

Introduction

The goals of the International Labour Organization (ILO) have a long history but were redefined and consolidated further in the late 1990s. With the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) a heated debate developed about the relative merits of international organizations such as the ILO and WTO in the promotion of core labor standards.

Much opposition to globalization rests on the assumption that globalization will lead to a “race to the bottom” concerning core labor standards. The scenario of a “race to the bottom” in core labor standards follows the logic of the familiar prisoner’s dilemma: While all countries benefit if all countries adhere to core labor standards, every individual country has an incentive to defect and disregard those standards to attain short term benefits. Yet, today, more countries subscribe to more human rights conventions, declarations, and treaties than ever before. Furthermore, there are many business and civil society initiatives as well as bi- and multilateral initiatives to promote labor standards. With the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO)¹ the international debate gained new impetus about how this alleged “race to the bottom” of labor rights could be preempted on a multilateral level. Which of the many labor standards should one focus on? Which international organization should assume the leading role? Should the WTO use coercive measures like a social dumping clause to ascertain that labor standards are upheld? Or does the strategy of the International Labor Organization (ILO), that is, by establishing labor standards with international conventions that countries can ratify voluntarily, suffice to improve labor standards? An emergent consensus among important international organizations is that there are certain *core* or *fundamental* labor standards that every country is obliged to uphold. Furthermore, the tentative consensus espouses the strategy of the ILO as one of the more promising ways. This dissertation examines the impact the ILO has had in pressuring countries

¹ For a concise discussion of the history and the mission of WTO and ILO, see section 3.2.3.2.

to ratify one of its core labor standard conventions and the effect that such ratification attained net of other influential factors. The labor standard examined is the prohibition of child labor. Child labor is the *only* core labor standard that would cause production costs to rise significantly and thereby put developing countries with labor intensive economies that implement this standard single-handedly at a comparative disadvantage. Thus the incentives for developing countries not to ratify or to ratify but not implement this convention are more pronounced than with other core standards.

On a global level, the reasons and results of a nation's ratification of these treaties have not been studied systematically. This dissertation examines four aspects. (1) What country characteristics account for the formal endorsement of human rights instruments? This is exemplified by the ratification of the core labor standard² "prohibition of child labor" using an event history analysis (1960-1995). (2) Does the ratification of the first ILO-Child Labor Convention lead to a significantly faster reduction of child labor? (3) What other determining factors influence the rate that child labor decreases especially regarding what kinds of international organizational, economic and coercive linkages lead to a significantly faster reduction of child labor rates? (4) Do Governmental or Non-Governmental organizational linkages (the later conceptualized as a social movement) have the greater impact on child labor rates dropping? The later three questions are answered using a panel analysis; the time frame spans from 1960 to 1990.

Drawing on the World Society Theory, I argue that the global ratification of the Minimum Age Convention (C138) (also referred to as the Child Labor Convention) of the ILO is significantly more likely if the country has

² Whereas ratification was voluntary since the organization's inception in 1919, the ILO *Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work* in 1998 specifies that all 188 member states are required to ratify and implement eight (of the approximately 200 conventions declared between 1930 and 1999) that codify the five *core* or most *fundamental* labor standards under ILO supervision. The five dimensions of core labor standards are composed of: (1) the right of association and (2) the conjoined rights to form trade unions and bargain collectively, (3) an absolute ban on the usage of child labor as well as limitations on youth labor in the case of hazardous work and (4) the right to a free choice of employment with an interdiction on using slave labor as well (5) the right not to be discriminated in training, employment and remuneration (Greven & Scherrer 1998, ILO 1999, 1999a, Kellerson 1998).

many international organizational links to the world society. This effect is independent of income level. Furthermore, I show that there is a very weak coupling between formal commitment to the convention and structural change in the labor market. Evidence demonstrates that the ratification of C138 has a very weak net effect on child labor rates. Far greater an effect is yielded through international associations. The denser the organizational connections linking a country to the wider World Society, the faster child labor drops.

In this dissertation, I thereby aim to test the prediction of the World Society Theory that there are world wide diffusion processes of standard models suggesting *what* a legitimate nation is responsible for and *how* it should handle this responsibility. There has been a substantial amount of research documenting the effects these diffusions have on formal endorsement commitment, e.g. ratifying human rights treaties. However, there is little research showing if a symbolic commitment, such as ratifying a treaty, has any real societal effect or, if not, what does.

According to the World Society Theory, these diffusion processes are accelerated by organizational linkages. The adoption of world societal models does not closely correspond with functional needs, e.g. defined in economic terms, of societies but rather with what is viewed as legitimate. What is viewed as legitimate is shaped by the organizational environments the nation state is embedded in. International organizational linkages, e.g. to the UN, embed nation states in the “World Society”.³ That a higher number of international organizational linkages leads to a significantly higher probability of nations ratifying the Minimum Age Conventions *and* accelerated reduction of child labor (while there is no direct effect of ratification) confirms the World Society perspective.

Furthermore, this dissertation addresses the social movement discussion by showing that non-state actors and associations (i.e. international Non-Governmental-Organizations) yield better results than traditional political

³ It is a „society“ insofar as norms are stipulated and it is a „world“ society because this takes place on the global level, e.g. through the declarations of the UN.

channels of influence (i.e. International Governmental-Organizations). As predicted by the Resource Mobilization and Political Process Model, (international) Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs) have a much stronger positive impact than international governmental associations (IGOs). The more INGOs a country has, the faster child labor rates decreases.⁴ The reason is that social movement type strategies that lead to the reduction of child labor are feasible for INGOs but for not for IGOs.

Outline

Part I is largely descriptive as I set the groundwork for many of the later assumptions and hypothesis in part II and III. I start with a brief overview of the historical and current discussion about the need to protect labor standards through international measures and to show the current relevance this theme has attained (section 1). After differentiating the labor standard terminology (section 2), I outline and discuss the different non-governmental (section 3.1) and governmental initiatives (section 3.2) that have developed to improve labor standards. Section 3.1 also shows why many observers argue that non-governmental initiatives do not suffice to uphold labor standards and that multilateral efforts with governmental cooperation are needed instead. In section 3.2, I present governmental national, regional, and multilateral strategies and portray the discussion that led to the ILO assuming a more important role and alteration of its strategy. The following section (section 4) shows that there is somewhat of a consensus where different international organizations draw the line between labor standards that every legitimate nation states *must* uphold and standards that only need to be complied with if the nation can *afford* it. The last section (section 5) discusses the current state the core labor standards are in to provide a backdrop for the discussion.

Part II and III are the core of the dissertation. They roughly follow the outline of a hypothesis-testing research design. Part II examines what prompts

⁴ At this point I want to emphasize that my data do not allow any evaluation of the effect of the globalization processes in general; I can only make statements concerning the development of child labor for the three decades 1960-1990 due to focus and data limitations.

nations to ratify the Minimum Age Convention of the ILO. After finding no significant correlation between ratifying the child labor convention and child labor rates dropping, I examine what the determining factors are that cause the empirically observable drop in the child labor rates. Normative organizational linkages prove to be the strongest accelerated factor regarding the decrease of child labor rates.

Thus in part III, I examine *types* of normative organizational linkages significantly increase the likelihood of nations ratifying the child labor convention. This part draws both on the World Society Theory and (taking a large number of (I)NGOs as an indicator of a social movement) the social movement literature. I find that non-governmental organizational linkages contribute more consistently to a significant reduction of child labor rates.