

Concept note

Background

World Day Against Child Labour 2017 highlights the relationship between conflict and disaster with child labour. Needless to say, children are among the most vulnerable population in conflicts and disaster situations. Around the world, children suffer from both short- and long-term effects on their livelihood and wellbeing due to poverty, malnutrition, and disruption of routines and family life inflicted and/or exacerbated by conflicts and disasters. Furthermore, many may have no choice but to drop out of their education and work for the sake of their family's survival.

Sri Lanka has observed a major decline in the number of children engaged in child labour in the recent decades. Child Activity Survey (2016)¹ reveals that compared to 1999, there was a decline of 89% in the number of working children, 89% decline in the number of children engaged in child labour, and 40% decline in the number of children engaged in hazardous forms of child labour. Nevertheless, out of 4 million child population in Sri Lanka, 103,704 children are engaged in economic activities (2.3% of total child population), 4,707 children are engaged in child labour but not hazardous (0.1%), and 39,007 children are engaged in hazardous forms of child labour (0.9%). Furthermore, the school attendance rate among these children is extremely low, in fact, 41% lower than back in 1999. Other alarming facts on children engaged in child labour are that 36% of them have been exposed to undesirable or unsafe working conditions, including e.g. dust, machines, sharp tools, noise and so forth. Additionally, 70% of working children mentioned that they have suffered injury and illness due to work at least once in their lifetime. However, considering the severe level of underreporting of fatal and non-fatal workplace injuries and illness overall², the extent of psychological and physical harm suffered by working children is most likely far beyond what is known.

The civil conflict in Sri Lanka has made a critical, indirect and direct impact on children through e.g. underage recruitment of children as soldiers and poverty has pushed them out of school and left them with no other choice but to work. Though the exact extent is unknown,³ past research⁴ and Roadmap 2016 on Worst Forms of Child Labour⁵ suggest that child labour in the present day is one of the legacies of the civil conflict.

The tsunami in 2014 and more recent flooding and drought in 2016/2017 underscore that Sri Lanka is not immune to natural disasters. Literature⁶ suggests that children in coastal region were most susceptible to child labour and abuse post-tsunami. According to a recent assessment⁷ on the impact of drought on child welfare, 4% of the children surveyed were taken out of school and prompted around 40% of parents in Mannar and Vavuniya, Northern Province, to reduce their spending on education. Though the exact extent to which these natural disasters have amplified the susceptibility

¹ Department of Census & Statistics, 2016. Report on Child Activity Survey 2016 Sri Lanka, Colombo, Sri Lanka: Ministry of National Policies and Economic Affairs.

² International Labour Organization, 2017. Optimize the collection and use of OSH data. Colombo, Sri Lanka, International Labour Organization.

³ Child Activity Survey (2016) was the first census to cover both Northern and Eastern Provinces. Child Activity Survey (1999) excluded data on both Northern and Eastern Provinces. The Survey conducted in 2008/2009 excluded data on the Northern Province whilst covered the Eastern province.

⁴ Remnant, F., Abdul Cader, A. & Coull, J., 2008. Child Poverty in Sri Lanka, Colombo, Sri Lanka: Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA).

⁵ Ministry of Labour Relations and Productivity Promotio & International Labour Organization, 2010. Sri Lanka's Roadmap 2016 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour: From Commitment to Action, Colombo, Sri Lanka: International Labour Organization.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ministry of Disaster Management & United Nations World Food Programme, 2017. Sri Lanka: Joint Assessment of Drought Impact on Food Security and Livelihoods, Colombo, Sri Lanka: World Food Programme.

of children to child labour is unknown, it is needless to say that greater resilience needs to be built among vulnerable households.

Child labour violates the international law and conventions. Sri Lanka has ratified Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Optional Protocol on Children in Armed Conflict, ILO Convention No. 182 on Elimination of Worst Forms of Child Labour and Convention No. 138 on Minimum Age. However, in order for Sri Lanka to be able to declare itself as child labour free country and ensure that children can remain children upon any circumstances, further consolidated effort needs to be taken.