



► Child labour in the Republic of Serbia

► Introduction

This policy brief provides an overview of the child labour situation in the Republic of Serbia, presenting key findings, conclusions and recommendations derived from multiple sources. These include the [2021 Serbia Child Labour Survey](#), the [Rapid Assessment of Child Labour in the Streets of Serbia](#), and an assessment of existing policies and legislative frameworks pertaining to child labour in Serbia. The assessment also includes an analysis of the progress made in implementing

Serbia [Roadmap to Eliminate Child Labour including its Worst Forms 2018–2022](#) (henceforth referred to as the Roadmap). The draft findings were discussed and reviewed with relevant stakeholders during an event held on 12 June 2023 in Belgrade to commemorate the World Day against Child Labour. Valuable insights gathered from these consultations have been incorporated in this policy brief.

► Key findings on child labour in Serbia

The strategic and legislative framework in Serbia is largely in line with international standards and definitions of child labour. Over the past years, progress has been made in enhancing legislation and strategic frameworks, and in strengthening the capacity of institutions involved in combatting child labour through the implementation of the Roadmap. The implementation of the Roadmap has been slowed down by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as by delays in reforms, particularly in the areas of social welfare and labour. Despite institutions fulfilling their administrative obligations, the desired impact has not been achieved. The prevalence and structure of child labour in Serbia have remained largely unchanged in recent years.

Despite the existence of a legal framework, mechanisms and procedures, child labour continues to jeopardize the well-being of numerous children. Engaging in work, children often neglect their education or drop out of school, significantly reducing their chances of breaking free from poverty. Their exclusion from the education system can further push them towards street work and life, resulting in severe developmental and psychological consequences. Inadequate care, unmet needs, family conflicts,

dysfunction, and a lack of support in learning and other activities further contribute to insecurity, anxiety, emotional instability and other psychological problems.

Approximately 9.5 per cent of children aged 5 to 17 are engaged in child labour in Serbia, with the highest rates among children aged 12 to 14 (15.1 per cent). Boys are more involved in child labour than girls, as well as children from non-urban areas. The highest rate of child labour is observed in the Šumadija and Western Serbia regions. The majority of children work in agriculture (over 50 per cent) and the services sector (around 40 per cent). In general, child labour is more prevalent in households with lower incomes. The largest proportion of children engage in work activities to supplement their family income (43.8 per cent) or to acquire specific skills (38 per cent). Other reasons for child labour include assisting in a family business, aiding in the repayment of family debts, or a lack of interest in school.

In addition, approximately 36 per cent of households in substandard Roma settlements have children working on the streets.

► Key conclusions on the process of eliminating child labour in Serbia

The coordination of Roadmap implementation has been weak, primarily conducted at a technical level through the activities of the Council for the Rights of the Child, which has ceased functioning since the beginning of 2022. It is crucial for the Government and relevant stakeholders to reach a consensus on the institution that will take a proactive role in coordinating and monitoring efforts to combat child labour.

Furthermore, there is a lack of centralized monitoring of child labour phenomena, as no institution is assigned the responsibility for comprehensive and regular monitoring of child labour issues. To ensure an effective implementation process, it is essential to address and eliminate gaps in monitoring and reporting. Recognizing child labour on the streets as a distinct issue requiring targeted interventions is crucial.

The consultations with relevant stakeholders have indicated the lack of harmonization among various sectors' legislative solutions, emphasizing the need for alignment in future reform processes. It is essential to analyse compliance with regulations in the Republic of Serbia regarding child work and child labour. Also, there is limited awareness of intersectoral regulations among relevant stakeholders, indicating weak intersectoral collaboration during the implementation process of the Roadmap. Weaknesses in collaboration between institutions are particularly evident at local level.

Inspections conducted by labour, social welfare and education authorities have not been sufficiently effective in identifying child labour cases, and addressing child labour incidents in street environments continues to pose challenges. In recent years, the education system has made progress in preventing dropouts, but it still lacks the ability to identify cases of child labour. Similarly, although the social welfare system has developed tools to identify child labour, these tools are not yet highly effective. The issue of child labour often intersects with other forms of child neglect such as violence, poverty and safety, which receive priority attention from institutions. As a result, the number of child labour cases remains underreported by the relevant institutions.

There is a scarcity of available services and support measures for children and families affected by registered child labour exploitation, particularly those involved in street labour. The absence of dedicated support measures, including social welfare services that can serve as a safety net, exacerbates the problem of child labour. To effectively address the issue of the worst forms of child labour, it is essential to establish

enhanced social services that can provide appropriate assistance to both families and children. This can involve the implementation of specialized interventions such as family outreach social services (*porodični saradnik*) and drop-in centre social services.

Strengthening the centres for social work (CSW) is crucial for an effective fight against child labour in Serbia. The CSWs play a vital role within the social welfare system and should be at the forefront of combatting child labour. However, without enhancing the capacities of the centres through measures such as increasing the number of qualified professionals (*case managers*) and improving the competences of the CSW staff, significant improvements in the social welfare system's response to protect children engaged in child labour cannot be achieved.

To effectively involve employers in reducing child labour cases through the implementation of a law on due diligence in supply chains in Germany and the new Corporate sustainability due diligence directive of the European Union, there is a need for close monitoring of EU decisions and policies in this regard. Increasing awareness among employers, especially exporters, about these EU-level changes (via Serbian Association of Employers and the Serbian Chamber of Commerce) is necessary. Furthermore, it is important to encourage non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to report instances of child labour by employers, thereby contributing to a decrease in the overall number of child labour cases.

Last but not least, public awareness regarding child labour issues in Serbia remains low. It is crucial to recognize the significant role of families and caregivers as vital allies in the fight against child labour, particularly its worst forms, especially when institutional efforts prove insufficient in reducing its prevalence. Prejudices and misunderstandings about the detrimental impact of child labour on children and their development contribute to these misconceptions. To address this, conducting national campaigns to eradicate child labour and regularly disseminating information and brochures about child labour issues are essential steps in raising awareness and mobilizing public support. Additionally, prioritizing the promotion of good practice examples and increasing the involvement of civil society organizations, including Roma civil society organizations (CSOs), should be a focus in this regard.

► Recommendations for future actions in eliminating child labour

Recommendations for enhancing coordination and monitoring

- Progress in eradicating child labour in Serbia requires strengthening implementation mechanisms, monitoring functions and reporting.
- Prior to commencing the development of a new Roadmap, it is crucial to establish consensus on an institution that will proactively assume the role of coordination of the Roadmap implementation process (potential partners suggested are the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs or the Ministry for Family Care and Demography or the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, or the Republic Secretariat for Public Policies).
- The coordination process should involve regular meetings among relevant institutions responsible for ongoing work, periodic (every two years) reports on the implementation of the new Roadmap, and regular (every three years) surveys on child labour conducted by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia.
- Efforts should also focus on standardizing the reporting system on child labour across different sectors and enhancing the quality of data collection in areas such as social welfare and education.

Recommendations for enhancing public policies

- Integrate child labour issues into relevant strategic documents, including the Social Welfare Strategy, Education Development Action Plan, and the Strategy to Combat Violence, among others.
- To prevent fragmentation in local strategic planning and alleviate the burden on limited local capacities, it is crucial to mainstream principles and measures for preventing child labour into local plans, strategies and protocols.
- Adopt the regulations outlined in the previous Roadmap and continue improving the legislative framework, including the Labour Law, Family Law, Regulation on Hazardous Work, and List of Light Work.
- Regulate and prevent child labour in multiple sectors, such as performing arts, culture, agriculture, sports and recreational activities, youth cooperatives, advertising, social media, volunteering and household work.
- Conduct an analysis of compliance with regulations in the Republic of Serbia regarding child work and child labour.
- Legal and strategic priority should be given to efforts aimed at preventing violence against children, child labour in agriculture, and child labour in households in the fight against child labour.



Recommendations for enhancing the institutional framework

- Strengthen centres for social welfare (CSW) by increasing the number of case managers and enhancing employee capacity.
- Optimize the role of schools in identifying child labour and preventing school dropout.
- Standardize and ensure regular funding for family outreach services.
- Secure consistent public funding for drop-in centre services in major cities across the country, including Belgrade, Nis, Novi Sad, Kragujevac and Vranje.
- Develop collaborative mechanisms among schools, local authorities and CSWs to address suspected cases of child labour.
- Utilize existing support mechanisms in the healthcare and education systems, such as healthcare mediators and educational assistants.
- Leverage the expanding network and responsibilities of municipal police in local self-governments to actively contribute to the fight against child labour.
- Organize biannual peer-review meetings to facilitate the exchange of experiences and good practices in eliminating child labour, along with joint training sessions for relevant inspections in areas such as labour, social welfare, education and agriculture.

Recommendations for enhancing public awareness

- Conduct campaigns that raise awareness about the severe consequences of the worst forms of child labour and promote good practices aiming to eliminate child labour.
- Improve the dissemination of information to professionals from various sectors, emphasizing the importance of identifying cases of child labour.
- Conduct training programmes for local self-governments on preventing and eliminating child labour, facilitated through networks and committees of the Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities.
- Encourage increased involvement of civil society organizations (CSOs) in eliminating child labour by supporting the establishment of CSO networks dedicated to preventing child labour. Specifically, greater participation of Roma CSOs should be encouraged to combat child labour effectively.
- In addition, it is crucial to promote increased involvement of employers in addressing child labour issues by adopting international practices, such as the supply chain legislation implemented in Germany and at the EU level. It is essential to raise awareness among employers, particularly exporters, about legal changes at the EU level, utilizing platforms such as employer associations such as the Serbian Chamber of Commerce. Furthermore, it is important to encourage CSOs to report cases of child labour involving employers, as their active involvement can contribute to a reduction in the overall number of child labour incidents.

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