

Work: No Child's Business (WNCB) Multi-Stakeholder Symposium

*'Child labour in supply chains and producing countries:
working together for a sustainable solution'*

The Hague, Thursday 10 October 2024

“Ending child labour, more urgent than ever”

After 5 years, the Work: No Child's Business (WNCB) Programme will come to an end. But efforts to end child labour must continue. And they will. In a room with over 70 stakeholders, attending the 2024 WNCB Symposium, it was not hard at all to feel that determination vibrating in the air. Representatives of government, private sector and NGOs all agreed that over the last few years, a wealth of experience, best practices, and tools have been built up. All available and ready for use.

Presentations from WNCB partners from Vietnam, Côte d'Ivoire and India showed how the combination of area-based and supply chain approaches can lead to sustainable results. At the same time, all participants agreed that this is also the moment, once again, to take up our responsibility. Let's find each other, let's cooperate, and let's make sure that our cooperation goes further than conversation! The European Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive, also known as the CSDDD, may prove to be of great help. But, as all participants agreed, each of us have a role in making it work, on all levels, and we have to start now. “Eradication of child labour is not something that we can leave for the next generation to solve”, one of the private sector representatives emphasized. “We must do this. So, there is no time to waste.”

Child labour has increased

Obviously, the WNCB Multi-Stakeholder Symposium had to start from a realistic view on the current situation. And, unfortunately, this situation shows that over 160 million children worldwide are involved in child labour. “We have to acknowledge that child labour has increased”, said Sofie Ovaa (WNCB Programme Manager, Hivos). “We also need to recognize the fact that SDG 8.7 will not be reached in time. And we need to deal with the fact that the political climate in many countries around the world has changed, making it unclear how the support for child labour eradication will evolve.”

To a random outsider, this might have been enough to lose hope. But not at this symposium. As Sofie continued: “WNCB has had an impact, many people have been reached, many lives have been improved.” Furthermore, in the European political arena, the CSDDD has become a reality.

To give an actual impression of what has happened over the last 5 years in their respective countries and intervention areas, 3 WNCB partner organization representatives gave some highly insightful presentations. All 3 of them focused on scalable best practices, showing how they worked with business, national and local governments and civil society leaders to get children out of work and back to school.

Urging businesses to look beyond first tier suppliers

The first speaker was Nguyen Ba Lam (Vietnam Senior Country Manager, The Centre for Child Rights & Business). By sharing some data from the National Child Survey from 2018, he provided insight in the Vietnamese context. More than 1 million children are working in Vietnam, with half of them

being engaged in hazardous work, especially in the age group from 15 to 17. As most of this work is happening in the private sector, interventions under the WNCB programme were also targeted at local and international businesses, many of them in the garment sector. In 83 companies measures were taken to put responsible recruitment processes in place and to prevent child labour of happening in all tiers of the value chain, including contractors and subcontractors. Measures were also taken to support youth in finding decent work, and to support parents with decent work, so that their children can remain in school instead of child labour.

Of specific interest was Lam's explanation on how [working together internationally with private sector partners](#) has led to a more transparent supply chain with an increased perception of where child labour occurs. This included both tier 1 and tier 2 suppliers. Based on the results, he called upon all businesses to start looking beyond their first-tier suppliers: "Factories in Vietnam will not wait for a new law to change their processes, if their clients are already demanding those changes."

Strengthen local government to scale up solutions

Second speaker was Soumahoro Gbato (Child Protection Specialist, UNICEF Côte d'Ivoire). In Côte d'Ivoire, child labour occurs especially in the cocoa sector. Representing 40 percent of the global cocoa production and 15 percent of the GDP of Côte d'Ivoire itself, child labour numbers are high in the cocoa sector. However, in addition to supply chain strategies, Soumahoro emphasized the importance of an area-based approach. "We need to take a more holistic approach when it comes to child labour prevention", he explained. "If not, child labour will simply move from one sector to the next."

Sharing some of the most significant WNCB successes in Côte d'Ivoire, Soumahoro explained how most of these examples were based on local solutions that were later adopted by local government. The introduction of bridge classes, offering re-entry education opportunities to children that missed out on school in previous years, is a good example. The idea was introduced at community level and was then adopted and widely introduced by local government. "That's why we need to strengthen local and national government capacities", Soumahoro added. "Only then can we develop integrated approaches and really scale up."

Engaging with businesses in area-based approach

Manish Singh Gour (Managing Director, Manjari Sansthan, India) was the third international speaker. Coming from the Budhpura region Rajasthan, Manjari works at the centre of one of the main cobble stone producing areas in the world. The cobble stone sector is known for its high incidence of child labour, and it is around this sector that Manjari, together with partner organizations such as Aravali, initiated some of their area-based solutions, such as the creation of child labour free zones.

"At the base of all our area-based work has always been the understanding that we need to change the social norm in our communities", Manish explained. "We must make it clear to everyone that child labour, in whatever form, is simply not acceptable. Secondly, we always work from the conviction that, all parents want to send their children to school." In working towards a changed norm, Manjari also started engaging with local businesses, slowly building trust, and slowly combining area-based approaches with supply chain adjustments. "We always make it very clear, that we are not here to harm businesses. On the contrary, by eliminating child labour from the supply chain as well as the surrounding area, we are in fact enhancing the business value and therefore the business case of local stone producers."

The three presentations were clearly, very much appreciated by the audience. As one participant stated afterwards: "These international stories really revealed what it is all about. It links everything

we have been doing to the real context where child labour actually occurs.” Or, like moderator Ama van Dantzig would summarize it at a more general, yet personal level: “The cocoa taste in our mouth, the cobblestone footpath that we walk upon, the clothes that we choose to buy... We tend to forget our relationship with those who are producing these products. But after these presentations, we can no longer keep seeing ourselves outside of this relationship.”

Making use of local experiences and examples

After the country presentations, time was given to Marchell Gerrmann (Ambassador for Business and Development/Director Sustainable Economic Development Ministry of Foreign Affairs) for a plenary presentation. He emphasized the importance of the implementing partners. “You are the eyes and ears for everything that has been supported by the programme”, he stated. “Now it is your experiences that we must share at a much wider scale. It is your knowledge that we need to take to other tables. Also, when starting to implement the CSDDD. Organizations will most certainly be looking for examples from producing areas.”

This message echoed with the next presentation by Marco Dubbelt (Senior director, Global March Against Child Labour). Representing an organization that brings together 75 NGO’s, Teachers’ Unions and Trade Unions, he underlined the importance of listening to and collaborating with Civil Society Organizations (CSO’s) in countries and at grassroot level, where child labour occurs, as they can provide very concrete insights and experience based advice. He presented a combined call to action, which is the outcome of a series of regional symposia held in Africa and Asia to address the issue of child labour through the area-based approach. These symposia brought together stakeholders - CSO’s, governments and trade unions – to reflect on local challenges, share knowledge, and develop coordinated strategies to eliminate child labour in their regions. His presentation provided a clear message to government, private sector and other stakeholders alike. The eradication of child labour demands more than isolated interventions; it requires a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approach. Marco emphasised the role of civil society in this. “CSO’s voices matter. Children cannot wait. Therefore, we need to start working together, now. And let’s make sure that our collaboration goes beyond conversation. Let’s get practical.”

Will the CSDDD be a gamechanger?

With these passionate words, it was time for a highly interesting panel discussion, bringing together stakeholders from government, private sector, and NGO’s. Panelists were Jeroen Verburg (Senior Policy Officer, Responsible Business Conduct, Ministry of Foreign Affairs), Annemarieke Jansen (Commercial Manager, IKEA Nederland), Vasilka Lalevska (Child Rights and Corporate Sustainability Advisor, Save the Children’s Child Rights and Business Global Hub), and Cleo Gaulier-Wright (Policy & Fundraising Officer, International Cocoa Initiative-ICI). The conversation was led by Manon Wolfkamp (Public Affairs & Sustainability Expert) who chose to centre the conversation around the CSDDD.

All panellists agreed on how this directive is clearly offering new opportunities. “A milestone, for us”, Jeroen said. “Something that will contribute to a level playing field for businesses, enabling a much larger impact”. Or, as Vasilka described it: “It may be a gamechanger. Something that may also inspire other legislations. Perhaps even something that we can take as a starting point to bring back a bit of the space around civil society organizations. This space has been shrinking over the last few years.”

“For the cocoa sector, the directive is certainly a big shift”, Cleo added. “I believe that it is a shift that cocoa companies are willing to make. Especially when a level playing field is being created for the whole sector.” Whereas some business sectors have actively worked against the CSDDD, IKEA has always been in favour of it. Annemarieke: “We know it is good business to be a good business. And in fact, I think our company already complies with the new directive. But clearly, we are glad about the

level playing field that will be created. Not only will this help us, it will also help consumers to start buying products with their heart again, and not only with their wallet.”

A shared concern for all panellists is how long the implementation of the directive may take. “Let’s not wait”, Annemarieke stressed. “There is nothing in the directive that businesses cannot start doing already.”

Youth participation, CSO and business stakeholder dialogue, and Q&A

After a short coffee break, participants could choose between three breakout sessions for some in-depth knowledge exchange. The first session was about youth participation. With so many of the participants involved in projects for children, it was interesting to learn how to actually organize youth participation. Examples were shared on how to give children a platform and on how to give their views due weight. In the second breakout session, an interesting exchange of stakeholder experiences took place. With the [TruStone Initiative](#) as a concrete example and a starting point for the conversation, it became quite clear how international companies will need to start improving their understanding of local supply chains. And even when it is only small companies that are involved, we still need front-runners that can bring about the first steps towards change in a sector. The third breakout session was planned as a Q&A session on how to apply an area-based approach to end child labour in various sectors. However, one core question proved to be important enough for the whole session. How to scale up further, once you have an area-based approach in place? Different experiences were shared: start small and then scale up to other sectors or to bigger areas, cooperate with other stakeholders that have (more) influence, and involve the government from the beginning.

Taking up our responsibility to end child labour: “It is more urgent than ever”

Towards the end of symposium, the floor was given to Arthur Molenaar (WNCB/Head of International Programmes, Save the Children Nederland). “This day is showing once again that the urgency for eliminating child labour remains unchanged”, he noted. “What combines all of us in this room is our belief in the right of every child to have an education. As well as the right to find decent work after having had an education. The European CSDDD provides a big step towards our goal. But we will need all of you to make it work. And that’s why, today, I believe that all of us have to re-affirm our commitment in the eradication of child labour.”

It was the perfect lead towards the closing video message by Isabel van Tol (Head of Trade for Development, Ministry of Foreign Affairs). “The programme may come to an end”, she said, “but the WNCB experiences are there to be used onwards, especially in relation with the introduction of the CSDDD.” She emphasized how the programme has resulted in many examples that show how value chain and area-based approaches can be combined. How these cases will offer inspiration and concrete examples, helping others to also join on this road to change. “Let’s take these lessons into account, let’s combine approaches, and let’s keep connecting to other stakeholders, to stop child labour. It is more urgent than ever.”