

Turn Off the Tap: Focus on Agriculture and Children 5-11 years

Policy Brief – VI Global Conference on the Elimination of Child Labour, Morocco 2026

The Problem



Child labour is concentrated in agriculture, particularly among younger children aged 5–11, who are often engaged as unpaid family labour on subsistence and smallholder farms. These farms face low productivity, weak market returns, and limited access to adult labour or quality schooling, creating functional dependence on child labour.

The Evidence



- **61%** of all child labour is in agriculture.
- Children aged 5–11 now make up **57%** of all child labourers (42% in 2008).
- In Sub-Saharan Africa, almost **7 out of 10** children in child labour are below 12 years.
- Most of the children **5–11** work as unpaid family labour on subsistence and smallholder farms.
- Subsistence and smallholder farms are **not generating sufficient income** to hire adult labour or employ youths in decent work, leaving them dependent on younger children to function.¹

The Recommendations for VI Global Conference on Elimination of Child Labour



To accelerate progress towards the SDG Target 8.7 by 2030, global efforts must pay special focus on children 5–11 working in subsistence and smallholder farming systems by:

- Ensuring the meaningful participation of subsistence and smallholder farmers' and workers' organizations in regional consultations leading up to the VI Global Conference on the Elimination of Child Labour, in the conference itself, in the drafting of the outcome document, and in post-conference initiatives aimed at developing and implementing a global strategy to eliminate child labour in agriculture.
- Reducing functional dependence of small farms on the labour of their children, particularly those 5–11, by mobilizing government, business, labour and donor commitment to ensure an integrated and coherent rights-based policy, production and procurement framework that enables decent living standards on those farms.
- Supporting the establishment of national platforms for cross-sectoral collaboration and coordination linked to the International Partnership on Cooperation on Child Labour in Agriculture and Alliance 8.7 Action Committee on Agriculture at the global level, recognizing that farms grow multiple crops and that making improvements such as living incomes and productivity requires that they effectively collaborate towards a common goal: making small farms viable.

Introduction



This policy brief provides a concise overview of the global child labour landscape, presenting key findings, conclusions, and actionable recommendations to inform the preparatory consultations, conference deliberations, outcome document negotiations, and post-conference follow-up of the VI Global Conference on the Elimination of Child Labour, scheduled to take place in Morocco in 2026.

The purpose of the policy brief is to inform stakeholders involved in the VI Global Conference on the Elimination of Child Labour, particularly international organizations, donors, governments, social partners, farmers' organizations, civil society, and multistakeholder initiatives, by highlighting the urgent need to focus on children aged 5–11 engaged in agriculture. It outlines evidence-based recommendations grounded in the “3P’s” framework – Production, Procurement, and Policy – to reduce dependence of subsistence and smallholder farms on the labour of children, particularly the youngest ones.

As only the second global conference of its kind to be held on African soil, the upcoming event is particularly significant: it comes at a time when the latest global estimates indicate that nearly two-thirds of all child labour cases are concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa. The ECLT Foundation, having been involved in the fight against child labour in agriculture in Africa and other regions of the world since 2000, welcomes the VI global conference and reaffirms its vision of a world where agriculture is free of all forms of child labour. The VI global conference presents a critical opportunity for the international community to stand with governments and social partners in Africa to address the region's position as the epicentre of global child labour and to reverse this trend in the years ahead. It is a moment to share lessons learned, reflect on progress, refocus priorities, renew commitments, and accelerate collective action toward achieving global targets for the elimination of child labour.

Key Insights from 2024 Global Child Labour Estimates



Child labour remains a prevalent issue in the agricultural and wider rural economy. The 2024 global estimates not only reaffirm this trend but also reveal that most children in child labour, **57% or 78.9 million** in absolute terms, are aged 5 to 11 years. Sixty-eight per cent of children in this age group are engaged in agriculture: performing unpaid work on small family farms in rural areas. In the Sub-Saharan Africa region, which accounts for nearly **63%** of all child labour cases, nearly **7 out of 10** children in child labour are aged below 12 years.

Despite overall global progress, reductions in child labour have been uneven – and most concerning – the slowest among the youngest children. Between 2008 and 2024, child labour among children aged 5 to 11 declined by just **13%, 12 million** in absolute terms. In contrast, far steeper declines were recorded among older age groups: **55% (34 million)** among children aged 12 to 14, and **50% (31 million)** among those aged 15 to 17. As a result, the share of child labourers aged 5 to 11 years rose from **42%** in 2008 to **57%** in 2024. This pattern underscores the persistent vulnerability of younger children, particularly in agricultural settings where they are often engaged as unpaid family labour on subsistence and smallholder farms.

This means that although overall progress has been made in reducing child labour among older children, a growing number of younger children are entering into it. This trend is particularly evident in Sub-Saharan Africa, where, despite a 2.4 percentage point decline in child labour between 2020 and 2024, the absolute number of children involved remained unchanged. It's akin to draining an overflowing bathtub without turning off the tap – the rate at which children aged 5 to 11 are entering child labour threatens to offset the gains made among older age groups.²

Recommendations for 'Turning Off The Tap' to End Child Labour in Agriculture



Most of the labour among children 5-11 years occurs within family subsistence systems and on smallholder farms, where these young children work informally as unpaid family labour.³ Subsistence and smallholder farms typically rely on manual labour and have limited capacity to generate sufficient income when they produce some surplus for the market. Moreover, the data shows that those who are leaving agriculture are mainly teenagers and young workers. The result is that the agricultural workforce is increasingly composed of older farmers and younger children. Consequently, these farms often depend on young children's labour to function, as farm earnings are insufficient to hire paid adult workers or invest in children's education.⁴ Even when children are enrolled in school, their attendance and study is often irregular due to competing demands on their labour at home. Addressing this functional dependence of subsistence and smallholder farms on child labour, particularly among younger children, is essential to 'turning off the tap', that is, preventing the concurrent engagement of younger children into child labour.


The 2024 ILO-UNICEF Global Estimates of Child Labour reveal that:

57%  5-11

Globally, children aged 5-11 make up **57%** of all children in child labour.

68% 

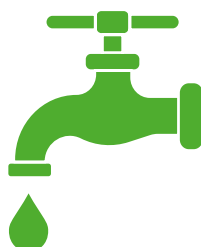
Children between 5 and 11 years constitute **68%** of all child labour in agriculture: performing unpaid work on subsistence and small family farms in rural areas.

5-11 

Progress against child labour has been **slowest** among children 5-11.

Small farms depend on child labour because they do not generate sufficient income to hire adult labour or youths in decent work.

To achieve the SDG 8.7 target by 2030, the ECLT Foundation emphasizes the urgent need to '**turn off the tap**' of child labour through a comprehensive, integrated approach focused on three strategic priority areas:



Production



Procurement



Policy



PROMOTE SOCIAL DIALOGUE IN THE RURAL ECONOMY, INCLUDING WITH REPRESENTATIVE ORGANIZATIONS OF SMALL FARMERS AND RURAL WORKERS, AND CREATE AN INCLUSIVE GLOBAL PLATFORM FOR CROSS-SECTORAL COLLABORATION AND COORDINATION.

To truly 'turn off the tap', it is essential that governments, businesses, the international community, practitioners, and child rights advocates prioritize addressing the three key pathways through which functional dependence on child labour manifests in subsistence and smallholder farming: production, procurement, and policy (3 P's').

Production



Improving access to labour-saving technologies, promoting good agricultural practices and climate-smart agriculture, strengthening rural infrastructure, expanding inclusive financial services, and supporting the development of strong farmer organizations.

Subsistence and smallholder farming systems are typically labour-intensive, low-input, and characterized by low productivity and unsustainable agricultural practices. These challenges are exacerbated by climate change impacts, volatile market prices and limited access to productive resources, credit, and infrastructure. Addressing these constraints requires coordinated investments in good agricultural practices, climate-smart agriculture, rural infrastructure, inclusive financial services, and farmer organization. Strengthening these foundations is essential not only for improving livelihoods and achieving living incomes, but also for reducing dependence on child labour and building more resilient rural economies.

Procurement



Promoting procurement practices that uphold commitments to decent work, living incomes, the promotion of fair prices with producer organizations, and the elimination of child labour.

The procurement practices of local, national and global traders, buyers, manufacturers, intermediaries, and government crop boards significantly influence smallholders' incomes and labour decisions, including through factors such as determination of production cost, the timing of payments, prices offered, delivery schedules, and other terms specified in procurement contracts. Procurement practices should ensure responsible sourcing and support for supply chain actors who commit to decent work, living incomes, the promotion of fair prices with producer organizations, and child labour elimination.

Policy



Government policies that expand access to free, quality public education in agricultural areas and promote robust, well-governed producer organizations—alongside corporate policies that assure decent wages and incomes for smallholder farms through collective bargaining and social dialogue—are key to reducing reliance on child labour.

Government and sector policies play a critical role in preventing and reducing the functional dependence of smallholder and subsistence farms on child labour by addressing the structural barriers that make such dependence necessary for survival. For example, government policies that expand rural education infrastructure, provide free and quality public education, reduce indirect schooling costs, and align school calendars with farming cycles can significantly ease the financial burden on parents and promote regular school attendance. In parallel, policies that support efficient producer organizations can strengthen farmers' collective capacity and reduce the economic pressures that contribute to child labour. On the other hand, sectoral commitments – joint efforts by companies, industry associations, cooperatives, and public institutions within a specific sector – can play a transformative role in overcoming the functional dependence on child labour in agriculture and other high-risk sectors. By adopting a sector-wide rights-based living income benchmarking and strategies, embracing shared responsibility, and enabling coordinated action, these commitments can drive systemic change.

How Smallholders Can Reduce Dependence on Child Labour: The Evidence

A landmark study by Pretty (2008) analysed 286 sustainable agriculture projects in 57 developing countries, spanning 37 million hectares and involving over 12 million farmers. In the study, sustainable agriculture refers to farming systems that maintain or increase productivity while safeguarding the environment, strengthening rural livelihoods, and ensuring social equity. Examples include conservation tillage, use of organic fertilizers, integrated pest management and crop diversification.

The findings demonstrate that smallholder productivity can be significantly enhanced when sustainable production is embedded within supportive policy frameworks and reinforced by responsible procurement practices, fair market access, creating the economic and structural conditions to break dependence on child labour.

- **Higher productivity:** Sustainable farming methods increased yields by an average of 79%, enabling households to meet food needs and generate greater marketable surpluses.
- **Market incentives:** Where productivity gains were matched with stable markets and fair prices, farmers sustained and expanded sustainable practices.
- **Policy support:** Smallholders with access to extension services, training, and farmer organizations achieved more durable impacts.⁵

Since 2000, ECLT Foundation's work in 13 countries has reinforced these findings, demonstrating that when the right production, policy, and procurement conditions are in place, smallholder farms can be productive and resilient, reducing their functional dependence on child labour.



A Call to Action

Implementing the 3P's requires global and national platforms for cross-sectoral collaboration and enhanced coordination. More importantly, it calls for genuine consultation with representatives of subsistence and smallholder farmers, cooperatives, and rural workers' organizations – before, during, and after the conference – as essential agents of systemic change. As affirmed in international instruments such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP), in the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, and the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), inclusion is a legal and moral obligation. It is also a strategic imperative: the foundation for building child labour solutions that are locally owned, effective, legitimate, and sustainable.

In light of the above, the ECLT Foundation calls on the ILO, social partners, FAO, Alliance 8.7, IPCCLA, multistakeholder initiatives, donors, and other key stakeholders to support and act on the following priorities in the context of the upcoming VI Global Conference on the Elimination of Child Labour:

- 1 Focus on agriculture and children 5-11 years who work in the sector as unpaid family labour:** Reducing functional dependence of small farms on the labour of their children through an integrated and coherent rights-based policy, production and procurement framework anchored on social dialogue and promotes decent work, including the achievement of living income and wages on those farms.
- 2 Amplify the voices of subsistence and smallholders:** Recognizing that the rural working population is often excluded from the process and scope of social dialogue at all levels, yet decent work deficits are particularly severe in rural areas.⁶ Promote social dialogue in the rural economy and meaningfully involve farmers, farm workers and their representative organizations before, during and after the conference in devising an inclusive global strategy and action plan to end child labour in agriculture.
- 3 Support the establishment of national and global platforms for cross-sectoral collaboration:** recognizing that farms grow multiple crops and buyers. As such, making improvements such as living incomes and productivity requires that they effectively collaborate towards a common goal: making small farms viable.

Endnotes

1 International Labour Organization and United Nations Children's Fund, Child Labour: Global estimates 2024, trends and the road forward, ILO and UNICEF, New York, 2025. License: CC BY 4.0.

2 International Labour Organization and United Nations Children's Fund, Child Labour: Global estimates 2024, trends and the road forward, ILO and UNICEF, New York, 2025. License: CC BY 4.0.

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6 ILO, 2019. Promoting Social Dialogue in the Rural Economy. Decent Work in the Rural Economy Policy Guidance Note. https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/economic-and-social-development/rural-development/WCMS_436223/lang--en/index.htm.



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