



President of the General Assembly 79th Session



Informal interactive dialogue on “Childhood with dignity: Eliminating child labour in all its forms, including forced recruitment and use of children in armed conflict”

Tuesday, 13 May 2025

SUMMARY

On 13 May 2025, the President of the General Assembly, with the support of the International Labour Organization (ILO), convened an Informal Interactive Dialogue on “Childhood with dignity: Eliminating child labour in all its forms, including forced recruitment and use of children in armed conflict” as one of his signature events, in alignment with the theme “Unity in diversity, for the advancement of peace, sustainable development, and human dignity for everyone everywhere”.

Opening segment

His Excellency Mr. Philemon Yang, President of the seventy-ninth session of the General Assembly, in his opening remarks, stated that nearly half of children subjected to labour were living in conflict-affected countries with many being recruited by armed groups and seeing their rights violated and lives endangered. The President of the General Assembly emphasized that children recruited by armed groups were not soldiers but victims, that the forced recruitment and use of children in armed conflict was recognized as one of the worst forms of child labour and that all children should be able to live a life of dignity and opportunity. The enforcement of existing tools, such as international conventions, should be strengthened. He acknowledged the reflection of education and social protection in national budgets and called for fair wage laws and the enforcement of child protection laws. He further encouraged greater investment in children and heightened attention to emerging threats that make children more vulnerable to child labour. The root causes of child labour, such as poverty, displacement, inequalities and lack of opportunities should be addressed. In closing, the President of the General Assembly urged Member states and stakeholders through discussion at the informal interactive dialogue and the upcoming High-level Political Forum to identify solutions, advance progress on SDG 8 and end child labour in all its forms.

Mr. Gilbert F. Houngbo, Director-General of the International Labour Organization (ILO) referred to the high number of children who remain in child labour including in hazardous work and in agriculture. He recalled that the effective abolition of child labour was a fundamental principle and right at work, particularly in today’s shifting world where

inequality, conflict and uncertainty threatened the foundations for decent work. He focused on several key pillars to respond to the urgent need for action and advocated for: the articulation of integrated strategies that promote all fundamental principles and rights at work; the development of national legal and policy frameworks that build on ILO child labour Conventions and are supported by strong institutions including labour administration and inspection; the generation of robust data and evidence on child labour; as well as for partnerships and collective action such as Alliance 8.7. The Director-General referred to the 6th Global Child Labour Conference, to be held in Morocco in 2026, as a valuable opportunity to take stock of progress, promote exchange of experiences, strengthen international cooperation and chart a course toward 2030. In closing, he stressed that inclusive societies and shared prosperity could not be achieved if millions of children were denied their rights.

Ms. Cristina Isabel Lopes da Silva Monteiro Duarte, Under-Secretary-General and Special Advisor on Africa to the United Nations Secretary-General depicted child labour as a structural crisis and a clear indicator of system breakdown and policy failure requiring a structural response. She observed that this crisis was particularly severe in Africa, which had the highest prevalence of child labour – disproportionately affecting girls. With the youngest population globally, Africa held immense potential, but the demographic dividend could also become a liability. In addition, Africa's debt burden was impeding investment in essential services. She advocated for investments in health, education, child protection, and decent jobs in line with a development model prioritising people, strengthening institutions and safeguarding the rights and potential of every child. School meals programmes were presented as an integrated solution that could not only raise school attendance, reduce dropouts, improve nutrition, tackle stunting, and shield children from being pulled into labour, but build livelihoods, boost local economies and strengthen resilience. There was a need for effective financing and the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development provided an opportunity to call for a new financing model.

H.E. Ms. Claudia Fuentes Julio, Chair of Alliance 8.7 and Ambassador, Permanent Representative of Chile to the United Nations Office and other International Organizations at Geneva, described the role of Alliance 8.7 in bringing together partners to coordinate action, share best practices and monitor progress to eradicate forced labour, child labour, modern slavery and modern trafficking. She affirmed that the pathfinder countries of the Alliance were essential to translate commitments into action on the ground notably by advocating for the ratification and implementation of human rights norms and standards including international labour standards. She emphasized three areas for action to deepen commitment with pathfinder countries, namely, adopting an inclusive, on-the-ground approach bringing together government, employers and workers and all relevant stakeholders; utilizing monitoring mechanisms to assess where support is needed; and adopting a whole-of-government approach by integrating the eradication of child labour into all government agendas.

Ms. Molly Namirembe shared her experience of working on a tea plantation as a child, describing long hours without sufficient food, proper gear or protection while watching other children make their way to school. With the support of a relative, she was eventually able to return to school and transform her trajectory. After initially struggling to speak about her experience, she gradually began sharing her story, finding healing and offering support to others. She emphasized that every child deserved to learn, play, and to grow in a safe and loving

environment, and concluded her intervention with a heartfelt appeal to all stakeholders to protect children, support families and give children opportunities to thrive.

Interactive panel discussion

Ms. Cynthia Samuel-Olonjuwon, ILO Special Representative to the UN and Director of the ILO Office for the UN moderated the interactive discussion. Introducing the session, she asserted that a childhood with dignity was possible for every child everywhere. The fact that millions of children remained trapped in child labour was not merely a matter of missed targets or statistical gaps, as every data point represented a child whose fundamental rights and future was being compromised. Proven solutions were available including decent work for parents, access to education for children and robust social protection systems that reach every child and family. Translating these solutions into action at the necessary speed and scale required significant investment and political will. Considering the event's focus on the forced recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts, she highlighted persisting gaps in knowledge and statistics and underscored the critical role of monitoring in raising awareness and ensuring accountability.

Mr. Pablo Espiniella, Senior Special Assistant, Chief of Staff, Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children highlighted an alarming rise in child trafficking with 38 per cent of detected victims globally being children and observed that many trafficked children were subjected to the worst forms of child labour. Trafficking in children was generating billions in revenue, with the largest share stemming from labour exploitation. Conflicts, forced displacement, climate change, growing inequalities and poverty further increased the risks. He called for the prioritization of prevention, protection, and accountability which included improved child protection systems, access to social services, birth registration, education, and sustainable livelihoods for families. Businesses should carry out human rights due diligence across their operations and supply chains. He reminded the Call to Action of the Inter-Agency Coordination Group against Trafficking in Persons (ICAT) and, with a view to the 2025 High-level Political Forum, the opportunity to strengthen child protection within sustainable development frameworks.

Mr. James Gray, Senior Advisor Child Protection, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) underscored the importance of schooling in eliminating child labour, which could be promoted by providing access to early childhood development services, childcare and pre-primary education, ensuring affordable education and supporting back-to-school campaigns and outreach. Strategies to keep children in school included ensuring that the minimum age for employment is not less than the end of compulsory schooling, providing universal child benefits to address poverty, and approaches extending beyond the education sector such as school feeding programmes, parenting support or health services. He reiterated that the forced recruitment of children in armed conflicts was one of the worst forms of child labour. In this regard, he advocated for a multi-sectoral approach that protects children from recruitment, prioritizes the release of those already recruited, and provides support for their reintegration. Children who had been recruited should primarily be seen as victims of conflict.

Mr. Timothy Ryan, Chairperson of the Global March Against Child Labour, emphasized good practices to promote fundamental principles and rights at work. He called for the

establishment of effective legal frameworks aligned with the ILO's core conventions, and the creation of an enabling environment for the participation of civil society organizations and unions. The willingness of governments and employers to work with them was critical. In rural and informal economies, where avenues for interventions or leverage are limited, it was crucial to provide a basic social foundation for health, education and the rule of law.

Ms. Shea Gopaul, Permanent Representative of the International Organization of Employers to the UN, Co-Chair of the UN Business and Industry Major Group stressed that the high prevalence of child labour was unacceptable and that there was a need for renewed political will, multi-stakeholder partnerships, resources and action. Child labour, forced labour, and human trafficking were particularly prevalent in the informal sector which in many countries accounted for a significant proportion of the workforce. Tackling child labour in supply chains remained a top priority. Challenges were rooted in structural vulnerabilities and weak governance. While national laws applied to all forms of production, the key challenge remained their effective enforcement. National labour institutions and inspectorates should be strengthened to ensure universal protection. Employers' organizations had a critical role in advocating for stronger labour laws, raising awareness, supporting businesses and engaging in social dialogue. Companies should ensure compliance with human rights and labour laws, advocate for the enforcement of labour laws, tackle decent work deficits and address the underlying drivers such as poverty, informality and corruption. Reference was made to guidelines developed to support employers including the ILO-IOE Child Labour Guidance Tool for Business. Addressing limited access to quality education was essential to eradicate child labour and prevent children from entering the workforce.

In their subsequent statements, **Member States** expressed appreciation to the President of the General Assembly for the convening of this informal interactive dialogue. They expressed deep concern over the persistent prevalence of child labour, particularly in the informal and agricultural sectors, as well as the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict. They reaffirmed their commitment to addressing and ultimately eliminating both practices.

Member States acknowledged that SDG target 8.7 to end child labour in all its forms by 2025 had not been achieved. They referenced the role of national frameworks and enforcement mechanisms in safeguarding fundamental rights and protections of children and to ensure their safety, dignity and opportunities to thrive. Delegations emphasized that the forced recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts constitute violations of international law and represent one of the worst forms of child labour. They described the fight against child labour as both a legal and moral imperative.

Member States called for the respect of international law, as well as fundamental principles and rights at work. They underscored the importance of ratifying and effectively implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, as well as the ILO Conventions on child labour, namely Convention No.138 on Minimum Age and Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour. Delegations also highlighted the Durban Call to Action on the Elimination of Child Labour, the Paris Principles and Commitments on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups, the Vancouver Principles on Peacekeeping and the Prevention of the Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers, and the Safe Schools Declaration. Reference was made

to the “Prove It Matters” campaign by the Special Representative for Children and Armed Conflict.

Emphasis was placed on the importance of international and multilateral cooperation with some delegations highlighting the value of regional and South-South cooperation. Multistakeholder engagement, including through initiatives such as Alliance 8.7, was also recognized as essential to advance efforts against child labour. The availability of data was described as a critical enabler of effective cooperation, prompting calls for the development of enhanced measurement frameworks capable of generating robust data.

Member States underscored the critical need to address the structural and root causes of child labour including poverty, informality, social exclusion, limited access to basic services and gender-based discrimination. Areas of intervention identified by Member States included addressing poverty and inequality, promoting access to healthcare and social protection, ensuring decent work for parents, and strengthening labour inspection, reintegration efforts and awareness raising initiatives. Access to quality, free and inclusive education was repeatedly emphasized as a critical tool in the fight against child labour. Equally important were strong national legal frameworks and child-sensitive policies. Concrete activities included the deployment of mobile labour inspection teams, the use of web-based inspection systems, outreach campaigns conducted in schools, and community-based interventions aimed at prevention.

Corporate due diligence, in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the ILO Tripartite Declaration of Principles concerning Multinational Enterprises and Social Policy, was recognized as essential for the promotion of decent work in supply chains, including the elimination of child labour.

The significant number of children living in areas affected by conflict was noted with concern. Children recruited by armed forces or groups should be regarded as victims; they were subjected to multiple intersecting rights violations and may be exploited in roles other than that of soldiers. Statements mentioned the heightened vulnerabilities of girls, migrant children, children living in remote areas, and those working in the informal economy and agricultural sector.

Delegations acknowledged the mandate of the Secretary-General’s Special Representative on Children and Armed Conflict and emphasized the importance of promoting reintegration efforts including through psychosocial support, education and vocational training. The protection of education including in conflict settings was recognized as a key factor in reducing drivers of recruitment and use of children in armed conflict.

The upcoming review of SDG 8 at the High-level Political Forum for Sustainable Development, the Second World Summit for Social Development and the 2026 Global Conference on the Elimination of Child Labour were recognized as key opportunities to exchange best practices, scale up efforts, and reaffirm the commitment to promoting fundamental principles and rights at work.

Civil society interventions called on Member States to strengthen legislative frameworks, enhance enforcement mechanisms and improve coordination across sectors.

In his closing remarks, **Mr. Gilbert F. Houngbo, Director-General of the ILO**, thanked the President of the General Assembly for the successful organization of the dialogue and acknowledged the valuable analysis and solutions presented by delegations recognizing, among others, the importance of national legal frameworks, international labour standards and key measures to prevent child labour such as decent work for parents, quality education and social protection. In closing, he called for continued efforts in the fight against child labour, forced labour and modern slavery and reaffirmed the ILO's commitment to that end.
