



THE PRESIDENCY
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

**ADDRESS BY PRESIDENT CYRIL RAMAMPHOSA AT THE OPENING
CEREMONY OF THE 5TH ILO GLOBAL CONFERENCE ON THE ELIMINATION
OF CHILD LABOUR**

**INKOSI ALBERT LUTHULI INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION CENTRE,
ETHEKWINI
15 MAY 2022**

Programme Director,
Director-General of the International Labour Organisation, Mr Guy Ryder,
Your Excellency Ms Amina J. Mohammed, Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations,
Your Excellency Saulos Klaus Chilima, Vice-President of the Republic of Malawi,
Your Excellency Stefan Löfven, former Prime Minister of Sweden,
Your Excellency Alberto Fernández, President of the Republic of Argentina,
Nobel Laureates, Mr Kailash Satyarthi and Ms Leymah Gbowee,
Regional Vice-President of the International Trade Union Confederation and General Secretary of the Congress of South African Trade Unions, Mr Bheki Ntshalintshali,
International guests,
Leaders of civil society,
Distinguished delegates,

South Africa is honoured to host this Fifth Global Conference on the Elimination of Child Labour in partnership with the International Labour Organisation.

On behalf of the government and people of South Africa, I welcome you to our country and to the city of eThekweni.

I wish to commend the ILO for organising this conference.

In the quarter of a century since the first International Conference on Child Labour was held in Oslo in 1997, the ILO has been at the forefront of the global effort to eradicate the practice of child labour.

Not only has the ILO forged international consensus through instruments such as the Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, but it has been active, together with its partners, to ensure that such instruments have a meaningful impact on the lives of the world's children.

We are particularly pleased to be hosting this conference in the year that South Africa marks 25 years since our democratic Constitution came into effect.

That was a seminal moment in the long and bitter struggle for the rights of all the people of South Africa.

The recognition and advancement of human rights was central to the struggle for democracy in South Africa.

From the earliest Bill of Rights, adopted by the African National Congress in 1923, through to our new democratic Constitution, adopted as the supreme law of the land, the rights of children have been expressly advanced as a fundamental element of broader human rights.

The African Claims' document adopted in 1943 asserted the right of every child to free and compulsory education.

The Freedom Charter, which was adopted at the Congress of the People in 1955, demanded that child labour should be abolished.

It further said that education shall be free, compulsory, universal and equal for all children, and that mothers and young children should receive special medical care.

This was not just a matter of principle.

The assertion of the rights of children was a direct response to the deprivation, discrimination and deliberate neglect that had been visited on the black children of this country by successive colonial and apartheid administrations.

The enshrinement of the rights of children in our country's Bill of Rights is about correcting this grave historical injustice.

Our democratic Constitution places obligations on all, including the state, to advance the rights of children to a name and a nationality.

It places an obligation on us to advance their rights to care, basic nutrition, shelter, health care and social services.

The Constitution enshrines the right of children to be protected from ill-treatment, neglect, abuse or degradation.

South Africa is also a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which established global standards for the protection, survival and development of children.

In reflecting on the paramount importance we have attached to the rights of all the children of our country, we recall President Nelson Mandela's words, when he said:

"Our children are the rock on which our future will be built, our greatest asset as a nation. They will be the leaders of our country, the creators of our national wealth, who care for and protect our people."

In giving effect to this conviction, President Mandela personally dedicated himself to the care and protection of children, establishing the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund and the Nelson Mandela Children's Hospital in Johannesburg.

He was adamant that in order for our young people to grow up and fulfill their role in society, they are in need and deserving of our protection.

The South African Constitution advances the right of every child to be protected from exploitative labour practices.

This includes not being permitted to perform work or services that are age-inappropriate, or that place the child's well-being, education, physical or mental health at risk.

Such exploitative labour practices are also disallowed as they impact on a child's spiritual, moral and social development.

Such labour practices rob children of a childhood.

They deny them the opportunity to explore, learn, develop and fulfil their potential.

Child labour perpetuates the cycle of poverty, denying young people the education they need to improve their circumstances.

It condemns communities to forms of economic activity and labour that limit any prospect of advancement or progress.

For many, the words 'child labour' conjure up images of young people working in sweatshops and informal factories.

We have all seen the terrible and heartrending images of children, some as young as six, labouring in mines in a number of locales around the world.

These images are the open face of child exploitation.

But there is also a hidden face that many do not get to see.

It is the children in domestic servitude to families and relatives, prevented from attending school because they have to do household work.

It is the children of labour tenants on farms fulfilling exploitative agreements with farm-owners, where the entire family must work on the land in exchange for the right to live on it.

It is the many, many children, male and female, who are bought and sold in the international sex trade, the worst of all forms of exploitation.

We are here because we share a common conviction that child labour in all its facets is an enemy.

Child labour is an enemy of our children's development and an enemy of progress.

No civilization, no country and no economy can consider itself to be at the forefront of progress if its success and riches have been built on the backs of children.

We are here because we recognise the urgent need to put an end to a situation where millions of children across the world are losing their formative years to the burden of unfair responsibility.

About this we are categorical, there is no excuse, explanation or justification for using child labour.

According to the ILO and UNICEF, we have made substantial progress in addressing the worst forms of child labour exploitation.

At the same time, the effect of worsening poverty means that, according to the ILO, a further 8.9 million children are expected to be engaged in child labour by the end of 2022.

This threatens our efforts to eliminate child labour by 2025 as part of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

This means that we need to intensify our efforts and tackle the challenges we still face with renewed purpose.

One of the most significant challenges is that the dire material conditions facing millions of families around the world often places them in an impossible predicament.

When life is about survival and families struggle to make ends meet, young children are often forced to leave school to earn wages to assist their families.

Another challenge is limited access to affordable quality education for children.

Without such opportunities – and particularly where there is no legal obligation on parents to send their children to school – there is a greater risk of children of poor families being put to work.

Lack of universal social protection, including child support grants and forms of childcare support for working mothers, contribute to conditions that increase the likelihood of child labour.

It is our duty and responsibility as the international community to ensure that no parent is ever put in such a predicament, that no child is denied decent schooling, and that no family is forced to send their children out to work because they have no choice.

Eliminating child labour is an integral part of our journey as the international community towards achieving social justice, human rights and protection for the most vulnerable.

This Conference will be looking at why millions of children are victims of exploitative labour practices, why this persists in some countries but less in others, and on what decisive interventions are needed to end these practices.

The COVID-19 pandemic has deepened poverty, inequality and underdevelopment across the world.

The fragmentation of global supply chains, and how this has affected child labour in countries with extractives-based economies, is a matter that should be taken up by the ILO, business, labour, human rights activists and civil society.

In time to come, the economic impact of the pandemic will also influence patterns of migration.

We know that child labour co-exists with migration flows and socio-economic instability in developing economies.

In a climate where millions are prepared to brave the harshness of deserts and rough seas in search of a better life, the risk of children being exposed to exploitative labour practices is high

The reality is that our prospects for eliminating child labour and achieving decent work are limited unless we change the structure of the global economy and the institutions that support it.

Among other things, this requires that patterns of trade and investment that are more inclusive, creating opportunities for developing economies to become more integrated into global value chains.

They need to have the resources and the opportunities to industrialise, to advance up the production value chain and to provide their people with better jobs.

We call on all social partners to adopt a Durban Call to Action that focuses on the practical steps will all need to take to make a difference.

The goal should be to complement the ILO reporting mechanisms without adding more responsibilities to member countries.

As a global community we must demonstrate our commitment to ending child labour by committing ourselves to far-reaching actions:

Firstly, we must ensure the full implementation by all countries of the ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention of 1999.

The Convention is a bold statement of intent, but its worth will only be realised if it is consistently and comprehensively implemented.

Secondly, we must attain universal access to social protection, with a specific focus on children and the vulnerable.

By providing a basic floor of support for families with children, we can reduce the need for children to be put to work, whether in the home or elsewhere.

Thirdly, we must work towards free, equitable and quality education for all children, so that every child has an opportunity to advance and to improve their material circumstances.

Our experience as South Africa has been that child support grants, fee-free basic education and school feeding schemes have been a lifeline for indigent families. Such initiatives help keep children in school and thus less vulnerable to exploitation.

Fourthly, we must intensify our efforts to end all forms of discrimination against the girl child, particularly with respect to domestic work and access to education.

Fifthly, we must work to expand global supply chains to include poorer countries as part of our efforts to achieve decent work and eradicate child labour.

Lastly, we need to ensure that companies and consumers are more aware of child labour and its effects, and that through their purchasing and investment decisions, they do not support exploitative labour practices.

Without a conscious effort to achieve social justice, we will struggle to eliminate child labour.

Vulnerable young people across the world are looking to all of us to emerge from Durban with actions that will radically change their lives.

Let us do everything within our means to meet that expectation.

Through the 'Durban Call to Action on the Elimination of Child Labour', we are optimistic that, as social partners and stakeholders, we will be able to chart a course towards eliminating child labour by 2025.

We wish the governments, employer organisations, labour organisations and all stakeholders success in the vital work they have to undertake to ensure that the rights of children are respected, protected, upheld and extended.

The world depends on you to continue to be the torchbearers for decent work, champions of a better life for the peoples of the world and fighters for social justice.

I thank you.

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