

GLOBAL MARCH AGAINST CHILD LABOUR NETWORK

OUR POSITION ON IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON CHILD LABOUR

The Global March Against Child Labour (Global March) is a worldwide network of trade unions, teachers' associations and civil society organisations working towards the shared development goals of eliminating and preventing all forms of child labour, slavery, trafficking and ensuring access by all children to free, meaningful and good quality public education.

As a distinctive organisation solely dedicated to the eradication of child labour actively present across 32 countries in the Global South, the Global March has always recognised and invariably advocated for collective efforts to prevent further worsening of the lives of the most vulnerable children, from children in all forms of child labour to children at risk of losing access to education and other basic rights amidst situations of crisis; regardless of the socio-economic-political landscape of countries and the world at large. [This commitment has further strengthened in the challenging times of COVID-19 pandemic.](#)

With the [International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour](#) fast approaching in 2021, the progress towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal target 8.7 is not only being negatively impacted on various fronts but also possibly reversing and slowing down due to the devastating impacts of the pandemic. [31 million children have been uprooted from their homes, including over 17 million who are internally displaced, 12.7 million refugees and 1.1 million asylum seekers.](#) In situations of conflict,

many of them are confined in overcrowded camps, informal reception centers, or squatter settlements, with a lack of clean water, sanitation, and medical services.

Worldwide, the lives of an estimated 152 million children in child labour, of which 73 million work in hazardous child labour, are in great peril (ILO). The pandemic is leading to direct and indirect impacts on vulnerable children with far-reaching consequences. Children engaged in worst forms of child labour are already out of school, besides the risk of million others who would remain out of school or drop out as schools shut down and economic pressures on families continue to grow, making child labour an imminent concern now more than ever. Even in regions where schools are gradually opening, the impact of economic shocks for families could push their children towards child labour instead of going to school.

There is no doubt that the devastating impacts of COVID-19 will impact marginalised children the most. However, it is also crucial to evaluate the myriad complex and overlapping realities of child labourers and other children at risk with a multidimensional approach to arrive at problem statements and solutions. This position paper highlights the various intersecting issues that need to be taken into consideration to address the complex socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on child labour, out of school children and other children at risk, thereby proposing advocacy supported interventions at all levels and commitments for adequate and urgent collective action.

CURRENT SCENARIO

1. EDUCATION DISRUPTION AND GENDERED IMPACTS

From children in emergencies and humanitarian conflict to children on the brink of starvation, challenges associated with COVID-19 multiply while considering the various facets of socio-economic realities and structural inequalities. To begin with, the negative impacts of school imposed closures, lack of access to technology and limited learning materials would be stronger and prolonged amongst marginalised children who are less likely to return to school, especially girls.

With school closures affecting nearly 91% of the world's student population, over 1.5 billion learners have had their education disrupted, of which 743 million are girls. This would further entrench gender gaps in education and lead to life threatening issues such as increased risk of sexual exploitation, early pregnancy, gender-based violence, trafficking, forced marriage and child marriage. Early pregnancy and forced marriages have been seen directly linked with school closures in previous crises like the Ebola, creating permanent barriers for girls to return to education even once the crisis ends.

Not to forget, the burden of unpaid and invisible domestic work is largely carried by women and girls, besides being lowly paid as domestic workers, something which post-pandemic, can lead to a higher risk for girls to permanently drop out of school and reversing the gains made in recent years.

While distance learning, most commonly in the form of Online Education (OE) is being promoted across countries, the global scale and speed of the current educational disruption remains unparalleled. More than two-thirds of countries have introduced national distance learning platforms, but among low-income countries, the share is only 30 per cent (UNICEF). Before this crisis, almost one-third of the world's children and youth were already digitally excluded. Girls especially, cannot equally access online learning as boys are 1.5 times more likely to own a phone than girls in low and middle-income countries and are 1.8 times more likely to own a smartphone that can access the internet.

Additionally, the challenges associated with ensuring education for all appear to be exceedingly crucial for children who never made it to any of the official statistics or in simple words, still remain uncounted such as children of migrant and seasonal workers, pastoralists and informal sector workers.

2. IMPACT OF GLOBAL SUPPLY CHAINS ON CHILD LABOUR

Economies of most regions embedded in global supply chains are disrupted today. Countries that are most dependent on international trade, especially with the Global North can already be seen weakening economically, thereby increasing possibilities of child labour which means more and more children out of school and being pushed towards poverty. It is estimated that the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic could push up to 86 million more children into household poverty by the end of 2020, an increase of 15 per cent (Save the Children and UNICEF).

Virus-induced restrictions could lead to disruptions in key global trade commodities in the agro-sector. For instance Cocoa, which is causing economic distress among rural cocoa farmers in the Ivory Coast and Ghana. Child labour in these regions is already widespread in agriculture with more than 70% child labourers constituting a key part of the agricultural workforce.

Similarly, COVID-19 has exposed the vulnerability of cross-country supply chains, with negative consequences for countries such as Bangladesh where the garment sector massively depends on demands in the US and EU. Most garment brands' stores are forced to shut amidst the pandemic along with many other essential and non-essential supplies considering the slowdown in US and EU economies which further has ripple effects in Bangladesh impacting their economy negatively. To make the situation worse, the shrimp sector in Bangladesh which is the second biggest revenue generating sector of the country was recently hit by the cyclone Amphan that wrecked thousands of shrimp farms in the coastal regions of the country. Reiterating that both the sectors in Bangladesh were already faced with issues such as child labour, gender based violence at work, poor wages, gender wage gap and unfavourable working conditions to name a few.

Understanding the impact of these drastic shifts in supply chains is crucial for analysing how it is affecting the 1.2 million children in Bangladesh already engaged in worst forms of child labour, forced labour, bonded labour and other forms of hazardous work that affects their physical and mental wellbeing.

3. INFORMAL SECTOR AND CHILDREN OF MIGRANT WORKERS

Apart from the impacts of cross-country supply chain disruptions in most regions, local economies and informal sectors also face key challenges, from fulfilling demands for every day needs to keep the economy afloat. Within the informal sector, agriculture, manufacturing and construction have been enormously dependent on seasonal, migrant, non-contractual and home-based workers. Children of these workers have always been at the edge of either losing the remotest opportunities for education due to constant migration for agricultural work or dropping out of school too early to support household income. One can already witness reverse migration of millions in India returning to the rural parts of the country which already faces issues such as rural agriculture distress and inadequate official policies to support the ailing rural economy as well as essential services for the poor.

Children of migrant families are also exposed to heightened risks of malnutrition and to child labour exploitation, discrimination and violence (FAO). A recent case highlighted by Global March's members in Central America (Global March members in Central America include CEIPA from Guatemala, RIA from El Salvador, Coiproden from Honduras, among others) suggests that children constitute a large chunk of migrants returning from the United States to countries such as Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, of which at least 1,000 are [unaccompanied migrant children](#). Lack of information and effective protocols in place for a safer reintegration has led to confusion and fear in both the returnees and receiving communities. The perception that children and families returning from the U.S. carry the virus, is leading to acts of violence and discrimination against them, adding to already existing threats like gang violence that drove the children and families to leave in the first place. This has led to further stigmatisation of migrants and a double risk for children in particular.

The impact of changes in the informal sector on women are worth taking into consideration as it can further lead to reduced wages, increased burden of work at home and more invisible labour for them. Such consequences also impact children, especially when the jobs that men are engaged in are affected, increasing the risk for children to be employed for cheap labour. Women employed as domestic workers might also not have a choice but to take children to work, further minimising any chances of education for them. Children, both girls and boys would also be vulnerable to being trafficked across countries to work in manufacturing units for meagre to no wages and additionally face extreme physical, mental and sexual violence.

TIME FOR BUSINESSES TO ACT, URGENTLY

In complex situations like the ones described above, it becomes even more crucial to address the challenges such as access to quality education, return to school, access to school feeding programmes and most importantly, preventing their transition to child labour.

As international development aid, businesses (employers) and regional governments put their best foot forward to address the most pressing challenges of developing countries and communities in jeopardy, the crisis presents an opportunity for businesses in global supply chains to rethink how they operate. There is no denying the fact that many businesses are themselves facing a wide range of financial setbacks, but in order to revive with time, supply chain leaders need to ensure they are not only profit oriented but socially responsible, minimising the potential adverse impacts on children and vulnerable households. The gains made over the past decade in supply chain due diligence to prevent child labour could also be lost or weakened by the pandemic making supply chains more vulnerable to child labour in its worst forms.

In responding to the immediate needs as well as the aftermath of the pandemic, the private sector must pay close attention to the tensions and unique challenges arising as a result of years of globalised trade with worst impacts on children in vulnerable countries living in a continuing crisis. Thus, interventions that are more inclusive of different realities of marginalised and most vulnerable children are required to understand their context and remediate accordingly.



Based on the above arguments, the Global March advocates for these three most urgent asks for collective action from the civil society, governments, unions, businesses (employers), donors, inter-governmental organisations, and humanitarian aid organisations:

1. Prioritising efforts to continue education of all using available technology and alternative means of learning for vulnerable children

Despite the intense increase in direct and indirect diverse impacts of the pandemic and pre-embedded socio-economic inequalities, learning must resume with a collective resolve to improve the quality and equity of learning opportunities. Efforts need to be focused on ensuring adequate support for the most vulnerable students and families during the implementation of the alternative education plans using all available technology, from online education to paper based material. Distance learning is a temporary emergency measure, to be implemented by and with teachers, in consultation with teacher organisations.

It is also equally and now more than ever important to examine specific implications for girls that may increase their risk of not being a part of education initiatives, such as responsibility for taking care of the sick at home, or exploitation when out of school. Respective boards and ministries of education must work closely with the civil society and education unions to boost re-enrolment with a gender-lens, as and when schools re-open, in order to minimise the number of children falling out of educational systems and into child labour simultaneously advocating for strengthening national budgets for public education.

2. Economic assistance such as cash transfers to economically weaker households to prevent child labour

In the absence of social protection schemes and cash transfers, ensuring immediate relief and welfare becomes challenging. Direct cash transfers (including both unconditional and conditional cash transfer) have proven to be one of the

strongest anti-poverty tools, with evidence from success stories and programs spanning Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Cash transfers also have positive impacts on children, from healthcare to reduction in child labour. Besides, placing money in the hands of the households can help prevent the vicious cycle of adverse effects of the vicious cycle on the poor and vulnerable, reducing chances for children being forced to work. Conditional cash transfers are also crucial for households with school going children to receive additional transfers for children to be able to attend school regularly.

3. No relaxation in child labour enforcements in any region

Governments need to ensure that under no circumstances, any relaxation in child labour law enforcements is allowed and that they are in line with international labour conventions enforced through increased inspections than before. [Proposals have already been put forward to lower the minimum age for child labour to cope with labour shortages in the coffee sector in Colombia](#). Even though the proposal suggests allowing only minors between 16 and 18 years to be involved with official authorisation issued by the local labour inspector, the conditions can still be complex and challenging to ensure that children are not employed and minors are not involved in hazardous activities.

It is likely that similar moves from other sectors and countries, especially in cash-strapped governments will follow that may weaken child labour law enforcement and the progress achieved so far, making things more complicated for not only the civil society but also various international and regional supply chains. In sectors such as agriculture, weakening of child labour laws and enforcement will exacerbate already widespread violations, especially in rural areas where is more complex, costly and time-consuming leading to an increase in hazardous work and other worst forms of child labour, including forced labour and human trafficking.

