

## **Call for eradication of child labour gathers strength in Nairobi**

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The Stop Child Labour Africa Tour comes to an end. With a bang.

Africa may be the world's worst affected continent when it comes to the prevalence of child labour, but even there efforts to fight the scourge which has been proven to perpetuate poverty instead of alleviating it, as some tend to believe, are well under way.

In what is perhaps the most encouraging sign, many African governments are now ready to join hands with international agencies, NGOs, trade unions and other stakeholders to put an end to the practice which denies millions of school-age children their right to education.

Leadership Forum, organized by Concern Worldwide and held at the Kenyatta International Conference Center (KICC) in downtown Nairobi provided one such glimpse on November 5. The event brought together social activists from Kenya and four other African countries, senior officials from the Ministry of Education in Nairobi as well as representatives of International Labour Organization and European Commission for half a day of presentations and fruitful discussion.

Also present were the delegates of the now concluded Africa Tour of the Stop Child Labour campaign. Delegation head Venkat Reddy from MV Foundation of India together with his colleagues Radha Koirala from Aasaman Nepal and Driss Elyoubi from Moroccan Teachers' Union SNE spent a month on the road, interacting with various NGOs, trade unionists, international agencies' representatives and government officials in Morocco, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, Uganda and Kenya, promoting the notion that all forms of child labour have to be abolished as it deprives children of their right to education.

At the tour's last stop in Nairobi they not only found a receptive audience but also strong support among the fellow speakers.

"The fact that over 200 million children worldwide are engaged in labour rather than in school activities is a tragedy," said Ambassador of the European Commission in Kenya, Mr. Eric Van Der Linden, adding that it makes little sense economically too, since it had been ascertained that every dollar invested in education repays itself seven times.

Although Kenya has made significant progress, cutting down the number of child labourers to about a million since the free primary education has been introduced on a national level in 2003, the conference heard from ILO's Kiura Bernard, much remains to be done. Especially when it comes to making sure that the schooling is available to even the poorest of the poor, who oftentimes struggle with the hidden costs of the "free" education.

Venturing deep into Nairobi's biggest slum Kibera just two days before the Leadership Forum took place at KICC, the Africa Tour delegation got a first hand experience with the lack of facilities and funding for the non-formal schools which are the only providers of education to most children living in the capital.

And thus the battle-scarred veteran of child rights campaigning Venkat Reddy knew it was his chance to speak for the underdog once again, when he took the microphone on Wednesday in Nairobi's prime conference venue:

"We take this opportunity to call on the Kenyan government that it integrates all of the existing non-formal schools into the formal system as it should be the responsibility of every government to provide free, full-time, quality education to its citizens, not only on paper but in reality," he said, stressing like he had so many times before, that school is the best place to work for any child.

The response came perhaps quicker than expected. Just a few minutes later Mr. Reddy found himself applauding to Mbarak Twahir, the undersecretary of Minister of Education, who announced at the forum that his office would make inventory of all the non-formal education centers in the country so that they can start getting the funding from the government just like any other schools.

But the final moment of glory for the skilled social mobilizer was yet to come. Just as the discussion was drawing to a close, Mr. Reddy addressed the children from Nairobi's non-formal schools, who had earlier made a plea against child labour in front of the audience through song, poetry and a skillfully acted short play.

"I want to know if you can help us bring all of your friends who are working, and who are out of school, to classrooms. Can you do it?" he asked, throwing the kids a line which no true Kenyan could miss on the day when the news broke of the nation's "greatest son" Barack Obama's victory in the US presidential election.

„Yes, we can! Yes, we can!“ was the thunderous response, constantly increasing in volume at the chief instigator's bidding.

“Stop Child Labour – School is the best place to work” campaign of the Alliance 2015 and its partners has clearly found an able ally in Venkat Reddy. He certainly did not fail to work his magic in Africa. Now it is time for him to try and charm important people in Brussels as the campaign takes its lobbying efforts to the seat of European Union. Can he do it? Yes, he can.