

Has Anti-Migration and Anti-Refugee Discourse Hampered Progress against Child Labour?

¿Ha obstaculizado el discurso antimigración y antirrefugiados el progreso contra el trabajo infantil?

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Abstract

The chequered application, since 2000, of integrated policies to eradicate the intersectional root causes of child labour sits more recently in a wider political context of recrudescing populist ethnonationalism accompanied by weakened respect by the governments of many countries for the rules-based international system and rights-based development. The author suggests that (apart from Northern-centric trade and policy interests) influential populist-nationalist governments (including those of the United Kingdom (linked to Brexit), and Australia (linked to the “Bali Process”)) have contributed to diverting global attention from the largest cohort intended to benefit from Sustainable Development Goal Target 8.7 - the 160 million children now in child labour - by conflating forced labour with trafficking and trafficking with migration and asylum. This conflation seeks to demonise asylum-seekers, refugees, and economic migrants. It is an important element of the discourse of populist-nationalist ruling parties in their search for continued electoral support and reflects a willingness to violate international law protecting human rights.

Keywords: Fundamental principles and rights at work (FPRW); employment, workers, child labour, forced labour, trafficking, migration, asylum, UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), ethnonationalism, xenophobia, antisemitism, exploitation, Brexit, Windrush Scandal, the Bali Process, human rights.

Summary: Introduction; Trends, What Went Wrong? Populist Ethnonationalism: The English “Example” – Racism, the “Hostile Environment”, Brexit, and the Nationality and Borders Bill; Northern-Centrism and SDG Target 8.7 and Conclusions and Proposals.

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Resumen

La aplicación accidentada, desde 2000, de políticas integradas para erradicar las causas fundamentales interseccionales del trabajo infantil se sitúa más recientemente en un contexto político más amplio de recrudescimiento del etnonacionalismo populista acompañado de un respeto debilitado de los gobiernos de muchos países por el sistema internacional basado en reglas y desarrollo basado en derechos. El autor sugiere que (aparte de los intereses políticos y comerciales centrados en el norte), al combinar el trabajo forzoso con la trata y la trata con la migración y el asilo, gobiernos populistas-nacionalistas influyentes, en particular los del Reino Unido (vinculados al Brexit) y Australia (vinculados al “Proceso de Bali”), han contribuido a desviar la atención mundial de la mayor cohorte destinada a beneficiarse de la Meta 8.7 del Objetivo de Desarrollo Sostenible: los 160 millones de niños que ahora se encuentran en situación de trabajo infantil. Esta fusión busca demonizar a los solicitantes de asilo, refugiados y migrantes económicos. Además, es un elemento importante del discurso de los partidos gobernantes populistas-nacionalistas en su búsqueda de apoyo electoral continuo y refleja la voluntad de violar el derecho internacional que protege los derechos humanos.

Palabras clave: Principios y derechos fundamentales en el trabajo (PDFT); empleo, trabajadores, trabajo infantil, trabajo forzoso, trata, migración, asilo, Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS) de la ONU, etnonacionalismo, xenofobia, antisemitismo, explotación, Brexit, Windrush Scandal, el Proceso de Bali, derechos humanos.

Introduction

In June 2021, the ILO and UNICEF jointly published global child labour estimates for 2016-2020 (ILO and UNICEF, 2021). The number of children concerned had risen from 152 million to 160 million. This was before the COVID-19 pandemic wrought havoc on the global economy and despite the global consensus proclaimed in the UN Sustainable Development Goal Target 8.7 to eliminate all forms of child labour by 2025, as well as all forms of forced labour by 2030. It was the first increase since quadrennial estimates began in 2000.

This setback should not surprise us. This article, based on the first-hand experience of a now-independent specialist on child labour, and the intersectionality of fundamental principles and rights at work (FPRW), explores some possible reasons for the chequered application, since 2000, of integrated policies to eradicate the intersectional root causes of child labour. The article is not, primarily, an essay about migration, nor is the Author a migration specialist. It seeks to reflect on how the recrudescent juggernaut of ethnonationalist populism and, especially, its conflation of forced labour with trafficking and trafficking with migration and asylum (as well as Northern-centric trade and policy interests), and related policies violating the rights of migrants and asylum-seekers, may have contributed to deflecting global attention from the largest cohort supposed to benefit from SDG Target 8.7: children in child labour.

Because, just as the four categories of FPRW - freedom from discrimination, from child labour and from forced labour, and freedom *to* organize and bargain collectively - are mutually supportive and interdependent, so too are violations of these rights “mutually aggravating”. The context of reversal of progress against child labour includes: the rejection of the global trade unions’ proposal for an integrated Alliance 8 to drive the 2015 Sustainable Development Goal on decent work for all, which derived from the established ILO position that FPRW were indivisible and interdependent; the establishment instead of an Alliance 8.7 intended to concentrate only on forced labour and child labour; and the narrow focus of certain influential governments, notably of the U.K. and Australia (both self-proclaimed leaders of the Alliance),

whose xenophobic anti-migration and anti-asylum discourse and policies were central to their populist, ethnonationalist project. This was epitomized in Australia by the Bali Process and the incarceration of men, women and children on Nauru and Manus: and, in the U.K., by the racist “Hostile Environment” policies that led to the Windrush Scandal, and which contributed to the little-England exceptionalism of the Brexit campaign and to a determination to violate the 1951 Geneva Convention: its most recent consequence was the death of 27 mainly Kurdish asylum-seekers, including three children, in November 2021, in the English Channel.

The article seeks to contribute to an analysis of why, for the first time in two decades, child labour is increasing. It explores some of the lexicon of the discourse concerning “modern slavery” (a term that appears nowhere in relevant authoritative international instruments) and its common reduction to trafficking. It also considers the unhelpful but increasingly common misuse of the term “exploitation” to imply that it takes place only in conditions of forced labour, rather than being the essential economic relationship between labour and capital in the capitalist mode of production, which organized labour seeks to moderate through collective bargaining.

Trends

A summary of the latest estimates and the chequered progress against child labour since 2000, especially the stagnation and regression since 2016 is the best introduction. The global estimates for 2016-2020 (ILO and UNICEF, 2021) show that:

- 160 million children are in child labour: eight million more than in 2016 and the first increase since the first global estimates in 2000.
- The Covid pandemic could prompt a further 8.9 million increases by late 2022.
- 79 million children (49 percent) are in hazardous work.
- Progress continued in the Asia and the Pacific Region and in Latin America and the Caribbean, but sub-Saharan Africa saw a further rise, accounting now for more than half of all child labour.
- Child labour among five-to-11-year-olds rose by 17 million; among 12- to-17-year-olds it continued to decline.
- 97 million boys and 63 million girls are in child labour but, among five- to-14-year-olds, the gap halves if we consider household chores performed by girls for more than 21 hours weekly.
- 123 million children in child labour are in rural areas, a prevalence (13.9 percent) almost three times higher than in urban settings.
- 112 million children perform child labour in agriculture (70 percent worldwide; 81.5 percent in sub-Saharan Africa; and still 44 percent in Europe and North America).
- 72 percent of all child labour and 83 percent among five- to-11-year-olds is in family farms or micro-enterprises. A quarter of these youngest children and half of 12- to-14-year-olds in child labour perform hazardous work.
- More than a quarter of five- to-11-year-olds in child labour and a third of 12- to-14-year-olds are out of school.
- The 2020 estimates did not provide a figure for forced labour: of 152 million children in child labour in 2016, 4.3 million were estimated to be in forced labour.

It is pertinent to note that the concept of “modern slavery” appears nowhere in the relevant Conventions. Its usage entered forced labour phraseology only recently, during passage of UK Prime Minister-to-be Theresa May’s 2015 Modern Slavery Act, partly to

broaden the ambit of forced labour to include forced marriage. Crucially, populist-nationalist governments' discourse commonly deploys "modern slavery" as a synonym for *trafficking*.

From 2000 to 2004, the number of children in child labour fell by 23 million. From 2004 to 2008 it fell by only seven million. Yet, between 2008 and 2012, greatly accelerated progress reduced child labour by 47 million: a sevenfold improvement on the previous four years.

The Third Global Conference on the Sustained Eradication of Child Labour (the Third Global Conference), hosted by the ILO's tripartite Brazilian constituents in 2013, followed that extraordinary period of progress and consolidated global consensus on the need for integrated policies to eradicate all forms of child labour. (Global Conference on Child Labour, 2013; ILO, 2014). Previously, the worldwide movement had talked of eliminating child labour, yet some had focused only on its worst forms, deviating from the intersectional premise of the 1998 ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (the 1998 Declaration).

Four things had become clearer in the run-up to Brasilia:

First, short-term direct-beneficiary measures, simple to attribute and report to donors, had not supported sustainable eradication - "pulling up the roots" - of child labour. Such measures, often not consonant with nationally-established development priorities, dominated international development assistance-funded projects on child labour in the first decade of the century.

Second, measures directed only at worst forms, not least in global supply chains (a small if important proportion of child labour), ignored the wider context of movement of the same child, siblings, and children in the same community between non-worst and worst forms and, perhaps, different sectors, seasons, and places. These considerations drove development of the Integrated Area-Based Approach to create communities free of all forms of child labour (ILO, 2017; ILO, 2018a).

Third, ILO Convention No. 138 (1973) on the minimum age for admission to employment explicitly links the minimum age for work with the minimum school-leaving age. The worldwide movement was increasingly clear that children's human rights to education and the eradication of all forms of child labour were indivisible. Indeed, millions of younger children in non-worst forms of child labour are still unable to go to school, attend irregularly, or are prevented by their child labour from benefitting fully from their attendance.

Fourth, seeking to tackle child labour in isolation from other fundamental rights was not only unsustainable, it entailed great risks. This had been illustrated dramatically in sporting goods manufacturing in Sialkot, Pakistan (a centre of activities against child labour) when a major multinational enterprise threatened to terminate contracts, endangering thousands of jobs, because of persistent violations of trade union rights. Tragically, the resulting tripartite Sialkot agreement on child labour and decent work (which the Author helped negotiate) was blown off course after Benazir Bhutto's assassination.

The principal root causes of child labour – family and community poverty – derive from an interrelated complex of social exclusion and unequal distribution of power and wealth not restricted to low-income countries. Child labour also persists in emerging and richer economies where political will has been lacking or stymied, notably among migrant worker families in the United States. Meanwhile, governments of some less developed or emerging economies,

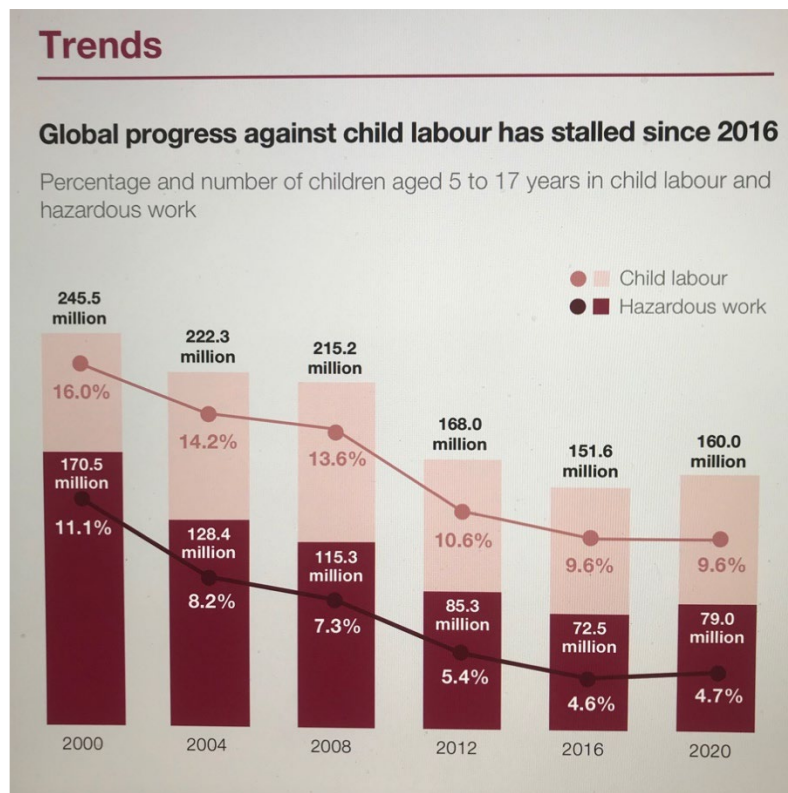
notably India and Brazil between 2008 and 2012, had sought to adhere to international standards and implemented successful nationally-determined policies. Sadly, not all donors followed the Brasilia consensus by supporting systemic change in other, still largely donor-dependent countries.

By 2017, only 43 percent of child labour was in low-income countries. 55 percent was in lower- and upper-middle-income countries, including the seven largest emerging economies in which half the world's people live. Today's figures (41 and 58 percent respectively) perhaps reflect the reversal of progressive policies in key middle-income countries. Approximately 14 percent of the world's people live in the 80 high-income countries, where 1.6 million children still perform child labour. The least unequal countries, like some in the European region, have largely eradicated child labour. However, there are high-income countries – most obviously under the Trump presidency – where super-concentration of wealth accompanies systemic poverty, weakened social protection, and deficient protection in law and practice of FPRW.

Several matters should be borne in mind when considering the roller-coaster up to 2012 and developments since then, as reflected in the ILO's comparable quadrennial estimates since 2000. Among them are: the need for integrated approaches against child labour; that poor and emerging economies can adopt and apply sound policies; and that misdirected donor conditionalities can hinder the development and piloting of such policies.

Figure 1

Trends in global progress against child labour, 2000-2020¹



Source: ILO and UNICEF (2021).

¹ The title could be clearer: key trends for the youngest children in agriculture and in Africa began to stall from 2012.

Between 2000 and 2012, child labour fell by 78 million and hazardous child labour by 85 million. There are several reasons why the hazardous figure exceeds the total:

- Children above the minimum age for work are considered to be in child labour only if it is a worst form: hazardous work is used as a proxy;
- At 18, children exit the child labour statistical pool;
- Children between the minimum age and 18 years might move from hazardous child labour into acceptable youth employment;
- Convention 182 on the worst forms of child labour requires children in worst forms to be removed from child labour altogether but, without integrated implementation of Conventions 182 and 138, children below the minimum age removed from hazardous work might continue to perform non-hazardous child labour. This appeared to have been the case particularly between 2000 and 2004: hazardous child labour fell by 43 million while the total child labour number fell by only 23 million; and
- Similarly, from 2004-2008, the number of children in hazardous work fell by 13 million, while the overall number fell by only seven million.

The worldwide movement re-emerged in the 1990s in the form of the Global March Against Child Labour, campaigning for what in 1999 became Convention 182. It was further reinvigorated by the adoption of the Convention, which also encouraged many more ratifications of Convention 138.

Nonetheless, in the decade after the adoption of Convention 182:

- An overwhelming focus on worst forms meant young children below the minimum working age continued to enter child labour and few were removed from non-worst forms.
- A widespread US-donor block on funding public services left their capacity, in general, weakened.
- Instead, major donors' conditionalities on direct beneficiary projects required NGOs (accountable to donors but not local communities) to deliver simple-to-report, short-term benefits to limited numbers of selected children or families.
- Most project funding went on short-term service delivery and reporting, rather than confronting systemic economic and governance root causes or promoting social dialogue; and trade unions were not always treated as key partners.
- Political considerations often took precedence over data and evidence. While not all donors pursued the direct beneficiary approach, it involved most of the funding of the ILO's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC).
- Although the Author and others proposed that an ILO Regular Budget Supplementary Account should be established to align development cooperation funds to the Governing Body's agreed strategies, the narrow focus on hazardous child labour in global supply chains often diverged from the principle that nationally established development priorities should prevail.

Child labour numbers fell by 23 million from 2000 to 2004 and by only seven million from 2004 to 2008. Then, despite the 2008 financial crisis, progress accelerated remarkably. From 2008 to 2012, the number of children in child labour fell by 47 million and, for the first time, not only among children in hazardous work: at least 17 million children too young to work but not in worst forms also benefited.

Further research might explain this remarkable surge, but our knowledge of two countries that contributed significantly to it supports some hypotheses.

Lower-middle-income India is around the middle of the Gini income inequality index, while upper-middle-income Brazil (with the world's sixth largest population) is among the least equal. During this period both governments pursued trilateral South-South child labour cooperation with South Africa. These three, then progressive, administrations asserted their sovereignty, pursuing nationally-determined priorities to accelerate equitable development, combat income and social wage poverty in the rural and informal economies, and, with varying commitment, to strengthen protection of FPRW. The ILO constituents in the three countries also enjoyed close and friendly collaboration with the ILO's child labour programme.

The three countries' determination found expression in India's Convergence Model (with parallels in Brazil) and Brazil's 2013 hosting of the Third Global Conference. (ILO-IPEC, 2013). Convergence sought to combine relevant national policies to create a multiplier effect. The constitutional amendment on the right to education, the midday meals scheme, and specialised bridge schools for children leaving child labour boosted school attendance and retention. The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme and extension of social protection curbed family and community poverty in the rural and informal economy and supported child-friendly infrastructure improvements. Similar approaches emerged, for example, in Pakistani Punjab, while Ghana's Torkor Model achieved international acclaim.

While labour ministries maintained their leading/convening roles, national tripartite child labour committees increasingly co-opted other relevant authorities, converging policies on labour markets, infrastructure, education, social protection and health services, law enforcement and access to justice, labour inspection and agricultural extension, antidiscrimination, and food security. Convergence also supported local government authorities to fulfil their crucial roles in delivering services to the population. This included community child labour monitoring and remediation systems, which (unlike supply chain social auditors) could provide permanent oversight, identify children in or at risk of child labour, and refer them to relevant public services.

In 2014, Kailash Satyarthi and Malala Yousafzai shared the Nobel Peace Prize. Kailash and Nitte Adyanthaya of the Indian National Trades Union Congress (the Author's successor as the ILO Governing Body Workers' group spokesperson on child labour) worked behind the scenes with committed civil servants towards India's 2017 ratification of both ILO child labour Conventions. This brought the vast majority of the world's children under their ambit.

Following the 2012 International Labour Conference resolution on FPRW, the ILO endorsed an integrated, intersectional approach to child labour as part of an integrated fundamental rights policy (ILO, 2016) and established an integrated Fundamental Rights Branch. (ILO, n.d.) Ratifications of Conventions 138 and 182 continued: in 2020, Convention 182 became the first to be universally ratified by all 187 ILO member States. And, in 2013, Brazil's brilliant influence on the Third Global Conference (Global Conference on Child Labour, 2013) supported a broad and incisive declaration targeting systemic root causes. Perhaps it was "of its time and place." If so, there are still lessons to learn, because the Brasilia Conference followed the period of greatest progress.

Recalling the 47 million reduction between 2008 and 2012, including 17 million children by definition below minimum age (in child labour but not in worst forms) what happened after Brasilia?

The title of Figure 1, taken from the ILO estimates, suggests progress stalled only after 2016, but it had already stalled for the youngest children from 2012 to 2016:

- 152 million children were still in child labour.
- The reduction of 16 million was almost all among older children in worst forms.
- The number of five-to-11-year-olds (73 million) stayed unchanged.
- Worse, among these youngest children hazardous child labour increased.
- And while other regions advanced, child labour numbers grew in sub-Saharan Africa, agriculture now accounting for 80 percent.

What Went Wrong?

What caused the dramatic stall? There is no “authorised” version of what happened after 2012 and further research is required, but there are possible explanations.

The ILO’s member States bear primary responsibility for eliminating child labour. However, the changes in government in India (2014) and Brazil (2019) cannot alone explain the 2012 to 2016 regression, nor should we underestimate the importance of ILO development cooperation with constituents, particularly in least developed countries. Unfortunately, after 2011, direct funding for integrated ILO support to strengthen constituents’ capacity to combat child labour declined and IPEC’s presence in member States shrank greatly (ILO, 2016).

Among Northern NGOs and donors (Ireland and Norway being notable exceptions) two principal emphases re-emerged: global supply chains and enforcement against trafficking from the global South to the global North.

First, however, most child labour is not in global supply chains. Also, despite the Rana Plaza disaster, too many actors still seek to hinder workers’ fundamental rights to organise and bargain collectively, arguing that supply chain problems can be resolved by snapshot social audits and conversations between multinational enterprises and NGOs.

These two emphases – global supply chains and enforcement against trafficking – emerged in a wider political context: the recrudescence in many countries of populist ethnonationalism alongside weakened respect for the rules-based international system and rights-based development. The Author suggests that, rather than accelerating progress against child labour as SDG 8.7 demanded, influential populist-ethnonationalist governments, by conflating forced labour with trafficking and trafficking with migration and asylum, and by seeking electoral support by demonising refugees and economic migrants, contributed to slowing progress against child labour.

In September 2017, at a side meeting at the United Nations in New York, the ILO launched its 2012-2016 global estimates on child labour and forced labour. 152 million children were in child labour, of whom 4.3 million were in forced labour (as were 21 million adults).

Several things stood out at that meeting, including crucial trends that subsequently continued unchecked and contributed to the recent increase in the number of children in child labour. The 2017 estimates showed that progress among the youngest children (aged five to 11) had stalled, and more of them were in hazardous work. Moreover, despite the efforts of the International Partnership for Cooperation on Child Labour in Agriculture and the Global March Against Child Labour to draw more attention to child labour in agriculture (including a major conference in Washington DC in 2012), the number of children concerned grew substantially.

In addition, sub-Saharan Africa was the only region to experience an increase in child labour overall and not just in agriculture.

One might have expected that these figures would have focused discussion on what had become the predominant typology of child labour (accounting perhaps for 40 million or more): the African child of primary school age, as likely to be a girl as a boy, working unpaid alongside their parents on a small family farm producing for local markets. Such expectation, while justified, would have been dashed. ILO Director General Guy Ryder (a stalwart supporter of the movement against child labour) presented the key statistics and called for the necessary action, yet most of the other speakers barely mentioned child labour, let alone its largest category.

Those with a feel for the politics and protocol of the discussion might have noted the dominance of speakers from Australia and the UK and Ivanka Trump's silent presence. They would also have noted that the Australian chair (of the meeting and the new Alliance 8.7) did not give the last word to the ILO Director General (the most senior person in the room²). He gave it instead to Australian mining magnate Andrew Forrest, whose Minderoo Foundation funded the Walk Free Foundation³ and who emphasised its campaigning against child trafficking, including for sexual exploitation (Eyewitness account by the Author).

Australia had by then already sought to deter migrants and refugees by incarcerating adult and child migrants and asylum-seekers in detention camps on Nauru and Manus with scant concern for their physical or mental health or rights under international law. Few Asia-Pacific countries have ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention. Indeed, Professor Susan Kneebone (2017) had been warning about the securitisation of refugee and migrant border control in the Asia-Pacific region through the Bali Process (the "Regional Conference on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime" co-chaired by Australia and Indonesia), and long before the Australian government sought (and failed, thanks to International Trade Union Confederation's alertness) to have it listed as good practice in the Fourth Global Conference on Child Labour outcome document (Global Conference on the Sustained Eradication of Child Labour, 2017).

Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) and recruitment of children for armed conflict – both specifically referenced in Convention 182 – attract justified moral outrage and varying degrees of vitally important and useful interventions. Such moral and religious outrage, however, often narrowed the focus at the expense of the wider, complex political economy of child labour (ignoring, for example, life-shortening hazards faced by children exposed to dangerous chemicals). This narrow focus on CSEC and trafficking for CSEC has also been misused by some who conflate all trafficking with sex work, and who also commonly: reject the evidence that constrained economic choices by working people within the continuum of freedom and lack of freedom in labour markets do not *always* result in forced labour as defined by international instruments; deny the agency of adult sex workers as rights holders; and oppose their right to organise and defend their interests through collective representation. (In so doing, of course, they also reject ILO Convention 87's essential principle that the inalienable right of freedom of association applies to all workers without distinction).

² By custom, the tripartite ILO being the UN's "senior service" established with the League of Nations in 1919, its Director General comes second to the UN Secretary General

³ <https://walkfree.org>

It appeared that the Australian government's main aim at the Fourth Global Conference in Buenos Aires was to gain support for its migration and asylum policies by conflating forced labour with trafficking and trafficking with migration and asylum. However, it was not alone in its eagerness to ignore its international obligations towards migrants and to demonise and victimise adults and children seeking safe haven. While Canberra proselytised the Bali Process, Britain's Conservative government, in a (still persisting) display of kith and kin proximity, had already enshrined the same conflation in then-Home Secretary Theresa May's "Hostile Environment" against migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. The Hostile Environment, launched in 2012, was a major cause of the Windrush Scandal that led to Black British *citizens* being unlawfully deported, and it legitimised the ethnonationalist xenophobia and racism which contributed to the Brexit "mix" (Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, n.d.). Other countries across Europe and Asia were also falling prey to resurgent populist-nationalist Islamophobia and antisemitism: in some, the parties concerned assumed control of government. The US, meanwhile, was also adopting harsh anti-migrant measures and, after 2017, began to withdraw from the multilateral system.

Populist Ethnonationalism: The *English* "Example" – Racism, the "Hostile Environment", Brexit, and the Nationality and Borders Bill

Perhaps most notable at the New York meeting (although some might consider it an abuse of the agenda), was the statement of Britain's (then) International Development Secretary Priti Patel that "open borders facilitate crime." This undisguised piece of Brexit propaganda reflected the leitmotiv of the UK and Australian governments' putative support for SDG Target 8.7 and for the Alliance established to campaign for it.

Most recently, Patel as Home Secretary (Interior Minister) moved the UK Nationality and Borders Bill, which would reduce support for victims of human trafficking (including children) and weaken systems for identifying them. Criticised for "excessive cruelty to asylum seekers," she and the Government have faced multiple challenges to their attempts to justify the Government's willingness to depart from international norms (Townsend, 2021b).

During 2021, more than 28,000 people crossed the English Channel in small boats; a small number compared to those crossing the Mediterranean (Similarly, far fewer people seek asylum in the UK than in Germany, France or Spain).

In a statement on March 20, 2021, the Home Office claimed an "alarming rise in people abusing our modern slavery system by posing as victims in order to prevent their removal and enable them to stay in the country" (Home Office, 2021). First leaked to the Sun (a right-wing tabloid in Rupert Murdoch's media empire) Patel said: "Our generous safeguards for victims are being rampantly abused by child rapists, people who pose a threat to national security, and failed asylum seekers with no right to be here." Patel's revolting conflation of victims of trafficking for forced labour with child rapists - almost harking back to the medieval antisemitic blood libel - echoed Trump's racist electoral campaign trope that Mexican migrants were drug dealers, criminals and rapists and, indeed, the prurient rants of Islamophobic racists in England and their counterparts in the RSS in India - the paramilitaries backing Narendra Modi (whom Patel so admires).

Yet a Freedom of Information (FoI) Act response to queries by ECPAT (Every Child Protected Against Trafficking) UK, revealed that the Home Office's Modern Slavery Unit

could not provide data on child rapists, national security threats or failed asylum seekers referred to the modern slavery system since 2017⁴ (Townsend, 2021b).

The response, that compiling the data would require trawling individual case files, suggested Patel's claims and policies lacked evidence.

In June, the High Court ruled that Patel had acted unlawfully in detaining, in former military barracks (which also failed to meet minimum safety standards during the Covid pandemic), six asylum-seekers who had been victims of trafficking and/or torture. Her process for selecting people to be held there was also deemed unlawful (Taylor, 2021b).

In October, barristers' legal opinion commissioned by NGO Freedom from Torture concluded the Bill breached domestic law, articles 31 and 33 of the 1951 Convention, and articles 2, 3, 4, 8 and 13 of the European Convention on Human Rights, in at least ten ways (Syal, 2021a).

In November, Patel was exposed as having misled Parliament by seeking to justify inhumane deterrence measures with false claims that the majority crossing the Channel were not asylum-seekers but single young migrant men seeking employment. While refusing a Freedom of Information request to reveal its most recent "evidence" about asylum-seekers' motivations (Townsend, 2021c), the Government also falsely claimed it had reached an agreement with Albania to "offshore" asylum-seekers while their claims were considered.⁵ This was denied by Albania's Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and Ambassador to the UK who, in a BBC Newsnight interview on 19 November, dismissed it as "fake news". Analysis by the Refugee Council and Médecins sans Frontières of Freedom of Information and Home Office statistics from January 2020 to May 2021 showed that 91 percent of asylum-seekers were from ten countries riven with conflict, human rights abuse and persecution; that 98 percent of those crossing the Channel applied for asylum; 61 percent of those from the ten key countries would have been granted refugee status following their initial claim (88 percent in the case of Syrians); and of the 39 percent whose initial claim was refused, 59 percent were likely to be granted on appeal.

From this research, the Refugee Council concluded that the Government should:

- Rapidly expand existing safe routes including both resettlement schemes and refugee family reunion;
- Establish a humanitarian visa system to allow people to apply for a visa to enter the UK safely for the purposes of claiming asylum;
- Recognise that many people seeking asylum have no option other than an irregular journey as recognised in the 1951 Convention, and therefore should be treated fairly and humanely by being granted a fair hearing on UK soil; and that
- The government should put in place an efficient, effective, high-quality and timely asylum decision-making system so people do not have to wait for months or years for an outcome (Refugee Council, 2021).

⁴ Formerly End Child Prostitution and Trafficking, ECPAT UK is a valuable ally seeking to situate its central campaign within a broader context, and vocal critic of the British government's failure to fulfil its obligations to protect child migrants, asylum-seekers, and child victims of trafficking. See <https://www.ecpat.org.uk/>

⁵ In the same vein, some government sources had suggested offshoring asylum-seekers on the Falkland Islands/Malvinas or Ascension Island.

Following an attempted bombing in Liverpool on 17 November, and despite calls for calm by politicians and police and warnings that she was inflaming tensions and risked inciting violence, including against lawyers acting for asylum-seekers, Patel nonetheless blamed the incident on what she described as an asylum system that had been broken “in the past” (her Party has been in Government for 11 years). She also added a clause to the Nationality and Borders Bill giving her unprecedented power to remove *without notification* UK citizenship from dual UK citizens born and raised in the UK, a measure the Race Relations Council concluded would be used disproportionately against British Muslims.

Other clauses would also violate international norms, “...including rendering claims from anyone arriving in the UK by an illegal route inadmissible, while criminalising them and anyone who seeks to save their lives, and giving Border Force staff immunity from prosecution if people die in the Channel during “pushback” operations” (Siddique, 2021). Trade unions representing UK Border Force staff stated that a policy of turning back small boats, already rejected by France, would violate maritime law and be unworkable. In November 2021, the Public and Commercial Services Union announced it might seek judicial review to challenge its lawfulness (Syal, 2021b). The Home Office’s lawyers advised that such a challenge would be highly likely to succeed, and that the union might also take industrial action and support individual claims under section 44 of the Employment Rights Act, 1996.⁶ The “culture war” now ran so deep that, in August, Nigel Farage and the British right-wing media dared criticise the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) for rescuing people – including children – from small boats in distress. The public, however, responded with vastly increased donations to this venerable (voluntarily-funded) service.

Also in November 2021, the UK Government sent military advisors to assist Poland in its enforcement of Fortress Europe borders against migrants and asylum-seekers who had become victims of the machinations of Lukashenko’s Belarus regime. In late November, 27 asylum-seekers, mostly Kurds, drowned trying to cross the English Channel to reach the UK. A week later, the RNLI website came under cyber-attack and its staff received threatening emails.

In the July 2021 parliamentary debate on Patel’s Bill, former Prime Minister Theresa May admitted that as Home Secretary she would have proposed similar measures to deter asylum-seekers by sending them to a “safe third country” had it not been for “practical concerns.” Whatever May’s credentials as EU Remainer and intellectual author of the UK Modern Slavery Act, as author of the Hostile Environment she contributed to the xenophobic rhetoric of othering that nourished the recrudescence of populist English nationalism.

This rhetoric is ever more familiar in today’s “culture wars”. The ethnonationalist political forces seeking to close borders against migrant workers and refugees and deny family reunion to unaccompanied children are precisely those that are also promoting neo-colonialist revisionism - decrying as “woke” and unpatriotic critical historical analyses of the transatlantic slave trade, colonialism, Empire, post-Civil War segregation in the United States, and their links to contemporary migration and refugee flows.

⁶ Section 44 provides employees with the right to withdraw from and to refuse to return to a workplace in which – in their opinion – the prevailing circumstances represent a risk of serious and imminent danger which they could not be expected to avert; and permits claims for Constructive Dismissal and unlimited compensation in the event that an employer fails to maintain safe working conditions. Cf: <https://section44.co.uk> for a simple explanation. Full text at <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/18/section/44>.

Speaking to Conservative Party Conference after the 2016 Brexit referendum, May had derided mobile people with multiple cultural, linguistic, and ethnic heritage who identified as Europeans. She said:

Today, too many people in positions of power behave as though they have more in common with *international elites* than with the people down the road, the people they employ, the people they pass on the street ... but if you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere. You don't understand what citizenship means (Davis and Hollis, 2018; Merrick, 2017; The Spectator, 2016; Author's italics).

Besides the obvious irony of a Conservative prime minister criticising elites, her choice of language and (hopefully genuine) ignorance of European history and the analogy of "international elites" and "cosmopolitans" was chilling. In November 1933, at the Berlin Siemens Dynamo Works, Hitler had derided:

[the] clique ... people who are at home both nowhere and everywhere, who do not have anywhere a soil on which they have grown up, but who live in Berlin today, in Brussels tomorrow, Paris the day after that, and then again in Prague or Vienna or London, and who feel at home everywhere⁷ (O Karlsson, 2018).

Within 15 years, "rootless cosmopolitan" became Stalin's synonym for Jew. Today, Hungary's Viktor Orbán shares this lexicon; his government's crude antisemitism one cause of its increasing distance from the EU⁸ (David and Moos, 2021).

Evidently, racism and xenophobia alone did not cause Brexit, nor were they sentiments shared by much of the UK population. However, while other member States educated children as EU citizens (and publicly celebrated EU membership and structural and regional fund projects), successive UK governments had fanned the Brexit flame by blaming the EU for their own failure to respond to globalisation and deindustrialisation with appropriate industrial strategies and by failing to highlight the peace, prosperity, and *acquis* of labour and other rights the EU had underpinned for decades.⁹ Nonetheless, this foul and foolhardy language contributed to releasing the racist genie from the bottle, to the Windrush Scandal, and to the toxic ethnonationalism and xenophobia that, playing on ahistorical delusions of English exceptionalism, helped build the slight majority¹⁰ in England and (among non-Welsh voters) in Wales in the (advisory) Brexit referendum. As the writer and critic Will Self said in March 2019, when challenged that he was accusing all pro-Brexit voters of racism: "You don't have to be a racist or an antisemite to vote for Brexit; it's just that every racist or antisemite in the country did" (Gelblum, 2019).

⁷ On Hitler and antisemitism see inter alia (and especially): Kershaw (1999 and 2001). Domarus' *Hitler Reden und Proklamationen 1932-1945* includes only an edited version of Hitler's 1933 Siemenswerk speech. However, the full quote used here was cited by O. Karlsson in an article in the *Berliner Tageszeitung* (10.10.2018) reporting criticism by historians Wolfgang Benz and Michael Wolfssohn of German AfD leader Alexander Gauland for using similar language resonant of that speech.

⁸ Declaration of interest: the Author's father and other family members were refugees from Nazi occupation; the few survivors in post-War Czechoslovakia became victims of Stalinist antisemitism. The reactions of other "Second Generation" children to this ethnonationalist-populist "Zeitgeist" are reflected in David and Moos (2021). In November 2021, the Author chaired an online conference on this subject: Lord Alf Dubs (leading advocate for child refugee rights in the House of Lords), Moos and David were principal speakers.

⁹ The Author would also argue that, compared with other EU member states, widespread (English) monolingualism hindered more people in the U.K. from using their freedom of movement to work and explore their shared European culture.

¹⁰ The 52 per cent who voted Leave was 37.5 per cent of the registered electorate.

The propagandist conflation of migration and asylum with trafficking is just one aspect of the growing wave of populist ethnonationalism around the world led by a New Right. However, it is central to our discussion because it contributed significantly to diverting attention from the ten percent of the world's children still in child labour. Indeed, in July 2021, amid the pandemic, Britain's "get Brexit done" government reconfirmed its disdain for the world's poorest children by cutting international development assistance, hitting child nutrition and girls' education and health, both essential elements in the struggle to end child labour (McVeigh, 2021).

Northern-Centrism and SDG Target 8.7

Let us return now from the downward spiral of the UK Government's populist-xenophobic rhetoric and (anti-)asylum legislation to the international stage of the SDGs. Target 8.7 aims to "eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms" (United Nations, 2015).

With hindsight, it was probably unwise to put child labour and trafficking (as a subset of "modern slavery") together, not least when (to borrow Bertolt Brecht's reference to war and the rise of Hitler from his 1941 play, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*) the ethnonationalist "bitch that bore him was on heat again" (Brecht, 1978).

In the late 1990s, some international trade union colleagues feared Convention 182 might be applied in isolation from or even supersede Convention 138. Indeed, although member States continued to ratify the Convention - and despite criticism by the ILO supervisory bodies of the Bolivian government's attempt to reduce the minimum age to ten years (ILO, 2019) - a coalition of NGOs and academics still campaigns against Convention 138 and its principle of a minimum age for work, which is inextricably linked to that of universal compulsory education. It was, perhaps, inevitable that Target 8.7, when put alongside the 2014 Protocol to Convention 29 on forced labour, could face similar risks and that this resurgent populist-ethnonationalist discourse would distort the crucial campaign against forced labour by conflating forced labour with trafficking and trafficking with migration and asylum, while the waters were being muddied further with the newly-invented category of "Modern Slavery" and misuse of the term "exploitation".

Unfortunately, the discourse swirling around the anti-migration juggernaut may also have sideswiped the campaign for ratification of the 2014 Protocol, despite its excellent content. The fact that some perceived it as a "trafficking protocol" probably did not help. The vocal support of the UK and Australian governments and the UK's incessant promotion of its enforcement-centric Modern Slavery Act - fell on barren ground in some developing countries with bitter experience of UK migration policies (views imparted to the Author by parliamentarians from South Asia). Protocols are rarely rapidly ratified, although this one supplemented the second-most ratified ILO Convention. The aim of 50 ratifications by 2018 was not reached until 2020. By comparison, in a similar period following its adoption, Convention 182 had gathered 157.

Several factors might have contributed to the formulation of SDG Target 8.7. Of the 152 million children in child labour in 2017, as defined by the Conventions and the International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ILO, 2018b), 4.3 million were in forced labour. Some wanted attention focused on child marriage, others on forced child labour - or "child slavery" as they called it. Although their narrow concern about what they considered the

most egregious form of child labour was understandable, it risked undermining the strategic, integrated policy approaches required to deal with the intersectional root causes of all forms of child labour. Sadly (and mostly unintentionally) it also boosted the populist-nationalist enforcement discourse. Criminal sanctions against “evil traffickers” (including those who are not traffickers but facilitate irregular crossing of closed borders)¹¹ sit far more comfortably with populist-ethnonationalist propaganda than complex discourse on the intersectionality of human rights and sustainable and equitable socioeconomic development.

True, some influential colleagues who were not child labour policy specialists erroneously believed all child labour was forced labour and so both belonged in a single SDG target. Indeed, until the ILO Convention 182 was adopted, and while Convention 138 had few ratifications, the ILO Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations had derived its child labour jurisprudence mainly from member States’ reports on the application of the widely ratified Convention 29. The Experts had held that, because a child could not give free consent, all child labour was forced labour. However, this jurisprudence obtained before the adoption of Convention 182, before IPEC became the ILO’s largest single development cooperation programme, before the first quadrennial global estimates in 2000 were developed, and before the growing understanding of the political economy of child labour.

Dominant Northern perceptions of child labour fuelled by global supply chain campaigns also showed scant interest in the wider child labour economy. It was and is right to condemn child labour performed for third-party employers, for example, in the production of garments, sports goods, surgical instruments, or agricultural commodities like bananas, tobacco, cotton, and prawns (although perhaps not pure coincidence that the US initiated some such campaigns when US farmers or prawn fishers were clamouring for support, as after the 2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill). Yet these campaigns were often predicated on the misapprehension that all children in child labour were under direct, unscrupulous control of an identifiable enterprise. Although often true, this narrow focus largely ignored what was and remains the predominant mode of child labour: unpaid work alongside parents in family farms and micro-enterprises producing primarily locally-traded goods and services. That (despite its widespread use of bonded labour of entire families) included brick-making, a textbook local manufacture. The exception, perhaps, was child labour in domestic work, although it still accounts for seven million children (2.5 million of them girls under 11).

One example of conflating forced labour and child labour in a global supply chain was the headline-grabbing claim that children trafficked from neighbouring countries produced all West African cocoa. Untrue when the campaign began in the USA (quickly followed by Europe and Japan), and still today, it nonetheless sparked the Harkin-Engel Protocol, which sought to impose measures, especially on Ghana and Côte d’Ivoire. Although the US ambassador to Ghana stated publicly that the nationally-determined child labour priorities were fishing, domestic service, and artisanal mining, the US maintained pressure on the cocoa/chocolate industry and on the two other governments. Furthermore, it supported the establishment of a monitoring body operating separately from the national child labour monitoring system, while rejecting proposals for tripartite, tri-national oversight.

Significant funding for IPEC work accompanied this campaign. However, it mostly went to direct beneficiary projects, partly because the US Government Performance and

¹¹ How easy it seems for some to forget resistance networks in Nazi-occupied Europe that delivered persecuted Jewish adults and children, resistance fighters, members of the Allied forces, UK SOE operatives and others to safety across closed borders. The Calais World War II museum dedicates a room to them. (Trilling, 2021)

Results Act required simplistic correlation of expenditure with results. The US then had (and still has) not ratified Convention 138 and was focusing exclusively on the worst forms of child labour (which it unhelpfully termed “exploitative” child labour, an adjective explicitly rejected by the ILO Conferences in 1998-99). Despite President Obama’s unequivocal call on World Day Against Child Labour in 2009 for the “elimination of child labour in all its forms” (Peters and Woolley, 2009), and Senator Harkin’s support for integrated interventions to tackle the root causes of child labour, resistance came from within the Administration to integrated fundamental rights and decent work approaches targeting all forms of child labour and to support for worker and small farmer self-organisation. This general exclusion of support for public services and for generalised benefits to communities meant root causes remained largely untouched.

It became clear that most children performing child labour (even if hazardous) in cocoa production had not been trafficked and were not in forced labour. Most were working on family farms run by their parents as owners, tenants, or sharecroppers (although, in the last two, conditions could approximate to forced labour), and might also be engaged in producing other crops or in other types of labour like domestic work or artisanal mining.

The “modern slavery” and Target 8.7 discourses deployed another damaging conflation, perhaps unintentional and based on common but inexact usage: “exploitation” became a synonym for forced labour. By repeatedly referring to exploitation as if it existed only in conditions of forced labour, this further hindered understanding of the mutually supportive and interdependent nature of FPRW at the heart of the 1998 Declaration and of the mutually aggravating nature of violations of those rights.

The Marxist definition of exploitation – extraction of surplus value by capital from labour, the essential relationship of the capitalist mode of production – is not universally accepted. However, suggesting that exploitation takes place *only* in conditions of forced labour (or to use the term exclusively or primarily in that context) undermines the struggle for universal realisation of all four interdependent categories of FPRW: freedom from child labour, forced labour and discrimination, and, particularly, freedom *of* association and the right to bargain collectively. Indeed, the 2012 ILO Conference made clear that freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining are *primus inter pares* among these rights. The 1998 ILO Declaration Preamble proclaims that the purpose of universal realisation of these rights is to “enable the persons concerned to claim ... a fair share of the wealth they have helped to generate” (ILO, 1998 and 2010). However, if only people in forced labour are exploited, then all others (including garment, plantation, and food-processing workers; teenagers in fast-food restaurants and “gig economy” delivery services; and migrant workers cleaning offices and hotels) must be receiving their ‘fair share’, and therefore do not need collective bargaining, and neither do small farmers need associations or cooperatives to negotiate fair prices.

Abuse of the specific meanings of the distinct economic and legal concepts *exploitation* and *forced labour* not only risks disdain for the universal rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining. The intrinsic overlap between denial of these rights and discrimination, social exclusion and disempowerment on one hand, and forced labour and child labour on the other is effectively universal (unlike the, mercifully, comparatively small overlap between child labour and forced labour). The narrow misuse of “exploitation” therefore also undermines the strategic understanding - enshrined in the 1998 Declaration and subsequent ILO resolutions - that forced labour, child labour, and discrimination will not be eradicated without universal realisation of freedom of association and effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining.

Moreover, several other related and erroneous beliefs are incompatible with an understanding that the struggle against the root causes of forced labour and child labour in the real economy requires the collective *agency* and representative voice of rights holders (if that concept is understood at all). Prominent among those ideas are that employer paternalism, “corporate social responsibility”, and social auditing render trade unions and small producers’ organisations and their principal collective bargaining function redundant, and that forced labour and child labour can be eliminated by a combination of donor-funded NGOs, philanthropic *noblesse-oblige*, draconian migration curbs, and blunt-instrument law enforcement. Billionaires’ proclamations – as heard by the Author – that philanthropy would end forced labour in the 21st Century are symptoms of an ahistorical, neo-colonialist pathology (‘Wilberforceitis’?) clustered in the global North. This peddles the delusion that white benefactors alone ended transatlantic slavery; denies the collective *agency* of enslaved workers; and ignores their struggle for self-organisation and their rebellions from ancient Mesopotamia to the Americas and the Caribbean of the 18th and 19th centuries¹² (and the centuries since, during which slave-owners’ descendants were paid compensation for “loss of their property”).

Today’s UK Government appears to be seeking the permanent renewal of populist-nationalist xenophobic support. It does so by attacking people “traffickers” alongside seeking to deport “illegal” migrants and “return” “illegal asylum-seekers” to “safe countries” through which they have passed (although there is no such thing as an illegal asylum-seeker, and none of those countries has agreed to accept them); and by stating its intentions to copy the Australian practice of offshore detention. Thus, the government signals its intent to breach its obligations arising from ratification of the 1951 Convention, the ILO 2014 Protocol, and Convention 182 to protect child and adult victims of trafficking, and under the law of the sea (See, *inter alia*, IMO-UNHCR-ICS, 2015; Røsæg, 2020).

The UNHCR criticised Australia’s deliberate separation of family members as a breach of fundamental human – and children’s – rights (Doherty, 2021). The UN Special Rapporteur on Racism and a large coalition of migrants’ and refugees’ rights organisations have also criticised the policies of the present UK Home Secretary as incompatible with international law (See, *inter alia*, Taylor, 2021a; Grierson and Marsh 2021; Townsend, 2021a).

Perhaps when Alliance 8.7 was established it was no surprise that vocal support for “stopping trafficking” ran alongside hostility by some governments to migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees, despite the clear evidence that *protected* migration and safe routes to asylum help *prevent* the vulnerability to trafficking for forced labour to which migrant workers, asylum-seekers, and their families may be exposed when denied safe passage. Despite the UN General Assembly’s adoption in 2018 of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (but see the record vote: UN Digital Library (2018)), tens of thousands of people, including infants and children, among them unaccompanied child refugees, have since died trying to reach safe shores.

Why pay such attention to this conflation and the wider context of weakened commitment to international norms in a discussion about child labour trends? Foremost, because despite some crossovers, forced labour and child labour are not the same thing. Of the 160 million children in child labour, 155 million are not in forced labour.

¹² See, *inter alia*, the work on slavery and slave resistance in Brazil by the late Prof. Dr Dick Geary, former director of the Nottingham University Institute for the Study of Slavery, and his colleagues: Geary (2016)

Deficits in rights-based development make people vulnerable to forced labour, and penal sanctions against the criminal offence of exacting forced labour are also essential. However, for most children in child labour, who are working unpaid in their family's small farm or micro-enterprise, rights-based development, social protection, and formalisation of the locally traded informal especially rural – economy are far more appropriate responses than sanctions against their parents. Indeed, while there is *some* crossover between child labour and forced labour, both are *consistently* interwoven with discrimination and with denial of freedom of association and the right to bargain collectively.

Conclusions

The author has attended every Global Child Labour Conference since the First (Oslo 1997). The Fourth (Buenos Aires, 2017), followed a severe reduction in progress against child labour but also the adoption of SDG Target 8.7, becoming a conference on child labour plus forced labour, plus youth employment. The outcome document maintained the language of the forced labour Conventions and of the sustained eradication of child labour; indeed, it was more detailed than the strategic conclusions of Brasilia. Yet, child labour received slightly fewer references than forced labour and trafficking, and the document inadequately differentiated these ills and their required solutions.

The global trade union movement had proposed an integrated Alliance 8 on decent work, explicitly recognising the interdependence of all four categories of FPRW. This being denied, and despite considerable efforts to persuade them to join, key global union federations declined to bring their crucial sectoral mandates to Alliance 8.7. Indeed, without the IUF, the global union federation with competence for agriculture, the Alliance could not convene a credible rural economy working group.

Child labour and forced labour, with trafficking delineated specifically, *were* put together and, after the SDGs were adopted, it appeared that more attention was paid to trafficking than to child labour (indeed, Australia, Alliance 8.7's first chair, has still not ratified Convention 138).¹³ This was, in part, fuelled by the policies of ruling parties which, conflating forced labour with trafficking and trafficking with migration and asylum, sought electoral support by demonising migrants and asylum-seekers. Future global estimates on forced labour might indicate whether that has helped or hindered the fight against "modern slavery". Already, however, continuing attacks, in government policies and on the street, on migrants, asylum-seekers, refugees and people from ethnic minorities, and, in the USA, an attempted insurrection by white supremacists indicate that the racist genie is now truly out of the bottle.

The result is an interesting intersectional equation illustrating how, in an era of populist-nationalist identity politics and othering, violation of one fundamental right further hinders the realisation of the others. In this crucial example, child labour is relegated as certain forces prioritise their discrimination *against* migrants, asylum-seekers, and refugees on the pretext of combatting trafficking. Such discrimination prevents safe passage and makes trafficking for forced labour more likely, not less, but is also a tool to divert attention from social and economic injustice. This weakens opposition to policies that increase wealth disparities: policies that in turn thrive when freedom of association and collective bargaining are hindered rather than promoted.

¹³ The other ILO member States that have not yet ratified Convention 138 are Bangladesh (believed to be in process), the Cook Islands, Iran, Lesotho, Marshall Islands, New Zealand, Palau, St Lucia, Somalia, Timor-Leste, Tonga, Tuvalu, and the USA

The author is not suggesting a conscious plot to side-line child labour, although some governments and some (certainly not all) NGOs in Alliance 8.7 displayed little interest in the topic. However, the lower priority it received stemmed partly from the anti-migration and anti-asylum stance of influential governing parties that deny the interdependent nature of FPRW. In the ethnonationalist discourse, child labour has no electoral value, unlike children seeking asylum, who gain it when governments boast fortress borders, denying them safe haven, incarcerating them, or letting them drown.

In 2013, the author hoped that replicating the 2008 to 2012 success of Brazil, India and others might eradicate child labour by 2030. The remarkable absence of detailed analysis of that extraordinary progress persists. Numerous conflicts - not least in Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Myanmar, the Sahel, and the Great Lakes region, the climate emergency, and the Covid pandemic have increased the challenge. Today 800 million children may be partially or wholly out of school, many vulnerable to child labour. Families are thrown into poverty: in the global North queuing at food banks; in the global South, sometimes fleeing violent persecution, returning from an imploded informal urban economy to seek food security in home villages.

More recently, the urgency of SDG 8.7 and the pandemic might have encouraged greater commitment by some actors to pursue both elements of the target. New national policy initiatives against child labour are emerging, including in rural Africa. The concept of SDG 8.7 pathfinder countries,¹⁴ which require support to demonstrate concrete results, is advancing. There are widespread (though not universal) efforts to implement the integrated area-based approach against child labour in supply chains.

Furthermore, given their *primus inter pares* role in the canon of FPRW, President Biden's vocal support for all working people to enjoy their rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining is encouraging (Biden, 2021). This could help recreate a climate in which mature labour relations are understood as normal and essential for social and economic justice and well-functioning democracies, in turn helping to renew support for the interwoven promotion of all FPRW.

Targeting the root causes of child labour has been a powerful convening and entry point for successful integrated activity to promote all - mutually supportive - fundamental rights at work. Following the International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour, (ILO, 2021) with the Fifth Global Conference in Durban pending in 2022, the 2025 SDG target demands reinvigorated multilateralism, international solidarity, tripartite consensus, and partnership to pursue accelerated implementation of integrated fundamental rights policies to eradicate *all* child labour. Durban could also provide an opportunity to promote a wider coalition with the International Partnership for Cooperation on Child Labour in Agriculture, directing greater attention to the great majority of child labour in locally traded goods and services in rural economies (Established in 2007, the IPCCLA comprises the ILO, FAO, IFAD and the IUF. See FAO, IFAD, ILO & IUF, 2020).

The nine-year-old African girl working unpaid alongside her parents on the family farm, producing mainly for local markets, perhaps occasionally going to school but prevented from exercising her right to fulfil her potential, might not move Northern consumers. Yet, unless we reject the racist diversion caused by the populist-nationalist conflation of trafficking with migration and asylum, and refocus attention on her and her parents' fundamental rights,

¹⁴ On Pathfinder countries and the response to the pandemic's effect on child labour see, e.g.: ILO (2020)

we will be unable to resume the integrated strategies required to eradicate child labour. Instead, we will need to apologise, yet again, for breaking the solemn promise to the world's children, repeated time and time again and to which, in 2015, we attached a deadline: to eradicate all forms of child labour by 2025.

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