

Child labour

trade union initiatives

Child labour is a growing social and economic problem across the world. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates between 100 and 250 million children are working globally, depending on the definition used. Africa has the largest incidence of child labour with an estimated 40% of all children between five and 14 years in work. Most of these work in the agricultural sector. An estimated 16 million children between the ages of 10 and 14 work in sub-Saharan Africa.

The prevalence of child labour has prompted numerous responses from governments, non-governmental organisations, labour and business. Some governments have done studies to look at the extent, causes and possible measures to eradicate child labour.

Whilst most research on child labour has focused on government activities to deal with child labour, less has been said about trade union initiatives. Trade unions have a long history of struggle against child labour all over the world. This article shows that unions are actively involved in activities to eliminate child labour in Southern Africa.

ILO conventions

The definition of child labour may be different in different countries. The ILO's Minimum Age Convention (138 of 1973) guides the definition in most countries.

Sabata Nakanyane
investigates what trade unions in Southern Africa are doing to eliminate child labour.

The convention requires countries that endorse or ratify it, to develop a policy to ensure the abolition of child labour. The convention sets the general minimum age for employment at 15 years, while the age for developing countries is 14 years.

The ILO has also developed a convention to prohibit and eliminate the worst forms of child labour (182 of 1999). This convention demands that countries eliminate the intolerable conditions many children are working in and help these children recover and lead a normal life. Although this convention provides broad guidelines on the worst forms of child labour, it allows countries to determine what the worst forms are at national level.

In Southern Africa a number of countries have started to ratify the conventions and develop a definition for child labour based on their conditions. (See the table on next page.)

Eliminating child labour

There are numerous issues involved in the elimination of child labour. The most relevant for trade unions relates to the

Country	Ratification of Convention 138	National databank	Definition of child labour
Malawi	In the process of ratification	In the process of setting up a databank	Under 16 and economically exploited through work that can interfere with education and is harmful to health or development
Mozambique	In the process of ratification	In the process of setting up a databank	Any person under 15
South Africa	In the process of ratification	In the process of setting up a databank through survey	Any person under 15
Tanzania	Ratified	In the process of setting up a databank	Any person under 14

Summary of actions taken on child labour in some Southern African countries (Southern African Development Community (SADC) member states)

economic and labour market impact of child labour. The elimination of child labour is an area of contradictory interests. On the one hand, child labour can be an important source of income for poor families. A family's survival might depend on the income generated by children. On the other hand, child labour affects the labour market negatively. The general belief is that child labour displaces adult labour. This reduces adult wage rates and/or increases adult unemployment rates.

When national economies rely on working children it has a negative impact on long-term economic growth and development. This reliance results in a vicious circle where poverty is maintained from one generation to the next. Thus, the elimination of child labour should be accompanied by increased quality education. This might result in:

- increased labour productivity and economic growth over the long run due to increased human capital and reduced health costs;

- decreased poverty and a more equal income distribution due to increased relative wages for unskilled labour resulting from a reduced supply of child labour.

Trade unions in Southern Africa have taken initiatives aimed at reducing and/or eliminating child labour. I shall look at four countries: Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa and Tanzania.

Malawi

Malawi has been identified as a developing country with a high incidence of child labour. Most of it takes place in the tea and tobacco estates and to a lesser extent in factories. Child labour in Malawi can largely be explained by poverty, lack of resources and poor institutional and regulatory settings. The Malawi Congress of Trade Unions (MCTU) has been central in the fight for the elimination of child labour in Malawi. It has introduced different measures to address the problem of child labour, these include:

- The establishment of a child labour unit within the MCTU to educate members and compile information on child labour
- The organisation of workshops on child labour to make tenants, chiefs, parents and farmers on estates aware of the need to combat child labour.
- Commissioning research regarding the extent of child labour in the tobacco-growing sector. An example is the report, *The Smoking Business: tobacco tenants in Malawi*, by Fafo.
- The negotiation of a collective bargaining agreement with the Tobacco Association of Malawi. The agreement states that all parties will respect the national law on child labour and that they will work towards eliminating child labour
- Joining forces with other organisations in calling on the ministries of Labour and Agriculture to monitor the use of child labour on the estates.

Mozambique

Child labour is common in rural and urban areas of Mozambique. This has been attributed to extreme poverty levels and cultural values. For some families child labour means income, while for others it is about the socialisation of children into the discipline of labour.

Child labour is widespread despite legislation making it illegal to employ children under 15 years and the ratification of the United Nations convention on the Rights of the Child in 1994. The convention aims to protect children from performing work that is unsafe, interferes with their education or harms their health or development.

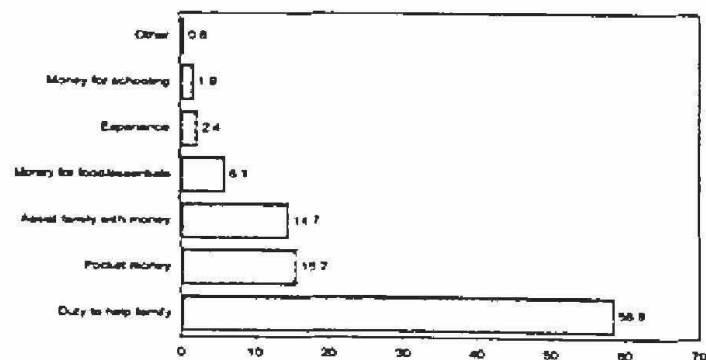
Under this umbrella of legislation and the ratification of

conventions, the trade union movement in Mozambique is very active in the struggle to eliminate child labour. Trade unions led by the Confederation of Trade Unions (OTM) and the National Forestry and Agro-Farming Workers Union (SINTAF) have initiated activities and programmes to eliminate child labour. The initiatives of OTM include:

- taking part in seminars and workshops on child labour,
- being involved in the design of the child labour regulations,
- participating in a local study on child labour;
- assisting the National Directorate of Labour Statistics in a research programme to find the main causes of child labour in Mozambique.

South Africa

The recent survey by Statistics South Africa on the economic activities of young people, argues that child labour in its exploitative sense is rare in South Africa. The survey estimates that about 1,4% of the 13,4 million children aged between five and 17 years were engaged in commercial agriculture in 1999. The survey also found that only 0,4% were engaged in manufacturing. Less than 0,05% were engaged in the construction or



Reasons for children working in South Africa (percentages) (StatsSA 2000)

Pic: Cedric Munn



Most children work to help their family.

mining industries. The survey also examines the reasons given by children for working (See the figure on p 47.)

Regardless of these findings, SAAPAWU has indicated that child labour is widespread in the agricultural sector. The union estimates that there are over 70 000 working children on farms. The constitution of South Africa and the BCEA prohibit child labour. The BCEA goes further. It determines that an employer who employs children will be subjected to a fine or imprisonment up to a maximum of three years.

To understand the state of child labour in the agricultural sector, SAAPAWU conducted a study in 1997. A booklet was published. It summarises views of parents and children about the extent and conditions of child labour on farms. The

results of the study led to SAAPAWU identifying actions to eliminate child labour in the agricultural sector.

These include:

- uncovering the facts and playing a watchdog role in bringing abuses to light;
- establishing sustainable structures like child labour units and networks with other organisations;
- developing and updating policies;
- monitoring of collective agreements and codes of conduct;
- campaigning for enforcement, public education and consumer action;
- establishing codes of conduct and making joint statements with the employers;
- supporting children with education and alternatives to dangerous work;
- using the supervisory machinery of international instruments.

SAAPAWU also participates in the Child Labour Intersectoral Group

(CLIG) created by the government as part of its strategy to combat child labour. CLIG represents all the stakeholders involved in child labour and is coordinated by the Ministry of Labour. CLIG assists in policy formulation and the improvement of issues around child labour and is responsible for conducting educational programmes for communities. One of the successes of CLIG has been the commissioning of Statistics South Africa to conduct a survey on child labour.

Tanzania

The Tanzania Federation of Trade Unions (TFTU) indicates that only 5% of the 9 million children in Tanzania under the age of 15 are involved in child labour. Whilst there are different reasons for the existence

of child labour, TFTU concluded that a strong relationship exists between family size and child labour. About 49% of working children come from families with between five and eight children. Only 10% come from families with one or two children.

To address the problem of child labour, the government of Tanzania ratified the ILO's convention (138) on minimum age in 1998. The government also provides for seven years of compulsory education for children up to the age of 15.

TFTU has criticised government for its failure to enforce laws relating to the use of child labour. Instead TFTU introduced an approach to ending child labour through the provision of alternatives to working for the children and their guardians. This includes

- providing entrepreneurship and small business development education to parents and assisting them with school fees and uniforms;
- forming community-based child labour committees to identify communities that qualify for the support.

TFTU's programme has been hailed as a success because more than 600 working children in Dar es Salaam withdrew from work and attendance in schools around commercial farms increased.

Conclusion

Trade unions can benefit from the elimination of child labour. Firstly, it may improve working conditions if adult workers, who replace the children, join the unions and the unions take up issues of working conditions. Secondly, membership may increase if the unions organise the adult workers.

The problem of child labour can benefit from trade unions. Evidence exists that child labour is rare in industries where unions are present. Thus, trade union organisation is one of the best ways to

ensure employment that is free of child labour.

Whilst the intervention by trade unions is important, it is still limited. Trade unions can play an important role when there are regulatory frameworks in place.

The ILO has acknowledged that the struggle against child labour needs to be fought at several levels and by several actors. Different programmes that are important in the elimination of child labour exist:

- Research has been identified as useful in exposing child labour. It can influence legislation on child labour.
- The use of the media can be useful in reaching communities and policy-makers.
- Legislation, although insufficient on its own, is a powerful instrument in the fight against child labour. It can serve as a deterrent if the penalties are severe and rigorously enforced.
- Working children and their families should be provided with alternatives to work. This includes education, training and social safety nets for the families. It can be combined with rehabilitation for those traumatised. ★

References

- Anker, R. (2000) *The economics of child labour* *International Labour Review* 139 (3)
- Gumbo, P. (1999) 'Tanzanian unions fight child labour' *Mall & Guardian*, 20/8/1999
- Kooljmans, J. (1998) *Definitions and legal provisions on child labour in Southern Africa* ILO/SAMAT Policy Paper
- SAAPAWU (1997) *Farm Workers Speak Out* SAAPAWU Shopsteward Manual
- StatsSA (2000) *Survey of activities of young people in South Africa*
- Tabusa, S. (2000) *Trade unions against child labour* In Haspels, N and Jankantsh, M (ed) *Action against child labour*
- Torres, L. (2000) *The smoking business tobacco tenants in Malawi* *Tafu-report* 339

Sabata Nakanyane is a researcher at Tafu