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Eradicating Child Labor: Ending Economic Exploitation of Children as an Objective of Sustainable Development



Child Labor in the Sustainable Development Agenda

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Synonyms

[Economic exploitation of children](#); [Exploitative child work](#)

Definitions

While there is no universally accepted definition of child labor, child labor is usually defined based on different international legal instruments as work performed by a child that is harmful to his or her physical and mental development by virtue of being physically, mentally, socially, or morally dangerous or harmful or that interferes with schooling by causing nonattendance, premature school leaving, or combination of school with heavy and long hours of work (ILO 2018a).

Global estimates show that 152 million children are in child labor and 73 million children are engaged in hazardous work. Child labor prevalence rates vary considerably between different regions but are highest in Africa with 19.6%, followed by Asia and the Pacific with 7.4%. Fifty-eight percent of children in child labor are boys, while 42% are girls. Nearly half of all children in child labor are 5–11 years old. Child labor is most prevalent in the agriculture sector, representing 70.9% of children in child labor, while the services industry represents 17.2% and the industry 11.9% (ILO 2017a). While child labor is more prevalent in poorer countries, middle-income countries house more child laborers in absolute terms (ILO-IPEC 2013). Although country- and region-level data do not routinely penetrate income and wealth discrepancies within countries, the poorest segments of society are known to have higher incidences of child labor even if child labor as a phenomenon is not confined exclusively to the poorest in a given society. Different studies have demonstrated that in the longer run, child labor adversely impacts future earnings, propagating intergenerational poverty and leading to increased income inequality (Fors 2012).

Child labor has been a historical fact and phenomenon just as the issue of combatting and eliminating child labor has long been on the global agenda. In fact, the first regulations attempting to protect especially young children from severe economic exploitation were introduced starting from the 1830s when Factory Acts in the Great Britain sought to improve working conditions of children by introducing minimum ages of entry into employment (Dahlén 2007). The International Labour Organisation (ILO), created in 1919, immediately adopted a minimum age convention and a convention on night work for young persons in industry during the first International Labour Conference that was held in Washington D.C. in October 1919 (ILO 2018b). Subsequent sector-specific minimum age conventions were adopted until the adoption of ILO Convention No. 138 on Minimum Age for Admission to Employment in 1973, which set global minimum age standards. The question of children's involvement in labor became a central issue of children's rights debates as early as the 1920s. The 1924 Geneva Declaration, endorsed by the League of Nations, stated that "[t]he child must be put in a position to earn a livelihood, and must be protected against every form of exploitation" (League of Nations 1924: Article 4). By 1959, when the UN proclaimed the Declaration on the Rights of the Child, the focus on minimum age restrictions had dominated the children's rights agenda alongside a prohibition for the involvement of a child "in any occupation or employment which would prejudice his health or education, or interfere with his physical, mental or moral development" (UN 1959: Principle 9). In 1989, child labor and minimum age restrictions were incorporated into children's rights law through the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child under Article 32. Three years later, the ILO created the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) with the objective of combatting and progressively eliminating child labor globally through capacity building and awareness raising. With IPEC, the commitment to eliminate child labor progressively was extended beyond States and undertaken in engagement with workers' and

employers' organizations, the civil society, and local communities. In the late 1990s, the issue of child labor was high on the global agenda. The Global March Against Child Labour was held in 1998, crossing in 103 countries on five continents with the support of approximately 7 million people (Global March Against Child Labour 2017). The March's founder Kailash Satyarthi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his work in combatting child labor and for advocating on behalf of children in 2014. In 1999, the ILO's continued work on child labor culminated in Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour. With this renewed focus on children's working conditions, the focus of the international community shifted to the urgency of eradicating these so-called worst forms of child labor.

The need for global action and mobilization to combat child labor was explicitly recognized in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN General Assembly 2015) and the linked Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). SDG 8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth includes two targets linked to child labor. Firstly, SDG 8 calls for "the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers." Secondly, it calls for an end to child labor in all its forms by 2025 (Target 8.7). The linked indicator 8.7.1 will measure the "proportion and number of children aged 5–17 years engaged in child labour" disaggregated by sex and age.

International Standards on Child Labor: Not All Work by Children Is Equal(ly or Unequivocally Bad)

The issue of child labor is governed globally at the intersection of labor law and human rights law. The international labor standards that govern child labor are found in the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Conventions No. 138 on Minimum Age and No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour. Both conventions are considered ILO fundamental conventions under the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and

Rights at Work (ILO 1998). According to the declaration, all ILO Member States have an obligation by virtue of ILO membership to promote and realize principles concerning fundamental rights in these conventions, including notably the effective elimination of child labor even if they have not ratified these relevant conventions (ILO 1998).

With ILO Convention No. 138, States Parties have made a commitment to effectively abolish child labor and to raise the minimum age for admission to employment progressively in order to allow children to enjoy their physical and mental development to the fullest (ILO 1973). According to ILO Convention No. 138, the basic minimum age at which children can start working is set at 15. According to exceptions foreseen for developing countries, this age can be lowered to 14 by States Parties by submitting a declaration to the ILO at the time of ratification. In fact, Convention No. 138 purported to set the minimum age for admission to employment around school-leaving age in order to ensure that work did not interfere with children's schooling (Cullen 2009).

Light work, or work that does not threaten children's health and safety or adversely affect their education and training, may be permitted for younger children from 13 to 15 years of age, and developing countries may lower these age limits to children from 12 to 14 years of age. Hazardous work, defined as "employment or work which by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out is likely to jeopardise the health, safety or morals of young persons" (ILO 1973, Article 3.1), is not permitted for persons under the age of 18. ILO Recommendation No. 190 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour gives further content to the meaning of hazardous work that is covered under ILO Convention No. 138 and subsequently under ILO Convention No. 182 Article 3(d).

The definition of hazardous work includes:

- (a) work which exposes children to physical, psychological or sexual abuse;

- (b) work underground, under water, at dangerous heights or in confined spaces;
- (c) work with dangerous machinery, equipment and tools, or which involves the manual handling or transport of heavy loads;
- (d) work in an unhealthy environment which may, for example, expose children to hazardous substances, agents or processes, or to temperatures, noise levels, or vibrations damaging to their health;
- (e) work under particularly difficult conditions such as work for long hours or during the night or work where the child is unreasonably confined to the premises of the employer. (ILO 1999b)

There is another facility to lower the age limit for hazardous work to 16, but this facility is available only after consultation with workers' and employers' organizations and provided that the young persons in question are fully trained and that States guarantee the full protection of their health, safety, and morals. While States also have the possibility to restrict the scope of application of Convention No. 138, such restrictions may not be introduced in heavy industry (mining and quarrying; manufacturing), infrastructure (construction; electricity, gas, and water; sanitary services; transport, storage, and communication), and heavy agriculture (plantations and other agricultural undertakings for commercial production).

ILO Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour transforms the focus of the child labor debate from blanket prohibitions based on minimum age to prohibitions based on conditions linked to specific forms of work. ILO Convention No. 182 is also a reflection of international community's concerns regarding the recruitment and use of children as soldiers and the commercial sexual exploitation of children at the turn of the last millennium, as are the two Optional Protocols to the CRC adopted in 2000,

on Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC) and on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (OPSC) (Cullen 2009). The Convention defines the worst forms of child labor and places an obligation on ratifying ILO Member States to “take immediate and effective measures to secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour as a matter of urgency” (ILO 1999a: Article 1). In addition, penal and other sanctions may be used by States Parties in order to elicit compliance with the Convention.

According to the ILO Convention No. 182, **the Worst Forms of Child Labour** are:

- (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) 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. (ILO 1999a)

The first three categories are deemed the “unconditional worst forms of child labor,” while fourth category is usually covered under the heading of “hazardous labor.”

ILO Convention No. 182 recognizes the need for a longer-term perspective that combines immediate action with ongoing interventions by taking effective and time-bound measures. The so-called Time-Bound Programme (TBP)

has been defined as a “set of integrated and coordinated policies and programmes to prevent and eliminate a country’s [Worst Forms of Child Labour]” (ILO 2003, 40). ILO Recommendation No. 190 notes that in efforts to eradicate the worst forms of child labor, States should pay particular attention to the situation of younger children, the girl child, and children with special vulnerabilities or needs (ILO 1999b).

It is worth noting that ILO Convention No. 138 remained sparsely ratified until the introduction of ILO Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour and Recommendation No. 190. It has been argued that the ratification rates of Convention No. 38 soared only after ILO’s ratification campaign for the two conventions following Declaration No. 190 (Cullen 2005).

Protection from economic exploitation and from any work that is hazardous or likely to interfere with schooling is also a children’s right. At first, this protection right was embodied in Article 10(3) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (United Nations 1966). It was later replicated in Article 32(1) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). According to CRC Article 32(2), States Parties are also under the obligation to “take legislative, administrative, social and educational measures” to protect children from economic exploitation by setting minimum age (s) for admission to employment, by regulating working hours and conditions of employment, and by establishing appropriate penalties and sanctions for the non-respect of such regulations. In fact, CRC Article 32 does not refer to child labor as such. On the other hand, Article 32 refers to “relevant provisions of other international instruments,” thereby synching the children’s rights perspective on child labor with the labor rights perspective.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC Committee) also recognizes that all work performed by children is not necessarily harmful. In fact, work that does not prejudice other rights such as the right to health or education may have developmental benefits for children by honing their skills, allowing them to make contributions to their families and communities and by

enhancing their social bonding with peers and other community members. Yet many forms of work or employment for children and adolescents are found to interfere with children's rights, and the Committee affirms that the full enjoyment of children's rights requires that child labor, or work that is either harmful or hazardous for children, be abolished in all its forms (CRC Committee 2003).

The two first Optional Protocols to the CRC, OPAC, and OPSC both cover some of the worst forms of child labor and reference in their preamble relevant international legal instruments, particularly ILO Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour. While the OPSC contextualizes the issue of the sale of children, child prostitution, and child pornography within children's right to protection from economic exploitation under Article 32 of the CRC, OPAC's focus on children in armed conflict is linked not to a concern around economic exploitation of children in armed conflict situations but to the detrimental effects involvement in armed conflict has on children's enjoyment of their rights more broadly.

Both Optional Protocols extend protections afforded to children beyond those provided by ILO Convention No. 182. While ILO Convention No. 182 focuses on slavery-like practices and thus compulsory recruitment in armed conflict, CRC-OPAC covers not only a prohibition of compulsory/forced recruitment of children into armed forces but also of voluntary recruitment, by setting the age at 18 as a general rule and requiring safeguards for children's well-being if a State Party permits voluntary recruitment under the age of 18. Likewise, CRC-OPSC goes beyond ILO Convention No. 182 by providing more detailed definitions of sale of children, child prostitution, and child pornography, requiring the penalization or criminalization of acts that are covered by these definitions as well as complicity, permitting the establishment of extraterritorial jurisdiction over the offenses when either perpetrators or victims are of a given State's nationality even if the acts are committed outside of the territory of that State, and pronouncing the offenses linked to these acts as extraditable.

Article 2: CRC OPSC

For the purposes of the present Protocol:

- (a) Sale of children means any act or transaction whereby a child is transferred by any person or group of persons to another for remuneration or any other consideration.
- (b) Child prostitution means the use of a child in sexual activities for remuneration or any other form of consideration.
- (c) Child pornography means any representation, by whatever means, of a child engaged in real or simulated explicit sexual activities or any representation of the sexual parts of a child for primarily sexual purposes.

Basic Distinctions in Child Labor Standards: A Summary

Child labor as a phenomenon takes many different forms, as evidenced by the use of different terminology such as hazardous labor, harmful labor, worst forms of child labor, and unconditional worst forms of child labor. Despite the long-standing legacy of minimum age regulations and the ongoing interest in combatting the phenomenon of the economic exploitation of children, defining what child labor exactly is remains a challenge. Yet, distinguishing between the types of work performed by children is essential as it clarifies whether or not a certain type of work or employment engaging children should be eradicated and what measures ought to be taken in response to a given type of work or employment.

In tracking child labor estimates globally, ILO-IPEC uses three distinctions: Children in employment, children in child labor, and children in hazardous work. Children in employment encompass all children who work, while children in child labor are a subset denoting all those

children in employment below the minimum age with the exception of those in light work as well as all children in worst forms of child labor. Children in hazardous work are a subdivision of children in child labor and encompass all children in work that, by nature or by type, negatively impacts a child's health, safety, and development (ILO-IPEC 2013).

Currently, the global rules that govern child labor are an amalgamation of minimum age standards and restrictions based on the type and nature of the work performed by children. The basic distinctions in child labor standards demonstrated below (Fig. 1) as governed by ILO Conventions and Recommendations are widely accepted as benchmarks and guide measures that are adopted and implemented for the eradication of child labor.

The unconditional worst forms of child labor are prohibited for all children and are to be eradicated as a matter of priority and urgency, followed by hazardous work as per ILO Convention No. 182. Non-hazardous work is permitted only for children over 15 years of age, while light work is permitted from the age of 12 as per ILO Convention No. 138. Accordingly, non-hazardous work of children under the age of 15 and light work for children under the age of 12 are also to be progressively abolished.

International Standards: Duties Beyond the State

International treaties on children's rights and labor rights address States Parties and their obligations with respect to the protection of children from commercial exploitation. Further to State obligations, however, lies the issue of the duties of private actors, most notably of businesses and institutions that provide financing to businesses, especially in development settings. Child labor in global supply and value chains, including in its worst forms, is an important and ongoing problem that needs to be addressed. Its pervasiveness has been documented in apparel, cotton, mineral,

cocoa, tea, and palm oil supply chains, to name a few (US DoL 2018).

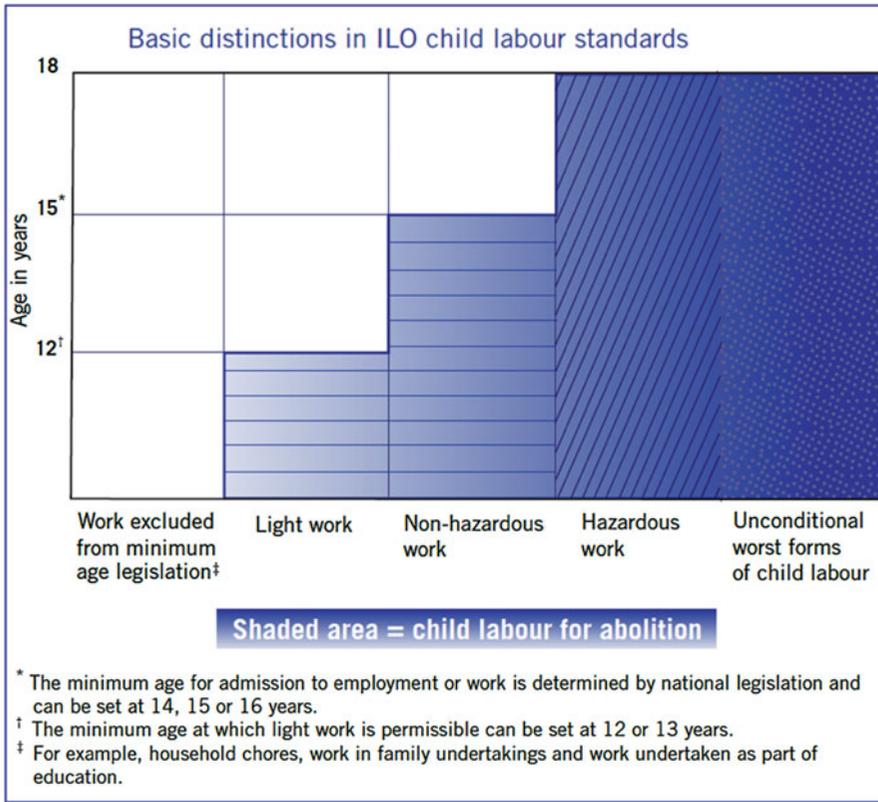
International standards on business conduct with respect to child labor are mostly voluntary commitments and non-binding standards. They are enumerated in various frameworks on business and human rights. They include the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises (OECD Guidelines for MNEs) and the ILO Tripartite Declaration of Principles Concerning MNEs and Social Policy (ILO MNE Declaration) that have been drafted by intergovernmental organizations, as well as the Children's Rights and Business Principles (CRBPs), which was drafted through a collaboration between UNICEF, Save the Children, and UN Global Compact and with the participation of children.

The OECD Guidelines for MNEs and the ILO MNE Declaration were both initially drafted in the 1970s but revised after the adoption of the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs) in 2011 to ensure coherence with the UN Protect, Respect, Remedy Framework and the UNGPs. The UNGPs themselves do not refer to the elimination of child labor or to children's rights explicitly. The UNGPs, however, state that businesses have a responsibility to respect all internationally recognized human rights, meaning – at a minimum – rights expressed in the International Bill of Rights and the ILO's Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work in their operations (UNGP 2011). The protection of children from commercial exploitation is a human right of children recognized in the CRC, and the effective abolition of child labor is included in Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and thus falls within the scope of the responsibility to respect.

The OECD Guidelines refer to a business duty in the context of the effective abolition of child labor, stating that:

Enterprises should, within the framework of applicable law, regulations and prevailing labour relations and employment practices and applicable international labour standards:

[1.] c) Contribute to the effective abolition of child labour, and take immediate and effective



Eradicating Child Labor: Ending Economic Exploitation of Children as an Objective of Sustainable Development, Fig. 1 Basic distinctions in ILO child labour standards. (© Reprinted with permission of the International Labour Organisation). (Source: ILO 2002)

measures to secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour as a matter of urgency. (OECD 2011: Chapter V. Employment and Industrial Relations, Article 1)

The Commentary to the Guidelines refers to the standards contained in ILO Conventions No. 38 and 182 on Minimum Age and the Worst Forms of Child Labour, respectively. Furthermore, it recognizes the positive role businesses can play in eliminating the root causes of poverty and of child labor by offering high-quality and well-remunerated jobs and contributing to growth (OECD 2011). Additionally, the OECD launched “Practical actions for companies to identify and address the worst forms of child labour in mineral supply chains” in 2017, linked to the OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains of Minerals from Conflict-

Affected and High-Risk Areas. The document explains the due diligence steps in addressing the worst forms of child labor in a company’s mineral supply chains: the establishment of company supply chain management systems, risk assessments, response to identified risks, independent third-party audits, and, finally, reporting (OECD 2017).

The ILO MNE Declaration specifically covers issues at the intersection of business and labor rights. The Declaration contains a subsection on the “Effective abolition of child labour: minimum age and worst forms,” which reads:

Multinational enterprises, as well as national enterprises, should respect the minimum age for admission to employment or work in order to secure the effective abolition of child labour and should take immediate and effective measures within their competence to secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour as a matter of urgency. (ILO 2017b: para 27)

Likewise, the CRBPs, which are the only set of standards that directly focus on children's rights in the context of the human rights duties of business, include contribution to the elimination of child labor as one of the ten principles that businesses should respect with regard to children's rights (UNICEF, Save the Children and UN Global Compact 2012).

Businesses undertaking projects funded by development finance institutions also have additional duties as set out by these institutions. Addressing child labor in the workforce of companies borrowing from the International Finance Corporation (IFC) arm of the World Bank has been a part of the IFC's Performance Standards (PSs) since their first adoption in 2006 (IFC 2006). Prior to the adoption of the Performance Standards, the IFC already had a policy statement on the issue of harmful child labor and forced labor, stating that the IFC would not support projects using such practices (IFC 1998). The revised Performance Standards dating from 2012 state that clients "will not employ children in any manner that is economically exploitative, or is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral, or social development" (IFC 2012: PS2, para 21). Clients are tasked with identifying the presence of workers under the age of 18 and to follow national laws regarding the employment of minors, provided that they conduct risk assessments and undertake regular monitoring of conditions of work (IFC 2012). In addition to its standards, the IFC's financial intermediaries cannot finance projects involving harmful child labor, including in microfinance and trade finance projects, as per its Exclusion List (IFC 2007). IFC's Exclusion List has inspired exclusion lists of national development finance institutions and has been standardized by the Association of European Development Finance Institutions into policy stating that "EDFI Members will not finance any activity, production, use, distribution or trade involving [among other things] child labor" (EDFI 2011: para 1).

Preventing the use of all forms of child (and forced) labor is an objective of Environmental and

Social Standard (ESS) 2 of the new World Bank Environmental and Social Framework on Labour and Working Conditions (The World Bank 2017). The requirements under ESS 2 are similar to those under the IFC Performance Standards, stating that no child below the minimum age should be employed or engaged in a World Bank-funded project and that children over the minimum age of employment and under 18 can should only be employed if the work is not hazardous, harmful, or in interference with the child's education after the appropriate risk assessments are conducted beforehand and only if the conditions and hours of work are continuously monitored (The World Bank 2017). Similar standards on child labor are contained in the safeguard mechanisms of regional development finance institutions such as the African Development Bank (AfDB 2013), the Asian Development Bank (ADB 2009), the European Investment Bank (EIB 2009; EIB 2018), the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development (EBRD 2014), and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB 2006).

International Standards: Criticism and Controversies

The seemingly broad consensus on the goal of combatting and eliminating child labor in all its forms, especially by focusing on particular age limits as codified under international law, is not without its critics. Firstly, opponents of minimum age requirements argue that there is evidence that minimum age restrictions do more harm than good by pushing working children further out in to the fringes of the labor market, decreasing working children's visibility, and preventing them from joining labor unions (Bourdillon et al. 2009). These opponents claim that minimum age restrictions have been set without a clear understanding of their impacts on working children. In fact, focusing on restricting employment below minimum age limits instead of improving working conditions for working children may mean that children below a certain age limit are removed from unfavorable working conditions only for several years at best because they find

themselves in the identical bad conditions once they reach the age limit and rejoin the labor force (Bourdillon et al. 2015).

Secondly, child protectionist attitudes espoused in Article 32 of the CRC and particularly in ILO Convention No. 138 that sets blanket restrictions on children's work based on age have been heavily criticized by many working children's organizations in Latin America and Africa based on claims that these protectionist attitudes undercut working children's agency while simultaneously dismissing the value of their work and their possible contributions to the debate on children's work. It has further been contended that the definition of exploitative children has been made without consultation with or participation of children who are actually working. In fact, some working children have been campaigning for the recognition of their right to work and their freedom to make decisions regarding "whether, where, how and how long" they wish to work (Liebel 2012: 225). One notable example is the ongoing debate on children's work in Bolivia, where different working children's organizations such as the Bolivia Union of Working Children and Adolescents (Unión de Niños, Niñas y Adolescentes Trabajadores de Bolivia; UNATSBO) and the Working Adolescents' Association (Asociación Nacional de Adolescentes Trabajadores; ASONATs) jointly claim that the children's right to work should be recognized as a human right and that children's work should not be eradicated but valued as an expression of children's participation in the society (Fontana and Grugel 2015). Some scholars have argued for an alternative to the abolitionist approach to child labor by prioritizing a participatory approach to children's work-related rights that allows children to participate in global norm-making on issues around working conditions and child labor (Hanson and Vandaele 2012).

Thirdly, because international standards combine restrictions based on age (minimum age regulations) with those based on unacceptable conditions of work (the worst forms of child labor), there is a lack of clarity as to how different

distinctions such as light work and hazardous work as outlined in Fig. 1 above are to be defined and implemented in practice. For instance, representatives of working children's organizations in Bolivia believed that sex work performed by children should be classified as crime and not hazardous work as is done by the ILO (Fontana and Grugel 2015).

Finally, blanket prohibitions such as those instated by minimum age restrictions tend to be unproductive unless they are combined with measures that tackle the root causes of exploitative work performed by children and that assist children who leave child labor. Enacting legislation that prohibits child labor and hazardous labor will not lead to the desired changes unless the factors resulting in the participation of children in these activities are eliminated or alternative avenues such as free of charge compulsory schooling are introduced (Pertile 2008). Of course, even in contexts like Bolivia where working children themselves have been demanding a right to work and where there is continued disagreement as regards the different definitions of child labor, there is recognition that the worst forms of child labor must be abolished and that exploitative labor is not acceptable (Fontana and Grugel 2015).

An Agenda for Progressive Elimination of Child Labor: Addressing the Root Causes

The progressive elimination of child labor necessitates addressing its root causes. Global data demonstrates that most child labor takes place in family settings such as on family farms or in family enterprises. Child labor outside of the family setting is, in fact, the exception rather than the rule. Nonetheless, given the sustained high incidence of child labor and its prevalence, children who work outside of the family setting are also not negligible in absolute numbers (ILO 2017a).

Empirical research has shown that working children contribute to household income, sometimes considerably, but the relationship between household income and child labor is not as linear

as it has been assumed to be (Edmonds 2008). Furthermore, contrary to what definitions suggest, child labor does not always result in a negative outcome in terms of educational attainment with education and labor being complements to one another (Basu 1999; Edmonds and Pavcnick 2005; Fors 2012). It is clear, however, that child labor may interfere with education and schooling especially when educational opportunities are too expensive for households to afford, even with the contributions of children from economic activity.

Besides poverty, research demonstrates that perception of low returns of education and the imperfections in credit or land markets impeding parents from borrowing against future earnings or land may contribute to increased incidence of child labor (Fors 2012). While bans and prohibitions do have a role to play in situations where children are abused for commercial benefit, trafficked, or sold, they may be less productive at best and harmful at worst in other settings where child labor takes place (Basu 2008). Without measures to address root causes such as poverty, credit or land market imperfections, and low returns of education in the longer run, blanket bans may have the effect of pushing children into more hazardous or criminal types of labor such as prostitution (Basu 2008; Fors 2012).

Some economists have argued that policy measures that fall short of addressing the root causes of child labor, including the worst forms of child labor, because of a lack of understanding about why and how child labor takes place and continues at the time policy-making. In essence, these scholars have argued that global policy-making has preceded research and that disincentives based on prohibitions do not directly address the root causes that create economic incentives for families to keep children in child labor (Dessy and Pallage 2005). What many economists propose are measures to alleviate poverty and to address market imperfections, such as conditional cash transfers in the form of food-for-education programs that help overcome liquidity constraints for poor families and promote schooling (Dessy and Pallage 2005; Edmonds and Pavcnick 2005).

Recent Global Trends

ILO started tracking child labor statistics globally in 2000 in order to estimate the progress being made in eradicating child labor. Estimates show that from 2000 to 2016, the incidence of child labor, including in hazardous work as well as its prevalence (depicted by percentages of children in child labor and hazardous work globally), has been decreasing steadily over the last two decades. Most important advances have been made in hazardous work, from 170.5 million children in hazardous work in 2000 to approximately 72.5 million children in 2016 (Table 1 and Fig. 2).

Disaggregating the estimates based on age group demonstrates that 5- to 11-year-old children make up nearly half of all children in child labor and nearly a quarter of all children in hazardous work. Furthermore, while rapid progress was made in the 2012–2016 period in the decline of child labor among adolescents aged 15–17, it has been posited that this may be an artificial drop due to the diminishing worldwide demand for young workers above the minimum age in the aftermath of the economic crisis. The claim is strengthened by the fact that child labor decline rates stalled for those between 5 and 11 years of age. Even more worrying is that progress is not uniform and regional discrepancies abound in child labor decline rates. In fact, sub-Saharan Africa experienced a 1% increase in child labor prevalence rates between 2012 and 2016 (ILO 2017a).

If the rates of eradication remain stable over the next years, it is projected that by the year 2025, 121 million children would still be in child labor, of whom 52 million would be in hazardous work. ILO estimates for 2016 also show that reaching SDG target 8.7 of end to child labor in all its forms by the year 2025 requires much faster progress than has already been made in the last two decades (ILO 2017a).

Future Directions

The SDGs paving the way forward toward achieving the ambitious goals set in the 2030 Agenda comprise 17 goals and 169 targets. The

Eradicating Child Labor: Ending Economic Exploitation of Children as an Objective of Sustainable Development, Table 1 The number of children in employment, child labor, and hazardous work (2000–2016)

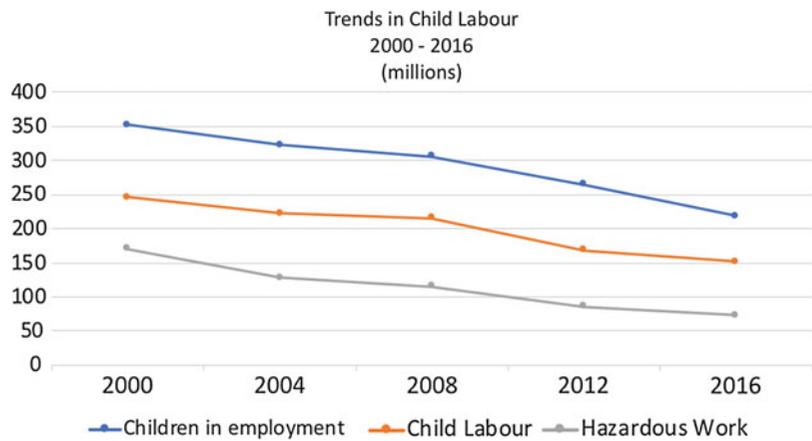
| | Children in employment | | Child labor | | Hazardous work | |
|-------------|------------------------|------|-------------|------|----------------|------|
| | Thousands | % | Thousands | % | Thousands | % |
| 2000 | 351,900 | 23.0 | 245,500 | 16 | 170,500 | 11.1 |
| 2004 | 322,729 | 20.6 | 222,294 | 14.2 | 128,381 | 8.2 |
| 2008 | 305,669 | 19.3 | 215,209 | 13.6 | 115,314 | 7.3 |
| 2012 | 264,427 | 16.7 | 167,956 | 10.6 | 85,344 | 5.4 |
| 2016 | 218,019 | 13.8 | 151,622 | 9.6 | 72,525 | 4.6 |

Source: ILO–IPEC 2013 and 2017

Compiled from the International Labour Office – International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) (2013), and ILO (2017a)

Eradicating Child Labor: Ending Economic Exploitation of Children as an Objective of Sustainable Development, Fig. 2 Trends in child labor.

(Source: ILO–IPEC 2013 and 2017). (Compiled from International Labour Office – International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) 2013, and ILO 2017a)



prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labor and the eventual eradication of all forms of child labor is 1 among these 169 targets. Yet, the issue of children’s exploitation in worst forms of child labor or labor that jeopardizes their well-being is a multifaceted one with implications beyond SDG 8 on Decent Work and Economic Growth. The continued engagement of children in the worst forms of child labor or labor jeopardizing their well-being creates negative outcomes for health (SDG 3), education (SDG 4), gender equality (SDG 5), and global equality (SDG 10). On the other hand, tackling the root causes of child labor that is sought to be eliminated and eradicated, as explored above, is linked to various issues on the SDG agenda such as ending poverty (SDG 1), ending hunger (SDG 2), ensuring access to educational opportunities for children (SDG 4), and promoting peaceful and inclusive societies to prevent conflicts (SDG 16). Thus, whether SDG 8’s

target on the elimination and eradication of child labor will be achieved depends, ultimately, on advances in these other fronts of the SDG agenda as well as on SDG 8.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Child Soldiers](#)
- ▶ [Collective Bargaining Agreements](#)
- ▶ [Corporate Social Responsibility](#)
- ▶ [Employment](#)
- ▶ [Gender Sensitivity](#)
- ▶ [Human Rights Compliance Assessment \(HRCA\)](#)
- ▶ [Informal Employment](#)
- ▶ [International Labour Organization \(ILO\)](#)
- ▶ [Labour Rights; Protection of](#)
- ▶ [Precarious Work](#)
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