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# Afghans need to stand up for the rights of street working children

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Outside Finest Supermarket, a landmark in the Shar-e-Naw of Kabul, a group of children were begging. Here, a member of our research team at Samuel Hall, an independent think tank, met Mubariz, 12, who cleaned cars. His first interaction with the streets of Kabul was as a chewing-gum seller in this area at age 6.

"I went to school but had to stop when I was in the second grade, as I had to start earning for my family," he said.

Not far away, on Chicken Street, lined with carpet, scarf and jewellery stores, some young children rushed towards a handful of shoppers to sell maps of Kabul for a dollar each. All these children, many below 15, are out of school.

Street work in Kabul and other urban areas of Afghanistan is child-intensive, where more than 73 per cent of child workers had their first work experience between the ages of 5 and 11, according to our survey. We also found that the children faced many challenges, including unsafe environments, risks of abuse and crime, exposure to the illegal drugs trade, workplace injuries and security threats.

Ten years later, Mubariz is one among a growing population of young people working on the streets.

Reports suggests that child labour in Afghanistan increased by 50 per cent in a decade before 2009, with at least 60,000 working in Kabul alone. Given the rapid growth of the population in the capital since 2009, including internally displaced, the number is perhaps much higher today.

As the world marks Street Children's Day, it is high time we reassess the present realities and try to find plausible solutions for child street workers in urban centres.

Ten years ago, a European Commission-funded consortium of NGOs, called Child Rights Consortium, signed a protocol with the Afghan ministry of education to integrate child workers into the formal school system.

This consortium has since been dissolved. Many organisations started education programmes for street children in 2007, but their capacity has significantly reduced in recent years because of paucity of funding.

In addition to ILO conventions, Afghanistan's labour law specifically prohibits employment of children under 15. But the 2007 report on street children in Kabul found that only 2.6 per cent of these were between the ages of 15 and 17 years, while the rest were younger. National strategies aimed at improving the health and education of at-risk children and street working children fell short of expectation, according to rights groups.

Economic woes and general insecurity in Afghanistan have overshadowed the needs of street children. The country is in the midst of a prolonged recession, while many have lost their fathers to the conflict. More than a third of the child workers' parents, who are in their late forties, told our researchers that they were too old to work – a way to justify why their children have to work at a tender age.

Given the interlinked reasons that force Afghan children to work on the streets, programmes to support them must be tailored to fit the local context. First, there needs to be a reactive approach that treats child labour as a problem.

Second, there needs to be a protective approach that classifies street-working children as a vulnerable demographic in need of protection. And third, there needs to be a rights-based approach that ensures that their voices are heard and their rights upheld.

In the Afghan context, approaches that view child labour as something that violates children's welfare are problematic. A well-known study on the social history of family structures and childhood explains the underlying issue: "The idea of street-working children as a minority, who are in need of integration into a mainstream, is a recent western construction of childhood and social organisation that is constantly changing."

Pilot projects with context-based solutions, such as Unicef's Technical and Vocational Education and Training programme, have been springing up, but a broader approach that can be scaled to meet the needs of the tens of thousands of street children in Kabul ought to be developed.

It is important that the programmes treat children as independent actors, with their own aspirations and desires, which may not always match with what others around them consider the best options.

Mubariz, for instance, is waiting to hear from an NGO worker, who offered him education. He dreams of becoming an engineer, a doctor or a teacher. But he also knows that he will not be able to attend school unless his family considers education to be a better investment than the work he does now.

Listening to these children and understanding their context and needs are vital for any initiative to succeed.