



“I Must Work to Eat”

Covid-19, Poverty, and Child labor in Ghana, Nepal, and Uganda

HUMAN
RIGHTS
WATCH





“I Must Work to Eat”

**Covid-19, Poverty, and Child Labor in
Ghana, Nepal, and Uganda**

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Summary

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, countries around the globe had made remarkable progress in reducing child labor. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the number of children in child labor decreased by approximately 94 million between 2000 and 2016, representing a drop of 38 percent. But as the pandemic caused massive school closures and unprecedented loss of jobs and income for millions of families, many children have entered the workforce to help their families survive, while others have been forced to work longer hours or enter more precarious and exploitative situations. Some have become their families' primary breadwinners after losing a caregiver to Covid-19. Some despair of ever going back to school.

The pandemic has had a profound impact on children's rights, including their right to an adequate standard of living, their right to education, and protection from child labor. A rise in child labor is not an inevitable consequence of the pandemic, however. Policy measures that provide economic relief to families, such as cash transfers and child allowances, contributed significantly to the dramatic decrease in child labor since the early 2000's. Used strategically, they can also help ensure the millions of families that experienced economic distress due to the pandemic enjoy an adequate standard of living and keep children out of dangerous and exploitative work.

This report examines the rise in child labor and poverty during the Covid-19 pandemic in three countries: Ghana, Nepal, and Uganda, the impact on children's rights, and government responses. Each of the three countries has made significant progress reducing poverty and child labor in recent decades. Each has also made an explicit commitment as a "pathfinder" country to accelerate efforts to eradicate child labor in line with the Sustainable Development Goals. Adopted by United Nations member states in 2015, these goals call for taking immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labor, modern slavery and human trafficking, and ending child labor by 2025.

Despite their commitments to accelerate progress in ending child labor, however, Ghana, Nepal, and Uganda have lagged behind many of their regional peers in using cash allowances to address the Covid-19 crisis, spending less than their peers and covering a smaller proportion of households with children.

For this report, researchers interviewed 81 children (48 boys and 33 girls) between the ages of 8 and 17 in Ghana, Nepal, and Uganda. The children were mainly from low-income households. The vast majority said that their family income had been negatively impacted by the pandemic and lockdowns imposed to slow the spread of the coronavirus. Their parents lost jobs when businesses shut down, lost access to markets due to transportation restrictions, or lost customers due to economic slowdowns. For example, 13-year-old Maimun said his parents were farmers, and that during Nepal's lockdown, "We couldn't sell our vegetables. We had to throw away the tomatoes and cauliflower because there was nowhere to sell them."

Many families have struggled to meet their basic needs, and some of the children described acute hunger. Fourteen-year-old Angelina from Uganda, said "There was no money to buy food, sugar, salt, and water. There were days when we could not get food. We survived on drinking water." When governments ordered schools to shut down to limit the spread of Covid-19, some children also lost access to the meals their schools previously provided.

Despite the economic hardships they faced, only 28 of the 81 children interviewed said that their families received any government assistance during the pandemic, primarily in the form of food aid. None had any knowledge of their family receiving cash assistance, although researchers were not able to confirm this with the children's parents or guardians.

Some children interviewed were already working before the pandemic began, but many entered the workforce for the first time to support their families. Some said that their families no longer had enough food to eat, and that hunger drove their decision to work. Thirteen-year-old Florence in Uganda said that before she went to work, her family survived on tea and porridge. "I started working because we were so badly off. The hunger at home was too much for us to sit and wait." Fourteen-year-old Patience, from Ghana, said her parents' fishing business lost customers during the lockdown, and that once schools shut down, she and her eight siblings no longer had access to free school meals. She felt that she had no choice but to go to work. "If I don't do it, life will be tough for all of us," she said.

Nationwide school closures have contributed to an increase in child labor. The majority of the children interviewed had limited or no access to distance learning, so had little to occupy their time. Fourteen-year-old Amir in Nepal said “There was nothing to do at home since school shut down. And with everybody at home, we started to run out of food quickly. I decided to go to work because what else was I going to do?” Others saw an opportunity to earn money that they would need for school fees and education expenses, once schools reopened. Although all three countries guarantee free primary and lower-secondary education, many families are still required to pay high tuition fees and additional costs.

The children interviewed worked at brick kilns, carpet factories, gold mines, stone quarries, fisheries, and in agriculture. Some worked as mechanics, rickshaw drivers, or in construction, while others sold items on the street, such as masks, brooms, or food.

The children described work that was often long and grueling, particularly during school closures and lockdowns. During Nepal’s lockdown, several children said they worked 14 hours a day or more in carpet factories. Gita, age 14, said that she worked at a carpet loom from 4 a.m. until 10 p.m. each day, with only an hour’s break in the afternoon. She said, “My fingers hurt from knotting the threads... my eyes hurt from looking at the design map... and I sit down for hours so it really hurts my legs.”

In each of the three countries, more than one-third of the children interviewed worked at least 10 hours a day, some for seven days a week. Some worked as many as 16 hours a day. Children who were already working before the pandemic said that they increased their hours after schools closed.

Some children described work that was clearly hazardous. In Uganda and Ghana, children worked at gold mining sites carrying heavy bags of ore, crushing the ore into smaller pieces with hammers, breathing in dust and fumes from processing machines, and handling toxic mercury to extract gold from the ore. At stone quarries, children reported injuries from flying stones, including sharp particles that got into their eyes. Children showed researchers cuts on their bodies from crushing stones while others displayed injuries from the machete-like tools they used to clear bushes from fields or the sharp edges of sugarcane stalks they bundled and carried. Others complained of body pain from carrying heavy loads or engaging in repetitive motions. Fifteen-year-old Daniel described his work at a construction site in Uganda carrying cement, bricks, and other materials up

and down the stairs of a 4-story building for 10 hours each day. “Sometimes I feel drained,” he said, “but I have to finish the work and earn my pay.”

Most of the children were paid very little for their labor, if they were paid at all. In Nepal, the minimum wage is 517 rupees per day (US\$4.44), but the majority of children interviewed made far less. In Uganda, most of the children were paid less than 7,000 shillings per day (\$2) even though nearly half worked at least 10 hours a day. Thirteen-year-old Saphina spent 9 hours a day crushing stones at a stone quarry in Uganda, but was paid only 4,000 shillings (\$1.11) per week. She said, “The money that I earn is too little compared to the work that I do.” Some children said that their earnings did not always provide enough money for food, and that despite working long hours, there were times when they still went hungry.

Some children received no steady wages and were compensated depending on their output. In Nepal, some children worked on a “piece rate” system with their parents in brick kilns or carpet factories; their parents were paid according to the number of bricks or carpets they and their children were able to produce. In other cases, children contributed to a family business and received a small amount of spending money, but no salary.

More than a quarter of the 81 children interviewed said that their employer sometimes refused to pay them or cheated them of their wages. Some said their employers arbitrarily made deductions from their salaries if they were not satisfied with the child’s work. For example, Maria, age 12, crushed stones at a Ugandan quarry, typically earning only 5,000 shillings (\$1.39) per week but said her employer would pay her even less if he was not satisfied with the size of the stones. In several cases, girls reported being paid less for their work than boys performing the same job. Several girls also reported facing sexual harassment by employers or other adults at their workplaces. In a few cases, children were subjected to violence by their employers.

Despite low pay, exploitation, mistreatment, and even violence, children believed that they had little choice but to continue working. Angela, age 15, said of her employer in Uganda, “He beats us, he can push you, slap you, but we endure . . . I need the job, I need the money, however little.”

The majority of children expressed a desire to return to school when they reopened. In Ghana and Nepal, where schools had already reopened at the time of interviews, most children had already returned, but continued to work before or after school. Some said that their work hours made it difficult to keep up with schoolwork, or that they did not attend as regularly as they would like because of work demands.

In some cases, schools had reopened, but children had not yet returned, either because they believed their families still needed their income, or because they needed to earn money for school expenses. Fifteen-year-old Kiran, from Nepal, said that his parents had no work for several months during the pandemic and were forced to borrow money to survive. He said, “If I go back to school now, my family will go further into debt. We have a lot of debt to repay and I cannot add more expenses to what’s already there.”

In Uganda, nearly half of the children interviewed had dropped out of school even before the pandemic began, primarily because their families could not afford required school fees. Even though primary and secondary education should be free in Uganda, many of the children interviewed said that fees remained a significant obstacle to resuming their education, even once schools reopened. Some were resigned to never returning to school, or at best, supporting the education of their younger siblings.

A small number of children interviewed had no interest in returning to school. In Nepal, for example, several boys that had secured employment as rickshaw drivers, mechanics, or in construction seemed satisfied with their employment and saw no reason to continue their education. A 13-year-old who worked servicing motorcycles and scooters said, “I have already spent so much time learning and improving my skills, so why would I leave this to go to school now?” Another, age 14, worked as a carpenter in a furniture shop, and said, “I enjoy working more than I ever enjoyed going to school. At least I can make money by working.”

According to UN agencies, the longer children are out of school, the less likely they are to return. UNICEF estimates that 24 million children that have missed out on schooling during the pandemic will drop out for good.

Cash transfers to families with children are a powerful policy intervention that has been used to successfully reduce poverty, reduce child labor, and increase school enrollment.

Despite their proven impact and the increased popularity of both targeted cash transfers and universal child allowances, the International Labor Organization (ILO) reports that prior to the pandemic, only 35 percent of the world’s children had access to social protection programs, including cash transfers. Approximately 1.3 billion children—mostly in Africa and Asia—were not covered by any social protection measure whatsoever.

International human rights standards also establish an international obligation to provide social protection, that is, a range of social security guarantees. International human rights treaties, in particular article 9 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), to which all three countries are party, guarantee everyone the right to social security. The Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, which oversees states’ compliance with the ICESCR has explained that this means states must ensure access to a social security scheme that provides a minimum essential level of benefits to all individuals and families that will enable them to acquire at least essential health care, basic shelter and housing, water and sanitation, food, and education.

As part of the Sustainable Development Goals, all countries have committed to implementing nationally appropriate social protection systems for all, including social protection floors to reduce and prevent poverty. International human rights standards also establish social protection as an international obligation.

In response to the unprecedented economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, the vast majority of countries have implemented economic stimulus or emergency relief packages, including cash assistance for families. According to the World Bank, by December 2020, at least 166 countries had implemented or expanded a cash transfer program in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In many cases, however, the assistance fell far short of the need. The World Bank found that most cash transfer programs were short-term, or consisted of a single, “one-off” payment. In low-income countries, social protection spending per capita in response to the pandemic was only \$6. For many families, government assistance—if they received any at all—has been far too little to enable them to cope with the economic stresses brought by the pandemic.

Governments should scale up their use of child allowances to alleviate the immediate and long-term impacts of the pandemic, and to meet their obligations to guarantee children an adequate standard of living, their right to education, and to protect them from child labor.

According to the ILO, achieving universal social protection for children would require an average of 1.8 percent GDP in Sub-Saharan Africa and 0.6 percent GDP in South Asia. Countries currently providing cash allowances for children have financed them in a variety of ways, including taxes on mining and gas (Bolivia, Mongolia, and Zambia), cuts to fuel subsidies (Ghana, Indonesia), and increased taxes on tobacco (Algeria, Mauritius, and Panama). Some countries have progressively rolled out their child benefits to address funding constraints. All governments, including those in the lowest income countries, should be identifying ways in which to ensure maximum resources are available to meet economic and social rights' obligations, including providing social security, for example, by re-allocating public expenditures, increasing tax revenues, and addressing corruption and tax evasion.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated economic vulnerability for countless families around the globe, putting their right to an adequate standard of living at risk. For children who have entered child labor and missed out on education, the impact will be long-lasting. As countries take steps to recover from the pandemic, implementing and scaling up child allowances can provide immediate and long-term protections for children's rights, by reducing the pressures on children to work and facilitating children's return to school. By helping the families that have been hit hardest, they can also help tackle the economic inequalities the pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated.

Recommendations

To all Governments

Regarding Social Protection:

- Ensure children enjoy an adequate standard of living and benefit from adequate social security, including through the progressive introduction of universal child allowances for all families with children.
- Ensure that any targeted allowances benefit all families that are eligible, by taking the following steps:
 - Establish effective communications strategies to ensure that everyone knows about the social protection program, its eligibility criteria, and the means of accessing it;
 - Make the application process accessible to all, including those with low literacy and/or no internet access;
 - Ensure that women are able to apply and receive these benefits as heads of households;
 - Invest in selection mechanisms that do not overestimate incomes of any applicant;
 - Avoid placing quotas on the number of people who can access a program;
 - Ensure that people can apply for the program whenever they require it;
 - Ensure that decisions on selection are as objective as possible;
 - Eliminate discrimination in decision-making;
 - Keep comprehensive information on selection decisions;
 - Establish effective grievance mechanisms that enable applicants to appeal unfavorable decisions;
 - Maintain a comprehensive database of information and statistics to inform planning and identification of beneficiaries for targeted allowances.
- Ensure adequate social protection budgets to provide a minimum social protection package for households with children.
- Ensure that social protection programs are financed via progressive revenue generation.
- In the wake of Covid-19, avoid austerity measures and budget cuts to essential public services like education and social protection.

Regarding Education:

- Guarantee universal access to free primary and secondary education of good quality, including by ensuring schools do not charge tuition fees, levy indirect costs, or require family contributions.
- Ensure primary and secondary schools are adequately funded, including by allocating additional resources for under-resourced schools, so that they can cover gaps in school budgets that were previously covered through tuition fees, indirect costs, and family contributions.
- Carry out national “back to school” communications and mass outreach campaigns to persuade communities and children who have been out of school—either due to the pandemic or other reasons—to return to school as soon as it is safe on public health grounds to do so. Include targeted strategies focused on marginalized children at greatest risk of not returning, including girls, migrants and refugees, children with disabilities, children who work, and children in rural areas.
- As schools reopen, monitor and follow up students’ attendance and participation, and in cooperation with local child protection and/or relevant school committees:
 - Identify children who do not return to in-person classes or do not regularly attend and engage in intensive outreach to them and their caregivers to re-engage them and provide any support they require to continue or resume their studies;
 - Promptly investigate cases of children being denied access to school or being expelled from school due to an inability to pay fees or for school supplies, including uniforms;
 - Ensure that appropriate enforcement authorities sanction schools and school officials that illegally levy school fees or turn away students.

Regarding Child Labor:

- Ensure national legislation regarding child labor is in line with international standards.
- Enforce child labor standards, including through vigorous monitoring, investigations, and appropriate penalties for violations.
- Pass laws requiring companies to conduct human rights due diligence throughout their global supply chains, to ensure they are not contributing to child labor or other human rights abuses.

To Donors

- The international community should establish a Global Fund for Social Protection to support low- and middle-income countries in realizing the rights to social security and an adequate standard of living for all, through better and increased technical cooperation, and the provision of co-financing to incentivize low-income countries to invest more in social protection.
- High-income countries in the G20 and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) should increase the amount of international aid in support of social protection.
- Aid should encourage sustainable and universal social protection programs, and where applicable support progressively moving from means-tested to universal ones.
- The International Monetary Fund (IMF) should ensure that its loans allow countries to maintain adequate levels of social spending and should refrain from promoting or imposing austerity conditions that would result in cuts to social protection programs or other social spending during and after the crisis.
- In its lending strategy the World Bank should bolster programs that finance universal social protection measures, including universal child allowances.
- Provide technical and financial support for programs aimed at strengthening social protection for children, including cash transfers and child allowances.
- Provide funding support for strengthening public primary and secondary education.
- Support mechanisms for promoting accountability for funds allocated towards social protection for children and universal primary and secondary education.

To Companies

- Conduct human rights due diligence throughout global supply chains to ensure the company is not contributing to child labor or other human rights abuses.

Methodology

This report was produced jointly by Human Rights Watch, Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (ISER) in Uganda, and Friends of the Nation (FoN) in Ghana.

In total, researchers interviewed 81 children between the ages of 8 and 17. In Uganda, ISER conducted interviews with 32 children (16 boys and 16 girls) in Kampala, Buikwe, and Moroto districts. In Ghana, FoN conducted interviews with 24 children (18 boys and 6 girls) in the towns of Prestea and Kpando-Torkor, and the Bolgatanga district. In Nepal, an independent consultant conducted interviews with 25 children (14 boys and 11 girls) in Nepalgunj and the Bhaktapur and Lalitpur areas of Kathmandu Valley. All interviews were conducted between January 19 and March 1, 2021.

Interviews in Nepal were conducted in Nepali or Hindi. Interviews in Ghana were conducted in Twi or Ewe. In Uganda, interviews in Moroto District were conducted through interpreters in Ngakarimojong; in Buikwe and Kampala districts, interviews were conducted in either English or Luganda. Most interviews were conducted individually and in private, though some children were interviewed in pairs. No one was interviewed in the presence of their employer or any government official.

Interviews were structured, covering topics related to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the child's family, their schooling prior to and during the pandemic, and their work experiences. Most interviews lasted 30 to 60 minutes. All interviews took place in person, while observing precautions to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

All interviewees were informed of the purpose of the interview, its voluntary nature, and the ways in which the information would be collected and used. Interviewers assured participants that they could decline to participate, end the interview at any time, or decline to answer any questions, without any negative consequences. Researchers obtained the consent of the interviewees to use the information they provided in this report. The names of all interviewees quoted in this report have been changed to protect their privacy and safety.

Interviewees were not provided with compensation in exchange for an interview. Children were provided with refreshments and in some cases, personal protective equipment related to their work.

Human Rights Watch also conducted a review of secondary sources, including government reports, World Bank and International Labor Organization data, reports prepared by United Nations entities and international groups, and other sources.

Letters were sent on April 7, 2021 to the Ugandan Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development; the Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports; the Nepali Ministry of Finance; the Nepali Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology; and the Nepali Ministry of Women, Children, and Senior Citizen; and on April 12, 2021 to the Ghanaian Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection and the Ghanaian Ministry of Education to share the findings of this report and request information about respective government efforts to address the economic impact of Covid-19 on families with children, increased risks of child labor, and ensuring access to education. The Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports responded on April 20, 2021; information it provided is reflected in the report.

In this report, “child” refers to anyone under the age of 18, consistent with usage under international law. In line with International Labor Organization standards, “child labor” is used to refer to work performed by children below the minimum age of employment or children under age 18 engaged in hazardous work. We note that not all work done by children should be prohibited as child labor. Children’s participation in work that does not affect their health and personal development or interfere with their schooling, can be regarded as something positive.

I. Covid-19, Poverty, and Child Labor

How the Pandemic Increases Child Labor Risks

The Covid-19 pandemic has increased pressure on children to enter the workforce, due to the economic crisis and escalating poverty it has caused, alongside massive school closures, the loss of caregivers due to death and illness, and limited enforcement of child labor standards. The pandemic also increases the household responsibilities that children may take on, for example girls taking on caregiving roles for younger siblings to enable parents to work remotely.

Millions of families have lost jobs or income due to the pandemic. The World Bank estimates that the number of people in extreme poverty (those living on less than US\$1.90 per day) grew by 88 to 93 million in 2020, and projects further increases during 2021.¹ When families lose income, it often creates pressure to send their children to work to meet their basic needs. According to ILO and UNICEF studies, a one percent rise in poverty results in a 0.7 percent rise in child labor.²

Massive school closures in 190 countries disrupted education for around 90 percent of the world's school-age children, shutting 1.4 billion children out of school.³ More than a third had no access to remote education, due largely to lack of internet access, computers, or other mobile devices.⁴ By January 2021, more than half of the world's students still had limited or no access to education, with full in-person school closures in 31 countries and

¹ Christoph Lakner, Nishant Yonzan, Daniel Gerszon Mahler, R. Andres Castaneda Aguilar, Haoyu Wu, "Updated estimates of the impact of COVID-19 on global poverty: Looking back at 2020 and the outlook for 2021," *World Bank Blogs*, January 11, 2021, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/updated-estimates-impact-covid-19-global-poverty-looking-back-2020-and-outlook-2021> (accessed May 16, 2021).

² International Labour Organization (ILO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), *COVID-19 and Child Labour: A time of crisis, a time to act*, June 2020, <https://data.unicef.org/resources/covid-19-and-child-labour-a-time-of-crisis-a-time-to-act/> (accessed May 16, 2021), p. 8.

³ UNICEF, "UNICEF Executive Director Henrietta Fore's remarks at a press conference on new updated guidance on school-related public health measures in the context of COVID-19," September 15, 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/unicef-executive-director-henrietta-fores-remarks-press-conference-new-updated> (accessed May 16, 2021).

⁴ "UNICEF chief: Closing schools should be 'measure of last resort,'" UNICEF news release, January 12, 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/01/1081912> (accessed May 16, 2021).

reduced schedules in another 48.⁵ Without access to schooling, many children and their families perceive work as a logical alternative. Even after schools reopen, many children may never go back.⁶ According to the UN, at least 24 million children may have dropped out for good.⁷ An April 2020 report by the Malala Fund found that girls are at greater risk of dropping out completely after school closures in comparison to boys.⁸

A significant driver of child labor is a parent's illness, disability, or death.⁹ When households lose a wage-earner due to illness or death from Covid-19, children may be forced into the workforce to support themselves and other family members. By mid-May 2021, more than 3.3 million people had died of Covid-19 and more than 160 million had been infected.¹⁰ In the United States alone, an estimated 43,000 children had lost at least one parent to Covid-19 by February 2021.¹¹ Due to numerous factors, including variation in morbidity and mortality rates, family structures, and data access, it is inappropriate to simply extrapolate from US rates to create a global estimate. However, these US estimates suggest that the number of children globally who have lost a parent could number in the hundreds of thousands.

Finally, many governments reduced or even eliminated labor inspections due to Covid-19 precautions. Without effective enforcement, child labor is likely to go undetected, and

⁵ "UNESCO figures show two thirds of an academic year lost on average worldwide due to Covid-19 school closures," The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) news release, January 25, 2021, <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-figures-show-two-thirds-academic-year-lost-average-worldwide-due-covid-19-school> (accessed May 16, 2021).

⁶ UNICEF et al., *Framework for Reopening Schools*, June 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Framework-for-reopening-schools-2020.pdf> (accessed May 16, 2021).

⁷ UNESCO, "UNESCO COVID-19 Education Response: How many students at risk of not returning to school?" Advocacy paper, July 30, 2020, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373992> (accessed April 21, 2021).

⁸ Malala Fund, *Girls' Education and Covid-19: What past shocks can teach us about mitigating the impact of pandemics*, 2020, https://downloads.ctfassets.net/00an5gk9rgbh/6TMYLYAcUpjhQpXLDgmdla/3e1c12d8d827985ef2b4e815a3a6da1f/COVID19_GirlsEducation_corrected_071420.pdf (accessed May 16, 2021).

⁹ ILO and UNICEF, *COVID-19 and Child Labour: A time of crisis, a time to act*, p. 18.

¹⁰ Johns Hopkins University and Medicine, Covid-19 Dashboard, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html> (accessed May 14, 2021).

¹¹ Rachel Kidman, Rachel Margolis, Emily Smith-Greenaway, Ashton Verdery, "Estimates and Projections of COVID-19 and Parental Death in the US," research letter, *JAMA Pediatrics*, April 5, 2021, https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2778229?guestAccessKey=43aa3546-0434-4397-b992-5e4806ea7953&utm_source=For_The_Media&utm_medium=referral&utm_campaign=ftm_links&utm_content=tf&utm_term=040521&appld=scweb (accessed April 12, 2021).

employers are less worried about violating child labor laws.¹² Employers may be more likely to hire children at lower wages than adults, or to delay or withhold earnings.

The Role of Cash Transfers and Child Allowances in Reducing Poverty and Child Labor

Terminology¹³

Cash Transfers: Cash payments to help families meet their basic needs, typically targeted to families experiencing or vulnerable to living in poverty, based on economic or other criteria. Cash transfers may or may not include a means test. Conditional cash transfers (CCT) are contingent on behavioral requirements such as regular school attendance and/or health check-ups for children, while unconditional cash transfers (UCT) are regular allowances with no requirements. Cash transfers to households with children are sometimes called child allowances or child benefits.

Social protection system/social safety net: Totality of social security and insurance policies and programs designed to reduce poverty and vulnerability by promoting efficient labor markets, diminishing people's exposure to risks, and enhancing their capacity to manage economic and social risks, such as unemployment, exclusion, sickness, disability, and old age.

Social Protection Floor: A set of nationally defined basic social security guarantees designed to prevent or alleviate poverty, vulnerability, and social exclusion. A national social protection floor should include at least the following four components: access to essential health care, including maternity care; basic income security for children, providing access to nutrition, education, care and any other necessary goods and services; basic income security for persons in active age who are unable to earn sufficient income, in particular in cases of sickness, unemployment, maternity and disability; and basic income security for older persons.

Universal child allowances: Cash benefits paid to all families with children, without conditions and regardless of parents' income or work status.

¹² ILO and UNICEF, *COVID-19 and Child Labour: A time of crisis, a time to act*, p. 27.

¹³ See also, ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2017-19: Universal social protection to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals*, November 2017, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_604882.pdf (accessed May 15, 2021).

The International Labor Organization (ILO) has identified social protection measures, including cash transfers, as a key factor in the dramatic reduction of child labor over the past two decades.¹⁴ Cash transfers are typically monthly payments to households with children to help families meet their basic needs. Also known as child allowances or child benefits, cash transfers have been called the “development revolution from the Global South.”¹⁵ They were pioneered by Brazil and Mexico in the late 1990’s and have since been adopted around the globe.

Cash transfers for families with children have been shown to be very effective in reducing poverty rates, increasing school enrollment, improving children’s health, reducing child labor, and even reducing domestic violence. A rigorous meta-analysis by the Overseas Development Institute of over 200 studies spanning 15 years concluded that cash transfers were a powerful policy instrument with an overwhelmingly positive impact in reducing poverty.¹⁶ For example, Brazil’s *Bolsa Familia*, the world’s largest cash transfer program, is credited with reducing the country’s poverty headcount by 12-18 percent between 2003 and 2009.¹⁷ In Pakistan, a cash transfer program resulted in a 19 percent decrease in poverty for recipients over a three-year period.¹⁸

Studies from Latin America in particular have found that cash transfers reduce both the prevalence of child labor and the number of hours that children work. In Colombia, child labor dropped by 15 percent for children with families receiving cash transfers, while in

¹⁴ “ILO report shows why social protection is crucial to tackle child labour,” ILO news release, April 29, 2013, https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_211472/lang-en/index.htm (accessed May 16, 2021).

¹⁵ UNESCO, *Education for All 2000-2015: Achievements and Challenges*, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000232205> (accessed May 16, 2021), p. 90.

¹⁶ Francesca Bastagli, Jessica Hagen-Zanker, Luke Harman, Valentina Barca, Georgina Sturge and Tanja Schmidt, with Luca Pellerano, *Cash transfers: what does the evidence say? A rigorous review of programme impact and of the role of design and implementation features*, Overseas Development Institute, July 2016, <https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/11316.pdf>, pp. 12, 99.

¹⁷ Sean Higgins, “The Impact of Bolsa Família on Poverty: Does Brazil’s Conditional Cash Transfer Program have a Rural Bias?” *The Journal of Politics and Society*, vol. 23 (2012), <https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/D8B27S8K> (accessed April 12, 2021), p. 116.

¹⁸ Iftikhar Cheema, Maham Farhat, Simon Hunt, Sarah Javeed, Katharina Keck, Sean O’Leary, *Benazir Income Support Programme – Second Impact Evaluation Report*, Oxford Policy Management, December 2015, <https://www.opml.co.uk/files/Publications/7328-evaluating-pakistans-flagship-social-protection-programme-bisp/bisp-second-impact-evaluation-report.pdf?noredirect=1> (access April 12, 2021), p. 44.

Nicaragua, cash transfers resulted in a 14-20 percent reduction in child labor among boys.¹⁹

Even small cash transfers have compound effects, with greater school attendance consistently accompanied by reductions in child labor. For families living in poverty in Honduras, for example, a modest cash transfer of \$50 per child per year led to 16-32 percent increases in school enrollment and 50-55 percent decreases in children working outside the home over a two-year period.²⁰

Targeted and Universal Allowances

Cash transfers can take several different forms. Targeted cash transfers are typically monthly payments provided to families experiencing or vulnerable to poverty, based on economic or other criteria. Targeted cash transfers can come with specific conditions attached, or without any conditions. Conditional cash transfers (CCT) are typically contingent on regular school attendance and/or health check-ups for children, while unconditional cash transfers (UCT) are regular allowances with no requirements. Universal child allowances, by contrast, are paid to all families with children, without conditions and regardless of income or other status.

Research shows that a major weakness in implementation of targeted programs can be the potential exclusion of those who need them most. When cash transfers are targeted according to economic or other criteria, many eligible households may be left out, while some ineligible households may be included. Accurate means testing is difficult and errors can be significant.²¹

In addition, when programs require households to register or apply to receive benefits, many families miss out due to limited information about the program, barriers to applying for or receiving the benefit, unwillingness or inability to meet conditions, and/or social

¹⁹ Bastagli et al., *Cash transfers: what does the evidence say? A rigorous review of programme impact and of the role of design and implementation features*, Overseas Development Institute, p. 190.

²⁰ Sebastian Galiani and Patrick J. McEwan, "The heterogeneous impact of conditional cash transfers," *Journal of Public Economics* 103 (2013), <http://academics.wellesley.edu/Economics/mcewan/PDF/praf.pdf> (accessed May 16, 2021), p. 91.

²¹ For example, the results of a UNICEF and the Overseas Development Institute nine-country simulation found that 80 percent of households living in poverty were counted as not in fact living in poverty, while 40 percent of households not living in poverty were counted as living in poverty. See ODI/UNICEF, *Universal Child Benefits: policy issues and options*, 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/media/72916/file/UCB-ODI-UNICEF-Report-2020.pdf> (accessed May 16, 2021), p. 79.

stigma. In OECD countries, for example, between 20 and 60 percent of eligible families do not take advantage of available benefits.²²

Targeted programs can foster tensions or resentment between recipients and non-recipients. They may also cause unintended negative consequences by creating incentives for adults in the household to work less or under-report their income to qualify for the program. Administrative costs, particularly for conditional cash transfers, may also be high. In Nepal, for example, an evaluation of cash transfer pilot programs found that the targeting process took up 22 percent of the project's total costs.²³

Benefits of Universal Child Allowances

A growing body of research has documented the significant benefits of universal child allowances. A simulation for 14 middle-income countries showed that universal child allowances financed by 1 percent of GDP would lead to a decline of overall poverty by 20 percent, with equivalent if not greater decreases in child poverty.²⁴ The study estimates that in Indonesia, for example, a universal child benefit of \$15 per child per month could reduce the percentage of children living in poverty from 11 percent to 3 percent.²⁵

Universal programs typically entail automatic registration for every child at birth. Because they require no means-testing or monitoring for eligibility, administrative costs are lower. Studies have found no evidence that universal child benefits reduce participation in paid work by adults.²⁶

Universal programs also may be more consistent with human rights principles of equality and non-discrimination. Because all families with children receive the benefit, they enhance social cohesion and family dignity, and avoid stigma.

²² ODI/UNICEF, *Universal Child Benefits: policy issues and options*, p. 81.

²³ UNICEF, "Why a Universal Child Grant Makes Sense for Nepal," Policy Brief, November 2016, <https://www.unicef.org/nepal/media/2451/file/Why%20a%20universal%20Child%20Grant%20makes%20sense%20for%20Nepal.pdf> (accessed May 16, 2021).

²⁴ ODI/UNICEF, *Universal Child Benefits: policy issues and options*, p. 74.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

²⁶ Lauren Jones, Kevin Milligan, and Mark Stabile, "Child Cash Benefits and Family Expenditures: Evidence from the National Child Benefit," Working Paper 21101, National Bureau of Economic Research (Canada), April 2015, <https://www.nber.org/papers/w21101> (accessed May 16, 2021).

Optimal Benefits of Child Allowances

The three most important criteria for effective child allowance programs are population coverage; the size of the allowance; and regularity of payments. In other words, the more families are covered, the larger the benefit, and the more regular the payments, the stronger the impact.

The most effective programs of all combine characteristics of both universal and targeted programs. With such an approach, all households receive a universal benefit, but the families living in the most extreme poverty receive a higher payment, while higher-income households are taxed back for their benefits. Studies estimate that such a system can reduce the child poverty headcount by up to 32 percent.²⁷ In addition, paying a benefit for every individual child results in better outcomes than a universal benefit for the household generally, regardless of number of children.

Despite their proven impact and the increased popularity of both targeted cash transfers and universal child allowances, the ILO reports that prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, only 35 percent of the world's children had access to social protection programs, including cash transfers. Approximately 1.3 billion children—mostly in Africa and Asia—were not covered by any social protection measure whatsoever.²⁸

Cash Transfers as Part of Covid-19 Response

In response to the dramatic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the economy and people's livelihoods, many governments implemented economic stimulus packages, including cash assistance for individuals and families with children. By December 2020, 166 countries had implemented or expanded a cash transfer program in response to Covid-19.²⁹ Of these, 133 countries provided new forms of cash assistance. Of countries with existing cash

²⁷ ODI/UNICEF, *Universal Child Benefits: policy issues and options*, p. 14.

²⁸ ILO, *World Social Protection Report 2017-19: Universal social protection to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals*, p. xxxi.

²⁹ Ugo Gentilini, Mohamed Almenfi, and Pamela Dale, *Social Protection and Jobs Responses to COVID-19: A Real-Time Review of Country Measures*, "Living paper" version 14, World Bank, December 11, 2020, <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/467521607723220511/pdf/Social-Protection-and-Jobs-Responses-to-COVID-19-A-Real-Time-Review-of-Country-Measures-December-11-2020.pdf> (accessed May 16, 2021), p. 3.

transfer programs, 33 increased the size of payments, while 26 provided additional payments, and 10 expanded their programs to include additional beneficiaries.³⁰

In total, expanded or new cash transfers in response to the pandemic reached 1.1 billion people—or 14 percent of the global population.³¹ Of the estimated \$12.6 billion in global stimulus packages announced as of December 2020, social protection spending made up approximately 6.3 percent of the total.³²

Government assistance often fell far short of the need, however. Most cash transfer programs were short-term, with an average duration of 3.3 months.³³ Of the 133 countries implementing new cash transfers, nearly half of the programs constituted only a single, one-off payment. In low-income countries, total social protection spending per capita was only \$6, on average.³⁴ The ILO also found that the countries that responded most effectively to the pandemic were those that already had robust social protection systems in place.³⁵

Each of the three countries examined in this report—Ghana, Uganda, and Nepal—has lagged behind its regional peers in utilizing cash transfer programs to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. For many families, government assistance—if they received any at all—has been far too little to enable them to cope with the unprecedented economic stresses brought by the pandemic.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 4-5.

³¹ Ibid., p. 5. Planned beneficiaries were projected at 1.55 billion.

³² Ibid., p. 13.

³³ Ibid., p. 4.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 13. In addition to cash transfers, social protection programs also included social pension schemes, food assistance, and cash-for-work.

³⁵ ILO and The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), *The Protection We Want: Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific*, October 15, 2020 https://unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/knowledge-products/Social_Outlook_Report_v10.pdf (accessed April 13, 2021), p. 23.

II. Uganda

Over the last three decades, Uganda has reduced substantially its official poverty rate, measured by the national poverty threshold, from 56 percent in 1993 to 21.4 percent in 2016. However, economic precarity remains high: as many as 18 million people—more than 40 percent of the population—were living on less than US\$1.90 per person per day in 2016.³⁶ An estimated 23 percent of those living in poverty in urban areas in Uganda lost their income during pandemic-related restrictions and the number of food-insecure people in the country increased by an estimated 44 percent.³⁷ The informal sector—which accounts for 98 percent of workers—including people working in trading, services and hospitality, was hit the hardest.³⁸

Under Uganda’s Employment Act, the minimum age for work in Uganda is 14. The Act states that children ages 12 to 14 are permitted to perform “light” work under adult supervision if it does not interfere with the child’s education.³⁹

The Pandemic’s Impact on Family Livelihoods

Nearly all of the 32 children interviewed for this report said that their family income had been negatively impacted by the pandemic. Moses’ mother lost her income when the hair salon where she worked shut down.⁴⁰ Maria’s father’s wages as a night watchman were

³⁶ Uganda’s national poverty measurement – US\$0.88–US\$1.04 per person per day – is much lower than the World Bank’s international standard of US\$1.90 per person per day. See Development Initiatives, “Poverty in Uganda: National and regional data and trends,” factsheet, October 2020, <https://devinit.org/resources/poverty-uganda-national-and-regional-data-and-trends/#downloads> (accessed May 16, 2021), pp. 6-7.

³⁷ Development Initiatives, *Socioeconomic impact of Covid-19 in Uganda: how has the government allocated public expenditure for FY2020/21?*, August 2020, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Socioeconomic_impact_of_Covid-19_in_Uganda.pdf; see also Monica K. Kansiime, Justice A. Tambo, Idah Mugambi; Mary Bundi; Augustine Kara; Charles Owuor, “COVID-19 implications on household income and food security in Kenya and Uganda: Findings from a rapid assessment,” September 18, 2020, *World Development*, vol. 137 (2021), doi: 10.1016/j.worlddev.2020.105199, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X20303260?via%3Dihub> (accessed May 16, 2021).

³⁸ Development Initiatives, *Socioeconomic impact of Covid-19 in Uganda*, p. 6.

³⁹ Government of Uganda, The Employment Act, UGA-2006-L-74416, enacted in 2006, <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/SERIAL/74416/76582/F1768664138/UGA74416.pdf> (accessed May 16, 2021).

⁴⁰ Interview with Moses, 15, Kampala, January 22, 2021.

cut.⁴¹ Angela’s mother lost her job as a nurse schoolteacher when schools shut down due to the pandemic.⁴² Fifteen-year old Evelyn’s father was a fisherman and lost his income when pandemic restrictions prohibited boat traffic.⁴³ Isaac, age 15, said his mother was a food trader, but during the lockdown, she could not get to the market due to lack of transport.⁴⁴ Robert, age 15, said his father worked at a stone quarry, but after the pandemic began, few customers came to buy stones.⁴⁵

Joan, age 15, reported a cascading sequence of hardships. She was living with her aunt, who lost income due to the pandemic. Unable to pay rent, they were evicted from their house by their landlord despite the Ministry of Lands ordering a halt to evictions during the country’s lockdown. When she and her aunt fell ill, they were unable to afford medical treatment.⁴⁶

Many of the children described lack of food and hunger. While their families lost income, food became more expensive due to movement restrictions and reduced supply. According to the International Food Policy Research Institute, the price of food staples in Uganda increased by more than 15 percent from mid-March to early May 2020.⁴⁷

Angelina, age 14, said that during the lockdown, “There was no money to buy food, sugar, salt, and water. There were days when we could not get food. We survived on drinking water.”⁴⁸ Eric, age 14, worked with his mother at a limestone quarry, but said that when the pandemic began, there were no customers to buy the stone. Instead of paying cash for their work, he said that their employer paid them with alcohol. “Sometimes we would borrow food from our relatives,” he said. “There were days when we slept on an empty stomach because we could not find anything to eat.”⁴⁹

⁴¹ Interview with Maria, 12, Kampala, January 21, 2021.

⁴² Interview with Angela, 15, Buikwe, January 26, 2021.

⁴³ Interview with Evelyn, 15, Kampala, January 26, 2021.

⁴⁴ Interview with Isaac, 15, Buikwe, January 30, 2021.

⁴⁵ Interview with Robert, 15, Kampala, January 21, 2021.

⁴⁶ Interview with Joan, 15, Kampala, January 22, 2021.

⁴⁷ Manuel Hernandez, Soonho Kim, Brendan Rice, and Rob Vos, “IFPRI’s new COVID-19 Food Price Monitor tracks warning signs of stress in local markets,” International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), May 5, 2020, <https://www.ifpri.org/blog/ifpris-new-covid-19-food-price-monitor-tracks-warning-signs-stress-local-markets> (accessed May 16, 2021).

⁴⁸ Interview with Angelina, 14, Buikwe, January 26, 2021.

⁴⁹ Interview with Eric, 14, Moroto, February 3, 2021.

Nearly two-thirds of the children interviewed indicated that their family did not receive any form of Covid-19 relief. Twelve children said that their family received some food assistance—typically maize flour and beans—but that it didn’t last long. Florence said her family received maize flour and beans that lasted two weeks;⁵⁰ Teresa said the food her family received only lasted two days.⁵¹

Schooling

To limit the spread of Covid-19, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni ordered the closure of all schools on March 18, 2020. The closures affected an estimated 73,200 schools, more than 15 million students, and 548,000 teachers.⁵² In October 2020, candidate students (those taking key determining examinations for primary and secondary school) returned to prepare for final examinations,⁵³ but in January 2021, more than nine months since the beginning of the pandemic, an estimated 13.8 million students were still out of school.⁵⁴

The government of Uganda initiated universal primary education in 1997 and universal secondary education in 2007, abolishing tuition fees and prohibiting schools from introducing other costs that could create barriers for students from vulnerable families.⁵⁵ According to the Ministry of Education, a lack of uniforms or money for school meals should not be used to refuse children access to school.⁵⁶ In practice, however, many Ugandan schools still levy fees.⁵⁷

⁵⁰ Interview with Florence, 13, Kampala, February 8, 2021.

⁵¹ Interview with Teresa, 14, Buikwe, January 26, 2021.

⁵² “Re-opening schools for non-candidates still a big puzzle,” *The Independent*, January 29, 2021, <https://www.independent.co.ug/re-opening-schools-for-non-candidates-still-a-big-puzzle/> (accessed May 16, 2021).

⁵³ Students in semi-candidate classes (Primary 6, Senior 3, Senior 5) were allowed to return on March 1, 2021, and the government announced that most other students would return on a staggered basis in April. See *The Independent*, “Full List of Museveni Decisions on School Re-Opening,” February 5, 2021, <https://www.independent.co.ug/full-list-of-museveni-decisions-on-school-re-opening/> (accessed May 16, 2021) and Serestino Tusingwire, “Semi-candidate classes to resume on March 1,” *Daily Monitor*, February 5, 2021, <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/semi-candidate-classes-to-resume-on-march-1-3280316> (accessed May 16, 2021).

⁵⁴ *The Independent*, “Re-opening schools for non-candidates still a big puzzle,” January 29, 2021, <https://www.independent.co.ug/re-opening-schools-for-non-candidates-still-a-big-puzzle/> (accessed May 16, 2021).

⁵⁵ Letter from Uganda’s Ministry of Education and Sports to Human Rights Watch and Initiative for Social and Economic Rights, April 20, 2021.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ See ISER, *Leaving No One Behind: Barriers to Continuity of Education for Vulnerable Children Impacted by Covid-19 in Uganda*, November 2020, https://www.iser-uganda.org/images/downloads/Barriers_to_Continuity_of_Education_for_Vulnerable_Children_Impacted_by_Covid-19_in_Uganda.pdf (accessed May 16, 2021).

Of the 32 children interviewed, four had never been to school and nearly half had dropped out of school before the pandemic began. The vast majority said that they dropped out because their families were not able to pay the required school fees. Jonathan, age 12, for example, said he dropped out from primary 3 in 2018 because the fees of 38,000 shillings (\$10.56) per term were too much for his family. “I left school because my parents could not afford school fees and other requirements like shoes, uniform, and school materials.”⁵⁸ Robert, age 15, said his school asked for 300,000 shillings (\$83.30) per term as school fees, which his family could not afford.⁵⁹

Moses, age 15, said he dropped out of school when he was in lower secondary school because his family could not afford fees of 250,000 shillings (\$69.40) per term.⁶⁰

Catherine, age 14, completed primary school but was not able to enter secondary school because of the 400,000 shillings (\$111.10) entrance fee. “There was no money,” she explained.⁶¹

Previous studies by Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (ISER) and Human Rights Watch have identified prohibitive school fees and the under-resourcing of public primary and secondary schools as significant barriers to the right to education in Uganda, especially for children living in or near poverty.⁶² Only one quarter of Ugandan primary students continue to secondary school.⁶³

About half of the children interviewed were still in school when the pandemic began. Maria, age 12, said “When the pandemic started, all schools closed and we were told to go back home.”⁶⁴ Some children said that they were given some study materials to take home. Joshua, age 15, said, “The school administration asked us to go home. The school gave us some homework and we were told to revise our books during that time.”⁶⁵

⁵⁸ Interview with Jonathan, 16, Buikwe, January 29, 2021.

⁵⁹ Interview with Robert, 15, Kampala, January 21, 2021.

⁶⁰ Interview with Moses, 15, Kampala, January 22, 2021.

⁶¹ Interview with Catherine, 14, Buikwe, January 26, 2021.

⁶² See ISER, *Leaving No One Behind: Barriers to Continuity of Education for Vulnerable Children Impacted by Covid-19 in Uganda*. See also, Lena Simet (Human Rights Watch), “From Pioneer to Laggard: Disinvestment and Privatization of Education in Uganda,” commentary, *NORRAG*, November 23, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/23/pioneer-laggard>.

⁶³ UNICEF Uganda website, “Education,” <https://www.unicef.org/uganda/what-we-do/education> (accessed May 16, 2021).

⁶⁴ Interview with Maria, 15, Kampala, January 21, 2021.

⁶⁵ Interview with Joshua, 15, Buikwe, January 25, 2021.

The Ugandan government, with a \$15 million grant from the Global Partnership for Education, provided self-learning home packages and educational broadcasts on television and radio to support continued education during school closures.⁶⁶ However, in 2018 only 43 percent of Uganda’s population had access to electricity, making remote learning difficult if not impossible for many children.⁶⁷ When interviewed at the start of 2021, none of the children interviewed said they were able to access remote learning or had any contact with their schools or teachers during the school shutdown. In April 2021, the Ministry of Education stated that it was printing and distributing approximately 5.3 million sets of self-study materials to help students recover lost schooling time.⁶⁸



After schools closed in Uganda due to Covid-19, a boy traveled from Eastern Uganda to earn a living at a maize mill in downtown Kampala. © 2021 Nakulima Saphina for ISER

Why Children Went to Work

Many of the children interviewed said they went to work because their families did not have enough food to eat and could not meet their basic needs. When schools closed countrywide, many children also lost access to school meals. Florence, age 13, said that before she went to work, her family survived on tea and porridge. “I started working because we were so badly off,” she said. “The hunger at home was too much for us to sit and wait.”⁶⁹ Jonathan, age 12, said, “It was a tough season for us at home.” “There was no money and the food in the garden was not ready to eat. I started working because there was completely nothing at home,” he said.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Global Partnership for Education, “Uganda: Covid-19 Response,” <https://www.globalpartnership.org/where-we-work/uganda> (accessed February 22, 2021).

⁶⁷ World Bank, “Access to Electricity (% of population) – Uganda,” <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EG.ELC.ACCS.ZS?end=2018&locations=UG&start=1960&view=chart> (accessed April 26, 2021).

⁶⁸ Letter from Uganda’s Ministry of Education to Human Rights Watch and Initiative for Social and Economic Rights, April 20, 2021.

⁶⁹ Interview with Florence, 13, Kampala, February 8, 2021.

⁷⁰ Interview with Jonathan, 12, Buikwe, January 29, 2021.

Many children said that in addition to helping their family, they also hoped to save money to cover school fees so that they could return to school once they reopened. Some girls said that they needed to earn money to pay for supplies to manage menstruation. Catherine, age 14, said “I lacked clothes, sanitary pads, and knickers. Every time my monthly periods would come, I would cut my clothes to use as pads.”⁷¹

Long Hours, Low Pay

The children interviewed worked in gold, marble, and limestone mines; stone quarries; fishing; construction; agriculture; and by selling items on the street, such as masks, biscuits, banana leaves, and brooms. Some children interviewed were already working when the pandemic began, while others began to work for the first time or worked longer hours than before. Nearly half of the children interviewed worked at least 10 hours a day, some for seven days a week. Some worked as many as 16 hours per day. Many of the children were involved in hazardous labor using dangerous tools, carrying heavy loads, or working in extreme heat. Several interviewees said they suffered fatigue, chronic pain, or had been injured while working.

Without exception, the children were paid very little for their labor. Most were paid less than 7,000 shillings per day (\$2) despite their long hours. For many, pay was not predictable or reliable, but per piece and at the discretion of their employer.

Elijah, age 13, worked in rice and sugarcane fields for 14 hours a day, and said that on some days, he made only 500 shillings (\$0.14).⁷² Saphina, 13 years old, spent 9 hours a day crushing stones at a stone quarry, but made only 4,000 shillings per week (\$1.11). She said, “The money that I earn is too little compared to the work that I do.”⁷³ Joan, age 15, worked 11 hours a day selling masks, but said that the money she earned was so little that she and her aunt sometimes went without food.⁷⁴

After 12-year-old George’s school closed because of the pandemic, he started selling fish and collecting and selling stones for construction workers. “There was no money at home

⁷¹ Interview with Catherine, 14, Buikwe, January 26, 2021.

⁷² Interview with Elijah, 13, Buikwe, January 26, 2021.

⁷³ Interview with Saphina, 13, Kampala, January 21, 2021.

⁷⁴ Interview with Joan, 15, Kampala, January 22, 2021.

and my mother was struggling so much,” he said.⁷⁵ He worked 7 days a week, from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m., earning between 3,000 and 9,000 shillings per day (\$0.83 to \$2.49). He said that sometimes his customers refused to pay him and that his meager earnings were not enough to feed the family. “It is hard being hungry a whole day. Many times, my mum has to borrow food at the shop, but sometimes those people at the shop refuse.”⁷⁶

For some children, the pandemic has meant separation from their parents. Blessing, age 11 or 12, said that her parents worked at a gold mine that shut down when the lockdown began. They sent her to a different area 10 kilometers away to stay with her cousin and work at another mine that was still open. She worked several days a week at the gold mine, digging and grinding the soil, and then panning it for gold. She said that digging the hard soil was the most difficult part of her work. She showed interviewers wounds on both her legs from falling on a sharp stone and said she didn’t have enough money to seek medical treatment.⁷⁷ Jackson, age 13, also worked at a gold mine, fetching water from 3 kilometers away for his mother to use to pan the gold. He said, “Carrying the water is hard. It’s a very long distance. By the time I get to my mother, I am tired and drained.”⁷⁸

Joan, 15 years old, walked Kampala’s streets for 11 hours a day, selling masks. She said that sometimes she got dizzy from walking in the sun and heat, and despite walking many miles a day, sometimes failed to find any customers.⁷⁹ Daniel, age 15, worked at a construction site, carrying cement, bricks, and other materials to other workers. He worked on a four-story building, carrying materials up and down the stairs for 10 hours a day. “Carrying mixed sand in containers on my shoulders up stairs is so hard,” he said. “Sometimes I feel drained, but I have to finish the work and earn my pay.”⁸⁰

Several children described injuries from their work. Moses, 15 years old, worked 13 hours a day welding spare parts onto cars. He said, “Sometimes small bits of metal get into my eyes or cut me on the fingers.”⁸¹ Maria, age 12, worked 7 hours a day crushing stone at a quarry. She said that her hands often got injured and that she got dizzy working under the

⁷⁵ Interview with George, 12, Buikwe, January 26, 2021.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Interview with Blessing, 11 or 12, Moroto, February 2, 2021.

⁷⁸ Interview with Jackson, 13, Moroto, February 1, 2021.

⁷⁹ Interview with Joan, 15, Kampala, January 22, 2021.

⁸⁰ Interview with Daniel, 15, Kampala, January 20, 2021.

⁸¹ Interview with Moses, 15, Kampala, January 22, 2021.

sun for long hours.⁸² Eric, age 14, also crushed stones at a limestone quarry and said that he had been injured many times by flying stones. He said, “The stone particles get in my eyes when we are breaking the stones. I have back pain at night when I lie down, especially on days when I have been breaking stones.”⁸³

Derrick, age 13, worked cleaning fish, and said that “the fish bones pierce my hands, my fingers swell as a result. Yet I have to continue working.”⁸⁴ Salima, age 15, carried bundles of sugarcane, and said that she got cuts all over her body from the sharp edges of the cane stalks.⁸⁵ Evelyn, age 15, used a sharp “slasher” to clear grass and bushes from the grounds of a large fish processing facility. “They can give you huge areas to slash with thorny bushes, that is why my legs are full of wounds,” she said.⁸⁶



Young boys working at a limestone quarry in Moroto District, Uganda. ©2021 Joseph Byomuhangi for ISER

⁸² Interview with Maria, 12, Kampala, January 21, 2021.

⁸³ Interview with Eric, 14, Moroto, February 3, 2021.

⁸⁴ Interview with Derrick, 13, Buikwe, January 25, 2021.

⁸⁵ Interview with Salima, 15, Buikwe, January 28, 2021.

⁸⁶ Interview with Evelyn, 15, Buikwe, January 26, 2021.

George, age 12, collected stones to sell to construction workers. Lifting and carrying the basins of stones was very difficult, he said. “They are very heavy and now I have constant chest pain. I am really thinking about quitting this type of work because I am tired. It is painful.”⁸⁷

Pay Theft and Exploitation

Twenty-one of the 32 children interviewed said their employer refused to pay them at times or cheated them of their pay. Isaac, who worked in sugarcane fields, said that his employer often paid him several days late, and on at least four occasions, refused to pay him at all.⁸⁸ Jonathan, who also worked in sugarcane, said that his employer refused to pay him 10,000 shillings he was owed, claiming that he had not made any profit from the sugarcane he sold.⁸⁹

Maria, age 12, worked crushing stones at a quarry, and was paid 200 shillings (\$0.05) for each jerry can she filled. In a week, she typically earned only 5,000 shillings (\$1.39), but said that her employer often paid her even less if he was unsatisfied with the size of the stones.⁹⁰ Derrick, age 13, worked cleaning fish, typically making less than 2,000 shillings per day (\$0.56), but also said that his employer didn’t always pay him.⁹¹

Three children interviewed worked at a processing facility that prepared silver fish (Lake Victoria sardines, also known as *mukenene*) for export. They each stated that they worked 11 hours a day, 7 days a week, drying fish, carrying stones, and clearing thorny bushes from the facility’s large grounds. They were promised 7,000 shillings per day (\$1.91) but said that their employer rarely paid them the full amount. Janet, age 16, said, “That *muzungu* (white man) can give you a yellow card any time, which means that you are not going to be paid that day. For example, if he calls you and you walk slowly, he gives you a yellow card. When he sees you standing while slashing, he gives you a yellow card... When you are carrying a stone, they expect you to run and yet the stones are very heavy... When slashing, you are not allowed to take a break, even to stand.”⁹² Evelyn, age 15, worked at the same

⁸⁷ Interview with George, 12, Buikwe, January 26, 2021.

⁸⁸ Interview with Isaac, 15, Buikwe, January 30, 2021.

⁸⁹ Interview with Jonathan, 12, Buikwe, January 29, 2021.

⁹⁰ Interview with Maria, 12, Kampala, January 21, 2021.

⁹¹ Interview with Derrick, 13, Buikwe, January 25, 2021.

⁹² Interview with Janet, 16, Buikwe, January 26, 2021.

fish processing facility, and said that one day her employer saw her touching a jackfruit on the compound and deducted 20,000 shillings (\$5.60) from her pay, even though her daily wages were only 7,000 shillings.⁹³

Salima, age 15, worked bundling and carrying heavy loads of sugarcane. Although she and other girls performed the same work as the male workers, she said they were paid less, receiving only 8,000-10,000 shillings per day (\$2.20-2.80), while the boys and men received 15,000 shillings per day (\$4.20).⁹⁴ Moses estimated that the shop where he welded cars took in 300,000 shillings per day (\$83), but despite doing most of the work, said he was paid only 7,000 shillings per day (\$1.90).⁹⁵

Violence and Sexual Harassment

Salima said that in the sugarcane fields where she worked, “The boys and men touch us in an inappropriate way and we have nowhere to report because the boss is never around. They harass us all the time.”⁹⁶ Catherine, age 14, began working in a restaurant when her father lost work during the pandemic, but said male customers “were very indecent with me, touching my bum” and that her employer frequently did not pay her.⁹⁷

Three girls working at the fish processing facility reported that their employer was physically and verbally abusive. One said, “It’s very scary. He calls us ‘monkeys.’”⁹⁸



A girl at a Nakabaat gold mining site in Moroto District, Uganda. She uses the basin to pan for gold. © 2021 Angella Nabwowe Kasule for ISER

⁹³ Interview with Evelyn, 15, Buikwe, January 26, 2021.

⁹⁴ Interview with Salima, 15, Buikwe, January 28, 2021.

⁹⁵ Interview with Moses, 15, Kampala, January 22, 2021.

⁹⁶ Interview with Salima, 15, Buikwe, January 28, 2021.

⁹⁷ Interview with Catherine, 14, Buikwe, January 26, 2021.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

Another said, “There is no peace. There is harassment, beating and reducing pay.”⁹⁹ Despite low pay, exploitation, and mistreatment, the children believed that they had little choice but to continue working. Jonathan, age 12, said that while cutting and carrying sugarcane, older boys sometimes insulted him. “I feel bad when verbally abused and yet I cannot leave the work because I badly need it.”¹⁰⁰ Angela, age 15, said of her employer, “He beats us, he can push you, slap you, but we endure . . . I need the job, I need the money, however little.”¹⁰¹

The Future

At the time of our interviews in early 2021, schools in Uganda had been closed for 9 months and had only reopened for students preparing for school-leaving examinations. Schools opened to other students in March 2021.¹⁰² The Ministry of Education prepared a back-to school campaign with partners, “Kalaamu Teliimba” (“Education Does not Lie”), using posters, fliers, social media, television, and radio to encourage students to return to school.¹⁰³

Nearly every child interviewed for this report expressed a desire to return to school once they reopened, but many stated that school fees were a significant barrier. Some were resigned to never returning to school, or at best, supporting the education of their younger siblings.

Evelyn, age 15, was in lower secondary school when schools closed due to the pandemic. She wanted to return, but her school charged 200,000 shillings (\$55.60) per term. At her current rate of pay (7,000 shillings per day), she would need to save an entire month’s worth of income to pay for a single term.¹⁰⁴ Catherine, age 14, made 150,000 shillings (\$41.70) per month at the fish processing facility, but needed 400,000 shillings (\$111.10)—more than two months’ pay—to pay entrance fees for secondary school.¹⁰⁵

⁹⁹ Interview with Evelyn, 15, Buikwe, January 26, 2021.

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Jonathan, 12, Buikwe, January 29, 2021.

¹⁰¹ Interview with Angela, 15, Buikwe, January 26, 2021.

¹⁰² Ministry of Education and Sports, “Press Information Brief,” February 17, 2021, <http://www.education.go.ug/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Press-Info-Brief-Signed.pdf> (accessed April 21, 2021).

¹⁰³ Letter from Uganda’s Ministry of Education and Sports to Human Rights Watch and Initiative for Social and Economic Rights, April 20, 2021.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Evelyn, 15, Buikwe, January 26, 2021.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Catherine, 14, Buikwe, January 26, 2021.

Isaac, age 15, hoped to earn enough money to go back to school by cutting sugarcane, but soon realized that his earnings were only enough to cover basic needs for himself and his mother.¹⁰⁶ Derrick, age 13, welded cars, earning 7,000 shillings per day (\$1.90) for 13 hours of work. Before the pandemic, he was in lower secondary school, but dropped out because his family could not afford the fees of 250,000 shillings per term (\$69). “I have no hope of going back,” he said. “You see, we are many at home and my father died in August 2020. So I have to continue working to help my mother educate the young ones.”¹⁰⁷ Elijah, age 13, who dropped out of school during grade 4 due to school fees, said he would love to go back to school. “I feel bad when I meet other children who are in school. I want to get a good job, not these ones I am doing of just suffering.”¹⁰⁸

When asked how the Ugandan government could help their families, nearly half of the children interviewed said the government should ensure free education. Salima, age 15, said, “I want the government to remove school fees from government schools. I would love to go back to school. I am tired of suffering.”¹⁰⁹ Others said the government should provide food and other assistance to families living in poverty. Saphina, age 13, said, “The government should buy for us food. Being hungry is hard. You cannot do anything whether at home or school.” Daniel, age 15, said, “The government should not only help my family but all struggling families with some financial assistance to use for basic needs.”

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Isaac, 15, Buikwe, January 30, 2021.

¹⁰⁷ Interview with Derrick, 13, Buikwe, January 25, 2021.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Elijah, 13, Buikwe, January 26, 2021.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Salima, 15, Buikwe, January 28, 2021.

III. Nepal

Nepal has made rapid progress in reducing both poverty and child labor. In less than a decade, the incidence of multidimensional poverty—when an individual or family is affected not just by no, or low, income, but by several deprivations simultaneously, such as no, or insufficient schooling, poor health, malnutrition, or a lack of electricity or clean water—dropped from 59 percent in 2006 to 28.6 percent in 2017.¹¹⁰ Millions of other families were near poverty; approximately 80 percent of households with children under five had a total per person consumption of less than 40,000 rupees (\$374) per year.¹¹¹

The Child Labor (Prohibition and Regulation) Act of 2000 establishes the minimum age for work at 14 and the minimum age for hazardous work at 18.¹¹² According to data from the ILO and the government’s Central Bureau of Statistics, 1.1 million children (15.3 percent) between the ages of 5 and 17 were engaged in child labor in 2018, down from 1.6 million a decade earlier, in 2008.¹¹³

The Pandemic’s Impact on Family Livelihoods

Nearly all of the 25 children interviewed said their families’ income had been negatively affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. Some said that during pandemic-related restrictions, their parents had no work for months at a time. Asim, age 12, said his father was a barber but could not go to work.¹¹⁴ Maimun, age 13, said his parents were farmers, but that during the lockdown, “We couldn’t sell our vegetables. We had to throw away the tomatoes and cauliflower because there was nowhere to sell them.”¹¹⁵ Faiza, age 8, said her parents

¹¹⁰ Government of Nepal National Planning Commission, “Nepal Multidimensional Poverty Index: Analysis Towards Action,” 2018, https://ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/VF-Nepal_2018_vs9_21Dec-2_online.pdf (accessed May 16, 2021).

¹¹¹ UNICEF, “Benefits of Nepal’s Child Grant for current and future generations,” Policy Brief, November 2016, <https://www.unicef.org/nepal/media/2441/file/Benefits%20of%20Nepal%E2%80%99s%20Child%20Grant%20for%20current%20and%20future%20generations.pdf> (accessed May 16, 2021).

¹¹² Government of Nepal, Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, No. 14, enacted 2000, <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/WEBTEXT/57354/65203/> (accessed May 16, 2021). The law was amended in 2017 to raise the minimum age for hazardous labor from 16 to 18.

¹¹³ ILO and Government of Nepal Central Bureau of Statistics, *Nepal Child Labour Report 2021*, April 2021, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-kathmandu/documents/publication/wcms_784225.pdf (accessed May 11, 2021).

¹¹⁴ Interview with Asim, 12, Nepalgunj, February 2, 2021.

¹¹⁵ Interview with Maimun, 13, Nepalgunj, February 3, 2021.

worked as daily wage laborers in construction, but couldn't find work. "My family was very worried about money," she said.¹¹⁶

Kiran, age 15, said the carpet factory where his mother worked shut down for a month because transportation restrictions prevented delivery of carpet threads. "We were borrowing money from the landlord and our relatives to buy food," he said.¹¹⁷ Rupa, age 14, said, "My parents were both working as daily wage laborers before lockdown. But when the lockdown started, they couldn't find work. Nobody was allowed to go anywhere and there was no work. My parents drank a lot and fought with each other about money."¹¹⁸

Sania, age 9, said her father ran his own tailoring shop, but had to close it down during the lockdown.¹¹⁹ Meena, age 12, said her mother worked for a catering company and did not get any work. "We didn't have any source of income for months. We still haven't paid eight months of rent."¹²⁰ Sajit, age 14, said, "My parents couldn't work during the lockdown. We just stayed home and ate the food we got as relief. Our landlord didn't give us rent relief so we have mounting rent that we haven't been able to pay."¹²¹

A World Vision International survey of 618 heads of household in late April 2020 found that 89 percent reported their income had dropped by two-thirds or more since the beginning of the pandemic, and that nearly half were taking loans to meet their basic needs.¹²²

Of the 25 children interviewed, 13 said that their family had received government food assistance during the pandemic, typically in the form of food packages including rice, dal, soap, and oil. Some said they also received masks or hand sanitizer. Many of the children said they received food assistance just once or twice, though 3 of the 25 reported receiving it three times or more. Several of the children working in carpet factories said that they

¹¹⁶ Interview with Faiza, 8, Nepalgunj, February 3, 2021.

¹¹⁷ Interview with Kiran, 15, Kathmandu Valley, January 26, 2021.

¹¹⁸ Interview with Rupa, 14, Kathmandu Valley, February 7, 2021.

¹¹⁹ Interview with Sania, 9, Kathmandu Valley, February 11, 2021.

¹²⁰ Interview with Meena, 12, Kathmandu Valley, February 11, 2021.

¹²¹ Interview with Sajit, 14, Kathmandu Valley, February 13, 2021.

¹²² World Vision International Nepal, *Rapid Need Assessment: Cohesive Response to COVID-19 in Nepal*, May 7, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/World%20Vision%20Briefing%20Paper%20-%20Rapid%20Need%20Assessment%20for%20Cohesive%20COVID-19%20Response%20in%20Nepal%20-%20May%202020.pdf> (accessed April 12, 2021), p. 2.

received food from their employer. Six of the children said their families had not received any assistance, either from the government or an employer.

Schooling

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, schools in Nepal closed on March 18, 2020, affecting over 8 million students.¹²³ The Ministry of Education worked to develop remote learning options through the internet, radio, and television, but according to UNICEF, two-thirds of Nepal's schoolchildren were unable to access them.¹²⁴ Although most Nepali households have electricity, only 34 percent of Nepalis had internet access in 2019.¹²⁵

Twenty of the 25 children interviewed were attending school when the pandemic began. Two girls said they were able to continue their studies online with a mobile phone, and one followed lessons on television for two hours a day. Others said they wanted to continue their studies but had no access to phones with data. Rajesh, age 14, said "I was so desperate, but we didn't have money to buy a phone."¹²⁶ Arun and Deepa, a brother and sister ages 14 and 13, said that during the lockdown, their school was offering online classes. "Apparently our teacher had called our father to inform him but my father had lost his phone so we didn't know about taking online classes."¹²⁷

By January 2021, many schools had reopened. To maintain health protocols and reduce the number of children in the classroom, many schools held two shifts with limited hours.¹²⁸ Of the 25 children interviewed in January and February 2021, 13 were back in school for at

¹²³ "Government of Nepal and partners launch campaign to mitigate learning loss wrought by COVID-19," UNICEF news release, January 13, 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/nepal/press-releases/government-nepal-and-partners-launch-campaign-mitigate-learning-loss-wrought-covid> (accessed May 16, 2021).

¹²⁴ "COVID-19: At least a third of the world's and two-thirds of Nepal's schoolchildren unable to access remote learning during school closures, new UNICEF report says," UNICEF news release, August 28, 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/nepal/press-releases/covid-19-least-third-worlds-and-two-thirds-nepals-schoolchildren-unable-access> (accessed May 16, 2021).

¹²⁵ "Internet penetration rate in Nepal from 2010 to 2019," *Statista*, November 24, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/765517/internet-penetration-rate-nepal/#:~:text=In%202019%2C%20approximately%2034%20percent,Nepal%20were%20using%20the%20internet> (accessed May 16, 2021).

¹²⁶ Interview with Rajesh, 14, Kathmandu Valley, February 11, 2021.

¹²⁷ Interview with Arun, 14, and Deepa, 13, Kathmandu Valley, January 24, 2021.

¹²⁸ Anup Ojha, "Parents apprehensive of sending kids back to schools after nine months," *The Kathmandu Post*, January 17, 2021, <https://kathmandupost.com/valley/2021/01/17/parents-apprehensive-of-sending-kids-back-to-schools-after-nine-months> (accessed May 16, 2021).

least 2 hours per day. In April 2021, the government ordered many urban schools closed again, due to a second wave of Covid-19 cases.

Why Children Went to Work

Most of the children interviewed began working because their families lacked money to pay for housing or food due to the pandemic and were struggling to survive. For many, school closures left them with little to do, making work a logical alternative.

Amir, age 14, stayed at home for the first two months of the lockdown. “There was nothing to do at home since school shut down,” he said. “And with everybody at home, we started to run out of food quickly. I decided to go to work because what else was I going to do? I was really fed up with staying at home. There was just so much going on in the house and money was really scarce.”¹²⁹

Sita, age 14, said her father was out of work for several months due to pandemic-related restrictions and the family had difficulty paying medical bills. “My mother suggested that we could all pitch in. I knew the situation at home. I couldn’t go to school and I couldn’t go anywhere, so I started working.”¹³⁰ Gita, age 14, said that her father had a disability and was unable to work. Before the pandemic, she said, the family “barely got by” on her mother’s salary, and during the lockdown, her mother got less work. “I couldn’t just sit back . . . I had to step up.”¹³¹

Some children were already working before the pandemic began, but increased their hours once schools closed. Sarita, age 13, said that before the lockdown, “I used to weave a little bit here and there” to help her parents at the carpet factory. But a few months into the lockdown, she saw the family didn’t have any food and began to work twelve hours a day.¹³² Similarly, siblings Arun and Deepa, said that before the pandemic, they used to help out occasionally at the carpet factory where their parents worked, but during the lockdown, they started working 14 hours a day. “The school was closed,” Arun said. “And

¹²⁹ Interview with Amir, 14, Nepalgunj, February 2, 2021.

¹³⁰ Interview with Sita, 14, Kathmandu Valley, January 23, 2021.

¹³¹ Interview with Gita, 14, Kathmandu Valley, January 24, 2021.

¹³² Interview with Sarita, 13, Kathmandu Valley, January 24, 2021.

we can't just stay home and eat while doing nothing. The money we earn can help us buy food and other essentials.”¹³³

Long Hours, Low Pay, and Hazardous Working Conditions

The children interviewed worked in brick kilns, carpet factories, in construction, as mechanics, rickshaw drivers, carpenters, and as vendors selling tea, cotton candy, balloons, masks, and other items. Many of the children worked long hours. Of the 25 children interviewed, 18 said that they worked for 8 or more hours a day during the lockdown in 2020, and eight said they worked at least 12 hours a day. Children reported fatigue, dizziness, and pain in their backs, legs, knees, hands, fingers, and eyes from engaging in repetitive motions, sitting for extended periods, or carrying heavy loads.

Seven of the children interviewed worked in carpet factories. Some said that during the lockdown, they worked 14 or more hours a day, and that their back and legs hurt from sitting for so many hours. Working on complicated designs also caused eye strain. Laxmi, age 14, said, “We work by looking at the design map that’s hung above the loom. And the designs are very intricate so my eyes hurt from continuously looking at it. I feel dizzy sometimes and like my eyesight is weak... If I had an alternative, I wouldn’t want to continue weaving carpets.”¹³⁴

Gita, age 14, said that during the lockdown, she wove carpets for nearly 18 hours a day, from 4 a.m. to 10 p.m., taking only an hour break in the afternoon. “My fingers hurt from knotting the threads.... My eyes hurt from looking at the design map... And I sit down for hours so it really hurts my legs.”¹³⁵ Arun, age 14, said “It destroys your fingers. The comb that we use after making knots, when you keep hitting the loom with it, your fingers start to hurt.”¹³⁶ Sunita, age 12, said that working to meet urgent deadlines was very stressful. “We end up working without taking breaks. We don’t even get to go to the toilet. We’re struggling to finish the loom so we hold it for as long as we can to buy time.”¹³⁷

¹³³ Interview with Arun, 14, Kathmandu Valley, January 24, 2021.

¹³⁴ Interview with Laxmi, 14, Kathmandu Valley, January 23, 2021.

¹³⁵ Interview with Gita, 14, Kathmandu Valley, January 24, 2021.

¹³⁶ Interview with Arun, 14, Kathmandu Valley, January 24, 2021.

¹³⁷ Interview with Sunita, 12, Kathmandu Valley, January 19, 2021.



A 14-year-old boy from Dolakha district at a brick kiln in Bholachhe, Bhaktapur, Nepal where he lives with his aunt's family. He works as a carpenter's apprentice in the day and helps his aunt's family make bricks in the mornings and evenings. He dropped out of school four years ago and believes that he's too old to resume schooling. © 2021 Nikita Tripathi for Human Rights Watch

Two of the children worked at a brick kiln. A 2020 survey by the International Labor Organization, UNICEF Nepal, and Nepal's Central Bureau of Statistics found that over 17,000 children are engaged in child labor in Nepal's brick kilns, making up approximately 10 percent of workers in the kilns.¹³⁸ Faiza, age 8, said, "I help my mother do the mixing and I help my father stack bricks, even though I can't carry more than two or three at a time."¹³⁹ Rupa, age 14, said, "I can only carry five or six wet bricks at a time. Seven if they're dry. It's tiring. It hurts your hands. You have to squat while making bricks and it hurts your knees."¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ ILO, UNICEF, and Government of Nepal Central Bureau of Statistics, *Report on Employment Relationship Survey in the Brick Industry in Nepal*, December 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/nepal/media/11896/file/Employment%20Relationships%20in%20the%20Brick%20Industry%20in%20Nepal%20.pdf> (accessed May 16, 2021), p. xv.

¹³⁹ Interview with Faiza, 8, Nepalgunj, February 3, 2021.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Rupa, 14, Kathmandu Valley, February 7, 2021.

Children working in carpet factories and brick kilns received no direct payment; employers pay their parents based on a piece rate. Sita, age 14, said “Me and my parents work on the same loom so my parents get the money from the owner. They don’t tell me [the amount] and I don’t ask.”¹⁴¹ Several of the other children working at carpet factories estimated that their labor increased their parents’ wages by 3,000-7,500 rupees per month (\$25.50-64.76). Faiza, age 8, worked at a brick kiln with her parents and 10-year-old brother, and said that her parents were paid by the number of bricks they made. On a typical day, the four of them made 1,500 bricks and were paid a total of 1,800 rupees (\$15.47).¹⁴²

Rupa, age 14, said that three years before the pandemic, she and her sister began working with her father at a brick kiln to help him repay a loan to the brick kiln owner. When the pandemic began, she was in grade 9 and still attending school. During the lockdown, she began working more hours. “We were always working and took breaks only to cook and eat.” When school re-opened, she continued working for six hours a day. Even so, she said, “We’re not making money right now. We’re going backwards. My parents are in a lot of debt. So, we’re paying it off by making bricks. We still have 50,000-60,000 rupees (\$424-\$510) to repay.”¹⁴³

Nepal’s minimum wage is 13,450 rupees per month (\$115.60),¹⁴⁴ or 517 rupees per day (\$4.44).¹⁴⁵ The majority of the children interviewed made far less. Bishal, age 14, for example, made 200-300 rupees a day (\$1.70-2.55) selling masks and chewing tobacco for ten hours a day at the Nepal-Indian border, and said that standing for hours in the sun or in the cold was difficult. “I have to stretch the hand with the masks so my hands get tired.”¹⁴⁶ Dipak, age 10, said he made 200-300 rupees per day (\$1.70-2.55) selling bird food and balloons at Durbar Square in Kathmandu. “You have to walk around. It’s very tiring. It hurts my legs.”¹⁴⁷

¹⁴¹ Interview with Sita, 14, Kathmandu Valley, January 23, 2021.

¹⁴² Interview with Faiza, 8, Nepalgunj, February 3, 2021.

¹⁴³ Interview with Rupa, 15, Kathmandu Valley, February 7, 2021.

¹⁴⁴ Dev Narayan Sah, “Minimum wage raised to Rs13,450 per month,” *The Kathmandu Post*, July 10, 2018, <https://kathmandupost.com/money/2018/07/10/minimum-wage-raised-to-rs13450-per-month> (accessed May 16, 2021).

¹⁴⁵ Umesh Poudel, “Minimum monthly wage for workers set at Rs 13,450,” *The Himalayan Times*, July 10, 2018, <https://thehimalayantimes.com/business/minimum-monthly-wage-for-workers-set-at-rs-13450> (accessed May 16, 2021).

¹⁴⁶ Interview with Bishal, 14, Nepalgunj, February 1, 2021.

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Dipak, 10, Kathmandu Valley, February 11, 2021.



A 9-year-old girl sells balloons in Durbar Square in Patan, Nepal. Her father had to close his tailoring shop because of lockdowns to slow the spread of Covid-19. She says her father had stopped drinking for years but the lockdown and subsequent financial burden drove him to start again, “He comes home drunk and my parents get into fights.” © 2021 Nikita Tripathi for Human Rights Watch

Kiran, age 15, worked around 13 hours a day helping to load and unload a cargo van, and said he made 8,000 rupees per month (\$68).¹⁴⁸ Alam, 16, worked as a day laborer at construction sites, carrying bricks, sand, and gravel, making 600 rupees per day (\$5.10). “None of it is easy. Everything is difficult. You get tired. You sweat. You get dirty.”¹⁴⁹

Amir, age 14, drove a rickshaw for 14 hours a day, seven days a week in Nepalgunj, near the Indian border. “The rickshaw is open so driving during winter is extremely difficult. My hands are always shivering in the morning because of cold. And if I’m driving passengers around back-to-back, my back and knees hurt.”¹⁵⁰ He said that he usually made 400-600 rupees a day (\$3.40-5.10) after paying the rickshaw owner a rental fee of 600 rupees per

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Kiran, 15, Kathmandu Valley, January 26, 2021.

¹⁴⁹ Interview with Alam, 16, Nepalgunj, February 2, 2021.

¹⁵⁰ Interview with Amir, 14, Nepalgunj, February 2, 2021.

day (\$5.10).¹⁵¹ Samir, age 15, similarly said that he made 300-600 rupees a day (\$2.55-5.10) driving a rickshaw, but that there were days when he did not make enough to cover the rickshaw's rental fee.¹⁵²

Some of the children described hazardous work. Sajit, age 14, worked as a carpenter at a furniture shop and said, "Using the planer can cut your hand off. It's easy to slip up."¹⁵³ Dinesh, age 13, worked with his uncle in construction, putting up metal scaffolding. "Metal frames are heavy," he said. "If you're not careful, you get hurt."¹⁵⁴

Work in brick kilns can also be hazardous. A 2020 survey by the ILO, UNICEF, and Nepal's Central Bureau of Statistics found that 64 percent of children working in brick kilns were exposed to dust and flames, 42 percent worked excessive hours (more than 36 hours per week), and 32 percent carried heavy loads.¹⁵⁵ Construction and carpet weaving are included in Nepal's hazardous work list, i.e. areas of work considered hazardous and therefore prohibited for children.¹⁵⁶

Combining Work and School

Most of the children interviewed who were attending school before the lockdown returned once schools reopened, but also continued to work. Juggling both could be very difficult. Gita, age 14, who said she wove carpets for nearly 18 hours a day during the lockdown, continued weaving for more than 12 hours a day after returning to school. She began work at 4 a.m. and wove for five hours before school, and another eight hours after she got home.¹⁵⁷ Sita, age 14, said she wove carpets from 4 a.m. until 8:30 a.m., then walked 30 minutes to get to school. After three hours of classes, she walked home and then worked

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Interview with Samir, 15, Nepalgunj, February 1, 2021.

¹⁵³ Interview with Sajit, 14, Kathmandu Valley, February 13, 2021.

¹⁵⁴ Interview with Dinesh, 13, Nepalgunj, February 1, 2021.

¹⁵⁵ ILO, UNICEF, and Government of Nepal Central Bureau of Statistics, *Report on Employment Relationship Survey in the Brick Industry in Nepal*, December 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/nepal/media/11896/file/Employment%20Relationships%20in%20the%20Brick%20Industry%20in%20Nepal%20.pdf> (accessed May 16, 2021), p. xvi.

¹⁵⁶ ILO, "Hazardous Work List: Nepal," May 2016, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---sro-new-delhi/documents/genericdocument/wcms_486747.pdf (accessed May 16, 2021).

¹⁵⁷ Interview with Gita, 14, Kathmandu Valley, January 24, 2021.

for another five hours, from 2 p.m. to 7 p.m. “I’m always thinking, ‘When will this be over?’ ... I just wish I didn’t have to do it.”¹⁵⁸

Rita, age 15, worked in the carpet factory for four or five hours in the morning before school. “It’s difficult to work and study,” she said. “If there’s an urgent order, and homework, exams, et cetera, it’s really difficult to manage both.”¹⁵⁹ Rupa, age 14, got up at 2 a.m. to work at a brick kiln for six hours before walking an hour to get to school. She said that between work, school, and chores at home, “There’s no time to do any reading or homework.”¹⁶⁰

The Future

Most of the children interviewed wanted to continue their education and some imagined eventually working in other jobs, such as a tailor, teacher, nurse, doctor, or opening their own shop. Fourteen-year-old Bishal said, “I want to study and become someone important.”¹⁶¹ Gita, age 14, was not sure what kind of work she wanted but said, “I don’t want to weave carpets. I want to do something else.”¹⁶²

Even though many schools had reopened in early 2021, several of the children said that they had no plans to return and that their families were still struggling. Kiran, age 15, was in grade 4 before the pandemic began, but had not gone back to school and planned to keep working, loading and unloading a cargo van. “We need money right now. My mother needs help.”¹⁶³

Sajit, age 14, dropped out of school and started working at age 12 because his father was sick with tuberculosis and the family needed money. During the lockdown, his parents had no work for several months and went further into debt. He said, “I enjoy working more than I ever enjoyed going to school. And if I go back to school now, my family will go further into

¹⁵⁸ Interview with Sita, 14, Kathmandu Valley, January 23, 2021.

¹⁵⁹ Interview with Rita, 15, Kathmandu Valley, January 19, 2021.

¹⁶⁰ Interview with Rupa, 14, Kathmandu Valley, February 7, 2021.

¹⁶¹ Interview with Bishal, 14, Nepalgunj, February 1, 2021.

¹⁶² Interview with Gita, 14, Kathmandu Valley, January 24, 2021.

¹⁶³ Interview with Kiran, 15, Kathmandu Valley, January 26, 2021.

debt. We have a lot of debt to repay and I cannot add more expenses to what's already there.”¹⁶⁴

Some of the children said they did not want to return to school and preferred to work. Maimun, age 13, worked as a mechanic, servicing motorcycles and scooters. “I have learned how to repair motorcycles and I feel accomplished when I do something on my own... I have already spent so much time learning and improving my skills, so why would I leave this to go to school now?”¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴ Interview with Sajit, 14, Kathmandu Valley, February 13, 2021.

¹⁶⁵ Interview with Maimun, 13, Nepalgunj, February 3, 2021.

IV. Ghana

According to the World Bank, Ghana reduced its poverty rate by half over the last 30 years, with the share of the population living below the national poverty line falling from 52.7 percent in 1992 to 24.2 percent in 2012.¹⁶⁶ In 2013, Ghana became one of the few countries in Sub-Saharan Africa to achieve middle income status.¹⁶⁷ However, progress in reducing poverty slowed after 2012, with an estimated 23.4 percent of the population still living in poverty in 2016.¹⁶⁸ Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, one in three children in Ghana already lived below the monetary poverty line, and two in three children were multidimensionally poor—meaning that their families not only had no or low income, but also experienced other disadvantages such as no, or insufficient education, poor health, or malnutrition.¹⁶⁹ An estimated 30 percent of children aged 5 to 17 were engaged in child labor in 2018.¹⁷⁰

Under the Ghana Children’s Act of 1998, the minimum age of employment is fifteen, although children may do “light work” beginning at age 13. The minimum age for performing hazardous work is 18.¹⁷¹

The Pandemic’s Impact on Family Livelihoods

Nearly all of the 24 children interviewed said that their family’s income was affected during the pandemic and resulting lockdown. Kofi, age 11, said his mother was a bread seller, but due to the slowdown of the economy, sales had suffered.¹⁷² Kwabena, age 16, said, “My father’s job [as a carpenter] has gone. He is not making as much furniture as he used to

¹⁶⁶ World Bank, “Ghana Poverty Assessment,” November 2020, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/34804/Ghana-Poverty-Assessment.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> (accessed April 14, 2021), p. 9.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ UNICEF Ghana and the Social Policy Research Institute, *Primary and Secondary Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Children in Ghana*, January 2021, [https://www.unicef.org/ghana/media/3486/file/Effects%20of%20COVID-19%20on%20Women%20and%20Children%20in%20Ghana%20\(I\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/ghana/media/3486/file/Effects%20of%20COVID-19%20on%20Women%20and%20Children%20in%20Ghana%20(I).pdf) (accessed May 16, 2021), p. iv.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁷¹ Government of the Republic of Ghana, The Children’s Act, Act 560, Enacted September 24, 1998, <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/WEBTEXT/56216/65194/E98GHA01.htm> (accessed May 16, 2021), sections 89 and 91.

¹⁷² Interview with Kofi, 11, Kpando-Torkor, February 27, 2021.

and his income has reduced.”¹⁷³ Anthony, age 12, said his parents were farmers and due to the pandemic, people no longer had money to purchase the food they produced.¹⁷⁴

Kwame, age 15, said that his mother worked selling fish. He explained that her sales at the market suffered because fewer people visited the market and traders were expected to reduce their workdays to only two or three days per week to maintain social distancing and reduce congestion at the market. He said, “Food became a problem because all of my siblings were at home and my mother had little money to care for us.”¹⁷⁵

During the pandemic, the government of Ghana suspended fees for water and electricity.¹⁷⁶ When asked about assistance from the government, three of the children interviewed said that their family received free water. The remaining 21 children said that their families had not received any government assistance during the pandemic, although researchers were not able to confirm this with the children’s parents or guardians.

Schooling

Nationwide school closures in Ghana began on March 16, 2020, affecting approximately 9,253,000 students from pre-primary through secondary school. Schools began reopening in a phased approach in June 2020, with students in the final year of lower and higher secondary school returning in August 2020. Schools re-opened to most other students in January 2021.¹⁷⁷

Most of the children interviewed were attending school when schools were shut down to limit the spread of the coronavirus. For some, school closures affected their access to food. Edward, age 12, said that he had received free meals at school, but after schools shut down, he and his three siblings no longer had access to the meals.¹⁷⁸ Patience, age

¹⁷³ Interview with Kwabena, 16, Gbani, March 1, 2021.

¹⁷⁴ Interview with Anthony, 12, Kpando-Torkor, February 27, 2021.

¹⁷⁵ Interview with Kwame, 15, Kpando-Torkor, February 27, 2021.

¹⁷⁶ “Ghana: Press focuses on 3-month extension of free water, electricity for lifeline customers, others,” *APA News*, January 4, 2021, <http://www.apanews.net/en/news/ghana-press-focuses-on-3-month-extension-of-free-water-electricity-for-lifeline-customers-others/> (accessed May 16, 2021).

¹⁷⁷ UNICEF Ghana and the Social Policy Research Institute, *Primary and Secondary Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Children in Ghana*, January 2021, [https://www.unicef.org/ghana/media/3486/file/Effects%20of%20COVID-19%20on%20Women%20and%20Children%20in%20Ghana%20\(I\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/ghana/media/3486/file/Effects%20of%20COVID-19%20on%20Women%20and%20Children%20in%20Ghana%20(I).pdf) (accessed May 16, 2021), p. 11.

¹⁷⁸ Interview with Edward, 12, Kpando-Torkor, February 27, 2021.

14, who has eight siblings, said, “My parents’ fishing business has gone down because there are few buyers at the market. I could not benefit from the free meals at school. It was a burden for my parents.”¹⁷⁹

Although the government provided distance learning programs, UNICEF Ghana and the Social Policy Research Institute found that children without access to televisions, mobile devices, and internet were unable to access the programs.¹⁸⁰ A survey conducted in May 2020 found that only 32 percent of households with a child in school had received communications from the child’s school and that 40 percent of children were no longer engaged in learning activities.¹⁸¹ None of the children interviewed for this report at the start of 2021 reported access to distance learning during in-person school closures.

Why Children Went to Work

Most of the children interviewed said they began to work to support their families. Joseph said his mother was a trader and did not make enough money to support him and his eight siblings. “I went to work to at least care for myself,” he said.¹⁸² Kofi, age 11, said, “I realized my family had financial problems and my friends were telling me about the money they have been getting from carrying goods.”¹⁸³ Patience, age 14, went to work gutting and scaling fish. “I had no choice but to help my mother,” she said. “If I don’t do it, life will be tough for all of us.”¹⁸⁴

Several of the children said that they went to work because of a combination of family hardship and the fact that they had little to do while schools were closed. Ebenezer, age 15, said, “I was idle at home after schools closed down, so I decided to work to reduce the burden on my mum.”¹⁸⁵

¹⁷⁹ Interview with Patience, 16, Kpando-Torkor, February 27, 2021.

¹⁸⁰ UNICEF Ghana and the Social Policy Research Institute, *Primary and Secondary Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Children in Ghana*, January 2021, [https://www.unicef.org/ghana/media/3486/file/Effects%20of%20COVID-19%20on%20Women%20and%20Children%20in%20Ghana%20\(I\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/ghana/media/3486/file/Effects%20of%20COVID-19%20on%20Women%20and%20Children%20in%20Ghana%20(I).pdf) (accessed April 14, 2021).

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁸² Interview with Joseph, 16, Prestea, February 22, 2021.

¹⁸³ Interview with Kofi, 11, Kpando-Torkor, February 27, 2021.

¹⁸⁴ Interview with Patience, 16, Kpando-Torkor, February 27, 2021.

¹⁸⁵ Interview with Ebenezer, 15, Prestea, February 22, 2021.



An 11-year-old boy in Ghana describes his work carrying fish, goods, and produce for shopkeepers to Stephen Ahorlu from Friends of the Nation. He said that lifting heavy loads was a challenge and that he often experienced neck pain. On some days, he works more than eight hours but is paid only 7 cedis (US\$1.21). He said that some clients delayed paying him, and that others refused to pay him at all. © 2021 Solomon Kusi Ampofo for Friends of the Nation.

Several children said they also worked to earn money for their schooling. Although primary and lower secondary schools are tuition-free, families typically pay up to 700 cedis (\$121) for books, uniforms, and other expenses.¹⁸⁶ Ibrahim, in grade 7, said that he began working to pay for food, as well as books and uniforms.¹⁸⁷ Daniel, age 17, had completed lower secondary school in 2020 and was awaiting his placement in upper secondary school. He said, “I started work to support my mum and earn enough money to pay for my senior high school education when the time comes.”¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ Interviews with respondents, February 2021.

¹⁸⁷ Interview with Ibrahim, 14, Prestea, February 23, 2021.

¹⁸⁸ Interview with Daniel, 17, Prestea, February 22, 2021.

At least 5 of the 24 children interviewed had been working before the pandemic to help their family. Mary said she had begun work three years earlier, when she was 11. “I had to sell water to support my family and my school needs.”¹⁸⁹ Anthony, age 12, started work in 2017 after his father was disabled in a traffic accident. “I had to step in,” he said, and now supervises other children who operate his father’s commercial pushcart and tricycle to transport goods.¹⁹⁰ Albert, age 16, said both his parents were dead and that he started working at age 12, after his mother died. “There was no one to take care of me,” he said.¹⁹¹

Surveys conducted by UNICEF Ghana and the Social Policy Research Institute in June 2020 suggested that the proportion of working children had increased by over 10 percent since the beginning of the pandemic.¹⁹²

Long Hours, Low Pay, and Pay Theft

The children interviewed worked in carpentry, gold mining, fishing, and transporting and selling goods. Many of them worked very long hours carrying heavy loads and reported exhaustion and bodily pain. Some handled highly toxic substances and reported respiratory difficulties or headaches from breathing dust and fumes.

During school closures, Edward, age 12, worked 11 hours a day carting fish from the riverside to market. “The most difficult part of my work is when I have to cart a very heavy load. Sometimes it is very heavy, yet I have no option but to cart it for the money. If my boss gets to know I refused to cart a load because it was heavy, he will not be happy with me.” He said that despite his long hours, he receives only 2-3 cedis per day (\$0.34-0.52). “On many days, I go very hungry.”¹⁹³

Abigail, age 14, worked 8-12 hours a day during the lockdown, processing and carrying heavy loads of fish. “Working for long hours is difficult. You cannot rest when the fish is being processed or else it will go bad, and you can’t rest while it is being smoked or it will

¹⁸⁹ Interview with Mary, 14, Kpando-Torkor, February 27, 2021.

¹⁹⁰ Interview with Anthony, 12, Kpando-Torkor, February 27, 2021.

¹⁹¹ Interview with Albert, 16, Gbani, March 1, 2021.

¹⁹² UNICEF Ghana and the Social Policy Research Institute, *Primary and Secondary Impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Children in Ghana*, January 2021, [https://www.unicef.org/ghana/media/3486/file/Effects%20of%20COVID-19%20on%20Women%20and%20Children%20in%20Ghana%20\(I\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/ghana/media/3486/file/Effects%20of%20COVID-19%20on%20Women%20and%20Children%20in%20Ghana%20(I).pdf) (accessed May 16, 2021), p. iv.

¹⁹³ Interview with Edward, 12, Kpando-Torkor, February 27, 2021.

burn.” She returned to school in January 2021 but continued to work 23 to 28 hours per week.¹⁹⁴

Some of the children had been working before the pandemic but increased their hours after schools closed and pandemic-related restrictions began. Kwame, age 15, began working with his father, a fisherman, when he was 12, while also attending school. When schools closed during the pandemic, he began working up to 18 hours a day, beginning at 5 a.m. and ending at 11 p.m. He said he managed nets and ropes on the fishing canoe, carried nets and fish, and fetched fuel. His father paid him 50-100 cedis per week (\$8.66-17.33).¹⁹⁵ Robert, age 14, also began working at age 12 as an apprentice carpenter, making fishing canoes, chairs, and other items. During the lockdown, he said he worked 11 hours a day, 6 days a week, but was paid little. He said his employer sold the canoes for 2,600-4,500 cedis each (\$450-780), but paid Robert only 20 cedis (\$3.46) for each of the canoes he made.¹⁹⁶

Kofi, 11 years old, worked carrying goods and produce, including maize, cassava, charcoal, fish, beverages, and helped shopkeepers stock their stores. He said that lifting heavy loads was a challenge and that he often experienced neck pain. During the lockdown, he worked 8 and a half hours a day, and 11 hours on market days. His pay was meager. He said on a “good” day he received 12 cedis (\$2.08), but on a “bad” day he received as little as 7 cedis (\$1.21). He said that some clients delayed paying him, and that others refused to pay him at all.¹⁹⁷

Other children also reported that they were cheated of their earnings. Mary, age 14, started working at age 11, selling water and ice cream at the market and train station. She said, “Some people treat me good and others do not. Some buy water and do not pay.”¹⁹⁸ She lived with her aunt and said that her aunt sometimes beat her when customers did not pay.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁴ Interview with Abigail, 14, Kpando-Torkor, February 27, 2021.

¹⁹⁵ Interview with Kwame, 15, Kpando-Torkor, February 27, 2021.

¹⁹⁶ Interview with Robert, 14, Kpando-Torkor, February 27, 2021.

¹⁹⁷ Interview with Kofi, 11, Kpando-Torkor, February 27, 2021.

¹⁹⁸ Interview with Mary, 14, Kpando-Torkor, February 27, 2021.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

Several of the children worked to help in their parents' business and said they did not get paid apart from a small amount of spending money. Patience, age 14, worked about 9 hours a day during the height of the pandemic, helping her mother scale and gut fish. After returning to school, she continued working 3-4 hours a day after her classes, and said her mother gave her 3 cedis (\$0.52) for spending money.²⁰⁰ Abigail, age 14, worked 8-12 hours a day with her grandmother during the lockdown, processing and selling fish. "I am not paid, as it is a family business," she said. "My grandmother provides me with my needs."²⁰¹



Women and children carry pans of ore at Dompim mining site, Tarkwa-Nsuaem district, Western Region, Ghana. © 2014 Juliane Kippenberg/Human Rights Watch

Child Labor in Gold Mining

Of the 24 Ghanaian children interviewed for this report, 15 worked in gold mining. Ghana is the seventh largest gold producer in the world,²⁰² and thousands of children work in Ghana's artisanal and small-scale gold mines, even though national law prohibits the work as hazardous for children.

Human Rights Watch published a report on hazardous child labor in Ghana's gold mining sector in 2015 and found that

children worked in hazardous conditions pulling the gold ore out of shafts, carrying and crushing loads of ore, and processing it with toxic mercury.²⁰³ The government of Ghana has recognized child labor in artisanal gold mining as a "rapidly growing concern," and in its 2017-2021 action plan on child labor, identified it as a worst form of child labor

²⁰⁰ Interview with Patience, 16, Kpando-Torkor, February 27, 2021.

²⁰¹ Interview with Abigail, 14, Kpando-Torkor, February 27, 2021.

²⁰² Frank Holmes - U.S. Global Investors, "Top 10 Gold Producing Countries," *Mining.com*, September 23, 2020, <https://www.mining.com/web/top-10-gold-producing-countries/> (accessed March 17, 2021).

²⁰³ Human Rights Watch, *Precious Metal, Cheap Labor: Child Labor and Corporate Responsibility in Ghana's Artisanal Gold Mines*, June 2015, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/06/10/precious-metal-cheap-labor/child-labor-and-corporate-responsibility-ghanas>

requiring immediate attention “because of the enormous health problems, including mercury poisoning, and other impact on children and the environment.”²⁰⁴

Most of the children interviewed for this report described hazardous working conditions at the mine sites. They said they carried heavy loads, crushed ore with hammers, breathed dust from processing machines, and handled toxic mercury. Thomas, age 16, started working at a mine site at age 12 to help support his family. He said, “I am a ‘loco boy’ and a ‘blast man.’”²⁰⁵ He explained that in addition to carrying sacks of ore, he also uses explosives to blast the ore. “Carrying the loads is hard work,” he said, “and the fumes from the blasts cause chest pains and headaches.”²⁰⁶ Solomon, age 14, said he worked 12 hours a day as a “loco boy” at a gold mine, and often felt body pain from carrying sacks of ore from the bottom of the mine pit to the top.²⁰⁷

Several of the children described crushing ore into smaller pieces with a hammer so that it could be processed by a crushing machine. Ibrahim, age 14, said crushing ore with a hammer was the most difficult part of the work. “I get really exhausted whenever I do that,” he said.²⁰⁸ He worked five hours a day after school, receiving 20 cedis (\$3.40).²⁰⁹



Two boys, 9 and 12 years old, demonstrate their daily work of washing and sluicing gold ore in Homase, Amansie Central district, Ashanti Region, Ghana. © 2014 Juliane Kippenberg/Human Rights Watch

²⁰⁴ Government of the Republic of Ghana, UNICEF, ILO, International Cocoa Initiative, “National Plan of Action Phase II (NPA2) for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour in Ghana (2017–2021): Towards Achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8.7.,” 2017, <https://www.unicef.org/ghana/media/1836/file/National%20Plan%20of%20Action%20to%20Eliminate%20the%20Worst%20Forms%20of%20Child%20Labour.pdf> (accessed March 17, 2021), p. 43.

²⁰⁵ Interview with Thomas, 16, Gbani, March 1, 2021.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Interview with Solomon, 14, Gbani, March 1, 2021.

²⁰⁸ Interview with Ibrahim, 14, Prestea, February 23, 2021.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

Crushing the ore and processing machines create dust particles in the air that workers breathe into their lungs. Charles, age 13, carried milled ore from a crushing machine to a sluice board to be “washed” and said that inhaling the dust from the crushing machine made him feel like he was choking.²¹⁰ Two 14-year-old girls, Beatrice and Janet, both worked carrying ore to a processing center for crushing, and said that they developed coughs from inhaling the dust at the processing site.²¹¹

Nine of the 12 boys interviewed who worked at gold mining sites reported that they used mercury to extract gold from the ore. They mixed liquid mercury into the ore, where it attracts gold particles, and then placed the resulting amalgam on a fire to burn off the mercury, leaving raw gold. Mercury is relatively cheap, but highly toxic. It attacks the central nervous system and can cause lifelong disability, including brain damage. Higher levels of mercury exposure may result in kidney failure, respiratory failure, and death. Mercury is particularly harmful to children, as their systems are still developing, and its damage is irreversible.²¹²

Some of the children were paid a daily rate for their work at the gold mines, while others received a portion of processed ore and were able to sell the gold they extracted. Daniel, age 17, worked 10 hours a day at a mine site carrying ore, and said he was paid 100 cedis per day (\$17.33).²¹³ Peter, age 16, worked 4 hours a day hammering ore for 20 cedis per day (\$3.46).²¹⁴ William, who “washed” ore, said he was paid 50 cedis per day (\$8.66) when working 9 hours, and 20 cedis (\$3.46) when working 3-4 hours.²¹⁵

²¹⁰ Interview with Charles, 13, Prestea, February 22, 2021.

²¹¹ Interviews with Beatrice, 14, and Janet, 14, Gbani, March 1, 2021.

²¹² Herman Gibb and Keri Grace O’Leary, “Mercury Exposure and Health Impacts among Individuals in the Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining Community: A Comprehensive Review,” *Environmental Health Perspectives*, vol. 122 (7), July 2014, accessed May 17, 2021, doi:10.1289/ehp.1307864; Stephan Böse-O’Reilly et al., “Mercury as Serious Health Hazard for Children in Gold Mining Areas,” *Environmental Research*, vol. 107 (2008), accessed May 17, 2021, doi: 10.1016/j.envres.2008.01.009, pp. 89-97; Stephan Böse-O’Reilly et al., “Mercury Exposure and Children’s Health,” *Current Problems in Pediatric and Adolescent Health Care*, vol. 40 (2010), accessed May 17, 2021, doi: 10.1016/j.cppeds.2010.07.002, pp. 186-215.

²¹³ Interview with Daniel, 17, Prestea, February 22, 2021.

²¹⁴ Interview with Peter, 16, Prestea, February 22, 2021.

²¹⁵ Interview with William, 13, Prestea, February 23, 2021.

Combining Work and School

After schools fully reopened in January 2021, the majority of the children interviewed returned, but continued to work before or after school. Abigail, age 14, worked 8-12 hours per day with her grandmother to process and sell fish during the lockdown, but worked 3-4 hours per day and 8 hours on Saturdays after returning to school.²¹⁶

Some children reported that their school attendance suffered due to demands of work. Anthony, age 12, said “I still spend most time at work.... I wish I could attend school more regularly.”²¹⁷ Edward, age 12, also returned to school but said “I do not attend regularly, because I must work to eat.”²¹⁸

Albert, an orphan, lived at a mine site where he worked 12 hours a day, and said he couldn’t go back to school. “If I go to school, I have no one to take care of me.”²¹⁹ Several other children said that even though schools had reopened, they had not yet returned because they still needed to earn money to buy schoolbooks and uniforms.

The Future

Most of the children expressed a desire to continue their education. Daniel, age 17, said “I hope the financial burden on my mum is reduced so I can finish school and become a better person.”²²⁰ Francis, age 13, said he has returned to school “because I want a better life for myself in the future.”²²¹ He hopes to become a police officer and make enough money to support his five siblings.²²²

The majority of the children also expressed a desire for greater government support for their families. Charles, age 13, said, “The government could help by providing educational

²¹⁶ Interview with Abigail, 14, Kpando-Torkor, February 27, 2021.

²¹⁷ Interview with Anthony, 12, Kpando-Torkor, February 27, 2021.

²¹⁸ Interview with Edward, 12, Kpando-Torkor, February 27, 2021.

²¹⁹ Interview with Albert, 16, Gbani, March 1, 2021.

²²⁰ Interview with Daniel, 17, Prestea, February 22, 2021.

²²¹ Interview with Francis, 13, Prestea, February 23, 2021.

²²² Ibid.

material for us so the financial burden on my father reduces.”²²³ Ibrahim, age 14, said, “The government should support my family with food, money, and clothes.”²²⁴

²²³ Interview with Charles, 13, Prestea, February 22, 2021.

²²⁴ Interview with Ibrahim, 14, Prestea, February 23, 2021.

V. Use of Cash Allowances by Uganda, Nepal, and Ghana

Uganda

Prior to the pandemic, Uganda allocated approximately 0.14 percent of its GDP to cash transfers, far lower than its East African neighbors, such as Kenya (0.4 percent) and Rwanda (0.3 percent).²²⁵ Its total social safety net spending was approximately half of the regional average in Sub-Saharan Africa, with approximately 80 percent coming from outside donors.²²⁶

After the onset of the pandemic, the government initiated an emergency program in April 2020 targeting 1.4 million people in Kampala and Wakiso districts for food assistance. The initiative was criticized for targeting districts with some of the lowest poverty rates in the country (3 percent), compared to much higher rates in Karamoja (61 percent), Bukedi (48 percent) and Busoga (42 percent) sub-regions.²²⁷ In Karamoja, the government and World Food Program distributed take-home food rations in July and November 2020 to 117,000 children who were no longer receiving school meals.²²⁸

In June 2020, the minister of finance presented the government's FY2020/2021 budget, dubbed the "Covid-19 budget." While the budget was 12.36 percent higher than the previous year's, its structure largely matched the previous, pre-pandemic budget. The budget allocation for social protection was slightly higher, with 0.4 percent of the overall government budget. The two main direct cash transfer programs—the Senior Citizens Grant and Northern Uganda Social Action Fund—were projected to cover only 3 percent of the population.²²⁹ Neither program targeted households with children.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ World Bank, *The State of Social Safety Nets 2018*, 2018, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/29115/9781464812545.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y> (accessed May 17, 2021), pp. 18, 20.

²²⁷ Ibid., p. 18.

²²⁸ Letter from Uganda's Ministry of Education and Sports to Human Rights Watch and Initiative for Social and Economic Rights, April 20, 2021. See also "Government and WFP distribute take-home food for 130,000 school children in Karamoja," World Food Programme news release, July 14, 2020, <https://www.wfp.org/news/government-and-wfp-distribute-take-home-food-130000-school-children-karamoja> (accessed April 1, 2021).

²²⁹ Ibid., p. 17.

Donors provided some cash transfer assistance. In August 2020, for example, GiveDirectly launched a US\$10 million cash transfer program, funded by USAID, to support people who lost income due to the pandemic and were at risk of food insecurity. The program was intended to benefit 120,000 people in six cities, with payments of \$27 per month for 3 months. However, in September 2020 the government initiated an investigation and then suspended the program, although no irregularities were ever substantiated.²³⁰ In another donor-supported initiative, Sweden funded one-time emergency cash transfers (ranging from 96,000-144,000 shillings (\$26-39)), administered by the Ugandan government and the World Food Program, to approximately 56,000 women and children impacted by Covid-19 in the West Nile sub-region in October.²³¹

Development Initiatives, a UK-based international development organization, criticized the Ugandan government for directing its Covid-19 relief primarily to the formal sector and people living in urban areas, rather than more vulnerable people working in the informal sector and those living in rural areas. “When compared to need,” it said, “the few programmes in place have left out significant numbers of vulnerable people.”²³² According to Initiative for Social and Economic Rights, in December 2020 only 3 percent of the 9.5 million people believed to be in need were receiving social protection coverage.²³³

Nepal

In 2009-10, the Nepali government introduced a Child Grant program to support vulnerable families with children under five. The program initially targeted families in the Karnali

²³⁰ Sara Jerving, “In Uganda, a government suspension results in a \$10M loss for GiveDirectly,” *Devex International Development*, November 5, 2020, <https://www.devex.com/news/in-uganda-a-government-suspension-results-in-a-10m-loss-for-givedirectly-98478> (accessed May 17, 2021). See also U.S. Embassy in Uganda, “Statement from the United States Embassy on Termination of COVID-19 Direct Cash Transfer Program in Uganda,” October 30, 2020, <https://ug.usembassy.gov/statement-from-the-united-states-embassy-on-termination-of-covid-19-direct-cash-transfer-program-in-uganda/> (accessed May 17, 2021).

²³¹ “Sweden funds emergency cash transfers to women and children impacted by COVID-19 in West Nile,” World Food Programme news release, October 6, 2020, <https://www.wfp.org/news/sweden-funds-emergency-cash-transfers-women-and-children-impacted-covid-19-west-nile> (accessed May 17, 2021).

²³² Development Initiatives, *Socioeconomic impact of Covid-19 in Uganda: how has the government allocated public expenditure for FY2020/21?*, August 2020, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/Socioeconomic_impact_of_Covid-19_in_Uganda.pdf (accessed May 17, 2021), p. 4.

²³³ ISER, “ISER Statement at the Celebration of the International Human Rights Day, 10th December 2020,” December 10, 2020, https://www.iser-uganda.org/images/downloads/ISER_Statement_on_Human_Rights_Day_2020.pdf (accessed May 17, 2021).

region—a mountainous region with high rates of malnutrition—and Dalit households in the rest of the country, providing monthly payments of 200 rupees (\$1.85) per household.

Initial assessments found that the program dramatically increased birth registration and that families reported using the grant for food, clothing, and to meet other basic needs. However, the amount of the grant was too small to make a meaningful difference in households' overall economic status and only 16 percent of the country's children under 5 were covered.²³⁴ In addition, UNICEF estimated that the targeting methods used—based on caste and a simple proxy means test—excluded more than two-thirds of eligible children living in poverty from the program.²³⁵ It concluded that a universal option would best reduce the poverty gap and best reach “the poorest of the poor.”²³⁶

In 2016, the government doubled the size of the monthly benefit to 400 rupees (\$3.70) and committed to expand the program to cover all households with children under five. By 2021, the Child Grant program was reaching approximately 737,000 children, representing approximately 25 percent of all children under 5 in the country. The government committed to add an additional 675,000 child beneficiaries each year, to reach 2.8 million children by 2024.²³⁷

Under the Sustainable Development Goals, Nepal has set a target of allocating 15 percent of total expenditures to social protection by the year 2030.²³⁸ UNICEF estimated that expanding the Child Grant program to cover all children under 5 would account for approximately 1.3 percent of the total government budget and 0.25 percent of GDP.²³⁹ According to the ILO, a universal cash benefit to all households with children under 18 of

²³⁴ Maricar Garde, Nicholas Mathers and Thakur Dhakal, *The evolution of Nepal's child grant: from humble beginnings to a real driver of change for children?*, Global Social Policy, 2017, http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/85326/1/Garde_Mathers_Dhakal_The%20evolution.pdf (accessed May 17, 2021), pp. 1-2.

²³⁵ UNICEF, “Why a Universal Child Grant Makes Sense for Nepal,” Policy Brief, November 2016, <https://www.unicef.org/nepal/media/2451/file/Why%20a%20universal%20Child%20Grant%20makes%20sense%20for%20Nepal.pdf> (accessed May 16, 2021).

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

²³⁷ Email communication from UNICEF Nepal to Human Rights Watch, February 14, 2021.

²³⁸ UNICEF, “An expansion strategy for Nepal's Child Grant,” Policy Brief, November 2016, <https://www.unicef.org/nepal/media/2426/file/An%20expansion%20strategy%20for%20Nepal%E2%80%99s%20Child%20Grant.pdf> (accessed April 14, 2021), p. 6.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

450 rupees per day per person would cost 4 percent of GDP and could reduce poverty in Nepal by 25 percent.²⁴⁰

Although the Child Grant program provides important support to families with young children, it covers only 6 percent of Nepal’s children, and does not reach families with school-age children or children who are likely to enter child labor. In addition, Nepal has not provided any additional cash transfers during the pandemic beyond beneficiaries of the Child Grant program.²⁴¹ By contrast, several of its regional neighbors scaled up their use of cash transfers to respond to the Covid-19 crisis. Pakistan, for example, expanded its cash transfer program with additional payments and additional beneficiaries, targeting 14 million families.²⁴² Bangladesh provided cash assistance to 5 million households as part of its Covid-19 response.²⁴³ India announced several cash transfer initiatives, targeting 200 million women and 87 million farmers, among others.²⁴⁴

Nepal’s Covid-19 relief initiatives have consisted primarily of a food assistance package for laborers in the informal sector and others in need of assistance, to be funded by local and provincial governments;²⁴⁵ a public works program for informal workers who lost employment, and subsidies to households for electricity and internet.²⁴⁶

Ghana

Ghana initiated a cash transfer program called LEAP (Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty) in 2008. The program was initially limited to households experiencing extreme poverty with at least one member who was older, living with a disability, or an orphaned and vulnerable child. It was later expanded to include households with pregnant women

²⁴⁰ ILO and The Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), *The Protection We Want: Social Outlook for Asia and the Pacific*, October 15, 2020, https://unesap.org/sites/default/d8files/knowledge-products/Social_Outlook_Report_v10.pdf (accessed April 13, 2021), p. 59.

²⁴¹ Ugo Gentilini, Mohamed Almenfi, and Pamela Dale, *Social Protection and Jobs Responses to COVID-19: A Real-Time Review of Country Measures*, “Living paper” version 14, World Bank, December 11, 2020, <http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/467521607723220511/pdf/Social-Protection-and-Jobs-Responses-to-COVID-19-A-Real-Time-Review-of-Country-Measures-December-11-2020.pdf> (accessed May 17, 2021), p. 3.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 398.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 259.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 370-371.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

and infants under the age of one.²⁴⁷ A national social registry, the Ghana National Household Registry, established in 2015, is used to identify households eligible for LEAP.²⁴⁸

By 2020, LEAP offered cash allowances every two months to about 332,000 households (about 1.5 million individuals), representing about 5 percent of the country's population, mostly in the northern part of the country. The allowance for each household for each transfer ranged between 64 and 106 cedis (\$12 and \$20).²⁴⁹

A 2014 impact evaluation of LEAP found that it contributed to a range of positive impacts for beneficiaries, including a reduction in child labor, a 7 percent increase in school enrollment, a 10 percent decrease in school absenteeism, lower household debt, and a 34 percent increase in enrollment of children under 6 in the national health insurance system. It also stimulated local economies, with every cedi distributed through LEAP contributing to an estimated increase in local income of 2.50 cedis.²⁵⁰ In 2012, the size of the payments were tripled, after assessments found that irregular and insufficient payments limited the program's impact.²⁵¹

After the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the hotline set up for LEAP experienced a spike in calls, primarily from families seeking additional assistance. Weekly survey calls to a

²⁴⁷ UNICEF, "Impacts of the Ghana Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty 1000 programme," February 20, 2020, <https://www.unicef-irc.org/article/1964-final-evaluation-of-ghana-social-protection-programme-for-infants-now-available.html> (accessed May 17, 2021). Approximately 80 percent of Ghana's social safety net programs are funded through budgetary allocations and approximately 20 percent are funded by outside donors. See World Bank, *The State of Social Safety Nets 2018*, 2018, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/29115/9781464812545.pdf?sequence=5&isAllowed=y> (accessed May 17, 2021), p. 18. In 2019, the World Bank committed US\$223 million to help Ghana strengthen its safety net programs for the poor, including LEAP. See also World Bank, "Ghana Productive Safety Net Project," last updated May 13, 2021, <https://projects.worldbank.org/en/projects-operations/project-detail/P164603> (accessed May 17, 2021).

²⁴⁸ Christabel Ewuradjoa Dadzie, Dhushyanth Raju, "Data-driven social safety net response to the COVID-19 crisis in Ghana," *World Bank Blogs*, January 4, 2021. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/nasikiliza/data-driven-social-safety-net-response-covid-19-crisis-ghana> (accessed May 17, 2021).

²⁴⁹ Christabel Ewuradjoa Dadzie and Dhushyanth Raju, "Economic relief through social safety nets during the COVID-19 crisis: the case of Ghana," *World Bank Blogs*, October 26, 2020, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/nasikiliza/economic-relief-through-social-safety-nets-during-covid-19-crisis-case-ghana> (accessed May 17, 2021).

²⁵⁰ Benjamin Davis, Silvio Daidone, Sudhanshu Handa, Michael Park, Robert Osei Darko, Isaac Osei-Akoto, "The Impact of Ghana's LEAP Programme" International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United States (FAO), From Protection to Production (PtoP), December 2014, https://ipcig.org/pub/eng/OP271_The_Impact_of_Ghana_s_LEAP_Programme.pdf (accessed May 17, 2021).

²⁵¹ Ibid.

sample of LEAP beneficiaries between April and August 2020 found that a large share of households had been negatively impacted by the pandemic, primarily through income loss.²⁵² In response, LEAP provided an additional round of cash transfers to beneficiaries in May 2020.²⁵³

In October 2020, the government announced that a new relief fund would provide 11 million cedis (\$1.9 million) in cash transfers to an additional 75,000 beneficiaries, primarily daily wage earners in the Greater Accra region, as well as smallholder farmers in the Ashanti and Western regions. The program, supported by the World Food Programme, projected monthly payments of at least 53 cedis (approximately \$9) per household for five months.²⁵⁴

Despite Ghana's efforts, it is still behind its peers. Before the pandemic, Ghana spent less than half of the regional average for Sub-Saharan African on social safety net programs, including cash transfers.²⁵⁵ Its pandemic response has also lagged behind. Globally, countries have increased their cash transfer coverage on average by 240 percent.²⁵⁶ For example, Mali scaled up its cash transfer coverage by 591 percent, and Kenya by 800 percent.²⁵⁷ In contrast, Ghana's new Covid-19 relief fund has expanded the number of individuals receiving cash transfers by only 5 percent.

A 2018 simulation by the United Nations University found that if Ghana adopted a universal child allowance program, it could make additional strides in reducing child poverty. A payment of just 6.3 cedis per month (\$1.08) for every child, amounting to 1 percent of GDP, could lift 202,000 children out of poverty, resulting in a 6 percent child

²⁵² Christabel Ewuradjoa Dadzie, Dhushyanth Raju, "Data-driven social safety net response to the COVID-19 crisis in Ghana," *World Bank Blogs*, January 4, 2021. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/nasikiliza/data-driven-social-safety-net-response-covid-19-crisis-ghana> (accessed May 17, 2021).

²⁵³ Christabel Ewuradjoa Dadzie and Dhushyanth Raju, "Economic relief through social safety nets during the COVID-19 crisis: the case of Ghana," *World Bank Blogs*, October 26, 2020, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/nasikiliza/economic-relief-through-social-safety-nets-during-covid-19-crisis-case-ghana> (accessed May 17, 2021). To minimize risks of Covid-19 transmission, the additional payment was made through electronic benefit transfer cards that beneficiaries could use at ATMs.

²⁵⁴ "GH¢11 Million COVID-19 Relief Fund Launched," *peacefmonline*, October 10, 2020, <https://m.peacefmonline.com/pages/local/news/202010/429481.php> (accessed May 17, 2021).

²⁵⁵ World Bank, *The State of Social Safety Nets 2018*, p. 20.

²⁵⁶ Gentilini et al., *Social Protection and Jobs Responses to COVID-19: A Real-Time Review of Country Measures*, p. 7.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

poverty reduction. If child allowances were “weighted,” paying more to the bottom 40 percent of households (9.5 cedis per child per month, compared to 4.27 cedis for other households), the impact would be even greater, lifting 287,000 children out of poverty, for a child poverty reduction of 8.5 percent, and increasing the incomes of 67 percent of all households.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁸ Martin Evans, “Simulating policy options for universal child allowances in Ghana,” WIDER Working Paper 2018/145, *United Nations University UNU-WIDER*, 2018, https://www.wider.unu.edu/sites/default/files/Publications/Working-paper/PDF/wp2018-145_o.pdf (accessed May 17, 2021), pp. 16, 18-20.

VI. Financing for Child Allowances

The ILO estimates that achieving universal social protection in four core areas—children, maternity, disability, and old age—would require an average of 3.3 percent of GDP for low- and middle-income countries, and that the average spending gap between current expenditure and achieving universal coverage in 2019 was 1.9 percent of GDP. In 2020, it estimated that due to the Covid-19 crisis, the spending gap had grown to 2.2 percent of GDP.²⁵⁹ Currently, the majority of global social protection spending—an estimated 55 percent—is allocated for old-age pensions, while benefits for children and families account for 9.1 percent.²⁶⁰

The cost of achieving universal coverage for the four core areas of social protection varies significantly from region to region. The ILO estimates that universal coverage in Sub-Saharan Africa would require 5.2 percent of GDP, on average, including 1.8 percent to provide benefits for all children. In South Asia, universal coverage for all four areas would require an estimated 2.8 percent of GDP, including 0.6 percent for children.²⁶¹

Countries providing cash allowances for children have financed them in a variety of ways, including taxes on mining and gas (Bolivia, Mongolia, and Zambia), cuts to fuel subsidies (Ghana, Indonesia), and increased taxes on tobacco (Algeria, Mauritius, and Panama).²⁶² Some countries have progressively rolled out their child benefits to address funding constraints. South Africa, for example, began its program by targeting children under seven, and the United Kingdom began by offering the benefit to households with two or more children.²⁶³

²⁵⁹ Fabio Durán-Valverde, José F. Pacheco-Jiménez, Taneem Muzaffar, Hazel Elizondo-Barboza, *Financing gaps in social protection: Global estimates and strategies for developing countries in light of the COVID-19 crisis and beyond*, ILO Working Paper 14, *International Labor Organization*, October 2020, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---soc_sec/documents/publication/wcms_758705.pdf (accessed May 17, 2021), pp. 7-8.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²⁶² ILO and UNICEF, *ILO-UNICEF Joint Report on Social Protection for Children – Towards universal social protection for children: Achieving SDG 1.3*, February 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/media/49401/file/Towards%20universal%20social%20protection%20for%20children.pdf> (accessed May 17, 2021), p. 23.

²⁶³ ODI/UNICEF, *Universal Child Benefits: policy issues and options*, 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/media/72916/file/UCB-ODI-UNICEF-Report-2020.pdf> (accessed May 16, 2021), p. 16.

In 2016, the Global Partnership for Universal Social Protection was launched to achieve the SDGs, led by the World Bank Group and the ILO, showcasing the efforts of several countries in reaching universal social protection.²⁶⁴

Even in the lowest-income countries, there are various policy options open to governments to ensure maximum resources are available to meet economic and social rights obligations, including the right to social security, including:

Re-allocating public expenditures: This can include replacing high-cost, low-impact programs with ones with larger socioeconomic impacts, eliminating spending inefficiencies, and/or tackling corruption.

Increasing tax revenues: This can be achieved by altering different types of tax rates— for example corporate profits, financial activities, property, imports/exports, natural resources—or by strengthening the efficiency of tax collection methods and overall compliance. For example, in 2020, Bolivia and Argentina introduced a new wealth tax to finance Covid-19 relief. Increasing taxes should not be carried only by consumption taxes— such as goods and services taxes or value added taxes (VAT) —which are generally regressive and therefore contrary to the aim of reducing poverty and inequality.

Reduce corruption and tax evasion: This entails investigating and holding accountable individuals and corporations involved in money laundering, bribery, tax evasion, fraudulent trade mispricing (covertly agreeing to non-market prices for international trade, to evade taxes and capital controls), and other financial maneuvering that deprive governments of revenues needed for meeting their economic and social rights' obligations including provision of social protection programs.

International Cooperation

Making the right to social protection for all a reality is first and foremost the duty of domestic governments. However, international human rights law also establishes an obligation of international assistance and cooperation on governments to help all countries fulfil these rights.

²⁶⁴ See Global Partnership USP2030, <https://www.usp2030.org/gimi/USP2030.action> (accessed May 17, 2021).

Donor countries have provided significant support to cash transfer programs in developing countries. For example, social safety net programs in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Malawi, Somalia, and South Sudan are entirely donor-funded.²⁶⁵

With Covid-19, the call for a global instrument of solidarity in providing social protection has become louder, and on September 21, 2020 more than 200 civil society organizations and trade unions issued a call for a Global Fund for Social Protection.²⁶⁶ The proposed fund would include:

- a) Technical support to introduce or complete social protection floors;
- b) Co-financing of social protection floor transfers, in cases where low-income countries would need a prohibitively high share of their total tax revenue to do so, while global tax cooperation and harmonization contribute to increase national fiscal space in the long run;
- c) Co-financing of social protection floor transfers in times of crises, such as natural disasters, reception of large numbers of refugees, and economic crisis.

²⁶⁵ World Bank, *The State of Social Safety Nets 2018*, pp. 16, 18.

²⁶⁶ Global Coalition for Social Protection Floors, “Civil Society Call for a Global Fund for Social Protection to respond to the COVID-19 crisis and to build a better future,” 2020, http://www.socialprotectionfloorscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020-07CivilSocietyCallGlobalFundSocialProtection_EN.pdf (accessed May 17, 2021).

VII. International Legal Standards and Commitments

The Rights to Social Security and an Adequate Standard of Living

The rights to social security and an adequate standard of living are enshrined in the international human rights framework. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, “Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security” and that “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family...and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.”²⁶⁷

These are incorporated into the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) which recognizes the right of everyone “to social security, including social insurance” and “to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family.”²⁶⁸

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which is nearly universally ratified, guarantees children an adequate standard of living. According to article 26, “States Parties shall recognize for every child the right to benefit from social security, including social insurance, and shall take the necessary measures to achieve the full realization of this right in accordance with their national law.” Article 27 recognizes “the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development...States Parties, in accordance with national conditions and within their means, shall take appropriate measures to assist parents and others responsible for the child to implement this right and shall in case of need provide material assistance and support programmes, particularly with regard to nutrition, clothing and housing.”²⁶⁹

²⁶⁷ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 22 and art. 25, G.A. Res. 217 (III), U.N. Doc. A/RES/217(III) (December 10, 1948).

²⁶⁸ International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, art. 9 and art. 11., adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 16) at 49, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 993 U.N.T.S. 3, entered into force Jan. 3, 1976.

²⁶⁹ Convention on the Rights of the Child, art. 26, para. 1, and art. 27, para 1 and 3, November 20, 1989, 1577 U.N.T.S. 3, entered into force September 2, 1990.

Under international law, every child should have the same opportunities for survival and development. Article 2 of the CRC prohibits discrimination of any kind, asserting states parties must “ensure equal opportunities for the realization of rights for all children.”²⁷⁰

The ILO Social Security (Minimum Standards) Convention, 1952 (No. 102) provides detailed guidance for the scope and content of the right to social security under the ICESCR and regional instruments in various parts of the world.²⁷¹ The basic social security guarantees constituting national social protection floors, according to the ILO Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (no. 202) can be considered as reflecting the minimum core content of the right to social security.²⁷²

According to the Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, which oversees compliance with the ICESCR, states parties are required to:

- a) ensure access to a social security scheme that provides a minimum essential level of benefits to all individuals and families that will enable them to acquire at least essential health care, basic shelter and housing, water and sanitation, foodstuffs, and the most basic forms of education;
- b) ensure the right of access to social security systems on a non-discriminatory basis;
- c) respect existing social security schemes and protect them from unreasonable interference;
- d) adopt and implement a national social security strategy and plan of action;
- e) take targeted steps to implement social security schemes; and
- f) monitor the extent of the realization of the right to social security.²⁷³

As part of the UN Sustainable Development Goals adopted in 2015, countries committed to implementing nationally appropriate social protection systems for all (SDG Target 1.3), including social protection floors to reduce and prevent poverty.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., art. 2.

²⁷¹ International Labour Organization (ILO), Convention Concerning Minimum Standards of Social Security (C102), adopted June 28, 1952, entered into force April 27, 1955.

²⁷² International Labour Organization (ILO), Social Protection Floors Recommendation (No. 202), adopted June 14, 2012.

²⁷³ CESCR General Comment 19, The right to social security (art. 9), adopted on November 23, 2007, para. 59.

Child Labor

Multiple international treaties prohibit child labor. The International Labour Organization (ILO)'s Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention (No. 182) prohibits the use of children in hazardous work, i.e. "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."²⁷⁴ The Convention obliges member states to take immediate action to prevent children from engaging in the worst forms of child labor, and to provide direct assistance for the removal of children engaged in the worst forms of child labor.²⁷⁵

The ILO's Minimum Age Convention (No. 138), sets the basic minimum age for employment at 15, and states that children ages 13 to 15 may participate only in light work that is not likely to be harmful to their health or development or hinder their education.²⁷⁶ The Minimum Age Convention also prohibits children under 18 from engaging in hazardous work.²⁷⁷

The CRC provides that children have a right "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."²⁷⁸ Under the convention, governments must take appropriate legislative, administrative, social, and educational measures to protect children from exploitative and hazardous work, including by establishing a minimum age for employment, regulating the hours and conditions of children's work, and providing for "appropriate penalties or other sanctions to ensure the effective enforcement" of such protections.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁴ ILO Convention No. 182 concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour (Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention), art. 3, adopted June 17, 1999, 38 I.L.M. 1207, entered into force November 19, 2000.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, art. 7.

²⁷⁶ ILO Convention No. 138 concerning the Minimum Age for Admission to Employment (Minimum Age Convention), adopted June 26, 1973, 1015 U.N.T.S. 297, entered into force June 19, 1976, arts. 2 and 7. The ILO Minimum Age Convention allows certain developing countries to specify a minimum age of 14 for entry into work, and to allow for light work by children ages 12 to 14.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, art. 3.

²⁷⁸ Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted November 20, 1989, G.A. Res. 44/25, annex, 44 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 49) at 167, U.N. Doc. A/44/49 (1989), entered into force September 2, 1990, art. 32.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, affirms state parties' obligations to protect all children from exploitative or hazardous child labor.²⁸⁰

As part of the UN Sustainable Development Goals, countries committed to ending child labor in all its forms by 2025 and eradicating forced labor, modern slavery and human trafficking by 2030 (SDG Target 8.7).

Right to Education

Education is a basic right enshrined in various international and regional treaties including the CRC, the ICESCR, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.²⁸¹

Under international and regional human rights law, all persons have a right to free, compulsory, primary education, free from discrimination.²⁸² All persons also have the right to secondary education, which includes “the completion of basic education and consolidation of the foundations for life-long learning and human development.”²⁸³

Human Rights Watch believes governments should take immediate measures to ensure that secondary education is available and accessible to all free of charge. State parties should ensure that different forms of secondary education are generally available and accessible and take additional steps to increase availability such as the provision of financial assistance for those in need.²⁸⁴

²⁸⁰ African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC), OAU Doc. CAB/LEG/24.9/49 (1990), entered into force November 29, 1999, art. 15.

²⁸¹ CRC, art. 28; International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), adopted December 16, 1966, G.A. Res. 2200A (XXI), 21 U.N. GAOR Supp. (No. 16) at 49, U.N. Doc. A/6316 (1966), 993 U.N.T.S. 3, entered into force January 3, 1976, art. 13; ACRWC, art. 11.

²⁸² ICESCR, arts. 13 and 2; See also United Nations Economic and Social Council, “Preliminary report of the Special Rapporteur on the right to education, Ms. Katarina Tomasevski, submitted in accordance with Commission on Human Rights resolution 1998/33,” E/CN.4/1999/49, January 13, 1999, <https://undocs.org/E/CN.4/1999/49> (accessed May 17, 2021).

²⁸³ UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, “General Comment No. 13, “The Right to Education (Art. 13),” E/C.12/1999/10, December 8, 1999, <https://undocs.org/E/C.12/1999/10> (accessed May 17, 2021), paras. 11–12.

²⁸⁴ ICESCR, art. 13(2)(b); CRC, art. 28(1)(b); African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, art. 11(3)(b).

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The report was written by Jo Becker, advocacy director in the Children’s Rights Division of Human Rights Watch, with contributions by Lena Simet, senior researcher on poverty and inequality in the Business and Human Rights Division of Human Rights Watch.

Bede Sheppard, deputy director in the Children’s Rights Division; Aisling Reidy, senior legal advisor; and Tom Porteous, deputy program director, edited the report for Human Rights Watch. The report was also reviewed by Solomon Ampofo from Friends of the Nation, Angella Nabwowe Kasule from Initiative for Social and Economic Rights, Oryem Nyeko, Uganda and Tanzania researcher for Human Rights Watch, Ida Sawyer, deputy Africa director at Human Rights Watch, Lena Simet, researcher on poverty and inequality in the Business and Human Rights Division of Human Rights Watch, Elin Martinez and Margaret Wurth, senior researchers in the Children’s Rights Division of Human Rights Watch, and Nisha Varia, advocacy director in the Women’s Rights Division of Human Rights Watch, and Kyle Knight, health editor for Human Rights Watch.

Delphine Starr, senior coordinator, Children’s Rights Division; Travis Carr, Digital coordinator; Fitzroy Hepkins, senior administrative manager; and José Martínez, administrative officer, produced the report.

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“I Must Work to Eat”

Covid-19, Poverty, and Child labor in Ghana, Nepal, and Uganda

The unprecedented economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, together with school closures and inadequate government assistance, is pushing children into exploitative and dangerous child labor. As their parents have lost jobs or income due to the pandemic and associated lockdowns, many children have entered the workforce to help their families survive. Many work long, grueling hours for little or no pay, often under hazardous conditions. Some report violence, harassment, and pay theft.

“I Must Work to Eat”: Covid-19, Poverty, and Child labor in Ghana, Nepal, and Uganda, is based on interviews conducted from January to March 2021 with 81 children, ages 8-17, in Ghana, Nepal, and Uganda. The children worked at brick kilns, carpet factories, gold mines, stone quarries, fisheries, and in agriculture. Some work as mechanics, rickshaw drivers, or in construction, while others sold items on the street. The report examines the impact of the pandemic on children’s rights, including their rights to education, to an adequate standard of living, and to protection from child labor, as well as government responses.

According to the International Labor Organization, the number of children in child labor worldwide dropped by nearly 40 percent between 2000 and 2016. The Covid-19 pandemic threatens to reverse that progress. Research shows that cash allowances to families with children is effective in reducing poverty, reducing child labor, and increasing school enrolment. Governments and donors should scale up cash allowances to families to enable them to meet their basic needs without resorting to child labor, and to support children’s return to school.

(above) A girl carries corn husks on her head in Kampala, Uganda, on July 23, 2020.

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(front cover) A Nepali child waits for customers as he sells vegetables in the early morning during lockdown amid the Covid-19 pandemic in Kathmandu, Nepal on June 12, 2020.

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