



## COVID-19 AND CHILD LABOUR: A TIME OF CRISIS, A TIME TO ACT



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## INTRODUCTION

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The last two decades have seen significant strides in the fight against child labour. But the COVID-19 pandemic poses very real risks of backtracking.<sup>1</sup> Positive trends may falter, and child labour may worsen, especially in places where it has remained resistant to change. These risks require urgent action to prevent and mitigate the tolls the pandemic takes on children and their families.

The full impacts and length of the crisis, and how different people will fare, remain uncertain. But some of the fallout is already obvious.<sup>2</sup> The pandemic has increased economic insecurity, profoundly disrupted supply chains and halted manufacturing. Tightening credit is constraining financial markets in many countries. Public budgets are straining to keep up.

When these and other factors result in losses in household income, expectations that children contribute financially can intensify. More children could be forced into exploitative and hazardous jobs. Those already working may do so for longer hours or under worsening conditions. Gender inequalities may grow more acute within families, with girls expected to perform additional household chores and agricultural work.

Temporary school closures may exacerbate these tendencies, as households look for new ways to allocate children's time.





**Article 32 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, ILO Convention 182 on the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour and ILO Convention 138 on the Minimum Age of Employment recognize the right of every child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to interfere with the child's education or harm the child's health.**

**Child labour reinforces intergenerational poverty, threatens national economies and undercuts rights guaranteed by the Convention on the Rights of the Child.**

**Unlike activities that help a child to develop, such as contributing to housework for a few hours a week or taking on a job during school holidays, child labour interferes with schooling and is harmful to a child's physical, mental, social and/or moral development.<sup>3</sup>**

There is no doubt that the current crisis is dire. At the same time, governments can make choices today that will determine the course and consequences of the pandemic. These choices must include conscious measures to prevent and eliminate child labour.

Where child labour has temporarily subsided due to movement restrictions, for example, opportunities may arise to prevent children from going back to work. Since potentially dramatic cuts in public spending can aggravate children's vulnerability to harmful and exploitative forms of work, deliberate choices can be made to mitigate these risks, such as through extended social protection for poor families.

By reviewing the literature about previous crises and their impact on child labour, this report discusses some of the main channels of influence. Most of these channels are connected, but are presented separately to clarify the issues in each. The discussion is not conclusive. The long-term impacts of the pandemic and the implications for child labour as yet remain unknown. But based on literature and mounting anecdotal evidence, some broad directions are emerging. The report builds on these to conclude with recommended actions that governments can take even at this early stage.



**Child labour is the combined product of many factors, such as poverty, social norms condoning it, lack of decent work opportunities for adults and adolescents, migration, and emergencies. It is not only a cause, but also a consequence of social inequities reinforced by discrimination.**

**Effective action against child labour must address the full range of vulnerabilities that children face, and requires the implementation of policies and programmes that can contribute to the elimination of child labour through sustainable solutions to address its root causes.<sup>4</sup>**





### **The ILO's policy framework to respond to COVID-19**

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has four policy pillars to respond to the COVID-19 crisis on the basis of international standards. First, stimulate the economy and employment. Second, support enterprises, jobs and incomes. Third, protect workers in the workplace. Fourth, rely on social dialogue for solutions. Urging a whole-of-society approach,<sup>5</sup> the ILO calls for governments, employers and workers' organizations to work together on effective policies to respond to all health, social and economic dimensions of the crisis. Some policy actions, such as social protection, cut across the four pillars, meaning they should be part of advancing policies in each.<sup>6</sup>

### **UNICEF's agenda for action on COVID-19**

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) calls for global coordination to prevent a health crisis from becoming a child-rights crisis.<sup>7</sup> It advocates action to:

- Keep children healthy and well nourished
- Reach vulnerable children with water, sanitation and hygiene
- Keep children learning
- Support families to cover their needs and care for their children
- Protect children from violence, exploitation and abuse
- Protect refugee and migrant children, and those affected by conflict

## FALLING LIVING STANDARDS

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The COVID-19 pandemic has wrought an economic downturn likely to continue long after the current period of sheltering in place. Some 55 per cent of people globally – about 4 billion – do not have any social protection. They are extremely vulnerable to shocks now and over the long term.<sup>8</sup>

For the billion people living in slums, informal settlements and inadequate housing, and those working in the informal economy, lockdowns have crippled livelihoods. Declining working capital from losses in remittances and business failures are likely to continue reducing demand for workers, lower wages and eliminate jobs.<sup>9</sup>

The result will inevitably be a rise in poverty. The number of people in extreme poverty could skyrocket by 40 million to 60 million this year alone compared to before the crisis.<sup>10</sup> Other estimates point to a 20 per cent rise in 2020.<sup>11</sup> A study of poverty increases based on three scenarios – global economic contractions of 5 per cent, 10 per cent and 20 per cent – found that the number of people in extreme poverty could soar by 85 million, 180 million and 420 million people, respectively, compared to 2018.<sup>12</sup>





With poverty comes child labour as households use every available means to survive. Prospects vary by country, but causal estimates of elasticity are mostly above 0.7.<sup>13</sup> In other words, a 1 percentage point rise in poverty leads to at least a 0.7 percentage point increase in child labour.

In previous crises that propelled falling living standards, many low- and middle-income countries saw dramatic reversals in progress in reducing child labour and enrolling children in school. A study in Côte d'Ivoire on the drop in cocoa prices in the 1990 economic crisis found that a 10 per cent fall in income led to a more than 3 percentage point decline in school enrolment, and a more than 5 percentage point increase in child labour.<sup>14</sup>

Evidence from economic downturns in Latin America points to weaker or even marginally positive impacts from recession, especially when proper social protection measures are in place. During the coffee crisis in Central America from 2000 to 2001, for instance, several countries of the subregion witnessed progress in primary school enrolment rates and a slight decline in child labour. Social assistance programmes played an important role in protecting household well-being. Households in coffee-growing areas with social assistance programmes could better protect household expenditures and children's school attendance compared to those in coffee-growing areas without such programmes.

## DETERIORATING EMPLOYMENT

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As economic contraction reduces opportunities in the labour market for parents, it can push their children into hazardous and exploitative work. The COVID-19 crisis is causing an unprecedented drop-off in economic activity and working time.<sup>15</sup> Global working hours fell in the first quarter of 2020 by an estimated 4.5 per cent compared to the final quarter of 2019. This adds up to approximately 130 million full-time jobs, assuming a 48-hour work week. Global working hours in the second quarter are expected to be 10.5 per cent lower, equivalent to 305 million full-time jobs.<sup>16</sup>

Fewer employment opportunities and lower wages can drive people into informal or exploitative work, which can further suppress wages and in turn contribute to child labour. Compared to adults, children are more likely to accept work for less pay and in vulnerable conditions. Businesses may deliberately recruit children to cut costs and boost earnings.<sup>17</sup>

Even with lower wages and fewer jobs, the number of people working increases when households cannot survive without working.<sup>18</sup> This was documented during the Indonesian financial crisis, which produced growth in hours per worker and the number of workers in rural areas.<sup>19</sup> Unsurprisingly, much of the growth in work was in household-based activities, since households became less reliant on wage income and less specialized in how they earned a living.<sup>20</sup>

This phenomenon of working more when wages fall has been documented elsewhere, including in India.<sup>21</sup>

Children are often the most available labour in households. When households need more financial support, they turn to children.<sup>22</sup> Parental unemployment due to economic shocks in Brazil has led children to step in to provide temporary support, for example.<sup>23</sup> Similar effects have been documented in Guatemala, India, Mexico and the United Republic of Tanzania.<sup>24</sup>

One form of financial relief for families is to cut school fees. This was an important part of how households coped with the Great Recession in El Salvador, with families shifting attendance from private to public schools within a school year to reduce expenditures on schooling.<sup>25</sup>

When families cannot find work and run out of options for sustenance even at home, children may be sent away, rendering them vulnerable to exploitation.<sup>26</sup> Similar consequences may result if family members relocate or separate. Children left behind or alone are even less protected and more vulnerable to the worst forms of labour. After the 2015 earthquake in Nepal, for instance, the breakdown of private and public protection mechanisms drove increased human trafficking of children.<sup>27</sup>



## RISING INFORMALITY

Past economic shocks have prompted growth in informal employment as those laid off from formal work seek any alternative source of income.<sup>28</sup> In Liberia during the Ebola crisis, formal employment contracted in part because of a cash shortage that left employers unable to pay employees.<sup>29</sup> In other crises, such as the Indonesian financial crisis, informality rose as families losing jobs in cities migrated to rural areas.<sup>30</sup>

As is well documented, child labour is prevalent mainly in the informal economy, where children can easily step in as unskilled labourers. Threats to children's rights from an enlarged informal sector should therefore not be underestimated. Greater informal employment coupled with economic hardship could push many children out of school and into the labour market.

Some households will start new enterprises to cope with job loss and economic displacement, which may prompt more child labour.<sup>31</sup> Recent evidence from Malawi, the Philippines and Zambia highlights how when production grows inside homes, child labour will also rise.<sup>32</sup> Work in family businesses generally gives little consideration to health and safety concerns. In all three countries, when children worked in informal family-based enterprises, they faced increased exposure to work-related hazards. Girls are particularly vulnerable to exploitation





in agriculture, informal labour and domestic work, and face greater risks of sexual and gender-based violence.<sup>33</sup>

Lockdowns may offset some of the negative effects of informality.<sup>34</sup> In Sierra Leone, during the lockdown related to the Ebola crisis, non-farm self-employment declined, a pattern that persisted after the restrictions ended.<sup>35</sup> Enterprises did not resume in part because households had to sell capital to triage the economic effects of the lockdown.

The current crisis may steer informality through different means. Capital-intensive small enterprises are likely to decline. Self-employment without significant capital requirements may grow, however, producing work especially conducive to child involvement. Other issues stem from the disruption of supply chains across borders and through domestic restrictions on movement. This can make food supplies erratic, undermining food security,<sup>36</sup> and lead to further job destruction in agriculture. Lower incomes for farmers will likely contribute to increases in child labour.<sup>37</sup>

Economic informality reduces the effectiveness of government regulation of children's working conditions. In Jordan, for example, where agriculture is largely unregulated, farms are reportedly already reopening for production without permits or permissions, and children are joining their families in work activities.<sup>38</sup>

## DECLINING REMITTANCES AND MIGRATION

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The global economic slowdown is certain to reduce domestic and international remittances. The latter mainly originate from the European Union and the United States of America. They account for a significant share of gross domestic product not only in many low-income countries such as Nepal (25.4 per cent) and Ethiopia (7 per cent) but also in middle-income countries such as Guatemala (12 per cent), Moldova (10 per cent), Sri Lanka (8 per cent) and Tunisia (5 per cent).<sup>39</sup> In the past, international remittances have been shown to reduce child labour in poor countries.<sup>40</sup>

The repercussions of economic downturns, lockdown measures and business closures from COVID-19 are rippling through the lives of many migrant workers – and those of their families. When migrants remit less income, families suffer. Studies of the Great Recession found that it considerably cut remittances from the United States to Mexico. Families experiencing a decline were more likely to have children in child labour.<sup>41</sup> Studies of the Asian financial crisis indicated that remittances supported family businesses while sustaining schooling and protecting against child labour.<sup>42</sup>

When migrant workers return home, either willingly or due to forced returns, they may reduce the value of a child's

economic contribution in a household, since adult workers are generally more productive. On the other hand, employment opportunities for children might edge upwards if returning migrant workers bring home new resources, know-how and connections.<sup>43</sup> The gender of the returning worker could have a significant effect, since children often work by their mother's side. One study from El Salvador found that when a mother is away from home, children are less likely to work than when the economically active mother is at home.<sup>44</sup>

Forced returns have resulted in children and families stranded at borders or confined in quarantine centres. In Nepal, the closure of some brick kilns coupled with a lack of transportation have kept some 12,000 people, including 2,000 children, from returning to their home villages.<sup>45</sup> As of 3 June 2020, in Ethiopia, about 1,359 children had returned from Djibouti, Kenya, Lebanon, Mozambique, Saudi Arabia and Sudan as part of public health responses to COVID-19. These children, many of whom are unaccompanied, must undergo a 14-day quarantine. During that time, social workers register them, perform a vulnerability assessment and initiate family tracing so that once they complete the quarantine and test negative for COVID-19 they can return to their homes.<sup>46</sup>





## A LOOMING CREDIT CRISIS

Functioning credit markets buffer shocks by allowing households to borrow against future income. Beyond the current economic crisis, however, lies a likely credit crisis, especially in poor countries. Unable to pay debts, businesses may default, limiting liquidity in the financial system. Uncertainty may make lenders hesitant to lend. Losses and contractions in high-income countries may further reduce the availability of credit in poor countries.

A credit crisis reduces household investment, including in schooling,<sup>47</sup> which can produce more child labour,<sup>48</sup> a progression evident, for instance, in South Africa.<sup>49</sup> A contraction in credit can make school fees less affordable, which keeps children out of school,<sup>50</sup> and may increase child labour as a self-insurance strategy. By contrast, a study from the United Republic of Tanzania found that households with assets that could be used as collateral avoided child labour during economic shocks, presumably by accessing credit.<sup>51</sup> In Bangladesh, credit allowed households to avoid resorting to child labour after economic losses caused by floods.<sup>52</sup>

When formal and informal credit options are unavailable, households can turn to more desperate ways to access credit, such as bonded labour. This has been a common strategy in recent history,<sup>53</sup> and the COVID-19 crisis could make it even worse. There is already anecdotal evidence of bonded child labour associated with the pandemic. The risk that children will be exploited by predatory lenders may grow especially once lockdown measures are lifted and normal manufacturing activities resume.<sup>54</sup>

There is some nuance in the relationship between credit and child labour, especially when credit facilitates new economic endeavours. When households can readily access microcredit to help grow family-based businesses, some children will actually work more.<sup>55</sup>





## CONTRACTING TRADE AND FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT

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Globally, international trade has collapsed, with expectations for the slump to persist as it did after the 2008 financial crisis. The pandemic caused a 3 per cent drop in global trade values in the first quarter of 2020. The downturn is predicted to accelerate in the second quarter. Recent forecasts see a decline of 27 per cent.<sup>56</sup>

Given how tightly woven global supply chains have become, measures to stop the spread of the virus, such as the closure of borders, transport and businesses, have suppressed global exports and imports, and cut production. Such shifts can influence the living standards of the poor by inflating prices while reducing income from labour and family assets. A decline in trade that diminishes living standards will worsen child labour.<sup>57</sup>

Foreign direct investment is expected to fall in the post-COVID-19 downturn through a contraction in resources in high-income countries, the loss of credit and the reduction in travel. Since foreign direct investment is generally associated with higher incomes and less child labour,<sup>58</sup> a drop-off could follow dynamics similar to those of international trade.

Changes in trade and foreign direct investment may alter the kinds of jobs that are available. The mix of industries may vary, directly influencing sector-specific demands for labour and living standards, both of which can impact child labour.<sup>59</sup> It is difficult to assess what will happen to the industry composition, but it seems likely that demand for agricultural goods and lower-quality products will rise, both of which are associated with less-skilled labour. Skill-intensive exports promote education, while unskilled labour-intensive exports discourage education and promote child labour.<sup>60</sup> If foreign direct investment is drawn into industries prone to hiring children, it will amplify the increase in child labour.<sup>61</sup>



## SHUTTING DOWN SCHOOLS

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Most governments around the world have temporarily closed educational institutions to reduce the spread of COVID-19. School closures have affected more than 90 per cent of total enrolled learners, or about 1.6 billion students.<sup>62</sup> Many schools have moved online with distance learning, but nearly half the world has no access to the Internet, leaving many students even further behind.<sup>63</sup> Besides education benefits, schools provide critical social protection resources for children and their families.<sup>64</sup> Closure thus raises many concerns around vulnerability.

Children of legal working age may drop out of school and enter the labour market with limited education and skills. Children below the minimum legal age may seek employment in informal and domestic jobs, where they face acute risks of hazardous and exploitative work, including the worst forms of child labour. Evidence of the long-term impact is mixed, however. During the Indonesian financial crisis, households held younger children out of school to cope with the economic loss,<sup>65</sup> but after a few years, there was no sign that enrollment had suffered.<sup>66</sup> This is consistent with reports from Sierra Leone that children had largely returned to class by the end of the Ebola epidemic.<sup>67</sup>

While fallout from schooling disruption may be limited for most children, this may not be true for those in poor households and in areas most intensively hit by COVID-19. Even when classes restart, some parents may no longer be able to afford to send their children to school. After the Indonesian tsunami, educated and wealthier families were better able to cope and keep their children healthy and in school.<sup>68</sup>

Evidence about child labour rising as schools close during the global shutdown is gradually mounting. In Malawi, for instance, the Government closed schools to prevent the spread of the virus. Unable to learn, children soon ended up with other tasks. As one child says, "Many parents in my neighbourhood have taken advantage of the 'holiday' to send children to town to sell fruits and vegetables."<sup>69</sup>

## COMPOUNDING SHOCKS TO HEALTH

The rising number of deaths from COVID-19 is trailed by growing numbers of children left without one or both parents as well as other caregivers such as grandparents. Children deprived of family care are particularly vulnerable to child labour, trafficking and other forms of exploitation.

Evidence from previous crises suggests that where health systems are underresourced and social protection mechanisms are lacking, families are highly likely to experience severe health shocks.<sup>70</sup> Many workers, especially those in the informal sector, have no choice but to continue working, which increases their risks of falling ill. Households may face catastrophic health costs exacerbated by losing a household breadwinner or pension recipient. Child labour then becomes a survival strategy. Girls in particular may take on greater roles in caring for household members who fall ill.

When adult household members get sick or die, it is not unusual for children to take over their work.<sup>71</sup> Maternal death results in the need for labour inside the home. One recent study in Mali documented how the illness of female family members causes children to assume certain tasks.<sup>72</sup> Even as children's work and that of their mothers are typically closely intertwined,<sup>73</sup> however, mothers often play a monitoring role in making sure children continue in school.<sup>74</sup>

Paternal morbidity and mortality can be influential too. If the father provided, then children may step into that role, as studies from Bangladesh and the United Republic of

Tanzania have found.<sup>75</sup> A study from Nepal indicated that paternal disability or death was the strongest predictor of children's entry into the worst forms of child labour,<sup>76</sup> a relationship also documented during the Ebola outbreak in West Africa.<sup>77</sup>

The current situation is atypical, as outside income-generating activities may be less readily available to children due to the economic contraction and lockdowns. Yet some children will be pushed into other tasks. Anecdotal evidence from different countries reveals that since people think that children are not affected by COVID-19, they are put to work instead of adults. They care for sick family members and do grocery shopping and other activities that entail breaking the quarantine. They supplement family income when adults are unable to work, especially since they can skip or bypass curfews as they are less visible and less likely to be caught by police.<sup>78</sup>

Given the efforts countries are now making to bolster health care, the COVID-19 crisis could improve health over the long run. After the Ebola crisis, use of health-care services increased, leading to declines in child morbidity.<sup>79</sup> The H1N1 crisis in Mexico persuaded people to permanently change their handwashing practices.<sup>80</sup> At the same time, some evidence from the United Republic of Tanzania shows that improved child health pushes children into more strenuous activities,<sup>81</sup> a cautionary tale underlining how even positive dimensions of a health crisis may spur growth in child labour.



## PRESSURE ON PUBLIC BUDGETS AND INTERNATIONAL AID FLOWS

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The COVID-19 crisis has prompted new debate around public budget choices and international aid flows. The results could have dramatic implications for social protection and broader poverty reduction efforts.

Governments have taken substantive recent steps to improve social assistance in ways that diminish child labour and mitigate the COVID-19 crisis for children. Past evidence illustrates that cash transfers to poor households reduce child labour,<sup>82</sup> and are especially valuable in helping households cope with economic shocks. In Colombia, cash transfers have partially offset impacts from parental death or divorce.<sup>83</sup> Cash transfers in Mexico and Zambia have helped households withstand the economic consequences of weather volatility.<sup>84</sup>

Will such programmes survive the fiscal crisis that is inevitably coming? Global progress on child labour has come from improving living standards, expanding social protection and support, and paying greater attention to adolescent welfare. All of these gains are under threat. Finding alternative, inexpensive ways to reinforce the

advances made will be a priority in the coming years. Countries will need to use all fiscal space available by mobilizing domestic resources and being flexible in the use of available budgetary resources. They may also need external resources to cope with the crisis while maintaining a sustainable level of debt.<sup>85</sup>

In the early stages of the COVID-19 response, Jordan, for example, channelled a portion of excess reserves for a maternity insurance scheme into direct transfers to vulnerable households. The Social Security Corporation has announced extended benefits under the existing unemployment insurance fund to include a partial wage subsidy for workers whose working time was reduced and those in companies in “hibernation”. Contributions to the social insurance fund have been partially suspended. Prolonged COVID-19 emergency measures may strain the financial sustainability of the social security system, however. This may occur even as additional measures appear necessary, including to subsidize wages or cover childcare costs for workers not able to return to activities because of care responsibilities.

## MAKING THE RIGHT CHOICES – AT THE RIGHT TIME

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All countries face important challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic, although the consequences will vary, determined by economic and social conditions. Vulnerable population groups, such as those working in the informal economy and migrant workers, will likely suffer most from economic downturn, increased informality and unemployment, the general fall in living standards and health shocks, among other pressures. Well-functioning social protection systems can mitigate the fallout, including risks that children will end up in child labour.

The complexity of child labour and the unique character of the current crisis make it clear that there is no single solution. Past experience indicates, however, that integrating child labour concerns across broader policies for education, social protection, justice, labour markets, and international human and labour rights makes a critical difference.<sup>86</sup> The following pages provide some directions for moving forward.

This is a critical moment for the entire world. To mitigate the impact of COVID-19, now and for the foreseeable future, upholding children's rights as well as fundamental workplace principles and rights has never been more urgent.

Making the right socioeconomic and child protection policy choices will safeguard families and their children during the immediate crisis. It will also yield lasting benefits. Ensuring decent employment and safe return-to-work policies for adults, and safe reopening of schools for children are of paramount importance. So are further adapting and strengthening child protection systems and social services, and social protection measures, such as cash transfers. For low-income families in particular, these are the fundamentals to meet basic needs without resorting to child labour or other harmful practices that put children at risk.







**In the global Sustainable Development Goals, the world committed to ending all forms of child labour by 2025.**

**The last two decades have seen 94 million fewer children in child labour.<sup>87</sup> This remarkable accomplishment is now under threat. The pandemic is likely to reverse progress and make the global target to end child labour harder to achieve.**

## Enact comprehensive social protection measures

Social protection measures are the foundation of any coordinated policy response to shocks. These measures can range from expanding cash transfer programmes and providing access to health care, to supporting job, income and food security.<sup>88</sup> All countries should enact an adequate emergency response. They should also develop a longer-term strategy for strengthening the system in place, towards establishing a nationally defined social protection floor<sup>89</sup> that can guarantee basic social security for children and their families.<sup>90</sup>

Huge efforts are being made to cope with the emerging economic crisis in the short run. Globally, 190 countries and territories have planned, introduced or adapted 937 social protection measures in response to COVID-19. Social assistance programmes account for 59.6 per cent of global responses, and cash transfer programmes for half of these.<sup>91</sup>

Cash transfer programmes are a widely used social protection measure, with demonstrated results in combating child labour while enhancing income security.<sup>92</sup> Increasing benefit levels

and extending coverage through existing or new programmes, and adapting entitlement conditions, obligations and delivery mechanisms are among the most important immediate responses to the crisis.<sup>93</sup> Other priorities are to reach and protect workers in the informal economy through social protection schemes. Actions to protect income and jobs can comprise supporting enterprises to retain workers, and providing unemployment benefits and other income support to those who are out of work.<sup>94</sup>

In the long term, informal workers can be protected by facilitating their transition to the formal economy. For example, Italy in May 2020 issued a decree formalizing national and migrant informal economy workers in agriculture and domestic work.

Urgent measures to sustain health care should be pursued in view of progress towards universal health coverage.<sup>95</sup> They should address the social distress, economic losses and risks of impoverishment associated with serious health issues, all of which raise the specter of child labour. Where comprehensive measures are not possible immediately, cash transfer programmes can ease access to health care by supporting the ability to afford out-of-pocket payments.<sup>96</sup>

**Millions of children are at risk of being pushed into child labour as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. That would mean a rise in child labour for the first time since 2000.**

Where formal employment rates are high, family-friendly policies such as paid parental and sick leave with adequate sickness benefits,<sup>97</sup> flexible working arrangements and access to affordable, quality childcare are essential.<sup>98</sup> Similar attention needs to be focused on access to childcare and income security for workers in the informal economy.<sup>99</sup> These mechanisms enable workers to protect themselves and their families, and to care for children and relatives during the pandemic.

A strong and rapid social protection response requires the allocation of sufficient resources, calling on governments to make extraordinary efforts to avoid the diversion of resources, given rapidly escalating pressure on public budgets.<sup>100</sup> Governments, in consultation with social partners and other stakeholders, should take the opportunity to strengthen their social protection systems, including social protection floors, as a cornerstone of national social and economic policy architecture.<sup>101</sup>

### **Guarantee access to credit**

Access to credit allows poor households to keep children in school and avoid child labour. Microfinance institutions have performed

an important role in extending access to credit to poor households, but the current crisis is affecting both institutions and clients.

Clients with existing microcredit debt who find themselves without means to keep up repayments will need to have their debts restructured or repayments suspended until they are back on their feet financially. Otherwise, these vulnerable people face choices to give up property or other permanent assets, sacrificing their future livelihoods and possibly sending their children into child labour. Among microfinance institutions, innovations are required to adapt to a dramatically changing financial landscape.<sup>102</sup> To avoid insolvency, these institutions should be included in broader measures to shore up the financial sector.<sup>103</sup>

### **Create decent work for adults**

Job losses, especially among those who can least afford them; disruption in trade and along global supply chains; and massive capital outflows all damage labour markets and the ability of countries to respond to the crisis. Effects on enterprises, jobs and incomes will be exponentially more severe if measures are not taken to protect workers, especially in countries where workers do not already have such protections.


**The COVID-19 crisis underscores the urgent need to safeguard fundamental human and labour rights, particularly for the most vulnerable populations.**

This crisis illustrates once again, in sharp relief, the importance of comprehensive responses to safeguarding children and other vulnerable groups. Social protection measures must sustain the income and consumption of families so they can avoid resorting to child labour. Additional policies need to stimulate the economy and employment.

Well-conceived fiscal policies can offer critical support to social protection and the health system to prevent and mitigate household shocks. Some countries are already using fiscal policies such as tax exemptions and unemployment benefits to stabilize families' incomes and consumption. Emerging and developing economies typically contend with limitations in shifting financial resources into emergency responses, however. To recover quickly, many will need to formulate medium-term macroeconomic policies in coordination with the international community.<sup>104</sup> The United Nations Secretary-General has called on the international community to support countries with very limited fiscal space by providing liquidity and financial assistance, and by relieving or postponing payment of foreign debt.<sup>105</sup>

The complexity of the COVID-19 crisis also calls for social dialogue and cooperation among governments, employers and workers' organizations. Together, they can design effective strategies and policies to mitigate the socioeconomic consequences of the crisis. These can protect workers and their families, especially the most





**The current pandemic and resulting lockdowns should not mean any compromise in protecting children from hazardous and exploitative labour. Where children are exploited, upholding the rule of law is essential in guaranteeing their right to justice.**

vulnerable, from the loss of jobs and income. They can help enterprises, especially micro- and small enterprises with limited savings and credit, avoid closure.

Already, important social dialogue practices are emerging in response to the pandemic. These have led to a variety of measures, such as emergency actions to contain the virus by bolstering financial and human resources for health systems, and steps to protect jobs and workers' incomes through partial unemployment or short-time work benefits and other types of income support. Support for enterprises encompasses wage subsidies, loan guarantees, and flexible payment schedules for tax and social security contributions.<sup>106</sup>

### **Ensure every child's access to education**

Temporary school closures are significantly affecting the education of children and adolescents around the world. Being out of school should not mean falling into child labour. While schooling systems have mobilized a range of innovative online and other distance learning measures, these have by no means benefited all children in all places and social groups. Particular attention should be paid to the period right after lockdowns, when schools reopen. This will be a critical window to help children restart schooling and avoid permanently dropping out.

In the medium term, back-to-school campaigns and active outreach should encourage parents to send their children back to their classrooms, particularly those already working and those unable to continue their studies in any form during school closures.<sup>107</sup>

Cash transfers or other social protection benefits can compensate vulnerable families for children's lost earnings or production.

"Second chance" and remedial "catch-up" learning will ensure that disadvantaged children whose education was most disrupted can succeed once they return to school. Such measures should reinforce broader efforts to extend and improve public schooling, so that schools are a worthwhile and viable alternative to child labour. Worldwide, a total of 59 million primary-school aged children were already out of school when the crisis struck.<sup>108</sup> This group must not be forgotten during and after the crisis.

### **Strengthen labour administration and enforcement**

Diversions of financial and human resources and mobility restrictions have dramatically reduced workplace inspections, or curtailed

them altogether. As economies reopen, labour inspectorates need the resources and capacity to proactively monitor sectors at high risk of child labour. Local community-based child labour monitoring systems can play important roles, having proven effective in working with labour inspectorates to identify and follow up child labour cases.

New technologies, public-private partnerships and various workplace auditing schemes could extend the reach of labour inspections.<sup>109</sup> An emerging strategic compliance inspection model – linking interventions by multiple actors – provides a broad framework for these efforts.<sup>110</sup> Prioritizing certain issues, based on political commitments or public demands, and drawing on enforcement and compliance data, may reveal businesses or sectors of the economy where violations of labour codes and standards are common, including in terms of child labour.<sup>111</sup>



## **Protect the health and safety of workers**

Health, safety, well-being and labour rights go hand in hand. Safe workplaces protect workers from the virus, and provide information on steps that workers, their families and communities can take to stay safe. Improving protections for workers depends on embedding policy guidance in national occupational safety and health systems. This will help stimulate continuous improvement across a variety of policies and programmes, in consultation with the most representative employers' and workers' organizations.<sup>112</sup>

Given the current reopening of many activities, a safe and healthy return to work should be a priority.<sup>113</sup> Some countries have issued national policies and guidance; others plan to do so as the situation unfolds. International labour standards should provide the normative framework and serve as a reference point for additional programmes

to curb pandemic impacts.<sup>114</sup> Governments and businesses, among others, should take opportunities to shift to practices or technologies that offer sustainable solutions to occupational safety and health concerns.

Special attention should be paid to the 88 million adolescents of legal working age, 15 to 17 years old, who are employed.<sup>115</sup> Many young workers come from particular groups already facing discrimination at work and in society, such as persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and migrants.<sup>116</sup> Where adolescents are working in sectors or occupations designated as hazardous, or where there is no scope for improving working conditions, the policy requirement is clear – they must be removed from the hazardous job. Risk mitigation is also an option, through measures to remove the hazard or minimize the associated risk. National youth employment policies should explicitly aim to protect adolescents

**Children's rights and protection from exploitation are closely linked to other fundamental principles and rights at work. These include freedom of association and collective bargaining, freedom from discrimination in employment and occupation, and freedom from forced labour. Efforts to eliminate all forms of child labour and realize other fundamental labour rights must go hand in hand.**

and youth from labour exploitation, and ensure that all young people realize equal treatment and rights at work.<sup>117</sup>

### **Fund and treat social service workers as essential**

Even as the COVID-19 crisis has heightened the risks children face, it has undercut the ability of social services to protect them and ensure their well-being.<sup>118</sup> Dedicated and qualified social service workers support children and families by alleviating poverty, identifying and managing risks, and facilitating access to essential social services. They are on the front lines when it comes to preventing children from ending up in child labour, and responding to and removing children where this occurs.

Both short-term mobility restrictions and the diversion of financial and human resources to other urgent needs have constrained the vital work of social service workers, however. This gap threatens all other efforts to protect children, including through the enforcement and implementation of policies and laws, the operation of effective case management systems, and service delivery.<sup>119</sup>

The reach, calibre and funding of the social service workforce must not retreat. Social workers, childcare workers, youth workers, community development workers, welfare officers and the range of other actors in the social services workforce should be designated as essential. Their work should be adequately funded,

and they should be appropriately equipped and empowered to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on children and families, including to prevent and address child labour. Providing protective gear and training means they can continue their work safely during the pandemic.<sup>120</sup>

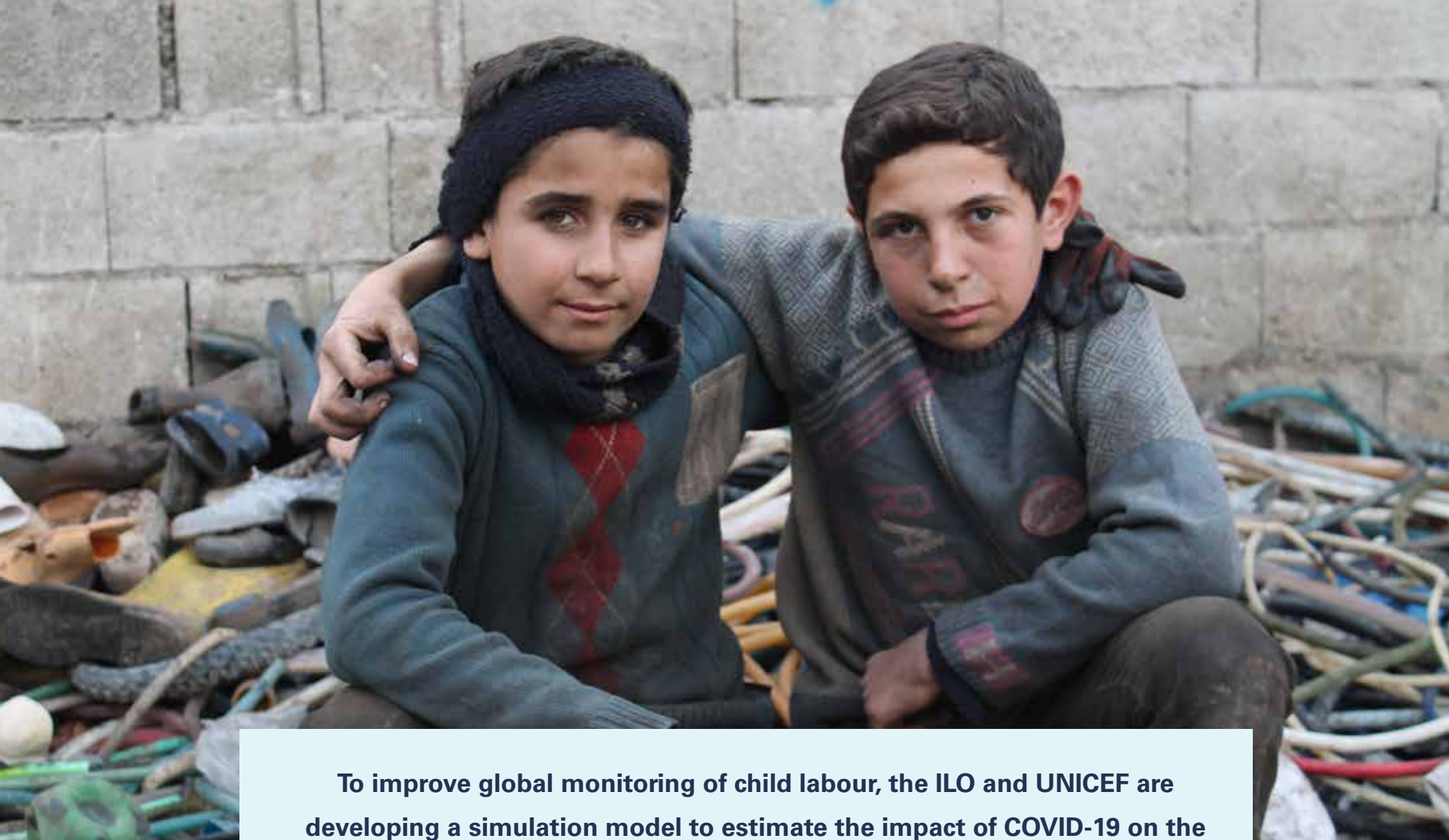
### **Promote changes in thinking**

Governments and community-based organizations should continue to support parenting and community education initiatives to change harmful social norms that treat child labour as acceptable. While the pandemic persists, this may require adapting innovative and remote communications solutions.

### **Sharpen the evidence**

More information is urgently needed to guide crisis responses relating to child labour and address its root causes. While temporary lockdowns and fears of contagion present unique challenges to traditional data collection methods, other types of data gathering, such as telephone and computer-assisted surveys, are already providing valuable information on the crisis. These methods should be expanded, quickly, to detect new and emerging patterns of child labour, and help manage actions accordingly. Other data collection tools for identifying the needs of affected populations are also being developed,<sup>121</sup> and should incorporate questions or modules on child labour.





**To improve global monitoring of child labour, the ILO and UNICEF are developing a simulation model to estimate the impact of COVID-19 on the global prevalence of child labour. The model will consider the root causes discussed in this paper. Estimates will be released in 2021.**

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