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Papers*

*Working Together to
Combat Child Labour*

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Working Together to Combat Child Labour

Champion the Cause of All Children

Maria Gabriella Lay



Maria Gabriella Lay has been a Senior Communications Officer in the Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour of the International Labour Organisation since August 1997. She is responsible for the management of the Global Campaign to Raise Awareness and Understanding on Child Labour (GAC), a project aimed at mobilising key sectors of society in the fight against child labour. As part of this campaign she designed a large-scale project named SCREAM (Supporting Children's Rights through Education, the Arts and the Media), which aims at encouraging young people to participate in and commit to the global campaign by giving them responsibility and by recognising the value of their contribution. As Public Affairs Officer for the Child Rights and Policy Section of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), in New York (1992-96) and Geneva (1997), she managed policy framework relations with the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Maria Gabriella Lay is an Italian national. As Tenured Professor for twenty-one years, she developed programmes based on student's ownership of the learning process.

My warm thanks to the organisers of this congress. It has been a meeting of hearts and minds and I am sure it will open new horizons in education. It has been enriching and fulfilling and it will spark fruitful social and political initiatives.

The title of the congress, "Champion the Cause of Children", is highly significant. Its meaning can be understood in the broadest terms and encompasses both individual and social issues. Each child has the right to fully develop his/her potential in a stimulating and nurturing environment. As a whole, all children deserve to benefit from universal human rights and social protection.

I wish to express the International Labour Organization's (ILO's) highest appreciation for offering this distinguished podium to give voice to the millions of voiceless unprotected children- victims of inhumane exploitation whose rights are constantly violated. They are suffering the combined effects of unresolved problems related to persistent poverty, unjust social systems and public indifference.

Child labour is a comprehensive term encompassing various forms of exploitation and abuse driven by poverty, lack of education and global economic and political situations in which the rights of a child are nonexistent, and he or she is systematically exploited and endangered through a variety of activities for the profit or other gain of adults. According to the ILO's latest estimates, there are around 250 million child labourers worldwide. Nearly 180 million of them work in situations considered highly hazardous. They are forced into armed conflict and prostitution. They are trapped in bonded labour and domestic labour; they work in agriculture, mining, manufacturing of chemicals and explosives, and deep-sea fishing, to name a few. These children's safety and opportunity for normal development are compromised on every level. They live in a world devoid of security and nurturance. Their physical health is endangered; their social, intellectual and moral development is jeopardized by absent or inadequate schooling and the lack of opportunities for play and socialization; and their psychological well-being is threatened by the traumatic results of prolonged abuse, deprivation and neglect. Child labour is by no means limited to developing countries. Millions suffer in more covert situations in industrialized countries. Child labour is the tip of the iceberg of a complex and widespread socio-economic problem that is undermining the human capital of the world. A staggering number of young people are deprived of the right to grow peacefully and realize their potential. In turn, the world is deprived of the contribution these children could give to society through their energy, creativity and imagination.

The ILO is the United Nations agency constitutionally mandated to promote social justice and fundamental principles and rights at work as the basis for universal and lasting peace. Child labour deprives children of education, health and safety- and, by depleting human capital, it perpetuates the cycle of poverty. Abolishing child labour has thus been a priority for the ILO action since its founding in 1919. The ILO is keen on encouraging young people to acquire principles of justice,

fairness, equality and compassion and to integrate them into everyday life. This gives way to behavioural change in present and future generations.

I have profound personal reasons to rejoice for being with you today to “champion the cause of children”. I remember reading about Maria Montessori’s revolutionary thinking in my twenties. I was struck by her inspiring speeches designed to empower women. I treasured her holistic vision, her strength, her enthusiasm, her determination. She has been a source of inspiration, particularly throughout my years as a teacher. Life, which unfolds through mysterious and unpredictable paths, led me to the UN. Being responsible for the global campaign to raise awareness and understanding of child labour, I became well acquainted with the social, economical, political and psychological factors that play out in the perpetuation of this problem. I therefore devoted my energy to designing a large-scale programme aimed at mobilizing key sectors of society in the fight against child labour. The programme – SCREAM - which stands for Supporting Children’s Rights through Education, the Arts and the Media - relies heavily on youth empowerment and child participation. It ensures that children’s outlook is reflected in the mainstream of world politics. SCREAM is an ILO education and social mobilization initiative that recognizes that young people have an important role to play in raising awareness and exerting their influence in their communities in order to bring about social change. This approach corresponds closely to Montessori’s understanding of children’s intrinsic need for using “movement” and “action” in order to develop harmoniously through purposeful activity. While using their intelligence and will in such creative “real life activities”, children and adolescents also deepen their ethical development sharing with others worldwide in uplifting artistic endeavours. The programme helps teachers, educators and young people themselves to promote understanding of social justice issues as a basis for universal peace and places the emphasis on the use of visual, literary and performing arts. It focuses on the social dimension of globalisation, human rights and child labour in particular. The programme was written and designed in such a way as to facilitate large-scale implementation with small-scale resources and to invest primarily in human capital. Because of this, it can be implemented in a wide variety of contexts. Thousands of children worldwide - from primary to high school - are now involved in SCREAM - driven projects in diverse socio-cultural settings. They are expressing their creativity in music and theatre performances, visual arts and canvases, photo exhibits, seminars, debates, interviews, and academic projects that deepen their awareness while contributing to social change.

The Montessori philosophy and the SCREAM methodology have many overlapping concepts and points in common. Education based on capacity building is the effective sustainable investment leading to social responsibility. This is at the core of our respective conceptual approaches. Youth empowerment and participation are essential to our work. Our efforts will amount to little unless we recognise that young people are a driving force for change in society, provided we give them the space and support they need and deserve. Education can serve as a valuable tool and entry point for the realization of this goal. Montessori stressed it is important to relate to children bearing in mind that the futures is in their hands and that they must become citizens of a global community. Likewise, SCREAM aims at bringing young people together in a common endeavour regardless of cultural and geographical barriers. The young are indeed an active force and represent the future of humankind. They need to gain awareness of social justice issues so they can be agents of change throughout their lifetimes.

The arts, including music, dance, visual arts, creative writing, poetry and theatre, are effective means for expanding young people’s comprehension of a topic and providing them with powerful tools for self-expression by delving into their creative and emotional spheres through an active learning methodology. Art is above all an excellent learning method for children and young people, combining fun and entertainment with a means for developing confidence, memory, self-discipline and self-esteem and for enhancing their social and personal development.

Montessori called for adults to “recognize the immense power of the unconscious forces existing in the child” (Montessori, 1949). This is certainly reflected in the SCREAM philosophy - the programme helps children move beyond the purely academic/intellectual spheres and into the creative and emotional depths of individual potential. Tapping into the unconscious while at the same time fostering self-awareness is a powerful process of personal growth that allows young

people to gain understanding of global and local issues as well as find their own place in working towards societal transformation.

Drama in particular, fosters the build-up of a strong platform for community education and awareness-raising. Throughout the history of humankind, theatre has played a powerful role in portraying society and its evolution. Whether looking at the human condition in the context of the past, the present or the future, theatre in all its forms acts as a popular vehicle for education, information and entertainment. Theatre helps us to see and feel empathy for the predicament of others and is a powerful educational tool, instrumental in all age groups.

On one hand, art speaks a universal language that transcends geographical and cultural barriers and on the other hand it reinforces cultural identity and promotes mutual understanding. Knowledge enables change. It gives rise to the capacity to overcome deeply embedded habits and to make informed decisions. SCREAM initiatives have been incredibly successful in helping young people of diverse cultural backgrounds learn about their environments and how their lives are affected by economic and social development at national and global levels. Deepening their understanding of the fact that a better distribution of wealth brings benefits to all people helps them take responsibility as global citizens. Young people become gradually equipped with awareness and knowledge of unsustainable production and consumption patterns and are hence guided to reinforce the social dimension of globalisation. This develops their capacity for integrated thinking and helps them value having a sense of responsibility, respect and commitment. It also empowers them to unleash their creativity, experience solidarity, express their skills, take action, and become agents of change. In the learning process, problems are presented in an unresolved form and children are invited to suggest and enact solutions. The examples of work I will now present prove that children possess understanding of principles and values and, in the appropriate environment, they find the power to act and to communicate them to the outside world.

The evolution of the human species supports the idea that we are all part of a collective consciousness. Art - including music and theatre - is a universal language that taps into the unconscious and is capable of uniting people of diverse backgrounds and abilities. As an educational medium, art is uniquely valuable because it encourages self-awareness, self-examination and emotional vigilance. Therefore, teaching and sharing through art allows one to get in touch with the emotional sphere and to have an all-encompassing and profound learning experience capable of reaching the unconscious as well as the intellectual levels. Moreover, learning through art strengthens communication.

Art has leverage in building local, regional and global networks. The scope and implementation of the SCREAM programme have seen an exponential rise both in developing and industrialized countries. It has continued to expand and create offshoot initiatives. Its multifaceted approach and flexibility have spurred initiatives in public and private schools, in rehabilitation centers, universities, theatre groups, scout movements, NGOs and UN agencies.

ILO established the World Day Against Child Labour (WDACL), observed yearly on June 12th, in an effort to call the world to action in the fight against child labour in today's global economy. In order to polarize joint efforts for the progressive elimination of child labour as a priority, ILO/IPEC developed the "12 to 12 Partnership Initiative". This initiative – partnerships for sustainable and global impact – seeks to harness the commitment and motivation of young people and to establish or consolidate systematic fruitful collaboration with old and new partners in order to generate valuable synergies and support for action. Its advocacy-coalition building strategy aims at creating a community-based worldwide network and at fostering joint plans of action within the UN system and with educational organizations. The twin goals of Education for All and the elimination of child labour are intricately linked and a vital aspect of achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) involves great collaboration between all UN agencies and the world of education. Only through collaborative action can we create a critical mass and encourage the re-thinking of our educational systems. They need to become more child-centered and holistic in approach. Governments should be prepared to re-think, review and re-orient their education policies, programmes and methodologies. Together, we can push in this direction; together, we can work to

combat child labour. Together, we can champion the cause of all children. It is a moral imperative for all of us. The Montessori philosophy and the SCREAM programme are in line with one another and they can become powerful allies in helping all children fulfil their potential while acting as global citizens for a better world.

Allowing our children to enjoy a holistic approach to learning and to tap into the emotional roots of social issues through the arts and media can become a revolutionary educational approach and indeed nurture a generation that will lead the way to a society richer in social justice, solidarity and respect for human rights.

Thank you.

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