



Lunchtime meeting on

The Elimination of Child Labour

'What role can the European Parliament Play?'

Tuesday 29th of September 2009

Hosted by: Jean Lambert (MEP)

Report

On the 29th of September The Stop Child Labour Campaign organised a lunchtime meeting on *The Elimination of Child labour. What role can the European Parliament play?* hosted by Ms. Jean Lambert MEP.

The aim of the meeting was to present the issue of Child Labour to the members of the new European Parliament not only in the context of health, education and the fight against poverty, but also in relation to industrial activities, trade and corporate social responsibility. The meeting also offered the opportunity to launch the book *A World for Children. Growing up without Child Labour* by Peter de Ruijter. A book that shows that child labour is a man-made phenomenon to be found on every continent in the world, from Asia, through (Latin) America and Africa to Europe. A copy of the book was presented to the participants.

The host and chair of the meeting **Ms. Jean Lambert** welcomed the participants. She stated that the new European Parliament offered an opportunity to revisit the issue of child labour, analyse the current situation and discuss the next steps in the fight against child labour and how MEPs could take the issue forward at EU level. She then invited the first speaker to take the floor.

Ms. Veronique Feijen, International Coordinator for the *Stop Child Labour, School is the Best Place to Work* Campaign (SCLC), introduced the Campaign which started in 2002 with financial support from the EU. Its main objective is to raise awareness and advocate for the need to get children out of the child labour environment and into the full-time education system. At EU level the Campaign had brought partner NGO's together to lobby decision makers and equip them with the information and arguments necessary to develop policies and take actions in the fight against child labour. Other targets for the Campaign's activities are consumers, the general public, schools and corporations who are all being sensitised to the extent in which child labour is used for the production of many daily goods and mobilised to develop activities to support the fight against child labour. The campaign also focusses on supporting companies to develop child labour free production mechanisms in those places where there is no legal framework to ban child labour. One of the activities the Campaign developed is the publication of a booklet: *Out of work and into school*, which offers an Action Plan for companies to combat child labour.

In addition, the SCLC works closely with partners in the South, particularly in developing SCL principles based on their experiences in working on the elimination of child labour. As an example she cited the cooperation with the MV Foundation in India. This foundation developed a model for a child labour free community in close cooperation with local communities and local, federal and national governments in India to change human behaviour regarding child labour and set in place legislation banning child labour. This was particularly successful in Andhra Pradesh, one of the poorest states of India. All together the MV Foundation so far freed 600.000 children from their working environment and integrated them into the formal education system.

Ms. Feijen pointed out that the SCLC does not limit itself to the worst forms of child labour, but advocates for the banning of **all** forms of child labour. She argued that the so-called poverty argument, which holds that poor families need the meagre salaries of child labourers to increase their income, is an invalid one, since these salaries are so low that they have little impact on the family budget. Furthermore, as long as employers are allowed to use child labour, they continue to employ children rather than more expensive adults, thus depriving parents from decent wages, which would enable them to provide for their families. Most importantly, however, child labour keeps children out of school, thereby robbing them and ultimately their families, of any opportunity to raise their chances for a better life. She called on the MEPs, in line with their right to exert democratic scrutiny, to query both the EC and the EU Member States on whether and how they worked towards banning all forms of child labour. An ideal opportunity for this would be the discussions on the EC report on child labour which the Commission is currently working on.

The next speaker, **Mr. Peter de Ruiter**, author of the book *A World for Children. Growing up without Child Labour* gave a brief overview of how being directly confronted with child labour and its consequences in the many countries he visited, drove him to write the book with the support of various organisations, mainly in the Netherlands¹. The book was published in March 2008 and presented to the Dutch government, the parliament and to the ambassadors of the 9 countries he reported on in his book. His experiences convinced him that child labour is not a natural phenomenon, but a man-made one. It is therefore up to man to eliminate it, be they decision-makers, companies (employers), consumers or parents. Children cannot take care of themselves, so governments will have to ensure that parents get better wages, schools are built that cater for quality education for all children and that legislation is in place that prevents employers from taking on children as labourers. The ultimate goal that the book is advocating for is a childlabour free world².

Ms. Jean Lambert then invited **Mr. Gerard Oonk**, Director of the India Committee of the Netherlands, a partner in the SCLC, to take the floor. Mr. Oonk started his observations by saying that a lot of development money is being allocated to education, while a strategy is lacking to systematically ensure that children who are not already part of the school system such as girls, children from minority groups or social excluded groups such as the Dalits and child labourers, will be allowed full access to (quality) education. The MV Foundation was one of the organisations that took up the challenge in India and worked with the community to improve the school governance at local level and ensure that every girl and boy could go to school. There is a clear link between education and the fight against child labour as the Dutch Parliament realised when they adopted a Resolution requesting the Dutch government to develop a comprehensive strategy with the Ministries of Economic and Foreign Affairs for combating child labour and realizing the right to education in developing countries. This should also be done by incorporating an anti-child labour strategy in bi-lateral education funding³. On the latter the Dutch government will soon be organising an international expert meeting.

However, more can be done via other policy areas, for instance, through Trade agreements and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as described in SCLC's paper *Child Labour, Trade Relations and Corporate Social Responsibility. What the European Union should do*⁴. Some of these issues were also taken up in the Dutch parliament, but could be taken forward in the EP as well. Public assessments could be made of the impact of EU policies on child labour and the fight against child labour in addition to publishing lists of countries and sectors which supply goods made by children to the EU. The US has already published such a list informing consumers, companies and governments about the products made by child labour.

Another measure would be – as is now done in the Netherlands- to link subsidies to companies to the obligation not to use child labour or violate other fundamental labour rights at any stage of their supply chain. This could also be implemented within the EU. In addition, the EU could introduce child labour in its political dialogues and trade negotiations with 3rd countries. (e.g.. the Revision of the Cotonou Agreement, the India-EU Trade Agreement negotiations). The Generalised System of

¹ 'A world for children' is supported by Dutch citizens and a broad coalition of Dutch and international authorities, businesses and relief organizations: the Dutch ministries of Foreign Affairs, of Development Cooperation and of Social Affairs and Employment; multinational firms ING Bank and Philips; World Vision, KidsRights, Plan, the Bernard van Leer Foundation, ICCO / Kerk in Actie and the European campaign Stop Child Labour (including Hivos, FNV (Federation of Dutch Trade Union), AOb en ICN in the Netherlands).

² The book is also available in PDF in Spanish and French on the website: www.aworldforchildren.net

³ Resolution 31 700 V, Nr. 51, adopted on 18 November 2008

⁴ <http://www.stopchildlabour.eu/stopchildlabour/English/About-Child-Labour/Further-reading>

Preferences (GSP) and particularly the GSP+ already have conditions on human rights, but links between trade preferences and the fight against child labour could be much stronger, including timebound programmes particularly for those countries with many child labourers. There have been strong calls for mandatory reporting mechanisms for companies (cf. EP Resolution on Child Labour⁵) which include reporting on the use of Child Labour in their production processes, which should now be implemented. Where children are victims of child labour they should be offered access to the judicial systems within the EU to seek redress for their suffering and exploitation.. As the EC's DG Trade is currently drafting the report on child labour they also need to include the legal options to combat child labour, which are now being explored in a larger EC study on the legal liability of companies for violations of human rights.

The earlier mentioned Action Plan for Companies (also available in Spanish, Italian, German and Czech and in the near future in Dutch) offers a set of useful guidelines to ensure that child labour is banned from the company's production processes.

Ms Jean Lambert thanked the speaker and observed that for the moment Corporate Social Responsibility is only implemented on a voluntary basis, complicating any compulsory actions. In the previous legislative period the EP had already been working on the issue of supply chain compliance, including the question of responsibility. This should be taken up again in the new EP. While the term 'Fair Trade' is currently well established it should in fact be extended to also cover the aspect of child labour. It will be part of the cultural shift needed in the near future.

Debate

Mr. Theo Peters, responsible for Development within the Dutch Permanent Representation to the EU, pointed out that a recent Eurobarometer survey indicated the citizens feel they are not informed well enough on human rights activities in EU External Action. Asked in what area the EU should do more, the citizens mentioned the fight against child labour. He also felt that the EC could be doing more to cover all aspects of the fight against child labour as, for instance, indicated in the May 2008 GAERC Conclusions on Children's Rights in External Action. The report which is being drafted, should have been ready by now in the view of the Netherlands and once finished should receive the right level of political attention by publishing it as an EC Communication and not as a Staff Working Paper. The Netherlands would like to discuss this report during the Swedish Presidency, i.e. before the end of this year. He also mentioned the fact that the Dutch MEPs had written a letter to the EC asking when the report would be ready. He asked what the EP could do to speed up this process and suggested that other MEPs from EU Member States might want to follow the example of the Dutch MEPs.

Ms. Juul-Jorgensen, Head of Unit in the EC's DG Trade, thanked the speakers for their interesting presentations. Child Labour is a complex issue linked with poverty, education, social structures etc. which all had to be taken account of. She was very interested in the documents Mr. Oonk had mentioned and hoped he would share them and others, if available, with her and her team, who are drafting the EC report. The report is in fact a joint effort by the many EC DGs involved with child labour and will result in a comprehensive study. The aim is to finish it within the Swedish Presidency, but so far it was not yet clear what status it will have as form follows content. The main objective of the report is to get in-depth reflection and a good debate going on the issue. The ultimate decision on the format lies with the Commissioner. However, a decision on the format should take account of the current institutional situation and allow for the newly elected members of the European Parliament to express their views on the topic.

After these interventions the chair, **Ms Jean Lambert**, made the final remarks. It is clear that MEPs should take actions, such as asking written and oral questions, deciding on which committee would be best to take the lead in the debate on the issue (probably the Development Committee) and ensuring that it becomes one of the cross-cutting issues in EU policies. Mr. Barroso's commitment to children's rights still needs to be proven, for instance, by appointing a Commissioner for Children's Rights, which would then also put the fight against child labour at a higher level.

Next year will be the Year against Poverty, which will also offer an opportunity to put the fight against Child Labour higher on the EP's and EU's agenda. If the EC report turns out to be mainly a staff

⁵ <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P6-TA-2007-0062+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>

working paper, the EP can still take it up and upgrade it. In this context it is also interesting to note that the Employment Committee is planning to put CSR on its agenda again.

Mrs. Lambert also announced that on Thursday 1 October the EP Subcommittee on Human Rights would be discussing Sri Lanka. The EP should discuss the need to develop standards on the fight against child labour to be included in future trade agreements.

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