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**Abstract** South Asian countries have experienced spectacular export performance since the late 1980s. Their commitments towards market-oriented reforms appear to have contributed to this, although there is considerable scope for further reforms particularly in factor market. Reforms so far have increased access to intermediate inputs, capital and technology, and reduced production costs, making exports attractive in the world market than ever before. Successful completion of the Uruguay Round of trade negotiations has also increased their access to the world market. Unfortunately, expansion of exports, particularly labour-intensive manufactured exports, has triggered a protectionist response in developed countries (DCs). Protectionist groups argued that the race to the bottom has resulted in poor labour standards including child labour practices in developing countries, contributing to export growth

# **Trade, Growth and Child Labour Practices in South Asia**

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

South Asian countries have experienced spectacular export performance since the late 1980s. Their commitments towards market-oriented reforms appear to have contributed to this, although there is considerable scope for further reforms particularly in factor market. Reforms so far have increased access to intermediate inputs, capital and technology, and reduced production costs, making exports attractive in the world market than ever before. Successful completion of the Uruguay Round of trade negotiations has also increased their access to the world market. Unfortunately, expansion of exports, particularly labour-intensive manufactured exports, has triggered a protectionist response in developed countries (DCs). Protectionist groups argued that the race to the bottom has resulted in poor labour standards including child labour practices in developing countries, contributing to export growth. This has hurt labour-intensive industries in developed countries. However, Bhagwati (2002:59) notes that:

'we have little evidence that governments actually play the race (choosing to attract investment) by offering to cut standards or that multinational corporations actually are attracted by such concessions and thus are competing in such a race'.

The view that countries with poor labour standards –including child labour-- obtain inherent comparative in international trade and investment has been widely propagated in international forums. This has increased pressure in international level to force WTO to improve labour standards in developing countries.

While Child labour is not a new issue, in recent years it has brought developed countries' (DCs) attention, despite a falling child participation rate<sup>1</sup>. Although the welfare of working children is a real issue, protectionist groups are trying to take advantage of this by putting pressure for trade sanctions against imports from countries with poor labour standards.<sup>2</sup> Such actions are not an effective way to deal with the problem.

In this paper we shed light on this debate using the experience from South Asia<sup>3</sup>. The examination of South Asian countries is particularly interesting because about 40 of the world's child labour exist in this part of the world and there has been rapid export growth since opening up their economies. The paper proceeds as follows. Following an introduction in Section I, Section II presents the issues. The state of Child labour in South Asia is discussed in Section III. The paper concludes in section IV with concluding remarks.

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<sup>1</sup> Child labour practices are in existence at least since the industrial revolution (Basu 1999). Between 1950 to 1995, child participation rate aged 10-14 years fell from 27% to 13% and is expected to fall to 8% by 2010 (ILO 1996). According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) anyone under the age of 15, engaged in economic activity regardless of occupation, is considered as child labour.

<sup>2</sup> With the liberalisation of trade in agricultural products and textile- following the signing of the Uruguay Round (UR) of trade negotiation in the mid 1990s- developed countries are facing growing competition in these sectors and they fear that with the full implementation of UR agreements their agriculture and textile sectors will suffer.

<sup>3</sup> Among South Asian countries the incidence of child labour is high in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan. Hence, we limit our analysis to these countries. Child labour is not a real problem in Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lank.

## **II. The Issues: Theory and Evidence**

In developing countries children are deployed in a wide range of economic activities including manufacturing of carpets and garment, restaurants, farming and selling goods on street. They are also utilised in household activities including looking after small sibling and colleting water and fire wood. It is deep poverty which forces parents to send their kids to work, which prevents them to form going school. This undermines their future earnings and potential. It is estimate that about one third of household incomes in these countries is derived by the working children.

Using international sanctions to address the problem of child labour is counterproductive because it does not address the root cause of the problem. Since the prevalence of child labour is the result of underdevelopment and poverty it is important to address this rather than to use trade restriction which are indirect and blunt (Markus, 1997). Compensation program from wealthy countries, focused on poverty reduction and better access to education be more effective and less costly than trade restrictions. Since only about 5% of child labour is found in tradeable sector, trade sanctions will not tackle the problem of exploitation of children.

Policies like trade sanctions in fact reduce household's income and do not encourage schooling unless they are compensated for sending their children to school. In this context, development assistance can be very useful which can be used to compensate household to send their children to school and to develop new schools in remote areas. Despite the importance development assistance in reducing the incidence of child labour, there has been a sharp decline in such assistance. For instance, in real per capita terms, net official development assistance to least developed countries has dropped by 46% during 1990 to 2000 period (UNCTAD, 2002:32).

Development assistance can be useful not only for compensating families but also improving the quality and quantity of schooling which are crucial for reducing child labour. Improving school quality encourages parents to send their children to school rather than to work with the hope of increasing future income of their children upon completion of school. On the other hand poor school quality might discourage parent from sending their children to schools if they perceive the future income is less than or similar to present income even after completing schooling (Krueger 1996a). Linking development assistance to policy reforms aims at improving and developing basic infrastructure such as education, health and electricity is essential would eventually improve labour standards in developing countries. By improving labour standards developing countries might be able to gain greater access to the markets of developed countries, but the experience with trade-related intellectual properties (TRIPs) suggests that they might regret later on (Brown et. al, 2001: 24).

Improving labour standards --including eliminating child labour-- is in the best interest of developing countries as the use of child labour today means a shortage of skill labour tomorrow, which will crucial to compete and sustain growth in the global work. Also, improvement in labour standards is likely to attract more foreign investment into the country. Available evidence suggests that countries with higher labour standards attract more FDI than countries with lower labour standards (Stern, 1998:13).

Freeman (1994) argues a market-based solution, such as labelling requirements, may be an effective way to raise the standards in developing countries. Labelling allows consumer to make their own decision as to whether or not they would like to use goods produced in countries with lower labour standards instead of producers' in developed countries who are motivated by protectionist sentiment rather than welfare of poor children.

### III. The State of Child Labour in South Asian

Some 95% of world children live in developing countries of which 60% are found in Asian developing countries. Within Asia, South Asia has a high incidence of child labour and this varies significantly between countries. For instance, children's workforce participation rates- the number of child workers to the child population- range from just above 5% in India to 42% in Nepal (Table 1). The lower percentage of child labour in India appears to be mainly due to rapid economic growth and export expansion brought about by economic liberalisation since the early 1990s, while a high incidence of child labour in Nepal appears to be mainly due to slow economic growth caused by civil unrest (Table 2)<sup>4</sup>. Appendix I presents key indicators of South Asia. Also, there appears to be a link between a high illiteracy rate and a high incidence of child labour. Bangladesh and Pakistan have also significantly reduced the incidence of child labour.

Table 1: Child labour in South Asia

Country	Total Population 1996 (millions)	Age Range	Number of Children in Age Range (millions)	Estimated Number of Child Workers in Age Range (thousands)	Percentage of Children Working in Age Range
Bangladesh	122	5-14	34.5	6,584	19.1
India	945	5-14	210.0	11,285	5.4
Nepal	22	5-14	6.2	2,596	41.7
Pakistan	134	5-14	40.0	3,313	8.0
Total	1241		295.0	24,316	

Source: <http://globalmarch.org/virtuallibrary/usdepartment/sweat5/chap2.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note that despite a decade of lacklustre growth performance, the incidence of child labour is very low in Pakistan.

Table 2: Economic growth and the incidence of child labour in South Asia

Country	(A) GDP Growth (1990-2001)	(B) Illiteracy Rate	(C) Total Population	Percentage of Children Working in Age Range <sup>(i)</sup>
Bangladesh	3.1% <sup>(i)</sup>	58.4% <sup>(ii)</sup>	138,900,600 <sup>(iv)</sup>	19.1
India	4% <sup>(i)</sup>	40.5% <sup>(ii)</sup>	1,067,421,100 <sup>(iv)</sup>	5.4
Nepal	2.5% <sup>(i)</sup>	54.9% <sup>(ii)</sup>	25,836,100 <sup>(iv)</sup>	41.7
Pakistan	1.2% <sup>(i)</sup>	56.8% <sup>(iii)</sup>	153,124,800 <sup>(iv)</sup>	8.0

Sources:

- (i) UNICEF, <http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/>
- (ii) ILO, <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/gems/eoo/download/>
- (iii) USAID, [http://www.usaid.gov/locations/asia\\_near\\_east/countries/pakistan/pakistan.html](http://www.usaid.gov/locations/asia_near_east/countries/pakistan/pakistan.html)
- (iv) <http://www.populationworld.com>
- (v) Table 1.

It must be noted that like many developing countries reliable data on child labour is not readily available for South Asian countries and there are huge discrepancies in data collected by various agencies. Collecting child labour data is a disincentive for countries as it shows weakness in implementing policy.

In all South Asian countries, incidence of child labour tends to be higher among boys than girls and in rural areas (Appendix II). The higher workforce participation rate for boys is due to the fact that girls work in informal sector (such as at home) which are harder to capture by statistics. Children often work alongside other family members. Urban children often work in garment, carpet and textile related activities, small business and bidi industry (hand-rolled cigarette) together with their parents while children in rural areas tend to work with their families in agriculture, fishing, forestry or small family enterprises.

Child labour represents 12% of the total labour force in Bangladesh. Of the children engaged in economic activities, 22.92% are seller/vendors, 16.10 % are factory workers 5.72% are

brick/stone breakers, 4.77% agricultural worker, 2.27% are in craft, 0.65% in fish processing and 0.44% beggars (ILO-IPEC, 1996)). It is estimated that 80% of child labour in India are employed in agriculture sector and 8% of the work force in the hand knotted carpet industry are child labours. In Nepal, 94.7% of child labours perform agriculture and household work and the remaining 5% are engaged in non-agriculture activities, including manufacturing and service industries (ILO-IPEC, 1999). Of those involved in non-agriculture, 1.6% are in construction, transportation and communication, 0.8% work as general technical workers and another 0.8% work as production workers and 0.4% as sales workers. In Pakistan, 67% of child labour are found in agriculture, 11% in manufacturing and remaining 22% work in service related activities (FBS, ILO and IPEC, 1996). It is evident that in South Asia most working children are found in non-tradable rather than in tradable sector and most of them are employed in agriculture along with their parents whose share in total export has been declining (Appendices III through IV), suggesting that export growth in South Asian countries has not been brought about by increasing use of child labour. Appendices III to IV also suggest that higher growth experienced by these countries have alleviated many children from child labour practices, with the exception of Nepal.

Although employment of child labour is illegal, in the absence of effective monitoring mechanism such practices remain a major concern in all South Asian countries. According to the Minimum Age Act, age of working children varies between countries. For example, in Bangladesh minimum age for employment is 12 years, while in India and Pakistan, the minimum work age of 14 applied only to certain specific occupations and processes. In Pakistan, the Employment of Children Act 1991 prohibits the employment of children under 15 in dangerous or hazardous activities. Procedures are also established for implementation of and enforcement of the Act, such as the requirement that all employers maintain a register



of particulars regarding the employment of any children under the age of 15. In Nepal, the minimum work age of 14 does not apply to certain activities, such as plantation and brick kilns. Table 3 presents the ratification status among the South Asian countries. Except for India, all South Asian countries have ratified, either the ILO conventions on Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (Convention 138) or the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (Convention 182) or both.<sup>5</sup>

Table 3: Ratification status of minimum age conventions (C138) and worst form of child labour convention (C182) in South Asia

<b>Country</b>	<b>Minimum Age Convention (C138)</b>	<b>Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (C 182)</b>
Bangladesh	Not yet ratified	Ratified (12/3/2001)
India	Not yet ratified	Not yet ratified
Nepal	Ratified (30/5/1997)	Ratified (3/1/2002)
Pakistan	Not yet ratified	Ratified (11/10/2001)
Sri Lanka	Ratified (11/2/2000)	Ratified (1/3/2001)

Source: ILO Web site

Since inception in 1919, ILO has approved 174 Conventions regarding labour standards. However, it does not have enforcement power and it relies on voluntary compliance with ratified Conventions. Thus, developed countries are trying to bring this into the WTO charter and use trade sanction as a tool of eradicating child labour in developing countries which is purely motivated by protectionist sentiment. While welfare of working children is a real issue, there are number of ways of tackling this. These include, effective development assistance, opening up market for labour-intensive products of developing countries (such as agriculture and textile and clothing) and transfer payments. Using trade sanction to alleviate child labour will in fact not solve the problem as most working children are found in non-tradable sectors. It can lead to other social problems like vandalism and prostitution.

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<sup>5</sup> ILO was established in 1919 for the implementation and monitoring of labour standards. Since inception it has approved about 174 conventions..

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Protectionist groups are working hard to exercise WTO rules to improve labour standards in developing countries primarily through trade sanctions. They believe that such actions are essential to ensure that the level playing field is fair and labour standards are improved in developing countries. In fact, use of trade sanctions can aggravate social problems (such as, poverty, vandalism and prostitution). If people in DCs are concern with the welfare of children in developing countries, the best solutions to address this are (i) through transfer payments, (ii) opening up developed countries' markets for labour intensive products from developing countries and (iii) channelling development assistance towards schooling. Developing countries around the world and South Asia are fully aware that child labour practices are not in their best interest. It is only due to economic compulsion parents are forced to send their children to work rather than to school. Unless economic condition of people living in extreme poverty improves and the quality and quantity of schools improves the problem of working children remains unsolved. The idea of overloading WTO with non-trade issue can slow down the pace of multilateral trade liberalisation and undermine the benefits of trade liberalisation and thereby poverty alleviation.

Appendix I: Distribution of economically active children 5-14 years old by sex in South Asia

	Economically active (Total)	Male	Female
<b>Bangladesh<sup>(a)</sup></b>	<b>6130000</b>	5047442 (82.34)	1082558 (17.66)
Age: 05-09	190000	-	-
10-14	5940000	-	-
Urban	-	-	-
Rural	-	-	-
<b>India<sup>(b)</sup></b>	<b>23160000</b>	9850000 (42.5)	13310000 (57.47)
<b>Nepal<sup>(c)</sup></b>	278000	138000 (49.64)	140000 (50.36)
Age: 05-09	55000	28000 (50.92)	27000 (49.08)
10-14	223000	109270 (49.00)	113730 (51.00)
Urban	12000	8000	4000
<b>Rural</b>	<b>266000</b>	<b>130000</b>	136000
<b>Pakistan<sup>(d)</sup></b>	3313420	2431992	881428
Age: 05-09	573084	333656	239428
10-14	2740336	2098336	642000
Urban	367745	321634	46111
Rural	2945675	2110358	853317
<b>Sri Lanka<sup>(e)</sup></b>	475530	295038 (62.00)	180492 (38.00)
Age: 05-09	91614	56177 (61.32)	35437 (38.68)
10-14	383916	238861 (62.22)	145055 (37.78)
Urban	-	-	-
Rural	-	-	-

**Note:** Figure in parenthesis represent percentage share.

*Sources:* (a) ILO-IPEC, Rapid Assessment of Child Statistics in Bangladesh (1996).

(b) Sen, R. K and Dasgupta, A. (2003:29). Data for 1991.

(c) Suwal et al (1997) table 3.6. Data for 1995/96.

(d) FBS, ILO and IPEC (1996) table 4. Data for 1996.

(e) Department of Census & Statistics, Sri Lanka 1999. Based on table 3.5. Data for 1999.

CSU Research Output

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## Appendix II: South Asia: Key Economic Indicators, 1997

	Bangla- desh	India	Nepal	Pakistan	Sri- Lanka	South Asia	Low income countries
Surface Area ('000 sq. km.)	144	3288	147	796	66	4441(3.3)	31244
Population (millions)	123.6	962.4	22.3	128.5	18.6	1255.4(21.6)	2036
GNP (US\$ billion)	44.1	357.4	4.9	64.6	14.8	485.8(1.6)	712
GNP per capita (US\$)	360	370	220	500	800	387(7.5)	350
GNP per capita – PPP (US\$)	1090	1660	1090	1580	2460	1600(4.4)	1400
<b>Structure of output</b>							
Agriculture	24	25	41	25	22	25	28
Industry	27	30	22	25	26	29	28
Of which	17	19	9	17	17	18	17
Manufacturing Service	49	45	36	50	52	46	43
<b>Employment by economic activity, 1997*</b>							
Agriculture: Male	53	59	91	44	36	57	61
Female	76	74	98	65	32	69	75
Industry: Male	35	17	0	18	18	18	15
Female	21	15	0	10	17	13	10
Services: Male	33	24	9	34	37	27	25
Female	11	11	2	15	31	14	14

*Notes:*

1. Given in brackets are the percentages of the total world figures.
2. Distribution of male and female labour force by activity. Data are for 1997 or the most recent year available.

PPP Purchasing power parity

*Source:* Athukorale (2000).

Appendix III: Growth in GDP, Exports and Structure of Exports (percent share in total exports unless otherwise stated) in India

	1970-1971	1980-1981	1990-1991	1995-1996	1996-1997	1997-1998	2000-2001	2001-2002
GDP Growth Rate	1.8	6.5	0.4	7.3	5.0	6.1	5.2	4.6
Export Growth Rate	0.3	1.6	10.8	7.1	6.2	4.2	9.0	4.8
Agriculture and allied products	31.7	30.6	18.5	19.1	20.5	18.9		14.1
Iron Ore	7.6	4.5	3.2	1.6	1.44	1.36	3.0	
Petroleum products	0.3	0.1	2.9	1.4	1.44	1.01	4.0	
Manufactured goods	50.3	55.8	71.6	73.9	73.5	75.8	77.0	74.7
- Gems and jewellery	2.8	9.6	16.1	16.6	14.2	15.3	-	-
- Readymade garments	1.9	8.4	12.3	11.6	11.2	11.1		12.1
- Engineering goods	12.0	13.0	12.4	13.8	14.8	15.2	-	-
- Chemical and allied products	2.3	3.5	7.2	7.4	8.0	9.0	-	-
- Leather and leather manufacturers	4.7	5.0	7.9	5.5	4.8	4.7	-	-
- Jute manufacturers	12.3	4.9	0.9	0.6	0.46	0.5	-	-
- Other manufacturers	14.2	11.3	0.7	0.4	1.2	1	-	-
Other Exports	10	8.9	3.9	3.9	3.09	2.9		11.2
Total exports	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Merchandise export % of GDP	3.5	4.4	6.0	9.5	9.3	8.4	13.5	15.2
Manufactured export % of GDP	1.8	2.6	4.2	6.9	6.7	Na	10.4	11.3
Non-manufactured export % of GDP	1.7	1.8	1.8	2.6	2.6	Na	3.1	3.9

Source: World Development Indicators 2003, World Bank and WTO 2003. – Not Available

Appendix IV: Growth in GDP, Exports and Structure of Exports (percent share in total exports unless otherwise stated) in Bangladesh

	1970-1971	1980-1981	1990-1991	1995-1996	1996-1997	1997-1998	2000-2001	2001-2002
GDP Growth Rate	-5.5	10.2	3.3	5.0	5.3	5.1	5.3	4.4
Export Growth Rate	-27.6	14.9	-2.8	7.4	14.5	14.3	22.1	-8.7
Agriculture and allied products	70.0	33.0	20.0	13.0	12.0	9.0	20.0	19.4
Iron Ore	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Petroleum products	0.0	0.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Manufactured goods	-	67.0	80.0	87.0	88.0	91.0	-	80.6
- Gems and jewellery	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
- Readymade garments	-	-	-	11.6	-	-	-	7.7
- Engineering goods	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
- Chemical and allied products	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
- Leather and leather manufacturers	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
- Jute manufacturers	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
- Other manufacturers	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other Exports								
Total exports	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Merchandise export % of GDP	4.7	4.8	6.9	11.2	12.4	13.8	15.4	14.3
Manufactured export % of GDP	-	3.2	5.5	9.7	10.9	12.5		11.5
Non-manufactured export % of GDP	-	1.6	1.4	1.5	1.5	1.3		2.8

Source: World Development Indicators 2003, World Bank and WTO 2003. – Not Available

Appendix V: Growth in GDP, Exports and Structure of exports (percent share in total exports unless otherwise stated) in Pakistan

–	1970-1971	1980-1981	1990-1991	1995-1996	1996-1997	1997-1998	2000-2001	2001-2002
GDP Growth Rate	0.5	7.9	5.5	5.0	1.2	3.3	2.6	2.8
Export Growth Rate	0.9	18.2	33.5	2.0	-6.5	3.7	11.8	12.5
Agriculture and allied products	60.0	49.0	21.0	15.6	14.0	16.0	15.0	19.2
Iron Ore	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Petroleum products	–	7.0	1.0	1.0	1.0	0.0	2.0	–
Manufactured goods	–	51.0	79.0	84.0	86.0	84.0	85.0	85.5
- Gems and jewellery	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
- Readymade garments	-	-	-	53.0	-	-	-	48.3
- Engineering goods	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
- Chemical and allied products	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
- Leather and leather manufacturers	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
- Jute manufacturers	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
- Other manufacturers	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other Exports	-	-	-	0.4	-	-	-	-
Total exports	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Merchandise export % of GDP	7.1	12.3	16.3	16.0	15.5	15.8	18.0	18.7
Manufactured export % of GDP	–	6.2	12.8	13.4	13.3	13.2	15.3	16.0
Non-manufactured export % of GDP	–	6.1	3.5	2.6	2.2	2.6	2.7	2.7

Source: World Development Indicators 2003, World Bank and WTO 2003. – Not Available

Appendix VI: Growth in GDP, Exports and Structure of Exports (percent share in total exports unless otherwise stated) in Nepal

	1970-1971	1980-1981	1990-1991	1995-1996	1996-1997	1997-1998	2000-2001	2001-2002
GDP Growth Rate	-1.2	8.3	6.4	5.3	5.0	2.3	4.8	-0.5
Export Growth Rate	-	21.1	19.4	-3.2	24.3	-10.0	-	-
Agriculture and allied products	75	48.0	19.0	20.0	23.0	15.0	33.0	14.0
Iron Ore	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Petroleum products	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Manufactured goods	-	52.0	81.0	80.0	77.0	-	67.0	86.0
- Gems and jewellery	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
- Readymade garments				48.1				22.4
- Engineering goods	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
- Chemical and allied products	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
- Leather and leather manufacturers	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
- Jute manufacturers	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
- Other manufacturers	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Other Exports	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total exports	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Merchandise export % of GDP	5.4	12.9	11.8	22.3	26.3	23.2	22.4	16.1
Manufactured export % of GDP	-	6.7	9.5	17.8	20.2	-	15.0	
Non-manufactured export % of GDP	-	6.2	2.3	4.5	6.1	-	7.4	

Source: World Development Indicators 2003, World Bank and WTO 2003. – Not Available



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