



# **Combatting Child Labor in Developing Economies in Sub-Saharan Africa**

**UN Economic & Social Council - Background Guide**

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**Introduction**

There has been an overall decrease in the use of child labor over the years in a majority of the world, but the issue persists in developing economies, most notably in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). The rates of child labor are no longer decreasing, but instead increasing in the region again. This is cause for concern as previous efforts to reduce this issue are proving ineffective. For this reason and due to the fact that this is a social cause that a majority of the world has advocated against, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) must take the initiative to discuss and work towards a more successful solution to this problem.

## **Background**

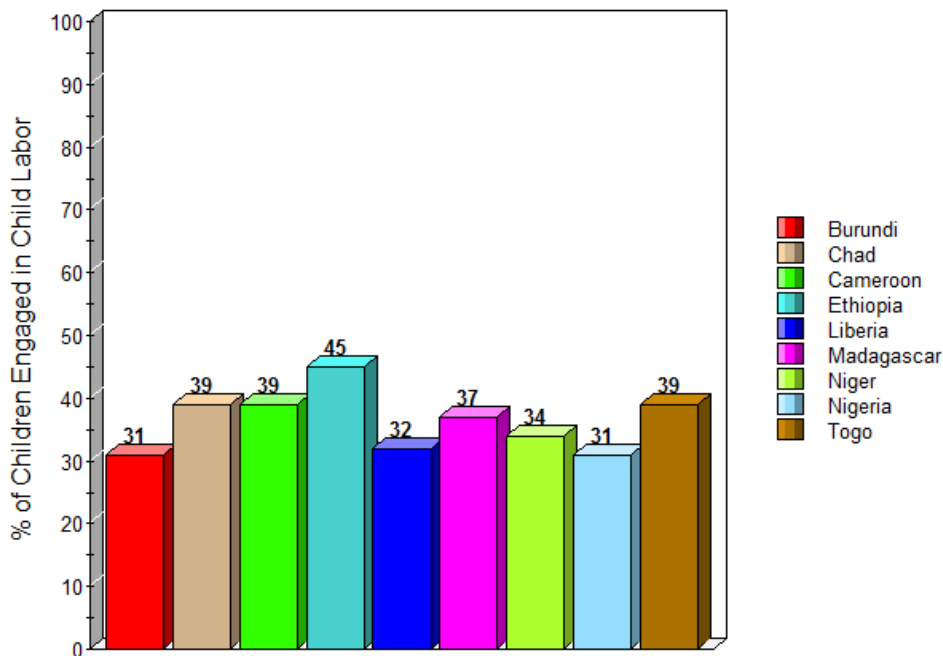
First, to understand this topic it is essential to know precisely what child labor means. Child labor is defined by the United Nations as work that is mentally, physically, socially, or morally dangerous and harmful to children. It also includes any work that interferes with a child's schooling. This being said there is some leniency in what type of labor precisely constitutes as child labor based on the age of the child, the number of hours worked, the working conditions, and the social and economic conditions in a region. Due to this, there is a lack of a proper, formal definition for child labor which complicates the creation of a solution.

Second, it is important to define what a developing economy is. Most often developing economies are seen within Least Developed Countries (LDCs) as the two are closely associated with one another. They can be classified by a gross national income (GNI) per capita of \$1,088 or below, representing a nation as low-income. Additionally, the economic vulnerability index (EVI) considers how vulnerable a state may be in the case of economic shocks. When scored below 36 a nation is considered economically vulnerable, which also indicates that it is a developing economy.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/least-developed-country-category/ldc-criteria.html>

Understanding the scope of this issue is also critically important. Of all the children in Sub-Saharan Africa over 26% of them are engaged in child labor. However, some nations within the region face the issue more severely than others and data collection by UNICEF can help put that into perspective.<sup>2</sup>



It is widely agreed upon by nations that child labor is an abhorrent practice, but there are social and economic pressures in certain regions, like SSA, that cause child labor to be resorted to. This can include established family dynamics and labor systems in which it is typical for children in the family to work. This is especially common with girls as even if they don't leave home to work, they are often given rigorous household duties and expected to help. It can also include poor wages that are not sufficient to support a family alone and a lack of opportunity to become a skilled laborer to make more money. This leaves little option for these families other than to have the children work so that they can afford to survive.

<sup>2</sup> [https://data.unicef.org/resources/data\\_explorer/unicef/](https://data.unicef.org/resources/data_explorer/unicef/)

The economic growth that the Sub-Saharan economy has seen in recent years is currently on a decline according to the World Bank. This means that the growth rate is not high enough to reduce extreme poverty levels. Additionally, the amount of public debt in the region has over tripled since 2010.<sup>3</sup> These economic conditions cause most individuals in the region to live below the poverty line. This in turn creates a need for additional income to support a family, and thus an increased presence of child labor. However, this also often reflects the economic state of the government of the nation as well and it is difficult for them to crack down on child labor if it is what is supporting their economy and their citizens. When examining how this increase in poverty and low economic activity could be solved there are many economic policies to consider. One such idea is debt relief plans considering the quick-growing public debt policies like this stand to provide opportunities to a large number of impoverished people. Another more large-scale idea is targeted investments from outside actors such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or corporations. These investments could aim to promote sustainable development as well as ethical labor.

The role that state fragility and crisis have played in the region is also noteworthy. According to most metrics, Sub-Saharan Africa is the region with the highest presence of fragile states in the world. It has been noted in studies that there is a strong association between fragility, poor growth performance, and lower well-being.<sup>4</sup> This fragility can be caused by conflict between states and armed groups which is rampant throughout SSA, rising food and energy prices, and again lack of economic success which contributes to an ever-growing wage gap between SSA and the rest of the world.<sup>5</sup> With these aspects combined the area is prone to exacerbate the issue of

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/afr/overview>

<sup>4</sup> <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/rode.12578>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2021/04/12>

child labor. This becomes especially problematic because the fragility of the states adds additional difficulty in increasing economic growth performance.

There are outside examples of state instability that have an impact on the region as well. The disruption of supply lines in Ukraine due to the war has caused food insecurity to become an even larger issue over the entire continent of Africa. Food insecurity directly contributes to a higher cost of living which contributes to an increase in child labor.

The direct correlation between all these external stressors and the increase in child labor is necessary to understand in order to try to solve the root cause of the issue. Increases in state fragility lead to less well-maintained infrastructure such as schools and education can often slip to a lower priority. However, a lack of education does not allow children to learn and become skilled laborers who will make livable wages and have decent, safe jobs. Instead, a cycle forms where children remain as a large pool of unskilled laborers who do not have easily accessible education, so they are forced into the labor pool in order to support themselves and their families.

It is also important to understand that most child labor is unpaid and often it is work done at a family farm or enterprise. In Africa, 85% of child labor is done through agricultural practices both commercial and subsistence.<sup>6</sup> When this is considered it brings into light just how severe food shortages can be in terms of their impact on rates of child labor. There is likely to be an increase in subsistence farming if food is no longer widely unavailable for purchase as it once was and the increase in labor that comes with it would likely fall to children. This highlights the fact that regardless of whether children have to work for money or not they still are forced to play a crucial role in supporting their family with labor.

## **Past Efforts**

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ilo.org/africa/areas-of-work/child-labour/lang--en/index.htm>

It is necessary to understand how ECOSOC has already played a role in this topic before beginning to tackle it. ECOSOC is largely responsible for the maintenance and construction of the SDGs and previously the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This is notable because both of the programs contain initiatives that target the elimination of the worst forms of child labor. The MDGs were one of the first resolutions worked with by ECOSOC that explicitly addressed the issue of child labor and with its continuation into the SDGs, it is the council's responsibility to maintain their efforts surrounding this topic.

Due to this, there was a discussion at the NY 2022 ECOSOC Conference surrounding the negative impacts that COVID-19 had on the rates of child labor. The pandemic specifically worsened issues that increase the severity of child labor rates such as poverty and economic inequality. The new course of action they discussed heavily included the financial sector as they have the ability to bring new jobs and opportunities to the region.

The United Nations as a whole has done significant work in order to help eliminate this issue, including passing a number of resolutions.

- [A/RES/44/25](#) (*Convention on the Rights of the Child*) - **1989**: This GA resolution acknowledged the best interests of children and the need to implement a system to protect them. It also emphasized specific rights that children hold that allow them to grow in a safe environment. There was a call for governments to protect children from economic exploitation and hazardous work. Additionally, a minimum age for children to work was strongly suggested.
- [A/RES/70/1](#) (*Transforming our world: the 2023 Agenda for Sustainable Development*) - **2015**: This GA resolution reaffirmed the Sustainable Development Goals and expanded on their implementation. It did this by focusing on the need for sustainable development

including economic, social, and environmental. It also called upon nations to end abuse, exploitation, and all other forms of violence against children in goal 16.

- [A/RES/73/327](#) (*International Year for the Elimination of Child Labor*) - 2019: This GA resolution reaffirmed 70/1 and the eradication of poverty in order to achieve sustainable development. It also invited nations to observe the International Year through activities aimed at raising awareness of the importance of eliminating child labor.

However, branches of the UN such as the International Labor Organization (ILO) have also made considerable contributions to this topic including a number of conventions.

- [ILO Convention No. 138](#) - 1973: This convention called for the establishment of a minimum work age as well as the establishment of national policies to eradicate child labor. It required all member states to realize the abolition of child labor even if they had not ratified the convention, but it actually came to be the first ILO Convention to achieve universal ratification. Additionally, it included Recommendation No. 146 which stressed that national policies should be implemented to help alleviate poverty and promote decent jobs for adults. This was to try to eliminate the financial pressure on children to work.
- [ILO Convention No. 182](#) - 1999: This convention reaffirmed and aimed to strengthen Convention No. 138. It emphasized the urgency of eradicating the worst forms of child labor as a priority while still upholding the integrity of the long-term goal. Importantly, it included Recommendation No. 190 which outlines the definition of hazardous work. It is defined as any work that exposes children to abuse, is underground, underwater, at dangerous heights, in confined spaces, includes the use of dangerous machinery, exposure to hazardous substances, has long hours, or unreasonable confinement at the place of employment.

Additionally, the ILO has established the ACCEL Africa program which aims to accelerate the elimination of child labor within gold mining supply chains. The program works to achieve its goal by helping children attend school and providing vocational training in the hopes that the children will be able to have safer, decent occupations. It also targets the legal and business framework to try to create safer working conditions and promote sustainable development throughout all layers of the supply chain. This program was carried out in the nations of Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, and Nigeria during a 4-year period from 2018-2022. The program was largely successful, but due to its relatively small scale in relation to the enormity of the issue, it is not an effective solution.

The United Nations' International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) has played an instrumental role in our understanding of this issue in the region. They do regular, extensive data collection and monitoring of child labor all around the globe which helps us grasp the full scope of this issue and its severity.

As for the regional response to this issue, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which is comprised of 15 member states with a number of them being located in the SSA region, partnered with the U.S. government to adopt a regional Child Policy and Strategic Plan of Action which outlined a framework to safeguard the wellbeing of children. It included means through which the worst forms of child labor could be combatted with a specific focus on stopping child trafficking. The program was ultimately withdrawn in 2014, but it was used to remove and prevent nearly 11,000 children from the worst forms of child labor.<sup>7</sup>

Since that time ECOWAS has reinstated a Child Policy plan that runs from 2019-2030 and again aims to respect the rights of children and their general wellbeing. It moves towards this goal

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ilo.org/ipecc/projects/global/ecowasi/lang--en/index.htm>



by working on the local community level while also adapting previous policies to better tackle the issue within the region.

Although most nations, within the region and outside, have a shared stance on the issue of child labor, the problem continues to worsen as unforeseen circumstances cause further economic recession in the region. In light of these circumstances, further efforts must be made in order to curb the growth of the issue and send it into remission once again.

## **Conclusion**

Although recent initiatives have discussed a more economic-centered approach there is still a lack of specific, up-to-date financial policy that will help alleviate the surrounding issues that create the pressure for children to work. Economic recession, state fragility, food insecurity, and severe poverty are all major factors contributing to the increasing rates of child labor and it cannot be expected that the issue will be resolved without first addressing those elements of the problem. The emphasis in resolutions is typically on educating and assisting children directly, which is important, but including recommendations about creating economic policy as well would do a more thorough job of taking into consideration all factors contributing to this problem. The social and educational aspects are also critically important to this topic and should be focused on in tandem with other perspectives. Additionally, nearly every part of this problem is a constantly evolving factor and that should be considered when creating a resolution as it's important for it to stay relevant and not outdated, which is an issue many past resolutions regarding this face.