

Ethical Value Chains: How Cooperatives Tackle Child Labour

Background

What is ICETT?

The [International Cooperative Entrepreneurship Think Tank \(ICETT\)](#) was formed in 2018 by International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) formed in 2018 to strengthen cooperatives' entrepreneurial performance by seeking and using innovative ideas, research, education, and cooperation to address the challenges that cooperative enterprises are facing. It aims to offer strategic thinking on cooperative entrepreneurship to demonstrate that the cooperative business model can be a key differentiator for entrepreneurial competitiveness and strengthen cooperatives' business performance.

The [ICETT members](#) are large cooperatives and cooperative groups that are directly or indirectly members of the ICA. They are entrepreneurial entities, differently from representative organizations and associations of cooperatives. ICETT works through its plenary sessions and its four working groups on “Future of Work”, “Human Rights in Value Chains”, “Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and the World Cooperative Monitor (WCM)”, and “Cooperative Entrepreneurship & Competitive Advantage”.

Introduction

The Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) describes human rights as a set of standards that allow all people to live with dignity, freedom, equality, justice, and peace. They are universal, interconnected, inalienable, indivisible, and non-discriminatory. Similarly, the United Nations defines human rights as moral principles and freedom inherent to all human beings, irrespective of their ethnicity, language, race, sex, religion, nationality, or any other status. These rights include the right to life and liberty, the right to work and education, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion, and expression.

Human rights are violated when they are directly or indirectly disregarded and disrespected. Violations can either be intentionally performed or come due to failing to prevent a situation that would cause a violation. In the context of global value chains, they include labour rights violations, child labour, environmental damage, among others. The UN declared 2021 as the International Year of Elimination of Child Labour. Therefore, in line with the ICA [Declaration](#) on Decent Work and Against Harassment at workplaces whereby its members committed to respect, promote and act diligently to support the fundamental tenets of decent work, namely freedom of association and full recognition of the right to collective bargaining; the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour; an end to child labour; and the elimination of discrimination in employment and every form of work¹; the ICETT WG 2 is organising a webinar to evaluate how cooperatives tackle child labour and share best practices to promote the elimination of child labour in the value chains.

¹ The 2018 [Declaration on Decent Work and Against Harassment](#) by the members of ICA.

What is Child labour?

Child labour is work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential, and their dignity, which is harmful to physical and mental development.

Who is “a child”?

The ILO convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, states that “the term ‘child’ shall apply to all persons under the age of 18.” This is also the definition used in the UN Convention on the Human Rights of the Child.

What are “the worst forms of child labour”?

- all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict.
- the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances.
- the use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in the relevant international treaties.
- work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.

What is “hazardous child labour”?

HCL is work in dangerous or unhealthy conditions that could result in a child being killed or injured (often permanently) and/or made ill (often permanently) as a consequence of poor safety and health standards and working arrangements.

Appropriate forms of work

The term “child labour” does not encompass all economic activities performed by children under the age of eighteen years. Millions of children legitimately undertake work, paid or underpaid, that is appropriate for their age and level of maturity. By so doing, they learn to take responsibility, gain skills and add to their families’ and their own well-being and income.

Children aged 13-15 are permitted to carry out “light work” as per the ILO Convention No. 138 on Minimum Age. Article 7 states that: National laws or regulations may permit the employment or work of persons 13 to 15 years of age on light work which is:

- not likely to be harmful to their health or development; and
- not such as to prejudice their attendance at school, their participation in vocational orientation or training programmes approved by the competent authority or their capacity to benefit from the instruction received.

Therefore, child labour does not include activities such as helping out after school is over and schoolwork has been done. Such “work” could include light household or garden chores, childcare or other “light work”.

What is at Stake?

The international community has identified the elimination of child labour as a fundamental human right at work. It has renewed its commitment through the Sustainable Development Goals to eliminate all forms of child labour by 2025. According to the recent figure by ILO, there are 152 million children still in child labour worldwide². On a positive note, there has been a decline in children's numbers engaged in child labour in recent years³ due to significant efforts and commitment by various stakeholders to advance the fight against child labour.

Child labour is a deep-rooted problem and needs a holistic and multi-stakeholder approach to solve. It is a consequence and a cause of poverty and underdevelopment. Children subjected to extreme forms of exploitation, with little or no basic education, are likely to grow into illiterate adults, physically and mentally stunted, who have virtually no prospect of breaking out of the trap of poverty into which they were born or contributing to the development of society. Child labour continues to be a tolerated practice by many countries in their ambition to enhance economic gain and economic competitiveness and as a strategy to combat poverty. This practice is neither ethical nor socially responsible, and it challenges the cooperative value of caring for others and conflicts with the ambitions of building sustainable enterprises.

Cooperatives have a strong presence in economic sectors where child labour is found, and they could play a significant role in its elimination. For instance, 70% of children engaged in child labour are in the agricultural sector⁴, and cooperatives work mainly in this sector. Therefore, one of the significant contributions that cooperatives can make to eliminating child labour is improving their members' livelihoods and those in the communities they serve. By contributing to reducing poverty and coupling this with the promotion of cooperative values in all business operations, awareness-raising on child labour to members, consumers, suppliers, and the general community, cooperatives can make significant headway in reducing the incidence of child labour.

Indeed, cooperatives should see the elimination of child labour as part of the adherence to cooperative values and principles, recognition of children's rights, and as a socially responsible action. Ending child labour is not only the right thing to do, but it also makes good business sense. Trends in the business world show that enterprises are increasingly judged on their behaviour in areas such as health and safety, environmental protection, human rights, human resource management practices, corporate governance, community development, consumer protection, labour protection, supplier relations, business ethics, and stakeholder rights. Acting against child labour and communicating about activities that combat child labour can improve economic success while promoting the cooperative form of business. Cooperatives are working to eliminate child labour in various ways; however, they rarely report it in such terms.

²ILO Report on Global Estimates of Child Labour:

https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_575499.pdf

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid, 1

The cooperative identity statement elaborated within the ICA and enshrined within the ILO Recommendation 193 on the Promotion of Cooperatives⁵ includes principles that unavoidably engage cooperatives in the issue of human rights. ICA recognises its responsibility to encourage the cooperative enterprises to carry out human rights' due diligence (HRDD) in their operations, respect and promote human rights in their value chains. It acknowledges the power of cooperation and partnership to learn and collaborate with others to raise awareness and promote human rights in value chains for a greater impact. It is important for every stakeholder at all stages of value chains to commit to safe and healthy working conditions for their employees, respecting and promoting human rights including labour rights, elimination of child labour, environmental rights in their operations and extended value chains.

Ethical Value Chains - How Cooperatives Tackle Child Labour

To mark International Day on Elimination of Child Labour, ICETT in collaboration with International Labour Organisation (ILO) will host an online event on 9th June 2021 to share best practices on how cooperatives enhance elimination of child labour in their operations and value chains. The ILO will launch a practical tool on cooperatives' role in eliminating child labour during this event.

The main aim of this event is to raise awareness of how cooperatives can help fight against child labour in their sphere of influence and value chains, sharing case studies and practical recommendations on how to enhance and accelerate the progress of elimination of child labour.

Specific Objectives included:

- Discuss how cooperative improve the livelihoods of their members and people in the communities they serve to eliminate the worst forms of child labour: Sharing case studies and best practices.
- Explore how cooperatives would ensure that their members do not use child labour - directly or indirectly.
- Discuss best strategies that cooperatives could engage in to enhance community mobilization and awareness-raising campaigns on elimination of child labour among their members and within the communities where they operate.
- Explore practical tools that cooperatives and other organisations could adopt to enhance and accelerate the fight against child labour

⁵ [R193 - Promotion of Cooperatives Recommendation, 2002 \(No. 193\)](#)

Programme

Human Rights and Ethical Value Chains: How Cooperative Tackle Child Labour

Date: 9 June 2021

Time: 14h00 (Brussels time)

Zoom Registration Link: https://zoom.us/meeting/register/tJ0of-2qrDooHdb_VS-AKJ7Xa3tETWRHyevW

Time	Activity	Who
	Moderator:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marjaana Saarikoski, ICA Board Member and Leader of Human Rights in Value Chain ICETT Working Group – SOK, Finland
5 mins	Opening remarks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bruno Roelants, ICA Director General
10 mins	Presentation on the background	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Merav Niv, Member of ICETT Human Rights and Value Chains Working Group, Kibbutz Movement, Israel
30 mins	First Panel - sharing case studies and best practices on how cooperatives enhance the fight against child labour through the following thematic areas: Basic education, Advocacy, Standards, Healthcare, and Vocational training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patrick Owusu, Manager, Asunafo Cocoa Farmers Union, Ghana • Mario J. González, President of La Riojana Cooperativa, Argentina • Lilian Maina, Social and Compliance Risk Manager, Fairtrade Africa • Todor Ivanov - Secretary General, Euro Coop
20 mins	Second Panel - Action-oriented recommendations & Practical tool on cooperatives' role on elimination of child labour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Andrea Dávila – Technical Officer on Cooperatives – ILO Geneva Presentation of ILO awareness raising tool “The role of cooperatives in eliminating Child Labour” • Edgar Aguilar - Social Finance Officer - ILO Regional Office for Africa Supporting cooperative organizations to address root causes of child labour within an integrated area-based approach – ACCEL Africa project
15 mins	Question & Answers	Moderator
10 mins	Closing remarks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Philippe Vanhuynegem, Director Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work Branch – ILO Geneva • Tarun Bhargava, ICETT Chair, IFFCO, India