



## ICI summary of UNICEF & ILO report “Child labour - global estimates 2020, trends and the road forward”

ICI Summary, June 2021

On June 10<sup>th</sup>, ahead of the World Day Against Child Labour, the ILO and UNICEF published the report [Child Labour Global Estimates 2020, trends and the road forward](#), which provides updated estimates of child labour at a global and regional level. It also calls for immediate steps to be taken to address the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and to eliminate child labour by 2025.

### Current levels and trends

As of the start of 2020, 160 million children – 63 million girls and 97 million boys – were estimated to be in child labour globally. Nearly half of those children – 79 million – were in hazardous work.

#### Key findings from the study include:

- **Global progress against child labour has stagnated since 2016:** the percentage of children in child labour remained unchanged over the past four years, while the absolute number of children in child labour increased by over 8 million, in line with the increasing global population.
- **Decreasing child labour prevalence in Asia and Latin America, has been offset by an increase in child labour prevalence in Africa.** In Sub-Saharan Africa, child labour prevalence is more than three times higher than any other region.
- **There are now more children in child labour in sub-Saharan Africa than in the rest of the world combined.** In sub-Saharan Africa, the number of child labourers has increased by 22% in the past five years, from 70 million children in 2016 to 86.6 million children in 2020. Child labour prevalence has also increased in the region, from 22.4% to 23.9%.
- **Child labour remains higher in rural areas than in urban areas:** 13.9% of children living in rural areas (122.7 million) are in child labour compared to 4.7% of children in urban areas (37.3 million).
- **Most child labour continues to occur in the agricultural sector and within families:** 70% of all children in child labour work in the agricultural sector, representing 112 million children. In 2016, 71% of children in child labour worked in agriculture, a sector where hazardous child labour is also more prevalent. In 2020, 72% of all child labour took place in families, primarily on family farms or in family microenterprises, compared to 69% in 2016. Family child labour is most common among younger age groups.
- **Child labour prevalence has decreased for older children but increased for the youngest age group.** Since 2016, child labour prevalence has decreased among children aged 12-14 and 15-17, but increased for children aged 5-11, from 8.3% in 2016, compared to 9.7% in 2020.
- **In the past four years, child labour prevalence has increased among boys and decreased among girls.** In 2020, 11.2% of boys were in child labour (up from 10.7% in 2016), and 7.8% of girls were in child labour (down from 8.4% in 2016).

- **When household chores are taken into account, the gender gap in child labour prevalence narrows.** When chores are included, 12.5% of boys are in child labour, compared to 10.9% of girls.
- **The majority of children in child labour attend school alongside work, but more than a third of children in child labour (35%) are out of school.** Among children in hazardous child labour, 44% are out of school. Children who combine child labour with schooling generally lag behind non-working peers in grade progression and learning achievement and are more likely to drop out prematurely.

## Correlations between regional child labour patterns and broader demographic, economic and development trends

The report discusses several broader trends and their relationship to the prevalence of child labour in different regions. The following challenges were raised in relation to Sub-Saharan Africa:

- **Poverty reduction:** despite considerable progress in reducing poverty in recent years, more than 40% of the population in sub-Saharan Africa still lives in extreme poverty.
- **Levels of informality:** the informal economy is particularly common in Africa, which concerns 86% of all jobs. Informality is associated with lower and less regular incomes, inadequate and unsafe working conditions, extreme job precarity as well as exclusion from social security schemes.
- **Social protection:** despite notable efforts to invest in social safety nets in several African countries, overall coverage remains lower in Africa compared to other regions.
- **Exclusion from education:** public spending on education in sub-Saharan Africa (as a share of GDP) has increased in recent years but remains largely below the world average. Despite this, the number of children in primary school has increased, as in all regions.
- **Population growth:** increases in prevalence and the population of children aged 5-17 have contributed to the rise in the total estimated number of children in child labour in Sub-Saharan Africa.
- **Other challenges:** many countries in sub-Saharan Africa are affected by conflict and fragility, the presence of refugees and asylum seekers, the prevalence of health pandemics, and the effects of climate change. These factors are estimated to exacerbate challenges related to child labour.

## The impact of the COVID-19 crisis on child labour

The global trends presented in this report are dated to the start of 2020, at the very beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. This means that the **estimated prevalence and numbers of children in labour do not account for the impact of COVID-19.**

However, the report stresses that the health and economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic poses substantial cause for concern in relation to child labour. Drawing on other sources, it suggests that the pandemic may further increase child labour for the following reasons:

- **The pandemic has increased poverty, a root cause of child labour.** According to a report by Unicef and Save the Children, the number of children in income-poor households increased by about 142 million in 2020, mainly due to the job and income losses incurred by their

families. Evidence suggests that child labour may be used as a coping strategy in such situations.

- **The pandemic caused many schools to close**, adding to the risk that children will work and raising concerns that children may not return to school once they reopen.
- **Quantitative and qualitative studies shows that child labour increased in several countries during 2020**, including Côte d'Ivoire, Ecuador, Egypt and Brazil. The report cites ICI's analysis [Changes in hazardous child labour in Côte d'Ivoire's cocoa communities before and after Covid-19 partial lockdown](#), which found a significant increase in child labour in 263 cocoa-growing communities in Côte d'Ivoire, compared to the same period before the pandemic. *[Note that the ICI study was mis-quoted: the significant increase observed was for the period 17 March to 15 May 2020. By July-September the child labour had returned to expected levels].*
- **The report stresses that a global rise in child labour is not inevitable.** The actual impact of the pandemic on child labour rates will depend on policy solutions, including the coverage of social protection schemes.
- **If access to social protection deteriorates, the pandemic will likely lead to “a substantial additional rise in child labour”.** A modelling exercise suggests that in a *worst-case* scenario, a deterioration of access to social protection could cause an estimated 8.9 million more children in child labour by the end 2022.
- **If access to social protection increases, child labour could fall.** The same model estimates that 15 million children could be taken out of child labour by 2022, if the coverage of social protection is increased.

## The road forward

The report concludes that the world is not currently on track to eliminate child labour by 2025. Global progress would need to be almost 18 times faster than the rate observed over the past two decades for this target to be met. This requires:

- **Policy change on a large scale:** including extending social protection for children and their families; ensuring free and quality education at least up to the minimum age for entering employment; guaranteeing birth certificates for all children; promoting decent work that delivers a fair income; promoting adequate rural livelihoods and resilience, including through supporting economic diversification and investing in basic services infrastructure; ensuring that necessary laws and regulations are in place; and addressing gender norms and discrimination.
- **Addressing child labour risks in domestic and global supply chains:** special attention should be paid to informal microenterprises and small and medium enterprises at lower tiers of supply chains, where human rights and child labour risks are often more salient. This includes public procurement measures that discourage child labour risks across supply chains. The report also notes the importance using information from child labour risk assessments within supply chains to guide the response of enterprises to challenges such as covid-19. This includes identifying and prioritizing 'hotspots' where risks are highest in terms of severity and scale.

- **Create resource mobilisation strategies:** given the budget shortfalls generated by the pandemic, the international community will need to fill the financial gap, including through development assistance and financing for sustainable development.
- **Reinforced international cooperation and partnerships:** collaboration between countries and all stakeholders – including civil society and businesses is key to solve the global challenge of child labour.