



# Child Labour: Definitions, Data and Misconceptions

An exploration of the topic of child labour  
from a definition, quantitative and supply  
chain perspective

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## **Content Warning**

This report contains content that readers may find disturbing, including descriptions of child labour, poor working conditions and some references to child abuse.

**HACE's purpose:** to use technology to supply the data that allows informed conversation between investors and companies

**HACE's values:** Transparency, Reliability, Accountability, Collaboration

# Executive Summary

This whitepaper explores the definitions of child labour, according to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the data landscape of child labour and common misconceptions surrounding the topic. It also explains how child labour interacts and overlaps with modern slavery and, importantly, how it differs. Case studies of two commodities are provided alongside an analysis of their respective supply chains and where child labour is most likely to occur within them.

## Misconceptions of child labour

Our previous Whitepaper on the Financial and Material Impacts of Child Labour describes a range of global misunderstandings about child labour that can inadvertently serve to rationalise the issue and could lead to confusion or misinformation. This whitepaper will aim to add to, expand on and correct some of these misconceptions, which are outlined below:

1. Child labour only occurs in low-income economies
2. Child labour is rarely hazardous
3. Child labour is a risk issue primarily confined to the fast fashion and Ready Made Garment industry
4. Child labour is a subset of modern slavery or forced labour
5. A working child is only categorised as in child labour if the child is under the national minimum age for work

## Conclusions

- Child labour is defined by including age, activity and hours worked.
- Child labour is a standalone risk alongside other human rights violations.
- Child labour does not always occur in the same commodities and geographies as forced labour.
- We must standardise our approach to child labour data collection.
- Child labour exists deep in supply chains and so has historically been a hidden risk; increasing supply chain scrutiny will change this.

# A Global Definition of Child Labour

The concept of what child labour is and the perception of it can vary based on geography, culture, national legislation or personal opinion, but the ILO has developed a [standard definition](#) that can be applied in a global context. This is the definition that HACE adheres to and states that:

*“The term “child labour” is often defined as work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development. It refers to work that:*

- is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and/or*
- interferes with their schooling by: depriving them of the opportunity to attend school; obliging them to leave school prematurely; or requiring them to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work.”*

## ILO Conventions and Recommendations

The ILO has also introduced two main Conventions related to child labour, and two associated Recommendations.

### [ILO Convention 138](#)

The goal of ILO Convention 138 on the minimum age is the effective abolition of child labour by requiring countries who ratify to:

- 1) establish a minimum age for entry into work or employment; and
- 2) establish national policies for the elimination of child labour.

ILO Convention 138 also sets the general minimum age for employment or work at 15 years old (13 years for light work; see [Article 7 of C138](#)) and the minimum age for hazardous work at 18 (16 under certain strict conditions). It offers the possibility of governments setting the general minimum age at 14 years old (12 for light work) where the “economy and educational facilities are insufficiently developed” (see [Article 2 of C138](#)).

## **ILO Convention 182**

In addition, some forms of child labour have been classified, again by the ILO, as the “Worst Forms of Child Labour” (WFCL). This was defined by ILO Convention 182, which lists the following as WFCL:

*“For the purposes of this Convention, the term the worst forms of child labour comprises:*

*(a) 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;*

*(b) the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances;*

*(c) 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;*

*(d) 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.”*

ILO Convention 182 was the first ILO Convention to be ratified across the world.

**According to the ILO**, it was also the quickest Convention to spread globally, with the majority of ratifications happening within 3 years of its adoption in 1999.

### **ILO Recommendation R190**

HACE focuses on eradicating all forms of child labour, both within and outside of WFCL. Yet, due to HACE's vision of the **sustainable eradication of child labour from corporate supply chains**, the scope of our work within WFCL mainly falls in to category (d) *“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.”* Despite this, there are often cases of child labour in corporate supply chains that fall in to multiple categories of WFCL, as becoming involved in one form can lead to vulnerability of the child to another form.

Point (d) is further defined by the ILO in Recommendation R190, which states:

*“In determining the types of work referred to under Article 3(d) of the Convention, and in identifying where they exist, consideration should be given, inter alia, to:*

*(a) work which exposes children to physical, psychological or sexual abuse;*

*(b) work underground, under water, at dangerous heights or in confined spaces;*

*(c) work with dangerous machinery, equipment and tools, or which involves the manual handling or transport of heavy loads;*

*(d) work in an unhealthy environment which may, for example, expose children to hazardous substances, agents or processes, or to temperatures, noise levels, or vibrations damaging to their health;*

*(e) work under particularly difficult conditions such as work for long hours or during the night or work where the child is unreasonably confined to the premises of the employer.”*

In general, whether a child's work is defined as child labour or is permissible work according to the ILO, depends on many factors, such as the child's age, location, type of work, length of work, place of work and time of work.

# The Data Landscape

## Trends

All data in this section is taken from the ILO's [Child Labour Global Estimates 2020, Trends and the Road Forward](#).

Child labour is currently estimated by the ILO to be at 160 million children aged 5-17 years globally, which equates to 1 in 10 children in the world. This increased by 8.4 million children between 2016 and 2020, and based on analysis at HACE, we predict the number will have increased again when new estimates are published in 2024.

49.4% of child labourers are in hazardous work. This number equates to 79 million children and increased by 6.5 million from 2016 to 2020.

70% of child labour is in Agriculture, which often involves the production of raw commodities that feed in to global supply chains.

A common misconception around child labour is that it only occurs in low-income economies, yet 1.6 million child labourers live in high-income economies. Additionally, 93.4 million child labourers, over half of all child labourers, live in either a lower-middle income or upper-middle income country.

Another misconception is that child labourers don't attend school, and that is the reason that they work. Actually, 65% of child labourers aged 5-17 years old also attend school.

63 million girls and 97 million boys are in child labour. Child labour is more prevalent in boys than girls across all age groups, but when household chores are considered, the gender gap narrows from 2.8% to 1.6%.

This data is all based on children aged 5-17 years old, despite [recorded instances](#) of child labour in children under 5 years old. This is one reason that means the data is likely to be an underestimation.

**Misconception 1:** Child labour is rarely hazardous

**Misconception 2:** Child labour is a risk issue primarily confined to the fast fashion industry

**Misconception 3:** Child labour only occurs in low-income economies

## Data issues

With 160 million children in child labour globally, and in a world where data is an ever-growing resource, you might assume there is a lot of open, clean, recent and standardised data on child labour. Unfortunately, this isn't often the case.

Data on child labour is collected by many governmental and international sources, such as national statistical offices, the ILO and UNICEF-MICS. However, variables are not measured or collected consistently over time, and they are not standardised between different sources. Some instances of these issues are explored here.

- Lack of completeness e.g. only children aged 5-17 are included in global estimates despite extensive evidence of children aged 0-5 working
- Timeliness of the data e.g. data is often published at least 1-2 years after it is collected
- Lack of standardisation e.g. definitions of indicators differ significantly.
- Bias and inequalities e.g. gender bias, proxy collection, localisation of data through NSOs/ NGOs all affect the objectivity of the data collected
- Data is often estimated or modelled using unverified proxies
- Companies don't collect sufficient data on bottom tiers of their supply chain, which is where child labour is most likely to be

For more information on and examples of these issues, please see [HACE's contribution](#) to the United Nations University's Code 8.7 Symposium: Using Tech-Driven Data to Address Child Labour.



# Child Labour and its Interaction with Modern Slavery

Child labour is often seen as a sub-set of modern slavery and therefore is not treated as a stand-alone risk.

Modern slavery, according to the International Labour Organization (ILO), consists of two types of exploitation; forced labour and forced marriage. In 2022, the ILO and Walk Free [estimated](#) a total of 49.6 million people were in modern slavery, with 27.6 million in forced labour and 22 million in forced marriage.

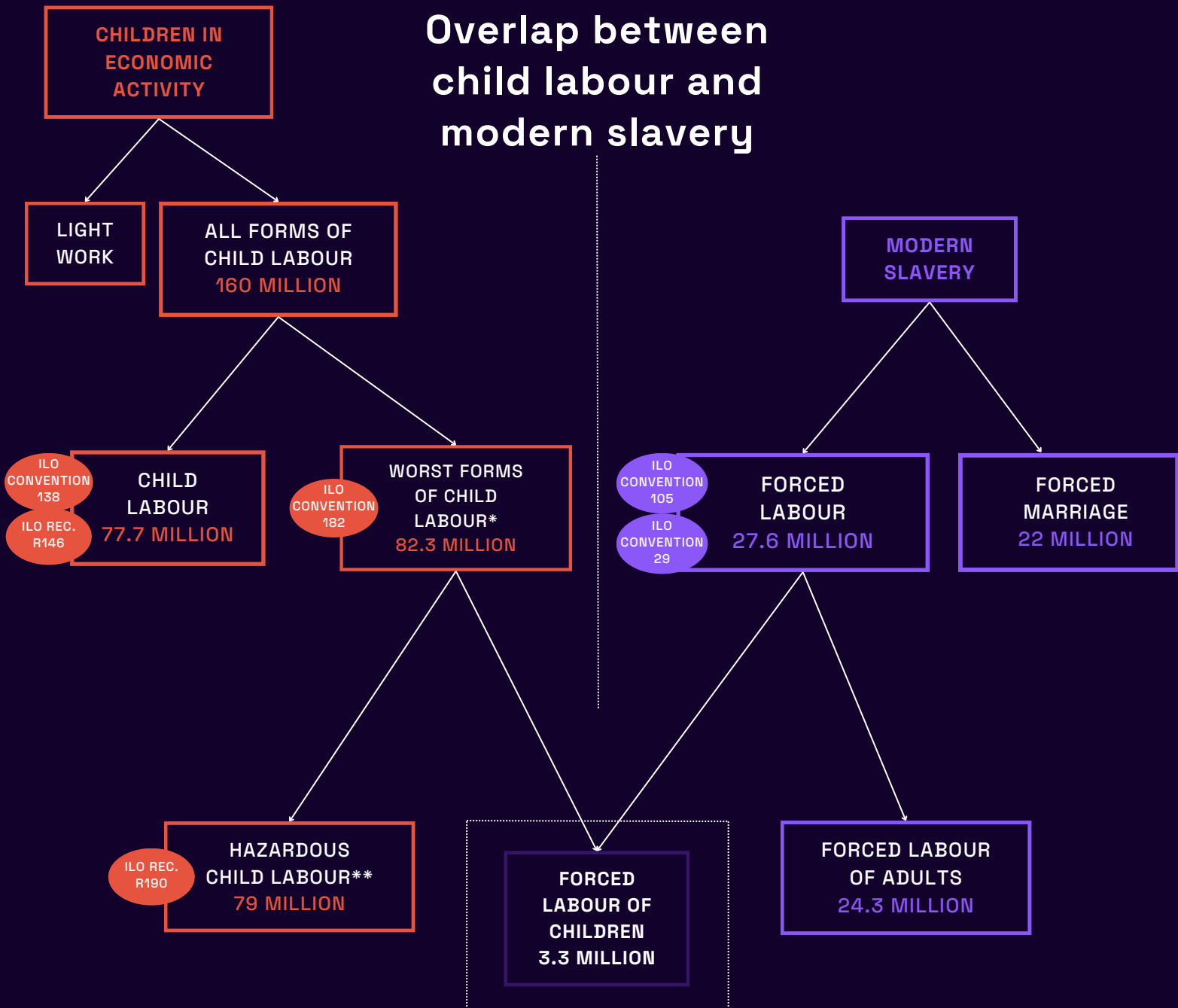
Of the 27.6 million people in forced labour, defined by the ILO [Forced Labour Convention 29](#), the ILO estimates that 3.3 million are children. These children are defined as 'forced labour of children', indeed, a subset of Modern Slavery. However, these 3.3 million children are not the only children in exploitative labour conditions; they are in a particular set of exploitative conditions known as forced labour (see the ILO definition of forced labour [here](#)).

Other forms of exploitative child labour exist and are extensive, with 79 million children in 'hazardous work', for example. The diagram above shows how child labour is broken down into different groups. The definitions of these groups ("child labour", "worst forms of child labour" and "hazardous child labour") can all be found in our previous blog post [A Global Definition of Child Labour](#).

Based on these global definitions, the overlap between child labour and modern slavery are the 3.3 million children classified as 'forced labour of children', meaning there are a further 156.7 million children under the definition of 'child labour', not 'modern slavery'.

**Misconception 4:** Child labour is a subset of modern slavery or forced labour

# Overlap between child labour and modern slavery



\* As defined by Article 3, ILO Convention 182 – Worst Forms of Child Labour, 1999

\*\* As defined by Paragraph 3, ILO Recommendation R190 – Worst Forms of Child Labour Recommendation, 1999

## SOURCES:

All data are estimates, taken from the International Labour Organization via the following:

- Child Labour: Global Estimates 2020, Trends and the Road Forward
- Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage, 2022

“A child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.”  
– UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

**Latest estimates** state there are 160 million children in child labour globally, which is 5.8x higher than the total number of forced labourers. Additionally, for every 1 child in forced labour in the world, there are 47 children in non-forced child labour.

## What does this mean in practice?

- Not all child labour is forced child labour, therefore all child labour does not sit under the classification of modern slavery.
- Both hazardous work and forced child labour are categorised as the Worst Forms of Child Labour, but they are separate groups.
- 2.06% of child labourers are in forced child labour. This is the only overlap between child labour and modern slavery.
- 49.3% of child labourers are in hazardous work.
- 48.5% of child labourers are neither in forced labour nor hazardous work.
- Child labour is defined conceptually by the ILO [here](#), but in practice, it is defined by a combination of:
  1. The child's age
  2. The child's activity or type of work
  3. The hours worked by the child, both the number of hours and the time of day.
- The minimum age for work according to national labour laws is important in determining whether a case is child labour or not, but children can still be in child labour even if they're over the minimum age of work.

### Example 1

The minimum age for work in Country X is 13. A 15 year old child is spraying pesticides on a family tobacco farm with no PPE. The child is in non-forced, the child is over the age of minimum working age, however they are performing hazardous work and therefore this case is categorised as child labour, not modern slavery.

### Example 2

The minimum age for work in Country X is 13. An 8 year old child is working for 35 hours a week on a family cotton farm watering crops. The child is in non-forced child labour and the child is not performing a hazardous task but they are under the minimum age of work, and therefore this case is classified as child labour and not as modern slavery.

**Misconception 5:** A working child is only categorised as in child labour if the child is under the national minimum age for work

# Child Labour in Global Supply Chains

This blog post will focus on two examples of commodities, the supply chains that contain these commodities and a description of child labour in two countries that have been proven to use child labour to produce these commodities. We have used the US Department of Labor (US DoL) [List of Goods Produced with Child Labor or Forced Labor](#) to identify the commodities and associated countries.

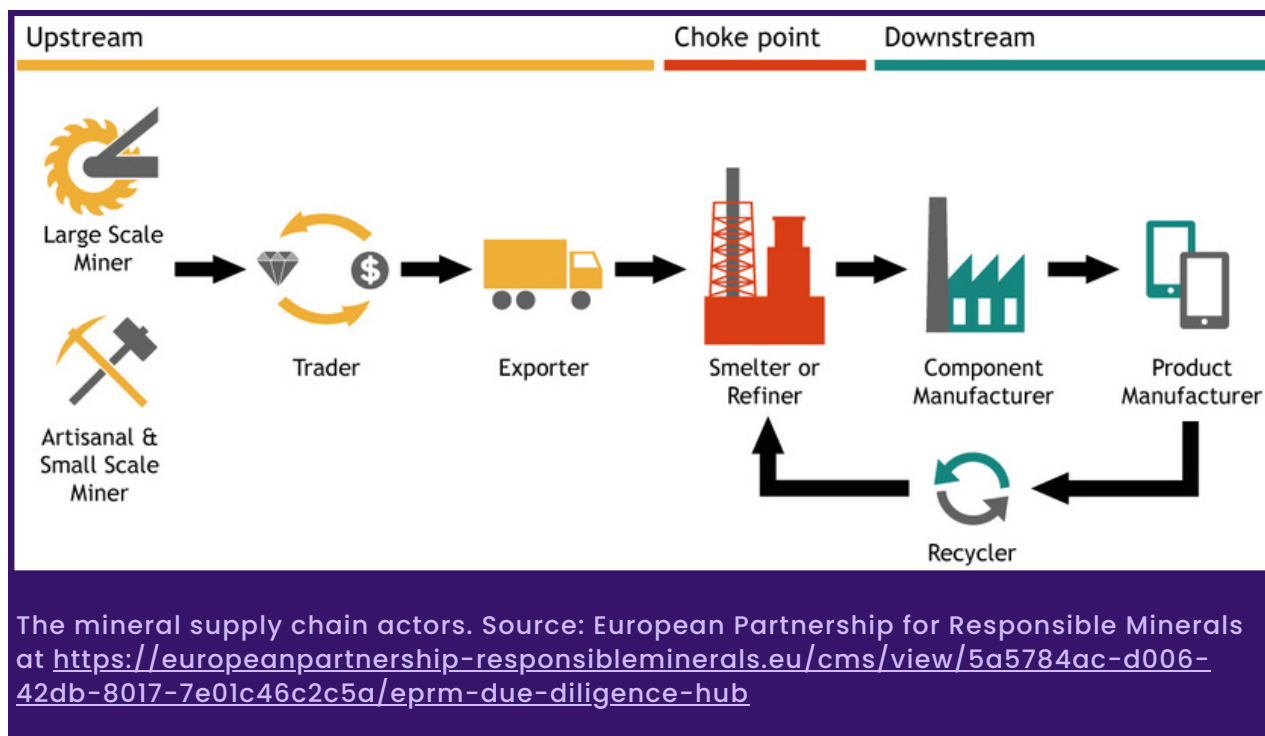
## Tin in Indonesia

Tin has been [proven](#) to be produced with child labour by the US DoL in 2 countries; Bolivia and Indonesia. Tin Ore (cassiterite) is a separate commodity on the US DoL list and has been identified to be produced with child forced labour in the Democratic Republic of Congo. According to the US DoL, an authority on this topic, there is no validated evidence to prove that Tin or Tin Ore (cassiterite) are produced with forced labour.

In 2018, it was [estimated](#) that 25% of global tin comes from [Artisanal and Small-scale Mining \(ASM\)](#). The fact that there is limited data from more recent years is indicative of the nature of ASM as an area of supply chains that is difficult to monitor. The World Bank [estimates](#) that ASM occurs in nearly 80 countries across the world, and is the main source of income for more than 44 million miners, which has tripled since 2000. Child labour is extensive within ASM, but estimated numbers vary considerably between sources. Much of the focus and data is around cobalt mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where it's been [identified](#) that at least 13.7% of ASM cobalt miners are children.

However, Indonesia is the [second largest producer](#) of tin after China, and the province of Babel is responsible for [88% of Indonesia's tin](#). The ILO [estimated](#) in 2015 that there were 6,300 children in informal tin mining in the region, with 69% of these children being 15-17 years old. The median working hours for this group is 42 hours per week, with hazardous work being [classified](#) as 43 hours or more per week. Mining, and specifically informal tin mining, is categorised as a hazardous industry; some [examples of working conditions](#) include working underground, on slippery land, at dangerous heights, and in places exposed to noisy or high vibrations that is potentially damaging to a child's health.

## How is the tin supply chain constructed, and where is child labour most likely to occur?



In the image above, we can see a typical supply chain for minerals including tin/ tin ore (cassiterite). As the trader buys tin from both Large Scale Miners and ASM, it is clear to see where difficulties in traceability begin. Additionally, the first stage of transition from ASM to trader can be expanded to include multiple levels of trading, making it difficult to trace back to the initial miner. This is especially the case when trading chains are illegal, exploitative, underpaying or overly regulated (IIED report for more detail [here](#)).

Tin is an essential commodity needed for producing electronics such as mobile phones and laptops, with circuit boards using [49%](#) of global tin. In a recent interview, Tim Cook, CEO of Apple, was questioned on the use of child labour in Apple supply chains. He [claimed](#) that “we have an intense level of tracing in our supply chain all the way back to the mine and the smelter to make sure that the labor used is not child labor”. As supply chains become increasingly under scrutiny, the traceability of supply chains becomes paramount as an initial starting point to gain transparency into potential child labour risks. Apple Inc. may claim to have intense levels of tracing to mines and smelters, but due to the complexity of the tin supply chain and increasing demand for raw minerals, as discussed in the IIED report, companies need to be aware of the possible brand risk of such claims.

## Sugarcane in Zimbabwe

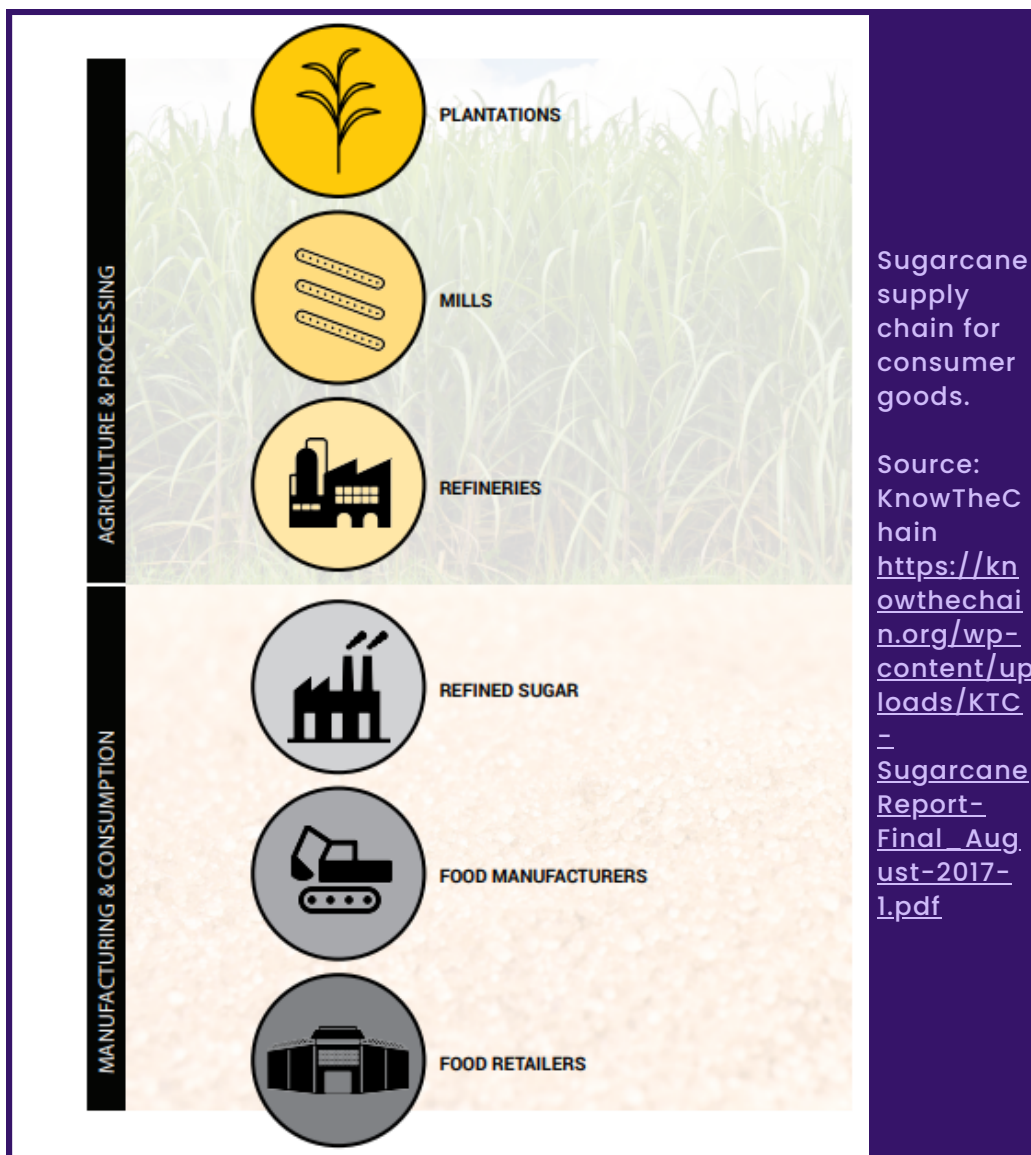
Sugar (from sugarcane) is one of the most widely distributed and utilised commodities globally, with some more recent applications in [renewable energy](#). However, as with many useful commodities, the prevalence of sugarcane also has negative implications; it has been proven to be produced by child labour and/ or forced labour in 19 countries by the US Department of Labor. The breakdown of these countries is as follows:

Exploitation type	Number of countries
Child Labour only	14
Forced Labour only	1
Child Labour and Forced Labour	4

It is clear that while sugarcane is a high-risk commodity for both child labour and forced labour, there is more than an overlap in these risks; there are 14 countries where only child labour been identified versus 1 country where only forced labour was found. Whilst monitoring for and managing forced labour risk in sugarcane may show some overlap with child labour, there are significant unexplored child labour risks across the world, even more so if child labour isn't viewed as a standalone risk outside of forced labour or modern slavery.

### How is the sugarcane supply chain constructed, and where is child labour most likely to occur?

In 2020, 70% of child labour occurred in Agriculture, [according](#) to the ILO, which means that stage one of the sugarcane supply chain shown below is the highest risk area for child labour. Unfortunately, this area of the supply chain is also where companies tend to have the least data, and therefore the least [traceability and visibility](#).



Sugarcane supply chain for consumer goods.

Source: KnowTheChain  
<https://knowthechain.org/wp-content/uploads/KTC-Sugarcane-Report-Final-August-2017-1.pdf>

As countries **don't tend to gather industry-specific data** on child labour, it is difficult to estimate the number of child labourers working in sugarcane in Zimbabwe, or even on a global scale. Additionally to this, children's labour in sugarcane production is often informal, sporadic or transient, therefore the ILO has **identified** sugarcane as a difficult commodity to research and quantify the prevalence of child labour that occurs in the growing of this crop. However, some **estimates** place 10,000 children working in the sector in Zimbabwe, the main region for production being the Masvingo Province.

According to the **Food and Agriculture Organisation**, sugarcane currently accounts for 86% of the world's sugar crops, with sugar beets making up the remaining 14% (which have also been proven by the US DoL to be produced with child labour in Türkiye). In Africa, sugar output is **projected** to increase by 36% compared to 2018-2020 output levels, reaching 15.1 Mt by the end of 2030. Such rapid growth is likely to have significant impacts on labour dynamics in African, and Zimbabwean, sugarcane supply chains. Therefore, child labour in this region should be closely monitored and certainly seen as a separate and specific risk area.

# Conclusions

This report on Child Labour: Definitions, Data and Misconceptions concludes with the following summarisations:

- Child labour is difficult to define, so we recommend organisations to define it incorporating age, activity and hours worked, alongside relevant ILO conventions. This information is the most important to understand, as it will inform aspects beyond a definition, such as the appropriate remediation process. This is dependent on truly understanding what happened to the child and how and why they were working.
- Child labour is a standalone risk alongside other human rights violations, specifically modern slavery and forced labour. This is from both a definition and a data perspective.
- Hazardous child labour, in particular, is present in commodities and geographies in which forced labour hasn't yet been identified or reported as a risk. This means that monitoring for forced labour does not necessarily mean that risk of child labour is inherently monitored.
- Regarding the data landscape of child labour, there must be a standardised approach to data collection i.e. what is being measured? Without this, we will continue to collect and report poor quality data from both a company and country perspective and compound existing data issues.
- Child labour exists deep in supply chains and so has historically been a hidden risk. However, increasing scrutiny on supply chains from both environmental and social perspectives may result in more child labour risks or incidences being highlighted. This is especially the case when environmental and social factors interlink, such as increasing demand on mineral supply chains as we transition to electric vehicles, for example.

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**Next series:**

**Reporting on Child Labour**

22nd February – 30th May 2024



# Appendix 1

## Misconceptions

- Misconception 1: Child labour only occurs in low-income economies -->
- Evidence: child labour actually occurs in all countries and all income classes. For example, according to the [ILO Global Estimates of Child Labour 2020](#), **25.3 million** children are in child labour across Upper-middle income countries and High income countries.
  
- Misconception 2: Child labour is rarely hazardous -->
- Evidence: almost **50%** of child labourers are estimated to be in hazardous child labour (ILO, 2020).
  
- Misconception 3: Child labour is a risk issue primarily confined to the fast fashion and Ready Made Garment industry -->
- Evidence: **70%** of child labour actually occurs within the Agriculture sector (ILO, 2020) e.g. working on farms producing agricultural crops. Other examples include children working in mines extracting minerals and therefore in the less visible, bottom tiers of a company's supply chain. There are currently 160+ commodities [proven by the US Department of Labor](#) to be produced with child labour, many of which are in multiple countries. These include high-profile commodities such as cocoa, tobacco and ready-made garments, but also much less spoken about commodities such as bricks, salt and glass.
  
- Misconception 4: Child labour is a subset of modern slavery or forced labour -->
- Evidence: the overlap between child labour and modern slavery are the 3.3 million children classified as 'forced labour of children', meaning there are a **further 156.7 million children** under the definition of 'child labour', not 'modern slavery'.
  
- Misconception 5: A working child is only categorised as in child labour if the child is under the national minimum age for work -->
- Evidence: hazardous work, accounting for nearly 50% of child labour, is applicable to all children, or "every human being below the age of eighteen years" which is the definition of a child according to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Therefore, children can be in hazardous child labour even if they are over the national minimum age for work.

# Appendix 2

## Source material

### A Global Definition of Child Labour

- <https://www.ilo.org/ipecc/facts/lang--en/index.htm>
- [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_INSTRUMENT\\_ID:312283](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID:312283)
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- <https://www.ilo.org/ipecc/facts/ILOconventionsonchildlabour/lang--en/index.htm>
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### The Data Landscape

- [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_norm/---ipecc/documents/publication/wcms\\_797515.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---ipecc/documents/publication/wcms_797515.pdf)
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- <https://unu.edu/sites/default/files/2023-08/Code%208.7%20Symposium-%20Using%20Tech-Driven%20Data%20to%20Address%20Child%20Labour.pdf>

### Child Labour and its Interaction with Modern Slavery

- [https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/forced-labour/publications/WCMS\\_854733/lang--en/index.htm#:~:text=Modern%20slavery%20is%20a%20scourge,were%20trapped%20in%20forced%20marriage](https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/forced-labour/publications/WCMS_854733/lang--en/index.htm#:~:text=Modern%20slavery%20is%20a%20scourge,were%20trapped%20in%20forced%20marriage).
- [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:C029](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C029)
- <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/forced-labour/definition/lang--en/index.htm#:~:text=It%20refers%20to%20situations%20in,of%20denunciation%20to%20immigration%20authorities>.
- <https://www.thisishace.com/blog/part-one-child-labour-definitions-data-and-misconceptions>
- [https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC\\_PRESS200910web.pdf](https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/UNCRC_PRESS200910web.pdf)
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## Child Labour in Global Supply Chains

- <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/reports/child-labor/list-of-goods>
- <https://www.iisd.org/system/files/publications/igf-asm-global-trends.pdf?q=sites/default/files/publications/igf-asm-global-trends.pdf>
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- <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/tin-production-by-country>
- <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a5f34feed915d7dfb57d02f/209-213-Child-labour-in-mining.pdf>
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