Committee: United Nations Human Rights Council

Issue: Eliminating Child Labour in Global Supply Chains: Corporate Accountability and State Responsibility

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Introduction

The modern global economy is built on interconnected production networks that stretch across continents, industries, and legal jurisdictions. Goods consumed daily, including clothing, electronics, food products, and raw materials, are frequently produced through supply chains involving numerous suppliers, subcontractors, agents, and intermediaries. This system has accelerated economic growth and lowered consumer prices, but it has also created spaces where exploitation can remain concealed. Among the gravest human rights concerns linked to these structures is child labour, which continues to persist in the most vulnerable and least visible parts of global supply chains.

Child labour is not a marginal problem. According to the latest ILO and UNICEF global estimates, nearly 138 million children were engaged in child labour in 2024, including around 54 million in hazardous work likely to endanger their health, safety, or development. Even though the world has made progress since 2000, this progress has not been fast enough to meet the international target of ending child labour by 2025. The scale of the problem demonstrates that exploitation is still embedded in the way goods are produced and traded internationally.

The issue of child labour in global supply chains raises two central questions for the international community. First, what is the responsibility of corporations whose commercial activity creates or benefits from exploitative conditions? Second, what is the responsibility of states that host, regulate, or import goods produced under such conditions? These questions are directly connected to the broader human rights framework, since children's protection from economic exploitation is not optional but a legal and moral obligation.

Definition of Key Terms

Child Labour

Employment of children in any stage of a product's or service's production process—from raw material extraction and agricultural harvesting to processing, manufacturing, and packaging—that deprives them of their childhood, interferes with their schooling, and is mentally, physically, socially, or morally harmful.

Global Supply Chains

The cross-border systems through which goods and services move from raw material extraction to final sale. These chains often involve multiple layers of production, making it difficult to monitor labour conditions far from the lead company.

Corporate Accountability

The principle that companies should be answerable for human rights harms connected to their operations, products, suppliers, and business relationships. In child-labour cases, this includes identifying risk, preventing abuse, and repairing harm.

State Responsibility

The duty of governments to protect children from exploitation through laws, inspections, prosecution, and social policy. States must not only ban child labour on paper, but also ensure that such laws are actually enforced.

Due Diligence

A risk-management process used by companies to identify, prevent, mitigate, and account for adverse human rights impacts. In supply chains, it requires active monitoring rather than passive compliance.

Worst Forms of Child Labour

The most severe forms of child exploitation, including slavery-like practices, trafficking, forced labour, hazardous work, and involvement in illegal activities. These forms are prohibited under international labour standards.

History

The issue of child labour in global supply chains became much more visible as globalization expanded production networks across borders. In earlier decades, child labour was mostly treated as a domestic labour and development problem, but as multinational companies began relying on complex supplier networks, exploitation could be hidden in lower tiers of production where monitoring was weak. Therefore, in the current status quo, child labour is utilized in any stage of product manufacturing clandestinely which interferes with children's well being. Child labour International organizations responded by building legal and policy frameworks, including ILO conventions and OECD guidance, which made the elimination of child labour a recognized global responsibility.

The issue entered public attention through a series of real-world investigations and corporate scandals. In 2013, Apple's supplier audit uncovered underage workers in its supply chain, showing that even major global brands could be connected to child labour through subcontracted production. In 2016, Amnesty International and Afrewatch documented hazardous child labour in cobalt mining in the Democratic Republic of Congo and traced that cobalt into global electronics and battery supply chains. More recently, Save the Children's 2023 research found child labour risks to be widespread across global supply chains in several sectors, confirming that the problem remains systemic rather than isolated.

Even with stronger international awareness, the scale of child labour remains alarming. The latest ILO and UNICEF estimates show that nearly 138 million children were in child labour in 2024, including about 54 million in hazardous work. This demonstrates that the issue is not historical only; it remains a present and urgent human rights crisis shaped by poverty, weak regulation, and corporate negligence.

Key Issues

The hidden nature of supply chains

One of the biggest challenges in ending child labour is the difficulty of tracking how and where products are made. A single product can go through many suppliers, who may also work with subcontractors or informal workers. As a result, major companies may claim that they did not know about the exploitation happening somewhere in their supply chain.

This opacity is especially serious in sectors such as agriculture, textiles, mining, and domestic production. In these sectors, children may work in family enterprises, small farms, or informal workshops that are far removed from the legal visibility of the final brand owner. Because of this fragmentation, monitoring alone is often insufficient unless paired with meaningful accountability.

Corporate purchasing practices

Companies do not only shape outcomes through direct instruction; they also influence labour conditions through pricing and procurement decisions. Short deadlines, excessive cost pressure, and unstable contracts can push suppliers to cut labour expenses, sometimes by using child workers or accepting dangerous forms of informal labour. This means that business models themselves can contribute to the risk of exploitation.

For that reason, child labour prevention cannot rely on symbolic statements or voluntary codes alone. Companies must examine all aspects holistically, such as their purchasing behaviour, supplier oversight, and remediation systems, because accountability begins with the structure of the business relationship itself.

Weak state enforcement

Although most states formally prohibit child labour, enforcement varies dramatically.

Some states lack labour inspectors, school access, poverty-reduction systems, or legal capacity to monitor remote production sites. Others have laws but do not apply them consistently. As a result, children remain vulnerable even in countries that have ratified international conventions. The state's role is therefore not limited to punishment after abuse occurs. Governments must create the conditions that prevent child labour in the first place, including education access, social protection, and credible enforcement institutions. Without this wider policy framework, bans on child labour remain incomplete.

For example, Bangladesh has ratified major international conventions on child labour, including ILO Conventions No. 138 and No. 182. However, child labour continues to occur in industries such as agriculture, garment production, and informal work. This shows that ratifying international conventions alone cannot fully protect children; effective enforcement, access to education, and social protection are also necessary.

Poverty and social vulnerability

Child labour is strongly linked to poverty, household insecurity, and lack of access to education. In many cases, families depend on children's work because adult wages are too low or because school is inaccessible, expensive, or distant. This is why child labour is often more severe in rural and low-income communities. The ILO and UNICEF data also show that child labour remains concentrated in agriculture, which reflects the role of family farms, informal work, and seasonal labour. The persistence of child labour in this sector shows that economic growth alone does not automatically remove exploitation. This further proves the point that targeted social policy is highly necessary.

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

State Actors

United States of America

The United States treats child labour in global supply chains as both a human rights issue and a compliance issue. As one of the world's largest consumer markets, it places strong pressure on multinational companies to improve sourcing transparency, conduct internal audits, and comply with labour standards through domestic law and trade enforcement. Because many major brands headquartered in the United States rely on overseas suppliers, the country has a particularly strong influence on corporate behaviour worldwide.

People's Republic of China

China remains central to global manufacturing and electronics supply chains, which gives it enormous significance in any debate on corporate sourcing and labour oversight. Because so many global brands rely on Chinese suppliers for assembly and component production, labour conditions in China affect multinational supply chains far beyond its borders. The country's role makes it one of the most important states in discussions of whether firms should be required to trace risks deeper into their supplier networks.

Swiss Confederation

Switzerland has positioned itself as a state that combines business competitiveness with stronger due diligence obligations. Since January 2023, Swiss companies have been required under new rules to comply with reporting and due diligence duties when there is a reasonable suspicion of child labour in products or services. Switzerland's model is important because it shows how a highly developed economy can adopt targeted rules on child labour and supply-chain transparency without fully abandoning market-oriented policy.

Republic of India

India is a major supplier in global agriculture and manufacturing, which makes it a key actor in discussions on supply-chain child labour. The country faces the challenge of balancing rapid economic growth, informal labour, migration, and the need to protect children in sectors such as coffee, spices, cotton, and sugarcane. Recent ILO-backed initiatives in India show that the state is increasingly emphasizing responsible business conduct, due diligence, and area-based approaches to child labour prevention.

European Union (EU)

The European Union has taken one of the most developed legal approaches to corporate accountability through the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive. The directive requires large companies to identify, prevent, and address human rights harms, including child labour, across their operations and supply chains. While many EU institutions support stronger responsibility rules, some member states and policymakers have debated the speed and scope of implementation, showing that even strong regulatory blocs still face political resistance.

Non-state Actors

International Labour Organization

The ILO is the leading international body on labour standards and child labour elimination. It emphasizes that the problem cannot be solved by law alone and requires enforcement, education access, social protection, and responsible business conduct. The ILO's work is especially important because it provides both the legal foundation and the technical tools for national implementation.

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

UNICEF views child labour primarily through the lens of children's rights and development. It stresses that child labour harms education, health, and long-term well-being, and it supports child protection systems, schooling, and social investment. UNICEF's reporting also underscores that progress is possible only when policy measures address the poverty and vulnerability that push children into work.

Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development(OECD)

The OECD supports responsible business conduct and due diligence frameworks for multinational enterprises. Its guidelines explicitly call on companies to contribute to the effective abolition of child labour, making it one of the most practical global policy tools for supply-chain accountability. The OECD is especially influential because it turns human rights norms into an operational framework that businesses and states can apply.

United Nations Global Compact

The UN Global Compact encourages businesses to respect human rights and eliminate child labour in their operations and supply chains. It treats child labour not only as a legal violation but also as a barrier to sustainable development and ethical business practice. Its approach is important because it links corporate responsibility to broader global development goals and public trust.

Timeline of Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

Date	**Description of event**
June 26, 1973	The ILO Minimum Age Convention No.138 is adopted, establishing international standards on the minimum age for work.
November 20, 1989	The Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms children's right to protection from economic exploitation. The Convention strengthened international protection against child labour by requiring countries to set minimum working ages, regulate working conditions, and enforce penalties for violations.
June 17, 1999	The ILO Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention No.182 is adopted. The convention established a global legal framework requiring countries to immediately prohibit and eliminate the worst forms of child labour, including forced labour, trafficking, and hazardous work.

2000	The global community begins stronger monitoring of child labour trends through international estimates and policy action.
September, 2015	SDG 8.7 calls on states to end child labour in all its forms by 2025.
November 12, 2019	OCED publishes detailed policy analysis on child labour causes, consequences, and remedies.
2024	New ILO projects and supply-chain initiatives continue to focus on child labour in global production systems. (Such as the ILO's ACCEL Africa Project, which targets child labour in cocoa, cotton, coffee, tea, and gold supply chains across Africa. Furthermore, such as the CLEAR Supply Chains Project, which targets child labour in coffee and cobalt supply chains through stronger due diligence, education, and social protection.)
June 11, 2025	ILO and UNICEF report that nearly 138 million children remain in child labour worldwide.

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

International efforts have created an important legal and policy foundation, but implementation remains uneven. States have ratified conventions and adopted anti-child-labour laws, yet enforcement is often too weak to reach the places where abuse actually occurs. This gap between law and practice is one of the main reasons the problem persists.

Corporate self-regulation has also produced mixed results. Many businesses publish codes of conduct and ethical sourcing commitments, but voluntary systems often fail when they do not include credible monitoring, supplier audits, and remediation. In practice, child labour can still exist in lower tiers of the supply chain even when top-level brands claim compliance.

Another challenge is that child labour is embedded in broader economic structures, particularly poverty, informality, and weak access to education. This means that even effective enforcement against individual employers will not be enough unless governments also invest in social protection and schooling. International data shows progress, but the pace remains too slow to meet global targets.

Possible Solutions

A durable response would combine mandatory corporate due diligence, stronger state regulation, and targeted social investment. Companies should be required to trace their supply chains, disclose risks, and take responsibility for harms linked to suppliers and subcontractors. This should include child-labour risk mapping, supplier engagement, and transparent reporting.

States would strengthen labour inspection systems and create specialized enforcement units for high-risk sectors such as agriculture, textiles, and mining. They should also improve birth registration, school access, rural development, and social protection so that families are not forced to depend on children's labour.

International cooperation may also be essential, because supply chains cross borders and regulatory gaps are easily exploited. Governments should share data, harmonize standards, and support cross-border monitoring so that companies cannot shift abusive production to weaker jurisdictions.

Finally, there exists a possibility that remediation is part of accountability. Children found in exploitative work need access to education, health services, family support, and safe withdrawal from dangerous labour. Without rehabilitation, the cycle of exploitation often continues even after formal interventions.

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