



**SPC2:** Special Conference on Labor in the 21st Century

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**Issue:** Increasing scrutiny on the child workers in South America

**TIMUN '24**   
Turkish International Model United Nations



Committee:	Special Conference on Labor in the 21st Century (SPC2)
Issue:	Increasing scrutiny on the child workers in South America
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## I. Introduction

Child Labor is a worrying trend around the world, especially in developing areas such as the South America region, where millions of children are being affected, who work in exploitative and dangerous conditions. However, even though South American Countries such as Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia have ratified various national legal frameworks and international conventions such as the International Labour Organization(ILO) Minimum Age Convention and the Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention in an attempt to deal with the issue, this cannot be said to have been effective due to challenges such as legal gaps, cultural and communal influences, socioeconomic factors, a lack of educational opportunities, limited regulatory inspection in certain industries, and the impact of the ongoing economic and political instabilities in the region, and the international pressures. Roughly more than 17 Million children and adolescents are being exploited in Latin America according to the recent ILO Reports, which highlights the urgent need for more scrutiny with corresponding regulatory actions to ensure that these children's rights are protected and they receive their right to be educated for a sustainable future. This report, therefore, underlines the various child-labor-related issues in South America, and the main aspects of the issue with some possible solutions within those areas where the problem most persists, such as agriculture, domestic work, and informal urban employment.

## II. Involved Countries and Organizations

### Brazil:

In the past years, Brazil made moderate advancements in efforts to eliminate the worst forms of child labor. Publishing the "Dirty List", which includes data on employers that are found to be using slave labor, including that of children, developing manuals and guides that provide information about national and international standards on child labor and how to identify the child labor and its risks, and making progress with the "Bolsa Familia" program that provides financial support to families to educate children were some examples of the solution attempts from the Ministry of Labor and Employment. Despite those attempts, child labor in Brazil presents a huge threat, prominently in agriculture, especially in sugarcane and coffee production.

### Bolivia:



Bolivia passed a legislation in 2014 allowing children as young as 10 to work, which is lower than the recommended 14 years old by the ILO as a cause of economic necessity. With the challenge that child labor is culturally accepted in Bolivia prominently in industries such as agriculture and mining, the country receives international criticism and pressure regarding its labor policies, which should be further addressed in the committee. Despite these controversial factors, Bolivia has been putting efforts against child labor as a part of the Regional Platform Against Human Trafficking and Smuggling, which also deals with the issue of forced child trafficking for the purpose of labor.

#### Peru:

Although the official minimum age for employment in Peru is 14, children between 12 and 14 can do light work without any specifications on the activities in which children may work, which creates a legal gap that should be addressed. Child Labor is extremely common in gold mining and agriculture in Peru, and some attempts have been made to solve the issue in recent years such as government funding for the inspection and detection of child labor, which lack enough resources and databases.

#### Colombia:

Child Labor in Colombia mainly happens in agriculture, as well as in urban labor. Internal displacement due to conflict and instability has made many children open to exploitation. In the past years, the government has developed significant technical support and awareness-raising campaigns, though the problem remains unsolved.

#### Ecuador:

Child Labor in Ecuador mainly occurs in agriculture and although Ecuador has ratified many international conventions, implementing laws in rural and country areas presents the main challenge. Despite the implementation of the policies to combat child labor, the government faces difficulties in monitoring compliance in remote regions.

**International Labor Organization (ILO):** ILO is the main international organization dealing with the issue of labor, and on this specific matter it has been publishing international standards and guidelines to combat child labor. For instance, the Regional Initiative Latin America and the Caribbean Free of Child Labor is an international alliance consisting of 31 countries in the region, which materializes the regional commitment to prevent and eradicate Child Labor.

**United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF):** UNICEF conducts detailed research and creates data on child labor across the globe. It calls for increased spending on public services such as social protection, global access to free and high-quality education, decent work for people of legal working



age, a developed focus on child labor in agriculture, laws to protect the rights of children, effective and comprehensive enforcement of various child protection systems.

**Global March Against Child Labor:** This organization is a Non-Governmental Organization, which deals with the issue of child labor. With comprehensive and detailed reports and studies, the Global March aims to raise awareness among the affected populations and supports international and governmental organizations for the actions against child labor and increasing the education rates of children in vulnerable regions.

### III. Focused Overview of the Issue

#### 1. Socio-Economic Factors Driving Child Labor

Due to the high rates of poverty in South America, many families are forced to rely on the money that their children make, frequently just to survive. About 30% of South Americans, with much greater rates in rural areas, live below the poverty line as in recent years, according to the World Bank. In nations like Bolivia and Peru, where more than 40% of the rural population lives in poverty, this economic misery is particularly noticeable. Sixty-six percent of children under the age of fifteen work in Bolivia alone, a statistic that reflects the economic pressures that lead families to view child labor as an unfortunate but necessary source of revenue.

It can be difficult for many families to pay for essentials like food, medical care, and education. According to UNESCO, the expenditures on education, such as uniforms, transportation, and supplies, prevent about 10 million children in South America—more than 15% of all students—from attending school. By the age of twelve, many youngsters in nations like Brazil and Colombia leave school to start working and helping support their families. Child labor is crucial to family income, as evidenced by a 2019 International Labour Organization (ILO) study that indicated households in South America with children working made, on average, 20–30% more than those without.

Extreme poverty in some areas makes it necessary for children to have even a small income. For instance, children who work in the unorganized sector, such as street vending or agricultural labor, may make up 10–20% of their family's monthly income. Due to the lack of work opportunities and irregular pay, this financial contribution frequently makes the difference between survival and hunger. Additionally, children's earnings may help their communities' expenses as well as support their own families, especially in remote rural areas with few economic options.

This dependency on child labor was made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused an additional 8 million people in Latin America to live in abject poverty. Due to financial and technological constraints,



schools had to close for extended periods of time, and kids who couldn't access online learning were frequently forced to find employment. UNICEF reports that poverty and pandemic disruptions were the main causes of the roughly 20% of youngsters in Latin America engaged in some kind of labor by the middle of 2021. As a result, child labor has proliferated as a financially motivated remedy for families struggling with ongoing poverty and restricted access to resources.

The prevalence of child labor in South America is greatly increased by the wealth gap between rural and urban communities. Child labor rates are two to three times greater in rural communities than in urban ones, which frequently have high rates of poverty and limited access to essential resources. This disparity results from rural communities' restricted access to social assistance programs, healthcare, and education, which pushes families to depend heavily on the labor of their children as a source of revenue. Nearly 70% of all child labor in South America occurs in rural areas, according to a 2020 International Labour Organization research.

Children are commonly exploited in informal labor, mining, and agriculture in rural areas, where they endure long hours in hazardous settings with no supervision or protection. The problem is made worse by the absence of schools and easily accessible transportation in these areas, which may leave kids with no other choice but to work. Furthermore, seasonal labor is frequently needed for agricultural work, which is the main occupation in rural areas. As a result, children are pulled out of any available schools during the busiest harvest seasons.

Urban areas, on the other hand, usually have stronger social infrastructure and governmental support systems, such as access to public schools and more stringent labor monitoring, even though child labor is still a problem there. Children no longer need to contribute financially to the household income because of the economic options that cities offer adults. A major contributing cause to the persistence of child labor in South American rural communities is the wealth and resource gap between urban and rural areas, where children are left vulnerable to labor exploitation due to a lack of other possibilities.

## 2. Limited Access to Education

Many South American youngsters still consider education to be a luxury because of the high expenses involved, the poor infrastructure, and the lengthy commutes that rural families must endure. Primary education is frequently free or heavily subsidized, although indirect costs like uniforms, books, materials, and transportation still fall on families. These costs can account for a sizable amount of a family's income in nations like Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru, making it difficult for low-income households to put education ahead of employment. Because of this, kids are frequently forced to work rather than go to school in order to support their families.



In addition, many rural towns lack accessible schools due to a lack of infrastructure, forcing kids to travel hours or even longer to go to the closest educational facility. This trip can be difficult, expensive, and even hazardous in isolated regions of nations like Brazil and Colombia, discouraging families from taking their kids to school. Furthermore, many rural schools have few resources, including overcrowded classrooms, antiquated supplies, and teachers with inadequate training. Because of these factors, education is frequently of poor quality, which makes families wonder about its long-term worth when kids may be making money instead.

Children are much more likely to enter the workforce early when schools are unavailable or pricey, especially in labor-intensive industries like domestic work, mining, and agriculture. Approximately 15% of children in Latin America and the Caribbean do not attend school, and children from rural, indigenous, or low-income homes are most likely to drop out in order to assist their families, according to UNESCO. Child labor is thus sustained throughout generations as a result of the intersection of educational obstacles and economic constraints.

Even when education is offered in some places, it might not be of high quality due to packed classes, a shortage of supplies, and subpar infrastructure. This deters families from putting their children's education ahead of their jobs. High dropout rates result from children who work finding it difficult to balance employment and school. These kids are more likely to experience ongoing cycles of labor exploitation and poverty throughout their lives if they don't receive an education.

### 3. Forms of Child Labor and Associated Sectors

In South America, one of the biggest industries using child labor is agriculture. Children are exposed to hazardous chemicals and large machinery while working long hours in physically taxing jobs. Child labor is crucial to the production of crops including cocoa, sugarcane, bananas, and coffee.

Children are exposed to hazardous conditions, such as mercury and other harmful compounds, while working in mining operations, particularly in Bolivia and Peru. Mines are infamous for being unregulated, physically hazardous, and prone to mishaps.

Many kids, particularly girls, work in domestic jobs where they could be abused and exploited. Because domestic work is frequently inconspicuous, it is challenging for authorities to oversee and control.

Child work in metropolitan areas includes garbage picking, shoe polishing, and street vending. In addition to being physically demanding, these activities frequently expose kids to abuse, harassment, and exploitation.

### 4. Health and Safety Risks



Heavy lifting, chemical exposure, repetitive strain, and hazardous working conditions put child laborers at danger of bodily harm. Work in mining and agriculture is particularly risky and prone to mishaps.

Particularly in violent or exploitative work contexts, children in labor environments frequently suffer from stress, anxiety, and trauma. Their psychological development may be impacted in the long run by this.

Chronic health conditions like respiratory illnesses, neurological disorders, and physical disabilities can result from exposure to dangerous chemicals in mining and agricultural industries.

## 5. Legal Gaps

Many South American nations find it difficult to successfully implement their child labor laws, even after ratifying international conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the International Labour Organization's Conventions 138 and 182. There are sometimes insufficient labor inspectors to oversee compliance due to a lack of financing and resources for labor enforcement organizations, particularly in rural and isolated areas where child labor is most common. For example, there is thought to be just one labor inspector for every 10,000 workers in Brazil, which makes it challenging to perform routine inspections.

Enforcement actions may also be hampered by bribery and corruption among employers and municipal officials. Employers in industries like mining and agriculture, which have high rates of child labor, may avoid inspection by bribing inspectors or taking advantage of legal loopholes. This corruption makes it easier for exploitative labor practices to go undetected by undermining accountability and discouraging whistleblowing. Together, these difficulties make it extremely difficult to detect, prosecute, and end child labor practices, which permits the cycle of exploitation to continue in spite of official pledges to safeguard children and global norms.

The disparities in the labor laws and age restrictions of the various South American nations make regional attempts to prevent child labor more difficult. Although the majority of nations have established a minimum legal working age, usually 14 or 15, there are sometimes exceptions for specific occupations, especially in family-run enterprises and agriculture. Bolivia, for instance, controversially reduced the minimum working age to 10 under specific circumstances, claiming that economic realities required the change. Some employers take advantage of the legal loopholes created by these provisions, employing youngsters in the name of "family work" or "apprenticeships" in order to circumvent labor laws.

Because child laborers may relocate between nations or regions with laxer enforcement or lower age limits, these discrepancies also make cross-border monitoring challenging. A youngster who is legally prohibited from working in one nation might, for example, be able to find work across the border where regulations are less stringent or standards are more liberal. A unified regional strategy is hampered by these disparities in



legal requirements and exemptions, which permit child labor abuses to persist under vague or accommodating legal interpretations.

Because rural communities frequently lack the official presence and infrastructure required for effective enforcement of child labor regulations, exploitative activities are usually uncontrolled. Due to a lack of access to social services, labor inspectors, and law enforcement, unlawful child labor is able to flourish in many South American isolated areas. It might be challenging for officials to carry out routine inspections or address complaints of infractions where there are few roads and little transit.

Furthermore, children and families may not be aware of the legal prohibitions on child labor in remote areas due to a lack of information about labor rights and laws. Children are more likely to work in physically hard and occasionally hazardous employment in these remote areas, where mining, agricultural, and other labor-intensive businesses predominate, with little concern for local authorities' reactions. Child labor is maintained as an accepted, if not essential, aspect of life in these communities due to the lack of regular government inspection, which permits exploitative behaviors to go unchecked.

## 6. Cultural and Communal Influences

Child work is accepted as the norm in several South American societies, where youngsters are expected to help support their families. It is challenging to confront and end child labor abuses because of this societal acceptance.

Because adult possibilities are limited and poverty rates are high, many families turn to child labor. Children become the main source of money in areas with high adult unemployment rates, and child labor is frequently seen as necessary for family survival.

## 7. The Impact of COVID-19

Millions of families in South America experienced abrupt job losses or income decreases as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which made already severe economic challenges worse. Children were forced into the workforce to help make ends meet as a result of many households' inability to pay for necessities like food, housing, and medical care as family incomes fell. UNICEF reports that during the pandemic, the number of youngsters working in the region increased by an estimated 3 million. Despite the hazards, children may quickly contribute to family income in informal sectors including domestic employment, street vending, and agriculture, which is where this surge was most visible.

Children were driven out of classrooms due to widespread school closures during the pandemic, which increased the possibility that they would enter labor. The dearth of remote learning choices and the absence of schools made it challenging for many low-income families to keep their kids interested in their education.





Many youngsters were unable to return once schools started to reopen because of financial problems and the debt from the epidemic years. One in five Latin American and Caribbean children who left school during the pandemic did not return, according to a 2021 study. For many, the possibility of returning to school was offset by the necessity of working to support their families, which led to a persistent rise in child labor in the area.

## 8. International Pressure and Accountability

In order to combat child labor, organizations like the International Labour Organization (ILO), UNICEF, and other international agencies are essential because they support governments, monitor adherence to international treaties, and push for more robust protections. These organizations collaborate closely with South American governments through initiatives such as the ILO's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), which aims to support educational programs, enact legislative reforms, and train local officials in the enforcement of labor laws. In order to put pressure on national governments to take action, they also carry out studies and write papers that highlight regions where child labor is common. These groups raise awareness, gather resources, and offer technical assistance to strengthen child protection systems in the region by bringing these issues to the attention of the world.

There is increasing pressure on multinational firms that depend on South American exports, including fruit, coffee, cocoa, minerals, and other goods, to make sure child labor is not included in their supply chains. A growing movement for corporate responsibility has been spurred by consumer lobbying and awareness, and businesses are now encouraged—and occasionally required by law—to audit their suppliers and reveal their labor policies. Certification programs that set standards for production free of child labor, such as Fair Trade and Rainforest Alliance, have become more popular as a result of the demand for ethical sourcing. Businesses in industries including mining, textiles, and agriculture are also forming alliances with non-governmental organizations and local governments to fund community development initiatives that provide alternatives to child labor. These initiatives support moral business conduct in addition to safeguarding children.

## IV. Key Vocabulary

**Child Labor:** According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), child labor is “work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential, and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development.” However, not all work done by children can be defined as child labor, as child labor is the work of children who are under the minimum age for employment.



**Exploitation:** ILO defines exploitation in terms of forced labor as “work or service which is exacted from any person under the threat of a penalty and for which the person has not offered himself or herself voluntarily.”

**Hazardous Work:** According to ILO Convention No. 182 hazardous child labor is “work which, by its nature of the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.” Specifically, the work done in dangerous conditions for the physical and mental health of children falls under the category of hazardous child labor.

**Supply Chain:** Supply chain is basically the required activities and steps in order to deliver goods or services to the consumer. It is important to address the transparency of the supply chains on the issue of child labor so that the products or services created by child labor can be effectively inspected and detected.

**ILO Convention 182:** Convention 182 is an international convention created by the International Labor Organization and ratified universally which helps inform the globe on the urgency of action to prevent especially the worst forms of child labor. The convention urges countries to take immediate, effective, and long-lasting precautions against the worst forms of child labor.

**ILO Convention 138:** Convention 138 aims to encourage countries to set national standards on the minimum employment age and to establish national policies for the elimination of child labor. Although all countries that ratified this convention have established a minimum age for children for employment, especially developing and under-developed countries face challenges when it comes to the implementation of this standard.

## V. Important Events & Chronology

Date (Day/Month/Year)	Event
1999	Adoption of ILO Convention No.182. Convention No.182 aims to eliminate the worst forms of child labor that refers to the work done by children, which includes slavery, prostitution, illicit activities, and hazardous work. ILO urges all ratified countries to establish mechanisms to monitor and detect those kinds of child labor and develop systems in alliance with governments, employers and workers to prevent child labor. Unfortunately the convention has not reached its aim due to regional challenges as mentioned.
2000	UN adopting Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), indirectly addressing the elimination of child labor. Although



	child labor is not directly addressed in the main 8 clauses, especially the ones that are aiming to protect children refer to the elimination of child labor.
2015	Sustainable Development Goals(SDGs), with SDG 8.7 specifically aiming to eliminate child labor by 2025, proposing the ratification and implementation of fundamental ILO labor standards and compliance in law and practice. Now we are concluding 2024, this goal does not seem to be fulfilled due to many national and international difficulties that need to be addressed in the committee.
2020	COVID-19 Pandemic caused a significant increase in child labor. The pandemic, when many families in South America went through job losses and economic challenges, led many children to drop out of school and work to contribute to the income of their families.
2021	United Nations declaring 2021 as the International Year for the Elimination of Child Labor.

## VI. Past Resolutions and Treaties

United Nations Resolution 73 /327 :

<https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=A%2FRES%2F73%2F327&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop&LangRequested=False> This United Nations Resolution underlines the urgent need for an action to combat human trafficking, specifically focusing on women and children, who are mostly affected by trafficking and forced labor.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC):

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child> Being the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history, the UNCRC defines the civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights of children under the four core terms that are non-discrimination, best interests of the child, right to life, survival, and development, and lastly respect for the views of the child.

United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8.7:

<https://www.unodc.org/roseap/en/sustainable-development-goals.html> SDG 8.7 calls for taking immediate



and effective actions to eliminate forced labor, end modern slavery and human trafficking and prevent the worst forms of child labor and end all types of child labor by 2025.

Durban Call to Action:

<https://www.ilo.org/resource/durban-call-action-elimination-child-labour> Durban Call to Action is a document that was adopted by Delegates at the 5th Global Conference on the Elimination of Child Labor on 20 May 2022. It focuses on the need for urgent actions worldwide to combat child labor, especially in the aftermath of Covid-19 pandemic. It urges countries to establish and develop protection systems to financially support vulnerable regions, in which children are forced to work.

## VII. Failed Solution Attempts

### 1) Loopholes in National Labor Laws:

Although many South American countries have labor laws that forbid child labor, exceptions, especially for family-owned businesses or seasonal agricultural work, have been exploited- thus allowing child labor to persist under legal cover.

### 2) Inadequate Enforcement of Labor Laws:

Enforcement of child labor provisions has been weak, due in part to scarce resources and the small number of labor inspectors, especially in rural areas where the problem is most acute. There is a lack of adequate inspection, and, essentially, without consistency in enforcement, child labor practices occur unchecked.

### 3) Economic Incentive Programs without Education Components:

Former financial assistance programs to reduce child labor did not include educational provisions. Therefore, some families began to depend on child labor for extra income without considering the issue of access and attendance at school.

### 4) Limited Impact of Corporate Certification Programs:

Certifications such as Fair Trade and Rainforest Alliance, which certify ethical sources, tend to cover only a fraction of producers and don't address informal labor. That means children continue to work in uncertified trades under weak regulation.



## VIII. Possible Solutions

### 1) Strengthening Regional Cooperation on Labor Standards:

It is important to establish regional, cross-border standards on the minimum age for children to be employed and to implement practices to eliminate legal loopholes and create a comprehensive and long-lasting framework for addressing child labor.

### 2) Increasing Funding for Education and Access in Vulnerable Areas:

Governments should invest in rural educational infrastructure such as school buildings, transportation ways, and training of qualified teachers. Conditional financial aid to families could increase school attendance, as it directly addresses one of the major causes of child labor.

### 3) Expanding Labor Inspectorate and Enforcing Supply Chain Transparency:

The increase of labor inspections by raising funding and training to improve oversight, especially in rural regions is crucial. Governments should pass legislation that requires corporate supply chain transparency to minimize the demand for child labor, particularly in industries like agriculture and mining.

### 4) Enforcing Community-Based Interventions:

Collaborating with local organizations to develop programs that offer economic aid and alternatives for families can also be a step in combating child labor due to financial reasons in the family.

### 5) Use of Technology for Remote Monitoring and Reporting:

An important aspect of the issue is the detection of child labor, therefore utilizing technology-based reporting systems that enable people to anonymously report incidents of child labor. Those technological systems can also be used in rural areas for remote monitoring and verifying labor conditions.

## IX. Useful Links

<https://www.unicef.org/documents/action-against-child-labour>

<https://www.ilo.org/regional-initiative-latin-america-and-caribbean-free-child-labour>

<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/combating-worst-forms-child-labor-through-horizontal-cooperation-south-america>

<https://www.hrw.org/topic/childrens-rights/child-labor>

<https://globalmarch.org/infographics/>



[Child Labor and School Achievement in Latin America](#)

[Report on Child Labour and Education during COVID-19 in South America by Global March Members](#)

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“Sustainable Development Goals.” United Nations : UNODC Regional Office for Southeast Asia and

the Pacific, [www.unodc.org/roseap/en/sustainable-development-goals.html](http://www.unodc.org/roseap/en/sustainable-development-goals.html). Accessed 05 Nov. 2024.