



International
Labour
Organization

► COVID-19 and Child Labour in Myanmar – Situational Assessment

Executive Summary and Recommendations

April 2021

► Background

The onset of COVID-19 posed a clear risk for the increase of child labour within Myanmar. The added strain put upon families, disruptions of household incomes and livelihoods and the increased vulnerability of children being forced or coerced into both paid and unpaid labour are circumstances that need urgent attention.

This summary report presents findings and recommendations following a comprehensive study commissioned by ILO¹ to understand the impact that COVID-19 has and will continue to have upon the incidence and dynamics of child labour in Myanmar. Fieldwork was conducted remotely from Yangon and incorporated 6 focal states and regions as identified by ILO: Ayeyarwady Region, Bago Region, Kayin State, Mon State, Shan State and Yangon Region. All fieldwork took place between July 2020 –and January 2021.

Executive Summary of Key Findings

Media habits and preferences

Parents

1. Facebook and TV ranked equal as the most preferred news sources regardless of whether the information pertained to general news or COVID-19. Additionally, word-of-mouth remains important for a sizable portion of people.
2. Facebook is accessed daily by nearly 4-in-5 parents and for half of them, their news feeds are likely to be highly localised by virtue of them following news and information pages pertaining to their state, region or township.

Stakeholders

3. Facebook was noted by virtually all stakeholders as a source of news, along with TV, other social media channels, newspapers, journals and directly from within their jobs.
4. Almost 97 percent check Facebook daily, and 82 percent of such respondents follow local news sources pertaining to their states and regions.

COVID-19: Impact on Livelihoods

5. COVID-19 has undoubtedly dealt a serious blow to the income and livelihoods of people across the country – with 82 percent of respondents noting either a slight or significant decrease in their household income. This has made meeting household needs extremely difficult and nearly half of respondents had taken up a loan during 2020 (75 percent of whom did so simply to meet household needs).
6. Around 41 percent of respondents note a loss of work by one or more household member. Amongst them, one person had lost employment in 44 percent of households, and in 34 percent of households two people had lost employment. Sectors in which jobs were lost were diverse, but factory workers, sales staff and taxi/bike drivers made up the most sizable portions.
7. Relying on savings, requesting salaries in advance and relying on loans were the most commonly cited methods for coping with income loss. Stakeholders expressed a concern that many families were in precarious positions of becoming entrapped in debt cycles after taking on high-interest loans, which are common risk indicators for reliance on children working.
8. Indeed, sending a child to work was rejected as an option to dealing with financial hardship by a vast majority (around 88 percent) of participants, with 9 percent indicating they might consider it, and 4 percent indicating they would definitely rely on it. Reducing spending on travel, clothing and food were the most commonly cited coping mechanisms.

¹ This study was commissioned by the ILO to Kantar Public Information Myanmar and was written by Mr Michael MC Grath.

Child labour: perceptions and attitudes amongst parents and stakeholders

Parents

9. A vast majority of parents believe it is not appropriate for a child to work if they are under 14. The most commonly cited age was 16 and over.
10. Nevertheless, work of children under the age of 14 years is thought to be common or very common in their township by 3-in-4 people. There was no significant difference in perception between urban and rural cohorts, or amongst different states and regions.
11. The service industry and agriculture are the sectors in which child labour is believed to be most common.

Stakeholders

12. Few stakeholders could comprehensively define child work and labour. Furthermore, there were mixed responses as to legal age and appropriate age, and limited to reference to the disruption of education being a defining feature of child labour, with physical safety being the most commonly cited danger.
13. Just 28 percent were aware of laws regarding hazardous work.
14. Notably – the perceived prevalence of child labour was *markedly* lower amongst stakeholders than parents. It is possible that this is due to them having a reputational stake in these numbers being low.
15. Poverty is cited as the key driver of children entering the workforce. Stakeholders also brought up ‘broken’ families or households (usually in reference to substance abuse or domestic violence).
16. Some regional differences regarding child labour were also noted – with different stakeholders putting it into the context of civil war or high levels of migration shaping the dynamics through which children enter the workforce.
17. Although poverty was cited as a driving force, many CSO leaders, teachers and government staff also tended to blame the mind-set of parents.

Impact of COVID-19 on children’s participation in the workforce

Stakeholders

18. As a general rule, a majority of stakeholders did not believe that child labour could have increased due to COVID-19. The reason cited for this was that work opportunities had diminished nationwide, which means there would be reduced opportunities for children to work. Perhaps unrealistically, some even noted that “fear of COVID-19” would deter children from working.
19. In general there seems to be a disconnect between stakeholders’ clear understanding that poverty instigates child labour and the disruption that C19 has caused to peoples’ livelihoods, and the firm perception by many that child labour has *not* increased. It seemed that many stakeholders predominantly thought about child work within the formal sector.
20. Amongst those who did believe there had been an increase in children’s work, it was believed this was most likely to be occurring in agriculture, street selling, manual labour and fishing – but no respondent had concrete stories or evidence.

Child work in the home

21. Almost 97 percent of respondents indicate that their child contributes to household chores – with estimates about hours working mostly being under 16 hours. Very few (n=9) said this contribution affects their child’s school attendance, but amongst those who did, it was more likely for this to be frequent than infrequent.
22. Around 40 percent of parents said contribution at chores at home had increased during 2020. This was largely attributed to children having more free time due to school closure.
23. Children’s perceptions on their contribution was significantly higher than their parents. 83 percent believed their contribution had increased since COVID-19, but 87 percent also reported contributing at home before COVID-19.

24. Unsurprisingly, 96 percent of children interviewed were not attending school; and 82 percent believed they would attend next semester, while 11 percent said they would not, and 7 percent did not know.

Child work outside of the home

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26. Almost 40 percent of parents said contribution at chores at home had increased during 2020. This was largely attributed to children having more free time due to school closure.

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Recommendations

Channels and Audiences

1. **Comprehensive stakeholder mapping should be undertaken to identify who is going to be targeted as the audience of future communications and awareness raising activities, and different strategies should be tailored for each group.** There are multiple stakeholders within communities who each have a different role to play in reducing the risk and incidence of child labour – be it parents, teachers, government staff or other community leaders. The findings within the study clearly demonstrate that government staff and community stakeholders believe that an approach that incorporates all facets of the community will be critical to success. Nevertheless, the perfect ‘activation’ message for one group might not be the most successful to reach another. To avoid risking a message that becomes diluted amongst different stakeholders, ILO would do well to create messaging and content that target specific audiences within the roles they play in their communities. Indeed, these should integrate into a bigger picture narrative or campaign, but generating content that targets different groups will ensure that awareness-raising and behaviour change messaging is more directly impactful.

Action points

- Determine stakeholder audience(s) to be targeted by awareness-raising materials
- Comprehensively delineate opportunities and limitations of targeting different stakeholders as is applicable to the chosen communications strategy

2. **Future awareness raising campaigns and interventions focusing on media platforms should take a multi-faceted approach utilizing Facebook and TV.** The study demonstrated that Facebook and TV are by far the most used media sources for information-seeking regarding the general news as well as COVID-19. The data also indicates that an individual’s social media newsfeeds is typically highly localized through their following of local community news pages and groups (state/regional and township level) alongside broader, national sources.

Action points

- Strengthen connections with networks and committees in focal areas and compile lists of relevant news/information groups that could be utilized in spreading materials
- Further research to understand how information is disseminated, received and engaged with on such news/information groups

- 3. Grassroots community actors should also be engaged as awareness-raising agents to strengthen commitment at a local level.** Numerous interviewees indicated that social media/TV messaging would only go so far to engage and educate audiences, and that more involved community level workshops or learning sessions could bolster the successes of a strategic communications strategy. This might include community/CSO leaders, teachers and township/village tract authorities, and would allow information to be tailored to be highly relevant to local communities. This will be particularly useful if the goal of the communications strategy is to promote awareness and usage of referral mechanisms, which would be too complex to cover in a “one size fits all” social media/TV campaign.

Action points

- ▶ Determine most promising community actors that can be utilized as awareness-raising agents as is relevant to the chosen strategic communication plan (i.e. teachers? CSO leaders? Township/village tract authorities?)
- ▶ Determine which information is best disseminated at the grassroots level through face-to-face means rather than social media/TV campaigns

- 4. Capitalising on media actors as dispellers of mistruths will assist in disseminating child labour reduction messaging – but media actors will need to be more proactively coached to be engaged on these issues, and encouraged to not sensationalize stories.** While media actors indicate a willingness to report in child labour issues, they can only do so insofar in that it is seen to be a relevant mandate of their respective agency. Furthermore, many media actors hold the same misconceptions as broader society on the topic of child labour (such as that child labour cannot increase during COVID-19 if there has been an overall reduction in work opportunities). There is also a tendency for child labour stories to be sensationalized – so that only the very worst case scenarios are reported to the public. Such an approach serves to distance audiences from the subject matter, as they are encouraged to only understand child labour through these extreme stories, and not as a very tangible and every day issue.

Action points

- ▶ Strengthen relationships and networks with national media actors and hold awareness-raising sessions on child labour issues, prevalence and dynamics.
- ▶ Encourage reporting that frames child labour as an everyday occurrence, rather than a sensational issue.

- 5. Materials will need to take into consideration the linguistic and contextual realities of Myanmar’s diverse population.** This might be as simple as ensuring that materials are translated into major ethnic minority languages. Furthermore, it should also take into account that child labour dynamics and industries differ between states and regions. (see Recommendation 5 for more.)

Action points

- ▶ Translate materials into local relevant languages
- ▶ Ensure materials culturally resonate amongst diverse communities and do not marginalize any minority cultural practices

Messaging content and themes

- 6. While nationwide campaigns can be effective in disseminating a broad message, content that is tailored to specific communities will better embed behaviour change messaging at a grassroots level and will help to activate local change agents.** This will necessitate taking the sectoral and industry differences between different states and regions into account. For example, in states and regions where rates of children participating in agricultural and fishery sectors are high, materials should seek to connect audiences with relevant stories and information. Meanwhile, for urban audiences, focusing on construction, hospitality and the informal sector will better bring stories and information to life. Messages sink in the most when they feel relevant, tangible and close to home, rather than when they can be lost in a bigger, broader picture – and if audiences can be inspired, they will be more likely to act at a local level.

Action points

- ▶ Determine critical industries to target in each state and region
- ▶ Create packages of information (content, themes, key issue areas and desired behaviour change) pertaining to each industry and/or location
- ▶ Generate clear behaviour change or impact goals for different sectors and communities (i.e. what are you asking people to *do*? What behaviour are you seeking to change with the new information?)

- 7. Awareness-raising or campaigns materials should hone in on specific themes to avoid overcomplicating messages for audiences.** Examples of themes could be around the importance of education to a child’s future or safety hazards within specific workplaces and sectors. Future research to understand which themes and issues compel the greatest incidence of behaviour change will ensure effective awareness-raising and campaign activities.

Action points

- ▶ Further research to determine most compelling behaviour change messaging
- ▶ Determine key themes to be tackled in awareness-raising and campaign materials

- 8. Awareness-raising activities should focus on debunking unhelpful misconceptions regarding who is to blame for child labour – particularly in reference to the tendency to blame the ‘mind-set’ of low-income parents.** While a majority of stakeholders identified poverty as a key driver for children entering the workforce, this was still often coupled with an assumption that ‘bad’ parents relied on their children to work. The survey results indicate that for the parents interviewed, having their children work would be completely unacceptable or would be an absolute last resort in the case of extreme financial hardship, and that there are multiple other steps that they would be more likely to take to alleviate their income deficit. There is thus a disconnect between people’s understanding that poverty coincides with child labour, and the assumption that requiring a child to work is a simple matter of choice that ‘good’ parents would avoid. Communications strategies should focus on shifting the public mind-set from accusations of bad parenting, to empathy for extreme financial hardship. A power dynamic in which community decision makers do not blame parents will ultimately bear more productive and effective results.

Action points

- ▶ Embed empathetic framing into campaign messaging and content that shifts blame away from parents and encourages empathy and a focus on overcoming underlying socio-economic problems.
- ▶ Training and/or awareness-raising sessions/materials for key stakeholders (government officers, CSO leaders, teachers, etc.) that clearly conveys the idea that poverty (not choice) is the sole driver of child labour, and that encourages empathetic approaches to vulnerable families.

Capacity Building

9. Stakeholders at both a government and community level require further training on child labour concepts.

The study demonstrated there are still gaps and inconsistencies around stakeholder knowledge and understanding. Tackling child labour requires all stakeholders to have uniform and accurate comprehension of child labour definitions, concepts and potential solutions. Given that a majority of stakeholders also agree that a unified and integrated community response to child labour is critical, a powerful opportunity presents itself to bring different actors together to learn and work on the issue.

Action points

- ▶ Undertake capacity-building trainings that bring together government and community stakeholders that focusses on child labour definitions, concepts and risks.
- ▶ Facilitate joint solution strategizing workshops between different stakeholders to combine both community and government level perspectives in policy development.
- ▶ Communications materials and campaigns should promote a united, integrated approach between different facets of the community.

10. Activities should focus on broadening perspectives of child labour from solely being conceived within the formal sector.

Numerous stakeholders (both government and CSO leaders alike) only discussed child labour within the confines of formal sector industries – such as manufacturing, construction, agriculture and hospitality. The research demonstrated that children working within the informal sector (e.g. unregistered street vendors, rubbish collection, begging) often do not factor into their conceptualization of child work and child labour, or at least that these types of work are not at the forefront of the minds of stakeholders. If the informal sector is not taken into account in policy responses, then vulnerable children will be left behind. Ensuring that understandings of child labour encapsulate a more holistic view of the types of work where child labour occurs will thus help to generate mind-sets and response frameworks that are more in touch with socioeconomic realities facing vulnerable families and children.

Action points

- ▶ Ensure that future awareness raising training and materials clearly unpack formal and informal sectors of the economy and the risks of child labour in each
- ▶ Workshops with government and stakeholders to develop policies and response frameworks that cater to the realities of child labour in both formal and informal sectors

- 11. Given the early stage of the referral mechanisms being set up by relevant child labour committees, both government and community leaders alike require further training and awareness raising to boost the utilization of these systems by communities.** When asked about referral mechanisms available in their communities, government and community leaders generally indicated that there were mechanisms but admitted to not knowing how to use them, or else were unaware of them completely. Robust referral mechanisms require not only a strong knowledge of usage, but also genuine trust and confidence in the systems themselves so that communities feel motivated to use them.

Action points

- ▶ Capacity-building training on usage and purpose of referral mechanisms that is tailored to specific local contexts.
- ▶ Communications materials and campaigns should promote a united, integrated approach between different facets of the community.

Recovering from COVID-19

- 12. Greater awareness needs to be built connecting the disruption to livelihoods caused by COVID-19 and the risks posed to increased child work and labour.** Across the board there was an insistence that child labour cannot have increased due to COVID-19 because livelihood opportunities had generally decreased, and therefore there would be less opportunities for children to find work. This reflects the widespread tendency to only conceptualise child labour within the formal sector (as per Recommendation 9) and stands in opposition to the clear links between financial hardship, desperate circumstances and child labour. Interventions should also take into account the high rate with which vulnerable households are relying upon loans to overcome financial hardships – primarily through informal systems. Debt traps is highly likely to push the risk of child labour further as future waves of COVID-19 disrupt the economy and livelihoods.

Action points

- ▶ Awareness-raising materials and trainings that draw a clear link between livelihood disruption due to COVID-19 and the risks of child labour for stakeholders

- 13. Livelihood recovery will be essential to ensure families do not find themselves in positions in which children are required to work to contribute to the household income.** Understanding the provisions and actions being taken by relevant ministries and industries to reinvigorate the economy will be essential to ensuring cohesive communications strategies. Any social protection measures that are currently taking place would do well to build-in messages concerning the risks of child labour. Critical to such messaging, however, will be embedding an understanding of the frustrations and limitations faced by vulnerable households, where sending a child to work is seen as a rational measure. There were indeed notes of caution in some interviews whereby stakeholders conveyed the difficulty in trying to discourage households undergoing extreme financial hardship to avoid sending children to work in lieu of any other reasonable options or social support.

Action points

- ▶ Further research, fact-finding and communications with the relevant ministries and unions around kick-starting the economy
- ▶ Ensuring campaign messaging and content is deeply sensitive to the frustrations and realities of vulnerable households, and that this sensitivity is carried by stakeholders at all levels.

- 14. There needs to be greater understanding around the impacts of the disruption to the education system caused by COVID-19 and the recovery plan (if any) to be implemented by the government so that ILO activities can align accordingly.** The study clearly demonstrated nearly all children were out of school – and that a significant number were not certain that they would necessarily return when schools re-open. With more free time, childrens’ participation in household chores appears to have increased. Furthermore, amongst survey participants there were 40 incidences identified of children working outside the household, around half of whom only started doing so with the onset of COVID-19. These dynamics present a need for a reinvigoration of the education system. There is also a clear risk of children entering the workforce at an early age and thus foregoing an education that would serve them to find more reliable employment opportunities in the future.

Action points

- ▶ Further research, fact-finding and communications with the Ministry of Education around plans for school re-opening.
- ▶ Develop awareness-raising material that specifically encourages parents to ensure their children return to school.

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