

THE ROOT CAUSES OF CHILD LABOR IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: A CASE STUDY OF THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR

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Abstract: *The purpose of this research is to examine the social demographic factors influencing child labour particularly in agricultural trade in Malaysia and a look at global trends in child labour. This research employs a qualitative research approach that entails survey together with self-generated global reports and quantitative analysis. The major goals found show that childhood necessities, no or meager school admission, and poor implementation of labour laws persist child labor in agriculture. There is also the necessity of policy aimed to eradicate the causes of children's work, namely combat with poverty, rural educational facilities' financing, and mandatory legal compliance in labor relations. Therefore, this research calls for multifaceted policy changes and grassroots approaches toward the eradications of child labor and support for sustainable agricultural improvements in Malaysia.*

Keywords: *Child labor, Agriculture, Agriculture of Malaysia*

Introduction

There is still a total and complete violation of child rights since child labor remains a worldwide concern in spite of international efforts (Takeshima & Vos, 2022). SDG 8.7 of the United Nations Set for Sustainable Development minimizes child labor by 2025 when it will not exist at all (UNGA, 2015). However, child economic activity is still rampant, more so in the agricultural sector where 71% of all child workers globally are found (ILO, 2016). As one of the leading producers of agricultural products such as palm oil and rubber, Malaysia has not fully addressed the prevention of child labor and especially in rural area where it still remains a strong problem, especially in Sabah and Sarawak. Just like most working children, implementation gaps prevent the realization of some national laws including the Children and Young Persons (Employment) Act 1966 as well as the Occupational Safety and Health Act 1994. Base on Malaysia Act, young person shall be engaged in any hazardous work or any employment other than those specified in the Act, with exceptions such as light work suitable to their capacity within a family-run undertaking or employment in public entertainment, subject to the terms and conditions of a license granted under the Act. Malaysia Employment Act 1955 allows children to work at the age of 13 years as provided by the Labour Law. However, in some exceptional circumstances, the following are allowed to work: children working in a light capacity within a family enterprise; and children working in public entertainments provided that the work has been done under a particular license obtained as provided under the Act. Such jobs must satisfy the stated conditions and guarantee that the child's health, safety, and wellbeing, will not be endangered.

However, there may appear certain differences in requirements according to concrete laws, and each detail should be referred to the rules established by current legislation.

The ILO and the Convention on the Rights of the Child defined child labor as the employment of children below the minimum legal age for employment excluding light work in countries that allowed it and as the worst forms of child labor (ILO, 2013a, Article 3; UN General Assembly, 1989, Article 1). According to ILO Convention 182, the worst forms of child labor are all forms of slavery and practices similar to slavery, the use, procurement, or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or pornography, use, procurement, or offering of a child for unlawful purposes; employment that by its nature or the surrounding environment is dangerous for the health, safety, or morality of young people (ILO, 1999). The last of the worst forms of child labor is commonly spoken of as hazardous child labor, and of the worst forms of child labor, accounts for the largest number. As such, perilous child labor involves work in conditions that could lead to the child being killed, injured or getting sick due to low safety and health conditions and working environment. On the other hand, ILO-Convention No. 29 force labor refers to all work or service which is exacted from any given person under threat of any penalty and for which that person has not offered his/her services voluntarily (ILO 1930).

This paper explores the underlying factors behind child labor in agriculture in Malaysia with reference to socio-economic conditions, implementation of the law and labour scarcity that results to high demand for inexpensive and informal workers. Knowledge of these causes is important in designing appropriate interventions with strategic imperatives and commitments in Malaysia and the global stage.

In effect, though the Malaysian government and the international community has put efforts in trying to curb on child labor in the agricultural industry, the problem persists. Research shows

that there is still widespread incidence of child labour mainly in palm oil and rubber plantations because of factors like poverty, lack of social care for families in migration and scarcity of labor (Wahab & Dollah, 2023). Previous literature mainly addresses generic macroeconomic and labor market trends but does not consider regional peculiarities, especially whether it is urban or rural space. In addition, they all reported that monitoring is poor, particularly for child labor laws and especially in the informal agriculture sector (Hanafi et al., 2024). This paper seeks to close these gaps by providing a synthesis of the socio-economic and structural conditions that underpin child labor in Malaysia's agricultural sector and an assessment of the current policy in regulating this problem. Thus, this paper aims to identify the socio economic and structural factors that lead to the use of child labor in agriculture sector in Malaysia, to assess the gaps in the existing legislation and policies on child labor and to give recommendation on measures necessary for addressing these challenges.

Table 1. Sectoral distribution of child labor (ages 5–17 years), 2008, 2012, and 2016 (percent) Source: ILO – IPEC 2013; ILO, 2017

Sector	2008	2012	2016
Primary (Agriculture)	60.0	58.6	70.9
Secondary (Industry)	7.0	7.2	11.9
Tertiary (Services)	25.6	32.3	17.2
(of which domestic work)	4.9	6.9	
Total	100	100	100

Discussion

Definition, role and importance of Child labour

The UN defined child labour as work which squashed child's childhood, denied him education and is hazardous to his/her health and wellbeing. This includes any work that is unsuitable for the child's age, denies a child education, and endangers the child's health. According to ILO, child labour means work which is likely to harm a child, physically and mentally, or without education to pursue a career. It includes different kinds of forced labour and slavery, traffic in persons; and hazardous employment especially in reciprocal agriculture, mining, and manufacturing industries. The implementation of work that does not harm a child's education or involves hazardous conditions is legal; however, light household work or family chores are prohibited child labour (International Labour Organization, 2023).

In many developing countries, child labour, therefore, becomes unfortunate source of family income for families living in abject poverty (Tong et al., 2025). In agriculture manufacturing domestic service and mining, children work to generate additional income to what their families earn. In these regions child labor is sometimes necessary because there are no other ways to earn money in the family. This paper discovered that child labour, though helps the family to meet its basic needs in the short run, keeps the child trapped in poverty if he or she is exposed to hazardous working conditions, he or she will not be in a position to come out of poverty since he or she does not go to school. Thus, child labour often poses a major hurdle to economic development and can create a culture of low skilled working population, little social mobility (UNICEF, 2021).

Child labour is vital to be combated for proper growth of the children of and the society in which they live. In the first place, first, the use of children in any undertaking is unlawful since it negates the universally recognized rights of children as provided for in different international

conventions. The child who is in employment is likely to get physically abused by getting injured or developing some illness due to the working environment. Also, economic growth is dogged by child labour since the next generation is locked out of any economic productive function by virtue of being engaged in work that denies them education. The issue of child labour should be central to attention as the problem focus at giving children a chance for a better life and, thus, eliminating poverty and inequality. When children stay in school and are protected from exploitative work they are predisposed to deliver in the labor market as adults and therefore increase productivity, health and socio-economic growth of their societies and nations (International Labour Organization, 2020).

Factors Cause the Child Labour

This paper looks at the aspect of economic, educational, cultural and legal factors in an effort to understand why child labour continues to exist in Malaysia's agricultural sector. Below, specific examples and data from Malaysia are integrated and analyzed for their roles in perpetuating this issue:

Economic Pressures

One of the most important reasons for child labor in Malaysia is poverty related squeeze and leaking consequences (Ahmady, 2024). Palm oil and rubber plantation owners mostly from the rural areas are among the poor since many of them are earning below the poverty level. These families depend on agricultural income and basic need for the income can only be produced through child labor (Wahab & Dollah, 2023). For instance, child workers are said to be involved in harvesting and applying pesticides in plantations of palm oil in Malaysia that reasons on the low cost of employing the youths.

Educational Barriers

The problem is also aggravated by the fact that vast majority of children in developing countries hardly have any access to quality education (Ahmady, 2024). Therefore, in areas where schools are located many, miles away from remote agricultural areas most children are unable to attend school due to high transport costs, school fees and other stationery requirements. Thus, children have to choose between work and school, and more often than not, they end up committed towards work instead. Statistics reveal that overall enrolment in schools in rural Malaysia reduce drastically especially in areas with children having much involvement in child labor (Abdullah et al., 2022).

Cultural and Social Norms

There are specific cultures that exist in Malaysia which support child labor. While in some African countries it is normal for children to be engaged in farm work as a passing rate or a way of teaching them farming responsibilities. Gender also fuels this practice; girls being held to account for both the farm work and house hold chores. This dual responsibility restricts their chances of being educated and crawling out of the chewed up and spit out cycle of poverty (Adonteng-Kissi, 2023).

Absence of strong labour laws and it's not effectively enforced.

While Malaysia has acceded to all relevant international conventions prohibiting child labour, compliance is generally lax particularly in relation to agricultural workplaces. Possible escape clauses and lack of supervision make it possible to exploit children (Adonteng-Kissi, 2023). Tong and Sun, write that according to the NGOs, informants there are cases whereby even

with regulations in place adequate enforcement is scarce; hence, the exploitation continues (Wahab & Dollah, 2023).

Interaction of Factors

These has tasks which work in a cycle that continues child labor. Poverty keeps families in a state that forces children to contribute financially, and lack of quality education keeps the youths chained down from improving their status from low-income farming (Ahmady, 2024). Child labor is therefore sustained by low acceptance of culture, poor legal protection of children, and insufficient punishment for employers involved in child exploitation. Solving one problem without solving the others would not be sufficient; there is the need to break the cycle and stop child labor in Malaysia's agricultural sector (Wahab & Dollah, 2023).

With these specific examples from Malaysia and appreciating how these factors interrelate, stakeholders can then formulate quite specific strategic measures to address child labour.

Impact and Challenges of Child Labor in Agriculture

Negative Impact of Child Labor in Agriculture

Besides physical abuse, the social cost of child labour in the agricultural sector is lifelong disability to the child (Lin, 2022). Children employed in agriculture experience dangerous conditions like heat stress, physical contact stress, and toxic stress associated with handling of dangerous things like pesticides. It has consequences that tend to create long-term chronic diseases including respiratory diseases, musculoskeletal disorders and long-term physical deterioration. All these health complications continue with the individuals into adulthood resulting in reduced productivity and quality life (Fouad et al., 2022).

Apart from the above physical effects, poverty-driven child labor in agriculture denies children justice and freedom appropriate for children. They are deprived of play and Interpersonal interactions that are fundamental in the cognitive/ emotional growth of a child (Fouad et al., 2022). These children psychologically have a lot of stress, anxiety and develop depression, they lack social interaction, and poor mental health. The lack of school makes these problems worse as children do not grow to be able to rise up and escape from poverty. They are, thus, confined to working in low-wage earners and low skill occupations therefore continuing serving perpetually in multigenerational poverty levels (Das, 2022).

On an economic stand, there are numerous costs in child labor. The type of children in agriculture does not attend school, and this renders them jobless in the future (Nordman et al., 2022). Due to this, the level of education and skill enhancement in the country remain low, leaving out a big part of the population as unskilled and unavailable to contribute toward the nation's overall economy. Skilled labour could be regarded as the key for nations to move from an agricultural driven economy to a more diversified, industrial economy. This leads to the crippling of countries, more time is spent in manufacturing goods that can be done by child labor ignoring the need to develop high level industries with qualified work force (Lin, 2022). This has a negative impact on social development in general achievements that set out to achieve educational, poverty eradication, and economic achievements.

One of the examples of these challenges can be evidenced by the use of child labor in Malaysia's palm oil plantations bearing in mind that there are national and international laws that prohibit such practices. The survey also shows that child labor occurs in Malaysia as the children are employed

in risky activities, including pesticide application and harvesting because it is cheap to hire children as workers. Sadly in states like Sabah and Sarawak the social expectations to pay school fees through the income generated by the children keep families tied in the poverty line and force children to work.

Challenges of Child Labor in Agriculture

The economic factors is the main push factor to child labor. Income earning from farming, especially among smallholder farmers in rural areas is usually low to enable them meet the basic necessities of life. Since wages for adult employees remain relatively low, children are considered a necessity to farm and harvest crops, use herbicides, or do some other work in the fields. This from the point of view of economic consideration puts the families in a position where they have no other option than to engage the children in labor. For instance, in Malaysia the palm oil sector whereby the smallholders and the workers suffering from financial problem their problem is solved by engaging the children in their plantations this is because the industry needs cheap labour. Most of these families cannot generate any other income and social protection within these communities remains virtually inaccessible and therefore getting out of the cycle of child labor is challenging (Ray, 2000).

Another challenge that hinders child labor eradication in agriculture is the-lack of or/and a weak implementation of the law. The government of Malaysia has endorsed the ILO International Labour Organization Convention No. 138 whose aim is to prohibit child labour However, the practice and the compliance rates of the laws are weak. In many rural areas there is little supervision of farming activities and authorities are usually unable to supervise many informal and small-scale farming where use of child labor is rife (Takeshima, & Vos, 2022). This is even complicated by poor or limited inspections and use of workers whose contract prevails to be temporary or informal within the agricultural industries such as the palm oil industry. Further, the consequences that come with failure to observe the child labor laws has been widely observed as being lenient most employers may consider the fines as loss upon when applying for employment. Again, where there are proven cases of violations there is an absence of the political will and or capacity to implement effective sanctions that can address the issue (Abdullah et al., 2022). The enforcement gaps are also enhanced by ignorance among employers regarding the legal consequences of engaging the young persons, silent endorsement of its prevalence in specific industries hence sustaining the vice (Mobeen Ahmed, Sanaullah, Shakir Adam, 2021).

By being affected from the cultural practices as well, many of the rural based societies also contribute to child labor in a huge way. In some parts of the world, agriculture is not just a way of making a living, but also as a way of raising a child. Many children are expected to engage in agricultural activities in today's world especially those that originate from agricultural-based families. Employment indeed in these communities is in some cases understood as a way of enforcing responsibility, discipline, and work ethic inherent in making the fields. Getting the children involved in farming also presents it as a means by which parents will prepare their children for the future and at the same time impart to them relevant skills in farming as passed down from generation to generation (Takeshima, & Vos, 2022). Child labor being part of these cultures can act as a very strong barrier to change, as culture implies adherence to local traditions. Moreover, such gender relations can take the particular practice even further as well. Girls in some rural societies may be forced to carry out both domestic and farm chores putting a lot of constraints to their education and growth (Lin, 2022). Such cultural values make it

extremely hard to try to change the existing structures and introduce change even if the law supports such change (LI et al., 2004).

Educational barriers are also one of the challenges in agriculture across the world. These realities particularly apply to rural areas where communities and children remote from large cities are often denied proper education primarily due to issue of quality and accessibility (Das, 2022). Schools are perhaps few miles from children's homes, transport or even school fees such as the uniform can be inaccessible to the poor family. At times even the facilities are available the quality of education is very low due to lack of resources and infrastructure, large number of students and teachers and lack of trained talents. Where children are concerned, there is a strong preference for putting them to work compared to sending them to school largely because parents want an immediate supply of income regardless of consequences it has on their children's future. In addition, where education is available, many children in the rural agricultural settings may not perceive its need because their setting's economy is mainly in agriculture. And the outcome of this is that per now most children are barely left with a choice between jobless labour in fields to help supporting family or being jobless in homes with almost no access to education. With out education these children do not possess the skills which are necessary in order to attain the higher paying jobs in the future and thus deeper enshrine the poverty cycle for generations to come (Takeshima & Vos, 2022).

However, these barriers to education and child labor are interrelated; they form many different networks in social, economic, and cultural context. For instance, literacy robs the children of employment opportunities and they are rendered poor, thus are likely to be compelled to work under lower dignity jobs in agriculture when they grow up. This makes it possible for children raised working in the farms to fail to provide education to sweet children, thus draining the cycle from one generation to the other. Third, due to the acceptance of child labor in-household within the rural region, child health hazards of working and impotent future will not only be unnoticed but also will open up.

Solution should be taken

Eliminating children involved in gainful employment especially in farming from the various regions requires menu actions. Economically, increasing adult income through such interventions as agricultural subsidies/ incentives and fair trade and non-agricultural income sources such as through micro-finance can help to reduce child labor. Schooling, especially in developing countries, often competes with child labor to cater for the family needs and School feeding programs such as Conditional cash transfers for Education are very essential since they act as an incentive to families to forgo work in order to attend school. From the legal perspective, eradicating child labor it requires an improvement in the enforcement of this specific law while further certification schemes of small farming can reduce this menace as well. Education campaigns that alter people's perception on child labor can contribute to society's cultural changes whereby; giving powerless groups such as the female children a voice can also change the culture. Accessibility to education especially to quality education and vocational training especially to the labor force in the rural areas is the best methods of providing alternatives to the farming labor. Lastly, integrated rural development programmes that enhance physical and human capital can help to reduce the economic forces that compel families to use children thus can topple child labor. To sustain such solutions, it is thus paramount that governments, NGOs and communities all work together (van Rooyen et al., 2012).

Economically, through subsidies in agricultural industries and fair trade, that raise the incomes of adults they are in a position to reduce on the use of children in earnings generating activities. Therefore in improving the financial standards of a family the need for children to contribute to the economic ehbo becomes less relevant. Microfinance also has more positive effects on the livelihoods of the adults so that they may not require the children to drop out of school in search of income generating activities (Rooyen et al., 2012; Baland et al.; Some research conducted indicates that micro-finance enhances household income, and therefore increases, income available for children's education instead of labor (Baland et al 2020).

Changing this paradigm means not only providing a means for these families to earn a living, but also working against education systems that force children to work and a cultural acceptance of child labor (Tong et al., 2025). Real solutions require enhancing education as the main resource for development, giving hope for acceptable living to families through other sources of income, and guaranteeing employment protection. The government, civic leaders and educators must increase access to education, keep costs low and ensure that education has regard to the practical need of a child in a rural community focusing on vocations (Hanafi et al., 2024). Besides educations reforms, which include poverty, such as micro financial, extension of health facilities and facilitation of rural development are equally important to minimize the impact of economic forced child labor. It is only possible to make progressive changes to eradicate Child labour in agriculture and poverty cycle simultaneously.

Conclusion and recommendation

In conclusion, this thesis raises concern on the unfolding occurrence of child labour. Within Malaysia's agricultural sector, policy and legislation. Thus, main conclusions, which can be drawn from this discussion: Child labour persists primarily due to poverty, lack of educational chances, low levels of compliance with labour legislation and tolerance of the use of children in labor relations. All these factors therefore contribute to make child labour an apparently inevitable economic imperative in most rural households. For instance, in the palm oil production and rubber plantations, hiring children is cheap or even affordable by poor households. However, the problems of distance learning; geographical access; and costs limiting school access make children decide between work and school, thus they work. Therefore, this problem results into a poverty cycle additionally and the future prospects of these children are also restricted. To solve this problem, thus it is necessary to develop an integrated approached that eradicating child labour but also creating better options for children as well as their families to avoid being forced to employ them as child labour.

Pervasive child labour is also a fragility in Malaysia's agriculture, due to poverty, low education, poor protection of worker rights and culture acceptance of child work in farming. Thus, resolution of this problem demands an extensive, complex approach. First of all, welfare policies should be further enhanced, especially on the countryside. Education can be helpful in preventing child labour by improving the family income through micro finance, cash transfers and agricultural subsidies. Through partnerships with NGOs and community organizations, education on financial and viable income generating activities can help families come out of the poverty trap without turning their young ones to children for work.

At the same time, education, as well as access to quality education is a key to preventing child labor. More investment should be made in structures in schools, transport for rural students should be subsidized, and fees should be regulated through scholarships. To overcome the obstacles affecting remote communities positive changes can be made through the provision of

mobile education units and teacher incentive programs that provide competitive salaries, and professional development training to teach in rural regions. Education is relevant as the long-term intervention for Child Labour, giving children the chance to acquire better jobs in the future.

Moreover, it has been observed that the mechanism for implementing child labour laws has to be made more effective. Malaysia has laws that ban children from working, however there is inadequate supervision, more so to sectors that include informal employment, and those with small-scale agricultural employers such as palm oil plantations. Frequency of inspection should be increased and formation of an enforcement agency should be done it is important. Further, technological interventions – probably involving satellite monitoring of remote locations, and use of mobile applications – can greatly enhance compliance with the child labour laws, given that conventional physical inspection may be tougher in such far-flung places. Measures concerning the reinforcement of laws and stickers for the violators will be useful for the prevention of child labour cases.

That change in cultural and social outlook regarding child labour is also a requirement. Sensitization efforts should therefore aim at changing the peoples' perceptions especially in the rural areas that the use of children in different forms of work is normal, positive implications of education and the rights of children should be encouraged. Those are the local elites, community advocates and media and they have the most important role in changing public perception and promoting education as the key to the improvement of the community's future. Also, with a focus on business, especially the agricultural sector, ethical labour practices must be enhanced by using CSR practices. To address the issue of accountability, governmental and/or non- governmental organizations should use rewarding techniques; these can include offering companies legal incentives for compliance with child labour-free policies like tax exemptions etc.; It will also be important to engage companies in industry associations and/or NGOs to certify compliance with proper labour standards. Last but not the least; combating child labour situation in Malaysia demands a multilateral approach. To boost the needed funding and technical cooperation for the implementation of such a fight against child labour program in Malaysia must seek more cooperation with ILO, UNICEF and World Bank and others. In this way, Malaysia can help its local programs be part of the global process of children's protection and coordinate them with international tendencies.

Nevertheless, it is important to focus on following problems: The stakeholders resistance may be due to cultural values within the local people and employers especially when the change of status affects their revenue or earnings. It is therefore possible to change by engaging local leaders and or offering financial incentives. Short of funds for monitoring specially in the peripheral regions is not a problem when extra regional funding is available and technology is fully tapped. Moreover, constraints to education, such as economic pressures on rural families, which compel children into work, can also be addressed using CCT program and vocation training to create employment opportunities for families.

In reference to the general policies, there is an urgent need whose solutions eliminate the root cause of child labour such as poor economic state/education facilities/absence of strict laws and facilitate quality education and economic security for families in the rural areas. If Malaysia is to layout an example of a brighter future for children, it needs to pay particular emphasis on poverty, education and child labour laws. Moreover, local governments; non-governmental organizations; and other firms must develop instances that offer viable anticipations to child

labor. Knowledge and dissemination are a key in transforming cultures so that the rights of children in this world are respected as well as be able to transform the different generations to embrace change and come out from the confines of poor status quo.

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