



# Analysis of child labour legislation in Sierra Leone

April 2025



International  
**COCOA**  
Initiative

# Protecting children and their families in cocoa growing communities

The International Cocoa Initiative is a non-profit partnership organisation dedicated to improving the lives of children and adults in cocoa growing communities. We are experts on child labour and forced labour in cocoa, advising governments and corporations to inform their practices and influence decisions-making, and working with NGOs in the field. We are committed to achieving sustainable cocoa production that protects the rights of children and adults worldwide.

[www.cocoainitiative.org](http://www.cocoainitiative.org) | [info@cocoainitiative.org](mailto:info@cocoainitiative.org)

**ICI Secretariat in Switzerland**

Chemin de Balexert 9,  
1219 Châtelaine | Switzerland  
+41 22 341 47 25

**ICI National Office in Côte d'Ivoire**

Riviera 3, Quartier Les Oscars, ILOT 109 - LOTS  
1139 & 1141 | Abidjan-Cocody | Côte d'Ivoire  
+225 27 22 52 70 97

**ICI National Office in Ghana**

No. 16, Djanie Ashie Street,  
East-Legon | Accra | Ghana  
+233 302 998 870

## Contents

Context	4
Definition of a child in Sierra Leone	4
Child rights	4
What is “light work” in Sierra Leone?	5
Light work for children under the age of 15	5
Minimum Age of Employment	5
Working Ages under Convention 138	6
What is “child labour” in Sierra Leone?	6
What are the “worst forms of child labour” in Sierra Leone?	7
What is “hazardous child labour” in Sierra Leone?	7
Sierra Leone Hazardous Activity Framework (HAF)	8
Enforcement of Child Labour Laws in Sierra Leone	8
Government coordinating body on child labour in Sierra Leone	9
Government policies and programmes for the prevention of child labour	9
Laws and Regulations on child labour in Sierra Leone	10
Key takeaways on the legal environment on child labour in Sierra Leone	11
References	11

## Context

Child labour exist in every country. It deprives children of their childhood, their potential, and their dignity. It harms children mentally, physically, socially, and morally. It interferes with their schooling, preventing them from attending or concentrating. It may involve them being enslaved, separated from their families, and exposed to serious hazards and illnesses.

Governments have responded to the situation through the enactment, ratification or strengthening of their national legislation, and setting up social protection programmes such as access to education, poverty reduction initiatives and awareness-raising campaigns.

Sierra Leone is signatory to many child rights conventions and protocols on child labour, including:

- the International Labour Organisation (ILO) **Convention 138** on the Minimum Age for Admission to Employment (1973)
- the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (**CRC**, 1989, the most ratified children's convention in the world)
- the ILO **Convention 182** on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (1999).

These Conventions govern child labour laws, regulate, and help prevent violations of children's rights. In 2007, the country incorporated the CRC into domestic law thereby enacting the Child Rights Act 2007. This Act is similar in its provisions to that of the CRC.

## Definition of a child in Sierra Leone

The Child Rights Act (Act 7) of Sierra Leone contains provisions drawn from the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child with some local adaptations. The National Child Rights Act supersedes all other existing national laws and adopts the international definitions of the child as any person below the age of 18 years.

## Child rights

Part III of the Child Right Act provides the following as child rights in Sierra Leone:

1. The right to life and maximum survival and development
2. The right to a name and nationality
3. The right to grow up with parents
4. The right to parental property
5. The right to parental guidance
6. The right to protect from involvement in armed or any other kind of violent conflict
7. The right to social activity
8. The right to opinion
9. The right to protection from exploitative labour, neglect, discrimination, violence, abuse, exposure to physical and moral hazards and oppression



10. The right to protection from torture and degrading treatment
11. The right to refuse betrothal and marriage (18 years as minimum age of marriage)
12. The right to special care (disable child)
13. The right to health care
14. The right to education
15. The right to adequate food and water
16. The right to shelter
17. The right to care, assistance and maintenance
18. The right to leisure
19. The right to liberty
20. The right to respect
21. The right to dignity
22. The right to participate in cultural activities

## What is “light work” in Sierra Leone?

ILO Convention No. 138 allows children to perform light work from 13 years, as long as the work does not fall under the scope of the worst forms of child labour and does not interfere with the child’s education and physical and mental development. Light work helps develop a child’s skills and encourages the child to learn family responsibility.

### Light work for children under the age of 15

Light work constitutes work which is not likely to be harmful to the health or development of the child and does not affect the child’s attendance at school or the capacity of the child to benefit from schoolwork. The Child Rights Act, 2007 (Section 127) sets the age for Light Work at 13 years. The Sierra Leone’s Employers and Employed Act, 1960 (Cap. 212) Section 51 and Child Rights Act, 2007 Section 126 provides clear conditions for light work:

- a. children who appear to be under the age of 12 years shall not be employed in any capacity whatsoever in light work
- b. no child shall be employed/engaged before six o’clock in the morning or after eight o’clock in the evening any day
- c. no child shall be engaged for more than 2 hours per day
- d. no child shall be required to lift, carry or move anything so heavy as to be likely to cause injury to him.

The Child Right Act sets the minimum age for light work at age 13. This is directly linked to the Minimum Age Convention (C138). However, the definition of “light work” in the Child Right Act is not specific enough to prevent children from involvement in child labour as it does not limit the number of hours per week for light work, determine the activities in which light work may be permitted, or specify the conditions in which light work may be undertaken (US Department of Labour, 2019). On the positive side, the Employers and Employed Act, section 51 provides the limit and further explains what light work is.

### Minimum Age of Employment

The Sierra Leone Employers and Employed Act, 1960 (Section 52) and the Child Rights Act, 2007 (Section 125) sets the minimum age of employment at 15 years.

The Employers and Employed Act, 1960 provides that:

- a. Children who appear to be under 15 years of age shall not be employed or work in any public or private industrial undertaken
- b. In any branch thereof, other than an undertaken in which only members of the same family are employed.

### Working Ages under Convention 138

Type of work	Minimum legal age at which children are allowed to work according to International Standards*	Minimum legal age at which children are allowed to work in Sierra Leone
Light work	13 -15 years	13 years
Minimum age of employment	15 years	15 years
Hazardous work	18 years (16 years under certain conditions)	18 years

\* ILO Convention No. 138 on the Minimum Age for Admission to Employment

## What is “child labour” in Sierra Leone?

The Child Rights Act and the Employer and Employed Act with the provisions of the ILO Convention 182 defines Child Labour as “any work that deprives children of their childhood, potential, dignity and undermines their physical and psychological development”. It includes all types of work that:

- a. Are mentally, emotionally, socially and morally dangerous and harmful to children
- b. Restrict or deprive children of their opportunity to attend school and force children to leave school prematurely
- c. Make children combine school and laborious work for excessive periods of time.

---

*Every child shall have the right to be protected from exploitative labour, exposure to physical and moral hazards*

*(PART VIII of the Child Right Act)*

---

## What are the “worst forms of child labour” in Sierra Leone?

ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour – which Sierra Leone ratified in 2011 and made reference in The Child Rights Act, 2007 – defines the worst forms of child labour as:

1. all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict
2. the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances
3. the use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs
4. work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children (hazardous work).

Category 1-3 are “unconditional worst forms” which are usually illegal, criminal and also unacceptable. They include all those activities whose status as worst forms cannot be altered no matter what is done to improve conditions of work.

The fourth category, which describes “work that is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of the children,” is generally referred to as hazardous work (ILO Recommendation No. 190).

The international community has recognized the urgent need to eliminate the worst forms of child labour.

## What is “hazardous child labour” in Sierra Leone?

This is any work that by its nature or the circumstances under which it is carried out is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children. (ILO C182, C138 and C184). Hazardous child labour is sometimes known as “conditional worst forms” or “hazardous work”.

Hazardous child labour is work in dangerous or unhealthy conditions that could result in a child being killed or injured or made ill as a consequence of poor safety and health standards and working arrangements. It can result in permanent disability, ill health and psychological damage.

Under the Child Rights Act (2007), Section 128 (2 & 3), a work is considered hazardous when it poses a danger to the health, safety or morals or a person.

Under the ILO Convention 182: “each country ratifying Convention 182 commits itself to defining a list of activities that constitute such hazardous work. Such activities can sometimes be improved by altering the circumstances so that they no longer affect the health and safety of the children who do them. The Child Right Act listed the following as hazardous work in Sierra Leone:

- a. going to sea
- b. mining and quarrying
- c. portering of heavy loads
- d. manufacturing industries where chemicals are produced or used
- e. work in places where machines are used

- f. work in places such as bars, hotels and places of entertainment where a person may be exposed to immoral behaviour.

The Child Rights Act states that the definition for hazardous work is applicable to both formal and informal sector. The minimum age for the engagement of a person in hazardous work is 18 years. The prohibitions on hazardous work for children do not adequately cover agriculture sector where child labour is known to occur.

## Sierra Leone Hazardous Activity Framework (HAF)

Sierra Leone ratified the ILO Conventions No. 138 and No. 182 in June 2011. The Sierra Leone Child Labour Unit is expected to develop detail list of hazardous work in line with the Conventions 182.

## Enforcement of Child Labour Laws in Sierra Leone

The government of Sierra Leone has set up institutional mechanisms for the enforcement of laws and regulations on child labour. Key agencies responsible for enforcement laws and regulations include:

No	Agencies	Roles
1	Ministry of Labor and Social Security (MLSS)	Formulates, implements, and monitors compliance with child labour regulations through its Child Labour Unit.
2	Ministry of Gender and Children's Affairs (MGCA)	Serves as the umbrella agency to oversee child protection issues, including child labour.
3	Ministry of Justice's Director of Public Prosecution	Responsible for undertaking criminal proceedings, including enforcement of criminal laws against forced child labour, child trafficking, commercial sexual exploitation, recruitment and use of child soldiers, and use of children in illicit activities.
	Ministry of Mines and Mineral Resources	Enforces regulations against the use of child labour in mining. Authorized to suspend licenses of mining operators found using child labour.
	Ministry of Internal Affairs' Police and Transnational and Organized Crime Unit	The Sierra Leone Police lead the investigation and prosecution of sexual abuse, domestic violence, and child abuse through Family Support Units. Transnational Organized Crime Unit (TOCU) enforces human trafficking laws and provides statistical data and general information on particular cases of human trafficking.



## Government coordinating body on child labour in Sierra Leone

The government, as part of its effort to effectively address child labour in Sierra Leone, has set up agencies to coordinate child labour interventions and actions. Agencies responsible for coordinating child labour interventions, including government efforts, are the following:

No	Coordinating Agency	Roles
1	National Technical Steering Committee on Child Labour	Coordinates efforts to address child labour. Led by MLSS and MGCA and includes representatives from 10 other government agencies, international organizations, and NGOs. As part of the National Technical Steering Committee on Child Labour, the National Commission for Children advises the government on ways to improve child welfare.
2	National Trafficking in Persons Task Force	Coordinates the needs and requirements of agencies that provide shelter and services for human trafficking victims, gathers data on reported human trafficking cases, and meets regularly to develop policies related to child trafficking.
3	Child Welfare Committees	Promote awareness of children's rights and report child welfare concerns to officials responsible for children's issues. Provide recommendations on the support of village children and address complaints and concerns by village inhabitants.

## Government policies and programmes for the prevention of child labour

The government policy related to child labour includes a National Action Plan on Human Trafficking. This policy includes strategies to address human trafficking through prevention efforts, victim identification, protection and referral of victims to services, training of personnel, and government coordination and monitoring. Although the Sierra Leone government has implemented this policy, our desk study did not find evidence of a policy on other worst forms of child labour.

The government also has programmes aimed at eliminating or preventing child labour. Key amongst them are the Child Trafficking Shelters and Free Quality School Education.

## Laws and Regulations on child labour in Sierra Leone

Standard	Meets International Standards	Age	National legislations
Minimum Age for Work	Yes	15	Section 125 of the Child Right Act Section 52 of Chapter 212, Employers and Employed Act
Minimum Age for Hazardous Work	Yes	18	Section 128 of the Child Right Act Sections 47–56 of Chapter 212, Employers and Employed Act
Identification of Hazardous Occupations or Activities Prohibited for Children	Yes		Section 128 of the Child Right Act Sections 47–56 of Chapter 212, Employers and Employed Act Sections 164 and 170 of the Mines and Minerals Act
Prohibition of Forced Labour	Yes		Part II, Section 2, and Part IV, Sections 14–15 and 21 of the Anti-Human Trafficking Act Section 19 of the Constitution of Sierra Leone
Prohibition of Child Trafficking	Yes		Part II, Section 2, and Part IV, Sections 14–15 and 21 of the Anti-Human Trafficking Act
Prohibition of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children	Yes		Sections 19–34 of the Sexual Offenses Act Part II, Section 2, of the Anti-Human Trafficking Act
Prohibition of Using Children in Illicit Activities	Yes		Sections 7 and 13 of the National Drugs Control Act
Minimum Age for Voluntary State Military Recruitment	Yes	18	Section 28 of the Child Right Act

Prohibition of Compulsory Recruitment of Children by (State) Military	N/A		
Prohibition of Military Recruitment by Non-state Armed Groups	No		
Compulsory Education Age	Yes	15	Section 3 of the Education Act Section 125 of the Child Right Act
Free Public Education	Yes		Section 3 of the Education Act Section 9 of the Constitution of Sierra Leone Section 11(c) of the Child Right Act

## Key takeaways on the legal environment on child labour in Sierra Leone

Sierra Leone has ratified all the key international conventions concerning child labour such as the – International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 138 on the Minimum Age for Admission to Employment, 1973; the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989); the ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, 1999; the UN CRC, Palermo Protocol on Trafficking in Persons; the UN CRC Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, the Child Prostitution and Child Pornography; and the UN CRC Optional Protocol on Armed Conflict.

Although laws and regulations have been established to eradicate child labour, gaps still exist within the legal framework to adequately protect children.

## References

1. The Constitution of Sierra Leone. Enacted: 1991. <http://www.sierra-leone.org/Laws/constitution1991.pdf> Retrieved 17th January .2022
2. Government of Sierra Leone. The Laws of Sierra Leone: Employers and Employed Act (Chapter 212). Enacted: 1960. Retrieved 17th January .2022  
<http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/MONOGRAPH/28611/57066/F2005526770/SLE28611.pdf> Retrieved 17th January .2022
3. Government of Sierra Leone. The Mines and Minerals Act, 2009. Enacted: 2010. <http://www.sierra-leone.org/Laws/2009-12.pdf> Retrieved 17th January .2022
4. Government of Sierra Leone. The Anti-Human Trafficking Act. Enacted: 2005.

5. Government of Sierra Leone. The Child Right Act. Enacted: 2007. <http://www.sierra-leone.org/Laws/2007>. Retrieve 17<sup>th</sup> January, 2022
6. U.S. Department of State. Trafficking in Persons Report- 2019: Sierra Leone. Washington, DC, June 14, 2019. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-trafficking-in-persons-report-2/sierra-leone>
7. ILO Convention n°138 of (1973) on minimum age for admission to employment and recommendation n°146
8. ILO Convention n°182 of (1999) on WFCL and recommendation n°190
9. United Nations Convention on the Right of the Child (UNCRC)