

Report No. 61

**Child Labour Policy of Bangladesh:
What are We Looking for?**

Centre for Policy Dialogue

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The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), established in 1993, is an innovative initiative to promote an ongoing process of dialogue between the principal partners in the decision-making and implementing process. The dialogues are designed to address important policy issues and to seek constructive solutions to these problems. The Centre has already organised a series of such major dialogues at local, regional and national levels. These dialogues have brought together ministers, opposition frontbenchers, MPs, business leaders, NGOs, donors, professionals and other functional groups in civil society within a non-confrontational environment to promote focused discussions. The expectation of the CPD is to create a national policy consciousness where members of civil society will be made aware of critical policy issues affecting their lives and will come together in support of particular policy agendas which they feel are conducive to the well being of the country. The CPD has also organised a number of South Asian bilateral and regional dialogues as well as some international dialogues.

*In support of the dialogue process the Centre is engaged in research programmes which are both serviced by and are intended to serve as inputs for particular dialogues organised by the Centre throughout the year. Some of the major research programmes of CPD include **The Independent Review of Bangladesh's Development (IRBD), Governance and Development, Population and Sustainable Development, Trade Policy Analysis and Multilateral Trading System, Corporate Responsibility, Governance, Regional Cooperation for Infrastructure Development and Leadership Programme for the Youth**. The CPD also carries out periodic public perception surveys on policy issues and developmental concerns.*

*As part of CPD's publication activities, a CPD Dialogue Report series is brought out in order to widely disseminate the summary of the discussions organised by the Centre. The present report contains the highlights of a dialogue organised by CPD held at **CIRDAP Auditorium, Dhaka on February 06, 2003** on the theme of **Child Labour Policy of Bangladesh: What are We Looking for?***

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Dialogue on

**Child Labour Policy of Bangladesh:
What are We Looking for?**

The Dialogue

The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) organised a dialogue titled *Child Labour Policy of Bangladesh: What are We Looking for?* on February 06, 2003 at the CIRDAP Auditorium, Dhaka. Participants included representatives from the policy-making establishments in the country, political parties, academia, development agencies, trade unions, NGOs and members of civil society. Mr Syed Manzur Elahi, Member, CPD Board of Trustees, chaired the discussion. Mr Md Lutfor Rahman Khan, MP, Minister for Labour and Employment, was present as Chief Guest. Vice Principal Md. Abdus Shahid, Opposition Chief Whip, and Mr Gopal Bhattacharya, Director, International Labour Organisation (ILO), Bangladesh, were present as Special Guests. The dialogue was also attended by Mr Hamid Tabatabai, Senior Economist, ILO, Geneva. (List of participants is attached as *Annexure*)

Dr Sumaiya Khair, CPD Fellow and Associate Professor, Department of Law, University of Dhaka, made the keynote presentation on *Child Labour in Bangladesh: A Forward Looking Policy Study*.

Opening Remarks

In his opening remark, CPD Executive Director, Dr Debapriya Bhattacharya, noted three main reasons for bringing the child labour discussion to the fore. *Firstly*, he observed that the CPD endeavours to bring forward issues which have strategic interest from the perspective of Bangladesh's development. Concern over the child labour policy is important not only because of external factors such as donor pressure but also because of the need to comply with the WTO related disciplines.

Secondly, it is of concern because it is intrinsically related to issues of raising human resource capabilities of the country. In other words, child labour should be given the attention that it needs in order to build a skilled and sustainable labour force for the country as a whole.

Thirdly, the ILO has been concerned with the issue of child labour for quite some time, especially about the worst forms of child labour and activities that are hazardous for children. In this context, the ILO has established a special programme, the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), particularly designed for this purpose and it has been implemented in Bangladesh for about five to six years. The ILO's aim now is to move forward on this issue by facilitating the creation of a global policy network in order to take on board all stakeholders concerned with the issue of child labour. Given CPD's interest in child labour issues, CPD finds it important to join hands with the ILO in addressing the relevant issues.

Fourthly, and most importantly, it is an opportune moment to bring the issue of child labour to the fore since the government has taken an initiative to formulate a *National Child Labour Policy*. This task is now under way and, hence, it is the right time for reviewing the relevant clauses and putting forward suggestions to improve upon the draft by taking cognisance of the civil society perspective. CPD is of the opinion that such recommendations can go a long way in improving the policy.

Dr Bhattacharya also emphasised that the study undertaken by the CPD is not a child labour study per se, since more than 200 such studies have been conducted earlier in Bangladesh, which addressed many of the relevant issues. The purpose of the dialogue is not to discuss the dimensions of child labour since we have already established the 'whys' of child labour. We know that this is often due to poverty-related factors, landlessness, river erosion, migration and other such structural reasons. The purpose of the discussion is to look at whether the government policy needs further input from a research perspective, whether a knowledge gap exists or some information gaps prevail. Accordingly, the purpose of the dialogue was to identify a set of research agendas which would help policy formulation.

Dr Bhattacharya observed that the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) reported that nearly a fifth of 5-14 year old children have been identified as child workers. We are thus dealing with a population of about 7.5 million. Within this group, the percentage of male child labourers is about 22 per cent, whilst that of female is slightly less, 16 per cent. In the case of girls, however, we often find that they are not included at the time of enumeration. That may be a reason why the female percentage is lower than that of the male.

Dr Bhattacharya noted that although about 83 per cent of child labourers fall within the agricultural sector, there is a tendency to concentrate more on those child workers that belong to the industrial sector, in particular, garments industry and the export-related industries. Their proportion in this sector is, however, rather small when compared to the total number of child labourers. There is, hence, a need to move towards mainstreaming the issue of child labour. A closer look at the issue may show us that a large group of child labourers will be found within the agricultural sector, and quite a substantial number within the service sector. These need to be incorporated within the overall policy framework.

Dr Bhattacharya further noted that since 1995 a *memoranda fund* has been established jointly by the ILO, the United Nation's Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA). Bangladesh is a signatory to a large number of initiatives concerning child labour. He observed, one of the issues begging attention is the fact that Bangladesh is yet to ratify the Minimum Age Convention of 1938. Bangladesh is currently working on about half a dozen minimum age legislations and the aim should be to try to incorporate the minimum age issue into the national policy framework.

In conclusion, Dr Bhattacharya said that he thought the Government is approaching the issue of child labour in the right spirit and from the right direction. Trying to remove child labour should not be a cause for concern merely because there was external international pressure. That would be a wrong approach. It is the people within the country creating a movement through civil society initiatives, those that are concerned with workers' rights, and those that are taking an interest in the child

labour issue who should take the ownership of this process. This is also going to make the policy-making process more participatory and demand driven. To build a more humane and prosperous society, unity amongst members of the civil society is a precondition to solving the problems of child labour. In this context, the new *National Policy on Child Labour* proposed by the Government is a move in the right direction, and the purpose of the dialogue is to extend support to this policy initiative by providing further inputs from various sections of the civil society.

The Background Study in Brief

Dr Sumaiya Khair, Fellow CPD and Associate Professor, University of Dhaka, made the keynote presentation of the study on ‘Child Labour in Bangladesh: A Forward Looking Policy Study’. The study was implemented at the CPD with support from the ILO.

Dr Khair identified broadly three components, which need due attention:

- How much do *we know* about child labour?
- How much do *we need* to know about child labour?
- What steps should we take in addressing the issue of child labour?

The study also made an attempt to identify theoretical and legal issues involved, national policy function, education and economic related issues in this regard. The main purpose of the study was to locate prevailing gaps in knowledge, policy formulation in practice, and to suggest a research agenda for future policy-making.

Dr Khair pointed out that in the context of development discourse, much has been said about child labour, but importance has not been given to children’s needs. From a review of the policies and legislations, it was found that most of the policies and plans of the government spelt out aims and objectives in extremely general terms. They did not provide concrete guidelines for their practical implementation. Furthermore, in the majority of cases, the documents did not give indications of budgetary allocations to relevant areas of child welfare.

The issue of child labour has received generic treatment in policy formulation in that the exercise lacks vision and objectivity, and is largely insensitive to children's needs in given contexts. Moreover, they do not highlight the linkages between child labour and educational opportunities, and fail to address the need to generate skilled labour in order to meet the exigencies of a progressively restructuring market. The policies also do not elaborate how schools can be made more inclusive to accommodate the needs of marginalized children for whom the cost of school attendance continues to be affordable.

Dr Khair noted that it has been identified time and again that there is an inexplicable link between poverty and the issue of child labour but, unfortunately, it has not been featured appropriately in the *Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper* (PRSP) of the government. While the issue of poverty has been raised to offset the critique about the use of child labour at home and abroad, the striking absence of such a discussion on the matter in the PRSP raises critical questions about the validity of such a stand. The policies also have no reference to special education for working children and the curriculum hardly meets the practical demands of impoverished children.

The current laws present a double standard as they make concessions to children working in family and light occupations, and they completely ignore the aspect of exploitation even in those particular situations. As a result, the work processes that are to be construed as exploitative become blurred.

Dr Khair noted that the study has concentrated more particularly on the Draft Child Labour Policy of 2002 and several salient observations emerged from that exercise. It was found that the document failed to locate the priorities within a structured policy framework. The strategies that have been discussed are broad-based and are more in the nature of recommendations. They have not been distinguished on the basis of children's work in formal and informal sectors. The Policy also spells out that the strategies have to be carried out by the relevant government authorities but this needs to be thoroughly looked into because, although, the draft policy paper highlights the functions of respected government and NGOs, it omits to signify the lead agency that would be responsible for monitoring progress and evaluating impact.

The Draft Policy also proposes to make concessions for children who work in family enterprises and light occupations; consequently, the study completely ignores the aspects of exploitation of children in such situations. It is thus necessary to move beyond the standard treatment of the issue of child labour and, instead, engage in an objective exercise that is inclusive of and sensitive to children's needs in given contexts. A great deal would be gained from taking into account children's views, which would eventually be reflected in some form or another in the policies that are meant to address them.

Dr Khair noted that a number of questions arise in the debate of child labour. Although the answers to these questions are not always correct or appropriate, these elements need to be discussed when formulating a policy. For instance, what is the age at which a child is considered to be exploited, what sort of work should children avoid and what sort of jobs can be taken as safe? These are some of the questions that need to be discussed thoroughly.

In her presentation, Dr Khair informed the audience that the study has put forward some possible directions for the future. These fall in the following categories:

- Developing legal and policy measures
- Strengthening institutional capacity
- Promoting quality education
- Addressing the gender dimension
- Ensuring children's participation
- Market linkages and forging alliances

As part of developing legal and policy measures, it is necessary to have child focused laws with welfare components; feasible protection mechanisms must be developed and national laws must be framed accordingly to provide a wide coverage, which is inclusive of the informal sector where the majority of children are engaged. In this regard, enforcement measures must also be geared up to tackle slack inspection services, punish and penalise inspection officials and employers for malpractice and corruption, and ensure strict conformity with labour laws and regulations.

While legislation is certainly important in the struggle against child labour, it is equally essential to develop social and economic measures simultaneously to address issues of poverty and inequality, which are often at the root of the problem. In this regard, it is important for programmes on poverty alleviation and development at the macro level to ensure equitable distribution of resources, to ensure delivery of services amongst the poor, and to put in place the necessary investment in the protection and development of human capacity, particularly of children and young people. To this end, initiatives must be taken to combine economic measures for economic development and education, to improve the government's material capacity for enforcement of laws and regulations, and to ensure vigilance of employers' and workers' organisations in overseeing that the laws and regulations are properly applied.

Dr Khair highlighted some of the priority areas for future research. This included studies that need to be undertaken to explore the causes of failure in the implementation of laws and policies, assess and examine them in terms of resources and attitudes to examine the impact of child labour on poverty, on growth in labour market, particularly over the longer term, and to conduct surveys in occupations or enterprises that are predominantly dependent on child labour in order to ascertain the demand, profitability and probable effects of implementation of child labour laws.

In terms of institutional capacity building, there is an obvious need to strengthen the capacities of state institutions in the relevant fields, and one has to be careful about the fact that allocation of resources is necessary for this because there has always been an undeniable gap between the needs and the actual allocations made. One of the fundamental problems in the policy arena is that the exercise of the formulation of policies is carried out centrally, with very little scope for participation from the local level.

There is an urgent need to reassess the roles of public officials and to hold them accountable for their actions as well as their inactions. The government must therefore engage in generating a pro-active agenda for children, and accordingly there must be clarity in their commitments and public policy implementation if quality

service delivery is to be ensured. The research priorities in this area would be that initiatives should be geared towards developing guidelines, for improving working conditions, streamlining recruitment and control mechanisms, and ensuring strict inspection services. A checklist may be prepared, identifying essentially hazardous occupations for immediate action by policy planners through technical support projects.

In terms of promoting quality education, it was found that attempts must be made to identify mechanisms for using education to enhance poor people's capacity, to take advantage of economic opportunities, and to make informed choices in life. The study identified that there has been quite a great deal of success in the technical, vocational, and non-formal education. The policy question which then arises is how best to integrate lessons claimed from the non-formal experience into the formal schools. The area of vocational training therefore requires immediate attention. Young people entering the labour force will require quality technical education in order to become employable and to sustain in an increasingly competitive labour market. The research priorities identified in this area would be that successful education programmes, like informal and technical training programmes, will be studied in detail to see how they could be replicated and integrated in the general education system. Comprehensive surveys involving working children, their families and communities may be undertaken to discover how best to reconcile their economic roles and responsibilities with educational opportunities. Research should also be undertaken to discover ways of reducing the cost of education and involving employers and entrepreneurs in making schooling accessible to working children.

Dr Khair noted that there is also an urgent need to address the gender dimension of the labour market. In this context, it was found that there is a great gap in information regarding this particular issue. Although girl children are involved in diverse occupations in various forms, they have received scant attention by policy-makers and researchers, and the fact that most of their work remains hidden has also been part of the reason why the issue has not been addressed adequately. The little information that we have on girl children is related particularly to trafficking issues, prostitution and domestic service. There is, thus, an immediate need to explore the position of girl

child workers in other occupations as well, in order to effectively generate plans and policies that address the gender dimension of the labour market. The priorities for research in this area would be to conduct a study on gender differentials in the labour market to assess the position of girls there, to undertake a study to discover about the home-based activities which are unpaid, and to explore their positions in such contexts in order to evaluate the impact of unpaid work patterns on girl children. Since girl children occupy the position of domestic help, it is also necessary to examine the vulnerabilities of those girls when they are engaged in private homes. Given the difficulties in accessing such areas, qualitative investigations may be undertaken to gauge the situation of child domestics.

Another point raised by Dr Khair is that there is a need, which has increasingly been felt around the world, to ensure that children actually participate in decisions that affect them. As a result, policymakers have increasingly been made aware of the need to address children as an important separate category in the population matrix, and it is equally important to identify children as a separate constituency. In so doing, however, regard must be given to the fact that children do not simply represent a segment of the population but that certain groups of children within that population, that is child workers, are in need of special attention and assistance. However, the study has found that children's needs, perceptions and priorities have not been addressed either at the micro or macro levels and, therefore, their views are not reflected as much as they should in the development planning and programme implementation. The priorities for research in this area would be to consider action research by children themselves, which would contribute significantly to the process of including their voices in the development of policies affecting them.

Research by children would reveal their motives for work i.e. whether economic imperatives alone motivate children to work or other related factors do. There is similarly a need to explore the effects of work in respective occupations in order to prioritise against the right type of work. It is also essential in all these respects to view these issues from a gender perspective.

Dr Khair also raised the issue of market linkages and forging alliances. The struggle against exploitative child labour would require collaborative efforts of government, NGOs, employers, trade unions, the private sector and the civil society as a whole. The private sector can, in fact, forge alliances with their suppliers to ensure minimum labour standards and healthy working conditions for children who are working for them. Accordingly, codes of conduct, procurement and recruitment policies may be made. The research priorities in this particular regard would be to consider exploring the best practices abroad for possible replication in the national context. We could also think of formulating codes of conduct, procurement and recruitment policies through collaborative efforts of the private sector, trade unions, NGOs and the government. A child labour policy that keeps the evolving trading regime in mind could also be formulated.

In conclusion, the issue of child labour is a complex one; as a result, a single policy will not be enough to resolve the attendant problems, similarly, a single organisation was not in a position to handle the issue. We therefore need a collaborative effort from different sections of society, and we need to make sure that children's voices are heard in policy formulation. To achieve this we need further debates and discussions and we need strong political support in this regard, Dr Khair concluded.

Floor Discussion

Introductory Remark

Mr Hamid Tabatabai, Senior Economist, ILO, Geneva, noted that Bangladesh is a pioneer in the exercise of engagement amongst stakeholders in child labour related issues.

Mr Tabatabai provided the context within which the Dialogue took place.

The ILO's international initiative for the elimination of child labour, the ILO-IPEC programme, was initiated about ten years ago as a very small outfit within the ILO. Since then, it has grown quite remarkably. A good deal of the work of that programme consisted of direct action projects, which essentially involved attempts to

reach specific groups of children in a particular area or sector. A fair amount of other activities have also taken place, but there has been relatively little attempt to try to influence national level policies on the question of child labour. There has also been a perception that this has not been adequately covered at that level. As a result, IPEC would like to complement this activity by trying to shift some work towards a policy oriented approach, in order to allow people to recognise child labour as a development problem, which has to be linked to developmental issues, such as poverty and growth in labour markets.

Another concern of increasing importance is that IPEC, being fairly small, has not been able to respond to the requests that are often made in connection with the type of support that it can actually provide. The ILO has therefore tried to enlarge the pool of institutions and agencies at the national level in order for them to engage in the relevant issues. One such category of institutions are the ‘think tanks’ and research institutes in the many countries. Although these institutions undertake excellent work, they have not done enough on the question of child labour and its linkages to the overall development process. And it is this that the ILO would like to promote and facilitate. In this regard, the ILO has decided to create a network. As part of this, the ILO would like to promote networking amongst stakeholders at the national, regional, international, and local levels. Based on this idea, a project was initiated in 2002. This networking project has three components:

- To promote the idea of the development policy network for the elimination of child labour. This is also the main purpose of this Dialogue.
- To promote networking with respect to hazardous child labour, which is of particular concern of the Convention relating to such forms of child labour.
- To promote gender mainstreaming within the project as part of the work of the gender component in the project.

Mr Tabatabai then made some comments on the purpose for the development policy network of which he is the Co-ordinator. The aim of this project is to take on a global character. In other words, institutions concerned with child labour as a policy issue, both at the national and regional levels, should create a forum and work together in one fashion or another. A good deal of this work will have to be carried out at the

national level. As a result, it has been thought that this will be a process that will involve initial work at the national level, and eventually, at the global level. At the initial stages of the project, given a variety of criteria, ten countries have been selected, five in Asia and five in Africa. There are plans to expand the project to other countries as well. This process involves consultations, both within the ILO, at the Headquarter in Geneva, and also with the partners at the national level.

In Asia, Bangladesh has been chosen first and foremost, as well as Pakistan, the Philippines, Indonesia and Nepal. Egypt, South Africa, Malawi, Ghana and Nigeria have been selected from Africa. In each of these countries, the ILO is establishing a partnership with the leading and prominent research institutes, who will take a lead role in the activities at the national level. In Bangladesh, Mr Tabatabai noted that the ILO is privileged to have the CPD agree to become partner in this endeavour. This is significant because the CPD has not been greatly involved in the issue of child labour in the past. The current process of networking, however, is giving the CPD an opportunity to become increasingly involved with this issue. This is precisely one of the functions or objectives of the development policy network i.e. to bring together great institutions of research and advocacy into the child labour debate.

At the national level, the initial task would involve a good review of the literature that already exists on various aspects of child labour, a policy study that would represent the case of Bangladesh, and networking. The latter would be one way of identifying partners and stakeholders who would be keen on working together in this area. To follow, an international meeting will take place within a few months to bring the various partners in the chosen countries together. In the case of Bangladesh, the activities are proceeding quite rapidly and this Dialogue is the first national dialogue that has taken place in this network creating process. Mr Tabatabai concluded by saying that this was one of the reasons for his presence at the Dialogue. He observed that the Dialogue gave him an opportunity to learn about how this process works at a national level and, noted that the dialogue process in Bangladesh will be of value to the other partners in the other countries involved in this project.

Child Labour Policy or Just a Child Policy

A number of participants at the dialogue were of the opinion that child labour should not be seen as a separate issue, rather it should be treated as an integrated issue. Mr Ahmadullah Mia, Director Research, Planning and Monitoring Division, *Ahsania Mission*, initiated the floor discussion by noting that child labour is a reality and it involved rather complex issues in present day Bangladesh. Since child labour is a problem, one should not be concerned about making this issue a premise for policymaking; rather there should be an overall ‘child policy’ the aim of which should be to address the structural problems currently present in our society. Children should be raised as productive human resources in order to allow them to become valuable members of the society. In this regard, he informed the audience that the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) is already in existence. This is a widely accepted and comprehensive instrument providing a very broad framework for all countries in the world. Hence, one should avoid talking about a child labour policy since this is the very problem we are aiming to eliminate.

Agreeing with Mr Mia’s perspectives on the issue, Ms Maksuda Khatoun Shefali, Executive Director, *Nari Uddog Kendra*, also pointed out that child labour should not be seen as a separate policy issue. If the ILO Conventions that are already in place were properly implemented, there would be no need to speak of a separate child labour policy. Furthermore, there are many child rights protection instruments and there is also a body that continuously protects and promotes children’s rights. At present, Bangladesh is finalising its Labour Code, and the issue of child labour could be highlighted in a chapter within this Code.

Worst Forms of Child Labour and the Need for Awareness Building

Professor Quazi Quamruzzaman, Professor of Surgery, and Chairman, *Institute of Community Health-Bangladesh*, pointed out that the aim should be to eliminate child labour in phases. Child labour per se is not the problem, as he understands, rather the problem is child slavery – an issue we often try to ignore. Domestic and commercial servitudes are not given adequate attention in the policies. Child slaves are often not considered as conscious human beings. This type of slavery is equivalent to bonded

labour because children are used for work in exchange of food and shelter in people's homes. These children need to be provided with special protection laws.

In Prof. Quamruzzaman's opinion, commercial child slaves are worse off than girl child workers. They are more vulnerable as they are employed in the most hazardous jobs available in the society. Recalling from his personal experience, Prof. Quamruzzaman described how he found children undertaking jobs that are extremely dangerous. In order to tackle these concerns, a child's protection is foremost and there was also a need to raise his/her awareness about this. There must be ways to oversee that the laws protecting children are implemented and monitored. A further point to take into account is to raise the awareness of those people who are using child labour, and he supported the view of Mr Ahmadullah Mia, of *Ahsania Mission*, who mentioned that, it is a cultural phenomenon in Bangladesh that is deeply rooted in our society. Unless the employers of child labour are made aware of its consequences, the problem will continue to persist. Hence, awareness programmes should also find place within the child labour protection laws, which should bring child slavery within its ambit.

Ms Maksuda Khatoun Shefali from *Nari Uddog Kendra* mentioned about other child workers such as porters at train stations who are being forced to take on jobs for the sake of physical survival even when these child workers themselves do not like to undertake such work. Sex workers are another group of children that need attention. Though, there is a law in Bangladesh which says a person has to be eighteen years of age before registering as a sex worker, the law is often bypassed because some of the young girls are not even aware that they are being exploited and they are signed up by adults who lie about their actual ages. There is therefore a need to inform these children and raise their awareness. They should be made aware of the implications of child labour.

Professor Ishrat Shamim, President, Centre for Women and Children's Studies (CWCS), also brought up the issue of child labour trafficking. Her main concern was that neither the paper presented by Dr Khair nor the government's National Child Labour Policy took specific note of this problem. The issue of child trafficking,

prostitution and pornography have been hidden agendas, and measures for combating or eliminating such forms of child labour have not yet been formulated. These are absolutely illegal forms of business. She argued that it is possible to tolerate a child domestic but this form of illegal exploitation of children cannot be tolerated. She added that it is sexual exploitation of an extreme nature and should be addressed both in the paper presented by the CPD and within the government's national policy. In this regard, Ms Dil Afroz Haq, Deputy Secretary and Deputy Chief in Charge, Ministry of Labour and Employment, pointed out that Bangladesh is a developing country, and consequently, abolishing child labour completely is not a possibility for the near future; however, focus is certainly required on the worst forms of child labour, such as prostitution.

Professor Shamim further stressed that there is an increasing tendency of using children in prostitution, especially girl children in order for them to avoid contracting HIV/AIDS; however, this is a complete myth. CWCS has been working on this issue and would like to recommend that it be taken up more seriously and community awareness building programmes be implemented further. There have been cases where communities have been made aware of the issue, and the parents of these children are now more aware of the consequences of sending children to neighbouring countries for work. They are more weary about sending their children away to unknown places, and they understand that things may not turn out to be as good as they are presented to them initially.

Need for Education & Awareness Building

In terms of education policies, Mr Khan Majles, Manager (Education), *Under Privileged Children's Educational Programme* (UCEP), noted that while there is a plethora of good policies, problems arise during implementation. As a result, Mr Majles recommended establishing an independent watchdog at the national level to monitor the situation. Taking cue from the networking element of the discussion, this could involve all stakeholders in the process of child labour elimination, such as government and NGOs, or it could just be a separate, autonomous body. Ms Maksuda Khatoun Shefali mentioned that although Bangladesh has a programme of education for all, it is not as tightly monitored as in Japan, where every household is made

responsible for their children's education. There are also penalty provisions for those that do not comply with the policy.

Mr Ahmadullah Mia raised a similar point as to the reason why child labour is so pervasive in this country. It is embedded in the structure of the society and its economy. Both government and NGOs are trying to provide quality education, but it has been observed that many children still remain out of schools. It is therefore necessary to identify the children who are dropping out and those who are not enrolling. In this context, it has been found that it is usually the poor parents who find it hard to visualise the utility of education, especially when future job prospects are weak. However, if the awareness of these parents are raised, and they can be made to realise the future prospects of their children in economic terms, then, they would be more willing to accept the costs of education in the short term. In this context, many activities are carried out by NGOs or through pilot projects, to raise their awareness, but this kind of opportunity has not been developed at the national level. This is an area that requires further attention.

Mr Shah Alam, Director, *Rural Development Bangladesh*, noted one way of raising awareness on child labour is to introduce it into school syllabuses. It should be introduced as early as possible into a child's schooling and continue up to Grade Eight. He also said there was a need for family-based work, for instance, by providing the parents of poor children some form of micro credit in order to enable their children to gain skills through such programmes instead of staying at home with their parents as they often do.

Mr Ahmadullah Mia also observed that the child labour problem is a locality-specific issue. Therefore, it is necessary to identify those localities. These are usually the areas where poor parents find that children can be engaged in some form of work, which brings immediate benefit to the family. The *Ahsania Mission* has found that in some cases parents are unable to work or feed their children. Therefore, sending these children to school becomes a question of survival. Unless the children earn some kind of living, they become malnourished or remain unfed, and their parents have to forego treatment for their illnesses. It is therefore necessary to look at individual

cases of child labour, and identify local conditions where intervention may take place. Education can also be made more meaningful to the poor families.

Child Garment Workers

BGMEA Director, Mr Lutfur Rahman's main concern is the actual amount of good that has been achieved even though the BGMEA has worked with the ILO and has also been awarded for its good work in the elimination of child labour within the garments industry. What has been the real achievement? he asked. The export sector could do little more than retrench children of the age of twelve and thirteen from the factories and these children are now floating aimlessly. They are either sent back to their villages or end up as street children, and in some cases work in the electioneering process. These children then return to the factories at the age of sixteen and seventeen, and join at the lowest rung of the factories as helpers having lost an opportunity to gain three to four years of work experience. They take yet another two to three years to become operators. These children do not go to school or acquire any form of training; they simply waste their time, become street workers and in some cases we see them earning Tk1-Tk5 canvassing for the *Upazila* elections. The government is spending a great deal on education, but we should concentrate on how much of it is being spent for the children's ultimate benefit. In many cases children are not attending the schools and the standard of education provided is very poor. The money is therefore being misused. It is thus necessary to equip these children with skills in order for them to become productive members of society in the future. It is also important that we ensure strict monitoring measures as every policy, which is not supported by enforcement measures, becomes redundant.

Taking cue from Mr Rahman's opinion, Ms Maksuda Khatoun Shefali provided some examples based on her own experiences. She raised some issues about the IPEC programmes, which have been a good learning experience. The *Nari Uddog Kendra* has been working with garments' workers since 1991, and when the issue of child labour arose, they discussed with hundred factories about how the issue of child labour can be addressed. It was suggested that basic education and skill learning could be imparted to these children, and after two or three years these children could

return to the same factories. The factory owners agreed to this but when this proposal was submitted to the ILO, it was rejected.

Nari Uddog Kendra (NUK) has a programme where they provide hostel facilities to the girls who work in the factories. Ms Khatoun shared a story of a girl who begged to stay on at the hostel because she was running a six-member family and earning Tk2000/month. This girl has foregone the IPEC's education rehabilitation programme and instead found herself in a more manual job, earning only Tk600. This is one drawback of the programme.

Supply and Demand Factors

Mr Ahmadullah Mia, from the *Ahsania Mission*, raised the issue of culture and the supply and demand factors involved in the persistence of child labour. Bangladeshi culture is such that it has continued to support child labour over time, either directly or indirectly. This has been accepted as a normal pattern of events historically. There are also obvious demands for the continuous supply of child labour. The private sector needs to scrutinise more closely where these children are being employed. Employers are a kind of promoters of child labour. These issues need to be addressed in more concrete ways.

Agreeing with Mr Mia, Mr Khan Majles, of UCEP, pointed out the need for a policy guideline to address the sources and users of child labour. At the policy level, the issue should be looked at both from a short term and also long term perspective. If child labour is to be eliminated, children must be provided with meaningful education. Through UCEP's project experience, meaningful education has meant providing education up to Grade Eight, followed by vocational skill training and, then, guiding into jobs. Yet families are pushing children into the labour market. Hence, it is necessary to identify the producers of child labour and intervene at policy level.

Legal Issues, Minimum Age, Monitoring

On a legal note, Mr Md. Moqsud Maleque, Co-ordinator, *Ain-O-Shalish Kendra(ASK)*, made some specific points on the Draft National Child Labour Policy

as his organisation was consulted to make some recommendations for this purpose. However, it is not known whether these will be taken into consideration in the Draft.

Firstly, in chapter three of the Draft, Mr Maleque noted that the age of a child worker is not specified clearly. ASK would like to recommend the age of 16 as a cut-off point for child workers because it is at 16 that a child can complete the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) exams and, then, achieve some form of vocational training that will be of significance him/her. However, in this context, Mr Shah Alam, *Rural Development Bangladesh*, recommended the working age of a child should be reduced from fourteen to twelve as, in his opinion, it is not possible to eliminate child labour all together.

The second legal point raised by Mr Maleque, was that there was no list of what consists a hazardous activity within the Draft National Child Labour Policy, and that this should be specified. The jobs that are considered to be hazardous in the context of Bangladesh should be included and children should gradually be taken out of these jobs, and possibly placed into jobs that are more suitable for them.

In chapter five of the Draft Child Labour Policy, where the issue of education is raised, it has been found that the current schooling system is not conducive for child workers. School timing should be considered and a more appropriate timetable should be provided for those children who are in work, as they cannot maintain standard school hours. Some NGOs are currently undertaking good work in this regard and they should be consulted. Vocational training should also be integrated into the school syllabus so that children can make use of the training in their future careers. Training needs to be modernised in order to allow them to make use of it in the evolving market.

Mr Maleque also raised the point of participation. He noted that since it is argued that the root cause of child labour is poverty, a policy should be formulated where the poor parents are consulted about their major concerns. Parents' jobs should be ensured so that they do not feel pressurised to send their children to work. At the same time, children should be made to participate in different annual school activities, for

instance, to ensure their continued participation in education. The question of family planning could also be integrated into the school syllabus to raise children's awareness. This would be a positive step towards population control, and should therefore find a place in the Draft Policy.

Ms Shahin Ara Begum, Information and Research Officer, *Bangladesh Sishu Adhikar Forum (BSAF)*, noted that they consulted children directly about legal matters. The children were aware of the child labour problem but did not know what protection mechanisms were available to them. Laws are in place but they are not adhered to and errant employers and officials are not penalised for their actions. Although BSAF has been working in 95 *Zilas* for several years which also involved lawyers, not a single case has been found where the lawyers said that a child labour case has been taken up. The gap lies here. There should be strict monitoring of the adherence of the current laws on child labour protection as well as its elimination. Elimination and protection should, hence, be seen as an integrated process. Ms Begum was also in agreement with Dr Khair and noted that a single organisation cannot alone tackle child labour elimination. It has to go through a consultative process, involving different stakeholders, and to this end the networking programme is a necessary step forward.

The Issue of Responsibility

Mr Moqsud Maleque proposed that the policy should be monitored carefully, and the government should be more specific as to who should take the responsibility of its implementation. Codes of conduct should be devised for jobs of hazardous and semi-hazardous nature. For instance, minimum wage levels can be identified. A special focus should be given to girl children, and child sex workers – they should be brought to the centre of the policy framework. Though, these are recommendations, the government should listen to the voices from civil society in order to achieve an improvement in the context of child labour.

Taking cue from Mr Maleque's proposal, Ms Dil Afroz Haq pointed out that the proposed National Council could monitor and oversee that legislations were implemented. She further informed the audience that this policy is only a 'guideline'

and should not be seen as the ‘law’, and civil society’s contribution and input was welcome.

Children’s Participation

Mr Fuad Chowdhury, Managing Director, United Networks Ltd., noted there was a lack of institutional stability and shared some of his experience with the audience. He worked with Ekushey Television (ETV), which has since gone out of air, where children took part in news broadcasting and other related programmes to voice their issues. A space was provided to them to participate and air their views. Two programmes were initiated: one was a children’s news programme, *Mukto Khobor*, and the other was a programme where children questioned adults about issues of their concern, *Bolte Chai*. These came about after they held several workshops in Dhaka and other regions, where children came up with 118 possible recommendations for children’s programmes. Thus an environment was created where both privileged and underprivileged children could come together to air their voices. Creating an enabling institutional environment is thus necessary to facilitate children’s participation. This is what process-orientation should be about. This is one way to raise awareness and to allow underprivileged children to tell their critical stories. Mr Chowdhury mentioned about a video that was made by a child living in *Shadar Ghat*, showing his day to day life in the area which gave a vivid picture about child workers.

The Importance of Networks

A number of stakeholders talked about their current work with child workers. Save the Children, Sweden, involved itself in a children’s participatory programme and a network building process had been started. Other, stakeholders like UNICEF automatically took on a role of partnership, as they too are interested in the same issues i.e. raising children’s voices. However, for networks to sustain a right institutional setting is required, otherwise, the process breaks down. On the note of participation, Ms Mafuza Huq of Save the Children, UK, queried whether children were consulted in producing Dr Khair’s paper. The answer was negative.

Participants from Save the Children UK and Sweden noted that there was a need for disaggregating the data for child workers according to age and sex. Children’s role in

the economy should be identified and the processes through which children can access benefits should be made available to them. It is necessary to link the gaps for strengthening the current draft child labour policy and incorporate best practices and lessons learnt from different projects/programmes.

Child Labour and Trade Unions

Dr Wajid Islam Khan, Secretary General, *Bangladesh Trade Union Kendra*, noted the importance of the role of trade unions in the endeavour to eliminate child labour. He considered working children as active members in the labour movement. He argued that the issue of child labour emerged from various initiatives undertaken by NGOs, the ILO and the donor community. In his opinion, poverty is certainly a cause of child labour, but cheap labour is also a source for the generation of child labour. As there is a market for cheap labour, the opportunity for children to join that market is higher. The lack of employment generation was also mentioned and Dr Khan noted the need for vocational training alongside general education. In this regard, it is important that minimum wages on a national basis, as raised by Dr Bhattacharya, is ensured. To this end, the *Trade Union Kendra* has lobbied with the government to ratify the Minimum Wage Convention.

Child Labour as an Issue of Poverty

Mr Md Abdul Latif, Secretary, Ministry for Women and Children, pointed out that various projects have been taken up by the Government to address the issue of child labour. His argument is that many economic debates are taking place and they provide different pictures of the situation, but the main point is that poverty remains in Bangladesh. Many poverty- alleviating programmes have taken place and there has been improvement in the economy with the rise of science and technology. Mr Latif also highlighted the Chief Guest and the Ministry of Labour and Employment for their part in tackling the issue of child labour, and noted that many projects have been undertaken by the NGOs in this regard, such as projects for street children etc. Mr Shah Alam, Director, *Rural Development Bangladesh*, also noted that further work on rehabilitating poor children should be undertaken, and that the kind of work that is feasible for them should be identified.

Dr Wajid Islam Khan of *Bangladesh Trade Union Kendra*, also emphasised that child labour is directly related to poverty. There is thus a need to attack the structural inequalities and link child labour to poverty since this was a crosscutting issue.

Remarks by the Special Guests

Mr Gopal Bhattacharya

Special Guest, Mr Gopal Bhattacharya, Director, ILO, Bangladesh, noted that the elimination of child labour has been a long-standing objective. The emphasis in international labour standard on child labour attest to the conviction of ILO constituents, which include employers, workers and the government.

Mr Bhattacharya observed that child labour, due to its very nature and condition in which it is performed, jeopardises the possibility of children becoming useful members of the community. Childhood is a period that is meant for education and development, not for working. More importantly, it attests to the conviction of ILO constituents that the issue of child labour is not inevitable but that it can be eliminated.

Mr Bhattacharya took note of a few points raised by participants at the Dialogue. Some participants mentioned that due to deep rooted causes, such as poverty, unemployment, the qualitative and quantitative deficiencies in the education system, and lack of adequate protection mechanisms, child labour is pervasive. Mr Bhattacharya was of the opinion that if we are resigned to the issue of child labour, a longer time will be required to eliminate it.

Mr Bhattacharya has had the privilege to work with the Labour Minister for some time, and he complemented the government's initiative in tackling the worst forms of child labour as an initial step towards the elimination of child labour. He also mentioned two other very important activities with which the ILO is happy to be associated with, both with the Ministry and other stakeholders. *Firstly*, the Draft National Labour Policy, which is a necessity because for an institution to function

within some parameters, a policy is required. *Secondly*, a large-scale survey was started in 1995 by the BBS (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics), which attempted to gauge the magnitude and complexity of child labour. The latest update on this survey has been initiated. In this regard, Mr Bhattacharya thanked the donors who contributed generously to these two programmes. One of the major initiatives that the Ministry of Labour and Employment is taking, and the ILO is collaborating with it in this endeavour, is to make the elimination of child labour programme time-bound.

The ILO Director also took note of what was said by the BGMEA Director, Mr Lutfur Rahman, who underscored the need to provide skills to the retrenched children to make sure they return to their old posts but better equipped, to maintain sustainability. The ILO is trying to highlight the issue of sustainability of the programme, which is being launched. In the context of Bangladesh, given the very large number of children involved in the worst forms of labour, and not child labour per se, and the nature of the scope of the activities undertaken by them, it is necessary to keep in mind the magnitude of the problem. Any programme that aims to tackle this problem will have to cover almost the entire country. Hence, sustainability of the programme in the longer term has to be borne in mind. On a related aspect, the question of advocacy or changing the mindset of people is very important. Here, he took note of Prof. Quamruzzaman's point about ignoring child slavery or the type of labour that is bonded, where we tend to exploit our own domestics inhumanely. If this is the prevailing situation, then, to change people's mindset a very intensive campaign, involving the building of alliances, networks and committees, is required. The programme launched by the government is, in fact, tackling these concerns.

Mr Bhattacharya took the opportunity to thank the donors who are contributing in the process of child labour elimination, including the DfID (Department for International Development, UK aid agency), NORAD (Norwegian aid agency), and the USAID (US aid agency). He also mentioned the support that the ILO has received from UNICEF (United Nations Fund for Children). The ILO is further trying to bring aboard the ADB (Asian Development Bank) and the World Bank, keeping in mind the economic factors which inform child labour in the developmental process. He added

that the advice and guidance received at the Dialogue from the different stakeholders will benefit the ILO's future intervention programmes.

Mr Md Abdus Shahid, MP

Vice Principal Mr Md. Abdus Shahid, MP, Chief Whip of the Opposition, noted the need for the civil society and the employing authorities to engage in a social movement against child labour. Education for all is also necessary, as is the provision for equal protection of law, he noted. These rights should be executed accordingly. Local level services, such as health and education, should be ensured; slum dwellers should be targeted for rehabilitation; women's rights should be ensured and included in the development process; and, village infrastructure should be developed to reduce migration to the cities. Rural development is a prerequisite since much of the child labour originates from there.

Remark by Chief Guest

The Chief Guest, Mr Lutfor Rahman Khan, MP, Minister in Charge for Labour and Employment, noted that the raising of awareness about the child labour issue is an appropriate one; however he found it saddening that the five essential rights of a child are not even taken cognisance of: food, clothing, housing, education and protection. He mentioned the need for cooperation amongst the different stakeholders. It is also necessary to identify the reasons why a child seeks labour. He mentioned corruption as being pervasive in our society, which is also a strong impediment towards sustainable development. There is also a need to bring rhetoric and reality together. We tend to say one thing and do another. We need to act together, he emphasised both civil society and government, including the political parties to address the attendant issues. He also felt that a parliamentary debate on child labour needs to be held. This was suggested by the Opposition Chief Whip, Mr Abdus Shahid and the Minister agreed to consider the suggestion.

Concluding Remarks by the Chair

Mr Syed Manzur Elahi closed the Dialogue by thanking all participants who made valuable comments on the issue of child labour, following Dr Khair's informative presentation. He hoped that the valuable suggestion put forward by the learned participants will provide inputs to the policy makers. He noted that the root cause of child labour was poverty, and this was the case two hundred years ago in Europe as well. So poverty is directly linked to child labour. It is only out of necessity that poor parents are compelled to send their children to work. It is therefore a poverty alleviation problem, and the more poverty alleviation programmes are available, the less child labour there will be – one is directly and proportionately related to the other. Bangladesh is still an LDC and unemployment remains very high among the adult population. A third of the population is children, and certain people employ them as a cheap alternative supply of labour. It is therefore necessary to cut the supply of child labour, and the only way forward is poverty alleviation. We therefore need to attack the problem at its root.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the strongest point raised by the participants at this dialogue has been the need for focus towards the worst forms of child labour, such as prostitution, pornography, trafficking and child slavery. It was also felt that stronger monitoring mechanisms should be provided to oversee the implementations of laws and policies. Networking amongst those involved with the issue of child labour should be further promoted at local, regional and national levels with the objective to raise awareness and further focus on implementing laws and policies prevailing in this area. Finally, the root cause of child labour – poverty – needs to be attacked more vigorously as without such initiatives, child labour will continue to remain in poor countries such as Bangladesh.

List of participants

(in alphabetical order)

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<i>Mr Md Mahbubul Alam</i>	Deputy Secretary (Development), Ministry of Women & Children Affairs
<i>Ms Shama Alam</i>	Corporate Finance Manager (Economic Issues), British American Tobacco
<i>Mr S M Shah Alam</i>	Author & Director, Rural Development Bangladesh
<i>Mr M H Ali</i>	Assistant Chief, Ministry of Labour and Employment
<i>Mr Nurul Azim</i>	Director , National Human Right Association
<i>Ms Wahida Banu</i>	Director Programme, Aparajeo Bangladesh
<i>Ms Sabina Lucky Bari</i>	UNITED Network Ltd
<i>Ms Shahin Ara Begum</i>	Information & Research Officer, Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum (BSAF)
<i>Mr Ronald Berghuys</i>	Chief Technical Officer, ILO, IPEC
<i>Mr Gopal Bhattacharya</i>	Director, ILO
<i>Mr Fuad Chowdhury</i>	Managing Director, UNITED Network Ltd
<i>Ms Aysha Doza</i>	National Project Coordinator, ILO
<i>Mr Syed Manzur Elahi</i>	Member, CPD Board of Trustees and Chairman, APEX Group of Industries
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<i>Mr S C Khan</i>	Joint Secretary, Ministry of Labour and Employment
<i>Mr Nessar Maksud Khan</i>	Director, DCCI
<i>Mr Md Lutfor Rahman Khan, MP</i>	Hon'ble State Minister for Labour and Employment
<i>Mr M Lutfur Rahman Khan</i>	Director, FBCCI
<i>Dr Wajedul Islam Khan</i>	General Secretary, Bangladesh Trade Union Kendro
<i>Ms Mashuda Khatun Shefali</i>	Executive Director, Nari Uddog Kendra

<i>Mr Mohammad Abdul Latif</i>	Secretary In Charge, Ministry of Women & Children Affairs
<i>Mr E A Khan Majles</i>	Manager (Education), Underprivileged Children's Educational Programme (UCEP)
<i>Mr Md. Moqsud Maleque</i>	Coordinator, Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK)
<i>Mr Ahmadullah Mia</i>	Director Research, Ahsania Mission, Planning & Monitoring Division
<i>Ms Nishat Afroz Mirza</i>	Programme Assistant, ILO
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<i>Ms Ruby Q Noble</i>	Team Leader, BEHTRUC Project, Child Development and Education Section, UNICEF
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<i>Mr M Ehsanur Rahman</i>	Deputy Executive Director, Dhaka Ahsania Mission
<i>Mr Lutfur Rahman Matin</i>	Director, BGMEA
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<i>Mr Jamil Uddin</i>	Programme Officer, ILO
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<i>Mr Shah Muhammad Abu Zafar</i>	President, Jatiya Sramik Party

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