Eliminating child labour: what needs to be done?

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Projected and real increases in children’s work and labour during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic\(^1\) between 2020 and 2022 point to a harsh reality in many parts of the world–child labour still remains a major coping strategy for families when faced with schooling disruption, health and economic shocks and livelihood insecurity arising from broader social inequalities. The disproportionately large size of the informal sector in many developing economies results in both low wages for adults and the precarity of jobs, with workers unable to access social security. Alongside insufficient and low-quality early childhood, elementary and secondary education, this often places children at the forefront of family survival strategies, hindering both their development and perpetuating intergenerational poverty.

Eliminating child labour is central, therefore, to advancing children’s rights as articulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), where Article 32 recognises the child’s right to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child’s education, or to be harmful to the child’s health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development. The CRC also calls on member states to set a minimum age for admission to work, according to the relevant provisions of international instruments. These normative standards are further reinforced through ILO (International Labour Organization) Conventions 138 (on minimum wage) and 182 (on worst forms of child labour), and the Sustainable Development Goals’ target 8.7 which calls on countries to ‘take immediate and effective measures’ to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking, and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour.

Despite some positive trends in reducing child labour globally,\(^2\) stalling prevalence rates since the period 2016–2020 point to the challenges that the current state of ‘poly-crisis’—the multiple, simultaneous and often intersecting crises of climate change, conflict, and economic and food insecurity—will pose for children and their families. Global estimates in 2020 suggest 160 million children are engaged in child labour (ie, hazardous forms of work), and this is before the effects of the pandemic were felt on children’s lives. Currently, sub-Saharan Africa faces the greatest challenge in terms of increasing numbers of children in child labour, including in the younger age groups of 5–11.\(^3\) However, as noted in global estimates published by ILO and UNICEF in 2021, national income is not the only predictor of child labour prevalence; more than half of all child labour occurs in middle-income countries. Inclusive and redistributive economic growth also plays an important role in the elimination of child labour.\(^4\)

Child labour is found predominantly though not solely within agriculture and family enterprises, located within areas of high poverty and outmigration, and within social groups who remain on the margins of social and economic development in different contexts. The phenomenon also spans a range of types of work from household chores and other work within the household at one end, to child soldiers and other worst forms of child labour, at the other. The diverse locations of children’s work make the task of elimination particularly difficult. Children’s work is often invisible, enmeshed within family and kin relations and occupying a fluid relationship with school participation. Hazards and harms can be experienced by children in all types of work, including within the household, and can involve both emotional and physical abuse.

The consequences of child labour are well known. When children enter the adult-dominated and adult-driven world of work, they lack the capabilities to resist exploitation. Even within the home, long hours of work, whether in the form of domestic chores or other contributions, can impede children’s ability to study, play and socialise with peers—all essential for their overall cognitive development and well-being. Child labour not only inflicts severe physical health consequences on children but also has lasting mental and psychological impacts, causing stress, anxiety and trauma due to the harsh working conditions, exploitation and the denial of a normal childhood experience. Prolonged exposure to hazardous work environments can lead to injuries, respiratory problems, malnutrition and stunted growth. Vicious intergenerational poverty cycles can trap children who leave school early (or combine school with work) well into adulthood. Given these consequences, there are no good reasons not to push for policies that aim for the complete elimination of all forms of child labour, including in relation to household chores and economic activities within the family.

So how can we invest most effectively in ending child labour?\(^5\) Multiple strategies across social and business sectors are needed to disrupt the incentives for continuing to employ children, whether on the farm, within the home, within small businesses, or across value chains in industries. Governments need to step up investments to universalise social protection, both in the form of social security for informal sector workers, as well as cash transfers that can support stable household consumption and reduce the impact of economic and health shocks on households. Household cash transfers should be designed to incentivise school participation and also be targeted at children in the form of scholarships for older students, when the opportunity costs of schooling and concerns about skills and jobs can push children prematurely out of secondary school and into unskilled labour, locking them into long-term cycles of low wages even as adults. Adequacy of the value of the transfer, pegged to inflation and delivered with regularity are critical features to ensure programme effectiveness.

Securing work opportunities, both for current and future adults, requires concerted attention and planning by both business and government sectors working together. This includes employment policies that create opportunities for both women and men, with appropriate measures of social protection and assistance, and support to ensure that income and hours of work translate into household well-being including time and resources for the care and raising of children. A focus on sectors where child labour is found can also offer a useful entry-point for transformative labour policies—such as in Uzbekistan where comprehensive reforms in the cotton sector over a 7-year period resulted in an estimated two million children being taken out of child labour and half a million adults out of forced labour.\(^6\)

Universalising quality elementary and secondary education must be a core strategy through ensuring equal attention to rural and urban areas, plugging gaps in infrastructure such as roads and transportation, improving the quality of school buildings and toilets, and ensuring effective distribution and performance of teachers across regions and areas.

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(and grades). Ensuring that schools function for a full day also can play a role in keeping children occupied in activities and learning appropriate for their ages. Supporting children’s schooling with nutrition in the form of quality school meals is another accelerator of child-focused food security and development. Investment in early childhood development services and education can play a critical role in securing timely transition to schooling, ensuring retention and completion, and freeing up time for older siblings and parents from childcare. Health systems should help in identifying child labour and addressing the health and mental health impacts of child labour, including through regular health check-ups and screenings for working children, especially in hazardous conditions. Additionally, community-based healthcare programmes should provide medical treatment, nutrition support and psychological counselling for affected children. Public awareness campaigns should also emphasise the importance of early inter-vention and access to healthcare services for child labourers.

Insufficient investments and inadequate attention to quality implementation contribute to the persistence of child labour, posing a formidable challenge for those working towards its eradication. Can child labour be eliminated when schools under-perform or do not exist? Can families be expected not to involve children in supporting their everyday functioning when women bear multiple unpaid care burdens including childcare and other domestic responsibilities such as fetching water and fuel, or lack childcare services to support their employment? Gender-responsive education, health and social protection services, and more effective employment and social security will need to remain foundational strategies in eliminating child labour. These efforts need to be accelerated in areas where child labour is known to be concentrated.

Alongside national measures, both universal and targeted, there is a need to focus attention to children engaged in child labour who are not within the care and protection of families. ‘Spaces’ of child labour—the street, migration journeys—are typically where the invisibility of children’s work and exploitation becomes a barrier to policy action, resulting in either limited enforcement or rescue-focused strategies with little attention to securing long-term change for the children involved or their families. Investing in child protection systems can help ensure that children living in complex circumstances receive the same quality of care and protection as those living with their families. Supporting communities to create positive environments where all children are free from violence, child labour and early marriage, can significantly boost efforts to prevent children from leaving home on their own volition or being placed in situations which violate their rights. Gender differences, particularly in terms of the disproportionate time spent by girls relative to boys in household chores globally is not just a child labour issue, but a larger issue of gender inequality, perpetuating underinvestment in girls’ education and reinforcing the unequal social value placed on girls’ and women’s rights.

While laws and data collection methodologies need to demarcate and define clear categories and boundaries for prohibiting or identifying child labour, policy strategies should embrace a more holistic vision that acknowledges the interconnections between children’s work and labour and other dimensions of rights and well-being. Fragmented strategies focused solely on one dimension (labour) to the exclusion of others (such as good health, nutrition, schooling, development and safety) will not be sufficient to push for sustainable change. All child-focused sectors should contribute to and measure their impact on ending child labour. Investing in child-centred research and listening to children’s life stories is also necessary to improve how their work and labour is understood, measured and addressed in a way that respects their rights. Improving financing for these efforts is critical both by governments but also the business sector, where accountability for child labour-free value chains should extend to financial investments in multisectoral approaches to ending child labour that cover the informal sector as well. High-income countries that benefit from lower cost of goods generated by the use of child labour, and multinational corporations that gain from tax benefits associated with operations in poorer countries should play a far stronger role in ensuring redistributive financing that can help countries with high levels of child labour to invest in appropriate policies and services.³

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