

## STATEMENT ON THE STATE OF CHILD LABOUR DURING THE PANDEMIC

The theme of this year's International Day of the African Child is **“30 years after the adoption of the Charter: accelerate implementation of Agenda 2040 for an Africa fit for children”**. As such, declaration of 2021 as the international year for the elimination of child labour by the UN is a tremendous opportunity to keep the momentum towards achievement of the Agenda 2040 objective – Restoring the dignity of the African child.

Before the covid-19 pandemic, countries around the globe had made remarkable progress in reducing child labour. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the number of children in child labour decreased by approximately 94 million between 2000 and 2016, representing a drop by 38 percent.

The UCCA, on January 28, 2021 launched a report *Child Labour in Agribusiness: A case study of select out grower communities and companies in Uganda's Sugar Industry*<sup>1</sup> and a complementary documentary, *Planting Poverty and Conflict: The Bitter taste of Sugar*.<sup>2</sup> The report and documentary examine the occurrence of child labour in select out grower communities and companies in Uganda's sugar industry. The report points out a host of factors that have previously and endlessly exposed children to the abuse of their right to freedom from economic exploitation such as; easy access to adult work coupled with the high levels of poverty and the high demand for cheap labour.

To limit the spread of Covid-19, the Ugandan President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni has on two occasions ordered the closure of schools; on March 18, 2020 and June 6, 2021 with the resurgence of the Covid virus a few months after schools had been re-opened. As a result of these measures, the children's cycle of studying has been greatly affected increasing pressure on children to enter the workforce.

With the prevalent child labour in Uganda aggravated by the Covid 19 Pandemic, ISER together with Human Rights Watch launched a report **“I must work to eat”: Covid-19,**

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<sup>1</sup> Accessed at <https://ucca-uganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Child-Labour-in-Agri-business-A-Case-study-of-select-outgrower-communities-and-companies-in-Ugandas-sugar-industry.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-zNbb41hZc>.

***Poverty, and Child Labour in Ghana, Nepal and Uganda***<sup>3</sup> on 26<sup>th</sup> May 2021. The report examines the rise in child labour and poverty during the Covid-19 pandemic in three countries: Ghana, Nepal, and Uganda, the impact on Children's rights, and government responses. It exposes the current challenges of Covid-19 and disproportionate effects on the children already leaving in poverty.

As the pandemic has caused school closures, unprecedented loss of jobs and incomes for millions of families and thus escalating poverty, many children have entered the workforce to help their families survive, while others have been forced to work longer hours or enter more precarious and exploitative situations characterized by low pay and pay theft. Others are exposed to violence and sexual harassment.

Whereas some children have managed to access remote education in urban centers, a substantive number of children could not access education largely due to lack of internet access. Without access to education, many children and their families perceive work as a logical alternative. With the re-opening of schools, many children could not afford to go back. Many children are forced to work in the hope that they can save money to cover school fees so they can return to school once schools are re-opened. The pandemic has had a profound impact on children's rights, including their right to an education, right to health, adequate standard of living and protection from child labour.

Corporate actors in plantation agriculture and in mining industries have been catalysts of the increased cases of child labour amidst the pandemic. These human rights abuses by companies have totally disregarded the principle of the best interests of the child. The responsibility of companies to respect human rights involves doing the minimum requirement to avoid infringing on children's rights in their core business actions through policy commitments, due diligence and remediation. Companies are also expected to take voluntary actions that seek to advance the realization of children's rights. One of the

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<sup>3</sup> Accessed at <https://www.iser-uganda.org/publications/reports/486-i-must-work-to-eat-covid-19-poverty,-and-child-labor-in-ghana,-nepal,-and-uganda>

responsibilities that are outlined is contributing to the elimination of child labour, including in all business relations and business activities.

Corporate actors engage in agriculture which is the largest sector contributing 25.8% of Uganda's GDP according to the World Bank. Not only are the children engaged in the sector but are also particularly engaged in the most hazardous phases like process of cutting, planting, unloading etc. What is happening in the sugar industry isn't different from other industries.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations address the critical child labour issues. If implemented, the recommendations will be critical components to eliminate child labour in Uganda.

- *There is need to equip the labour officers with the necessary resources since they are the responsible and immediate officers at community level.*
- *Pass laws requiring companies to conduct human rights due diligence throughout their global supply chains, to ensure they are not contributing to child labour.*
- *Companies should be required, as a must, to have policies that gear them towards compliance regarding the issue of child labour. However, we cannot rely on the goodwill of individual companies to do what's right but rather have the consequences clearly set out in policy, laws and by-laws.*
- *Members of the district local government, District Education Officer, Labour officers should be well facilitated so as to properly monitor and enforce policies and frameworks against child labour.*
- *Ensure adequate social protection budgets to provide a minimum social protection package for households with children.*
- *Ensure that national legislation regarding child labour is in line with International standards*
- *Enforce child labour standards, including vigorous monitoring, investigations, and appropriate penalties for violations or abuses. There should be consequences for companies that are found using children either directly or in their supply chains.*