International Labour Organization | ACCEL Africa

Community-led awareness and monitoring to eliminate child labour - The COTU-Kenya model

Good practices

Responds to the following criteria

- Innovative
- Replicable
- Effectiveness
- Impact

Main stakeholders

- Central Organization of Trade Unions – Kenya (COTU-K)
- Affiliate trade unions
- Community-Based Child Labour Committees (LCLCs)
- Employers and industry bodies
- Schools and education authorities

Description

The Central Organization of Trade Unions–Kenya (COTU-K), together with its affiliates, has developed and implemented a robust, community-rooted model to combat child labour in high-risk regions of Kenya. Grounded in local ownership and supported by structured monitoring, this good practice combines two interlinked pillars—awareness and monitoring—as mutually reinforcing strategies to prevent, identify, and eliminate child labour in agricultural and informal sectors, particularly in sugarcane, tea, coffee, and domestic work.

The initiative emerged in response to the prevalence of child labour in Kenya, despite the country's ratification of ILO Conventions 138 and 182 and the enactment of national laws such as the Children's Act (2022) and Employment Act (2007). In many rural and informal settings, child labour is often normalized as a cultural practice or economic necessity. Recognizing this, COTU-K's strategy aims to dismantle these perceptions by engaging entire communities—trade unionists, parents, teachers, local leaders, faith-based actors, and even former child labourers—through targeted sensitization and education campaigns. Community awareness initiatives have been carried out in known child labour hotspots like Chemelil, Muhoroni, Nambale, and Ruiru, using culturally appropriate platforms such as barazas, union meetings, radio broadcasts, and workplace trainings.

What makes this approach particularly effective is the simultaneous rollout of local child labour committees (LCLCs), which serve as grassroots watchdogs. These committees are trained to detect cases of child labour, refer children for school reintegration, and support alternative livelihoods for affected families. COTU-K also developed and distributed practical monitoring tools, such as workplace child labour checklists, community monitoring forms, and special school attendance registers that flag absenteeism patterns linked to seasonal work demands. These tools provide an evidence base for targeted interventions and allow for early detection of child labour risks.

Furthermore, the initiative extends into workplaces, where union representatives are trained to educate workers on the impacts of child labour, including how it undermines adult job opportunities. With the support of the Kenya Union of Sugar Plantation and Allied Workers (KUSPAW) and other affiliates, COTU-K has also influenced the content of Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs) to include child protection clauses, holding employers accountable and embedding child labour prevention into formal employment structures.

Process

Identification of high-risk areas and stakeholder mapping	COTU-K and its affiliate unions began by identifying regions with a high prevalence of child labour, particularly in the sugarcane, tea, coffee, and domestic work sectors. Areas such as Chemelil, Muhoroni, Nambale, Ruiru, and Kiambu were prioritized. Stakeholders including trade unionists, teachers, local chiefs, religious leaders, parents, youth representatives, and community elders were mapped to ensure a multi-actor engagement.
Formation of local child labour committees (LCLCs)	Local Child Labour Committees were formed in each hotspot community. These committees included trade union representatives, local government authorities, teachers, police officers, village elders, and faith leaders. Their role was to act as the community's frontline mechanism for identifying child labour cases, referring children to education or protection services, and raising awareness through community forums.
Community awareness and education campaigns	Through a mix of grassroots outreach and national messaging, COTU-K carried out sustained awareness campaigns. This included organizing community barazas (public meetings), distributing banners and flyers, and training former child labourers to act as peer educators. Workplace-based education was also prioritized—over 600 stewards in sugar plantations and 1,500 workers in tea and coffee estates were trained on how child labour displaces adult employment and violates children's rights.
Development and Deployment of Monitoring Tools	To formalize and strengthen monitoring, COTU-K developed a suite of user-friendly tools. These included child labour checklists for use by shop stewards, monitoring forms for community representatives, and standardized school attendance registers to detect absenteeism during peak harvest or market days. These tools enabled early identification of vulnerable children and provided a clear mechanism for documenting and reporting cases.
Integration of child protection in collective bargaining agreements (CBAs)	Trade union negotiators were trained to incorporate child labour provisions into CBAs. Clauses typically included a strict prohibition on the employment of persons under 18, monitoring responsibilities, and provisions for supporting workers' children's school attendance (e.g. flexible scheduling during exams). Private employers, and the Kenya Tea Growers Association adopted these clauses, reinforcing accountability.
Multi-stakeholder coordination and joint inspections	COTU-K coordinated joint monitoring visits with labour officers, social workers, and local authorities to child labour hotspots. These inspections not only supported enforcement but also opened dialogue platforms between unions, government, and employers. In domestic work sectors, unions like KUDHEIHA advocated for inspection access in private homes—a typically hidden area of child labour.
Promotion of alternative livelihoods for affected families	Recognizing that child labour is often driven by poverty, COTU-K supported families with income-generating initiatives. Parents of child labour victims were supported to run canteens near factory sites, lease land for farming, or join women-led cooperatives. Seed capital and skills training were provided to boost household income and reduce dependency on child labour.

Process

Documentation, learning, and scale-up

Throughout implementation, union branches and committees maintained logbooks and reporting templates to document cases, trends, and follow-ups. This data was used to refine interventions, develop training manuals in local languages, and expand the model to other regions. Lessons learned were shared through national union networks to encourage replication.

Enabling factors

Supportive legal and policy framework

Kenya's ratification of ILO Conventions 138 and 182, along with national legislation such as the Employment Act (2007) and the Children's Act (2022), provided a strong legal basis for action. This alignment with international and domestic law gave legitimacy to union-led monitoring and empowered stakeholders to hold employers and community members accountable.

Nationally recognized trade union federation with an extensive grassroots network

Trade Unions presence across sectors and regions meant that it could mobilize affiliate unions, community members, and local leaders with credibility and trust. This grassroots reach allowed interventions to be locally led and culturally appropriate, ensuring ownership and sustainability.

Community buy-in and multi-stakeholder engagement

The creation of Local Child Labour Committees (LCLCs) that brought together chiefs, police officers, teachers, religious leaders, and even former child labourers fostered collective responsibility and transformed child labour from a hidden issue to a community concern. These committees acted as both watchdogs and educators, creating a protective ecosystem around children.

Tailored tools and training materials

The development of checklists, logbooks, school registers, and training manuals in English and Kiswahili enabled widespread and consistent application across regions. The tools were practical, user-friendly, and adapted to the field realities of both workplace and community actors.

Strong partnerships with government authorities and employers

By working with labour officers and social workers, the unions could link community reports to formal enforcement mechanisms. Meanwhile, the inclusion of child protection clauses in Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs) gave the model a formal, legal edge and encouraged employer accountability—especially as companies sought to meet Fair Trade and due diligence standards.

Addressing the root economic drivers of child labour

Poverty and lack of opportunity are at the heart of child labour in many Kenyan communities. By providing seed capital, supporting women-led cooperatives, and promoting income-generating activities like canteens and farm leasing, the initiative reduced families' reliance on children's earnings and fostered long-term resilience.