ILO arrives at the estimation, that, in the year 2004, there were 317 million “economically active” children between 5 and 17 years of age out of which 218 were regarded as “child labourers”. According to the ILO, out of the latter, 126 million were involved in hazardous work. The corresponding numbers for the tighter drawn age group of 5 to 14 years are: 191 million economically active children, 166 million “child labourers” and 74 million children performing “hazardous work” (p. 18). Following the definitions of the ILO, only a fraction of the working children is recorded and also the assumptions concerning the reduction of child labour and its soon disappearance can be regarded for the larger part as arbitrary. Since the ILO refers mainly to the “worldwide movement against child labour” as a reason for the supposed reduction, the conclusions seem more of a self-incantation or a self-adulation rather than a realistic survey.

Apart from the problematic character of the categories, the question should be raised, which recording methods the data is based on and which problems came about in praxis during the cross-national, worldwide surveying using unified criteria. The report itself does not provide information on this. The report argues that the number of economically active children has declined especially in Latin America and the Caribbean, within four years by no less than two thirds (pp. 7). In contrast, from a report by terre des hommes Andean bureau, one can draw the conclusion that the data was tailored in order to let the activities combating child labour appear in a better light. According to the National Statistic Institute in Bolivia, e.g., the number of working children climbed between 1992 and 1998 continually from 500.000 to 800.000, thus by 62 percent, whilst strangely the number declined in the year 2005 to 350.000, thus by 56 percent. Preceding, the evaluation methods were coordinated with international institutions. In many other countries, the experience that NGOs and movements of working children have made, also speak against the ILO’s declarations of success. Whereupon one must take into consideration that many working children were forced to shift from public spaces in city centres towards urban peripheries and non-public areas. The measures undertaken by the ILO and its “International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour” (IPEC) are no strangers to this evolution.

The ILO Report not only lacks credibility, but also analytic constancy. The “German NGO Forum on Child Labour” rightly criticises that the ILO Report “does not examine which effects globalisation processes and economic-political strategies such as liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation have on child labour” (press release from May 4th 2006). In a negligent manner, the ILO even argues that the decrease of child labour is due to the rising consciousness of policy makers, their larger efforts to reduce poverty and the expansion of “mass education”. In many countries there may well be a growing dissatisfaction and outrage within the population about the catastrophic consequences of the past two or three decades of

neo-liberal politics which have made the rich richer and the poor poorer. But multinational enterprises, international trade and finance institutions such as the WTO and IMF as well as some rich states of the North, threaten countries which have lately tried to set a progressive political course and take on the battle against increased poverty. They achieve this by replacement of capital, sanctions and credit denial. By using nebulous words, the ILO Report merely alleges the will to a “fair globalisation” without naming the necessary shift of worldwide power ratios. Should this possibly be achieved by the declared closer collaboration with the World Bank?

Work and education are considered, regarding children, as incompatible antagonists. Although an improved quality of educational institutions is repeatedly demanded and at one time there is even talk about a “child-friendly school”, no thought is wasted on how schools could be reconciled with the living conditions of working children. Concrete and often successful approaches of “non-formal education” with working children whose experiences are taken seriously, are discredited as “second-class education”, or even branded as “a parallel system competing against the formal education system” (p. 60). The report leaves the impression that the ILO has never heard of educational conceptions and progressive schools that aim at linking learning with work experience and which could pose a promising alternative, especially for working children.

Elusory, the report appears to construct antagonisms between working children on the one hand and unemployed youths and adults on the other hand. As if, beyond the ILO conventions, there was a clearly fixable dividing line between both age groups, the work of children is made responsible for youths not finding jobs. Whilst “decent work” is proposed as a solution for the youths problems, working children are sweepingly alleged neither to learn anything, nor to attain any professional qualifications whilst working. This assumed contradiction which the ILO calls a “cruel irony” (p. 63) could pass through as a lack of logical thinking. However, the perfidiousness becomes evident when labour unions are advised to set foot in the “informal sector”, since here most children can be found, i.e. replaced. The ILO sees in this “the reservoir of future membership” (p. 71) – at the expense of working children.

The report does not cease in emphasizing the dangers of work for the children, but it lacks any sensibility for the concrete hardships, needs and expectations of the working children. It seems that the ILO’s main interest is that child labour “impoverishes and even destroys the human capital that is necessary for the economy to grow in the future” (p. 2). Hence it is no wonder that the flowery adjurations of the “rights” and “participation” of children do not mouth in concrete proposals of dialog and collaboration. Children are only invited to participate under the condition that they support “child labour efforts” (p. 80) in the sense of eradicating it. In the whole report there is not a trace of reflection about the often negative effects that coincide with measures against child labour for the children themselves. Different conceptions about the appropriate strategies to improve the situation of working children are discredited as “danger of factionalism” (p. 79). The movements of working children might be mentioned, but there is not a word to be found on their experiences, demands and suggestions.²

² Further information can be obtained on the following internet sites: www.workingchild.org (English), <http://www.enda.sn/eja> (English and French), <http://www.ifejants.org> (Spanish), <http://www.pronats.de>

The new Report on Child Labour is new evidence, that the International Labour Organisation is deaf for the concrete interests and needs of working children. Instead of preaching the elimination of child labour, the ILO should be recommended to ask exactly what could help to improve the situation of these children – whilst actually listening to working children and their organisations and beginning a serious dialogue in mutual respect.

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Author's Address:

Philip Meade
ProNATs e.V.
c/o Manfred Liebel
Roennestr. 5
D-14057 Berlin
Germany
Email: info@pronats.de
<http://www.pronats.de>

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(German), as well as the book: Liebel, Manfred: A Will of Their Own. Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Working Children. London/New York: Zed Books, 2004.