

## World Day Against Child Labour

The International Labour Organization (ILO) introduced the World Day Against Child Labour in 2002. The day is observed annually on 12 June; in 2023 the theme is 'Social Justice For All – How to End Child Labour'.

### Background

The United Nations (UN) defines child labour as work performed by children who are under the minimum age legally specified for that kind of work, or work that, because of its detrimental nature or conditions, is considered unacceptable for children and is prohibited. Not all work by children should be considered child labour. Forms of work that are beneficial to a child's personal and social development, that do not interfere with schooling and childhood, but rather provide useful experience and skillsets, should be encouraged.

*Worst forms of child labour.* The biggest concern within the scope of child labour, according to ILO [Convention No 182](#), these forms of labour are prohibited for any person below the age of 18 and must be eliminated as a matter of urgency. They include all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery; involvement of children in commercial sexual exploitation; involvement of children in illicit activities; and work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children (Article 3).

**Global trends.** The number of children between the ages of 5 and 17 involved in child labour has declined significantly in the past two decades, from an estimated 246 million children worldwide in 2000. Nevertheless, according to the [latest global estimates](#), there were still a total of 160 million children engaged in child labour in early 2020. Nearly half of them (79 million) were carrying out hazardous work, endangering their health, safety and moral development. There is [evidence](#), meanwhile, that the COVID-19 crisis caused a substantial rise in child labour. Over half of all child labour is recorded in sub-Saharan Africa. The region has the highest rate of child labour, with 24 % of children employed as child labourers, a total of nearly 87 million. Next come Asia and the Pacific, where, although a [steady decline](#) has been seen since 2008, 48.7 million children remain in child labour. Globally, the vast majority of child labourers (71 %) work in the agricultural sector. Although the phenomenon is more commonly associated with non-EU countries, and reliable data are lacking, there is [evidence](#) that child labour also persists in the EU and Europe.

**Root causes.** Child labour is commonly [driven](#) by family and community poverty, paired with a lack of access to decent work for adults and young people (income insecurity, inadequate wages), weak social protection and a lack of free, high-quality public education and other public services.

**Future goals.** The ILO's initial [goal](#) was to eliminate the worst forms of child labour by 2016, a goal that despite progress has still to be achieved. The UN Sustainable Development Goals – [Goal 8](#) in particular – set the [target](#) of eliminating all forms of child labour by 2025. To achieve this, progress would need to be 18 times faster than in the past 20 years, and immediate action is needed to reduce the negative impact of the pandemic. The risk of child labour rising with growing crises, conflicts, and disasters must also be addressed. Social protection needs to be universal, and children's education safeguarded and advanced. It is important to address the risk of child labour in both domestic and global supply chains.

### 2023 World Day Against Child Labour

The theme for this year's World Day Against Child Labour is '**Social justice for all – How to end child Labour**'. Addressing root causes and advancing social justice were at the heart of the 'Durban Call to Action', adopted at the 5th Global Conference for the Elimination of Child Labour in 2022, and are central to the [Global Coalition for Social Justice](#), a new ILO initiative seeking to address rising inequalities and reduce child labour. A [report](#) released at the 2023 International Labour Conference states that over 244 million children and young people across the world are still out of school, and 7 out of 10 children in low- and middle-income countries cannot read a simple story at the age of 10. These deprivations in access to quality education impair children's future opportunities to find decent work and achieve a standard of living that is adequate for their own health and well-being and for that of their families.



## International legal framework for combating child labour

The abolition of child labour has been one of the ILO's main goals since it was established in 1919. It plays a crucial role in raising awareness of the issue and in establishing recognised standards. Three international conventions form the legal framework for national action against child labour. [ILO Convention No 138](#) on the minimum age for admission to employment and work, adopted in 1973, has been [ratified](#) by 175 countries, including all EU Member States. This crucial document lays down standards for the minimum age for employment, calling on the parties to set the minimum age at 15 (Article 2(3)), or 18 for hazardous work (Article 3(1)). It also emphasises the importance of taking all necessary steps to ensure the effective abolition of child labour. [ILO Convention No 182](#) on the worst forms of child labour, adopted in 1999, has been [ratified](#) by 187 countries, including all EU Member States; it is known for being the fastest ratification in ILO history. It calls on members to take immediate and effective measures to secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour as a matter of urgency (Article 1). The 1989 UN [Convention on the Rights of the Child](#) (CRC) has been [ratified](#) by 196 countries, including all EU Member States. The CRC confers upon children the right to protection from economic exploitation, as well as from performing any work likely to be hazardous or to interfere with their education, or to be harmful to their health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development (Article 32). It urges parties to set a minimum age for employment, to regulate working hours and conditions, and establish penalties for non-compliance.

## EU action to combat child labour

The EU's firm commitment to eliminating child labour is reflected in Article 32 of the 2012 [Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU](#) (CFR), which prohibits the employment of children and states that the minimum age of employment may not be lower than the minimum school-leaving age. The main legal instrument prohibiting child labour in the EU is [Council Directive 94/33/EC](#). It allows Member States to set a minimum age for employment below the minimum school-leaving age only exceptionally, in Article 4(2).

There is also an external dimension to the fight against child labour, and to the EU's [full commitment](#) to its eradication. Building upon a [document](#) from 2010, a 2013 Commission staff working document on '[Trade and Worst Forms of Child Labour](#)', provides a framework for understanding the complexity of the issue, emphasising the link between trade and child labour, and pointing out the positive impact of economic growth on the elimination of the worst forms of child labour. A 2017 Commission staff [working document](#) addresses child labour in the context of promoting sustainable garment value chains through EU development action. More recently, in its 2021 [communication](#) on the EU strategy on the rights of the child, the Commission confirms its strong commitment to eliminating child labour and to the 'zero tolerance' approach already announced in its own [political guidelines](#). The elimination of child labour is also at the heart of the Commission's 2022 [communication on decent work worldwide](#). The Council of the EU [reaffirmed](#) its commitment to eliminating child labour, particularly its worst forms, in 2016, and stressed the importance of eradicating the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict, including child soldiers.

The **European Parliament** has condemned [child labour](#) and its various forms within and outside the EU in a number of resolutions over the years. During the current term, Parliament has issued, inter alia, a [resolution on children's rights in view of the EU strategy on the rights of the child](#) (March 2021), calling on the Commission and Member States to end, in law and in practice, all child labour and all other forms of work likely to harm children's health and safety. It also called on the Commission to embed children's rights in the upcoming EU sustainable governance framework, and recommended adopting cross-sectoral mandatory due diligence and ensuring that all EU policies are child-friendly. In another [resolution](#) from 2021, on sustainable and responsible corporate behaviour, Parliament called for a ban on imports of products connected with severe human rights violations, such as forced or child labour. It also stressed that the objective of combating these practices must be included in all EU free trade agreements. In the same vein, Parliament has prepared amendments to the draft directive on [corporate sustainability due diligence](#) now under discussion.

In February 2020, Parliament adopted a [resolution](#) on child labour in mines in Madagascar, in which it stressed that the EU's long-term budget should reflect its commitment to eliminating the worst forms of child labour. In a June 2022 [resolution](#) on new EU rules on products made by forced labour, Parliament called for cooperation with partners who support ending forced labour globally and banning goods made by forced labour.

*This is a further update of a 2021 'At a glance' note originally drafted by Kristina Grosek.*

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