



Response to "Playing with Children's Lives: Big Tobacco in Malawi"

by Alain Berthoud, ECLT Foundation Acting Director
March 10th, 2008

Letter to the Editor of CorpWatch
in response to CorpWatch article posted on their website on 25 February 2008

Dear Editor,

On 25 February Corporate Watch published an article called "Playing with Children's Lives: BigTobacco in Malawi", signed by Pilirani Semu-Banda

Working with the ECLT Foundation as acting Director, and on behalf of the Foundation Board, I would like to make the few following comments which we would like you to add to your article and post on your website.

I remain at your disposal to further discuss ECLT's mission and activities at your convenience

ECLT is cited in the article, but was not contacted for comment. Therefore, as key donor to the mentioned project, we would like to describe in more detail who we are and the project activities. We hope this gives your readers a better perspective.

ECLT is a sectorwide alliance grouping the major manufacturing and tobacco processing multinationals together with the growers associations, the global trade union federation dealing with agriculture and tobacco (IUF), and the program for the elimination of child labour, IPEC, of the ILO.

These members have agreed to work together to address the child labour issue in different regions of the world, acknowledging that none of them could individually solve such a complex problem. It is therefore a collective effort against child labour that goes beyond the very specific interests of each single actor. The collaborative efforts, commitment and community engagement of the ECLT are not shown in the article and are an important component in trying to make an impact on the serious issue of child labour.

Concerning the ICLEP -Integrated Child Labour Eliminating- project that we support in Malawi, your article does not really explain our approach in addressing the issue of child labour in a global and integrated manner; nor does it discuss the concrete results and achievements, which are quite significant at local level..

Let us provide you with the following data; at the end of the present 4-year project (by mid 2010), with 4 million dollars invested, we will have reached about half of the children population in the concerned areas (15'000 children) or over 2/3 of the child population considered to be potentially involved in child labour. Although needs are immense, we do believe this is more than a drop in the ocean and that it certainly constitutes an example of what can practically be done to fight child labour when interested parties come together in a collaborative fashion.

Anyone who has been in this region understands the need for adequate infrastructure, specifically schools. Although it is not exactly the tobacco companies' core competency to set up schools, via our project tobacco companies together with the other ECLT partners have taken this on. 28 schools blocks have been built or renovated; teachers' houses have been built to attract and keep the teachers motivated; local authorities and teachers are being trained in order to improve the quality of education. Child labour committees are in place in each community to fight child labour and to monitor children attendance at school; As a result enrolment rates increased by 20% during the first phase of the project, and continued to increase by 12% in the last year during which 500 children, strictly non-school going child labourers, and another 1'100 at risk children, have entered school.

Sensitisation is done at all levels; at parents and community level to change attitudes regarding child labour as well as with district officials (including labour inspectors). This also means ECLT and its local partners are taking on the role of facilitating the implementation of the international conventions that, as you rightly say, Malawi has ratified.

Poverty is an important cause, as well as the result, of child labour. Beyond the usual approach consisting in withdrawing children from work situation and reintegrating them in school, the ECLT funded project considers the living conditions of the parents so that they can afford to let their children go to school.

The following activities are undertaken:

Access to safe water and sanitation; 22'000 people have now access to a safe water source (topped shallow well or borehole) within a 500m range from their homes. Unfortunately, the burden of fetching water often falls to the child, and mostly girls. The project reduces this burden as well as prevents them from catching waterborne diseases.

Food security; A small scale irrigation scheme has been developed (600 treadle pumps supplied) together with crop diversification to ensure food security at the community level. It goes along with soil conservation and reforestation (300 nurseries, over 2 million trees planted). The burden of fetching wood also falls to the children, something the project attempts to alleviate by making a sustainable supply of firewood available.

Health; Malaria, and above all HIV/AIDS are widespread and certainly play a role in child labour. The project has set up outreach clinics tending to the community needs and training community agents for health prevention. A clinic was built in the project area -in Kasese- and works in collaboration with the existing government infrastructure. In only a few months, the public at large has been provided with tens of thousands of medical consultations.

The holistic approach of the project is implemented together with the community leaders, the districts officials in charge of education, health, agriculture, etc... 500 of them have been associated with the project and trained on child labour issues in order to build capacity and to ensure the dynamic of the project will be sustained.

At management level, oversight of the project as well as the sharing of good project practices and lessons learned is secured through a project steering committee on which key actors are serving (unions, growers, companies, ministry representatives) or acting as advisors (IPEC/ILO, Unicef, NGOs); it is chaired by the Principal Secretary of the Ministry of Labour.

We are proud of the ECLT supported project in Malawi and believe it is an example of what can be done to fight child labour when cooperation of all interested parties is realized. Whether it is too little is a legitimate question, but the ECLT strives to establish demonstrably effective projects that can be 'scaled up' and adopted by other public and private organisations, to reach a much larger number of children and families. The ECLT believes the best approach to make progress on this serious issue is the one of focus and collaboration, and we welcome discussions with others that share that concern.

Alain Berthoud
ECLT Foundation acting Director, Geneva
4 March, 2008