



► Eliminating child labour and improving occupational safety and health

The role of cooperative development in the coffee and tea supply chains in Uganda

May 2025

► An overview of research findings

This brief summarizes the findings of an assessment conducted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) on the current and potential role of cooperatives in supporting their members to prevent and eliminate child labour and improve occupational safety and health (OSH) in Uganda's coffee and tea supply chains, with a focus on women's empowerment. It also provides recommendations for national and sectoral ILO constituents and other stakeholders on strengthening cooperatives to play a more active role in promoting decent work.¹

The ILO mandate

As recognized in the [ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work](#),² the elimination of child labour,³ the right to a safe and healthy working environment,⁴ and the elimination of discrimination at work are universal human rights. These rights are essential for human dignity, and well-being, and they form the foundation of inclusive and just societies. They are inseparable, interrelated, and mutually reinforcing.⁵

A cooperative is defined as “an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise.”⁶ Efficient member-based organizations such as cooperatives play a vital role in improving working conditions within their enterprises and at the community level. This is particularly important in rural areas, where agriculture is a dominant economic activity, and public services are often limited.⁷

Cooperatives have the potential to be key drivers in promoting OSH, non-discrimination, and the prevention and elimination of child labour within agricultural supply chains. Often connecting producers with buyers, cooperatives can leverage their structure, economies of scale, and proximity to community members to ensure that agricultural products are grown and harvested under decent work conditions.

1 The assessment was jointly conducted by the ILO's [ACCEL Africa Project Phase 2](#), the [CLEAR supply chains project](#), the [Vision Zero Fund](#), and the [Cooperative, Social and Solidarity Economy Unit](#).

2 See: [ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its follow-up](#), adopted in 1998 and amended in 2022.

3 Child labour is defined as work that is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children, and that interferes with their schooling by depriving them of the opportunity to attend school, obliging them to leave school prematurely, or requiring them to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work. The prevention and elimination of child labour are anchored in the ILO Minimum Age for Admission to Employment Convention, 1973 (No. 138), the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182), and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. These international legal instruments emphasize freedom from child labour as a human right and the elimination of child labour as a universal and fundamental value.

4 This means that every worker has the right to be protected from hazards and risks that may cause injury, illness or death in the workplace. See: ILO, [A safe and healthy working environment is a fundamental principle and right at work](#), 2022.

5 See: ILO, [Resolution concerning the third recurrent discussion on fundamental principles and rights at work](#), 14 June 2024.

6 See: ILO Recommendation of the Promotion of Cooperatives, 2002 (No. 193) and the [International Cooperative Alliance \(ICA\) Statement on the Cooperative Identity](#), 1995.

7 See: FAO, [Agricultural cooperatives and gender equality](#), 2012.

Although data is limited, existing research underscores the important role agricultural cooperatives can play in reducing child labour. Membership in cooperatives has been shown to help decrease reliance on child labour by mitigating income volatility and improving farm livelihoods.⁸

Coffee and tea grower cooperatives in Uganda

The cooperative movement has been active in Uganda for over a century. Over the past 15 years, it has grown significantly.⁹ By September 2024, Uganda had 45,948 cooperatives registered with the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Cooperatives (MTIC), the government institution responsible for overseeing the cooperative sector in accordance with the Cooperative Society Act of 1991.¹⁰ Among the registered cooperatives, 888 operated in the coffee supply chain, while 38 were involved in the tea supply chain.

In 2024, the ILO published a study which highlights coffee as a vital crop for Uganda's society and economy.¹¹ It is produced across most districts in Uganda, supporting livelihoods for around 12 million people.

In the 2019-20 season, 23 per cent of coffee farmers were members of organized farmer groups or cooperative societies. These cooperatives provide members with access to inputs, financing and training, and may also facilitate direct commercial relationships with exporters.¹²

The same ILO study indicates that several coffee exporters in Uganda seek to establish direct buying relationships with cooperatives, which are considered more efficient and consistent in quality than traders. About half of exporters' buying transactions are with cooperatives, and the other half with traders.¹³ Currently, around 50 per cent of Uganda's coffee production is sold through organized producer groups or cooperative societies.¹⁴

In 2023, the ILO published another study which indicates that Uganda's tea production operates under two main models: (i) companies that own large plantations, process the tea in factories and are responsible for marketing; and

(ii) outgrowers on family farms who sell their tea leaves to the large companies. Close to 80,000 farming households are involved in tea production, which supports over 200,000 skilled and unskilled workers.¹⁵

Child labour in the Ugandan coffee and tea supply chains

The 2023 ILO study included a child labour survey conducted in the districts of Mbale, Buikwe, Kikuube, Kabarole, and Bushenyi. Findings confirmed the presence of child labour in Uganda's coffee and tea supply chains, with some forms being visible while others were disguised as family work or described as "children assisting parents."

The study found that the prevalence of child labour varied significantly between the two sectors. In the coffee supply chain, child labour ranged between 20 and 75 per cent, depending on location, whereas in the tea sector, it ranged between 5 and 10 per cent. This disparity is largely due to the seasonal nature of coffee production and its longer supply chain. In contrast, the tea supply chain operates year-round with fewer actors.

The study also noted that most children engaged in the coffee and tea sectors performed casual farm and off-farm work, particularly those aged 5–14 years. Among older children (15–17 years), there was a broader range of work activities. Farm tasks mainly involved weeding, harvesting, and planting. Over 70 per cent of children surveyed reported participating in these activities, with higher involvement in coffee than in tea. The study further revealed that 83 per cent of children in coffee and 58 per cent in tea worked for five or more hours per day. Additionally, 14 per cent of children in coffee and 13 per cent in tea were found to be involved in hazardous activities such as spraying pesticides.

Most children in these sectors worked primarily for their parents – 77 per cent in coffee and 79 per cent in tea. Child labour hiring was significantly higher in coffee-growing households (45 per cent) compared to tea-growing households (16 per cent). A gender breakdown showed that male-headed households were more likely than female-headed households to hire child labour.¹⁶

8 A 2016 study by the Understanding Children's Work (UCW) project found that child labour among farm households belonging to agricultural cooperatives in Rwanda was about one-third lower than in other farm households, even when controlling for other household characteristics. See: Understanding Children's Work Project (UCW), *Farm cooperatives, household vulnerability and agricultural child labour in Rwanda - Policy appraisal*, 2016. See also: ILO, *Ending child labour by 2025: A review of policies and programmes*, 2018.

9 As of February 2020, the cooperative movement in Uganda comprised 21,346 registered cooperative societies. In January 2011, it accounted for 10,746 registered societies. For more information, see: ICA, *Mapping: Key figures - Uganda*, 2020.

10 The Cooperative Societies Regulations provide detailed guidelines for the governance and management of cooperatives in Uganda. The cooperative structure is hierarchical: primary cooperative societies at the base, followed by cooperative unions and then the national apex organization, the Uganda Cooperative Alliance (UCA). UCA is formed by unions while unions are formed by primary cooperatives.

11 ILO, *Mapping the coffee value chain in Uganda*, 2024. Coffee is produced across most districts in Uganda, supporting livelihoods for around 12 million people.

12 Ibid.

13 Nalunga 2021, cited in ILO, *Mapping the coffee value chain in Uganda*, 2024.

14 UCDA 2021a; Rainforest Alliance 2021; Nalunga 2021, and IDH 2020, cited in ILO, *Mapping the coffee value chain in Uganda*, 2024.

15 ILO, *Identifying productive strategies for inclusion and economic empowerment in the eradication and prevention of child labour in Uganda: Mapping and analysis of the coffee and tea supply chains*, 2023.

16 Contributing factors include deficits in other elements of decent work; lack of access to OSH services (such as hazard identification, measurement and control; occupational health services; OSH training); employment status; working conditions (especially working hours and wage structure); lack of effective social protection coverage; and level of organization – not only of workers, but also of employers and producers.

Occupational safety and health in the Ugandan coffee and tea supply chains

In agricultural plantations, the prevention and management of OSH risks are still in their early stages. Producers and workers face numerous OSH hazards, such as working on sloping landscapes, which increases the risk of falls and fractures, and lifting sacks of coffee, sometimes weighing up to 100 kilograms, which can result in hernias. They are also exposed to psychosocial risk factors including long working hours and job insecurity.

Specific groups of workers face additional challenges to occupational safety and health, as they are more likely to be exposed to occupational hazards and have a low capacity to cope with the consequences of such exposure. Such factors include other key elements of decent work, such as: (i) effective access to OSH services (e.g. hazard identification, measurement and control; occupational health services; OSH training); (ii) working conditions (e.g. long working hours, wage structure); (iii) effective social protection coverage (especially branches that have an impact on OSH, e.g. health protection, sickness benefits, employment injury and maternity benefits); or (iv) level of organization of employers, workers, and producers.

Women, in particular, often shoulder a double or triple workload and are at higher risk of violence and harassment in the workplace. When accidents occur, workers often downplay their severity and, when medical services are available – which is often not the case – they do not seek professional medical attention.¹⁷

Methodology

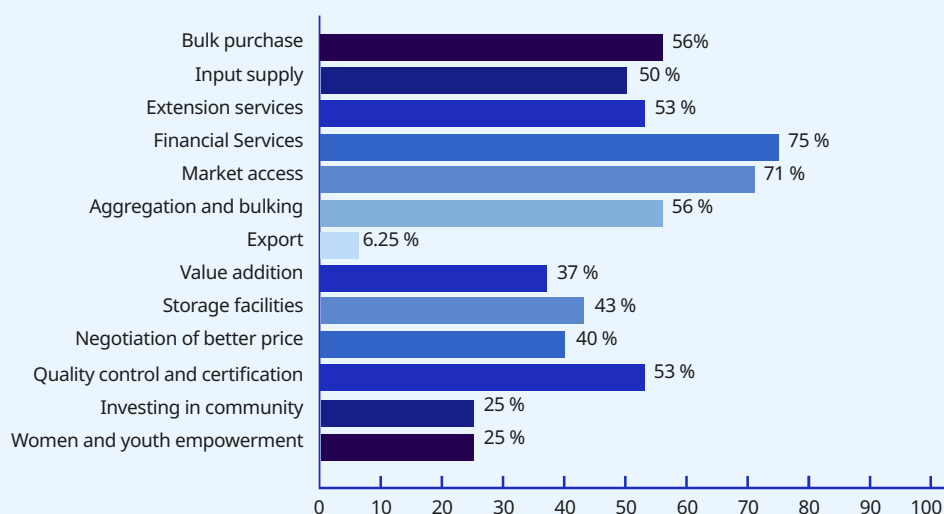
The ILO assessment focused on 32 coffee and tea farmer organizations and cooperatives from the districts of Mbale, Sironko, Bulambuli, Manafwa, Masaka, Kalungu, Kabarole, Hoima and Kikuube, representing a total membership of 15,280 producers and farmers (8,517 men and 6,763 women).¹⁸ In addition, interviews were conducted with 63 key informants from national and district level government ministries, employers' and workers' organizations, and relevant partners.

Research findings

Cooperatives' structure, governance and services

Half of the cooperatives interviewed reported having **leadership structures** that supported effective decision-making and management. A similar proportion engaged in **bulk purchasing**, enabling members to **negotiate better prices** for essential inputs like seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides. These cooperatives also implemented **quality control measures** to meet **market standards** and enhance competitiveness. In terms of **skills development**, 53 per cent provided training on modern agricultural practices, financial literacy and business management. Many also facilitated mentorship opportunities to promote knowledge sharing and good practices. While 75 per cent had savings and credit schemes, offering access to affordable loans, only 25 per cent engaged in **social initiatives** benefiting the wider community, such as health programmes, educational support, and infrastructure development. Sixteen per cent had special programmes for women focused on financial services.

► Graph 1. What types of services are cooperatives providing to their members?



Source: ILO elaboration.

¹⁷ For more information on OSH in the coffee supply chain, see: ILO, *Improving OSH in coffee supply chains: A toolkit for action*, 2021.

¹⁸ The assessment covered 16 coffee cooperatives, 6 tea cooperatives, and 10 cooperatives involved in both coffee and tea.

Child labour

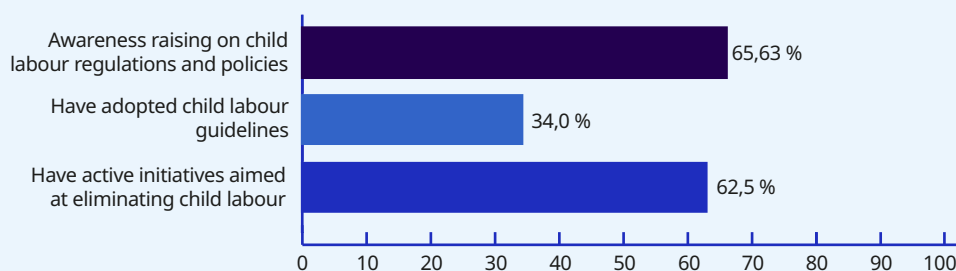
Uganda has adopted laws and policies to combat child labour. In some cases, cooperatives have responded accordingly, setting up structures to support their members in preventing and addressing child labour. Cooperatives implement programmes to raise awareness and provide training to members and the wider community on the risks associated with child labour, develop guidelines, and monitor child labour in collaboration with local governments.

During interviews with cooperatives and their members, respondents identified key challenges faced by the coffee and tea sectors in efforts to eliminate child labour. These include: (i) high levels of poverty in coffee- and tea-growing regions (78 per cent of respondents); (ii) lack of knowledge (72 per cent); (iii) cultural norms (19 per cent); and (iv) weak enforcement of child labour laws (13 per cent).

Findings revealed that cooperative members often lack awareness of government regulations or cooperative-led programmes to address child labour. Several cooperative leaders said they were unaware of programmes specifically designed for this purpose.

In addition, some cooperative members did not fully understand the long-term harmful effects of child labour on children and their communities. They did not appear to fully recognize the value of education or understand the importance of complying with child labour laws, in some cases due to practices rooted in local cultural perceptions. Cooperative leaders noted that efforts to engage parents in prevention initiatives often faced resistance, as parents viewed child labour as an economic necessity. This perception makes it difficult for cooperatives to implement meaningful interventions in this area.

► Graph 2. Organizational involvement of cooperatives in the elimination of child labour



Source: ILO elaboration.

Women's empowerment



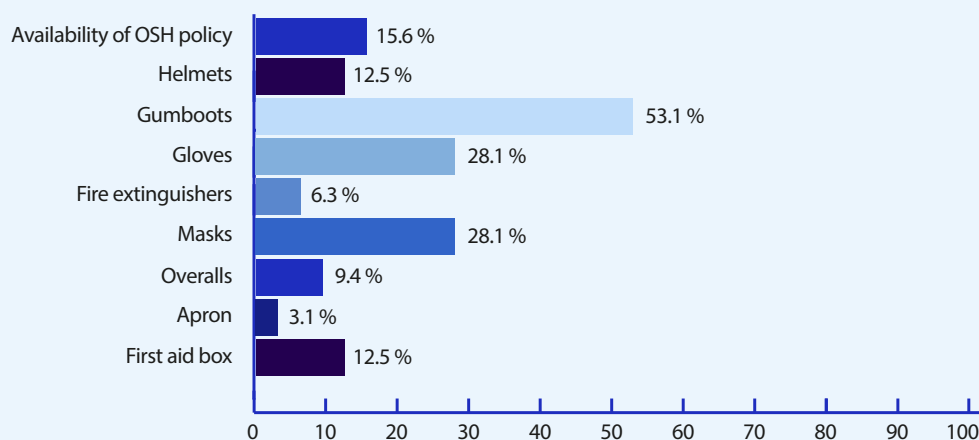
Female coffee worker, Bukomasimbi, Uganda. © ILO, November 2023.

Women represented 44 per cent of the members in the 32 cooperatives and farmer groups assessed. Among these cooperatives:

- 72 per cent ensured that women held positions within cooperative management, and 41 per cent of management positions were filled by women (95 out of 234 positions). In 12.5 per cent of cooperatives, the position of treasurer was reserved for women, reflecting a deliberate effort to increase their representation.
- 34 per cent reported having adopted a gender policy.
- 16 per cent implemented programmes to support women's empowerment.

Women in these cooperatives were involved in various activities, including member mobilization, training of new members – particularly women – selling coffee, inducting new members, advising committees, and overseeing quality control, such as sorting and drying coffee. Despite these advancements, there remains room for further improvement.

► **Graph 3. What safety equipment are cooperatives providing their members?**



Source: ILO elaboration.

Occupational safety and health (OSH)

Interviews revealed that only 25 per cent of cooperatives were aware of the Occupational Safety and Health Act, 2006.¹⁹ Key informants noted that the government's capacity to enforce OSH standards is limited, and cooperatives often lack the resources to provide support. Only 12.5 per cent of cooperatives reported ever receiving a visit from the Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development.

Both cooperatives and their members demonstrated low awareness of OSH issues. When asked about OSH, nearly half of the cooperatives associated it solely with the provision or use of personal protective equipment (PPE), indicating a limited understanding of OSH management systems. As a result, OSH is often perceived as a "cost." Given the challenges of low yields and fluctuating coffee prices, investing in safety equipment or improved tools is not considered a priority. In some districts, traditional farming practices further contributed to the neglect of OSH, with little recognition of the long-term implications for workers' health. Cooperatives also cited financial and human resource constraints as significant barriers to implementing OSH programmes, with insufficient knowledge and lack of funding being the most frequently mentioned challenges.

However, 15.6 per cent of cooperatives reported having adopted an OSH policy, and many mentioned providing some form of safety equipment to their members.

Conclusions and recommendations

Addressing challenges related to child labour and OSH requires collective action from multiple stakeholders, including national and district level governments, employers' and workers' organizations, international organizations, NGOs, cooperatives, partner organizations and communities.

Given their strong presence, cooperatives can play a crucial role in advancing fundamental labour rights and improving working conditions in Uganda's coffee and tea supply chains. As value-based and principle-driven organizations, cooperatives are well positioned to promote respect for fundamental principles and rights at work among their members, engage with their communities, and undertake joint initiatives with other actors to advance the fundamental principles and rights at work. However, it is clear that they face several challenges that hinder their ability to realize their full potential.

Enhancing cooperatives' capacities to ensure that Ugandan tea and coffee are produced under safe and healthy working conditions and free from child labour, is essential for the sector's profitability and long-term viability. This contributes to more productive members and sustainable businesses, helping to prevent supply chain disruptions and mitigate reputational risks.

¹⁹ In Uganda, all OSH matters fall under the mandate of the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD), Department of Occupational Safety and Health (OSH). Implementation is guided by the Occupational Safety and Health Act, 2006; Employment Act, 2006; and the Workers' Compensation Act, 2000.

Recommendations

- **1. Strengthen cooperatives' governance and leadership structures.** Improving transparency, accountability and decision-making processes is key to enabling cooperatives to provide better services to their members and improve market access by ensuring coffee and tea are produced in alignment with market requirements.
- **2. Conduct awareness raising activities targeting cooperatives and members.** ILO constituents and other stakeholders can play a vital role in educating communities, farmer organizations and cooperatives about child labour, OSH and related policies and legislation. Cooperatives can serve as key actors in disseminating messages and promoting changes in attitudes and practices among the producers.
- **3. Train cooperative and farmer organization leaders on child labour, OSH and governance.** Providing targeted training on child labour prevention and improved OSH management is essential. Implementing a training-of-trainers approach, in which cooperative leaders are trained on these topics, can lead to multiplier effects, with leaders subsequently training producers. Training should include comprehensive information on biological and chemical safety, ergonomics, and the use of machinery and personal protective equipment. Similar training on cooperative management and governance should also be carried out, as weaknesses in these areas affect member engagement and the overall effectiveness of cooperatives.
- **4. Adopt institutional policies and tools to address OSH and child labour.** Cooperatives should adopt clear institutional policies on OSH and child labour, with defined objectives and a structured framework to guide their actions. These policies could include awareness-raising and training activities to ensure cooperative members are informed about OSH standards and national child labour laws, and to promote preventive measures by supporting members in identifying and managing OSH risks. Cooperatives should also develop and adopt protocols to guide members on how to address cases of child labour – such as referrals to child protection services – and occupational accidents, including immediate care. To ensure effective implementation, cooperatives should designate focal points or committees responsible for providing guidance, monitoring progress and following up on reported issues.
- **5. Strengthen employers' and union engagement.** Encourage cooperatives and farmer organizations to join employers' and workers' organizations. Membership can enhance representation in social dialogue processes, and provide access to services, including support for negotiating collective bargaining agreements with provisions on child labour prevention and OSH improvement.
- **6. Support cooperatives in complying with child labour and OSH regulations.** Strengthen the capacity of the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development to conduct inspections and provide support services to cooperatives.
- **7. Promote women's participation.** Increasing women's involvement in cooperatives, both as members and in leadership roles, can enhance community development and strengthen the sector's resilience to market changes. Empowerment programmes should address key barriers such as limited access to education and OSH training, cultural and social restrictions, and financial exclusion. When women have access to opportunities that improve their livelihoods, they can play a vital role in enhancing OSH conditions, reducing child labour and contributing to inclusive and sustainable development.



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8.7
Accelerator Lab

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