



► What is forced labour of children and how can businesses help to end it?

December 2021

Sustainable Development Target 8.7 aims to eradicate child labour by 2025 and forced labour by 2030. The ILO Global Business Network on Forced Labour (ILO GBNFL) supports companies, their representative organizations, and partners to meet these targets.

The [2021 UN International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour \(IYECL\)](#) provides a unique opportunity to accelerate the pace of progress. The ILO GBNFL has decided to highlight one of the worst forms of child labour: Forced labour of children.

Where forced labour and child labour overlap, children are in forced labour. Forced labour of children is less understood than both child labour and forced labour because it has not been as well researched. Some types of child labour, such as hazardous work, or specific types of forced labour of children, such as commercial sexual exploitation, have benefited from more research.¹

This brief seeks, firstly, to raise awareness of forced labour of children by summarizing and sharing the limited amount of information currently available. It focuses on forced labour of children in the private economy, and not on, for instance, state-imposed forced labour of children or child soldiers. This brief also outlines actions for the business community to help end forced labour of children and meet Sustainable Development Target 8.7. Importantly, this brief is intended only as an introduction to the topic. More detailed guidance on addressing forced labour of children is forthcoming in 2022.

Recommended actions for companies

- ✓ **Make a commitment and act on it.** Regardless of company size, a commitment to addressing forced labour of children is paramount.
- ✓ **Target action.** Understanding the nature of forced labour of children is key to tackling it. Address forced labour of children where it is most prevalent, including in domestic economies and lower tiers of supply chains.
- ✓ **Identify risks.** Gather information on risk factors and act accordingly. Apply the ILO's 11 indicators of forced labour while bearing in mind that children are generally more vulnerable than adults to coercion and deception.
- ✓ **Collaborate, collaborate, collaborate.** Companies stand to benefit from working with employer and business membership organizations, worker representative organizations, child and forced labour experts, as well as local stakeholders.
- ✓ **Work with relevant authorities and/or experts to remove children from forced labour.** Where forced labour of children is identified, coordinate with (local) experts and the respected authorities to remove the child(ren) from the situation as soon as safely feasible. Ensure this is done in a manner that preserves the immediate and long-term interests of the child.
- ✓ **Recognize the role of national governments and advocate for action.** Businesses can play an important role in eradicating forced labour of children, but they cannot do it alone. National governments, regional authorities, and local institutions must create and enforce the right regulatory framework.

▶ The nature of forced labour of children

Key points

The first section of this brief answers some basic questions:

- ▶ What is forced labour of children?
- ▶ How many children are victims?
- ▶ What are the root causes?
- ▶ Where does forced labour of children occur?

What is forced labour of children?

ILO's Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29) defines forced labour of any person, regardless of their age, as:

▶ All work or service which is exacted from any person under the threat of menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily.

In the case of forced labour of children, further nuances were added through the [ILO's Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 \(No. 182\)](#), which applies to anyone under the age of 18. The convention states that forced labour of children includes:

- ▶ All forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour
- ▶ The use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances
- ▶ The use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in relevant international treaties.

Generally, forced labour of children takes two forms. In the first form, parents are in a situation of forced labour with their children working alongside them or for the same employer. In practice children who work because their parents are in forced labour are also considered as victims of forced labour.²

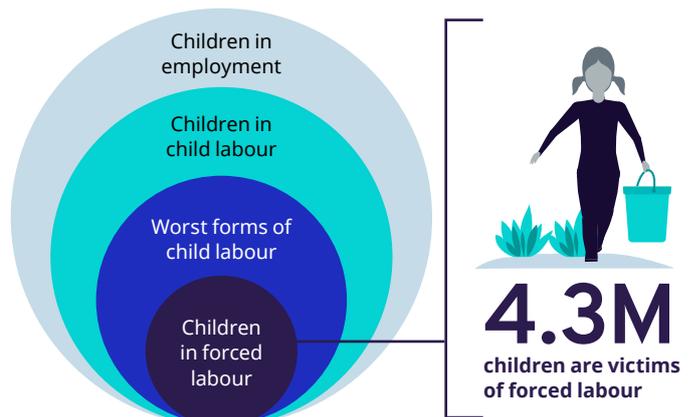
Children may also be trafficked, deceptively recruited, or coerced into working for an employer without their parents. Examples of this could include children who migrate alone or who are trafficked into forced domestic work. In this case, guardians are unlikely to be aware of the situation of the child.³

While both adults and children can be victims of forced labour, children have inherent rights and needs that differ from those of adults. These rights are set out in the 1989 [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#). This international legal instrument recognizes children's right to protection from economic exploitation and from performing work that is hazardous, interferes with education, or that can be harmful to a child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral, or social development.

Other relevant terms and international legal instruments

The ILO's Forced Labour Convention and Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, together with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, provide the core framework for defining forced labour of children. Other international legal instruments also contribute, in particular the [Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime \(2000\)](#). Also referred to as the 'Palermo Protocol', this instrument states that 'forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery' are forms of human trafficking.

Moreover, while there is no internationally agreed definition of 'modern slavery', the term is often used by experts, relevant stakeholders, and the media. Alliance 8.7, the global partnership delivering on Sustainable Development Target 8.7, and the ILO have



interpreted modern slavery as covering both people trapped in forced labour and in forced marriage.⁴ The term ‘modern slavery’ therefore also applies to forced labour of children.

It is worth noting that ILO’s Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention also defines types of work and exploitive practices deemed too dangerous for children. ‘Hazardous child labour’ is separate to forced labour of children and constitutes any work that can harm the health, safety, and morals of children. Individual ILO Member States determine what types of work should be classified as ‘hazardous child labour’.

How many children are victims of forced labour?

According to the ILO’s [Global Estimates of Modern Slavery](#) there were an estimated 4.3 million children in forced labour in 2016, of which:

- 3M** Three million children were trapped in forced labour in the private economy
- 1M+** More than one million were trapped in commercial sexual exploitation
- 300K** Nearly 300,000 were in state-imposed forced labour.⁵

Since then, the actual number of children trapped in forced labour is likely to have increased. The latest [estimates](#) by the ILO and UNICEF indicate that the number of children in child labour has risen to 160 million globally – an increase of 8.4 million children in the last four years and accounting for almost 1 in 10 of all children worldwide. The COVID-19 crisis is likely to push millions more children into child labour and increase their vulnerability to forced labour.

What are the root causes?

The root causes of forced labour of children are often multiple and vary depending on culture, religion, family makeup, economic status, and the number of risk factors affecting a family and a child, among others. Primary causes include the following:



Poverty

Poverty is the greatest single force driving children into the workplace. Income from a child’s work is felt to be crucial for his/her own survival or for that of the household.⁶



Weak governance structures

A lack of, or poorly executed, legislation that criminalizes perpetrators of forced labour of children coupled with poor coordination amongst government agencies to address the issue allows the practice to go unnoticed or unpunished.⁷



Socio-economic pressures amongst the most vulnerable

Poverty, violence, climate change, and the absence of social services are some of the factors that limit choices for the most vulnerable families globally, and also have the greatest impact on children. Families, pressured to accept, or sometimes forced into, very low paying jobs with poor working conditions, often bring their children with them to work or send their children to work independently to help the family survive.⁸



Lack of access to quality education

Education is a crucial component of any effective effort to eliminate child labour. Children with no access to quality education have little alternative but to enter the labour market.



Lack of company awareness of forced labour of children and/or capacity to root it out

Companies may lack the awareness, capacity, or the commitment to uphold human and labour rights in the workplace.⁹



Labour market informality

Forced labour and child labour imposed by private sector actors occur overwhelmingly in the informal economy. Those working in the informal economy are also often without social safety nets and may not be able to access government relief or support.



Discrimination

This leads to increased risks of forced labour and child labour because of social exclusion and abuse. Discrimination can be based on gender, religion, caste, tribes, disability, and more.

Exacerbating factors

The following factors exacerbate the abovementioned reasons why children might be forced to work.



Migration

Conflict, poverty, and climate change are some of the reasons why people migrate to find work. The lack of safe migration corridors for migrants, especially children, puts them at higher risk of exploitation. Cut off from family support, migrant workers may lack knowledge of local languages, laws and customs, and support systems.^{10, 11, 12, 13}



Unfair recruitment practices

Abusive and fraudulent recruitment practices by recruitment agencies and other intermediaries can lead to debt bondage and forced labour among child migrants. Children who migrate for work out of need are often deceived about their working conditions and the type of job. The exploitation of children for labour is more likely to occur when there is a high demand for labour and children to meet the demand.¹⁴



Sudden shocks

Sudden familial, economic, or weather shocks, as well as conflict situations, can have a disastrous impact on families and push children (and their family members) into forced labour. Such shocks may include the death or illness of the main breadwinner of the family, or an infestation that ruins an entire season of a crop that sustains a family.^{15, 16}

Where does forced labour of children occur?

Little information is available on where in the world children are in forced labour. However, available research on forced labour and child labour can provide clues.

- Child labour is most common in production for the domestic economy, particularly in regions where children work alongside their parents in subsistence agriculture and among the lower supply chain tiers.¹⁷
- Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest prevalence of child labour, with 23.9 per cent of children in child labour,

followed by Northern Africa and Western Asia with 7.8 per cent, and Eastern and South-eastern Asia with 6.2 per cent.

- The highest prevalence of forced labour, in 2016, was found in Asia and the Pacific where 4 in every 1,000 people were victims of forced labour, followed by Europe and Central Asia (3.6 victims out of every 1,000 people) and Africa (2.8 victims out of every 1,000 people).¹⁸

High risk sectors

Putting together available information on forced labour of children, child labour as well as forced labour, we can see that forced labour of children is more likely to occur in some sectors than in others.

Agriculture

Agriculture remains the major employer of children, accounting for more than 70 percent of child labour worldwide. Agriculture is also a significant employer of migrant child labour, who are particularly vulnerable to forced labour.^{19, 20} Forced labour of children occurs in the production of cotton, rice, cocoa, coffee, sugarcane, bamboo, rubber, Brazil nuts, beans, and tobacco.²¹

Small-scale mining

Artisanal extraction is amongst the most hazardous sectors for children with respect to fatal injuries, with an average fatality rate of 32 per 100,000 full-time worker equivalents for children.²²

Apparel sector

Children have reportedly been trafficked to work in sweat shops and deceived into working under poor conditions. These children may be subjected to 16-hour workdays and are often not paid for their work.²³

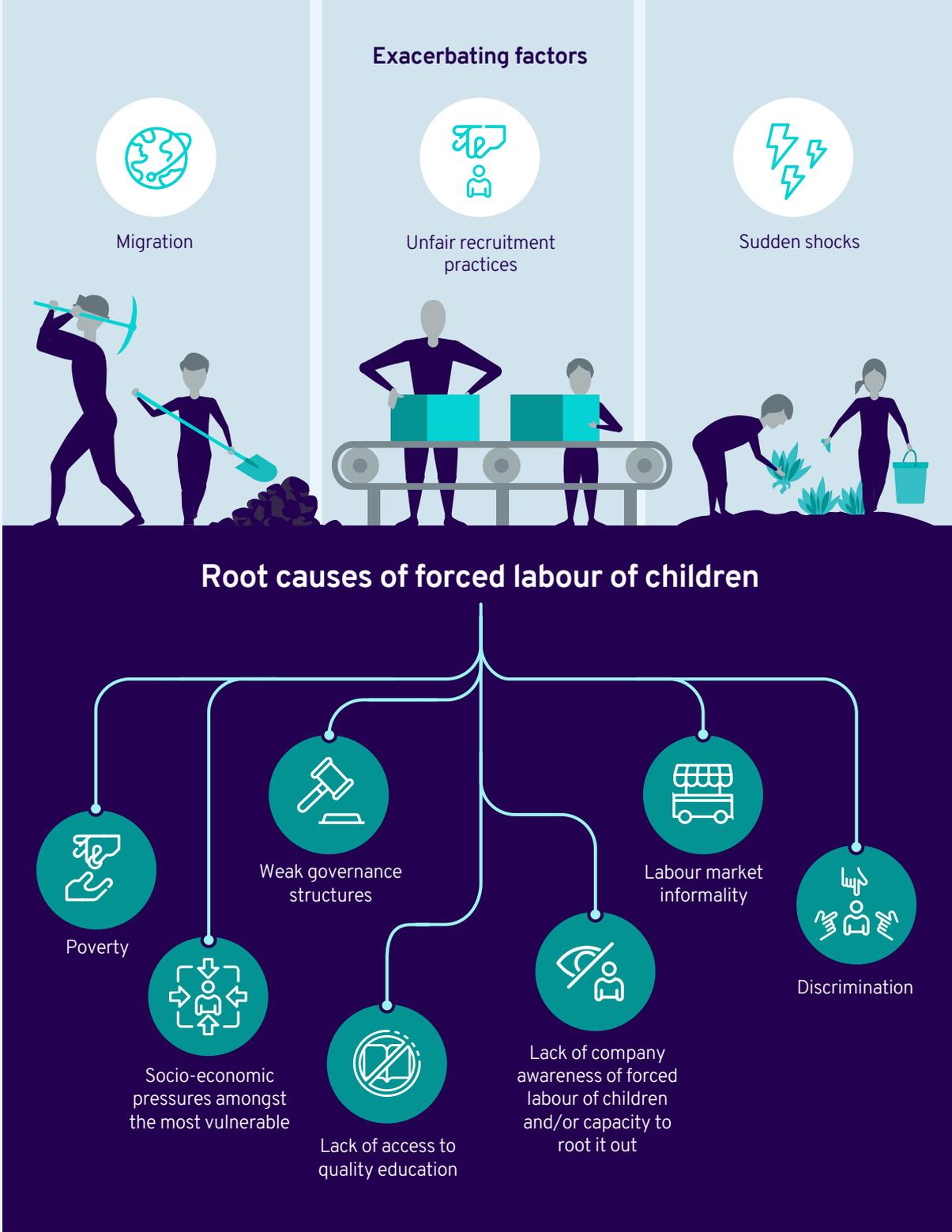
Brick production

Children working in brick kilns tend to suffer from poor working conditions and are at a high risk of injury and poor health, including work-related illnesses. The kilns are generally located in open areas without shade and workers are not protected from the hot chimneys, exposing them to heat and sun. Children that work here are often subjected to bonded labour, for example, through a parent's debt.^{24, 25}

Domestic work

Children, the majority girls, working as domestic workers in third-party homes around the globe is among the most prevalent forms of forced labour of children. Due to its hidden nature and informality, it is also one of the hardest to monitor and regulate. The private, isolated nature of domestic work makes those

Root causes of forced labour of children and exacerbating factors



involved particularly vulnerable to physical, sexual, psychological, and other forms of abuse, as well as harassment and violence.^{26, 27}

Entertainment industry

One million children are estimated to be victims of sexual exploitation for commercial purposes. Some children are duped into believing they will get a job as

a server in a restaurant rather than perform sex work. Others live on the street and sell their bodies for sex as a survival mechanism. The production, promotion, and distribution of pornography of children is also a form of forced labour.^{28, 29, 30}

▶ Businesses can play a major role in ending forced labour of children

This section sets out the following recommendations and actions for companies:

- ✔ **Make a commitment and act on it.** Regardless of company size, a commitment to addressing forced labour of children is paramount.
- ✔ **Determine the risk.** Gather information on risk factors and act accordingly.
- ✔ **Collaborate, collaborate, collaborate.** Companies stand to benefit from working with employer and business membership organizations, worker representative organizations, child and forced labour experts, as well as local stakeholders.
- ✔ **Work with relevant authorities and/or experts to remove children from forced labour.** Where forced labour of children is identified, coordinate with (local) experts and the police/labour inspectors to remove the child(ren) from the situation as soon as safely feasible. Ensure this is done in a manner that preserves the long-term interests of the child.
- ✔ **Recognize the role of national governments and advocate for action.** Businesses can play an important role in eradicating forced labour of children, but they cannot do it alone. National governments must create and enforce the right regulatory framework.

Make a commitment and act on it

A fully integrated business commitment to ending forced labour of children begins at, and is articulated from, leadership level. It leads to a company culture that respects and addresses human rights.

This commitment can take a different shape according to the characteristics of the company. For instance, a larger business with supply chains can mainstream due diligence requirements, communicate ways in which it is addressing the issue, and integrate impact results and learnings into further actions and policies.³¹

Company due diligence standards are particularly effective if they include a robust management system³² that:

- ▶ Outlines a policy on forced labour of children and activities to address it
- ▶ Sets out the roles and responsibilities of staff managing the process
- ▶ Allocates sufficient resources
- ▶ Includes partner engagement
- ▶ Details grievance mechanisms
- ▶ And includes transparency systems.

Small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), in particular those operating at a national or local level and with no or more limited supply chains, can demonstrate their commitment through a strong focus on their local communities. SMEs can, for example, have a huge impact on forced labour of children at a local level by working with partners to create Child Labour Free Zones (more on this further down).

Determine the risk

Prior to developing strategies to directly address forced labour of children, companies need to identify and assess what, where and why any risks exist. Employing a risk-based approach can help a company better understand contextual risk factors that can inform the development of mitigation and remediation strategies as well as the choice of partners for implementation.³³

The ILO's [11 indicators of forced labour](#) were developed to help identify situations of forced labour. These indicators can be used to identify forced labour of children, but they must be applied flexibly as children are generally more easily deceived and overall more vulnerable than adults.³⁴

► ILO's 11 indicators of forced labour

The ILO's 11 indicators of forced labour			
Isolation	Physical & sexual violence	Intimidation & threats	Retention of identity documents
Withholding of wages	Debt bondage	Deception	Excessive overtime
Abuse of vulnerability	Abusive working & living conditions		Restriction of movement

Critical risk assessment questions to seek out information on forced labour of children should begin with the ILO's forced labour indicators adapted to children.³⁵ Select questions could include:

- Is there a high risk of forced labour of children occurring in the country and/or sector?
- What are the characteristics of children likely to be present at the worksite? For example:
 - Are they likely to be separated from their parents?
 - Are they likely to be child migrants working alongside their parents?
 - Are they predominantly girls or boys?
 - Are they bonded or do they owe a debt?³⁶
- Are there characteristics of the worksite that may lead to risks of forced labour of children, such as deception by a job recruiter, or the use of intimidation or threats?
- Are the children able to move freely and leave the worksite if they want to?
- Are children in possession of their passports and legal documents?
- Have the children been paid their promised wages?³⁷

Other risk factors which may contribute to an increased likelihood of forced labour of children could include:

- Poverty or low parental income
- Poor education level of parents
- Lack of economic, educational, and social opportunities in the immediate environment
- Community at risk, for instance a community with a high number of street children or beggars
- High prevalence of child abuse or neglect
- High school dropout rates
- Discrimination, for example based on gender or ethnicity.

Collaborate, collaborate, collaborate

There are two main reasons for companies to work together with other businesses and stakeholders to fight child and forced labour. Firstly, businesses are experts in doing business, not in child and forced labour eradication. Working with experts allows businesses to more effectively prevent children from becoming victims and also to more successfully remove children who have become trapped (see further below).

Secondly, greater collaboration between businesses and other stakeholders allows for scaling effective solutions and sharing lessons learned. Fundamentally, this also helps to address the cost, which can be a burden on a single company.³⁸

For example, larger companies with supply chains are more likely to successfully implement due diligence processes when working together. In doing so, it is important to work with expert stakeholders who understand the political context in which the companies operate and who have experience of innovative strategies to address the issue. This is demonstrated by the case study on the next page.

So-called area-based approaches, including the above-mentioned [Child Labour Free Zones](#), have been particularly successful at eradicating child labour. These approaches bring together all relevant stakeholders in a given area, including businesses. Area-based approaches examine all employment of children so that displacement of (forced) child labour to another area or industry can be prevented. Through awareness raising, building protection mechanisms, and gaining buy-in from community leaders, area-based approaches create zones where child labour is no longer acceptable.

Child Labour Monitoring and Remediation System



The International Cocoa Initiative (ICI) is a non-governmental organization (NGO) bringing together the private sector, civil society, governments, and farmers to protect children in cocoa-growing communities in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. Industry partners include companies such as Nestlé, Cargill, and Mars, Incorporated.

The ICI's Child Labour Monitoring and Remediation System (CLMRS) monitors and remediates cases of child labour. Facilitators in cocoa-growing communities raise awareness on the issue of child labour, identify cases and request remediation actions that are implemented by ICI together with the relevant chocolate company and cocoa supplier. All the information is collected via smartphones and gathered on a database from which systematic analysis can be conducted and remediation strategies refined.

Started in 2012, the system currently assists 194 farmers' cooperatives and targets over 160,000 cocoa farming households through its implementation in the supply chains of eight companies. A total of 215,000 children have been assisted since 2015 as a result of the CLMRS.

To date, ICI does not monitor forced labour of children. This would involve tracking additional indicators such as the use of deception to convince a child to work, whether the child or a family member is paying off a debt, or whether the child is free or not to leave the place of work.

We recommend that companies and their representative organizations:

- Form strong partnerships with government, employers' organizations, worker representative organizations, civil society, and community stakeholders in areas where forced labour of children is prevalent. This could include partnerships with:
 - Local worker representative and civil society organizations as these understand the local culture and population, as well as the solutions that work best for the children and their parents.
 - Local government, and particularly local government service providers (schools, health clinics, etc.) as it is their duty to provide quality services to their populations.
- Support holistic strategies, such as area-based approaches to child labour eradication, that consider all children's work, not solely forced labour, and involve all relevant stakeholders.

Work with relevant authorities and/or experts to remove children from forced labour

It is not the role of businesses to intervene in cases of forced labour of children; this is the responsibility of the police and/or the labour inspectorate. Yet businesses need to have a system in place to ensure a child can exit forced labour as soon as possible. Therefore, they should consider working with civil society organisations, ILO offices or other UN organizations that are experts in forced and child labour situations on the ground. This builds on the wider point already made about the need for collaboration.

Such organizations are well placed to determine how best to remove a child from forced labour in the fastest, safest, and most sustainable way. They can also often help to set up systems to prevent, monitor and identify forced and child labour. The online [Modern Slavery Map](#), an initiative by ILO GBNFL and others, helps companies find the right organizations to partner with.

From a practical perspective, if you suspect a child is in a situation of forced labour, you could:³⁹

- Ensure the child feels safe and not threatened. It is often preferable to have a woman approach the child
- Assure the child that she/he has done nothing wrong
- Ensure the child understands why she/he should not be doing the work she/he is doing

SMEs fight forced labour of children in Costa Rica’s tourism industry

Tourism is a major source of income in Costa Rica but sexual exploitation, particularly of minors, in tourist accommodation was rife. SMEs in the industry, together with NGO PANIAMOR, successfully turned the tide.

Hotels, tour operators, travel agencies, transport companies, car rental businesses, and others wanted to do the right thing but lacked the tools and knowledge to do so. In response, PANIAMOR developed a code of ethics, launched in 2003.

Businesses that adopt the code:

- Have a zero-tolerance policy and share this with customers, peers, and suppliers
- Train their staff on the issue of sexual exploitation in the tourism sector
- Are trained to handle and report any suspected cases of sexual exploitation
- Recommend the code to others and invite their suppliers to be part of the programme.

Today, the Code of Conduct for the Protection of Girls, Boys and Adolescents against Commercial Sexual Exploitation associated with travel and tourism (ESCNNA-VT) is adhered to by 453 businesses across the country. It is also part of the sustainable tourism model promoted by Costa Rica.

For further information, and to access the code (in Spanish), please click [here](#).

- Where safe to do so, remove the child from the workstation to a safer location such as an office
- Seek local experts, such as civil society organizations, ILO offices or other United Nations agencies, to provide support and advice to ensure the child can be adequately cared for
- Document information about the situation.

You must also be aware that the child’s legal guardians may similarly be in a situation of forced labour.

Recognize the role of governments and advocate for action

Businesses can play an important role in eradicating forced labour of children, but they cannot do it alone. National governments, regional authorities, and local institutions must create and enforce the right regulatory framework for businesses to operate in, in consultation with social partners. Where the right policies and enforcement have not been put in place, businesses and their representative organizations should advocate for positive change, collaborating where possible.

To support companies in eradicating forced labour of children governments need to:

- Make a strong commitment to ending child and forced labour, and act on it. Most recently, many national governments have taken important steps forward here as part of their contributions to the [2021 International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour](#)
- Ensure government agencies coordinate to:
 - Effectively address the often-hidden nature of forced labour of children
 - Develop coordinated response mechanisms
 - Criminalize the practice and punish perpetrators.
- Invest in decent work, worker and wage protection policies, and social protection schemes
- Develop the capacity of labour inspectors and government social service providers to find, address and root out forced labour of children. This includes investing in social workers who can support victims in under resourced areas
- Invest greater resources in researching forced labour of children. Countries need to collect more timely and more accurate data to better understand the nature of forced labour of children, allowing for more effective action.

To join us and for further information

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Endnotes

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