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Tackling child labor and protecting their right to education

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Over many decades, an intense debate has been raging in India as to the causes of child labor. Although this in many ways mirrors the debate existing elsewhere in the world, it's a socio-economic burden that India is unable to ward off despite its unparalleled growth story since independence. More than half a million children in India below 18 years are working in seed production farms. This is mainly because hybrid seed production is very labor-intensive process and farmers are often at a loss to tackle complicated issues such as increasing cost of production, labor-scarcity due to urban migration and sometimes sheer poverty.

Gaps in the system: A National Policy on Child Labor in 1987 was adopted. This Policy seeks to adopt a gradual and sequential approach with a focus on rehabilitation of children working in hazardous occupations. It envisioned strict enforcement of Indian laws on child labor combined with development programs to address the root causes of child labor such as poverty. However, public awareness of child labor is still very limited, making it difficult to build grass roots support for collective action.

Confronting the child labor challenge: In December 2002, Bayer Group completed the acquisition of India-based Aventis CropScience. Bayer CropScience first learned about the incidence and prevalence of child labor in its newly acquired India-based cottonseed operations a few months post acquisition, in April 2003. The Aventis acquisition had brought on board a well-known Indian company, Proagro, which already had operations in the cottonseed production and marketing-a new segment of the supply chain for Bayer. Child labor was widespread in cottonseed production-a traditional practice taken for granted not only by Indian farmers but also by several 100 Indian companies then accounting for approximately 90 percent of the market share. Faced with alarming statistics and evidence of child labor in the supply chain of its newly acquired subsidiary, the company sought to eliminate the practice of employing child labor on cottonseed contract farms. This unique program was strengthened in 2005, when the company turned it into a multi-level action program.

Child care program: For the past seven years, Bayer CropScience has worked effectively to implement a comprehensive multilevel Child Care Program (CCP) as a part of its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). CCP has been rolled out in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Gujarat, and Tamil Nadu where the company has contracted cottonseed production. It aims at getting children off the fields of contract farmers and into the schools. Bayer CropScience Child Care Program was set up with robust management systems that formulated specific actions, step-by-step, for identifying and monitoring child labor at cottonseed farms. Awareness rising was at the heart of its proposal.

A well-planned awareness activity was envisaged that included everything from written messages against child labor, printed on all company seed packaging in local languages, to farmer awareness campaigns, to traditionally accepted media such as puppet shows, slides in cinema theaters and street plays. The campaign message was standardized as "Let's stop children from working, let's protect their right to education." A series of program-enabling elements such as a sophisticated monitoring program, an incentive and sanction scheme, Target 400, a training program for the enhancement of farmers' productivity, safe use and handling of crop protection products became a part of the model. A strict guideline based on company policy of "zero tolerance for child labor", was implemented and Bayer started working only with those farmers who confirm by contract not to employ children on their fields.

Monitoring was tautened. Cotton production staff along with Child Care Program field monitors started to carry out unannounced assessment visits on the farms. These teams were rotated across locations. During each of these visits, the staff collected age information about the laborers. When a child laborer was identified, the farmer was given two working days to find an adult replacement. When the age of a worker could not be unambiguously established, an age verification process was set in motion and had to be completed within four working days.

The system ended all ambiguity toward identification and monitoring of child labor. Such a system also provided Bayer with accurate and precise data and information on child labor cases. Further, guidelines for external stakeholders interested to visit the cotton farms were implemented. Monitoring efforts were validated via external sample checks by Ernst & Young on a relevant number of randomly selected farms. They independently conducted unannounced field visits over the crop season.

Achieving the goal of zero child labor: Compared to figures of about six working children per acre of cottonseed fields, quoted by some NGO studies, Bayer CropScience managed to reduce this number in the company's production area to a practical level of zero.
Where isolated cases of child labor are still being found on occasion, they are being immediately addressed by trained company staff of the established, fully resourced in-house CCP organization. A top auditing firm annually audits the program independently and advises on areas of improvement.

Learning for life project: A key component of the Child Care Program is the educational module under the broader "Learning for Life" initiative. It provides out-of-school children from cottonseed production farms with access to education. To that end, Bayer CropScience has entered into cooperation with Naandi Foundation, a well known NGO, to establish Creative Learning Centers, which are bridge schools that prepare the children for integration into regular government schools.

Farm assistantship for young people: In 2008, Bayer CropScience, in cooperation with Vignana Jyothi, a reputed non-governmental organization, established the Bayer-Ramanaidu Vignanajyothi School of Agriculture (Bayer-RVJ School of Agriculture) in Medak District near Hyderabad. The Bayer-RVJ School of Agriculture runs a six-month full-time residential vocational training program in agriculture. Till date, 234 students have graduated from this course.

CCP-a case study: Bayer's successful Child Care Program to tackle child labor in cottonseed production in India is gaining international acclaim. Prof. Charles Dhanaraj and Prof. Oana Branzei from the prestigious Richard Ivey School of Business in Canada profiled Bayer's Child Care Program in a case study. The study is already part of the MBA curriculum at four colleges in Italy, India, Singapore and the United States roughly one month after its publication. The case study is now also being made available by the Harvard Business Review.

Child Care Program has also been highlighted in the German Federal Government's current Human Rights Report, as a "particularly good practical example of the contribution that corporations can make towards abolishing child labor." More than 10,000 farmers have since received training as part of this program and, as a consequence, have been able to boost their yields significantly. Schooling and vocational training has been made possible for more than 2,500 children and adolescents.