Food and Agriculture Organization
of the United Nations

Social protection and child labour

Eliminating child labour in agriculture with social protection

Child labour: cause and consequence of rural poverty and hunger

Limited access to markets, social and financial services, infrastructure and productive assets not only hinder the ability of the rural poor to build more efficient and productive livelihoods, they also increase their vulnerability to risks and threats and force them to cope in ways that can imperil not only their present wellbeing but also their future ability to withstand shocks. **Child labour** is a frequent phenomenon and is widespread in times of crisis. What's more, it is overwhelmingly concentrated in agriculture (ILO, 2017a).

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The International Labour Organization defines child labour by way of two Conventions (no. 138 and no. 182).[1] They refer to the tasks undertaken by children that are not appropriate for their age; work that is too heavy, that requires them to work too long hours, that deprives them of their childhood, interferes with their ability to benefit from compulsory school, and that is mentally, physically, socially or morally harmful.

Consequently, child labour represents a violation of children's basic rights, carrying with it detrimental long-term effects on their future lives and that can help trigger or perpetuate lifelong poverty by jeopardising their physical health and human capacities development.

[1] C138 - Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138) and C182 - Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182).

WHAT IS CHILD LABOUR?

Child labour refers to work that:

- engages children **below** the minimum age for employment;
- **interferes** with compulsory schooling;
- is **hazardous**; and/or
- is mentally, physically, socially or morally **dangerous** and **harmful** to children.

The **worst forms of child labour** are:

→ all forms of **slavery** (trafficking, debt, bondage, or forced labour);

→ **prostitution** or **pornography**;

→ **illicit activities** (trafficking, illegal logging or fishing, or drugs/opium production); and

→ **hazardous work**, which by its nature or circumstances, is likely to harm the health of children.

The **age of the child** matters:

- **below the ages 12/13**: children should not engage in agricultural work but can learn and attend to simple and safe tasks;
- **between ages 12/13 and 14/15**: children can engage in light work in agriculture, out of school hours and in safe conditions;
- **above 14/15**: children can work in agriculture full time but cannot undertake hazardous work or any other form of the Worst Forms of Child Labour.

Not all tasks undertaken by children in agriculture are considered child labour or, in other words, harmful to children. Some tasks in agriculture can, on the contrary, help children learn useful agricultural and life skills.

Adapted from the FAO Handbook for Monitoring and Evaluation of Child Labour in Agriculture.

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Child labour in agriculture is a complex phenomenon

Child labour is found predominantly in the agricultural sector, including fisheries and aquaculture, forestry, livestock, and crop farming. Currently, **more than 70 percent of child labour worldwide is found in agriculture, corresponding to 108 million children between 5 and 17 years of age** (ILO, 2017a).

While the total number of instances of child labour worldwide has declined, numbers keep increasing in the agricultural sector: there are ten million more child labourers in agriculture today than in 2012 (ILO, 2017a). **Furthermore, many children enter agricultural work at a very young age compared to other sectors (industry, services) – as early as 5 years old on some occasions, which increases the duration and extent of exposure to the hazards over the course of their lifetime.** Most child labourers in agriculture undertake unpaid family work; 69.1 percent is family work, in family farms or enterprises or as household chores (ILO, 2017a). **While the work undertaken by child labourers varies by agricultural sub-sectors** such as crop farming, livestock, forestry, fishing or aquaculture, agriculture

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CHILD LABOUR

Hundreds of millions of children around the world, including those in rural areas, face increasing threats to their safety and wellbeing – such as mistreatment, gender-based violence, exploitation, social exclusion and separation from caregivers – due to the measures taken to contain the spread of the pandemic.

COVID-19 and its direct and indirect economic impacts particularly affect rural populations, leading to an increase in hunger and poverty. To cope with this situation, rural households may likely resort to using child labour among other negative coping strategies, facilitated by the closure of schools in response to the spread of the virus.

In the immediate term, children may be requested to work to help protect their families' livelihoods on- and off the farm, as either contributing family workers or as wage workers. They can be exposed to hazardous or exploitative working activities, especially when child labour is used to compensate for acute labour shortages due to movement restrictions.

When already engaged in child labour prior to the crisis, children are now likely to face even worse working conditions and to be considered even more important for securing the food security and livelihood needs of their family and community. In the medium term, necessary extended closure of schools increases the risk of children dropping out of school and working instead, especially in the likely scenario of drawn-out and severe socio-economic effects of the pandemic.

FAO, Impact of COVID-19 on informal workers;
ALLIANCE CPHA, Child Labour and COVID-19

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is one of the three most dangerous sectors, along with mining and construction.[2] This means, in terms of work-related fatalities, non-fatal accidents and occupational diseases.

Despite the number of successful responses to eliminate child labour in many sectors, interventions that aim to reduce it in agriculture still generally fail. In fact, a multitude of drivers is pushing children into harmful work in agriculture.

[2] For more information on the typical tasks undertaken by children in different agricultural sub-sectors and related hazards they face, please consult the FAO Handbook for Monitoring and Evaluation on child labour in agriculture.

The large prevalence of child labour in agriculture can be explained by the nature of the sector, largely characterized by:

SOCIAL CHALLENGES: poverty, informality, limited access to basic services and social protection, and low labour law enforcement or coverage;

ECONOMIC THREATS: price fluctuations and limited access to markets, knowledge, inputs and financial services;

ENVIRONMENTAL LIMITATIONS: seasonality, limited access to natural resources (water, land, fishing grounds, and forests), climate variability.

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Moreover, family farmers are economically and functionally dependent on children's contribution to farm work:

ECONOMICALLY: children's work represents an essential contribution to the families' livelihoods and survival;

FUNCTIONALLY: labour force to conduct farm work is not always affordable or available, and it is often impossible for small-scale farmers to reach the production level required to survive without the labour undertaken by children.

Often, children are considered "helping hands" and the tasks they perform are associated with a traditional way of life or local culture, even though they may be required to fulfil the workload of an adult. In these cases, **rural families may perceive education as irrelevant** because it does not contribute to the development of children's knowledge and skills in agriculture.

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Social protection in rural areas

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) recognizes **social protection as a core ingredient for poverty reduction and resilience. Social protection plays a central role in promoting inclusive and sustainable rural development.**

Despite significant progress in the extension of social protection in many parts of the world, **only 45 percent of the global population are effectively covered by at least one social protection benefit. The remaining 55 percent - or 4 billion people – are left unprotected and the majority live in rural areas** (ILO, 2017b). This **lack of coverage** is particularly concerning, as poverty is widespread in rural areas, where families generally depend on farming, livestock, forestry, fishing or aquaculture for their livelihood.

There is a widespread consensus that **social protection provides a means for reducing child labour in agriculture and other sectors.** It can mitigate some of its main causes and contribute to transforming the world of agriculture in a positive and sustainable manner.

The role of social protection in eliminating child labour in agriculture

Social protection can contribute to the elimination of child labour in all the agricultural sub-sectors, when it is appropriately designed and implemented in coherence with the other relevant sectors. In fact, social protection interventions can address several economic and non-economic drivers of child labour among poor and vulnerable households in rural areas by:

PROMOTING ECONOMIC INCLUSION, thereby reducing the need for small family farmers to send their children to work;

INCREASING RESILIENCE IN CASE OF SHOCKS, INCLUDING IN HUMANITARIAN CRISIS thereby reducing the need for families to adopt negative coping strategies, including child labour;

IMPROVING CHILDREN'S ACCESS TO EDUCATION, thereby encouraging change in sociocultural norms associated with child labour and giving incentives and opportunities for building human capabilities in rural areas.

THE **WORK OF FAO** IN SOCIAL PROTECTION

Social protection refers to the **set of policies and programmes aimed at preventing or protecting all people against poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion throughout their lifecycles**, with a particular emphasis on vulnerable groups.

Social protection encompasses **THREE PILLARS**:

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE
Alleviating chronic poverty.

SOCIAL INSURANCE
Protecting the uninsured against adverse personal circumstances lifecycle hazards livelihood risks.

LABOUR MARKET REGULATIONS
Facilitating employment and promoting livelihoods, ensuring basic standards at work and extending rights.

Social protection has **FOUR ESSENTIAL FUNCTIONS**:

PROTECTIVE | **PREVENTIVE** | **PROMOTIVE** | **TRANSFORMATIVE**

and it is guided by **THREE CROSS-CUTTING PRINCIPLES**:

SOCIOECONOMIC INCLUSION | **GENDER EQUALITY** | **SUSTAINABILITY**

FAO's Social Protection Framework; FAO's Position Paper on Social Protection and resilience

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EXAMPLES FROM AROUND THE WORLD SHOW THAT **SOCIAL PROTECTION CAN REDUCE CHILD LABOUR**

SCHOOL FEEDING

Using **school feeding** to complement interventions aiming to reduce child labour is a relatively novel approach. Preliminary evidence shows the positive impact of school feeding programmes in reducing child labour, as illustrated by success stories in Bangladesh (Food Education Programme), Egypt (School Feeding Programme) and Zambia (Home-Grown School Feeding Programme, combined with the Conservation Agriculture Scale-up Project).

CASH TRANSFERS AND SCHOOL ENROLMENT

In Mexico, **conditional cash transfers** reduced child labour in agriculture by addressing income, agricultural or climate-related shocks, but only when conditions for school attendance such as the availability of school premises within a reasonable distance were met (De Janvry *et al.*, 2006) which highlights the importance of having a coherent approach with the education sector to eliminate child labour.

SOCIAL AND HEALTH INSURANCE

Evidence from South Africa (Edmonds *et al.*, 2006) and Brazil (de Carvalho Filho, 2012) shows that access to **pensions** reduces child labour, and that access to **health insurance** has been an excellent way to reduce it in Guatemala (Guarcello *et al.*, 2010) and Pakistan (Frölich *et al.*, 2012).

CASH TRANSFERS AND ECONOMIC INCLUSION

In Africa, **unconditional cash transfers** such as the Kenya's Cash Transfer for Orphans and Vulnerable Children and Ethiopia's Social Cash Transfers Pilot Programme in the Tigray region significantly reduced child labour and contributed to economic inclusion in agriculture.

Recommendations

Knowledge gaps

Evidence showing the **impacts of social protection on child labour** exists, but this relationship is still **insufficiently documented and monitored.** It is clear that social protection has positive impacts on the economic and non-economic drivers of child labour through its contribution to economic inclusion, resilience, human capabilities and gender empowerment, but its **direct** impacts on child labour are less well documented. There is a clear need to gather more evidence on the impacts of social protection on the elimination of child labour in agricultural sub-sectors, especially concerning **social assistance for persons with disabilities**, but also for **public works and unemployment benefits**, as evidence from Tanzania (Beegle *et al.*, 2003), Argentina (Rucci, 2003), Brazil (Neri *et al.*, 2005) and Togo (UCW, 2012) shows that **child labour is highly associated with unemployment.**

Towards an integrated approach

To enhance the impacts of social protection on economic inclusion and resilience in agriculture and its sub-sectors, **a coherent and integrated approach associated with agricultural policies and programmes is necessary.** Linkages between social protection and agricultural policies and programmes, including agricultural insurance and microcredit, must be promoted. The latter have shown positive results on the economic drivers of child labour. When social protection is combined with other interventions in an integrated manner, it can ensure that the **labour force to conduct farm work is more affordable or available**, thus sparing children from the need to provide their own work to help their families cope. Clearly, the impact of social protection on reducing child labour of children under 12-13 years old can be only effective if primary schools remain accessible in rural areas. There is no single "optimal" social protection intervention for eliminating child labour in rural areas. **Children's age and their vulnerabilities in specific agricultural sub-sectors**, as well as the **interactions between policies and programmes from various sectors** must be considered to achieve good results.

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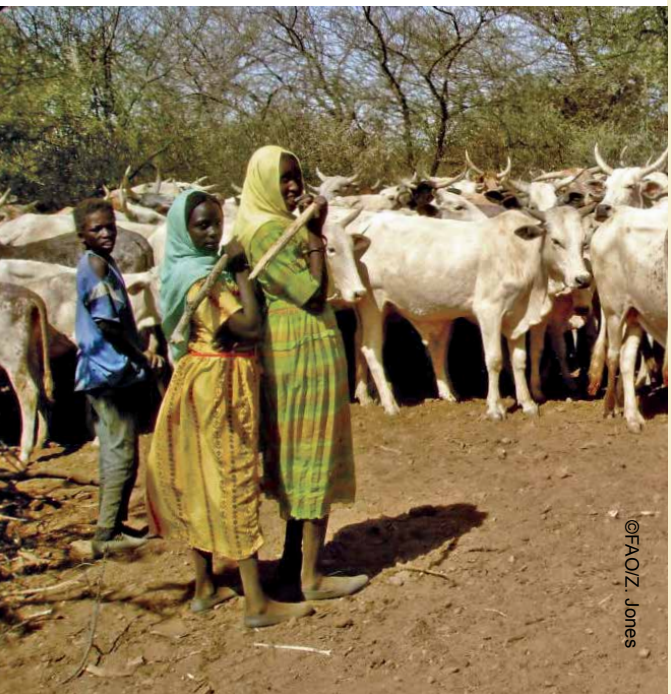
Avoiding adverse effects

Cash transfers, if not adequately designed or properly complemented with other interventions, can occasionally increase child labour, especially when social protection promotes an intensification of agricultural production (Rosati, 2016) without considering its effects on small farm-household's reliance on child labour. It is therefore essential to consider child labour at every step in the design and implementation of social protection interventions. An accurate and timely assessment provides the foundation for interventions to support children, especially in situations of protracted crisis and conflict, natural disasters and disruptions to food supply chains (FAO, 2017a).

FAO's work and vision on social protection for eliminating child labour

The prevalence of child labour remains high in agricultural sub-sectors. Because social protection coverage remains limited and cash payments and other types of support to subsistence farmers, forest communities, fisherfolk and artisanal fishers are often scarce or irregular, **FAO encourages the expansion of social protection to rural areas as an effective strategy for eliminating child labour.**



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To achieve this result in partnership with Governments other UN organizations in the coming years, FAO will focus its work on the following objectives:

- **Creating** and disseminating new evidence on the role of social protection for eliminating child labour in agriculture.
- **Developing** a toolkit for the design and implementaton of integrated social protection policies and programmes for eliminating child labour in agriculture in developmental and humanitarian settings.
- **Promoting** global and country-level dialogue on the negative impacts of child labour and the need to eliminate it from the world of agriculture and all of its sub-sectors.
- **Providing** technical assistance to countries for the planning, design and implementation of effective strategies for the elimination of child labour in agriculture.
- **Implementing** innovative social protection interventions for eliminating child labour in agriculture.
- **Evaluating** the impacts of these interventions to ensure that they inform the implementation of the most effective strategies for eliminating the plight of child labour in agriculture once and for all.

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