



CHILD LABOUR IN SOUTH SUDAN

The first and most comprehensive national assessment with the EU's support

ISSUE

South Sudan is facing a child protection emergency of historic proportions. New national evidence reveals that nearly **one in every two children** aged 5-14 is engaged in **labour**, the second highest rate in Africa. Even more concerning, almost **two-thirds** of these **children** are trapped in the worst forms of child labour, with some counties reporting prevalence as high as **90%**. This crisis is deepening quietly but rapidly, and without decisive action, South Sudan risks losing an entire generation to exploitation.

Why This Matters

South Sudan stands at a moment of profound consequence. Years of conflict, repeated displacement, economic freefall, and climate shocks have pushed families to the edge. As livelihoods collapse, children are increasingly being forced into dangerous and degrading work simply to keep themselves or their families alive.

Against this backdrop, the 2025 National Study on Child Labour, conducted by Save the Children with the support of the European Union, offers the first holistic picture of child labour since independence. Spanning eight counties across seven states, this assessment provides unprecedented detail on who is affected, where risks are highest, and what is driving the surge in exploitation.

Key Findings

The findings are sobering, but they also create an opportunity. For the first time, South Sudan has a clear evidence base that can guide targeted, coordinated, and systemic action at national scale. South Sudan is facing one of the most severe child labour crises on the continent. In 2025, nearly **46%** of children aged 5-14 were engaged in labour, a sharp rise from **34%** in 2023 and now the second highest rate in Africa, surpassed only by Burkina Faso. This figure is more than double the continental average and higher than all neighbouring countries.

Even more concerning, some **64%** of working children are trapped in the worst forms of child labour, activities that directly endanger their safety and survival. The crisis is most acute in counties such as Kapoeta South and Yambio (**both 90%**), Magwi (**79.7%**), and Akobo (**79.5%**), where exploitation has become nearly universal.

2 out of **3** 
children in South Sudan trapped
in **worst form of child labour**

Behind these figures are real children: girls forced into domestic servitude or commercial sexual exploitation, boys recruited by armed groups, and young adolescents mining, herding cattle, or working on the streets to support their families. The data reveals not only a worsening trend, but a landscape where childhood itself is being eroded by poverty, insecurity, and lack of alternatives.

Five Dominant Exploitation Patterns

Hazardous Labour: mining, cattle herding, brick-making, charcoal production, construction, often involving long hours, dangerous equipment, and no protective gear.

Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSE): an urgent but often hidden crisis affecting girls and an increasing number of boys; troublingly, over **70%** of reported cases involve child perpetrators, pointing to deep community-level harm.

Recruitment & Use by Armed Groups: both boys and girls continue to be used as fighters, porters, cooks, and spies.

Human Trafficking: internal and cross-border trafficking linked to displacement and cattle-raiding routes.

Bonded Labour: often tied to household debt, driving **68.6%** of bonded labour cases.

Patterns Driving Exploitation

Deeper Forces at Play

The study reveals that behind every instance of child labour lies a combination of pressure, vulnerability, and systemic breakdown. Many caregivers know the laws meant to protect children, yet of the children in hazardous labour, some **72%** come from households where caregivers report knowing child labour laws. Awareness alone cannot overcome hunger, insecurity, and the absence of viable alternatives.

Gaps in Knowledge of Laws & Services

While **69%** of households know child labour laws exist, fewer than half know where or how to report violations, and only a third of children know of any protection service in their area. This leaves vast numbers of children unprotected and unheard.

Protective Factors

Despite the risks, several powerful protective factors emerge clearly:

- Children who attend school regularly are far less likely to be involved in exploitation.
- In households where the head has post-secondary education, involvement in worst forms of child labour falls to just below **8%**.
- Food security strongly reduces risk.
- Children themselves highlight the importance of family support, with some **37%** citing caregivers as their key source of protection.

Root Drivers

Poverty, hunger, and the collapse of household livelihoods remain the strongest drivers of exploitation. Children from food-insecure households are **4.4** times more likely to engage in worst forms of child labour. Displacement, orphanhood, and exclusion from education further compound vulnerability.

Gendered Risks

The experiences of boys and girls diverge sharply. Boys face high rates of hazardous work and are more frequently approached by armed actors. Girls carry the heaviest burden of domestic labour, face heightened risk of sexual exploitation, and earn significantly less for their labour.

Systemic Weaknesses

Beneath these patterns lies a system struggling to cope. Despite a reasonable legislative framework on paper, implementation remains extremely weak. The study finds the following:

- No prosecutions of child labour violations have been recorded in more than a decade.
- Labour inspection capacity is largely limited to Juba.
- The national Hazardous Work List is still not finalised.
- The minimum age for work, which is 14, does not align with the end of compulsory education age of 13.
- There is no functional national referral pathway for children engaged in the worst forms of child labour.

This is not a failure of intention but of capacity, and this is where donor partnership can accelerate transformational change.

Strategic recommendations:

What can we do?

The release of this new evidence opens a window for a new model of collective action that moves beyond isolated projects toward a coherent national response. With support from government and donors, we can help turn this evidence into systemic change through **four strategic investments**.

- **Targeted Expansion to High Burden Counties:** Support integrated programmes that combine education access, cash transfers, legal assistance, case management, psychosocial support, and community-based protection structures. This approach is critical in locations such as Yambio, Kapoeta South, Magwi, Akobo, and Bentiu.
- **Strengthening Household Economic Resilience:** Child labour is primarily an economic survival strategy. Priority support is needed for vocational training, cash-based programming, women-led livelihood initiatives, and diversified income streams for vulnerable households. These investments address the root causes that push children into exploitation.
- **Education as the Primary Protective System:** A strong education system can dramatically reduce child labour. Donor investment is needed to rehabilitate schools, eliminate informal fees, expand school feeding, establish mobile and alternative education for pastoralist communities, and provide accelerated learning for out of school adolescents.
- **Policy, Legal, and Enforcement Systems:** Donor support can accelerate national reforms by enabling the ratification of the Palermo Protocol, finalising and adopting the Hazardous Work List, harmonising the minimum work age with the end of compulsory education age, expanding the Labour Inspectorate beyond Juba, and establishing a national referral mechanism.

Conclusion: A Call to Action

South Sudan's children are living through one of the least visible but most devastating crises of our time. The 2025 National Study leaves no doubt: without urgent and coordinated action, the country risks forfeiting its human capital, weakening its social fabric, and condemning millions of children to lives defined by exploitation.

Yet this is also a moment of possibility. With clear evidence, strong government engagement, and committed partners, South Sudan is better positioned than ever to confront child labour head-on.

Save the Children stands ready to work alongside government, donors, and communities to translate findings into protection, opportunity, and hope.

A future where **no child** is forced to work, where **every child** attends school, and where **every young person** can fulfil their **potential** is within reach, but only if **we act now**.
The **children** of South Sudan **cannot wait**.

