

How can we help stop child labour?

February 2019

<http://oe.cd/child-well-being>

In 2016, about one-in-ten children (152 million in total) aged 5 to 17 were engaged in child labour worldwide, many of them as unpaid family workers in agriculture. Nearly half of the children in child labour were in hazardous work and exposed to serious health and safety risks.



About one-third of children in child labour do not attend school at all; the others go to school, but not all the time. Children in child labour are more likely to leave school early, before grade completion, and underperform in tests.



Sustainable Development Goal target 8.7 aims to eradicate child labour in all its forms by 2025. To meet this goal, countries must adopt policies that strengthen social protection, improve education, and foster technological advancement. This will reduce both the supply of and the demand for child labour.



Most countries prohibit child labour below a certain age and/or set limits on the tasks and working hours of adolescents. Countries should enforce these laws and regulations, where necessary strengthen labour inspections and monitoring systems, and promote responsible business practices.

Eradicating the worst forms of child labour is not only a moral imperative, it is also essential for ensuring that children can fully enjoy their childhood and fulfil their potential. To reach this goal, it is necessary to monitor child labour trends and identify the forms of child labour that have the most serious consequences on children's lives.

What is child labour?

"Child employment" concerns all children working in any form of market production and certain types of non-market production (e.g., domestic work, subsistence agriculture). Recent ILO data (2017) suggest that about 218 million children were in employment worldwide. Some forms of work can be beneficial for the development of children's skills and the welfare of their families; adolescents working occasionally or assisting in the family business, for example, can help them develop their levels of responsibility and maturity. "Child employment" is the term commonly used for this form of labour force participation by adolescents who are above the minimum age for work, are employed for a limited number of hours in a safe environment, and at fair pay.

"Child labour" captures forms of work that are harmful to the physical, social, mental or moral development of children (ILO Convention, n°138). It includes work that interferes with children's schooling by obliging them to leave school prematurely or requiring them to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work. According to the latest ILO estimates 152 million children are victims of child labour.

In its most extreme forms, child labour involves children being enslaved, separated from their

families, exposed to serious hazards and illnesses and/or left to fend for themselves on the streets of large cities – often at a very early age.

Whether or not particular forms of "work" are defined as "child labour" thus depends on the child's age, the type and hours of work performed, and the conditions under which it is performed. Definitions and the acceptance of certain forms of child work may vary across countries and economic sectors.

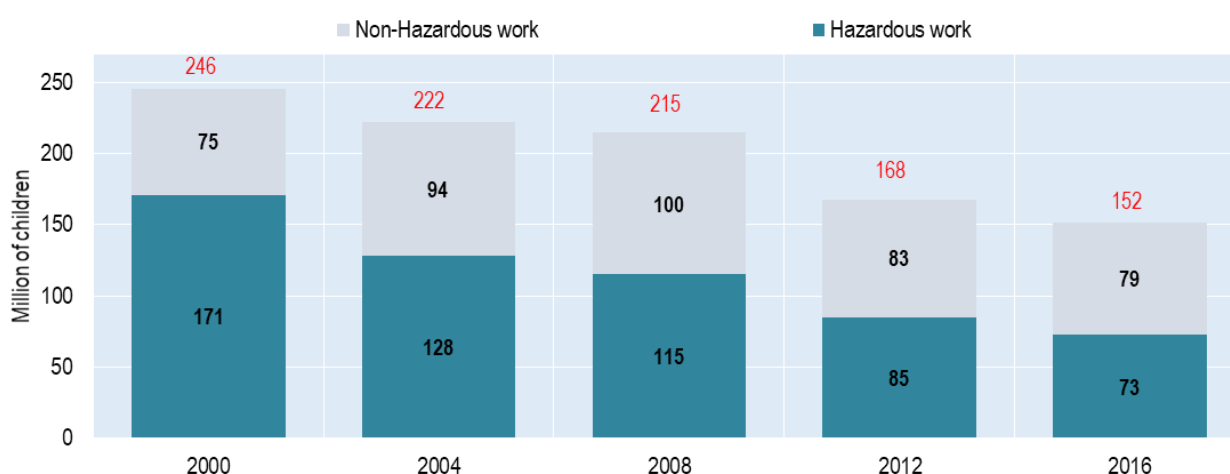
In order to help countries measure child labour, the International Labour Office (ILO) has developed a set of resolutions setting standards for the collection, compilation and analysis of national child labour statistics (ILO, 2009). The standards also make child labour statistics more comparable across countries.

The worst forms of child labour, as defined by Article 3 of ILO Convention No. 182, include:

- (a) all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict;
- (b) the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances;
- (c) the use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in the relevant international treaties;
- (d) "hazardous" work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.

Figure 1. Child labour is declining, but progress has slowed down

Millions of children aged 5-17 years old in child labour, 2000-2016



Source: ILO Global Child Labour Trends 2008-2012 and ILO (2017) Global Estimates of Child Labour Report.

Child labour is declining, but so is the pace of progress

Since the adoption in 1999 of the ILO Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, much progress has been made in reducing child labour: in 2016 around 152 million children were in child labour worldwide, down from 246 million in 2000 when data on child labour was first estimated (Figure 1). However, after a significant decline in the late 2000s, the pace of progress has slowed down since 2012, mainly because child labour in sub-Saharan countries is increasing again.

Child labour is a heterogeneous phenomenon and there are large differences across and within countries in the same region. Yet, the global picture suggests the following key facts:

- In 2016, there were about one-in-ten children aged 5 to 17 engaged in child labour, and nearly half of them were in hazardous work (Figure 1).
- Around half of the children in child labour (73 million) are aged 5 to 11 years, while the other half (79 million) is aged 12 to 17.
- Children in “child labour” are typically working in paid or unpaid household-based economic activities, and mainly engaged in agriculture work (Figure 2). The latest ILO figures on child labour suggest that 108 million boys and girls are working in the agricultural sector (ILO, 2017a).

This is an increase of 10 million children compared with 2012, driven primarily by an increase in child labour in the African region.

- Boys are often more involved in paid work than girls. Girls, however, do more unpaid work, spend longer hours of household chores than boys, which often keeps them from attending school.
- Roughly two-thirds of children engaged in child labour are enrolled in school, but they are more likely to leave school early, before grade completion, and demonstrate less knowledge in tests.
- Worst forms of child labour, particularly in hazardous jobs, create long term, chronic health problems that have repercussions for physical and/or mental health status in adult life (health issues include back problems, arthritis, and a lack of stamina).
- Children doing unpaid household work such as cooking, cleaning, and caring are typically not counted in child employment and child labour statistics, but ILO (2017) estimates that around 800 million children aged 5-17 spend at least some time each week performing chores for their households. Girls are more likely to perform household chores and to do it for more than 14 hours a week.

Figure 2. Most children in child labour work in family businesses and/or in agricultural sectors

Share of total child labour, 2016

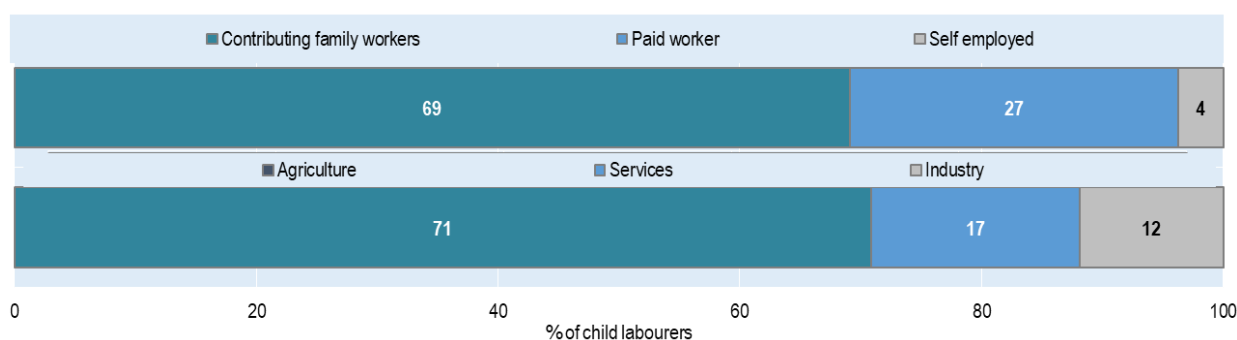
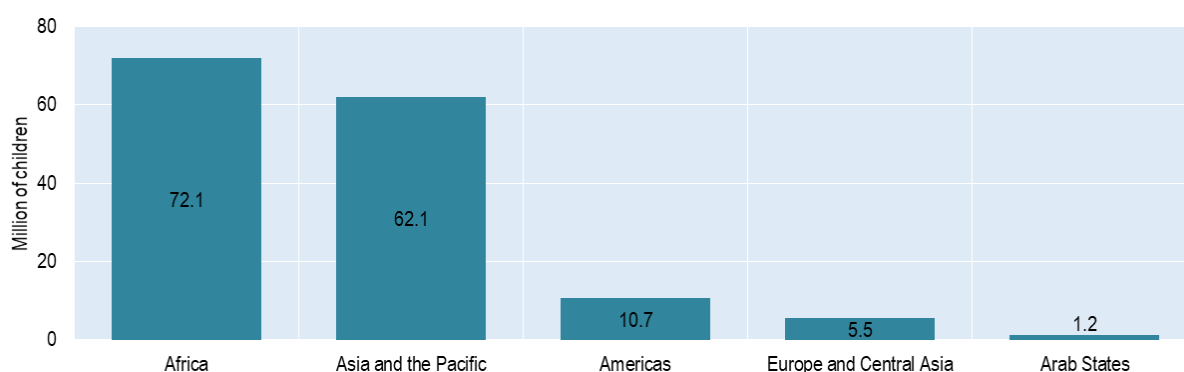


Figure 3. Nine-in-ten children in child labour live in Africa or in Asia and the Pacific

Regional estimates of child labour, 5-17 years old, millions, 2016



Note: The Africa region comprises both northern Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, while the Arab States region excludes northern Africa. The Americas region comprises both Latin American and the Caribbean and northern America. The regional estimates based on the new regional classifications are therefore not comparable with the regional estimates based on the previous ILO regional classification system employed in the 2012 and 2008 global estimate reports.

Source: ILO (2017), [Global Estimates of Child Labour: Results and trends 2012- 2016](#), ILO Geneva.

Most child labour takes place in low- and middle-income countries

- About nine-in-ten children involved in child labour live in Africa, Asia and the Pacific (Figure 3). Africa ranks highest with one-in-five children in child labour, while the share is seven per cent in Asia and the Pacific.
- The highest child employment rates are found in countries with relatively low GDP per capita (Figure 4); conversely, employment of children under 15 is generally low in the more economically advanced countries. But the link between child employment and level of economic development is not linear. When the economic development is taking off child labour falls most rapidly and then declines more slowly

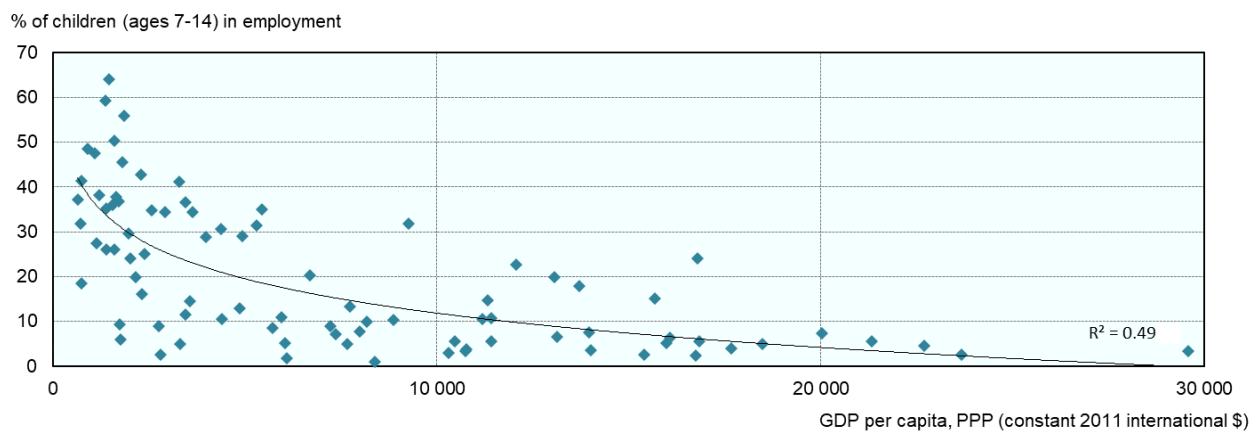
above a certain level of economic development, suggesting that additional levers are needed to eliminate child labour.

But child labour also exists in high-income countries

Child labour also exists in high-income countries, where it is concentrated among children over 15 years of age. For example, it is quite common for children to help their parents in the family business, particularly in agriculture, where parents often see a lot of benefits to expose their children to farm work. These perceived benefits include: meeting the family's needs for childcare and family time; building work ethic, responsibility and pride; and the positive impacts of involvement in the family's agricultural heritage (Eliot et al., 2018).



Figure 4. More economically advanced countries have lower child employment rates



Source: World Development Indicators, World Bank

Data on children doing farm work are partial at best. For example, in the United States, it is estimated that 600 000 to 700 000 children or adolescents under 20 years of age performed farm work in 2014; but there is little information on the type of work performed at different ages and overall compliance with laws and standards adopted to combat child labour. However, a Human Rights Watch (2010) study showed that children working on farms routinely worked more than 10 hours per day, and they typically were paid less than the minimum wage.

In addition, children doing farm work are particularly vulnerable to the work injuries (12 000 youths were injured on farm in 2014 in the United States). Working in this sector involves handling sharp tools and heavy machinery, being exposed to chemicals, climbing up tall ladders, lugging heavy buckets and sacks, and children get hurt and sometimes they die. As a result, teenagers aged 15 to 17 working on farms are four times more likely to die on the job than teenagers in all other jobs (Human Watch, 2010). The US DoL (2018) reported that in 2016 there were 17 fatal occupational injuries among youth aged 16/17, and 13 fatal occupational injuries among children below age 16 in the United States.

Working in the tobacco industry is particularly dangerous. For example, Human Rights Watch (2014) found that nearly three-quarters of the 141 children working in fields of tobacco plants who were interviewed, all aged 7 to 17 years, had serious symptoms of acute nicotine poisoning, or green tobacco sickness, from nicotine being absorbed through the skin while handling tobacco. The US Department of Labour works with the tobacco industry to improve compliance with labour laws and conditions for workers (US DoL, 2018).

OECD countries all have laws prohibiting child labour below a certain age, and set limits on the tasks that can be performed by adolescents below age 16, as well as on working hours and starting and finishing hours. Nevertheless, many cases of violations of laws on working hours and working time applicable to adolescents are reported (US DoL, 2018). For example, adolescents can be required to work in the evening or during a school day beyond the limits set by law.

How to combat child labour?

The importance of stakeholders

The engagement of a wide range of actors since the late 1990s has increased the momentum to combat against child labour. An important event was the *Global March against Child Labour*, led by Kailash Satyarthi, which brought together a group of children's rights activists for a 50 000 mile-long journey from Manila to Geneva. The Global March featured events, rallies, foot marches, and bus caravans to raise awareness of child labour issues. Passing through 103 countries before ending in Geneva in June 1998, just in time for the ILO's annual meeting, the Global March drew the participation of more than 7 million people, including representatives from NGOs and trade unions, teachers, children, and other concerned individuals.

A year later, ILO members unanimously adopted ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour committing countries to take actions to prohibit and eliminate the worst forms of child labour. To date, 181 out of 187 ILO member states have ratified the Convention, and most countries have taken action to make their economies less dependent on child labour.

Macroeconomic trends

Child labour typically declines as countries industrialise, because employment in the agricultural sector where child labour is concentrated declines. Technological advancement linked to the industrialisation of agriculture (e.g. increased mechanisation, the spread of tractors and irrigation pumps) also helps reduce child labour. More broadly, increase in the demand for skilled workers in production sectors outside agriculture contribute to falling demand for “unskilled” child labour. Therefore, incentives to invest in technological development promoting skilled work are important to reduce the demand of child labour.

Economic growth affects not only the demand, but also the supply of child labour. Economic development has led to a reduction in extreme poverty, and thus in child labour supply (Edmonds and Schady, 2012).

Strengthen Social Protection

From a policy perspective, combating family poverty is an important means to prevent child labour. Evidence suggests that child labour is most often used by households as a way out of extreme poverty, and that incentives for child labour reduce markedly when families have a permanent income at least equal to the minimum subsistence level. Transitory income losses, such as those following a drop in real wages, a loss of employment or migration of a family member, are also factors that encourage child labour for at least a limited period of time. Therefore, in countries where social protection floors do not exist, child labour is often used as a “self-insurance strategy” to secure household income.

Setting up social protection floors reduces the need of families to secure income by sending children into work and while not always reducing child labour in general, tends to reduce the worst forms of child labour. For instance, Landmann and Frolich (2015) show that the provision of health and accident insurance to participants in a micro-finance project in Pakistan helped reduce child labour and participation in hazardous activities.

Ensuring minimum income security helps improve children's material well-being, although cash benefits alone do not completely eliminate the risk of hazardous work for children. For instance, De Hoop, Groppo, and Handa (2017) found that following the payment of unconditional cash transfers in Malawi and Zambia children moved out of extremely undesirable work outside of the household. However, children increased their engagement in both the expanded household entrepreneurial activities and household chores, and “excessive” working hours and work-related hazards also increased. The cash transfer is thus used to develop family business, with

a substantial increase in the work done by both adults and children. Nevertheless, transfer income and the expansion in household production both contributed to more household consumption and improvements in children's material wellbeing. School attendance also increased substantively despite the higher involvement in household production and household chores.

Helping adults in a family to retain a job and therefore a stable source of income can reduce the need for child labour. However, to date, the evidence on the impact of public employment programmes seems to indicate that they do not significantly reduce child labour (ILO, 2017b). One reason is that public work programmes often help the most vulnerable parents find a job for a limited period of time only, and therefore do not guarantee a permanent source of household income that is sufficient to do without child labour.

By contrast, there is some evidence to suggest that a parent's return to employment can lead to increased engagement of children in household chores when that is no longer carried out by the adults. For instance, Shah and Steinberg (2015) document that India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS, one of the largest public employment programme in the world) is associated with an increase in girls', aged 13-16, participation in unpaid domestic work and reduced school enrolment. Adolescent boys also reduced their school attendance and participated more in market work. Though work on NREGS projects was legally limited to adults over the age of 18, the labour demand for adolescents increased through different channels. First, there could have been some leakage in who was allowed to work for the programme, with either adolescents lying about their age, or programme administrators looking the other way. Second, the introduction of NREGS jobs may have created additional jobs, such as selling tea or food to workers. Lastly, adolescents' labour could be substitutes for adults' labour in family business and for girls in domestic work. Providing affordable family and childcare services is therefore important to ensure that adolescent girls continue their education.

Moreover, while financial assistance does not always change behaviour when the child is already working, it can prevent children from entering child labour. Financial assistance, also when not contingent on school attendance, can increase the likelihood that children move from primary to secondary school (Edmonds and Schady, 2012).

Make school a viable alternative to child labour

The decision to put children into work is based on a trade-off that balances the short-term benefit of increased income with the expected future benefit of an additional period of schooling. When children are not needed to work for family income, they are more likely to be at school and successfully complete education.

For parents to choose schools over work, schooling must be a cost-effective alternative to work. For many developing countries, this implies improving school quality to raise the benefits that children and families' can expect from continuous schooling. For instance, Mexico's *Consejo Nacional de Fomento Educativo* improved school infrastructure, updated technological equipment, and expanded access to learning materials in the early 2000s. This initiative to improve school quality appears to have both increased school attendance and decreased child employment (Rossi and Rosati, 2007).

Many countries also provide assistance to poor families with Conditional Cash Transfers, the purpose of which is to raise school attendance and reduce child labour at the same time. For example, Brazil, Ethiopia, and Morocco, among others, operate large-scale cash transfer programmes to increase school enrolment and reduce dropout rates. Mexico's recently abolished Progresa programme has been shown to substantively alter child time allocation, increase schooling and decrease child employment at the same time (Skoufias and Parker, 2001). Positive effects on child nutrition and health are also associated with this programme.

One challenge is to set financial aid at a level that is large enough to reach most disadvantaged families and encourage the transition from labour to school, while at the same time limiting the burden on public spending. If subsidies do not cover the full cost of children's participation in school programmes, compensatory behaviour may result in a simultaneous increase in schooling and participation in paid work by the same children (De Hoop et al., 2017). Another reason for setting cash transfer amounts at a reasonably high level is that children in hazardous forms of child labour often come from the most disadvantaged families and tend to receive greater compensation for their work, perhaps as a compensating differential for the hazards of the work (DeGraff et al. 2015).

In setting cash transfer amounts, however, care should be given not to allocate substantial resources to households who would comply with the conditions even with lower transfers. Edmonds and Shrestha (2014), for instance, provide evidence that there is no need to fully compensate for the loss of net income following the cessation of child labour. They

estimated that conditional transfers to children associated with carpet factories in Kathmandu in Nepal – of which the value was 20% of the income children could earn as weavers – nearly eliminated child participation in weaving during the programme-period. Nevertheless, the effect phases out over time (children do not always return to school after school holidays), and making cash transfers conditional on school attendance is a way of keeping children at school throughout the year.

Provide social support

Social programmes serve a variety of important functions in addressing child labour. They can help families to find alternatives to the worst forms of child labour, including work that respects children's rights and their health. Social services can also provide direct assistance to remove children from child labour situations, and facilitate their rehabilitation and reintegration into school and society, including by providing temporary shelter and assistance to cover basic needs. Social programmes can also prevent child labour by raising public awareness and mobilising stakeholders, as well as by identifying children at special risks and provide services for them.

Most countries have programmes that include the goal of eliminating or preventing child labour. For instance, in 2016-17, India established the Platform for Effective Enforcement for No Child Labor (PENCIL) to enforce child labour laws and implement a district level project that identifies children working in hazardous work, withdraws them from dangerous situations, and provides them with education and vocational training.

To be effective, these programmes need to be adequately funded and equipped with staff that has the skills to deal with complex economic and social issues. However, such programmes are too often under-resourced or their scope is insufficient to fully address the problem (US DoL, 2018). For instance, many localities with high levels of child labour lack the infrastructure of psychologists and social workers necessary to help children cope with their experience. Teachers may need training to reintegrate in their classroom children who had interrupted their schooling in order to work. Community engagement is a key component of the social support needed to "disengage" children from child labour.

In addition, there is little evidence on the persistence of intervention effects after programmes end, and on the capacity of interventions targeting individual beneficiaries to produce persistent community-wide change (Dammert et al., 2018). To generate such a change, it is necessary to have an appropriate policy monitoring framework in place and to act together on the demand for child labour.

Establish comprehensive Child Labour Monitoring Systems

A sound legal and institutional framework is essential to identify reprehensible forms of child labour, pursue perpetrators and effectively enforce penalties.

Most countries have ratified all the relevant international conventions and established hazardous work prohibitions in line with international standards (ILO, 2017b; US DoL, 2018). However, for many governments, developing a legal framework to address child labour in compliance to the ILO conventions remains a challenge and national laws continue to be deficient in key areas. For example, one-third of the 132 countries reviewed on the worst forms of child labour do not have a minimum age for work that is in line with international standards (US DoL, 2018).

Laws prohibiting work under a certain age and in certain types of tasks are usually particularly effective to combat the worst forms of child labour. However, minimum age restrictions can divert children from working in regulated sectors to unregulated sectors with uncertain working conditions (Edmonds and Shrestha, 2012). In particular, adolescent work in family business is often poorly regulated, although this is where child labour is most common.

Although necessary, laws remain empty shells if they are not accompanied by institutions to enforce them and monitor their development and effects. Labour inspectorates and criminal law enforcement agencies are key players to check workplaces and working conditions; they need the resources, capacity and authority to carry out their jobs.

Many governments still fail to fully implement their child labour laws. US DoL (2018) reports that 49 of the 132 countries reviewed made no meaningful efforts in 2017 to enforce laws related to child labour. Workplace inspection systems remain generally weak in the majority of countries, largely because of capacity and resource constraints of Labour Inspectorates in terms personnel, vehicles, fuel, and training. For instance, in Burundi the Labour Inspectorate did not have a single vehicle. Similarly, Indonesian inspectors lacked office facilities and fuel for transportation needed to carry out inspections (US DoL, 2018). In addition, less than half of governments allow their inspectors to set penalties for violations of the law and hold perpetrators accountable. Finally, inspections of workplaces in the informal economy are rare, and this is where most child labour takes place.

Coordinating the actions of the various entities involved in monitoring the implementation of laws, codes of conduct and compliance with international

commitments is crucial. Without coordination, the efforts of governments and other stakeholders can be duplicative and inefficient. Some countries have made great progress in this regard. For instance, Panama's Ministry of Labour launched a child labour monitoring information system to strengthen interagency co-ordination on child labour cases and established agreements with municipal councils to design and implement child labour elimination strategies. However, major gaps in interagency coordination to address child labour remain. The US DoL report (2018) notes that in 2017 63% of governments did not make a significant effort to improve inter-ministerial coordination on child labour; and that where coordination mechanisms exist, very often no activities were reported for the year 2017.

A clear commitment by governments, reflected in a policy action plan, is necessary to set priorities for action, ensure coherence, set objectives and mobilize the necessary financial and human resources. Several countries have recently introduced such national policies (US DoL, 2018). For example, Argentina, Mozambique and Turkey adopted national action plans against child labour in 2017. The Colombian government approved a roadmap for the prevention and elimination of child labour in mining; or Chile released a National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights, a policy that promotes respect of human rights in supply chains.

Setting up such action plans is a necessary step, but their success depends on the resources made available to implement them. Unfortunately, 47% of the governments reviewed by US DoL (2018) did not take significant steps to implement existing plans in 2017.

As seen earlier, combating cases of "hazardous" work is also an issue in more economically advanced countries. And in these countries too, eradicating child labour requires efficient reporting and control mechanisms, and an amply resourced labour inspectorate that is up to the task.

Regular statistical monitoring of the extent and quality of the work done by children and adolescents is necessary to mobilise policy makers, stakeholders and parents against the risks and abuses associated with child labour. However, such data are not issued on a regular basis in most OECD countries, if they exist at all. Relevant information could be collected either through existing surveys on children and adolescents, by adding ad-hoc modules to general employment surveys to cover the population at risk or by conducting specific surveys in economic sectors at risk.

Promote responsible business practices

Governments have a key role to play to support companies to act responsibly, including in addressing forced labour and child labour across their business activities. In addition to addressing contextual root causes of forced labour and child labour, this entails establishing and enforcing a strong legal framework to provide protections against human rights abuses in the world of work. It also means setting the expectation clearly that all business enterprises domiciled in their territory and/or jurisdiction act in accordance with international standards on responsible business conduct. These standards define a company's responsibility towards the adverse impacts, including child labour, in its own activities but also in relation to its supply chains and impacts linked to other business relationships.

For businesses, addressing child labour risks entails embedding responsible business conduct actions into company management systems, including, as a first step, by adopting a policy statement on child labour that is valid throughout the entire supply chain and communicating this policy to all business partners.

In order to help companies move in this direction, the [OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises](#) (2011) and accompanying [OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Business Conduct](#) (2018) provide companies with practical recommendations on how to address risks, including child labour, across global supply chains. The guidelines encourage companies to assess the likelihood of child labour risks in their supply chains based on the countries that they operate or source from, the products produced, the sector they are operating in and suppliers' business and sourcing practices. By identifying and assessing risks companies can then take steps to effectively address these. To support companies to address child labour across their supply chains, the OECD has developed [Practical Action on the Worst Forms of Child Labour](#) for companies operating in the minerals supply chain, which provides hands-on advice on types of actions companies can take to address child labour.

Transparency is essential for effective action. The OECD recommends that companies report publicly on the risks that they have identified vis-à-vis child labour and provide regular updates on the steps that they are taking to address and mitigate these risks. Companies are also advised to establish grievance mechanisms and, where relevant, cooperate with state-based judicial or non-judicial grievance mechanisms, like the OECD's network of National Contact Points, to provide remedy to victims of child labour when they have caused or contributed to child labour.

Child labour is a complex problem that requires cooperation amongst multiple actors. Addressing this complexity is key, and it requires that companies

work with a wide range of stakeholders including government agencies, international organisations, civil society, workers, and families to address the root causes of the problem.

Citation

Please cite as: OECD (2019), "How can we help stop child labour?", Policy Brief on Child Well-Being, OECD Publishing.

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