



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

Strengthening
efforts of agricultural
stakeholders to address
child labour
in agriculture
in the Near East and
North Africa region



REGIONAL REPORT





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FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION OF THE UNITED NATIONS
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1. Introduction

The General Assembly of the United Nations declared 2021 the International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour in light of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8, target 7 (ILO, 2019a), which is to eliminate child labour in all its forms by 2025.

What is child labour?

Child labour refers to work that is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children, and interferes with their schooling. It engages children below the minimum age for employment.

The age of the child matters:

- ▶ Under 12/13 years of age: children should not engage in agricultural work but can learn and attend to simple and safe tasks.
- ▶ Between 12/13 and 14/15 years of age: children can engage in light work in agriculture, out of school hours and in strict conditions.
- ▶ Above 14/15 years of age: children can work in agriculture full time but cannot undertake hazardous work or any other form of the worst forms of child labour (slavery or forced labour, prostitution or pornography, illicit activities).

Source: ILO Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138) and ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182).

This includes the ratification and implementation of the related International Labour Organization (ILO) labour standards and compliance with national laws and practices so as to encourage legislative and practical actions to eradicate child labour worldwide.

In the Near East and North Africa (NENA) region, the situation of child labour has deteriorated over the past ten years, during which time the area has experienced high levels of armed conflict leading to huge population relocation – both within and between countries. Child labour in agriculture is associated mostly with small-scale farming, where inexpensive intense labour is in great demand, particularly on family farms that rely on contributions of children.

In the Near East and North Africa (NENA) region, the situation of child labour has undoubtedly deteriorated in the past 10 years.

The issue in numbers

160 million boys and girls are trapped in child labour in 2020

70% of whom were working in agriculture

260 million children were out of school in 2019

10% of world's population were undernourished in 2020



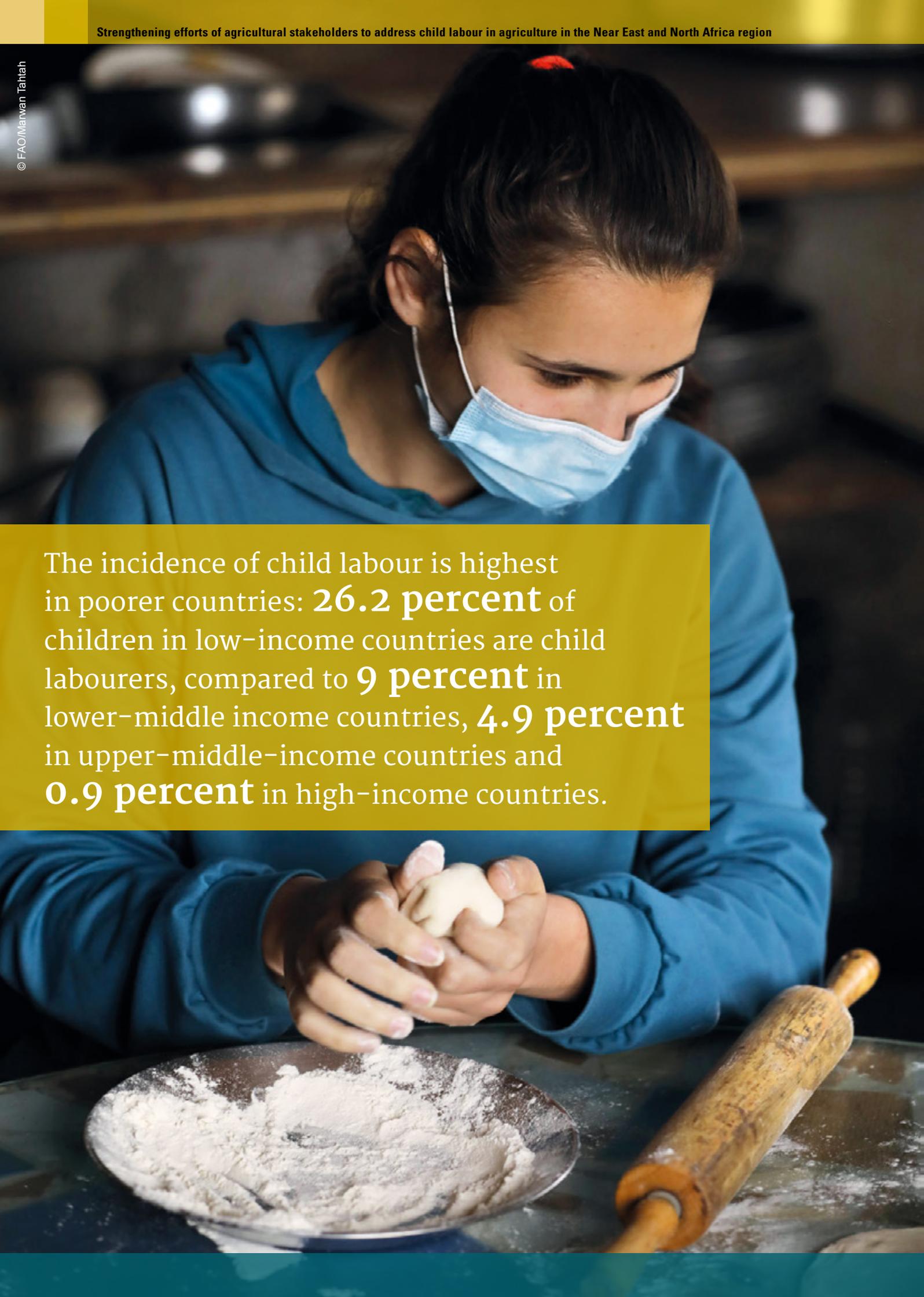


The majority of children in the agricultural sector are unpaid family workers. Conflict and instability have compounded the situation and weakened government capacities to implement laws to safeguard children from hazardous work and exposure to pesticides in the NENA region (UNICEF, 2007). Although there are various laws in the region that protect children (from labour and other types of violence), many are outdated and/or face significant gaps (Defence for Children International, 2015). In addition, NENA countries tend to have low levels of awareness and information on the impacts of hazardous child work, including exposure to pesticides, harmful insects and other detrimental activities and risks.

Food insecurity and malnutrition are persistent challenges. The structural dependence of these countries on food imports makes the region highly vulnerable

to shocks, increasing the inability of entire communities to feed themselves. As a result, hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition are widespread and require comprehensive and urgent intervention. The severe health and social consequences of early employment and poor working conditions in the NENA region are likely to have a detrimental impact on agricultural productivity and development and on the well-being of children (FAO, 2020a).

Child labour has long-term consequences for individuals and households. Young men and women who were exposed to child labour, especially its worst forms, have less access to the skills and qualifications needed for higher paying jobs and they may suffer from permanent disability, ill health and psychological damage. These circumstances can in turn perpetuate intergenerational cycles of poverty.



The incidence of child labour is highest in poorer countries: **26.2 percent** of children in low-income countries are child labourers, compared to **9 percent** in lower-middle income countries, **4.9 percent** in upper-middle-income countries and **0.9 percent** in high-income countries.

2. Challenges in agriculture

Child labour has long been a feature of economic life in the NENA region, particularly in agriculture. Children have worked irrespective of conflict, political unrest or economic shocks, and over the past ten years the situation has worsened (FAO and ILO, 2019).

Children have been increasingly drawn into the worst forms of child labour, especially hazardous work found in agriculture. According to Arab League officials, the issue of child labour in the Arab world is becoming a disturbing trend.

Child labour monitors warn that irregular data leave policymakers in the region struggling against this problem, as young people are exposed to toxic agricultural chemicals on farms and life-threatening machinery in factories and workshops (Arab Trade Union Confederation, 2016).

Research on child labour in Lebanon found that Syrian child workers dominate the agriculture sector in Central Bekaa, where they are engaged in such activities as bagging vegetables, picking up bricks and cleaning pesticide-contaminated lands (AUB and Lebanon, Ministry of Labour, 2019).

2.1 Economic drivers: poverty and inequality

Poverty is a key cause of child labour in agriculture (ILO, undated [a]). In many rural communities, children play an essential role in household food security and each year conflict and disaster push children into work that is unsuitable for their age and is therefore likely to harm their physical and mental development and deprive them of the opportunity to learn. Child labour is driven by economic and cultural pressures that weigh heavily on the poorest and least educated families. The incidence of child labour is highest in poorer countries: 26.2 percent of children in low-income countries are child labourers, compared to 9 percent in lower-middle-income countries, 4.9 percent in upper-middle-income countries and 0.9 percent in high-income countries.

In countries such as Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Yemen, studies have found that various dimensions of poverty influence the incidence of child labour, including low household income. Not only do children provide cheap sources of labour on family farms, especially during times of financial hardship, but their labour is also used to supplement household income, as paid agricultural workers carrying out tasks like picking and weeding, as well as hazardous tasks

like pesticide application. It is important to note that, while poverty is a common driver of child labour, in turn child labour also perpetuates intergenerational cycles of poverty, making it difficult for individuals to break out of poverty at later life stages.

According to previous ILO Global Estimates, the poorest Arab countries have the greatest rates of child labour (as cited in FAO and ILO, 2019). Children's employment participation varies greatly across the Arab world, with the two poorest nations (Sudan and Yemen) having the highest rates of child employment (up to 19.2 percent and 34.8 percent, respectively). Jordan has the lowest rates (1 percent for children aged 5 to 14 years and 5.6 percent for those aged 15 to 17 years) (FAO and ILO, 2019).

2.2 Labour market and workforce in agriculture

Agriculture is an underregulated sector. Workplaces are distant, difficult to access and fragmented, and labour inspection capacity is low in rural areas, making legislation more difficult to enforce. There is a shortage of decent work opportunities for youth and adults in rural areas. Working children represent a plentiful source of cheap, informal labour that can help to fill market demand. Low levels of productivity, poor infrastructure and inadequate technology make returns

It is important to distinguish between light duties that do no harm to the child and child labour.

Age appropriate tasks that are of lower risk and do not interfere with a child's schooling and leisure time can be a normal part of growing up in a rural environment.

Source: AUB and Lebanon, Ministry of Labour, 2019.

from agriculture low, which renders hiring adult labour or investments in technology unviable. In these contexts where inadequate technology and limited access to markets reduce profitability, child labour helps to meet production quotas and income targets. It can also help to offset the migration of youth away from rural areas or away from jobs in agriculture due to perceived decent work deficits. Landless poor, refugees and migrants are vulnerable, often lacking access to social protection (e.g. insurance, workers' compensation, health services and minimum income guarantees). Vulnerable children and their families engage in child labour as a means for coping with financial stress (FAO and ILO, 2017).

2.3 Social and gender norms

Many children enter agricultural work at a young age and continue to spend their lives in poor rural areas within the culture and traditions of a “family farm”. They provide their parents with helping hands, thus increasing the duration and extent of exposure to the hazards of such work during their lifetime (FAO and ILO, 2017). Fetching water and collecting wood are common tasks in agriculture but they are classified as domestic chores in statistical questionnaires (De Lange, 2009). This phenomenon is closely linked to the level of educational attainment of the parents or household heads. To some extent, children’s involvement in agricultural work can be positive, giving them skills and facilitating an intergenerational transfer of knowledge; however, it is important for rural households to be able to differentiate between engagement that is beneficial and that which is detrimental to a child’s development (ILO, 2019b).

Gender roles, age and cultural norms determine and influence the type of work performed by girls and boys, the number of hours worked and who receives an education.

Despite the progress achieved during the past decades in the NENA region, girls are often still disadvantaged in their access to education, especially in rural areas. In many cases, when domestic chores are taken into account, girls work more hours than boys, leaving less time for school (ILO, undated [a]). While boys are more likely to undertake activities in agriculture and industry, girls outnumber boys in services. Both boys and girls work in fields and are often isolated for long hours, facing the risk of violence and abuse. For example, in farming, boys are often responsible for operating machinery, using sharp tools, spraying chemicals, and they are more often exposed to cuts, burns, pesticide poisonings and other adverse health impacts. Girls are often responsible for carrying water and collecting and carrying wood, thus risking musculoskeletal injuries, fatigue and sexual abuse (ILO, undated [b]). These risks are increased in refugee communities where poverty is higher, as government oversight is weaker and migrant girls are left more vulnerable.

In addition, social norms and cultural attitudes give household responsibilities to adolescent girls, who, as a result, are not permitted to pursue an education or various forms of employment, thus being deprived of their fundamental rights (ILO, 2019b). In Morocco, cultural norms are such that girls are more involved in agricultural work, since boys work in trade and other sectors (Schomp, 2007). In Egypt, work in agriculture is more prevalent among young girls, with 77 percent of employed girls working in agriculture, compared with 60 percent of boys (ILO and CAPMAS, 2012). This typically has to do with cultural norms influencing what are considered appropriate gender roles.

2.4 Child labour in agriculture in crisis and humanitarian contexts

Humanitarian crises negatively affect child labour (The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2020). Studies report that over half of Arab countries are currently affected by conflicts or, as neighbouring countries, face high inflows of refugees and internally displaced persons (ILO, 2019b). The region is home to nearly 25 million children in need, including refugees and those who are internally displaced. The majority of these children were uprooted due to armed conflicts and wars in Iraq, Libya, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, Yemen and the State of Palestine (UNICEF, 2020).

When looking at the Syrian context alone, children are one of the vulnerable groups most affected by the crisis, including being victims of explosive hazards. They are increasingly out of school, separated from their parents or living with an elderly or disabled caregiver. With the increase in the population living in extreme poverty, child labour is being used as a coping mechanism (FAO and ILO, 2019). Accordingly, Syrian displaced children are working in agriculture as a result of the crisis that increased child labour. The situation is similar for Syrian and Palestinian refugees inside Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and the Sudan; however, there is a lack of documented data (FAO, 2017a). In Jordan, due to new agricultural investments and an increase in the size of irrigated agricultural land, farming production has grown and attracted the

highest concentration of Syrian refugee workers, with approximately 32 percent of all Syrian refugees in Jordan working in agriculture, most of whom are children (ILO, 2014).

Another growing concern is the unprecedented economic impact of the corona virus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, together with school closures and inadequate government assistance, which has also pushed children into exploitative and dangerous child labour. Unless supported by national social protection systems and programmes, families will have no choice but to resort to negative coping mechanisms such as child labour, early marriage and school drop-out only to survive (UNICEF, 2020).

2.5 Effects of climate change and environmental degradation on child labour in agriculture

The NENA region is among the world's most vulnerable to climate change, which acts as a threat-multiplier to political instability, poverty and unemployment (Sieghart, Betre and Mizener, 2018). Children are the largest group of people affected by climate change and the most vulnerable to its harmful effects. Children who survive disasters may be deprived of schooling and may face an increased incidence of disease and disruptions in access to clean water and adequate sanitation.

In addition to being impacted by natural disasters, children suffer more than any other group from the adverse health consequences of rising temperatures related to global warming, accounting for up to 80 percent of all illnesses, injuries and deaths attributable to climate change globally (UNICEF Office of Research, 2014). As most agricultural work is performed outdoors, children are exposed to harsh weather conditions that affect their health, such as dehydration, heat cramps, heat exhaustion, heat stroke and skin cancer (FAO and ILO, 2017).

Studies have also shown that farmers often resort to the overuse of pesticides and fertilizers as a coping strategy to increase yields in the face of climate change and other factors threatening productivity. This has contributed to further biodiversity loss and soil degradation and, importantly, increased the risk of exposure to hazardous chemicals, especially among children (Myers, 2017). Lastly, in countries where girls and boys are responsible for fetching fuelwood or water, climate change and environmental degradation could mean longer distances in harsher conditions.



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Vulnerable children and their families engage in child labour as a **means for coping with financial stress.**

(FAO and ILO, 2017)

In light of these risks, there is a strong need to gather more quantitative evidence on the impact of climate change on child labour in the NENA region.

2.6 Child labour and hazardous work in agricultural subsectors in the region

Agriculture is crucial to economic growth: in 2018, it accounted for 4 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP) and in some developing countries it can account for more than 25 percent of GDP (World Bank, 2020). Agriculture in the NENA region contributes approximately 13 percent of the region's GDP on average. High strategic importance is attached to the rural sector in the region, given food insecurity and the high dependence on imported food, the potential of the sector to provide employment opportunities and the role of the sector in water security – all of which contribute to the economic and political importance of agriculture (FAO and IFPRI, 2018).

The agricultural sector can be divided into four main subsectors, namely crop farming, fisheries and aquaculture, livestock and forestry. Child labour, including in hazardous work, is common in all agricultural subsectors, although with different characteristics.





“Children are more vulnerable to climate change than adults. It is estimated that extreme weather events – which are becoming more frequent and more intense as a consequence of climate change – are likely to affect 175 million children a year.”

Source: UNICEF Office of Research, 2014.

Crop farming

- ▶ **Family farming:** Child labour in the context of farming, especially on family farms, is a result of such factors as migration, household poverty, a lack of technology, limited access to schools, minimal regulations and enforcement, and rooted attitudes about the roles of children in rural areas. The majority of child labour in the region occurs in the crop farming subsector.

On plantations, agricultural workers are encouraged to use children to increase output, and hence income and related health hazards can vary widely depending on the specific farming environment. Tasks that present many hazards may include exposure to sharp tools and dangerous machinery, the risk of injuries from other animals, exposure to extreme environmental conditions, and exposure to inorganic fertilizers and pesticides (ILO, undated [c]).

- ▶ **Industrial farming:** In Egypt, child labour is common in the cotton industry. Children as young as 7 years of age are being recruited for work by agricultural cooperatives. According to unofficial estimates, over 1 million children between 7 and 12 years of age were employed to cultivate, harvest and process cotton. Children are exposed to hazardous pesticides, physical abuse and up to 11 hours of work without rest, for little or no pay. Toxic pesticides sprayed on cotton crops can affect children, in serious cases causing paralysis and death (Human Rights Watch, 2001).



Fisheries and aquaculture

Child labour is widespread in this subsector, as fishers, fish farmers, and fishing and aquaculture communities are often poor and vulnerable with limited access to resources, social protection and education. Work in fisheries and aquaculture can be dangerous for all ages, and children are susceptible to hazardous work (FAO, 2018). Children engaged in child labour fish at sea, work for long hours, face bad weather, extreme temperatures and conditions, and spend long periods of time far away from home, making it difficult for children to enrol in and regularly attend school. Because data on fishing

communities are limited, child labour in this subsector tends to go undocumented. Although most workers in the fishery sector are men and boys, there are still few studies addressing the child labour situation and its gender dimensions.

A notable exception is Tunisia, where the national child labour survey of 2017 noted that the north-west region – consisting of the governorates of Béja, Jendouba, Kef and Siliana – had the highest incidence of child labour, with 48.8 percent of child labour in these governorates taking place in fisheries.



Livestock

Livestock production contributes a large amount of the global value of agricultural output and supports livelihoods. It is expanding rapidly, and the problem of child labour in this subsector is often ignored. Among certain cultural groups, cattle herding is almost entirely done by children and is the most widespread and culturally accepted form of children's work in many regions. Children in rural communities may spend many months as shepherds and herders in remote, isolated areas tending animals or participating in heavy work, such as leading livestock long

distances to water sources, thus impeding normal school enrolment and attendance. Depending on the conditions, herding, shepherding and handling livestock may be considered as hazardous work. Children rarely wear protective shoes or boots, which increases their risk for additional injuries and illnesses such as cuts, wounds, bruises, thorn injuries, skin disorders and infections. Diseases can be contracted through routine contact with animals and insects. In addition, livestock dust can penetrate deep into the lungs causing health problems (ILO, undated [d]).



Forestry

Forestry production includes the harvesting of wood and non-timber forest products, such as wild berries, bananas, seeds and nuts, oil palm, cocoa beans, mushrooms, honey, vines, oils, coconuts, cones, moss and rubber. Child labour is found in many forestry workplaces, which are often located in remote areas. Isolation and migration increase vulnerability to exploitation in forestry and can also make it difficult for children to enrol in and attend schools (ILO, undated [e]).

The share of forestry in agriculture production in the NENA region is low, and data on the extent and prevalence of child labour in this subsector are scarce, pointing to the need for further research and information on the extent and characteristics of child labour in the forestry subsector across the region.



3. Opportunities and the way forward

Agricultural stakeholders, such as ministries of agriculture, the private sector, and employers' and producers' organizations, play a critical role in the elimination of child labour in agriculture. Governments are responsible for ensuring that policies and programmes to eradicate child labour and protect children are in place and aligned. Ministries of agriculture may incorporate child labour prevention into their policies to develop more synergies with both labour and social policies. Producers' organizations benefit from having a strong voice when it comes to public policy and legislation. They can ensure that ending child labour in agriculture is reflected in national, sectoral, and district policies and programmes (FAO, 2017b).

In September 2021, FAO will hold a regional conference on child labour in agriculture, in the context of the International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour. The regional conference is organized in the lead-up to the Global Solutions Forum on acting together to end child labour in agriculture, organized by FAO in close collaboration with ILO and to be held on 2 and 3 November 2021. Below are selected actions to assist in the elimination of child labour in agriculture, including hazardous work, to be considered during the regional conference.





Actions at the regional level

- ▶ **Regional commitments:** Governments and public authorities have the primary responsibility for policy action and legislation, including the development of national action plans and recommended policy approaches and regional commitments in line with the ILO Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138) and the ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182) (ILO and UNICEF, 2021). Progress requires translating these commitments into national laws that are then used as a trigger for action (ILO and UNICEF, 2021). The key guiding question is: How can we give more attention to the agricultural sector in these commitments and in policy work?
- ▶ **Climate change:** Vulnerable groups will be the hardest hit by climate change; however, the impacts on child labourers, particularly in agriculture, are less understood. The key guiding question is: How can the resilience of rural communities be built in a way that ensures rural households affected by climate change do not resort to child labour?
- ▶ **Evidence generation and dissemination:** Additional attention and resources should be given to data collection and public research on child labour in agriculture. There should be free access to all data, which should be disseminated for public awareness and used to inform policies and action. The key guiding questions are: How can these data gaps be addressed and what is the role of national child labour surveys in this context?



Actions at the national level

- ▶ **Role of agricultural stakeholders:** Agricultural stakeholders have a crucial role to play in ending child labour by helping to raise awareness on what constitutes child labour and its consequences, implementing projects and programmes that protect children in rural areas, and advocating for policies and legislative frameworks that safeguard the rights of children. The key guiding question is: How can we strengthen the role of diverse agricultural stakeholders in preventing and reducing child labour in agriculture?
- ▶ **Social protection:** Social protection plays a central role in promoting inclusive and sustainable rural development through poverty reduction and resilience, protecting uninsured children against adverse personal circumstances, life-cycle hazards, livelihood risks, and facilitating employment and promoting livelihoods, ensuring basic standards at work and extending rights (FAO, 2020b). The key guiding question is: What are the gaps in social protection in rural areas, and how can these be filled to contribute to the elimination of child labour in agriculture?

Actions at the community level

- ▶ **Education and awareness-raising:** It is essential that communities be educated on the gender dimensions of child labour and on its detrimental effects on development and youth empowerment. Withdrawing children from hazardous work and providing children of legal working age with employment opportunities is important. The key guiding question is: What are the most effective ways to strengthen awareness and mobilize action at the community level?
- ▶ **Crisis and conflict:** In the absence of functioning institutional and legal structures, children, and especially child refugees, are even more vulnerable to child labour and other forms of abuse. Girls in particular are more vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Protecting children in crises and conflicts requires even greater concerted and coordinated efforts. The key guiding question is: How can agricultural programmes in humanitarian contexts contribute to the elimination of child labour in agriculture?



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