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What the Economic Crisis Means for Child Labour

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ABSTRACT The paper examines the likely impact of economic crisis on child labour. It argues that the paucity of conclusive research on this subject results from an over-simplified focus on child labour as an economic phenomenon without consideration of the behavioural context in which child labour occurs. Family behaviours at times of crisis, when heads of household are making coping decisions and reviewing the allocation of their own and their children's time, are crucial to understanding why some families send a child into labour and others do not, even where their socioeconomic profiles may be identical. The paper makes a number of recommendations, including the need for further development of the economic/behavioural model; improved comprehensive and disaggregated data on child labour; investment in safety nets; policies and programmes targeted at influencing family decisions in favour of children's education and protection from child labour; and more refined targeting of vulnerable populations linked to these policies.

KEYWORDS *child labour, coping behaviours, poverty, safety nets, vulnerability*

1. What Is Known about Crisis and Child Labour

The food price rises of 2008 and the global economic crisis that began the same year will undoubtedly have a devastating effect on the world's poor. In March 2009, the World Bank Global Economic Forecast Update noted that the pace of poverty reduction had slowed and that about 65 million people were estimated to remain under the \$2 per day poverty line in 2009 as a result of the crisis (World Bank, 2009b). By October 2008, the International Labour

Organization (ILO) Director-General had predicted that the global financial crisis could increase world unemployment by an estimated 20 million women and men, pushing many families below the poverty line and threatening family survival for many (ILO, 2008).

The notion that economic crisis will automatically result in increased child labour, regularly assumed in commentary on the crisis (UNICEF, 2009: 10), is based largely on the notion that child labour is a result of poverty and that, since economic crises deepen poverty, child labour is likely to increase. Recent empirical studies, however, suggest that the relationship between poverty and child labour is not a matter of simple cause and effect. An August 2008 working paper for the World Bank Research Group, for example, concluded that: 'Although early work on this topic [the effect of aggregate shocks on schooling and health outcomes for children] often betrayed a general presumption that economic crises would have a negative impact on education and health outcomes, the actual empirical findings reveal no such simple regularity' (Ferreira and Schady, 2008: 2).

Since child labour is often clandestine and a criminal offence, it is understandably difficult to quantify, so school enrolment and attendance are frequently used as proxy measures of levels of child labour. A third state, 'idleness', relating to the status of a child who neither attends school nor works, is similarly difficult to quantify and additionally may mask home-based economic activity, for example a child caring for siblings or doing housework or working in the family business. It is generally discounted in the 'child labour versus school attendance' equation, as is the fact that in some countries, many children may attend school, but also work. Since all the statistics quoted are, in any case, to some degree speculative because of a lack of reliable data, the proxy of school attendance to indicate likely levels of child labour is considered valid (Blanco and Hagemann, 2008: 4).

Poverty – or just a sudden negative shift in a family's economic wellbeing – may not be directly determinant in the likelihood that a child will enter child labour, but it is a factor in household decisions relating to the coping strategies they will adopt when faced with challenges such as economic shock, and these strategies may include reassessing the allocation of children's time (to education and training, work or 'idleness'; Holmes et al., 2008: 14).

In January 2009, the World Bank estimated that almost 40% of developing countries are highly exposed to the poverty effects of the global economic crisis, 56% are moderately exposed and less than 10% face little risk (World Bank, 2009a: 1). In the East and Southeast Asia region, China, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Thailand were adjudged to be moderately exposed because of decelerating growth. Nepal and Papua New Guinea were similarly considered to be moderately exposed as a result of high poverty levels. Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Mongolia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Timor-Leste and Vietnam were considered to face high exposure as a result of both decelerating growth and high poverty.

1.1 THE EVIDENCE TO DATE

There is a growing, but still embryonic, body of literature on the links between economic crisis and child labour. Most of this focuses on specific shocks at specific times on specific groups of children and so does not offer a model that can, or should, be applied across the board. Moreover, the conclusions of studies carried out to date indicate a need for caution in making blanket conclusions about the impact of any individual occurrence of shock on levels of child labour or school enrolment. For example, a 2008 in-depth study by the Understanding Children's Work (UCW) project (Guarcello et al., 2008) into the impact of different kinds of shocks (in this case, drought, floods and crop failure) on child labour in Cambodian villages concluded that: 'household responses to shocks depend considerably on the specific type of shock encountered'. In this case, crop failure reduced school attendance and increased child labour, droughts were less relevant, and floods had no significant impact on child labour or school attendance at all.

The results vary considerably across the study samples. A 1997 study on rural India (Jacoby and Skoufias, 2008) demonstrated that parents withdrew their children from school when facing a decline in crop income. In 2003, an analysis of Guatemalan families suggested that they adjusted the activity status of children in response to idiosyncratic shocks and natural disasters, often by leaving children in school, but requiring them additionally to take on work (Guarcello et al., 2002).

A 1999 study of 18 Latin American and Caribbean countries indicated that macroeconomic shock in that region had 'played a crucial role in slowing down school attainment since the early 1980s' (Behrman et al., 1999, cited in Guarcello et al., 2008: 2). The effect was particularly significant for girls, who were likely to replace their mothers in household duties as women entered the labour force to boost family income. A 2000 report on the East Asian crisis notes a drop in enrolment rates and a rise in child labour among 10–14 year olds in the Philippines (Lim, 2000). The impact of the crisis was also noted as resulting in increased exploitation of girls in Indonesia and Thailand.

Although there is a growing body of evidence, therefore, that shocks of various kinds may impact negatively on both school enrolment and the level of child labour, it is clear that the links are far more complex than simple cause and effect. The 2008 UCW study rightly concludes that:

The existing literature ... has not assessed the differential impact of the various shocks that can hit households. Instead, shocks have been treated as a general category of negative events affecting the household, while in reality they are of course different in nature and in their likely consequences. Better policy formulation and targeting would require the identification of the shocks that are most damaging to children's welfare in terms of education and participation in child labour. (Guarcello et al., 2008: 2)

This confirms but nuances the same authors' conclusion in an earlier report (Guarcello et al., 2002: 1) that, 'there is no established evidence on the extent

to which children's labour supply is actually used as a risk coping strategy and/or as a buffer against shocks'.

1.2 PRIORITIZING CHILD PROTECTION

Most studies therefore recommend taking a 'default' policy and programme approach that aims to protect children at times when families may be making decisions about coping strategies, for whatever reason. This so called 'protection approach' aims to reduce the vulnerability of the child (and more generally the family) to factors that put her or him at risk of dropping out of school or entering child labour.

Whether faced with idiosyncratic shocks (unemployment, the death of a family member, for example – often called 'trigger factors'), natural disasters (floods, droughts) or macroeconomic shocks, families may include children's education and work in the mix of solutions they consider when they assess how they will cope with changed circumstances.

Not all families will do this, however, so it is vital to identify those households that are most likely to consider reallocation of the child's time as part of a coping strategy (so called 'at risk' or 'vulnerable' households) and to fully understand the underlying context in which these decisions are taken and the range of factors at play. Much more behavioural research will be required before this can be mapped out adequately. Moreover, this macro-analysis can only truly be carried out at national or even local level because of the many variables that must be taken into account in measuring vulnerability.

In relation to what can be measured and is well documented, it is known that 'vulnerability factors' occur not only at the level of the family, but also at the level of the individual child, the community and the workplace (ILO-IPEC, 2008c: 20–4).

At the level of the individual child, it is clear that some children are more vulnerable to entering child labour than others. Some of the vulnerability factors are universally true, but most depend also on the interface of the child's individual vulnerability profile and the labour market/sector into which the child may enter. Some of these vulnerability factors will be more susceptible to economic shocks than others. The age of the child, for example, will be relevant in countries (like many of those in East Asia) where children of secondary school age are likely to be at risk of leaving school early in times of hardship because of the higher costs involved. Additionally, in the industrialized countries of East Asia, where young people are generally used to enjoying a relatively high level of consumer power, these children may be particularly at risk if they suddenly have less disposable income than some of their peers and are under pressure to find a way to get more money.

In relation to vulnerability at the level of the family, since it is most often the family – not only parents, but also potentially older siblings, grandparents or other carers – who make the decisions about how the child's time will be allocated, vulnerability factors such as income levels, educational levels of the

parents, family size and make up are of crucial importance. Very often several of these coexist.

Some vulnerability factors relate to the broader community in which the child and family live. These are also sometimes known as ‘external’ or ‘institutional’ risk factors. They relate to the social and physical environment, governance and history, and social factors affecting society generally. Most of these factors are relevant, to varying degrees, in the countries of East Asia. Youth unemployment and migration for work, for example, are of great consequence in the region, even in less worrying economic times, and in recent years a tightening of migration restrictions as a result of the worsened global security climate since 9/11 has exacerbated the regulatory pressure on people seeking to migrate for work, leading to increased recourse to unregulated recruitment agents and irregular migration channels frequented by human traffickers.

Finally, the sectors in which child labour is to be found are not random. They exhibit particular characteristics and/or function in a particular regulatory regime that makes them a factor in increasing the likelihood that they will draw in child labour. In relation to these ‘workplace vulnerability factors’, it is of particular concern that economic crisis tends to lead to an informalization of labour markets and that informal sectors are more likely than formal sectors to seek out and employ child labour. If other risk factors (such as weak labour market regulation and policing) also exist, then this produces a potentially high-risk situation.

Individually, these risk factors may not result in a child entering child labour. However, as they accumulate, the risk increases. Many children live in a situation of high risk and one trigger (for example, a death in the family that reduces family income unexpectedly) may be enough to lead to the family’s reassessing coping strategies and reallocating the child’s time in ways that have a negative impact on the child’s wellbeing.

2. Child Labour in East Asia

2.1 DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTS

The ILO Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138) sets the age below which children should not be in work at 15 (a country whose economy and educational facilities are insufficiently developed may, after consultation with the organizations of employers and workers concerned, where such exist, initially specify a minimum age of 14 years – Article 2).

In some countries, approximately two years before they reach this minimum legal age for work (that is, when they are 12 or 13), children are able to do ‘light work’, often defined through consultations among governments and workers’ and employers’ organizations. The ILO generally considers this to be non-hazardous work for no more than 14 hours per week that does not interfere with the child’s schooling.

Children under the minimum working age who are doing more than light work are in child labour. UNICEF uses these same parameters, but, additionally, considers children to be in child labour if they do domestic work in their own homes for 28 hours or more per week. Many children, especially girls, even if they are enrolled in school, spend long hours in 'economic activity', working unpaid for family businesses (including in agriculture) or working around the house, doing housekeeping or looking after siblings. Although, in moderation, this can be a valuable way of learning and gaining self-esteem, children whose schooling suffers as a result, or whose health is compromised, must be considered to be effectively in a situation of child labour.

Working children between the minimum age for work and 18, whose work does not fall into any of the categories of child labour or its worst forms, are regular (child) workers. It is important to note that, in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, in addition to their rights as workers under national and international labour laws, children in this group should also enjoy all their rights as children.

The international community has agreed that child labour should be eliminated as soon as possible and the International Labour Conference has set a target date of 2020 for this to be achieved; the target for elimination of the worst forms is 2016. The ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182) identifies the following forms of child labour as 'worst forms' from which children should immediately be withdrawn:

- (a) all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict;
- (b) the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances;
- (c) the use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in the relevant international treaties; and,
- (d) work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.

Categories a–c are considered 'unconditional', while countries may decide which work or elements of work fall under category (d). All the countries of East Asia, except Myanmar and Timor-Leste (as at October 2008), have ratified ILO Conventions No. 138 and No. 182. Of the Pacific Island countries (PICs), Papua New Guinea ratified in 2000 and Fiji in 2003.

2.2 THE NUMBERS INVOLVED

The ILO estimates that in 2004, there were about 218 million children in the world who were in child labour or the worst forms of child labour

(ILO, 2006b: 12). Three-quarters of the children were 5–14 years of age and considered to be in child labour; 52 million children were 15–18 years of age and so legally able to work, but in hazardous or unacceptable occupations (worst forms of child labour). According to ILO estimates, some 1.2 million children had been trafficked domestically or across borders and were still in a situation of exploitation (i.e. their labour was being exploited for the profit of others; ILO, 2006a: 4). Approximately 250,000 of these were in Asia and the Pacific.

The ILO recorded a global fall of 11% in the number of children in labour between 2000 and 2004, with the number of children in hazardous labour showing an even sharper decline: a 33% fall in the 5–14 year age group and a 26% fall in the number of 5–17 year olds in this category (ILO, 2006a: 7).

In Asia and the Pacific, however, progress was less impressive. The number of 5–14 year olds in child labour in the region fell by a little over 6%, from 127.3 million in 2000 to 122.3 million in 2004. The ILO points to large numbers of children between the ages of 5 and 14 in the region being in hazardous labour (6.2 million) and unconditional worst forms of labour (6.6 million).

There are no sources available that investigate whether, or to what extent, this slower decline may be attributed to the impact of the 1997 Asian financial crisis. A report on the impact of the crisis on child labour, focusing particularly on Thailand and Indonesia, was not conclusive, but suggested that the impact was in fact as likely to be positive as it was negative (ILO, 1998: 4). While the report pointed to increased poverty levels and a fall in school attendance augmenting the *potential* supply of child labour (i.e. the number of children at risk, not necessarily the number actually entering child labour) and the closure of formal sector businesses resulting in an informalization of the economy, growing the sectors where child labour is more likely to be used, it also noted that some analysts considered that economic sectors affected by the crisis were likely to let child labourers go; that because of the economic slowdown, children would not have to work overtime; and that a lack of economic opportunities in urban areas would lead to reverse migration that might see children moving into ‘safer’ forms of rural work. The report points out, however, that there are little or no data to substantiate any of the theories and that reliable statistics – always difficult to find – are even more difficult to obtain when they relate to a process that needs to be measured over time.

The ILO statistics are the most reliable estimates available,¹ however, accurate figures are essentially impossible to ascertain; child labour, especially in its worst forms, is in most countries illegal and therefore often clandestine. Children in labour are often ‘invisible’ and, even when they are ‘visible’, their situation is generally not reported and so not reflected in official statistics. This is especially true of children in the worst forms of child labour, where not only labour laws, but also other laws (such as abduction, trafficking, exploitation, rape, abuse, violence, etc.) may be broken.

2.3 THE GEOGRAPHY OF CHILD LABOUR

Children in Asia and the Pacific have long been exploited in agriculture, manufacturing and domestic services, as well as construction, fisheries, hawking and other street-based activities. The sexual exploitation of children, considered an unconditional worst form of child labour, also remains a problem in the region. Trafficking of children into various forms of exploitation has become widespread in the past decade. The recruitment of children as soldiers, couriers, servants or in other roles allied to the militia is also of concern, as armed conflict in some countries of the region continues or has re-emerged. And despite efforts to tackle drug abuse, dealing and trafficking in Asia and the Pacific, the market for illicit drugs is thriving and children are regularly exploited as drug dealers or couriers. Very young children are also exploited in begging and children may be used in petty crime, such as burglary or picking pockets, as well as more serious crimes including, for girls especially, involvement in illegal prostitution (ILO, 2007: 3).

While this general description of child labour in the region holds for all the countries under consideration, there are also specificities in each country in relation to the sectors in which child labour is to be found:

The **Cambodia** Child Labour Survey of 2001 indicated that 45% of boys and 44.6% of girls between the ages of 5 and 14 were in child labour; 8.6% of these children participated in the labour force without attending school, especially in rural areas (ILO-IPEC, 2008a). The ILO reports that 76.5% of child labourers aged 5–14 work in agriculture; 5.8% in the industrial sector; and 17.7% in services. Boys are more likely to be employed in agriculture than are girls, and less in services. Many in the 5–14 year age group are unpaid family workers (89.9% boys and 90.8% girls). Among children aged 10–14, economically active children are slightly less likely to be attending school than children who are not economically active. Children from the poorest households are more likely to be engaged in the labour force without attending school.

A 2003 Child Domestic Worker Survey carried out by the National Institute of Statistics of Cambodia concluded that 27,950 children between the ages of 7 and 17 were in child domestic labour in Phnom Penh alone (Cambodian Government, 2004: 79).

The sexual exploitation of children remains a concern, drawing in mostly female adolescents. Girls in this age group may also risk being trafficked into Thailand for sexual purposes. Very young infants are ‘rented out’ to female traffickers who take them to beg on the streets of Bangkok (Mirror, 2007: 1).

China has set the minimum legal working age at 16 and considers adolescents between the ages of 16 and 18 to be ‘juvenile workers’, with restricted access to hazardous sectors or activities. Nevertheless, children under the age of 16 are reported to labour in small enterprises, including coal mines, brick factories, weaving and clothing factories (USDOL, 2008).

Most rural children are engaged in family businesses. Some accompany adult family members into cities and towns to engage in trade or commerce.

Although China's labour laws do not permit the hiring of under-16s as apprentices, this does happen. There are also reports of 'work-study' programmes organized by schools that raise income by sending children into work seasonally; for example, 11–15 year olds from the mountainous areas of Hunan, Guangxi and Guangdong provinces are sent to work in toy and handicrafts factories (*CLB*, 2007: 2).

There is some anecdotal information on child labour in the footwear, electronics, handicrafts (including artificial flowers) and gun industries, but supporting evidence is not available. There is documented child trafficking into sexual exploitation from Yunnan province in the south into Thailand (*ILO*, 2007).

Across the PICs, children are to be found in child labour in agriculture, family businesses, street-based work and the informal sector. In **Fiji**, there are reports of children being exploited in the sex industry (*ILO*, 2007: 4).

UNICEF estimates that there are nearly 3 million children in the labour force in **Indonesia**, many in dangerous occupations (*UNICEF*, 2008). A very small percentage (6% between 2000–05) of school-aged children are not in school. Child labour has been reported in the garment and the wood and rattan furniture industries and in food processing, chocolate, shrimp and seafood processing, and the export-oriented pumice stone industry (*USDOL*, 2008).

Human trafficking remains a serious problem and each year thousands of women and children fall victim to traffickers, including into the sex trade. Much of the trafficking is internal, but there are also reports of human trafficking into Malaysia.

There are few reports of child labour in **DPR Korea** except for the exploitation of girls to provide sexual services through restaurants and cafes (*US-STATE*, 2005).

Around one in 10 children aged 5–11 in **Lao PDR** is involved in child labour, mostly in agriculture, urban shops or private households, despite labour laws fixing the minimum working age at 15 (except in certain conditions in family businesses; *ICCB*, undated). Sexual exploitation of children continues to be reported. Additionally, Lao PDR is a country of origin and transit for human trafficking (*ILO-IPEC*, 2007).

Child labour in **Malaysia** occurs primarily in agriculture and the informal sector. Children labour in plantations, often alongside their parents, but are not paid. In urban areas, children toil in family food businesses, night markets and small-scale industries. Girls are trafficked into prostitution (*US-STATE*, 2005).

In **Mongolia**, 22% of 5–17 year olds are in child labour, including in herding, livestock, gold mining and selling small goods. In one in three poor households and one in 10 of the wealthiest, there is one child involved in child labour (*UNICEF MICS5*). Some 21% of children in labour also attend school.

Despite national legislation prohibiting the recruitment of children under 18 into the armed forces or groups, children in **Myanmar** are recruited into the armed forces of all parties, including non-state groups. With few or no

skills, increasing numbers of children are in child labour in the informal economy or on the streets, where they are exposed to crime, risk of arrest, abuse and exploitation (UNICEF MICS5). School enrolment is high, but fewer than 55% of enrolled children complete the primary cycle. Myanmar is a country of origin for the trafficking of children and women into Thailand and Malaysia (ILO, 2007: 4).

Papua New Guinea has experienced rapid growth in the youth population and concomitant youth unemployment. Children are to be found in labour in subsistence agriculture, family businesses, street-based activities, markets and hotels. There are reports of girls being trafficked internally into child domestic labour or to work as nannies. Sexual exploitation of children is also documented (ILO, 2007: 4).

The most recent **Philippines** Child Labour Survey indicates that 13.4% of boys and 8.4% of girls between the ages of 5 and 14 are in economic activity. Some 1.6% of children in this group participate in the labour force without attending school and boys are three times more likely to be involved in labour than girls. Girls are more likely to be employed in services and less in agriculture. A large percentage of the children are unpaid family workers (70.9% for boys and 75.4% for girls). There is documented internal trafficking of children for sexual and labour purposes. Outbreaks of conflict in some islands have resulted in child recruitment into armed groups (ILO, undated).

Estimates on the number of children in labour in **Thailand** vary greatly. The ILO puts the number at 4 million, with 600,000 between the ages of 13 and 14 (ILO, 2008d). The US Department of Labour in 2008 quoted literature reviews and site visits suggesting that child labour exists in export industries, including garments, gems, leather bags, shrimp and seafood processing and wood and rattan furniture (USDOL, 2008). Children are also to be found in child domestic labour, agriculture and services, begging, street-based activities and prostitution.

UNICEF reports that Thailand has increased access to basic education. However, the dropout rate is as high as 50% in some of the poorest regions. Only about 30% of eligible Thai children enter secondary school. UNICEF estimates that 15% of students drop out before completing primary school (UNICEF MICS5).

Thailand is a destination country for children trafficked into labour and sexual exploitation from a number of countries and in particular neighbouring Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar. This is grounded in long-established patterns of movement across the borders for temporary and seasonal work and the ILO suggests that there are some 250,000 unregistered foreign children under 18 in Thailand 'as a low estimate' and that, on this basis, 'an estimate of 100,000 working may be realistic' (ILO, 2008d).

Child labour in **Timor-Leste** is to be found in agriculture, the informal sector, family businesses and street-based activities. There are reports of domestic trafficking (rural to the capital, Dili) for sexual purposes. Timor-Leste has a significant problem of youth unemployment (ILO, 2007: 4).

Although the law in **Vietnam** prohibits the employment of children under the age of 15, children generally still share the workload and household responsibilities of the family in both rural and urban environments. Child labour is also exploited in construction, gold mines, timber operations, cargo transport and other hazardous occupations. In urban areas, many children are employed as domestic servants, in restaurants or shops, as street vendors, shoe shiners, sweepers and scavengers (Save the Children, 2008). Children are trafficked into sexual and labour exploitation (ILO-IPEC, 2007).

2.4 A NOTE ON THE INFORMAL ECONOMY

The overwhelming majority of workers in the developing economies of the region work in the informal economy or as contributing family workers. This leaves them more vulnerable to economic risk and gives them little access to social or labour protections to mitigate this risk. Women are particularly likely to be working in the informal sector or in family-based business, which is in itself a vulnerability factor for child labour, since out-of-school children are likely to accompany their mother (for example, while she sells small goods on the street or performs cleaning duties) and then 'join in' the work.

By 2006, the service sector, which includes subsistence street trade activities, had overtaken agriculture as the main sector of employment in East Asia, although agriculture remains the major employer in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. The disempowerment of informal sector workers, because land, infrastructure, finance and, importantly, business skills and learning remain in the hands of employers, inevitably contributes to a cycle of poverty, low education and dependency.

The informal economy remains not only an area that is particularly open to exploitation and child labour, but which is also difficult to document, regulate and police. To this extent, informalization of the economy in the wake of economic crisis may constitute an increased institutional vulnerability factor for children entering child labour.

3. Policy and Programming Response Options

Although children themselves, particularly older children, may participate in, or even single-handedly take, the decision to reallocate their time out of school and into labour, in general the decision to send a child into child labour is a family/parental decision made as part of a broader coping strategy. The key to understanding why child labour occurs is understanding the individual and cumulative vulnerability factors that underlie the decisions that families make on the allocation of the child's time.

While shocks of various kinds may influence these decisions, there are generally also factors already in place or that arise that make it more likely that some families will consider the option of child labour. This paper argues, however, that there is additionally an unmeasurable and as yet unexplored

'human' factor that makes it more likely that some parents include child labour or work as an option, while others reject this outright. It is the coincidence of an increase in vulnerability and behaviour that tolerates child labour as an acceptable option that leads to a child being removed from school (or not being sent there in the first place) and being tasked with earning an income for the family (or, in some cases, being sent into child domestic labour in a third-party household, for example, not earning an income, but ceasing to be a burden on the family finances).

3.1 FAMILY CHOICES

At times of crisis, in making decisions about the allocation of children's time to child labour, parents are faced with a number of options. Some have a negative impact on the child, some leave the child's situation unaltered and some may have a positive impact. Taking the right policy and programming options at the right time can influence the decisions taken and therefore have a significant impact on the outcomes for the child.

Negative Outcomes

Continue sending a child to school, but additionally require her/him to bring in an income. Depending on the age of the child, the nature of the work and the hours worked, this might be acceptable 'light work' or result in the child being in a situation of child labour (including worst forms). This is a very plausible option, however it is risky because it might result in the child underperforming at school, dropping out of school or finding her/himself in hazardous labour or indeed the worst forms. It will require close **monitoring by school personnel** to ensure that the child is not in a situation of child labour and that even light work is not impacting on the child's school performance or health. Since many children in the region already combine school and work, it is also vital to monitor for signs that the hours of work have been increased or that the child has moved from labour into a worst form of child labour.

Remove a child from school in order to send her/him into child labour. Clear indicators do not exist, however this option becomes more likely as vulnerability factors accumulate and is accelerated if trigger factors come into play. It is a strong argument for a range of school-based programmes that include school feeding, education subsidies (uniforms, books, stationery, transport) and other safety net programmes designed to reduce the opportunity cost of schooling.

Remove a child from school to become idle. This may seem unlikely, but it is a possible response if the costs of the child's schooling become a burden and the parents do not wish, or are unable, to send a child to work or into labour. As above, it is a strong argument for school-based and general safety net programmes.

Remove a child from school to replace an adult family member who moves into employment. This is a likely choice, especially in families

that run a family business or smallholding or have young children who need care. While both girls and boys are at risk, girls are particularly likely to be taken out of school to care for children and do housework if it is the mother who finds employment. Again, it is an argument for school-based and general safety net programmes and additionally requires that changes in adult employment patterns be accompanied by improved and affordable childcare services and monitoring of vulnerable children in schools.

Send an idle child into child labour. A very likely occurrence, since the child is a cost to the family with no immediate (income) or longer term (education/work) contribution. This might include putting a child into begging (a form of child labour) or allowing/encouraging/turning a blind eye to a child becoming involved in petty crime (stealing, picking pockets). This is a challenge for programming because these children may not be on the radar screen if they are not involved in some form of organized group or activity outside the home. It requires a range of child labour elimination policy and programme responses.

Seek out opportunities to send a child who is already in child labour (or not) to another place in the expectation of higher income/lower costs to the family. This is particularly likely if a child is already in child labour and there is a family or community tradition of movement for work. This requires specific attention to the full range of anti-trafficking policy and programme responses.

Neutral (or Uncertain) Outcomes

Do nothing at all. Retain the *status quo*, regardless of whether the child is currently at school, in labour, in legitimate work or idle. This is the 'default' option and will most likely be chosen when there are at least expectations of other variables changing (for example, knowledge that the crisis is likely to be short-lived or that mitigating measures are going to be made available promptly). This underlines the importance of **communication** efforts to make available to families information that they need to inform their decisions.

Remove a child (of appropriate age) from school in order to send her/him into legitimate work. This is a real possibility for children in the final years of secondary education (i.e. above the minimum age for work) or for children one or two years below this age if paid apprenticeships or transition programmes are available. It is a strong argument for scholarships or grants to keep children in this category in school. It is also, however, a strong argument for putting part-time apprenticeship or transition programmes (conditional on completion of schooling or specifically designed to complement schooling – so called 'sandwich courses') in place to help these children to transition more easily into work when they are ready to do so.

Remove a child from child labour to become idle. This seems unlikely, although it may be that an employer would put pressure on a family to

remove a child if the work she or he is doing becomes unsatisfactory (for example, because the child is malnourished and cannot perform); there are less costly alternatives (for example, government subsidies for youth employment); or the family is required to do so as a condition of receiving assistance. One concern is that children removed from child labour may be sent into a worst form of child labour because demand exists (for example, girls into sexual exploitation, boys and girls into hazardous work, children of both sexes into the hands of traffickers). The programming options here are those that are usually implemented to shore up family understanding of the impact of child labour and to identify and remove children from situations of labour and provide rehabilitation and reintegration avenues.

Positive Outcomes

Send an idle child (of appropriate age) to school. This may seem unlikely but, in fact, if a child is doing nothing to contribute to the family, but is rather a cost (food, clothing, etc.) and a school feeding or grants programme is brought into operation, it may be more cost effective for the family to send the child to school. This is a strong argument for school-based feeding programmes and education subsidies.

Send an idle child (of appropriate age) to legitimate work. This is an optimal solution because it sees an unemployed minor of working age entering employment. This presumes, of course, that the employment is non-hazardous and conforms to Decent Work standards and that the child has completed her or his schooling. It is a strong argument for launching or accelerating youth employment schemes.

Remove a child (of appropriate age – most likely primary or lower secondary) from child labour to return them to school. This may seem particularly unlikely, however it may be indicated if the returns from school feeding programmes or grants outweigh the returns from the child's labour. This is a strong argument for these programmes to be put in place. Additionally, there may be a need for bridging education programmes for children returning or entering school after child labour, especially for those entering higher grades.

3.2 PROPOSED ACTIONS

Based on the analysis of options that a family might consider when reassessing their coping strategies, the following actions might be considered.

Safety Nets

The World Bank stresses that countries that already have safety nets in place should respond to the current crises by scaling these up; where safety nets are not in place, these should be initiated for longer term resilience to future shocks.

Safety nets include: cash transfers (conditional/unconditional); food distribution; price subsidies; agricultural inputs; family benefits; childcare support; public works; health, asset and life insurance; school-based food programmes; education scholarships; and micro-finance. These should be targeted at newly vulnerable populations in the first instance, especially in urban areas (since rural areas produce some of their own food whereas urban areas are dependent on food purchases), and very young children. Guarcello et al. (2002) stress the importance of targeting children at risk, however they note that risk is not based solely on family income/economic status, but that other vulnerability factors must be taken into account.

Cash Transfers

Both conditional and unconditional cash transfers are recommended in the literature (World Bank, 2008b: 6). However, it is clear that making cash transfers conditional on all school-aged children attending school is strongly indicated in efforts to stave off child labour. The World Bank argues that transfers in cash are preferable to transfers in kind because they allow the family to use the funds according to their specific needs.

The World Bank also recommends income transfers, cash or in kind, such as family benefits, food vouchers, disability allowances, child benefits or food assistance. These must be targeted and aim to boost the incomes of beneficiaries by some 20–25% (2008b: 6). Cash transfers should be adequate and periodic (for a limited period, made clear at the outset) and not be made as an up-front payment which might prompt a poor family to consider moving for work, increasing the vulnerability of both the child and the family in general.

Food Distribution

The World Bank argues that general subsidies are more expensive at times of economic crisis, are fiscally unsustainable and that they undermine optimal adjustment (World Bank, 2008a: 34). They are also untargeted, so distort prices to producers (including smallholder farmers) and may disrupt food supply chains. Food distribution proper is an option only where national supplies permit this. Cash transfers that allow families to vary their eating habits to adjust to available foodstuffs are preferable.

Boosting Agriculture

The UN Secretary-General's High-Level Task Force on the food crisis, UNICEF, ILO and the World Bank have all stressed the importance of increasing agricultural inputs, in particular investment in small-scale agriculture (seeds, fertilizers, irrigation). They note that, in both the short and longer term, boosting smallholder farmer food production will make food available and support rural families and economies.

However, it is important to note that this might also provide incentives for rural families to exploit children as agricultural labourers. Many rural children help out on family smallholdings and already have the required skills; it is vital that this 'helping hand' does not become fully-fledged child labour. Providing rural producers with adolescent workers through subsidized employment schemes may reduce the likelihood of this happening. The young workers will need appropriate training and safety equipment to ensure that they can handle farm equipment and that there are no threats to their health or safety.

Childcare Support

Where families increase household income through female employment, it is vital that enhanced (even temporary) childcare services are available and accessible to women who have children below school age or any other children who need care (sick children, for example). Where communities do not have government or private childcare places already, alternative schemes can quickly be put into place.

School-based Programmes

These include school feeding programmes and take-home rations that not only safeguard a child's nutrition, but also provide an incentive for the child to attend school. The World Bank and UNICEF both suggest prioritizing secondary grades for fee waivers, scholarships and grants for clothes, books and transport, since children in this group are generally a higher cost for the family because of the distance travelled to school and higher expenses related to schooling, and so are particularly at risk of being taken out of school to find work.

Multi-level Monitoring

Keeping children in school is not the same as keeping them out of work/labour. Many children in East Asia go to school and also work and this will continue to be an option that many parents choose. Vital to protecting children who are already studying and working, and those who begin some work while still in school, is **school-based monitoring**. Teachers and other educational staff need rapid training on how to recognize signs of a child potentially having started work or of an increased workload: fatigue, sudden absences, lack of concentration, physical injuries, etc. A system of alerts to protection or social services should be put in place and used to report cases where children are at risk.

Upgraded **labour monitoring**, both governmental and through workers' organizations and employer groups, is also important at times of crisis to identify children moving into child labour.

Social monitoring is crucial, and social services already in place to identify and protect children at risk should receive additional support where possible. These include visits by family social workers; mother and baby clinics and postnatal visits (in both cases, staff can also check on other children in the

family); facilitated mothers' groups or meetings at which information can be shared; crisis hotlines or other reporting mechanisms; and referral services.

Micro-finance/Income Generation

Programmes that reinforce the family's ability to earn an income or use available funds better are a longer-term necessity given that, at times of crisis, markets are likely to be less open and easy to penetrate. It is important to remember that expectations are often raised along with income and may prompt migration (a risk for children when it is not legal, prepared and informed). Such programmes should always be accompanied by trafficking prevention measures, such as information and awareness raising, especially in communities with a history of labour migration.

Youth Employment Schemes

Youth unemployment is a global problem. Getting young people of working age into Decent Work must be a priority and is an important step in reducing the vulnerability of younger children to enter labour prematurely. Youth employment schemes, including apprenticeships, subsidies to employers, accelerated school-to-work transition schemes, 'work for dole' schemes and subsidies for diversification training and non-formal education for those young people who need to upgrade their basic skills are all important in the medium to long term to reduce the likelihood of child labour and, in some instances, may also be a short-term option.

Information, Communication and Education (ICE) Initiatives

Accompanying all the actions outlined above should be immediate and sustained ICE initiatives on the importance of education and the risks of child labour. These should be both general and targeted; families might receive educational briefings during parents' meetings in schools, at health clinics, mother and baby clinics and other places that parents and families frequent. The aim of these should be to influence family decision making in a context where options are being made available, so it is important that briefings include information about available programmes.

Clearly, more work needs to be done (particularly by behavioural researchers) to further develop this model of family decision making in relation to use of the child's time. While there is a growing body of research on the impact of economic shock on family finances and investment in children, the leap of understanding has not been taken into the links between a family's economic status and the choice of child labour as a coping strategy. Only when this is clearer will we be able to understand why some families choose to send their children into labour while others with the same economic profile do not. Additionally, therefore, the following proposals are made to support future research and programming.

Data and Profiling

An overwhelming imperative remains the need for comprehensive, systematic national data on child labour, fully disaggregated by the child's age, sex, (dis)ability, educational profile, family circumstances and sector worked/risk factors observed. Gaps in data in all regions continue to hamper research and planning. Data and information should be shared transparently and in a form that allows researchers to analyse raw data, test hypotheses and draw conclusions.

Vulnerability Profiling

Vulnerability profiling is an obvious byproduct of comprehensive data collection and provides another reason why governments should consider this as a matter of urgency and donors should provide support to quickly build up a better platform of reliable information. Vulnerability must be measured at the level of the individual child, the family and the community, and the institutional level, in order to begin to draw up the most detailed profile possible of the family that chooses child labour as an acceptable coping strategy.

It is also important to monitor incidences of violence against children. While violence against children occurs in the lives of children from all socio-economic backgrounds, for children living in poverty, the risks and likelihood of violence and high-risk survival behaviour are significantly more likely in times of crisis, especially as protection mechanisms falter due to other stressors and demands on the family.

Examples of likely changes include an increase in the incidence of children coming into conflict with the law for survival crimes such as stealing, restitution of stolen items or status offences such as vagrancy or loitering with intent; increased numbers of children separated from families, abandoned, lost or 'left behind' as a result of migration; more children being placed in institutional care or informally adopted without due process; and an increase in the level of child abuse, including physical and sexual abuse and neglect, and children being forced or resorting to commercial sex to support the family.

3.3 A FINAL WORD

While the importance of programmes to prevent children from entering child labour and to keep them in school is clear, other longer term actions will also be necessary, both within the frameworks of National Action Plans against Child Labour and Time-bound Programmes against the Worst Forms of Child Labour, as well as other frameworks for child protection and welfare.

In the medium term, it will be vital to regularly monitor both the impact on families of continuing economic crisis and of the programmes that have been put in place. Vulnerability is not a static phenomenon, but constantly shifting; poverty deepens, incomes may rise as a result of participation in programmes, children grow and their demands on family finances change, family earners may become unemployed or conversely find work, people get sick or die. At

a community level, there may be immigration or emigration, communities may find common resources that can be used to support at risk families and negative economic factors may see protection mechanisms close down or others grow.

In terms of family choices, there will be a progression that grows out of the family's purchasing power. In economic terms, increased prices will lead to a decrease in real purchasing power that, as a result of economic crisis, will also equate to reduced nominal purchasing power. Together, these lead to income and substitution effects over many rounds. It may be that in Round 1, for example, families will deal with reduced purchasing power by simply reducing family expenditure on marginal goods or, if they are already in poverty, on food (income effect). Round 2 may see them replacing their normal (now reduced) diet with less expensive or poorer quality food (substitution effect). If, over time, this response is not adequate, families in a position to do so may, in Round 3, try to increase family food production (for example, by planting vegetables), which may lead to increased pressure on water for irrigation, leaving less for personal hygiene, leading to another round of decisions if health begins to be affected.

The challenge is that it is impossible to identify or quantify how many 'rounds' a family will pass through before making a decision about the allocation of children's time, and that decision in itself may be reviewed through successive rounds.

In short, the vulnerability profile assigned to a family or an individual child as programme planning begins will shift and will need to be reassessed at regular intervals, as the family also goes through different stages of response to the challenges posed by the crisis.

NOTE

1. SIMPOC (Statistical Information and Monitoring Programme on Child Labour) at the ILO regularly publishes data gathered in cooperation with national governments or research institutes or through SIMPOC data collection exercises (www.ilo.org/ipec/). UNICEF's MICS database, additionally, provides regular updates on nationally sourced child welfare indicators (www.childinfo.org).

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RÉSUMÉ

La Signification de la Crise Économique Pour le Travail des Enfants

Cet article examine l'impact probable de la crise économique sur le travail des enfants. Il soutient que le manque de recherches concluantes sur ce sujet résulte d'un accent simplifié à l'excès sur le travail des enfants comme un phénomène économique, sans prendre en considération le contexte de comportement dans lequel le travail des enfants se produit. Le comportement des familles en temps de crises, quand le chef de famille prend des décisions pour se débrouiller et revoit l'allocation de son temps et celui de ses enfants, est essentiel pour comprendre pourquoi certaines familles envoient leurs enfants au travail tandis que les autres ne le font pas – bien que leurs profils socioéconomiques soient identiques. Cet article fait plusieurs recommandations, parmi lesquelles: la nécessité de développer plus profondément le modèle économique / modèle de comportement; l'amélioration des données compréhensives et désagrégées quant au travail des enfants; l'investissement dans les filets de sécurité; des politiques et des programmes qui essaient d'influencer les décisions de famille en faveur de l'éducation des enfants et la protection du travail; et une orientation plus raffinée vers les populations vulnérables liées à ces politiques.

RESUMEN

El Impacto de la Crisis Económica en el Trabajo Infantil

Este documento examina el probable impacto de la crisis económica en el trabajo infantil. Propone que la escasez de investigaciones concluyentes sobre este tema resulta de un énfasis demasiado simplificado en el trabajo infantil como un fenómeno económico, sin tener en cuenta el contexto de comportamiento en que se produce. La conducta de las familias en tiempos de crisis – cuando la cabeza de familia está tomando decisiones para enfrentarse a los problemas, y está revisando la asignación de su tiempo y el tiempo de sus hijos – es decisiva para entender las razones por las cuales algunas familias mandan a sus hijos a trabajar, mientras que otras no lo hacen, aun cuando sus perfiles socioeconómicos sean idénticos. El documento propone varias recomendaciones, inclusive: el desarrollo más profundo del modelo económico/modelo de comportamiento; un mejoramiento de los datos comprensivos y desagregados sobre el trabajo infantil; la inversión en redes de seguridad; la formación de políticas y programas que intentan influenciar las decisiones de familia a favor de la educación de los niños y la protección

del trabajo infantil; y un sistema más refinado para ayudar a las poblaciones vulnerables asociadas con estas políticas.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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