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Chair

Mr. Michael Levitt

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (1310)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): Good afternoon, colleagues.

I'm going to call this meeting of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights to order.

This is going to be the first of six sessions on child labour and modern slavery, an issue which has been raised at the foreign affairs committee, and which we are now going to be tackling at the Subcommittee on International Human Rights.

I want to welcome our two witnesses for today. Speaking first is going to be Mr. Smith. He is the senior officer for corporate social responsibility with the International Labour Organization, ILO, and has significant experience on this issue. Following him is going to be Christopher Evans, who is with us here in the committee room today. He is the government strategist for the Walk Free Foundation, a non-governmental organization committed to ending modern slavery and human trafficking.

Mr. Smith, since we have you on the line, and we know that sometimes the technology conks out on us, I'm going to ask if you would please begin with your remarks. Mr. Evans, we'll go to you right after that, and then we'll hand it over to the members of the committee for some questions.

Mr. Benjamin Smith (Senior Officer, Child Labour, International Labour Organization): First of all, thank you very much. It's an honour to have this opportunity to address the subcommittee.

I'd like to briefly provide information on recently published ILO global estimates of child labour and child forced labour, what we know about child labour in supply chains, as well as the significant knowledge gaps, before focusing in a bit more detail on child labour in the fishing and seafood sector in Southeast Asia and the garment supply chain in South Asia.

This is just an overview of the numbers that the ILO published a couple of months ago. There are 152 million children, who are defined as people below the age of 18, in child labour today. Seventy-three million of these children are in hazardous work. This is work that is likely to jeopardize their health, safety, or morals. Sixty-nine per cent of children who are in child labour are contributing family workers. They're not in an employment

relationship with a third party. Twenty-seven per cent are paid workers, and 4% are self-employed.

In terms of sectors, most child labour, 71%, can be found in agriculture. There are 4.3 million children in forced labour, about 18% of the total number of people in forced labour, which is 25 million victims worldwide. This includes one million children who are in forced labour for sexual exploitation and 300,000 children who are in forced labour imposed by state authorities. Caution is required, however, in interpreting the numbers of children in forced labour, given the difficulties in measuring these hidden and illicit activities. These figures also are quite recent; they are from our global estimates on forced labour and modern slavery that we produced with the Walk Free Foundation.

This is just to note the important challenges in measuring forced child labour. Forced labour is defined in ILO conventions as work for which a person has not offered himself or herself voluntarily and is done under a menace of a penalty or coercion. Some means of coercion, like isolation or intimidation, may take specific forms in the case of children who are uniquely vulnerable. Other forms involve children working with their parents, and the parents themselves are in bondage, which has been documented in sectors including tobacco and brick production. It's an intergenerational phenomenon.

Forced child labour also occurs when parents or guardians send their children to work as domestic labourers or in shops or factories for the family of the creditor to whom the family is indebted.

The ILO has led extensive efforts to tackle child labour in supply chains. Sectors where we have worked include coffee, sugar cane, melons, cocoa, tobacco, fishing, mining, and manufacturing supply chains for things like surgical instruments and soccer balls.

We've conducted baseline surveys in all of these sectors, which provide information and identification of the target group and provide an understanding of the nature of child labour and the causes and consequences in those sectors. However, they do not provide estimates of the numbers of children in supply chains at the national level, so we don't have those numbers at the global level.

The ILO supports national child labour surveys around the world. Our most recent global estimates draw from over 100 national household surveys. However, these surveys typically are not broken down by subsector. For example, national surveys will tell us how many children are working in agriculture, but not how many are working in sugar cane or coffee.

There's a lack of reliable statistics in the number of child labourers who work in supply chains. We are working in this area, though, to develop a methodology to help fill the knowledge gaps, and that research will be concluded in 2018.

- (1315)

Child labour and child forced labour are concentrated in the informal economy and are often hidden from view and outside the reach of labour inspectorates and other enforcement mechanisms. It's mostly unpaid family labour. Child labour in supply chains actually reduces the labour cost of the goods and services concerned, and companies may derive economic benefit from it. Companies with extended supply chains may not be aware that there is child labour or forced labour in their supply chains.

In the past 15 or 20 years, private voluntary initiatives have proliferated around these issues. While positive impact has been seen, particularly with regard to health and safety, as well as payment of minimum wages, the impact on rights-based issues such as forced labour and child labour has been weaker. Companies often rely on social audits, but these usually only extend down to the first tier of production, while child labour is most often found deeper in the supply chain.

Child labour and forced labour occur in global as well as domestic supply chains in most sectors and most regions of the world. In 2013, the ILO published research on corporate social responsibility initiatives in major emerging economies in the global south. The research found little documentation of efforts among companies based in Brazil, South Africa, and India to address any adverse impacts they might have with regard to child labour in their own supply chains. Most of the CSR initiatives we looked into consisted of philanthropy and was unconnected to supply chains, possibly due to the fact that there tends to be less scrutiny by governments, consumers, and civil society organizations of those companies in the global south relative to companies in the global north.

To turn to fishing and the seafood sector, we have some recent research that I'd like to give you a quick overview of.

In 2017, in an ILO survey, 434 workers in 11 provinces in Thailand, under a project called Ship to Shore Rights which is funded by the EU, we found little evidence of child labour. Only about 1% of the workers interviewed were below the age of 18, although one third of the workers reported having begun working as children below the age of 18 in any sector. The ministry of labour has strengthened child labour in its considerations in its inspection regime, and new rules were adopted in 2015 establishing a minimum age of 18 for work in fishing or seafood. These have contributed to reductions in child labour in the sector. Another sign of increased attention to the problem is the commitment of the Royal Thai Government to conduct its first-ever national child labour survey in 2018.

A previous project of the ILO, funded by the United States, focused on child labour in seafood processing in Thailand, which has a significantly greater number of workers than in boats, in fishing. Children in the shrimp and seafood processing industrial hubs in Thailand were more frequently exposed to workplace hazards than those working in other industries, and twice as likely to sustain injuries. Migrant children in this industry, mostly from Myanmar and Cambodia, also worked longer hours on average than Thai children, about six hours per week longer.

Only one quarter of working children in shrimp and seafood processing between the ages of 15 and 17 were aware of child labour laws, and nearly 65% of those children did not enjoy the legal protection of a contract. One third of migrant children in the shrimp and seafood industry in Thailand do not attend school due to a combination of challenges and constraints that include household debt, child care commitments for their siblings, and parental mobility.

- (1320)

While all children in Thailand have access to education regardless of their registration status, the children of undocumented migrants were less likely to enrol in school, with low incomes leaving families less able to meet the supplementary expenses involved.

With regard to the garment supply chain which I also want to touch on, in garment and apparel factories, there has been improvement over the last 20 years in ensuring that children under the minimum age of employment, which is usually, as you are most likely aware, 14, 15 or 16 years of age, are not employed. On the first tier, there has been improvement; however, there is a continued challenge to ensure that children between the ages of 15 and 17 are not involved in hazardous work, which is the most common and what's called the worst form of child labour in ILO conventions.

Child labour has been documented in leather tanneries in Bangladesh and other countries, which is particularly hazardous. This is particularly hazardous due to the use of toxic chemicals. There is continued risk related to inadequate age verification as well as unauthorized subcontracting, including for work in households where the risk of child labour is inherent. Brands that establish long-term relationships with suppliers and have a clear understanding of those suppliers' production capacities can lower these risks.

Less is known about garment production for domestic markets, which in countries such as India accounts for the vast majority of production.

In terms of the lead farms or brands at the top of supply chains, there is often less visibility of the chain moving further upstream in the stages of spinning mills and ginning, and in cotton growing. I'd like to focus for a couple of minutes on cotton production. It generates—

• (1325)

The Chair: Mr. Smith, you're at 12 minutes now. Could you take maybe another minute or a minute and a half? I do want to have time for members to ask questions of both you and Mr. Evans. If you could start to wind down, that would be good. Then, hopefully, we'll get to some of the additional things. Also, if you want to submit some additional points, we can add them to the testimony.

Mr. Benjamin Smith: Absolutely. I'll wind it up.

For cotton production there is less visibility. There are some 100 million cotton farms, and in developing countries, these tend to be small plots of land of 0.5 hectares to one hectare. It's often family labour, and that brings with it the risk of child labour.

In sub-Saharan Africa and in China, these small holder farms predominate.

There has been a history of state-led mobilization of child labour in the Commonwealth of Independent States, and that has had particularly serious consequences, although there is evidence that is changing.

The ILO has made tackling child labour in cotton-growing communities a priority, with projects under way in countries, including Uzbekistan, Mali, Peru, Pakistan, and India. There are significant health and safety risks associated with cotton growing.

By way of conclusion, for the ILO, addressing child labour and forced child labour in supply chains is a priority. We know that without accelerated progress in these areas we won't reach the sustainable development goal target of the elimination of all forms of child labour by 2025.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Smith.

Mr. Evans, I'm going to turn it straight over to you.

Hon. Christopher Evans (Director, Perth Headquarters, Western Australia, Walk Free Foundation): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

I thank the committee for allowing me to appear today. It's a great honour and a great opportunity from our point of view.

Walk Free is engaged in the measurement of global slavery, in advocacy, in working with faiths on mobilizing faith leadership, and in business. We've done some measurement work with the ILO. I won't go over that sort of ground. But I thought what I would say, Mr. Chairman, to start is that this is a man-made or person-made problem. It's something we can fix. So many times parliamentary committees have to deal with issues that cannot be fixed. This can be fixed. It requires action not only from those countries that are, if you like, suffering from having child labour and forced labour within their countries, although all countries do have some, including Australia and Canada.... But we know that in Asia and Africa and

other places there are widespread issues involving modern slavery and child labour. It is something that we can attack and end.

The world came together at the United Nations when it developed the sustainable development goals and made target 8.7, which is to take measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and trafficking, and eliminate the worst forms of child labour, and by 2025 end all forms of child labour. Now, that's an ambitious target, but it's one that Canada signed on to, along with about 180 other nations. My submission to you is that we have to be serious about it and we have to get on with it. We have to do things that will make a difference.

One of the things I want to focus on today is this question of supply chain transparency, because it will and can make a difference. It's something that is within the power of each nation's parliaments to do. It's not a question of NGOs coming before you today saying, "Give us lots more money and find solutions to insoluble problems." It's about saying, "There are things you can do, and we'd urge you to do them."

I'm conscious that I shouldn't try to lecture another Parliament, but there are a lot of international developments that I think you should be cognizant of and you should be made aware that organizations like mine, and the Australian government, the U.K. government, and others are looking to Canada to help lead. We have made much progress in the last couple of years, but we need more voices, more people standing up and making an impression.

May I just say that the G20 last year really focused on some of these supply chain issues, and Canada signed on to those recommendations as well. Effectively, it said that globalization, we think, is a good thing. The opening up of trade and economic activity among all nations has brought benefits not only to the wealthier nations but to the poorer nations as well in terms of economic development and jobs. But there's also a downside. There is an increase in inequality. The benefits of globalization have not been shared as much as they should have been. They've not been as inclusive, fair, or sustainable as they should have been. That's an analysis I think all G20 countries have come to, and I think most people accept that.

That's why it's important that the issue of child labour and slave labour be addressed by those wealthier countries, by the G20 countries. While their problems might not be nearly as significant in terms of their domestic concerns, what we know is there's exploitation of children and forced labour and traffic labour in those supply chains of Canadian companies operating or using suppliers from around the world. It's true of all those G20 countries.

We also know that local enforcement is not sufficient to solve these problems. Sometimes it's down to weak regulation. Sometimes it's down to lack of enforcement. Sometimes it's down to plain corruption. The reality is we've been living with this for many years. In many cases, we've had some good progress on child labour, but quite frankly, the estimates we have of about 40 million people in modern slavery, I think, are widely agreed to be conservative, very conservative. Without leadership from the developed countries, we're not going to solve these issues; we're not going to free those people from slavery or give those children a chance of an education and remove them from child labour.

●(1330)

The other thing we know, Mr. Chairman, is that we can't do without business engagement. Governments and NGOs have been trying for years, but we know now that a large part of the problem we're dealing with is about the economics of international business and the supply chains of businesses that are ultimately generally owned in the developed world. We've seen around the world the beginnings of a demand for supply chain transparency reporting from those companies; to engage with them to make sure that what they do is morally correct and that it provides opportunities for jobs for people in these countries, but does not exploit them, enslave them, or see children at work.

You've seen the U.K. lead with their Modern Slavery Act. You've seen the EU engage, the French, the Netherlands, and in Australia, we are about to introduce legislation into Parliament next year with bipartisan support to require it of Australian companies as well.

You're seeing a movement, but equally a lot of people are reluctant to take up the issue. I think it's important to say we have more voices. Canada has made a range of commitments in this space. The Canadian government is committed to the sustainable development goals, the G20 resolutions, to the ILO, and made a further commitment at the child labour conference last week. It signed up to the U.K. call to action on modern slavery at the UN General Assembly week this year. Canada has made those commitments to act. It has identified the need to activate all its resources in modern slavery and child labour. The question is what do you do to make that happen. I would suggest that supply chain legislation is one important step. It's a step that can be taken.

I'd just like to make two points about the experience in the U.K. and Australia. One is that businesses are up for it. They're open to the idea. Many businesses are way in front of politicians and governments on these issues. They've been dealing with it for 20 or 30 years, but the performance is sketchy. Some are doing really good work, and we've got others, quite frankly, who don't care and don't look. The idea is that regulation helps bring them all along. Legislation helps them all conform and take the issue seriously. It also provides leadership in the debate.

Two is to say that parliamentary inquiries have driven the change in the U.K. and Australia. It's come from Parliament, not from government. The government has followed Parliament as a result of serious and major parliamentary inquiries in both those nations. The calling of your inquiry is a really important development as far as I'm concerned because with the engagement of a parliamentary committee, particularly when you move out to engage with business

and wider groups, I think you'll see a consensus can be built. In both those countries, it's been politically bipartisan. There's no difference between the Conservative or Labour or Liberal sides in those Parliaments. It's not an issue that divides. It's an issue that can unite and bring business and NGOs together.

The other thing I'll quickly say is that a number of your companies are already reporting against the U.K. act, so the U.K. act is already impacting on Canadian companies. The Australian act will also impact on Canadian companies. Many are already having to deal with these sorts of regimes. The other thing to say is a lot of work is going on in Canada already. NGOs like World Vision have done a lot of work on child labour. I met with the Mining Association of Canada today. They've done a preventing child and forced labour verification protocol. That's business being proactive on these issues already, and you have the investment industry as well.

Mr. Chairman, I won't take up much more of your time other than to say that I think it's a great opportunity for the Canadian Parliament to really engage with this issue, to help deliver on Canada's commitments, and quite frankly, make a real difference to the exploitation and abuse of children and workers around the world. We'd appreciate your work, and hopefully it will lead to a wider debate, both in Parliament and in the Canadian community.

Thank you.

●(1335)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Evans.

Thank you to both of you.

We're going to the first question, which will be from MP Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank both of our witnesses for being here today.

I want to talk a little later about supply chains because I think that's going to be quite a focus of our hearings. I want to come back to this definition of child labour and the numbers that are involved here so I can establish a foundational understanding of what we're talking about.

Is your definition fairly inclusive? Are all individuals under the age of 18 included in the definition of child labour? Maybe the ILO is the best place to go with that question. I'll ask that first, and then I'll break it down a bit.

Hon. Christopher Evans: The definition of a child is a person under 18 years of age. That's correct.

Mr. David Anderson: When you do your evaluation, do you do any evaluation by age groups, or do you just say that, for every child under the age of 18 who is working in this world, the goal is to eliminate them from being in the workplace? When you talked about eliminating it by 2025 or whatever, is it the goal that no one under 18 will be working on this earth, and that will be the realization of what you've set as a goal?

Hon. Christopher Evans: No, that's not the goal. There's more than one minimum age. There is the general minimum age for entry into work, which is 15 in ILO conventions. Developing countries can set it at 14. Some countries set it at 16. That age should be the age of school leaving. You should have compulsory education up to the minimum age for work so you can have a good school-to-work transition.

At that point, children can work. Youth unemployment is a serious concern of the ILO, and we do not want to discriminate against those older children who've finished their education and reached the minimum age to have an opportunity to work. It just needs to be in safe conditions. It can't be hazardous work. It can't be in forced labour conditions, and so on.

We very much [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] the different age ranges.

Mr. David Anderson: When we're thinking about this issue, we should be thinking about kids who should be in school working towards whatever the level of schooling is when they would step out into the bigger society. Is that what you're suggesting? Does that fit your definition?

Hon. Christopher Evans: Absolutely.

Mr. David Anderson: Do you make much of a difference, then, between developed, developing, and underdeveloped countries in terms of your breakdown of this? We come from a country where, you know, we may come from the farm, and we started working when we were a lot younger than 15 years old. It was just done for fun and a little bit of money, I guess, or whatever.

Do you make a distinction between that and someone who's being forced into a situation in a developing country who may not have any choice in that matter at all?

Mr. Benjamin Smith: I would say that child labour exists in all regions in all countries. The numbers are particularly bad in the global south, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, where we've seen the highest rates of child labour. About 20% of all children in sub-Saharan Africa are in child labour. Elsewhere, the rates are lower. Globally, it's a little bit less than 10% of all children who are in child labour.

The ILO conventions talk about different forms of child labour. There are worse forms of child labour, and those include, I think, what you're referring to in terms of forced labour, work in extremely hazardous conditions with pesticides or toxic substances, and then there's just child labour for which the child is too young. An eight- or nine-year-old at work also falls under our definition of child labour, and it interferes with schooling, so it has big repercussions for societies and for the future labour force.

● (1340)

Mr. David Anderson: Do you make a distinction as well, then, between family and non-family labour? You mentioned the numbers, and the numbers are phenomenal when it comes particularly to agriculture. I assume much of that would be family labour, but also family and non-family is quite a distinct difference. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Mr. Benjamin Smith: Sure. It's a great question because the majority, two thirds, of child labour is in that family context, so it's a

big part of the challenge. It's a tough one, because you're talking about private households. You're not talking about the stereotypical big, bad employer who's abusing children.

Most child labour is driven by poverty, and those children contribute to the household income, so an enforcement first approach isn't the right way to go. It's more about offering better opportunities for decent work for parents so that the children can go to school.

Mr. David Anderson: I think I'm going to run out of time here fairly quickly, but I'm just wondering how that number ties into supply chain accountability. If you have that high percentage of young people working in a family where there's a farm, a business, or whatever, do you try to approach accountability there, or are you dealing more with a different subset of forced labour?

Mr. Benjamin Smith: I think that companies whose supply chains dip into the informal economy are at particular risk. Those that are in agricultural-based products have particular risks, and I think that in terms of accountability, there's a soft law, but increasingly, it's a movement towards hard law. The reporting requirements that we've seen in the U.K. and elsewhere are, I think, just going to increase. It will be more of a must-do rather than a nice-to-do scenario down the road.

Mr. David Anderson: Mr. Evans, could you give us a little bit of detail about the Australian legislation? We've had presentations here, actually in Parliament from some of the folks from Britain, just talking about the moves they've made. I'm wondering if you could give us a little more information about your legislation, what you're proposing, and how it works.

The Chair: Mr. Evans, we have about 30 seconds left. I want to ensure we have time to get to the other members. Maybe that's a follow-up that one of the other members can ask you. Can you give a short answer to that?

Hon. Christopher Evans: There have been two parallel processes. One is a major parliamentary inquiry by the foreign affairs, defence and trade committee that is to report probably in the next couple of days, and they've gone wider than just these issues. They've done child sexual exploitation, orphanage tourism, and a range of things, so they've had a bit of a wider remit.

The government has agreed to legislate. They've put out a consultation paper that's closed, and there's pretty broad agreement around the core principles that will be based on the U.K. act, but, quite frankly, probably a little more effective.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're now going to go to MP Khalid.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): I don't believe it's my turn.

The Chair: Okay.

MP Fragiskatos.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you to both of you for being here.

My first question will go to Mr. Evans.

Mr. Evans, what do you think about the threshold, thoughts on a particular number when it comes to legislation and what would be required? In the United Kingdom, as you well know, the U.K. legislation mandates that, in terms of annual turnover, a business would have to have, in the equivalent of Canadian dollars, \$61 million as far as annual turnover is concerned to be affected by the legislation. In Australia, what the committee is looking at now is roughly in that same range.

There have been concerns raised by the business sector in Australia. I'll read a quotation:

The executive director of the Australian Retailers Association, Russell Zimmerman, says: "Special care must be taken regarding over-regulation and impact on businesses with small turnover who do not have the resources to deal with what are very complex issues."

How do you feel about a threshold being put in place, and where should that threshold be if that happens?

• (1345)

Hon. Christopher Evans: It is a contested space. My personal view is that it doesn't really matter where you start, the reality of the supply chain accountability is that you cascade down the supply chain so that the reporting is by the people at the top, but it requires accountability down the supply chain.

The government in Australia is currently recommending \$100 million Australian. To be frank, I think the Parliament will come at a figure lower than that when the legislation is finalized. There won't be any science to it either way. The \$100 million was a figure the government found relating to some tax provisions. It's not illogical, but it's not science, either. A lot of NGOs are arguing for \$30 million to \$40 million, or \$50 million thresholds. Obviously each Parliament will decide what they think is appropriate.

I think in terms of the quote, it's fair to say that the Business Council of Australia represents the people impacted by the proposal in Australia, not the Australian Retailers Association, which perhaps represents smaller organizations. The Business Council of Australia is supporting the legislation.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much. I don't mean to cut you off, but I'm subject to time constraints.

Mr. Smith, may I ask you a question about what we heard at the outset of the answer from Mr. Evans' supply chain investigation? Can you go into that again? It seems to me that it would be tremendously complex to really understand all the touchpoints in a supply chain. How do you carry out such a process? It seems incredibly complicated to investigate the entire supply chain to ensure that modern slavery isn't being carried out.

I think, for example, of fair trade, which is a welcomed initiative as far as international trade goes, but we know that all too often, perhaps in most cases, what is marketed as fair trade has not been developed in a fair way at all, that there is exploitation well in the process, early on in the process, in the middle of the process, and towards the end of the process. You see how it would be difficult to understand, from my perspective and, I think, the perspective of others as well, about the supply chain and the challenges of monitoring it.

Mr. Benjamin Smith: Yes, absolutely, it is complex, certainly. Supply chains are getting longer, and they're getting more complex.

Thinking of particular subsectors, just to give you an example, cocoa has been one that's received a lot of attention for forced labour and child labour, and the cocoa industry has been at it, with efforts to eliminate child labour in their supply chain, for 15 to 20 years, and they're still at it. This is after many tens of millions of dollars going into it.

The challenge is really that the supply chain in west Africa is comprised of 1.5 million small holding farmers in cocoa, so you can imagine the challenge of monitoring that sort of supply chain. What the companies have done in terms of certification, and you referenced the fair trade model, there are real limits to it just because of the sheer geographic scope and scale of these supply chains.

What we have found works best is really to work with governments, with communities themselves, to empower people to look after their own interests and their own children. That means working with co-operatives, working with trade unions, so that you can have more of a continual monitoring happening because snapshot social audits can tell you what's happening today, but they don't tell you about yesterday or tomorrow.

I think companies are learning some difficult lessons about the limits of the tools they typically use and have in the toolbox, and are coming up with more creative approaches. We work quite closely with cocoa, with tobacco, with garments to try to have a more effective approach that can reach down deep into these supply chains.

• (1350)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Mr. Chair, with any remaining time, I have a feeling that my colleague, Mr. Tabbara, who I think is third in the list, might not have an opportunity to ask his questions....

The Chair: There is time for a short question.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): I'll just ask a very quick question.

What specifically caused the dramatic decline in child labour since the ILO began monitoring?

Mr. Benjamin Smith: We have just come out with an analysis of that, which points to some key policy levers that have contributed.

In Latin America we've seen a sharp decline. The reason is that it has put in place very strong social protection mechanisms that are targeted at child labour, so things like cash transfers for poor families to send their children to school and keep them out of work, and poverty elimination efforts. I think it's also quite tied to demographic trends. The general progress on reaching universal education and poverty reduction is quite linked to the declines we have seen in child labour.

I would note that in these past four years there has been a plateau. The decline is much slower. That's a cause for concern and we're looking into why. What has happened in the past four years that has caused that?

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Why is there a plateau? Why is there a decline?

The Chair: In 30 seconds or less, please.

Mr. Benjamin Smith: I think demographic trends have a lot to do with it. We've seen in Africa particularly that it's moving in the wrong direction. It may be that we've reached the low-hanging fruit, in a sense, and now we're dealing with child labour that is really entrenched and rooted in systemic poverty. But I don't want to say too much because our analysts are looking into that and we'll be able to say something with a lot more confidence in the coming months and into next year.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Sorry to be a stickler on time, but I wanted to make sure that we had a full question for MP Hardcastle, and it is now MP Hardcastle's turn.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

In the interests of time, because we do have a hard stop with this committee with the time slot that we're in right before question period—just so you guys understand that—what I think I'll do, which has been my habit with witnesses in the past, is give you one quick question and let the two of you share the time on it.

I was extremely intrigued by the comment that was made by Mr. Evans in answering my colleague's question with regard to legislation and how we move forward. Mr. Smith, maybe you heard Mr. Evans say this as well. He said that we're anticipating some legislation like the U.K.'s, but only more effective. I take that as a learning opportunity for us on this committee.

Maybe you could share with us what you think would be some effective ways for us to be approaching this journey towards legislation.

Hon. Christopher Evans: There is wide recognition of a few weaknesses in the U.K. act, as with any legislation after some experience, and there's some talk of amendment bills coming in. There are issues around the reporting repository, that there should have been one established that's easily accessible, and that's not the case, so you can't find all the reports at one place.

There's concern there wasn't enough mandatory content requirement, so that some of the reporting is superficial and others do a very good job of it. It's quite patchy, if you read the reporting. There's a range of issues such as that.

The point I stress to people is that it has changed the conversation. There is a supermarket firm now in the U.K. employing former victims in the U.K., running a jobs program for them. It has had a conversation in the society that has made people more aware, and the act has been a real catalyst for that. In Australia, the inquiry has also been a catalyst.

What we do know is that it sure is a complex question and solutions are hard, but it's a very worthwhile thing to undertake. As I

said already, your own mining industry has a voluntary protocol. They are trying. They are giving advice. If you look at companies such as Coca-Cola or Unilever, they're quite sophisticated in their approaches to these supply chain issues.

Yes, the U.K. act can be improved upon. I think you'll find the Australian parliamentary report will be quite extensive in going through those things. There have been submissions from U.K. parties about that. They'll be a good source of information about the critique of the U.K. legislation, but there is ongoing debate in the U.K. as well.

• (1355)

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Mr. Smith, you have a few minutes.

Mr. Benjamin Smith: The ILO hasn't come up with a policy one way or the other, in favour or against such legislation, so I wouldn't be able to give an institutional perspective.

Just in our experience, transparency is critical. I would agree with Mr. Evans that the conversation has really evolved in important ways in recent years, coinciding with some of the laws that we've seen.

In terms of industry collaboration, it seems to me quite important that there be as few barriers as possible to sharing of information about supply chains, so that companies can reward the good actors. These are pre-competitive issues when it comes to child labour and forced labour in supply chains.

Of course, there are antitrust concerns, but at times those are overblown. There is more scope for sharing amongst companies about what's happening in their supply chains and how they're structured and who they work with.

The ILO hosts what's called the Child Labour Platform. This is a group of companies that come together under the Chatham House Rule of safe space for an exchange of information and experience on tackling child labour in supply chains—big companies such as Coca-Cola and Primark, from a variety of sectors such as mining firms. It's really in the interest of accelerating progress so that companies can learn from each other. A sector such as cocoa, which has been at it for quite some time, can provide its perspective so that mining firms and telecoms can benefit from that experience.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We have about a minute and a half left. There's a question I want to follow up on and maybe you can submit it. One of the members just put it forth.

Slavery and hazardous conditions are easier to determine, but how do you determine exploitation? For example, if there are no opportunities for the parents but a child of, say, age 13 in Bangladesh can make \$60 a week, which is almost the median income, how do you measure exploitation related to the wage and the responsibilities they might have? Maybe it's something that we can get you to provide some written input on, if there's an answer to that, or is it something that there's a response back for?

Mr. Benjamin Smith: Is this directed to me?

The Chair: Sorry. Yes, it was.

Mr. Benjamin Smith: Exploitation isn't a term that's defined in ILO conventions, so it's a slippery one. I would be happy to follow up with a more fully fleshed response to that.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Thank you to both of our—

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Mr. Evans, since reporting directly would expose some company that would have those employees, how do we deal with that?

The Chair: Mr. Evans, if you have any thoughts on that and care to submit them, we'll absolutely take those with gratitude as well.

Thank you to both our witnesses. You have given us a lot to think about as a first session on this topic. We really appreciate your participation, both here and by video conference.

The meeting is adjourned.

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