

Economic and Social Council

Preventing Child Labor in the Agricultural Sector



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Issue: Preventing child labour in the agriculture sector

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Introduction

Child labour in the agricultural sector is a pervasive issue that affects millions of children worldwide to this day. The problem is rooted in poverty, lack of access to education, and social and economic inequalities. The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that agriculture is the sector with the highest number of child labourers, with many children working in hazardous conditions. There have been multiple attempts to solve this issue and while the numbers of child labourers have declined, it is still a pressing question to all countries. This report aims to provide an overview of the issue, its causes, and its impact, as well as past attempts to address it and workable solutions.

Definition of Key Terms

- **Child labour:**
Work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential, and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development.
- **Child:**
Defined by International Law as a person under the age of eighteen.
- **Hazardous work:**
Work that is likely to harm the health, safety, or morals of children. In the agricultural sector, this can include the use of heavy machinery, exposure to pesticides, and carrying heavy loads.
- **Agricultural sector:**
The sector that includes farming, livestock, and forestry.
- **Worst Forms of Child Labor:**
Defined by the ILO Convention No. 182 as work that includes hazardous work, forced or bonded labour. Agriculture is included if it exposes children to dangerous conditions.

General Overview

Child labour in agriculture is a significant problem worldwide. According to the ILO, there are approximately 138 million child labourers between the ages of 5 to 17. There are fifty-nine million girls and seventy-eight million boys who are child labourers, which makes up almost 8% of all children globally. Fifty-four millions of those children work in hazardous circumstances. Out of all the child labourers, approximately 71% work in the agricultural sector. Hereby, most child labourers are in Sub-Saharan Africa. The region with the second largest number of child labourers is Latin America and the Caribbean, closely followed by Asia and the Pacific's.

The products with the most child labour include sugar cane, cotton, coffee, tobacco and cattle. Many children work long hours in hazardous conditions, exposing them to pesticides, heavy machinery, and other risks. The consequences of child labour in agriculture can be severe, including injuries, illnesses, and even death. In the United States of America in 2018 there were an estimated 115 deaths of children working in the agricultural sector and 100.000 children experienced non-fatal injuries through agricultural work. The primary causes of fatal injuries (in the United States) are the work with machinery, including tractors, which caused about 25% of child labourer deaths and drowning which caused round 16% of the deaths.

The causes of child labour in agriculture are complex and multifaceted. Poverty and lack of access to education are major contributing factors. In many rural areas, children are forced to work to support their families' livelihoods. Additionally, the agricultural sector often relies on cheap labour, which can lead to the exploitation of children. Since the 20th century, there have been multiple

attempts to abolish child labour. Hereby the region of Asia and the Pacific made the greatest progress, as they managed to halve the percentage of child labourers since 2008.

Major Parties Involved

- **International Labor Organization (ILO):**

The ILO is a specialized agency of the United Nations that aims to promote social and economic development through better working conditions.

- **United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF):**

UNICEF is a global organization that works to improve the lives of children and their families.

- **International Partnership for Cooperation on Child Labor in Agriculture (IPCCLA):**

The IPCCLA is a partnership of organizations that aim to eliminate child labour in agriculture through international cooperation.

- **Sub-Saharan Africa:**

The Sub-Saharan Africa region is the region with the most child labourers, counting 86.6 million child labourers in 2024, with a prevalence of 22%. The Sub-Saharan Africa region includes all countries below the Sahara and therefore counts over forty countries. The countries in this region with the highest numbers of child labour are South Sudan, Ethiopia and Burkina Faso.

- **Asia and the Pacific's**

Asia and the Pacific's are the region with the second highest number of child labourers, counting 27.7 million child labourers in 2024. This region includes all of Asia and countries in the Pacific such as Australia and New Zealand. In this region the countries with the most child labour are India, Bangladesh and the Philippines.

- **Latin America and the Caribbean**

Latin America and the Caribbean are the region with the third highest number of child labourers, counting 7.3 million child labourers in 2024. This region includes South America, Mexico and the Caribbean Islands. Here the countries with the most child labour are Brazil, Mexico and Peru.

Timeline of Events

- 1919: The International Labor Organisation (ILO) is founded by the UN and aims at the abolition of child labour.
- 1959: The UN adopts the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, which outlines ten principles for the child's well-being.
- 1973: The ILO adopts Convention No. 138, which establishes fifteen as the minimum age for work in general and eighteen as the minimum age for hazardous work.
- 1989: The UN General Assembly adopts the Convention of the Rights of the Child (Resolution 44/25), which implements the basic rights all children have.
- 1992: The ILO launches the International Program on the Elimination of Child Labor (IPEC).
- 1999: The ILO adopts Convention No. 182, which defines the worst forms of child labour.
- 2001: The Harkin-Engel Protocol is signed by chocolate and cocoa industry representatives and aims to eliminate the worst forms of child labour in the growing and processing of cocoa beans, wherever cocoa is grown.
- 2002: The ILO establishes an annual Awareness Day for Child Labor on the twelve June.
- 2007: The International Partnership for Cooperation against Child Labor in the Agricultural Sector (IPCCLA) is launched by the ILO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and the International Union of Food (IUF).
- 2015: The United Nations adopts the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including Goal 8.7, which aims to eradicate all kinds of Child labour by 2025.
- 2015: The ILO introduces the International Program on the elimination of Child Labor and Forced Labor (IPEC+), which merged the efforts of IPEC and the Special Action Program to Combat Forced Labor (SAP/FL).
- 2019: The UN General Assembly adopts Resolution 73/327, which declares 2021 as International Year for the Elimination of Child Labor and calls all Member States to raise awareness and share their best practices to eliminate child labour in 2021.
- 2020: The ILO reports that child labour has increased for the first time in 20 years, with 152 million children aged 5-17 engaged in child labour.

Past Attempts to Solve the Issue

There have been multiple attempts to solve the issue of child labour in the agricultural sector, such as the foundation of International Labor Organisation (ILO), the International Program on the Elimination of Child Labor (IPEC) and the International Partnership for Cooperation on Child Labor in Agriculture (IPCCLA), which promote action and cooperation. In 1989, the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention of the Rights of the Child, which implements basic rights for every child and sets a first cornerstone towards the elimination of child labour. ILO set a minimum age for labour and hazardous labour and defined the worst forms of child labour as well as required action to go against those kinds of child labour. Additionally, ILO has been providing technical cooperation to countries on all continents since 1950, aiming to make the Decent Work Agenda implemented on national levels. However, ILO has a weak enforcement power, so while many countries accept funding and training, they fail to implement reform once projects end.

The United Nations adopted the Sustainable Development Goals, including Goal 8.7, which originally aimed to eradicate all kinds of Child Labor. Seeing that child labour often occurs because the families cannot survive without the children working; to eradicate child labour, it would be necessary to address rural poverty. Therefor the Sustainable Development Goal 8.7 failed to meet its deadline of eradication child labour until 2025.

There have been multiple projects to raise awareness, such as declaring 2021 as the International Year for the Elimination of Child Labor and the establishment of an International Child Labor Awareness Day, which helped to educate many people about the pressing issue and while raising awareness is a big contribution to solving the problem, it does not provide alternatives for children and families.

Despite these efforts, child labour in agriculture remains a significant problem to this day.

Possible Solutions

Three solution approaches to address child labour in agriculture are:

1. Expanding Access to Quality Education in Rural and Agricultural Areas

One approach to preventing child labour in the agricultural sector is to strengthen access to quality education in rural communities. Governments, with support from international organizations, can invest in building and improving schools in agricultural regions, reducing travel distances for children. In addition, adapting school schedules to agricultural seasons and providing incentives such as school meal programs or transportation support may help address economic and logistical barriers that often prevent children from attending school. By making education more accessible and compatible with rural livelihoods, this approach reduces the need for children to engage in agricultural labour and gives them the opportunity to build a more stable future for themselves and their families.

2. Addressing the Economic Root Causes Through Social Protection and Adult Employment

Another solution is to address the economic factors that cause child labour in agriculture by improving income security for families. This may include expanding social protection systems such as cash transfers, crop insurance, or income support for smallholder farmers, as well as promoting decent work opportunities for adults in the agricultural sector. When households have stable and sufficient income sources, they become less reliant on child labour. This approach focuses on prevention by reducing poverty-related pressures rather than penalizing families, while also supporting rural development and food security.

3. Strengthening Regulation and Monitoring of Hazardous Child Labor in Agriculture

A third approach involves strengthening national frameworks to prevent children from engaging in hazardous agricultural work. Hazardous tasks are clearly defined by international labour standards and Governments can improve monitoring mechanisms through trained labour inspectors and local authorities. Cooperation with farmers' organizations and community leaders can further raise awareness of child protection standards. By focusing on the elimination of the most dangerous forms of child labour, this approach protects children's health and safety while allowing for appropriate differentiations between light work and harmful labour.

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