



Photo: WFP/Griff Tapper

Food security, nutrition, and ending child labour in agriculture for recovery and resilience

Overview

In a crisis or humanitarian setting, tackling child labour through agriculture, food security and nutrition programming is key for recovery and resilience. Investing in humanity and leaving no one behind will not happen without addressing the fact that an estimated 70 percent of child labour is in agriculture, accounting for some **112 million boys and girls worldwide**.

2021 has been declared the **International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour**, in light of UN Sustainable Development Goal 8.7 aiming to end the unacceptable practice by 2025. However, today we are further away from achieving this than ever, as child labour is only increasing due to **COVID-19**: the outbreak has aggravated humanitarian needs worldwide, affecting millions of children and communities who already live in poor conditions and have scarce means of putting food on the table.

COVID-19 has increased child poverty, pushed children out of education, and reduced nutrition without access to school meals. The pandemic has undermined efforts to achieve zero hunger, **disrupted agricultural and food systems**, and forced children into work to make up for income loss and labour gaps in food and agricultural production caused by movement restrictions. Safeguarding children's food security and ensuring a better future for them is of utmost importance in these difficult times.

Child labour increases during **conflicts, food system crises and climate and natural disasters**. Homes are destroyed, agricultural livelihoods and assets lost, safe food and water put at risk, exposure to diseases and chemicals increase, and access to education is often interrupted. Rural and agricultural communities bear a heavy burden of these crises, with children pushed into labour for survival.

Most child labour worldwide happens in agriculture, which is one of the most hazardous sectors. **Hazardous work is often invisible**, taking place within family units through informal or without contracts. The instability and insecurity caused during crises worsens children's working conditions, for example through exposure to landmines, firearms, pesticides or extreme weather conditions, and can seriously disrupt a child's development.

Child labour involves those below the minimum employment age (14 or 15), and hazardous or mentally, physically, socially or morally harmful work for children (ILO).

Hazardous work examples:

-  Livestock: long hours, isolation, extreme weather
-  Fisheries: risk of drowning, lack of safety equipment
-  Agriculture: exposure to ERW (Explosives Remnants of War) / UXO (Unexploded Ordnance), or toxic substances
-  Forestry: heights, climbing, injuries, heavy loads, violence

Key figures

- **160 million** child labourers worldwide, 8 million more than in 2016: 70% of them, 112 million, work in agriculture.
- **79 million** child labourers are in hazardous work
- **1 in 4:** children (535 million) grow up in areas affected by conflict or natural hazards, where families struggle to provide food, education or protection for children.
- **175 million:** children and young people expected to be affected by disasters each year.
- **420 million:** children living in conflict-affected areas.



COVID-19

- UN estimates that in 2021, **42 million to 66 million children** could fall into extreme poverty and **745,000 could be pushed into child labour** – the first increase since 2000.
- The pandemic has forced **1.6 billion students out of school** – some may never have the chance to go back.
- **370 million** children could no longer rely on school meals during closures, damaging their development and nutrition.

Main drivers



Poverty and food insecurity: poorer households or those with limited employment are less likely to send children to school, often resorting to child labour to meet basic needs. Rural families also have less access to financial and insurance markets, hampering their production and income.



Loss of productive assets: crises can destroy land, livestock, and crops, which in rural and agricultural communities may be the only source of income and subsistence. Rural families who lose their livelihoods can turn to child labour or migrate in search of better opportunities.



Separation and migration: crises can drive internal displacement, refugee movements and migration, removing livelihood opportunities for families who will inevitably resort to child labour to rebuild their livelihoods. Children are often also separated from their families and turn to work to survive.



Lack of education: Children may miss out on school in order to work, but when crises strike education might not even be a possibility – it could be unsafe to go, buildings might be damaged, or there could be no schools where families flee to, inevitably pushing them into work.

Not all tasks undertaken by children in agriculture are considered child labour: age-appropriate tasks can be useful for learning skills or as recreational activities, as well as providing much needed support for families.

Effects

- Child labour deprives generations of education and healthy development, perpetuating a vicious cycle of remaining poor in the future. **Reducing rural poverty** is therefore the starting point for successful strategies to combat child labour, since increasing household income and agricultural productivity can lessen dependence on extra labour or income supplied by children.
- Food systems and food security often rely on children for income and production, yet a **sustainable food system** is one that can be secured for future generations without causing economic, social or environmental harm: child labour is untenable for realizing this.
- The consequences of **child labour, food insecurity, and lack of nutrition hinder recovery and resilience** for children, their families, and entire communities affected by crises.



Integrating child labour prevention into agriculture, food security and nutrition programming is an important part of the solution.

Well-timed interventions for crisis-affected populations can help to **prevent, mitigate, or even eliminate child labour in agriculture**, while strengthening livelihoods and building sustainable and secure food systems.

- Advocate for the prevention of child labour locally, nationally and internationally, accounting for cultural sensitivities.
- Integrate child labour prevention in food security and nutrition emergency preparedness and response and monitoring and evaluation to assess positive and unintended negative impacts of programming.
- Coordinate across humanitarian sectors and actors: food security, livelihoods, child protection, education, health, nutrition, gender-based violence.
- Build capacities of communities, governments, employers, other key stakeholders, providing practical guidance on age-appropriate and safe agricultural work for children.
- Integrate child labour prevention in key institutional processes (evaluations, monitoring, risk assessments, audits).
- Collect and share child labour data (i.e. age, hours of work, tasks, working conditions, school attendance).
- Support livelihoods interventions for decent rural work, including community projects to restore livelihoods, produce more food, and cope with future shocks. Integrate gender responsive, labour-saving technology and practices. Support households and agricultural systems to build resilience and cope with shocks.
- Ensure safeguards are in place in all programmes to prevent child labour, such as mitigation strategies, codes of conduct, prevention of exploitation and abuse, and do no harm.
- Strengthen social cohesion and protection in agricultural areas for those directly and indirectly affected.
- Support access to education and school attendance through school feeding programmes to prevent child labour.