

# SARD and... child labour

Visions of children herding livestock, helping their parents harvest fruit or haul in the daily catch may not seem as tragic as the vision of a child at a grueling factory job. Yet tens of millions of children face hazardous, even potentially deadly, situations in agriculture. No clear lines define the difference between children “working” in agriculture and “child labour” in agriculture, but there is an enormous difference between school children helping with light chores on the family farm and child labourers who work 40-60 hours a week, often in risky, strenuous labour.

The challenge to eliminate child labour is particularly daunting in agriculture where children comprise a third of the workforce. Policies aimed at eliminating child labour in agriculture focus on reducing health and safety hazards in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries, as well as improving access to and incentives for education. However, above all, policies for eliminating child labour must address its root cause – poverty.

## Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development (SARD)

Agriculture and rural development are sustainable when they are ecologically sound, economically viable, socially just, culturally appropriate, humane and based on a scientific approach.

Rural development policy must aim to meet the nutritional and other human needs of present and future generations; and maintain, and where possible, enhance the productive and regenerative capacity of the natural resource base. It must also provide for the durable employment of those generations, reduce their vulnerability and strengthen their self-reliance.

## Did you know?

### Globally

- 318 million children under 18 work in some form of productive activity.
- 218 million children are in work defined as child labour.
- 126 million child labourers are engaged in hazardous activities.

### In Agriculture

- 70 percent of all child labourers, more than 132 million children, work in agriculture.
- Agriculture ranks as one of the three most dangerous work activities, along with mining and construction.
- Child labour is increasing in post-harvest processing, transport, marketing and a range of agro-industries.

### Reasons for Optimism and Challenges

- Between 2000-2004, the number of all child labourers declined by 11% with the largest decline, 26%, in hazardous work.
  - Latin America and the Caribbean had the fastest decrease – from 16.1% to 5.1%.
  - Asia had a decrease but not as much as was expected – from 19.4% to 18.8%.
  - Africa, dealing with expanding populations and huge loss of agricultural workers to diseases such as HIV/AIDS, had a slight increase – from 26.4% to 28.8%.
- The agriculture sector had the lowest rate of decrease of any sector.

## Why is action needed?

- Child labour in agriculture reinforces the cycle of rural poverty. Children work on the family farm or as hired labour to supplement meagre household incomes when their parents do not earn enough to support the family or send them to school.
- Children’s wage rates are lower than adults, thus undermining the bargaining power of adult agricultural workers for fair and decent wages by providing a source of cheap labour.
- In addition to the immediate danger of working with dangerous machinery, sharp tools and loads they are not strong or mature enough to handle, children are more susceptible than adults to long-term health problems from exposure to farm chemicals, dust or fibres – problems that may not show up until adulthood.
- Young girls often take on household responsibilities in addition to their farming tasks in order to free their mothers to take on paid employment or work on the family farm. As a result they often have no time for school or are too tired to learn when they get there.
- Young boys often engage in heavier and more dangerous work than girls, such as cutting sugar cane or fishing in small boats in the open seas.
- Denying rural children an education and placing them in work situations that interfere with their health and mental and physical growth affect their opportunities to train for more skilled agricultural or non-farm work and their future earning potential.



### Household tasks differ from child labour

Participating in household farm and off-farm activities, especially in subsistence farming, gives children an opportunity to develop skills they will need to succeed as farmers. It also gives a sense of belonging to the community that leads to feelings of self esteem and social security. This participation becomes an issue when farming activities interfere with schooling, when family farm work is hazardous or when children must take paying jobs to help support the family and are given dangerous tasks they are not strong or mature enough to handle.

## Who are the child labourers in agriculture?

The employment statistics of children who work in agriculture, forestry and fisheries are often underestimated and underreported in labour statistics and the total, even now, remains elusive. Yet in almost all poor farming, pastoral and fishing communities around the world, children must contribute to their family's on-farm activities, working long shifts and as hard as their parents in all levels of production, processing and marketing systems. On family farms, children work alongside their parents; on plantations, children work as permanent, seasonal or migrant workers and often are not counted as employees – even those whose helping hands contribute to the amount the parents are paid. In cases of plantations, large commercial farms or agro-industries where children are paid for their labour, they receive only a fraction of an adult's payment, even though they have the same responsibilities and face the same, if not more, risks.

A gender breakdown of child labour in agriculture is also elusive although it is known that children comprise up to 5 percent of the labour force in fisheries where more than 85 percent of child labourers are boys who work directly on the boats and in processing, while the girls assist with fish cleaning and processing. In most agricultural households, girls are more likely to be engaged in caring for home gardens and small livestock

and fetching water and fuel, while boys work in the fields and with large livestock.

## What are the policy goals?

Policies that foster higher agricultural production and productivity, improved occupational safety measures, quality education for children, improved health services, and more and better jobs for parents allow SARD to flourish. When adults have opportunities for decent, stable and productive employment, family survival does not depend on the income of children.

At the macro level, economic stability provides an environment where growth can occur. National economic growth can contribute to solving child labour issues if the benefits of growth are passed to the poor through complementary measures such as:

- **national labour and social policy**

- enacting legislation to eliminate child labour, ensure health and safety at work, and establishing mechanisms for its effective enforcement;

- **education and training** – providing affordable access to quality, relevant education;
- **social mobilization** – seeking community participation and media support to increase awareness of child labour issues;
- **social protection** – supporting policies and interventions that assist the poor and those at risk of becoming poor to reduce the risks of shocks, mitigate their impact and cope with the aftermath so that vulnerable families are not forced to take their children out of school and send them into marginal/abusive employment.

## Eliminate and prevent child labour by reducing poverty – strategies

Investment in prevention is the most cost-effective, long-term approach to ending child labour. Prevention must be based, above all, on recognition that poverty is the major underlying cause of child labour. Families need income security and social benefits, such as access to health care, if they are to survive short and long-term



## Defining

### economic activity

most work undertaken by children, whether for the market or not, paid or unpaid, hourly or full time, casual or regular, legal or illegal. It does not include chores in the child's household or school.

### child labour

work that harms, abuses and exploits a child or deprives a child of an education. It refers to working children below the national minimum employment age.

### worst forms of child labour

unconditional – work that involves children in activities such as child prostitution, pornography, trafficking, forced labour, child soldiers.

hazardous – work that harms the safety, health and morals of children, including poor safety and health standards or working conditions.

crises without depending on extra labour or income supplied by children.

Employers' and workers' organizations should also share responsibility for finding solutions. At the same time, key development and human rights frameworks, such as the Millennium Development Goals and poverty reduction strategies, should address the issues of child labour.

- **Poverty reduction:** improve household economic situations through actions such as improving access to land and agricultural productivity, diversification of economic opportunities, improved wages and higher returns to labour.
- **Incentives for education:** provide support for free school meals and minimize school fees, especially for primary education, in order to bolster school attendance. The government can provide, or work with organizations that provide programmes that use cash or food

as an incentive for needy families to send their children to school, thereby reducing the need for children's wages. Perhaps more importantly, these programmes empower future generations by educating today's children, which may mean that they, in turn, will not have to send their children to work.

- **Educational reform:** organize school calendars around agricultural seasons to free students when they are especially needed on their farms. Design vocational courses that meet specific needs of young farmers, provide encouragement and help prepare them for the future.
- **Systems of prevention and building resilience:** encourage micro-insurance schemes that protect small farmers against crop loss. With government or non-state agency support, these can link to larger structures, such as banks and credit schemes. Governments can help by providing start-up funds, matching workers' contributions and developing supportive laws.
- **Collective bargaining:** increase bargaining power of agricultural unions to improve workers' conditions, adult wages and raise awareness of child issues so they include clauses addressing child labour in their contracts.
- **Self-help groups:** provide assistance on group promotion, savings and business management through cooperatives or mutual benefit societies to strengthen household livelihoods and resilience.
- **Agricultural technologies:** introduce labour-saving technologies to cut down on drudgery and time required in agricultural and rural domestic tasks, reducing the demand for child labour.
- **Health and safety:** improve awareness and training in the safe use of agricultural equipment and agro-chemicals.
- **Child care:** establish facilities where working parents can leave their children so that they can be cared for appropriately in their parents' absence.

## Moving forward with specific initiatives

- **Undertake gender disaggregated research** – assess the unique problems girls face as child labourers so appropriate support programmes can be designed.
- **Study effectiveness of education incentive programmes** – determine which types of education incentive programmes have the maximum impact on



child labour reduction and how to increase the effectiveness of these programmes to reduce child labour (e.g., by targeting boys and/or girls, secondary education, etc.).

- **Set up awareness-raising and training opportunities for employers and parents** – bring governments, agencies and families together to look for solutions to causes underpinning the need for child labour.
- **Establish locally relevant regulations for employing children and for improving health and safety standards** – provide training in integrated production and pest management (IPPM) to decrease reliance on pesticides and other farm chemicals especially harmful to children.
- **Make school relevant for farm children** – sponsor junior farmer field and life schools that provide vital information to rural children and adapt school schedules to farming seasons.
- **Mainstream child labour issues into existing activities** – take advantage of existing development programmes in developing countries, from field to government levels, which can serve as entry points for discussing hazardous child labour issues.
- **Support development of labour-saving technology** – take pressure off of families, especially those who have lost able-bodied family members to diseases such as HIV/AIDS.

## ILO Conventions cover child labour

ILO Convention No 138, Minimum Age

ILO Convention No 182, Worst Forms of Child Labour

ILO Convention No. 184, Safety and Health in Agriculture

With increasing global awareness of the potential effects of hard and often dangerous labour on children's development, health and education, 156 nations had, as of 2006, ratified Convention 182. As a result of an 11% decrease in child labour globally between 2002-2006, the ILO office has now set a goal of eliminating all worst forms of child labour by 2016, as part of its Global Action Plan on the Elimination of Child Labour. This target has been welcomed by the ILO's tripartite constituents - governments, employers' organisations and workers' organisations.

## Contacts

Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO)

**Eve Crowley**

eve.crowley@fao.org

**Ari Gudmundsson**

ari.gudmundsson@fao.org

International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)

**Atiqur Rahman**

at.rahman@ifad.org

**Maria Hartl**

m.hartl@ifad.org

International Labour Organization (ILO)

International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour

ipec@ilo.org

International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)

**Akhter Ahmed**

a.ahmed@cgiar.org

World Food Programme (WFP)

**Nicholas Crawford**

nicholas.crawford@wfp.org

International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP)

**Mercy Karanja**

mercy.karanja@ifap.org

International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Association (IUF)

**Sue Longley**

sue.longley@iuf.org

## References

This brief was prepared by Nancy Hart in collaboration with Paola Termine, Jennie Dey de Pryck, Peter Hurst and others (Contacts).

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The "SARD and..." Policy Briefs are designed to encourage and assist governments in developing and implementing policies to achieve sustainable agriculture and rural development.

This series is produced by the SARD Initiative, a multi-stakeholder framework established to support the transition to people-centred sustainable agriculture and rural development. It is led by civil society, supported by governments and inter-governmental agencies and facilitated by FAO.  
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