

Breaking the rural poverty cycle: Getting girls and boys out of work and into school

Instead of attending school, millions of girls and boys in rural areas worldwide are child labourers. They are everywhere, but often hidden, on farms, on fishing boats, in plantations, in mountain areas, herding livestock or toiling as domestic servants. Child labour perpetuates a cycle of poverty for the children involved, their families and communities. Without education, these rural boys and girls are likely to be the poor of tomorrow. Policies must address the root causes of child labour and promote decent work for adults in rural areas.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Worldwide 215 million children are child labourers, of whom 115 million are engaged in hazardous work.¹
- A staggering 60% of child labourers aged between 5-17 years work in agriculture, in contrast to 7% in industry, 26% in services, and 7% in other sectors.² Agriculture is among the three most *dangerous sectors* to work in at any age, and even more dangerous for children.³
- Only 1 in 5 children are in paid employment – the majority are unpaid or family workers.⁴
- Rural children, particularly girls, tend to begin work at a very young age, sometimes between 5-7 years old.⁵
- Gender roles, age, birth order and cultural norms distinguish the type of work performed by girls and boys, the number of hours worked as well as who works and who gets an education.⁶ Gender differences in child labour increase with age.
- Without considering household services, on average, boys make up 63% and girls 37% of child labour in agriculture in the age group 5-17 years.⁷ The larger involvement of boys in agriculture often comes at the expense of a much larger involvement of girls in unpaid household services. On average, 92% of girl child labourers in the age group 5-14 years also perform household chores, as compared with 67% of boys.⁸ In many societies, girls work more hours than boys when domestic chores are taken into account, but this work is often invisible or under-valued.⁹
- The number of boys aged 15-17 years engaged in hazardous work rose by 10.5 million from 2004 to 2008, while in the same period, it decreased for younger boys and for girls.¹⁰

WHY IS ACTION NEEDED?

Child labour is an enormous cost for the children themselves and for society, as it keeps children out of schools and hampers the healthy development of their mind and bodies. Many rural girls and boys plant and harvest crops, spray pesticides and tend livestock. They work on fishing boats or on shore cutting and smoking captured fish. The majority contribute to family undertakings. Some are trafficked. Some are bonded labourers working to pay off family debts. The high prevalence of child labour in rural areas, the under-regulation of the agriculture and domestic work sectors, the hazardous nature of some of their work, and its long term cost, make this an area deserving urgent attention.

A gender focus takes into account the specificities of girls' and boys' in rural areas. Girls often suffer discrimination in access to school and employment opportunities when they get older. Different strategies may be necessary to get girls out of work and into school than with boys. Failure to look at child labour through a 'gender lens' risks missing some forms, causes and consequences of child labour.

1. Pervasive poverty in rural areas and low visibility of child labour in agriculture

- Child labour is highly prevalent in situations of poverty, parental illiteracy and environments with cheap and unorganized labour. All these conditions are particularly characteristic of rural areas, where a high number of children are vulnerable to entering child labour and being trapped, as adults, in poverty.



BOX 1 What is child labour?

A **child** is defined as any person under 18 years of age. **Child labour** is defined based on a child's age, hours and conditions of work, activities performed and the hazards involved. Child labour is work that interferes with compulsory schooling and damages health and personal development. Especially in the context of family farming and other rural family endeavours, it is important to recognize that some participation of children in non-hazardous activities can be positive as it contributes to the inter-generational transfer of skills and children's food security.

The **ILO Minimum Age for Employment Convention No. 138 (1973)** (ratified by 156 countries) sets the minimum age for children to work at 15 years of age in general (the convention allows for certain flexibilities in specific circumstances). For work considered hazardous, the age is 18.

The **ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention No. 182 (1999)** (ratified by 173 countries) defines worst forms of child labour as all forms of slavery, trafficking of children, forced recruitment for armed conflict, use of children in illicit activities, sexual exploitation, and hazardous work. Hazardous work should be listed nationally. It is 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.

- Poverty is one of the main causes of child labour. In many rural areas, children work for their survival and to meet the need for cash, food, shelter and clothing. In this context, parents may depend on their children's labour, even when they know it is wrong.
- Child labour in agriculture is often invisible, as most children work as unpaid family workers in dispersed small-scale farms or rural enterprises – or is actively hidden by employers facilitated by the limited reach of labour inspectors in rural areas.
- Data available on girls' and boys' labour in agriculture, the occupations they are involved in, and the risks associated are limited. This makes child labour in agriculture even more invisible, difficult to prove, and address by policy makers.
- Most national surveys do not yet take into account domestic chores, failing to capture the 'double-burden' shouldered especially by girls in combining domestic work with other forms of child labour, or the 'triple-burden' when schooling is included. When a broader definition of work which includes non-economic activities is used, more girls work than boys.¹²

2. Limited access to quality education in rural areas

- Boys and girls miss out on schooling if they work full time, or if their labour is given precedence over education. Even if enrolled in school, their attendance and performance suffer if they work. Missing out on education harms the future prospects of boys and girls and affects the development of human capital.
- Rural areas often experience a lack of (quality) schools and teachers, limited pedagogical materials, poor school infrastructure, and irregular school attendance resulting in lower educational achievements. School curricula are often not relevant to the needs of agricultural communities.
- Girls tend to devote more time than boys to household chores, leaving even less time for school. Girls' burden is aggravated by poor living conditions and infrastructure,

which translate into long distances to collect water, firewood and fuel, and to attend schools. Girls face further obstacles, such as traditional attitudes that do not value girls' education or the risk of abuse during long commutes, or from school staff. Globally, 57% of illiterate children are girls.¹¹

- Most rural work is seasonal and often incompatible with school calendars. Seasonal migration disrupts schooling, and even if children attend school on their destination farm, it can be difficult to rejoin the formal education system upon return.
- Girls' education is particularly beneficial, as it decreases female fertility rates and infant, child and maternal mortality rates. Education helps protect against HIV and AIDS, increases women's labour force participation and earnings, improves their ability to organize in the workplace, and increases the likelihood, in the future, that children are sent to school.

3. Life-cycle impact

- Cultural and social norms, as well as age, affect the gender division of labour in agriculture. Children's responsibilities vary across regions and during their life-cycle.
- Child labour leaves little time for play and rest, which are both basic children's rights

and necessary for the healthy growth and development of social and other life skills. Child labour is detrimental to long-term health, education and higher-level skills acquisition, and decreases the chances of decent employment in youth and adulthood. As adults, former child labourers are more likely to rely on their own children's labour to meet the household's basic expenses, perpetuating the vicious cycle of poverty, illiteracy and child labour.

- High rates of youth unemployment are disincentives to invest in education. A lack of non-agricultural work opportunities for women in rural areas is common in many parts of the world.
- Agriculture and rural societies are dynamic and are changing rapidly. Climate change and scarcity of water, energy and land affect food production processes, while population growth, globalization and urbanization affect demand and preferences for food. Rural communities need the ability to respond to these shocks and changes.

4. Hazards and risks in rural areas

Agriculture is a sector with a high incidence of work hazards and risks which can have a more severe impact on children's immature bodies and minds than on adults.¹² Rural work is physically demanding, often involving long periods of stooping, repetitive movements, and carrying heavy loads over long distances. Children often work in extreme temperatures, without appropriate protection and lack access to safe water. Hazards commonly experienced by boys and girls include:

- Musculoskeletal injuries from heavy work, cuts from sharp tools, falls while picking high-growing fruit or into water, accidents from working around farm vehicles and heavy machinery.
- Exposure to skin irritants contained in crops (for example tobacco) that can provoke allergies, rashes and poisoning. Vulnerability to water-borne

BOX 2 Supply and demand determinants of child labour

Supply factors	Demand factors
Need to supplement household income to meet basic needs	Cheap labour, as children are often unpaid or their wages are lower than adults'
Limited schools in rural areas, and commute to school considered dangerous for girls	Insufficient labour supply at peak times, particularly in agriculture (e.g. for weeding, harvesting)
Perceived irrelevance of education	Quotas or piecework based on family work units that put pressure on parents / guardians to involve children
Limited access to financial services and children's labour used to repay debts	Low productivity of small farms and rural enterprises operating at very small margins
The need to cope with shocks such as a failed harvests, death of livestock or the illness or loss of breadwinners	Requirement on some plantations that children work in order for them to live with their families
Children's participation in agriculture considered a way of life and necessary to pass on skills and knowledge; low awareness of the hazards of agricultural work	Perception that children's fingers are nimble and ideal for some agricultural tasks (flowers and horticulture)
Substitution of adults in domestic chores and labour when parents are working	Children, particularly girls, considered to be more docile workers

diseases when working barefoot in ponds and paddy fields. Exposure to high levels of organic dust from fields or livestock that can provoke allergic respiratory diseases (asthma).

- Exposure to pesticides and other chemicals that can damage brain functions, behaviour and mental health, reproductive systems and may cause cancer. While some children mix and apply these pesticides, most children suffer from environmental exposure to pesticides by working, living nearby or passing through sprayed fields. Lack of proper pesticide storage and disposal worsens the situation.

The division of tasks along gender lines means that boys' and girls' exposure to specific hazards can often be different. For instance, the hazards of handling poultry, a common task for girls in many societies, differ from herding livestock. Boys in pastoral communities may spend many months in remote areas looking after herds. Boys often work in capture fishing, where they are at risk of drowning, hypothermia, entanglement and crushing injuries. Girls are more commonly found working on-shore and suffer respiratory problems from smoke inhalation when drying fish, as well as cuts and burns.

WHAT ARE THE POLICY OPTIONS?

Eliminating child labour in rural areas requires a comprehensive and gender sensitive approach. It involves addressing its root causes (and first of all, poverty) and preventing girls' and boys' engagement in child labour. This requires collaboration with governments, social partners and other actors in agriculture and rural development, education, health and youth employment. Policy strategies should include the following six main areas of intervention:

1. Reduce rural poverty and improve rural livelihoods and youth employment

- Reduce poverty in rural areas through targeted agricultural and rural development policies that specifically integrate decent work concerns and address the interactions between adult and child employment. Set up partnerships between governments, workers' and employers' organizations, farmers and rural producers' organizations and communities to develop these policies¹³ and to raise public awareness about linkages between poverty and child labour.
- Ensure that women and girls have the same access as boys and men to land, training, agriculture extension services, technologies and inputs, business development services and

microfinance. Ensure that child-care facilities are accessible and at a safe distance from worksites.

- Target parents/guardians of child labourers or children at risk in programmes designed to generate rural incomes, including through skills and entrepreneurship training and access to microfinance.
- Promote youth employment for children above minimum legal age, together with health and safety training on proper use of equipment, tools and substances.
- Support safe migration of youth above the minimum age for employment, so they can obtain decent work and not fall victim to trafficking. Cooperation within governments (at various levels) and a good understanding of labour market realities and migration patterns are required, along with registered and monitored employment/recruitment agencies. Migration awareness raising campaigns are essential in rural areas, and also in destination countries.

2. Apply laws on child labour

- Ratify and implement ILO child labour Conventions (C. 138, C. 182), and other conventions regulating agricultural work, such as C. 184 (Safety and Health in Agriculture Convention), C. 188 (Work in Fishing Convention), C. 141 (Rural Workers' Organizations Convention), and C. 110 (Plantations Conventions), and review labour legislation so that it fully applies to agriculture, including small scale and family farms and other informal rural and agricultural undertakings.
- Draw up and periodically revise hazardous work lists that define jobs, activities and working conditions prohibited for children under age 18, considering girls' special vulnerabilities and also ensuring proper coverage of tasks and conditions in agriculture, including subsistence agriculture, family farms, livestock keeping and small-scale fisheries (as per Article 3 of C.138 and Article 4 of C. 182). Build the capacity of labour inspectors in monitoring and enforcing these laws in agriculture.
- Encourage employers to enforce socially responsible corporate policies and codes of conduct that respect core labour standards, including in sub-contracting arrangements. Motivate private and public institutions to establish long-term contracts with suppliers, respect minimum wages, and offer social protection to workers.

3. Improve access to quality education adapted to the needs of rural girls and boys

- Provide compulsory, affordable and quality schooling in rural areas and make schooling more relevant to local communities. Provide incentives for equal school enrolment of rural boys and girls,

BOX 3 Tackling child labour in agriculture at its roots: the integrated area-based approach

Eliminating child labour in a rural community requires addressing all forms of child labour jointly to avoid that as a result of interventions children merely shift sectors or locations while continuing to work. ILO's Integrated Area-Based (IAB) approach promotes a programme of interventions based on the involvement of local communities and dialogue and cooperation among government, employers' and workers' organizations. Stakeholders are supported in identifying the root causes of child labour and in promoting alternatives and change in supply chains.

and their completion of post-primary education and/or vocational training.

- Provide incentives for children's attendance through school feeding programmes and food-for-schooling programmes (so all the family benefits from the take-home food rations given to children attending school), or cash transfers (as in the case of Cambodia where transfers conditional on families keeping teenage girls in school, increased enrolment rates by between 20% and 30%)¹⁴.
- Raise awareness among children and families on the benefits of education, using different targeted messages for boys and girls. Increase the incentives to invest in girls' education, and expand awareness of the actual returns to schooling.
- Make schools girl-friendly. In Pakistan and Bangladesh, girl-only schools, or employing female teachers and having separate toilet facilities helped overcome culturally-rooted reluctance to send girls to school.¹⁵ To free up time for girls' education, improve rural infrastructure such as water systems and roads to decrease the time-burden of domestic duties, including firewood and water collection.
- Provide education programmes for orphans and vulnerable children, who may be excluded or marginalized from public education. A combination of agricultural and life skills, such as in the Junior Farmer Field and Life School (JFFLS), enhances youth confidence and productive skills.
- Encourage and supply resources for early-childhood education, providing alternatives to bringing children to workplaces. Provide second-chance education for children withdrawn from child labour. Some children may benefit from bridging/transition education while, for older children, vocational and skills training (linked to market realities) may be most appropriate. Ensure vocational programmes are gender sensitive, and contribute to improve the productivity and profitability of youth's labour, and their ability to respond to changing markets.

Provide opportunities to achieve relevant certifications and services to help them find jobs or start their own business.

- Encourage dialogue between rural school teachers, the community and parents, so programmes and courses respond to the specific needs and constraints of rural communities (timing, harvest seasons, technical skills to be taught or trained), and parents can better understand the potential returns of sending their children to school instead of engaging them in child labour.

4. Reduce household and worker vulnerability

- Raise awareness of the hazards of agricultural work, building capacity of farmers, workers and rural communities to undertake risk assessments and identify safer production practices. Provide training in occupational health and safety to improve working conditions and increase capacity to make informed judgments as to when activities are safe enough for children above the minimum legal age. Support agricultural extension services in promoting safer use of chemicals and technology, and sensitize them on national child labour policy, gender equality and what can be done about child labour in the areas they serve.

- Promote social protection in rural areas such as old-age pensions or access to basic health services. Support micro-insurance programmes to smooth risks associated with crop failure, death of livestock, floods and droughts, as well as micro health insurance programmes to protect rural families from the loss of breadwinners.

- Develop equitable land tenure and inheritance laws to increase the likelihood that children are protected and attend school when a household head dies. Support programmes that diversify crops and income-generating activities to reduce vulnerability of rural families.

5. Mainstream child labour into agricultural and rural policies, programmes and research

- Factor child labour elimination into all agriculture and rural development planning. Raise awareness among Ministries of Agriculture and Labour and increase inter-ministerial cooperation on child labour. Examine how labour-saving technologies may affect girls and boys differently and the demand for their labour. Place child labour elimination in rural areas on the agenda of donor programmes.
- Collect data on the contributions of women in agriculture and other rural activities, disaggregated by age. Undertake re-

search on key topics such as inequalities in the treatment of boys and girls in rural areas, abundance or scarcity of agricultural labour supply, and on the impact that improved energy sources, biofuels, solar cooking facilities and better access to water have on reducing girls' domestic labour.

- Set up long-term monitoring studies to assess the impact of programmes which remove underage boys and girls from rural work (to check if they entered school, training, or other forms of labour).

6. Promote social dialogue

- Promote the organization of employers' and workers' associations and cooperatives. Promote their involvement in scaling-up action against child labour. Support the outreach of workers' and employers' organizations to self-employed rural workers in small-scale and family farms and non-farm activities and informal, family and migrant workers. Support their sensitization and mobilization against child labour. Support collective bargaining throughout supply chains.
- Ensure that workers and multinational and national agri-companies work together in adopting policies prohibiting child labour. Where child labour does exist, encourage private companies and public institutions to work with suppliers to provide alternatives to child labour that are viable for both the business and the children.

Endnotes

- 1 ILO. 2010. *Accelerating action against child labour*, Report of the Director-General, International Labour Conference, 99th Session, pp. 6-7. Geneva.
- 2 ILO. 2010. pp. 10. Geneva.
- 3 IPEC. 2006. *Tackling hazardous child labour in agriculture: Guidance on policy and practice*. p. 2. Geneva, ILO.
- 4 ILO. 2010. p. 5. Geneva.
- 5 IPEC. 2006. p. 3. Geneva, ILO.

- 6 Basu, K. and Tzannatos, Z. 2002. "The global child labor problem: what do we know and what can we do?". *World Bank Economic Review*. (2002) Vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 147-173.
- 7 ILO. 2010. p. 12. Geneva.
- 8 IPEC. 2009. Blanco Allais, F. *Assessing the gender gap: Evidence from SIMPOC surveys*. Geneva, ILO.
- 9 ILO. 2009. *Give girls a chance. Tackling child labour, a key to the future*, p. 12. Geneva.

- 10 IPEC. 2010. Diallo, Y., Hagemann, F., Etienne, A., Gurbuzer, Y., Mehran, F. *Global child labour developments: Measuring trends from 2004 to 2008*. Geneva, ILO.
- 11 UCW. 2010. *Joining forces against child labour: Interagency report for The Hague Global Child Labour Conference of 2010*. p 79. Geneva.
- 12 IPEC. 2006. *Tackling hazardous child labour in*

agriculture: Guidance on policy and practice. Guidebook 3, Chapter 1, pp. 1-16 for more details on hazards. Geneva, ILO.

- 13 Such as different sections of government; agricultural extension services; trade unions; employers associations; farmers'/agricultural producers' organizations; agricultural research organizations; women's groups; vocational associations; youth

representative organizations; and local, provincial and issue-based groups; as well as NGOs, UN agencies and donors.

- 14 Filmer, D. and Schady, N. 2008. "Getting girls into school: evidence from a scholarship program in Cambodia", in *Economic Development and Cultural change*, Vol. 56, no. 2, pp. 581-617.
- 15 UCW. 2010. p. 114. Geneva.

TOOLS AND RESOURCES

- International partnership for cooperation on child labour in agriculture (ILO, FAO, IFAD, IFPRI, IFAP, IUF): <http://www.ilo.org/agriculture-partnership>
- FAO-ILO joint website "Food, agriculture and decent work", page on child labour: <http://www.fao-ilo.org/fao-ilo-child/> and IPEC webpage on child labour in agriculture: <http://www.ilo.org/ipec/areas/Agriculture/>
- IPEC. *Training resource pack on the elimination of hazardous child labour in agriculture* (Geneva, ILO, 2005) available at: <http://www.ilo.org/ipecinfo/product/viewProduct.do?sessionId=?productId=1759>
- IPEC. *Tackling hazardous child labour in agriculture: Guidance on policy and practice*. (Geneva, ILO, 2006): http://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/2006/106B09_457_engl.pdf
- FAO. *Child labour prevention in agriculture. Junior Farmer Field and Life School Facilitator's guide* (Rome, FAO, 2010): <http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/i1897e/i1897e.pdf>
- FAO-ILO. *Recommendations from the workshop on child labour in fisheries and aquaculture* (2010): <http://www.fao-ilo.org/fao-ilo-child/workshop-2010/en/>
- SARD and Child Labour policy brief (Rome, FAO, 2007): <ftp://ftp.fao.org/docrep/fao/010/ai117e/ai117e.pdf>
- *Understanding Children's Work* (UCW), an inter-agency research cooperation project on child labour: <http://www.ucw-project.org/>
- More tools on child labour are available at: <http://www.ilo.org/ipecinfo/product/editSearchProduct.do?type=normal>
http://www2.ilo.org/pls/apex/f?p=109:3:1396169550994795::NO::P3_SUBJECT:CHILDLABOUR
<http://www.fao.org/economic/esw/esw-home/esw-population-dynamics/children-youths/esw-child-labour/en/>

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