Eradicating Forced Labor and Child Labor

Topic Background

Around 215 million children across the globe work full time jobs, with no access to education or play time like other young children.¹ This is known as child labor, a global problem that can best be understood if considered from three main concepts: the concepts of child labor, forced labor, and human trafficking. The International Labor Organization (ILO) defines forced labor as all work which a person is required to do under the threat of punishment and especially in instances where the person has not offered their work voluntarily.² The ILO estimated in 2012 that 20.9 million people are victims of forced labor globally. Of these, 4.5 million are in forced commercial sexual exploitation, and 14.2 million are in other forms of labor exploitation spanning sectors such as agriculture, construction, domestic work and manufacturing. The remaining 2.2 million are in state-imposed forms of forced labor. Despite efforts to combat forced labor, these figures remain accurate even today.

The UN defines child labor as work that children should not be doing because they are too young to work, or – if they have reached the minimum age – because it is dangerous or otherwise unsuitable for them.³ In child labor, children are exposed to dangerous working conditions, slavery, and using them to carry out illegal activities such as drug trafficking (whether or not they accepted to do it). Forced labor and child labor are closely linked. They occur in the same geographical areas, the same industries and are mainly caused by poverty and discrimination, and up to half of all people in forced labor are children.⁴

In a similar manner, forced labor, child labor and child (human) trafficking are very much interconnected. Child trafficking falls under the concept of human trafficking which is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, keeping or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion such as abduction, fraud, deception, or using power to induce those who are vulnerable or paying someone to be able to have their permission to have control over another person, so that they can be exploited.⁵ This makes human trafficking a terrible

means to get children into forced labor. For the purposes of discussing this topic as a combination of the factors mentioned above, we could use the term “forced child labor”, which can be understood as getting a child to work by using force.

In numerous countries, domestic workers, including children, are trapped in situations of forced labor, and in many cases they are restrained from leaving the employers’ home through threats or violence. Such forced labor persists in South Asia where millions of men, women, and children are tied to their work through a vicious cycle of debts they owe. In Europe and North America, an increasing number of women and children are victims of trafficking for labor and sexual exploitation. Finally, there is also forced labor imposed by some States for the purposes of economic development or as a punishment for expressing political views.⁶

**Past International Actions**

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)⁷ is the first legally binding document to provide a complete set of human rights to children all over the world. It also defines a child as a person below the age of 18. The CRC was designed to provide a legal framework to guide other nations so they could take appropriate measures to enforce the principles outlined in the document. The four core principles of the Convention are non-discrimination, devotion to the best interests of the child, the rights to life, survival and development, and finally, respect for the views of the child.

The International Labor Organization⁸ was founded in 1919 to promote rights at work, encourage decent employment opportunities and enhance social protection in work-related issues. Its mandate also includes abolishing child labor by devising standards and protocols based on the age of the child and safety of the workplace. Convention number 138 of the ILO states that “the minimum age for admission to employment shall not be less than the age of completion of compulsory schooling” and this means that education is very important in the development of the child and should not be compromised in anyway.⁹ In order to make informed decisions, the ILO hosts the International Labor Conference in Geneva annually to create effective solutions.

Trafficking in persons has also been the subject of growing international attention in recent years. In the year 2000, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a Protocol to mark a

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significant success step in the efforts to stop the trade in people.10 As the guardian of the Protocol, The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes addresses human trafficking issues through its global program against trafficking in persons.

The United Nations encourages the work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to further the cause of eradicating child labor. One especially notable NGO called “Save the Children India”, which has existed since the 1920’s, works to ensure children’s rights and focuses on four pillars: child survival, child protection, education, and responding to emergencies and disaster risk reduction.11 Anti-Slavery International is another important NGO in the field that has been working on child labor issues since the 1970s, with activities mainly in research and international advocacy.12 Both organizations work with other NGOs, inter-governmental bodies and trade unions, and focus on the worst forms of child labor and slavery-like practices. Save the Children India has focused its operations in India and Anti-Slavery International has activities in Senegal, Peru, Costa Rica, Philippines, Togo and Tanzania.

Possible Solutions

This problem of forced labor and child labor is a big problem for the achievement of the MDGs 1, 2 and 6. Of these, MDG 2 is the most directly and adversely affected. It should be noted that forced child labor denies children the needed education (MDG 2) for them to develop and work meaningfully to cater for themselves and their families when they grow and this makes them poor (MDG 1). If we don’t make children free from labor, it will be difficult to achieve universal primary education (MDG 2). Also since some children in forced labor are victims of sexual exploitation and this becomes a major means of spreading HIV/AIDS (MDG 6).

Forced child labor can happen in any industry, but is especially common in industries that require low-skilled labor, such as agriculture and mining, or occupations hidden from public view, like domestic service.13 While it is important to note that lack of education, cultural values, and poverty within families create a fertile ground for children to be forced into labor, it is important to understand that rise in unemployment, falling income and expanding informal economies (businesses that are not registered and regulated under laws of a country) has left children more vulnerable to work exploitation.14 It is very possible however, to mistake forced child labor as a problem for developing poor countries alone but this is not so. The report of the

11 Save the Children India: http://www.savethechildren.in/about-us.html
13 United States Department of Labor, http://1.usa.gov/1J0yDIQ
14 United States Department of Labor, http://1.usa.gov/1J0yDIQ

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Global Alliance against forced labor provides clear evidence that the abolition of forced labor represents a challenge for virtually every country in the world – industrialized, transitioning and developing countries alike.\(^{15}\) It emphasizes the importance of sound laws and policies and their severe enforcement, as well as effective prevention strategies to deal with child labor.

Despite the factors that serve as challenges to the fight against forced child labor, those who work on the problem believe we can give these children hope. Juan Somavia, the director of the International Labor Organization (ILO) once said, “A world without child labor is possible with the right priorities and policies: quality education, opportunities for young people, decent work for parents and a basic social protection floor for all.”\(^{16}\) Under the current sustainable development agenda, the UN can help solve forced labor and child labor through two main ways:

**Ending Poverty:** As the first of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, the world is aiming at eradicating poverty by 2030. The UN member states will have to prevent forced child labor from producing more poor people in the future. Many families are forced to send their children into the workforce because of their overall low income and many children in child labor are likely to continue this cycle. By supporting the growth of poverty stricken areas, the need for child labor can be diminished if basic needs are addressed. It is important therefore to discuss how poverty stricken families can be made independent.

**International Policing Measures:** SDG 3 emphasizes the need for healthy lives and wellbeing for all ages. This places children as an important part of this as they are at a very vulnerable age. Since trafficking is a key means of recruiting children for forced labor, it is important that UN member states work together to strengthen organizations like the INTERPOL and local police to collect intelligence information within and across the borders of countries in order to check human trafficking.

In conclusion, it is important to note that the global community is responsible for the safety and well-being of all individuals, including young children that are vulnerable to dangerous conditions. By eliminating child labor, children will have better lifestyles with proper education, basic needs, and opportunities to succeed in the future.

> “They (the children) must be at the heart of our thinking on challenges we are addressing on a daily basis. We know what to do, and we know how to do it. The means are at hand, it is up to us to seize the opportunity and build a world that is fit for children.” - Ban Ki Moon, 2009

**Further Research**

\(^{15}\) International Labor organization, [http://bit.ly/1K1LDQc](http://bit.ly/1K1LDQc)

Guiding Questions:

1. What supplies or basic needs are necessary to provide to poverty ridden areas in order to initiate change?
2. How can UN member states improve collaboration between organizations like INTERPOL and local police agencies?
3. How can children who are rescued from forced labor by NGOs and state agencies be rehabilitated so that they can resume their lives in society free of trauma and the aftershocks of their ordeal? This might require counselling and support for affected families; how can governments do this in their respective countries?

Research Sources:
- Global March against Child Labor
- Millennium Development Goal 2
- International Labor Organization
- Anti-Slavery International

Worksheet Questions

1. What are the three key issues discussed under the topic in this guide?
2. Name any three factors that allow forced child labor to grow?
3. Mention 2 main ways that the problem of forced child labor can be solved?
4. Which MDG is most affected by the problem?
5. How is child labor, forced labor and human trafficking linked?

Answer Key

1. Child labor, forced labor, and human trafficking
2. Lack of education, low incomes, and expansion of informal economies
3. Ending poverty and improving global policing
4. MDG 2
5. Many children are working against their will (forced) and human trafficking is one key way of getting children for forced labor.