



COVID-19 AND CHILD LABOUR: A TIME OF CRISIS, A TIME TO ACT



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INTRODUCTION

The last two decades have seen significant strides in the fight against child labour. But the COVID-19 pandemic poses very real risks of backtracking.¹ Positive trends may falter, and child labour may worsen, especially in places where it has remained resistant to change. These risks require urgent action to prevent and mitigate the tolls the pandemic takes on children and their families.

The full impacts and length of the crisis, and how different people will fare, remain uncertain. But some of the fallout is already obvious.² The pandemic has increased economic insecurity, profoundly disrupted supply chains and halted manufacturing. Tightening credit is constraining financial markets in many countries. Public budgets are straining to keep up.

When these and other factors result in losses in household income, expectations that children contribute financially can intensify. More children could be forced into exploitative and hazardous jobs. Those already working may do so for longer hours or under worsening conditions. Gender inequalities may grow more acute within families, with girls expected to perform additional household chores and agricultural work.

Temporary school closures may exacerbate these tendencies, as households look for new ways to allocate children's time.





Article 32 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, ILO Convention 182 on the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour and ILO Convention 138 on the Minimum Age of Employment recognize the right of every child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to interfere with the child's education or harm the child's health.

Child labour reinforces intergenerational poverty, threatens national economies and undercuts rights guaranteed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Unlike activities that help a child to develop, such as contributing to housework for a few hours a week or taking on a job during school holidays, child labour interferes with schooling and is harmful to a child's physical, mental, social and/or moral development.³

There is no doubt that the current crisis is dire. At the same time, governments can make choices today that will determine the course and consequences of the pandemic. These choices must include conscious measures to prevent and eliminate child labour.

Where child labour has temporarily subsided due to movement restrictions, for example, opportunities may arise to prevent children from going back to work. Since potentially dramatic cuts in public spending can aggravate children's vulnerability to harmful and exploitative forms of work, deliberate choices can be made to mitigate these risks, such as through extended social protection for poor families.

By reviewing the literature about previous crises and their impact on child labour, this report discusses some of the main channels of influence. Most of these channels are connected, but are presented separately to clarify the issues in each. The discussion is not conclusive. The long-term impacts of the pandemic and the implications for child labour as yet remain unknown. But based on literature and mounting anecdotal evidence, some broad directions are emerging. The report builds on these to conclude with recommended actions that governments can take even at this early stage.



Child labour is the combined product of many factors, such as poverty, social norms condoning it, lack of decent work opportunities for adults and adolescents, migration, and emergencies. It is not only a cause, but also a consequence of social inequities reinforced by discrimination.

Effective action against child labour must address the full range of vulnerabilities that children face, and requires the



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