



What makes child labour harmful and what does it mean for the cocoa sector?

Executive summary

A review of the effects of child labour and other adverse childhood experiences on child development and the implications for protecting children.

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Protecting children and their families in cocoa growing communities

ICI is a non-profit foundation that works to ensure a better future for children in cocoa-growing communities. We are a multi-stakeholder partnership advancing the elimination of child labour and forced labour, by uniting the forces of the cocoa and chocolate industry, civil society, farming communities, governments, international organizations and donors. We innovate, catalyse and support the development, implementation and scale-up of effective practices and policies that promote child rights and that prevent and remediate child labour and forced labour in cocoa.

SUPPORTED BY:



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Executive summary

Much progress has been made in recent decades to reduce the prevalence of child labour worldwide. Yet, children's exposure to harmful work remains a persistent global issue, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, where around one in ten children was still involved in child labour in 2020 (ILO, 2021). In cocoa-growing areas of Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana, 1.56 million children aged 5-17 (45% of children living in agricultural households) were estimated to be involved in cocoa-related child labour alone (Sadhu, 2020).

All forms of child labour should be eliminated. Nevertheless, **children's working conditions and overall situation vary greatly, with different consequences**. We use the term *the severity of child labour*, to describe the extent to which child labour causes (irreversible) harm.

A better understanding of the factors that lead to or prevent harm in the cocoa sector can help us to:

- Better protect working children from harm and support them to reach their full potential
- More effectively target interventions based on vulnerability and needs
- Measure incremental progress in terms of reduced harm, in addition to measuring reductions in child labour prevalence.

ICI commissioned a literature review of existing causal evidence on the links between child labour and harm, [How does child work affect education and health?](#), which examined the short- and long-term effects of work on a child's physical and mental health, in addition to education and socioeconomic outcomes in adulthood. The available empirical studies, however, did not allow us to answer some important questions, such as: *How does child labour cause harm? How applicable is this evidence to cocoa growing communities in West-Africa? How does harm differ, depending on gender? Which factors protect children from harm?*

This paper aims to fill these gaps. By drawing on 152 empirical papers on the detrimental effects of adverse childhood experiences on child development, it presents:

1. How child labour can cause harm
2. An operational definition of the severity of child labour for the cocoa sector
3. An overview of the implications for efforts to prevent and address child labour.

Results

What determines the extent to which child labour is harmful?

- **Child labour** can be considered an *adverse childhood experience* and can harm children's development in the same ways as other forms of abuse and neglect.
- The severity of the situation of a child in child labour is determined by the **type of experience** induced by working as a child (abuse/threat, deprivation/neglect¹), the **duration and timing** of exposure to work, the **accumulation** of adverse work experiences, the **characteristics of the child**, the **child's environment**, and the presence or absence of **protective factors**.
- **The extent of harm depends on the context:** child labour can **add** to other factors that can negatively affect children's development (e.g., other work, violent discipline, poverty and parental

¹ See section "Adversity: when is child work detrimental to children?" for the definition of these terms.

neglect). Child labour can be harmful to child development on its own, but even more so when it **interacts with other negative factors** that harm a child's development.

What types of harm can child labour cause?

Child labour can cause the same types of short-term and long-term harm as other forms of abuse and neglect. These include:

- **During childhood:** impaired cognitive development, lower wellbeing, poor learning and physical / mental health, girls' reproductive health issues.
- **During adulthood:** impaired cognitive functions, poor academic achievement, lower-paid occupations, lower overall socioeconomic status, poor health behaviours and status, low wellbeing, impaired social skills, and maladaptive behaviours.
- **These negative outcomes can be transmitted to the next generation** and contribute to the **perpetuation of poverty and child labour**.
- **Gender differences** are mostly due to differences in the intensity and context of exposure to adverse experiences, but not to specific biological vulnerabilities of girls and boys.

How does child labour cause harm?

Harm is caused by the **interaction** between the child's **environment**, the child's **experience** (including of work) and the child's **biology**. The biological imprint of experiences is often "silent" but leads to far-reaching negative effects: adverse childhood experiences can alter a child's DNA, accelerate cellular aging, alter the child's brain structure and performance, and **disrupt the normal functioning** of a child's stress and immune systems. These changes are responsible for the short- and long-term harm caused to children's physical and mental wellbeing.

Harm is caused both **directly**, including by exposure to work (e.g., as a result of abusive/threatening working conditions), as well as **indirectly**, by **depriving** children of experiences needed for a healthy development (e.g., neglect). This "indirect" harm – **child labour as a form of neglect** – has so far been **overlooked** and is an important dimension to consider when it comes to protecting from harm and remediating harm caused.

Which factors can protect children from harm from child labour?

Safe, stable and nurturing relationships across all the layers of the child's environment (jointly referred to as "the child's ecology") can help protect children from harm. One dysfunctional layer of the child's ecology can be compensated for by another supportive layer (e.g., a quality education can help mitigate the negative effects of unsupportive parents and excessive work).

Reinforcing the skills, capacities and behaviour of caregivers creates a more supportive environment for children, increasing their resilience to harm. Examples of this include supporting parents to improve their socio-economic conditions and their parenting skills, as well as improving the quality of children's education and giving them opportunities to participate in decisions that affect them.

Early intervention and reduced exposure to harmful experiences can help protect children from harm:

- Early supportive and nurturing relationships lay solid foundations for healthy child development, equipping children to cope better with adversity and stay protected from harm.

- Developmental time-windows (early childhood, middle childhood, adolescence) can be used to target interventions according to the opportunities these specific periods allow.
- Early interventions are the most cost-efficient in improving outcomes for children – the later the intervention, the greater the investment required to achieve the same outcomes.
- Providing long-term access to protective environments is more efficient than one-off interventions.

What are the operational implications for efforts to prevent and address child labour in the cocoa sector?

Identifying children at risk and monitoring progress

Granular information about a child's situation and environment, including protective factors, can help to assess the likelihood of harm, identify appropriate support, and better monitor the impact of interventions over time. Efforts should be made to measure:

- **The total time children spend on all types of work**, including household chores, hazardous tasks and other work. This *does not* mean that hours for each different type of work should be counted separately.
- **A wider range of child outcomes, beyond participation in child labour**, such as child wellbeing, learning and health, as well as indirect effects of working such as disrupted capacity to attend school or do homework, social isolation, and limited positive interaction with adults.
- The **indirect effects of working**, such as disrupted capacity to attend school or do homework, social isolation, and limited positive interaction with adults.
- **Protective factors** such as the child's access to quality education, parents' education level and skills, community-level child protection services, etc.

Some of these indicators are already being collected and could be exploited more systematically to inform prevention and remediation activities, as well as helping to capture **the positive impacts of interventions on children's ability to reach their full potential**, beyond child labour participation.

Longitudinal data, such as that collected through panel studies or Child Labour Monitoring and Remediation Systems (CLMRS), is key to monitor changing exposure to harm over time and to assess the impact of interventions.

Prioritizing and targeting support

- **Young children are most vulnerable to harm** from adverse events and early intervention is more cost-efficient than acting later. **Extending support to parents and children under five** is therefore both a relevant and cost-effective means of preventing harm from child labour.
- **Developmental time-windows should be used to prioritize and target different types of support according to the specific opportunities they offer**: younger children and their parents should be prioritised for preventative support to build resilience, while support for adolescents should aim to mitigate and repair harm that has already occurred to children's development, as well as to prevent the transmission of harm to future generations.
- While boys are more likely than girls to do hazardous child labour in cocoa, **girls' overall workload is systematically underestimated when household chores are not taken into account**. Girls in cocoa growing communities are also less likely to complete school and more likely to have lower levels of wellbeing. **Supporting adolescent girls** (future mothers) is also key in fighting the transmission of vulnerability to the next generation.

- **Quality education plays a crucial role in preventing harm** and promoting positive outcomes for children. **Out-of-school children** should be prioritized for support, regardless of their involvement in child labour.
- **Consistency across the different layers of a child's environment is key.** Care should be taken to deliver consistent actions and information campaigns to adults at home, in schools and communities.
- **Blanket interventions to promote healthy child development can have positive and lasting effects on children,** regardless of a child's involvement in child labour. In a context of high child labour risk, delivery of interventions to reach all children, families or the community as a whole can also speed up the provision of support, help build trust, and introduce cost savings when conducted at scale.

Provision of support

- **The longer exposure to an adverse experience, the greater the harm caused. Reducing delays** between the identification of a child at risk and the provision of support can help prevent (further) harm.
- **Withdrawing a child from adverse forms of work is not enough to reverse harm that has already occurred. Ongoing support is needed,** especially for older children, to mitigate and reverse harm and prevent long-term negative consequences for children (such as activities aiming at developing non-cognitive skills, encouraging adolescents' participation and transformative understanding of gender roles, strengthening parental skills and sexual health behaviour).
- **Child labour tends to co-occur with other adverse childhood experiences, with which it shares the same root causes.** Integrating strategies to tackle child labour and related harm into a broader framework, rather than focusing only on work-related activities, could result in a greater and more lasting impact on children.
- **Integrated strategies to promote healthy child development and prevent harm from child labour could include** focus on **quality education** (improving the quality of teaching and learning, combatting violence by teachers, preventing child labour at school), **health** (such as health insurance for parents and children to improve access to preventative and emergency healthcare, in the case of injury), **parenting interventions** (to build parents' skills and capacity to nurture their children's healthy development and protect children from harm), **gender equality** (including promotion of adult literacy, action to combat gender stereotypes, promotion of joint decision-making and sharing of work, as well as tailored interventions for teenage girls).