

Policyweekly

Building a Child-Friendly Nation: Policy Initiatives and Challenges



Policy Recommendations

- 1 There is a need to address the root cause of child labour through a comprehensive approach involving legislative reforms and government-targeted efforts at creating employment opportunities.
- 2 Adequate provisions should be made for the enforcement of child labour laws.
- 3 Government agencies, relevant NGOs, international organisations, and local communities must collaborate in tackling child labour.
- 4 There is a need for adequate funding, monitoring and evaluation, peace and security for initiatives to sustain children's quality education, access and enrolment.

Introduction

Child labour remains a critical and pervasive global issue that casts a shadow over children's fundamental rights and well-being. As of 2021, [160 million children, comprising 63 million girls and 97 million boys, were involved in child labour](#), compromising their childhood, education, and overall development. The impact of child labour is particularly concerning when considering the hazardous conditions under which a substantial portion of these children work. Nearly 79 million children aged 5 to 17 are compelled to undertake tasks that expose them to risks such as physical injuries and long-term health implications. These hazardous conditions impact their well-being and perpetuate cycles of poverty and diminished opportunities for advancement. The regions mostly affected by child labour are [Africa, Asia, and the Pacific, accounting for nine out of every ten children in child labour](#) worldwide.

In Nigeria, child labour represents a deeply entrenched challenge that warrants attention

and effective policy interventions. With an estimated 180 million people and at least 7 million babies born each year, [46 per cent of the country's population is under the age of 15](#). This demographic reality underscores the substantial role of young people in shaping various sectors of the nation, including education, healthcare, and the broader social and economic fabric. However, despite these young minds' potential and energy, a stark statistic casts a shadow over this narrative. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), [Nigeria has 15 million child workers across the country](#). The distressing figure paints a grim picture of exploitation and the lost potential of these children's futures.

This edition of Nextier SPD Policy Weekly looks at the prevalence of child labour in Nigeria. By fostering a deeper understanding of child labour's complexities, this article seeks to inspire policy changes, ignite collaborative efforts, and contribute to the ongoing conversation for a Nigeria where every child can be a child.

A Closer Look at Child Labor

Not all work done by children is classified as child labour or negative. As highlighted by the [International Labour Organisation](#) (ILO), work undertaken by children or adolescents above the minimum age for employment that doesn't compromise their well-being, personal growth, or educational pursuits is generally considered beneficial. Such positive endeavours can encompass aiding in a family business to earn supplementary income outside of school hours or during vacations. These activities actively contribute to children's development. They facilitate skill acquisition experience accumulation and lay the groundwork for productive adulthood, fostering their contribution to society.

The [definition of a child](#), according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, encompasses individuals under the age of 18. The ILO Minimum Age Convention (No. 138) establishes the minimum age for light work at 13 years and above, work employment at 15 years and above, and hazardous work at 18 years and above (16 under certain strict conditions). From the perspective of the ILO, "child labour" is defined as work that deprives children of their childhood, potential and dignity. It refers to work that is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous, harmful to children, and/or interferes with their schooling.

Hazardous work is the work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm children's health, safety or morals. [Article 3 of ILO Recommendation No. 190](#) outlines hazardous work activities that should be prohibited to safeguard the well-being and safety of children. This recommendation guides governments, employers, and other stakeholders in creating policies and regulations related to child labour.

Prevalence and Predicament in Nigeria

Children in Nigeria are subjected to the worst forms of child labour. According to the United States Bureau of International Labor Affairs, these troubling manifestations encompass not only commercial sexual exploitation and involvement in armed conflict but also extend to activities like quarrying granite and engaging in artisanal mining. Nigeria continues to be a source, transit, and destination country for forced labour and sex trafficking of both adults and children. Trafficked Nigerians are recruited primarily from impoverished homes in rural areas. While women and girls are recruited for domestic service and sex trafficking, boys are recruited for street vending, domestic service, mining, agriculture, and begging. Nigerian girls are also sent to North Africa and Europe for forced labour and commercial sexual exploitation. Commercial sexual exploitation robs children of their childhood, and grave violations and abuses are committed against them. The horrors of this practice have profound implications for their emotional and psychological well-being, often leaving lasting scars that impact their future relationships, self-esteem, and overall mental health.

Nigeria has been in an unending war with armed groups for over a decade. Conflict disrupts traditional family structures and safety nets, leading to situations where children might be forced into labour or coerced into participating in hostilities as child soldiers. This issue not only threatens their present but casts a long shadow over their future. Children ensnared in armed conflict are often recruited from vulnerable areas. These regions are already grappling with socio-economic challenges, making children susceptible to manipulation and coercion by armed groups. The recruitment often preys on their vulnerabilities, exploiting their desperation and limited opportunities. Just as trafficked girls are often subjected to domestic service and sexual exploitation, boys in conflict areas are coerced into roles such as combatants, messengers, spies, and even suicide bombers. Girls are more vulnerable to sexual exploitation, forced marriage, and other forms of gender-based violence. These roles expose children to violence and trauma, undermining their childhood.

Nigeria's struggle against child labour extends to the alarming exploitation of children in the quarrying of granite and artisanal mining sectors. Global demand for cheap products can lead to exploitative practices at various production levels. Their tasks, often involving heavy machinery and exposure to harmful substances, put their physical health and safety at significant risk. Lacking the necessary protective measures, these children are vulnerable to accidents, injuries, long-term health complications and a cycle of exploitation and poverty.

Factors Behind Child Labor

The roots of child labour are deeply intertwined with socio-economic factors, especially poverty. Poverty is a deeply entrenched issue in Nigeria,

particularly in rural areas. As noted by [Francis and Yinalabi \(2022\)](#), impoverished families often struggle to meet basic needs such as food, shelter, and healthcare. In such circumstances, sending children to work becomes a means of survival, as their contributions to the household income are necessary for the family's well-being. Economic hardships can force parents to prioritise immediate needs over long-term investments like education. Child labour may seem like the only available income source for families facing limited opportunities, even if it compromises their children's education. Highlights of the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) 2022 Multidimensional Poverty Index survey reveal that [63% of Nigerians \(133 million people\) are multidimensionally poor.](#)

In addition to poverty, protracted hostilities in violent hotspots also limit children's education access. About [10.5 million of the country's children](#) aged 5-14 are out of school. The situation is even grimmer in the [northern part of the country, where the net attendance school rate is 53 per cent.](#) In the northeast and northwest states, the primary net attendance rates for females are notably lower at 47.7 per cent and 47.3 per cent, respectively, indicating that over half of the girls in these areas are not attending school.

Socio-cultural norms and traditions are another causal factor contributing to child labour. Nigeria is a culturally diverse country with various traditional beliefs and practices. In some communities, there's a prevailing perception that education is less important for girls or that certain labour is natural for children. There is also a prevailing belief that a child working from a young age is a form of skill-building or a rite of passage. Gender roles can also influence child labour dynamics. Girls are more likely to be engaged in domestic labour due to traditional gender roles and expectations. The pressure to care for younger siblings and perform household chores can limit girls' ability to attend school or engage in other activities. This perpetuates a cycle where girls are confined to domestic roles, and boys are exposed to hazardous labour. Cultural norms can influence decisions to engage children in work, particularly if these norms align with the family's economic needs.

Strategies for a Child-Labor-Free Nigeria

The Nigerian government has made efforts to address the issue of child labour. The government validated the National Policy on Child Labor and established the [National Action Plan for the Elimination of Child Labor \(2021-2025\)](#). These policy frameworks provide a comprehensive roadmap for tackling child labour at policy and operational levels. The government also initiated a program to [provide seed capital to vulnerable](#)

[households](#). The approach aims to empower these households to establish new businesses in regions with high child labour rates, offering an alternative to child labour for generating income. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has provided various forms of assistance aimed at helping Nigeria accelerate efforts towards eradicating child labour. [Partnering with the ILO through the ACCEL Africa Project funded by the Dutch Government](#), Nigeria has set up systems to communicate the collective harm caused by child labor through a National Social and Behavioural Change and Communication (SBCC) Strategy; and a Child Labour/Forced Labour Monitoring and Remediation System to sanitise supply chains and society in general. Nigeria's action includes conducting a National Child and Forced Labour Survey. This initiative underscores the government's efforts to collect accurate data to effectively inform policy decisions and interventions.

While these laws and initiatives have helped address the challenge, [gaps exist in Nigeria's legal framework in enforcement and adequate protection of children from child labour.](#) For instance, the Child's Right Act enshrines children's rights. The Act has been adopted by only 29 of the nation's 36 states, including the federal capital territory. This leaves seven states with legal provisions that do not meet global standards for preventing children from involvement in illegal activities. In addition, the Child's Right Act [upholds some portions of the Labor Act that do not comply with international child labour standards](#), especially the minimum age for employment.

Turning the Tide: Policy Strategies to Ensure Childhood Protection

1. Poverty remains a major factor that drives child labour in Nigeria. Addressing the root causes of child labour requires a comprehensive approach involving legislative reforms and government-targeted efforts to create employment opportunities for adults and raise awareness about children's rights and the risks of child labour. It is also important that all states are supported in adopting and enforcing the Child's Right Act.
2. Adequate provisions should be made for the enforcement of child labour laws. The government must ensure labour inspectors receive sufficient resources to enforce child labour laws. This could include providing inspectors with the necessary financial, technical, and human resources to perform their functions effectively.
3. Collaboration among government agencies,

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Nextier SPD (www.thenextier.com/spd) is an international development consulting firm that uses evidence-based research to develop and build knowledge and skills to enhance human security, peace, and sustainable development as means to achieving stability and prosperity in Nigeria, and in the African region.

relevant NGOs, international organisations, and local communities is imperative in tackling child labour. Policy changes, awareness campaigns, and social support programs are essential components of a holistic strategy to combat child labour. Policymakers must work closely with faith leaders, parents, and community groups to design, monitor and implement strategies that consider the local context, provide viable alternatives to child labour practices, and keep vulnerable children out of hazardous work.

- It is also important to ensure adequate funding, monitoring and evaluation, peace and security so that initiatives like the [Safe School](#) and [Educate A Child \(EAC\)](#) can sustain children's quality education access and enrolment. Strengthening the education system's monitoring and evaluation will track progress and identify areas for improvement. Also, reforming the education curriculum to make it more relevant to the needs of the 21st century will help to ensure that the government is getting the most out of its investment in education and that children are learning the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in life.

Conclusion

In the heart of Nigeria's bustling cities and serene rural landscapes, the issue of child labour persists as a poignant reminder of the challenges that hinder the full realisation of children's rights. Addressing child labour is a long-term and multifaceted challenge that requires sustained efforts across multiple fronts. Effective solutions involve a combination of poverty reduction, access to quality education, awareness campaigns, enforcement of laws, collaboration between government and non-governmental organisations, and creating supportive economic environments for families. Progress will likely be gradual and require a comprehensive approach that tackles the underlying drivers of child labour.

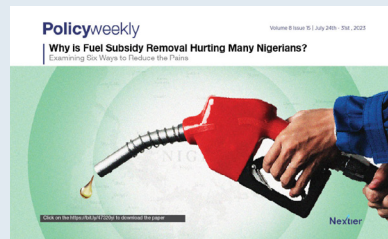
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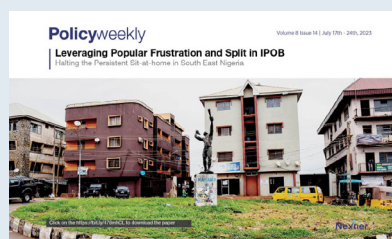
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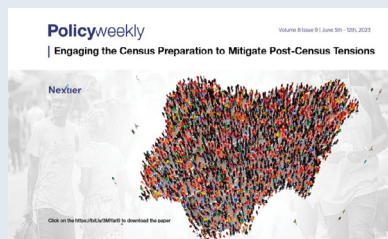
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