

Unlucky for some: 13 myths about child labour

There are 168 million child labourers around the world today.

Contrary to popular belief, these are not teenagers doing light work or after-school jobs: they work in dangerous and dirty jobs that deprive them of a childhood and their education. Some 73 million of these child labourers are between five and 11 years old.

Child labour is not an inevitable part of global development. In fact, it slows global economic growth and has been linked to an increase in adult unemployment.

Whilst the Australian public may be shocked by this moral and ethical injustice, they may unwittingly be supporting companies that profit from child labour.

In order to end child labour, we must get the facts straight so we can all play our part.

Child labour is work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity. It is work that is mentally or physically dangerous and harmful to children, and that interferes with schooling.



This child from the Democratic Republic of Congo works with her mother and siblings in a copper mine all day instead of going to school. Photo: Alain Mwaku/World Vision

Myth #1:

Child labour is necessary if children are going to survive extreme poverty.

Child labour is commonly viewed as the only way families can survive extreme poverty, however in most cases child labour actually exacerbates the problem. Education is critical to ensuring children can gain the skills needed to secure better jobs and opportunities in the future. But if they are spending their days working instead of attending school, they may not have the chance to gain even a basic education.

If children are engaged in hazardous work that impacts their physical or mental health and development, this may affect their ability to work in the future.

For example, child labourers in cotton fields breathe toxic pesticides that are sprayed on the crops. This can cause tremors and in some cases paralysis, as the pesticides are designed to impede the nervous systems of pests. When suffering these conditions, children will have more limited employment opportunities in the future, and often increased medical costs, making it more difficult for them to escape poverty.



A young girl in India breaks stones all day that will be sold for use in the construction industry. Photo: Kaikho Ashuni/World Vision

If children are going to survive extreme poverty, adult wages need to increase, so parents can afford to send their children to school. Parents will usually withdraw their children from the labour market once the household income earned by adult workers surpasses a certain threshold¹. This shows that higher adult wages can result in a reduction in child labour.

Myth #2:

I worked as a child – child labour doesn't do any harm.

Child work is different to child labour. Child labour refers specifically to work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity. It is work that is mentally or physically dangerous and harmful to children, and that interferes with schooling. Of the 265 million children in employment, 168 million are child labourers doing jobs that negatively impact upon their long-term development.

If children are above the minimum age to work, employed for a limited number of hours in safe conditions, paid fairly, and if the work does not impact on their mental, physical or social development, working can help a child's personal development by teaching them life skills and developing their levels of responsibility and maturity. This type of work could include vocational education opportunities or an after-school job

Child labour, however, does not have a positive effect on children's lives. Any work that is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children, that interferes with their schooling or exceeds a minimum number of hours should not be tolerated.



Sonali from India was five years old when she started working making jewellery. Photo: Annila Harris/World Vision

Myth #3:
Most child labourers are almost adults anyway, so it's okay.

Alarming 44 percent of all child labourers are aged between five and 11 years. That's 77 million children.

Of the 85 million children estimated to be in a hazardous form of labour, 37.8 million are aged between five and 14 years, with more than half that number under 12.

Myth #4:
Child labour is an inevitable consequence of growth and development.

Child labour is not a consequence of growth and development. In fact, it is an obstacle to achieving growth.

It's widely acknowledged that there is a strong negative correlation between the existence of child labour and per capita GDP². In other words, more child labour equals lower national income.

Child labour is linked to a range of negative impacts on macro-economic growth, including: depressed wages, increased adult unemployment, slow technological progress and difficulties attracting foreign inward investment³.

Investing in "human capital" – the skills and capacities that reside in people – is one of the most important determinants of a nation's economic success⁴. The use of child labour undermines this, as it means that workers are not being invested in, nor given appropriate wages for their work.

**Myth #5:
Child labourers work in sweatshops.**

The majority of child labourers actually work in the agricultural sector.

Whilst there has been more media coverage of child labour in sweatshop-like conditions, the industrial sector, which includes sweatshops, factories, construction sites and mines, accounts for only 7.2 percent of child labourers.

Some 58.6 percent work further down the supply chain on farms and plantations. This work includes planting, cultivating and harvesting raw materials like cotton that may end up in products manufactured around the world.

This type of child labour can be extremely harmful to children as they work long hours ploughing, weeding, planting, spraying toxic pesticides, harvesting and carrying heavy loads. Often they will not have protective clothing to protect them from sharp equipment or harmful pesticides. Exposure to pesticides can lead to ongoing respiratory and nervous system problems. They may also have to carry heavy loads repeatedly, which can damage their skeletal development.

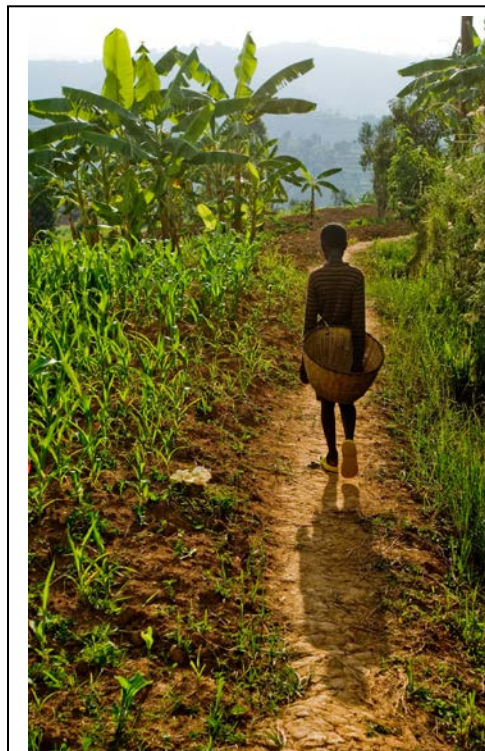
**Myth #6:
Some countries' economies couldn't survive
without child labour.**

Child labour doesn't just hurt children – it also hurts a country's economy.

Child labour drives down wages and increases adult unemployment, especially among young workers, because children are used to do the same jobs for less pay⁵. This means adults are not able to productively contribute to the economy – which is essential in ensuring ongoing economic prosperity.

**Myth #7:
All businesses that use child labour should be shut down immediately.**

Simply shutting down businesses that use child labour is seldom in the best interests of children and their communities.



At 12 years old, Anitha was forced to work 12 hour days on a Rwandan tea plantation, in cold, dangerous conditions. Photo: Jon Warren/World Vision

Such actions can exacerbate the root causes of the poverty that force children to work in the first place and drive businesses that use child labour underground, making it more difficult to identify and provide support to child labourers. In some cases, it may drive child labourers into more dangerous industries.

Companies and employers that enable or benefit from child labour must change their policies to uphold the rights of children and actively discourage exploitative practices.

Governments, business and civil society must work together to address the root causes of child labour, to ensure that families can earn a decent wage so they can support their children's education and that there are safe alternative solutions in place to help children transition from labour to education.



Two young boys work in dangerous conditions in a brick factory in Nepal. Photo: Sunjuli Kunwar/World Vision

Myth #8:

The work that child labourers do isn't very hard – so it's okay.

The persistent belief that most work carried out by children is not particularly burdensome is sadly not true. More than 63 percent of employed children work in conditions that are classified as child labour, and more than half that number work in hazardous conditions. So, for the majority of children, their labour is seriously detrimental to their development.

They can suffer long-term health problems due to malnutrition, exposure to chemicals, abuse and exhaustion. In agriculture, children may be exposed to toxic pesticides or fertilisers. They work with dangerous blades and tools and carry heavy loads. In mining, children may use poisonous chemicals, face the risks of mine collapse and sometimes work with explosives. In construction, children may carry heavy loads, work at heights and risk injury from dangerous machinery. In manufacturing, children may use toxic solvents, perform repetitive tasks in painful positions and risk injury from sharp tools. In domestic work, children risk abuse, work long hours and often live in isolation from their families and friends. Children who are engaged in child labour can suffer serious psychological harm, which can result in behavioural problems. This can seriously impact on their social development and their ability to successfully complete their schooling.

Myth #9:

It's a cultural practice to start work younger overseas than here, so it's not so bad.

In some contexts child labour is so widespread that it has become an “accepted” norm. However, this makes the practice no less damaging to the child or the community.

Parents will usually withdraw their children from the labour market once adult wages increase the household income⁶, which shows that child labour is not a preferred practice. There is also evidence to suggest that reductions in child labour, accompanied by an increase in household income, can have a ripple effect, leading to the emergence of new social norms that oppose child labour, leading again to even greater reductions in child labour participation rates⁷. Education is also key to breaking this cycle in the future. When an educated child grows up they will be better placed to make informed decisions that will help influence future generations.

Myth #10:

Children can go back to school later once they've made a bit of money.

Child labourers face significant barriers in going back to school. Often children earn far less than adult workers, however poverty forces them to work alongside adult family members in order to have enough to survive. Therefore it's unlikely that children could earn enough to save for future schooling. A better solution would be for companies, and the governments of the countries in which those companies operate, to ensure that adult workers are paid a decent wage which allows them to send their children to school, rather than into child labour.

Also, once removed from school, children often find it difficult to catch up. Child labour can affect the health and wellbeing of children which can impact their ability to learn. Millions of children have to work long hours in hazardous conditions. This can have lasting psychological, social and intellectual impacts, which can have drastic effects on a child's development. This may include behavioural problems and learning difficulties that can impair their ability to successfully complete their schooling.



Dubale, aged 12, from Ethiopia was forced to work weaving continuously for more than 17 hours a day in the suffocating dust of cotton in a very small room. Photo: Tessema Getahun/World Vision

Myth #11:

Parents don't care about their children if they let them be exploited.

Most parents don't want to send their children to work, but often have no other choice because their earnings are too low to provide for the basic needs of their family. If parents have a decent wage and living conditions they won't need to send their children out to work.

Many parents may have been child labourers or kept out of school themselves. With little education about alternative solutions or the risks that face their children, they may not see another choice.



A child labourer works in filthy conditions on a rubbish dump in Cambodia. Photo: Sopheak Kong/World Vision

Increasing access to education and working with communities to keep children in school are important in protecting children from exploitation and ensuring they gain the life skills required to help them secure work in the future.

Myth #12:

It's not Australia's job to end child labour.

Australia and almost every other country in the world have committed under international law that governments are responsible for protecting children from child labour.

Australia is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states its obligation to guarantee “... *the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development*”⁸.

Addressing child labour is not just the right thing to do – it is also in Australia's best interest. Ending child labour is critical to ensuring the sustainable growth, development and technological advancement of the countries that we rely on to produce the materials, goods and services that we buy. Also, increased

prosperity in other countries creates a bigger market for the goods and services that Australia exports. So Australia has a moral, economic and legal responsibility to address child labour.

Where once individual firms, and even entire countries, specialised in certain industries and the manufacture of finished products, most things we purchase today can be said to be “made in the world”. Reliance on a global workforce to produce many of the goods that we purchase here in Australia means that we are implicitly linked with the people behind the products we buy – and the prosperity of the communities and countries that they live in.

Myth #13:
There will always be child labour – it’s too big a problem to end.

It is possible to end child labour. The number of child labourers around the world has declined by one-third since 2000⁹. That’s 78 million children who are no longer working in exploitative conditions.

Child labour is declining because of the collective efforts of governments, business, civil society and individuals. But there is still much more to do.

Continuing this trend requires collective action to address the “supply” of child labour and the global “demand” for cheap goods produced through child labour.

Businesses must protect children from exploitation within their workplace, supply chain, marketplace and the wider communities in which they operate. Companies should transparently report on their efforts to mitigate their risk of labour exploitation and to seek third party auditing of these efforts.

Governments should take steps to ensure vulnerable children are not exploited within their borders through the implementation of legislative and judicial measures to eradicate exploitative practices. Governments can also discourage the use of child labour through public procurement policies, particularly when purchasing products sourced through agricultural and industrial sectors.

Individuals must ask questions of the companies they buy from, to ensure they are not indirectly supporting the use of child labour in the products they buy. They must put pressure on companies to provide transparent information about how their products are made and their company’s practices. Just as governments can encourage better practice through public procurement policies, by demanding more ethical products, the public can send a message to corporations that they will not tolerate children being exploited for profit.



Instead of being in school, a child labourer works every day using sharp tools to cut bamboo for weaving. Photo: Annila Harris/World Vision

Three steps you can take to help end child labour

The Australian public may be purchasing products made with child labour and supporting companies that profit from the exploitation of children.

Follow these simple steps and help end child labour.

1. Purchase more ethical products.

Download the [Shop Ethical!](#) app today and start making more informed decisions about which products you buy.

2. Tell businesses to end child labour

If you can't find products that are free from child labour, leave a [card](#) in store asking retailers to start stocking more ethical alternatives.

3. Tell others that they are #FreeTo end child labour

Post a photo of your ethical purchases on social media with the hashtag #FreeTo and help others to start taking ethical actions against child labour.

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