

Papatheophilou, Simela; Tröster, Bernhard

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Ending child labour: Implementation of SDG 8.7

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Ending Child Labour – Implementation of SDG 8.7

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Simela Papatheophilou, Bernhard Tröster
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AUSTRIAN FOUNDATION FOR DEVELOPMENT RESEARCH

Ending Child Labour – Implementation of SDG 8.7

Simela Papatheophilou, Bernhard Tröster

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target 8.7 calls for the elimination of child labour by 2025. As of this year, 137.6 million children remain in child labour worldwide. This shortfall underscores that substantial additional efforts are required to achieve a meaningful reduction.

Drawing on both a literature review and expert interviews, this paper outlines how child labour is conceptualised, reports the global and regional data concerning child labour, summarizes the international legal framework prohibiting child labour, and identifies policy approaches and measures found to be effective in decreasing child labour, especially those that tackle root causes and structures leading to child labour. These include providing decent work conditions and labour inspection mechanisms, promoting collective bargaining and social dialogue, supporting measures related to education, regulating global value chains, sector and area-specific interventions, strengthening social protection and poverty alleviation measures, and building child care and child protection systems.

Rather than merely prohibiting child labour, all of these measures either address the economic vulnerability driving it or provide viable alternatives to child labour. They must always be underpinned by social dialogue, including the voices of affected children, workers' organisations, local administrations, and local civil society.

As these measures are diverse, so are the actors that both Austria and the EU should cooperate with to achieve progress in the above-mentioned policy areas. Multilateral cooperation, through organisations such as the ILO, UNICEF, or UNESCO, is the avenue for creating widespread policy change on a national or even regional level, while bilateral cooperation and supporting local initiatives is needed to achieve tangible results that directly impact the lives of the affected communities.

Effective child labour prevention requires addressing the underlying economic vulnerabilities through social protection and creating viable alternatives through education and decent work, particularly in the framework of bilateral cooperation. It also demands legislative action and strong enforcement of corporate responsibilities throughout supply chains by the EU and its Member States and a commitment to long-term development strategies. Furthermore, accompanying measures are suggested to ensure that companies effectively abolish purchasing practices that foster child labour and contribute to projects limiting child labour. Austria and the EU must ensure that policies are not only legally sound but practically impactful on the ground.

This paper offers targeted recommendations to Austrian and EU institutions that contribute to accelerating progress against child labour globally, thereby closing the gap on the missed SDG target. Austria could in particular step up its support for targeted programmes executed by the ILO (e.g., the Better Work Initiative, and the Global Programme on Skills and Lifelong Learning), and UNESCO (e.g., the Global Education Cooperation Mechanism), and by joining the Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty. At the bilateral level, Austrian Development Cooperation could support programmes to establish “child-friendly villages”, and support sector initiatives raising the income of farmers, such as The Living Income Community of Practice.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ADA	Austrian Development Agency
AU	African Union
CCT	Conditional Cash Transfer
CLRISK	Child Labour Risk Identification Model
CSDDD	Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
ECLT	Eliminating Child Labour in Tobacco-Growing Foundation
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agricultural Organisation
FTA	Free Trade Agreements
GCM	Global Education Cooperation Mechanism
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
HDI	Human Development Index
IFI	International Financial Institution
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
ILO	International Labour Organisation
ITUC	International Trade Union Confederation
IVTI	Child Labour Vulnerability Model
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
N/A	not available
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
ÖGB	Österreichischer Gewerkschaftsbund (Austrian Trade Union Federation)
RTA	Research to Action
SCI	Sustainable Cocoa Initiative
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SNA	United Nations System of National Accounts
TNC	Transnational Corporation
UCT	Unconditional Cash Transfer
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
USA	United States of America

1 INTRODUCTION

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a global framework adopted by the United Nations in 2015 to address pressing social, economic, and environmental challenges by 2030. Among these, SDG 8 focuses on promoting sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all. Within SDG 8, target 8.7 calls for “[...] immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms” (UN 2024).

In this report, we focus on child labour as a specific aspect of SDG target 8.7. As indicated in the target formulation, child labour can take different forms, including hazardous work in agriculture, domestic labour, forced labour, sexual exploitation, forced involvement in armed conflicts or in illicit activities. Therefore, the conceptualisation and definitions of child labour and its different forms are presented in section 2.

Next, section 3 presents the latest trends and statistics on child labour, while also identifying existing data gaps and areas requiring further attention. As is explained in the section in detail, the global estimates for children in child labour and for children exposed to the worst forms of child labour show that we are still far from meeting SDG target 8.7. In fact, 137.6 million children – almost 8 % of children worldwide – are in child labour (ILO/UNICEF 2025), i.e., work to an extent, in an environment or in a way that is harmful to and/or interferes with their education. More than 3 % of children globally, i.e. 54 million, do hazardous work (ibid.). On the bright side, the data reveal that significant progress has been made, especially in regions like Asia and Latin America, and that progress, which had stalled between 2016 and 2020, has recently picked up again (ibid.). To accelerate progress, increased political attention to the topic is needed, as progress in this field often stalls when media attention fades.

Section 4 depicts the international legal framework around child labour, showing the quasi-universal consensus to eliminate child labour. Section 5 presents measures and policies in line with that goal. While poverty is the biggest factor for child labour, better economic development overall does not always equate to less child labour. The variation between countries with similar GDP levels with respect to likelihoods of child labour is explained by their respective policies (ILO 2018b). Synergies between various development policies and child labour eradication efforts do exist. For instance, health protection policies to reach SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing) and educational policies to reach SDG 4 (Quality Education) have been found to have positive effects on child labour prevention, but this does not mean that any successful development policy will reduce child labour, as some have been found to have adverse effects (ibid.). In fact, our interviews confirm that the influence of some factors is disputed among experts.¹

Understanding child labour as a complex policy issue requires an in-depth look at strategies and policies, which could accelerate action towards a world free of child labour, especially as SDG 8.7 envisioned 2025 to be the year signalling the end of all child labour. Given this state of affairs, the aim of section 5 is to assess various policy approaches to end child labour.

¹ The ILO's Research to Action (RTA) Project has put together an Evidence Gap Map, which shows the many factors that influence the occurrence of child labour as well as the many factors of which we do not know enough to determine whether and how they influence child labour (ILO 2025).

In section 6, we list concrete measures that Austria and the EU should take to support policies presented in section 5, focusing on multilateral cooperation (6.1.), legislative action, implementation of laws, and accompanying measures (6.2.), and bilateral and local interventions (6.3.). Lastly, section 7 presents a short conclusion of our findings.

Our findings are based on a literature review, as well as five interviews with child labour experts from notable International Organisations, Non-Government Organisations, and state agencies active in this field. An anonymized list of interviewees and the interview questions used are added as an annex.

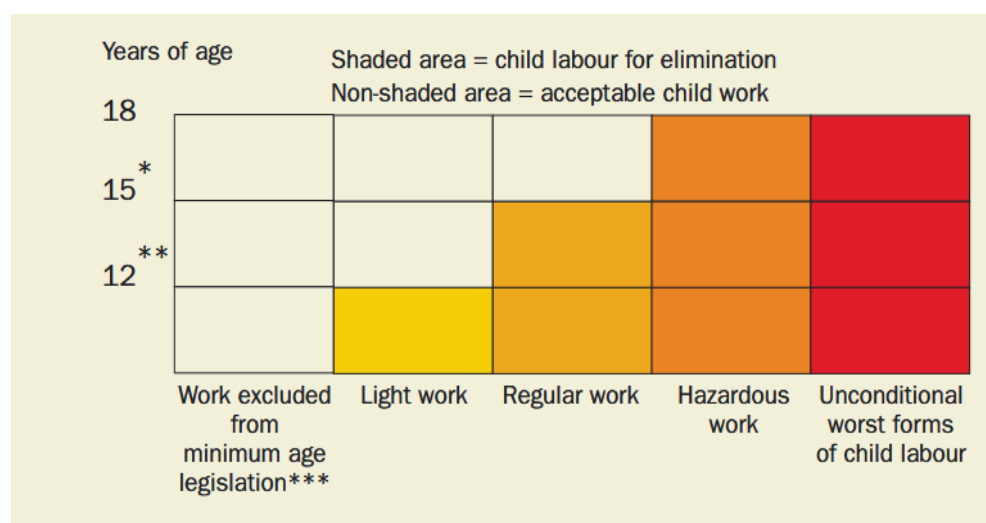
2 CONCEPTUALISING CHILD LABOUR

Even though there is no universally accepted definition of the term ‘child labour’, the commonly used statistical concepts and definitions by UN organizations are based on the three main international conventions in this field – the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and ILO Conventions Nos. 138 and 182 (see details in section 4; ILO 2018b; Türkelli Erdem 2021). The broad term ‘children in employment’ refers to all forms of work done by children – permissible (‘child work’) or unacceptable (all forms of “child labour”) (ibid.).

The criteria to distinguish between ‘child work’ and ‘child labour’ are ‘age of the child’, ‘number of working hours’, ‘type of work’, ‘location and environment of work’ and ‘what it limits or offers’. In a nutshell, ‘child labour’ refers to all kinds of work that are harmful to children and/or interfere with their education. The different forms of child labour are further classified into ‘light work’, ‘regular work’ that is non-light and non-hazardous and ‘worst forms of child labour’, which includes ‘hazardous work’ (i.e., work which is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children) and ‘unconditional worst forms of child labour’ such as slavery or practices similar to slavery, forced or compulsory labour, child prostitution or pornography, use of children in armed conflict and illicit activities like production or trafficking of drugs (ILO 2024, 2018; ILOSTAT 2024).

As shown in Figure 1, the ILO definitions of the different kinds of child labour and child work include several socio-economic facets and the same activities in light and regular work can be considered acceptable or should be abolished depending on the age of the child concerned. Most importantly, all worst forms of child labour, including hazardous work, which jeopardizes a child’s health, safety, or morals for instance through the exposure to dangerous machinery, chemicals, heavy loads, or harmful environments are defined as unacceptable. Compared to the former one-dimensional definition of child labour by the minimum employment age, the current more differentiated definitions and the prioritization of the worst forms of child labour are important shifts (Hoque 2021). This is also explicitly emphasized in the formulation of SDG target 8.7.

Figure 1: Basic distinctions in ILO child labour standards



* The minimum age for admission to employment or work is determined by national legislation and can be set at 14, 15 or 16 years.

** The minimum age at which light work is permissible can be set at 12 or 13 years.

*** For example, household chores, work in family undertakings and work undertaken as part of education.

Source: Nippierd et al. 2007

3 DATA AND TRENDS IN CHILD LABOUR

The global indicator framework for the SDGs includes the “proportion and number of children aged 5–17 years engaged in child labour, by sex and age” as indicators for the target 8.7 (UN Stats 2024). Two measures of this indicator can be reported based on the United Nations System of National Accounts (SNA) and the general production boundary basis, with the latter including unpaid household services (ILOSTAT 2024).

Generally, measuring child labour is challenging. There exist few official statistics as child labour happens mostly within families and informally. Thus, data on child labour are derived from different types of national surveys, which typically have various limitations. The ILO and UNICEF combine and model the results of these diverse surveys every four years, with the latest global report published in June of 2025 (ILO/UNICEF 2025). The data in the latest report is based on surveys conducted between 2019 and 2023, adjusted for demographic changes since data collection. On this basis, estimates for child labour in 2024 were derived (ILO/UNICEF 2025b).²

Comparing national data poses risks, as countries set different minimum ages and classify different types of work as ‘hazardous’ (see section 4). Also, different availabilities of data pose a problem (ILO/UNICEF 2025b). Research on child labour emphasizes that child labour can only be understood and assessed in its local context (Cannon et al. 2024; ECLAC, ILO 2022), hence caution is needed when making statements about child labour from a national, regional or even global perspective. It is evident that the closer one looks, the more nuanced a picture emerges regarding the prevalence of child labour. Therefore, all data on child labour presented

² Additional data are available for instance here https://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/child-labour/#elementor-toc_heading-anchor-0 and here https://data.unicef.org/resources/data_explorer/unicef/?ag=UNICEF&df=GLOBAL_DATAFLOW&ver=1.0&dq=.PT_CHLD_5-17_LBR_ECON-HC.&startPeriod=2015&endPeriod=2025.

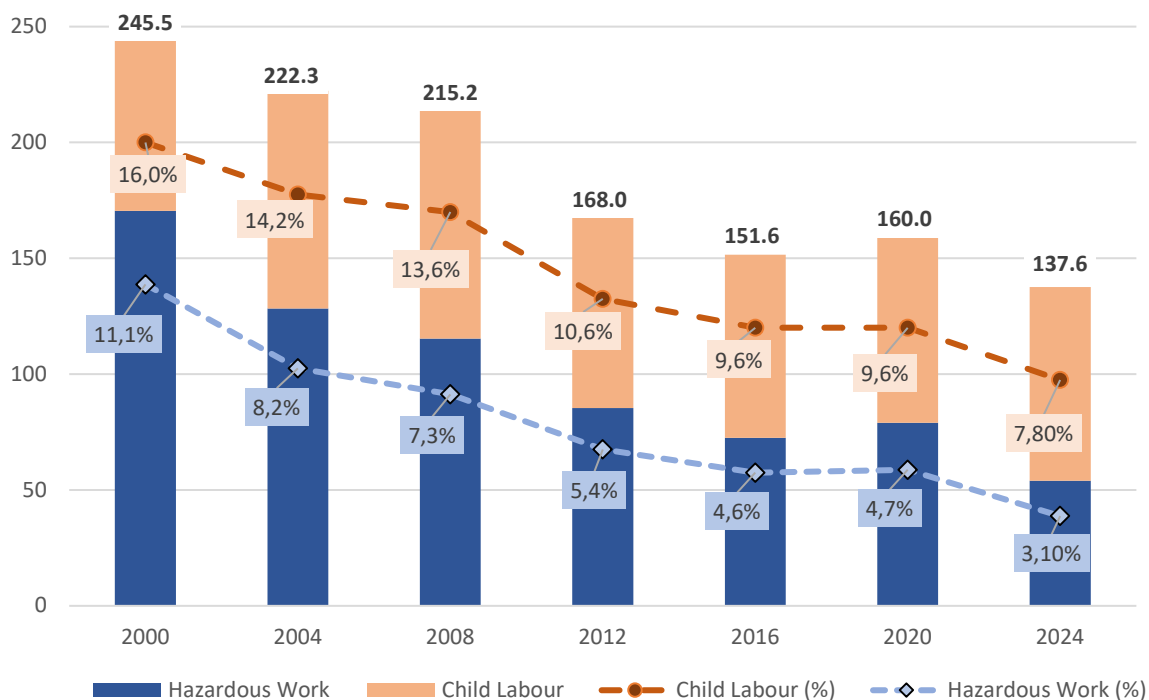
below have to be understood to present broad trends, which may differ significantly in some regions.

In the previous report of 2021, UNICEF for the first time in two decades reported an increase in children affected by child labour and especially children in hazardous work. In 2020 (pre-COVID-19), 160 million children (9.6 % of children worldwide) were in child labour worldwide and almost half of them (79 million) were performing hazardous work (ILO/UNICEF 2021). The expectation back then that child labour would increase due to the COVID-19 pandemic did however not materialize.

According to the 2025 ILO/UNICEF report, 137.6 million children were in child labour in 2024, 54 million of whom were performing hazardous work, thus reflecting a reduction at rates comparable to those seen in the early 2000s (ILO/UNICEF 2025). Thus, over the last four years child labour declined slightly more than predicted (cf. expectation of 139.7 million children in child labour by 2025 in ILO/UNICEF 2021). The major reasons are economic growth and demographic factors.

Yet the challenges to eliminate child labour have hardly changed with the new data: In order to reach the target of SDG 8.7 by 2030, the pace of reduction would have to become “11 times faster than it has been in the last four years” (ILO/UNICEF 2025: 15). Even eliminating child labour by 2060 would require four times the pace of change of the last four years (ibid.).

Figure 2: Children in child labour and hazardous work (in millions)



Source: ILO/UNICEF 2025

A look at regional developments shows considerable variation: In Asia and Latin America, child labour is continuously decreasing, while in Africa, child labour has been shown to have increased already in 2016 in comparison to the 2012 data and is now decreasing much slower than in other parts of the world – owing in part to demographic factors (ILO/UNICEF 2025; see Table 1).

There are also statistically significant gender differences across different sectors concerning child labour (Awaworyi Churchill et al. 2021; Ravetti 2020; UNICEF 2024a). Across all ages of children and adolescents, boys are more likely to endure child labour according to statistics which exclude household chores (UNICEF 2021; ILO/UNICEF 2025). In contrast, statistics including household chores show similar levels of child labour for boys and girls or slightly higher levels of child labour for girls in comparison to boys (UNICEF 2024a; ILO/UNICEF 2025).

Due to its informality and oftentimes closeness to the family, agriculture is the biggest sector affected by child labour worldwide, with 61 % of child labourers working in this sector. The remaining child labourers work in the provision of services (27 %) and industry (13 %) (ILO/UNICEF 2025). As some sectors are more prone to child labour, sector specific approaches are presented under section 5.5.

Table 1: Estimates of various forms of child work by region, years 2008–2024

REGION	YEAR	CHILDREN IN EMPLOYMENT (MIO)	CHILD LABOUR (MIO)	CHILD LABOUR (%)	HAZARDOUS WORK (MIO)	HAZARDOUS WORK (%)
ASIA AND THE PACIFIC	2008	174	114	13.3	48	5.6
	2012	129	78	9.3	34	4.1
	2016	90	62	7.4	29	3.4
	2020	68	49	5.6	22	2.6
	2024	N/A	28	3.1	18	2.0
LATIN AMERICA AND CARIBBEAN	2008	19	14	10.0	9	6.7
	2012	18	13	8.8	10	6.8
	2016	16	10	7.3	6	4.4
	2020	12	8	6.0	6	4.0
	2024	N/A	7	5.5	5	3.5
SUB- SAHARAN AFRICA	2008	84	65	25.3	39	15.1
	2012	84	59	21.4	29	10.4
	2016	96	70	22.4	31	9.8
	2020	116	87	23.9	39	10.7
	2024	N/A	87	21.5	23	5.8

Sources: Fors 2024; ILO/UNICEF 2025

While the ILO/UNICEF data show a tangible decrease of hazardous work, another form of the worst forms of child labour – namely trafficking in persons – has been shown to increase particularly starkly. The latest numbers show an increase of 31 % of child victims compared to 2019. Most trafficked boys are used in forced labour or forced criminality, with unaccompanied migrant children being at a higher risk, while most trafficked girls are exploited sexually (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2024). Statistics like this explain why a gendered analysis is especially important when devising, implementing and evaluating policies against child labour.

4 INTERNATIONAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK

States are bound by international law, be that in the form of treaties which they ratify or in the form of customary international law or general principles of law. Important international legal obligations of states regarding child labour can be found in some ILO conventions as well as some UN human rights treaties. In the following, we provide an overview:

ILO, Minimum Age (Industry) Convention, (1919) 38 LNTS 81; Night Work of Young Persons (Industry) Convention, (1919) 38 LNTS 93:

Although both of these conventions were later replaced by other conventions, they show that prohibiting child labour has been a priority of the ILO since its first session in 1919, when the two conventions were passed.

United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948):

There is no explicit prohibition of child labour, however some provisions include implicit prohibitions of some of the worst forms of child labour, such as the prohibition of slavery and servitude, the right to life, liberty and security, the right to social security and the right to education.

While the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is non-binding, some of its provisions are considered as customary international law, giving them binding effect. This is most clearly recognized for the prohibition of slavery, which is seen as a customary rule of international law and an *erga omnes* obligation (Reinisch/Neuhold 2013).

ILO, Minimum Age Convention Nr. 138 (1973):

Signatory states must set the minimum age of employment at not less than 15 years, with exceptions for light work (starting from 13 years). Developing countries may make use of an exception to allow children of the age of 14 to work and children of the age of 12 to do light work. While some developing countries make use of this exception, many have also opted to set the minimum age at 15 or 16 years of age (ILO undated). Dangerous work must be prohibited under the age of 18 (with exceptions being possible under specific conditions for those 16 and older).

The Minimum Age Convention has been ratified by 176 countries (ILO undated). Even among states that have not ratified it, no state “dispute[s] the fact that were they to allow children to work below the age of twelve and possibly fourteen that they would be in breach of international legal obligations” (Schabas 2021: 183). The obligation to set a minimum age for employment and to ensure that children are protected against the worst forms of child labour, can be argued to be international customary law (ibid.).

While this Convention is binding law to states that have ratified it (and other ILO member states according to the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its Follow-up, see below), recommendations passed by the General Conference of the ILO – such as the Minimum Age Recommendation (Recommendation No. 146) – are not binding upon states, but merely act as soft law instruments.

The Minimum Age Recommendation urges states to commit to full employment, ensure family living standards and incomes at a level that makes it “unnecessary to have recourse to the economic activity of children”, to extend social security and family welfare measures, and have

facilities for the protection and welfare of children and young persons. The needs of youth without families, migrant youth and those who “live and travel with their families” are to be prioritized, e.g., through offering fellowships and vocational training. It recommends to require full-time attendance in schools and vocational trainings.

The recommendation instructs states to set the minimum age for employment at the same level for all sectors of economic activity. Where states do not find it feasible to fix a minimum age for all employment in agriculture, they should at least fix a minimum age for work on plantations and commercial (non-family or small-scale) agriculture (Art. 8 Recommendation No. 146).

The recommendation also calls for strengthening labour inspection to ensure fair remuneration, the strict limitation of hours spent working, the prohibition of overtime for underage workers, a minimum consecutive period of 12 hours night rest, the granting of annual holidays not shorter than that granted to adults and the coverage of social security schemes.

Furthermore, public authorities should maintain a system of birth registration and issue birth certificates, employers should be required to keep documents indicating the birth date of employees and in the case where checking of employers' records are impracticable (e.g., when children are working in outside stalls), licenses should be issued which indicate the eligibility for such work (Art. 16).

UN, Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) 1571 UNTS 3:

This UN Convention was ratified or accepted by all UN member states except the USA (United Nations 2024). The convention applies to all children under the age of 18 in signatory states, and to older youth if the national legislation deems them still ‘children’ domestically.

Children must be “protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or [...] development” (Art. 32). To this end, states must take legislative, administrative, social and educational measures, including to provide a minimum age of employment, to regulate working hours and conditions, and enforce this article through sanctions. States' obligations go beyond simply adjusting their legal frameworks. They include obligations to actively work on the realization of the rights mentioned in the convention.

ILO, Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (1999) No. 182:

Art. 3 of this convention lists the worst forms of child labour (see section 2). 187 countries – i.e. all member states of the ILO – have ratified the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (ILO undated a).³ They are obliged to consult the organizations of employers and workers to determine the types of work falling into this category and establish mechanisms to monitor the implementation of the prohibition of anybody under 18 years of age to work in such forms of labour. States must also implement programmes of action to eliminate the worst forms of child labour, including the provision of direct assistance for the removal of children from the worst forms of child labour and for their rehabilitation and social integration and for ensuring access to education for those children.

³ The only nations who are members of the UN but not of the ILO (and therefore not of the convention either) are Andorra, Bhutan, Liechtenstein, Micronesia, Monaco, Nauru and North Korea.

The ILO has passed a supplementary Worst Forms of Child Labour Recommendation (No. 190) in 1999, which includes categories to consider when determining which work falls into the definition of the worst forms of child labour. States are urged to collect information and statistical data on child labour, implement an effective system of birth registration and birth certificates and cooperate internationally (through exchange of information on criminal offences and prosecuting perpetrators transnationally). Furthermore, states need to ensure that the use of children in the worst forms of child labour are punishable criminal offences according to their domestic laws, and that enterprises can be supervised and their operating permits revoked in case of violations.

ILO, Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its Follow-up (1998), as amended in 2022:

This Declaration obliges all member states of the ILO – regardless of whether they have ratified the Conventions in question – to respect, promote and realize the five Fundamental Principles at Work defined in the declaration. One of them is the abolition of child labour. This means that all ILO members must implement the Convention No. 138 on Minimum Age and Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, even if they have not ratified them.

Regional human rights treaties or provisions:

The European Union's Charter of Fundamental Rights (2000/C, OJEU C 364/1) prohibits child labour in its Art. 32 and furthermore states that young people may only work under appropriate conditions for their age, which precludes exploitation and harm to them or their development. This Charter binds all EU Member States as well as new Member States who enter the EU and is further specified by the EU's Directive 94/33/EC on the protection of young people at work (OJEU L 216/12).

The African Union's African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child has been ratified by 50 of the AU's 55-member states and has been in force since 1999. In its Art. 15, it forbids all work for children which is exploitative, likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's development.

5 POLICIES AND MEASURES AGAINST CHILD LABOUR

There is no silver bullet against child labour, as its causes are complex (see e.g., Awaworyi Churchill et al. 2021; UNICEF Ethiopia et al. 2020). UNICEF (2021) therefore calls for a “multisectoral approach”, wherein child protection systems, labour enforcement systems, civic registration systems and education systems all play a part. Legal measures serve as a first bastion against child labour. But the best law is only as good as its implementation. Good implementation requires many preconditions, such as knowledge and awareness of the laws by stakeholders, strong and well-funded institutions, sufficient numbers of agents such as labour inspectors, and adequate institutional arrangements for coordination and monitoring. A publication by the African Union (African Union 2019: 11) lists all of those as lacking in its member states, which are the states most affected by child labour.

Lacking implementation capacity explains the discrepancy between the prevalence of child labour and the universal understanding of all states for the need to eliminate child labour, which is evident from the almost universal ratifications of conventions in this field (see in detail section 4).

Given the universal understanding of the need to protect children against exploitation, actors on various levels work on eliminating child labour:

- Sub-national level: regional actors (including public and private sector, civil society, unions)
- National level: states
- International level: International Organisations (most importantly the ILO and UNICEF), INGOs⁴ (e.g., Save the Children, World Vision International, Anti-Slavery International, Global March Against Child Labour and Plan International)

Also, cooperation initiatives among various actors, also across levels, have been initiated: The 'Alliance 8.7', which was launched by the ILO in 2017 to accelerate efforts to achieve SDG sub-goal 8.7., encompasses 403 organisations, ranging from civil society organisations to international organisations, government institutions, academic institutions, workers' organisations, and employer organisations.

There are also various issue-specific approaches to stop child labour happening at different levels of administration and in different geographies. Approaches pertain to decent work conditions and labour inspection (5.1.), collective bargaining and social dialogue (5.2.), education (5.3.), value chain legislations (5.4.), sector and area-specific approaches (5.5.), social protection and poverty alleviation policies (5.6.), early warning systems and research-informed target interventions (5.7.), and child care and child protection systems (5.8.). It should further be stated that some of the worst forms of child labour require different measures (such as better coordination of law enforcement across countries, or humanitarian efforts), which are not addressed here in detail, as they differ considerably with respect to the type of child labour concerned.

5.1 Decent work conditions & labour inspection

Almost every country in the world is a member of the ILO and is therefore committed to setting minimum age requirements for work and abolishing the worst forms of child labour (ILO Declaration on the Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work 1998 in conjunction with ILO Convention 138/1973 and ILO Convention 182/1999).

Yet, bans can only be effective if they are properly enforced (Bargain/Boutin 2021; Bharadwaj et al. 2020). Many countries find themselves lacking "the institutional and technical capacities of agencies involved in the application/enforcement of legislation relating to child labour" (African Union 2019: 22). Enforcement agencies, such as labour inspection units require more resources (ILO 2018b).

However, and even more importantly in the context at hand, even enforced bans alone cannot be effective, when there are no viable alternatives for families (ibid.). Studies show that bans can instead have adverse effects on family income, and consequently child wellbeing, if adult wages are not increased simultaneously and the costs of schooling remain high, as the loss of income from child labour is not compensated for in such cases (Basu/Van 1998; Doepke/Zilibotti 2005; Piza et al. 2024). In other words, labour inspections must not only ensure that children are not working, but also that the fundamental rights of working adults are respected. This includes timely payments of wages, proper worker registration, adherence to safety protocols, and the protection of collective bargaining rights (see also 5.2.). Working

⁴ International Non-Governmental Organisations, can also have non-state members.

children themselves have identified adequate and stable work for parents and caregivers as a key demand to address their basic needs (Dialogue Works 2023). As one expert put it: “If I only help the child, I have not helped against child labour” (Interview 4).

Austria should assist other countries in the implementation of the bans on child labour as well as their other fundamental rights relating to work. Assisting other ILO members in the implementation of ILO Conventions is one of the duties that Austria must fulfil as a signatory to the Conventions (Art. 8 ILO Convention 182/1999; Art. 3 1998 Fundamental Principles Declaration).

A clear focus should be placed on enforcing the ban on the worst forms of child labour (including hazardous work), prioritizing the removal of children from such situations (Interviews 4 & 1). Among experts, there are different views with respect to enforcing bans on other types of (forbidden) child labour, with a majority being in favour, as long as additional measures are taken to combat poverty as the leading cause of child labour (Interviews 4 & 3). Other interviewees highlighted that local enforcement often excessively punishes parents for letting children work despite the parents themselves being exploited as well, and thus has stigmatizing effects for the affected children (Interviews 2 & 1).

5.2 Collective bargaining and social dialogue

Policies that facilitate freedom of association and collective bargaining are crucial to prevent child labour, as they allow working adults to improve overall working conditions and wages that provide a living income without additional labour from children (ILO 2018b). Strengthening labour unions and other forms of workers’ representation is therefore critical. Overall, policies to prevent child labour should be underpinned by social dialogue to ensure their relevance (ibid.). Experts emphasized that such dialogue formats should include local politicians and administrations (Interviews 4, 2 & 3).

Key actors often overlooked in debates about child labour are (working) children themselves. Working children emphasize that policy approaches to child labour taken without consulting them can be ineffective or lead to adverse effects, such as criminalization or further hurdles to staying in school (Thorben 2025). In 2023, committees and associations of working children from 16 countries came together for the Global Gathering of Working Children and Youth in Kigali, and issued a joint declaration. Named after the meeting place, the Kigali Declaration outlines the key policy demands of working children, including support for working children’s committees, associations, networks and movements (Dialogue Works 2023).

It should be noted that 6 of 10 children in child labour are working in the agricultural sector, most of whom work on family farms (ILO/UNICEF 2025). Taking this into account, improving rural livelihoods and incomes is crucial (UNICEF 2021). Low and volatile commodity prices are the major reason why parents rely on child labour in this sector. To support better bargaining positions against more powerful buyers in this particularly affected field, support is needed for producer associations, unions and cooperatives (ILO 2018b; Interview 2).

5.3 Education

Overall, children in child labour are three times as likely as other children to not attend school (ILO/UNICEF 2025). The percentage of children out of school due to child labour varies considerably between different world regions, with 20 % of children in child labour (under 14 years of age) out of school in Latin America and the Caribbean, compared to 29 % in Sub-

Saharan Africa and 42 % in Asia and the Pacific (ibid.). As stated in section 2, child work becomes child labour when it interferes with education. Across all regions, children in hazardous work are even more likely to not be in school, with globally 47 % of the children in hazardous labour not attending school (ibid.).

As the ILO reports (2018b: 6) “[t]here is broad consensus that the single most effective way to stem the flow of school-aged children into child labour is to improve access to and quality of schooling”. Key demands of working children who do not wish to drop out of school or miss school include active measures to re-enrol out-of-school-children, and the abolishment of factors hindering school attendance such as violence, discrimination, and tuition fees (Dialogue Works 2023). Experts also elaborated that child labour often occurs in regions where (especially secondary) education is out of physical reach due to poor infrastructure (Interviews 4 & 2). Furthermore, there are often the hurdles of additional costs for school meals, books, and uniforms (Interviews 2 & 3).

The initiative ‘Latin America and the Caribbean Free of Child Labour’, which was founded in 2014, includes almost all countries of the region⁵ and is a good example of South-South cooperation in the fight against child labour. Many of the strategies identified within the initiative to prevent child labour and to create a low-risk work environment for working adolescents centre on education (see in detail ILO/Regional Initiative Latin America and the Caribbean Free of Child Labour 2024):

- Programmes to help students finish their education were found to be among the most cost-efficient strategies to prevent child labour. They were most effective if accompanied by measures to prevent teenage pregnancy and support adolescent parents and by early warning systems to detect students at risk of dropping out. School reintegration offers for former drop-outs can be effective, but often lack quality.
- Apprenticeship contracts/programs have shown to be most effective in reducing informality and allowing adolescents to access better-paying jobs. However, the certificate received must be recognized at the national level and conditionalities for entering programmes should not be too high, as otherwise only those adolescents can enter who anyhow would have had little trouble on the labour market. Training programs were less effective. Least effective (against child labour) was the only evaluated approach without a connection to education, namely employment subsidy programs, which provide incentives to companies to hire especially disadvantaged persons.

The African Union’s 10-year plan for the eradication of child labour similarly sees education as the main lever for achieving the action plan’s goal (African Union 2019). Likewise, the EU also recognizes education as the main lever for reducing child labour. However, in the International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour 2021, the EU initiative presented as the flagship project in this regard was the TACKLE project, which at this point had ended already eight years prior (European Commission 2021; ILO 2013).

Implementing apprenticeship programs, while falling under the broad scope of education, crucially requires cooperation with the private sector and labour inspectorates (Alshehail 2024). Likewise, other educational initiatives showed better results if there was strong involvement of trade unions, employers and local NGOs (ILO 2013). Skills accreditation measures and apprenticeship programmes are particularly important for the formalization of work, which is seen by experts as a major stepping stone against exploitation (Interviews 4 &

⁵ Exceptions: Belize, Dominica, and St. Vincent & the Grenadines.

1). Furthermore, state institutions and ideally labour unions need to be actively involved to ensure that apprenticeships are carried out under safe workplace conditions, are fairly remunerated, and do not constitute an obstacle to formal education (see Alshehail 2024).

5.4 Value chain legislation approaches

There is ongoing work to create an international legal framework for the responsibility of transnational corporations (TNCs) to adhere to human rights (including the prohibition of child labour), as the increasing power of TNCs warrants their taking on more responsibility in this regard.

Some states, such as the Netherlands, France, Germany and Norway have established binding corporate due diligence legislation, which is enforceable and therefore goes beyond voluntary industry standards.⁶ The EU had intended to follow suit with its Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (Directive 2024/1760; also: CSDDD). The CSDDD obliges large companies who have a branch within the EU to conduct “risk-based human rights and environmental due diligence” (Art. 5 (1) CSDDD). The prohibition of the worst forms of child labour, as defined in ILO Convention No. 182, and the prohibition of the employment of children below the age where compulsory schooling is completed and in any case below the age of 15, as stated in ILO Convention No. 138, are among the human rights listed, which companies have to monitor.

Specifically, companies have to monitor actual and potential instances where those rights could be adversely impacted from their own operations or those of their subsidiaries or business partners where related to their chain of activities (Art. 8). Companies must take appropriate measures to prevent or mitigate potential adverse impacts and to end actual adverse impacts (Art. 10 f.). Initially, EU member states would have to transpose the Directive into domestic law until July 2026. This also entails establishing (i.e., staffing and funding) supervisory authorities that may issue penalties for companies who infringe any of the above-mentioned obligations. After that, the CSDDD was to take effect in multiple steps in the following years.

While the EU’s CSDDD was once hailed as a major stepping stone towards global human rights compliance, the latest Omnibus regulation proposal of the European Commission aims at significantly reducing the number of businesses the CSDDD applies to, postponing its application, limiting due diligence requirements to the companies’ own operations and those of direct business partners and removing the planned liability regime (European Commission, COM(2025) 81 final, 2025/0045 (COD); see for critique of the proposal among others Costa 2025; Menschenrechte brauchen Gesetze 2025; OHCHR 2025). Multiple interviewees expressed disappointment about the “watering down” of promising legislation to something they now see as a mere “distraction” (Interviews 4, 2 & 3).

Child labour is typically concentrated at the very beginning of value chains. Limiting the duties of lead firms to only their direct business partners means failing to follow human rights requirements all the way to the source of products, which could be – and in many cases are – produced under conditions violating human rights. This does not only apply to child labour, but also to the payment of adequate living wages to employed workers and adequate living income to smallholders and self-employed workers (another human right that must be monitored

⁶ Germany currently suspends the reporting rules in its national regulation. Due diligence checks are paused—except for serious human rights abuses—until the EU CSDDD takes effect.

according to the CSDDD⁷, but which would be limited to the uppermost step in the value chain according to the new Omnibus regulation proposal). Living wages and living income are seen as a key preventative factor for child labour.

The new proposal to restrict the obligations under the CSDDD to the first tier was fiercely criticized by experts (Interviews 2 & 3). It presents a reversal of the risk-based approach that the CSDDD was originally based on, according to which companies shall identify risks, regardless of where they are in their value chain, and then based on the identified risks take prevention and mitigation actions (Art. 6 ff. CSDDD). The risk-based approach, which is also found in the soft law instruments that the CSDDD is based on, crucially hinges on the concept of mapping activities across the whole supply chain (Husseini et al. 2025) – something that the Omnibus proposal discards through its narrow focus on the first tier, where typically less risks are found.

Some other legislation can be found concerning specific human rights. While not being a value chain regulation approach strictly speaking, the new EU Regulation 2024/3015 on prohibiting products made with forced labour on the Union market follows a similar logic, wherein economic operators who want to offer their products within the EU need to ensure that their products were not made using forced labour, which explicitly includes child forced labour. The scope of human rights to be monitored is thus much narrower than in the case of the CSDDD. If investigations reveal that products were made with forced (child) labour, the product must be removed from the European market. Similar to the CSDDD, it will take a while until any impact will be seen, as the Regulation enters into force only at the end of 2027.

5.5 Sector and area specific approaches

Certain products are especially often connected to child labour, such as cocoa, cotton, tobacco, tea, rubber, palm oil or coffee. Mining for jewellery and raw materials used for electronics production are non-agricultural sectors known for their high prevalence of child labour (Healey 2017). As effective EU-wide or international legislation on value chains remain absent, private sector initiatives to prevent child labour in value chains have become widespread, especially in sectors that receive negative media attention for child labour.

For this purpose, voluntary corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives have been developed. The UN Global Compact is the largest of these. One of its ten principles is the abolition of child labour. These instruments have remained rather toothless, especially because of the non-existence of enforcement mechanisms, even if corporations decided to apply the rules to themselves. Concerns about the effects of voluntary due diligence are also underlined in an EU commissioned study that found that the top three incentives for companies to undertake voluntary human rights due diligence are reputational risks, and demand from investors or customers (British Institute of International and Comparative Law et al. 2020). As a result, there is a tendency of companies to only publish results if these are “communicable to costumers or shareholders” (Grohs et al. 2023: 30).

Some multi-stakeholder initiatives are heavily dominated by industry actors using such initiatives to create an image of being socially responsible corporations. For example, the leading tobacco companies are all part of the Eliminating Child Labour in Tobacco-Growing Foundation (ECLT), and use this foundation to lobby for more lenient laws governing tobacco

⁷ Annex I, Art. 1 (6) and recital 34, Directive 2024/1760/EU.

and to distract from the low wages that they pay, which are a leading cause of child labour in the first place (Tobacco Tactics 2022).

There have been only few studies on the effects of voluntary private sector programmes on child labour (see overview in Engelbertink/Kolk 2021). One study that focused on the cocoa sector in Ghana found that such programmes show positive effects in decreasing child labour, but have limited effects against structurally too low commodity prices that reinforce poverty (Ansong/Agomor 2024). This is in line with previous findings that identified the effects of CSR initiatives on the issue of child labour to be positive, but limited where unable to tackle root causes (Engelbertink/Kolk 2021). Another study focused on the textile sector in China and Turkey found the effects of voluntary CSR programmes of companies to be limited due to a conflict of interest between cheap production as the core interest of buyers and the initiatives' interest in CSR, the inability to enforce rules, and lacking "embeddedness in the societies whose standards they seek to reform" (Bulut/Lane 2011: 66).

A pitfall of companies' voluntary CSR approach is that in the case that companies only try to eliminate child labour from their own value chain, the problem may simply be pushed onto other parts of the sector where no CSR measures exist or child labour moves to other sectors. Interviewees emphasized that this is a real danger (Interview 3) and listed examples of where 'zero tolerance' policies in some sectors or value chains pushed child labourers "into the riskier jobs and more hazardous jobs" in other sectors (Interview 2). Examples were given of children previously working in the cocoa sector being pushed into gold mining, and of children being pushed out of the garment sector into child prostitution (Interviews 2 & 1).

To avoid this, area-based approaches have been developed (Grohs et al. 2023). They address "factors driving all types of child labour in a given geographic area" (ILO 2018b). An example of this approach is the project 'Work: No child's business' by the Dutch government. The reason such approaches have not become the norm is the fact that they are costly compared to sector or value chain approaches (Interview 3).

Certifications are commonly used to show the effects of initiatives against child labour. However, voluntary industry-driven certifications without independent control only contribute to the "insane jungle of certifications" that confuses consumers and leads to their ultimate inaction (Interview 4). To ensure that certifications are useful, verifications need to be "decoupled from business interests", which is best achieved through independent state authorities as "certifiers of certifications" (Grohs et al. 2023: 33). Examples of state-led or state-coordinated certification schemes are Mexico's MEXSTI, a state-coordinated label showing that an entity demonstrates effective practices for child labour prevention and adolescent worker protection, Mexico's DEALTI label for agricultural enterprises free of child labour, and Peru's Child Labor Free Seal (SEITI), a state-run initiative for (especially agricultural) companies, in child-labour-prone sectors (Regional Initiative Latin America and the Caribbean Free of Child Labour 2024).

CSR initiatives have been found to have positive effects where companies cooperate with each other and with state actors to ensure that there is no duplication of efforts, but rather synergies to achieve common goals (Grohs et al. 2023). Some good-practice examples of voluntary (i.e., industry-initiated) supply chain measures taken to exclude child labour from the value chain are the initiatives of the Lázaro Cárdenas Sugar Mill in Mexico, Coca-Cola Brazil (concerning the açai supply chain), the Mexican National Chamber of Sugar and Alcohol Industries (Cámara Nacional de las Industrias Azucarera y Alcoholera), the Roberta Barbery Paz sugar mill (itself part of UNAGRO S.A.), HOLCIM ECUADORS S.A. and El Salvador's Chamber of

Agriculture and Agri-Industry (CAMAGRO) (Regional Initiative Latin America and the Caribbean Free of Child Labour 2024).

In the cotton sector, the EU and the ILO financed the five-year CLEAR Cotton project, which ended in 2023. It was an integrated approach including measures for building institutional capacity in the participating countries (Burkina Faso, Mali, Pakistan, and Peru), strengthening labour rights and income of cotton farmers, implementing data collection mechanisms, developing monitoring and remedial mechanisms, supporting due diligence initiatives, and improving access to education in cotton producing areas (ILO 2018a).

In the cocoa sector, the Sustainable Cocoa Initiative (SCI) of the EU, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Cameroon (the major producing countries of cocoa) was established in 2020. Within this framework, producing countries agreed to ensure that until 2026, national child labour monitoring systems cover all of the cocoa-producing areas and provide reliable data on the incidence of child labour. Together with the national governments, sector-wide cocoa traceability systems should be established within the same timeframe, by which measure the EU and producing countries hope to eliminate child labour in the cocoa supply chain (Sustainable Cocoa Initiative 2022). Initiatives for living income of cocoa farmers are another piece of the puzzle to de-incentivize child labour.

5.6 Social protection policies and poverty alleviation

“In the absence of other coping mechanisms, exposure to poverty and shocks can force households to resort to child labour as a fall-back survival strategy. Continued progress against child labour will require policies that help mitigate the economic vulnerability of households” (ILO 2018b: 7). One interviewee gave an example of what this looks like in practice in Côte d'Ivoire, a country with high instances of malaria: “If in the high season your dad contracts malaria and is unable to work, suddenly you're drafted in, you're pulled out of school” (Interview 2).

The most comprehensively-tested policy approaches in relation to the goal of reducing child labour are cash transfer programs (ILO 2018b; for a sector-specific analysis see Grohs et al. 2023; International Cocoa Initiative 2022). Most of these are conditional cash transfer (CCT) programs. In CCT programs, poor households need to fulfil certain obligations (e.g., attendance of medical appointments, attendance/enrolment in school, participation in workshops) to be eligible for the cash transfer (Ravetti 2020: 8). Their effects on child labour have been studied in various contexts, such as Nicaragua (Gee 2010), Brazil (Peruffo/Ferreira 2017), Bolivia (Chong/Yáñez-Pagans 2019), Lesotho (Sebastian et al. 2019), South Africa (Tondini 2022), Costa Rica (Meza-Cordero 2023) and Indonesia (Utami et al. 2024).

In Unconditional Cash Transfer (UCT) programs participants receive regular cash transfers regardless of the continued fulfilment of any conditions. They are commonly employed in Sub-Saharan Africa, but also Pakistan and sometimes other Asian countries. Studies suggest that they are similarly effective – in terms of reducing child labour – as CCTs (Awaworyi Churchill et al. 2021).

The comparative study of Ravetti (2020) shows that the contexts in which cash transfer programmes are applied vary so much, that no general statement can be made about the sums necessary to achieve a decline in child labour through such programs or to predict who would benefit most from such programmes. A third of the studies she reviewed found unambiguous decreases in child labour, a third found reductions for specific groups of children (certain age

brackets, gender, children employed in certain areas) or households, and a third showed adverse effects for some children, such as more participation in household work.

A main finding of Ravetti's (2020) meta-analysis is that CCTs and UCTs can even increase child labour, if cash payments are invested in increasing the productivity of the family farm or enterprise, which can lead to an increased demand for labour that children fill. CCTs can further lead to an increase in child labour, if the associated cost for fulfilling the conditions are so high, that child labour is needed to fill the gap, e.g., if school enrolment is the condition, but school fees are high. The success of cash transfer programs hinges crucially on the context, especially circumstantial factors, such as the size of the transfer relative to the amount necessary to offset the income from children's labour (ILO 2018b). Such policies are therefore best made locally and supported with reliable (ideally long-term) funding. A core aspect is ensuring good coverage in the informal sector, as most child labour takes place there (Interviews 2, 4 & 5).

5.7 Early warning systems & research-informed target interventions

As poverty and inequality are the drivers of child labour, interventions against child labour are budget-intensive. This warrants prioritization of specific forms of child labour (namely the worst forms of child labour). Such a prioritization is only possible, if the states are aware of where hazardous activities take place.

Therefore, the African Union announced to invest more into data collection and statistics to identify areas and sectors where children are at particular risk (African Union 2019). So far, the main outcome of this pledge appears to be some industry actors in Africa taking up the approach of using blockchain technology to record and store data of products as well as of workers along the value chain and the AU's Development Agency urging further industry actors to use this approach to increase traceability (APET Secretariat et al. 2023). UNICEF also supports research projects into the risk factors of child labour. Another example of far-reaching research programs into child labour is CLARISSA in Nepal and Bangladesh (Cannon et al. 2024).

Risk factors hinge also on cultural factors, local economic factors and other highly locally specific variables, which cannot easily be generalized, thus requiring specialized research (Alshehail 2024; Ansong/Agomor 2024; Cannon et al. 2024; Bulut/Lane 2011). The identification of risk factors is essential for the adoption of policy responses to eliminate child labour, without criminalizing children or pushing them into other forms of exploitation.

Together with the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, the Regional Initiative Latin America and the Caribbean Free of Child Labour created the Child Labour Risk Identification Model (CLRISK), which 11 of the member countries of the initiative employ (ILO undated b). CLRISK assesses risk factors for child labour to identify vulnerable territories. In the end, this allows to see which municipalities have a low, medium or high risk of child labour prevalence and which risk (or protective) factors are particularly prevalent in a municipality, so that preventive policies can be applied at the subnational level targeting the precise problem-structure on the ground. This model thus follows insights according to which the local context (rather than the national one) matters most as to whether people resort to child labour (ECLAC, ILO 2022).

Another widely used early warning system is the Child Labour Vulnerability Model (IVTI), which likewise allows for a territorial characterization of vulnerability to child labour. IVTI creates sub-indices for the relevant factors, such as education factors, social protection and labour market

factors, which all taken into consideration create an index for the risk of child labour, similar to how the Human Development Index (HDI) considers 3 sub-indices (health, education and income) to create an index for human development (ibid.).

5.8 Child care & child protection systems

Child care encompasses in its narrower meaning facilities where children are being taken care of, while their parents/usual care takers work. This helps to keep children away from adult workplaces (e.g., farms), which can be more hazardous to children than to adults. Examples of this are the UNICEF-project 'Casas de la Alegría' in Costa Rica, which consists of 40 day care centres for the children of coffee and sugar farmers (Alshehail 2024), or Argentina's state-sponsored all-day child care during high season for tobacco farmers (Regional Initiative Latin America and the Caribbean Free of Child Labour 2024). The availability of pre-school facilities has been shown to prevent child labour (Berlinski et al. 2008).

In a broader sense, child protection systems at large can be seen as protection against child labour. Such systems are crucial for the protection of children most at risk of child labour, such as orphans, unaccompanied migrant minors, internally displaced or refugee children, or children that experienced abuse, violence or exploitation at home (African Union 2019).

Increasingly, child care and child protection tasks are taken on by private sector actors in projects to decrease child labour. However, oftentimes those private sector social initiatives only have a mandate for a specific commodity, which can lead to displacing child labour into other sectors. Also, often they do not cooperate with state-run child protection agencies (Interview 2).

6 MEASURES THAT AUSTRIA AND THE EU SHOULD TAKE

In order to contribute to the above specified policy areas to combat child labour, we recommend both Austria and the EU to consider multilateral and bilateral cooperation, supporting local interventions through in particular financial support, as well as legislative action. Table 2 illustrates at which levels measures for the various goals should be taken. Levels at which measures are recommended are marked ('X'), with examples of organisations/approaches stated below.

Table 2: Policy approaches and Measures to Combat Child Labour

	Decent work conditions & labour inspections	Collective bargaining & social dialogue	Educational measures	Value chain legislations	Sector and area-based approaches	Social protection and poverty alleviation	Early-warning systems & target interventions	Child care & child protection
Multilateral	X <i>ILO</i>	X <i>ILO, BetterWork, Global Deal, ITUC</i>	X <i>UNESCO, UNICEF, Global Programme on Skills and Lifelong Learning</i>	X <i>Alliance 8.7</i>	X <i>Sustainable Cocoa Initiative, Clear Cotton</i>	X <i>IFIs, Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty</i>	X <i>UNICEF, ILO</i>	X <i>UNICEF</i>
Bilateral	X	X <i>support for unions + working children's organizations</i>	X		X	X <i>cash transfer programmes</i>	X	X
Local		X <i>Living Income Projects</i>		X <i>company actions, e.g. through Child Labour Fund</i>	X <i>Child friendly villages</i>			
Legislative Action	X <i>human rights in FTAs</i>			X <i>CSDDD, implementation</i>				

Source: own elaboration

6.1 Multilateral cooperation

The most prominent multilateral organisation in this field is the **ILO** which strives both to eliminate child labour and ensure decent work. The ILO has a significant international presence and is strongly engaged in various projects to reduce child labour. In Austria, cooperation with the ILO is organized through the Labour Ministry (BMASGPK 2025). Voluntary contributions to the ILO for development cooperation from Austria in the past four years have amounted to an average of 806,000 US-Dollars (around 750,000 €) annually. Out of the 30 development partners of the ILO, only five contributed less than Austria (ILO 2024). Austria could increase its funding for the ILO, e.g. with dedicated additional contributions.

It is also possible for Austria to develop and finance specific projects in cooperation with the ILO (Interview 5), for instance in the priority countries of Austria's development cooperation. Contributions could also go to designated projects of the ILO, such as the BetterWork Initiative⁸ promoting collective bargaining and better working conditions, the Global Programme on Skills and Lifelong Learning⁹, or projects to increase agricultural livelihoods in the framework of development cooperation with specific governments (Interview 5).

Concerning the promotion of access to quality education, **UNESCO** coordinates various global initiatives as part of the Global Education Cooperation Mechanism (GCM) (UNESCO undated) in order to achieve SDG 4 (Quality Education). Austria should become a partner to key global initiatives under this mechanism, such as the Global Initiative for Education in Crisis Situations.

⁸ Co-conducted by the ILO and the International Finance Corporation, currently supported by the EU, the USA, Australia, the Netherlands, Germany, and Switzerland (BetterWork 2025).

⁹ Conducted by the ILO, currently funded by Flanders, the Norwegian and the German Development Cooperation Agencies, and the Islamic Development Bank (ILO 2024).

The latter is a good example of an initiative that ensures the consistency of emergency measures with development efforts (as demanded by FAO 2022; ILO 2018b). The EU has showed dedication to supporting multilateral education initiatives, among others by supporting the Transforming Education Summit convened by the UN in 2022 as one of four donors. Against this background, it is striking that Austria as an EU Member State was not among the 114 countries that issued national statements of commitment in the course of this Summit.

To support child care and child protection, the multilateral partner with the most experience in coordinating such endeavours is **UNICEF**. Among other activities, the organisation provides day care centres for the children of farmers who would otherwise be on sugar or coffee plantations (Alshehail 2024). According to the latest data, Austria made voluntary contributions to UNICEF amounting to 1.4 million € (ADA 2024: 7) in 2023. This is considerably less than other Development Assistance Committee (DAC) member governments were willing to donate and pales in comparison to the 9.2 million € that the Austrian Committee for UNICEF managed to raise from the Austrian private sector and Austrian civil society in the same period (UNICEF 2024b).

Another multilateral avenue for supporting collective bargaining, social dialogue, and freedom of association is the **Global Deal** initiative, where Austria is already a partner. While the most recent annual report of Global Deal lists various actions that Austria has undertaken domestically to foster social dialogue, no commitments outside of Austria were registered (Global Deal 2024). Best-case practices in this regard can be found, as countries such as the Netherlands, Sweden, and Belgium have included their international contributions as part of their commitments (ibid.). In other words, these countries have pledged to contribute beyond their borders to supporting social dialogue, and goals such as labour standards or living wages.

In the field of protecting and advancing collective bargaining rights, unions are important actors. The Österreichische Gewerkschaftsbund (ÖGB, Austrian Trade Union Confederation), as a member of the International Trade Union Confederation (**ITUC**), as well as other multinational fora that advance labour rights (ÖGB undated). While ÖGB also supports projects (for instance, through solidar Austria) and bilateral cooperation (ÖGB undated), multilateral fora remain important for policy change. ITUC e.g., uses its quasi-global character, having members in almost 170 countries, to show how the current democratic backsliding is hurting workers' rights globally and to advocate for better protection of labour rights internationally (ITUC 2025).

To increase the income of farmers in particular, **The Living Income Community of Practice**, which is open to partners, is a notable initiative working on living incomes for adult farmers (FAO 2022). Focusing on specific sectors prone to child labour, the EU should continue its support to the **CLEAR Cotton** project and the **Sustainable Cocoa Initiative** (FAO 2022), particularly by supporting information and outreach to the public to ensure that consumers know about certification schemes. Such projects are funded with the contribution of the EU as a whole as well as with the contributions of Member States (European Commission 2020). Austria should increase efforts to contribute to this 'Team Europe Approach'. The EU itself should continue to support such vital initiatives. Furthermore, via public procurement both Austria and the EU could commit its own institutions to buying certain products, for which reliable certifications exist.

Concerning avenues to support social security mechanisms, Austria could contribute to the financing of cash transfer programs through the **International Financial Institutions** (IFIs), which are frequently at the forefront of financing cash transfer programs (Troilo 2012). These

include the World Bank Group, the African Development Bank Group, the Asian Development Bank, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the Inter-American Development Bank. Austria could support any of those institutions financially with budgets earmarked for cash transfer systems. IFIs also coordinate multilateral funds for specific development endeavours, such as the **Global Partnership for Education** (GPE). This fund for supporting education in lower-income countries, which is hosted by the World Bank, has partners ranging from governments to civil society organisations, private sector actors, and teachers' organisations (Global Partnership for Education 2022). While the EU is already a donor to GPE, Austria is not yet a donor to this multilateral initiative.

To support cash transfer programmes, Austria could alternatively cooperate with **Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty**, which was established in November 2024, when various governments, development banks and international organisations announced commitments for cash transfer programmes to reach more than 500 million people in low and lower middle-income countries by 2030 (Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty 2024). While the EU is a member, Austria is not yet a member, but could become one by stating its commitments to the goals of the Alliance.

While multilateral organisations are engaged in a large variety of activities and approaches to combat child labour, there are important limitations. UN organisations such as the ILO or UNICEF often work in partnership with governments and state institutions on the national and regional level, focusing on changes to the regulatory framework and strengthening the capacities of public actors (Interviews 3 & 4). They are also the primary collectors and distributors of data on child labour. Thus, their impact on child labour reduction tends to be indirect with minor local interventions (Interviews 5 & 3).

The current development of major donors dramatically reducing funding for development cooperation are particularly worrying. The aid cuts announced by the USA, the UK, Switzerland, but also EU Member States such as France, amount to a serious challenge for development efforts globally (Collinson/Hurley 2025; Hurd 2025; Institute of Development Studies 2025; Langrand 2025). Several UN agencies, such as UNICEF or UNESCO have announced substantial budget cuts (Blackburn 2025). The ILO announced the need to terminate 1 in 10 employment contracts (AFP 2025). Against this trend, support to these multilateral bodies by the EU and Austria becomes more urgent.

6.2 Legislative action, implementation of laws and accompanying measures

Despite the recent adjustments to the CSDDD, the European Parliament still has the power to amend the Commission's Omnibus proposal. From the perspective of preventing child labour along the value chain, it clearly should prevent the CSDDD from becoming "a hollow instrument", as human rights defenders fear (Thygesen/Wrzoncki 2025). On the contrary, the EU should ensure a strong, effective CSDDD.

European debates are currently mostly concerned with minimizing companies' obligations and their administrative burden under the CSDDD (European Commission 2025b; Bogart 2025). However, to reduce child labour in global value chains, legal instruments, such as the CSDDD, are urgently needed and able to complement voluntary action in ways that only legal approaches can. Discussions on "cutting red tape" to increase the efficiency of legislation for corporations risks to put the effects of these legislations for those affected by human rights violations abroad on the line.

Experts emphasized that a proper implementation of a European supply chain legislation could benefit European companies in the long run, if all countries are required to meet the same human rights (Interview 4). By acting as ‘front runner’ companies with respect to implementing changes in their value chains, they could use this as a selling point or marketing tool to attract consumers who value ethical business practices (Interview 3). In order to ensure an effective implementation, a few core requirements need to be met:

Firstly, the limitation of the scope of applicability of the CSDDD only to companies with a net turnover of € 1.5 billion and 5,000 employees foreseen in the Omnibus proposal, and the limitation of due diligence obligations of these companies to only their tier-1 suppliers and contractors, unless they have ‘plausible information’ of adverse human rights impacts, severely circumscribe the scope of the Directive. Experts criticized that this re-design of the CSDDD is not in line with the fact that human rights violations are typically not found so downstream in the value chain, but rather at its beginning (Interviews 2 & 3; see also Bulut/Lane 2011). The EU should consider **enlarging the scope** of the CSDDD to its original intention, or at least adopting a broad definition of ‘plausible information’ to ensure that human rights violations, including child labour, in global value chains, are properly scrutinized. Member States such as Austria should to enlarge the scope of the Directive for companies based in Austria.

Secondly, **sanctions for corporations** disregarding the CSDDD need to be sufficiently severe, ideally formulated as a percentage of the corporation’s annual turnover, to ensure that the sanctions actually deter corporations from neglecting their due diligence responsibilities. Neither the CSDDD nor the changes to it in the Omnibus proposal define sanctions, but leave the margin to the Member States.

Thirdly, sanctions need to actually be enforced. **Active enforcement** requires low-threshold access to enforcement authorities, enforcement authorities which are competent, well-staffed and appropriately funded to conduct also *ex officio* investigations and also do so in practice. In past transposition and implementation of EU regulations such as the Conflict Minerals Regulation (Regulation (EU) 2017/821) pertaining to due diligence requirements of corporations, Austria has not paid sufficient attention to both points (Küblböck 2025). As Austrian enforcement authorities do not have competencies to conduct on the ground investigations outside of Austrian territory, **cooperation with local authorities in third countries** is necessary to ensure the implementation of the CSDDD in practice.

In the absence of effective value chain regulations, ‘front runners’ of sustainable value chains should bundle their efforts in initiatives for child-labour free value chains. The Austrian Development Agency (ADA) as well as respACT – an Austrian business association for CSR – are participants of the **UN Global Compact**. According to the actions that the Global Compact urges members to take to eliminate child labour (UN Global Compact undated), both ADA and respACT should become Alliance 8.7 members and advocate for Austria to become a so-called pathfinder country in **Alliance 8.7**. Furthermore, respACT should encourage members to join the ILO Child Labour Platform, establish family-friendly workplace policies, and apprenticeship programmes.

Furthermore, the Netherlands has initiated a novel approach to tackling the enforcement of value chain regulations: In the **Fund against Child Labour** programme, Dutch companies with supply chains in countries receiving development assistance could apply to receive help from the Fund to identify the causes for child labour in their value chains and to take action to prevent child labour (Netherlands Enterprise Agency 2024). The fund is financed by the Netherlands Enterprise Agency, which is itself state-funded. While it can be criticized that

public money is used to fund and de-risk undertakings which should fundamentally be conducted by the companies in their own interest, the fund did achieve results in showing companies how to actually take care of risks of child labour in their value chains (Interview 3).

Most importantly, the Fund against Child Labour relies on two pillars: On the one hand, **companies conduct (together with NGOs) local interventions** to eliminate child labour (most of which centre on increasing incomes, such as setting up village saving and loan associations), and on the other hand, they work on their **own purchasing practices, policies and due-diligence throughout the value chain** (Interview 3).

This is in line with expert demands for active interventions rather than just passive auditing against risks, and it ensures that low commodity prices and overall exploitation of primary producers as the root causes of child labour are not upheld simultaneously (see Interviews 2 & 4). In other words, through such funds, company actions along their value chain go beyond the legal approach and strive for impact along the value chain (see Interview 5). Interviews revealed that companies might be more interested in investing into living income initiatives rather than initiatives to counter child labour, as most companies prefer to be transparent about living income initiatives (Interview 3). Given the likely budgetary constraints in the coming years, the encouraging of private sector initiatives could serve as a viable strategy to support child labour prevention efforts.

Apart from effective legislation to ensure human rights along the value chains of products for the European market, on the EU level, a legislative action to be further developed is the recently started practice of binding Trade and Sustainable Development chapters in **Free Trade Agreements** (FTAs), which include provisions safeguarding core human rights, such as labour rights (Jütten 2023): New FTAs of the EU since 2023 all include so-called Trade and Sustainable Development Chapters, which include an obligation to ratify and implement the core ILO Conventions. However, those chapters were in the past always exempt from dispute settlement, which only extended to the other chapters of FTAs, thus rendering such chapters rather toothless. The EU-New Zealand FTA, signed in July 2023, was the first which went beyond this approach: In the case of violations of the core ILO principles, the dispute resolution mechanism can be applied and sanctions could be imposed (ibid.). Such chapters should be included in future FTAs and should be implemented in practice.

Lastly, as shown in detail in section 4, the ILO conventions prohibiting child labour are universally respected by states, yet many countries struggle with the implementation of the domestic laws prohibiting child labour. Providing assistance to other states to eliminate the worst forms of child labour is not just a moral duty, but also one of the legal duties Austria has committed to undertake by ratifying ILO Convention 182/1999 (cf. its Art. 8) and by being a member of the ILO (cf. Art. 3 of the 1998 Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its Follow-up).

6.3 Bilateral cooperation and local interventions by NGOs

Interviewed experts emphasized the need to supplement multilateral cooperation with bilateral cooperation, as multilateral cooperation is needed to change policies and achieve broader impact, while bilateral cooperation can bring local perspectives into play and lead to more direct impact on the ground (Interviews 3 & 4). To limit the risk of a duplication of efforts and efficiency loss, bilateral cooperation should ideally take place in the form of support for existing programmes (Interview 2).

Education stands out as the area of child labour prevention to which Austria has contributed significant funding, namely on average € 7.4 million annually from 2021 to 2023, through both bilateral and multilateral cooperation (ADA 2024: 26). Those efforts should be upheld and it should be ensured that prevention of child labour and re-integration into school of children in labour are aspects actively considered in the design of such interventions. An aspect of education that should be paid attention to is high quality and safe apprenticeship programmes embedded in social dialogue (see examples for skills accreditation policies in this field from India, Vietnam, and Rwanda: Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship of India 2024; Republic of Rwanda 2015; UNESCO undated). Austria could support such measures, especially given its experience in developing such programmes in social dialogue between government, employers' and employees' associations.

Local interventions are typically carried out through NGOs, whose projects can be financially supported. 'Child friendly villages' established in India and Uganda (Global March against Child Labour 2019) are exemplary of the area-based approach against child labour, which are conducted by NGOs. Financing of this promising approach is often difficult to find, as it requires cooperation between different actors and different sectors. Private sector actors might see the benefit of ensuring that no children work in their specific value chain, but will often not show interest in financing interventions to prevent child labour in value chains of different sectors (Interview 3). State funding for this approach is therefore crucial.

Experts interviewed mentioned many other NGOs which work locally to support children, such as Terre des Hommes, World Vision, or Save the Children (Interviews 1 & 4) and emphasized the need to work with NGOs who ensure that the voices of children in child labour are being heard. To better ensure that children's needs and interests are prioritized in the measures adopted against child labour, directly cooperating with committees and associations of working children should also be considered. This is highlighted in the Kigali Declaration, which was a result of the Dialogue Works campaign (Dialogue Works 2023), a follow-up of the Time to Talk campaign of Kindernothilfe and Terre des Hommes built on the premise that "children are the experts of their own living conditions and therefore have to be included in sustainable change" (Kindernothilfe undated).

7 CONCLUSION

The interventions outlined above show that simply banning child labour is not enough to eliminate it, despite the robust international legal framework outlawing child labour. As one interviewed expert put it, "Banning without helping is cynical" (Interview 4). 'Helping' in this context means tackling both the root causes of child labour and ensuring that there are alternatives in place for children.

Measures have to be taken against economic uncertainty and exploitation as root causes of child labour. This is best done through supporting living income initiatives and amplifying efforts to reach decent working conditions, for instance through supporting the efforts of the ILO. This goal also requires effective collective bargaining, which can only be reached through supporting unions and producer associations.

In addition, there is a need for social protection mechanisms for those unable to make a living for themselves and their children, ideally paired with early warning systems to identify risk factors for child labour. Austria and the EU can support cash transfer mechanisms bilaterally

or multilaterally through institutions such as the Global Alliance against Hunger and Poverty or International Financial Institutions.

Ensuring alternatives to child labour requires investments in quality education that is accessible both physically (through proximity and infrastructure) as well as affordable (including the costs of books, school uniforms, and meals), along with a safe learning environment. Education also encompasses child care and apprenticeships to ensure formalization of labour for youth. Multilateral cooperation in this field could take place through UNICEF, alongside various options for bilateral cooperation.

Where child labour happens for the sake of low-cost production of goods ultimately used in Europe, European law makers have a special responsibility to ensure that companies conduct due diligence along their value chains in a way that goes beyond risk mitigation for the companies, and actively contributes to positive impact on the ground. The current Omnibus proposal regulation would curtail potential opportunities before the CSDDD is even implemented. The EU and Austria are called on to not water down companies' obligations to safeguard human rights and instead rise to the occasion of the current state of the world, wherein a common solution is needed to tackle a global problem such as child labour. Furthermore, both Austria and the EU, should consider measures to assist companies in taking action to ensure impact on the ground, and initiate a change in public purchasing practices to tackle the root causes of child labour.

To ensure that child labour does not simply migrate from one sector to another, area-based approaches have been developed, which though costly have bigger impacts than sector approaches. Examples of such approaches being used by NGOs as well as state-funded interventions exist.

All approaches need to be underpinned by social dialogue, including with the affected communities, local policy makers, public administrations, private sector actors, civil society representatives, workers' unions and smallholders' associations. The increased role played by the private sector in initiatives against child labour must go hand in hand with cooperation with state institutions, from governments to child protection agencies. The importance of collaboration between NGOs with their ties to local civil society, states, private actors, and international organisations is highlighted by the need to avoid duplications of efforts, which was mentioned by several interviewees (Interviews 2 & 3). Importantly, the voice of working children themselves, who sometimes have formed their own organisations, should be taken into consideration, which requires their platforms to be supported.

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ANNEX

List of interviewees

No.	Interviewee	Current affiliation	Date
Interview 1	Expert on the rights of working children	Academia	06.03.2025
Interview 2	Expert on child labour in global value chains	NGO	06.03.2025
Interview 3	Expert on child labour in global value chains	State agency	25.03.2025
Interview 4	Expert on child labour	NGO	27.03.2025
Interview 5	Expert on global child labour data/surveys	International Organisation	07.04.2025

Interview Questions

All interviews conducted were semi-structured interviews, meaning that further questions in addition to the ones listed below were included, and that questions were tailored to the specific focus of interviewees:

- What are the main leverage points that can be used to eliminate child labour?
- What does your organisation/agency do to fight child labour?
- How do you counter the threat of pushing children out of a value chain and into another (maybe more dangerous) types of labour?
- What are mistakes that have been made in attempts to eliminate child labour?
- Is the goal you work towards the elimination of all child labour or do you view it in a more differentiated way, and if so, how?
- What should the EU or a country like Austria do to contribute to eliminating child labour in countries in the Global South?
 - o What measures should be supported to eliminate child labour and how (policies/projects)?
 - o Which actors should Austria or the EU support in the fight against child labour, especially financially? From an Austrian perspective, is multilateral more useful than bilateral cooperation?
- What roles do companies in the EU or Austria play?
 - o What measures can Austria or the EU take to better ensure that their companies are not using child labour?

Information about the authors

Bernhard Tröster is an economist and senior researcher at the Austrian Foundation for Development Research, specializing in international trade and global production networks in the commodity sectors.

Simela Papatheophilou is a junior researcher at the Austrian Foundation for Development research and researches law and development.