



THE CONCERNED FOR  
*Working Children*

## Children and Social Security

Ganapathi M.M.



The Concerned for Working Children  
303/2, L.B. Shastri Nagar  
Vimanapura Post  
Bangalore 560 017

Website: [www.workingchild.org](http://www.workingchild.org)  
Email: [cwc@pobox.com](mailto:cwc@pobox.com)

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## **Children – grappling with social insecurities**

Today, in the name of setting 'global economic standards' the new Capitalist imperialism is forcing new terms and conditions on developing countries. Due to the competition in the world market, welfare of people is no longer a state priority. As a result, democracy and democratic values in our countries are being eroded.

In order to adhere to the rules of the new game, countries such as ours have had to do away with a large number of safety nets for the marginalised. Our countries have reduced the subsidies they offered to the poor, cut down the subsidies for farmers, artisans, and small-scale industries etc. All service sectors like health, education, transportation are getting privatised. Through such measures, we are dismantling our social protection mechanisms and the needy are becoming increasingly vulnerable. The setting of global standards has actually resulted in further marginalisation of children and their communities. The services which were provided earlier by the State now have to be paid for. This makes an increased pressure on families which are already burdened by lack of employment. One of the immediate outcomes of this is the increased number of children who are pushed into exploitative work situations.

This social insecurity is also aggravated due to acute unemployment of adults. As a result of the global standards, traditional employment sectors are no longer viable. The markets are flooded with mass produced, inexpensive, attractive, and machine made products. The traditional markets cannot compete with this onslaught. Fishing, agriculture, pottery, weaving, dairy are all among the most harshly hit sectors.

Children of these communities are doubly affected. On one hand their families are on the brink of pauperisation. On the other, the education which is within their reach is sub-standard. They are not in a position to 'pay' to private institutions. Their economic situations force them to work, yet, because child labour is banned, they seek work in sectors which are invisible. They find themselves in jobs which are even more harmful and exploitative than ever before.

One of the popular State responses to these children is to conduct raids and enrol children into government schools. There are no support systems available to children to deal with the reasons which force them to work or to support their education in the schools. The schools do not provide children meaningful education. Yet, such acts are routinely carried in order to "clean up the sectors – especially the export sectors - off child labour". International Agencies such as the ILO, several international funding agencies and governments endorse the 'raid' approach to child labour without paying attention to either the short term or long term impact of these raids on children.

Children are increasingly losing their ground to resist such acts, to express their difficulties and to raise their voice against exploitation. Civil society is increasingly silenced and is unable to have any say with regard to the welfare of the people. There is a strong sense of helplessness and frustration which is setting in. Such a situation will soon lead to total chaos. More and more people will begin to say that 'democracy will not deliver the goods to people'. Those in power will begin to argue for and justify fascism as the only means to 'discipline' the people and to 'control' them in order to carry out an effective rule. It is very likely that such fascism may seek and get the support of the middle class by promising them a life-style which is on par with affluent societies of the world.

But Bhima Sangha<sup>1</sup> and other children's movements in India, working children's movements in Africa and Latin America are aware of this trend. So they have organised themselves and have tried to raise their voice wherever possible, from the local to the international level. They have tried to argue with and convince the Governments at different levels, international agencies such as the UN and the ILO, to listen to their voices. It has not been easy for them to participate and to express their opinions about their situations and about policies which affect them. At the local level, where fairly decentralised structures of governance exist, it has been relatively easier for them to influence decision making processes within the preview of the available power and resources. These movements demonstrate the power of children's participation. But at higher levels of governance, it becomes more and more difficult for children to influence decision making.

### **Children's survey and Identification of families below the poverty line**

Bhima Sangha and Makkala Panchayats<sup>2</sup> have conducted house to house surveys of over 7000 households in 8 Panchayats of Karnataka and have collected in-depth information about their socio-economic situation. In one of them, Uppunda Panchayat, the Government prepared a revised BPL (Below the poverty Line) list. A large number of families that had figured in the Bhima Sangha and Makkala Panchayat Survey as extremely needy families had been left in the Government's list.

Children took up this matter with the higher officials and supported their argument with their survey results. The Assistant Commissioner of the area took their objections seriously and requested them to take part in the forthcoming Gram Sabha and to take up the matter with the members of the Panchayat. The children did so and were able to convince the Panchayat that their data was far more authentic. The Panchayat took a decision to revise the list on the basis of the information collected by children.

Since then, the adult members of the Panchayat consult the members of Bhima Sangha and Makkala Panchayat regularly before they finalise the list of beneficiaries for the various schemes being implemented by the government.

The working children's movements of Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe have formed the international Movement of Working Children. They were able to demonstrate their collective strength in the ILO conference held in Amsterdam in 1997 on the issue of the worst forms of Child Labour. Adults who were at the conference clearly saw what children are capable of contributing to the international policy discussions as protagonists. But instead of paving a way for increased participation of children in the international discussions, the children show of strength resulted in increased resistance to children's participation since many adults saw it as a threat to their authority.

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<sup>1</sup> A union of, by and for working children in Karnataka facilitated by the Concerned for Working Children, with a membership of over 20,000, striving for the realisation of child rights

<sup>2</sup> A children's Village Council or parallel government of children, set up jointly by Bhima Sangha and the Concerned for Working Children. It is a forum for all children to participate in decision-making and governance at the Panchayat level.

In the recent past there is an increased mention of children participation. Quite often, this participation is little more than tokenistic, as was seen in the UNGASS or almost non-existent, as seen in the reporting process of the UN CRC and ILO consultations.

Most of the adult's agencies who endorse the Convention on the Rights of the Child are concerned with the 'protection' and 'provision' aspects of the CRC. But even they do not see how critical participation rights are for children to realise their rights. In spite of strong resistance from most of the world and a little support from few agencies, children's movements have already made significant strides.

### **Children inspired their Panchayat to start a High School**

At present, the State Government of Karnataka is not very keen to start new high schools in the rural areas. Hence no money is being allocated for them. But the local governments, such as the Panchayat of Alur, have been repeatedly placing requests for new High Schools in vain.

A large number of children in Alur dropped out of school after 7<sup>th</sup> class since the high school nearest to them were at least 15 kilometres away. . Bhima Sangha and Makkala Panchayats constantly raised this issue before the Panchayat and their community members. The adults felt helpless since year after year the State Government did not respond to their request. When they explained this, children suggested, "why don't we start an Extension High School<sup>3</sup> here?" The Panchayat had the experience of running Extension Schools for working children. So Panchayat began to explore the idea. They had an old building which could be used as the premise. They hired a few educated youth of the area to teach and these young persons were trained by the Concerned for Working Children. The members of Bhima Sangha and Makkala Panchayats convinced the families to send their children to this High School. All the families contribute some money and materials for the running of the school. The Panchayat also makes a contribution. 75 children, most of them girls, who otherwise would have left schooling, are attending this High School. Subsequently the school was moved to the community hall constructed by the Panchayat. The Panchayat president Ratnakhar Achar proudly says," This is the only high school run by the village Panchayat".

Children should get more support and solidarity from people's movements. All civil society movements need to realise that whatever affects adults also affects children, but not necessarily in the same way. They have to recognise that children have their own world view and are capable of expressing their opinions about the matters concerning themselves. For this to happen, children should be enabled to access appropriate information and to get organised. The World Social Forum, 2004 is one example of civil society movements opening up a space for children to have a say in global issues. This will enable children to learn from other movements and to contribute to the creation of a new world.

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<sup>3</sup> An Extension School is an extension of the formal school, where all the children are registered at the formal school, but are able to study at their convenience with regard to timings, location and scholastic needs.