

COVID-19 and Child Labour in Lebanon



The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a devastating impact on children, especially girls, their families and communities. The first case of COVID-19 was declared in Lebanon on 21 February 2020. As of 12 May, the number of people infected with the virus declared by the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) has reached a total of 870 confirmed cumulative cases, including 26 associated deaths. While schools and universities had been closed since 29 February, the government announced a state of medical emergency on 18 March, and Lebanon went under full lockdown to stop the further spread of the coronavirus, followed by a strict country-wide curfew. The outbreak therefore significantly impacts Lebanon at a time when the country is experiencing its worst economic and socio-political crisis in years, limiting the access to livelihood opportunities and basic services for both Lebanese and refugee populations, and exacerbating pre-existing vulnerabilities.

Based on Plan International Lebanon's COVID-19 Needs Assessment conducted in April 2020, a total of 63% of caregivers indicated not having enough food to last for the next two weeks, 58% stated their main source of stress being the lack of food, followed by 36% referring to the lack of livelihoods. Poverty and harsh living conditions, depleted savings and resources, insufficient humanitarian aid and the struggle to meet basic needs will lead parents to adopt negative coping strategies including restricting children's access to education and resorting to child marriage or child labour. While one might think that child labour may decrease due to government restrictions, financial desperation is likely to lead to an increase in child labour in the medium term. With government restrictions gradually easing, we are seeing children return back to work in agriculture for long hours, often up to 10 hours a day.

POTENTIAL RISKS

- Child labour was prevalent in Lebanon prior to March 2020 but not to the extent that will be experienced following the COVID-19 outbreak. More children are likely to be working, under poorer conditions, for longer hours and extra jobs to make ends meet.
- Children will work in the same sectors as prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, but with an increase in the less visible forms of child labour, within homes and in farms, placing them at greater risk of abuse and exploitation. In rural areas, we are likely to see higher rates of children involved in agricultural work, and begging and working on the streets in urban settings.
- COVID-19 is compounding gender inequalities, with alarming effects on adolescent girls who are often struggling with "invisible" consequences on their lives, with girls undertaking more domestic chores than boys¹.
- Forced and bonded labour may increase, particularly for Syrian children working in agriculture and on the streets, driven by the huge debts that families have incurred and the erosion of savings or assets due to the lockdown and movement restrictions.
- Families under immense pressure to meet basic needs will push children into child labour, which may restrict their access to formal and non-formal education, as well as distance learning opportunities.
- The increase in pressure on children to financially support their families may lead to an increase in psychosocial distress and negative coping mechanisms.
- There might be increased risks of arrest and detention of working children, as violating local laws.
- Children are likely to be more exposed to all forms of violence, exploitation and abuse by caregivers, employers and people in positions of power.
- There might be increased risks of family separation as caregivers and children search for work opportunities that are no longer available within their areas of residence.
- Children are likely to be more exposed to physical, biological, chemical and ergonomic hazards causing illness, injury and mental health issues due to the longer working hours and poor work conditions.

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¹ Plan International Lebanon, COVID-19 Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment, April 2020.

- The application of personal safety measures might be overlooked by employers which might increase the risks in the workplace, causing children further harm.
- Working children are to get lower wages than prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the recent devaluation of the Lebanese Lira and the steep increase in prices.
- The existing capacity within the formal system to protect children in general has been significantly compounded by COVID-19. Service providers are overwhelmed as they provide a large range of interventions for at-risk children and survivors of violence which might delay the intervention for Child Laborers.

PROGRAMMATIC RECOMMENDATIONS

The growing concerns over Child Labour during COVID-19 are the result of compounded risk factors including poverty, low access to services, limited access to education opportunities and loss of livelihoods. As children engaged in the worst forms of child labour and those at risk are being exposed to serious risks and daily stressors that have detrimental impact on their protection and development, more comprehensive programmes should be designed to offer long-term, targeted and holistic (multi-sectoral) interventions to address such complex protection issues.

Child Protection and Psychosocial Support

- Provide remote awareness raising sessions for girls and boys engaged in the worst forms of child labour, their caregivers and communities on the COVID-19 risks, the CP and GBV risks faced by girls and boys in the workplace and relevant protection measures, the legal minimum working age in Lebanon, the harmful effects of child labour on children's physical, cognitive and psychosocial well-being and development, the different reporting mechanisms for child labour, and available services.
- Provide remote support to working girls and boys including in the worst forms of child labour:
 - Targeting working girls and boys and their caregivers with remote awareness raising on the importance of harm reduction strategies in the work place, and providing them with safety equipment against COVID-19 and other risks.
 - Providing child protection case management services for girls and boys who have experienced violence and those involved in the worst forms of child labour.
 - Providing remote psychosocial support activities for girls and boys to enhance their ability to protect themselves and others in the work place, and cope with distress and COVID-19 stress factors.
- Engage remotely with employers to promote safety in the work place against COVID-19 and other risks and jointly develop harm reduction strategies to address existing risks and hazards.
- Ensure referrals to health, legal, protection and basic assistance services through a regularly updated service mapping.
- Encourage existing Child Protection Community Based Mechanisms (CBCPM) to act as gatekeepers for the protection of at-risk within the community.
- Ensure consistent coordination with shaweeshs in informal settlements, to relay back trends, risks and needs.
- Continue advocating for the activation of the Child Labour Task Force, and encourage regular meetings once Ministries resume operations.

Food Security and Livelihoods

- Increase the distribution of in-kind food assistance for vulnerable Lebanese and Syrians, especially for families who lost their source of income due to the economic situation and/or to COVID-19, in order to prevent child labour.
- Provide targeted cash support to families and caregivers whose income generating opportunities were affected by the COVID-19 outbreak to relieve the financial pressure on families and provide alternatives to child labour.

Education

- Design and put in place measures to support and invest in distance learning modalities for working children in the event of schools' and NFE centers' closures, particularly focusing on Syrian children and those at risk of not returning to school.

WASH

- Provide remote awareness sessions to children engaged in child labour and employers on the symptoms and prevention measures of COVID-19.
- Provide hygiene kits, along with guidance and IEC materials about handwashing.
- Provide facial masks and hand sanitizer with increased focus on Syrian refugee children working in the agriculture sector.

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About Plan International

Plan International strives to advance children's rights and equality for girls all over the world. We recognise the power and potential of every single child. But this is often suppressed by poverty, violence, exclusion and discrimination. And it's girls who are most affected.

As an independent development and humanitarian organisation, we work alongside children, young people, our supporters and partners to tackle the root causes of the challenges facing girls and all vulnerable children.

We support children's rights from birth until they reach adulthood, and enable children to prepare for and respond to crises and adversity. We drive changes in practice and policy at local, national and global levels using our reach, experience and knowledge. For over 75 years we have been building powerful partnerships for children, and we are active in over 70 countries.

Since 2017, Plan International has been working in partnership with local, national and international organisations to strengthen capacities and address the needs of Lebanese and refugee children in Lebanon. With a focus on adolescent girls and young women, Plan International Lebanon implements projects in the sectors of Child Protection, Gender-Based Violence, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, Education, Youth Economic Empowerment and Participation.