



Eliminating Child Labour in the Digital Era, Climate Change Situation, and Sustainable Business

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ABSTRAK: Pekerja anak merupakan manifestasi nyata dari ketimpangan sosial dan ekonomi yang parah, serta mencerminkan lemahnya sistem perlindungan sosial, terbatasnya akses terhadap pendidikan, dan regulasi ketenagakerjaan yang tidak memadai di banyak negara. Data dari Organisasi Perburuhan Internasional (ILO) menunjukkan bahwa lebih dari 160 juta anak di seluruh dunia terlibat dalam pekerjaan, hampir setengahnya bekerja dalam kondisi berbahaya yang mengancam keselamatan, kesehatan, dan perkembangan mereka. Era digital menghadirkan peluang sekaligus tantangan terhadap isu ini. Di satu sisi, teknologi digital dapat dimanfaatkan untuk meningkatkan akses terhadap pendidikan, pelatihan keterampilan, dan pemantauan praktik ketenagakerjaan yang adil. Di sisi lain, digitalisasi juga menciptakan bentuk-bentuk pekerjaan baru yang belum sepenuhnya diatur oleh hukum, sehingga membuka peluang bagi eksplorasi pekerjaan anak—terutama dalam sektor ekonomi informal, e-commerce, dan industri rumahan berbasis daring. Pekerja anak tetap menjadi tantangan serius di tengah perubahan global dalam dunia kerja. Untuk merespons isu ini secara efektif di masa depan, diperlukan pendekatan multidisipliner—yang mengintegrasikan pendidikan, keselamatan dan kesehatan kerja, perlindungan sosial, serta kemitraan lintas sektor. Dengan menjunjung tinggi prinsip keadilan sosial dan hak-hak dasar pekerja, dunia dapat bergerak menuju penghapusan total pekerja anak sejalan dengan Agenda Pembangunan Berkelanjutan 2030.

Kata kunci: *Penghapusan Pekerja Anak di Era Digital, Perubahan Iklim, Bisnis Berkelanjutan*

ABSTRACT: Child labour is a stark manifestation of severe social and economic inequality, as well as a reflection of weak social protection systems, limited access to education, and inadequate labour regulations in many countries. Data from the International Labour Organization (ILO) indicate that over 160 million children worldwide are engaged in labour, nearly half of whom are involved in hazardous work that threatens their safety, health, and development. The digital era presents both opportunities and challenges regarding this issue. On the one hand, digital technology can be leveraged to improve access to education, skills training, and the monitoring of fair labour practices. On the other hand, digitalization also creates new forms of employment that are not yet fully regulated by law, opening opportunities for the exploitation of child labour—especially in the informal economy, e-commerce, and online-based domestic industries. Child labour remains a serious challenge amid global changes in the world of work. To respond to this issue effectively in the future, a multidisciplinary approach is needed—one that integrates education, occupational health and safety, social protection, and cross-sector partnerships. By upholding the principles of social justice and the fundamental rights of workers, the world can advance toward the total elimination of child labour in line with the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

Keywords: *Elimination of Child Labour in the Digital Era, Climate Change, Sustainable Business*

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this era of accelerating globalization and digital transformation, labour issues are becoming increasingly complex and dynamic. One of the most pressing global concerns is child labour—a violation of fundamental human rights and a major obstacle to sustainable development. Broadly speaking, this challenge is further exacerbated by the impacts of climate change on economic and social life, which intensifies the urgency of promoting sustainable business practices (UNICEF 2021). To address this issue, the international community has united through the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Sustainable Development Goals/SDGs), a global framework aimed at eradicating poverty, protecting the planet, and ensuring prosperity for all by 2030.

The 2030 Agenda comprises 17 interconnected goals and 169 targets. Among these, SDG 3 and SDG 8 stand out as key components for addressing child labour and improving the quality of working life. SDG 3 aims to ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages, while SDG 8 seeks to foster inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all (Nations 2015). Specifically, Target 8.7 calls on the global community to take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking, and eliminate the worst forms of child labour. (Aye Sudarto, Muhamad Bisri Mustofa 2022) Meanwhile, Target 8.8 emphasizes the importance of protecting labour rights and promoting safe and secure working environments, including for migrant workers and those in vulnerable conditions (ILO 2021a).

Child labour is a clear indicator of acute social and economic disparities and of the failure of social protection systems, access to education, and effective labour regulations in many countries. According to ILO data, over 160 million children are engaged in labour globally, with nearly half involved in hazardous work that endangers their safety, health, and development. (Sudarto. and Imtihanah 2021) Climate change, which leads to more frequent natural disasters, crop failures, and economic pressure on families, compels many children to enter the labour market to support household incomes(FAO 2020). This contributes to a vicious cycle of poverty, depriving children of access to quality education and increasing the likelihood that they will become low-skilled workers in adulthood.

The digital era offers both opportunities and challenges in addressing child labour. On the positive side, digital technologies can expand access to education, enhance skills training, and facilitate the monitoring of fair labour practices. However, digitalization also introduces new, unregulated forms of employment that can lead to the exploitation of child labour—

particularly within the informal economy, e-commerce, and online-based household industries (UNICEF 2022a). Therefore, responsive and adaptive regulations are required to address technological developments, along with comprehensive social protection policies to ensure that digital transformation does not create new avenues for child exploitation.

In the context of sustainable development, the elimination of child labour must be integrated into long-term strategies to build inclusive and just societies. Investments in occupational safety and health (OSH) are essential. Decent work entails not only adequate wages but also safe and healthy working environments. The OSH approach not only improves productivity and worker morale but also serves as a vital tool in preventing children from entering hazardous labour markets (ILO 2022b). Children raised in families with safe, stable, and decent working conditions are more likely to access education and social protection.

Additionally, sustainable business practices play a crucial role in addressing the root causes of child labour. Companies have a social responsibility to ensure that their supply chains are free from exploitation and that they adhere to fair labour standards (OECD 2018). Certification, social audits, and partnerships between the private sector, governments, and civil society are essential tools to ensure accountability and transparency in business operations. Sustainable business models also foster innovation, resource efficiency, and local community engagement, ultimately supporting the achievement of the goals outlined in the 2030 Agenda.

Furthermore, successfully eliminating child labour requires multi-stakeholder commitment and cross-sector collaboration. Governments must establish firm regulations and strengthen law enforcement, including labour inspections. Educational institutions must provide safe and inclusive learning environments. Financial institutions can support vulnerable families through access to credit and social security (Children. 2021). Civil society and the media have strategic roles in raising public awareness and advocating for policy change.

In conclusion, the elimination of child labour cannot be separated from global challenges such as climate change, economic digitalization, and sustainable development. Rather, it is a reflection of our collective success or failure in creating a just and equitable world for future generations. Therefore, the integration of the 2030 Agenda, SDG 3 and SDG 8, along with OSH-based approaches and sustainable business principles, forms the foundation for building a future free from child exploitation and full of opportunity for all.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a library research method, utilizing secondary data obtained from various sources such as books, academic journals, digital data, and official documents relevant to the topic of Elimination of Child Labor in the Digital Era, Climate Change Situations, and Sustainable Business(Sudarto 2024). The literature review was conducted by gathering relevant information from various sources as the primary foundation for examining the issues at hand.

This approach enables the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the interconnection between child labor phenomena, the dynamics of climate change, and sustainable business practices in the digital era (Sudarto 2025). All collected data were analyzed comprehensively and systematically to present a holistic, critical, and reflective overview of the phenomena under study.

3. RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. The Future of Work: Challenges and Opportunities for Child Labour Issues

a. Technology and Changes in the World of Work

Technological advancements are drastically transforming how work is done, who performs it, and how it is managed. Innovations such as digitalization, automation, artificial intelligence (AI), and nanotechnology are not only reshaping the world of adult labor but also have significant implications for child labour issues—both in terms of emerging risks and new opportunities for its elimination.(EU-OSHA 2018).

Digitalization and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are central to the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The implementation of technologies such as 3D/4D printing, autonomous vehicles, collaborative robots (cobots), and virtual and augmented reality (VR/AR) is expanding across sectors. These innovations are fundamentally altering the nature of work: machines can now recognize human voices, movements, and even emotions, and can interact dynamically through self-learning algorithms. (EU-OSHA 2018).

These advances have the potential to reduce children's exposure to hazardous work, such as heavy labor in agriculture and manufacturing. The use of robots and automated sensors can replace child labor in high-risk informal sectors. Moreover, digital distance learning can serve as an empowering tool for children in remote areas(UNICEF 2022b). However, these developments also give rise to new risks.

Psychosocial risks have emerged as a major challenge in the digital work ecosystem. Children involved in the informal digital economy such as digital content creation, home-based e-commerce, or gig work may face isolation, job insecurity, and technostress, which refers to psychological pressure caused by excessive technology use (EU-OSHA 2018). In addition, online surveillance and biometric data collection threaten the privacy rights of children working within unregulated digital systems.

In the context of Occupational Safety and Health (OSH), digitalization presents new opportunities: real-time OSH data collection, AI-based health promotion, and wider, low-cost OSH training through online platforms. These are particularly relevant in developing countries, where technology can enhance labor standards without high costs (ILO 2022a).

Automation and robotics are accelerating changes in the labor landscape. Data shows that Amazon's use of warehouse robots increased from 1,400 to 30,000 in less than two years (Frey, C. B., & Osborne 2016). Automation now encompasses cognitive tasks once thought exclusive to humans. On the one hand, this offers an opportunity to remove humans including children from dangerous jobs. On the other hand, human-robot interaction presents new challenges, including accident risks, ergonomic concerns, and a digital skills gap among young workers.

Nanotechnology, meanwhile, introduces new materials with health risks that are not yet fully understood. Nanomaterials used in electronics and consumer products are increasingly common across sectors, including manufacturing and agriculture. If children are involved in informal or home-based production, they may be exposed to hazardous substances without adequate protection (Commission 2018).

Therefore, OSH education and training are critical, as emphasized in ILO Convention No. 155 on Occupational Safety and Health. The convention affirms that workers must be trained to recognize and manage workplace risks, including those arising from new materials like nanomaterials (ILO 1981). This type of education is also relevant for children and their families, especially in areas vulnerable to child labor exploitation.

b. Demographic Change and Youth Labor Dynamics

Demographic change is another major factor shaping the future of work. Global population structures are diverging: on one hand, the youth population is growing rapidly in developing countries; on the other, aging populations are dominant in

developed nations (DESA 2022). These demographic pressures directly affect labor markets and social security systems.

In regions with large youth populations, limited access to employment and education often drives children to work at an early age. Rising youth unemployment creates new vulnerabilities to child labour. When educational and economic systems cannot absorb the influx of young workers, informal work becomes a common, yet often exploitative, alternative (ILO 2021b).

Conversely, in countries with aging populations, there is a growing need to expand employment opportunities—including for younger generations. In this context, building safe and inclusive work systems can serve as a long-term strategy to prevent child labour, through vocational training and access to decent work starting in adolescence.

Inclusive OSH policies for young age groups are essential to ensure that future generations are not only protected from hazardous work but also have access to relevant job skills. OSH must be integrated into work training curricula for young people to prepare them for new risks in the modern labor market (ILO 2022a).

c. Young Workers and Older Workers

Certain regions of the world, especially Africa and South Asia, have large youth populations entering the labor force. This presents significant employment challenges, as younger age groups (under 25) are statistically more vulnerable to unemployment. Global data shows that youth unemployment stands at approximately 13 percent—nearly three times higher than the rate for older adults (4.3 percent) (ILO 2018c).

Young workers also face higher workplace safety risks compared to older workers. A study found that non-fatal workplace injury rates are more than 40 percent higher for workers aged 18–24 compared to older workers. (EU-OSHA 2007) In the United States, workers aged 15–24 are twice as likely to experience non-fatal occupational injuries compared to those over 25 (CDC 2010). Thus, improving OSH for young workers should focus on five key areas, as outlined in the ILO 2018 OSH Campaign (ILO 2018b).

While youth populations are growing in some countries, global population growth overall is projected to slow—from 65 percent between 1980–2017 to about 35 percent between 2018–2050. This phenomenon is driven by declining birth rates and increasing life expectancy, occurring more rapidly in developing nations (ILO 2018c).

Aging affects workers' physical capabilities, with variations by gender. Women tend to live longer and are more likely to suffer from musculoskeletal disorders, osteoarthritis, and osteoporosis—all age-related conditions that impact work capacity (ILO 2018c). Employers must therefore integrate age and gender considerations into risk assessments and create healthy work environments for older workers. This approach includes applying geriatric medicine principles to occupational health strategies and investing in lifelong learning programs (ILO 2016a).

In 2019, about 13.5 percent of migrant workers were under the age of 20, with 86.5 percent falling within the productive age range of 20–64 years (ILO 2018a). Although they typically migrate in good health, migrant workers are highly vulnerable to poor working conditions throughout the migration cycle. Many work in “3D” jobs—dirty, dangerous, and demeaning—in sectors like agriculture, construction, or domestic work, which are often informal and lack adequate legal and social protections (Quinlan, M., & Bohle 2008). These conditions increase physical and mental health risks as well as workplace safety issues. Moreover, migrant status often limits access to social protection and decent work guarantees (ILO 2018c).

Gender inequality remains a major issue in the global labor market. In 2018, women were 26 percent less likely than men to be employed, and over nearly three decades, this gap has narrowed by only about 2 percent (ILO 2019). Women are also more likely to be in precarious or informal work. Although women make up only 40 percent of the total labor force, they account for 57 percent of all part-time employment (ILO 2016b).

National OSH policies must take into account the gender dynamics of workplace risks, especially in female-dominated sectors. Platform-based and flexible work arrangements are also blurring the line between the formal and informal sectors. (Sudarto et al. 2022) In this context, household care responsibilities should be shared fairly between men and women, supported by state policies that promote shared parental leave and balanced domestic duties (ILO 2018c).

Young women, in particular, face significant risks of becoming trapped in the Worst Forms of Child Labour (WFCL), due to the prevalence of digital work opportunities that require little skill. This makes them vulnerable to exploitation in unsafe and undignified jobs (ILO 2016a).

B. Child Labor in the ‘Green’ Industry: Green Technology and Occupational Safety and Health (OSH)

a. Occupational Health and Safety Risks in the Green Industry

Green technology has become a central pillar in the transition toward a sustainable economy. However, behind its potential environmental benefits lie significant occupational safety and health (OSH) challenges that arise at every stage of the technology's life cycle—ranging from raw material extraction, manufacturing, transportation, installation, and operation, to final disposal (ILO 2018b).

Workers in the green industry face various risks, including: Recycling industry: This sector carries a high risk of acute injuries, exposure to heavy metals such as lead and mercury, and toxic chemicals like polybrominated diphenyl ethers and flame retardants. Respiratory problems due to organic dust and biological agents are also prevalent (EU-OSHA 2015). Substitution of hazardous chemicals with 'eco-friendly' alternatives: The replacement of solvent-based paints with water-based alternatives often requires the addition of biocides, which may introduce new risks. Similarly, replacing chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) with hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs) as refrigerants can increase carcinogenic exposure risks (ILO 2019).

However, the green energy transition also presents opportunities for risk reduction, for example: Reduced risks in coal mining: Coal mining is one of the most hazardous occupations, especially in the informal sector of developing countries. A shift toward renewable energy could lower such exposure (ILO 2018c). Organic farming: This approach reduces the use of chemical pesticides and agrochemicals, which are major causes of acute and chronic illness among farmers (WHO 2020).

Changes in Work Organization and Their Impact on OSH

Excessive working hours: Global shifts in work organization also affect OSH conditions. Excessive working hours are strongly correlated with increased non-communicable diseases, psychosocial disorders, and work fatigue. The ILO Global Commission report suggests that regulating working hours could reduce workplace accidents and stress-related risks (ILO 2019). Women are especially vulnerable to long working hours due to the dual burden of paid work and domestic responsibilities. It is therefore essential to redesign work patterns that support work-life-family balance (OECD 2021).

Non-Standard Employment (NSE): Forms of non-standard work—such as short-term contracts, outsourcing, and freelance arrangements—entail four major risks: injury and accidents, psychosocial stress and harassment, exposure to poor working conditions,

and mental health and fatigue issues (ILO 2016a). Flexible working arrangements: Models such as telework, ICT-mobile work (ICTM), and flextime offer benefits for work-life balance, especially for women, older workers, and persons with disabilities. However, new risks have emerged, including the erosion of boundaries between work and personal time, increased stress from constant connectivity, and intensified workloads (ILO & Eurofound 2017). Informal economy: Informal sector workers generally lack access to legal and social protections, including OSH guarantees. These workers often operate unsupervised, outside the reach of labor inspectorates, and under hazardous conditions. Gradual formalization strategies and public policy interventions are essential to improve working conditions in this sector (ILO 2014).

b. OSH Challenges in Digital Platform Work

The digitalization of work has introduced new models such as crowdwork and gig economy app-based jobs. While digital platforms provide high flexibility, they also exacerbate OSH risks due to a lack of: Access to training and occupational protection, Information on work-related hazards, and Availability of protective equipment and employer support.

Workers are frequently made fully responsible for their own OSH, often without insurance or social security (Garben 2017). This poses a global challenge, necessitating international governance approaches to ensure occupational safety and health in digital platform work..

4. Responding to Future Challenges and Opportunities in Addressing Child Labor

Child labor remains a complex and evolving issue, driven by globalization, demographic shifts, and technological change. Despite progress in recent decades, child labor continues to pose a major challenge requiring a multidisciplinary and collaborative response from all stakeholders. For a just and humane future of work, child labor must not be overlooked within the sustainable development framework.

A. A Multidisciplinary Approach to Child Labor

Child labor extends beyond legal and social protection concerns and encompasses OSH, education, economic, and cultural dimensions. A multidisciplinary approach is thus essential in addressing the issue.

The transformation of OSH professionals' roles reflects shifts in the economic structure. In countries experiencing declines in manufacturing and mining sectors, OSH practitioners

must adopt more flexible roles and engage with informal work sectors, where children are especially vulnerable to exploitation (ILO 2019). In this context, future OSH professionals must be equipped with interdisciplinary skills that address both social and economic aspects of child labor.

Moreover, mainstreaming OSH into early education is critical. General education that integrates OSH values can foster collective awareness from childhood about the importance of safe and exploitation-free workplaces (ILO 2019). This aligns with the universal right to lifelong learning, encompassing formal and informal training throughout the working life cycle, including efforts to prevent children from entering hazardous labor.

B. Strengthening Government Roles and Expanding Social Partnerships

Eliminating child labor requires synergy among governments, worker and employer organizations as tripartite partners, as well as engagement with non-traditional actors such as NGOs, academics, OSH institutions, and other private and public sector entities.

Robust and expansive partnerships enable collaboration in capacity-building, information dissemination, and child protection advocacy. A global database connecting institutions engaged in OSH development can enhance cross-border knowledge sharing and cooperation toward a safer and more humane future of work (INTEROSH 2025). Such initiatives hold significant potential in identifying and addressing new risks impacting children, especially in informal and domestic work contexts.

Reinforced child-oriented regulations and public policies must also be supported through comprehensive social protection systems. These efforts form part of a transformative agenda for social and gender equality, as recommended by the ILO Global Commission on the Future of Work (ILO 2019).

C. Workplace Transformation and Its Implications for Child Labor

The future of work is undergoing major transformations, including digital technology advancement, climate change, and the transition to a green economy. These shifts introduce new OSH challenges and lead to informal job creation, increasing risks for child labor.

The ILO Global Commission (ILO 2019) calls for the recognition of occupational safety and health as a fundamental principle and right at work, and the implementation of Universal Labor Guarantees, including decent wages, fair working hours, and protection from exploitation. Realizing these principles is critical to preventing the spread of child labor practices, particularly in informal sectors that lack proper labor standards.

It is thus vital that all stakeholders leverage these transformations to build more inclusive and equitable labor systems that ensure children are not involved in work that endangers their physical or mental well-being.

5. CONCLUSION

The green industry and evolving world of work—marked by flexibility, digitalization, and informality—pose new challenges to occupational safety and health. Children and other vulnerable worker groups in these sectors face heightened OSH risks. Policy strategies, labor inspections, global regulation, and improved worker literacy in OSH are crucial to ensure that the transition to a green and digital economy does not compromise the fundamental right to a safe and healthy work environment.

Child labor remains a serious issue amid global changes in the nature of work. Effectively addressing this issue in the future requires a multidisciplinary approach that integrates education, occupational safety and health, social protection, and cross-sector partnerships. The transformation of OSH roles, integration of OSH learning into education, and global collaboration are essential steps in creating a labor ecosystem free from child exploitation. By upholding the principles of social justice and fundamental labor rights, the global community can progress toward the complete elimination of child labor in accordance with the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda.

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