



Civil Society Consultation Report on Child Labour in Asia & Pacific *Preparation for the 5th Global Conference*

South Asia Coordinating Group on Accelerated Action to End Violence against Children

Photo credit: World Vision International



Working Together to End
Violence against Children

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INTRODUCTION

Background

The latest global estimates of child labour, released by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and UNICEF in June 2021, show that for the first time in two decades, the incidence of child labour has risen. The report states around 160 million children are engaged globally in various forms of labour; 79 million in hazardous work. The figures also show that the number of children engaged in work has increased by 8.4 million and suggests that, without mitigation measures, the overall number will increase further, to 168.9 million by the end of 2022.

The Asia and Pacific regions (APR) have, contrary to global trends, made progress in the fight against child labour in recent years. However, new challenges, such as COVID-19 and the growing climate crisis, and their economic impact, risk slowing down or reversing this progress.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) have been playing a significant role in the elimination of child labour in APR. They contribute towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Target 8.7 through implementation of programmes aimed at preventing and eliminating child labour, working closely with governments, United Nations (UN) agencies and other stakeholders in advancing the legal and policy frameworks of countries in the region towards this end. Many CSOs work directly with children engaged in labour, particularly in rescue, rehabilitation and empowerment programmes. They also ensure child participation in important policy and programmatic initiatives.

Pre-Consultation

ILO is organizing the Fifth Global Conference on Child Labour (VGC) in South Africa in May 2022. Ahead of the VGC, the governing body of ILO had requested that regional consultations be held with various stakeholders in order to shape the agenda for the VGC. One such consultation was planned for the APR region. Places at these consultations were limited; nevertheless, ILO was keen to get comprehensive inputs from civil society and hear the views of wide & diverse range of CSOs and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working in this area.

The South Asia Coordinating Group on Accelerating Action to end Violence against Children (SACG) is a

consortium of UN agencies, international & regional NGOs and other CSOs working at the regional level on issues of child rights and protection in South Asia. ILO's APR regional offices, therefore, requested SACG, given its unique composition and mandate as a network operating at regional level, linking UN agencies and NGOs, to conduct a pre-consultation meeting for NGOs/ CSOs in APR and present the consolidated views and inputs of the group at the APR regional consultation.

Accordingly, SACG organized the pre-consultation meeting on December 8, 2021, which brought together CSOs and youth participants mostly representing the Asia Pacific region. Prior to the meeting an online survey form was also distributed to several NGOs/CSOs and networks in APR, in order to capture responses, especially if they were unable to attend the pre-consultation. This report summarises the proceedings, key discussions and recommendations made at the pre-consultation and received through the online survey.

ABOUT SACG

SACG was created in 2004 as a regional coordination body for the World Congress II against commercial sexual exploitation of children. SACG's long term objective is to see the end of all forms of violence against children in South Asia and for this purpose works in partnership with similar national groups & regional coalitions, supporting & engaging in policy dialogue & advocacy, coordination, networking, capacity building, knowledge sharing and new knowledge generation activities. SACG has a longstanding partnership with the South Asia Initiative to End Violence Against Children (SAIEVAC).

SACG has constituted a thematic working group (TWG) which reviews the issue of child labour in the region and has a work plan outlining various initiatives for the group to be engaged in.

PRE-CONSULTATION MEETING

The pre-consultation meeting was attended by 80 participants mostly representing the Asia Pacific region, including CSO representatives and youth participants, i.e. young people who are either survivors of child labour or currently engaged in labour.

Opening Session

1. Cherian Thomas, Regional Leader, South Asia & Pacific – World Vision International

As Chair of the SACG. Mr. Thomas emphasised that despite steady progress in the elimination of child labour in the region, Target 8.7 of SDG 8 is far from achieved. The progress made in the region is under threat from both new challenges such as COVID-19 and climate change, and their consequent impact on economic activity. He added that while recently preparing an impact summary of child labour elimination projects in the South Asia region, the SACG had not seen “many recent projects”, and strongly urged the need to bring child labour and its elimination to the center stage if we want to see meaningful progress towards the elimination of child labour in the next few years.

2. Ms. Bharati Pflug, Senior Specialist, Fundamental Principles & Rights at Work, ILO

Ms. Pflug, gave an introduction to the VGC, a hybrid event to be hosted in South Africa, reaching a global audience of diverse stakeholders. The agenda would be built around a plenary session and panel discussions, supported by side events fostering healthy knowledge sharing and exchange of ideas. The meeting would conclude with an outcome document that would translate commitments into concrete actions.

She spoke on the importance of these Global conferences as they are vital for raising awareness about child labour and forced labour. Ms. Pflug concluded her remarks by emphasising the importance of voices from APR as one of the regions that managed to keep a steady downward trend of children in child labour, but is yet far from having reached Target 8.7. She added that APR would have important messages to share, and also benefit through learning from other practices at the VGC.

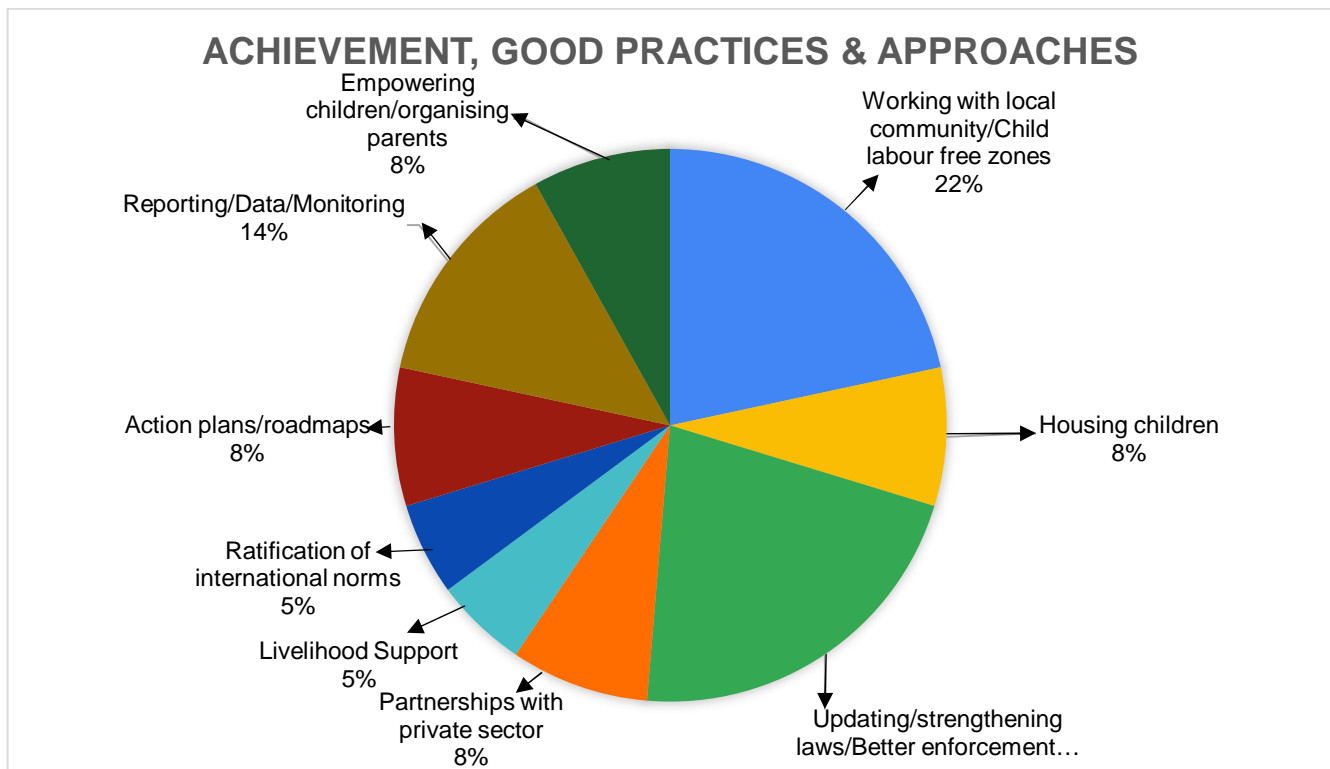
GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Following the opening plenary, participants moved to virtual breakout group sessions for 90 minutes, where they discussed qualitative questions around achievements, challenges and priorities in the fight against child labour. These questions were similar to those contained in the online survey forms sent out prior to the pre-consultation. The answers provided, among other inputs received, would help guide and shape the agenda of the VGC.

- 1. What are your/organization's major achievements/ good practices and approaches in eliminating child labour since the last Global Conference on Child Labour which was held in Argentina in 2017?*
- 2. What are your/organisation's major challenges faced in eliminating child labour since the last Global Conference on Child Labour in 2017?*
- 3. What are your/organisation's key priorities for the elimination of child labour between now and 2025?*
- 4. In your/organisation's opinion, what are the 3 most important items to be included in the agenda for the Fifth Global Conference on Child Labour in South Africa?*

The following sections provide an overview of the responses brought back to the plenary, before diving deeper into individual themes. While there were a range of views and opinions expressed, some common patterns and themes emerged across the region.

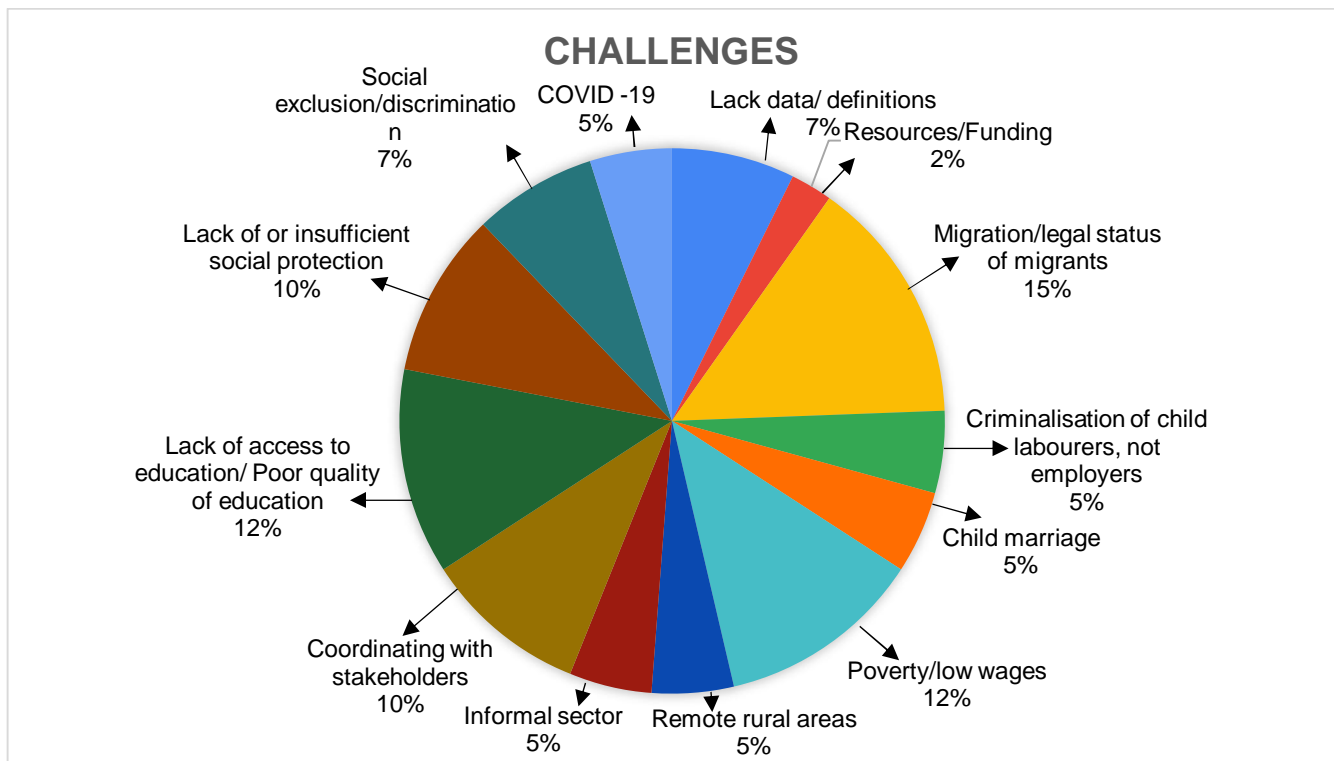
1. ACHIEVEMENTS, GOOD PRACTICES & APPROACHES



The graph above indicates the highest area of intervention by CSOs has been in two areas - "Updating/strengthening laws" and "Working with local communities". Some CSOs have been successful in working with locals in mitigating the issues of child labour at both community and local government levels. Many have focused not so much on advocating for new laws and regulations, but instead for strengthening and better enforcing the existing laws against child labour.

Some of the achievements have been very concrete and have been in response to an immediate need, i.e. filling a gap where government services were unavailable, such as direct economic support or housing children. Most achievements however have been made through holistic, multi-stakeholder approaches that centre around one issue but have far-reaching effects on different dimensions of the problem. For instance, in the area of education, where a large focus of work was to improve access to education or supplementing struggling educational systems, it could also include education-to-work transition schemes, traineeships, awareness-raising and so on. Typically, these initiatives require broad alliances of many different actors, such as (local) governments, the private sector, trade unions, schools and other institutions. CSOs are a key driving force in bringing these coalitions together. And yet, despite these achievements, significant challenges still remain.

2. CHALLENGES



Many of the challenges are implicitly linked to governments - either because there is a lack of coordination (or interest) among ministries and other government agencies, inadequate child protection services, or legal issues that impede the fight against child labour. CSOs have noted that it can be difficult to work with some government and private sector partners, as they are either unclear of their obligations or are unwilling to assume responsibility. Among these - migration and criminalisation of child labourers (paradoxically, not the employers of child labour) were highlighted the most. The issue is not migration per se, but the ways in which migrants are often treated and criminalised. Children of illegal migrants, as well as children who are victims of trafficking, don't have proper documents, which in many cases prevent them from receiving formal education or access to various government services or social protection. Here, enhanced cooperation between governments could help address this area of concern.

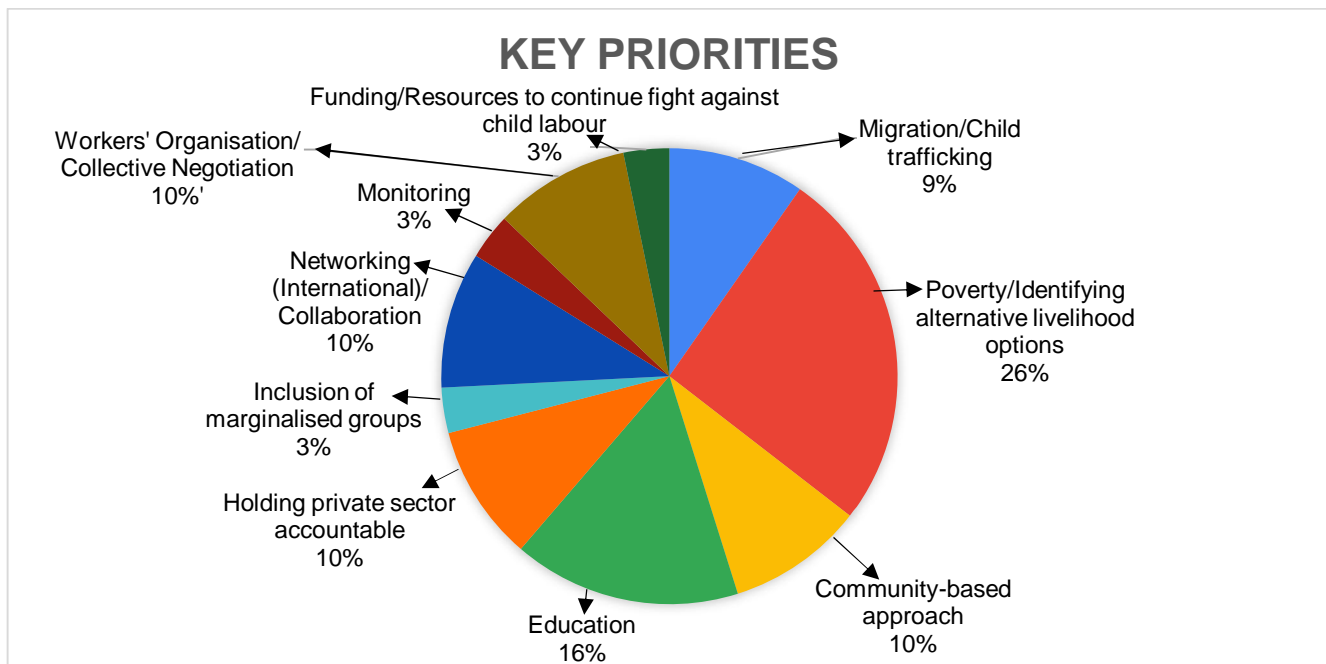
Regarding the issue of criminalisation, often children of illegal migrant as well as children living in poverty, are vulnerable to child labour, most commonly selling products on streets. In India, women and girls have turned to making liquor from fruits, which they sell on streets, making them targets of the police for hawking. Police harassment is also motivated by bribes, which then force children to sell

more so that they can afford these bribes resulting in a vicious cycle of child labour that's not easily broken.

Lack of data and not having standard definitions of child labour are also few other challenges, especially for the informal sector where much of child labour occurs. This sector is difficult to track and monitor; data and statistics on informal employment are hard to come by. Since children in the informal sector are not registered as workers, there is very likely a much higher number of child labourers than officially reported. This is compounded by labour laws in some countries that allow employers to self-monitor and self- inspect, which makes children vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

As in other areas, education, or rather the lack of (or access) to education, is also a major challenge. This has been especially highlighted during the pandemic. School closures and loss of jobs, are seen as a highlighting of a fragile system, and CSOs have tried to compensate by promoting education by providing other supplementary services such as school meals, that are other provided by government. In other words, the pandemic has increased the pressure on an already overburdened, underfunded and inadequate educational system.

3. KEY PRIORITIES

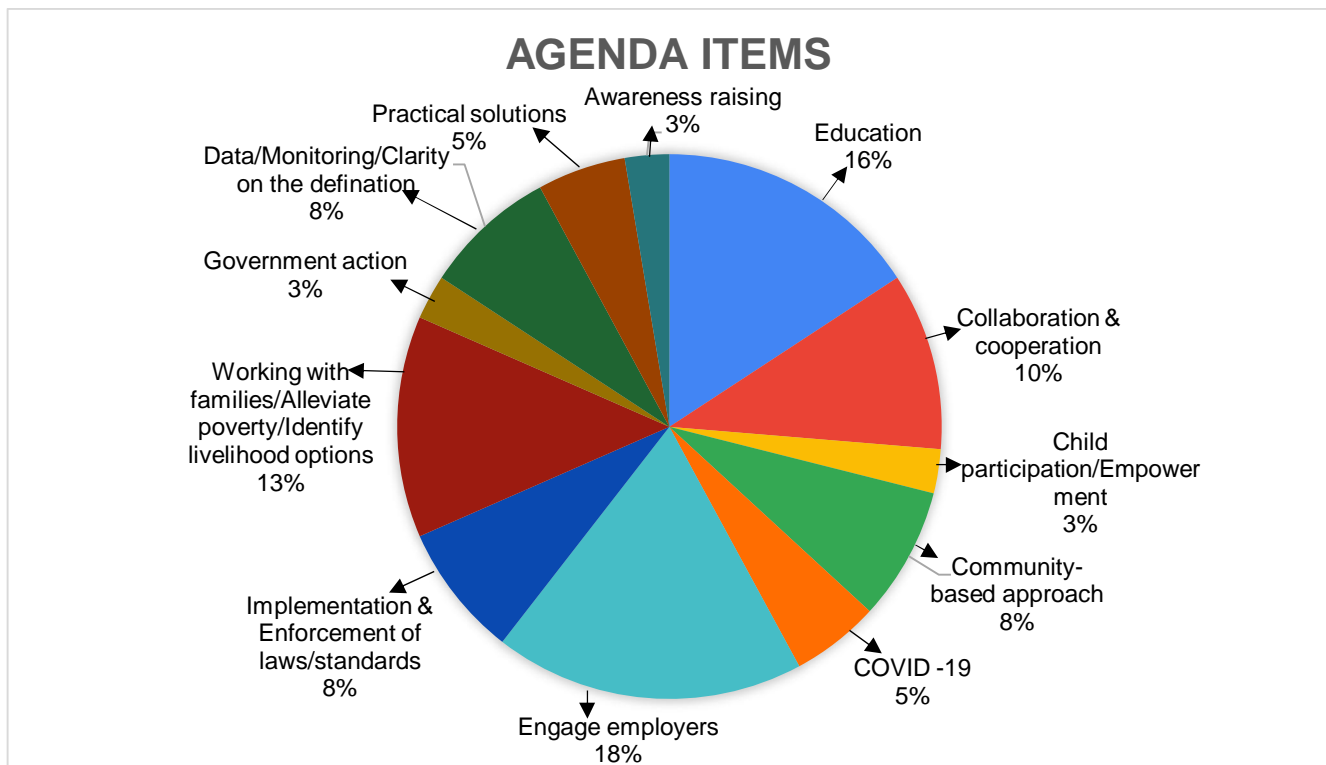


The biggest set of priorities identified (by 25.8% of the group) are those of reducing poverty through identifying alternative livelihood options of some form or other. Livelihoods and poverty alleviation are the main thrust and so have been included together; while other priority areas ultimately contribute to poverty alleviation, they are not the main thrust. For instance, worker organisation would strengthen the collective bargaining process and serve to hold employers to account for their actions. Trade union representatives during the consultation highlighted that firms where workers are organised tend to have no child labour. Nevertheless, it also contributes to reducing poverty in that collective bargaining, secures higher wages for adults so that children won't have to work to supplement the family income.

Education is also directly linked to poverty reduction, i.e. parents with higher incomes don't require their children to work in order to survive, but would instead send their children to school. The long-term impact of this, is that better educated children will have more choices later on in life.

The priorities also included the call for more collaborative approaches, across borders to tackle issues related to migration and to prevent child trafficking. However, it is also worth pointing out that strengthening international networks and cooperation are key priorities of CSOs in the fight against child labour, that has helped in creating awareness, advocate with various government bodies, and helped in knowledge sharing

4. AGENDA ITEMS



The graph clearly indicates the most important item to be included in the agenda for the VGC - engaging employers in the fight against child labour. Clearly there is a strong need and a will to work with the private sector, both formal and informal employers, to eliminate child labour, but the way in which CSOs and youth participants imagine this engagement are diverse. Some argued that as employers are ultimately the main beneficiaries of child labour, it is vital that partnerships with this sector should lead to employers doing their due diligence and being held accountable. It was also shared that the role of employers as job creators, providing jobs to adults so that families don't need to rely on child labour to make ends meet be appreciated better. This point, of course, touches on education, as this allows children to go back to school. Similarly, engaging with employers would also ensure that there are professional opportunities once young people have completed their education.

Most participants felt that access to (quality) education is key in retaining and motivating families to send their children to educational institutions. Poor educational facilities and lack of access to quality education, often discourages parents in prioritising education over family income. This gap is further enhanced by the mismatch between the education system and the employment market where it is

seen that children are not being trained for future employment or when education does not result in employability.

It was observed that many participants didn't necessarily see COVID-19 as a new challenge, but as accelerating previously existing problems or accentuating the present underlying dynamics. It is for this reason that putting discussions about the pandemic on the agenda of the VGC was only listed by 5% of the respondents, even though the pandemic clearly had a significant and deleterious impact on the region. In the context of the educational system, COVID-19 and ensuing school closures meant that children once again became vulnerable to child labour, as many services were unavailable to them. While CSOs made an outstanding effort to compensate for school closures in some areas, for example by setting up mobile libraries for learning, trying supplementary methods to education, arranging remedial classes for children or supporting digital learning activities, in all too many cases, the impacts of the pandemic were felt dramatically. This is especially true in areas where social protection is lacking, thus plunging their families back into poverty and making children vulnerable to child labour. Most youth participants from several countries called on governments to make concrete plans and provide social protection.

In the absence of government services, CSOs reported that they had success with strategies that put families at the centre and help identify alternative livelihood options for adults where children would otherwise have to contribute to the household income. CSOs also reported progress in places where they could work with whole communities or cooperate with many different actors, such as schools, (local) governments, private businesses and so on. However, there is still a long way to go, and while responses focusing exclusively on community-based approaches made up only 8% overall, the thematically related areas of collaboration and cooperation (10.5%), working with families/ potential employers to promote livelihoods & employment (13%), engaging employers (18%) and government action (2.6%) show that there is a clear desire and necessity to work across sectors and involve multiple stakeholders in the fight against child labour.

Concluding Remarks

Mr. Ponpadian Thangam, Country Manager, Terre des Hommes

As Co-Chair of SACG, Mr. Thangam thanked the participants specially the youth participants for their time and contributions. He emphasized the importance of collaboration between various actors - CSOs, governments and private sector in addressing issues related to child labour in the context of the pandemic, the challenges that it brings and the need to connect them all.



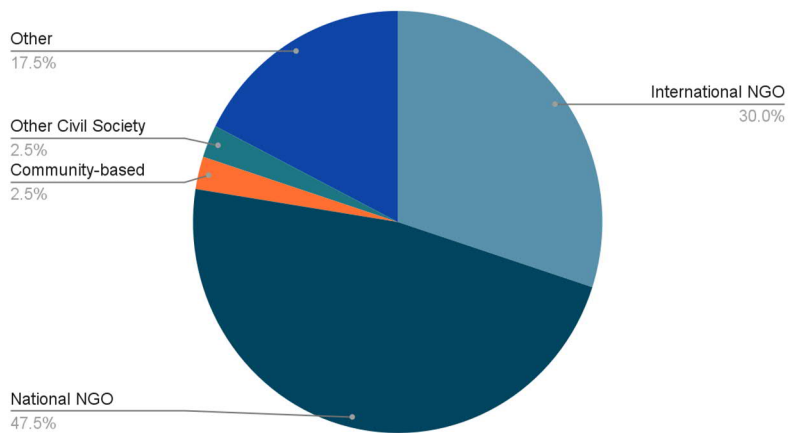
Photo credit – World Vision International

Online Consultation Survey

Overview

Sharing below the findings of an online pre-consultation survey that was conducted and led by Mr. Philip Seidl, ILO Consultant.

a) PROFILE OF ORGANISATIONS

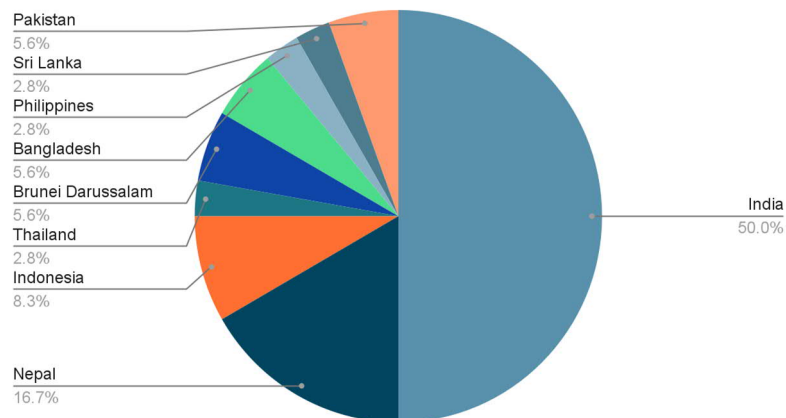


PROFILE OF THE ORGANISATIONS

Out of the 43 responses that were received, around a third of all responses came from larger, international NGOs, the rest from smaller, local organisations.

b) COUNTRIES REPRESENTED

Countries in which respondents operate



COUNTRIES REPRESENTED

In terms of where respondents are based, it is perhaps unsurprising that half of all responding organisations are based or operate in India given the size and population of the country. Additionally, as the survey was sent out in English only, language barriers may have played a role in the large number of India-based responses.

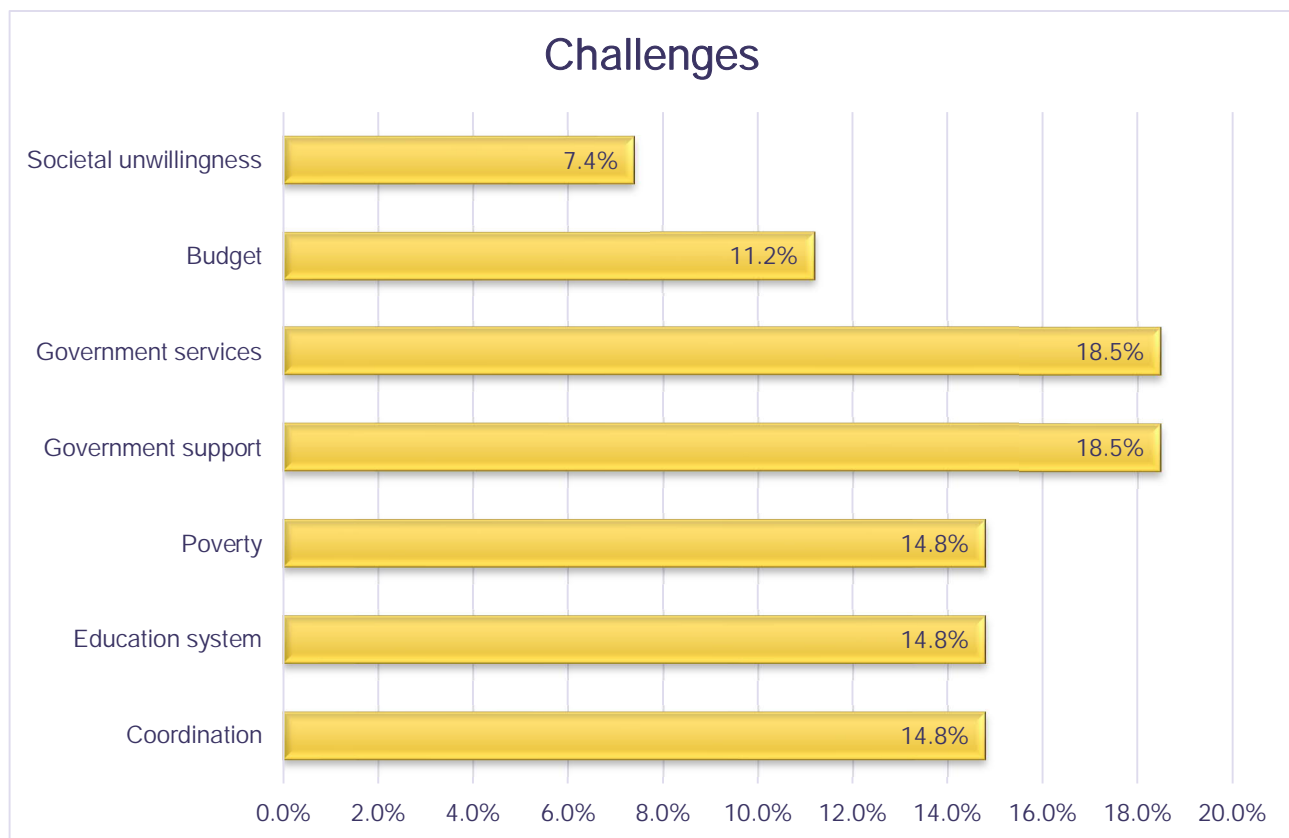
1. ACHIEVEMENTS, GOOD PRACTICES & APPROACHES



This survey broadly describes the progress from recent years. As ever, responses to this question are not entirely clear cut and distinct from one another. However, for a better overview, they can be divided into four programmatic areas: Prevention (e.g. raising awareness, inspections, education around children's rights), Protection (education - keeping children in school/getting them back into school), social relief, working with families on identifying alternative livelihood options, direct economic support), Partnerships (e.g. partnering with local businesses, monitoring supply chains) and Policy (e.g. legal changes, working with governments on local/regional/national levels).

As in the discussion above, the responses to the survey clearly showed that the most successful approaches are those that are multi-pronged, and involve multiple actors. In other words, they can be centred around education, raising awareness or identifying alternative livelihood options for families, but are not exclusive to any one issue. Most CSOs reported achievements in the areas of Protection and Prevention - especially at local levels where they provide services, working with families and communities as part of their core mandate. Policy here too referred more to enforcing and strengthening existing laws or ratifying existing agreements rather than legal innovation.

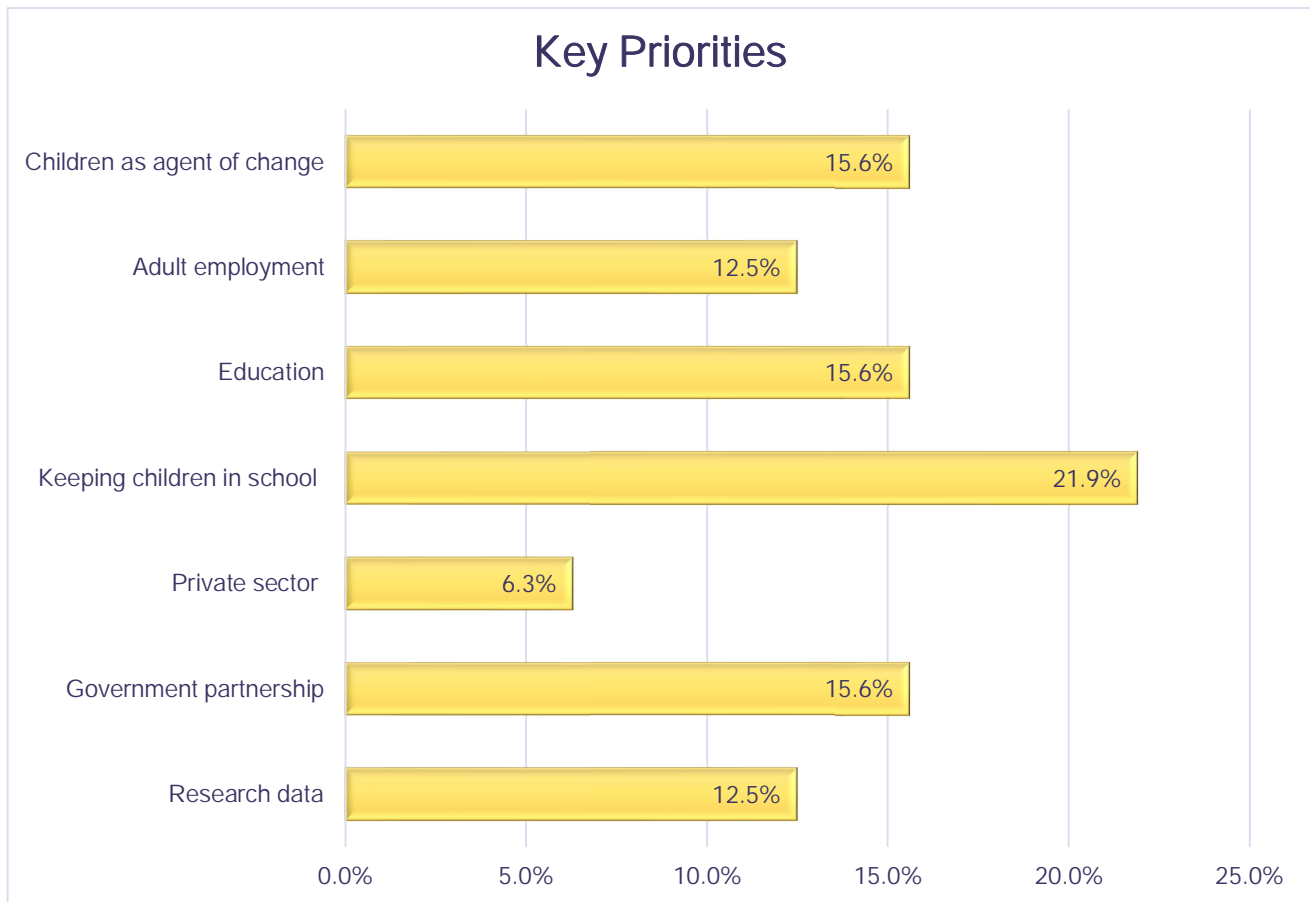
2. CHALLENGES



In terms of challenges, COVID-19's impact seems to have been more an accentuation of existing, underlying issues rather than a fundamentally new challenge. The impact of the pandemic and lockdowns has accelerated some trends and made painfully clear the areas in which social protection and other government services and support systems are lacking. Interestingly, both government support (i.e. support of CSOs, making it difficult to work with governments because of structures/hierarchies) and government services (services provision to citizens) are described as challenges.

Recurring themes are Education and Coordination, both also implicitly referring to governments in that access to education may be lacking or of low quality, or that governments are not coordinated enough internally to effectively tackle child labour, or unwilling or unable to coordinate with other actors to deploy meaningful action against child labour. The item "budget" here refers to the budget of CSOs to fulfil their mandates, something that had featured not quite as prominently in the breakout groups. In the survey however, some organisations have reported real concerns about their finances.

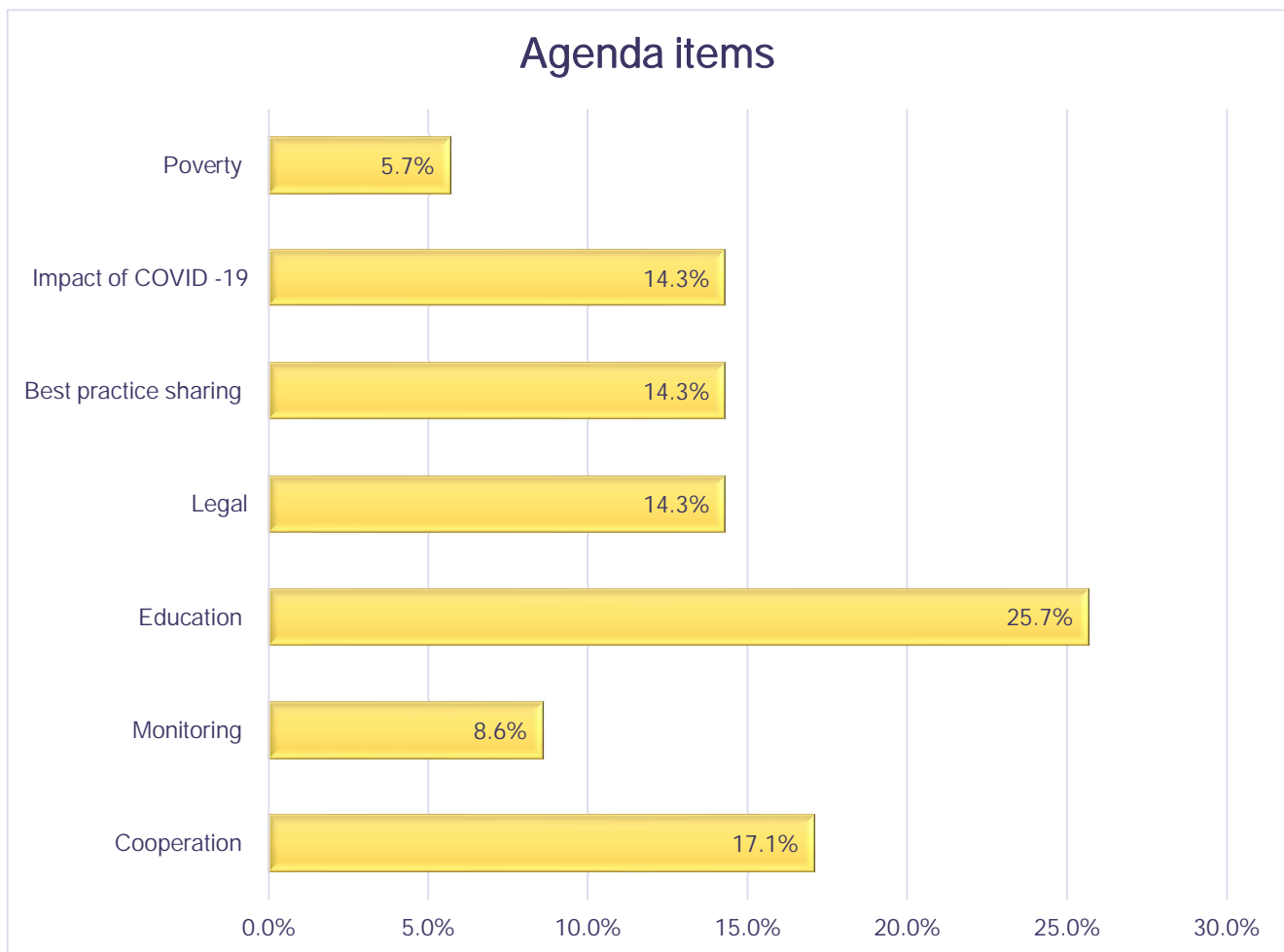
3. PRIORITIES



Priorities are mostly focused on education - either keeping children in school or opening up new education opportunities (combined around 37%). Similarly, empowering children as agents of change involves educational aspects, i.e. empowering them to learn about their rights and articulate their needs.

Adult employment is closely related with finding economic opportunities - this could be via skills training for adults, or other initiatives like cooperative businesses that have been tested in some areas (eg. Bangladesh). This matches with the breakout group discussion that focused on alleviating poverty, but the groups made slightly different arguments as to how to go about it, e.g. by collective bargaining and raising wages.

4. AGENDA ITEMS



Discussion on education is a prominent recommendation at first sight. While 25.7% of survey respondents consider that education should feature on the VGC agenda, only 15.8% of breakout group participants accord it the same importance. However, this is more illustrative of where participants - in either the event or the survey - locate the responsibility for education. In the case of the survey, responses indicate that education is a task that should be fulfilled by the state; in the case of the breakout groups it has been made clear that participants expect employers to contribute to education, for example by offering traineeships. It is therefore fair to say that education is, in both cases, a key priority in the fight against child labour.

Part of this different location of responsibility is certainly that in the survey, employers or the private sector more generally, have been mentioned obliquely than in the breakout groups. For example, the areas of “monitoring” and “cooperation” touch on partnerships with the private sector, in that employers are part of the actors involved in those tasks. However, cooperation in the case of the

survey, refers to a much wider coalition of CSOs, institutions, local and national governments, intergovernmental agreements etc.

“Best practice sharing” is another interesting topic. While best practice sharing has been discussed as an important part of the VGC in the breakout groups, no group selected it as part of their top three agenda items, whereas 14.3% of survey respondents indicated that they would like to see it included in the conference. To some extent, this might be explained through the format of the pre-consultation with Ms. Pflug’s presentation highlighting that the global conferences are in any case a forum for sharing best practices, so that it may have felt redundant for breakout group participants to list this as a separate item. However, it is also worth noting that the responses from the breakout groups feature more concrete proposals overall - likely also an outcome of a moderated process in which participants could hone their contributions.

Meanwhile in the online survey conducted ahead of the pre-consultation (see below), the responses could be classified under different themes but the distinctions between the themes were not clear-cut, as it reflects the complexity and interconnectedness of the issue.

SURVEY RESULTS – KEY HIGHLIGHTS

Overall, while the responses should still be read in their respective economic, political, cultural and social contexts, there are some broader trends that likely hold across the region:

Cooperation and Coordination on local, national and international levels are seen as key to eliminating child labour. Local cooperation involves local governments and community organisations, working with families and schools and coordination between multiple CSOs. At a national level, more cooperation with government bodies is necessary. However, international cooperation across borders was also mentioned, especially when it comes to protecting children from trafficking for exploitation, and to implement and enforce national and regional standards in border areas. Furthermore, increased cooperation between the Global North and Global South is seen as vital by some.

Education is a key area, both in terms of challenges as well as opportunities. Best practices all have education at their core, but likewise, where education systems are difficult to access, under-resourced or closed (e.g. because of Covid), numbers of vulnerable children increase and they become more difficult to reach.

Government support and services need to be strengthened and a greater commitment is required to

address this issue. Obviously, the pandemic has posed additional challenges, but also independent of this special circumstance, responses indicate that governments either need to increase their enforcing of already existing child labour laws, or increase the reach and accessibility of education and social security systems in order to combat child labour successfully.

With schools closed and economic pressures resulting from lockdown measures placed strain on families. The consensus is that Covid has accentuated and accelerated pre-existing challenges and dynamics, such as social protection or service provision by governments more generally, as well as a broader societal or governmental reluctance to acknowledge child labour in the first place.

AT A GLANCE: KEY FINDINGS

Combined Summary of Group Discussions and Online Survey



While the overall picture from the survey is largely in keeping with the discussion outcomes during the pre-consultation, it is still worth highlighting some differences. Some of these may stem from the unequal numbers of responses (more organisations and young people participated in the pre-consultation than submitted survey responses), but it is also interesting to think about the different processes by which these responses were arrived at - i.e. as responses from one single organisation or individual in the case of the advance survey, or through discussion and exchange of ideas and observations in the breakout groups. This may also account for the greater diversity of responses in the breakout groups.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE VGC

Despite the progress made in the recent past, to address the issue of child labour, COVID- 19 and its impacts have accentuated and accelerated the need for greater collaboration and coordinated effort as more families fall back into poverty leading to many children being engaged in various forms of labour. Keeping this in mind the CSO consultation recommends the following priorities to the forthcoming VGC:

- *Coordinated responses at various levels among CSOs, between government and CSOs, as well as between States - especially in border regions, where labour migration/child trafficking are highly prevalent.*
- *To effectively enforce, monitor and strengthen existing laws and regulations rather than introducing new ones.*
- *To allocate more funds in the areas of social protection, access to education, programming and policies related to child labour that would have a holistic approach in addressing the root cause rather than targeting child labour as a distinct problem.*
- *For long term sustainable planning, education plays a pivotal role not only in ensuring that the child is in school, or gets back into school, but also as providing a foundation for future employment.*
- *A multipronged strategy to eliminate child labour should include a community-centric and child centric approach. This involves empowering children to be aware of their rights, to articulate when these rights are being infringed upon, resulting in them becoming agents of change. Simultaneously, empowering communities to strengthen their social and economic protection mechanisms is a key enabler.*
- *Collaborating and Partnering with the private sector to provide employment opportunities for adults as well as to establish voluntary monetary schemes to prevent children from becoming victims of child labour in family crisis situations.*

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