

Executive Summary

This synthesis report includes a summary of the key findings of three individual case studies undertaken by AREU that deal with the complex decision-making processes about child labour among the poor in both rural and urban Afghanistan.¹ Research was conducted in Badakhshan, Kabul and Herat, focusing on poor households that utilise child labour and those that do not. Qualitative in nature, this work complements a number of other valuable quantitative studies that have been conducted concerning child labour in Afghanistan.

The purpose of this research project has been to go beyond poverty and explore a range of additional factors that also influence the decision to use child labour. This work assists the ongoing efforts of the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs, Martyrs and Disabled (MOLSAMD) in dealing with the numerous issues relating to the dependence of Afghan households on child labour, along with its work to foster more secure livelihoods throughout the country. Through an examination of both the social and economic costs and benefits of work and education that inform household decision-making, specific recommendations for successful policy responses to reduce dependence on child labour in Afghanistan are presented.

The term, “child labour,” is utilised in this report to refer to children’s work activities, both paid and unpaid, across all levels of risks and hazards. This includes unpaid domestic tasks; labour in a family enterprise; unpaid work undertaken outside the household, such as collecting firewood; and remunerated work in cash or kind outside the household, such as vending, apprenticeships, or

doing housework for others. This work may be done in combination with schooling or not. For the purpose of this research, child labourers are those aged 14 and younger working in any type of context (for pay or not, at home or outside), and those aged 15-18 who are working in more hazardous occupations. However, this study does not focus upon the most dangerous forms of child labour such as sex workers, trafficking, or smuggling. It rather seeks to understand the numerous everyday forms of child labour in both villages and cities and how poor households consider different options when making decisions about who among their children will work and in what type of activities.

Since 1994 Afghanistan has been a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which protects children from economic exploitation, hazardous work, and work that might interfere with schooling. In addition, the Afghan Labour Code has recently been updated. It now defines the working age as 18, but also allows light non-hazardous work for children 15-18. In spite of these legislative commitments, however, the nation presently lacks the institutional means to implement these directives within the formal sector, much less within the informal sector where most children work.

Key findings

- Poor households in both villages and cities are plagued by chronic livelihood and economic insecurity that includes high unemployment, low productivity and earnings, high costs of living, and debt. However, their poor economic situation is not necessarily the singular or most prominent consideration in decisions pertaining to child labour. The lack of an able-bodied adult male worker in the household due to death, disability, or migration may result in the utilisation of child labour, but not necessarily; local social networks may provide the required support that enables children to avoid work and attend school.

¹ With funding provided by UNICEF and the Child Rights Consortium and overall support from MOLSAMD, this triad of case studies includes the following: P. Hunte and A. Hozyainova, “Factors Influencing Decisions to Use Child Labour: A Case Study of Poor Households in Rural Badakhshan” (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2008); P. Kantor and A. Hozyainova, “Factors Influencing Decisions to Use Child Labour: A Case Study of Poor Households in Kabul” (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2008); and A. Sim and M. Hoiland-Carsen, “Factors Influencing Decisions to Use Child Labour: A Case Study of Poor Households in Herat” (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2008).

- In households lacking adult male workers, the seclusion of adult females in the family and their subsequent inability to find productive work may also result in the utilisation of child labour. In some cases, however, mothers choose to make the sacrifice and, going against prevailing gender norms, undertake income generation that enables their children to avoid work and attend school.
- Parents, both fathers and mothers, are usually the major decision-makers concerning who among their children works and who goes to school. Children themselves also have some agency, depending upon specific family dynamics, their ability to negotiate and individual personalities. In some rural settlements, the larger community, including the local *shura*, village elders and teachers, may make the decision.
- Community norms, embedded in social networks, exert considerable influence on individual households and their respective decisions concerning child labour or schooling. In some settlements, norms pertaining to child labour predominate, while in others education-related norms prevail. A household is concerned about what others in their community think about the behaviour of its members, both male and female, and fear of negative gossip is common, with parents often anxious about how their children's behaviour, achievements, or failures are interpreted by the larger society.
- Traditionally it is usually the eldest son in a household who is called upon to work, and he often has to sacrifice his desires for the good of the household and his younger siblings. In families that have no sons, or those that have small boys too young to work, a daughter may assume the role of a breadwinner. However, gender norms severely limit income generation options for girls, especially at the onset of puberty, and thus females usually work within the private sphere of the household while boys work in the public sphere.
- A common strategy employed by many child labour households entails diversification, in which one or more children may work while their siblings attend school. The monetary cost of education is a limiting factor for many households, and a child's intelligence and interest, as perceived by his or her parents, also influences the decision about who has the opportunity to attend school among siblings.
- Households realize the importance of schooling, and the majority of parents desire education for both sons and daughters. Education is perceived as potentially resulting in valuable employment, economic security and concomitant social status for both individual and household. Thus poor households conduct a complex cost-benefit analysis as they assess the tradeoffs between work and school. Individual children may combine both, but it is often difficult to balance the competing priorities of these diverse activities, and withdrawal from school is common; working children are often unable to complete their homework and absenteeism is common. Parents of these children are often concerned about the poor quality of education, along with possible harassment and beating of their children by teachers. In the urban setting, parents prefer more flexible NGO-sponsored courses for their working children.
- For parents whose children must work there are a number of perceived positive features related to child labour that influence the decision-making process. These include the opportunity to learn a skill, which may lead to viable employment, and the perception that work provides the individual with a sense of responsibility. Work may also enhance a child's self-confidence, and communications skills with both peers and adults may develop. Children value the opportunity to socialise with their peers and parents believe that work keeps their children occupied and out of trouble.
- However, child labourers whose activities are in the informal sector do not work under conditions that meet with the requirements of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) or the Afghan Labour Code. In the unregulated milieu of the informal sector, there are numerous hazards associated with their work that put them at risk of injury, illness, dangerous social repercussions, or even death. These include

hazards that occur when travelling to and from work (road accidents, sexual harassment, etc.) and those that pertain to the physical environment of the workplace (use of dangerous tools, inhaling noxious fumes, etc.). Even in the case of a coveted apprenticeship, employers may exploit the relationship, demand long hours of work from the child with little compensation and frequently use physical punishment.

- The psychosocial effects of child labour upon the individual may be positive or negative. Although some children enjoy their work and take pride in their accomplishments, others express anger towards their parents that they must work rather than go to school, and conflict within the household is common. Children who have been withdrawn from school to assume employment exhibit anger, depression and humiliation, especially if they have been good students. Others are under considerable emotional stress due to chronic worry about how they can best help to alleviate the economic problems facing their families.
- Child labour households and non-child labour households face many of the same daily challenges

and occasional crises, but exhibit different responses to their problems. In general, non-child labour households refer more to positive role models who are educated and successful and encourage their children to act similarly. There is also a greater degree of agency, or a “can-do” spirit, among non-child labour parents, and they are generally more optimistic about the future. Of special importance, these two groups of households undertake different types of risk management strategies, with child labour units exhibiting more coping or reactive strategies that deal with present-day risks and often entail the utilisation of child labour. In contrast, non-child labour units demonstrate more forward-looking strategies, investing in their children’s education today, with the hope of a better tomorrow.

- These characteristics are not immutable, however, and may change depending on the social context and economic resources of the household at a given point in time. Interventions pertaining to child labour and its elimination must employ flexible multi-pronged strategies that take into consideration the full array of both social and economic variables.