

# CHILD LABOR IN AGRICULTURE - AN OBSTACLE FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURAL DEVELOPMENT IN VIETNAM

Nguyen Quang Thanh\*

*Faculty of Economic Law, University of Economics and Law, VNU-HCM*

\*Email: [thanhngq21710@sdh.uel.edu.vn](mailto:thanhngq21710@sdh.uel.edu.vn)

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## ABSTRACT

In many countries around the world, the rate of child labor in the agricultural sector is quite high. According to statistics from the International Labor Organization, up to 60% of child laborers between the ages of 5 and 17 have to work in agriculture, including farming, fishing, and animal husbandry. Of which, up to 67.5% of child laborers are unpaid family members. In Vietnam, the situation of child labor in agriculture is no exception to this general situation. The results of the 2018 national survey on child labor showed that 62.2% of child laborers participated in agricultural work such as: planting annual crops, growing fruit trees, agricultural services, fishing, and animal husbandry. Children having to participate in labor from an early age exposes them to many hazards from the working environment (chemicals, herbicides, pesticides) or have to work long hours, affecting their learning process. On January 28, 2022, the Deputy Prime Minister of the Government of Vietnam signed and promulgated the Strategy for Sustainable Agricultural and Rural Development for the 2021-2030 period, with a vision to 2050. In particular, one of the specific goals set for 2030 is "the rate of trained agricultural workers reaching over 70%". However, the rate of child labor in the agricultural sector is quite high, leading to difficulties in rural vocational training as well as building high-quality human resources in agriculture. This is a significant obstacle to sustainable development in agriculture. This article contributes to clarifying the situation of child labor in agriculture, the challenges of this issue for the process of building sustainable agriculture in the future; thereby, proposing a number of solutions to contribute to preventing and abolishing child labor in the agricultural sector.

*Keywords:* Child labor, child labor in agriculture, abolishing child labor, sustainable agriculture.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Child labor is a global issue, particularly prevalent in the agricultural sector, which accounts for the highest proportion of child labor among all industries worldwide. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), approximately 60% of children aged 5 to 17 are engaged in agriculture, including activities such as farming, livestock rearing, fishing, and providing agricultural services. Among these, over 67.5% are unpaid workers, primarily family members.

In Vietnam, this trend is no exception. The 2018 national survey revealed that 53.6% of child laborers were engaged in agricultural tasks such as cultivating seasonal crops, fruit farming, animal husbandry, and fishing [1]. Early involvement in labor not only reduces children's educational opportunities but also exposes them to hazardous working conditions,

including contact with chemicals and pesticides, and strenuous workloads—factors that severely affect their physical and mental development.

As Vietnam aims to build a sustainable agriculture sector—with the target of having more than 70% of agricultural workers trained by 2030 [2]—child labor in agriculture poses a significant obstacle. The presence of child labor not only hampers efforts to improve human capital quality but also hinders modernization and international integration in the agricultural sector. This situation calls for urgent research to assess the current status, causes, and impacts of child labor on sustainable agricultural development, as well as to propose feasible solutions for its prevention and eventual elimination.

This paper seeks to clarify the situation of child labor in Vietnam's agricultural sector, analyze the challenges it poses to sustainable agricultural development, and propose specific solutions. By synthesizing secondary data from studies, reports, and surveys, this paper not only raises social awareness but also provides a scientific basis for stakeholders—including authorities, organizations, and communities—to work together in addressing this issue, striving toward a future in which children's rights are protected and Vietnam's agriculture grows sustainably and modernly.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Studies on the concept of child labor**

The term child labor has not been consistently interpreted globally, especially in terms of age in determining child labor in each country. However, in research documents, there is a certain inheritance of the ILO's definition of child labor. According to the definition of this organization, "child labor" is understood as work that deprives children of their childhood, potential and dignity and harms their physical and mental development. This term refers to work that is: (i) mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children; and/or (ii) interferes with children's learning by: depriving children of the opportunity to attend school; forcing children to leave school early; or requiring children to combine schooling with excessively long and strenuous work. This concept has been accepted and developed in many later studies.

In Vietnam, studies on child labor are relatively diverse and examined from multiple perspectives. Ngan Binh Do provided analysis and interpretation of the concepts of 'child' and 'child labor' at the time when the 1994 Labor Code came into effect [3]. At that time, Vietnamese legislation had not yet clearly defined "child labor"; it only stipulated that "a worker must be at least 15 years old." Simultaneously, the Labor Code identified underage workers as "individuals under 18 years old" and prohibited the employment of children under 15 in hazardous or arduous work. It is evident that during this period, the legal definition of child labor in Vietnam remained unclear.

Another study, closely aligned with terminology in Vietnamese law, is Thang Loi Tran's doctoral dissertation in legal studies titled "Improving Legislation on Juvenile Workers in the Context of International Integration" [4]. The author pointed out distinguishing features between juvenile labor and other labor forms, as well as differences between the concept of underage labor in Vietnam and internationally. Notably, at the time of the dissertation, the term "juvenile worker" (Article 119, 1994 Labor Code) and the term "child labor" (Clause 7, Article 7 of the 2004 Law on Child Protection, Care and Education) lacked age-related consistency.

Similarly, Lan Phuong Thi Phan addressed the concept of "child labor" and clearly differentiated it from "working children" [5]. According to the author, working children are those who engage in tasks that do not hinder their physical development, schooling, or

recreation and may even promote healthy development. In contrast, child labor refers to situations where children perform work that is excessively demanding for their age, are compelled to work, and are vulnerable to physical and sexual exploitation.

## **2.2. Studies on the causes of child labor**

The causes of child labor are quite diverse and depend on the context and level of socio-economic development in each country. Therefore, there are many studies on this issue. Some typical works include the following:

Thanh Mai Thi Vu raised the issue of preventing and addressing child labor, identifying several contributing factors—each playing varying roles depending on specific contexts [6]. These include: (i) the influence of families and communities; (ii) the dominance of small-scale business operations; (iii) poverty; and (iv) migration. Among the causes listed in this study, one of the most notable is the condition of “economic liberalization, global economic integration, and intense competition, which compel small businesses and household enterprises to increasingly exploit child labor.”

Thi Dung Do presented quite specifically about child labor and international legal regulations on child labor; thereby, clarifying the current state of Vietnamese law and the current state of law violations against child labor [7]. In particular, the author also analyzed some basic causes of law violations against child labor including: poverty, illiteracy, families with poor understanding and no responsibility for their children; lack of understanding of the law and profit motives from employers.

Foreign research works continue to analyze and explain the causes leading to child labor from many different perspectives. Fors reviews and evaluates various theoretical perspectives on child labor, such as poverty theory, human capital theory, and cultural factors. Fors's findings have several noteworthy points: First, poverty, market imperfections, and parental conditions can all contribute to the decision to send children to work [8]. As a result, no single policy instrument can eliminate child labor on its own. Second, to successfully eliminate child labor, policies must aim to address the causes of child labor and provide viable alternatives by ensuring access to quality education, addressing market failures, and providing economic support to those facing poverty, as well as by pursuing long-term economic growth and development strategies.

## **2.3. Studies on child labor in agriculture**

Globally, the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) have conducted research and warned of a significant increase in child labor of about 160 million, an increase of 8.4 million in the period 2016-2020. It is noteworthy that up to 70% of child laborers work in the agricultural sector, accounting for about 112 million children globally [9]. The report also pointed out the common feature that most child laborers are concentrated in small-scale, household agricultural activities.

Another ILO report focuses on the situation of child labor in East Asia, Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands (Asia-Pacific region, excluding South Asia). Accordingly, in early 2020, the region had about 25.1 million children, including 8.8 million girls and 16.4 million boys, who were in child labor, accounting for 6.2% of the total number of children in the region. Child labor is mainly concentrated in rural areas and the rate of child labor in rural areas is 3 times higher than in urban areas. Agriculture accounts for the largest proportion, about 57% of child labor in the region works in agriculture, forestry and fisheries (mainly small-scale farming) [10]. In addition, the report also shows that child labor is mostly unpaid family labor, reflecting rural poverty and the need for small households to use child labor.

In South Asia, child labor remains widespread and agriculture remains the sector with the highest rate of child labor in South Asian countries. An estimated 16.7 million children (5–17 years) are engaged in child labour in the South Asian region, with the youngest children (5–11 years) accounting for a significant proportion. India has the largest number (about 5.8 million), followed by Bangladesh (about 5.0 million), Pakistan (about 3.4 million) and Nepal (about 2.0 million). In terms of proportion, Nepal has the highest rate of child labour in the region (about 26% of children aged 5–17). The report also found that the majority of working children in South Asia work in the rural economy and agriculture, and many are engaged in the worst forms of child labour. In some countries, the majority of older children (15–17 years) are engaged in hazardous work (e.g. 75% in Bangladesh, 72% in Sri Lanka) [11]. These figures show a major challenge to efforts to eliminate child labor in South Asia, requiring strong measures on poverty reduction, education and social protection in rural areas.

Not out of the general trend, in Southeast Asia, child labor is still concentrated mainly in rural areas, remote areas and in the informal economic sector. According to national survey data from 7 ASEAN countries, the agricultural sector (including forestry and fisheries) has the highest rate of child labor, followed by services and industry. This reflects the characteristics of ASEAN where many children have to work on farms, plantations or fishing. The document also proposes key groups of solutions such as: improving the legal framework and law enforcement on child labor, poverty reduction and rural economic development, expanding education and skills training for children and parents, raising community awareness, and strengthening regional cooperation [12].

#### **2.4. Studies on solutions to prevent and limit child labor**

Van Bang La has analyzed and explained the theory and practice in implementing the law on child protection in general in Vietnam in the period from 2013 to 2018 [13]. In particular, this research work argues that child protection must be implemented systematically and at three levels: (i) The first level is prevention, including protection measures used for the community, family and all children. The purpose of applying measures at the first level is to contribute to raising social awareness of child protection issues; (ii) The second level is support, including protection measures applied to groups of children in special circumstances such as those at risk of exploitation, violence, abandonment, etc. to minimize risks and harm to children; (iii) The third level is intervention, including protection measures applied to children and their families who have been abused to prevent abuse; contribute to supporting, caring for, rehabilitating and reintegrating children into the community.

Bourdillon and Carothers point out several shortcomings in current child labor policies: (i) prohibiting economic work can hinder children's essential contributions to livelihoods and thus can hinder families' efforts to overcome poverty; (ii) prohibiting formal work can push children into more hazardous types of informal work; (iii) focusing on preventing children from working eliminates experiential learning opportunities that could better prepare children for future careers; (iv) work bans exclude children from social activities that help to impart cultural values and practices and develop social responsibility; (v) policies based on working age do not focus on protecting children from harm in work that is otherwise legal; (vi) policies that focus on eliminating children from work distract from improving their lives; (vii) children and their families refuse to accept a policy that they consider harmful to children's well-being and development and is imposed from outside [14].

Dinkua and Fielding suggest different perspectives when examining the status of child labor in countries [15]. From a human rights perspective, child labor is considered to jeopardize children's right to healthy personal development. From an economic perspective, there is concern that child labor undermines children's human capital and future earning

potential. The main concern of this study is to answer the question of whether all child labor has a significant negative impact on children's development? Therefore, the research team drew on survey data from children's lives in Ethiopia to examine the link between child labor and cognitive outcomes. Through their analysis, the authors argue that there are large potential benefits from policies designed to encourage parents to reallocate their children's time from the farm to the classroom, and that designing such policies should be a priority.

Although the literature review shows that there have been some studies on child labour in agriculture, there are still some important gaps that need to be filled. First, the concept of child labour in agriculture is not unified, as the boundary between "family assistance" and child labour is still vague. This leads to the situation that many cases of children working in the fields, making handicrafts, fishing, etc. are not included in official statistics because they are considered to be assistance rather than real labour. Second, the quantitative approach is limited: large-scale studies and reliable statistical data on the scope and characteristics of child labour in agriculture are still lacking, especially in Southeast Asian countries and Vietnam. In fact, in the context of this region, very few in-depth studies have been conducted, leading to a lack of comprehensive understanding of the impact of socio-economic factors (such as poverty, lack of access to education, local customs and practices) on child labor. In particular, studies on the impact of child labor on the implementation of sustainable development policies in agriculture are still not clear and specific enough to propose appropriate policies for the current period. Therefore, this study contributes to answering two questions:

*First, what are the causes leading to the higher proportion of child labor in the agricultural sector compared to other economic sectors?*

*Second, how does child labor affect the process of building sustainable agriculture in Vietnam?*

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The primary findings of this article are based mainly on secondary data collected from books, newspapers, journals, theses, dissertations, and reports published by relevant organizations. During the research process, the author employed analytical, synthetic, and comparative methods to clarify and comment on both theoretical and practical issues related to child labor and its impact on the process of developing sustainable agriculture in Vietnam. From there, the study proposes policy recommendations to promote the prevention and reduction of child labor in the agricultural sector.

### 4. RESULTS

#### 4.1. Scale and trends of child labor in agriculture in Vietnam

Over the past two decades, Vietnam has made considerable progress in preventing and reducing child labor compared to many countries and regions globally. According to the first national survey on child labor conducted in 2012, 2.83 million children were involved in economic activities, of whom 1.75 million were classified as child laborers, accounting for 9.6% of all children aged 5–17 nationwide [16]. By 2018, six years later, the proportion of child labor had declined to 5.4%, representing approximately 1.03 million children [1]. Most recently, the General Statistics Office (GSO) incorporated content on child labor participation among children aged 5–17 into the 2023 Labor and Employment Survey [17]. Therefore, the data from 2023 is only indicative and not directly comparable with the 2012 and 2018 national child labor surveys. As estimated, Vietnam had around 269.604 child laborers in 2023, representing 1.31%.

Table 1. Child labor in Vietnam 2012-2023 [16, 1, 17]

Year	2012	2018	2023
Child population (5-17 years old)	18.3 million	19.2 million	20.6 million
Number of children participating in economic activities	2.83 million	1.75 million	731.6 thousand
Number of child labor	1.75 million	1.03 million	269.6 thousand
Percentage (compared to total number of children nationwide)	9.6%	5.4%	1.31%

In terms of child labor distribution between urban and rural areas, surveys consistently show that child labor is predominantly concentrated in rural regions. In 2012, there were 265.255 children in urban areas (accounting for 15.1%) and 1.489.557 in rural areas (84.9%) [16]. By 2018, the proportions remained nearly unchanged with 161.621 children (15.7%) in urban areas and 870.323 (84.3%) in rural areas [1]. The 2023 survey continued to reflect this trend, with 23.6% of child laborers in urban areas and 76.4% in rural areas [17].

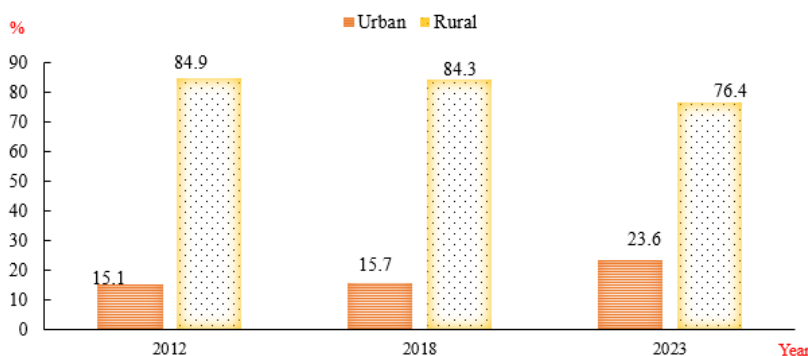


Figure 1. Proportion of child labor in urban and rural areas 2012-2023 [16, 1, 17]

Although child labor in Vietnam has declined, it remains highly concentrated in rural regions and the agricultural sector. In 2012, nearly 1.18 million child laborers worked in agriculture (67.1%), compared to 276,000 in industry and construction (15.8%), and about 293.000 in services (16.6%). Notably, rural child laborers were overwhelmingly engaged in agriculture (about 73.9%), while urban child laborers were more evenly distributed among the three sectors: 32.5% in industry-construction, 38.3% in services, and 28.5% in agriculture [16].

Results from the 2023 Labor Force Survey show that the structure of child labor by economic sector has changed significantly, with the proportion of child labor in the agriculture, forestry and fishery sector (38.9%) being equivalent to that in the industry and construction sector (38.3%). In particular, as children get older, they tend to shift to non-agricultural jobs. For the 5-11 age group, 75.7% of child laborers are involved in the agriculture, forestry and fishery sector; 59.9% and 26.5% are the proportions of children in the 12-14 and 15-17 age groups, respectively [17].

Regarding the nature and working hours of child laborers, many children were found to be working long hours under strenuous conditions. In 2012, around one-third (approximately 569.000 children) worked more than 42 hours per week—equal to or exceeding adult working hours—adversely impacting their education and health [16]. By 2018, it was estimated that nearly 520.000 children (roughly half of all child laborers) were engaged in hazardous or harmful work [1]. Of those, 40% worked more than 40 hours per week. In 2023, 30.9% of child laborers in agriculture, forestry, and fisheries worked at night—three times the proportion in industry, nearly double that in services, and ten times that in construction [17].

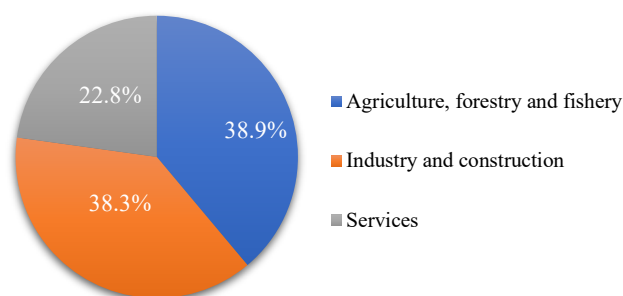


Figure 2. Proportion of child labor by economic sector in 2023 [17]

In terms of child labor locations, the two surveys in 2012 and 2018 showed that child labor accounted for a high proportion of work locations such as farms, gardens, home work and mobile work.

Table 2. Child labor locations in the period 2012-2018 [16, 1]

Work location	2012		2018	
	Total	%	Total	%
Home	402.365	22.9	255.236	24.7
Farm/field/garden	658.805	37.5	124.839	12.1
Mobile	217.429	12.4	82.792	8.0
River/lake/swamp	27.568	1.6	17.345	1.7

In terms of learning opportunities, when they become child laborers, their learning opportunities in economically developed regions are lower than those in economically underdeveloped regions. Specifically, in 2023, the rate of child laborers in urban areas attending school was 7.8% points lower than in rural areas (16.1% and 23.9%, respectively). Meanwhile, for the group of non-child laborers, the school attendance rate of children in urban areas was 1.2% points higher than in rural areas (98.2% compared to 97.0%) [17]. This difference can be explained by the difference in the working environment between urban and rural areas. In rural areas, the jobs that child laborers participate in are mostly seasonal or part-time jobs in agricultural activities of households. Therefore, when the harvest season ends, children can still go to school, leading to a higher school attendance rate for children in rural areas than in urban areas.

In general, although the situation of child labor in the agricultural sector in Vietnam has improved compared to two decades ago, it is still a matter of concern, especially in the context of building sustainable agriculture according to the orientation of our Party and State. Hundreds of thousands of children, mainly in poor rural areas, are still forced to work in difficult conditions, sacrificing their education and childhood. This is considered one of the major challenges to the goal of sustainable agricultural development and improving the quality of rural human resources in the future.

#### 4.2. Causes of child labor in agriculture

Child labor in agriculture in Vietnam is a complex and persistent problem. The complexity of the problem stems from the fact that this situation exists due to many different causes from economic, social, cultural to policy implementation. The persistence of child labor has lasted for decades despite significant efforts from many relevant organizations and

individuals. Therefore, clarifying the main causes leading to this situation is really necessary to propose feasible and effective policies in the coming time.

#### 4.2.1. Economic causes

Poverty and income instability of households have been identified as the leading causes that push children to participate in early labor in rural Vietnam over the past many years. Low-income farming families cannot meet their minimum spending needs, so children are forced to become laborers to help and contribute to the family's income. Typically, families in rural areas of Vietnam often rely on child labor to support farm work due to a lack of financial resources to hire workers or invest in technology development. This situation is becoming more and more common when agricultural product prices are unstable, "good harvest, low price", while the cost of investing in agricultural materials and supporting machinery is quite high, forcing families to mobilize many labor resources, including children, to participate in farming.

The results of the 2018 national survey show that up to 20.7% of child laborers are motivated by the need to "generate family income" and 27.3% of children "want to participate in household production and business" [1]. This trend is most evident in the older group of children.

*Table 3. Main causes of child labor participation in 2018 [1]*

Reasons	Total	%	Gender		Age group		
			Male	Femal	5-12	13-14	15-17
			%	%	%	%	%
Create income for yourself	95.956	9.3	9.8	8.5	3.9	3.6	14.6
Create family income	213.319	20.7	21.9	18.9	10.2	24.8	25.5
Want to participate in household production and business	281.651	27.3	27.4	27.1	37.6	27.8	20.9

It can be seen that when the income of adult workers in the family is not enough to cover essential needs, children are at high risk of becoming an involuntary "supplementary labor" force to increase income or reduce labor costs in agriculture. In particular, in some self-sufficient agricultural jobs, the labor of children in the family can save part of the cost of hiring workers during the crop season. Therefore, in rural areas with difficult economic conditions, ethnic minority areas, mountainous areas, child labor is considered an important force for households to survive in the face of economic shortages. In addition, as a country that is often affected by natural disasters such as storms, floods, droughts or saltwater intrusion, the agricultural cultivation process in Vietnam is easily affected, leading to crop failure or decreased output. This also becomes the reason why children are easily drawn into labor to help their families. The ILO has warned that more frequent natural disasters due to climate change could force more children into child labor if appropriate precautions are not taken [17].

#### 4.2.2. Social and cultural causes

The persistent existence of child labor in rural areas of Vietnam also stems from cultural and social factors. Accordingly, traditional farming family culture considers early child labor as normal and necessary. Some families see children working as a way to practice skills, a "duty" to contribute to the family economy, or a form of "inheriting property". Therefore, many children from 10 years old and up have begun to participate in family work such as herding buffalo, cutting grass, weaving, etc. However, the line between helping the family and child labor is really fragile. This depends on the time and intensity of the child's work. If the regulation is exceeded, the initial motivation to help the family will certainly become child labor exploitation.

In addition, some cases of child labor still exist because parents and the community do not fully understand the issues of education, development and children's rights. In some mountainous areas and ethnic minority areas, many parents have experienced hard work as children, so they consider this natural and are not aware of the long-term harmful effects of early labor on their children. At the same time, East Asian culture emphasizes children's responsibility to the family, the obligation to "show filial piety" to parents is sometimes misunderstood, causing children to prioritize working early to help their parents instead of focusing on studying. According to UNICEF, parents' lack of awareness of children's rights is closely related to children dropping out of school to work early. In addition, social prejudices that still exist deeply in many places have created a favorable environment for child labor to persist. A typical example is the notion that "children from poor families must work early". Gender prejudices cause many ethnic minority girls to drop out of school early to stay home to work in the fields and do housework. UNICEF believes that backward social norms are one of the factors that maintain child labor, especially at the community level [17].

In addition to cultural factors, perceptions and social prejudices, education - an important social aspect - is also identified as having a direct impact on child labor. Indeed, there is a close link between children participating in early labor and not attending school fully or dropping out of school. Although the dropout rate of child laborers has improved, it is still quite high. In 2012, the country had 911.430 child laborers who did not attend school, but this number decreased to 501.095 children in 2018 [16, 1]. However, the school attendance of working children and non-working children surveyed in 2023 still showed that this trend has not changed significantly. Specifically, the proportion of working children who are attending school is 44.9%, while the proportion of children who are not attending school is 55.1% [17]. This difference is completely insignificant. So what has caused the lack of education of child laborers in rural areas of Vietnam? There are many aspects that can be mentioned such as: (i) Cost of accessing education. Including direct costs and loss of income when children go to school instead of working. (ii) Parents' education level. If the household has parents with low education or lack of awareness of the importance of education, the child is likely to not go to school. (iii) Children's learning outcomes. Children with poor learning outcomes often drop out of school to participate in labor because they think that generating income will be more useful than studying. (iv) Facilities and transportation conditions. This is especially difficult for children in mountainous areas and ethnic minority areas, where the school system is still lacking, the distance to school is long and there is a shortage of teachers.

#### *4.2.3. Institutional and legal enforcement causes*

Over the years, the legal framework on the prevention and suppression of child labor has been amended and supplemented to meet practical requirements as well as international legal standards. Specifically, Vietnam has joined the International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention No. 138 on the Minimum Age of Employment in 1973 and Convention No. 182 on the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labor in 1999. Along with that, domestic legal regulations have covered important aspects to prevent and stop child labor such as: regulations on the minimum age; regulations on jobs and corresponding working conditions that minor workers are allowed or not allowed to do; regulations on the list of jobs that are harmful to the physical, mental and personality development of minors; regulations on workplaces that are harmful to the physical, mental and personality development of minors; specific regulations on prohibited acts in the labor field; regulations to punish acts related to some of the worst forms of child labor in criminal law...

However, despite many efforts to improve the legal framework, law enforcement to prevent and eventually eliminate child labor in practice is still limited, especially in the agricultural sector. Because the majority of child laborers work in the informal sector in forms

such as: family labor, small farms, odd jobs..., where the inspection and examination process of competent state agencies is quite limited. In particular, for rural households in remote, isolated and mountainous areas, labor inspectors do not have the conditions to regularly access. The team of staff working on child protection at the grassroots level still lacks the skills to detect cases of disguised child labor (for example, in the form of vocational training). In addition, the boundary between participating in family support work and child labor is often difficult to determine. Many children participate in family support work but exceed the prescribed working hours, work in difficult, toxic conditions, dust, pesticides, etc. On the other hand, the punishment of child labor is not really effective, strict and timely in many localities, causing some employers to still take advantage of child labor as a source of cheap labor to increase their competitive advantage in price.

In general, the situation of child labor in the agricultural sector in Vietnam comes from a combination of many factors including economic difficulties, lack of awareness, education as well as limitations in law enforcement, making this issue not thoroughly controlled. In particular, poverty is considered the overarching cause, mainly forcing households to let children work early.

### **4.3. Impact of child labor on sustainable agricultural development**

Agriculture plays a core role in the socio-economic development policy and ensures national food security in Vietnam. However, over the past decades, due to the impact of the growth model based on the exploitation of natural resources, intensive farming as well as the impact of climate change, production efficiency and quality of agricultural products have not met expectations, and farmers' lives are still difficult and unstable.

Based on the above reality, the Party and State of Vietnam have set out a strategy to build a sustainable, modern, efficient and climate-resilient agriculture. At the 5th Conference of the 13th Party Central Committee, Resolution No. 19-NQ/TW dated June 16, 2022 on agriculture, farmers and rural areas to 2030, with a vision to 2045 was issued. The Resolution has determined: *“Developing effective, sustainable, multi-value agriculture towards increasing added value and competitiveness, associated with promoting the development of processing and post-harvest preservation industries and developing agricultural markets both domestically and internationally; ensuring food safety, national food security, protecting the ecological environment; encouraging the development of green, organic, and circular agriculture”*.

Sustainable agricultural development requires a balanced combination of many factors, including economic growth associated with progress, social equity and environmental protection. However, the current situation of child labor in agriculture in Vietnam can significantly affect all three of these factors, reflecting certain shortcomings in the development and implementation of policies and laws. Children's participation in early labor may bring short-term benefits to rural households due to economic shortages, but will certainly lead to future consequences for the quality of national human resources. In addition, child labor often exists in small-scale, informal farming models, hindering the application of advanced scientific achievements to build a sustainable, modern agriculture as the orientation presented. The negative impacts of child labor on the development of sustainable agriculture in Vietnam are analyzed in the following four aspects:

#### *4.3.1. Economic impacts*

From an economic perspective, the use of child labor in agriculture can have negative impacts on the productivity and efficiency of the sector in the future. The first factor that can be seen is that the labor productivity of child labor cannot be equal to that of adult labor even though the working time is extended. In many cases, due to incomplete physical development,

children are susceptible to occupational accidents and health problems from agricultural activities such as pesticides, chemical fertilizers, labor tools such as knives, scythes, hammers, etc. The use of child labor in agriculture also leads to the consequence that farmers lack the motivation to invest and apply science and technology to cultivation due to the habit and practice of depending on cheap and available labor sources. This, inadvertently, can lead to a vicious cycle in agriculture, significantly affecting the construction of sustainable agriculture: low productivity leads to low household income, which makes the conditions for investment in agricultural development low, resulting in continued dependence on child labor. In addition, if children participate in labor early, their learning opportunities may be deprived, and their families will lose skilled, trained labor in the future. Society will lack a generation of high-quality human resources to operate complex machinery and equipment, thereby reducing the competitiveness of agriculture. It causes stagnation in the process of rural restructuring.

At the same time, child labor also significantly affects the ability to integrate internationally and participate in the global agricultural value chain. Indeed, in the context of increasingly strong international integration, labor standards and corporate social responsibility in all fields are being promoted, requiring strict and tight compliance, including enterprises in the field of agricultural production and trading. Therefore, the existence of child labor in the supply chain will reduce the prestige and trustworthiness of Vietnamese agricultural products in demanding markets such as Europe, the United States, Japan, etc. For example, if partners and markets importing agricultural products from Vietnam are found to be using child labor in the production chain of coffee, cashew nuts, and seafood, they can apply sanctions for breach of contract or have their products boycotted by consumers in these markets. Several new free trade agreements that Vietnam has recently joined also include commitments to eliminate child labor in production activities, such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Vietnam-EU Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA).

Table 4. Commitments on abolishing child labor in CPTPP and EVFTA.  
(Source: Author's synthesis of agreements)

Agreement	Commitment Location	Commitment Content
CPTPP	Chapter 19. Labor	Article 19.3: Labour Rights 1. Each Party shall adopt and maintain in its laws and regulations and in the implementation thereof, the following rights as set out in the ILO Declaration: (c) the effective abolition of child labour and, for the purposes of this Agreement, a prohibition on the worst forms of child labour;
EVFTA	Chapter 13. Trade and Sustainable Development	Article 13.4 2. Each Party reaffirms its commitment, in accordance with its obligations under the ILO and the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its Follow-up Actions, adopted by the International Labour Conference at its 86th Session in 1998, to respect, promote and effectively implement the principles of fundamental rights at work, in particular: (c) the effective abolition of child labour;

Thus, from an economic perspective, child labor can hinder the development of sustainable and modern agriculture, reduce the quality of human resources in the future, and hinder the process of deep participation in the global supply chain. Therefore, solving this situation also contributes to improving the image and sustainability of the agricultural sector,

meeting development requirements and international standards, thereby realizing SDG 2 and SDG 8 in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.

#### *4.3.2. Social impacts*

On a social level, child labor can aggravate and deepen social inequality between population groups and regions. As analyzed, child labor in Vietnam is often distributed in mountainous areas, poor rural areas and ethnic minority areas. According to the 2023 labor and employment survey, the rate of child labor in rural areas (76.4%) is still three times higher than in urban areas (23.6%) [17]. Regions such as the Mekong Delta, the Southeast, the North Central and Central Coast regions, the Northern Midlands and Mountains - where economic conditions are difficult and school attendance rates are low - also have high rates of child labor compared to the general situation in the country. This shows that child labor is both a result of economic deprivation and a cause of increasing social gaps between regions and ethnic minority groups. In addition, child labor significantly affects children's health and access to education - key factors for social development. Instead of going to school and participating in age-appropriate recreational activities, child laborers have to participate in farm work to help their families earn a living. Many rural and ethnic minority girls, due to gender stereotypes, still have to shoulder housework and family care from an early age. This situation causes a large number of child laborers to seriously lack basic knowledge and skills, and face difficulties in integrating into society and the formal labor market later on. In addition, the agricultural work environment often poses many potential risks to children. They face difficult and toxic working conditions such as carrying heavy objects, exposure to pesticides, dangerous machinery, etc. According to the 2018 National Survey, about 286.253 children are exposed to dust, garbage, and smoke (accounting for 27.7%); 33.373 children work underwater (ponds, lakes), diving, and offshore fishing (accounting for 3.2%); 82.860 children are exposed to chemicals (accounting for 8%) [1]. These factors can make children susceptible to respiratory diseases, skin diseases, spinal injuries and musculoskeletal injuries.

In general, child labor is a cause of hindrance to the goal of developing human resources in the future, especially in areas with difficult socio-economic conditions. Rural communities with many children dropping out of school and suffering from health problems from an early age will have difficulty in developing and competing, thereby causing poverty and social inequality to persist for many years to come.

#### *4.3.3. Environmental Impacts*

In terms of resource exploitation, due to focusing on ensuring immediate livelihoods, many poor households tend to exploit land, deforest and use water resources unsustainably. This significantly affects forest protection and soil erosion prevention. In addition, the use of child labor is a cause of hindrance to the application of sustainable farming measures such as crop rotation and soil fertility restoration. This leads to land degradation and biodiversity loss in agriculture. In addition, children do not have access to knowledge of environmental protection and sustainable agricultural techniques, which will lead to huge consequences in the future when they become adult workers. This situation will continue to create another vicious cycle when the agricultural farming environment is degraded, productivity and efficiency are low, households continue to be poor and increasingly dependent on child labor. This cycle is even more difficult to solve in the context of global climate change. In particular, to build and develop a sustainable and modern agriculture, child labor is one of the barriers. In recent years, Vietnamese businesses and farmers have accessed many sustainable agricultural certification programs in the world such as Fair Trade, Rainforest Alliance, and Organic certification. The noteworthy point of most of these certifications is that they all set the criterion of "not using child labor" as a mandatory requirement. Therefore, if farmers still

use child labor in all stages of the production process, they will not be granted this certification. This also means losing new opportunities to access potential markets with high added value.

#### 4.3.4. *Impact on policy and institutional aspects*

As presented, Vietnam's policies and laws on the prevention and elimination of child labor are relatively comprehensive. At the same time, Vietnam has ratified international conventions on children's rights as well as signed new-generation free trade agreements with commitments to eliminate child labor. However, from promulgation to implementation of policies and laws, there are still certain limitations. This stems from many objective and subjective reasons, including family and community awareness; the labor inspection team is still small and mainly concentrated in the formal sector; the mechanism for monitoring law enforcement at the grassroots level is still weak... The above limitations also show that local governance capacity and inter-sectoral coordination are not really tight in some localities, especially in remote areas, where child labor exists in secret and persistently due to difficulty in effective control.

In addition to developing and implementing domestic laws, Vietnam has also made efforts to coordinate with international organizations in the strategy to eliminate child labor. For example, the International Labor Organization has provided technical assistance to help build national capacity and share international experience in preventing and reducing child labor with key activities such as: Project "Support for the development and implementation of programs to eliminate the worst forms of child labor" for the period 2009-2013; Decent Work Country Program (DWCP) for the period 2012-2016; Project "Technical assistance to enhance national capacity to prevent and reduce child labor for the period 2015-2019". In addition, Vietnam has boldly and proactively participated in regional and international initiatives and joint statements to promote international cooperation, exchange and share experiences on this issue. For example, Vietnam participates in the 8.7 Alliance to eliminate all forms of child labor; participates in the ASEAN Joint Declaration on Child Labor [20].

Through the above analysis, it is impossible to use the immediate benefits that child labor brings to exchange for the huge losses to the children themselves and the agricultural sector in the future. To achieve the goals set by the Party and the State for the development of sustainable and modern agriculture, one of the obstacles that must be overcome is to prevent, minimize and eventually eliminate child labor.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Recognizing the seriousness of child labor in general and agriculture in particular, Vietnam has made efforts to implement many solutions over the past 20 years. However, child labor is an issue that has impacts on many aspects from the economy, society to the environment and the international integration process. Therefore, to realize the elimination of child labor, towards building sustainable agriculture and prosperous rural communities, strong policy solutions and synchronous implementation are needed.

*First*, continue to improve the legal framework and internalize international commitments on preventing and eliminating child labor. Although efforts have been made to improve the legal framework over the past years as well as ratify two important conventions of the International Labor Organization, it is necessary to be more specific for some contents such as: improving regulations on the minimum age for working; Supplement and complete the list of occupations and jobs for minors, especially new jobs and workplaces that may affect the physical, mental and personality development of children; complete regulations on working hours; enhance the social responsibility of enterprises in implementing the commitment to eliminate child labor.

*Second*, reduce poverty and develop the rural economy. This is considered the main motivation for rural households to decide to let their children participate in labor at an early age. Therefore, solving this root cause is an opportunity to completely eliminate child labor not only in rural areas but also in large cities. International and Vietnamese experience in implementing the national target program on sustainable poverty reduction has shown the link between improving the socio-economic life of the community and solving child labor. Therefore, the Government has implemented a series of poverty reduction and rural development programs such as Program 135, Resolution 30a, New Rural Program... to create jobs for adults, support production credit, improve rural infrastructure. Therefore, the key solution is to continue to integrate the goal of reducing and eliminating child labor into poverty reduction programs. In other words, each project and program for agricultural and rural development needs to add criteria of not using child labor and creating sustainable livelihoods for households.

*Third*, improve the quality and access to education for children at high risk. In addition to improving rural household livelihoods, improving the quality and opportunities for children to go to school is the key to breaking the cycle of child labor. Accordingly, it is necessary to continue investing in and upgrading the quality of educational facilities in remote areas, ethnic minority areas, effectively implementing the policy of exempting and reducing tuition fees and supporting scholarships to ensure that children go to school instead of participating in early labor. In addition, increasing the construction of boarding schools and dormitories in areas with difficult transportation and mountainous areas helps keep children in school, limiting accidents and risks during travel. At the same time, propaganda should raise awareness among parents about the importance of education for their children's future, eliminating backward ideas and concepts as well as gender stereotypes.

*Fourth*, supporting livelihoods and transforming the rural labor structure. To reduce the dependence of households on child labor, there is a need for alternative livelihood projects such as supporting agricultural machinery to reduce the need for manual labor in the fields. In addition, it is necessary to integrate the goal of preventing and reducing child labor into agricultural extension programs. Specifically, local departments and sectors need to provide technical guidance on sustainable farming, increase productivity, help households increase income with less labor, reduce the need for children to participate in labor; promote the establishment of mechanization service cooperatives (harvesters, hired plows, etc.), provide seasonal labor rental services for adults so that families do not have to mobilize children to participate. At the same time, in agricultural export chains, the agricultural sector needs to closely coordinate with the labor sector to control the absence of child labor, meeting international standards.

*Fifth*, strengthen law enforcement and local governance. In addition to doing a good job of propaganda and education, monitoring and strictly handling violations in the use of child labor must be carried out seriously, promptly and effectively. It is necessary to supplement the team to do inspection, examination and handling of violations, expand the agricultural and informal sectors. Local authorities continue to coordinate closely with relevant agencies and organizations to establish a reporting mechanism and hotline for people to promptly report cases of illegal child labor. In addition, it is possible to consider integrating the goal of preventing and combating child labor into the emulation targets of local authorities. For example, adding the criterion of "commune without child labor" to the assessment of advanced new rural communes, model new rural communes or communes meeting legal access standards will also motivate grassroots leaders to take more drastic actions.

*Sixth*, it is necessary to mobilize community monitoring and intervention. Based on successful international models such as the "Child Friendly Village" in India [21, 22], the Community Child Protection Committee system in Ghana [23, 24] or the child labor

monitoring program in Nigeria [25, 26], a central and sustainable solution to solving the problem of child labor in agriculture is to mobilize the strength of local communities. Specifically, it is possible to establish community monitoring groups consisting of representatives of commune authorities, teachers, unions, parents and adolescents themselves, with the task of detecting, intervening early and providing timely support to cases of children at risk or participating in labor. These groups need to be trained in law, child protection skills and coordinated with local social services. At the same time, it is necessary to build children's councils at the commune level like the Indian model so that children can speak up and participate in the decision-making process on issues affecting their lives. International experience shows that when communities are empowered and aware, they can become the most effective and pioneering force in protecting children from hard and hazardous labor. For Vietnam, this solution is particularly suitable in the context of a large proportion of small-scale farmers and community relations still play an important role in rural governance. Integrating child protection activities into new rural development programs, farmer organizations, cooperatives, etc. will help improve the sustainability and scalability of the solution.

In short, eliminating child labor in agriculture is not a problem of a single agency, a locality or a particular sector, but requires comprehensive, comprehensive and interdisciplinary intervention. To build and develop modern, clean, sustainable organic agriculture, improve the quality, added value and competitiveness of agricultural production, it is necessary to synchronously solve many problems, including preventing and minimizing child labor in this area. This requires all links from economics, education to social awareness and local governance to operate synchronously, towards the common goal of ensuring the rights and development opportunities of all children. At the same time, this is also the foundation for building modern, sustainable agriculture and a fair and equal Vietnamese rural community in the future.

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## TÓM TẮT

### LAO ĐỘNG TRẺ EM TRONG NÔNG NGHIỆP – MỘT RÀO CẢN ĐỐI VỚI PHÁT TRIỂN NÔNG NGHIỆP BỀN VỮNG TẠI VIỆT NAM

Nguyễn Quang Thành\*

*NCS Khoa Luật Kinh tế, Trường ĐH Kinh tế-Luật, ĐHQG TP. HCM*

\*Email: [thanhng21710@sdh.uel.edu.vn](mailto:thanhng21710@sdh.uel.edu.vn)

Tại nhiều quốc gia trên thế giới, tỷ lệ lao động trẻ em trong lĩnh vực nông nghiệp vẫn còn ở mức khá cao. Theo số liệu của Tổ chức Lao động Quốc tế (ILO), có đến 60% trẻ em lao động trong độ tuổi từ 5 đến 17 phải làm việc trong lĩnh vực nông nghiệp, bao gồm: trồng trọt, đánh bắt thủy sản và chăn nuôi. Đáng chú ý, có đến 67,5% số trẻ em lao động là lao động không được trả công trong hộ gia đình. Tại Việt Nam, tình trạng lao động trẻ em trong nông nghiệp cũng không nằm ngoài xu hướng chung này. Kết quả cuộc khảo sát quốc gia về lao động trẻ em năm 2018 cho thấy, có đến 62,2% trẻ em lao động tham gia vào các hoạt động nông nghiệp như: trồng cây hàng năm, cây ăn quả, dịch vụ nông nghiệp, đánh bắt thủy sản và chăn nuôi. Việc trẻ em phải lao động từ sớm khiến các em đối mặt với nhiều nguy cơ từ môi trường làm việc (tiếp xúc với hóa chất, thuốc trừ sâu, thuốc diệt cỏ) hoặc phải lao động trong thời gian dài, từ đó ảnh hưởng đến quá trình học tập và phát triển toàn diện. Ngày 28 tháng 01 năm 2022, Phó Thủ tướng Chính phủ đã ký ban hành Chiến lược Phát triển Nông nghiệp và Nông thôn Bền vững giai đoạn 2021–2030, tầm nhìn đến năm 2050. Trong đó, một trong những mục tiêu cụ thể đến năm 2030 là “tỷ lệ lao động nông nghiệp qua đào tạo đạt trên 70%”. Tuy nhiên, tỷ lệ lao động trẻ em trong nông nghiệp còn cao đang là một trong những yếu tố gây cản trở công tác đào tạo nghề ở nông thôn, cũng như quá trình xây dựng nguồn nhân lực chất lượng cao cho ngành nông nghiệp. Đây là một rào cản đáng kể đối với mục tiêu phát triển nông nghiệp bền vững. Bài viết này góp phần làm rõ thực trạng lao động trẻ em trong lĩnh vực nông nghiệp, những thách thức mà vấn đề này đặt ra đối với tiến trình xây dựng nền nông nghiệp bền vững trong tương lai; từ đó, đề xuất một số giải pháp nhằm phòng ngừa và tiến tới xóa bỏ tình trạng lao động trẻ em trong lĩnh vực nông nghiệp.

*Từ khóa:* Lao động trẻ em, lao động trẻ em trong nông nghiệp, xóa bỏ lao động trẻ em, nông nghiệp bền vững.