

Hazardous child labour in Côte d'Ivoire's cocoa communities during COVID-19

Rapid analysis of data collected during partial lockdown, July 2020

Summary

To assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on child labour, the International Cocoa Initiative (ICI) analysed data from 263 communities in Côte d'Ivoire. In these communities, 1,443 cocoa-growing households were visited under ICI's Child Labour Monitoring and Remediation System between 17 March and 15 May 2020 to identify cases of child labour. ICI's findings show that the percentage of children identified in child labour increased from 16% to 19.4%, compared to the same months in previous years in the same communities. This corresponds to a 21.5% increase in child labour identification.

While it is unclear how much of this increase can be directly attributed to impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, since other factors may be also involved, the increase in child labour is concerning. This rapid analysis presents details of the methodology used, the results of the analysis, and their implications for stakeholders within the cocoa sector.

Context

On 16 March 2020, in response to the first reported cases of COVID-19 in the country, the government of Côte d'Ivoire introduced a set of measures to prevent the spread of the virus. They included closure of all pre-schools, primary and secondary schools, prohibition of gatherings of more than 50 people, partial closure of international borders and quarantine of new arrivals. A week later, curfews and restrictions on movement came into effect, regulating transport within and between towns and cities and prohibiting unauthorized travel between Abidjan and the interior of the country.¹ The COVID-19 pandemic and related measures, in combination with the international economic downturn and collapsing commodity prices, have already had tangible consequences on all sectors of the country's economy and on various aspects of social wellbeing. The more vulnerable members of Ivorian society are likely to be negatively affected, including cocoa growing households and their children.

One possible consequence of COVID-19 and the measures that taken in response would be an increase in child labour in cocoa cultivation. First, as schools had to be closed, parents might have taken their children with them to the farm, where they could be supervised and might have been called on to help with the work. Previous

During partial lockdown, the percentage of children identified in child labour by ICI's systems increased from 16% to 19.4%, corresponding to a 21.5% increase.

¹ Gouvernement de la Côte d'Ivoire, [Message à la nation de SEM le président de la république](#), 23 March 2020

analysis has shown that child labour prevalence is higher in communities where schools are not present,² and higher during school holidays compared to term time.³ Second, restrictions on movement within the country and across borders may have limited the availability of adult labour, increasing pressure on families to call on their children to make up the shortfall. Third, with the overall economic downturn, cocoa farmers may be experiencing increased pressure on their household budgets, including through decreases in income from various sources or through surges in prices for essential consumption goods. In an ICI telephone survey of certified cocoa producers in Côte d'Ivoire, over half of respondents reported a decrease in household income since schools closed in March.⁴ Literature on income shocks shows that when household incomes decrease, child labour tends to increase.⁵ Finally, some programmes run by the government, civil society and industry to support vulnerable cocoa-growing households and promote child protection were necessarily disrupted during the partial lockdown, reducing access to these services.

This briefing uses data collected during the partial lockdown to examine how child labour in cocoa-growing households in Côte d'Ivoire has been affected by COVID-19 and measures taken to contain the virus.

Data on child labour identification

The restrictions on movement have posed challenges for the generation of empirical evidence about how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected child labour in rural communities. However, ICI's Child Labour Monitoring and Remediation System (CLMRS) provides a valuable source of data to fill this gap.

The set-up of ICI's CLMRS means that data is being collected continuously throughout the year by agents

² ICI (2019) [Education quality and child labour: Evidence from cocoa-growing communities in Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana](#).

³ ICI (2020) [How will the COVID-19 crisis affect children in cocoa-growing communities?](#)

⁴ Based on data collected by telephone from 515 cocoa producers between 2-9 July 2020. This data is part of an ongoing survey by ICI to understand more about the impact of COVID-19 on cocoa farming households.

⁵ ICI (2020) [The effects of income changes on child labour: A review of evidence from smallholder agriculture](#)

living in cocoa-growing communities who are tasked to identify and assist children at-risk. These agents visit cocoa-growing households in certified cooperatives to monitor child labour. Interview data is recorded using a mobile phone or tablet, allowing results to be synchronised with a central database as soon as connectivity allows. Therefore, even with travel restrictions in place, ICI continued to receive data on child labour from many communities, since agents continued visits, while respecting precautionary guidelines, and maintained data collection within their own communities.

The set-up of ICI's CLMRS means that data is collected continuously throughout the year. During partial lockdown, data collection could continue in communities where facilitators lived, while respecting precautionary measures.

This analysis is based on the full set of child labour monitoring data available from ICI's systems in Côte d'Ivoire. The dataset covers a five-year period, starting in February 2015 and ending in May 2020, two months after the first measures to control the pandemic came into effect. We analysed results from visits to identify child labour. During these home visits, community facilitators assess whether any of the children aged 5-17 living in a household engage in hazardous child labour, through interviews with parents and children.

During the partial lockdown, monitoring visits continued in 263 communities in Côte d'Ivoire, representing approximately 40% of all communities in which monitoring visits took place over the last 6 months. A total of 1,443 households from 40 different cooperatives were visited between 17 March and 15 May 2020 to identify cases of child labour. A total of 3,223 children were interviewed.

Figure 1: Means comparison (t-test) of child labour identification rates among children visited prior to vs. during partial lockdown

	Observations (# of children)	Mean child labour identification rate	Standard error
Prior to partial lockdown: (Mar-Apr-May in years 2015-2019)	2171	16.0%	0.0079
During partial lockdown: (17 March-15 May 2020)	2910	19.4%	0.0073
Difference:		3.4%	0.0109

$t = -3.1334$; Degrees of freedom = 5080; H_0 : difference > 0 ; $\Pr(T > t) = 0.9991$

Method and Results

We analyse how child labour identification within the CLMRS evolved during the partial lockdown, by comparing results from home visits from 17 March to 15 May, with those from previous years.

For such a comparison to be meaningful, first we need to take into account that child labour identification rates vary across communities, between monitoring agents, and over time. For example, if we look at all data collected before 17 March, average child labour identification rates are lower in those communities where data collection continued after 17 March, compared to those communities where it stopped (21% against 24%). For this reason, we include in the analysis only children from the 263 communities where data collection continued.

Second, due to the seasonal nature of work on the cocoa farms, child labour identification rates fluctuate over the course of the year: analysis of CLMRS data over several years shows that rates of child labour identification are lower on average in the months of March, April and May compared to the rest of the year (18% against 25%).

Using a simple means comparison of child labour identification rates, we see that the percentage of children identified in child labour increased from 16% to 19.4% during the partial lockdown, compared to the same months in previous years in the same communities. This represents a 21.5% increase in child labour identification and the difference is statistically significant.

To rule out that this difference is driven by a longer-term trend, we test a “placebo lockdown” effect, ie. a hypothetical lockdown period during the months Jan-March 2020, rather than the true lockdown period; this placebo lockdown period is not marked by higher child labour identification in comparison to the same season in previous years. This supports our interpretation that the increase in child labour identification during 17 March to 15 May is indeed related to the partial lockdown, and not a due to a general trend.

To account for additional factors which may be driving these numbers, we use multiple regression analysis to separate out the effects of seasons, communities and monitoring agents.⁶ Regression analysis also allows to account for potential differences in the composition of our samples before and after lockdown. The unusual circumstances of lockdown – notably school closures – may have implied that the set of farmers and children available for interviews was different from the longer-term average in the data base. To avoid this, we include in the regression analysis controls for key household and child characteristics that are correlated with child labour risk, such as the child's age and sex, and the household head's age and level of education.

⁶ Specifically, we estimate a linear probability model on a sample of children interviewed, where the outcome variable is a binary indicator of whether the child is doing hazardous tasks on the cocoa farm; and the explanatory variables are whether the interview was held during the partial lockdown period; fixed effects for the month of the year of the interview, for the community where the child lives, and for the community facilitator holding the interview; the child's age and sex; and the household head's age and level of education.

The regression analysis confirms that the share of children identified in hazardous child labour increased by approximately 3 percentage points on average, taking into account all the additional factors mentioned above.⁷ In other words, we see this difference when comparing outcomes during lockdown with outcomes from the same month of a previous year, within each community and for the same community facilitator, for the same profile of child and household (see supplementary results tables here).

The exact magnitude of the effect varies depending on the data we include in the analysis. For example, when alternatively, we extend the control group to all communities rather than only the 263 communities where data collection continued, we find an increase in child labour identification of approximately 6 percentage points during the partial lockdown (results available upon request).

Conclusion

Data collected through ICI's Child Labour Monitoring and Remediation System during the partial lockdown in Côte d'Ivoire provides a valuable source of information to help us understand how child labour in cocoa communities evolved during this period.

It is important to note that the increase in child labour may be partly due to other factors, which we cannot account for in this analysis. These may include the constantly evolving economic environment (cocoa price, labour markets, etc.), project cycles of the monitoring systems, and the evolving qualification and motivation of community facilitators, all of which drive child labour identification rates up and down over the course of time.

In the coming months it will be important to use longer time series data, including from after the lifting of the partial lockdown, as well as more refined econometric tools, to understand to what degree this rise can be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic and measures taken to control it.

Whatever the mix of reasons behind it, the recorded rise in hazardous child labour is concerning.

⁷ Full results are available here: [Supplementary Results: Hazardous child labour in cocoa communities in Côte d'Ivoire during COVID-19](#).

These findings underline the vulnerability of cocoa-growing households and show how quickly progress in addressing child labour can potentially be reversed.

By the time of writing in June 2020, schools in Côte d'Ivoire have already re-opened, some movement restrictions have been eased, and many interventions to improve child protection in cocoa-growing communities have resumed. These include activities by the government, industry and civil society to raise awareness, mobilise communities and support children's access to education.

While these changes may help to reverse the trend observed, the number of new COVID-19 cases in the country continues to rise, and the economic impacts of the pandemic and continuing partial lockdown are likely to continue to be felt. A continued deterioration of the situation and any necessary imposition of additional restrictions could further antagonise the situation.

The findings presented here suggest that stakeholders in the cocoa sector should:

- Intensify activities to prevent and address child labour in cocoa growing communities, either directly, where such activities can be resumed safely, without undue risk to communities, farming households, workers and staff; or remotely, through local community structures, where the risk of COVID-19 still requires operational restrictions to be maintained
- Closely monitor the situation of children in cocoa growing communities over the coming months, including their engagement in hazardous work and school participation
- Collect additional data to try to understand how cocoa growing households have been – and may continue to be – affected by the COVID-19 crisis, and use this to inform the design of appropriate response measures
- Based on priority needs and challenges identified, provide additional support to households and children that have been negatively affected, for example helping out-of-school children to restart their studies; supporting household incomes where

these have suffered; and assisting households to access adult labour, where this is unavailable or unaffordable.

Although the mechanism behind the rise in child labour identification is still unclear, these findings underline the vulnerability of cocoa-growing households and show how quickly progress in addressing child labour can potentially be reversed. Further efforts are clearly needed to support the ability of cocoa households to cope with future shocks – be they related to income, labour supply, health or climate. In terms of education, stakeholders need to make concrete plans to support children to continue learning in case access to schooling is interrupted again. Such efforts should include interventions which have been proven to boost resilience and reduce child labour.

These findings also highlight the importance of preparedness to ensure cocoa growing households are better able to cope with future shocks. Systems to prevent, identify and remediate child labour should be strengthened so that they remain active and can support farming households at times when they need it most.