Understanding Children’s Work: An Interagency Data and Research Cooperation Project

Alec Fyfe, Frans Roselaers, Zafiris Tzannatos, and Furio Rosati

During the 1990s broad interest resurfaced among the public and policymakers on the subject of child labor, this time concentrating on the plight of children in the developing world. The Children’s Summit in New York (1990), the World Summit on Social Development in Copenhagen (1995), and the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) adoption of Convention 182 on Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour (1999) are clear evidence of the increasing international concern. In several conferences leading up to the 1999 ILO convention (Geneva 1996, Amsterdam 1997, Cartagena 1997, and Oslo 1997), the same commitment to combat child labor was expressed, along with the need for closer cooperation between international organizations, a point emphasized especially in Oslo.

With the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals in 2000, the realization quickly grew that international and national efforts to address key developmental objectives will be hampered unless there are adequate data for measuring, monitoring, and managing results; sufficient capacity to use the data at the local level, supplemented by technical assistance; donor harmonization of policies for setting global (rather than donor) priorities and exploring synergies among all stakeholders; and—conditional on the previous three areas—timely and relevant policy interventions.

This note describes a major initiative for international cooperation on child labor, including the creation of a database that can be accessed electronically by researchers. The initiative aims to develop a common language and methodologies and to stimulate more intense joint action on the ground to create local capacity to address the problem of child labor.

I. Origins of the UCW Project

In December 2000 the three leading international agencies on children, labor, and development—the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF),
the International Labor Organization (ILO), and the World Bank—launched the joint interagency research project, Understanding Children’s Work (UCW). Its goals are to:

- Enhance child labor research, data collection, and data analysis;
- Enhance the capacity for child labor data collection and research, especially at local and national levels;
- Improve the assessments of interventions against child labor.

The project is guided in part by the Agenda for Action, unanimously adopted at the 1997 International Conference on Child Labor in Oslo. The agenda specifically identified the need for better information on child labor—its extent and nature, its causes and consequences, and the effectiveness of policies and programs for addressing it. Data gaps and conceptual differences hamper an optimal understanding of child labor. They make it difficult to identify priorities, design policies, effectively target resources, and assess program impact and so are an obstacle to achieving maximum synergy among programs to combat child labor.

The UCW project also responds to the need for stronger and better articulated cooperation and coordination on child labor among partner agencies. There is general recognition that under different mandates and instruments (such as ILO Convention 138 on Minimum Age of Work and Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labor, the 1989 U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child, the 1997 Oslo Agenda for Action, the Millennium Development Goals, and the World Bank’s project, programmatic, and advisory activities), action on child labor is often insufficiently harmonized and coordinated at national and local levels.

The value of the UCW project to the three agencies (and potentially to others that may join or follow similar efforts) is in facilitating research and analysis and interagency cooperation on child labor issues. The project’s independence from the strict mandates and operational requirements of the individual agencies leaves it uniquely positioned to fulfill these roles. The project is pushing the child labor research agenda forward in areas of direct relevance to the program work of the agencies concerned. It also addresses the research process itself, providing technical support to the development of the research tools and methodologies needed at the country level for exploring new areas of knowledge. By helping create a common knowledge base on child labor as a necessary starting point for improved cooperation and cross-fertilization of experience and ideas, UCW contributes to greater coherence in approaches to child labor. These dimensions go beyond cooperation on child labor research to positively influence operational projects, advocacy, and the policy advice given to governments and other partners at the country level.

II. DATA AVAILABILITY AND ACCESS BY THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

By bringing together information on child labor from a wide variety of sources, the UCW project Web site improves access to this information for researchers and
policymakers alike (www.ucw-project.org). The Web site presents a broad spectrum of surveys and survey-based data sets relating to child labor, child labor statistics for over 50 countries, a comprehensive child labor bibliography, a database on child labor–related agency projects, and various country studies, reports, and research papers. It also provides links for downloading micro data and studies from UNICEF’s Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS), the World Bank’s Living Standards Measurements Surveys (LSMS), and ILO’s Statistical Information and Monitoring Programme on Child Labor (SIMPOC).¹

Beyond improving access to existing data, the UCW project is developing a joint core survey questionnaire on child labor designed to standardize and extend child labor data collected by the three agencies. The project also supports the development of tools for researching areas that are beyond the scope of the large-scale institutional surveys of the three agencies, such as quantifying child involvement in the worst forms of labor, measuring the health effects of child labor, and identifying factors influencing the demand side of the child labor equation.

### III. Current and Potential Areas of Research

Using available data, researchers can undertake analyses designed to improve the understanding of child labor and a host of household factors affecting child labor. The information in the various data sets can be used to study a wide range of issues, such as health effects of child labor, links with education, social risk management, youth employment, and the worst forms of child labor. Country-level research and capacity-building activities are also planned, along with mainstreaming and dissemination efforts to increase awareness and uptake of research outputs by countries themselves and by other agencies.

The UCW project is also currently mapping information on impact assessments. A methodological review was conducted on the limited number of completed impact assessments of child labor–related activities, agency projects relating to child labor were mapped, and a review was undertaken of progress in identifying best practices. With this mapping exercise now largely complete, the focus is shifting to the impact of specific programmatic child labor interventions at the country level.²

¹ UNICEF’s MICS, based on household surveys, includes a list of global indicators developed jointly with other agencies (including the World Health Organization, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization, and the ILO) to assess progress for children. For more information see http://childinfo.org/MICS. The World Bank’s LSMS are household surveys designed to better measure and understand poverty in developing economies. The surveys often have specific information on children’s activities. For more information see www.worldbank.org/lsms. The ILO’s SIMPOC carries out a wide range of surveys around the world on child labor. Key to SIMPOC are national household-based surveys collecting detailed information on the extent, nature, causes, and consequences of child labor. For more information see www.ilo.org/ipec/simpoc.

² For more information on project activities, see www.ucw-project.org.
Through shared information and data and joint research, the UCW project has strengthened interagency cooperation among UNICEF, the ILO, and the World Bank and advanced a number of activities undertaken by the agencies individually. For the ILO, for instance, references, data, and methodologies obtained through the project were used to establish new global estimates on child labor in 2002. The parameters of ILO’s SIMPOC surveys were discussed with its partners in the UCW project and adapted. For UNICEF the project has been particularly valuable at the country level, for example, in El Salvador, Guatemala, Nepal, Morocco, and Yemen, where it helped strengthen inter-agency collaboration and provided a common platform to promote child labor concerns and assist governments in identifying priorities for future action. For the World Bank the project has broadened awareness of partners’ activities and of the multisectoral nature of child labor, education, and health, which calls for greater coordination among units within the World Bank and for enhanced dialogue with countries and other agencies.

The UCW project is about to enter its second phase, and more activities are planned for joint research and data collection to advance understanding of the causes and consequences of child labor.