

REDUCING CHILD LABOUR:

LESSONS LEARNED FROM SUPPLY CHAIN ENGAGEMENT

A business-aligned model for reducing
child labour while strengthening
resilient agricultural supply chains



INTRODUCTION

The ILO estimates that nearly 138 million children are still trapped in child labour – 54 million of them in hazardous work. Behind every number is a child denied their right to education, safety and a future.

In a fight against this situation, legislation against the use of child labour is being developed, such as the EU Forced Labour Regulation applicable in December 2027 and the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive which comes into force in July 2028

Action on Poverty (APT) is a UK-based NGO with extensive experience in addressing the issue of child labour. Over the past six years, we have worked in partnership with the private sector, African NGOs, governments and communities to eliminate child labour in Sierra Leone and Uganda. We have particularly focused on the palm oil, rice and sugar sectors ensuring that we reach the smallholder farmers at the end of the supply chain. Our project in Sierra Leone has achieved:



Reduction in
hazardous child
labour

98.9% → 5%



Community
loans issued

15,000+



Reduction in
food insecurity

97% → 2%



Children removed
from hazardous work

8,000

Relevance for Businesses and Supply Chains

This document is primarily intended for companies and supply chain actors seeking to strengthen their human rights due diligence and eliminate child labour risks within their sourcing operations. It describes our successful approach, the lessons we have learnt, and the model we have developed.

The lessons presented are directly relevant for:

- Regulatory preparedness (e.g., due diligence legislation, reporting requirements),
- Supplier engagement and responsible procurement practices,
- Certification readiness, long-term supply chain resilience, and traceability.

Companies play a critical role in addressing upstream risks like child labour through proactive supplier engagement and investment, deepening and sustaining compliance.

A BUSINESS-ALIGNED MODEL FOR ELIMINATING CHILD LABOUR IN SUPPLY CHAINS

APT's model is designed to help companies move beyond risk identification toward effective risk mitigation—addressing the root causes of child labour while strengthening supply chain performance. Unlike traditional compliance-driven approaches, this model integrates community-level interventions with supply chain engagement, ensuring both social impact and business value.

Risk-Based Value Chain Analysis

Identify where child labour risks occur and why, aligned with due diligence expectations (e.g., OECD, ETI frameworks):

- Supply chain mapping and risk assessment
- Identification of high-risk groups and practices
- Alignment with company compliance and reporting needs

Household Economic Resilience

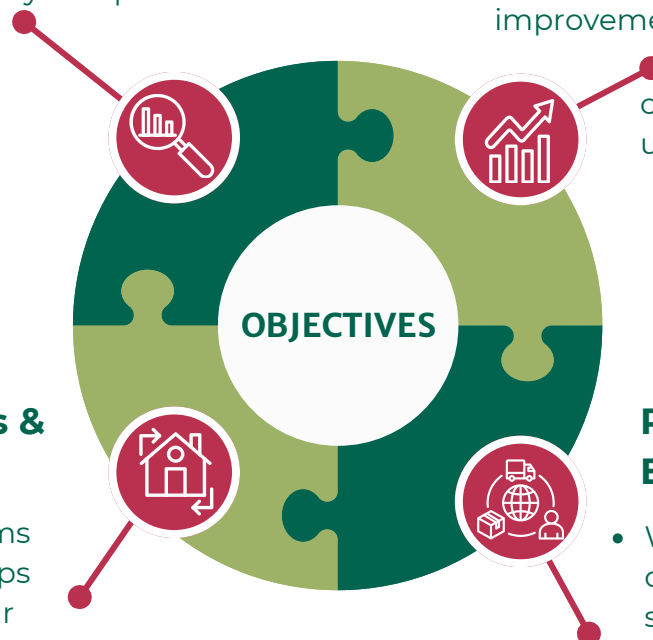
- Reduce dependency on child labour by improving household income and financial stability.
- Revolving Loans scheme
- Income diversification and enterprise support
- Climate-smart agriculture and productivity improvements
- Alternative, safe opportunities for young people unable to return to school

Community Systems & Behaviour Change

- Address social norms and governance gaps that enable child labour
- Awareness on child rights and education
- Community by-laws and enforcement mechanisms
- Child welfare committees and local accountability structures

Responsible Business Engagement

- Work with companies to embed child labour prevention within sourcing practices and supplier relationships.
- Supplier engagement & capacity building
- Support to certification and compliance (RSPO, Fairtrade, etc.)
- Strengthening traceability and monitoring
- Alignment with HRDD requirements



THEORY OF CHANGE

04

APT's approach is grounded in the assumption that child labour in agricultural supply chains is driven by interconnected structural factors—primarily poverty, limited awareness, and weak supply chain accountability.

IF



Households have access to stable and diversified income sources,



Communities adopt norms prioritising education and child protection,



Companies actively engage in responsible sourcing and supplier support,

THEN



Households will reduce reliance on child labour,



Children will turn to education or other training opportunities,



Supply chains will become more resilient, compliant, and sustainable.



Companies reduce exposure to risks.



LESSONS LEARNT

Companies sourcing from smallholder farmers have less visibility and control over what is happening at a community level, than they do while sourcing from their own plantations. By working with APT and trusted, locally rooted NGOs, businesses have gained access, insight, and influence to the very end of their supply chain. This has allowed them to increase the availability of produce grown by trusted smallholders and embed traceability systems into the sourcing process, so they can guarantee a child labour free value chain. It has lowered the costs of improved compliance and strengthened ESG performance, helping them to stay ahead of growing regulatory requirements while delivering genuine social impact. Moreover by significantly increasing the resilience

of farmers through poverty reduction strategies we have strengthened supply chains, increased efficiency and ensured that products can truly be certified as 'child labour free'.

Our model has proved that multi-sector collaboration, community ownership and interventions tailored to the specific context, can effectively change attitudes and practice with regard to the worst forms of child labour.



CONTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Through detailed consultation and analysis we have provided our private sector partners with deeper insights into the causes of child labour

To combat child labour, it is necessary to start with a detailed assessment of the local context and to understand the positions held by stakeholders throughout the value chain. By working with local NGO partners who have a standing in the community, APT bring together essential insights into the attitudes and practices not just of farmers and producers but the regulators, influencers and communities in the areas where they work;

all of whom have critical roles. In each of our projects, we held extensive consultations with communities, local government and business people for more in-depth understanding on why children are employed in hazardous work and how this affects them, their families and their employers. This approach was essential to ensure that we truly understood the drivers of child labour and could co-design interventions accordingly. We aimed to avoid a top down approach with stakeholders feeling the child rights agenda was being imposed from outside.

'Before the project we used to take the children to the farm and gave them huge palm bunches, we never knew we were doing bad to our children'

Town Chief, Sierra Leone

BUILDING UNDERSTANDING, LEVERAGE AND ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS IN COMMUNITIES

Creating a common understanding of what constitutes child labour has made it easier for businesses to enforce laws and refuse to employ children



Understanding of how child labour is defined and why it is important

Central to the success of our child labour projects, has been a mindset change in the community, challenging commonly held ideas that work is beneficial to children and that businesses are helping poor families by allowing children to work for them. We found that in both Uganda and Sierra Leone there was a need to clarify the concept of child labour in the local context, and generate an agreed understanding of the difference between acceptable domestic tasks and hazardous work. Joint awareness raising with both communities and employers, improved trust and communication between them, and increased the standing of businesses which were willing to take action against child labour.

Leveraging through interactions with other stakeholders

To achieve this mindset change, we conducted far reaching education campaigns which focused on child rights, what constitutes child labour and its impact on children's development, together with information on national and local laws governing the employment of children. The methods used to spread these messages were tailored to the local context, and included face to face meetings, community radio and TV broadcasts.

The training of local organisations and of community champions (those in leadership roles in education, social work and village governance) established a base of sustained community influence. We also supported local government bodies and/or traditional chieftdom structures to develop by laws and action plans, taking ownership of the process and establishing accountability mechanisms for both parents and employers. Reporting mechanisms were established so that concerned individuals had a number of channels through which they could report child labour cases, including through community champions, police or tollfree phone lines. Finally, child to child awareness raising was promoted with 'child change agents' working in schools to promote child rights and to support their peers.

Once the understanding and mindset was started, key influencers and champions amongst businesses, small holder communities and duty bearers became proactive in sharing the need to change amongst their peers, extending the outreach and deepening its sustainability.

This improved understanding, mindset change and establishing accountability mechanisms for all stakeholders is critical to addressing the supply of child labour and allowing the sustainable transformation of practice in business operations.

'We are walking the talk; exploitation of children is not tolerated here in our community'

Community champion,
Bugiri District Uganda

TACKLING POVERTY DRIVERS

Taking action to reduce poverty and vulnerability among smallholder farmers, not only reduced incidences of child labour but led to a stronger, more resilient and happier work force.

Poverty drives child labour: we invested in income-generating activities and savings mechanisms—not only to reduce families' reliance on child labour but also to protect smallholder farmers from inflation, seasonal food shortages, and exploitative loan systems which draw suppliers away from more productive transactions and buyer relationships.

Training in income generating activities, women's literacy and financial literacy, together with funding for vegetable seed banks and revolving loan schemes, allowed smallholder farmers to be resilient to seasonal fluctuations in farming income; for example in Sierra Leone our approach led to food insecurity dropping from 97% to 2%.



'There is more food available resulting from improved agricultural practices. Families are happier and there are fewer incidents and sicknesses resulting from malnutrition'

Smallholder farmer,
Sierra Leone

Training of young people in apprenticeship schemes enabled youths to develop their own futures and bring services to communities, contributing to local economies.

We recognised the disproportionate burden women bear in smallholder households and ensured they were the primary participants in alternative livelihood training and took up leadership roles in project activities. The improved well-being of the farming communities led in turn to better health, increased resilience and more reliable agricultural production.

COST-EFFECTIVE BUSINESS MECHANISMS

By working directly with private sector players, we have allowed employers to find their own ways to eliminate child labour from their workplaces and supply chains, without detriment to their business.



In Sierra Leone we partnered with Goldtree, a sustainable palm oil supplier, working alongside their compliance officers to ensure child labour was not used by the smallholder farmers in their supply chain. In both countries, child labour gangs have been replaced by adult labour gangs for harvesting work: as school absenteeism among children of smallholder farmers in Sierra Leone fell from 73% to 18%. The use of adult labour gangs led not only to improved school attendance but to increased efficiency and better quality of harvested products, as adults were found to work more effectively and with minimal supervision.

In Uganda, following an initial consultation and training exercise, we engaged members of the business

'There is increased output from adults compared to working with children. Adult workers do quality work and save time.'

Business owner, Iganga Uganda

community to develop self-regulation guidelines for their workplace. Once developed and published, a core team of employers has been rolling this out to other businesses in the sector. Their strong commitment has been essential in driving change, as has their ability to influence their peers.

ESTABLISHING TRUST AND LOYALTY

Before this project my fruits were weighed by the visiting agents and payment made accordingly. I accepted whatever was given to me because I never went to school and so could not interpret the weighing scale for myself... The fact that I am now a registered and certified farmer doing business with Goldtree is a dream come true.'

SHF, Sierra Leone

Building trust between the stakeholders was a necessary part of transforming attitudes to child labour, but it also brought direct business benefits as mutual efforts to reduce child labour took place. We have been able to improve communication and trust between different actors in the supply chain and this has led to better sourcing stability for businesses, and to improved working conditions and income for smallholders.

Specific Techniques Building Trust in Transactions:

Before the project in Sierra Leone, there was a degree of mistrust between smallholder farmers and Goldtree, the palm oil producer. Farmers also sold to a number of different agents, and were often indebted to them before the harvest, so unable to negotiate or decide who to sell to. The empowerment of workers through literacy training, and particularly weighing scales training, improved relations between communities and employers.

Transparency in fruit pricing was also enhanced through the use of Farm Force software and visible price boards. These tools empowered smallholders to independently verify payments and understand pricing structures. Improved communication—such as updates on fruit collection schedules and issue resolution—further increased trust. Involving Internal Control System (ICS) officers employed by Goldtree, closely in all community-based activities also proved a great strategy to foster trust and build stronger relationship with farming communities.



ADDED BENEFITS



Rebuilding trust with farmers, not only facilitated behaviour change related to child labour, but also improved broader supply chain cooperation and loyalty. The improved relations between the community and the business, ensured that smallholder farmers were willing to sell their produce to them. In Sierra Leone, the buyer saw a clear benefit from improved relationships with smallholders, in terms of higher volumes of fresh fruit bunches sold under transparent, fairer terms. In return, farmers benefitted from higher prices, access to fair loans, and technical support. In addition to fewer incidents of child labour, these efforts have contributed to reduced debt cycles and improved farm productivity.

COMPLIANCE & REPUTATION

The business case is strengthened by the achievement of certification goals (e.g. RSPO expansion, fairtrade), access to impact investment, and reputational benefits in international markets. Reputation is also important on a more local scale: in Uganda, a number of businesses that engaged strongly with the project have reported increased sales, as they talk to their suppliers about the issue of child labour stronger relationships are formed and shared amongst peer groups, increasing the number of their customers and supporting their anti-child labour stance.

BUSINESS VALUE & STRATEGIC RELEVANCE

This model directly supports companies in meeting emerging regulatory and market expectations, including:

- Human rights due diligence (OECD, ETI frameworks)
- EU regulations (CSRD, CSDDD, EUDR, Forced Labour Regulation)
- National regulations (Canada, UK ...)
- Certification requirements and audit readiness

At the same time, it delivers tangible business benefits:

- Improved supply chain resilience and reliability
- Stronger supplier relationships and reduced disruption risk
- Enhanced traceability and data for reporting
- Increased credibility with investors, buyers, and consumers



ENSURING SUSTAINABILITY

In order to ensure that positive action against child labour is sustainable, we have strengthened capacity and systems in both the private sector and the community.

- Training for duty bearers (including labour inspectors, social workers, employers) to develop a sustained understanding of child rights and of the laws surrounding the employment of children.
- Labour inspectors trained and supported to carry out workplace inspections.
- The development of an inspection checklist in Uganda has greatly aided them in this task and has been shared far beyond the original project area.
- Communities trained how to raise concerns about children through official channels.
- CSOs mentored to deal with child labour, remediation with parents and employers.
- Links made to social welfare providers to support children in difficulty.

WITHIN COMPANIES

The development of policies, staff training and screening checklists for the registration of smallholder farmers has ensured the continuation of actions against child labour.

Goldtree's ICS officers are continuing to monitor child labour risks and support smallholder activities beyond the project's end—ensuring the due diligence process remains active and community-rooted. A dedicated budget has been allocated to support ongoing training, monitoring, and enforcement. This has included continued investment in the development of adult labour gangs, along with provision of equipment and refresher training on safe and fair labour practices. This marks a decisive shift from reactive compliance to proactive, system-wide risk management.

ENVIRONMENTAL SUSTAINABILITY

Addressing child labour and poverty alleviation can also be combined with actions to ensure environmental sustainability. The project in Sierra Leone, introduced practices aligned with Goldtree's organic sourcing commitments. Over 3000 women received training on climate-smart agriculture, composting and seed saving, and the use of seedbanks encouraged more sustainable, organic farming methods. Farmers reported taking greater care of their land and natural resources, reflecting a growing awareness of the environmental dimensions of responsible production.

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

Our child labour programs also highlights a number of structural challenges that companies and partners should consider when designing and scaling child labour interventions in supply chains:

1



Misalignment Between Commercial Timelines and Social Change

Sustainable reductions in child labour require long-term investment, whereas business operations often prioritise short-term results.

Behaviour change, income diversification, and system strengthening typically take multiple seasons to materialise, creating tension with reporting cycles and commercial expectations

2



Addressing Root Causes Requires Investment Beyond Compliance

Child labour cannot be eliminated through monitoring and auditing alone.

While compliance systems (e.g., codes of conduct, audits) are important, they are insufficient without parallel investment in livelihoods, community systems, and local capacity—areas that are not always integrated into core business models.

3



Supplier Constraints and Incentive Structures

Smallholder farmers and suppliers often operate under tight margins and limited access to finance, reducing their ability to adopt improved practices.

Without appropriate incentives (e.g., fair pricing, long-term contracts, co-investment), expectations placed on suppliers can shift risk downstream rather than resolve it.

4



Data Availability and Reliability

Generating robust, verifiable data on child labour, income, and working conditions remains a significant challenge.

Data collection in smallholder contexts is resource-intensive and sensitive, and inconsistencies can limit companies' ability to track progress, meet reporting requirements, and demonstrate impact.

5



Complexity of Behaviour and Social Norm Change

Child labour is often embedded in cultural norms and household coping strategies.

Shifting these norms requires sustained engagement, trust-building, and locally led approaches, which cannot be achieved through one-off interventions or externally driven programmes.

6



Sustainability Beyond Project Cycles

Ensuring that outcomes are sustained after external funding ends remains a critical challenge.

While community structures and business engagement improve sustainability, long-term impact depends on continued ownership by both local actors and supply chain partners.

CONCLUSION

Our approach proves that tackling the issue of child labour, can have wide reaching benefits. Most importantly it releases children from dangerous work, which affects their health, well-being, education and future.

However, there are also considerable benefits for companies, in developing resilient supply chains, improving the well-being of their smallholder farmers, increasing efficiency in their supply chain, improving trust and loyalty from their suppliers, and securing an improved reputation both locally and internationally.

Contact

APT Action On Poverty

111 Gloucester Road, Bristol, BS7 8AT

01386 861294

info@aptuk.org.uk



 www.aptuk.org.uk

 [@actiononpoverty](https://www.facebook.com/actiononpoverty)

