

# IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON CHILDLABOUR: INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT AND ISSUES FOR VIET NAM

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## **Abstract**

*Child labour is a global issue, taking place mainly in poor and developing countries when socio-economic conditions are limited. There are various causes of this situation and one of them is the consequences of poverty, the level of access and quality of education, the lack of parental care, public awareness and the support efficiency of the social security system ... This situation not only affects the quality of labor resources, hinders the development of many aspects of society, but also a strategic issue, requiring countries to commit to solving when participating in world economic integration. In recent years, countries have shown great efforts to improve the situation, estimating that the number of child labour globally has decreased from 246 million children to 152 million in the 2000s. However, in the current context, with the existing impact from the Covid-19 pandemic, the above achievements are shaken. Covid-19 has devastated the global economy, affecting the livelihoods of many households, especially poor families in least developed countries, and increasing the risk of children becoming child labour. This article explores the impact of Covid-19 on child labour and the challenges of this problem in some countries around the world. From there, this article will discuss and point out strategic issues in the prevention and settlement of child labour from the approach of social policy and social work in Vietnam.*

**Keywords:** *Child labour, Covid-19, Social Policy, Social Work*

## **1. Introduction**

The concept of "child labour" means children participating in labor in accordance with the law and labor activities that hinder or negatively affect the development of their physical, intellectual, personality and comprehensive development. Is a case of child labour considered based on three factors: (1) Does the nature of the work the child participate in have a negative effect on the physical, mental and moral development of the child? (2) Are working conditions heavy, toxic and dangerous? (3) Is the working time suitable for the age prescribed by law?

Between 2008 and 2012, globally, the recruitment of child labour among the ages of 5 to 14 decreased by 2.7% (about 32 million); and the 15-17 year old group decreased by 2% (9 million). This reduction is available in both sexes, but the declining rate for boys is faster than for girls [6]. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO)'s "World

Report on Child Labour (2015)” report, there are 168 million child laborers in the world [9], in which the Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rate of child labour (with 28% of children aged 5-14), then to the Middle East and North Africa; East Asia and the Pacific (each with a rate of 10%), Latin America and the Caribbean (9%) [28]. Nearly half of all disadvantaged child labour (about 73 million children) are doing jobs that directly endanger their health, safety and mental development. The main areas focusing on child labour were agriculture (70.9%), services (17.1%) and worked in the industry (11.9%) [10]. In some countries such as India, Nepal, China, Philippines, Pakistan etc., the situation of child labour is still quite complicated. In particular, with the strong impact from the Covid-19 pandemic to the world currently, the disadvantaged groups in society including child labour will be directly affected and face many risks. This creates many new challenges for countries and regions in developing and implementing intervention strategies and programs to address child labour in the new context.

Vietnam is one of the countries that still has child labour. With the efforts of the government and the support of international organizations such as the ILO, UNICEF etc. the number of child labour has decreased from 1.75 million (in 2012) accounting for 9.6% of the population of children aged 5-17 to 1.03 million (in 2018) accounting for 5.4% of the population of children aged 5-17 [12,13]. However, in many countries, the impact of covid-19 is placing new difficulties and challenges with the increased risk of child labour in Vietnam's non-official economic sectors, especially among poor families who have lost their livelihoods due to the epidemic. By overview approach to understanding the effects of Covid-19 with the child labour situation in some countries, the article proposes recommendations for developing and implementing solutions in prevention and intervention to address this issue in the new context from the approach to policy and social work activities.

## **2. Method**

Find out how changes in the socio-economic context under the impact of Covid-19 are affecting the lives of young workers to recommend solutions that are appropriate to the new context to intervene to address this issue is the purpose throughout the documents mentioned. There are many different approaches to achieve that goal. As the Covid-19 epidemic spreads, children are vulnerable to neglect due to lower mortality rates, one study has reported a mortality rate of 0.03 per 100000 deaths among children aged 0–9 years [3]. Some child welfare organisations have warned that the various lockdown measures will lead to more cases of child sexual, physical and emotional abuse and neglect [4]. Ugandan Health Ministry figures show that there has been a significant increase in child abuse rates in various forms across Uganda during the blockade due to Covid-19 [23]. The number of calls to the Uganda Children's Help Hotline (UCHL) to ask for help has increased 13-fold since before the Outbreak of Covid-19 [14]. On the other hand, considering the impact of Covid-19 on child labor is placed in the context of the seasonal migration of their parents. The closure of workplaces and the risk of Covid-19 have directly affected the livelihoods of seasonal migrant working families in Nepal. Coupled with the disruption in access to education has increased the risk of children participating in child labour in both groups: children emigrating

with their families or children left behind for care relatives in their home country [1]. In addition, considering the impact of previous crises on child labour such as the Ebola epidemic in Africa and the global HIV/AIDS epidemic and the August 2007 global financial crisis also provides corroborating evidence for understanding the assumptions about the possible effects of Covid-19 on child labour in the current context [23]. The increased risk of child labour was also found when considering the impact of Covid-19 on the lives of poor families, the effects that children in poor families face such as nutritional needs are reduced, inability to respond to changes in learning methods when schools are closed, access to social security systems is interrupted etc. found to be one of the main effects of many children being over-engaged [11].

By overview and analysis of the sub-document including academic articles in specialized journals synthesized by the search engine on the website: <https://scholar.google.com>, <https://www.sciencedirect.com> with the search keywords "*impact of covid-19, child labour, social work*"; academic articles at the international scientific conference on Social Work with Child Labour (ISBN: 978-604-65-3274-3, 2018); press release, project documents etc. posted on the ILO website in the "*Child labour*" directory; ILO, UNICEF, survey and research reports... and relevant agencies and organizations about child labour, this article aims to contribute to highlighting the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the situation of child labor in the world. From there, it raises policy issues and social work activities in preventing and solving this problem in Vietnam.

### **3. Results**

#### ***3.1. Covid-19 increases the risk of child labour***

Human Rights Watch (HRW, 2020) warns that the global economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 crisis will likely increase child labour and child marriage rates. "Research has found that child labour has a lot to do with the financial shocks that families experience, such as illness, disability or loss of parental employment. Many families don't have the credit or savings to withstand financial failures, including loss of income and without adequate government support, their children may be at higher risk of joining the workforce to help their families survive". De Hoop and Edmonds (2020) emphasizes that: "child labour will be an important coping mechanism for poor households experiencing COVID-related shocks" [5]. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), global child labour has steadily declined over the past two decades, but the COVID-19 pandemic threatens to reverse this trend. There are up to 60 million people are expected to fall into poverty this year, and that certainly motivates families to send children to work. A joint report by the ILO and the United Nations Children's Fund estimated that as the poverty rate rises by 1%, child labour will increase by at least 0.7% [15,25].

- *The number of child labourers* at increased risk due to parental death or treatment, the reason for COVID-19 can force children to become main workforce that generates income for families, especially in poor families [8].

- *Child labour is at greater risk of abuse and exploitation*: in the effect of the Covid-

19 pandemic, the demand for personal protective equipment (PPE) increases, medical equipment manufacturers put pressure on progress for their factories located in countries such as China, India, Malaysia etc. increases the risk of using child labour in countries considered to be the world's factories because the labor costs of child labour are always much lower than that of adult workers. Meanwhile, regulations on the sale and purchase of these products from suppliers suspected of forced labor were also relaxed due to urgent demands from the market. The situation is similar in agriculture, the agricultural processing industry and the garment industry. An apparel exporter in India explained the pressures on the industry that could lead to an increase in the use of child labor as follows: when work has fallen, contractors can accept orders at a lower cost, and this will require them to use cheaper labor, especially child labour [8]. For agriculture, social distancing causes households to fall into temporary agricultural labor shortages, so they can use their own children as alternative workers. In fact, children in rural areas will have to work more time in fields, plantations ... with the nature of work is also harder, more toxic than usual.

- *The closure of schools increases the risk of child labour and marriage among girls:* It is clear that in addition to the functions of cultural education for children, it also plays a very important role when keeping children at school and reducing the risks of labor and early marriage in children. However, when going to school was disrupted due to Covid-19 along with reducing families' incomes pushing poor families to look for ways to survive, they were forced to let children become low-cost workers or for girls to marry early [8,23]. In India, while the Covid-19 pandemic forced children out of school, many children secretly moved to farms and factories to work, exacerbating the problem of child labour in the country [15,24,27]. The situation is similar in Uganda, with many parents losing their incomes, unable to feed their families and being pushed into extreme poverty, leaving children in these families engaged in dangerous work to support their families. According to the Save the Children survey: 56% of respondents thought there had been an increase in child labour since the start of the lockdown [26]. In many parts of Uganda, children have been seen selling food items, alcohol, firewood on the streets or working in gold mines and grazing livestock... since the blockade began [14,26]. On the other hand, due to the impact of the epidemic, schools turn to online learning, but not all families are equipped with modern equipment suitable for children's distance learning, this leads to disruptions in access to education or affects the quality of learning and learning. This situation is common in many countries such as India, Nepal, Ghana, Bangladesh etc. [1,8,11].

- *Child labour faces a high risk of infection:* For various reasons such as un-protective working environment, lack of protective equipment or disease prevention etc. make child labour work in service areas, small manufacturing households, especially street child labour at increased risk for Covid-19 infection. In Ghana, many children from low-income families have to make a living raising themselves and even raising their whole family, by working on the streets. More than 90,000 children are reported to be working on Ghana streets and are involved in various jobs such as cleaning glasses, begging or porters [11]. With the harsh economic reality caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, many children have been forced to take to the streets to work, despite the risks of infection from the

epidemic. In India, when the epidemic spread quickly and a blockade was issued, while people were asked to go home, around tens of thousands of street child workers had nowhere to go. This puts them at risk of arrest, fines or even imprisonment for violating social control orders [8].

- *Programs and activities to prevent and intervene with child labor are interrupted:* with the requirements set out from the blockade and social distancing to control the spread of the epidemic, the intervention activities to solve this problem of agencies and social organizations are suspended, especially with activities organized based on the community or direct mass media activities [8,11,15,23]. In addition, the impact of Covid-19 has a significant impact on the economic development of countries, putting more pressure on the state budget on social security. In the new context, many countries must rebalance the priority of disbursement for urgent programs in disease prevention such as vaccine purchasing, expense for the health system etc. also significantly affects the allocation of budgets for action programs to address child labour. In Uganda, during the blockade because of the pandemic of social workers on the front lines of the government - those worked with monitoring cases of abuse, violence, and exploitation of children were classified as non-essential workers. On the other hand, when schools are closed, social workers in schools also have their support and supervision work interrupted with children who are at risk of becoming child labour. This fact makes it even more difficult to check, early detection of acts of abuse and exploitation of child labour [23].

### ***3.2. Recommendations for the prevention and settlement of child labour in the context of Covid-19***

- Strengthen case management at the facility in monitoring and early detection of cases of child labor through reports of violations from people in the community through support hotlines. Develop a social security information management system to capture information on child protection and the implementation of social security systems for subjects, strengthening the provision of inter-linked social services in different fields (e.g., social protection, child protection, education, health etc.) through a software system managed by the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs.

- Enhance indirect forms of communication through social platforms such as Fanpage, voice message, website, youtube etc. At the same time, to ensure the effective use of social media platforms, the government needs to stop taxes or reduce taxes on telecommunications companies, social media platforms with effective content.

- It is necessary to properly recognize the position, role and importance of social workers in the early supervision, detection and management of cases for child labor at the establishment.

- Focusing on the coordination of stakeholders in the prevention and solving of child labor issues such as: social invalids, police, health, schools, child care protection officers, social workers...

- Develop child-friendly health services by strengthening equipment, improving

professional capacity for junior health centers.

- Improve access to water, sanitation and housing services for children, especially girls.

- Provide financial and social support to disadvantaged families with activities such as loans, technical assistance, tax exemption, strengthening support packages for unemployed workers, extending bank loans, encouraging young parents to join peer support groups...

#### **4. Discussions and Conclusions**

The impact of Covid-19 has placed many new challenges in terms of the risk of increasing the number and complex and dangerous developments of child labour, which has become the effectiveness of activities and programs to prevent and tackle child labour in many countries around the world. This fact requires governments to take immediate action, further expressing their efforts in the prevention and repelling of the Covid-19 pandemic. At the same time, it is also necessary to continue to effectively implement strategies on the eradicating of child labour in the global supply chain. In order to do so, it is necessary to build, design and implement intervention solutions on child labour in the coming time, requiring flexible integration, in line with new requirements from practice.

In Vietnam, the situation of child labour in the 1980s has improved significantly. With the remaining **1.03** million child labour numbers (2018), which **519,805** have been identified as being in hard work, toxic, dangerous (accounting for 2.7% of the total number of children aged 5-17, accounting for nearly 50.4% of the total child labour) and the common challenges that are pose in the context of the Covid-19 epidemic are creating many difficulties for the government and stakeholders is solving this problem [13]. From the recommendations drawn in addressing child labour in some countries in the context of the Covid-19 epidemic, in near future, the prevention and reduction of child labour in Vietnam should pay attention to some of the following contents:

- *From a policy and legal perspective:* It is necessary to continue researching, formulating, amending and finalizing the relevant legal framework on child labour; to define and give a unified concept of child labor in legal documents, to finalize process, procedures and guidance in the Inspection Law on the organization of child labour inspection and supervision in non-official economic areas; to change and raise the punishment level for cases of violations of child labour; To research and put solutions in to practice for control and trace ability of exported products to avoid the use of child labor in the supply chain; Formulating, finalizing and proceeding to seek opinions to promulgate the Law on Social Work Practice as a legal basis for the professional activities of social workers *in Vietnam*.

- *From the social work activities perspective:* Child protection is one of the top priority areas and tasks of Social Work, especially for disadvantaged children such as child labour. With four basic functions: prevention, therapy, recovery and development, Social Work focuses on two main groups of activities including: (1) Activities of prevention of child labour and (2) Activities of intervention and support for child labour. In the new

context, social work activities should also focus on adjustments to the COVID-19 epidemic situation.

+ With activities to prevent child labour: Social work should continue to focus on activities such as communication to raise awareness for children, especially the group of children participating in economic activities - high-risk subjects become child labor with knowledge about children's rights, the provisions of the law on child labour, the consequences of child labour ...; Raise awareness of the families of children and communities about the provisions of law and the responsibilities of families and communities in preventing and abolishing child labor; Inform enterprises and employers about regulations prohibiting the use of child labor in the production supply chain, regulations on child labor in the commitments of free trade agreements (CPTPP, EVFTA). It is necessary to help employers recognize the responsibility of the business in this regard, because no one can replace the business in overseeing the entire production process, subcontractors and its entire supply chain. Estimating the requirements set out from social distancing to control the epidemic, media and forms of communication also need to add and choose new forms based on social platforms such as fanpage, voice messages, website, youtube etc. Combining the broad spectrum goal by mass media with in-depth communication according to the group model, the club with the choice of media content suitable for each group of audiences. Continue to maintain support activities of social work in schools on education and development of life skills for disadvantaged children and children participating in economic activities; Motivate resources to provide, equip minimal techniques, or promote online education through television, radio... to maintain distance learning for children who do not qualify in the event of school closures. Promoting networking activities, supporting the improvement of livelihood conditions for poor families and disadvantaged families with loan support, production technical assistance, tax exemption, strengthening of support packages for unemployed workers, extension of bank loans, emergency subsidies in cash or in-use.

+ With the activities of intervention and support for child labor: Implementing the expansion of statistics, listing and importing data into the child management system at risk of becoming child and child labor who have been child labor in the areas in order to serve the case management; Develop, complete and train leading social workers on emergency intervention procedures for child labour in need; Building monitoring system, providing information, shelter addresses etc. in the community in supporting early detection and intervention with child labour; Promoting the provision of intensive social work services with child labour (medical care; counseling/psychological counseling, alternative care for cases where it is necessary to ensure safety, temporary isolation from risk factors for injury to children; protection, legal assistance to protect the legitimate rights of children before related parties; to provide repatriated support in case of wandering child labor for a living, being herded or trafficked; support community integration for child labour after intervention etc.) in the direction of bringing these services closer to the community, not merely those provided framed at social work centers and social protection centers. In the context of the epidemic, it is necessary to promote the strengths of indirect interventions such as the

operation of the child protection hotline (111), providing counseling services, psychological counseling over the phone, carrying out monitoring and case management through capturing information from online platforms etc. In addition, it is necessary to strengthen the development of the social work network in the hospital and focus on coordinating with stakeholders in the process of operation. At the same time, it is necessary to strengthen the activities of training and developing human resources in social work, regularly training and improving professional capacity for social workers at the base of in-depth knowledge and topics on skills and working processes with child labour.

Preventing and addressing child labour in the context of covid-19 is solving many new challenges for governments in many countries including Vietnam. Maintaining and adjusting interventions in accordance with new conditions is a task set for state management agencies to achieve dual objectives while ensuring epidemic prevention and control, socio-economic development and significant control of risks and consequences from the epidemic. In the current context, it should be recognized that: preventing and reducing child labour no longer stops at the issue of child protection, it is also a strategic issue of national economic development in the context of integration, increasing pressure on the health system in the context of the epidemic when the risk of covid-19 infection of child labour increases and is a global social problem that hinders the implementation of progress, fairness and social development. The synchronized and sustainable solutions with the cooperation of many relevant departments, branches and social organizations are considered the most effective strategies to solve this problem in the current context.

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