

# The rights of children



**Background Briefs**  
Development issues and efforts

## The issue

The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (UNDR) states, “All people are created free and equal.” If all are free and equal, everyone should have equal access to human rights. These rights include food, shelter, education and a life free from torture and slavery. In some countries in the developing world, those rights do not apply equally to children. Worldwide, millions of children work long hours and do not enjoy the rights and freedoms of children in the developed world.

In some countries, many adults use children as a resource. Employers take advantage of children by paying them very little money or making them work long hours in terrible conditions. Employers may use children for certain jobs because they are smaller than adults. The employers often use them because children have no power to resist abuse. The children often do not have access to enough food. They rarely have access to education. Banning all child labour would not likely solve the problem of no education, and it would likely create another problem. Around the world, 130 million children must work to support themselves or help support their families. Without their income, they or their families would not survive. For that reason, it is important to look at the different kinds of child labour.

The girl selling fruit on the street in the morning and then using the money to help pay for her schooling is both helping her family and going to school. It is different, however, for the boy who sits for 10 hours a day making

carpets from very tiny strands of wool. He will do this for the rest of his life to help pay off his family’s debt. When he is an adult, the work will have ruined his eyesight. He never attended school so will be unable to do any other kind of work.

Aside from missing out on an education, some child labour is harmful to the child’s development. Children who are in contact with dangerous chemicals when they are spraying pesticides are at risk. Children who have to lift heavy loads for long periods may damage their spines. Young people forced to work in the sex trade, abducted to be child soldiers or sold into slavery face the greatest danger.

Well over 100 million child labourers are street children. Street children are young people who live and work on the streets. Some live with their families on the streets. Some have a home to go to at night. Others live alone or with other children. These children live in abandoned buildings, under bridges, in doorways or in parks. All these groups of children spend their days working on the streets. The children range in age from 3 to 18 years old. Most are boys, but an increasing number are girls.

Life on the streets is very dangerous. Around the world, police or other authorities abuse (and sometimes murder) the street children. Up to 90 percent of street children use some kind of drug or chemical to try to make their life more bearable. Addiction to these substances causes health problems or sudden death.

## The road to rights for all children

Since child labour often means children's survival, it would be foolish to try to stop all child labour. The children could end up in even more dangerous work situations. It is important, however, to make sure that children who must work are able to reach their full potential. To do this, they need knowledge, tools and opportunities.

They need child-friendly schools, not places where they are abused or not helped to learn. They need schools with timetables that are flexible so they can combine work and school. Working children need schools that are close to where they work and provide education related to their lives.

When we try to improve their lives, we need to remember that street children are valuable members of society and deserve our respect. Many of them run successful businesses. They support themselves and, sometimes, their families and other children. These children need a community that will protect them from harm and help them move off the streets. They need better access to health care and legal aid. They also need training to help them develop safe and better ways to earn a living.

Unless child workers have better protection and more opportunities, society will continue to overlook them, both as children and as adults. We must protect the rights of all children, whatever their circumstances.

## Projects to promote and protect the rights for all children

Canada, through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), supports a number of projects to help improve the lives of children around the world. CIDA's Action Plan on Child Protection projects focus on such

things as basic education, health and nutrition and peace building.

CIDA adopted a rights-based approach, based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). CIDA believes that children who enjoy their rights have a much better chance of becoming responsible adults who will contribute to their communities.

**Improving life for child labourers:** CIDA partnered with Save the Children Canada in India to improve life for child labourers, including street children. Between 1998 and 2004, the project increased access to education and vocational training for more than 7500 children. It also supported activities that produced income for nearly 4000 families and helped 2000 children to stop working.

**Providing a home for street girls:** In Brazil, CIDA helped fund a project to build and equip a home for up to 60 street girls. The home provides basic education, counselling and skills training. This helps the girls fit into society. It also reduces the number of young women involved in the sex trade.

**Addressing the needs of street children:** In Thailand, CIDA worked with the Thai Red Cross Society and Canada's Street Kids International to produce a manual for helping street children. Printed in the Thai language, the manual addresses the needs and living conditions of both street children without family and those with family. The simple language provides important information on such things as HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, child rights, personal safety and access to health and social welfare services.



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