



International
Labour
Organization

► Child labour self-help guide for SMEs in Afghanistan



▶ **Child labour self-help guide
for SMEs in Afghanistan**

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First published 2023



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ISBN 9789220392560 (Print)

ISBN 9789220392553 (Web PDF)

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Printed in Afghanistan

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Acknowledgements

AACS Consulting and the ILO recognize the invaluable support of the Balkh Chamber of Commerce and the local authorities in Balkh Province, among other partners who assisted in the data collection, for their participation in interviews and the consultation workshop. AACS and the ILO would also like to offer thanks for the participation by and support of national children's rights and advocacy groups, SMEs, child labour experts, and local agencies, who shared their time, knowledge and expertise.

The content of this tool guide has been adapted from ACT/EMP Child Labour Guide, the Employers Guide for Eliminating Child Labour by the Fiji Commerce and Employers Federation, literature from the OECD and UNICEF, and various ILO reports. The research team has elaborated this tool guide at AACS Consulting with support and feedback from the ILO Afghanistan team and international specialists.

ILO further acknowledges the financial support of Japan, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare through the Afghanistan Crisis Response: Safety and Health of Workers, and Child Labour Elimination in Micro, Small, and Medium-sized Enterprises (MSMEs), (SSN/JPN) Project to prepare this guide.

Introduction

At the start of 2020, around 160 million children worldwide – or nearly 1 in 10 – were involved in child labour, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic put an additional 9 million children at risk. Almost half of these children are engaged in hazardous labour that directly jeopardizes their moral growth, health and well-being.¹ More than 1 million children are working across Afghanistan.²

Hazardous child labour is defined by Article 3(d) of the ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182) as “work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children”.³

Often these children live in countries where child labour is prohibited, including Afghanistan. They work despite this because their family's poverty forces them to, because there may not be any economical or suitable options for learning and because it is considered acceptable by society. Child labour continues because there is a demand for it in agriculture, industries, enterprises and homes, and children are made available to work, feeding into that demand.

This short self-help tool guide is intended to assist small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and their associations in comprehending legal requirements, identifying child labour, and taking corrective action, and thereby working to reduce and eliminate child labour, particularly hazardous child labour, in their workplaces. This tool guide is based on qualitative interviews and observations conducted by AACS Consulting for the ILO, as well as a review of the extensive existing literature on child labour.

This tool guide provides:

- ▶ strategic recommendations for the prevention of child labour and the withdrawal of children from work;
- ▶ strategic recommendations for the protection of those children who are above the minimum age for employment and who are working;
- ▶ definitions and explanations of the causes and the consequences of child labour; and
- ▶ the rationale for not employing children.

For SMEs, the tool guide therefore offers:

- ▶ an explanation of their options and possible strategies for eliminating child labour; and
- ▶ an explanation of the collective role that SME and other business associations can play in helping their members on this important topic.

1 UNICEF, “Child Labour”.

2 Save the Children, “Press Release on Afghanistan: A Fifth of Starving Families Sending Children to Work as Incomes Plummet in Past Six Months”, 14 February 2022.

3 ILO, “Hazardous Child Labour”.

▶ 1

What is child labour



Definitions

Not all work done by children should be classified as child labour. Article 2 of the ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182), defines a “child” as anyone under the age of 18. The term “child labour” refers to work that deprives children (any person under 18) of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to their physical and/or mental development. It refers to work that is mentally or morally dangerous and harmful to children, and/or interferes with their schooling by:

- ▶ depriving them of the opportunity to attend school;
- ▶ obliging them to leave school prematurely; or
- ▶ requiring them to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work.

Child labour can refer to excessively long and/or heavy work that is inappropriate or dangerous for a child to perform. In its most extreme forms, child labour involves children being enslaved, separated from their families, exposed to serious hazards and illnesses and/or left to fend for themselves on the streets of large cities – often at a very early age.

Whether or not particular forms of “work” can be called “child labour” depends on many factors, such as the child’s age, the type and hours of work performed, the conditions under which it is completed, and the objectives pursued by individual countries.⁴

Therefore, the ILO also uses the terms “working children” and “economically active children”, particularly for statistical purposes, in addition to the term “child labour”. These first two terms describe children who are engaged in work that lasts more than an hour over the course of seven days. This work may be for the market or not, paid or unpaid, regular or casual, and legal or illegal. However, this work does not include the basic chores that children do in their own households.



A child working in a handicraft company before child labour training intervention, Afghanistan, 08/2022. © AACSI/ILO

Legal age for children to engage in work



The ILO [Minimum Age Convention, 1973 \(No. 138\)](#), calls for the minimum working age to be set at not lower than the end of compulsory schooling and, in any case, at not less than age 15. In line with international Conventions, 18 is the minimum age for employment under Afghanistan’s Labour Law. Children between the ages of 15–17 are allowed to work only if the work is not harmful to them, requires less than 35 hours a week, and represents a form of vocational training. Under the law, children 14 and younger are not allowed to work.⁵

4 ILO, “What Is Child Labour?”

5 HRW, “They Bear All the Pain’ – Hazardous Child Labor in Afghanistan”.

Hazardous work and risks



“Risk” and “hazard” are closely related concepts. Anything that has the potential to cause harm is a hazard. The possibility that the potential harm from that hazard will materialize is a risk. Hazardous child labour is defined by Article 3(d) of ILO Convention No. 182 as “work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children”. More specifically, hazardous child labour is work in dangerous or unhealthy conditions that could result in a child being killed or injured or made ill as a consequence of poor safety and health standards and working arrangements. Hazardous work can result in permanent disability, ill health and psychological damage.⁶ Therefore, for the purposes of this assessment, any industry where the employment of children (above the age of 14) could potentially result in hazardous child labour as described above can be termed a “hazardous industry”.

⁶ ILO, “Hazardous Child Labour”.

▶ 2

Causes of child labour

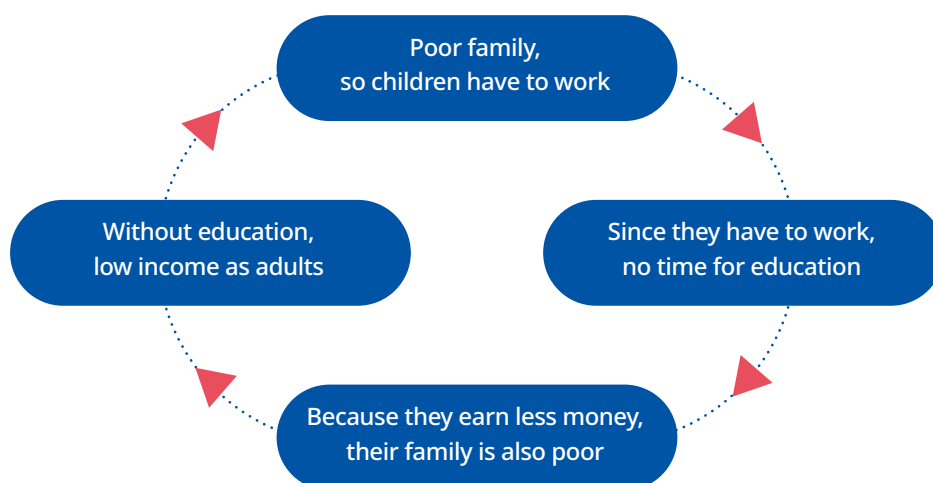
Many causes contribute to child labour and exploitation. These include poverty, societal norms that support child labour, a lack of opportunities for adults and teenagers to find decent work, migration, and emergencies. These elements not only contribute to societal injustices that are exacerbated by prejudice, but they are also a result of them.⁷

Below are some of the root causes that make children particularly vulnerable to child labour.⁸

Poverty

Poverty is unquestionably the biggest reason forcing children into the workforce. Families are forced to send their children to work to boost their family income. This happens when they cannot provide for their basic needs, such as food, water, education or healthcare. Given its links to other major contributors to child labour – such as poor literacy and numeracy rates, a lack of good employment prospects, natural catastrophes and climate change, wars and mass migration – poverty is regarded as one of the most significant causes of child labour. Without addressing one, we cannot end the other – as poverty can cause child labour, and child labour can later lead to adult poverty, creating an unending cycle (figure 1).

▶ **Figure 1. The poverty–child labour cycle that can impact multiple generations**



7 ECLT, “Why Does Child Labour Happen? – Here Are Some of the Root Causes”.

8 UNICEF, “Child Labour and Exploitation”.

Lack of access to quality education

The accessibility and quality of education are among the most crucial elements. The school setting must be friendly, with reasonable class sizes, a curriculum tailored to the area, and affordable fees. It is one thing to get children into school and away from dangerous jobs, but keeping them there entails making high-quality education available to everyone.

Poor access to decent work

Children who were engaged in child labour frequently lack a fundamental education. Acquiring this education could enable them to acquire skills and enhance their prospects for a decent adult working life. Young people frequently have little option but to labour in dangerous conditions. This is because they cannot find jobs that offer them social safety, fair compensation, equality for men and women, and a place to voice their thoughts.

Limited understanding of child labour

Families are more inclined to send their children to work when they are unaware of the risks associated with child labour and how these can affect their child's health, safety, well-being and future. Social and cultural conventions and attitudes can also contribute to child labour.

Natural disasters and climate change

Concern over the consequences of climate change and natural disasters is growing in Afghanistan and around the world. Extreme weather events, changing rainfall patterns and soil erosion are particularly dangerous for rural communities whose livelihoods depend on predictable seasons. Families struggle to make a livelihood and are more likely to send their children to work on nearby farms and small and medium-sized industries when crops are lost or farming land is devastated.

Conflicts and mass migration

According to UNICEF, children make up more than half of all those displaced by conflict.⁹ Due to an increase in economic shocks, a collapse of social support, education, and basic services, and disruption of child protection services, these children are more exposed to forms of exploitation, including child labour. Conflict-affected nations have a rate of child labour that is almost twice as high as the world average.



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An ILO-supported women owned tailoring company after OSH training, Afghanistan, 08/2022. © AACSI/ILO

9 UNICEF, "Press Release on Nearly 37 Million Children Displaced Worldwide – Highest Number Ever Recorded", 16 June 2022.

▶ 3

Consequences of child labour

Not only does child labour harm the working child's long-term prospects, but it also affects the working child's siblings and other family members. More broadly, a high prevalence of child labour harms the economy as a whole, because it favours unskilled labour over greater human capital investment and slows the adoption of technologies that require skilled workers. Since export and import industries employ a large percentage of individuals with relatively high skill levels, the growth of international commerce and the ability to attract foreign investment may also be impacted.¹⁰ The following are examples of how child labour harms both children as well as the country:



- ▶ Health issues caused by child labour, especially in hazardous occupations, impact adult physical and/or mental health (and can include back problems, arthritis, reduced strength and stamina).
- ▶ Even though more than two-thirds of children who work are enrolled in school, a vast body of research indicates that children who work are more likely to leave school early and do worse on examinations. Children who drop out of school too soon forfeit skills that might have subsequently allowed them to start careers with faster income growth.

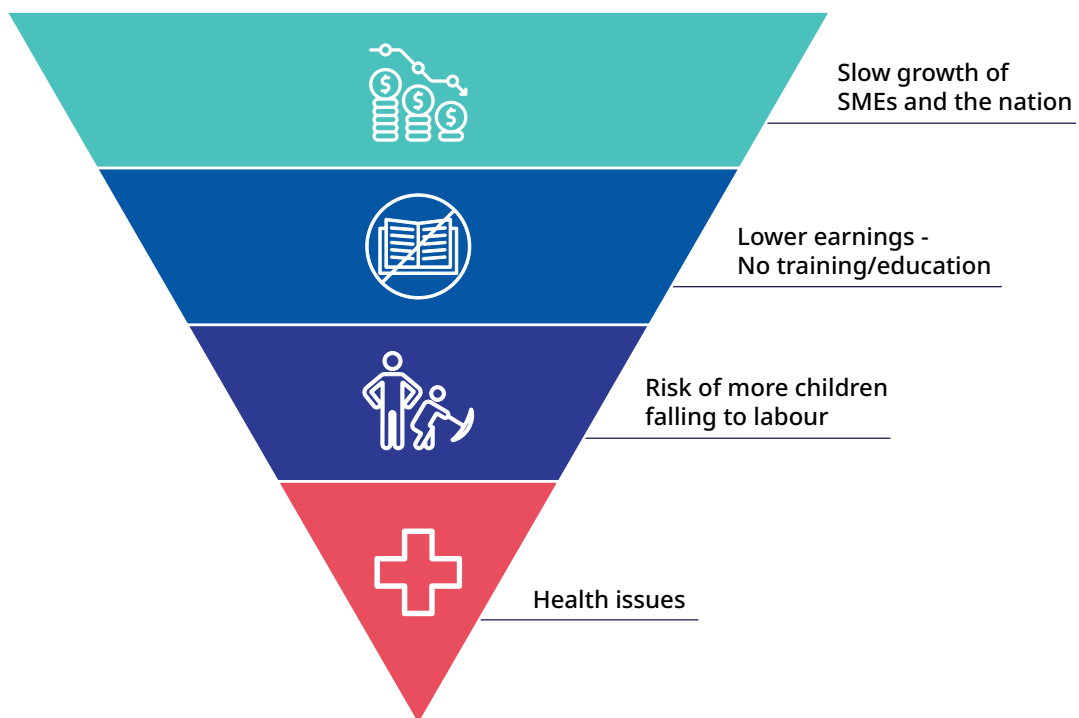
¹⁰ Olivier Thévenon and Eric Edmonds, "Child Labour: Causes, Consequences and Policies to Tackle It", OECD Social, Employment and Migration Working Paper No. 235.

- ▶ One child's activities can influence their siblings, as child labourers typically live in households. Siblings may be prevented from working because of the support of one child who is working. For instance, the likelihood that another child in the family will send to work while we restrict one child from working. Therefore, the perception is sometimes that in circumstances in which a family is in need of income from a child, they may send their one child to work and others to school.
- ▶ Because most child labour is unskilled, its predominance results in lower earnings for these workers. Additionally, putting more unskilled labour to work encourages the use of production techniques that discourage the development of new skills and the spread of technical innovation – which eventually limits the potential for economic progress.
- ▶ Finally, child labour may harm not just a company's reputation but also that of the nation, its ability to attract foreign investment, and its ability to engage in commerce if consumer opposition to child labour is powerful enough to affect demand for the items being produced.



An ILO-supported carpet production company after OSH and Child Labour training, Afghanistan, 08/2022. © AACS/ILO

▶ **Figure 2. The consequences of child labour, from the national to the personal**



▶ 4

The need to eliminate child labour

Employers should minimize and eventually end child labour for at least four reasons, as detailed below. These arguments are supported by elements that make sound business sense and allow employers to live up to their ethical obligations.



Legality

The fact that child labour is illegal in most countries, including Afghanistan, is the first justification for ending it. Like other legal obligations established by the government of the country in which it operates, an employer must follow child labour regulations. Penalties and other legal repercussions may result from breaking the law. Respecting the law, whether it pertains to child labour or other labour law-related issues, enables an SME to have an open and “cooperative” relationship with the government, instead of a closed and “confrontational” one.

Market access

Through the work of humanitarian organizations, lobbying groups and the media, the buying public is becoming more aware of child labour. International and domestic companies, as well as customers, want to adhere to recognized labour standards worldwide to prevent negative publicity and potential boycotts. Therefore, the abolition of child labour benefits certain businesses in emerging nations. But it also benefits entire industries. Buyers will become aware of an SME's reputation for not using child labour, which will increase their willingness to place orders.

Productivity

SMEs frequently hire children because they believe it will increase their revenue. But typically, this is a short-term approach. Because it prevents the growth of a trained and productive adult workforce, child labour hinders the long-term profitability of businesses. Children are less adept at using machines properly, have shorter attention spans, and have a weaker understanding of quality control. They also lack the physical strength of adults. Some SMEs, particularly those in the informal sector, may readily determine the direct cost savings of hiring children at lower pay rather than adults at higher salaries. However, the overall and long-term costs of employing children who produce at lower productivity levels and frequently sustain injuries are significantly more challenging to calculate.

Ethics

An employer might consider the effects of their company on society, both economically and from a social or ethical perspective. Employers contribute to the economy by working for themselves, producing goods, and employing workers. By making employment decisions that enable children to receive an education, an employer is positively impacting society. As a result, these children will have higher future incomes, be part of a better-educated workforce and contribute to a more prosperous economy. However, the choice to not hire children need not be only focused on the potential economic gains to society and children in the future. In an ideal society, children would be spared from the hardship and potential suffering of arduous and dangerous employment. Afghan children undergo this hardship on a daily basis, but by not supporting child labour, employers can actively participate in creating a better, more ideal society for children.



A beneficiary of OSH and Child Labour training in an ILO-supported company, Afghanistan, 08/2022. © AACS/ILO

► 5

Feasibility and steps to eliminate child labour

As of 2020, all 187 countries that are members of the International Labour Organization (ILO) have ratified the ILO Convention to protect children from the worst forms of child labour (Convention No. 182). The ILO estimates that about 152 million children worldwide are involved in child labour, with 73 million in hazardous work. But improvements have been made, as child labour in its worst forms dropped by almost 40 per cent between 2000 and 2016 as countries adopted laws and policies, while employers increasingly adhered rules around the minimum age to work.¹¹

However, child labour has persisted in Afghanistan due to the COVID-19 pandemic and political instability. According to a Save the Children study, an estimated 1 million Afghan children are engaged in child labour.¹²



An ILO-supported confectionery company, Afghanistan, 08/2022. © AACs/ILO

Using this guide to fit your SME

It is challenging to suggest a one-size-fits-all approach that can address all business models and all child labour scenarios. Therefore, this tool guide offers the following four guiding principles to approaching the issue of child labour:

- 1. Understand the consequences of your actions** – Hasty decisions can lead to negative, unintended consequences for children and their families. Employers must consider the welfare of children when creating a workplace free of child labour. Careful planning is needed, and can ensure that negative consequences are avoided.

¹¹ ILO, “Press Release on Child Labour Convention Achieves Universal Ratification”, 4 August 2020.

¹² Save the Children, “Press Release on Afghanistan: A Fifth of Starving Families Sending Children to Work as Incomes Plummet in Past Six Months”, 14 February 2022.

2. **Proactive rather than reactive** – Much like occupational safety and health, waiting for an incident to occur before taking action is not recommended. Instead, active action to reduce child labour is recommended. Proactive steps need to be undertaken to reduce child labour, whether through internal efforts or through collaboration work with outside organizations that can offer help and advice. SMEs may include the elimination of child labour as an action item in the company's strategic plan.
3. **Cooperation** – Numerous national and international organizations and coalitions have been established to combat child labour. Sectoral organizations, business associations or employers' organizations may also have ongoing programmes on the subject. An SME may be able to develop a responsible programme with the aid of all of these.
4. **Chain reaction** – SMEs are responsible for their own workplaces, but they can also influence other SMEs. SMEs can encourage or even help suppliers reduce child labour in their businesses. SMEs can also work with other organizations to create awareness and support broader programmes to improve education facilities for children.

► **Figure 3. Principles for eliminating child labour in SMEs**



Using these four guiding principles, the following steps need to be taken to eliminate child labour in your workplace and in your business' supply chain:

Step 1. Assessing the situation

To address child labour, an employer must first understand the size of the problem within their own business and among their suppliers. An SME will likely already know whether they employ children under the age of 15, and an SME in a hazardous industry will likely know whether they employ children under the age of 18. However, these SMEs might not be aware of the minimum age requirement for employment or of the definition of hazardous labour, and therefore not realize that they are actually illegally engaging in child labour.

Therefore, an employer should first check whether any of their workers are under the minimum employment age, which is 15 in Afghanistan. In addition, SMEs should check to see whether any workers under the age of 18 (but over the minimum age of 15) are performing activities that may be considered hazardous. "Hazardous" child labour is defined in the ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Recommendation, 1999 (No. 190), as work involving:



1. exposure to physical, psychological or sexual abuse;
2. work underground, under water, at dangerous heights or in confined spaces;
3. exposure to dangerous machinery, equipment or tools;
4. the handling of heavy loads;
5. exposure to unhealthy environments (substances, agents, processes, temperatures, noise, vibrations); and
6. work under difficult conditions, including for long hours, at night or being unreasonably confined to the premises of the employer.

If the assessment finds that children are engaged in work that has a risk of being hazardous, the employer can then take steps to either eliminate these risks or remove children from performing those activities.

In many smaller SMEs, one or more of the owner's own children may be working for the business. If this applies to your SME, you can determine which of your children can legally work there and which cannot under the law. You might think about adopting the idea that work should not interfere with or replace a child's education, and this can guide the way that you think about employment for both your own children and other people's children.

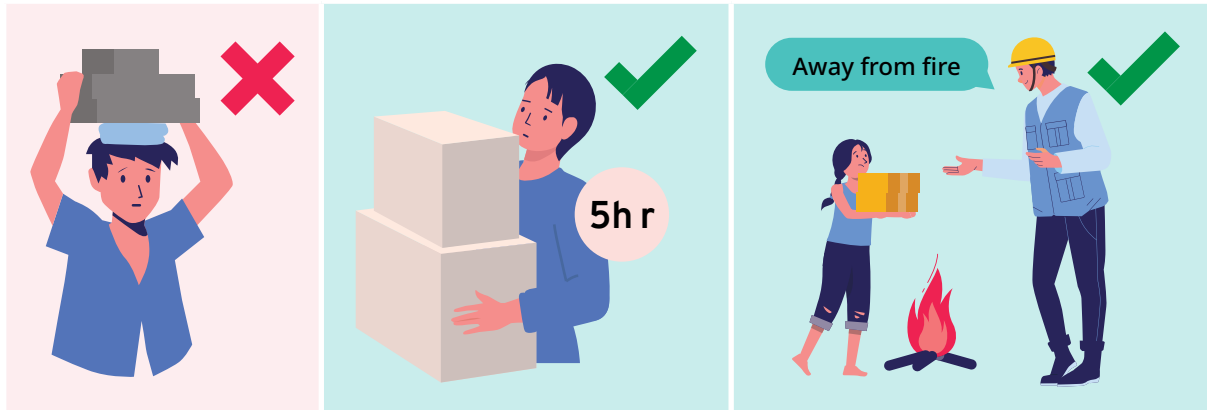
Step 2. Devising a strategy

Eliminating child labour within one's enterprise and supply chain requires the development of a strategy so as to not negatively impact the welfare of the children and to ensure business continuity. The strategy will depend on the company's goals and the severity of its child labour issue. A small company might only have modest financial goals, and therefore merely try to eliminate child labour within the business. A medium-sized enterprise, however, might be aiming to supply other SMEs or enter the export market; larger goals that could be compromised by the presence of child labour in the business. Following the ascertaining of goals, SMEs may seek solutions to meet their desired business objectives while addressing the child labour issues that they assessed in the previous step. To do this, they may seek support from NGOs, community members or business associations.



Step 3. Quick actions

This step involves three immediate actions an employer needs to take towards their specific objective of eliminating child labour without negatively impacting the business. Children and their families' welfare may suffer if they are removed suddenly. However, there are certain quick solutions that an SME can do to minimize the problem of child labour without harming the children or the SME. These immediate actions are:



1. Stop hiring child labour – You can immediately cease hiring children for your SME. This will guarantee that you are not aggravating the issue further. Individuals in charge of the employment process can achieve this by enforcing a strict hiring policy. Verifying job candidates' ages is the key priority.

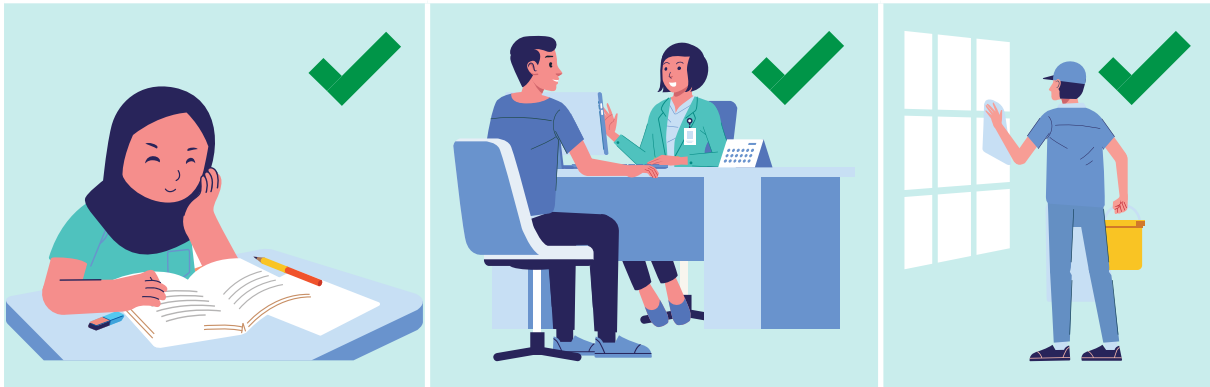
2. Eliminate hazardous child labour – Children should not be working in conditions with high risks from hazards. There are two ways to eliminate hazardous child labour:

- i. reducing the risk from hazards by improving workplace safety and health (see the [ILO OSH guide](#))
- ii. remove adolescents from tasks and environments that are deemed hazardous for adolescents but not for adults (such as heavy loads, night work, heavy machinery).

3. Reduce working hours of children – National laws in many countries, including Afghanistan, permit children between the ages of 15 and 18 to perform light labour for a short time each week. According to Article 7 of the ILO Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138), such labour is permissible, but there is one crucial criterion: if possible, the income received should not decrease even though the hours worked do. This will guarantee that the child receives the same amount of money each week to sustain their family. Additionally, this will lessen the possibility that the child will need to work somewhere else in order to attend school.



Step 4. Providing support



It is necessary to take measures that strike a balance between the twin aims of keeping families financially stable while keeping children out of the workforce. This can be in the form of:

1. supporting the education of children;
2. providing children with skills via vocational training;
3. providing parents with skills via vocational training;
4. hiring a child's parent or older sibling instead; and
5. checking for available support from NGOs and business associations.

Step 5. Eliminating the need for children in the workplace

SMEs are more likely to depend on the cost savings brought about by paying children modest wages. This includes family-owned businesses paying younger family members modest wages or none at all. SMEs can lessen their reliance on child labour by:

1. **Mechanization** – Using new machinery to replace child labour.
2. **Improving production workflow** – Rearranging production layouts to require fewer human resources.
3. **Calculating wage differentials** – Review whether hiring a child, who will perform inefficient work, is actually cheaper than hiring an adult who is a more efficient worker.
4. **Reducing family child labour** – Review whether it is more useful to employ an adult worker to substitute for a minor family member working for the SME.



Step 6. Eliminating child labour from supply chain

To grow one's business both locally and internationally, SMEs need to build goodwill and their reputation, and the use of child labour by SMEs may tarnish that reputation. Therefore, it makes logical sense that SMEs eliminate child labour in their own workplaces and in the workplaces of other SMEs they deal with in their supply and value chains. To do this, SMEs can:

1. make suppliers aware of their child labour-free requirements;
2. include such requirements in contracts;
3. monitor their suppliers for compliance;
4. collaborate with suppliers to improve compliance;
5. provide feedback and warnings; and
6. change suppliers in case of non-compliance.

Step 7. Code of conduct

A code of conduct may have several purposes. Such rules can boost a company's brand, draw investors, and make hiring competent and motivated employees simpler while also supporting labour standards and increasing productivity. SMEs without a global focus may opt not to have a written code of conduct. Still, they may have an unwritten rule against recruiting children and informal processes for managing the matter if an employee is discovered to be underage.

Further, SMEs that are part of a business association or a chamber of commerce may jointly prepare and adopt a code of conduct, which may help SMEs translate ideas into action.



Beneficiaries of OSH and Child Labour training in an ILO-supported company, Afghanistan, 08/2022. © AACCS/ILO

Step 8. Auditing and monitoring

An evaluation can be done to ensure an SME or a supplier does not use child labour. Typically, a social audit refers to a single assessment. Monitoring is the term used to describe a sequence of recurring assessments. Several techniques may be undertaken to carry out auditing and monitoring, either internally or through outside parties. Monitoring can take place over whatever length of time and at whatever intervals the SME decides.



Monitoring has two objectives. First, it serves as a mechanism for detection and verification. It informs the company that there is no child labour present, or if child labour is detected, what the nature and scope of the issue is. By using this knowledge, corrective action can be taken. Second, monitoring is a kind of assurance that shows consumers and potential customers that an SME is free of child labour. After an evaluation, the SME may receive certification that it does not use child labour from the auditor or from an organization that has approved the audit.

Conclusion and overview

The ILO's child labour programme, known as IPEC, has created monitoring systems that focus on identifying, rehabilitating and tracking child workers rather than removing children from work. The goal is to eliminate child labour from society as a whole, not just in some sectors of the economy.¹³ SMEs and business associations can use this strategy to combat child labour in their respective sectors and geographic areas.

Furthermore, volunteer initiatives have emerged largely due to the failure of social discussion on or government regulation of child labour. Although voluntary monitoring is helpful, governments are still in charge of upholding child labour laws when they are in place. The shared responsibility of SMEs, organizations and governments is to address the issue of child labour and to ensure the education of children to secure a brighter future for Afghanistan.



Beneficiaries of OSH and Child Labour training in an ILO-supported company, Afghanistan, 08/2022. © AACS/ILO

¹³ ILO, "International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC)".

Steps for eliminating hazardous child labour in your SME

Assess situation

- ▶ Determine the extent of problem.
- ▶ Decide what your end goal is.

Devise strategy

- ▶ Determine goals of your business.
- ▶ Match these goals with the approach needed to achieve them.

Quick actions

- ▶ Stop engaging in child labour.
- ▶ Move existing child workers away from hazardous tasks
- ▶ Reduce working hours of child workers

Provide support

- ▶ Support the education of child workers
- ▶ Provide vocational training skills to child/adult family members for non-hazardous labour
- ▶ Hire adult family members of child workers
- ▶ Check available support from NGOs and chamber of commerce

Eliminate need for children in workplace

- ▶ Improve and introduce machinery
- ▶ Improve production layout
- ▶ Review costs/benefits and wages
- ▶ Reduce family child labour

Eliminate child labour from supply chain

- ▶ Tell suppliers about your child labour-free goals
- ▶ Include goals in contracts
- ▶ Monitor suppliers for compliance
- ▶ Collaborate with suppliers to improve compliance
- ▶ Provide feedback and warnings
- ▶ Change suppliers if they still engage in child labour as before with no change

Introduce or adopt a code of conduct

- ▶ Adopt a written or informal code
- ▶ Approach business association/chamber of commerce

Auditing and monitoring

- ▶ Assess and monitor improvements over time
- ▶ Allow external and third parties to monitor, like the chamber of commerce

Child labour self-help guide for SMEs in Afghanistan

This guide provides guidelines for parents and SME owners who employ children between the ages of 15 and 17. The guidelines provided in this guide have been written based on the findings of the Child Labour Rapid Assessment conducted in the province of Balkh in Afghanistan. The guide serves as training material that can be used in workshops or distributed among SME owners. The information provided in this guide provides the very basics of OSH standards for working children and should be adhered to as much as possible. This guide is expected to alleviate some of the harsh working conditions children face in Afghanistan and the rest of the world, and we hope that this guide will find itself in the hands of as many parents and SME owners as possible.

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