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Guest Editors

There has been progress in the universal commitment to end child labour by 2025, as set out in the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Over the past twenty years, 86 million fewer children are in child labour (160 million in 2020 compared to 246 million in 2000). Yet the incidence of child labour is rising again in absolute numbers. It has increased by over eight million in the past four years¹, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Covid 19 pandemic has undermined human rights, destroyed jobs and forced many already vulnerable people into further debt and poverty. Many families have been forced to resort to child labour to meet their economic needs. Children locked out of school have had to take on additional burdens as well as being vulnerable to increasingly new forms of exploitation through online platforms and apps. Children who are subject to the worst forms of child labour are harmed in ways that impede their physical, mental and emotional development, which affects their prospects for a decent life. They may fall victim to slavery and slavery-like practices as a result of human trafficking or other forms of coercion into forced labour or sexual exploitation by those willing to abuse their vulnerability.

Child labour also results in children being denied access to accessible and quality health care, schooling and other their fundamental rights and freedoms. Some children are also forced into servile marriages in order to support their families or based on discriminatory laws, norms and practices. Of course, children above the minimum age of employment can and should be able to work, provided this does not detrimentally affect their education or harm their health and development. Their agency to exercise this right is important and is recognised in international law, and the types of work they are permitted to carry out should be proscribed in national laws designed to protect their health and development.

Despite universal ratification of ILO Convention 182 on the worst forms of child labour (which was achieved in August 2021 - all 187 ILO member states), and the widely ratified ILO minimum working age Convention 138 (short only of 14 ratifications). Despite this, child labour and its worst forms remains a persistent social and economic problem globally. Children are performing child labour in the formal and informal sector; in agriculture, artisanal mining, manufacturing and in services such as domestic work; and in the supply chains of transnational

¹ ILO and UNICEF, 'Child Labour: Global Estimates 2020, Trends and the Road Forward.' (New York: International Labour Office and United Nations Children's Fund, 2021)

enterprises. Domestication of these standards in national laws, policies, action plans, monitoring and enforcement are largely inadequate. To accelerate progress to achieve SDG 8.7, the United Nations declared 2021 the International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour, calling on the governments of the world to take urgent action to fulfil this promise to children.

International norms and public pressure have highlighted the unacceptability of child labour – especially in its worst forms. Over many decades, we have seen high levels of commitment and massive investment in bilateral, multilateral and multi-stakeholder initiatives to tackle the problem, import bans of goods suspected to be made with child labour, worker-centred trade policies in the USA, and thousands of large and community-based projects aimed at reducing or eliminating child labour. But there remains limited evidence of the effectiveness and long-term impacts of interventions to address child labour.

This special edition of the *Journal of Modern Slavery* seeks to explore the degree of progress there has been in tackling systemic and complex issues of child labour. Child labour – especially in its worst forms – is most often evident at the intersection between high levels of poverty, discrimination and exclusion, lack of social protection, lack of access to affordable, quality education, failures in labour rights protection & monitoring by states, impunity & lack of accountability of the private sector and high degrees of labour market flexibility. It often affects those working in the informal economy, doing work that is often invisible to public scrutiny and outside of the scope of labour protections. As such, strategies to end child labour need to involve multiple interventions and resources by multiple actors operating at the level of work sites, across whole sectors, at national levels and transnationally - crossing borders – with added risks and vulnerabilities associated with migration and displacement.

A critical issue flagged by various authors in this edition is the problem of definition. The ILO's commonly used definition is work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, that is harmful to physical and mental development, as well as work that interferes with a child's education. These concepts are understood differently in different contexts. Also, the six categories of child work and child labour stipulated by the ILO are also subject to interpretations by different countries whose laws determine the age at which children can work and the type of work permitted at different ages.

This poses challenges for multi-national companies whose supply chains span multiple jurisdictions, involve many types of work and a range of commercial partners. They are rightly held accountable for abuse of human rights – including international standards on child labour - but must contend with varying legal frameworks in different jurisdictions on what type of work is allowed at different ages.

Several articles in this edition cite the complexity and multi-dimensionality of tackling child labour and highlight the importance of taking a more holistic and long-term approach to end child labour. There are also examples that give priority to the participation of those most directly impacted and affected by child labour in finding appropriate solutions.

Corporate actors that adopt a zero-tolerance approach with their suppliers when child labour is found, remove risk and liability to themselves but do not solve the problem. It is

common to see patronizing and somewhat racist attitudes based on assumptions that families or employers are simply not aware or concerned about the harm that is caused to children engaged in hazardous work. Initiatives that ‘rescue’ children from situations of harm without putting in place viable alternatives can subject them to even greater levels of vulnerability and harm. The children that must do what they can to survive and support their families are often pushed further into dangerous forms of work that are hidden further down supply chains in the informal economy. Some end up in illegal work that subjects them to criminal prosecution.

Our assumptions about the children who work and who employs them are rarely based on a deep understanding of the complex root causes of the problem. But even where structural drivers are recognized, interventions to tackle child labour are fraught with limitations: the challenges are too enormous to tackle by a single actor or even multiple actors that have limited influence, resource and capacity.

Projects and programmes are often designed by professionals in large international agencies or non-governmental organizations, based on a standardized model and are funded by those with an interest in ending the practice within a specific time frame. But several years later, it is common to go back and find there is little to show for earlier efforts, so the cycle starts again – sometimes with a new design based on fact-finding, identifying stakeholders and partners that will implement their interventions based on a menu of options (education, livelihoods, behaviour change etc.), with agreed outputs and outcomes. Everyone walks away feeling they’ve made a difference with the time, resources and effort they’ve invested. But little changes for those living and working at the margins of the economy and society: often desperately poor, vulnerable to shocks, invisible to decision-makers, and sometimes belonging to groups that subject them to discrimination and social exclusion in their own communities.

In relation to child labour in global supply chains, while many articles have been written by scholars about the role and responsibilities of multinational businesses and the ways they have sought to address the problem, there is still little understanding of the impact of their interventions in the lower tiers of supply chains. This is in large part because of the multiple layers of complexity in the sourcing, production, logistics and trade systems, spanning multiple jurisdictions, involving labour market dynamics and employment relationships that lack transparency and are determined by fierce competition and a race to the bottom on pricing. In places where unions are prevented from organizing and representing adult workers in negotiations for better terms and conditions, the incidence of exploitation of all workers – including child and forced labour – is greater. But it has also meant that both companies and scholars have had little understanding of where and how the worst forms of child labour are taking place, and what to do about that.

The articles in this edition seek to advance our understanding and provide some interesting new insights and suggested ways forward.

The edition moves from the general to the specific: starting with two articles on theoretical and conceptual models for understanding and designing interventions on child labour. What follows is a series of articles focused on community-based initiatives and multi-stakeholder

initiatives involving large multi-nationals, and end with a specific therapeutic approach aimed at the personal healing of children as individuals who have been traumatized by abusive practices. And finally, we offer a few conclusions as food for thought.

Developing a participatory action research methodology to understand the drivers of the worst forms of child labour is the subject of the article '**Reframing, refining, and reconceptualising the worst forms of child labour: early experiences from CLARISSA**' by Marina Apgar and Danny Burns from the Institute of Development Studies at Sussex University. The programme is a collaborative initiative involving multiple international, national and local organizations – focused on the worst forms of child labour in the adult entertainment sector in Kathmandu, Nepal and the leather supply chain in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The article focuses on the participatory action research methodology that has guided the conceptualization, implementation, monitoring and review process, and draws on complexity theory to make explicit the hidden and complex dynamics around the worst forms of child labour (WFCL).

The “Child Labour: Action-Research-Innovation in South and South-Eastern Asia” (CLARISSA) programme takes as its starting point that child labour is complex, and that initiatives to tackle the forms of work that cause harm to children must recognize its’ multiple, changing and sometimes uncertain chains of causality.

The authors posit that that the agency of children often remains absent from the design of interventions to address child labour, despite the many policy frameworks that recognize children’s rights to participate and make decisions affecting their lives. The programme therefore applies a participatory approach to both shed light on the multiple factors that drive WFCL and adopts an adaptive programming model that can adjust the interventions as greater clarity of the specific contexts and factors in which the most harmful child labour practices are discovered. It shows that the links between school, home life and working life are interconnected: in poor many children work in family businesses. The study seeks not only to learn about the types of work being done, but how that work is understood by the children, their families, their employers and other significant local and wider actors, as well as their views on how harm could be mitigated.

Funded by the UK government at an initial cost of £11m, the programme is designed to build a rigorous evidence base, generate innovative solutions to the drivers of (WFCL) that can be scaled. It has set up multiple participatory learning and advocacy groups in each country, as well as a social protection intervention in Bangladesh to test universal and unconditional cash involving a participatory approach with families and communities.

Unlike many WFCL interventions on global supply chains that involve multinational companies and brands, this programme focuses on the informal economy, local and regional markets for the goods that children are producing: this is where most of the WFCL is taking place. It remains invisible in plain sight of the everyday struggle for survival facing families in the poorest urban slums. In scope of the study is are the multi-layered, long and complex supply chains production processes in a whole supply chain (in the case of leather - 107) involving small family-run business units that contend with extremely tight margins and struggle themselves to make ends meet. The imperative to employ the poorest, most vulnerable children is obvious;

working for very low pay, doing back-breaking work for long hours, using dangerous equipment and exposed to hazardous chemicals. The health and long-term impacts on children are enormous, although these are rarely recorded.

COVID-19 and the funding of the programme have significantly disrupted the research and implementation, and as such, it is premature to present findings and conclusions. However, the authors assert that the collaborative teamwork and trust that has been built has generated important insights and has convinced them of the value of experiential learning. They remain convinced that understanding the complexity of child labour is critical to finding solutions to end it. They posit that we should avoid pre-constructed solutions (e.g. education and livelihoods) based on assumptions that are often well-meaning but misguided. The most sustainable solutions will be found in understanding the multi-faceted drivers of the problem and the participation of those most directly involved and affected.

In his article **“Reviewing child labour and its worst forms: Contemporary theoretical and policy agenda”**, Mahmudul Hoque strongly challenges abolitionist approaches to the worst forms of child labour. His article features ILO legal standards and evidence from academic scholars in reviewing how child labour is defined and understood. The international legal framework regulating child labour is based on three major ILO conventions – C38, 138, C182. The ILO draws distinctions between work excluded from minimum legislation, light work, non-hazardous work, hazardous work and unconditional worst forms of child labour – the latter being the subject of zero-tolerance, ‘abolitionist’ strategies and approaches. He argues that whether child labour is conceptualized from an economic, political economy, moral and ethical, human rights or modern slavery perspective, these theoretical constructs most often fail to provide a valid explanation for why child labour as a phenomenon is increasing rather than decreasing, and why it persists in some contexts, even when poverty indicators improve. As such, the global target to eradicate child labour by 2025 is unattainable.

The paper reviews a wide range of studies (including meta-studies) in their understanding of child labour, its definitions and classifications, and the degree to which these have shaped the global fight against it. Despite decades of work and significant investment in tackling this issue, Hoque argues, the incidence of child labour in all forms continues to increase and ‘poses a great threat to the progress of many developing countries’.

The paper cites studies that expose the inconsistencies and lack of clarity in how basic definitions of childhood differ, as well as how harmful and hazardous work is understood by theorists and practitioners. Regarding education, he agrees with scholars that argue concepts of childhood need to be understood in their socio-cultural contexts and involve a range of factors that are continuously evolving. One example is the idea that child labour interferes with a child’s basic right to education, but ignores the fact that many children support their schooling from their income.

In relation to minimum age restrictions, he cites studies that argue these do more harm than good by pushing working children further out into the fringes of the labour market and eventually encourage hidden practices under informal arrangements. He cites number of scholars

who argue that bans, boycotts and trade policies do not effectively reduce child labour incidences. In relation to hazardous and harmful work, he also argues that there are different perceptions of this, and argues that the views of children, families and communities should be sought on finding alternatives to the worst form of child labour, but that also recognize the economic contribution of working children. He concludes that innovative community-led alternatives to the worst forms of child labour are more likely to be in the best interests of children.

The article, **“Prioritising Agro-Rural Areas with Holistic and Community-Participatory Initiatives to Accelerate Progress towards Elimination of Child Labour”** focuses on agriculture, which continues to be the most challenging sector for child labour interventions, with the majority of child labourers (70%) working in hazardous conditions. It points out that innumerable interventions to tackle child labour have failed to impact informal supply chains in agro-rural regions. The article examines the key challenges and emerging good practices to understand and address child labour in informal economies such as agriculture by using an intersectional and holistic lens. Drawing from the experiences of Global March Against Child Labour (Global March) and its regional partners of more than two decades, it proposes a holistic, area-based approach to address child labour in agro-rural regions.

The article draws examples and insights from key data published by the ILO, UNICEF and other such agencies on child labour. It uses evidence from civil society organisations, especially the ones working on the issue of child labour, bonded labour and forced labour in agriculture. Global March Against Child Labour’s suggested approach to address exploitation of children in agro-rural sector is centred upon tackling the issue of child labour holistically, that is, by focusing on root causes, combining proven and emerging good practice area-based interventions at grassroots level with multi-layered advocacy (i.e., top-down and bottom-up) and engagement between all actors from Global North and Global South. Further, the holistic approach combines ‘whole-of-supply chain’ action with gender as a cross-cutting issue. This offers a better understanding of the (gender) inequalities perpetuating child labour and more sustainable solutions to address this intersectionality. Such an approach not only enables prevention of child labour and detecting of weak systems responsible for perpetuating it, but also keeps communities at the centre, using area-based good practices such as Child Friendly Village and Child Labour Monitoring System which in turn creates an ecosystem for sustainable and child labour friendly agro-rural supply chains. Being an advocacy and network based organisation, evidence and lessons from grassroots work is used by Global March to influence policy implementation and delivery at local (district), national and regional levels. Its’ access and participation in international forums and alliances is used to inform southern civil society of global developments and put pressure on national governments.

In elaborating upon Global March’s approach towards addressing child labour in agro-rural areas, the article refers to the adoption of various crucial models and best practices built on the area-based approach in an interconnected manner. Of these, the Child Friendly Village Model

based on a village or community wherein there is no child labour, all children are in learning, and key decisions in the community are made keeping the welfare of all children in mind. It also considers various other models that have been used and analyses their long-term impact. It makes the key point that “it takes a village to raise a child”/ This addresses child labour in informal sectors such as agriculture, and as such, requires the villages and other such communities to be empowered socio-economically in order to raise children in a child friendly ecosystem with no need for child labour.

The article ‘**Multinational Enterprises and child labour: Insights from supply-chain initiatives in different sectors**’ by Ans Kolk, Jolijn Engelbertink explores how Multinational Enterprises (MNEs) have sought to eliminate child labour in the lower tiers of their supply chains – focusing specifically on multi-stakeholder partnerships engaged in coffee, cocoa, and textile sectors.

The authors highlight the challenges referred to earlier about definitions of child labour that vary in different jurisdictions. They review the literature on the root causes of child labour ‘supply side’ and ‘demand-side’ factors that create the enabling environment for child labour. They also cite evidence on conditional and unconditional cash transfers, awareness-raising, alternative income strategies and those focused on improving opportunities for families, school attendance through investment and incentives.

Self-regulation has been the dominant framework used by multi-national companies to manage child and forced labour risks, using voluntary codes of conduct, certification schemes and social auditing compliance systems. The authors recognize (as they should) the limitations of these, particularly as there are a multiplicity of standards and certifications with different sectoral and geographical scope that differ also in the types of employment arrangements that are covered at certain tiers in the supply chain.

The authors review collaborative initiatives of multi-nationals based on a recognition of the limitations of their own influence and individual efforts to tackle systemic and structural drivers of child labour. The article reviews three examples of these:

- An area-based initiative to tackle child labour in the coffee sector in Uganda using UTZ certification standards and involving a range of local and international organizations
- Child labour monitoring and remediation systems in the cocoa sector in Cote d’Ivoire and Ghana involving Nestle, the International Cocoa Initiative and local partners
- Workers’ committee grievance mechanisms in the textile sector in Tamil Nadu, India

Independent evaluations of these programmes highlight some successes and lessons learnt for the future. But the impact of COVID-19 means that some of the positive impacts of this work are at risk of being rolled back.

The authors draw three conclusions at the end of their article. First, multi-national companies have significant leverage: while the problem of child labour may exist in the lower tiers of their supply chains, they can make a difference by doing sound analysis, identifying the

right stakeholders and support the right interventions for the problems in the specific context that are identified to be most effective. Second, they argue for a pragmatic approach to the problem of definitions. Third and finally, they assert that the evidence on long-term effectiveness of these interventions is limited: evaluations are generally limited in scope. The results are often difficult to attribute to a particular intervention given the wide range of factors that are at play in any given time. They conclude with a sober recognition that addressing child labour takes time and will need to include political, social and economic drivers that are beyond the scope of specific companies and their supply chains. They emphasize the importance of building relationships between different actors in the supply chain and for flexible approaches that take account of each context and the prevailing conditions under which children work.

The article “**The role of NGO-supported community-based schools gardens in contributing to reducing the worst forms of child labour in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**”, presents key findings from a qualitative longitudinal study that observed the implementation and assessed the potential of the school garden intervention in a project designed to reduce the worst forms of child labour in eight school communities in North and South Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo. The study focused on helping communities by cultivating crops that can be utilised to support households’ economy to reduce the necessity of child labour for those households. It generated findings on how to improve the relevance, community ownership, and sustainability of the school gardens intervention to contribute to a reduction in the prevalence of child labour in at-risk communities.

The study is based on project implemented by Partnership Against Child Exploitation (PACE), which is a consortium of non-Governmental, academic, media, and private sector organisations working together to implement the programme funded by the UK government. The project essentially seeks to identify and test effective approaches to prevent and reduce the worst forms of child labour (WFCL) defined by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) convention n. 182 as “*all practices that include the use of children in slavery, forced labour, trafficking, debt bondage, serfdom, prostitution, pornography, forced or compulsory recruitment for armed conflict, and all forms of work that are likely to harm the safety, health or morals of children.*”

The article describes the context in which child labour occurs in North and South Kivu and the risk factors and compounding factors that increase the risk of children becoming engaged in worst forms of child labour. The study focuses on pilot school gardens implemented in eight schools across two geographic areas of the DRC: three schools in Masisi territory, North Kivu Province, and five in Walungu territory, South Kivu Province. It analyses how school gardens implemented by international NGOs working in collaboration with community groups can contribute to reducing the worst forms of child labour in fragile contexts.

The article notes out that in fragile and conflict-affected contexts such as the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), chronic poverty and acute shocks, including displacement, frequently impact households’ income as well as children’s access to education and other basic rights. PACE is therefore implementing a range of interventions designed to address the root causes of

the phenomenon, including developing alternative livelihoods to alleviate households' reliance on child labour and supporting children to access quality education and vocational training opportunities as alternatives to the WFCL. Child labour is a frequently observed coping mechanism for families in situations of food insecurity; therefore, projects aiming at strengthening food security also have the added benefit of fighting child labour. Yet, according to a recent report, using school feeding to address social issues such as child labour is a relatively new approach with limited evidence of impact to date. The study also refers to other studies exploring the impact of school feeding systems on the use of children's time and these have found mixed results.

The research question examined for the study is: "How can school gardens implemented by international NGOs working in collaboration with community groups contribute to reducing the worst forms of child labour in fragile contexts?" More specifically, the following sub-questions are analysed: What factors are or are not likely to impact school gardens' ability to contribute to reducing the worst forms of child labour? What did we learn about implementing school gardens in a fragile and conflict affected context through this pilot learning?

It outlines findings in three key areas: relevance, community ownership and motivation and intervention sustainability. The first set of findings suggest that school gardens can be relevant to addressing child labour only if the use of the harvest is well designed to serve children at risk of engaging in, or already engaged in child labour. In the study, school gardens that did not have such planning tended to benefit relatively better off caregivers who were able to commit a substantial amount of time volunteering in the garden and benefited personally from their participation. It recommends that to reach more vulnerable children, school gardens should be connected to feeding programs that serve all the children of the school. It notes that sustainability relies on community ownership and leadership by school staff and the school gardens committees. It also notes that unless local and national governments will ultimately take over the responsibility to ensure long-term sustainability of school meals systems and programmes, it is unlikely that an NGO-implemented project will succeed in establishing fully sustainable school feeding systems. It suggests that future research could include exploring how NGOs can work with governments to ensure sustainability and scale-up of school garden models.

The article, "**I'm literally here to hear your story... let them know that**": Exploring Narrative Therapy Approaches with Victims of Child Trafficking, Exploitation & Slavery", outlines the use of narrative therapy techniques with children and young people who have been subjected to trafficking, exploitation and slavery, in particular the Tree of Life Approach is presented as an approach for supporting children and young people to reconstruct personal narratives focussed on resilience and hope.

The article describes the 'best practice fit' routine therapeutic interventions that are used with children and young people who have been subjected to, or are at risk of been subjected to, trafficking, exploitation and slavery, given the high number of cases of child trafficking, exploitation, and slavery in the UK and at present. It states that although these can be effective at reducing harm in the short-term, few interventions have been developed which begin to promote

long-term and sustainable positive change in the lives of children and young people. The article recognises that there are significant mental health needs for victims of child trafficking, exploitation & slavery because of their psychological distress and multiple traumas, often within their early years of development. Despite this, within the UK child trafficking, exploitation and slavery continues to pose systemic challenges in effectively engaging children and young people in therapeutic interventions to reduce risk and harm, as current therapeutic mental health interventions are primarily focussed on physical safety, stable housing, financial stability, location, relocation, rescue and rehabilitation. It outlines emerging novel and innovative interventions and found the key theme of these to be that interventions which utilise co-production and co-design principles seem to be most effective with children who have been subjected to exploitation. The article explains that narrative therapy focuses on the idea that an individual's difficulties are not problems which are located within them but are external to their identity.

The narrative therapy approach proposed by the paper, is the Tree of Life approach. It was originally developed to support vulnerable children affected by HIV/AIDS in Southern Africa and utilises the metaphor of a tree derived from Zimbabwean folklore and collective narrative practice to support individuals and communities to overcome difficult life experiences. The Tree of Life enables people to speak about their lives in ways that are not re-traumatising, but instead strengthens their relationships with their own history, their culture, and significant people in their lives. The paper posits that using the Tree of Life approach would enable a child victim of trafficking, exploitation and slavery to amplify the seldom heard narratives of their life including strengthen their self-esteem, capabilities and relationships. It concludes that although there is a growing evidence base around the use of narrative therapy approaches with children and young people who have been subjected to exploitation, trafficking and slavery, there remains a need for further research and exploration of this approach with children and young people.

CONCLUSION

We are encouraged by a growing number of conceptual frameworks and research that reflect a far more nuanced analysis of the structural drivers and root causes of child labour – that acknowledge complexity, context and the multiplicity of factors that are at play where child labour is found and where it continues to rise despite well-intentioned interventions. Our expectations need to change also on the time it takes to deliver lasting change, and the recognition that there is no single actor or intervention that can deliver lasting change.

Building trust, increasing transparency, listening, enabling dialogue and collaboration between relevant and diverse actors - including children, their families, their employers, local and national governments, multinationals, donors, NGOs, community organisations and trade unions and international organisations. They need to sit around the table – listening and responding appropriately to the problems that are revealed, rather than picking from a menu of

interventions based on a set of assumptions or acting according to a need to see the problem removed from sight and their responsibility relinquished.

We hope you will find this edition interesting and that it challenges your thinking. We would be happy if it prompts debate - even heated debate. It should stimulate researchers and practitioners to raise new questions, build knowledge, generate evidence and new insights into what we can do better to address the urgent and critical problem of harmful forms of child labour.