

The Right Tool for the Job?

Child Labour "Traffic Light"

| Exploitation (RED) | Potentially Detrimental (YELLOW) | Positive (GREEN) |
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| Virtual slave-like employment, e.g., domestic helpers in abusive work conditions, prostitution, child soldiers. | Positive work experience that if undertaken excessively can hinder a child's development, e.g., family agricultural work, work on a plantation that seriously affects school attendance. | Positive impact on a child's mental, physical, or social development, e.g., work in newspaper delivery. |

Exploitation. In a world of relatives, there are nevertheless some absolutes. One is that the exploitation of children is unacceptable. There is no argument in support of the exploitation of children. The immediate focus of international attention is increasingly on the eradication of child exploitation, i.e., child prostitution, de facto slave labour, and children working in unambiguously dangerous conditions. Nor is child exploitation necessarily a conceptual grey area. There are a number of cases of child exploitation that are fairly well known and documented. These include such cases as children being forced to labour on construction projects in Myanmar, and children being supplied to brothels in Thailand. Nonetheless, in some countries, the existence of what amounts to child slavery is officially denied.

Potentially Detrimental. The potentially detrimental category is difficult to describe along neat lines. This obscurity arises from the nature of the category; it encompasses trade-offs and subjective valuations. It is a category that is a continuum from clear exploitative labour abuse to uncontested positive work experiences. It raises the question of balance, of when a child labourer moves from a positive experience to a more abusive condition that is not in the child's interest.⁹ Because of this, simplistic labels on the types of jobs performed by children are not very helpful. A youngster employed in childcare could include the positive experience of part-time baby sitting or it could refer to near slave-like conditions. The question of alternatives to a given work experience, such as access to schools or to alternative employment, also arises.

UNICEF's State of the World's Children 1997, for example, reports that in

⁹ It is worth emphasising that this statement refers to the child's interest, not the interest of the child's parents or guardians. This is itself a subjective point, as it may be debated who best determines the child's interest.