

## Child labour massively in our shopping cart.

*It is a painful paradox: for the first time in history, there is a global commitment to banning child labour and yet it occurs on a massive scale. Right down to our shopping cart. From the clothes we wear to the chocolate we eat. That is why the World Day Against Child Labour on 12 June is absolutely necessary. More than ever, because the pandemic threatens to turn back the clock 20 years. The tools that can stop it are also clearer than ever. Fortunately. Because everyone likes to eat chocolate with a clear conscience.*

All 187 member states of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) ratified the Convention prohibiting the worst forms of child labour last year.<sup>1</sup> A historic milestone. Yet even before the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 150 million children were working instead of going to school.<sup>2</sup> And the pandemic only exacerbates these dramatic figures.<sup>3</sup> The United Nations has declared 2021 the "International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour".<sup>4</sup> How is it that this is still needed in the 21st century?

### Child labour ever closer

Not all tasks performed by children are child labour. From the moment that children do work that is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous for them, or that the work prevents them from going to school, we speak of child labour.<sup>5</sup> More than 150 million children are in the latter category today. And we are - much more than we realise - "affected party". The products made by children's hands also end up in our shopping cart. Just think of the diamond in our engagement ring, the cotton used to make our T-shirts, the bananas we eat, the coffee and tea we drink, the minerals needed to make our smartphones, electric cars and solar panels, the flowers we give on birthdays and the palm oil in our skincare or margarine.<sup>6</sup> And so is our chocolate.

### Child labour hidden in the chain

Child labour is hidden in the international supply chains of large and small companies that sell these products to us. A report by the International Trade Union Confederation on the international supply chains of 50 large companies showed that they only employ 6% of the people directly and that 94% of the people working on their products are hidden in their chains. This is how companies escape taking responsibility.<sup>7</sup> All too often, companies still act according to the "what they don't know won't hurt them" principle. Too often, companies do not look beyond their direct suppliers.<sup>8</sup> In the absence of transparency, violations go further

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mo.be/nieuws/hele-wereld-verbiedt-ergste-vormen-van-kinderarbeid>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ituc-csi.org/elimination-of-child-labour>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.vrt.be/vrtnws/nl/2020/10/15/coronacrisis-kinderarbeid/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ituc-csi.org/elimination-of-child-labour>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ilo.org/ipec/facts/lang--fr/index.htm>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/reports/child-labor/list-ofgoods#:~:text=The%20most%20common%20agricultural%20goods,and%20fireworks%20appear%20most%20ofrequently.>

<sup>7</sup> [New ITUC report exposes hidden workforce of 116 million in global supply chains of fifty companies - International Trade Union Confederation \(ituc-csi.org\)](https://www.ituc-csi.org/new-report-exposes-hidden-workforce-of-116-million-in-global-supply-chains-of-fifty-companies)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.unicef.nl/files/Child%20Labour%20in%20Global%20Supply%20Chains.pdf> p. 3.

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in the chain simply continues. Multinationals continue to depress prices, leading to exploitation for which no one feels responsible.

### **Worthwhile work for the parents**

Decent work for adults, respect for workers' rights, universal social protection and free quality education are the conditions to finally banish child labour from the world.<sup>9</sup> Structural changes are needed, because as long as a family has too little income to survive, (some of) its children will continue to work and not go to school. Therefore, living wages and dignified jobs for the parents<sup>10</sup> are necessary throughout the international supply chains. Companies must pay living wages to their employees, ensure that human rights are respected in the rest of the chain and maintain humane prices and stable contracts with their suppliers, who often operate in very fragile conditions.

### **Just doing your best voluntarily is not enough**

After decades of charitable actions and empty promises by companies, it is time for binding legislation that obliges companies to ensure that human rights are respected throughout international supply chains. We call this compulsory chain care. This is necessary to eradicate child labour permanently. Just voluntarily taking care of the chain is clearly not enough to bring about change on the ground, as the cocoa sector shows. In 2001, companies in the cocoa and chocolate sector promised to eliminate child labour by 2006. Then in 2010 they promised to reduce child labour by 70% by 2020. These agreements are known as the Harkin-Engel Protocol. However, the promises did not lead to the necessary action. The latest follow-up study published last year indicated that child labour in the cocoa sector has increased since 2001. Today, Harkin-Engel is a symbol of the failure of promises made by companies without accountability.

### **Laws needed**

There is therefore an urgent need for legislation that makes chain care compulsory, so that companies look into their chains and take the necessary measures. Chain care also belongs on the agenda of the social consultations, because trade unions always have the role of defending and strengthening the rights of workers. When the supply chains are international, so is the social dialogue. Trade unions are already very active at all possible levels to put both child labour and chain care on the agenda, locally, nationally, Europe-wide and globally. It is because workers cooperate across borders and can enter into consultation with companies that it will be possible to have fair chocolate - without child labour.

### **High time for change**

Fortunately, change is in sight! The appeal by NGOs and trade unions, as well as by many companies that no longer want to be in unfair competition with companies that exploit children, has not fallen on deaf ears. The European Commission is currently working on legislation concerning compulsory chain care. If the Commission keeps its word, it should come out with a first proposal in September. In Belgium, too, things are speeding up. In February, no fewer than sixty Belgian companies submitted an official letter to Ministers Dermagne and

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.ituc-csi.org/elimination-of-child-labour>

<sup>10</sup> [End Child Labour in Global Supply Chains - International Trade Union Confederation \(ituc-csi.org\)](https://www.ituc-csi.org/end-child-labour-in-global-supply-chains)

Kitir in which they call for a Belgian law on compulsory chain care.<sup>11</sup> In April, a bill on this subject was tabled in our Parliament.<sup>12</sup> Fortunately, our Belgian MPs are taking the lead, because the legislative process at European level could still take years.

If Belgium really wants to commit to a world in which every child can grow up in safety and dignity<sup>13</sup>, then legislation on compulsory chain care should not wait any longer. Members of Parliament, it is time to push the green button.

Laura Eliaerts - Policy Officer ACV-CSC International

Santiago Fischer - WSM policy officer

Bart Van Besien - Policy and project officer Oxfam Belgium/Belgium

Koen Van Troos - Head of PR and advocacy Fair Trade Belgium

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.tdc-enabel.be/2021/02/04/ministers-kitir-en-dermagne-ontvangen-brief-duediligence/#:~:text=60%20enterprises%20and%20business%20federations%20are%20establishing%20and%20environment%20in%20their%20supply%20chains.>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.dekamer.be/FLWB/PDF/55/1903/55K1903001.pdf>

<sup>13</sup>

[https://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/policy/policy\\_areas/highlighted/people/undiminished\\_focus\\_childrens\\_rights](https://diplomatie.belgium.be/en/policy/policy_areas/highlighted/people/undiminished_focus_childrens_rights)

