



# good work, bad work, tough choices



Child Labour and  
World Vision's  
Area Development  
Programs  
in Thailand, India,  
and Philippines

Author – Matt Scott

A key element of this research project is direct participation by children. They described the circumstances of their work and they defined what types of work they think are desirable and undesirable. Children in Thailand were also invited to draw pictures of themselves working, titled "Me Working." They also drew pictures of "Good Jobs" and "Bad Jobs," to show what factors were important for them. Selected children were given cameras to document children in their communities who were involved in various types of work.

The children's photographs and drawings provide a context for understanding the nature of child work through their own eyes. In combination with other data that was collected and analyzed, the drawings were used to identify research findings and make recommendations to improve the conditions of their lives.



SARA AUSTIN

(above) – Street children drawing pictures to depict themselves at work. These children live as a group under a bridge in Bangkok. They collect scraps of metal and cardboard during the night to sell.



SARA AUSTIN

(left) – A 13 year old refugee from Myanmar sells roses on a bridge in Bangkok to support her family.

(below) – A drawing by a 13 year old girl (see photo at left) entitled "Me at Work — Selling roses on the bridge".



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SARA AUSTIN

**World Vision**



World Vision is a Christian humanitarian organization reaching out to a hurting world.

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## Abbreviations

ADP	Area Development Program
CPP	Children's Participatory Photography
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Child
DAC	Development Assistance Committee – Members of the OECD who provide ODA to developing countries
DPC	Daily Profile Chart
ECL	Exploitative Child Labour
ECPAT	End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography, & Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GC	Girl Child
HBLP	Hnong Bua Lam Phu
IACE	Initiative Against Child Exploitation
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IPEC	International Program on the Elimination of Child Labour
NGO	Non-Government Organisation
ODA	Overseas Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
SCF	Save the Children Fund
UN	United Nations
WV	World Vision
WVC	World Vision Canada
WVDF	World Vision Development Foundation (Philippines)
WVFT	World Vision Foundation of Thailand

# Table of Contents

<b>Abbreviations</b> .....	.2
<b>Acknowledgement</b> .....	.4
<b>Message from the President – World Vision Canada</b> .....	.5
<b>Research Summary</b> .....	.7
<b>Good Work or Bad Work</b> .....	.8
<b>Tough Choices</b> .....	.11
1. Legislative Approach .....	.11
2. Market-based Approach .....	.11
3. Child Development Approach .....	.12
<b>Initial Findings</b> .....	.13
1. Legislative approach can be helpful .....	.13
2. Poverty alleviation efforts have a positive impact .....	.13
3. Family loyalty and the rights of children can work together .....	.14
<b>Listening to Children</b> .....	.15
Work and Education: More Tough Choices .....	.16
<b>Recommendations</b> .....	.19
1. Invest in understanding specific circumstances of child workers .....	.19
2. Increase expenditures on preventive measures .....	.19
3. Enforce the ILO Convention .....	.21
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	.22

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—Matt Scott, World Vision

## Introduction

One of the things I love most about my work is the chance to meet children and to listen to them, their stories, their viewpoints, their aspirations. I've learned so much from young people and have had my own world view shaped by their enthusiasm and insight.

One group of children whose voices especially need to be heard are child labourers. World Vision supported this research project, *Good Work, Bad Work, Tough Choices*, to learn more about child labour directly from working children and their families. Listening to their voices is essential if we are going to develop practical programs and effective public policies to eliminate child exploitation.

Child labour is a complex problem. On the one hand, I have seen the life-limiting impacts on children who spend long hours operating heavy machines in dreary surroundings. On the other, I have witnessed the devastating impact on children and families when heavy-handed measures are imposed from the outside to eliminate their jobs without any consultation.

It is easy to say we are opposed to child labour; the challenge is to develop effective solutions that address the needs of children and families.

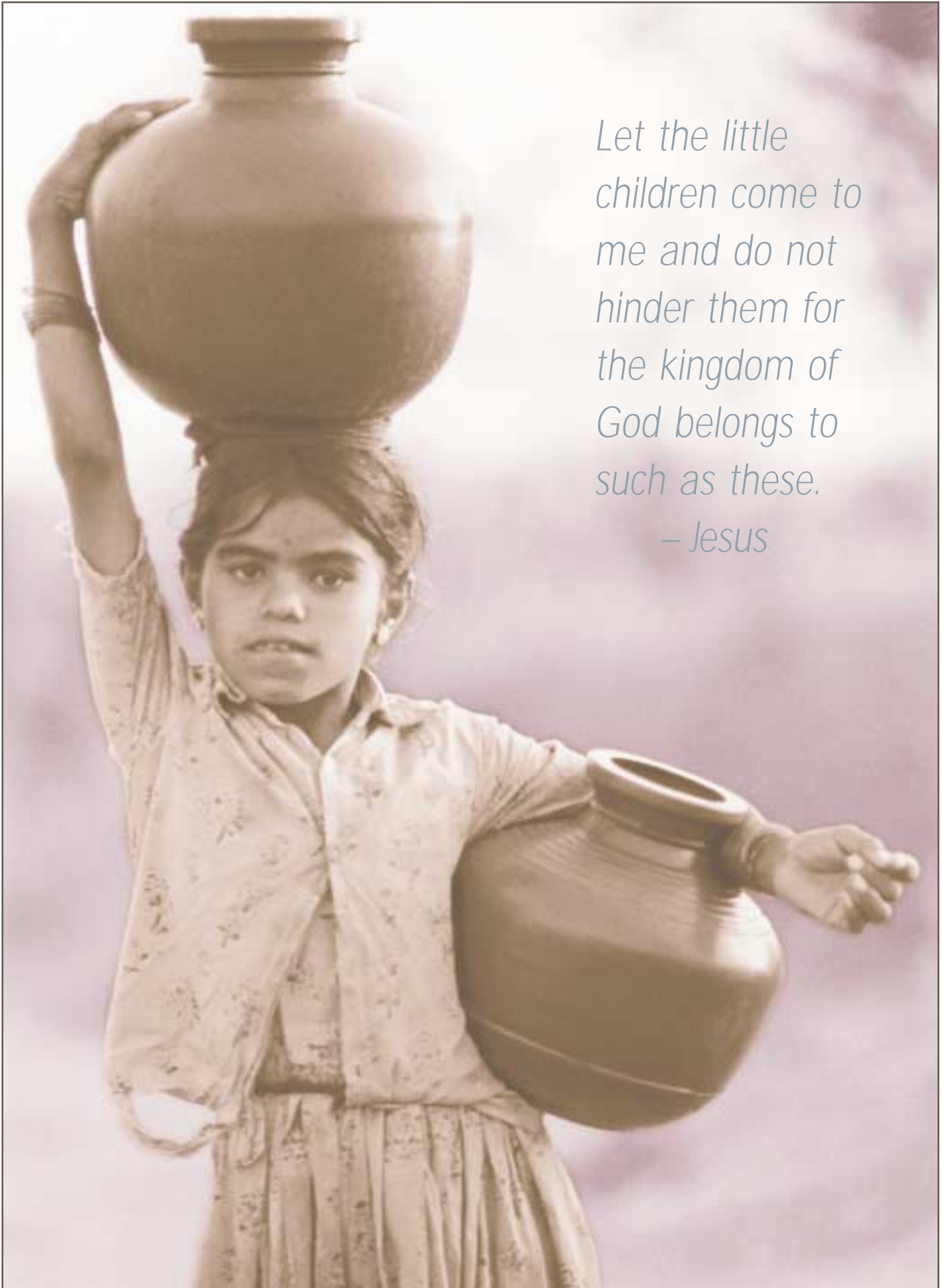
The research highlights the importance of taking seriously what children have to say about their own circumstances. Children do know the difference between work that develops their skills and allows them time to study and play, and work that is dangerous, harmful or mind-killing.

The research also suggests that the rights of children can be respected without ignoring the strength of family loyalty and the importance children themselves give to making a contribution to the well-being of the community.

For World Vision, respect for children is rooted in our conviction that every child is created by God, and each has tremendous potential to contribute to the world around them. Our Christian faith reminds us that the strongest judgment is leveled against those who abuse and neglect children. They are not cheap labour, nor are they the helpless recipients of our charity. Children want to be accepted as active participants in their own development. Our challenge is to provide room for them to grow and opportunities to develop their potential so they can make their own contributions to the well-being of their families and communities.

The place to start is to listen. The more we listen to the voices of working children, the more effective we will be in helping create an environment that genuinely respects their rights and meets their needs.

*—Dave Toycon, President of World Vision Canada*



*Let the little children come to me and do not hinder them for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.  
– Jesus*

# Research Summary

Children have laboured throughout human history; in the 1990s, public interest in the plight of child labourers in the developing world increased enormously. Recent international advocacy campaigns such as the Global March Against Child Labour have raised the profile of child labourers. The 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child has also focused the world's attention on the difficulties children face everywhere. Despite substantial attention, however, the global problem of child labour is not well understood. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has suggested that as many as 250 million children under 15 are working around the world. But the ILO admits this figure is a very rough estimate. None of the countries with large and visible numbers of child labourers collect detailed statistics. Even less is known about the specific circumstances of those children. We simply do not know enough about working children in the developing world.

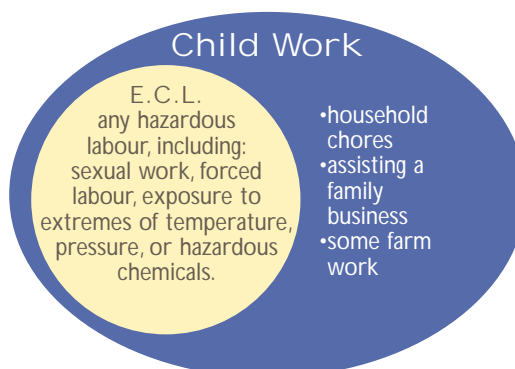
The main thrust of this research project is to highlight the need to listen to children in order to develop effective solutions to the problem of child labour. Children in this project, who live in India, Thailand and the Philippines, told us that they want to work, that they play an active role in choosing the kind of work they do, and that their goal is to support their family. Whether they live at home in the country or on the street in large cities, children say that they hope for good jobs, fear bad jobs, and struggle with difficult choices. They have strong, clear ideas about what kinds of work children should and should not be doing, and they deserve to be heard. According to many development practitioners, "we need a change in thinking that allows us to see children as agents of transformation" (Myers, 191). ■

**Children as young as 5 or 6 work in the garbage dump in Manila. The best trash goes to the quick and the limber.**



# Good Work or Bad Work?

The children<sup>i</sup> who participated in this study, from India, the Philippines and Thailand, spoke openly about the work they do, whether household chores or repetitive tasks on a factory floor. Most of the children whose voices are reflected here did not regard school as work. Those who did regard school as “work” generally valued it as a desirable form of work. What really matters to children, however, is distinguishing between **child work** and **exploitative or intolerable child labour** (Regional Working Group, 11). Child work is not necessarily exploitative; it is usually beneficial to child development; and it is sometimes better than irrelevant or inappropriate education. **Exploitative child labour**, on the other hand, robs children of their childhood, their dignity and their rights. This crucial distinction forms the basis of the research and permits the development of a variety of initiatives specifically aimed at eradicating exploitative child labour, rather than all child work.



Making a clear distinction, however, between child work that is part of the normal development of children and harmful work is not always easy. A great deal of confusion has resulted from vague use of the phrase “child labour”. Differing definitions of what constitutes exploitative child labour function in

various countries and even between different communities within a region.

In the 1997 State of the World's Children Report, UNICEF listed the following characteristics of intolerable child labour:

- full-time work at too early an age
- too many hours spent working
- work that exerts too much physical, social, or psychological stress
- work and life on the streets in bad conditions
- inadequate pay
- too much responsibility
- work that hampers access to education (by absorbing too much time, leaving children too exhausted, making the child miss classes, undermining the child's notion of the value of education, traumatising due to mistreatment affecting concentration)

Fig. 1

Most Unacceptable Types of Work	Unacceptable Jobs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• operating big machines</li> <li>• direct contact with chemicals</li> <li>• carrying heavy things</li> <li>• long working hours</li> <li>• stay outside in the extreme weather</li> <li>• high risk of being abused by strangers</li> <li>• prostitution/flesh trade, prone to AIDS/HIV, and STDs</li> <li>• domestic work – sexual abuse and maltreatment</li> <li>• agriculture using sharp objects</li> <li>• pyrotechnics</li> <li>• working in factories that might cause back cramps</li> <li>• risky and harmful to physical and mental conditions</li> <li>• intellectually and spiritually destructive</li> <li>• interfering with health</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Soldier</li> <li>• Fisheries</li> <li>• Industrial work</li> <li>• Construction</li> <li>• Porter</li> <li>• Garbage collecting</li> <li>• Prostitute</li> <li>• Waitress (sexual harassment, drug abuse, cigarettes)</li> <li>• Fireworks Factory</li> <li>• Salt processing field</li> <li>• Removing landmines</li> <li>• Mining/quarrying</li> <li>• Deep-sea fishing</li> </ul>

work that hampers access to education (by absorbing too much time, leaving children too exhausted, making the child miss classes, undermining the child's notion of the value of education, traumatising due to mistreatment affecting concentration)

- work that undermines children's dignity and self-esteem, such as slavery or bonded labour and sexual exploitation
- work that is detrimental to full social and psychological development (physical, cognitive, emotional, social and moral development)

In a recent Asian forum on child labour, children from around Asia developed a similar list of what they agreed to be the most

<sup>i</sup> Even within the UN system, the definition of child is open to interpretation. The CRC considers all persons under 18 years of age as children. Specifically in regard to labour, the ILO has suggested that children under 15 years of age should not be working full-time. For the purpose of this study, the ILO definition is used as a general guide.

intolerable forms of child labour. What adults called exploitative child labour, children said were “unacceptable” forms of child labour (Regional Working Group 1997). Fig. 1 depicts the children’s list of unacceptable types of work (left column) and unacceptable jobs.

Whether in India, Thailand or the Philippines, children face the same types of unacceptable hazards. One of the most inexcusable hazards, however, is the failure on the part of many policymakers and activists to understand the circumstances of work that children face<sup>ii</sup>. Failure to understand these circumstances has led to well-intended initiatives, in the name of ‘protecting’ children, which have failed to do exactly that. The Harkin Bill, passed by the US Congress in 1993, was designed to discourage US imports of child-produced garments from Bangladesh. Instead of discouraging child labour, however, the Bill indirectly forced hundreds of thousands of Bengali children, who still needed to support their families, into more hazardous and more exploitative work in less regulated sectors. It remains the clearest example of “how sanctions used as blunt trade instruments have long-term, unforeseen consequences, with the result that they harm, instead of help children” (Scott 1997). Although the Bill’s supporters had the best interests of children in mind, the lack of complementary measures, such as an increase in direct assistance for primary education, resulted in harm for the children the Bill was designed to assist. Closer consultation with children would have allowed a more holistic and effective policy solution.

Just as critical to effective protective measures, however, are meaningful initiatives to promote the participation of children who must work in efforts to achieve safer and healthier environments. A variety of innovative initiatives in South and Southeast Asia have linked child labourers with policymakers in the search for solutions. Despite advances in understanding, however, the balance of political rhetoric in industrialised *and* developing countries leans toward the eradication of all child work. The issue is a complex one; simplifications of this nature are unhelpful because they flatly ignore the persistence of poverty and the difficult choices that children face.

Under the best circumstances, work provided opportunities for social interaction, education (often



rivaling or surpassing what was available in the classroom), income for personal purchases and meaningful contribution to the family income. Some kinds of work evoked negative responses from children, depending on the specific circumstances. For instance, rural boys in Northern Thailand said they found mushroom cultivation highly undesirable, whereas jungle foraging was highly desirable. Girls in the same region, by contrast, tended to dislike jungle foraging and preferred schoolwork, something their male friends found undesirable. But making assumptions about the categories of work children prefer – without their input - is unhelpful. What makes work desirable depends on a variety of factors, which the children identified broadly as: good earning potential; high demand for that type of work; low danger or risk associated with the job; and a job that is not too physically or mentally demanding. Designing programs that incorporate these observations by children will go a long way to addressing the particular conditions of working children.

Children must be allowed to have a voice in decisions about what is appropriate and inappropriate work, according to their knowledge and abilities.

**Bad Jobs**  
**“Getting up early to work on the farm, and spray pesticides”**  
**An 11 year old girl in Ban Mai, Phayao.**

<sup>ii</sup> In this research we have sought to abide by three cardinal principles in understanding child work: a) shed all previous assumptions b) understand *why* children work, and c) “systematically listen to children” (Boyden et al, 1998).

Policymakers, for their part, must weigh children's perspectives more heavily in the design and implementation of programs to eradicate exploitative work and promote healthy work. The results gathered from children in the three countries studied in this project are remarkably similar to what children have identified as most helpful to them in other consultative projects. The Children's Forum of the 1997 Regional Working Group, for instance, identified a similar list to what the children's drawings, interviews and focus groups in Thailand identified as appropriate work circumstances:

- the ability to continue education and/or training
- sufficient rest
- time to play
- awareness of their legal rights as child workers
- opportunity to say no to hazardous work and be protected from harassment
- access to safe work programs

While the children did identify a few specific jobs as being intolerable, they tended to focus on factors related to the circumstances of work. Rather than certain types of work, children identified 'non-negotiable' principles. Particular jobs were unacceptable because "...when we are employed in these jobs, we have no time for study and education, no time to play and rest and we are exposed to unsafe working conditions and are not protected" (Regional Working Group 1997).

When children in both rural and urban Thai communities were given an opportunity to draw

pictures of good jobs for children, for example, they typically included the following characteristics:

- proximity to or location in the home
- involved friends and/or family members
- healthy environment free from hazards
- did not involve abuse of power relationships between adults and children

The circumstances of the jobs that these children define as good take into account the interests of their families and communities, as well as their own personal interests. By integrating these various factors into their drawings, children have represented themselves as members of a community that functions better as a result of their work; their contribution has value not only to themselves as individuals but also for their families. While having a job close to home was a central theme through many of the children's drawings, being close to one's family does not necessarily represent protection from danger or hazards. Many children come from homes where abuse is an issue, or where the working conditions of their family do not protect them from harm. The drawings displayed here represent "good jobs for Thai children" as the children themselves drew them. In most cases the children have envisioned themselves as being members of a healthy family situation in this "ideal environment" that they have created.

The drawings and the research speak clearly, however, about both the kinds of work that children want protection from and the kind they prefer. The research attempts to define the specific

circumstances children find themselves in, whether urban or rural, whether boys or girls, whether in school or out of school. The focus group discussions, surveys and participatory exercises sought to hear from children and adults affected by exploitative child labour. The ideas presented here were discussed with the communities concerned, and will continue to be pursued with them. The analysis presented below was compiled from all of the sampling activities. They are followed with recommendations for effective policies to help working children remain free of exploitation. ■

**Good Jobs**  
**"Working with the buffalo on the farm."**  
**A 14 year old street boy.**



# Tough Choices

There is strong public support in industrialised countries for eliminating exploitative child labour. Full-time work or exploitative work is seen as a violation of a child's fundamental rights, specifically to a childhood free of exploitation, and filled with learning and play. But when it comes to translating public concern into public policy, this issue has proved more difficult to handle. Few agree on what constitute the most effective tools for addressing the issue.

Three main approaches have dominated the international policy response to child labour in the developing world in the last decade: the legislative approach, market-based mechanisms, and a child development approach. Clearly none of these approaches, on their own, can address all of the complex socio-economic and cultural aspects of child labour. World Vision strongly endorses and engages in interventions which integrate all three approaches, and like many agencies, we continue to search for the most effective mix of the following three approaches.

1. The **legislative approach** focuses on international covenants and national legislation. The best example of this is the June 1999 ILO Convention on the most intolerable forms of child labour. This approach focuses on the development of international standards, national laws, penalties for violation, and enforcement mechanisms to encourage the widest possible adherence to laws that protect children from harmful labour practices. The capacity of the international community to enforce such standards consistently is pivotal to maintaining a level playing field in a global economy. A great deal of harm can be inflicted on working children by well-meaning but inadequate legislative prohibitions on child labour, such as the US Harkin Bill mentioned earlier.

Furthermore, the legislative approach only addresses the formal, regulated economy. The vast majority of intolerable and exploitative child labour occurs in the informal economy. In many cases it is often far more harmful than what could be regulated and enforced in the formal economy. In a paper published for the World Bank, Siddiqi and Patrinos suggest that the prohibitive approach is at best unjustified, and at times misguided. While the legislative approach has led to many policy failures, the strengths of it lie in its ability to create and refine international minimal norms for the



treatment of working children, and to attach moral stigma to the violation of these norms.

2. **Market-based mechanisms** to control child labour focus on the use of consumer action in the North to raise awareness about the plight of working children. A major weakness of market-based approaches, as with legislative ones, is the failure to recognise the centrality of children's incomes to families in poverty. A number of groups have tried to effect change through this mechanism. World Vision's experience is that such measures have not provided meaningful long-term solutions. 'Buycott' campaigns only affect a tiny fraction of the problem, and often negatively affect children in the same way that legislative approaches such as the Harkin Bill have.

**Bad Jobs**  
"Carrying heavy loads of rice"  
An 18 year old girl from Bantajampi, Phayao.

## Case Study: Market-based campaigns & Nike

In response to widespread consumer campaigns in North America and Europe, the Nike Corporation adopted a Code of Conduct on labour practices in January 1999, applicable to all its sub-contractors. The Code establishes age limits for different types of work involved in the manufacturing of athletic footwear and apparel. More strenuous, complex or hazardous work is restricted to workers 18 years of age, and all other workers must be 16 years of age or older. Many non-governmental organisations are involved in the monitoring and verification of Nike's code, as well as in the education of workers regarding their human rights.

Impoverished children will always work, especially where acute poverty is widespread and where severe income disparities exist. Studies in India have shown that the earnings of a child labourer on average account for a third of total household income (Mehra-Kerpelman 1996).

Consumer campaigns only have value if they acknowledge the necessity of children's work, and focus on ways in which children can be protected from workplace dangers. Well-designed consumer campaigns can use economic incentives to reward companies that demonstrate strong levels of monitoring and compliance, and disincentives for companies that ignore the problem of child labour. In response to consumer action, many transnational corporations have adopted codes of conduct that do not necessarily eliminate child labour, but provide minimum age limits, safer working conditions, and educational and recreational opportunities.

What remains unresolved is the viability of these campaigns to successfully monitor and verify compliance in the long-term. Furthermore, while consumer action in the North has an important and strong effect on market mechanisms, the child labour problem in Asia is primarily and overwhelmingly a problem of the informal economy, well beyond the reach of Western market 'buy-cotts' and 'boycotts'.

**Bad Jobs  
"Prostitution"  
An 11 year  
old girl in Ban  
Mai, Phayao.**

3. The **child development approach** to exploitative child labour focuses on making policy decisions with the best interests of the child in mind. This paradigm fully recognises the need for



poor children to work, but goes further in valuing work as a developmental activity. Children clearly still need time for learning and play, but the experience of working can provide healthy ways to learn and contribute to their family's income. Where children need assistance is in the provision of a variety of economic alternatives combined with protective measures, so they can choose the best option for their impoverished situation and be safeguarded from exploitation.

The child-centred development approach highly values the contribution of children in formulating and implementing child labour policy. In fact, the child development approach dismisses any policy solutions that have not been developed with the substantive involvement of children. This view is most articulately embodied in Boyden, Ling and Myers' 1998 monograph, "*What Works for Working Children*".

Critics of this approach argue that it assumes too much about the capacity of children to fix policy problems that adults have created and failed to resolve. Furthermore, the high emphasis on the agency of the child inherently diminishes the rights of parents. In response, Boyden, Ling and Myers clearly articulate that the rights of the child must always be contextualised in the life of the family, and that adults must share the burden of finding better ways to protect the rights of children. This approach does require more analysis, and in many ways, is the least tested; it deserves further exploration and more resources.

The child development paradigm is fundamentally consistent with World Vision's concern for holistic and transformational child-centred development; it ought to be the starting point, from which legislative and market-based mechanisms to control child exploitation are pursued. Market-based mechanisms that work hand in hand with child-development and legislative approaches have shown promise. A 1995 joint effort between the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), UNICEF and the ILO is one of the more successful examples of the private sector promoting the rights of working children, particularly to education. The joint program involved various government ministries and a variety of indigenous NGOs in the establishment of schools for children under the age of fourteen who were employed in licensed garment factories. So far, however, such examples are exceptions rather than the rule. ■

# Initial Findings

In the Philippines, India, and Thailand, attention has been mostly focused on legislative mechanisms, public education campaigns, and preventive strategies. The preliminary research in India and the Philippines demonstrated three things:

**1. Legislative approaches can be helpful, but in isolation they can also be ineffective and harmful to children in the short-term.** Since 1919, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) has focused much of its attention on the issue of exploitative child labour. As part of its ongoing campaign, the ILO proposed and adopted various international legal instruments to combat the worst forms of child labour, supplemented by recommendations for practical action and assistance. In July 1999 the ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour was approved, banning child slavery, debt bondage, commercial sexual exploitation, and any other work likely to jeopardise the health, safety or morals of children. The new Convention requires children to be removed from such unacceptable work and be provided with alternative activities that meet their economic, educational and developmental needs. This new legislation deserves support, and the ratification of it by member states will go a long way to improving the circumstances under which children work. Nevertheless, hundreds of millions of children remain mired in work that is beyond the reach of legislation.

The failure of solely legislative approaches to the child labour problem lies principally in the lack of adequate enforcement, public education, and appreciation by policy-makers of the problem's complexity. The Indian government, for example, has instituted legislation and spoken out on the issue in a variety of international policy forums for decades<sup>iii</sup>. Yet some estimates of the number of child labourers in India are as high as 115 million, the highest incidence in the world.

Not surprisingly, labour statistics in countries throughout the region suggest that little has changed as a result of legislative efforts to date: even by conservative rough estimates, millions of children remain caught in exploitative child labour, despite continued economic growth in India and

the region. With adequate enforcement and public education, legislative efforts hold promise, but only when accompanied by other initiatives that address the root causes that force children into the workplace.

**2. Poverty alleviation efforts generally have a positive impact on working children, but do not automatically protect them.** Child support and community development initiatives such as World Vision's Area Development Programs (ADPs) provide effective options for families faced with difficult decisions about their children's work and education. Such approaches deal with the root cause: chronic and debilitating poverty. When dire poverty makes even education inaccessible, parents often have no choice but to send their child to work in order to stave off hunger. Among other things, the direct financial and educational assistance provided to families through child sponsorship and ADPs allows access to free education for all children in an ADP community. Parents can access resources and programs that help them to break the poverty cycle. In ADPs, which operate at a district level, income support for individual families is combined with economic development strategies to provide long-term solutions for both families and their children. The combination of the two components can be an effective approach to reduce the need for child labour.

At a macro level, however, the impact of poverty alleviation programs remains poorly understood. Various studies in the last several years have attempted to establish a causal relationship between a decrease in the population below the poverty line and a decrease in children forced to work. In a World Bank study on child labour, Siddiqi and Patrinos (1998) conclude, "as countries develop, the incidence of child labor decreases substantially". The rapid change in Indonesia's economic situation in the last decade indicates circumstantial linkages between decreases in the population below the poverty line and decreases in national rates of child labour. While causal linkages are extremely difficult to establish, there are historical examples to support the claim that prosperity removes the

<sup>iii</sup> The South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC), a regional body whose members have poor records on child labour enforcement, voted unanimously in August 1996 to end all forms of child labour by the year 2010, and to curtail all 'hazardous' child labour by the end of the century. Such blunt approaches to child labour are both ill-informed and doomed to failure.

survival motivation that normally forces children into the workplace. Northern industrialised countries that struggled with child labour in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries did observe a reduction in the incidence of children working as overall income levels increased. Some policymakers believe that developing countries will inevitably struggle through an economic phase of reliance on child labour. The few studies that have analysed the macroeconomic evidence, however, have concluded that adoption of higher labour standards “would not hurt developing countries’ economic performance or competitive position... indeed [they] might be helpful in the long term” (OECD 1996). The policy solutions required to reduce exploitative child labour are by no means simple:

[Policymakers] should not naively believe either that child exploitation will be eradicated without improving the economic situation of the very poor *or* that improving the economic conditions of the poor will naturally dry up child exploitation (Boyden, Ling & Myers 1998).

Even the OECD concurs with the view that economic development itself will not ‘fix’ the child exploitation problem: “there are reasons to doubt that market forces alone will automatically improve core [labour] standards” (OECD 1996). Overall increases in average national income typically diminish reliance on child labour, but only if income inequalities are low. The bulk of macroeconomic evidence refutes the commonly held assumption that relying on child labour is a necessary stage in a country’s development. The OECD study lists a variety of examples where countries that have deliberately taken measures to protect children have reaped the benefits of equitable economic growth. The evidence

suggests that the incidence of working children diminishes only when the poorest sector of society experiences rising incomes. The literature and World Vision’s research underscore the fact that community-based poverty alleviation programs are necessary in the battle to eliminate exploitative child labour, but also that these programs by themselves are insufficient.

**3. Family loyalty and the rights of the child can work together in addressing child labour.** One of the significant findings of this study is that children make their decision to work in large part out of a sense of duty to contribute to the household income, in the context of extreme poverty. According to Reyes-Boquiren, typically fewer than 5% of Filipino children claim to have been forced to work by their parents. In fact the evidence in this study suggests that children usually participate in a family decision about when they begin working.

Many child rights advocates pit family loyalty against the rights of the child, especially in the choice between work and education. This is based on an assumption that families in which children work treat their children as economic assets only and do not value education. World Vision’s research challenged both of these assumptions.

The majority of families do recognise the value of education and most also recognise that an educated child can help the family more. The problem is not a lack of value for education; the problem is access and income. When these are missing, short-term survival needs of the family take precedence over their own longer-term interests.

Positively, family loyalty and child rights can and do work together. Family loyalty can be used to promote education as much as it leads to child labour. Working with families, not against them, is the best approach. 80% of families interviewed in the Philippines, for example, said that income support was the biggest factor that allowed them to keep their child in school. 72% of the parents surveyed strongly agreed with the statement that “children can be more help to parents if they finish their education”. The children, in turn, agreed that getting an education will allow them to help their parents more. This approach is in keeping with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which puts a strong emphasis on the right to family life. ■

**Bad Jobs**  
**“Selling Drugs”**  
**Drawing by a**  
**12 year old**  
**boy in Hnong**  
**Bua Lam Phu.**



# Listening to Children

With these preliminary findings in mind, the second phase of research aimed at developing a deeper understanding of the situation from a child and family perspective in one country, and in different situations within that country. From the start the focus of this research has been on child labour in the informal sector. In the interest of gathering information from stable communities, the research focused mostly on children already being assisted, mostly through Area Development Programs (ADPs) of World Vision, or through sectoral projects such as the Street Children outreach project in Bangkok.

The research in Thailand analyzed child labour in a variety of different contexts: urban and rural, street children and 'intact families', domestic labour and "outside the home" labour. The emphasis on participatory research methodologies increased, combining children's journaling, photography, and drawing with child focus groups and child surveys, as well as surveys with adults. The analysis of this data has yielded interesting findings on differences in



## Soccer and Turtles

Jook is a 10 year old boy who lives in Bangsu, along the banks of the Chao Phrya River in Bangkok. He is not a sponsored child, but receives assistance from WV. He is in grade 4 at school, but sometimes he doesn't go, so that he can go to the river with his friends to catch turtles. When Jook catches turtles, he takes them to the market and sells them. He usually works for a couple of hours each day, and earns less than \$0.50 USD for his work. He says "it's not difficult, but sometimes I get cuts on my feet from nails on the dock, and I can also get sick from the water that is very polluted." Jook does this work to support his mother, who is HIV positive and cannot work because she is not well. Jook wants to be a soccer player when he grows up. He says he doesn't really like going to school, and prefers to go to the river with his friends to play and catch turtles. Jook thinks that jobs like chores in the house and working in the market pushing carts of vegetables are good work for kids, and jobs that make kids go out in the streets aren't good for them.

gender roles, the struggle to balance education with work, and more specific information on the family duty/obligation question. These findings in turn have led to recommendations for action by all the institutions and organisations involved in setting policy or intervening directly to help children affected by exploitative labour: communities, World Vision offices, organisations and donor countries who support international development, and international institutions.

The primary overriding theme of this research has been to listen to children and their needs. The stories are both heartbreaking and heartwarming. The heartbreaking aspect is the relentless and interminable poverty that forms the background context for all of the children who participated. Overwhelmingly, in both phases of the research, children said that in general they were not forced to work, but chose to work as a means of supporting the

(Left) *Bad Jobs*  
"Construction in the city"  
A 12 year old boy in Hnong Bua Lam Phu.

(Below)  
*Me Working*  
"Washing cars at a gas station"  
A 15 year old street boy.



*Me Working  
"Feeding  
chickens."  
A 12 year old  
boy in Hnong  
Bua Lam Phu.*



children and their families indicated receptivity to the notion that finishing their education would allow children to make a greater contribution to their family. At the same time, a sense of duty to support the family may cause the children to work out of guilt and obligation. Cultural traditions, combined with a lack of attractive employment or educational options, combine to force rural Thai girls into some of the most exploitative sectors, such as the commercial sex industry and domestic service. In essence, these girls accept being exploited in order to lighten their family's economic burden. The

family's income. Naturally, we recognise that children's choices may be so socially conditioned that they do not constitute 'free choice', nevertheless the research clearly shows that many children choose work in the context of choices about family, and are not overly coerced. Often they attempt to continue their education while working. What is heartwarming is the resilience and courage of children and their families confronted with the difficult choices that endemic poverty presents.

This research discovered that one of the main determinants of the level of exploitation that children (or their parents) accept is income; the poorer the family, the more likely they are to tolerate exploitative child work. The participatory research in Thailand uncovered more detail: children indicated that they selected a work situation based on a complex interrelation of the income, risk/danger, demand, difficulty and desirability of a particular job. The relative weighting of each of these concerns in the selection of work requires a level of statistical analysis well beyond the scope of this study but would nevertheless provide an interesting topic for further research.

### ***Work and Education: More Tough Choices***

While responsibility to the family is often seen as a major cause of exploitative child labour, the research showed that this impulse can be destructive or constructive. In the Filipino and Thai communities, a strong cultural value to support the family can be framed positively, to promote staying in school. Both

children's sense of duty to their family makes them more vulnerable to intolerable forms of labour. Yet promoting the rights of children to an education does not have to be approached as a challenge to family loyalty; pursuing their mutual interests has proven to be effective in many communities.

In the Philippines, India, and Thailand, education is generally highly valued by parents and children alike. Without question the primary problem is not lack of appreciation for education; it is access and affordability. Eliminating barriers to education is an important strategy to prevent involvement in child labour. In the Philippines, for example, families identified income support as a key factor in their decision to keep their children in school. Other barriers to access and affordability include the school fees, conflicts in schedule between the school calendar and children's seasonal employment, or physical distance from school.

The appropriateness of the education that children receive is an important factor in determining whether or not to participate in school. In countries where there is great disparity between urban and rural areas in terms of children's lifestyles, educational policy makers must take into consideration the needs of different children and the dubious appropriateness of a generic curriculum. Traditionally, school curricula have been designed to suit the needs of urban children; thus children in rural areas are forced to participate in a program that is often ill-suited for their needs. This has contributed to the indoctrination of children (by the education system itself), regardless of their



*Me Working  
"Doing the laundry"  
A 19 year old  
girl in Ban  
Tajampi,  
Phayao.*

circumstances, to pursue and prefer urban lifestyles. Thailand's universal educational policy is a case in point; children in rural areas grow up without any formal training in agriculture, and as a result they develop aspirations of moving to the city to get "good jobs." This shortsighted approach to children's education fails to address the agricultural needs of the country. It does not prepare children for the reality that the urban job market simply cannot absorb the entire population. It also fails to recognise that the country cannot sustain itself if everyone leaves agriculture for another way of life. In order for curricula to be designed in the best interests of the child, policy makers must consider

the circumstances of the children for whom they are programming, the state of the national job market, and the developmental needs of the country.

While access, affordability, appropriateness, and quality are essential factors in helping children and families make a choice to stay in school, the findings point ahead to another crucial factor for an effective strategy to reduce exploitative child labour. Children and families in all three countries put a lot of hope in education to lead to a better job. Given the effects of the Asian economic crisis, their hopes and dreams may not be realised. The surveys in the Philippines and Thailand uncovered evidence of young people

who stayed in school and could not find a job at the end. When as many as a third of the street children World Vision surveyed in Bangkok expressed a desire to complete university, serious questions need to be asked about the appropriateness of an educational policy model that focuses on "access not quality" (Boyden 1998). Education for children is ideally both universally accessible and tailored to a specific child's needs. In all likelihood, few of the street children interviewed will attend university. It is inappropriate for

**(Left)**  
A photo taken by a 12 year old girl in Bangsu District, Bangkok, of one of her friends helping with housework by doing the laundry.



the primary schooling, which most of the street children had briefly experienced, to convince them that university is the only good option. Addressing the economic crisis in Thailand requires that realistic options for education and employment be offered to Bangkok's street children.

Access to education has been identified as a strong deterrent of exploitative child labour, but the danger is widespread disillusionment with the promise that education is the key to a better future. In the World Vision context, while child sponsorship focuses on supporting families to choose education, the ADP, by virtue of its size and economic development component, can work toward creating job opportunities and integrating appropriate employment training programs with basic education. Forward-looking ADPs will focus more attention on initiatives to ensure that there will be jobs available when the children finish school.

The development of school/work programs could possibly serve to address some of the issues identified above, in terms of improving children's skills training. Not only do school-work programs increase children's income-generating capacity in the short term, but their overall capacity to find employment can be improved by expanding their skills base. This type of programming also improves

children's access to education by increasing their income during their schooling years and reducing the economic burden on their families. This approach values children's contribution to the family unit and to the community, and it also recognises work as playing an important role in the developmental process of childhood.

Yet another approach to tackling the problem of continuing education is providing access to education on the job. In situations where children are not able to enroll in regular school programs, opportunities can be provided for them to receive non-formal education on their work sites. By developing links between children's employers and the Government, with the input of child spokespersons, programs can be developed and resources gathered to provide quality education that is easily accessible for children in their work environment.

Using work-based educational programs as a stepping stone, children can also be provided with information on workers rights, giving children greater agency in determining the circumstances of their work. This in turn empowers children to shape their work environment and be key players in setting the direction of their own lives, rather than treating them as passive participants in the process. ■

**Bad Jobs**  
"Towing a buffalo under the hot sun"  
A 9 year old girl in Phayao.

Photo taken by a 9 year old boy in Hnong Bua Lam Phu of his friend towing a buffalo through the field.



# Recommendations:

**1. Invest in understanding the specific circumstances of child workers.** Policymakers and NGO practitioners alike need more data, analysis and understanding concerning the real circumstances of working children. Empirical studies on the impact of codes of conduct and/or national legislation on child labour rates are desperately needed. All of this requires policymakers and practitioners respectfully and substantively to involve working children in the design and implementation of programs designed to prevent exploitation and promote healthy and safe child work.

The children interviewed in this research identified the choices they made to arrive at different kinds of work: family choices, social choices, and economic choices. When deciding on particular jobs, children performed a fairly complex calculation of five different factors about the work: the anticipated income, danger, demand, difficulty and desirability of a job. A child who decides to sell roses to motorists on a busy street corner, for example, has decided that the danger (being run over) and difficulty (running back and forth, breathing car fumes) are outweighed by the demand for this job, the income it garners, and other desirable aspects (their friends do this work). Policymakers and practitioners need to make decisions based on a more thorough examination of these specific factors. Children face a particular set of circumstances that must be understood by adults in depth in order for effective policy choices to be made to end

## Expanding Children's Participation in Social Reform (ECPSR)

ECPSR is a project undertaken by four NGOs in the Philippines, namely World Vision Development Foundation (WVDF), Christian Children's Fund, PLAN International and ERDA Foundation. WVDF is the lead agency in the implementation of this project. Key objectives are:

- I. Organizing children (10–17 years old) as a sector to increase their participation in the public policy arena
- II. Create and establish national and local coalitions of NGOs and POs to collectively address issues and concerns affecting children
- III. Intensify advocacy efforts for and in behalf of the children in the legislative process.

The project also seeks to integrate children into the joint Filipino government/NGO Task Force on the newly adopted ILO Convention 182, train them in advocacy and journalism skills, and facilitate the establishment of links between children in various communities across Southeast Asia.

exploitative child labour and promote respect for children's rights.

**2. Increased expenditures on preventive measures, especially education, reduce the need for rescue and rehabilitation of exploited child workers.** Much public attention and development assistance funding is focused on rescue programs that "save" children caught in exploitative labour. While such interventions are valuable and important, programs that prevent children from being exploited in the first place

represent a far more effective investment. Providing truly free and universal access to education and implementing poverty alleviation programs have been identified here as the keys to prevention. Similarly, carrying out extensive public or informal education, especially in the workplace, can inform children of their rights and their options, and reduce their vulnerability to exploitation.

The ILO, for instance, has speculated that the vast majority of child workers are agricultural,

(Left)  
*Bad Jobs*  
"Spraying Pesticides"  
A 17 year old girl in Ban Tajampi, Phayao.



## Linking Educational Expenditures to Child Labour Rates

The Indian state of Kerala distinguishes itself from the rest of the country with its educational system. The Kerala authorities allocate more funding for education than any other Indian state, with a per capita expenditure of 11.5 rupees compared to the Indian average of 7.8 rupees (Weiner 1991, 175). Kerala spends more money on "mass education than colleges and universities" (Weiner 1991, 176). No correlation exists between expenditure on education and literacy when comparing different countries because some countries, such as India, spend more funds on higher education than on primary education (Weiner 1991, 160). Yet Kerala's emphasis on primary education has led to a negligible dropout rate, a literacy rate of 94% for males and 86% for females (The World Bank 1995, 113), and a low child work participation rate of 1.9% (in 1971). This child work participation rate compares favourably to the Indian average of 7.1% in 1971 (Weiner 1991, 175). Weiner (1991) points out that "...the Kerala government has made no special effort to end child labour. It is the expansion of the school system rather than the enforcement of labour legislation that has reduced the amount of child labour" (p. 177). Clearly the success of Kerala's approach is not simply a matter of increased expenditure, but of strategic expenditure.

that "rural-to-urban" movement accounts for a larger portion of urban child worker exploitation than commonly is realised (Boyden, Ling & Myers 1998). World Vision's participatory research to date supports the idea that investing in vocational and non-formal education could significantly reduce rural to urban migration, an important component of exploitative child labour.

Without exception, children in all three countries listed lack of resources as the single biggest obstacle to further education. On average, just under half of the children surveyed in Area Development Programs in Thailand aspired to a university education, but an overwhelming 86% cited cost as the single biggest obstacle to that aspiration. Street kids had more modest goals, the largest group (35%) wanting simply to finish primary school. Yet insufficient funds was also their single biggest obstacle, cited by 45% of those surveyed. Similarly, 80% of families in four separate communities in the Philippines identified educational assistance for their children as the most important factor that allowed them to keep their children in school.

The educational goals of Asian children and their families ought not to be thwarted by a lack of political will to mobilise funding for schools, teachers, uniforms, materials and transportation. Yet expenditures on poverty alleviation and education in the developing world represent a negligible and shrinking fraction of the overseas aid profile of OECD member countries. The participatory research conducted by World Vision confirmed what other studies have shown, namely that poverty and the cost of education combine to make schooling inaccessible for large sectors of the population. Weiner (see inset) and others have established a strong case for the capacity of large-scale educational spending to reduce child work rates dramatically. Given this compelling evidence, the paltry 1.3% of all DAC foreign

**Good jobs**  
"Helping mother prepare dinner"  
An 18 year old girl in Ban Tajampi, Phayao.



assistance devoted to basic education in 1996 seems an affront to the rights of children. International action that focuses on universal systemic factors, such as an inadequate or ineffective education systems, will go some way to addressing the most intolerable forms of child labour. Efforts in Thailand to raise the number of compulsory years of schooling to nine will likely result in more children “better able to understand and assert their rights in terms of working conditions” (ILO 1998). But common sense and our research suggest that making school compulsory longer does not address the things that keep children away from school. If school is unaffordable, because of tuition, materials or transportation costs, students will not stay, even if compelled. If school is an oppressive environment, especially for poorer students, students will not stay. If school will not lead to a better job, it will be perceived as a waste of time, a less attractive option than working.

**3. Enforce the ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour.** If effectively and uniformly enforced, the July 1999 Convention has the potential to make respect for the rights of

children a cultural norm in places where it is not currently practiced. Countless such initiatives have floundered without the political will, adequate funding, and training of the enforcers (police) necessary to make them successful. Children must be universally and clearly told by their families, community members, teachers, and civic authorities that they need not perform any sexual labour, be coerced or enslaved into work, be conscripted into military service, nor put themselves at any physical or psychological risk in order to earn income.

Inviting the full participation of children in this research has empowered them to express themselves, understand their rights and experience the freedom of participating in a solution to child exploitation. The words and pictures of children deserve not simply respect, but the attention and action of policymakers. We know too little about the specific circumstances of working children, and further research to understand this global scourge desperately needs more funding. What we do know is that in order to protect children from exploitation, we need to consult and invest in them. ■

*Good jobs  
“living and working  
‘upcountry’  
(in a rural area)”  
An 18 year  
old street boy.*



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A typical form of work for young boys in rural parts of Northeastern Thailand is "going to the jungle." They go out morning and evening with slingshots to kill birds, lizards, and rats, which they bring home to feed their families. Because the Northeast is the poorest region of the country, young boys have a particularly strong sense of responsibility to help support their families by bringing home food on a daily basis.

(above) *Me Working* "Shooting birds for my family to eat". A boy from Hnong Bua Lam Phu, in Northeastern Thailand.  
(below) Photograph taken by a young boy in Hnong Bua Lam Phu to show his friends at work, gathering food for their families with slingshots.



(Front cover photo) →  
Photograph taken by a 11 year  
old boy in Bangkok who  
formerly lived and worked on  
the streets. The picture was  
taken under a bridge,  
overlooking a canal in Bangkok,  
to document the life of a young  
girl whom he knows that still  
lives and works on the streets.



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*Good Jobs "Feeding the chickens"*  
By a 16 year old girl in Ban Tam, Phayao.



World Vision is a Christian humanitarian organization reaching out to a hurting world.