

Reports monitoring covid-19 pandemic in countries and regions of the Global South
Nº 22 17th October 2020

Increase in child labour as a result of the pandemic crisis

The *Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)* and the *International Labour Organization (ILO)* define child labour as "all work that deprives children and adolescents of their childhood, potential and dignity, and that is harmful to their physical and psychological development" (ECLAC and ILO, 2020). Both *ILO* and *UNICEF* state that such child labour is the result of a combination of different factors such as poverty, regional emergencies and migration, as well as a direct consequence of socio-economic inequalities (ILO & UNICEF, 2020).

Since the 1990s, great efforts have been made around the world to reduce the number of child labourers. *ILO* (2018) has stated that since 2000 there has been a progressive and steady decline in child labour worldwide (Figure 1). More specifically, the number of children who stopped working during that period was 94 million. However, as shown in Figure 2, many children are still working under these conditions.

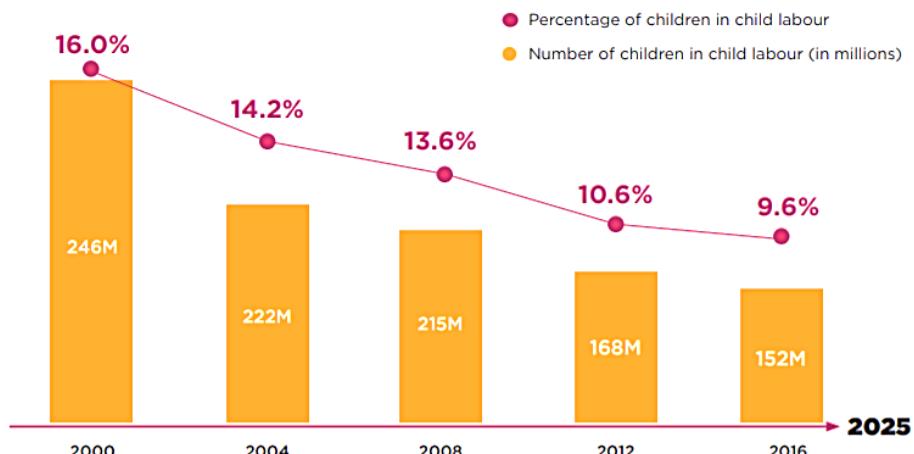


Figure 1. Percentages and absolute numbers of children in child labour worldwide. Source: ILO, 2018.



Figure 2. Worldwide: absolute numbers of children in child labour; number of children working per 10; and percentage of children working in the agricultural sector and percentage of children in unpaid family work. Source: ILO, 2018.

All the above-mentioned organizations fear that the gains made in reducing child labour may be reversed. Such a situation would be the consequence of different factors closely related to the

current pandemic. One such factor is the fact that many children are suffering from the loss of one or both parents or guardians. In countries such as Mexico, Mali, and Tanzania, it has been seen that when this happens these children quickly take over household chores, greatly increasing their responsibilities (UNICEF, 2020).

According to *UNICEF* (2020), the socio-economic crisis, which is resulting in increased unemployment and poverty worldwide, is directly proportional to the increase in child labour. In countries such as Brazil, Guatemala, Mexico, India and Tanzania, an increase in child labour resulting from parental unemployment has already been observed (ILO & UNICEF, 2020). Millions of children are therefore expected to become employed, mostly in the informal sector, during and after the pandemic. In this regard, the *Daily Monitor* newspaper has reported that in Jinja City, Uganda, there has been an increase in the number of children between the ages of 7 and 15 selling food on the streets. The country currently has more than 2 million child labour victims. According to the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada*, in 32.3% of households with a child population, at least one family member has lost his or her job during the pandemic. In addition, 41.7% of these households do not have the economic resources to stay at home and thus comply with restrictive mobility measures.

According to the *ILO and UNICEF* report (2020), often when adults cannot find work and are left with no options for survival, children are expelled from their homes and family environments. In this way, such children are vulnerable to being exploited or to becoming victims of the worst types of child labour. In this sense, the newspaper *La Jornada* reports that in Mexico 3.2 million children are currently working in illegal economic activities. In addition, it says that the current situation may lead to a greater risk of children being involved in organised crime and other activities such as trafficking and sexual exploitation. For its part, the newspaper *El Tiempo* denounces that different Colombian armed groups are taking advantage of the crisis situation to recruit children, in order to make them commit crimes or sexually exploit them. It further states that, in Colombia, indigenous children are the most susceptible to recruitment by these armed groups.

Furthermore, the closure of educational centres is expected to have permanent effects on children, especially the poorest ones (UNICEF, 2020). Generally, when children leave school and start working, they do not return. Especially those who cannot follow classes online due mainly to lack of technological resources. According to the newspapers *La Presse* in Tunisia and *Concord Times* in Sierra Leone, this could not only increase the number of children who will fall into child labour, but also increase gender inequalities. This is because girls are more likely to be exploited in rural and household work, and less likely to return to school than boys.

Finally, all of the above agencies agree that the increase in child labour will have a greater impact in rural areas than in urban areas. As shown in Figure 2, this sector accounts for 71% of the world's child labour. The Mexican newspaper *La Jornada* reports that the pandemic may indeed lead to an increase in child labour in the agricultural sector. According to *The Namibian* newspaper, 82% of the poorest families in Africa live in rural areas. These children have a high chance of being exploited or exposed to hazardous work. They are also the most likely to drop out of school, which will perpetuate the cycle of poverty and hunger.

In conclusion, child labour, which has decreased markedly since 2000, is at risk of increasing again as a result of various factors related to the crisis associated with the pandemic. Among these, the most relevant are: the loss of one or both parents or guardians; the increase in unemployment and poverty due to the global socio-economic crisis; the expulsion of children from their homes; and the closure of educational establishments. All of these factors increase children's responsibilities in household chores and the number of children doing informal work outside their homes, who are likely to drop out of school permanently. And on the other hand, children are susceptible to labour exploitation and illicit activities, which put their lives at risk. All these problems are seen to a greater extent in rural areas than in urban areas, and in the most vulnerable groups of children, which include the poorest, migrants and indigenous children. Governments have an obligation to ensure the protection of children around the world, their continuity in the school system and the full realization, without exception, of all their rights.

References:

ECLAC & ILO. The COVID-19 pandemic could increase child labour in Latin America and the Caribbean.

June 2020. Available at:

https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/45679/1/NotaTecnica1OIT-CEPAL_es.pdf

ILO & UNICEF. COVID-19 and child labour: A time of crisis, a time to act. 2020. Available at:

<https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/COVID-19-and-Child-labour-2020.pdf>

ILO. Ending child labour by 2025: A review of policies and programmes. 2018. Available at:

https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---ipec/documents/publication/wcms_653987.pdf

UNICEF. Why child labour cannot be forgotten during COVID-19. May 2020. Available at:

<https://blogs.unicef.org/evidence-for-action/why-child-labour-cannot-be-forgotten-during-covid-19/>

The research group BIOCOP-SC from the Polytechnic University of Catalonia is in contact with different research groups and governmental offices in order to jointly predict the evolution of the pandemic covid-19. Moreover, we follow up local media in 35 African countries and 9 Latino American countries and complemented it with interviews to field experts.

<https://biocomsc.upc.edu/en/covid-19>