



POLICY BRIEF:

CHILD LABOUR IN LEBANON: THE ECONOMIC CRISIS AND THE COMPOUNDING IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Save the Children believes that every boy and girl has the right to learn, play, and be healthy active citizens, free from any type of violence, including economic exploitation and child labour. Save the Children addresses the complexity of children's work through a holistic and integrated approach, combining our expertise in child protection, economic strengthening, social protection and in health and education to create opportunities for children to become healthy, educated, protected and empowered citizens.

This paper outlines Save the Children's position on the current situation of child labour in Lebanon, **exploring the effect of the economic crisis and the compounding impact the coronavirus pandemic** is likely to have in the medium to long term. It also provides recommendations for action to policy makers, donors and practitioners.

While child labour may logically decrease in the short term due to government lockdown, families living on the edge will plunge further into poverty, likely leading to an increase in child labour – including Worst Forms of Child Labour – in the medium to longer term.

CHILD LABOUR POLICY FRAMEWORK

Lebanon ratified the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182), in 2003 and later in 2012, the Government issued Decree 8987 (2012), which prohibits the employment of children under 18 years of age where such work could "harm their health, safety or morals, or limit their education." Children as young as 14 years of age are allowed to work if the work is safe. It is forbidden to set children below 18 years of age to work more than six hours per day.

In 2013, the Ministry of Labour, committed to eliminating the worst forms of child labour as per the International Labour Organisation (ILO) recommendations; it presented its strategy in the National Action Plan (NAP) (ILO & MoL, 2013). The NAP aims to eliminate the worst forms of child labour through strategic interventions on multiple fronts including legislation, education, capacity building, awareness-raising, and child protection and rehabilitation (ILO & MoL, 2013). In 2017, the action plan was revised to include Syrian refugee children and set a goal to eliminate the worst forms of child labour by 2020 (Government of Lebanon & UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator for Lebanon, 2017).

LEBANON'S ECONOMIC CRISIS AND GROWING CONCERNS

Since the Syria crisis began in 2011, Lebanon has witnessed a rise in child labour. Accurate data is limited due to the likelihood of under-reporting. According to UNICEF, 6.7% of Syrian children and 5% of Palestinian children were engaged in some form of work in 2016. However, child labour has not only risen among refugee children but also among Lebanese children. The prevalence of Lebanese working children tripled between 2009 and 2016, from 1.9% to 6%¹. In November 2018, a brief developed by Inter-Agency Coordination found that 21% of children supported with case management and/or specialised psychosocial support were at risk of, or engaged in, child labour.

Child labour is part of the livelihood coping strategy for many families, with income from a child's work considered crucial to survival. Livelihood opportunities for Syrian refugee families are limited, as work permits are restricted to only three sectors². The lack of legal residency, as well as curfews applicable to Syrian refugees in many municipalities, exacerbates this situation as it affects their freedom of movement and prevents caregivers from generating income.

Boys are more likely to be engaged in child labour than girls across all population groups, noting that in agriculture, Syrian refugee girls are the more significant share of full-time child workers in that sector³. Child girls and adolescent girls are also more likely to work at home which in turns increase their exposure to other types of abuse, often invisible to the outside world.

An assessment on working children conducted by IRC in 2019 showed that 100% of the working children interviewed reported that their entire income goes towards supporting their families in essential items such food and rent. Twenty-two percent of surveyed children declared they were entirely responsible for the payment of the rent. Seventy-nine percent of surveyed working children reported being under pressure due to economic hardship and debt was incurred from food, rent and health costs.

Although there has been a consistent economic deterioration in Lebanon over the last 10 years, this has worsened with the recent devaluation of the Lebanese Lira⁴, the steep increase in prices of basic goods and services, increased inflation, lack of liquidity, et al, since October 2019.

Projections for 2020 suggest a sharp increase in poverty, with an anticipated 40% of the Lebanese population living below minimum poverty thresholds, and 20% facing extreme poverty⁵. This situation will create further economic necessity for children to support their family income. A recently conducted assessment by UNHCR highlights that 23% withdrew a child from school and 11% engaged children in income generating activities since October 2019⁶. Additionally, Syrian refugees interviewed for this assessment cited the main problem faced (at the family level) was not having enough money to cover their needs (59%), followed closely by increased prices (56%) and loss of jobs (50%).

“WHEN YOU CLEAN THE FISH, YOU START SMELLING THE SAME”

At 14, Karim has to shoulder the burden of helping his family financially.

As the economic crisis unfolded in Lebanon, Karim had to put in more hours working as a fish vendor. The scars on his hands caused by the knife he uses are a constant reminder of his hardship.



“My job is to scale the fish and clean it from inside and outside. I cut the fish using a knife, I hurt myself. My hands bleed. What I hate the most is the smell; when you clean fish, you start smelling like it, and it doesn't go easily. I prefer the smell of the school, the classrooms and of the chalk. If our situation wasn't like this, I would have been at school to become a doctor”

¹Inter-Agency Coordination Lebanon 2018 “In Focus: Child Labor in Lebanon” (Both figures are expected to be much higher as many cases remain under-unreported)

²In agriculture, construction and waste management.

³FAO, UNICEF 2019 “Child Labor in Agriculture: The Demand Side”

⁴At the time of writing, the official pegging of Lebanese Lira to USD remains and current black market value is 2800

⁵World Bank, January 2020, unpublished document

⁶Monitoring of the Economic Deterioration on Refugee Households, March 2020

HOW DO WE EXPECT THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC TO AFFECT CHILD LABOUR?

The COVID-19 crisis has upended the lives of children and families in Lebanon and across the world. In Lebanon, COVID-19 response by the government has included complete closure of schools and nonessential businesses, and enforcement of movement restrictions across the country. These school closures and movement restrictions are disrupting children's routines and support systems. They are also adding new stressors on caregivers who may have to forgo work and risk being further impoverished.

In such circumstances, new or increased risks including child abuse, neglect, violence and exploitation may arise due to the absence of in person child care and support, as well as other much needed services. **While child labour may logically decrease in the short term due to government lockdown, families living on the edge will plunge further into poverty, likely leading to an increase in child labour – including Worst Forms of Child Labour – in the medium to longer term.**

Protection concerns for children at risk or already engaged in child labour that can arise from the child and/or the caregiver contracting COVID-19 and/or by the prevention and response measures include:

- Loss of household income due to death or illness of caregiver increases the risk of child labour and – for girls in particular — transactional sex;
- Loss of household income due to isolation or quarantine measures, particularly in informal tented settlements, can increase children's risk of engagement in hazardous labour and transactional sex;
- Loss of formal jobs and moving into informal, potentially more dangerous, income generating activities (danger to life, health and morals);
- Pushing under 14 year olds to work in riskier and harmful jobs;
- Compounding the vulnerabilities for working children; stigma related to COVID-19 will leave some children more vulnerable to violence and psychosocial distress including in the workplace.

The impact of COVID-19 will exacerbate an already struggling economy and will have many months of aftereffects as businesses struggle to remain viable following periods of closure due to the health crisis.

Families across the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum will also be hit hard. In a recently conducted Household Economy Analysis⁷ in Greater Beirut, baseline data was used to model the effect of COVID-19 on poor and very poor Lebanese and Palestinian households. When modelling this scenario, the analysis showed that very poor, poor, and even middle-income households will likely see a monthly survival deficit between LBP 592,688 - LBP 650,176. Unemployment levels among adults and caregivers will continue to worsen with the COVID-19 pandemic which is compounding the pre-existing economic crisis. Poverty among the host and refugee communities has been increasing rapidly with constant challenges faced on the national level, leading to an increase in the needs, vulnerabilities, and tension among communities.

Children who **live and work in the streets are more exposed to the virus** and have less opportunity to access prevention information and protective measures such as regular sanitising. Many of these children are adolescent boys living in groups in informal shelters with no or limited adult supervision. This poses a concerning situation in the case that such an adolescent falls sick⁸ including the need for an alternative care placement (while in isolation) and the provision of adequate care and protection in case of hospitalisation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Policy and advocacy level:

- The Government of Lebanon must immediately implement a transparently-distributed and adequate social assistance package for the most vulnerable Lebanese families to cover minimum basic needs, and help offset loss of income due to the COVID-19 pandemic ultimately preventing further increase in child labour.
- The Government of Lebanon must renew efforts to enforce Lebanese laws (including Decree 8987) to address child labour and protect and support child labourers regardless of their nationality or legal status;
- Adopt the revised Labour Code, raise the minimum working age to 15 in accordance with Lebanon's commitment under ILO Convention No. 138;

⁷ Household Economy Analysis of Low-Income Neighbourhoods, Save the Children, February 2020

⁸ While COVID-19 has largely been asymptomatic in children, older adolescents may suffer from symptoms.

- Advocate for the implementation of temporary agricultural work permits for adult refugees;
- Carry out regular checks at farms, shops, food supplies in cities and villages to ensure children are not being recruited in facilities and sectors exempted in the recent lockdown;
- Conduct public awareness campaigns targeting employers and the wider community to promote the understanding of child labour laws and child rights;
- Ensure sustained, predictable, longer-term and multi-year funding to support such interventions to eliminate child labour over the longer term especially in the climate of economic crisis and exacerbated poverty conditions in Lebanon as described above;
- Ministry of Labour to ensure that employers' working conditions comply with Operational Safety and Health (OSH) standards; provide adequate wages to cover childcare for caregivers and ensure suitable maternity/paternity leave in accordance with Lebanese law.

Programmatic level:

Child labour is only preventable through integrated approaches, addressing the root causes of child labour and building greater support for children's rights. Cross-sector activities must simultaneously address poverty, inequity and the lack of access to legal residency among Syrian refugees. They also have to aim to improve access to quality education and child protection services, strengthen the enforcement of regulations, and mobilise public support for respecting children's rights.

- Increase the understanding of the primary individual and collective drivers of child labour (specific to girls and boys) and how to better use social behavioural change and communications strategies to promote community messaging addressing child labour.
- Roll out programming that either provides or promotes financial stability for households and supports livelihood options and appropriate skills training for adults to enter the labour market to help them endure economic strain without resorting to child labour. Provision of cash plus skills development and social behavioural change programming has demonstrated successful outcomes for child labour.
- Social assistance provided to vulnerable host and refugee families to cover loss of income due to the COVID-19 lockdown or quarantine, should be at a value sufficient to ensure families meet their basic needs, reducing the likelihood of resorting to child labour.
- Interventions intending to eliminate the worst forms of child labour require a twofold long term-approach to incorporate adequate provisions into social policy as well as to promote social behavioural change strategies targeting partners, communities, and employers.
- Deliver programming that provides, through Case Management, a solid and comprehensive picture of the needs of the family within the specific context and focuses on age-appropriate services for children and adolescents at risk and/or engaged in child labour.
- Provide training and technical advisory services for all relevant actors including employers, judiciary and case management agencies working on child labour across Lebanon.
- Design programmes that enable employers and businesses engaged in Livelihood programming to be equipped to eliminate WFCL and ensure health and safety standards can be met for all employees.
- Increase programmatic focus on adolescent boys and girls working on the streets to guarantee their protection and wellbeing at all times, including special provisions for their alternative care in case directly affected by COVID-19.
- Support research that focuses on qualitative information, given the limitations of quantitative methods and gaps in current data related to child labour.

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