

► The role of social protection in the elimination of child labour

Evidence review and policy implications



▶ **The role of social protection in the elimination of child labour**

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Foreword

Child labour is a violation of every child's right to a childhood – and a breach of every government's most fundamental duty to protect its children.

For nearly two decades, beginning in 2000, the world was making steady progress in reducing child labour.

But over the last few years, conflicts, crises, and since 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic have plunged more families into poverty – and forced millions more children into labour.

Today, 160 million children still engaged in child labour – some as young as 5. That's almost one in ten children, worldwide. Nearly half of these children are engaged in hazardous work likely to cause physical and emotional harm.

This is both morally unconscionable – and strategically short-sighted. Children who stay in school and out of work have a better chance to fulfil their own potential, in turn helping break intergenerational cycles of poverty and supporting sustainable economic growth.

This new report provides a rigorous review of what the latest research says about the power of social protection to combat child labour. Providing families with direct assistance to help them weather crises can help reduce negative coping strategies like child labour and child marriage.

The report also shows that the impact of social protection measures is even greater if countries also put in place integrated systems that provide social protection benefits across the lifecycle.

Unfortunately, too little progress has been made in expanding social protection services to reach the families in greatest need – and the children at greatest risk. Worldwide, the families of approximately 1.5 billion children 14 and under receive no family or child cash benefits at all.

We can and must change this.

Authored jointly by the ILO and UNICEF, this report is intended to inform discussion at the 5th Global Conference on the Elimination of Child Labour, in South Africa in May 2022 – and to spur urgent action by governments to build comprehensive, child-sensitive social protection systems. The joint endeavour of Alliance 8.7 and the Global Partnership for Universal Social Protection (USP2030) could also be an important vehicle to advance this effort and support Member States.

We cannot emphasize strongly enough that the choices made by countries now will affect millions of children alive today and millions yet to be born. We urge decisionmakers to live up to their commitments – and to implement the recommendations contained in this report.

Investing more in universal social protection will help millions of children realize their right to be children – and to reach their full potential, free from the scourge of child labour.

Guy Ryder
Director General
International Labour Organization



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Executive Director
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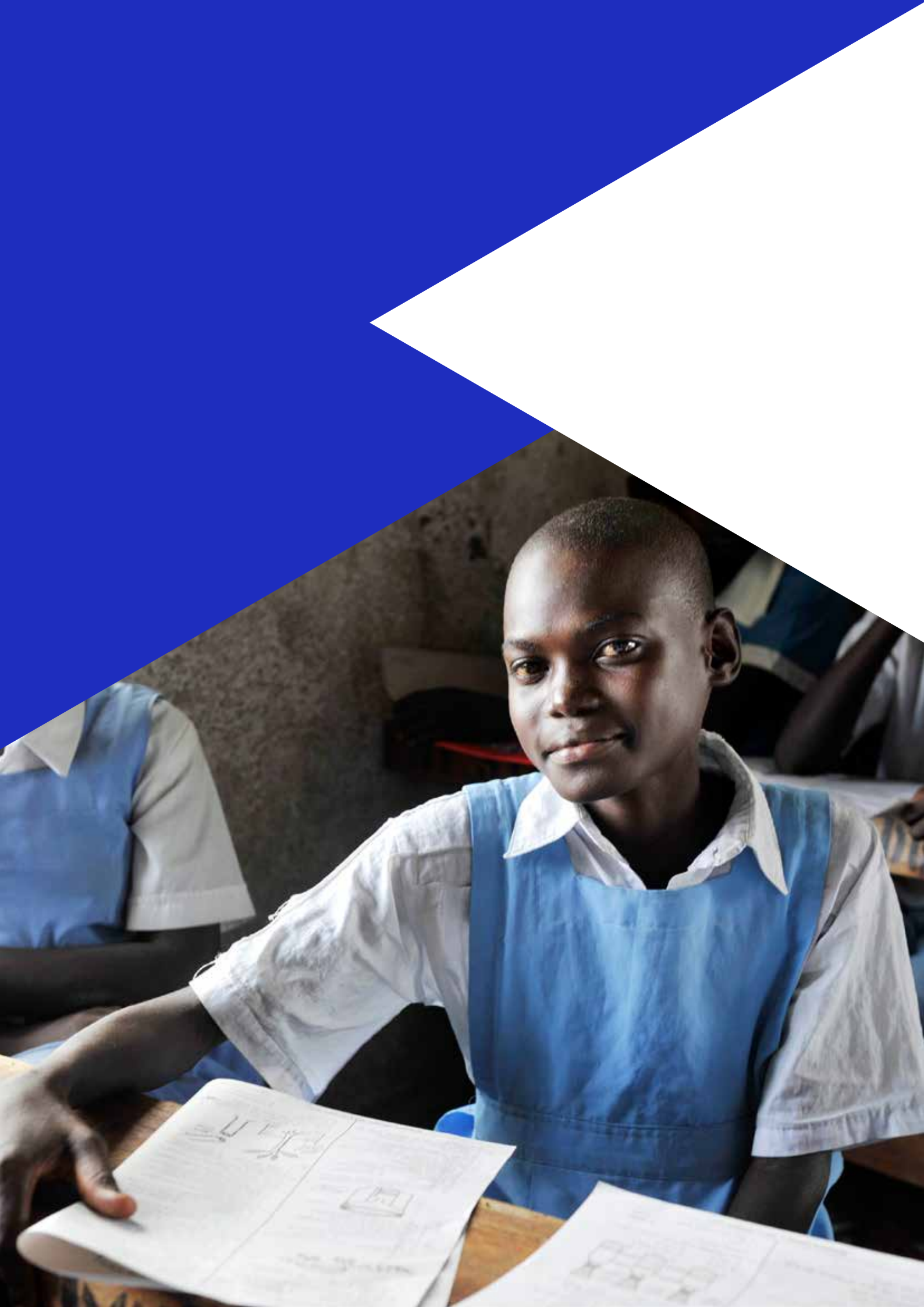
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Acronyms and abbreviations

AP	Asia and the Pacific region
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization (United Nations)
GDP	Gross domestic product
HIC	High-income countries
ICI	International Cocoa Initiative
ILO	International Labour Office/Organization
LAC	Latin America and the Caribbean region
LIC	Low-income countries
LMIC	Lower-middle-income countries
NGO	Non-governmental organization
ODI	Overseas Development Institute (United Kingdom)
PEP	Public employment programme
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SSA	Sub-Saharan Africa
UBI	Universal basic income
UBOS	Uganda Bureau of Statistics
UCB	Universal child benefits
UMIC	Upper-middle-income countries
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USP	Universal social protection





Executive Summary

► Child labour is at a crossroads

At the beginning of 2020 1 in 10 children aged 5 and over were involved in child labour worldwide – equating to an estimated 160 million children, or 63 million girls and 97 million boys. Despite significant progress in reducing child labour in the past two decades, most recent data shows that global progress on this measure has stalled since 2016 (ILO and UNICEF 2021).

Global estimates hide uneven progress by region in the past 20 years, with Asia and the Pacific (AP), and Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) showing steady reductions overall, while rates actually increased in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) from 2012 onwards. Although there is much variation across countries within each region, today, there are more children in child labour in SSA than in the rest of the world combined.

Evidence by age groups shows that there has been a greater toll on children aged 5-11 years, whose rates of child labour actually increased in contrast to a steady reduction for those aged 12 years or above. Girls are faring better than boys, whose trend decreased more slowly over time, and indeed reversed to register an overall increase in recent years (ILO and UNICEF 2021).

The above trends undermine children's rights, well-being, and development, as well as the efforts being made through the Sustainable Development Goals and other mechanisms to eradicate child labour.

And what is more, these trends were observed prior to the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, which has put millions more children at risk of child labour. It is estimated that without mitigation strategies, the number of children in child labour could rise by 8.9 million by the end of 2022, due to higher poverty and increased vulnerability (ILO and UNICEF 2021).

► Strong social protection systems are necessary for the reduction and eventual elimination of child labour

By reducing family poverty risks and vulnerability, supporting livelihoods and school enrolment amongst other things, government social protection systems are essential in the fight to eradicate and prevent child labour (ILO 2013; ILO and UNICEF 2019 and 2021; Dammert et al. 2018; De Hoop and Rosati 2014a).

The good news is that in recent years many countries have significantly improved social protection coverage, by strengthening their social protection systems, and establishing effective social protection floors (ILO 2021d).¹ However, global coverage is still too low: as of 2020, less than half of the global population were effectively covered by at least one social protection benefit, leaving more than four billion people wholly unprotected.² Social protection coverage varies widely by region, broadly aligned with income levels (see [Section 1.3](#)).

Importantly, for child labour concerns at the global level, the vast majority of children under 15s – 73.6 per cent or 1.5 billion children in total – receive no child or family cash benefits (ILO 2021d). In many cases, programmes are not designed with the objective of benefiting children directly or to address child labour risk specifically. And, where other benefits are available, they are often not sufficiently adequate, comprehensive³ and child-sensitive and in many cases the quality of services is far from satisfactory.

Coverage and quality limitations are associated with underinvestment in social protection. Prior to the pandemic, low-income countries (LIC) and lower-middle-income countries (LMIC) spent respectively 1.1 and 2.5 per cent of GDP on social protection (excluding healthcare), compared to 8 per cent in upper-middle-income countries (UMIC) and 16.4 per cent in high-income countries (HIC). Countries spend on average 12.9 per cent of GDP on social protection, and child-specific spending was a mere 1.1 per cent (ILO 2021d). With children making up around 28 per cent of the global population, it is clear that this level of child-specific social protection spending is too low. Filling this “financing gap” for children, to ensure at least minimum provision for all, should be a priority, and an action which is likely to have significant implications for child labour too.

The need to access healthcare, sickness and unemployment benefits, care and family friendly-policies, became especially acute after the outbreak of COVID-19, and 2020 saw the largest mobilization of government social protection measures ever (Gentilini et al. 2022; ILO 2021c and 2021d). The ILO estimated that expanding social protection to adequately respond to the COVID-19 crisis could reduce the number of children in child labour by 15.1 million between 2020 and 2022 (ILO and UNICEF 2021).

1 Many low- and middle-income countries have achieved universal or near-universal social protection coverage for different types of benefits, for example for child benefits (Argentina, Brazil); maternity protection (Mongolia); disability benefits (Brazil) and old-age pensions (Argentina, Plurinational State of Bolivia, Botswana, Cabo Verde, China, Lesotho, Mauritius, Mongolia, Namibia, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Trinidad and Tobago) (ILO 2021d).

2 Excluding healthcare and sickness benefits.

3 Comprehensiveness refers to the range of life-cycle risks and contingencies covered, while adequacy refers to the benefit amount of social protection programmes.

However, the sensitivity of the overall social protection response to COVID-19 to the needs of families with children has been limited. Government stimuli in high-income countries and middle-income countries made little use of child-specific social protection measures, and instead focused on business supports and job protection schemes – often excluding households without secure and formal employment (Richardson et al. 2020a and 2020b). Indeed, support for vulnerable groups in the COVID-19 response in general was criticized by the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty as being “maladapted, short-term, reactive, and inattentive to the realities of people in poverty” (De Schutter 2020).

To strengthen social protection systems for the reduction and elimination of child labour, this report recommends:

- ▶ Close the yawning gap in the coverage of social protection for children by promoting inclusive social protection systems, and develop sustainable and equitable financing for this, as a matter of priority. This could translate into prioritizing child benefits as well as extending social protection to the two billion informal economy workers. The latter will support their transition to the formal economy. Formalization is a critical step in sustainable tax and transfer systems.
- ▶ Don't wait for development to build social protection systems – these systems are **key to development**. How specific social protection programmes complement one another **within a system** will determine overall efforts in addressing the determinants of households' vulnerability to child labour across the life course. This is true also for integrated cross-sectoral social provision for children. No single programme will do the job.
- ▶ In support of system building efforts, policymakers can utilize existing international policy commitments to universal social protection in building political consensus for action. Pre-existing commitments and frameworks, including the Sustainable Development Agenda and Goals (SDGs) and the strong tripartite policy consensus agreed by the International Labour Conference, offer this opportunity.

► Design features of social protection policies matter

While social protection can be a powerful tool to combat child labour, it is not guaranteed that it reduces child labour in all cases. For instance, access to cash benefits can reduce the demand for child labour and increase household investment in children's education, yet, at the same time, such transfers can lead to households investing in productive assets such as livestock or agricultural inputs that can potentially increase the demand for child labour. It is through the expansion of household economic activities that children can be drawn into child labour, sometimes in hazardous conditions,⁴ particularly if households cannot afford to access labour-saving technologies or engage adult workers.

To help ensure that productive investments by families do not increase child labour, the design features of social protection programmes matter. The transfer amounts, regularity and predictability, and duration of payments can all determine the child labour impacts of social protection. Moreover, as child labour is also influenced by national child labour legislation and enforcement capacity, social norms, local markets and infrastructure, as well as schooling access and quality, programme design features need to account for contexts to be effective in reducing it. Overall, it is a combination of economic, social, and educational policies (underpinned by appropriate national legislation and enforcement) that is needed to provide families and children with viable and sustained alternatives to child labour (Thévenon and Edmonds 2019).

To strengthen the design of social protection programmes for the reduction and elimination of child labour, including its worst forms, this report recommends:

- Make use of inclusive universal social protection programmes which can increase the coverage and take-up of benefits by limiting exclusion errors, reducing stigma and shame, and procedural complexity, and therefore lower transaction and opportunity cost barriers.
- Apply child-sensitive designs that consider the potential implications in terms of child labour, in the different sectors where children work. This can include sensitization on children's rights, or provision of information on the hazards related to child labour. In combination, positive "messaging" on the relevance of promoting education over labour can make the difference.
- Ensure both adequacy and predictability of social protection benefits. This is critical for generating protective impacts on child labour. Setting adequate benefit levels means taking into account household size and number of children, and adapting transfer amounts according to contexts such as local prices and wages, and revising transfer amounts to account for inflation. Regular payments make for predictable incomes, and longer-term decision making, including productive investments, that secure futures including for children at risk of child labour.
- Combine social protection programmes with complementary and resourced interventions in the education and health sectors – this is particularly relevant in humanitarian settings, or settings where services might be weak or where supply struggles to meet demand. For instance, where education facilities are missing or of low quality, households may lack sufficient incentives to invest cash benefits in education opportunities.

⁴ Similar mechanisms are at play for any interventions that incentivize adults to start economic activities or new businesses.

► What's in this report?

This report explores the mechanisms by which social protection can impact child labour, and assesses the role of programme design features and contextual characteristics. To do this, it updates and expands previous ILO work in this area (ILO 2013), builds on recent systematic reviews (Bastagli et al 2019; Dammert et al. 2018), and conducts new searches for impact evaluations on the child labour impact of social protection in the period 2010-22.

Because all forms of social protection can impact child labour (even when not designed with an explicit child labour reduction objective) this report considers programmes beyond child and family benefits to include social protection available to caregivers of children (working-age adults and older persons) such as unemployment benefits or pensions. To learn more about the importance of design features, the report examines and compares different types of social protection programmes from non-contributory tax-financed schemes, contributory schemes, labour market policies for caregivers of children, social services, and integrated social protection programmes that combine cash benefits and services (“cash plus”).

Section 1 follows with a closer look at child labour trends and social protection policies globally. **Section 2** summarizes the evidence on social protection policies by type, and their impacts on child labour. **Section 3** concludes with policy implications and research recommendations.





1. Trends in child labour and social protection

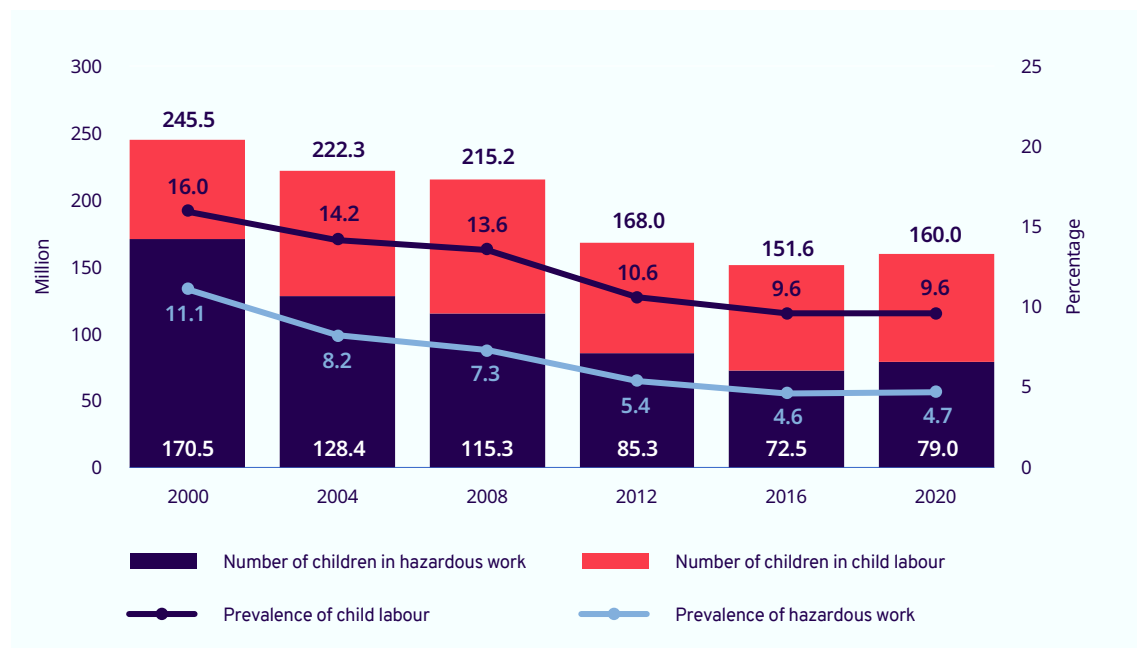
► 1.1 Child labour

Prevalence of child labour in the recent past

Globally, significant progress has been made in reducing child labour in the past two decades (ILO and UNICEF 2021). The number of children in child labour declined by 85.5 million between 2000 and 2020, before the onset of COVID-19. The prevalence of child labour also declined substantially, from 16 to 9.6 per cent. Similar progress was observed for children working in hazardous conditions (figure 1.1).

However, the decline in the prevalence of child labour has slowed over time and has stalled since 2016. Between 2016 and 2020, the absolute number of children in child labour increased by more than eight million, from 152 to 160 million children, of which 79 million were working under conditions directly endangering their health and safety. Some definitions of what constitutes child labour are given in box 1.1.

► Figure 1.1 Percentage and number of children aged 5 to 17 in child labour and hazardous work, global estimates, 2000-2020



Source: ILO and UNICEF (2021).

By age, child labour is increasing among children 5 to 11 years old, with the latest estimates registering an increase of 16.8 million younger children in child labour between 2016 and 2020. Of particular concern is that about 40 per cent of these additional children were performing hazardous work. Over 75 per cent of younger children in child labour work in agriculture and about 83 per cent of them work within family (farms or non-farm) microenterprises.

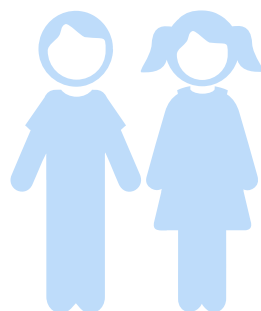
Since 2016, the share of children that worked within the family increased, a trend that has been linked to the growth in the number of younger children in child labour overall (ILO and UNICEF 2021).

► Box 1.1. Defining child labour

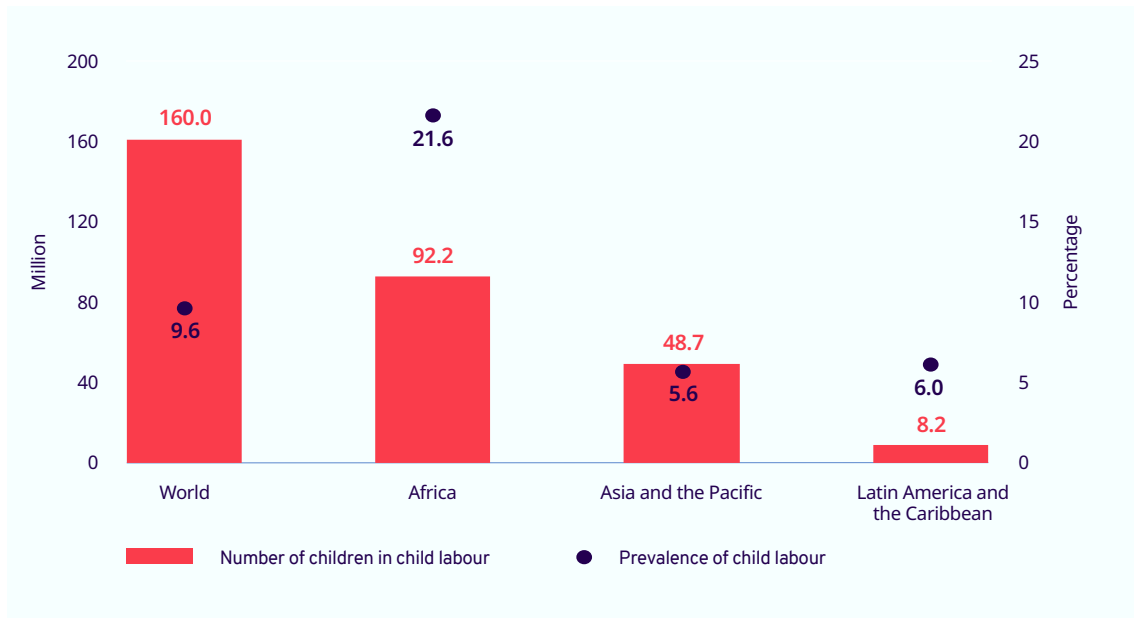
Three main international human and labour rights instruments – the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the ILO Minimum Age for Admission to Employment Convention (No. 138) and the universally ratified ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (No. 182) – set legal boundaries for child labour and provide grounds for national and international actions to end it. Child labour comprises work that children are too young to perform, that is, below the minimum age for work, which is usually 15 years (developing countries may set it at 14), and 13 years for light work that does not interfere with schooling. In all cases, the minimum age for work should be the same as the age of completion of compulsory education. The minimum age for hazardous work, which is work that by its nature or circumstances is likely to harm children’s health, safety or moral development, is 18. Hazardous work is one of the worst forms of child labour, which also include slavery and similar practices, commercial sexual exploitation, and the use of children in illicit activities such as drug trafficking. Child labour can encompass work in both the formal and informal economy, inside and outside family settings, for pay or profit (cash or in-kind, part-time or full-time) and domestic work outside the child’s own household for an employer (paid or unpaid).

Source: ILO (2018a).

Moreover, the prevalence of child labour is increasingly unequal across regions. [Figure 1.2](#) shows the number of children in child labour and the prevalence of child labour across regions. Both are highly unequal, with Africa standing out both in terms of absolute numbers and prevalence. In early 2020, the prevalence of child labour was 21.6 per cent in Africa, more than twice the global average.



► **Figure 1.2 Percentage and number (in million) of children aged 5 to 17 in child labour, by region, 2020**



Source: ILO and UNICEF (2021).

Within each region there are similar disparities by country. For example, in South Asia the child labour rate is 11 per cent on average, ranging from 0.9 per cent in Sri Lanka to 23.6 per cent in Afghanistan (ILOSTAT).⁵

Several factors can explain cross-regional variation in child labour:

- **Monetary and multidimensional poverty** influences child labour prevalence, as it is one way for families to manage poverty and deprivation risks. In sub-Saharan Africa higher rates of child labour are seen alongside levels of extreme poverty that affect two in five people (World Bank 2022). Of further concern are estimates suggesting that as many as nine out of ten children in sub-Saharan Africa will live in extreme poverty by 2030 (UNICEF 2016b).
- **Informality** is experienced by an estimated two billion workers worldwide leading to lower and irregular incomes, unsafe working conditions, and extreme job precarity. Moreover, labour informality means less access to contributory social protection schemes and narrowly targeted social assistance. Africa, where child labour increased in the latest examined period, was the region with the highest prevalence of informal employment (85.6 per cent) in 2016 (ILO 2018b).
- **Social protection**, by providing additional sources of regular income and access to health care, or compensating households in the face of economic or health shocks, can effectively reduce the need for households to resort to child labour as a precautionary or coping strategy. Despite progress in extending social protection, coverage still falls short and remains unequal across regions, as detailed in [Section 2.2](#).

⁵ For South Asia, data are available for six countries: Afghanistan (2014), Bangladesh (2019), Bhutan (2010), Myanmar (2015), Nepal (2014), Sri Lanka (2016) (ILOSTAT).

- ▶ **Education**, or children being out of school, is frequently linked to child labour. To reduce child labour, it is essential that families can afford to send children to school, and that households' perceived returns to schooling are greater than those associated with child labour. Globally, although the share of children out of primary school has markedly declined in recent years, large regional disparities in both educational expenditures and access to schools remain (Al-Samarrai et al. 2021).
- ▶ **Population growth** differences by region are likely to be associated with child labour trends. In LAC, the number of children engaged in child labour dropped by six million from 2008 to 2020 as the child population fell by 4.8 million; whereas, over the same period, AP experienced a decline in the number of children in child labour of 64.9 million, while the child population increased by 12.8 million. In contrast, in SSA the number of children engaged in child labour rose by 21.5 million and, simultaneously, the child population increased by 104.8 million.⁶

A range of other factors related to countries in crisis are likely to be contributing factors. For instance, both conflict and displacement are higher in Africa than elsewhere (World Bank 2020; United Nations General Assembly 2020) – leading to vulnerabilities to which child labour may be one mechanism for coping. In addition, in fragile States social protection coverage is also very low and poverty rates are disproportionately high (Silwal et al. 2020).

Prevalence of child labour since the COVID-19 pandemic

Following the outbreak of COVID-19, the economic losses and health shocks experienced by households significantly increased the risk of child labour. Protracted school closures represented another risk factor.⁷

Survey data showed an immediate decrease in children's participation in economic activity at the start of the pandemic (ILO and UNICEF forthcoming) – suggesting that the overall decline in economic activities associated with lockdowns had affected children's work too. However, in some household where lockdowns led to falls in earned income, children started to work more. Testimonies from 81 children across Ghana, Nepal, and Uganda revealed that they had to work to eat, as their families no longer had enough food. Those already working before the crisis started working longer hours after school closures (Human Rights Watch 2021).

The testimonies of children are consistent with recent statistics from Uganda, showing that the prevalence of child labour rose from 21 to 36 per cent during COVID-19 (UBOS 2021).⁸ In Côte d'Ivoire an assessment of 263 communities also found a major increase in child labour in cocoa businesses between July and September 2020, compared to the same period 12 months earlier (ICI 2020). In Egypt, children were sent to work in cotton cultivation and other agricultural work (ILO 2020c). And in both Ecuador and Brazil (São Paulo) the prevalence of child participation in economic activities also increased once the pandemic had started (UNICEF Ecuador and Inclusión SAS 2020; UNICEF Brazil 2020).

Results reported above, and in a recent global simulation of child labour trends by ILO and UNICEF (2021) suggest that any decline in child labour due to COVID-19 is likely to be outweighed by a rebound in child labour prevalence due to increased poverty risks over time.

⁶ Figures for 2008 are from Diallo et al. (2010). Figures for 2020 are from UNDESA (2019).

⁷ Across eight West African countries, children consistently reported working because there was no school, so their parents expected that they should work (World Vision 2020), or were not willing to leave them at home alone, unsupervised (Franceinfo Afrique 2020). School closures also resulted in significant learning losses (Patrinos and Donnelly 2021), which, in turn, may increase school dropout and child labour.

⁸ The 2019/20 Uganda National Household Survey was conducted in two phases, each covering about half of the sample. Phase I lasted from September 2019 to February 2020, and Phase II from July to November 2020 (UBOS 2021).

▶ 1.2 Social protection

The state of social protection worldwide

Despite progress made in the coverage of social protection in recent years, it has not been enough. As of 2020 and prior to COVID-19, only 46.9 per cent of the global population were effectively covered by at least one social protection benefit, while the remaining portion – as many as 4.1 billion people – were left wholly unprotected (see [figure 1.3](#) and the stark absolute numbers in [box 1.2](#)). Behind this global average, there are significant inequalities across and within regions, with coverage rates equalling 56.3 per cent in LAC, 44.1 per cent in AP and 17.4 per cent in Africa.

Only 26.4 per cent of children worldwide receive social protection benefits. Despite some important progress in the extension of social protection to children in recent decades, the vast majority of children – 73.6 per cent of children aged 0-14, a significant number of whom must labour – receive no child or family cash benefits. Effective coverage is particularly low in Asia and Pacific (18 per cent) and Africa (12.6 per cent) (ILO 2021d).

▶ Box 1.2. The numbers at a glance: The absence of social protection for different population groups and selected benefits



▶ **1.5** billion children aged 0-14
receive no child or family cash benefits



▶ **71** million mothers with newborns
do not receive cash maternity benefits



▶ **One third** of the working-age population
is legally entitled to sickness cash benefits



▶ **179** million unemployed persons
do not have access to unemployment cash benefits



▶ **150** million persons with disabilities
do not receive a disability cash benefit



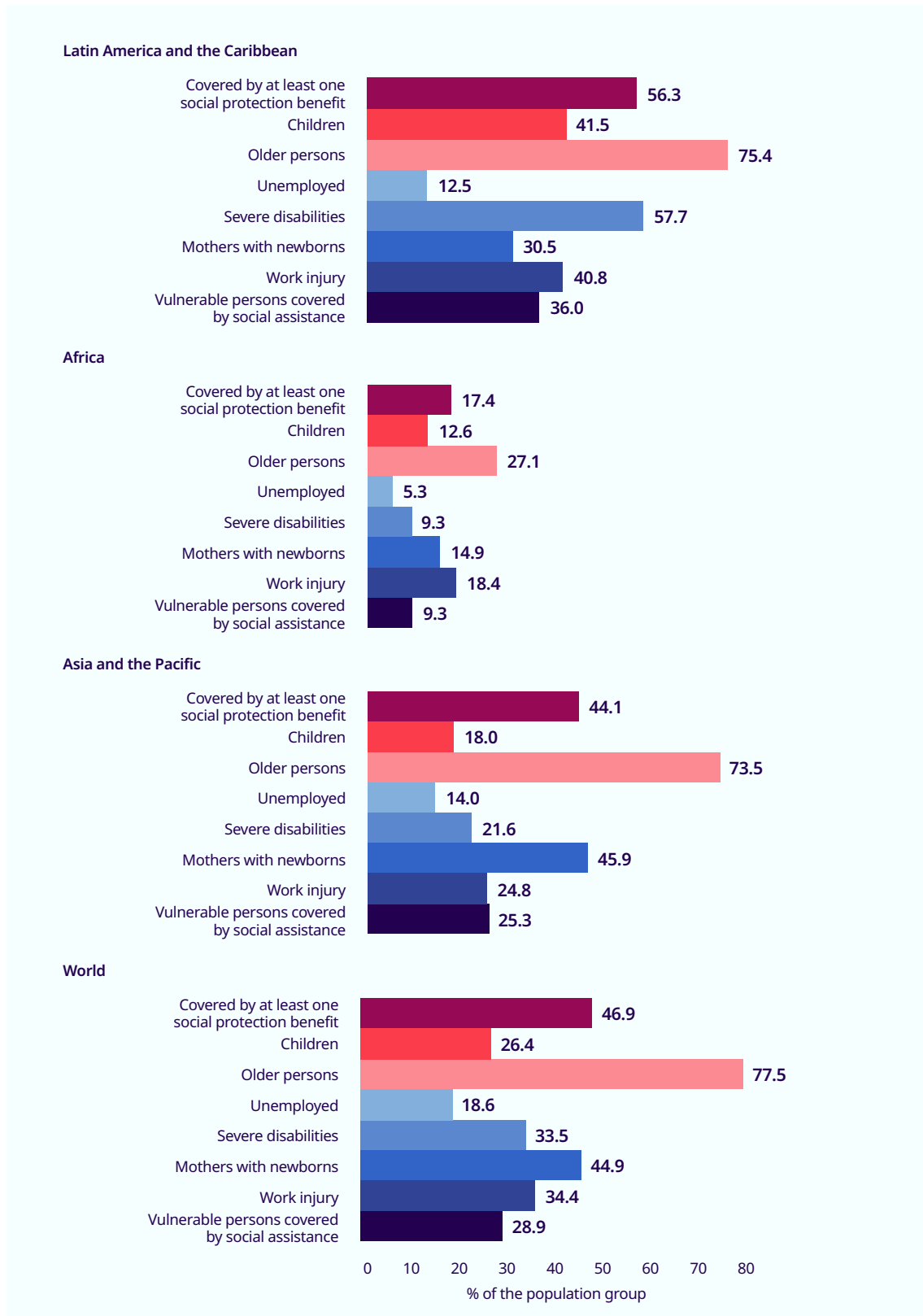
▶ **164** million older persons
do not receive a pension



▶ **2.7** billion people
are not protected by any kind of health protection scheme

Source: ILO (2021d); [World Social Protection Data Dashboards](#).

► **Figure 1.3 Effective social protection coverage (SDG indicator 1.3.1), global and regional estimates, by population group, 2020 or latest available year**



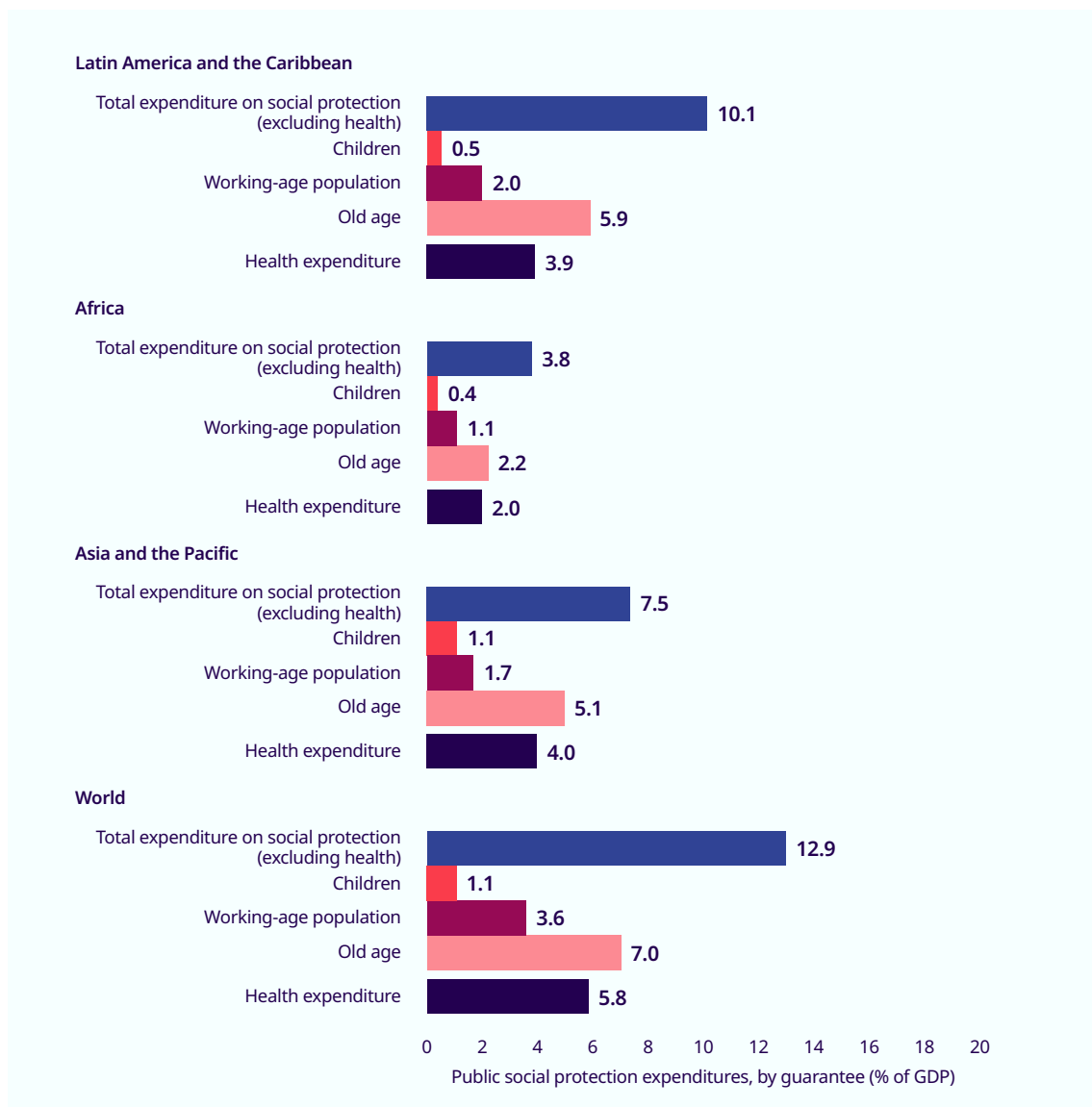
Notes: See Annex 2 of ILO (2021d) for a methodological explanation. Global and regional aggregates are weighted by relevant population groups.

Sources: ILO (2021d); [World Social Protection Database](#), based on the SSI; ILOSTAT; national sources.

These gaps in coverage, adequacy and comprehensiveness are associated with significant underinvestment in social protection systems for all groups and especially children. At the global level, national expenditure on social protection for children reaches only 1.1 per cent of GDP, compared to 12.9 per cent of GDP spent overall on social protection (see [figure 1.4](#)). In Africa, the region with the largest share of children in the population and the greatest need for social protection, an equivalent of 0.4 per cent of GDP is spent on social protection for children (ILO 2021d).

It is high time that adequate and sustainable financing is found to close these protection gaps by achieving universal social protection for all, especially children. To guarantee at least a basic level of social security through a nationally defined social protection floor, LMIC countries would need to invest an additional US\$362.9 billion and UMIC countries a further US\$750.8 billion per year, equivalent to 5.1 and 3.1 per cent of GDP respectively. LIC countries would need to invest an additional US\$77.9 billion, equivalent to 15.9 per cent of their GDP (ILO 2020b; Durán et al. 2020).

► **Figure 1.4 Public social protection and health expenditure as a percentage of GDP, by social protection floor guarantee, 2020 or latest available year**



Notes: See Annex 2 of ILO (2021d) for a methodological explanation.

Sources: ILO (2021d); [World Social Protection Database](#), based on the SSI; ILOSTAT; national sources.

Importantly, the ILO's June 2021 International Labour Conference – comprising governments, workers, and employers – called for universal social protection systems for all (see [box 1.3](#)) (ILO 2021b). This represents an emphatic reaffirmation of political and tripartite commitment to close gaps in social protection. UNICEF's new strategic plan also prioritizes efforts to achieve inclusive social protection for all children, in the organization's work between 2022 and 2025 (UNICEF 2022b).

► Box 1.3. Conceptualizing universal social protection

This report employs the definition agreed upon by governments, employers, and workers at the 2021 International Labour Conference. Here it was agreed that “universal social protection entails actions and measures to realize the human right to social security by progressively building and maintaining nationally appropriate social protection systems, so that everyone has access to comprehensive, adequate and sustainable protection over the life cycle, in line with ILO standards” (ILO 2021b, para. 3).

This commitment to universal social protection sends a clear signal to policymakers. In contrast to a patchy, minimalist social safety net approach, building universal social protection systems anchored in a rights-based approach can progressively guarantee more comprehensive and adequate provision for all, which is sustainably and equitably financed. The Global Partnership for Universal Social Protection (USP2030) also emphasizes that universal social protection is achieved through a nationally-defined system of policies and programmes that provide equitable access to all people and protect them throughout their lives against poverty and risks to their livelihoods and well-being. It emphasizes five core principles: protection throughout the life cycle, universal coverage, national ownership, sustainable and equitable financing, and participation and social dialogue (USP2030 2019).

Despite the promise of these recent international developments and the large social protection response to the pandemic, now is not the time for complacency, and policymakers must redouble their efforts to close these protection gaps identify and implement those types of social protection that best address child labour.



Social protection during the COVID-19 pandemic

Social protection was a critical pillar of the COVID-19 response. Governments were effectively able to use existing systems to channel urgent and emergency support. The response was commendable given existing fiscal constraints and multiple priorities. At the same time, the pandemic also brought to light the large gaps in social protection provision, and highlighted the difficulties of the two billion informal economy workers and their families, women, care givers, migrants and others. However, an important development has been the crucial role that social protection has played in an unprecedented policy response worldwide.

Between February 2020 and March 2022, 1,730 social protection responses have been announced or implemented in over 200 countries and territories (ILO 2022). Undoubtedly, without this massive and rapid expansion of social protection through the pre-existing provision, and introducing emergency measures, the human and socioeconomic toll of the crisis would have been much greater – demonstrating the indispensability of social protection as a cornerstone of all well-functioning and responsive societies.

During COVID-19, countries that already had strong social protection systems were able to use them to guarantee better protection. However, countries without such strong systems developed parallel systems to support many households, and although these were critical and lifesaving for particular groups (such as migrants, caregivers, informal workers) on many occasions these could not take advantage of pre-existing infrastructure, were temporary, or lacked an adequate protective response.

However, the quality of response depended not only on the quality of pre-existing social protection systems, but also on the fiscal response that could be mobilized. Expenditure on the social protection response varied across low- and middle-income countries, with the average expenditure per capita ranging from US\$8 in LIC countries to US\$145 in UMIC countries (see [table 1.1](#)). Whilst recognizing the fiscal constraints in many countries, this is insufficient to be deemed adequate for people to ride out the pandemic with enough protection against poverty and falling living standards.

► **Table 1.1 COVID-19 response: Expenditure on social protection and labour measures spending, by income group, 2020-21**

Income group	Spending (billion US \$)	Average US \$ per capita	% of GDP
HIC	2,575	716	2.1
LIC	5.7	8	1.3
LMIC	94.6	45	1.7
UMIC	324.3	145	2.5

Source: Gentilini et al. (2022).

Many countries provided benefits to previously unprotected workers, such as workers in the informal economy in some cases, at least temporarily, and in doing so opened policy windows to extend social protection coverage to informal workers in a more sustained way (ILO 2020a, 2021a and 2021d). Provisions for unprotected workers have potential to positively impact child labour when concentrated in informal family-based agriculture or where families have previously been excluded from work-related protection and tax-financed social assistance (ILO and FAO 2021).

Nevertheless, the sheer size of the COVID-19 response was deceptive, as in many cases the social protection responses were constrained by limited child sensitivity. Children were among certain more-vulnerable population groups that were underserved by the response: of the social protection response measures announced between February and December 2020, only 7.6 per cent were directed at children and families (ILO 2021d). This is troubling given the evidence for child-sensitive social protection being an effective response to crises in all contexts (Tirivayi et al. 2020). While some good practice examples were observed,

these were exceptions to the rule, and would have done little to arrest the increase in child labour (see [box 1.4](#)). To compound the issues of a lack of child-focus in response, most emergency cash transfer support was short-lived (4.5 months on average) (Gentilini et al. 2022).

Given the ongoing pandemic, fiscal consolidation, inflation, fuel and food prices hikes and the pervasive challenges posed by climate change, there is clear potential for the further exacerbation of child poverty and inequality, and this has significant implications for child labour if left unaddressed.

The jury is still out as to whether the multitude of pandemic response measures might result in the long-term and sustainable extension of social protection in some contexts. However, the ruling is clearer from a child-sensitivity perspective. Despite its promise, an opportunity was lost during the response. The immediate and long-term needs of children could have been far better addressed programmatically and in the fiscal allocation for child-focused responses – a goal more likely to be achieved if policymakers build stronger, child-sensitive social protection systems now, and beyond the pandemic.

► Box 1.4. Utilizing existing child benefits for a child-focused pandemic response

Outlined below are examples of some lower-income countries with established child benefits that were able to scale up or appropriately modify protection quickly when the pandemic struck. This emphatically underlines the importance of having systems and provisions in place to contend not only with ordinary life-cycle challenges but also those that are primed and can be easily bolstered to respond to shocks. They continue to support children and their caregivers during the crisis response and recovery phases. It is precisely for this reason that ILO and UNICEF have been advocating for universal child benefits (UCBs) to protect all children in crises or times of non-crisis (ILO and UNICEF 2019; ODI and UNICEF 2020; ILO 2021d).

- Mongolia: increased its Child Money Programme monthly benefit by five times from MNT 20,000 per month to MNT 100,000 for one year.
- Guatemala and the Philippines: dropped the behavioral conditions assigned to their child benefits to removed impediments to benefit take-up.
- South Africa: increased the amount of the Child Support Grant, usually R450, by R300 in May and R500 (US\$27) June-October 2020 and provided it to every caregiver each month.

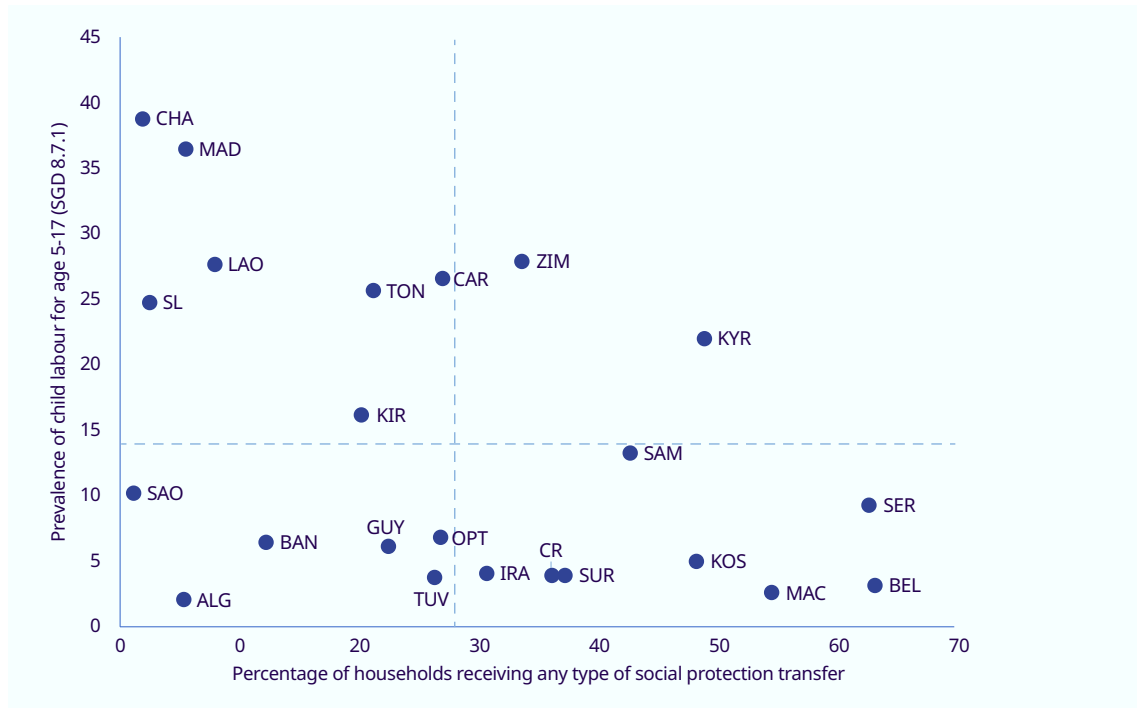
Source: Bastagli et al. (2022).

► 1.3 Social protection and child labour across countries

Higher social protection coverage is associated with lower child labour prevalence. **Figure 1.5** shows data on child labour prevalence and the proportion of households covered by any type of social protection transfer, across 23 countries. The four quadrants are distinguished by the average child labour rate (14.5 per cent) and average share of households covered by social assistance (26.6 per cent).⁹ Among the ten countries in the sample with high social assistance coverage, eight have below-average child labour rates – data from the two outlier countries suggests that higher social protection coverage does not automatically guarantee lower than average child labour rates.

However, more efforts are needed to simultaneously collect data on social protection and child labour across countries.

► **Figure 1.5** Scatterplot of social protection coverage and prevalence of child labour, 2017-2019




Note: 23 low- and middle-income countries (Algeria, Bangladesh, Belarus, Central African Republic, Chad, Costa Rica, Guyana, Iraq, Kiribati, Kosovo, Kyrgyz Republic, Lao PDR, Madagascar, North Macedonia, Occupied Palestinian Territory, Samoa, São Tomé and Príncipe, Serbia, Sierra Leone, Suriname, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Zimbabwe).

Source: UNICEF MICS 6.

That countries are also populating the lower left quadrant of **figure 1.5**, where both social protection coverage and child labour rates are low, underlines the evidence that social protection coverage is not the only factor that might simultaneously determine child labour. Factors such as laws, social norms and school attendance may also be at play. Building on this basic association, and to correctly identify the impact of social protection on child labour, **Section 2** looks at the recent evidence of child labour impacts of social protection based on studies applying experimental or quasi-experimental methods.

⁹ A similar pattern is observed for hazardous work (figure not reported).





2. Social protection as a policy response to child labour: What does the evidence say?¹¹

▶ 2.1 Introduction

This review aims to answer the following questions, in the context of low- and middle-income countries:

- ▶ What is known about the impacts of social protection systems, schemes and programmes on child labour outcomes?
- ▶ What is known about the contextual factors that influence these impacts?
- ▶ What design features of social protection programmes increase or reduce their effectiveness in addressing child labour, and how can programmes be adapted to strengthen beneficial impacts?
- ▶ What are the evidence gaps and priorities for future research?

To answer these questions, this report synthesizes findings from rigorous impact evaluations of social protection programmes.¹¹ Following both UNICEF's and the ILO's life-cycle approach to social protection (UNICEF 2019; ILO 2021d), the report reviews programmes that address the diverse needs and vulnerabilities of families with children, working-age populations and older persons. Programmes are classified in the following categories: programmes for families with children including maternity protection, cash or in-kind transfers, and integrated social protection programmes ("cash plus"); public employment programmes; unemployment protection; income security in old age. Two categories cross-cutting the life course are also considered: social protection for people with disabilities, and social health protection.

For each programme area, the report reviews interventions that can potentially influence child labour outcomes, even if that is not an explicit objective of the intervention.¹²

The review primarily focuses on social protection programmes anchored in law and implemented by government agencies. However, considering the limited evidence available on social protection and child labour for interventions other than cash transfers, as well as the learning potential from any social protection intervention, the search was broadened to interventions by market-based actors, third sector organizations (such as NGOs), or multilateral organizations.¹³ The evidence base covers the period 2010-22.

¹⁰ A considerable portion of this section draws on, and further develops, arguments and an earlier evidence base contained in an earlier report (ILO 2013).

¹¹ See Guilbert et al. (forthcoming), for details on the methodology used for the studies' search and synthesis.

¹² This review focuses on the following outcomes: (i) child labour, including work below the minimum age, the worst forms of child labour, and hazardous household chores (see box 1.1); (ii) child participation or time spent in economic activities (such as agricultural work, livestock herding, fishing, or participation in non-agricultural business -within or outside the household); and (iii) child participation or time spent in household chores undertaken within children's own homes, such as taking care of other children, elderly or sick household members, cooking, cleaning. The description of study findings (sections 2.3-2.9) distinguishes between general engagement in economic activities and engagement in child labour for elimination if this was analysed in the respective study.

¹³ This deviates from the common understanding that "programmes implemented solely by private organisations or non-governmental organisations without government affiliation are not considered part of social protection" (UNICEF 2019).

► 2.2 Overview of the evidence base

Considering the period 2010 to the present, this review identified 62 studies covering 47 different programmes. Of these studies, 37 (60 per cent) found unambiguous reductions in children's engagement in productive activities (economic activities and/or household chores); 11 (18 per cent) reported increases in children's engagement in productive activities; seven (11 per cent) reported mixed effects, with programmes increasing some types of child labour activities and decreasing others; and the remaining seven (11 per cent) reported no significant changes in children's time allocation.

Fourteen of the studies identified included impacts on child labour as defined by ILO standards (such as work under hazardous conditions or for long hours; see [box 1.1](#) for details). Of these 14 studies, nine (64 per cent) found unambiguous reductions in child labour, one found mixed effects, another study found no impact, and the remaining three found increases in child labour.

► **Table 2.1 Summary of study findings (2010 to present)**

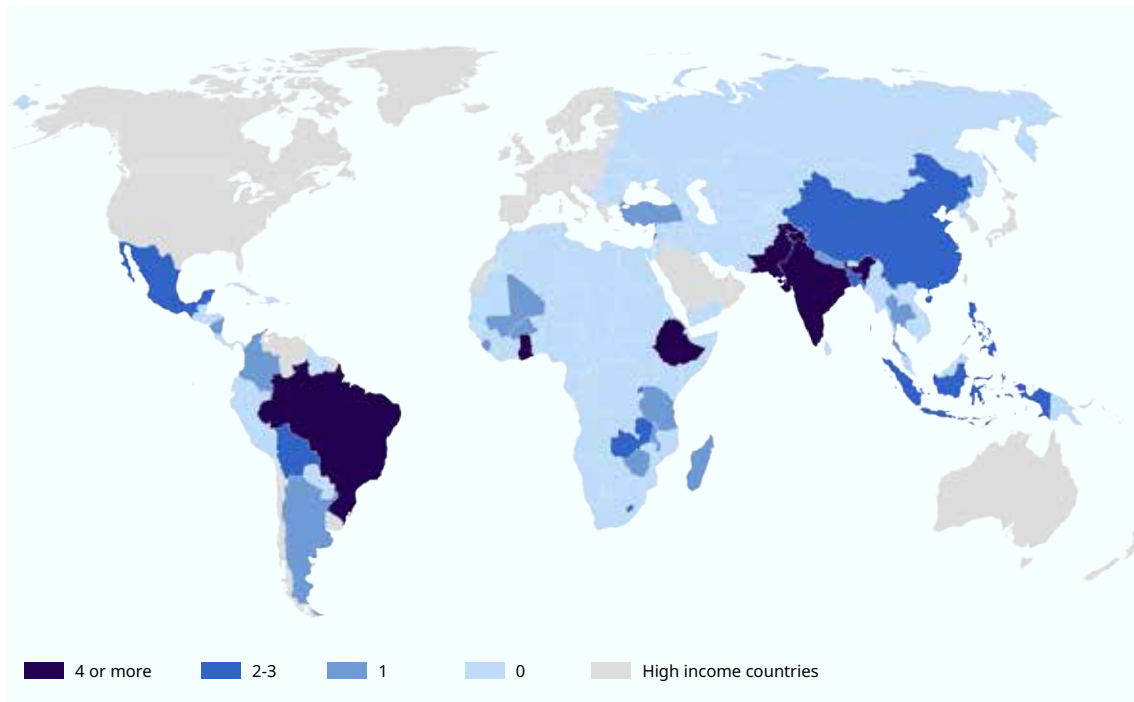
Social protection instrument or branch	Evidence base	Child focus	Evidence on impact on child labour outcomes
Cash transfers	Extensive (26 studies, 21 programmes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most cash transfers set benefit levels depending on the number of children in the household. • A few programmes encourage recipients to spend (part of) the transfer on children's wellbeing. 	<p>Cash transfers help to reduce children's engagement in work or household chores when amounts are adequate, and payments are regular.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistent reductions in paid work. • Evidence on child labour in household farms or businesses is mixed, particularly when households expand productive activities.
In-kind transfers	Limited (4 studies, 4 programmes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School feeding programmes are specifically designed to address children's needs. • Other in-kind programmes (food subsidy, food distribution) can be directed at families with children. 	<p>Limited evidence found mixed effects, depending on the modality of distribution.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-kind transfers are less effective at reducing child labour than cash transfers of similar amount. • School feeding is associated with lower participation in economic activities.
Integrated social protection (cash plus)	Good (11 studies, 7 programmes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Several programmes provide households with information on child protection issues and linkages to child protection services. • Other programmes are not focused on children, but rather on household livelihood opportunities, with potentially harmful consequences for children if they are requested to support new productive activities. 	<p>The evidence is mixed, but this covers diverse programmes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combining cash with intense sensitization on child labour has proven effective in reducing it. • Programmes promoting livelihood activities tend to increase child labour, an issue that can be mitigated with sensitization sessions.

Social protection instrument or branch	Evidence base	Child focus	Evidence on impact on child labour outcomes
Public employment programmes	Good (10 studies, 4 programmes)	The programmes covered by this review did not have a focus on children.	The evidence to date is mixed. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children may take over the activities of other household members participating in public works. • Adverse effects on child labour are less likely when these programmes pay more regular and higher amounts.
Unemployment protection	None identified on child labour	No direct focus on children or households raising children.	Although no studies were found on child labour, there is evidence that unemployment benefits reduce poverty and vulnerability.
Maternity protection	None identified on child labour	Programmes are designed to support primary caregivers of infant children allowing parents to spend time with the child, these programmes are directly linked to children's well-being.	Evidence linking maternity protection with long-term educational participation outcomes is mixed and predominantly from high-income countries.
Disability protection	None identified on child labour	Adult and child disability benefits, common in high-income countries, are an obvious way to protect persons with disabilities.	Although no studies were found on child labour, there is evidence that disability benefits reduce poverty and vulnerability.
Social health protection	Limited (five studies, four programmes)	Most health protection programmes favour a family rather than an individual approach for service provision.	Consistent evidence that social health protection can reduce child labour. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protective effects for children observed after health shocks. • Social health insurance also reduces child labour in absence of health shocks.
Old-age pensions	Limited (five studies, five programmes)	No direct focus on children.	Most studies showed that old-age pensions reduce child work. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Old-age pensions also increase school enrolment.
Universal basic income	Limited (one study)	UBI is, in principle, an individualized payment to children and adults. Whether children should get a smaller or larger sum is a source of debate.	Prevalence and time spent in casual wage labour declined, but time spent working for the household increased. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other related evidence (from simulations) suggests that UBI would reduce poverty and vulnerability and facilitate the working-age population's access to work.

Note: The extent of the evidence base is defined as “limited” when fewer than 10 studies are available, “good” when between 10 and 20 studies are available, and “extensive” when over 20 studies are available.

The selected 62 studies cover 28 low- and middle-income countries. The map in [figure 2.1](#) shows the distribution of the studies.¹⁴ Latin America and the Caribbean and Eastern and Southern Africa are the regions with the highest number of studies (15 each), followed by South Asia (11 studies), Western and Central Africa (nine studies), East Asia and Pacific (eight studies), and Middle East and Northern Africa (four studies).

► **Figure 2.1 Geographical distribution of studies (2010 to present)**

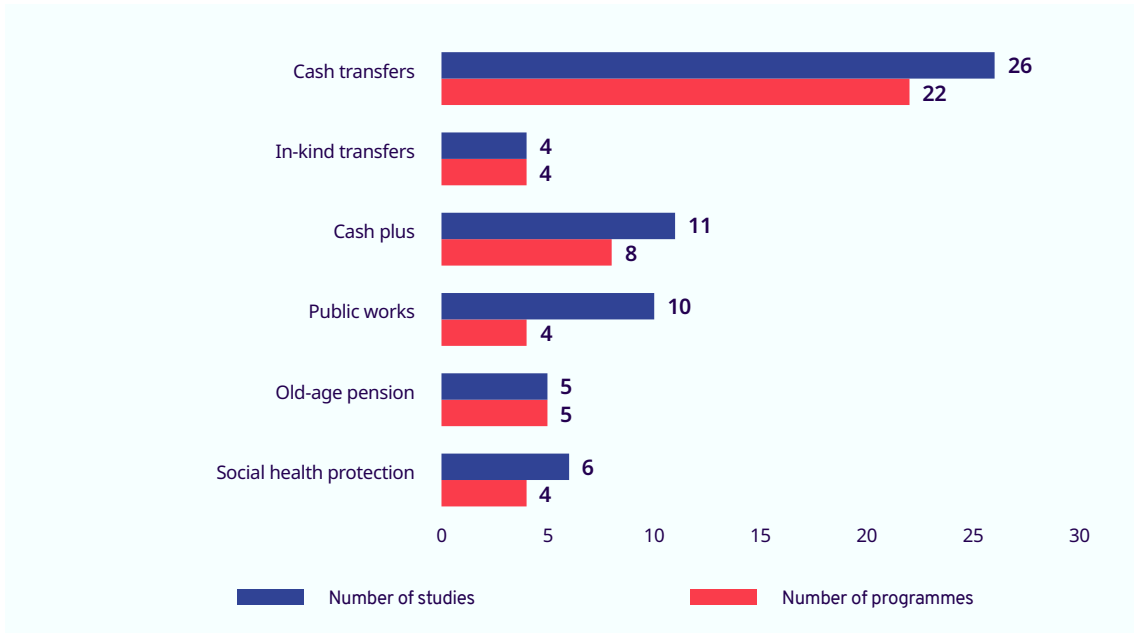


Source: Elaboration based on the studies selected as part of the review.

[Figure 2.2](#) shows the distribution of studies (and programmes examined) by programme type. Cash transfers are the most studied type of social protection, as pertains to child labour outcomes. A second group of commonly studied programmes includes integrated social protection programmes (cash plus). In-kind transfers, social health protection and old-age pensions are studied relatively less frequently with respect to their impacts on child labour.

¹⁴ A similar map is obtained when showing the number of programmes studied.

► Figure 2.2 Distribution of studies and programmes by category, 2010 to present



Source: Elaboration based on the studies selected as part of the review.



► 2.3 Transfer programmes directed at families with children

Maternity protection

► Key findings

No recent studies were found detailing the impacts of maternity protection on child labour.

There is evidence linking maternity protection with the long-term educational outcomes of children covered by such protection (maternity benefits, paid parental and maternity leave). This evidence is mixed and mostly from high-income countries.

More research is needed to fill the knowledge gap on the effects of maternity protection, including access to free maternity care, on child labour, particularly from low- and middle-income countries.

Future research should also investigate the impacts of maternity protection on the education and labour of older (already existing) children within the family, and in particular in the case of teenage pregnancies.

Working women and their families are vulnerable during pregnancy and after child-birth, which can influence decisions on children's education and child labour (ILO 2013). Adequate maternity protection ensures the income security and access to health care that they need to prepare for childbirth and recover and care for new children; preventing their premature return to work while safeguarding their jobs and earnings.¹⁵

Theoretically, maternity protection can improve family well-being through the following pathways: less stress during pregnancy; mothers and parents spending more of their time caring for their children during early life; guaranteed income for the family and resources for nurturing the newborn(s) (Rossin-Slater 2017; Carneiro et al. 2015); and access to good maternal healthcare without hardship (ILO 2021d). The second and third pathways have implications on the wellbeing of all family members and their participation in work including care and household chores. Without adequate maternity protection, poor families may resort to child labour to cope with any deprivations, including with the high cost of delivery if maternity care is not provided for free (ILO 2013).

To date, there is no robust evidence on the impacts of maternity protection on child labour. However, there are studies that have examined the long-term educational outcomes of children covered by paid parental and maternity leave, which can be used to infer greater investment in, and engagement with, the education system.

¹⁵ See also <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/equality-and-discrimination/maternity-protection/lang--en/index.htm>.

Evidence from high-income countries – focusing on school access and attainment – reports mixed results:

- Extensions of maternity leave duration was associated with lower drop-out rates in Norway (Carneiro et al. 2015).
- A recent review of extensions of parental/maternity leave duration showed little or no impact on children's graduation rates and education attainment in Denmark, Germany and Norway (Rossin-Slater 2017).

This area is under-investigated and more attention should be paid to it considering the pathways highlighted above. Future research should also investigate the impacts of maternity protection on the education and labour of older children within the family, and in particular in the case of adolescent pregnancies. Indeed, adolescent pregnancies in contexts where there is no social protection, maternity care or cash benefits are at risk of both poverty and reproducing a cycle of early school drop out and early labour market participation, especially for girls (WHO 2014).

Unconditional and conditional cash transfers

► Key findings

Family and child cash benefits represent an important source of income security for households with children, and tend to reduce child labour.

Cash transfers consistently reduced children's participation in paid work outside the household.

As households partly invest cash transfers in productive activities, this may determine an increase in children's work within the household, including cases of hazardous work.

Conditionality is not a prerequisite for the effectiveness of social protection in terms of child labour.

Rather, the effectiveness of cash transfers in reducing child labour is related to transfer size, duration, and regularity of payments.

Limited evidence on the worst forms of child labour suggests that if transfer size is adequate and transfers are delivered sustainably over time, cash transfers can also reduce the worst forms of child labour.

Cash transfers are generally implemented with the objectives to ensure income security and improve living standards and food security, as well as to limit the risk of harmful coping strategies that may lock households into intergenerational poverty cycles. In addition, they have been also used to reduce access barriers to critical services, including education, health and nutrition. Cash transfers are expected to reduce the demand for child labour through the additional resources they provide to households. However, as the programmes also allow poor households to expand their investment in productive assets, the demand for child labour may increase if this investment is not matched by adult labour supply, increases in productivity or technological solutions.



In some contexts, when conditioning cash receipt to specific outcomes, conditional cash transfers aim to change household behaviours and promote investment in human capabilities. However, evidence is clear on the role that unconditional transfers also play to change household behaviours through higher income security and better access to services, without making the receipt of benefits conditional upon specific behaviours, and enhancing choice and planning capacities for programme participants. For instance, while both conditional and unconditional transfers allow households to invest more in education, conditions on attendance may provide a further incentive to attend school, and crowd out children's time allocation to labour. The debate whether to condition or not is a recurrent one (see [box 2.1](#)).

Evidence of conditional cash transfers is extensive and documents protective impacts on child labour outcomes, although the magnitude of the effects was found to vary greatly across programmes and contexts (ILO 2013). Early evidence on the effects of unconditional cash transfers was more limited and produced mixed results.

The review completed for this report identified 26 studies on cash transfers, of which 12 were on unconditional cash transfers and 12 on conditional cash transfers; one study by Fenton et al. (2016) examined the separate impacts of each transfer type, while another study by De Hoop et al. (2020a) focused on a programme combining conditional and unconditional transfers (plus public employment).

Out of these 26 studies, 16 found that cash transfers caused a reduction in children's participation in, or time spent on, economic activities. Of the remaining studies, three found an increase, four found mixed effects and the remaining three found no impact.

Two of the four studies reporting mixed evidence document the reallocation of children's time within the household. In Malawi and the United Republic of Tanzania, cash transfers reduced participation in paid work outside the household, but increased participation in economic activities for the household (De Hoop et al. 2020; De Hoop, Groppo and Handa 2020). In Zambia, children also increased their work within the household farm, although without a corresponding reduction in work for pay outside the household, possibly due to the relatively low prevalence of this activity among children at baseline (De Hoop, Groppo, and Handa 2020). While generally safer compared to work outside the household, work within the household can be hazardous. Indeed, in both Malawi and Zambia children's engagement in hazardous work increased following cash transfers (De Hoop, Groppo, and Handa 2020). Hazardous work remained unchanged in the United Republic of Tanzania (De Hoop et al. 2020).

Four studies found that cash transfers reduced children's participation or time spent in household chores (Sebastian et al. 2019, Hiziroglu Aygün et al. 2021; De Hoop et al. 2018a; Cahyadi et al. 2020). This effect was specific to girls in households receiving the Lesotho *Child Grant Programme* and the Indonesia *Programme Keluarga Harapan*. Two studies reported that cash transfers were effective in fighting the worst forms of child labour specifically among girls in the carpet weaving sector in Nepal (Edmonds and Shrestha 2014) and among (supposedly boys) combatants in Colombia (Pena, Urrego, and Villa 2017).

► Box 2.1. The policy choice of conditionality versus unconditionality

Yet, such conditions have been questioned for a number of reasons, including increased administration and operational cost of setting and monitoring conditions (potentially lowering transfer amounts); the risk of failure to meet conditions – particularly when binding – and how this can accentuate inequalities in certain populations (Standing and Orton 2018); assumptions that the main deterrent for not accessing a specific services is economic and not linked to quality, access or adequacy; and the risk of reinforcing traditional gender roles while adding to women’s unpaid workloads (see for instance Bastagli et al. 2019; Cookson 2018; Fultz and Francis 2013; Molyneux 2007).

Is the conditionality necessary for cash transfers to have the positive effects they seem to have, or are unconditional transfers similarly effective?

The answer partly depends on the outcomes of interest. Both types of transfers are found to yield positive impacts on schooling, health, and nutrition outcomes. Baird et al. (2014) found that both conditional and unconditional programmes similarly improve enrolment and attendance, compared to no programme. However, when the set of conditional transfers is restricted to those that monitor and enforce conditions (as opposed to “soft conditionalities”), conditional programmes in some case can contribute to enrolment and attendance.

The review conducted for this report only identified one study, Fenton et al. (2016), that compared the effectiveness of conditional and unconditional transfers with respect to children’s paid employment. Both reduced the time spent by children in paid employment, with the difference in impact being only marginally statistically significant in favour of conditions. Considering that school attendance and health monitoring conditions were soft (after six months of not meeting the conditions households would lose 10 per cent of the transfers), it is plausible that the same result could have been achieved by simply integrating messaging in the unconditional transfer without the risks and costs outlined above.

With this evidence in mind, necessarily, the decision to introduce conditions linked to human development outcomes (such as health and education) depends on context-specific considerations and should carefully balance potential advantages and costs, understanding of drivers and access barriers, in line with national priorities and should be decided by local authorities, guided by the set of principles contained in ILO Recommendation No. 202 (see ILO 2013 and 2021d; UNICEF 2016a).

From the review of unconditional and conditional cash transfers a number of design and implementation findings are evident:

- ▶ **Adequate transfer amounts are essential to reduce child labour.** High transfer size can be associated with stronger improvements in children's time allocation (Hiziroglu Aygün et al. 2021). Conversely, small transfers may yield no impact (Ambler and De Brauw 2019; Canelas and Niño-Zarazúa 2019; Churchill et al. 2021; Vera Cossio 2019); or only reduce labour intensity but not prevalence (Costa et al. 2020); or only reduce paid employment, maintaining other key indicators, such as household expenditure on education, unchanged (Dias et al. 2021). Low transfer size may even lead to increases in child labour, if transfers are insufficient to cover the full cost of schooling (De Hoop et al. 2019), or to offset the impact of adverse economic shocks (Cepaluni et al. 2022). Ensuring an adequate amount of benefits commensurate with the specific context can vary between rural and urban areas within the same country (Prifti et al. 2020). See also the ILO Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No. 102).¹⁶
- ▶ **Longer programme duration is associated with stronger reduction in child labour.** When benefits were delivered over longer periods, protective effects were stronger (Cahyadi et al. 2020; Churchill et al. 2021; Moussa et al. 2022; Salti et al. 2022). This is related to households consolidating poverty reduction and reaping the returns from productive investments over time, which can further reduce child labour. Economic security helps families to diminish the pull of child labour as a preventive or coping strategy. Sustained social protection efforts appear particularly important to address the worst forms of child labour and keep children out of hazardous work (Edmonds and Shrestha 2014). However, it is important to monitor programme effects on children's time allocation also in the short term, to ensure that long-term gains are not obtained at the cost of higher child labour in the short term.
- ▶ **Conditionality is not a prerequisite for effectiveness in terms of child labour.** The proportion of studies showing protective effects is similar for conditional and unconditional transfer programmes. The evidence also shows that associating messaging or labelling to unconditional cash transfers can improve their effectiveness with respect to child labour outcomes (De Hoop et al. 2018a; Pellerano, Porreca, and Rosati 2020; Sebastian et al. 2019). Nevertheless, when income shocks occur, conditionality may provide an additional incentive to keep children in school and limit their involvement in economic activities (Fitz and League 2021). The consideration of the potential child labour reduction effects of an unconditional universal basic income is discussed in [box 2.2](#).
- ▶ **Programmes designed with a focus on children's outcomes are more effective in addressing child labour.** As mentioned above, programmes which included messages in support of children's education were more effective with respect to child labour outcomes. Moreover, programmes where the transfer size varied according to the number of children in the household also showed relatively stronger protective effects. In households receiving cash transfers, even ineligible children experience reduction in economic activities (Lincove and Parker 2016). Cash transfers proved beneficial for particularly vulnerable children, including refugees and indigenous children, even when not tailored specifically for them (Hiziroglu Aygün et al. 2021; Lopez-Calva and Patrinos 2015).
- ▶ **Service access and quality, as well as comprehensive and effective regulations can boost the positive effects of cash transfers on child labour.** Community-level factors also affect programme effectiveness in combatting child labour. Cash transfers cannot reach their full impact potential if public education or health infrastructures are lacking or inadequate. This was for instance the case in Lebanon, where the increase in school participation following the transfers was limited by insufficient school capacity (De Hoop et al. 2018b). Insufficient service availability may also discriminate marginalized or more vulnerable populations if they have to travel long distances to satisfy programme conditionalities. The national legal framework regulating child labour (such as the age at which children are legally allowed to work), and necessarily its enforcement, is likely to be an important moderator of

¹⁶ https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C102.

programme effects, and should be considered in the design of social protection programmes (Canelas and Niño-Zarazúa 2019).

Finally, the review showed that the effects of cash transfers depend on child, household and contextual characteristics, including:

- ▶ Large differences in effects by gender and age of the child in the contexts of Ethiopia, Lesotho, and the United Republic of Tanzania (De Hoop et al. 2020; Prifti et al. 2020; Sebastian et al. 2019). For example, in the United Republic of Tanzania reductions in paid work outside the household were specific to older boys, while paid work remained unchanged for younger children and girls (De Hoop et al. 2020).
- ▶ Differences in impacts by household composition, such as the number of adults who are able to work, with children more likely to start working or working longer hours when households include fewer adults who are able to work (see, for instance, Cepaluni et al. 2022; De Hoop et al. 2020; Edmonds and Theoharides 2020), and numbers of brothers and sisters, and their ages, with older children benefiting from cash transfers targeted at younger children (Lincove and Parker 2016). The gender of the household head may also moderate impacts. In Lesotho, girls benefited more in terms of improved schooling and reduced work in male-headed households, while boys benefited more in female-headed households (Sebastian et al. 2019).
- ▶ Effects also depend on traditional norms on child labour and other harmful practices, such as child marriage. As described in section on integrated social protection programmes (“Cash plus”) below, programmes combining cash with sensitization challenging these norms were found to be effective in reducing child labour, including in its worst forms (see, for example, ICI 2022; Karimli, Rost, and Ismayilova 2018).



► Box 2.2. The promise of universal basic income: expected impacts and challenges

Recent interest in universal basic income (UBI) has grown in prominence, especially with calls for an emergency UBI to be implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic (ECLAC 2020; Gray Molina and Ortiz-Juarez 2020). However, aside from numerous pilot experiments – and a short-lived UBI in Mongolia and a quasi-UBI in Iran – the UBI has not yet made any permanent breakthroughs in national policy. Necessarily, evidence of child labour impacts of UBIs are limited.

A UBI reaching all children and paying adequate benefits could contribute to reducing child labour by reducing monetary and multidimensional poverty and more – as would also be the case for comprehensive life-cycle social protection. On the other hand, a modest UBI benefit may risk spreading resources too thinly across the population, but adequacy brings concerns about the significant financing requirements of a UBI that is set at an adequate level.

Three pilot UBI programmes conducted in Madhya Pradesh, India (2011 and 2013) shed some light. The largest of these pilots disbursed a modest UBI for 18 months to approximately 6,000 men, women and children in eight villages, and the results were compared with 12 otherwise similar “control” villages (Davala et al. 2015). After a year of UBI having been paid, the proportion of children in economic activity was only marginally down. On closer inspection, it became clear that fewer children were engaged in casual wage labour, and that they allocated less time to these activities. However, in line with findings elsewhere, the amount of time devoted to work on family plots or helping out around the home had increased, yet parents reported, that this type of work was less likely to interfere with schooling (Standing and Orton 2018).

In-kind transfers

► Key findings

The evidence base on in-kind transfers is limited.

School feeding or take-home rations have meaningful impacts on school enrolment and attendance, hence potentially generating reductions in children’s work.

In difficult times, the conditionality intrinsically attached to school feeding programmes may be meaningful to keep children in school and away from labour.

The value of the in-kind transfer is an important parameter for programme effectiveness in reducing and preventing child labour.

In-kind transfers seem to be less effective in fighting child labour compared to cash transfers of similar amounts, which allow more flexible expenditure.

Operational and logistical difficulties associated with the delivery and monitoring of in-kind transfers are common and raise concerns about their efficiency.

This review did not identify any study assessing the impact of in-kind transfers on hazardous labour.



In-kind transfers cover part of household consumption costs, hence limiting the need to resort to child labour to afford certain goods, and offer a more limited set of consumption choices. They do not provide income security to beneficiary households compared to cash transfers. However, they may restrict the usage of the transfer to the consumption of goods that potentially are complements to (or inputs for) human development outcomes.

Globally, as cash transfers became easier and less costly to implement through rapid digitalization, they have gradually supplanted in-kind transfers. They also provide participants with choice to use cash to meet multiple needs, in addition to food or specific supplies. Nevertheless, in-kind transfers in the form of school feeding or support to educational costs remain widely implemented and are still expanding in low- and middle-income countries.

For instance, earlier evidence on in-kind transfers focused on school feeding and take-home rations programmes in Bangladesh and Burkina Faso, finding modest reductions of children's involvement in economic activities and no effect on household chores (ILO 2013).

This review identified four recent studies assessing the impact of in-kind transfers on children's time use and schooling, with one study (Tang, Zhao, and Zhao 2020) specifically analysing impacts on child labour for elimination, and one looking at conflict-affected regions of Mali (Aurino et al. 2019). Results were mixed and showed that:

- Protective effects of the Free Compulsory Education Reform in China reduced the prevalence of child labour for elimination (defined in the study as work below the minimum age), although only for boys (Tang, Zhao, and Zhao 2020). And, in Mexico, the *Programa de Apoyo Alimentario* reduced the prevalence and intensity of children's participation in economic activities for children in the middle-income distribution (Tagliati 2019); however, it was the cash transfers (of similar amount) that enabled the poorest households to reduce children's participation in economic activities, rather than the food baskets. The "Rice for the Poor" programme in Indonesia found no impact of the food subsidy on children's participation in economic activities (Jayawardana, Baryshnikova, and Pham 2021).
- In conflict-affected regions of Mali, Aurino et al. (2019) found that school feeding was effective in reducing months spent in farm labour, while generalized food distribution increased participation in farm work. Effects on girls' participation in farm work were weaker for generalized food distribution, while school feeding, on the other hand, led to a large decrease in the time spent on farming and animal-rearing by girls.

An important consideration with in-kind benefits is the transaction costs that households have to face when accessing the service. In the case of food subsidies, constraints such as getting to specific stores on specific days were shown to lead to certain eligible households failing to collect their benefits. Failure to monitor causes of, and address, low take-up can undermine the efficacy of the benefit, and ultimately result in children being trapped in or drawn into child labour.

Integrated social protection programmes (“Cash plus”)

► Key findings

Available studies reported mixed effects, depending on the specific complementary interventions considered.

Combining cash transfers with social health insurance slightly reduced children’s participation in productive activities.

Combining cash transfers with information campaign on child labour appears a promising strategy to reduce child labour, including hazardous labour.

Programmes combining cash with livelihood promotion interventions (such as training and asset transfers) pose risks for children, who may be drawn into productive activities for the household, including hazardous work. Such programmes can still reduce child labour, if further combined with sensitization on children’s rights and the hazards related to child labour.

The amount of the cash transfer, and the intensity of sensitization components, are key to ensuring protective effects.

Integrated social protection programmes – also referred to as “cash plus” – combine cash transfers with complementary interventions to simultaneously promote households’ and children’s well-being, including information on the detrimental effects of child labour or access to services such as health or education. Acknowledging the mixed evidence on conditionality, service take-up and risk related to household investment in economic activities, complementary interventions are expected to generate synergies particularly relevant to address child labour.

Integrated social protection programmes are rapidly expanding in low- and middle-income countries, including for instance Burkina Faso (Child Sensitive Social Protection Programme, combining cash with water and sanitation and nutrition services), Ghana (*Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty, LEAP*, combining cash with social health insurance), and Mozambique (*Child Grant Programme*, combining cash with nutrition behavioural change communication). However, studies examining the child labour impacts of cash plus programmes are rare.

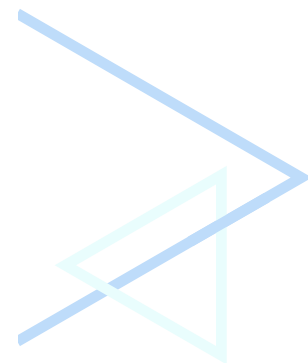
This review identified 11 studies on integrated social protection programmes. Of these, five were undertaken in Ghana, and focused on combining cash transfers with social health insurance, and combining cash with an information campaign on child labour. The other six studies assessed combinations of cash transfers with livelihood promotion – for instance, productive asset transfers and training on business activities – which in some cases were also associated with sensitization on child labour. This evidence shows that:

- **Programmes combining cash transfers with social health insurance** have the potential to reduce households’ reliance on child labour as a coping strategy in the face of adverse health needs – including as a precautionary strategy. However, regularity and adequacy of the cash component remain important determinants of programme effectiveness in cash plus approaches. Short-term evaluations of Ghana’s LEAP programme and its extension (LEAP1000, which also covers households with pregnant women and children up to two years) and its link with the National Health Insurance, showed limited impacts on children’s productive activities (Aborigo et al. 2021; Angeles et al. 2017; Handa et al. 2014; Osei and Lambon-Quayefio 2019). The authors mostly explained the limited impacts based on the irregularity and small amount of the cash payments (Handa et al. 2014; Angeles et al. 2017; Aborigo et al. 2018).



- ▶ **Programmes combining cash with campaigns or sensitization against child labour** specifically address the risk of children participating in the household expanded productive activities. Such programmes indeed inform caregivers on the hazards associated with child labour, thus supporting transfer expenditure on education, and deterring children’s engagement in hazardous work. In Ghana, International Cocoa Initiative (2022) found that a programme combining unconditional cash transfers with an information campaign was effective in reducing the prevalence of hazardous work among children.
- ▶ **Programmes combining cash with livelihood promotion** can help households increase their income and reduce demand for child labour, but may also increase child labour if additional support is needed in the newly created businesses. Building on early evidence on this type of programme – which showed that asset transfers may significantly reduce the protective effects of social protection (ILO 2013) – this review identified six studies, five of which provided null or negative results. Two studies show that these programmes did not change children’s participation in economic activities in Brazil and India (Banerjee et al. 2011; Costa, Helfand, and Souza 2018), three found that children’s participation in economic activities increased in Bangladesh and the Philippines (Bandiera et al. 2013; Edmonds and Theoharides 2020; Sulaiman 2015).¹⁷ Of the three studies that found increase in general participation in economic activities, one study also assessed impacts on child labour (see [box 1.1](#)) and found that the programme in the Philippines even increased the prevalence of child labour, despite being designed with the objective of reducing it (Edmonds and Theoharides 2020). Karimli, Rost, and Ismayilova 2018 study in Burkina Faso was the only positive example, with the authors recording uniquely protective effects when the cash-plus livelihood promotion programme also included sensitization on child labour. In this programme, the sensitization component had relatively high intensity (including monthly sessions for six to eight family members), which likely increased programme effectiveness.

What is clear from the cash-plus evidence is that family context and effective implementation of the “plus” components matter. The strong and negative effects found in the Philippines by Edmonds and Theoharides (2020) study were explained by a scarcity of adult labour in recipient households, and potentially by a lack of awareness of the hazards associated with child labour despite the programme including child labour orientation sessions (covering the legal definition and explaining how the Government is engaging communities to reduce child labour). However, in qualitative interviews recipients reported little value in these sessions and were unaware of the programme objective. In contrast, in Karimli, Rost, and Ismayilova (2018) study in Burkina Faso, the child labour sensitization component had a higher intensity and coverage in the family.



¹⁷ Bandiera et al. (2013) considers all children in the household, so presumably these includes a mix of younger and older children; Edmonds and Theoharides (2020) focus on children 12 to 17 years old; and Sulaiman (2015) considers children 6 to 15 years old.

▶ 2.4 Public employment programmes

▶ Key findings

Studies found mixed impacts of public employment programmes on children's participation in economic activities.

Public employment programmes certainly present risks in terms of child labour, with older children being likely to increase their participation in productive activities, to substitute for adults who engage in public employments.

Impacts differ by sex, with girls substituting their mothers in household chores and boys being more likely to work outside the household, like male adults.

Improving the amount and regularity of payments from public employments can avoid potential detrimental effects on children's work.

This review did not identify any study assessing the impact of public employment programmes on hazardous labour.

Public employment programmes (PEPs) provide a source of employment for adults from poor or chronically food insecure households, especially during lean seasons, thus (hypothetically) reducing household demand for child labour as an alternative income source. PEPs can also help to build public infrastructure and expand basic services, including health and education services, which can further reduce child labour. However, such programmes may increase children's engagement in productive activities for the household, if they take on work at home for adults who engage in PEPs outside the household. Evidence also suggest that, in some instances, children may also directly participate in PEPs.

Public employment programmes can be key elements of social protection systems, and are common in the form of active labour market policies, in the most developed systems worldwide. In low- and middle-income countries, programmes such as the *Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS)* in India, the *Productive Safety Net Programme (PSNP)* in Ethiopia or the *Expanded Public Works Programme* in South Africa have been implemented over long periods, becoming flagship schemes in their respective countries. Yet despite PEPs being an important component of social protection systems, the evidence on these programmes is rather limited, mostly covering NREGS and PSNP.

Building on early evidence, which showed mixed effects of PEPs for child labour reduction by sex, favouring girls (ILO 2013), this review covers 10 recent studies from Argentina, Ethiopia, India, and Sierra Leone. The new evidence is also mixed, with four studies showing protective effects, four reporting adverse impacts, one reporting mixed effects, and one study reporting no impacts. In summary:

- ▶ Three studies of Ethiopia's PSNP showed reduced children's participation in economic activities, especially for older children (Dinku 2019; Behrane et al. 2017; Porter and Goyal 2016). A similar pattern was found for Argentina's *Programa Jefes y Jefas de Hogar Desocupados* (Juras 2014). Another PSNP study by Belete (2021) reported mixed results, explained by changes made to indicators used by the study (see Guilbert et al. forthcoming).
- ▶ Three studies of India's NREGS all reported increased children's participation in economic activities (Ajefu and Abiona 2019; Li and Sekhri 2020; Shah and Steinberg 2021). Shah and Steinberg (2021) found that among adolescents, girls were more likely to substitute for their mothers in household chores, while boys were more likely to work outside the home for pay.



- ▶ Rosas and Sabarwal (2016) found that Sierra Leone's *Youth Employment Support Project* (YESP) did not affect children's involvement in paid activities, but increased school absenteeism, which may indicate child labour substituting for the household chores previously managed by adults before their participation in the programme (Dammert et al. 2018).

Importantly for the implementation of future programmes, the evidence suggests that the timing of PEPs – together with the amount and regularity of payments – are important determinants of child labour impacts. For instance, when PEPs offer employment during the high agricultural season, children are more likely to substitute for adult farm work, both within and outside the household (Ajefu and Abiona 2019). Moreover, larger and more regular payments can improve programme impacts, further reducing the prevalence of working children, school attendance, and highest grade completed (Berhane et al. 2017).

▶ 2.5 Unemployment protection

▶ Key findings

No recent studies were found detailing the impact of unemployment protection on child labour.

In households without unemployment protection, when adults lose their job they can be forced to rely on children's labour as an alternative income source.

Having the income replacement function that unemployment protection provides would in all likelihood diminish the need for households to resort to child labour.

Research is required to gauge a potential relationship between unemployment protection and child labour.

The link between unemployment and child labour risk is clear, as are the implications of low levels of labour market formalization. When an adult member of the household loses his or her job, in the absence of unemployment protection the household can be forced to rely on children's labour as a coping strategy.

This review did not identify any study investigating direct links between unemployment protection schemes or related statutory income support programmes and child labour. However, previous evidence from the ILO (2013) report regarding Argentina, Brazil, the United Republic of Tanzania and Togo suggests that, where unemployment protection is absent, households can be forced to rely on children's labour to cover lost employment income. The clear implication is that unemployment protection has a role to play in efforts against child labour, by providing at least partial income replacement and enabling the beneficiary to maintain a certain level of household consumption until new employment is available and thereby removing the need to rely on the income of working children.



▶ 2.6 Income security in old age

▶ Key findings

Generally, most of the evidence shows that children living in households with an old-age pension recipient are less likely to work.

These positive impacts appear to be age-sensitive (older children), with the sex of the pension recipient (female) influential in some contexts.

Old age pensions also improve child literacy and school enrolment, and proved to reduce hazardous work, although there is evidence on this form of child labour only from one study.

The evidence is predominantly from Latin America and rural populations. Hence, more research is needed from diverse low- and middle-income countries and urban settings.

Old age is a source of vulnerability as people lose their income-earning ability, experience deteriorated health and are at greater risk of poverty. In multigenerational households,¹⁸ or split-generation households, income security in old age can play a key role in the economic security of the household as a whole, including its youngest members. Old-age pensions can provide this income security and potentially affect child labour.

Building on early evidence from South Africa that showed that old-age pensions can reduce child labour overall and improve school enrolment among girls (Edmonds 2006), the review uncovered examples from both means-tested/targeted and universal approaches:

- ▶ In Brazil, a non-contributory means-tested pension reduced the labour force participation of children aged 10 to 15 years (De Oliveira, Kassouf, and de Aquino 2017). Another study in Brazil found that an old-age pension scheme for rural workers reduced participation in work for pay and hours worked among girls living with a female beneficiary (De Carvalho Filho 2012).¹⁹ In Mexico, a non-contributory rural pension scheme (now discontinued) decreased the labour force participation of adolescent boys aged 12 to 17 from the poorest households, who were living with a female beneficiary (Juarez and Pfitze 2015).
- ▶ Evidence from universal schemes is inconclusive. In Thailand, a universal old-age pension scheme reduced informal agricultural work (girls) and in formal non-agricultural work (boys) among children aged 12 to 18 years (Herrmann, Leckcivilize, and Zenker 2021). In Bolivia, a universal pension reduced the likelihood of work among boys in rural households (Chong and Yáñez-Pagans 2019).

¹⁸ As of 2010, the prevalence of households including both children under 15 and an older person aged 60 years or above amounted to 13 and 14 per cent in Asia and Africa, respectively, while it was lower at 8 per cent in Latin America. At the country level, the prevalence of such intergenerational households ranged from 5 per cent in Argentina to 37 per cent in Senegal (UNDESA 2017).

¹⁹ Only hours above 15 per week are recorded, so results indicate that the programme reduced hazardous work in the form of long hours.

▶ 2.7 Social protection for people with disabilities

▶ Key findings

No recent studies were found detailing the impact of disability protection on child labour.

Research is required to gauge a potential relationship between disability protection and child labour.

Cross-country evidence shows that the socio-economic vulnerabilities associated with disabilities can increase household reliance on child labour.

Nonetheless, a wide array of social protection measures can be taken to address the vulnerabilities accompanying both short-term and long-term disabilities.

Households with people with disabilities are among the most economically and socially vulnerable, and many of them are among the poorest of the poor. Disability can compromise the ability to work and earn income; and at the same time people with disabilities face added costs for medical expenses and equipment. Other household members may also have to forgo paid work in order to care for the disabled person. In addition to economic vulnerability, people with disabilities suffer other “hidden” challenges, among them discrimination and various forms of social exclusion. For children with disabilities, social exclusion can take the form of denied education and seclusion within the home. Not surprisingly, in developing countries, the multidimensional poverty rate for households with disabled children is much higher than for other households (UNICEF 2021).

All in all, increased risks of poverty and vulnerability in households with a person with a disability can push children into work, which is reflected in substantial literature associating disability and child labour. The ILO (2013) report containing studies from Bangladesh, Nepal and Gansu Province, China, have found that children in households where adults are sick or disabled or have missed work are more likely to be in child labour within or outside the household. Another study from Nepal found evidence suggesting that parental disability was strongly associated with the likelihood of children ending up working as porters and ragpickers – both among worst forms of child labour entailing significant physical and psycho-social risks (Edmonds 2010). Children with disabilities may be engaged in some of the worst forms of child labour, such as begging (Groce, Loeb and Murray 2014; UNICEF 2022a).

There is a wide array of social protection measures that can be taken to address the vulnerabilities accompanying both short-term and long-term disabilities. These include contributory and non-contributory disability benefits; wage replacement for disabling injuries and illnesses; and free or subsidized access to assistive devices, public transport, housing, and other provisions; as well as support services complemented by a range of high-quality public services (ILO 2021d). Research is, however, lacking, and efforts need to be made to identify the specific impact of such measures against child labour among disabled children or children in households with disabled members.



► 2.8 Social health protection

► Key findings

The evidence review focused on social health insurance. There is a need to investigate further the impact of broader social health protection policies, in particular social assistance programmes that guarantee free or affordable health interventions for maternity and early childhood development and programmes guaranteeing free health care for children.

The new studies generally confirmed earlier findings showing that children living in households covered by social health insurance are less likely to experience child labour and positive effects on schooling were also found.

Social health protection was found to have ex-ante impacts, reducing child labour among protected households even when they do not experience health shocks.

Catastrophic health expenses can compel households to sell assets and rely on children's labour to cope.

Social health protection can shield households from resorting to child labour by eliminating or reducing out of pocket expenses on health and improving health outcomes.

Social health protection also proved to be effective in reducing hazardous child labour.

Universal health coverage and universal social protection can sometimes, erroneously, be thought of as separate entities undermining the obvious interlinkages. In reality, effective health systems distribute and redistribute resources forming a key part of the social protection floor, while other dimensions of social protection systems can impact on the social determinants of health, which in turn can influence the drivers of child labour (ILO 2020d).

Social health protection is a necessary form of social protection against poverty and vulnerability. Without social health protection, injuries, diseases, premature death or even pregnancy and child birth can place economic pressure on households in two ways: by reducing the earning capacity of individuals for some time and by imposing added, unforeseen, health-care costs on the household budget. Universal social health protection is not yet a reality for all. While over 60 per cent of the global population is protected by a scheme, this proportion is only 34 and 16 per cent in middle-income countries and low-income countries, respectively (ILO 2021d).


As with other in-kind services, additional barriers to accessing healthcare also remain in the form of informal payments on health services, physical distance, limitations in the range, quality and acceptability of health services, and long waiting times, as well as opportunity costs such as lost working time (ILO 2021d). In 2015, 930 million people worldwide incurred catastrophic health spending (defined as OOP expenditures exceeding 10 per cent of total yearly household consumption or income), creating a major poverty risk (WHO and World Bank 2020) and raising the risk of coping through child labour. There is an increasing body of evidence confirming that even relatively small health spending periodically required on a regular basis have impoverishing impacts, and not only big health shocks. This calls for comprehensive social health protection with a strong focus on primary health care (ILO 2021d).

There is earlier evidence of a lower reliance on child labour in households with social health insurance in Guatemala and Pakistan (ILO 2013), and in Kenyan households accessing essential health services for antiretroviral treatment for HIV-positive household members (Thirumurthy, Graff Zivin, and Goldstein 2008). New evidence from China, Ghana, Pakistan and Rwanda shows that social health insurance has contributed to reduced child labour and increased schooling. More specifically:

- ▶ Access to China's New Cooperative Medical Scheme (NCMS) completely offsets the adverse effects of health shocks in terms of decreased school enrolment and increased child work prevalence (Liu 2016).
- ▶ Ghana's National Health Insurance Scheme (NHIS) significantly reduced the incidence of child labour (by 8 percentage points or 22 per cent) among households with more episodes of illness, and reduced hours of weekly household chores overall. In households experiencing more episodes of illness, there was a greater positive impact on boys' school attendance and a greater reduction in girls' engagement in child labour and household chores (Garcia-Mandico, Reichert, and Strupat 2021).
- ▶ Through providing microfinance services and mandatory social health insurance to cover accident and health risks of all affiliated persons and their dependants, Pakistan's National Rural Support Programme (NRSP) is associated with decreased children's engagement in hazardous work by 4 percentage points, and child labour earnings by about 125 rupees/month. Impacts were larger for boys and fewer days of schooling missed were overall (Landmann and Frölich 2015).
- ▶ Rwanda's Community-Based Health Insurance (CBHI) social health insurance scheme is associated with children working less (on average one hour less per week) and better educational outcomes for children. While work intensity declined only for boys, schooling outcomes improved for both boys and girls, with stronger impacts for girls. The authors suggest that the social health insurance scheme reduced the need for precautionary savings to cover expenses on health, and consequently encouraged investments in education and discouraged child labour (Strobl 2017). Altogether, the CBHI social health insurance scheme was found to protect children from increasing their participation in market work and family businesses when their parents are experiencing a health shock (Woode, Bousmah, and Boucekkine 2017).

This review of evidence focused on social health insurance and there is a need to investigate further the impact of a wider breadth of social health protection policies. In particular, social assistance programmes that guarantee free or affordable maternity and new-born care and/or access to health care without hardship for children under a certain age threshold may have impacts on child labour within concerned households. Those programmes are increasingly being developed in sub-Saharan Africa. However, it is unclear the extent to which the impact would be as significant as social health protection programmes covering the entire household. Indeed, in some of those programmes the age threshold for health care without hardship is as low as 5 years old, leaving most of childhood out of the scope of such protection.





3. Where next for social protection and child labour?

▶ 3.1 Building social protection systems for children: Turning promises and plans into reality and action, now

The evidence underscores the inextricable link between social protection and children's right to freedom from child labour. While social protection instruments directed at families with children appear especially pertinent to combatting child labour, the evidence also points to a clear role of other social protection instruments across the lifecycle, and their combined power to reduce the drivers of child labour through a system-wide approach. In essence, the eradication of child labour now relies on effective schemes to withdraw children from child labour, while at the same time strengthening social protection systems, education, and decent work opportunities for parents and caregivers to address the conditions that drive child labour risks in the future. Moreover, a systemic approach has the added benefit of achieving multiple rights and well-being goals for all children, including their rights to social security, health, education, and an adequate standard of living.

Accelerating progress in strengthening social protection systems, in particular by extending coverage and improving the comprehensiveness and adequacy of benefits and services, means moving beyond promises and commitments to immediate action. In that vein, several policy actions stand out as priorities for eliminating child labour, so that all children have access to social protection.

Close the yawning gap in the coverage of social protection for children. That in the third decade of the twenty-first century the vast majority of children – 1.5 billion children aged 0-14, many of whom are children in child labour – still receive no child and family cash benefits at all is a moral, social, and economic catastrophe. Under these conditions, children must labour, or go hungry and miss out on schooling, and communities and countries suffer from the unrealised potential in the form of squandered lives and enormous social costs (lost capabilities, productivity, and prosperity, among others). Increasing coverage of inclusive child and family benefits, means at the very least formalization and adequate finance, and to accomplish this, policymakers can:

- ▶ **Harness synergies to make a concerted effort to extend social protection to the two billion informal economy workers to contribute to a reduction of child labour and to facilitate their transition to the formal economy.** This is critical given that child labour is concentrated in informal economy settings where adult workers – the children's caregivers – have little or no access to social protection, and are largely excluded from work-related protection and tax-financed social assistance. Extending social protection to workers in the informal economy, especially in informal agricultural contexts, is key to realizing decent work, facilitating workers' transition to the formal economy, and reducing vulnerabilities that create the need to turn to child labour. Formalization is a critical step in sustainable tax and transfer systems.

- **Closing the protection gap requires filling the “financing gap”, by considering a diversity of mechanisms and ensuring that sustainable and equitable financing is a matter of priority.** Protection gaps are associated with significant underinvestment in social protection. Currently, low- and middle-income countries spend a woefully low amount of GDP on social protection for children. This must, and can, increase. Approximately US\$19 trillion was mobilized in the global fiscal stimulus-response to the pandemic, while in comparison US\$77.9 billion per year would be required to ensure a social protection floor in LIC countries (ILO 2020b; Duran Valverde et al. 2020). This will require countries to reinforce existing sources of financing and identify new and innovative ones too. International experience shows that countries can draw on various strategies to create fiscal space (Bierbaum and Schmitt 2022), and the pandemic has shown that increasing the effective coverage, comprehensiveness and adequacy of provision is possible, both practically, and fiscally. Doing this will have a substantial impact on child labour and child well-being, and is in line with international obligations (ODI and UNICEF 2020; Ortiz et al. 2017 and 2019). The 2021 International Labour Conference called for investment in social protection to help eliminate child labour (ILO 2021b, para. 13(h)). Efforts to close the financing gap should progressively secure domestic financing, if necessary supplemented by international support. This would also require closer coordination in international and national public financing and debt management.
- **As social protection systems are expanded,** it is crucial to ensure adequacy, inclusion and gender transformation, and that they address climate-related and conflict-related risks. The pandemic has highlighted the fact that, while the poorest and most vulnerable groups and communities experience the worst impacts of such shocks, they are the least adequately covered by social protection. To remedy this situation, inclusive policies and programmes must be developed, with particular attention being paid to the needs of children in child labour, girls and women, children with disabilities, migrant children and those in other marginalized groups. Significant work is also needed to ensure that social protection programmes are responsive to shocks, to avert adverse impacts on the incidence of child labour. The measures deployed during the policy window provided by COVID-19 can and should also be built on to prioritize investments to close critical gaps (ILO 2021d).
- **As systems are strengthened, countries should rapidly move towards universal social protection for children.** The response to the COVID-19 pandemic has both emphasized the importance of strong social protection systems and the opportunity the crisis provided to make progress on universal social protection for children. This can be achieved initially through quasi-universal or universal child benefits (UCBs). Evidence from countries with long-established universal child benefits demonstrates that they help to achieve greater poverty reduction than means-tested benefits. Moreover, in countries currently without UCBs, simulations show that a UCB scheme costing just 1 per cent of GDP would reduce child poverty rates by as much as 20 per cent (ILO and UNICEF 2019; ODI and UNICEF 2020). This has significant implications for child labour, which alone is good reason for policymakers to consider a UCB.

Policymakers should be cognizant that countries do not build social protection systems after they develop; they build social protection systems as part of development. Failure to build and invest in social protection systems for children is irrational for any society that wishes to enjoy the prosperity that comes with development. Investing in social protection not only assures children’s rights; it plays a critical role in the virtuous cycle of development, part of which involves transitioning to more formal work; and a strengthening of tax and transfer systems that reduce vulnerability and enable additional investments in human capabilities, national infrastructure and other conditions that are conducive to the elimination of child labour and more. The most effective social protection systems for addressing child labour and its root causes are integrated systems, which are well coordinated internally and cross-sectorally. For these reasons:

- **A systems approach from a child labour perspective should focus on how specific social protection instruments can complement one another in addressing contingencies rendering households vulnerable to child labour.** Figure 3.1, based on the evidence presented in Section 2, illustrates the interaction of challenges and instruments within a social protection system and how it

can be constructed to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of social protection responses to child labour. There is no “one size fits all” solution in terms of social protection systems. Instead, the specific mix of interventions will necessarily depend on context, the specific challenges being addressed and a variety of other factors. Such an approach is fully in line with ILO Recommendation No. 202, which emphasizes national ownership and the importance of national strategies for social protection extension formulated through social dialogue.

► **Figure 3.1 Elements of an integrated social protection system for addressing child labour**

		Challenges rendering households vulnerable to reliance on child labour							
		General poverty and vulnerability	Individual shocks	Collective shocks	Injury and illness	Lack of school access, high costs of schooling	Job loss	Long-term disability	Income insecurity associated with old age
Social protection instruments	Benefits to children and families	Cash transfers	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
		In-kind transfers	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
		"Cash plus" programmes	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
		Quasi-universal or universal child benefits	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
	Other benefit categories	Public employment programmes	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
		Unemployment protection	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
		Maternity protection	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
		Old-age pensions	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
		Disability protection	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
		Social health protection	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
		Sickness benefits	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
		Employment injury compensation	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
		Survivors benefits	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
		Universal basic income	■	■	■	■	■	■	■

■	Evidence of child labour reduction impact exists
■	Despite lack of child labour studies, high probability of a protective impact on child labour
□	No identified impact

► **Moreover, it is of tremendous importance that policymakers recognize and implement integrated cross-sectoral social provision for children, with a key role for social protection systems.** Specifically, this means the role of child and family benefits that directly address the financial barriers that impede the realization of children’s rights, and their access to key human services that protect them from child labour and promote their rights such as health and education. In this way, well-designed social protection can “oil the wheels” of social provision and much-needed structural transformation. To develop an integrated systems approach means the coordination of the design and implementation of childcare and education services, child protection services, access to healthcare without hardship and more.

Finally, in support of system building efforts, policymakers can utilize existing international policy commitments to universal social protection, further building consensus for action. Pre-existing commitments and policy frameworks, such as the Sustainable Development Agenda and Goals (SDGs) and the strong tripartite policy consensus agreed by the International Labour Conference represent such a possibility. Within the SDG Agenda, if Alliance 8.7 and the Global Partnership for Universal Social Protection to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (USP2030) could join their forces to promote universal social protection for eradicating child labour, this could be an important vehicle to advance this effort and support Member States.

The UN Secretary General's Common Agenda and the 2021 launch of the Global Accelerator for Jobs and Social Protection for Just Transitions offers tremendous potential to realize the right to social protection for all. The Accelerator is a UN system-wide initiative capable of developing an integrated policy response that aims at helping lower-income countries to create at least 400 million decent jobs and extend social protection to four billion people. If this initiative realises its potential, it could help ensure that more children live their lives free from child labour, enjoying social protection and with their caregivers working in decent formal jobs.

► 3.2 Designing social protection programmes that prevent and reduce child labour: What does the evidence say?

To complement [Section 3.1](#) on recommendations for the social protection system that can best address child labour concerns, this section offers specific recommendations on the design of social protection schemes.

The evidence in this report has uncovered multiple promising practices for the design of social protection schemes for preventing and reducing child labour. Programmes which applied these practices had stronger reduction impacts on child labour, including its worst forms. These include the following:

Inclusive universal social protection programmes are more likely to reduce child labour. Well-designed schemes can increase prospective entitlement holders' take-up of benefits by limiting exclusion errors (see Grosh et al. 2022; Kidd, Gelders, and Bailey-Athias 2017), ensuring ease of access to benefits and reducing stigma and shame, as well as reducing procedural complexity and thereby lowering transaction and opportunity costs. And so, policymaker should consider:

- Lowering the administrative burden on the system and households, which can increase the risk of exclusion for those most in need, by prioritizing categorical targeting where possible, and where this is not the case, by improving means-testing or other targeting mechanisms, and ensuring that these processes are transparent, rights-based and as unintrusive as possible.²⁰ Universal programmes have much lower procedural complexity for rights holders to access benefits. A UCB for example requires certification just once through the birth registration of a child. Poverty-targeted programmes require frequent (re)certification of eligibility to avoid exclusion errors; however, high-frequency recertification significantly raises administrative costs (Grosh et al. 2022). Savings in administrative costs therefore leaves more money available for benefits.
- Avoid using problematic design features such as hard, even punitive, conditionality in programmes design.

²⁰ An ILO appraisal concludes that the universal schemes reviewed exhibited the lowest average administration cost at 2.5 per cent of the total programme costs, whereas targeted programmes had an average administration cost of 11 per cent (Ortiz et al. 2017).

- ▶ Strive to implement programmes that are as inclusive as possible, prioritizing universal and unconditional programmes that cover all households with children irrespective of income status. Such an inclusive design has critical implications for children in child labour and increases their opportunity to access entitlements.

Social protection programmes should be child-sensitive, and designed considering the potential implications in terms of child labour. The evidence clearly shows that programmes which increase household income (such as cash transfers), while serving an essential poverty reduction goal, may risk an increase in child labour, if children participate in the household's expanded productive activities. A similar concern is associated with livelihood promotion programmes (such as cash combined with productive assets). To avoid such unintended effects on child labour and to boost protective impacts, it is important to incorporate child labour concerns in the design of the programme, such as:

- ▶ Adding sensitization or provision of information on hazards related to child labour, through regular monthly sessions with multiple household members to raise awareness on child protection issues, including hazardous child labour, labour-related child separation, and early and forced marriage.
- ▶ Adding “messaging” on the relevance of education, as this is also associated with better child labour and schooling outcomes from unconditional transfers.

Adequacy and predictability of social protection benefits is key for protective impacts on child labour. Programmes delivering higher transfer amounts determined stronger reductions in children's work, while adverse or minor impacts on child labour are often attributed to low amounts. Therefore, to improve the impact of social protection on child labour, policymakers should consider:

- ▶ Setting adequate benefit levels, taking into account household size and composition to better address household needs in line with international social security standards.²¹
- ▶ Adapting transfer amounts according to contexts such as local prices and wages, whilst accounting for opportunity costs (foregone earnings) of schooling, including between rural and urban settings. This could be informed by community-based participatory research including with children and families which is needed to understand their basic needs and related costs.
- ▶ Regularly revising transfer amounts to account for inflation.
- ▶ Ensuring that social protection payments are provided **regularly**, as household decisions on child labour and schooling depend on income stability.

Combining social protection programmes with complementary interventions in the education and health sectors, as these are particularly effective in reducing child labour. Key recommendations include:

- ▶ Combining **education** supply-side interventions (such as better access to school or improved teaching approaches) with cash transfers to boost programme effectiveness in reducing child labour and improving schooling outcomes. Indeed, wherever education facilities are missing or of low quality, households lack sufficient incentives to remove children from work and send them to school.
- ▶ Public service supply is particularly relevant in humanitarian settings, where a large influx of refugees can generate sudden increases in the local demand for services.
- ▶ Other options include the provision of childcare services on public works sites to support households, and specifically women, in taking up employment without relying on children (most frequently girls) to substitute them in the care of younger children.

²¹ International social security standards provide guidance on transfer size. The ILO Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202) sets out that basic income security should allow life in dignity, and that nationally defined minimum levels of income should correspond to a set of necessary goods and services, national poverty lines or comparable thresholds (para. 8). ILO Convention No. 102 (Part VII) sets minimum standards for the provision of family (or child) benefits in the form of a periodic cash benefit, benefits in kind (such as food, clothing, housing) or a combination of both.

- Securing universal social health protection coverage for children and engaging with the health system to secure the availability of quality health services adapted to children and available near home and school is also paramount.

Finally, as work continues in the fight against child labour – including the compounding effects of COVID-19 – more research is needed to build an adequate evidence base to guide and inform policy.

Evidence is needed both on the economic and social challenges rendering households vulnerable to child labour, and on the effectiveness of a range of social protection instruments, and their combined effects, in addressing these challenges. It is especially relevant to expand the evidence base on impacts on hazardous child labour and other worst forms of child labour. This report has made clear that desirable outcomes in terms of child labour are by no means automatic in the case of many social protection instruments: this means that solid evidence of which approaches work in which circumstances, and why, is especially important in addressing the continued scourge of child labour.

The eradication of child labour is not only a moral priority, but clearly an achievable goal provided both political will and resources are in place. The evidence suggests that social protection can play a critical role in achieving these ends.



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