

understanding this issue is having some idea of the size and distribution of the child labour workforce.

The actual number of children working, defined as working in either the formal or informal sectors of the economy by persons under 18 years of age, is unknown. It is particularly difficult to obtain reliable estimates on the number of children engaged in domestic labour and the conditions under which the work is performed. But this in no way diminishes the importance or distorts the fundamental problems embodied in the child labour issue. Best estimates are that between 250-350 million children are working in some capacity.⁵ The most populous region, Asia, is thought to account for the majority of child labourers. However, Africa may have the highest number of children working as a percentage of the total child population. Millions of children also work in Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe, and the developed OECD countries. Child labour appears to a global phenomenon.

Absolute numbers say nothing of the type of employment or the working conditions of child labourers. While child labour occurs in both developed and developing countries, the characteristics of the work experience significantly differ. By-and-large, child workers in the developed countries face less onerous working conditions. Child workers in the developed countries are also most often considered to be working by choice rather than by necessity. Conversely, it is widely thought that children in the developing countries work primarily because they are poor and/or lack educational alternatives. Though normally paid less than adults, or in the informal sector possibly not paid at all⁶, child labourers in developing countries are often important contributors to the household's welfare.⁷

⁵ The most authoritative source is the ILO. In a recent International Labour Office report of the ILO, Child Labour: Targeting the Intolerable, it is estimated that some 250 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 are working in developing countries. Of this total, 120 million children are full-time workers, and 130 million work part-time.

⁶ In this paper, references to child workers in the informal sector refers to children who are self-employed, work for their parents in a domestic or agricultural capacity, partake in casual and irregular wage work, or are employed in small-scale enterprises in manufacturing or services. By contrast, work in the formal sector refers to larger-scale enterprises with more regulation of work conditions. See David Wield, "Unemployment and Making a Living," in Tim Allen, Alan Thomas, (eds.), Poverty and Development in the 1990's, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, p.65.

⁷ Surveys in selected areas of Ghana, India, Indonesia, and Senegal revealed that many working children under 15, often 70-80%, are unpaid family workers. See International Labour Office, Child Labour Surveys, Results of methodological experiments in four countries 1992-93, Geneva, 1996.