

Technical Note: COVID-19 and Child Labour



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1. Introduction

The United Nations declared 2021 the International year for the Elimination of Child Labour, an effort to eradicate this form of abuse and exploitation, a milestone in reaching the Sustainable Development Goal target 8.7. Worldwide, an estimated 152 million children are in child labour, almost half of them, 73 million, work in hazardous child labour. The emergence of COVID-19 places these goals in great peril. The global health crisis is leading to mass disruption with far-reaching consequences. Many children are out of school and economic pressures on families continue to grow. This could push millions of children into child labour and makes child labour an imminent concern. Already working children are likely to be more exposed to the virus (further increasing spread) and face higher risks to falling into worst forms of child labour (WFCL)¹.

¹ Article 3 of ILO Convention No. 182, <https://www.ilo.org/ipec/facts/WorstFormsofChildLabour/lang--en/index.htm>

This technical note offers guidance and information to practitioners and policy-makers on child labour issues during and after COVID-19 and what actions can be taken. Section 2 presents the potential risks COVID-19 can pose to children at risk of child labour and children engaged in child labour. Section 3 presents programmatic and advocacy actions in line with the 2019 Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action (CPMS) and the Child Labour in Emergencies Toolkit (revised edition forthcoming in 2020). Section 4 lists available resources.

2. Child labour in the context of COVID-19

Whilst child labour risks are not always immediately visible, experience shows that crises with high economic impact worsen risk factors of child labour and are likely to increase its prevalence. Some of the child labour risks below have already emerged in the current COVID-19 pandemic, while others are potential child labour risks that have been prevalent in previous humanitarian crises including infectious disease outbreaks.

Risk of Child Labour	Contributing Risk Factors
Children at risk of child labour²	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More children pushed into child labour/WFCL including commercial sexual exploitation to meet basic needs of their families. • Children, especially girls, assuming greater responsibilities for family survival, taking longer hours in domestic and care duties*. • Lack of external workers places more responsibility on children to assist in family activities, including agriculture and home-based industries*. • Caregivers resort to negative survival strategies including child labour and child marriage*. • Child caretakers, especially girls, more exposed to risks of disease contraction by looking after sick relatives*. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Closure of school, learning facilities and limited access to remote learning increase time at home. • Reductions in family income due to death, illness, quarantine job loss. • Reinforcement of traditional gender roles at home: increased role of girls in cleaning, cooking, and caregiving; increased pressure on boys to help their family with income generating activities. • Weakened or overburdened governments unable to prevent exploitation in certain at-risk sectors. • Essential services for children at risk of child labour are reduced and therefore basic needs are not met. • Children in isolation do not see their peers and friends and are disconnected from other support networks. • Family separation due to hospitalization, quarantine, isolation, migration or death. • Myths around COVID-19 that downplay the risks of the disease, especially for children.

² Includes unaccompanied or separated children; children previously engaged in child labour; children who have siblings who work already; child refugees, asylum seekers or migrants.

* Risk identified for both children at risk of child labour and already engaged in child labour.

Children already engaged in child labour

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• More hazardous working conditions (i.e., longer hours, more dangerous tasks or more harmful work circumstances) for children, particularly in agriculture.• Risks of arrest, legal sanctions, fines and/or imprisonments of working children, as a result of violating social control orders*.• Increased psychosocial distress*.• Exposure to trafficking and all forms of violence including sexual violence, exploitation and abuse by actors in position of power*.• Greater exposure to contracting the disease.• Increased risks of family separation and migration as parents and children search for work can further isolate children and/or expose them to new risks*.• Reduced likelihood of returning back to school after lockdown. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Working adolescents, especially in agriculture, who are involved in low-skilled, low-paid jobs typically do not have access to protective equipment or safety gear, medical care, sick leave or social protection.• Loss of jobs or reduced hours in sectors or services that are no longer functioning.• Closure of essential services for children in child labour (accelerated learning programs, schools, food, case management, psychosocial, health). Children living/working in the street, irregular migrants or refugees are especially at risk.• Reduction in overall household income due to death, illness, quarantine measures or loss of jobs.• Limited child labour oversight and/or regulations in sectors that provide essential services such as agriculture, food value chains, manufacturing and/or waste management.• Limited inspection and law enforcement of formal and informal sector workplaces for child labour.• Lack of hygiene practices or personal protective equipment in the workplace increasing hazardous conditions and risk of infection and/or transmission of the COVID-19 virus. |
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3. Program actions: preventing and responding to Child Labour during COVID-19

Individuals, families and caregivers, communities including employers have an important role in protecting children from child labour. To mitigate risks and address child labour during COVID-19, child protection actors must prioritize the following actions.

3.1. Working with other sectors

To effectively prevent and respond to child labour during the COVID-19 pandemic, child protection actors must work together with other sectors to address the diverse needs of children at risk of, or in child labour.

Health sector (CPMS Standard 24)

- Ensure children engaged in child labour access child-friendly health messaging targeting activities and work sectors.
- Train Health staff involved in the COVID-19 response on how to identify, prevent and report child labour.
- Develop strategies to promote health of working children by providing information and services to children in the workplace, providing (mobile) health services in areas with high prevalence of child labour, or through referrals of children with caregivers or family members who are ill.
- Include updated and tailored information on prevention and response to COVID-19 in mental health and psychosocial support activities, including in life skills and other activities for working children.
- Ensure that all COVID-19 health information and support channels including mental health services and (child) helplines are child-friendly and accessible for children engaged in child labour.
- Provide gender and age-appropriate and inclusive information, communication and educational activities to working children including COVID-19 prevention kits (personal protection equipment, hand sanitiser, cleaning materials, soap etc.).

Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) sector (CPMS Standard 26)

- Ensure that WASH programmes do not push children into child labour related to fetching, transporting, home delivery or selling of water, sanitation and hygiene supplies and services.
- Ensure child-friendly COVID-19 and WASH awareness and prevention messaging reach sectors and activities where child labour is present to ensure working children access vital information.
- Train WASH staff involved in the COVID-19 response on how to identify, prevent and report child labour.
- Provide gender and age-appropriate and inclusive information, communication and educational activities to working children including COVID-19 prevention kits (personal protection equipment, hand sanitiser, cleaning materials, soap etc.).

Education sector (CPMS Standard 23)

- Include child labour prevention messages in remote (formal/non-formal) education activities and programmes.
- Include child labour prevention messages in community awareness raising activities.
- Ensure education programmes are inclusive of children at risk of child labour and provide tailored activities for already working children – use radio and online platforms where possible. Ensure that heightened risk of exposure to harmful online content, and to online predators, associated with increased time spent online is addressed through monitoring, enforcement and awareness raising.
- Ensure that (remote) education activities and programmes are tailored to the specific needs of younger and older adolescents, girls and boys, children with disabilities, migrant, displaced and refugee children and other vulnerable children at risk of child labour.
- Ensure that education programmes balance the learning and earning needs of families and working children, by facilitating work and study schedules that meet children’s best interests.
- As schools re-open, implement a comprehensive outreach effort to ensure re-enrolment and enrolment of all children who have not completed compulsory schooling.
- Promote Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) opportunities and local income-generating opportunities that can continue in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as: digital skills, programming, software development, etc.
- Strengthen school monitoring systems to detect children at-risk of school drop-out or who dropped out to engage in child labour.

Food security and livelihoods (FSL) sector (CPMS Standard 22, CPMS Standard 21)

- Identify children at risk of child labour and link their families to food assistance and emergency livelihoods programmes.
- Include families of children at risk of, or already in child labour in the targeting criteria of food assistance programmes and consider the economic impact of the pandemic on households that (used to) rely on child labour.
- Ensure FSL programmes promote do-no-harm - ensure cash-for-work activities/employment opportunities prevent child labour and only involve adolescents who have reached the legal age for work and who have completed compulsory education.
- Monitor the positive and negative impact of emergency agricultural support (such as farming, livestock, fishing kits distribution) and cash for work on child labour.
- Monitor rapidly changing markets and labour market situation and adapt economic strengthening programmes to the new conditions. For instance, promoting market opportunities created by the COVID-19 crisis such as selling PPE equipment, food etc. while continuing monitoring the child labour situation.

Protection sector

- Sensitize families and children on different child protection risks including: child marriage as a coping mechanism; trafficking and job offers such as delivery jobs or running goods across borders; domestic labour with extended family or strangers; artisanal mining; massage/dancing jobs; agriculture and food processing roles and where to get help.
- Consult with working children to identify key health and protection risks, their priorities and solutions.
- Ensure that gender- and age-appropriate information and protection services are accessible to children and adolescents who are at risk of, or already engaged in child labour.
- Brief authorities and protection actors on child labour risks, to be able to detect suspicious activities and perpetrators who may seek to exploit vulnerable families.
- Ensure subcontracted work of aid agencies, such as cash for work and their global supply and procurement chains, are not supporting child labour

Cash and Voucher Assistance (CVA)

- Assess where and how CVA can support child and adolescent well-being outcomes in COVID-19 prevention and response programmes that address child labour.
- Ensure that the amount of CVA provided in response to COVID-19 considers and matches the loss of income from child labour, in order to be effective.
- Advocate for social protection systems to be accessible to and inclusive of families of children at risk of, or engaged in child labour.
- Monitor child labour risks at household level during CVA programming including (post-distribution) monitoring and refer new cases of child labour child protection case management actors.

3.2 Child Protection Specific Actions

<p>Initial response phase</p> <p><i>aims to delay the spread of the virus after confirmed cases</i></p>	<p>Main response phase</p> <p><i>aims to mitigate widespread of community transmission</i></p>	<p>Recovery phase</p> <p><i>aims to support re-opening of schools and markets</i></p>
<p>Case Management (CPMS Standard 18)</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure children engaged in or at risk of child labour are prioritised when case management and referral systems are revised during the pandemic, including those who are displaced and highly mobile, and part of any existing child labour monitoring or child protection systems. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide children already engaged in child labour or at high risk with individualized case management including alternatives if no pathways to decent work for children of legal working age. • Prioritise prevention of and response to the WFCL. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with the social service workforce to identify and follow up children who are engaged in or at-risk of engaging in child labour.
<p>Group activities for child well-being (CPMS Standard 10, CPMS Standard 15)</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consult younger children and adolescents (through helplines, community members or remotely) to develop key messages about the risks and consequences of child labour/WFCL and how children in legal working age can keep safe during the pandemic, with safety and hygiene in the workplace etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When organising PSS activities (either remotely, or in line with government guidelines) include children and adolescents who are engaged in child labour; link them and their families to income generating activities and specialised PSS. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design gender- and age-sensitive and tailored programmes for working children with strong linkages to alternative education programmes.

Strengthening family and caregiving environments (CPMS Standard 16)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide targeted, multi-sectoral family support including access to cash interventions/social protection schemes and psychosocial support to vulnerable families with children at-risk of or engaged in child labour. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide parenting support and financial and material assistance (cash or Non-Food Items) to families and adolescents whose income-generating opportunities have been affected by COVID-19. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinate with multi-sectoral actors (including protection, education, food security and livelihoods actors and national actors including child labour and anti-trafficking actors) to develop family strengthening strategies to address child labour. • Provide long-term livelihood options and social protection.
Community-level approaches (CPMS Standard 17)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support community members to develop and lead community-level initiatives to prevent and respond to child labour, end stigmatization of children in child labour. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with communities to identify strategies such as community level case management to follow up and support children at risk or engaged in child labour (e.g., refugees, children in alternative care, agriculture). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess and build the capacity of community-level child protection actors and systems to engage in efforts to prevent and to respond to child labour during the recovery phase.
Alternative Care (CPMS Standard 19)		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevent family separation by addressing the priority health and food security and livelihoods needs of families. • Ensure alternative care is available for children at risk or already engaged in child labour. • Provide social protection and psychosocial support to existing family-based alternative care arrangements. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build the capacity of child protection actors to prevent family separation and child labour • Engage in family tracing and reunification, and provide family-based alternative care for unaccompanied and separated children (UASC). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure policies and practices that prevent and respond to (the worst forms of) child labour among unaccompanied and separated children including children in alternative care arrangements.

3.3. Working with Governments

Advocacy and awareness-raising activities are essential to prevent and respond to child labour in the COVID-19 pandemic. They can be a powerful tool to bring about positive changes in the lives of working children. **Key advocacy messages for working with governments and organisations are:**

- Prioritise families with children at risk of child labour for cash and voucher assistance (CVA), livelihoods support and/or advocate for their inclusion in social protection schemes.
- Ensure that any child protection response, plan or assessment incorporates child labour adequately.
- Uphold the rights of working children who are refugees, internally displaced, migrants or stateless, children with disabilities, indigenous and tribal peoples, minorities, giving special consideration to specific barriers that they and/or their caregivers face in accessing services, education and decent work.
- Provide opportunities for continuous (alternative) learning to children at-risk of, or who have dropped out of school to enter child labour.
- Strengthen school monitoring systems to detect children at-risk of school drop-out or who dropped out to engage in child labour.
- Create decent job opportunities for families and promote youth employment – include adolescents who have reached the legal age for work to prevent them from falling into child labour.
- Engage employers and workers' and their organisations, and civil society organisations in preventing and responding to child labour and promoting economic empowerment opportunities, social protection schemes and safe work opportunities for children of legal working age and families of vulnerable children.
- Allocate resources to consult and safely involve children and adolescents who are at risk of, or already engaged in child labour in advocacy efforts, to ensure issues prioritised by them are included.
- Continue and prioritize life-saving interventions such as Case Management, Care arrangements and access to Education, Health, Food and Shelter during COVID-19, especially for children in the worst forms of child labour, including, for example, commercial (online) sexual exploitation, child survivors of trafficking and children (formerly) associated with armed forces and armed groups.

4. Resources

Child Labour Task Force	Child Labour Task Force website with all relevant resources including Child Labour in Emergencies Toolkit and collection of examples on how COVID-19 impacts child labour, practices and programme adaptations
The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action	The Alliance for CP in HA website with all COVID-19 resources including the technical Note: Protection of Children during the COVID-19 Pandemic and annexes.