

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Child welder © David Parker

Executive summary

Children in hazardous work are in many respects the silent majority within child labour. Although they appear in photos, when it comes to action they are often eclipsed by forms of child labour that have captured the public eye, such as child soldiers or trafficked children, or they are subsumed within general child labour efforts. Still too few policies or programmes are geared to the special needs of children who do hazardous work.

There are solid reasons for giving this issue urgent attention: (1) the scale of the problem – estimates place the current total of children in hazardous work at 115 million; (2) the recent rise in hazardous work among older children – an increase of 20 per cent within 4 years; and (3) the growing evidence that adolescents suffer high rates of injury at work, in comparison with adult workers.

There are also sound reasons to believe that it is in the area of hazardous work that major progress can be made in eliminating child labour. This report shows that there has been some real success in removing younger children from hazardous work, as well as in reducing the number of girls caught in this worst form of child labour. This suggests that efforts are paying off.

Hazardous work of children has been highlighted in recent ILO policy directives, such as the Global Plan of Action on Child Labour which set 2016 as the target date for elimination of the worst forms of child labour. The Hague Global Conference on Child Labour in 2010 also called for more focus on hazardous work.

Against this background the ILO has been reviewing what is known about the problem and examining “good practices” in dealing with it. This report offers a summary of this knowledge and practice and proposes how we might move forward.

The report is divided into three parts. The first provides a general overview of the issue. It discusses hazardous work of children in terms of how it is defined (Chapter 1), how many children are affected (Chapter 2), and why, from a health and a legal standpoint (Chapters 3 and 4, respectively), children require special protection.

The second part considers the research evidence regarding the problem and positive initiatives in addressing it. The research summary (Chapter 5) looks at the scientific data with respect to seven sectors: crop agriculture, fishing, domestic service, manufacturing, mining and quarrying, construction, and street and service industries. These were selected not because they are necessarily the “worst”, but in order to demonstrate the importance of knowing and understanding the risks inherent in an industry, the importance of conducting a “risk assessment” as to how the risks manifest themselves in a particular situation or locality, and the importance of using this information to identify which activities are age appropriate and which are not.

In this part the report warns that children’s lives are being lost or shortened by being exposed to hazardous work. Many people simply do not realize how vulnerable children are to toxic chemicals, to extreme temperatures, to repetitive mind-numbing tasks, to isolation or to denigration, threats and violence.

Also within this part, Chapter 6 presents a sampling of concrete activities that have potential for addressing hazardous work of children on a wider scale. They are offered for consideration as potential models because each embodies an approach that has been used successfully in a variety of countries. They approach the problem of hazardous work of children from different angles and under the leadership of different parties: the government, trade unions, employers and the community.

The third and final part gathers the threads from the previous parts together into a conceptual framework that aims to show what a coordinated, comprehensive effort to stop hazardous work of children should look like. Instead of seeing child labour as a problem specific to a rather narrow age group, it urges that we take a life-cycle approach. This involves a stronger focus on ensuring that education and training policies prepare children for work life so as to achieve an effective school-to-work transition. It also requires that when adolescents move into the labour force there are adequate safeguards for their safety and health.

The report stresses that addressing hazardous work by children is not only a technical issue. Major and sustainable progress requires public policies that address the root causes of child labour: tackling poverty, ensuring children have access to education and providing a social protection floor which protects the vulnerable.

Although the number of children in hazardous work is large, some of the most dangerous types of child work are concentrated in specific localities, specific occupations, specific tasks and specific age groups. Focusing energies on these pockets could go a long way towards generating the momentum needed to make progress. However, the report also warns that the scale of the problem could increase in many countries due to demographic changes, as youthful population bulges move into adolescence.

Overall, the report makes the case for children in hazardous work being made a priority for action over the next 5 years. It calls for specific action on three fronts:

- ▶ Making a renewed effort to ensure that all children are in school, at least until the minimum age of employment;
- ▶ Strengthening workplace safety and health for all workers, but with specific safeguards for youth between the minimum age of employment and the age of 18;
- ▶ Providing the crucial legal foundation for action against hazardous child work, with the support of workers and employers.