



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

Accelerating action to help to end **child labour** **in agriculture** in Africa

FAO Conference for Africa
Virtual Event
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BACKGROUND PAPER





There are more children in child labour in sub-Saharan Africa **86.6 million** boys and girls – than in the rest of the world combined.

1. Introduction

Over the past years, the African continent, and sub-Saharan Africa in particular, has increasingly experienced political instability, high levels of inequality, climate shocks, forced migration and conflict, which, coupled with structural impediments, contribute to poverty and hunger. This situation has pushed more children into child labour, which is often hazardous in nature, to support their families at the expense of their wholesome development.

Data available from the **2020 ILO–UNICEF global labour estimates** (ILO and UNICEF, 2021) show that there are more children in child labour in sub-Saharan Africa – 86.6 million boys and girls – than in the rest of the world combined. Furthermore, 82 percent of children in child labour in sub-Saharan Africa are engaged in agriculture, and mostly family work. Given this situation, the Regional Conference on Child Labour in Agriculture will give particular attention to child labour in agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa. Without a breakthrough on the continent, achieving **target 7 of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8** of ending child labour in all its forms by 2025 remains elusive (ILO and UNICEF, 2021). Despite this gloomy picture, efforts are ongoing in various sectors to change the situation.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) (2020a) developed the **framework on ending child labour in agriculture** to help to address child labour, including in its worst forms,¹ in agriculture. In 2021, the Organization, led by the Director General, pledged to scale up efforts to eliminate child labour in agriculture. A **call for action** was launched to document and identify efforts of agricultural stakeholders to address child labour in agriculture, as well as to galvanize action at local, national and global levels with substantial contributions from actors in various parts of Africa.

In order to accelerate action, the African Union launched a **ten-year action plan to eradicate child labour, forced labour, human trafficking and modern slavery (2020–2030)** (African Union, 2019). The plan is in line with the **ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182)**, which has been ratified by all countries in the region, and the **ILO Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138)**, which remains to be ratified by Liberia and Somalia. The two conventions have led to the development of national plans of action and road maps at the macro level aimed at enforcing the prohibition of child labour in all sectors, including agriculture.

¹ The worst forms of child labour are defined by ILO in its Convention No. 182.

These efforts require more resources and concerted actions among stakeholders, in particular those engaged in agri-food systems, to address the root causes of child labour and to put an end to child labour in agriculture.

What is making this scenario even more worrisome is the impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, which has exacerbated this situation, making it more urgent than ever to revisit the drawing board and answer some critical questions, such as:

- ▶ What can stakeholders, particularly those engaged in agri-food systems, do to change the current trend, especially in a COVID-19 environment?
- ▶ How can we harmonize resources and the commitment of stakeholders to address the drivers of child labour, such as hunger and poverty?
- ▶ What comparative advantage does Africa have that can be used as a leverage to accelerate the elimination of child labour in agriculture?
- ▶ What game-changing solutions have been applied successfully that can be replicated or scaled up to end child labour in agriculture in Africa, especially in sub-Saharan Africa?

The latest child labour estimates suggest that the world needs to act 18 times faster than what was prospected 20 years ago to reach target 7 of SDG 8

(ILO and UNICEF, 2021).

Addressing these critical questions requires multiple approaches and collective efforts. Notably, public and private investments can play an important role in the elimination of child labour in agriculture. In addition, partners and stakeholders from governments, academia and development agencies, and members of civil society must concentrate their efforts on collecting relevant data and implementing interventions that tackle the root causes of child labour in agriculture. This is essential for the sustainability of agri-food systems and the reduction of poverty.

This paper seeks to shed more light on child labour in agriculture in Africa in general but with an emphasis on sub-Saharan Africa, outlining the various aspects of the phenomenon and suggesting ways to address the problem. To do this effectively, one needs to understand the agricultural labour situation and the drivers of child labour in Africa.

2. Agricultural labour in Africa

Agriculture in Africa is predominantly practiced at the subsistence level. Smallholder farmers make up about 80 percent of all farms in sub-Saharan Africa and employ nearly 175 million people (FAO and OECD, 2016).

Gender disparities in agriculture in Africa, for instance in access to and control over land, and in wages, persist. At the same time women play central roles in agriculture, including in pre-production, production and post-production activities, making them key role players in the supply chain. This figure is likely to increase in the coming years, as agriculture is becoming more feminized due to men exiting farming more frequently (Christiaensen, Rutledge and Taylor, 2020).

Women form roughly 50 percent of the entire agricultural labour force, contributing to about 60 to 80 percent of the food production in the region

(Bongiwe and Kaaria, 2015).



Without the corresponding support for women, sub-Saharan Africa stands the risk of having smallholder farming operations dependent on labour from vulnerable groups, including children, to alleviate poverty and hunger.

With regard to the demographic representation of youth in the agricultural labour force, currently there are nearly 60 percent of African youth in rural areas working in the agricultural sector (FAO, 2018a). Sub-Saharan Africa is expected to have nearly 17 million people entering the labour force annually over the next ten years (FAO and OECD, 2016). Within agri-food systems there are many untapped opportunities for decent employment opportunities for young people, be it as wage workers or self-employed farmers and entrepreneurs. However, they are also faced with several challenges, such as the acquisition of land, farming inputs and resources, access to finance, vocational guidance and training, markets and appropriate labour-saving technologies.

Children are found in various stages of the value chain in agriculture, but predominantly in the lower tiers. Agriculture has been observed as the entry point for child labour activities with children starting to work as young as 5 years old (ILO and UNICEF, 2021). A report by ILO and UNICEF (2021) also indicates that globally the prevalence of child labour in rural areas is almost three times larger than in urban areas. If children continue to form a substantial share of the labour force in agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa, the region is at risk of facing prolonged food insecurity, increased rural poverty, malnutrition and low productivity in general (ILO and UNICEF, 2021).

In order to better understand how actors can accelerate the elimination of child labour in agriculture, there is a need to look at the growing debate on the future of work² in agriculture (see Christiaensen, Rutledge and Taylor, 2020). Some experts argue that rural economies will witness an increased labour shortage due to rural-urban migration creating an aging population in rural areas, thereby increasing the risk of child labour.

Others state that the automation of agriculture will reduce humanity's interactions in crop farming and lead to a rapid departure of labour out of agriculture in developing countries (Christiaensen, Rutledge and Taylor, 2020). In some countries in sub-Saharan Africa, this exit of labour in agriculture will necessitate a shift in focus in the agricultural value chain from traditional farming to food processing. Some expect that the exit of labour will lead to the reduction of child labour and the eradication of hunger, as well as address the challenges that are linked to food security in general (Christiaensen, Rutledge and Taylor, 2020).

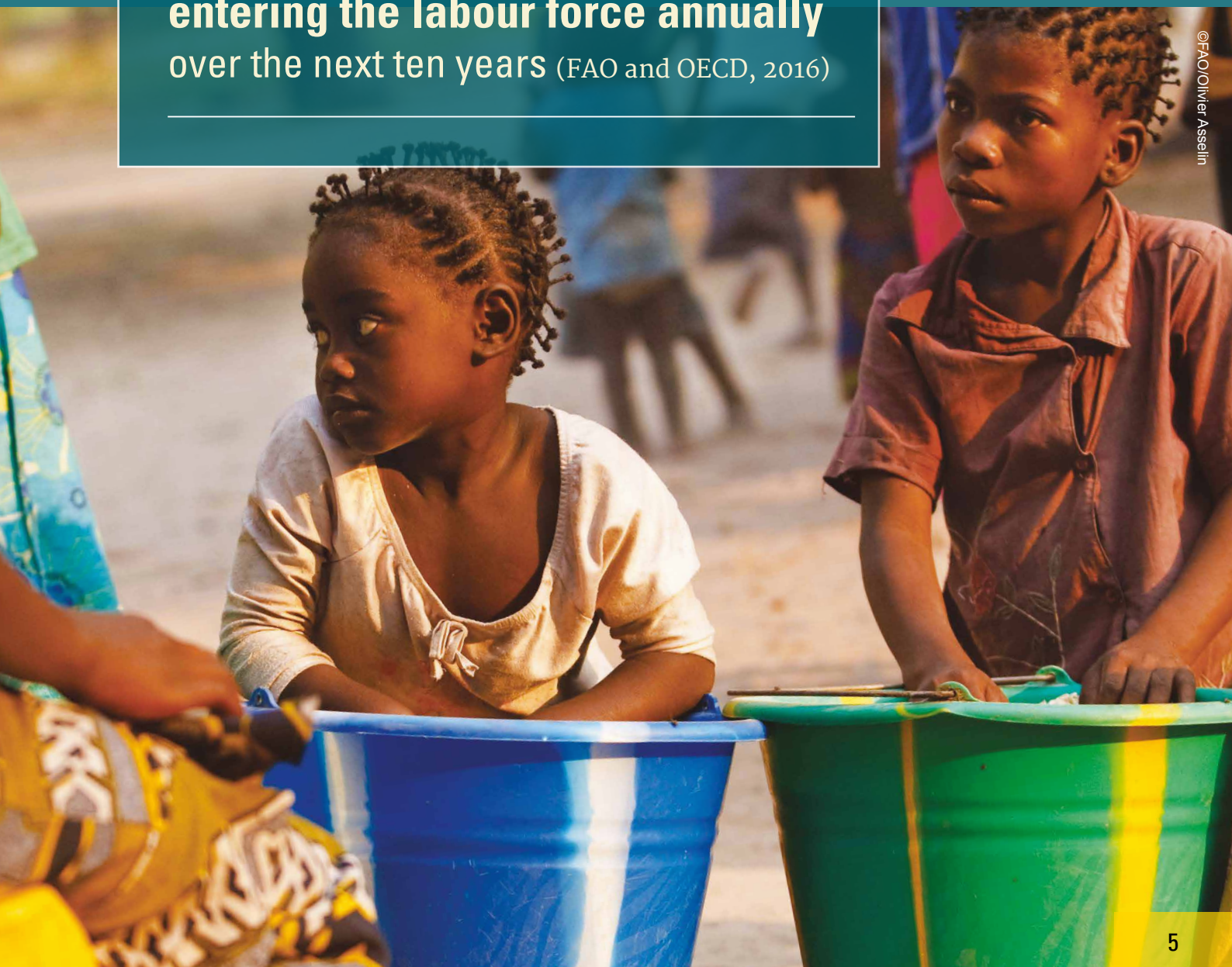
Yet, there is a gap in the body of knowledge on labour in agriculture and its subsectors, and for that matter in the rural economy. What is undisputed is the involvement of children in global, regional and domestic value chains in agriculture and in subsistence farming, all which need to be addressed.

² The “future of work” describes changes in how work will get done over the next decade, influenced by technological, generational and social shifts (Gartner Glossary, 2020).

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3. Overview of child labour in agriculture in Africa: Sub-Saharan Africa

Globally, as part of normal upbringing, children are engaged in unpaid family work in small-scale farming or rural jobs (FAO, 2020a). This may include running errands or helping in family work under the supervision of adults. As long as these tasks are age-appropriate and safe and do not interfere with a child's compulsory education, they are not considered to be child labour. In fact, such activities can help children to acquire important agricultural and life skills for their future and contribute to intergenerational knowledge transfer and families' livelihoods. The dynamics change to become child labour when these tasks are inappropriate for a child's age, affect a child's education, or are likely to harm a child's health, safety or morals (ILO, 2004).

Child labour in agriculture is a cause of poverty, but it also perpetuates poverty. Without adequate education, nutrition and health, today's children trapped in child labour will be much less likely to find decent work and income opportunities when they become adults. Due to the multifaceted nature of the phenomenon, various sectors and organizations have a complementary role to play in tackling the multiple

determinants. For FAO, there cannot be “zero hunger without zero child labour” (see FAO Regional Office for Africa, 2021).

FAO strives for a world where children are not exposed to hazardous work and have access to quality education and vocational training in rural areas, and sufficient and nutritious food, giving them the resources to grow and to become healthy, productive and skilled producers or workers of tomorrow (FAO, 2020a).

Key facts on child labour in agriculture in Africa: Sub-Saharan Africa

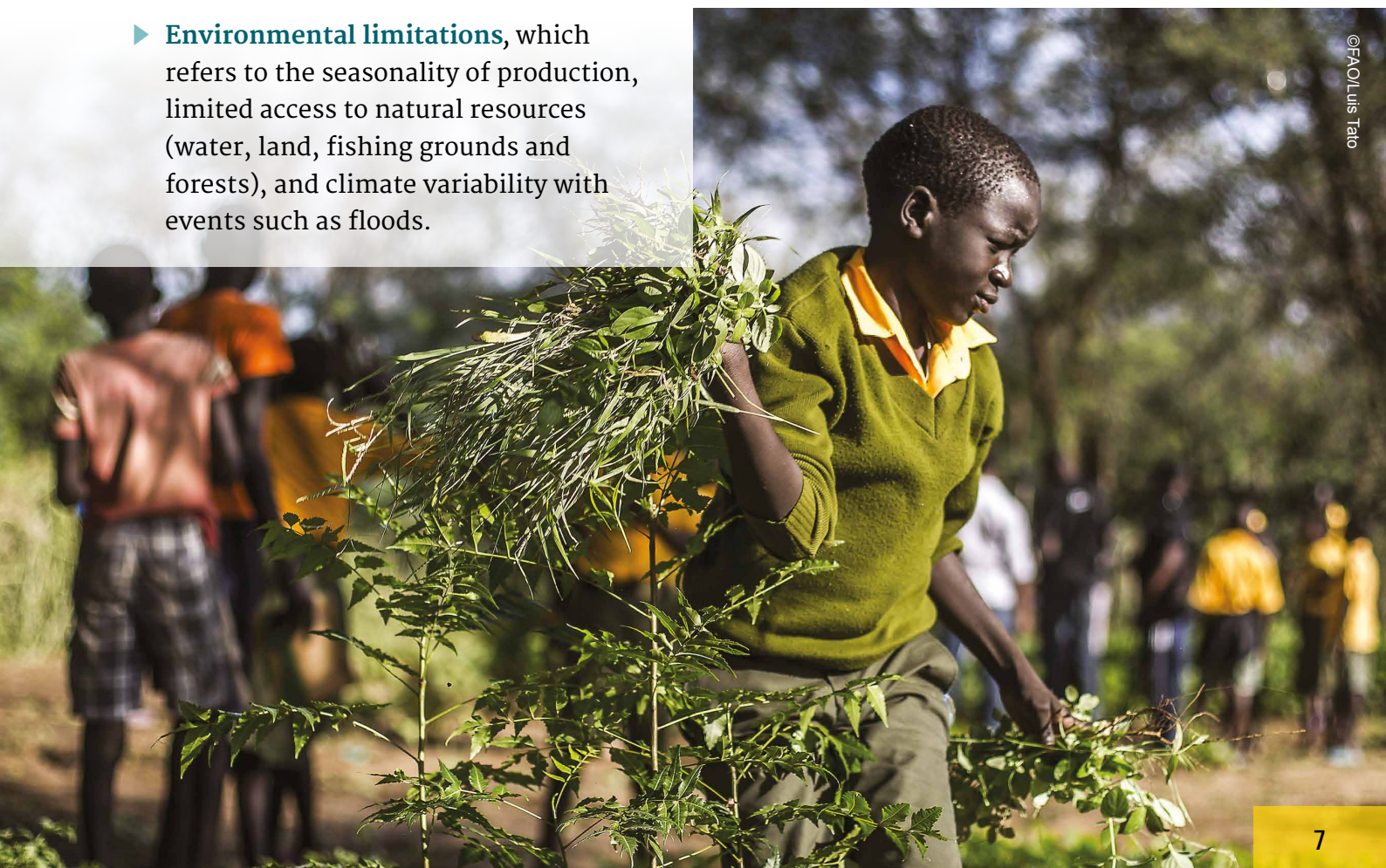
- ▶ Over the past four years, the incidence of children in hazardous labour increased by 6.5 million (ILO and UNICEF, 2021).
- ▶ As stated earlier, there are more children in child labour in sub-Saharan Africa than in the rest of the world combined.
- ▶ Child labour prevalence stands at 24 percent in sub-Saharan Africa, which is three times that of Northern Africa (ILO and UNICEF, 2021).
- ▶ The ratio of children in child labour in agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa stands at 4 in every 5 children (ILO and UNICEF, 2021).

Causes of child labour in agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa

FAO has outlined **five broad areas that cause the prevalence** of child labour in agriculture in sub-Saharan Africa (2020b), including:

- ▶ **Social challenges**, including poverty, the informality of the agricultural sector, limited access to basic services and to social protection, and a lack of labour law enforcement.
- ▶ **Economic threats** at the macro and micro levels. They include price instability and the limited access of poor rural farmers to markets, knowledge and technology, farm inputs and financial services.
- ▶ **Environmental limitations**, which refers to the seasonality of production, limited access to natural resources (water, land, fishing grounds and forests), and climate variability with events such as floods.

There is a functional and economic dependency upon child labour in the agricultural sector, especially among poor households. The presence of children in agriculture is indeed a key contributor to the sustenance of family livelihoods, and farming operations are often labour-intensive. This labour force is not always affordable, or in some cases not available, thus making it challenging for small-scale farmers to attain the level of production needed for their survival without children's involvement (FAO, 2020b). In sub-Saharan Africa, child labour in agriculture can be found across the different sectors, namely plant and **crop farming**, forestry, **fisheries and aquaculture**, and **livestock**. For the purposes of this paper, the focus will be on child labour in crop farming, fisheries and aquaculture, and livestock, which arguably have the major incidence of child labour in agriculture in the region.



Child labour in crop farming

Crop farming forms a large part of the rural economy. For the past 24 years, crop production has contributed to 85 percent of the total agricultural production values (FAO and OECD, 2016). Many child labourers in agriculture are likely to be found in this sector, participating in a wide range of operations from weeding to packaging, and in some cases they are involved in the application of pesticides.

Findings from a study conducted by ILO on cocoa farms in Côte d'Ivoire indicated that about 86 percent of children perform dangerous work (involving cutting tools, heavy loads and chemical products) (ILO, 2019). Children are highly at risk as they absorb more chemicals into their bodies; their organs are still developing, making exposure to toxins potentially more dangerous (FAO, 2020a).

In sub-Saharan Africa, major cash crops where child labour has been reported include cocoa, cotton, tea and coffee, while little information is available about child labour related to crops that do not reach the global market.



Child labour in fisheries and aquaculture

This sector is often associated with significant levels of child trafficking, as is evident in literature on child labour in fisheries and aquaculture. Fisheries and aquaculture encompass a wide range of activities, from fishing at sea to farming and harvesting fish through to processing, selling and distribution. Children are engaged throughout the supply chain, in addition to being required to perform household chores (FAO, 2018b). Benin, Ghana, Senegal and Uganda are some of the countries with a significant proportion of child labour in fisheries (FAO, 2010).



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Child labour in livestock

One of the fast-growing subsectors of agriculture is livestock, contributing 40 percent of the global value of agricultural output as of 2009. Children working in the livestock sector often undertake tasks in the family unit, such as herding animals, and in many cases this is closely linked to historical sociocultural traditions related to the division of labour within the household. The available literature also shows that children involved in pastoral systems start as young as 5 to 7 years of age, with some of them being victims of cross-border trafficking as herdsmen or pastoralists (FAO, 2013).



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4. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child labour

The emergence of the global pandemic changed many dynamics in the global and national economies. COVID-19 and its direct and indirect economic impacts are affecting rural populations, leading to an increase in hunger and poverty. To cope with this situation, many rural households have resorted to using child labour, among other negative coping strategies, facilitated by the closure of schools in response to the spread of the virus.

In a modelling exercise, ILO and UNICEF (2021) predict that, if all factors of social protection³ remained constant, 8.9 million⁴ more children would be in child labour by 2022 as result of the poverty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

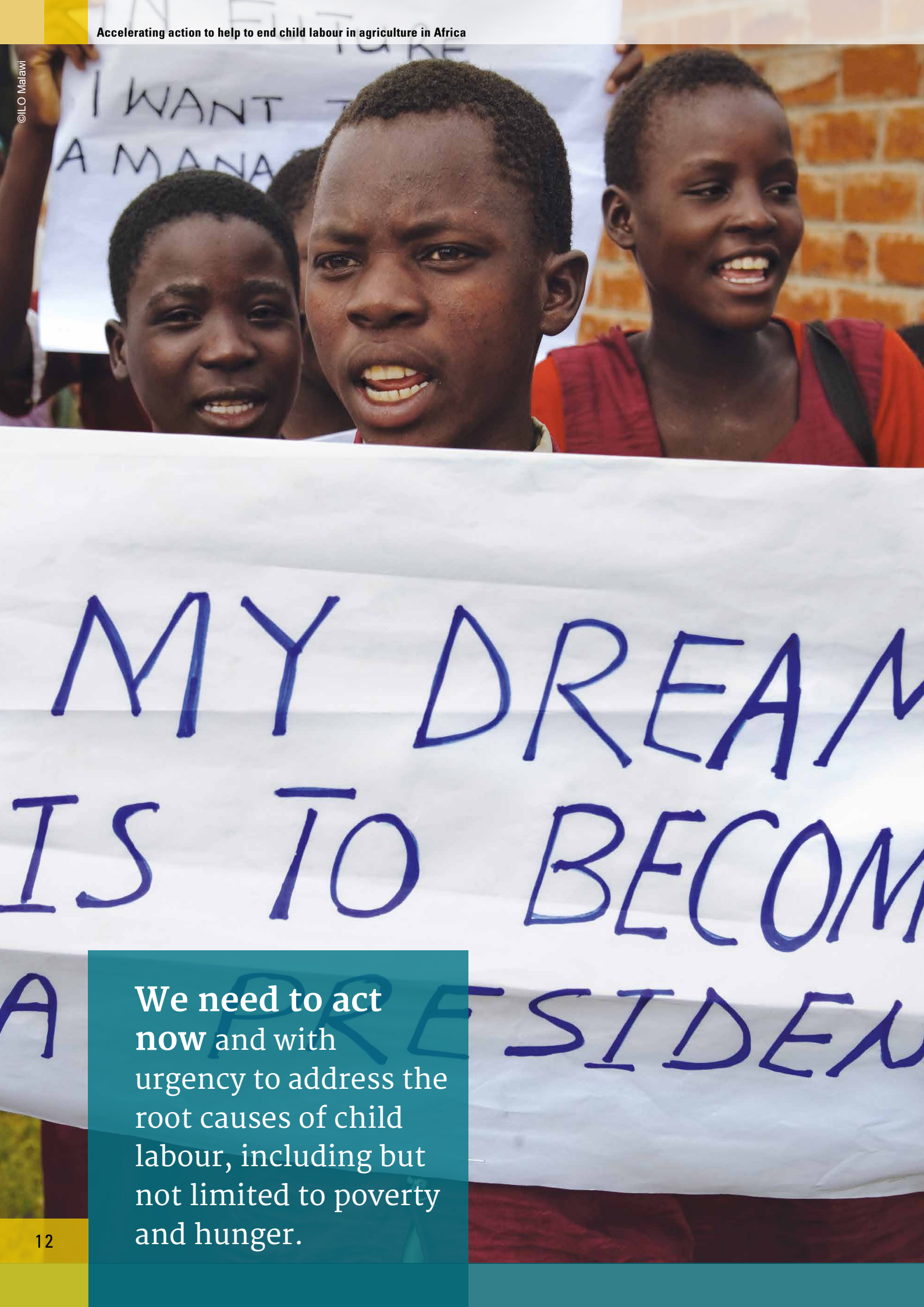
³ FAO defines social protection as “the set of policies and programs aimed at preventing or protecting all people against poverty, vulnerability, and social exclusion throughout their lifecycles, with a particular emphasis towards vulnerable groups. Social protection can be provided in cash or in-kind, through non-contributory schemes, providing universal, categorical, or poverty-targeted benefits such as social assistance, contributory schemes with social insurance being the most common form, and by building human capital, productive assets, and access to jobs.” (FAO and ILO, 2021)

⁴ This scientific modelling undervalued the effect of disruptions to children’s education.





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5. Way forward

Eliminating child labour in agriculture in the region is an enormous task and a challenging duty, requiring much more demonstrated commitment by a wide range of actors. The following list of recommendations is far from complete and meant to provide some impetus for the discussions during the conference. They refer largely to policies, programmes and investments in agri-food systems to help to end child labour in agriculture.

- ▶ Stakeholders should aim to collaborate with regional bodies such as the African Union and national governments to develop and implement national policies, strategies and programmes focused on ending child labour in agriculture, including through investments in sustainable agri-food systems.
- ▶ Agricultural actors should help to identify and provide alternative and safe agricultural practices and technologies to reduce the economic and functional dependencies of households on child labour in crop production, fisheries and aquaculture, forestry and livestock.
- ▶ Agricultural actors and educators should support the development of skills of young people in rural areas to prepare for the future of work, and through this facilitate the school-to-work transition and provide decent youth employment opportunities, while protecting children from child labour. Governments should

encourage the inclusion of agriculture, food security and nutrition in primary education while providing children with school meals to improve their school attendance, given their right to compulsory education.

- ▶ Public and private investment programmes in agriculture, as well as in poverty reduction, food security, natural resource management, social protection and many others, need to be designed and implemented to be child-labour responsive and to include child labour prevention measures. Given the large scale of some of these programmes, they have a significant potential to support households who engage in child labour in agriculture or who are at risk of engaging in child labour.
- ▶ Apply good business practices, transparency and traceability related to child labour in agriculture along agri-food value chains and measures to ensure living incomes for farmers and workers. Ensure that effective child labour monitoring and remediation systems are in place.

Lastly, all of these recommendations may not yield the necessary impact if peace and security on the continent are not enhanced and social protection systems do not reach out to poor families. We need to act now and with urgency to address the root causes of child labour, including but not limited to poverty and hunger.

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ACTING TOGETHER TO END **CHILD LABOUR** IN **AGRICULTURE**

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