

Childhood foregone

Two years after governments set a 2025 target to end child labour, delegates from 100 nations at a recent conference in Buenos Aires were told that they will miss the deadline. The implication is also that realising the objective could take well over 20 years after the expiry of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimates that eight years from now, around 121 million boys and girls would still be engaged in various occupations. The present figure is around 152 million children aged 5-17. That is to say, only 31 million children are expected to be rescued between now and 2025 from conditions that deprive them for life of the fundamental ingredients of basic survival.

Should countries resolve to reinvigorate their efforts to reach the target, they would be looking at a reduction each year of 19 million. That is close to five times the prevalent pace of decline. That would be a stupendous record of eradicating a practice inconsistent with modern democratic norms.

That goal seems elusive at the moment on a number of indicators. Overall, there was a slowdown in the reduction of child labour, just one percentage point, during the four years until 2016. In contrast was the fall of three percentage points in the corresponding period up to 2012. More worrisome is that there was almost no progress with respect to the rescue of children under 12 years in the four years since 2012. Equally, the decline in child labour among girls was only half the proportion of that of boys during this period.

The ILO points to four systemic failures that underpin the lack of progress. Foremost is the absence of national legislation to give effect to global conventions on the employment of children in hazardous industries, as well as on the minimum age of work. The fact that the two instruments have received the largest number of ratifications brings into sharp focus the lack of harmony between global commitments and domestic priorities. Relevant here is the research on the incoherency between laws that prescribe a minimum age for employment and those for completion of compulsory school education. It also means that the expansion of quality universal basic education has to extend beyond the fulfilment of statutory provisions.

Complementing the legal inconsistencies is the lack of effective labour inspections in the informal economy. Around 71% of working children are concentrated in the agriculture sector, with 69% of them undertaking unpaid work in family units. A strong legal framework that mandates punitive action against errant firms and recruitment of youth and adults are important tools to guarantee the protection of children. Above all, it is inconceivable that these policies could be entrenched in the absence of strong collective bargaining mechanisms and effective social protection policies from the cradle to the end of their lives.

The definition of harassment needs to be constantly updated, and the process for justice made more robust

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