

Activity Sheet 2.1

A Labour of Necessity?

While 12-year-old Andrew in the UK devotes his after-school hours to practising penalty shoot-outs with the roar of an Old Trafford crowd filling his imagination, 12-year-old Asma in Pakistan has her sights on more practical goals.

By stitching the footballs Andrew's team plays with, she's helping finance herself through school, with the hope one day of becoming a teacher. For the thousands of Pakistani children who have never set foot in a school, Asma's ambition is on the scale of Andrew's dream of playing for Manchester United.

The contrast between the lives of the children such as Andrew and Asma fuelled public concern earlier this year when the extent of child labour in the production of footballs was publicised. About 80% of the world's match-grade footballs are produced in the Sialkot district in northeast Pakistan, many of them by children.

But, while the gulf between opportunities faced by Andrew and Asma rightly causes concern, Save the Children is cautioning campaigners against rushing in and taking ill-thought-out action. While children are at risk of exploitation by their boss, work can be a way of children gaining skills and increasing their choices.

Emotional responses in the past have caused more harm than good, for example when children were banned from working in the clothes industry 4 years ago. The American government threatened not to allow imports of clothes made by children. Clothes manufacturers sacked all children under 14 years of age but many of them were so poor that they were forced to take on more dangerous, less well-paid types of work, including prostitution.

When Save the Children was asked to help in a campaign to stop child labour in Sialkot we went to ask the children themselves what they thought. One girl said, 'If people want us to go to school instead of work, they must give us money to do so, and make schools better.' Her mother added, 'No parent wants to see their child work; it is because of poverty and poor standards of education.' Whereas Save the Children would welcome a world where no child is forced to work, we have to look at improving children's options in the real world.

We supported the gradual ending of child labour in this case but only because we made sure there were other schemes in place to provide small scale credit and saving schemes to help poor families and also projects to improve the schools.

We believe that just banning child labour is dangerous. 'It's not as though if children were stopped from working that they'd be lining up to attend a nice primary school down the road. A whole package of social reform has to be put together,' said Angela Penrose from Save The Children at a recent conference.

In all of this we need to make sure that we are listening to the views of the children themselves.

(Source: article adapted from Save the Children)