

Will Substantial Gain on Reducing Child Labour Fail Due to Covid-19? School Closure, Economic Crisis and Child Labour during pandemic

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Abstract

Child labour is most prevalent among children from excluded social groups such as poor families, subsistence farmers, and landless households. These children work in different sectors such as agriculture, industry and the service industry. The COVID-19 Pandemic has aggravated the problem. Post the imposition of the lockdown in the country, huge population of migrants have returned to their home states, fuelling the risk of children being forced into labour or trafficking to make up for the lost income. A report released by the World Bank titled 'COVID-19 Crisis through a Migration Lens' recognized the impact of the virus on the livelihoods of a large proportion of the country's internal migrants. Migrant labour is a key driver of the urban economy; however, lock-down has forced many to return to their villages due to the absence of employment and a steady flow of income. Moreover, with a significant number of households' migrating with their families, children have been forced to discontinue schooling, engage in labour or home-based work upon return to their native villages. According to ILO Global Estimates in the last two decades, progress has been made to ensure that 9 out of 10 of the world's children are not in child labour, slavery or trafficking; however, ending the exploitation of the 1 child in 10 has proven to be a challenge, with the decline in child labour between 2012-2016 at a third of the rate of the decline in the 2008-2012 period. Unicef and ILO foresees that millions of children are at the risk of being pushed into child labour as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, which could lead to the first rise in child labour after 20 years of progress. With the vast impact of the coronavirus pandemic, the vulnerability is exacerbated for children to be forced into labour as schools are closed or inaccessible, there is economic downturn in household income, limited functioning of social services and greater demand for cheap labourers. Thus, it is unlikely that we will be in a position to achieve our target of elimination of all forms of child labour by 2025. Better efforts need to be made to prevent children from getting forced into labour. In India over half of the child labourers are located in the five states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh – the same states that account for the majority of out-of-school children (with the exception of Maharashtra). The irony is that all these states have been very badly affected by COVID-19.

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Will world leaders be able to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal of Eliminating all forms of Child Labour by 2025 (Goal 8.7)? Will India, that holds the burden of having the largest share of world's child labours, stand up to meet the expectations, amid the turmoil created by the COVID-19 crisis? How will the COVID-19 crisis affect the world economy and education, as well as the rate of employment of children in agriculture, industry and services?

Ever since (2002), the International Labor Organisation and its constituent Members States started observing World Day Against Child Labour on the 12th of June every year, to renew their commitment and action to end child labour. However, the world has not faced an unprecedented catastrophic crisis like COVID-19 before which has shattered every

aspect of life across the globe. Only 5 years ago, world leaders met and resolved to end child labour by 2025 from the world. This commitment is a part of the most ambitious and celebrated set of Sustainable Development Goals (Goal No 8.7) adopted by all United Nations Member States, including India. Now, 5 years down the line and 5 years away from the target, the whole world helplessly stares at an imminent defeat in this regard, and in fact for almost all other goals, due to the devastating impact of COVID-19 on world economy and health.

Unfortunately, children are the worst victims of any crisis or disaster, and the COVID disaster is believed to have pushed millions of children into labour. The Pre-COVID-19 child labour situation was already too frightening. 'Worldwide 218 million children between 5 and 17 years are in

employment. Among them, 152 million (almost 10% of all children worldwide) are victims of child labour; almost half of them, 73 million, work in hazardous child labour. Child labour declined, rather at a slower rate than before, during the period from 2012-2016 continuing the trend seen since ILO started publishing quadrennial Global Estimates of Child Labour'. India has been doing a fabulous job of reducing child labour in the country, especially after making education a fundamental right. As per Census 2011, there are 10.1 million child labourers (down from 12.6 million in 2001) in the age group of 5-14 years in India. There are 33 million (5-18 years) working children in India. In addition, 42.7 million children in India are out of school, although the Right to Education Act is in force. Together, Uttar Pradesh (21.5%), Bihar (10.7%), Rajasthan (8.4%), Maharashtra (7.2%), and Madhya Pradesh (6.9%) constitute nearly 55% of total working children in India, as per Census 2011. The irony is that all these states have been very badly affected by COVID-19.

We can directly correlate and forecast the magnitude of the child labour problem in the days to come in India and other developing and under-developed countries, if we look at the drivers of the issues and how these drivers are amplified by the COVID-19 crisis. The primary reasons behind child labour in India (almost same with other countries as well), apart from poor enforcement of child labour law and other related legislations and schemes, have been children out of school, dependency of poor families on their small childrens' income (at the cost of their education and leisure), adult unemployment and the demand of cheap and submissive labour who surrenders their voice and choice. We are already seeing that whenever lockdowns have eased, children are already being trafficked for work.

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could lead to the first rise in child labour after 20 years of progress. With the vast impact of the coronavirus pandemic, the vulnerability is exacerbated for children to be forced into labour as schools are closed or inaccessible, there is economic downturn in household income, limited functioning of social services and greater demand for cheap labourers. Thus, it is unlikely that we will be in a position to achieve our target of elimination of all forms of child labour by 2025. Better efforts need to be made to prevent children from getting forced into labour.

School Closure and lack of access to remote education

School closures carry high social and economic costs for people across communities. Their impact, however, is particularly severe for the most vulnerable and marginalised boys and girls and their families. The resulting disruptions exacerbate already existing disparities within the education system, but also in the other aspects of their lives. Increased exposure to violence and exploitation: when schools shut down, early marriages increase, more children are recruited into militias, sexual exploitation of girls and young women rises, teenage pregnancies become more common, and child labour grows. Evidences are already stating that child labour is rising as schools close during the pandemic. Temporary school closures have affected more than 1 billion learners in over 130 countries. Even when classes restart, families may no longer be able to afford to send their children to school. In India alone, around 320 Million learners are affected by school closures due to the pandemic.

Economic impact of the pandemic on family

From previous pandemics and epidemics, it is known that children's involvement in paid work increases due to the reduction in household income. The economic activities in vulnerable households, where people work as daily wage earners, have taken a big dip. The access to existing social protection schemes has been minimal. In a majority of households, there is not enough cash to sustain basic requirements for over a month. There are already reports and estimates that suggest a rise in poverty, and therefore, an increase in child labour because households employ this coping mechanism to survive. The studies also suggest that one percentage point rise in poverty leads to at least

a 0.7 per cent increase in child labour in certain countries. Thus, access to social protection schemes, direct benefit transfers and livelihood support to poor and vulnerable families would be crucial in preventing a large number of children being forced to work.

The COVID-19 crisis and its impact on socio-economic lives of people further aggravates the situation and adds fuel to all the reasons mentioned above. Factories, hotels, tourism, shops and establishments and other economic activities are shut down, with millions losing their livelihood and jobs, especially in unorganized sectors that constitute almost 90% of the labor force. Adult Unemployment and reverse (urban to rural) migration is at an all-time high in this decade. “About 400 million people working in the informal economy in India are at risk of falling deeper into poverty due to the coronavirus crisis which is having “catastrophic consequences”, says ILO in its Report titled ‘ILO Monitor 2nd edition: COVID-19 and the world of work’. Schools and colleges are shut right now and many private small schools will be shut forever. A majority of school children, especially those studying in government schools, do not have access to mobile/computer and internet connectivity to attend online classes during lockdown, and they are lagging behind their better off peers. Schools, once reopened post lockdown, would find it difficult to continue classes while maintaining hygiene and social distancing. Parents would be reluctant to send their children to school. So, experts fear that the school dropout rate among the poor and disadvantaged group would be increased significantly (though there is no estimation given). Marginal and poor families have lost their jobs and livelihood and might not mind stopping their children, especially girls, from attending school, and instead engage their children in economic activities to earn sustenance. There would be a heavy demand for cheap labour post lockdown to recover the losses made by companies and business houses. So these demand and supply factors, coupled with the relaxation in conditions and hours of work and in monitoring and supervision of certain factories, shops and establishments as per recent labour reforms in India, shall push millions of poor children into labour. We must not forget the relaxation given in the recently amended Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act 1986 for children to work in

family enterprise and businesses. Many experts who study and work on the issues of child labour strongly believe that this relaxation in the laws is going to be grossly violated and misused by parents/guardians, middle men and the employers. Thousands of children are likely to be trafficked. Trafficking of children for labour has been going on unabated even amidst this covid-19 crisis. The whole scenario will push more and more children into a system of exploitation and abuse.

Due to the alarming situation created by this pandemic, there is a need for unprecedented, innovative and pro-active measures at scale from all quarters to save childhood and achieve SDG 8.7 by 2025. Expanding the outreach and quality of education with new tools and techniques, expanding the food and social security cover to include all poor and marginalised, providing jobs and employment opportunities to adult and securing household food security, making the labour laws more stringent, increased inspection of factories and domestic/small enterprises, strengthening Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) and District Child Labour Task Forces to check trafficking and to rescue and rehabilitate child workers, empowering Gram Panchayat with adequate resources to track and secure every child are some of the measures that can be suggested to bring India on track to achieve SDG 8.7. The Child Protection Committee, as mandated under ICPC, is well placed to monitor and track child labour and child trafficking and other child protection issues and respond appropriately in coordination with District Child Protection Unit and Child Welfare Committee. It is high time that world leaders, business houses, donors and civil society take a pledge to reinvigorate efforts to achieve SDG Target 8.7 to end all forms of child labour by 2025.

V.V. Giri, former President of India who was also the Labour Minister in his early years of political life, termed child labour as “a bad economic activity” and as an “overt social evil”. India has to take a tough stand and a host of positive measures against the employment of children, as mandated under Article 39 of the Constitution which states that the tender of children must not be abused and that they are not forced by economic necessity to enter avocations unsuited to their age or strength.

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