



POLICY PAPER OF THE ASSOCIATION LITTLE HANDS

WHO WE ARE

The association Little Hands was founded in 2010 in Cantù (Italy): Its objective is that of fostering solidarity and cooperation with the Working children movements and with those associations that support them in the promotion of children's and adolescents' rights.

The issue of child labour is extremely complex and therefore deserves an accurate and in-depth approach: Little hands has decided to opt for a critical, constructive approach to this issue. Child labour can serve as a means of growth, even if the person involved is underage, if the working conditions are appropriate, if human rights are protected and if work does not hamper his/her psycho-physical development or social integration. Our position stems from the observation of the working experience of the majority of children we met in the poorer neighbourhoods of the world's Southern Countries.

These children and their families do not consider Work as a mere source of income, but also as an educational experience; as a meaningful activity in order to develop one's own social identity.

Since it was founded, Little Hands has developed strong connections with the following Movements: Ejt Benin, Ejt Burkina Faso, Foundation Pequeños Trabajadores, Creciendo Unidos and Escuela Viajera (Colombia).

The objective of the Movements we support is that of claiming for the full recognition of children's rights and at the same time that of creating dignified work opportunities thanks to the development of growth opportunities, both from a professional and a cultural point of view.

WHY A POLICY PAPER?

We are going through a serious economic crisis, finding the right way to market the children's products on the international market is much harder; the Association thinks that it is necessary to better outline the guidelines that should guide our present and future actions in the field of **solidarity-based economy**.

Moreover, we not only want to go on along the path we have already started with some associations; but also we would like to create a network in order to convey and exchange energies. We are available to provide contacts and get in contact with new realities, whom we can trust and with whom we can share fundamental values such as: common commitment, mutual respect, the desire to create a new society based on cooperation and solidarity.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

Since Little Hands was born, we can state that significant steps forward have been taken. Our relationship with the children's movement and our mutual knowledge has increased thanks to a constant cooperation in order to better organise the import of their products.

While visiting the children workplaces and laboratories, we were asked to set up a dedicated space that would host only the children's products, and finally we were able to have such a space.

Our strategy allows us to act on 2 sides at the same time: we support dignified working realities that involve the most vulnerable parts of the population and, while selling or participating to event such as fairs etc, we can inform a wide number of people and raise awareness on the children's conditions. The results we have achieved make us think that this kind of cooperation i.e. based on the shared proposals made by the children, will be fundamental in the coming years.

SOLIDARITY-BASED ECONOMY: A POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVE TO EXPLOITATION

We are aware that one of the worst effects of the free market and the economic crisis will have a strong, bad impact, once again, on the weakest part of the world population. That's why we think that it is quite urgent to provide an answer to the vital needs of human beings: friendship, cooperation and solidarity; these needs must be fulfilled through effective development projects.

Our idea is that, by selling the children's products we can achieve 3 fundamental objectives:

- Support the movements during the current, difficult economic situation
- Convey information on who has manufactured the product, to the buyer, including information on their socio-economic conditions;
- Helping the children become protagonists within their family and social environment. A child who can pursue a healthy and self-conscious growth will be less likely to be a passive victim of exploitation and ill-treatments.

Such a project can be turned into reality only if a basic principle is shared by all of us: a dignified and adequate work is meaningful even when carried out by a young, underage person.

As regards our economic and social commitment, we would like to share the comments made by one of the organization we work with:

«Every order for Little Hands products is a proof of what we can do with our creativity, our educational process and our hands. It makes us feel that we “exist again”, despite the problems we have to face everyday in order to survive, despite our daily fights get worse and worse everyday, despite our helplessness and discouragement.

The products we make are precisely that spark of hope that we need in order to believe that anything is possible, that thanks to our job and thanks to our ability of turning it into an educational environment, we are able to turn our problems into smiles, our difficulties into wilfulness and thus we find the necessary strength to go on.

Solidarity goes back to its ancient meaning, the concept of something that is “solid, stable, complex and common”. This idea gives us the strength to endure poverty, the absence of the state and exclusion, armed conflicts and all the silence that are trapped in our hearts and memories.

DIGNIFIED WORKING CONDITIONS FOR WOKING CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

In order for child work to be acceptable it is necessary for it to be carried out in “dignified conditions”. By “dignified working conditions” we mean a working activity that has a number of hours, a salary and a place that are suitable to a child. It has to leave enough space for education and playing. Education is the bottom line of the working activity of the child, moreover, very often it is only thanks to their working activities that children can access education and go on with their studies. As children themselves say, work has to be *light, limited and safe*.

Production activities usually involve handicraft laboratories, or small micro-credit activities: these are not only a source of income, but are also opportunities to learn a job.

SOLIDARITY-BASED ECONOMY

One of the reasons behind the crisis of the capitalist society is the separation of 2 concepts: economy and solidarity. The damages caused by this separation have become more and more visible lately: social problems, new poverties, increase of economic inequalities and also increase of social distress, precarious working conditions, and a widespread lack of trust towards the future, that can turn into violence and destruction.

We should learn how to better analyse the distress that affects our society. Our development model is based on growth and extreme consumerism, and this attitude has erased spare time, or the time to be devoted to relationships, to ourselves and to the kind of activities based on solidarity.

The economic system that we try to build has to be able to link economy and solidarity. The projects that we have set up in Benin Burkina Faso and Colombia are the visible proofs of what these words mean to us.

SOLIDARITY

Solidarity-based economy can be defined as such when it unites good-willed people who share the wish to pool material and financial resources in order to provide mutual economic support, protecting the most vulnerable people: in our case, the children.

ECONOMY

When it comes to Economics, our focus is placed on 3 objectives:

- Developing commercial relationships so that these can benefit all the different actors with whom we get in contact, for instance sending orders for products to all the organisations we work with.
- Encouraging the creation of products that can stimulate the children's creativity and that respect the environment and local cultures.
- Finding new specific markets and increasing visibility.

As to the second bullet-point, we underline that in the western world the increase of consumerism has been made possible by an exaggerated exploitation of the environment. Scientific evidence shows that the current development model is not sustainable for the environment. We therefore attach a great importance to the materials we use for the manufacture of the products (i.e. the souvenirs or gifts): they have to contribute to the **protection of environment and health**.

In this particular field we have had positive impact and positive reactions from the kids, who are very keen on producing eco-friendly products; also our costumers like the idea of combining solidarity and ecology.

AN OBJECTIVE TO BE ACHIEVED: SETTING UP THE NETWORK

To sum up: we can state that a solidarity-based economy lab should combine 3 fundamental components:

- An educational perspective
- A training perspective for children and adolescents for the creation of future social businesses
- A perspective for economy and production aimed at increasing family incomes, facilitating micro-businesses and self-sustainable future.

These perspectives should be backed by an adequate information campaign, and this should be our task. We have to be motivated in order to get customers appreciate the children's products, and better understand our initiatives.

In order to achieve this objective we need to **set up a network**, as it will allow to share experiences, brotherhood and friendship, it will allow us to find a solution to problems connected to social exclusion and poverty. For this reason it is important to communicate, exchanging messages, proposals and thoughts. The network is a means that can allow us to overcome long distances and it will help us feel less lonely against the world's injustices.

In our opinion, the creation of the network will allow us to increase our political lobby both at global level and locally, in the working children's countries. Thus we will have the opportunity to start new projects. Our association will take on the responsibility of setting the network by collecting all the information and needs coming from the different actors, in order to share them and start the debate.

These are the challenges we are facing at the moment: these challenges need a common approach in order to achieve a new social justice.

We want to build on our past experience and continue along the path towards the creation of a network based on shared knowledge and brotherhood.

If you believe it....you can achieve it!

February 2012