

IPEC's Surprising Successes: The Numbers Hide More Than They Reveal

How many times has the ILO (International Labour Organization) declared?: "The elimination of child labour is within our reach." (ILO's 2006 Global Report) The ILO proudly presents its "International Program for the Eradication of Child Labour" (IPEC), created in 1992, as the "biggest technical cooperation program that the ILO offers with an annual budget of 60 million dollars in which more than 450 people work, 90% of them on the ground. Twenty years ago, this level of development would have been unimaginable." (Alec Fyfe, *The global movement against child labour. Progress and future direction*. Geneva: ILO, 2009, p. 9.)

We are on the eve of the ILO's new Global Newsletter announced by the "*Global Conference on Child Labour*" and forecast for May 10-11, 2010 in The Hague (Holland). One must wonder how the ILO will handle the contradictions of its previous Global Report of 2006. In this report it made the sensational announcement of the nearing end of child labour, assuring that in the past four years at the global level, supposedly, the number of child workers had been reduced by 11% and 26% for those who work in dangerous conditions. This means that to achieve the proclaimed eradication of child labour there remains no more or less than a trifle 89% of child labourers, and 74% of those who work in dangerous conditions.

Evidently, the numbers presented do not come close to what was promised as they are based on questionable categories and on insufficient methods of measurement. The ILO's broadest definition refers to the so-called "economic activity" of the children. The tasks that children do at home and their "homework" are explicitly excluded. If indeed the definition of economic activity includes activities whose result is not directly destined for the market, all the other activities that do not result in the "generation of economic value" become excluded, independent of whether or not they are or are not vital (ex. Work in the home for the family of the production for personal sustenance).

The ILO only talks about "child labour" that requires political measures with respect to the prohibited activities outlined in its Conventions 138 and 182. According to these, the work that children older than 12 years old do part-time during the week in permitted activities is not considered "child labour". The labour activities that are not considered dangerous for children older than 15 years of age also are not considered "child labour". From the ILO's perspective, child labour is strictly a legal category and, as such, is defined by legal concepts that tacitly presume that such activities are "adequate" and "in the best interest" of children. This is also true for the children who do dangerous work. This category is also inspired from the legal framework of the ILO's Conventions, particularly number 182.

Using these categories as a base, the ILO estimates that in 2004 there were 317 million children "economically active" between the ages of 5 and 17. Of these, 218 million were considered "child labourers". According to the ILO, 126 million worked in "dangerous conditions". The corresponding numbers for the group of children between 5 and 14 years of age are: 191 million economically active children, 166 million "child labourers" and 74 million children working in "dangerous conditions". The ILO's numbers only include what is, in actuality, a minimal number of working children. The ILO's numbers must be qualified as no more than an arbitrary affirmation.

A fundamental problem with the numbers presented by the ILO is that they are based on definitions of 'child labour' that do not allow for more than a negative interpretation of it. As such, it is considered that 'child labour' is incompatible with the education and scholastic development of children and that constitutes a "developmental obstacle", especially for economic growth and the overcoming of poverty. This concept of child labour not only reduces our view to the negative aspects of work, but the statistics and strategic opinions of the ILO leave aside the vital activities that children themselves value positively.

We do not wish to rule out the possibility that in the last few years some expert from the IPEC has started to realize that the only way for his or her measurements to be successful is to ignore the “abolitionist” dogmas and, on the other hand, start to include “civil society” in its plans. But they always leave aside the needs, expectations and hopes of working children and their families. They do not get tired of counting the dangers of work for children but in reality the major interest of the ILO is the worry that child labour will destroy and impoverish the “human capital” necessary for the economy to keep growing.

As such, it comes to no surprise that the elegant affirmations on the “rights” and on the “participation” of children do not offer a concrete space for dialogue and participation. Indeed, children are invited to participate only on the condition that this promotes “the efforts destined to eradicate child labour”. We can not find in any of the ILO’s reports or declarations any reflection on the fact that often the measures taken to abolish child labour have negative consequences for working children. Any different opinion on what may be more adequate strategies to improve the condition of the child worker is simply identified as a “dangerous partisan confrontation”. Instead of continuing to insist on the eradication of child labour, the ILO should start to think about how it can really work to better the situation; it should really listen to what working children, and the organizations they belong to, have to say for themselves; they should start a serious dialogue based on mutual respect.