

Child labour – Stopping the exploitation of children, safeguarding educational opportunities

In spite of all progress the International Labour Organization (ILO) reckons that worldwide there are still about 218 million children aged from 5 to 17 years gainfully employed. The forms of child labour vary greatly: Most often children through their work help to support their families in subsistence farming. A particularly large number of girls hire out as workers in private households. According to ILO approx. 126 million children are working under the most dangerous conditions in quarries, mines, chemical factories or as carriers. Children are being exploited and abused as prostitutes, slaves and forced labourers. Most of these children never had a chance of attending school, because in their countries compulsory schooling is only one of many laws and because child labour is tolerated there. There is no alternative for them for the vicious circle of poverty, discrimination, illiteracy and exploitation.

This is in stark contrast to all international agreements which like the General Declaration of Human Rights of 1949 or the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 were ratified by most states. The ILO Core Labour Standards contained in eight conventions, ratified by 150 states, or the ILO concept of decent work demand an end to child labour on paper. No sanctions are envisaged.

Development aid organizations, foundations and private networks support initiatives against exploitive child labour. They draw for this on the millennium development targets which not only want to halve poverty by 2015, but also demand a basic education for children. They are fighting to improve the income situation of the parents and for education and training of children, young people and adults. They use information campaigns to explain to consumers the important role which they have. And they appeal to the community of states to act together against child labour.

The principle “Child and forced labour is degrading” must at last be enforced worldwide. As people who act ethically we must not base our prosperity on child labour, neither in the private nor the public sphere. In harmony with the values and principles which form us we therefore support the international demands for abolishing child labour. To achieve this goal we appeal to the level of the European Union to increase the European efforts for worldwide coordinated political and social action and to take appropriate steps that products from child labour will no longer reach the internal market. For this purpose we are proposing a European initiative oriented on the following points:

Abolishing child labour and promoting education

1. Child labour is a global topic which we need to face more strongly. We can only achieve the aim of abolishing child labour if the countries concerned cooperate with the western industrial nations, both on the political level and in the social field. The national civil societies must be sensitized much more than so far for the topic.
2. Child labour has many different forms and causes. It keeps the children caught up in poverty and without a chance. Therefore we must fight child labour more strongly and invest in opportunities for education.

Enforcing international standards

Child labour disregards human rights. These rights are internationally documented and recognized by the community of states. The enforcement of these standards is still poor. A lack of political will and corruption continue to hinder progress.

3. We therefore demand better control and sanctioning mechanisms for ILO, the strengthening of the bilateral dialogue and a more active role of the EU as a credible ambassador of human rights also in foreign trade policy.

Fighting the causes

4. Poverty as well as political and economic instability is the most frequent cause for child labour. The present crisis of the financial economy reinforces this effect. Education and enlightenment are therefore for us the key to long-term success which must also reach the national governments and the people concerned.
5. Poverty is an experience which spans generations and which is accompanied by social, political and economic discrimination. For this reason it is absolutely necessary for us to remind the governments of the countries of their moral obligation to stand up for the rights of minorities and the participation rights of social (fringe) groups.
6. According to estimates of ILO there are approx. 900 million unemployed adults in countries with child labour. Child labour thus becomes a clear indicator of economic exploitation of children. They get only a fraction of the wages of an adult, if they get anything at all. It is therefore even more important to enforce the ILO Core Labour Standards in every country.

Changing consumer behaviour

Worldwide enlightenment campaigns for ethnically correct consumer behaviour are of immense importance. The price is one of the most important factors for the decision to buy. But the question about the production conditions must be allowed. We appeal therefore to the private and public consumers to make an active contribution to fighting child labour.

7. Thanks to globalization it is most likely that granite and natural stones for road and facade works come from child labour. The thought that even tombstones on our cemeteries come from child labour is scandalous! We need to make sure that our citizens will become aware of the problem of child labour.