



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations



Eliminating child labour in fisheries and aquaculture – Promoting decent work and sustainable fish value chains



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- 1 Child labour in fisheries and aquaculture
- 2 Occupational safety and health
- 4 Taking action
- 5 What role can fisheries and aquaculture organizations play?
- 6 The role of FAO

Today, 152 million children worldwide are engaged in child labour. The vast majority (71 percent) of these boys and girls are in the agricultural sector, including fisheries and aquaculture.

Some 48 percent undertake **hazardous work**, likely to harm their health, safety or morals. Nearly half of these children are in the youngest age group (5–11 years), and 42 percent are girls.¹ Child labour occurs in all sectors of the informal economy, frequently as **unpaid family labour**. Situations of **conflict and disaster** can make children more vulnerable, as can **migration**. This global problem is a human rights abuse and perpetuates poverty, especially in rural areas.

Appropriate action is required to address this critical issue and generate decent employment opportunities that will sustain agriculture, increase food security and help families and communities transcend out of poverty.

The **sustainable management of fisheries and aquaculture development** is indispensable. Indeed, fish demand and consumption are rising – fish accounts for 17 percent of the global population's intake of animal protein² – and approximately one in ten people rely on fisheries and aquaculture for their livelihoods.³ Fish and fishery products are, globally, among the most internationally traded products in the food sector; they represent a great source of

protein and foreign currency, especially in developing countries.⁴ Unfortunately, in many cases, child labourers do not attend school and instead undertake hazardous work in order that consumer demands may be met.

Child labour harms children's well-being and hinders the sustainable growth of the subsector. Child labour often prevents children from attending or completing compulsory education and can involve hazardous work that is detrimental to their social and physical development. This can trap them in situations of poverty, perpetuating the cycle of poverty for families and fishing communities. Child labour can also contribute to overfishing and unsustainable resource use, as fishing continues even when it has become unprofitable for adults due to low fish stocks. Unsustainable fisheries management also undermines the long-term employment prospects of youth and adults in the sector. It is essential to **engage and empower stakeholders in the fisheries and aquaculture sector** (including producer and fish worker organizations, local authorities, governments, retailers, suppliers and other private sector actors) in order to **end child labour in fisheries and aquaculture** and provide **viable alternatives to children and their families**.



Child labour in fisheries and aquaculture

Child labour is widespread in the sector, as fishers, fish farmers, and fishing and aquaculture communities are often poor and vulnerable:

They have limited access to resources, credit and loans, productive services and markets, and lack social protection, institutional support and education. Therefore, families, fishers and communities tend to depend on the labour of children in order to sustain themselves.

Fisheries and aquaculture encompass a wide range of activities, from farming and harvesting fish through to processing, selling and distribution. **Children are engaged throughout the supply chain** and are also required to perform household chores. Not all activities undertaken by children are harmful: some can even be positive for their personal growth and development, in addition to helping preserve traditional knowledge on how to use fisheries resources.

The problem begins when children undertake activities that are hazardous or inappropriate for their age, or that jeopardize their education or development (see Box 3 on Legislation).

Frequently, **boys and girls undertake different tasks**. As a result, they are exposed to different health and safety hazards. They may also face different impacts on their education depending on the time requirements of the tasks and the time of day they are undertaken. Gender division varies according to the culture. It is also important to consider less visible work, such as that frequently undertaken by girls. Girls often face a triple work burden, because they have to: i) be productive (economic activity and household chores), ii) be reproductive (take care of the family and the household) and iii) undertake community work. Moreover, girls are often more vulnerable to slavery and human trafficking.

BOX 1: COMMON ACTIVITIES CHILDREN PERFORM

In fisheries, children engage in the following:

- Capturing of fish: all phases of a fishing trip (loading of equipment, rowing, motoring, bailing water out of boats or canoes, diving to disentangle nets or scare fish into nets, sorting and cleaning catch); shore collection of fish and shellfish; and illegal and harmful practices (e.g. fish poisoning or fishing with explosives).
- Building and maintenance: boat building and repairing; and net making and repairing.

In aquaculture, children engage in the following:

- Farm operations: feeding, fertilizing, cleaning and maintenance of aquaculture gear and holding units; guarding facilities (e.g. pond areas, cages, hatcheries); and harvesting fish.
- Collection of fish/shrimp fry or seeds.

In post-harvest activities, children engage in the following:

- Transport: loading and unloading fish for transport; and shovelling ice.
- Marketing.
- Fish processing: shrimp peeling, gutting, slicing, filleting, salting, smoking, drying, packing.

There is growing global concern that worst forms of child labour take place in fisheries and aquaculture, namely, forced labour and trafficking.

Reports and studies have revealed that children are being trafficked from their home villages, traded and sent to faraway destinations, unknown to their parents and where they are forced to work as fishers.⁵



Occupational safety and health

Work in **fisheries and aquaculture can be very dangerous** for all ages, and children are particularly susceptible. Children are still growing and have special characteristics in terms of physical, cognitive, behavioural and emotional growth that make them more vulnerable to hazardous work and expose them to additional risks. Frequently, they are also untrained and lack protective equipment. Improving occupational safety and health (OSH) in fisheries and aquaculture and reducing risks faced by young workers can help transform situations of child labour into decent employment opportunities for younger youth; **youth aged 15–17 are still considered children, but are legally entitled to work, provided the work is not hazardous.**

One of the initial steps in addressing OSH issues, and child labour in general, is to undertake a risk assessment, in order to understand what constitutes unacceptable and harmful activities for children.



Hierarchy of risk controls



BOX 2: UNDERTAKING AN OSH ASSESSMENT

To undertake an OSH risk assessment:

1. Identify work hazards and injuries or health effects (see Box 1 on Common hazards).
2. Evaluate the risks for each hazard and compare with applicable national OSH standards and hazardous work lists.
3. Introduce risk control measures (in the following order): eliminate the hazard, substitute the hazard, implement technology measures, provide information and training, apply medical/health control measures, and/or provide personal protective equipment.
4. Promote binding and voluntary measures helping to enforce application of OSH standards, and facilitate consultation and grievance resolution procedures with the participation of workers and employers.

To learn more about how to undertake a risk assessment, take lesson 1.3 of the FAO-ILO E-learning course [End Child Labour in Agriculture](#).

Risk assessments are very useful for developing **hazardous work lists**. These lists are required by all countries that have ratified the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182). Countries outline hazardous work activities and sectors that are prohibited for children in consultation with workers' and employers' representatives. It is important to consult fisheries and fish worker organizations.

Improving safety and health in fisheries and aquaculture is crucial in order to improve working conditions and reduce child labour. However, to combat child labour, additional action is needed beyond improvements in OSH.

TABLE 1: COMMON HAZARDS IN FISHERIES AND AQUACULTURE AND POTENTIAL HEALTH CONSEQUENCES*

Tasks	Hazards	Health consequences
Sorting, unloading and transporting catches	Sharp or heavy tools and blades	Joint and bone deformities, blistered hands and feet, lacerations
	Heavy loads	Back injury, muscle injury
	Large machines with moving parts	Amputation of fingers, toes and limbs
	Loud equipment	Noise-induced hearing loss
Transporting aquaculture feeds, fertilizers and chemicals	Carrying heavy loads	Musculoskeletal injury
Preparing food on fishing vessels	Stoves in poor repair	Burns
Diving: for various aquatic species; to free snagged nets; or to scare fish into nets, aquaculture cages and rafts	Boat propellers and fishing nets (entanglement)	Death from drowning, hypoxia, hypothermia, nausea, claustrophobia, emphysema, ear infections, hearing loss
	Rapid pressure change	Decompression illness, dizziness
	Attacks from aquatic animals, contact with dangerous or poisonous fish, animals and plants	Stings, bites, tail kicks, fish poisoning
Fishing and pulling fish onto boats	Heavy loads	Blistered hands and feet, back injury, muscle injury
	Sharp objects	Lacerations
	Marine animals	Fish poisoning, stings, bites
Heading out to sea and returning from sea	Lack of appropriate fishing ports, boat shelters and anchorages	Death or broken bones from surf crossing
Working on boats engaged in fishing operations	Capsizing under pressure from a large catch of fish, getting caught in nets, ropes running out while setting gear, trawling vessel gear snagging due to obstacles on sea floor	Death by drowning
Operating motors	Noise from motors	Hearing loss
Working on boats, aquaculture units and water in general	Capsizing, being swept overboard, grounding, getting lost, loss of engine power, unsuitable boats, bad weather, lack of radio communication, fire on board	Nausea, death by drowning
Spending long periods at sea on boats or fishing platforms	Confined and crowded conditions, and deep, cold, polluted water	Claustrophobia, skin irritations, allergies, bilharzias, guinea worm and similar parasitic infections, malaria, dengue, pesticide poisoning
	Slippery walkways, long hours standing or bending	Broken bones, head, muscle and other injuries, cuts, strains, fractures
	Exposure to extreme temperatures, harsh weather	Hypothermia, heat stress
	Lack of drinking water, long hours, working at night	Exhaustion, hunger, dehydration, heat stress
	Attack from aquatic animals	Stings, bites, tail kicks, fish poisoning
	Physical or emotional abuse, sexual abuse, intimidation, exposure to and pressure or enticement to engage in adult behaviours, harassment, violence	Sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS, alcoholism, drug use, smoking-related diseases, psychological harm
Fishing under time pressure or restrictions (e.g. when spatial-temporal closures limit the fishing time or area)	Venturing too far offshore, working long hours	Death by drowning, physical exhaustion, getting lost
	Taking on board loads of fish that are too heavy for the boat	Blistered hands and feet, lacerations, backache and other musculoskeletal strains and disorders, exhaustion
Cleaning and handling fish and shell fish: peeling, processing, smoking or selling	Deficient/unsafe equipment, machinery and infrastructure, including unsuitable electrical equipment operated in unsafe conditions	Electrocution, injury, death
	Sharp tools, long hours standing or bending	Lacerations, blistered hands and feet
	Smoke and chemicals	Respiratory problems, poisoning
Repairing nets and vessels	Sharp or heavy tools	Blistered hands and feet, back injury, muscle injury
Tending aquaculture farms: preparing and cleaning; maintaining aquaculture gear and holding units; feeding and fertilizing; collecting fish seed	Falling	Death by drowning
	Pathogens and parasites (nematodes, cestodes, trematodes, use of animal/human waste)	Fungal and viral infections
	Mosquitoes	Malaria, dengue
	Exposure to pollution and contamination (oil spills, pesticides, xenobiotics etc.), disease control compounds,	Pesticide poisoning
Guarding facilities	Being attacked	Injury, death
	Night work	Exhaustion, sleep deprivation

* FAO and ILO, 2013. Guidance on addressing child labour in fisheries and aquaculture <http://www.fao.org/docrep/018/i3318e/i3318e.pdf>



Taking action

Tackling child labour means taking action to withdraw children from child labour, including the provision of post-withdrawal support, ensuring that working children are protected from situations of child labour, and implementing measures to prevent children from entering child labour. It means addressing the **root causes** of the problem and ensuring **viable alternatives** for children and their families. It is important to address the demand for child labour; otherwise, children removed from child labour will be replaced by other children.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has a specific target (**SDG Target 8.7**) on ending child labour, including the trafficking of children for labour exploitation.

Global commitment to developing sustainable fisheries and aquaculture value chains also provides hope for these children and their families:

- The **Blue Growth** approach envisages sustainable uses of aquatic resources for economic growth, aquatic ecosystem health, and improved livelihoods and jobs. The first goal of the FAO Blue

Growth Initiative⁶ is to “increase decent work opportunities and foster healthy, resilient, gender- and age-inclusive communities”.

- The FAO Committee on Fisheries in 2014 endorsed the **Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries** in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication. This is the first internationally agreed instrument dedicated to the small-scale fisheries sector, and includes a chapter on social development, employment and decent work with explicit reference to child labour eradication.⁷

It is important to note that reducing reliance on child labour could create opportunities for youth employment. Also, if hazardous working conditions are addressed, it is possible to **turn child labour into decent employment for rural youth**, including those in the 15–17 age group. Additionally, as most child labour is a result of economic dependency, it is important to consider improving economic opportunities for youth and adults. This could be through, for example, improved value addition, diversification or creation of additional livelihood opportunities outside of current fishing activities.

In order to address child labour, it is important that national legislation, voluntary self-regulatory good practice instruments (e.g. industry codes of practice) and certification schemes are in line with **international conventions and regulations against child labour** (see Box 3 on Legislation).

BOX 3: LEGISLATION AND GUIDANCE AGAINST CHILD LABOUR

- **Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)** protects children's rights and abolishes child labour, affirming "the right of the child 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" (Article 32).
- **Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138)** permits light work to be undertaken between the ages of 12/13–14/15, and sets the minimum age of employment at 14 or 15 years.
- **Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182)** prohibits slavery, prostitution, illicit activities, and hazardous work to be undertaken by any child under the age of 18. Hazardous work is work that is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of the child.
- **Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 (No. 188)** stipulates age limits for work on board fishing vessels (Article 9) and **Work in Fishing Recommendation, 2005 (No. 199)** provides non-binding guidance on its implementation. The Convention is also implemented through flag State and port State inspections.
- **FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries** covers safety and health standards and adherence to international law on child labour.
- **FAO Technical Guidelines on Aquaculture Certification** guides the development, organization and implementation of credible aquaculture certification schemes.
- **FAO Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Reduction (SSF Guidelines)** urges states to eradicate forced labour and child labour and small-scale fisheries actors to recognize children's well-being and education and to respect the CRC.

To ensure implementation of legislation, regulation, guidance and, where appropriate, certification, **government action** must include the following:

- **Institutionalize measures against child labour** by creating mechanisms and procedures across



relevant ministries and through policy and action plans and frameworks that effectively address child labour in fisheries and aquaculture.

- **Establish adequate control of child labour** at borders and ports and carry out labour inspections.
- **Collaborate with other governments**, in particular where migration is involved or concerning work at sea.
- **Penalize** any action that promotes or facilitates the worst forms of child labour.
- **Provide suitable schooling**, free of charge, for fishing and fish-farming communities.
- **Provide economic incentives and social protection** to ease parents' reliance and

dependency on children's work and enable and incentivize them to send their children to school.

- **Strengthen the knowledge base** by collecting data on child labour in fisheries and aquaculture, health impacts and alternatives (disaggregated by age and gender) and developing monitoring and evaluation programmes.
- **Collaborate with the private sector** to improve decent work along the supply chains and to reduce child and forced labour.
- **Actively recognize freedom of association**, provide an enabling environment for self-organization, and encourage social dialogue between (fish) workers and employers.

Taking **action at community level** is also necessary. Child labour occurs in highly remote areas where law and regulation enforcement remains an enormous challenge for most countries. This is particularly the case at sea where cross jurisdictional issues further increase the difficulty of enforcement. Recommended actions at community level:

- **Ensure community engagement** and raise awareness of children, youth, parents, communities and community leaders and local institutions (schools, extension services, banks, retailers, media, religious groups etc.) on the concept of child labour and its consequences, and collaborate with organizations of fishers, fish farmers, fish workers and employers, and other sectoral institutions to raise awareness and change attitudes and behaviours towards child labour.
- **Build capacity** of local organizations of fishers, fish farmers, fish workers and employers, and other sectoral institutions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to raise awareness and change attitudes and behaviours towards child labour.
- **Establish protection networks** and community watch systems to identify, address or refer child labour cases to the appropriate authorities and organizations for further action.

What role can fisheries and aquaculture organizations play?

Organizations of fishers, fish farmers, fish workers and employers, and other sectoral institutions and the private sector play a central role in reducing and preventing child labour.

Recommended actions:

- **Strengthen actions and organization** to promote decent work.
- **Find practical solutions** to prevent and eliminate child labour, in active collaboration with governments and other institutions.
- **Conduct risk assessments** and identify hazardous child labour, in cooperation with governments and other partners.
- **Extend membership to self-employed fishers, fish farmers and fish workers** as a means to include those working in the informal economy.
- **Promote good practice standards** including child labour clauses in collective bargaining agreements and human rights due diligence.
- **Engage in awareness-raising** campaigns.
- **Adopt policies and codes** to eliminate child labour in the sector.



The role of FAO

FAO endeavours to achieve **a sustainable fisheries and aquaculture sector that accounts for economic, social and environmental matters**. FAO's role entails contributing to decent employment in fisheries and aquaculture for all, including youth, men and women, and **preventing child and forced labour**.

FAO is working towards **decent youth employment** in fisheries and aquaculture by addressing hazardous work in the sector, enhancing training for youth, linking youth to regional and global markets, and supporting business opportunities for youth.

FAO is addressing child labour in fisheries and aquaculture as follows:

- **Raising awareness** among fisheries and aquaculture stakeholders in major conferences and committees, and among fisher and fish farmer organizations and communities at grassroots level.
- **Expanding the knowledge base** on child labour in fisheries and aquaculture.
- **Building capacities** of agricultural stakeholders and developing capacity-building material adapted to diverse regions (see [FAO-ILO Guidance on addressing child labour in fisheries and aquaculture](#)).
- **Working with governments to implement international and national legislation** against child labour.
- **Collaborating with governments to develop national policies** against child labour in fisheries and aquaculture.
- **Supporting partners** in the implementation of the Small-Scale Fisheries Guidelines and major initiatives to improve the sustainability of fisheries and aquaculture, such as the [Blue Growth Initiative](#).
- **Supporting families and communities** in additional income-gaining activities and alternative livelihoods.

- **Promoting sustainable fishing practices** that address the root causes of child labour linked to poverty, food insecurity and the degradation and depletion of natural resources.

FAO is working to improve fish supply for food and nutrition, and to increase livelihood opportunities, in order to **reduce rural poverty and make fisheries and aquaculture more productive and sustainable** while contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,⁸ in particular SDG Targets 8.7, 14.b and 16.2. This includes addressing the root causes of rural poverty in fisheries-dependent communities by, *inter alia*, strengthening fisher and fish worker organizations, reducing food losses and waste across the fish and seafood value chain, and promoting multistakeholder dialogue.⁹

BOX 4: THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: FIGHTING CHILD LABOUR AND ABUSE, TRAFFICKING AND VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

Para. 8.

A world which invests in its children and in which every child grows up free from violence and exploitation.

Para 27.

We will eradicate forced labour and human trafficking and end child labour in all its forms.

SDG 8.7

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, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms.

SDG 14.b

Provide access for small-scale artisanal fishers to marine resources and markets.

SDG 16.2

End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children.



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Notes

- 1 ILO. 2017. *Global estimates of child labour*. http://www.alliance87.org/global_estimates_of_child_labour-results_and_trends_2012-2016.pdf
- 2 FAO. 2016. *The state of world fisheries and aquaculture*. <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i5798e.pdf>
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- 6 FAO. 2017. *Blue Growth Initiative – Partnering with countries to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals*. <http://www.fao.org/3/a-i7862e.pdf>
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- 8 United Nations. 2015. *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld/publication>
- 9 FAO. 2015. *Vigo Dialogue on benefits of decent employment in fisheries and aquaculture*. <http://www.fao.org/3/i7091en/i7091EN.pdf>



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Worldwide, the majority of child labour is concentrated in the agricultural sector, including fisheries and aquaculture. This brief provides an overview of children's engagement in child labour in fisheries and aquaculture, the risks they are exposed to and what can be done to address the problem, with a particular focus on the role of fisheries stakeholders.

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CA0177EN/1/06.18

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