

A Brighter Future

Eradicating Child Labor in Agriculture

The Rainforest Alliance is creating a more sustainable world by using social and market forces to protect nature and improve the lives of farmers and forest communities.



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Front cover. A tea plucker on a farm in India poses with her son on his way to school. Photo by Kalyan Varma

INTRODUCTION

152 million children worldwide are engaged in child labor. Of those, 72 million work in Africa and 62 million across Asia and the Pacific. The vast majority (71 percent) work in the agricultural sector—performing tasks that can be dangerous and exhausting, often with long hours spent in the hot sun.¹ Children may suffer lasting physical and mental harm from doing work that is hazardous or unsuitable for their age. And their personal development will certainly be harmed if work stops them from going to school.

Children are far more vulnerable than adults to the long-term consequences of dangerous work, as they are still growing and developing. Child labor, therefore, prevents children from realizing their potential and from contributing to the future of their communities and countries.

Remarkable strides have been made in the last 20 years

to decrease the number of children involved in child labor worldwide by 38 percent (from 220 to 152 million)—and the UN Sustainable Development Goal 8.7, which aspires to eradicate all forms of child labor by 2025, has added to the momentum.² The Covid pandemic, however, has been a major setback for all SDGs. The need to “Build Back Better” is clear and with 2021 being the International Year for the Elimination of Child Labor, there is an important opportunity to invest in structural and sustainable solutions to tackle this issue for good.

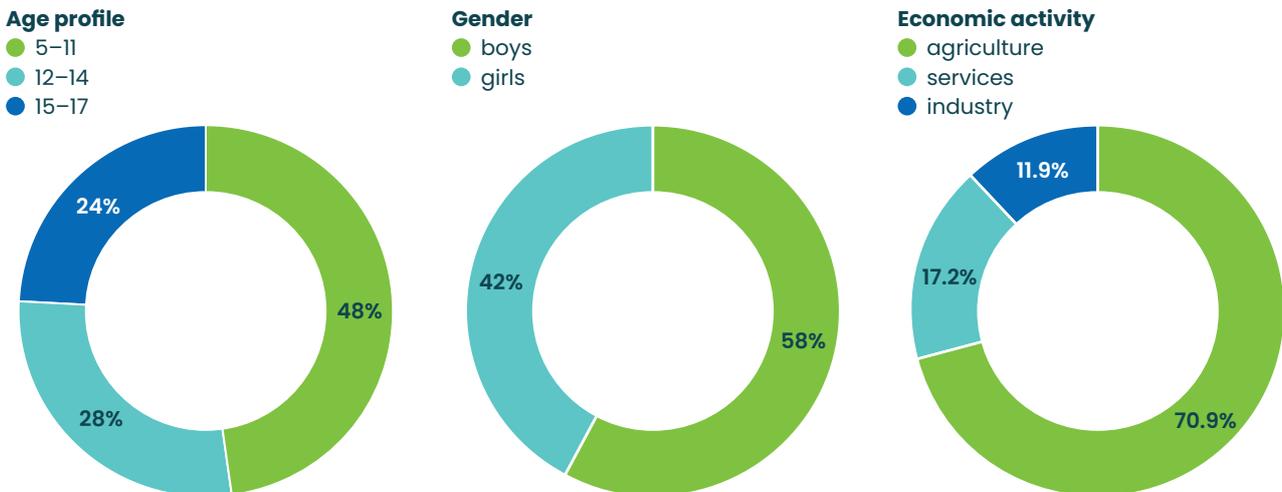
The Rainforest Alliance is committed to creating a more sustainable world where people and nature thrive in harmony. We partner with diverse allies—rural producers, companies, NGOs, and governments—around the world to drive positive change across global supply chains and in many of the world’s most critically important landscapes. There is no place in either sustainable agriculture or responsible business for human rights abuses such as child labor.

1 Alliance 8.7, International Labour Office, Global Estimates of Child Labour, 2016, available at: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_575499.pdf

2 Alliance 8.7/ International Labour Office, 2016 global estimates of child labour, frequently asked questions, 2016, available at https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---ipecc/documents/publication/wcms_575604.pdf

FIGURE 1

Breakdown of the 152 million children in child labor globally. Source: ILO, Global Estimates of Child Labour, 2017



SIDEBAR

What is child labor?

The Rainforest Alliance uses the International Labour Organization (ILO) definition of child labor:

“Work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to their physical and mental development. It refers to work that is mentally, physically, socially, or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and interferes with their schooling by depriving them of the opportunity to attend school or obliging them to leave school prematurely; or requiring them to attempt to combine school

attendance with excessively long and heavy work.”

A note on age-appropriate children’s work:

It is important to recognize that children’s work can be an essential part of learning the family business and in becoming a skilled farmer. The Rainforest Alliance, in accordance with international law, acknowledges the positive role that age-appropriate work can play in children’s development. Depending on their age, children can perform paid regular or light work on farms, as long as this work is both safe and age-appropriate—and does not interfere with school.

TACKLING THE ROOT CAUSES OF CHILD LABOR

The reasons why child labor is so prevalent in agriculture are complex. Root causes include:

- multi-dimensional poverty
- low crop prices
- lack of social security or financial safety nets (to protect rural families from shocks such as death, health issues, or a sudden drop in income)
- limited access to quality education and health care
- weak enforcement of labor laws
- gender norms impacting girls' access to education and the division of labor at home
- low levels of education among parents
- lack of decent work opportunities for rural youth
- large family sizes
- lack of awareness about the harms of child labor

Gender norms dictate boys' and girls' life experiences including child labor. For example, girls are more likely than boys to suffer a triple burden of work (at home, at school, and on the farm or elsewhere), and this may adversely affect schoolwork, or stop them from attending school. Girls are also more likely to suffer a skills deficit due to missing out on school and because a large proportion of their responsibilities at home involve the household rather than farming or workplace skills. Child labor can therefore perpetuate inequalities between boys and girls, and negatively impact the long-term wellbeing of families and communities.³

The best way to eradicate child labor is to tackle its root causes. Quality education, decent wages, decent income

³ International Labour Office, "Give Girls a Chance, tackling child labour, the key to the future, 2009, available at: <http://www.ilo.org/ipeinfo/product/viewProduct.do?productId=10290>

and livelihood opportunities, gender equality, social security, healthcare, child protection, and affordable health insurance—these are all essential to break the cycle and create an environment in which families can support their children to complete their schooling and reach their full potential.

While international and national efforts to tackle the root causes of child labor have resulted in huge progress (including increased access to education and healthcare, and a reduction in poverty), civil society and corporate efforts to tackle child labor in supply chains and specific project locations are not always linked to national policies and programs, resulting in duplication and ineffectiveness. This needs to change. To stand any chance of success, such efforts must be integrated within regional and national policies and programs.

That's why the Rainforest Alliance is committed to bringing the diverse members of our global alliance together to advance coordinated actions in farming and supplier practices, schools, government policies, and community development programs. Acting together is the only way to prevent and remediate child labor.

THE RAINFOREST ALLIANCE APPROACH

Child labor-free agricultural supply chains can be realized through a number of complementary pathways.

Certification is an important tool in the fight against child labor. Experience has taught us that merely prohibiting and penalizing child labor violations is insufficient to prevent and eliminate this complex problem. In fact, a punitive approach invariably drives abuses underground, making them harder to detect, mitigate, and remediate. That is

SIDEBAR

What is multi-dimensional poverty?

Households experiencing multi-dimensional poverty not only have limited financial and material resources, but also experience other forms of deprivation in their daily lives: poor health, lack of education, inadequate living standards, disempowerment, poor quality of work, and the threat of violence, among others. Such households can also be located in environmentally hazardous areas. All told, these deprivations mean households are less capable of withstanding a sudden loss of income and may be more at risk of child labor.

The global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) directly measures the deprivations people face at the same time in different aspects of their lives. The MPI has three dimensions and ten indicators.

A person is MPI poor if he or she is deprived in 1/3 or more of these weighted indicators, where health and education indicators are weighted at 1/6 and living standards indicators at 1/18.

Source: Oxford Poverty & Human Development Initiative

THREE DIMENSIONS OF POVERTY

Health

nutrition

child mortality

Education

years of schooling

school attendance

Living Standards

cooking fuel

sanitation

drinking water

electricity

housing

assets



Strategic pathways towards child labor-free agriculture

- I. Certification
- II. Landscape and community programs
- III. Supply chain services
- IV. Advocacy

Through our enhanced 2020 Certification Program and our other interventions in partnership with companies, civil society, governments, and rural communities, the Rainforest alliance aims to achieve the following outcomes:

- Organizations and workers are committed to eradicate child labor by having the knowledge, resources, and systems in place to identify and mitigate the risk of child labor, monitor member farms and workplaces, and to identify and remediate actual cases
- If child labor occurs, organizations fulfil their responsibility to respond swiftly and decisively—including drawing on external support for remediation activities
- Certification Bodies (CBs) carrying out audits have the knowledge and resources to certify our assess-and-address system for child labor—and to identify and respond appropriately if child labor is found during an audit
- Companies purchasing and selling Rainforest Alliance Certified products know that these are produced in a manner consistent with international best practice on child labor due diligence
- Farmers, rural communities, supply chain actors, governments, and civil society all play a role in preventing and responding to child labor and tackling the root causes of child labor

why our new and enhanced [2020 Certification Program](#) introduces a risk-based “[assess-and-address](#)” approach to better prevent, monitor, and respond to child labor.

To ensure greatest impact, the Rainforest Alliance combines certification with a wider, strategic approach—engaging in other complementary pathways to prevent and remediate child labor, at a government, landscape, community, and company level. These pathways include partnerships between business, civil society, government, and communities to create environments that enable children to go to school and provide families with the financial means to support their children’s education and not to resort to child labor.

OUR 2020 CERTIFICATION PROGRAM: ASSESS-AND-ADDRESS

Our assess-and-address approach requires certificate holders, their farms, and workplaces to tackle the root causes of child labor rather than try to hide it.

Certificate holders including large farms and groups are required to set up an internal committee that is responsible for preventing child labor—along with forced labor and all forms of workplace violence, harassment, and discrimination.

These committees work proactively to prevent child labor by:

- Identifying and tackling the underlying causes at a local level
- Raising awareness about what forms of work children are and are not allowed to do
- Monitoring, identifying, and providing remediation for children who are in child labor

Farms will be able to share information on the progress they are making to prevent and respond to child labor with their supply chain partners and seek sustainability investments from them in addressing the issue.

Child labor will never be tolerated on certified farms, but an identified case will not lead to immediate decertification. This is because we have found that imposing sanctions, without addressing the root cause, can be destructive for farming families and communities. A punitive approach does nothing to lift farmers out of poverty or to address the underlying drivers of child labor. Instead, farm or farmer groups are required to immediately remove the child from the workplace and support the family to prevent any further exploitation of the child. This support can vary from helping a family obtain their children’s birth certificates to register for school, to improving access to quality schooling, or supporting a farmer to improve the household income.

Key Principles of “Assess-and-Address”

Systematic Due Diligence

The assess-and-address system incentivizes farmers to tackle child labor together with supply chain and local partners through systematic due diligence—including



On a certified hazelnut farm in Turkey, summer school is provided for the children of seasonal workers. Photo courtesy of Durak Hazelnuts

stronger commitments, tailored risk assessment and mitigation measures, enhanced monitoring and remediation strategies.

This system moves away from a punitive approach—including immediate decertification if a child labor case is identified—which often simply drives abuses underground, making them harder to identify, remediate, or prevent.

A Risk-Based Approach

Supporting farms to research and understand their specific contextual risks—and focusing their attention on mitigating those risks—helps ensure that sustainability investments and activities can be targeted where they are most needed. This allows our certification system to be more effective in tackling the actual risks in the region.

Remediation

Taking practical steps to rectify the harm done by child labor is necessary to ensure the immediate protection of the child and to address the reasons why the child was involved in child labor in the first place. Remediation must prioritize the best interests of the child. This means supporting the child's safe return to school, improving their family's economic situation, and facilitating ways in which children can do safe and age-appropriate tasks that enable them to learn skills and develop.

Continuous Improvement

Instead of punishing farms that identify higher risks of child labor, our assess-and-address approach supports those farms to make the improvements needed to reduce this risk. This shift in approach moves away from certification as a series of pass/fail requirements to a system that helps farms improve the way they tackle child labor over time.

COLLABORATION

Certification is just one strategic pathway used by the Rainforest Alliance to tackle child labor. Our other approaches include landscape management, supply chain services, and advocacy.

Landscape and Community Programs

Civil society organizations play a key role in improving the situation of farming communities—especially women, children, and youth—by advocating for effective policy change and through the implementation of community development and skills-building programs.

The Rainforest Alliance works closely with other civil society organizations on landscape and community programs designed to tackle the complex root causes of child labor in agriculture. Our approach includes:

- **Linking supply chain, civil society, and government initiatives:** We strengthen farms' efforts to tackle child labor at both a farm and community level and link these with government services and civil society programs that tackle root causes of child labor. This can increase investment in, improvement of, and increase demand for child protection, education, social security, health, and infrastructure. Our [Sector Partnerships Program](#) activities in Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, and Uganda help create these sustainable partnerships.
- **Gender equity and gender-sensitive approaches to child labor:** We [strengthen the position of female farmers](#) in cooperatives and sector organizations, to build more gender equitable farming communities. Our child labor programs often include activities that strengthen the economic position of women through



Eriberto Ruiz, a worker on the Finca Santa Marta banana farm in Costa Rica, helps his daughter with her schoolwork.

village saving and loan funds and income generating activities. Such initiatives, when linked to child labor and education programs, have shown to positively impact school enrolment and can reduce the incidence of child labor.⁴

- **Area-based approaches to tackle child labor:** This approach aims to reduce the incidence of child labor by addressing its root causes within a specific landscape and working to eradicate abuses in all sectors across that landscape. This multi-dimensional approach includes activities to tackle poverty and to improve access to and quality of education. It also promotes local policies that support investments in education, health, infrastructure, and social welfare—as well as awareness raising initiatives to tackle harmful practices that result in child labor and child marriage. In Uganda, through our [Child Labor Free Zone](#) program (part of our wider Sector Partnerships Program), we reduced child labor to 2-5 percent and premature school drop-out to 10 percent.⁵

Supply Chain Services: Encouraging Corporate Leadership

Companies have a vital role to play in tackling child labor: creating better economic and career opportunities, paying decent wages and a decent price for products, and

promoting labor and human rights in their supply chains. These steps—coupled with paying fair tax contributions to governments’ national budgets for education, healthcare, economic development, and social care, among others—contribute to an enabling environment in which farming families can break free of the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

Companies are in a unique position because they can promote responsible business practices together with their suppliers and producers. By mapping suppliers to the farm level, companies can improve oversight and responsibility for child labor prevention and remediation. Their influence can help drive change and amplify good practices. Major chocolate companies, for example, have been supporting the expansion of monitoring and remediation systems at producer level.

Perhaps the most important tool available to companies is helping to advance a living income for all farmers and a living wage for all workers. Paying better prices and supporting income diversification to help farmers achieve a living income is a crucial part of the child labor solution. When crop prices are too low, farmers—especially those who lack the skills or resources to diversify their income streams—often resort to child labor to save on the costs of hired labor during the harvest. The Rainforest Alliance offers tools to measure the gap between actual earnings and a living income and to monitor how interventions, including the payment of higher prices, help to close this gap.

Advocacy: Influencing Government Policies

Governments also have a critical role to play by providing the necessary infrastructure to support children’s access to their basic rights, as well as implementing and enforcing corporate due diligence legislation. The Rainforest Alliance advocates, often together with other civil society organizations, to ensure that governments create an enabling environment in which child labor is monitored, remediated, and ultimately prevented. We do this through sharing research, working in partnership with local and international NGOs, and being an active member of multi-stakeholder platforms tackling child labor, such as the International Cocoa Initiative, Alliance 8.7, and the Sustainable Coffee Challenge.

Our four key asks for governments are:

- enacting and enforcing mandatory human rights due diligence legislation in consumer countries to improve corporate accountability for human rights impacts across supply chains
- ensuring that the laws on child labor and hazardous work are clear and in line with international labor conventions and enforced through regular inspection
- providing access to free and quality education for children and access to decent healthcare for everyone
- supporting vulnerable families through social protection and income support

⁴ See forthcoming evaluation: AidEnvironment, Evaluation of Rainforest Alliance’s Child Labor Free Zone project in West-Nile, forthcoming (2021)

⁵ See forthcoming evaluation: AidEnvironment, Evaluation of Rainforest Alliance’s Child Labor Free Zone project in West-Nile, forthcoming (2021)

CREATING DECENT EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH

Of the 1.3 billion young people (aged 15 to 24) in the world, one fifth are classified as NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training).⁶ Young people are three times as likely as adults to be unemployed, and globally, young women are twice as likely as young men to have NEET status.⁷ This troubling youth employment crisis is shaped by many factors, including social exclusion of marginalized youth, lack of employment opportunities for rural youth, and a lack of skill readiness for youth entering the job market.

Formal education and training systems often do not meet the needs of marginalized youth, leaving them without the skills needed to realize their aspirations.⁸ Of those who are employed, young workers continue to face high rates of poverty.⁹ This is, in part, because opportunities for young people in most developing economies are mainly in the informal sector where job security is scarce, wages are low, and learning opportunities at work are limited.

Globally, the average age of a farmer is 60 years old, and young people are increasingly pursuing non-agricultural careers. As demand for commodities such as coffee, cocoa, and forestry products continues to rise globally, it is crucial to find approaches that both motivate youth to choose careers in these sectors, and ensure that these careers can offer a stable future.

Young people can provide the innovation, leadership, and ambition necessary to ensure the long-term sustainability and well-being of rural communities. However, youth often face barriers to meaningful inclusion in these sectors, pushing many to migrate to seek work in other areas. Barriers include attitudes and tensions amongst youth, their families, and their communities; lack of access to land, finances, and the market; lack of youth participation in local policymaking; and skills mismatch in the labor market. Working toward youth inclusion requires addressing these barriers and gaps to create an environment in which youth have the access and ability to fully participate in society.

When children are eligible to work, but are performing hazardous tasks, the Rainforest Alliance supports transitioning them to safe, age-appropriate tasks under adult supervision (where possible), coupled with technical training, including innovative farming and production techniques.

This approach can reduce the risk of child labor through:

- supporting children to learn skills safely
- supporting families with additional labor and/or income
- fostering sustainability transformation across rural communities by creating positive opportunities for

⁶ This indicator provides a measure of youth who are outside the educational system, not in training and not in employment, and serves as a broader measure of the youth labor market than youth unemployment (see ILO).

⁷ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_737648.pdf

⁸ <https://www.un.org/development/desa/youth/wp-content/uploads/sites/21/2018/12/WorldYouthReport-2030Agenda.pdf>

⁹ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_737648.pdf



Coffee farmer Diana Mendoza plants on her farm in Honduras with her daughters as part of a Rainforest Alliance collaboration with OneTreePlanted.

youth to engage with and innovate

- improving children's development, skill sets, and self-esteem

CONCLUSION

Child labor—not only in agriculture but also in other global sectors and supply chains — demands our urgent attention because it is harming children and thus, future generations.

Our new assess-and-address system equips certificate holders with the knowledge and practical tools they need to better prevent child labor and to remediate actual cases. This risk-based approach enables farms to better understand and mitigate the local causes of child labor. We have shifted away from a simple, punitive stance (which can lead farmers to hide child labor) to risk-based solutions and continuous improvement. Our goal is to incentivize farmers to work with us to tackle child labor.

Our experience and analysis of child labor in agriculture underlines that households experiencing multi-dimensional poverty are more likely to rely on child labor, particularly when incomes fall suddenly, or prices drop. But we also know that safe and age-appropriate work is crucial for children's skills, their development, and self-esteem. Prevention, therefore, requires asking what more can be done to facilitate children's access to safe, age-appropriate child work alongside free and quality education.

No single organization can tackle child labor alone, at either the local or international level. Collaboration is the key to the success of all Rainforest Alliance interventions—from a farm assess-and-address committee reaching out to local government experts to local NGOs working with farms to provide skills training for youth, and suppliers and brands working with farms to improve labor management systems and invest in sustainability transformation. At each level, collaboration transforms short-term prevention into long-lasting, sustainable change. 🌱

rainforest-alliance.org
email: info@ra.org

