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THE REPUBLIC OF UGANDA
MINISTRY OF GENDER,
LABOUR & SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Enabel

COMBATING CHILD LABOUR IN UGANDA:

Lessons from Select Sub-Saharan Countries

POLICY BRIEF

July 2026

1.0 Introduction and Context

Child labour remains one of the most persistent and well-documented challenges to human development in Uganda, effectively depriving millions of children of their potential, dignity, and fundamental rights. According to recent data from the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS) and international assessments, the proportion of children involved in child labour in Uganda rose from 38.5% in 2019/20 to 39.5% in 2021. This upward surge reflects a profound disjuncture between law and lived reality, further entrenched by the fact that 56% of Ugandan children live in multidimensional poverty.

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- The Busoga Sub-region: Comprising 11 districts and one city accounts for up to 45% of children from poor households involved in economic work. The sub-region is characterized by labor-intensive economic activities that drive high demand for underage workers, particularly in sugarcane and rice plantations. Children are frequently documented cutting and loading heavy sugarcane, scaring birds in rice fields, and working in waterlogged rice paddies under hazardous conditions.

- The Albertine Region: Covering 8 districts and one city faces an acute child labour crisis, with a reported prevalence of 26% in Masindi district alone. Agriculture accounts for 84% of working children in this region, with a heavy concentration in tobacco and tea cultivation. Children as young as 12 are involved in preparing land and harvesting tobacco - exposing them to harmful green leaf fumes - while those in the tea sector perform strenuous tasks such as carrying loads up to 24 kilograms and facing active pesticide exposure.

As a Pathfinder Country under Alliance 8.7, Uganda formally committed to eliminating child labour in all its forms. However, this timeline has proven overambitious and thus failing to meet the Sustainable Development Goal target 8.7 on ending child labour by 2025. Piecemeal interventions, however well-intentioned, are no longer sufficient to address these systemic constraints. What is required is a clearer appreciation of what has worked elsewhere and why, drawing on independent research and drawing benchmarks from peer African jurisdictions - Kenya, Ghana, and South Africa - that have actively grappled with child labour.

2.0 What is Child Labour?

Drawing on field research and past programmatic experiences in Uganda, independent documentation reveals that the persistence of child labour is driven by a complex intersection of structural, economic, fiscal, and regulatory gaps:

2.1 Poverty and the weak supply chain mandate

Widespread household poverty remains the fundamental economic driver of child exploitation. In Uganda, 33.1% of households are engaged in basic subsistence production, forcing families to utilize their children as unremunerated family laborers for survival. This structural vulnerability is exploited across agricultural supply chains. For instance, large-scale business operators, such as sugar millers, frequently claim they lack the mandate to supervise or stop child labour on private out grower plantations. This directly contradicts Uganda's National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights (NAP-BHR), which singles out child labour as a major human rights violation by business operations and explicitly mandates companies to undertake human rights due diligence across their entire value chains.

2.2 Subsidised education window-dressed as free

While the government introduced Universal Primary Education (UPE) and Universal Secondary Education (USE), their effectiveness is severely limited by high dropout rates and a primary completion rate of only 52.7%. The primary driver of this educational erosion is fiscal underfunding. The government currently allocates only UGX 20,000 per learner per year as a capitation (operation) grant for the day-to-day running of public schools, a figure well below the operational thresholds recommended by the National Planning Authority.

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To survive, public schools exploit legal loopholes permitting voluntary contributions for emergencies, converting them into unregulated, compulsory non-tuition fees for registration, exams, and operations. Consequently, 6 out of 10 learners drop out of school permanently due to the high indirect cost of education, shifting directly into hazardous work.

2.3 The three-year regulatory legislative loophole

A critical structural gap exists within domestic legislation. The *Education Act* mandates school attendance only until the completion of primary school, which typically occurs at age 13. However, the *Employment Act* sets the minimum age for legal employment at 16. This contradiction creates a three-year statutory policy gap where adolescent children are neither legally required to be in a classroom nor legally permitted to work, leaving them highly vulnerable to tracking into informal, clandestine, and hazardous work environments.

2.4 Low coverage and age misalignment of social protection

Weak social protection systems leave poor families without a financial buffer against economic and climate-induced shocks. This gap is acute in Uganda, where the primary social security program, the Social Assistance Grant for Empowerment (SAGE), provides a monthly grant of UGX 25,000 but restricts eligibility exclusively to persons aged 80 years and above. This age cap is entirely disconnected from local mortality realities, given that Uganda's average life expectancy is 68.2 years. SAGE fails to reach vulnerable, child-headed, and orphan-led households, forcing children to assume breadwinning obligations at a young age.

2.5 Operational deficits within the labour inspectorate

While Uganda's legal regime includes statutory protections across the *Children Act, the Mining and Minerals Act,* and the *Occupational Safety and Health Act,* physical enforcement is completely paralyzed. Enforcement is fragmented between the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MoGLSD) and local governments, operating with a severe shortage of personnel: only 180 labour inspectors exist to monitor an active workforce of over 18 million people. District labour offices are structurally starved of operational funding, rendering them the least-funded sectors within local governments. Furthermore, corporate operators and plantation managers frequently block access to fields, using armed guards or hostile environments to frustrate inspection efforts.

3.0 Comparative Synthesis of Regional Best Practices

Research across the Sub-Saharan region reveals that targeted structural adjustments can prevent costly domestic missteps and duplications. The table below synthesizes benchmark strategies from other jurisdictions and maps their direct lessons for Uganda.

Comparative Lessons for Elimination of Child Labour for Uganda from Kenya, Ghana, and South Africa

Area	Kenya	Ghana	South Africa
Education policy	Free Primary Education (FPE) introduced in 2003; Implementing 100% Transition Policy from primary to secondary; ministerial fee guidelines regulate non-tuition charges.	Free Compulsory Universal Basic Education + Free Senior High School; Ghana School Feeding Programme (GSFP).	No-fees policy that covers 81% of poorest primary schools in the county; compulsory schooling to Grade 9/age 15; free education for orphans, conditional, partial or exemption policies for parents who cannot afford school fees in schools that charge fees, school meals in public schools.
Cash transfers	Cash Transfers to Orphans and Vulnerable Children (CT-OVC) covering over 440,000 households with KShs 2,000 per month leading to 12% reduction in on-farm child labour; increased secondary enrolment in beneficiary households.	Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP): provides bi-monthly cash transfers (GHS 64-106/ household); soft conditions on school enrolment and no involvement of children in child labour are part of the conditions to benefit from LEAP.	Child Support Grant (CSG) reaching over 13m children by providing R580 per child per month; Old Age Pension of older persons starting from 60 years and above. These two programs have increased school attendance and reduced child labour in recipient households.
Legal protections	Children Act 2022 & Employment Act: set minimum age 13 (light work), 16 (industry); night work prohibited for all children.	Children's Act set minimum age 15 (general), 13 (light work), 18 (hazardous).	Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA) prohibits employment of any child under 15 years or still in subject to compulsory schooling. In 2013, BCEA was amended to cover children working in informal/ uncontracted workers; Occupational Health & Safety Act contain provisions

Area	Kenya	Ghana	South Africa
			that protect health & safety of children lawfully permitted to work.
Corporate accountability	National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights considers mandatory Human Rights Due Diligence for companies; 2024 interstate partnership (Uganda, Kenya, Malawi) on tea plantations.	National Steering Committee on Child Labour (NSCCL) and the Child Labour Coordinating Secretariat coordinates cross-sector enforcement and reporting.	Child Labour Action Program (CLPA) coordinates multi-department enforcement; targeted ILO/ Department of Labour inspections in KwaZulu – Natal (KZN) and Western Cape.
Labour inspectorate	Child labour committees in key counties; the 2024 interstate collaboration on elimination of child labour in tea plantations between Kenya, Uganda & Malawi.	In 2023, Inspectors were increased from 48 to 179 leading to more worksite inspections and convictions.	Targeted area-based enforcement; training of community organisations and public officials.
Child Labour Free Zones	Community committees in Kwale, Kajiado, Mombasa, Nairobi.	Child Labour Free Zones (CLFZs) in cocoa and galamsey zones; community monitoring model.	Not a primary strategy; sector-based enforcement preferred.
OVC support	Presidential Secondary School Bursary (KShs 1.35M per constituency, 290 constituencies); CT-OVC for poorest households.	LEAP offers cash transfers every two months to vulnerable households; GSFP school feeding.	CSG; no-fee policy includes full orphan exemption from all school fees. Conditional, partial or full exemption for some parents who cannot afford.
Key lesson for Uganda	Regulate all school fees (not just tuition); expand Orphans and Vulnerable Children bursary; scale CT-OVC model with government funding.	LEAP model for SAGE reform; CLFZs replicable; build shock-responsive social protection; strengthen enforcement beyond single-commodity focus.	Extend legal protections to informal/uncontracted workers; implement no-fee model with orphan exemptions; expand CSG-style cash transfers.

4.0 Recommendations

The elimination of child labour in Uganda requires a shift from fragmented, piecemeal interventions toward a comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach. The following targeted recommendations are addressed to specific duty-bearers.

4.1 Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MoGLSD)

i. Establish an Information Management System tracking employer compliance with employment, health, and safety standards, enabling strategic deployment of limited enforcement personnel.

ii. Integrate District Labour Offices into a centralised reporting structure, providing institutional backing to enforce compliance, particularly against high-influence local corporate actors.

iii. Amend the Employment (Employment of Children) Regulations 2012 to extend protections to children working without formal contracts – modelled on South Africa's 2013 BCEA amendment – closing the loophole most exploited in subsistence agriculture and domestic service.

4.2 MoGLSD and Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development (MoFPED)

i. Implement the Cabinet resolution reducing SAGE eligibility from age 80 to 65 years, directly aligning the programme with Uganda's national life expectancy of 68.2 years.

ii. Pilot universal, child sensitive cash transfers targeted at primary caregivers of children, modelled on Kenya's CT-OVC and South Africa's Child Support Grant, as essential buffers against uninsured shocks in flood-prone Busoga and drought-affected Albertine.

iii. Significantly increase funding for District Labour Offices. The current ratio of 180 inspectors for 18 million workers is functionally equivalent to no oversight.

4.3 Ministry of Justice and Constitutional Affairs, and Parliament

i. Review the Companies Act and introduce mandatory human rights due diligence obligations for companies, particularly large-scale plantations and extractive sector operators, requiring transparent periodic human rights reviews covering full supply and value chains.

4.4 Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) and Parliament

i. Amend the Education (Pre-Primary, Primary and Post-Primary) Act to fund and provide for genuinely free and compulsory basic education and explicitly prohibit the employment of children of compulsory school-going age.

ii. Issue binding regulations for all school charges – both tuition and non-tuition – modelled on Kenya's ministerial fee guidelines, to prevent the cost-driven dropout that is a primary driver of child labour.

4.5 MoES, MoFPED and Parliament

i. Increase the capitation grant allocation to UPE and USE schools to at least the National Planning Authority's recommended threshold.

ii. Recruit and deploy sufficient teachers in UPE and USE schools.

iii. Provide sufficient instructional materials and infrastructure in UPE and USE schools.

iv. Implement a universal, government-funded school feeding programme across all UPE and USE schools, serving as both a nutritional intervention and attendance incentive.

4.6 District Local Governments especially the labour and education offices

i. Sensitize the communities on the difference between child work and child labour and its dangers to children and society in general.

ii. Routinely monitor and inspect work places especially plantations and mines to ensure that children are not engaged in child labour.

iii. Arrest and prosecute culprits of child labour in the courts of law to act as example to the rest of the society.

iv. Undertake effective monitoring and supervision of UPE and USE schools to ensure that children attend school regularly.

v. Coordinate with SMCs and Local Council leadership to ensure that parents who withdraw their children out of school and engage them in child are brought to book.

4.7 Business entities

i. Establish due diligence mechanisms for elimination of human rights abuses such as child labour in their respective supply chains.

4.8 Community Leaders, Households, and Civil Society

i. Challenge social norms that view child labour as traditional socialisation. Empower communities to identify and report invisible forms of exploitation, including hidden domestic servitude and artisanal mining.

ii. Promote the meaningful participation of children as agents of change through school clubs, youth councils, and advocacy platforms, particularly in Busoga and Albertine.

iii. Undertake continued awareness creation to enable the communities understand the difference between child work and child labour.

iv. Target the root causes of gender inequality, specifically the disproportionate burden of household chores placed on children, which reinforces underinvestment in their education and perpetuates cycles of poverty.

v. Support parents/ guardians that are willing to act against persons that engage their children in child labour with litigation costs or even leading them to the responsible government offices.

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