



## Breaking the cycle of child labour is in India's hands

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**(Mains GS 2 : Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources & Issues relating to poverty and hunger)**

### Context:

- The true extent of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child labour is yet to be measured but all indications show that it would be significant as children are unable to attend school and parents are unable to find work.
- However, not all the factors that contribute to child labour were created by the pandemic; most of them were pre-existing and have been exposed or amplified by it.

### The data of child labour:

- As the world enters the third decade of the 21st century, 152 million children around the world are still in child labour, 73 million of them in hazardous work.
- A Government of India survey (NSS Report No. 585, 2017-18, Statement 3.12, p.35) suggests that 95% of the children in the age group of 6-13 years are attending educational institutions (formal and informal) while the corresponding figures for those in the age group of 14-17 years is 79.6%.
- Hence, a large number of children in India remain vulnerable, facing physical and psychological risks to a healthy development.

### Number of out of school children is huge:

- The Census of India 2011 reports 10.1 million working children in the age group of 5-14 years, out of whom 8.1 million are in rural areas mainly engaged as cultivators (26%) and agricultural labourers (32.9%).
- While multiple data vary widely on enrolment/attendance ratios in India, UNESCO estimates based on the 2011 Census record 38.1 million children as “out of school” (18.3% of total children in the age group of 6-13 years).
- Work performed may not appear to be immediately dangerous, but it may produce long-term and devastating consequences for their education, their skills acquisition.

- Hence their future possibilities to overcome the vicious circle of poverty, incomplete education and poor quality jobs.
- A Rapid Survey on Children (2013-14), jointly undertaken by the Ministry of Women and Child Development and UNICEF, found that less than half of children in the age group of 10-14 years have completed primary education. These remain challenges we must overcome.

### **A decrease in India**

- One piece of good news is that child labour in India decreased in the decade 2001 to 2011, and this demonstrates that the right combination of policy and programmatic interventions can make a difference.
- Policy interventions such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) 2005, the Right to Education Act 2009 and the Mid Day Meal Scheme have paved the way for children to be in schools along with guaranteed wage employment (unskilled) for rural families.
- Concerted efforts towards convergence of government schemes is also the focus of the implementation of the National Child Labour Project.
- Ratifying International Labour Organization Conventions Nos. 138 and 182 in 2017, the Indian government further demonstrated its commitment to the elimination of child labour including those engaged in hazardous occupations.

### **Coordinated efforts is the key:**

- The Ministry of Labour and Employment-operated online portal allows government officials, law enforcement agencies and non-governmental organisations to share information and coordinate on child labour cases at the national, State and local levels for effective enforcement of child labour laws.
- While child labour has declined during the past decade globally, estimates indicate that the rate of reduction has slowed by two-thirds in the most recent four-year period.
- These positive and negative trends have to be taken into account when developing India's policy and programmatic response during and after the novel coronavirus pandemic.

### **Pandemic creates more risk:**

- The economic contraction and lockdowns ensuing from the pandemic have affected all countries in Asia, leading to income reductions for enterprises and workers, many of them in the informal economy.
- The large number of returned migrant workers has compounded the socio-economic challenges.
- India experienced slower economic growth and rising unemployment even before the pandemic.

- Subsequent lockdowns have worsened the situation, posing a real risk of backtracking the gains made in eliminating child labour.
- With increased economic insecurity, lack of social protection and reduced household income, children from poor households are being pushed to contribute to the family income with the risk of exposure to exploitative work.

### **Challenges in education**

- With closure of schools and challenges of distance learning, children may drop out leaving little scope for return unless affirmative and immediate actions are taken.
- As many schools and educational institutions are moving to online platforms for continuation of learning, the 'digital divide' is a challenge that India has to reconcile within the next several years.
- The NSS Report No. 585 titled 'Household Social Consumption on Education in India' suggests that in 2017-18, only 24% of Indian households had access to an Internet facility, proportions were 15% among rural households and 42% among urban households.
- The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2020 survey highlights that a third of the total enrolled children received some kind of learning materials from their teachers during the reference period (October 2020) as digital mode of education was opted for.

### **Steps to be taken:**

- The challenges are significant and manifold but it is not impossible to meet them if the right level of commitment among all the relevant stakeholders and the right mix of policy and programmatic interventions are present.
- It is through strategic partnerships and collaborations involving government, employers, trade unions, community-based organisations and child labour families that we could make a difference building back better and sooner.
- As we reinforce the commitment to protect children from unacceptable forms of work, our focus to mitigate the aftermath of the pandemic also remains.
- We need a strong alliance paving our way towards ending child labour in all its forms by 2025 as countries around the world have agreed to in Sustainable Development Goal 8.7.

### **Conclusion:**

- All stakeholders like governments, employers, unions, civil society organisations and even individuals must rise and pledge to 'Take Action against Child Labour' as a part of the UN's declaration of 2021 as the International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour.
- Our actions today will determine the future of children tomorrow.