

# INTERNATIONAL LABOR STANDARDS AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CHILD-LABOR REGULATION

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## **Abstract**

Child labor is a persistent phenomenon in many developing countries. In recent years, support has been growing among rich-country governments and consumer groups for the use of trade policies, such as product boycotts and the imposition of international labor standards, to reduce child labor in poor countries. In this paper, we discuss research on the long-run implications of such policies. In particular, we demonstrate that such measures may have the unintended side effect of lowering domestic support for banning child labor within developing countries, and thus may contribute to the persistence of the child-labor problem. (JEL: I21, J88, O11, O19, O24)

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## **1. Introduction**

The eradication of child labor in developing countries is widely viewed as a key goal for the work of governments and international organizations. Yet despite many efforts at both the national and international levels, the phenomenon of child labor has proved remarkably resilient. In 2004, there were still more than 200 million child workers in the world (Edmonds 2008). A closer look at the data reveals a lot of heterogeneity across countries. Whereas some countries have successfully eradicated child labor early on in their development process, in other cases child labor remains widespread even at fairly high income levels (Doepke and Zilibotti 2005).

One reason why child labor is difficult to eradicate is that in countries where child labor is widespread, political support for child-labor restrictions is often weak. In our earlier work on the political economy of child labor (Doepke and Zilibotti 2005), we argue that the lack of political support for restrictions is due to economic dependence on child labor. In countries where child labor

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