

Position Paper: Ending Child Labor

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Every child has the right to learn, play, develop and live free from economic exploitation and hazardous work.

Overview

Child labor comprises work that children are too young to perform and/or work that, by its nature or circumstances, is likely to harm their health, safety and development. It includes work that interferes with a child's education, deprives them of childhood, or is harmful to their physical, mental or social development.

International standards distinguish hazardous and exploitative child labor from age-appropriate, permitted work that does not harm children or interfere with their rights. The applicable minimum age, conditions for light work and prohibition of hazardous work are established under national law and international labor standards.

ChildFund International believes no child should have to trade education, safety, health or development for work. Ending child labour requires more than removing children from worksites. It means addressing the root causes of hazardous and exploitative child labor, including poverty, exclusion, weak protection systems and exploitative business practices that place children at risk. Governments, employers, workers' organizations, civil society and communities must work together to prevent exploitation, identify children at risk or directly affected, provide safe pathways back to education and dignified and empowering work when appropriate and support families in achieving economic security.

The world missed the Sustainable Development Goal target of ending child labour in all its forms by 2025. The latest estimates show renewed progress, but 138 million children remain in child labour, including 54 million in hazardous work. ChildFund calls for renewed political leadership, funded national action, stronger enforcement and prevention rooted in communities and children's rights.

138 million
children aged 5–17 were in child labor in 2024.

54 million
children were in hazardous work likely to harm their health, safety or development.

61%
of child labour was in agriculture; 27% in services; and 13% in industry (rounded).

Sub-Saharan Africa alone accounted for approximately 86.6 million children in child labour (21.5% of children aged 5–17), close to two-thirds of the global total. In contrast, Asia and the Pacific recorded the largest reduction since 2020: prevalence fell from 5.6% to 3.1% and the number of children affected declined from about 49 million to 28 million. Latin America and the Caribbean recorded an 8% relative reduction in prevalence and an 11% decline in numbers. In sub-Saharan Africa, prevalence fell by around 10%, but the total number remained broadly unchanged due to population growth.

These gains are not enough. At the current pace, the world is not on track to meet the commitment to eliminate child labour. Agriculture remains the largest sector, often involving unpaid family work and smallholder farming; services including domestic work and street or market selling; and industry including manufacturing, construction and mining. Girls' work in domestic settings and unpaid household responsibilities may be underestimated in official data, while boys are more represented in some hazardous sectors.

ChildFund's integrated approach to combat child labour: policy, systems, families and communities

ChildFund combines top-down engagement with policymakers, institutions, employers and civil-society coalitions with bottom-up action alongside children, young people, caregivers, schools and communities. Local organizations, community actors and young people themselves are essential allies to ensuring hazardous and exploitative child labor is effectively prevented and addressed. They are experts on local realities, able to identify key gaps and potential solutions and critical stakeholders who can help adapt and implement policy commitments to ensure effective protection within their local contexts.

TOP-DOWN: POLICY, SYSTEMS & ACCOUNTABILITY

Ratify and align national laws and minimum age rules with international standards; strengthen labour inspection and child protection systems; improve supply chain due diligence; ensure accessible reporting, referral and remedy; collect and use reliable, disaggregated data; and coordinate labour, education, protection, justice and migration systems.

BOTTOM-UP: COMMUNITY-OWNED PREVENTION & PRACTICE

Identify children at risk through community-based mechanisms; support school attendance and re-entry; engage children and youth, parents and caregivers; strengthen local organizations and frontline workers' capacities; connect families to sustainable livelihood opportunities; and address harmful norms, discrimination and forced displacement that put children at risk.

INDIA | COMMUNITY VIGILANCE & SYSTEMS

ChildFund India's Zero Child Labour initiative identifies children at risk or already engaged in labour through household visits, community outreach and coordination with local leaders and child-protection mechanisms. It engages parents, children and adolescents on their rights and the potential risks of child labor, while strengthening district and local-government capacity on laws, enforcement and rehabilitation. To date, the initiative has reached 170 district/local-government stakeholders and 1,800 community members.

ETHIOPIA | PROTECTION, EDUCATION & LIVELIHOOD SUPPORT

ChildFund Ethiopia's response to child labour combines humanitarian assistance with educational and livelihood support. The country office's approach combines providing support to young people to raise awareness of child-rights violations, including child labour, while building household resilience in crisis settings.

ChildFund's position and policy asks

ChildFund International calls on governments, employers, workers' organizations, donors and partners to turn the global commitment to end child labour into adequately resourced, measurable and sustainable action.

STRENGTHEN LAWS AND ENFORCEMENT

Align national legislation with ILO Conventions No. 138 and No. 182 and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Set and enforce minimum-age protections; prohibit and eliminate hazardous work and all worst forms of child labour; strengthen adequately resourced labour inspection, including in informal and rural workplaces.

MAKE EDUCATION ACCESSIBLE, SAFE AND RELEVANT

Guarantee free, inclusive, quality education and early childhood services. Remove barriers to enrollment, attendance, attainment and completion. Provide flexible learning and safe reintegration for children withdrawn from work and ensure schools identify and refer children at risk.

ADDRESS POVERTY THROUGH SOCIAL PROTECTION AND DECENT WORK

Expand child sensitive social protection, income security and access to essential services. Promote decent, dignified work and living wages for youth and adults. Support resilient livelihoods for families. Ensure that crisis responses reduce rather than intensify risk factors that may lead to children experiencing child labor.

PREVENT EXPLOITATION IN SUPPLY CHAINS AND INFORMAL ECONOMIES

Require effective due diligence and remediation by businesses and employers. Map risks in agriculture, domestic work, mining, manufacturing and other high-risk sectors. Strengthen responsible recruitment practices and ensure that remediation prioritizes children's safety, education and best interests.

INVEST IN COMMUNITY-OWNED CHILD PROTECTION

Empower local child protection mechanisms, civil society organizations and frontline workers to identify risks, report concerns and connect children and families to services. Engage employers, workers, faith and community leaders, schools and local authorities in sustained prevention and accountability.



PROTECT CHILDREN FACING DISPLACEMENT AND EXPERIENCING CRISES

Integrate child labour prevention into humanitarian action, environmental sustainability practices, disaster response and refugee protection. Ensure birth registration, protections tailored for children facing displacement, family tracing and reunification as appropriate, and continuity of education and protection services.

LISTEN TO CHILDREN AND ADDRESS RISKS

Meaningfully and safely involve children and young people in policy design, monitoring and evaluation. Recognize the different and often hidden forms of work experienced by girls and boys, including domestic work and unpaid household responsibilities, and address discrimination affecting children with disabilities and marginalized groups.

MEASURE PROGRESS AND RESOURCE THE RESPONSE

Set timebound national and local targets, publish regular disaggregated data, strengthen case identification and referral information, and track education, rehabilitation and prevention outcomes, not just the number of children withdrawn from work. Mobilize sustained domestic and international financing and report transparently against SDG Target 8.7.

A successful response is not only a child withdrawn from work. It is a child who is safely learning, a family with access to decent livelihoods, young people who have access to skills-building to prepare them for modern workplaces and dignified economic opportunities, companies and employers upholding appropriate labour standards, a community able to identify and address risk factors and report exploitation, and a public system that prevents recurrence.

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