

Speech Minister Ploumen at the Global Conference on Child Labour in Brasilia

Toespraak | 09-10-2013

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I'm excited to be here in one room with so many key players in the struggle against child labour. I would like to congratulate Brazil as the first country outside Europe to hold this Global Conference on Child Labour. Having chaired the conference in 1997 and 2010, the Netherlands is honoured to officially pass the baton to Brazil!

Ladies and gentlemen, last spring I visited Uganda. It is a low-income country, but in the last few years their economy has been growing. Still, child labour is a serious problem. Children as young as ten work on plantations or as domestic helps. Sometimes, the work these children do is downright dangerous: baking bricks, crushing stone, and mining for gold.

But in a few areas there are child-labour-free zones. Where children attend school instead of going to work. In one of those zones in Entebbe I spoke to teachers, children and youth activists. They told me the project had been successful. They said the key to this success was that it was a concerted action. The whole community was brought into action to get children back to school. Those children now get a proper education. Their parents receive assistance too, with affordable loans and training in how to save.

This is one example of the efforts to combat child labour. We, the international community, have been working hard. More and more countries are ratifying the ILO conventions on the minimum age for a child to work and on the elimination of the worst forms of child labour.

The recent ILO report shows we are making progress. But it also shows that this progress is too slow. We will not meet the targets we set for ourselves. We will not eliminate the worst forms of child labour by 2016. Our tireless and continued dedication to these targets is crucial.

I was happy to hear that after the Kampala conference, Central American countries also adopted a declaration on child-labour-free zones.

Let me highlight a misconception that is also addressed in this report: child labour is not solely a poverty problem. It is not limited to the poorest countries. It is not even at its highest in poorer countries. No, it is found predominantly among the poor in middle-income countries.

In many Asian countries, the Pacific and Sub-Saharan Africa we have seen spectacular economic progress. But in those countries child labour is still rampant. This confirms what we have long feared: a rising GDP is not the automatic solution to child labour. It is further proof that the trickle-down effect is illusory. Growth is great as a key driver for development, but it is not a cure-all. Not everyone is reaping the benefits of their country's economic growth. Too often women and children lag behind in the race for prosperity. They are the

ones who cannot enforce their rights. It is a sobering thought: we can't just sit back and let growth do the work.

We need to step up our efforts and we are doing so. We are making the final push for universal ratification of the important ILO conventions that I mentioned earlier. During the last global child labour conference in The Hague, participants adopted a Roadmap for eliminating the worst forms of child labour. The Roadmap has led to renewed vigour in this fight. It spells out what governments, employers, trade unions and NGOs can and should do. It outlines actions in the field of legislation, education, social protection and labour market policy.

Such efforts are important bricks in the wall. We are set to add another important one when we sign the Brasilia Charter on Child Labour later on. It will once more urge all stakeholders to implement the Roadmap. I also welcome the Government of Brazil's intention to bring the Declaration to the attention of the ILO governing body for further follow-up.

These are vital steps. But we have to be realistic: it will still not be enough.

I feel we have reached a new phase in our struggle. In some instances, it is no longer legislation and international charters that hamper our progress. In this phase the bottleneck is often elsewhere, outside the realm of international agreements. That means we also have to look elsewhere for solutions. A key notion here is awareness at grass-roots level. This poses both a challenge and an opportunity. Because, ladies and gentleman, awareness works in two ways.

Let's first look at the producing countries where child labour is still a problem. A challenge that we need to meet there is raising awareness. Often the laws are in place, but they need to be implemented. That means that everybody must not only be told, but really be made to understand and feel that children belong in school, from the village elders to the mothers and fathers and the children themselves.

However, in countries like the Netherlands, grass-roots awareness is of a totally different order. The mass media and internet sites increasingly uncover practices that consumers will not stomach. They no longer wish to taste the fruits of child labour. Our companies are very much aware of this. This has led to some interesting initiatives. I will give you an example.

A few years ago a Dutch television documentary raised questions about hazelnut picking in Turkey. It turned out that whole families worked all summer in this industry. Many very young children worked alongside their parents, often missing out on school for weeks. The Dutch public was indignant about what they saw. Questions were raised in parliament. Even though direct Dutch involvement was slight at best, both our government and businesses were prompted to take action. The Dutch embassy funded a study into the matter. Action was subsequently taken in four sectors where children were used in harvesting: hazelnuts, sugar beet, cotton and fruit.

Training programmes were set up, along with a system to monitor child labour. A campaign was also launched to heighten awareness among local companies and labourers. The Dutch government and Dutch companies did all this in close cooperation with the ILO, international and Turkish NGOs, and Turkish local authorities.

Consumer pressure has led to interesting results, also due to an increased receptiveness for such signals on the part of Dutch companies. As Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation I maintain ongoing contact with Dutch companies operating abroad. As you may know, the Netherlands is a staunch advocate of corporate social responsibility. Companies are required to take measures to prevent working condition abuses in their supply chain. But our ambitions go further. It is no longer enough that our companies do no harm. We want our companies to do good.

Increasingly, Dutch companies share this ambition. They spread the word, as it were, through their own supply chain, all the way down to the villages where people have to choose: do we send our children off to work or off to school?

Here in Brazil we have an outstanding example in a company called Nature's Pride. It is a successful Dutch business that imports and exports exotic fruit and vegetables from a number of countries, including Brazil. They not only focus on profit, but also care for the growers' communities. They make their suppliers comply with certain standards, including zero child labour. And they invest in education and water supplies, which benefit the community's children directly.

It is companies like these that can make the difference. They can help heighten awareness at grass-roots level on the side of producers. They can also help by setting an example to governments, encouraging them to shoulder their responsibility. In this way we can raise the standard.

When it comes to labour standards, I hope we can encourage a race to the top. To achieve this we must bring all partners together: government, NGOs, local communities and companies.

In the Netherlands I try to get them all round the table at regular intervals, to talk about improvements to the supply chain. At international level, we find we can always rely on the ILO. They provide the framework we operate in. One very important initiative in this respect is of course the Decent Work project.

As you all know, yesterday was Decent Work Day. I cannot stress the importance of such initiatives enough. They put a very necessary focus on what should be so obvious but still is not: the right to normal, safe work with a decent salary. For adults, that is. Not for children. And most certainly not for young children.

As for combating child labour, ladies and gentlemen, we need an inclusive approach. The sense of urgency can never be too high. Because children shouldn't have to work in mines, in the fields or in households. They deserve safety, health and happiness.

But combating child labour goes beyond moral values. It is not particularly a poverty problem, but a poverty solution. Children are a country's future. They are the ones who take care of jobs, education and innovation for future generations. They can't do that without a proper education themselves. Without prospects for their future.

In Uganda, ladies and gentlemen, I was pleased to visit the child-labour-free zone. I saw children who used to spend their days working now enjoying school. My visit was on a Saturday, yet all the pupils were there. They assured me they were happy to be there. Even at the weekend. It was only at that point that I wasn't quite sure whether to believe them.

The sad thing, however, is that this best practice is called a child-labour-free zone. We need to make this term obsolete. What we need is a child-labour-free world. These children have to stop working. They have to be able to go to school. We must give them time to dream first. Then they will really be able to work on making their countries' dreams come true.

Thank you.