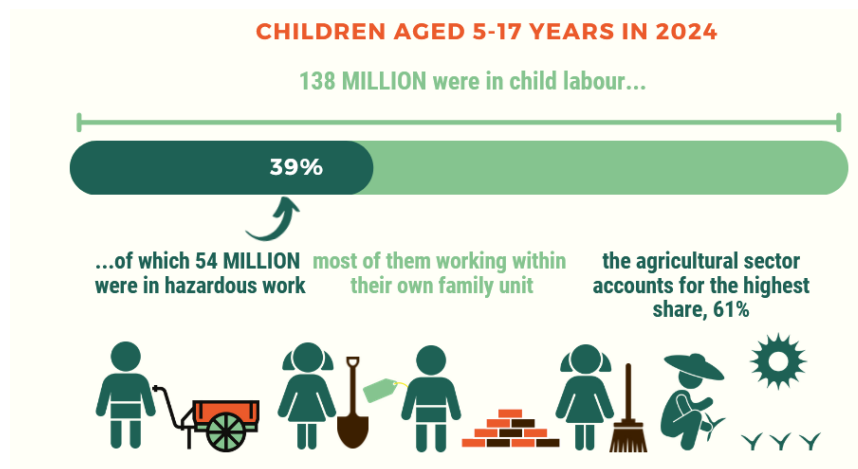


Protecting Children's Rights: Definitions

Child labour is strictly prohibited in the 4C System. It is important to distinguish it from acceptable activities for children and young workers under 18 years. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), not all work done by children is harmful. Helping at home or in a family business can support their development, as long as their well-being and education are not affected.¹

Protecting children's rights and shielding them from child labour is crucial because it ensures their safety, health and access to education. Safeguarding children from exploitation helps promote their physical, emotional and social development, breaks cycles of poverty and upholds international legal and ethical standards. It's a fundamental step toward building fair, inclusive and sustainable societies.



Source: ILO and UNICEF, *Child Labour: global estimates 2024, trends and road forward*, ILO and UNICEF, 2025 & US Department of Labour, *2024 List of Goods Produced by Child Labour or Forced Labour*, 2024

This quick guide provides definitions of key concepts related to the protection of children's rights:

- Child Labour
- Light work
- Young workers under 18 years

¹ Sabates-Wheeler, R. and Sumberg, J, Understanding Children's Harmful Work in African Agriculture: Points of Departure, ACHA Working Paper 1, 2020.

Child Labour

*"Child labour is defined as work that is mentally, physically, socially, or morally dangerous and harmful to children, and interferes with their schooling by depriving them of the opportunity to attend school; obliging them to leave school."*²

Child labour entails two concepts:

a) **Work undertaken by children below the legal minimum age for admission to employment:**

- According to ILO Convention No. 138, the minimum age for admission to employment or work must not be less than the age of completion of compulsory schooling and, in any case, must not be less than 15 years. In developing countries, exceptions may exist for children from 14 years of age. If local laws and regulation establish a different minimum age or age of completion of compulsory education, the stricter rule must be followed.

The **4C System** requires compliance with all relevant national and regional laws – as long as they don't conflict with 4C standards. If national law and ILO standards differ, the stricter rule must be followed. The concrete requirements are:

- Children under the age of 15 (or of compulsory school age) are not part of the regular workforce
- Compulsory school age is the age defined by national law, until which children are obliged to go to school
- Children and young workers under 18 years are not allowed to work during school time or at night

b) **Worst forms of child labour:**

- According to the ILO Convention No. 182, the worst forms of child labour include all forms of slavery, commercial sexual exploitation of children, use of children for illegal activities and hazardous work.
- Children must never be involved in hazardous work, which includes tasks that could harm their health, safety, or morals— for example, working at night or for long hours.

According to the 4C System, hazardous work must only be performed by adults and must strictly follow all safety and protection requirements. Hazardous work is never acceptable to be carried out by anyone under 18 years under any circumstance.

² <https://www.ilo.org/topics/child-labour/what-child-labour> (Retrieved on October 2025)



Light work

- Children below the minimum age for admission to employment or below the age of completion of compulsory education are not allowed to be employed on a full-time basis. However, they can perform age-appropriate light work under certain conditions and if allowed by local laws and regulations. Light work³ is defined by the ILO Convention No. 138 as work that:
 - does not affect their health and development;
 - does not interfere with schooling or vocational training programmes approved by the national authority; and
 - does not limit their capacity to benefit from their education/vocational training

The 4C System requires compliance with all relevant national and regional laws – as long as they don't conflict with 4C standards. If national law and ILO standards differ, the stricter rule must be followed. The concrete requirements are:

- The minimum age for permitting light work is defined by the local legislation; in case no applicable laws are available, light work is allowed from the age of 13 years, as long as this does not conflict with applicable laws. Weekly light working hours must not exceed 14 hours or the maximum number of hours established by local laws and regulations.
- Light work must not be conducted during school time or at night.

Employment of young workers under 18 years

- Young workers above the national minimum age for employment but below 18 years, may participate in the workforce, which can support their development when combined with education.
- While the UN defines youth as individuals aged 15–24, employment conditions differ for those aged 15–17 compared to those who are 18 years or over.
- Young workers under 18 years of age must not do hazardous work, that is considered part of the worst forms of child labour (ILO C182). Young workers under 18 years are also not allowed to work overtime or to do night shifts.
- The rules governing employment of young workers under 18 years are set by national laws.

³ https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/C138_at_a_glance_EN.pdf (Retrieved on June 03 2026)



The 4C System requires compliance with all relevant national and regional laws – as long as they don't conflict with 4C standards. If national law and ILO standards differ, the stricter rule must be followed. The concrete requirements are:

- Young workers under the age of 18 do not perform hazardous/harmful work. If a national list on the definition of hazardous work is not available check if the ME/BP has defined their own list of hazardous work that young workers under the age of 18 years are not allowed to perform.
- Young workers under 18 years are not allowed to work at night or to work overtime, and the maximum working hours per day and week should not exceed 8 hours/day and 40 hours/week. They should receive at least 12 consecutive hours of night rest each day, and one full rest day per week. Working hours should allow young workers to participate in school and vocational training programmes approved by the competent authority and should not interfere with their ability to study.

	Acceptable Activities for Children	Child Labour
What is it?	• Does not harm a child's health or education • Generally seen as positive, as it supports their socialisation and development	• Harmful to children's health and their physical and mental development • Deprives children of education
When is it allowed?	• Conducted for a limited amount of time • Does not affect physical or mental health or development • Does not affect schooling • Under adult supervision	• It is never allowed
Examples	• Child of 13 years: sorting green coffee beans together with their parents after school (no longer than 14 hours a week) in a country where light work is permitted from 13 years	• Child of 14 years: carrying heavy coffee cherry bags • Child of 15 years: spraying herbicides

Examples

Acceptable Activities for Children	Employment for young workers under 18 years	Child Labour
6-year-old playing at coffee plantation while grandmother is picking cherries	n/a (below local youth employment age)	6-year-old assisting in coffee cherry picking 3 hours after school (on the weekend) in a farm area that is very steep (danger of slipping)
7-year-old helping his mother with household chores for 2 hours on Saturday	n/a (below local youth employment age)	7-year-old picking coffee cherries, for 5 hours each Saturday and Sunday. This qualifies as child labour, as the activities are likely to affect the child's health, and may also interfere with their free time and schoolwork.
A child of 13 years sorting green coffee beans together with parents after school, not longer than 14 hours a week (if in line with local laws and regulations)	n/a (below local youth employment age)	Child of 13 years spraying herbicides
A child of 14 years assisting with packing coffee under parents' supervision under safe conditions after school, not longer than 14 hours a week (if in line with local laws and regulations)	n/a (below local youth employment age)	A 14-year-old doing pruning activities with sharp tools
n/a	A 16-year-old assists with packaging under safe conditions without interfering with schooling	16-year-old carrying heavy backs of coffee cherries (=hazardous work)
n/a	A youth of 17 years manages water flow and cleans beans at the washing station	Youth of 17 years spraying herbicides (=hazardous work)