MORFAI JOURNAL Multidisciplinary Output Research For Actual and International Issue
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Multidisciplinary Output Research For Actual and International Issue (MORFAI Journal) ISSN (e): 2808-6635
Volumes 5 No. 1 (2025)

Social Protection and the Reduction of Child Labour: Evaluating the Role of Welfare Policies in Developing Economies

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Received:04/03/2025 | **Revised** : 10/03/2025 | **Accepted:** 25/03/2025 | **Published** :28/04/2025

Abstract

Child labour continues to strip millions of children of their childhood, their schooling, and, quite often, their long-term health. Despite decades of legislative reform and international commitment, the practice persists at a troubling scale, sustained in large part by household poverty, income shocks, and gaps in access to basic services. This paper examines whether, and under what conditions, social protection instruments conditional and unconditional cash transfers, public employment guarantee schemes, school feeding programmes, and integrated child development services reduce child labour in developing economies. Drawing on secondary data from the International Labour Organization (ILO), UNICEF, the World Bank, India's Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) and Census records, along with a review of programme evaluations from Latin America, South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, the study builds a comparative picture of what has worked, what has not, and why. Particular attention is paid to India, where the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), and the Mid-Day Meal Scheme are examined as case illustrations of welfare policy operating at scale in a federal, largely informal economy. The paper finds that social protection measures generally lower child labour incidence and raise school participation, but the magnitude of the effect depends heavily on programme design particularly on whether conditionalities are enforced sensibly, whether transfer values keep pace with the opportunity cost of a child's labour, and whether complementary investments in school access and quality accompany the transfer. The paper closes with policy recommendations relevant to India and comparable middle- and low-income economies.

Keywords: child labour, social protection, conditional cash transfers, MGNREGA, ICDS, welfare policy, developing economies, India

1. Introduction

Walk through almost any wholesale vegetable market, brick kiln, or roadside dhaba in a small Indian town before eight in the morning, and it is not unusual to see a child - ten, perhaps twelve years old - stacking crates or wiping tables instead of walking to school. This is not a fringe phenomenon confined to a handful of unfortunate households. According to the most recent joint estimates released by the International Labour Organization and UNICEF in June 2025, nearly 138 million children between the ages of five and seventeen were in child labour across the world in 2024, of whom about 54 million were engaged in work classified as hazardous (ILO and UNICEF, 2025). The figure represents genuine progress - down from 246 million at the turn of the millennium - yet it also represents a missed target. The world had committed, under Sustainable Development Goal 8.7, to eliminate child labour altogether by 2025. That deadline has passed with the problem still very much alive.

Child labour rarely exists in isolation. It is, more often than not, a symptom of household economic distress - a coping mechanism adopted when adult wages are insufficient, when illness or crop failure strikes, or when the cost of keeping a child in school (books, uniforms, transport, and the forgone income the child might otherwise bring in) exceeds what a poor family can bear. This is precisely the logic that makes social protection - cash transfers, employment guarantees, food-based safety nets, and child development services - a plausible lever for reducing child labour. If poverty and income volatility push children into work, then policies that stabilise household income or reduce the cost of schooling should, in principle, pull them back out. The relationship, however, is not mechanical. A cash transfer that is too small to offset a child's earnings will not change household behaviour. A public works scheme that pays adults but inadvertently increases demand for child labour on family farms during peak season may do more harm than good. A school meal programme that improves attendance but does not address the underlying economic vulnerability of the household may only shift, rather than end, a child's working hours. It is these nuances

- the gap between a policy's intention and its actual behavioural effect on a poor household's decisions - that this paper sets out to examine. The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the theoretical literature connecting household poverty, credit constraints, and child time allocation. Section 3 surveys empirical evidence from major cash transfer and public works programmes internationally, with emphasis on Latin America, the region that pioneered conditional cash transfers. Section 4 turns to India in detail, examining MGNREGA, ICDS, the Mid-Day Meal Scheme, and related welfare architecture. Section 5 presents a comparative discussion and a simple framework for evaluating programme design. Section 6 discusses limitations of the evidence base, and Section 7 offers policy recommendations before the paper concludes.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the scale, sectoral concentration, and regional distribution of child labour globally and in India.
2. To review the theoretical channels through which social protection is expected to influence household decisions on child work.
3. To evaluate empirical evidence on the effectiveness of major social protection instruments - cash transfers, employment guarantee schemes, and school feeding programmes - in reducing child labour.
4.

1.2 Significance of the Study

India carries a disproportionate share of the global child labour burden relative to its income level, and it is simultaneously home to some of the world's largest social protection programmes - MGNREGA alone guarantees, on paper, 100 days of wage employment to over one hundred million rural households. Understanding whether and how these programmes affect child labour is therefore not a narrow academic question; it bears directly on the design of the next generation of Indian welfare policy, and it offers lessons transferable to other developing economies with comparably large informal sectors and rural poverty concentrations.

2. Review of Literature and Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Economic Theory of Household Child Labour Decisions

The dominant theoretical framework used to explain child labour in the development economics literature is the household model built on the seminal contributions of Basu and Van (1998), who introduced the 'luxury axiom' - the idea that households send children to work only when compelled by poverty, and would withdraw them from work if household income rose sufficiently. In this framework, child labour is not a preference but a constraint-driven outcome. A corollary, the 'substitution axiom', holds that adult and child labour are substitutes in production, meaning that policies affecting adult wages can have knock-on effects, positive or negative, on the demand for child labour. Basu and Van's model helps explain why multiple equilibria can exist: in one equilibrium, adult wages are high enough that no household needs to send children to work, and the absence of child labour in the market keeps adult wages high; in another, low adult wages push households to supplement income with child labour, which in turn depresses adult wages further by expanding overall labour supply. Baland and Robinson (2000) extended this line of reasoning by showing that child labour can be inefficient even from the standpoint of the household itself when credit markets are imperfect - parents may be unable to borrow against a child's future higher earnings (from being educated) and are therefore forced into a sub-optimal reliance on the child's current labour. This credit-constraint framing is central to understanding why social protection can matter. If the core problem is that poor households cannot smooth consumption or finance the opportunity cost of schooling, then transfers, guaranteed employment, or in-kind support that relax the household budget constraint should, other things equal, reduce reliance on child labour.

2.2 Channels Linking Social Protection to Child Labour

The literature identifies several distinct channels through which social protection programmes can influence child labour outcomes, and it is useful to separate them clearly because they carry different policy implications.

- Income effect: A transfer raises household income directly, reducing the marginal utility of an additional rupee earned by a child and making it easier for the family to forgo that income.
- Price effect / conditionality: When a transfer is conditional on school attendance, it effectively lowers the relative price of schooling versus work, inducing substitution toward school.
- Insurance effect: Programmes that provide income during shocks (illness, crop failure, unemployment) prevent the 'distress' pull into child labour that typically follows a negative shock, a mechanism documented by de Janvry et al. (2006) in the context of Mexico's PROGRESA programme.
- Labour market effect: Public employment guarantee schemes that raise adult wages can, depending on the elasticity of substitution between adult and child labour, either reduce child labour (income effect dominates)

or, in specific contexts such as peak agricultural seasons, increase demand for child labour as a cheaper substitute (substitution effect dominates).

- Access and quality effect: Programmes that improve school infrastructure, provide meals at school, or reduce the direct costs of education (uniforms, books) lower the relative cost of the schooling option independent of any cash component.

2.3 Empirical Evidence: Latin America

Latin America pioneered the conditional cash transfer (CCT) model, and consequently carries the deepest evidence base. Mexico's PROGRESA (later renamed Oportunidades, and subsequently Prospera) has been studied more than perhaps any other anti-poverty programme in the world. Using its randomised phase-in design, Skoufias and Parker (2001) found that the programme increased school enrolment and reduced the incidence of child work, with somewhat larger effects for boys than girls, since boys' baseline participation in paid work was higher. Subsequent work by de Janvry et al. (2006) showed that PROGRESA-covered households were better able to keep children in school following adverse shocks, although in some specifications children in beneficiary households facing a shock still raised their labour supply modestly relative to non-shock years, suggesting the transfer cushioned but did not fully eliminate the shock-driven pull toward work.

Brazil's Bolsa Familia programme, which consolidated several smaller cash transfer schemes in 2003, has likewise been associated with significant increases in school attendance and corresponding reductions in child labour force participation, as documented in comparative reviews of the programme (Soares, Ribas and Osorio, 2010, and subsequent literature reviewed in later syntheses through the early 2020s). Reynolds (2015) found that extending Bolsa Familia eligibility to older adolescents (16-17 years) had a more muted effect on their work and schooling time allocation than the effect observed among younger children, underscoring that the responsiveness of child labour to cash transfers is age-dependent - older adolescents closer to full labour productivity are less easily drawn back into school by a fixed transfer. A randomised evaluation of a CCT pilot in Costa Rica by Meza-Cordero (2023) is a useful, more recent addition to this literature: it confirmed that conditional transfers reduced the probability that adolescents left school, but found comparatively weaker direct evidence that the conditionality itself, as opposed to the income component, was doing the work of reducing child labour specifically as a shock-coping response. This nuance matters for policy design in India and elsewhere: it suggests that the income/insurance component of a transfer may be doing more of the work in curbing child labour than the schooling condition per se.

2.4 Empirical Evidence: Africa and South-East Asia

Unconditional and conditional cash transfer pilots in Sub-Saharan Africa - including Kenya's Cash Transfer for Orphans and Vulnerable Children (CT-OVC), Zambia's Child Grant Programme, and Malawi's Social Cash Transfer Programme - have generally reported reductions in child labour hours, particularly in hired or off-farm wage labour, though effects on unpaid work on the household's own farm or in domestic chores have often been smaller or statistically insignificant (Asfaw et al., 2014; reviewed subsequently in Food and Agriculture Organization and UNICEF syntheses through 2022-23). Indonesia's Program Keluarga Harapan and the Philippines' Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program similarly report positive schooling effects, with somewhat more limited but generally favourable effects on reducing child work intensity.

2.5 Public Employment Guarantee Schemes: A Distinct Instrument

Public employment guarantee schemes occupy a different theoretical position than cash transfers because they operate through the adult labour market rather than through a direct household transfer. India's MGNREGA is the largest such scheme in the world and has therefore attracted the most sustained empirical attention on this specific question. The evidence is somewhat more mixed than for CCTs. An ILO-commissioned assessment (International Labour Organization, 2013) examining the incidence of child labour within and around MGNREGA worksites found that while the scheme legally excludes minors from its own payrolls, its broader income effect on participating rural households was associated with improved child welfare indicators, although pockets of child involvement in unpaid household substitution work (looking after younger siblings, domestic chores, or informal farm work while an adult parent worked on an MGNREGA site) were also documented. Islam and Sivasankaran's empirical work, along with Uppal (2009) and subsequent analyses summarised in Mukherjee and Sinha's (2018/2019) study published in Development in Practice, found that MGNREGA is associated with reduced school absenteeism, with the effect strongest among Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe households and among girls. However, the same body of research also flags a competing hypothesis worth taking seriously: because MGNREGA can, in specific agro-climatic contexts, tighten the availability of adult agricultural labour during peak sowing and harvest periods, it may raise the relative attractiveness of child labour as a cheaper substitute on family farms during those windows. The net effect, therefore, appears to depend on local labour market conditions, seasonality, and the extent to which MGNREGA wages are actually paid on time - delayed wage payments, a recurring implementation problem documented in numerous social audits, blunt the scheme's intended income-smoothing effect.

2.6 Nutrition and School-Based Programmes

India's Mid-Day Meal Scheme (renamed PM POSHAN in 2021) and the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme represent a different category of social protection - in-kind, service-based, and targeted at younger children. These programmes act primarily through the access-and-quality channel described above: by providing a meal at school, the programme reduces one of the direct and opportunity costs of attendance and, evidence suggests, has historically improved enrolment and attendance, particularly among girls and children from lower-income and lower-caste households (Afridi, 2010, and subsequent literature). Because these programmes rarely make a large direct cash contribution to the household budget, their effect on child labour operates less through income smoothing and more through raising the relative attractiveness of the schooling option itself.

3. Child Labour: Global and Indian Overview

Before turning to programme-level evidence, it is useful to establish the scale of the problem this paper is concerned with, both globally and within India specifically.

3.1 Global Trends

Figure 1 plots the trajectory of global child labour since 2000, drawing on the successive rounds of the ILO-UNICEF Global Estimates series, culminating in the most recent 2024 estimates released in June 2025. The total number of children aged 5-17 in child labour fell from around 246 million in 2000 to approximately 138 million in 2024 - a decline of roughly 44 per cent over the period, though progress was not linear: the total rose between 2016 and 2020, a period widely attributed to conflict, climate-related shocks, and the economic disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, before resuming its downward path thereafter (ILO and UNICEF, 2025).

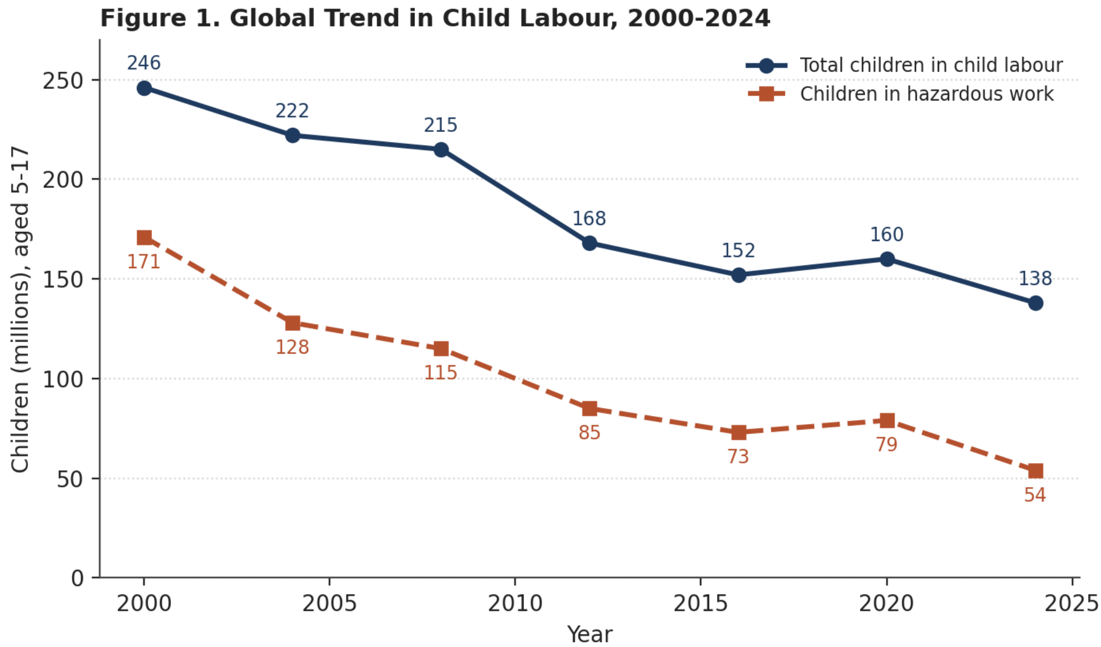

Figure 1. Global trend in child labour, 2000-2024 (millions of children aged 5-17). Source: compiled from successive ILO-UNICEF Global Estimates of Child Labour reports (2002, 2006, 2010, 2013, 2017, 2021, 2025).

Table 1 summarises the same series in tabular form, alongside the global child labour prevalence rate (the share of all children aged 5-17 who are in child labour), which more accurately captures progress once population growth is accounted for.

Year	Total in child labour (millions)	In hazardous work (millions)	Prevalence rate (%)
2000	246	171	16.0
2004	222	128	14.2
2008	215	115	13.6
2012	168	85	10.6
2016	152	73	9.6
2020	160	79	9.6
2024	138	54	7.8

Table 1. Global child labour, 2000-2024. Source: ILO-UNICEF Global Estimates of Child Labour, various rounds; 2024 figures from ILO and UNICEF (2025).

The regional picture is far less encouraging than the aggregate trend suggests. As Figure 2 shows, Sub-Saharan Africa alone accounted for approximately 86.6 million of the 138 million children in child labour worldwide in 2024 - nearly two-thirds of the global total - and, unlike other regions, saw its absolute numbers stay roughly flat between 2020 and 2024 even as its prevalence rate declined, because population growth in the region has outpaced the rate of decline (ILO and UNICEF, 2025).

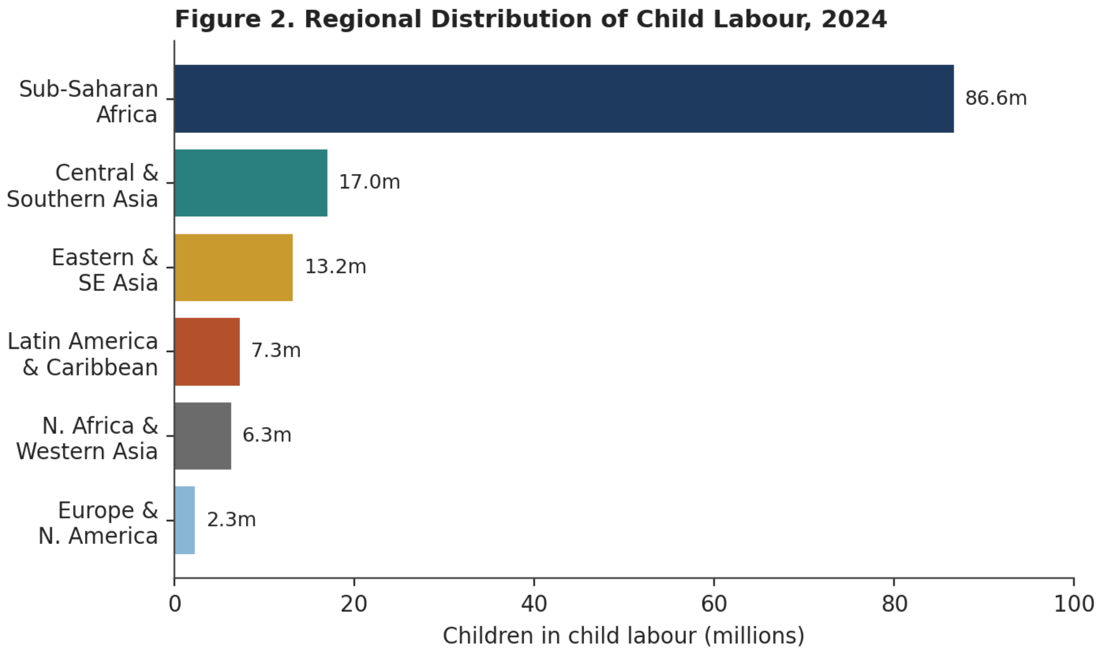

Figure 2. Regional distribution of child labour, 2024 (millions of children aged 5-17). Source: ILO and UNICEF, Child Labour: Global Estimates 2024, Trends and the Road Forward (2025).

Sectorally, agriculture remains overwhelmingly dominant, accounting for 61 per cent of child labour worldwide - rising to seven in every ten working children in Sub-Saharan Africa specifically - with services (27 per cent, including domestic work and small-scale commerce) and industry (13 per cent, spanning construction, manufacturing, and mining) accounting for the remainder (ILO and UNICEF, 2025).

3.2 The Indian Picture

India's most recent full census enumeration of child labour dates to 2011, which recorded approximately 10.1 million working children aged 5-14 out of a total child population of roughly 259.6 million in that age band (Registrar General of India, Census of India 2011). More recent estimates rely on survey-based projections rather than a fresh census count: the Kailash Satyarthi Children's Foundation, extrapolating from 2011 Census trends, projected approximately 7.8 million child labourers in India for 2023, while the U.S. Department of Labor's 2022 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labour report cites ILO analysis of NSS Round 68 data placing the working-children share of the 5-14 age group at around 1.4 per cent nationally, alongside a school attendance rate of 90.7 per cent for the same age group (U.S. Department of Labor, 2023). A parliamentary Standing Committee on Labour, Textiles and Skill Development, in its December 2023 report on the National Policy on Child Labour, explicitly flagged the absence of updated official enumeration as a policy gap, noting that the 2011 Census remains the latest comprehensive national data source and recommending that ministries coordinate periodic surveys to produce more current estimates (PRS Legislative Research, 2024, summarising the Standing Committee report). This data gap is itself a policy-relevant finding: without updated enumeration, the precise effect of the intervening decade of social protection expansion (which includes the scaling-up of MGNREGA, the National Food Security Act of 2013, and Ayushman Bharat, among others) on child labour prevalence cannot be measured with confidence, and analysts are left combining older Census figures with more recent but narrower survey rounds such as PLFS. Figure 3 presents an illustrative sectoral breakdown of working children in India, synthesised from the qualitative and quantitative patterns reported across NSSO, PLFS-based academic literature, and the U.S. Department of Labor's sector-mapping exercise (U.S. Department of Labor, 2023), which documents child involvement in cottonseed and vegetable seed production, cotton and rice cultivation, brick-making, stone quarrying, garment production, and domestic service.

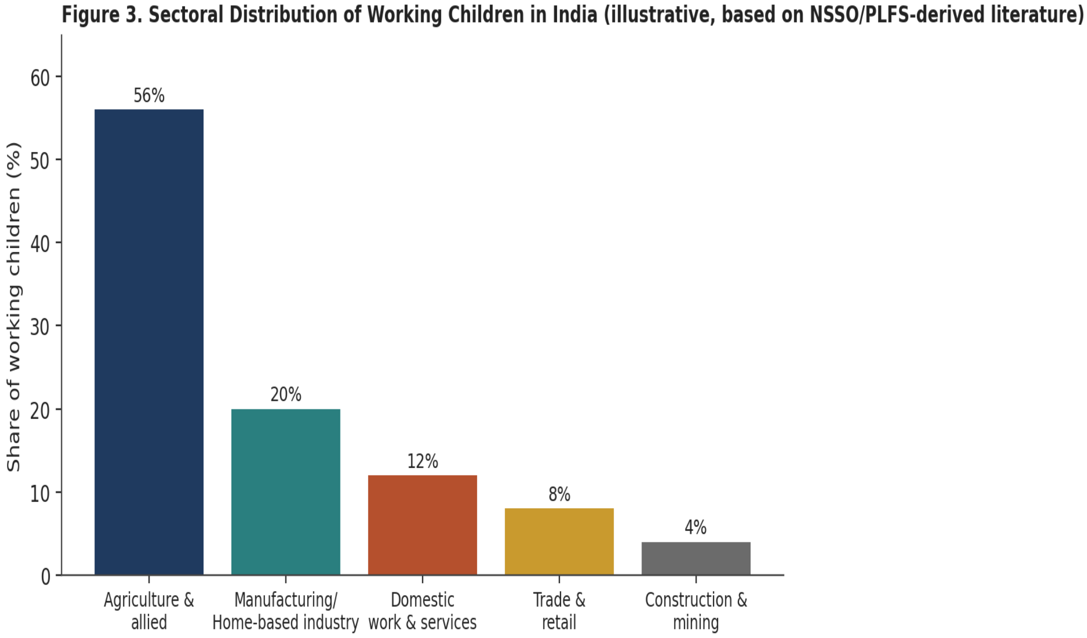

Figure 3. Sectoral distribution of working children in India (illustrative, synthesised from NSSO/PLFS-based literature and U.S. Department of Labor, 2023).

Table 2 sets out the principal legal and policy milestones governing child labour in India, which form the backdrop against which welfare schemes operate.

Year	Instrument	Key provision
1986	Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act	Prohibited employment of children below 14 in specified hazardous occupations and processes
2006	Right to Education Act (enacted 2009, in force 2010)	Made free and compulsory education a fundamental right for children aged 6-14
2016	Child and Adolescent Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act	Extended prohibition to all occupations for children below 14; regulated adolescent (14-18) employment in hazardous processes
2021	PM POSHAN (rebranding of Mid-Day Meal Scheme)	Continued school meal provision as an enrolment and retention incentive

Table 2. Key legal and policy milestones on child labour in India.

4. India's Social Protection Architecture and Child Labour

India offers a particularly instructive case because it combines a large residual child labour problem with an unusually extensive - if imperfectly implemented - social protection system. This section examines the three schemes most directly relevant to child labour: MGNREGA, ICDS, and the Mid-Day Meal Scheme/PM POSHAN, before considering complementary programmes.

4.1 MGNREGA: The Rural Employment Guarantee

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, passed in 2005, legally entitles every rural household to 100 days of unskilled manual wage employment per year, at a stipulated minimum wage, on demand. Persons below the age of 18 are explicitly barred from employment under the scheme, so MGNREGA does not directly employ children; its relevance to child labour is entirely indirect, running through the income and adult-labour-market channels described in Section 2. The evidence, summarised in Section 2.5, is genuinely mixed rather than uniformly positive. On one hand, an ILO-commissioned study (International Labour Organization, 2013) and subsequent academic work (Mukherjee and Sinha, 2018/2019) associate MGNREGA participation with reduced school absenteeism, with the largest gains recorded among Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribe, and girl children - precisely the groups historically most vulnerable to being pulled into work. Research using child-level panel data (summarised in work examining female labour-force participation and children's educational attainment under NREGS) similarly finds that a rise in the mother's share of household NREGS workdays raises both school attendance and grade attainment for her children, an effect that operates above and beyond any pure income effect, suggesting a distinct empowerment or intra-household bargaining channel is also at work when women gain independent earning opportunities.

On the other hand, the same literature flags a genuine tension: because MGNREGA competes with private agricultural employers for adult labour, particularly during sowing and harvesting seasons, some studies (reviewed in Mukherjee and Sinha, 2018/2019) find that it can tighten the effective adult labour supply available to smallholder farms at peak times, creating a modest incentive to substitute toward child labour on the family's own land during those specific windows - even as the scheme's broader income effect works in the opposite direction across the rest of the year. This is a textbook illustration of the theoretical tension between the income effect and the substitution effect discussed in Section 2.2, and it underlines why programme timing and local implementation quality matter as much as the existence of the scheme itself. A further, frequently under-appreciated implementation issue is payment delay. Numerous social audits and academic assessments have documented chronic delays in MGNREGA wage disbursement, sometimes running to several months. A scheme intended to smooth household income and cushion against shocks loses much of that insurance value if wages arrive late, precisely when the household's need for immediate cash - the moment a distress-driven decision to send a child to work is most likely to be made - is greatest.

4.2 Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS)

ICDS, launched in 1975 and among the largest child development programmes in the world, delivers a package of supplementary nutrition, immunisation referral, health check-ups, and pre-school non-formal education through a national network of Anganwadi centres, targeted primarily at children below six years of age and pregnant and lactating mothers. Because ICDS targets children below the age at which child labour is typically measured (5-17 years, with most survey instruments focused on the 5-14 or 5-17 band), its relationship to child labour is more indirect and longer-horizon than that of MGNREGA or the Mid-Day Meal Scheme: the mechanism runs through improved early childhood nutrition and cognitive development, which the literature associates with better later school readiness and retention, which in turn is associated with a lower probability of dropping out into work during adolescence. ICDS also generates a more immediate channel relevant to this paper's concerns: by providing crèche-like care atAnganwadi centres, it can reduce the extent to which older siblings - very often girls - are kept home from school to look after younger children while parents work. This form of unpaid domestic and care work performed by children is frequently undercounted in standard child labour statistics (which tend to focus on economic activity) but is captured in the ILO's broader 'hazardous unpaid household services' measure introduced in the 2024 Global Estimates methodology (ILO and UNICEF, 2025), and is explicitly noted in that report as a channel through which girls' unpaid work burden, once included, reverses the usual gender gap in child labour statistics.

4.3 Mid-Day Meal Scheme / PM POSHAN

India's school meal programme, one of the largest in the world by enrolment covered, provides a cooked mid-day meal to children in government and government-aided primary and upper-primary schools. Afridi (2010) and the subsequent literature find that the scheme is associated with improved school enrolment and attendance, with effects concentrated among girls and children from historically disadvantaged castes - again, the groups most at risk of being withdrawn from school for work. Because the scheme's transfer is in-kind rather than cash, and delivered conditional on physical presence at school, its theoretical channel of effect is closest to the 'access and quality' mechanism described in Section 2.2: it lowers the relative cost of attending school without materially raising overall household income, and so would be expected to have a comparatively modest direct effect on child labour occurring outside school hours or during school holidays, even as it raises attendance during term.

4.4 Complementary and Emerging Instruments

Several other components of India's welfare architecture bear indirectly on child labour, though they were not designed with child labour as a primary target. The National Food Security Act (2013) provides subsidised foodgrain to roughly two-thirds of the population through the Public Distribution System, reducing overall household food insecurity and thereby, in principle, the distress channel of child labour. PM-KISAN, launched in 2019, provides direct income support to landholding farmer families, though its exclusion of landless agricultural labour households - among the groups most associated with child labour in agriculture - limits its direct relevance. The National Child Labour Project (NCLP) Scheme, in contrast, works at the tail end of the problem: it identifies and withdraws children already in labour, enrolling them in bridge-course special training centres before mainstreaming them into formal schools, and provided rehabilitation to over 13,000 children in the 2021-22 financial year alone, according to U.S. Department of Labor reporting (U.S. Department of Labor, 2023).

5. Comparative Analysis and Discussion

Bringing together the international and Indian evidence reviewed above, a set of comparative patterns emerges that can usefully inform policy design.

5.1 Cash versus In-Kind versus Employment-Based Instruments

Conditional cash transfers, where transfer values are reasonably generous relative to a child's potential earnings and payments are reliable, show the most consistent evidence of reducing child labour across the Latin American experience. Employment guarantee schemes such as MGNREGA show real but more contested effects, partly because they work through an indirect adult labour market channel rather than a direct household transfer, and partly because implementation quality (payment timeliness, seasonal targeting) varies considerably by state and district. In-kind, service-based programmes such as school meals and ICDS show strong, well-established effects on school enrolment and attendance but a comparatively thinner direct evidence base specifically on child labour hours, in part because most evaluations of these programmes were not designed with child labour as the primary outcome of interest.

5.2 Design Features That Matter

Across both the international and Indian evidence, four design features recur as consequential:

- Transfer adequacy: transfers set well below the market value of a child's labour are unlikely to change household behaviour meaningfully.
- Payment reliability and timing: delayed or unpredictable payments (a persistent MGNREGA implementation problem) undermine the insurance function that is central to preventing shock-driven child labour.
- Targeting of the landless and informal sector: schemes conditioned on land ownership (such as PM-KISAN) or formal registration systematically exclude many of the households most associated with child labour in agriculture and informal industry.
- Complementarity: programmes appear to work best in combination - a cash or employment transfer that eases the household budget constraint, paired with a school-based intervention (meals, reduced fees) that lowers the relative cost of the schooling alternative, addresses both the income and price channels simultaneously rather than relying on either alone.

5.3 Gender Dimensions

A consistent finding across both the global and Indian literature is that girls benefit disproportionately from social protection interventions in terms of school attendance, likely because girls' baseline exclusion from school (for domestic or care responsibilities) is often higher than boys' to begin with, leaving more room for improvement. At the same time, the 2024 ILO-UNICEF Global Estimates explicitly note that when unpaid household chores of 21 hours or more per week are counted alongside economic activity, the usual finding that boys are more likely to be in child labour than girls actually reverses (ILO and UNICEF, 2025) - a reminder that girls' work, concentrated in domestic and care responsibilities, is systematically undercounted by conventional labour statistics and that programmes such as ICDS, which reduce the sibling-care burden on older girls, may be doing more for this hidden population than official child labour statistics reflect.

5.4 A Simple Comparative Snapshot

Table 4 offers a stylised, illustrative comparison across the main programme types discussed in this paper, rating each on transfer/benefit adequacy, targeting precision, and the strength of the available evidence base specifically on child labour outcomes (as opposed to schooling outcomes more broadly).

Programme type	Example	Transfer adequacy	Targeting precision	Evidence on child labour specifically
Conditional cash transfer	PROGRESA/Oportunidades (Mexico), Bolsa Familia (Brazil)	Moderate-High	High (proxy-means tested)	Strong
Unconditional cash transfer	Zambia Child Grant, Kenya CT-OVC	Moderate	High (categorical)	Moderate-Strong
Public employment guarantee	MGNREGA (India)	Variable (payment delays)	Self-selecting (universal rural)	Mixed
School feeding	Mid-Day Meal/PM POSHAN (India)	Low (in-kind, in-school only)	Universal within schools	Indirect/Moderate
Early child development	ICDS (India)	Low-Moderate (in-kind)	Universal within age band	Indirect/Limited

Table 4. Stylised comparison of social protection instruments against child labour outcomes. Ratings are qualitative syntheses by the author based on the literature reviewed in Sections 2 and 4.

6. Limitations of the Evidence Base

Several limitations qualify the conclusions of this paper and merit acknowledgement. First, India's most recent comprehensive enumeration of child labour remains the 2011 Census, a gap explicitly flagged by Parliament's own Standing Committee in December 2023 (PRS Legislative Research, 2024). Any assessment of how the past decade of welfare expansion has affected child labour prevalence in India is therefore built on projections and narrower survey rounds rather than a fresh national count, and should be read with appropriate caution. Second, much of the rigorous causal evidence on cash transfers and child labour originates from Latin America, where administrative and survey infrastructure, along with a tradition of randomised programme roll-outs, has enabled cleaner identification of causal effects. Evidence from South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa is comparatively thinner and more reliant on quasi-experimental or descriptive methods, which this paper has drawn on but which carry weaker causal claims.

Third, MGNREGA's relationship to child labour is inferred largely through its effect on adult labour markets and household income, since the scheme does not employ children directly and few studies were designed from the outset with child labour, specifically, as the primary outcome variable; most evidence instead comes from studies of school attendance, from which effects on labour are inferred rather than directly measured. Fourth, official child labour statistics, in India as elsewhere, are known to undercount work performed within the household - domestic chores, care of younger siblings, and unpaid family enterprise work - which disproportionately affects girls. The ILO's 2024 methodology represents a meaningful step toward correcting this by introducing a broader hazardous unpaid household services measure, but comparable time-series data extending this correction backward is not yet available, limiting trend analysis.

7. Policy Recommendations

7.1 For India

- Commission a dedicated, updated national child labour survey - the 2011 Census gap has now persisted for over a decade and constrains evidence-based policymaking, as Parliament's own Standing Committee has noted.
- Strengthen MGNREGA wage payment timeliness through stricter enforcement of statutory payment deadlines and compensation for delay, since the scheme's insurance value against distress-driven child labour depends on payments arriving when households need them, not months later.
- Extend income support instruments to landless agricultural labour households, who are systematically excluded by land-ownership-conditioned schemes such as PM-KISAN yet are among the groups most associated with agricultural child labour.
- Expand crèche and after-school care provision alongside ICDS and school programmes specifically to reduce the sibling-care burden that keeps many girls out of school and out of standard child labour statistics simultaneously.
- Sequence MGNREGA work allocation to avoid concentrating public works during peak agricultural labour demand seasons in a given district, to minimise the risk that the scheme inadvertently tightens adult labour supply and raises the relative attractiveness of child substitutes on family farms.
- Strengthen convergence between NCLP rescue-and-rehabilitation efforts and preventive welfare schemes, so that children withdrawn from work are linked systematically to MGNREGA-covered households, PDS entitlements, and school feeding, rather than being served by NCLP in isolation.

7.2 For Developing Economies More Broadly

- Where feasible, prioritise transfer values calibrated against local child wage rates rather than fixed nominal amounts that erode in real value over time.
- Pair income-support instruments with school-access or school-quality interventions, since the evidence suggests income and price/access channels are complementary rather than substitutable.
- Build monitoring systems that specifically track child labour and unpaid household work outcomes in programme evaluations, rather than relying solely on schooling proxies, to build a more direct and current evidence base.
- Pay particular attention to programme design in agrarian economies, where public employment schemes can interact with seasonal agricultural labour demand in ways that partially offset their intended benefits.

8. Conclusion

The evidence reviewed in this paper supports a qualified but genuine conclusion: social protection, well designed, does reduce child labour. Conditional cash transfer programmes in Latin America, unconditional transfers in parts of Africa, and India's own mix of employment guarantees, nutrition support, and school feeding programmes have each, in different ways and to different degrees, eased the poverty and shock-vulnerability that push households toward relying on their children's labour. But the paper's review equally makes clear that the relationship is not automatic. Transfer size, payment reliability, targeting precision, and complementarity with school-access interventions all shape whether a given scheme meaningfully changes a household's calculus, or merely provides marginal relief without altering the underlying decision to send a child to work.

For India specifically, the picture is one of considerable achievement alongside considerable unfinished business. MGNREGA, ICDS, and the Mid-Day Meal Scheme together constitute one of the most extensive social protection architectures of any developing economy, and the balance of evidence associates them with improved school attendance and, plausibly, reduced child labour, particularly among girls and historically disadvantaged social groups. Yet implementation gaps - delayed MGNREGA payments, the exclusion of landless households from land-based transfers, and the absence of updated national child labour data since 2011 - constrain both the schemes' full effectiveness and this paper's ability to state its conclusions with greater precision. As India and other developing economies continue to expand and refine their welfare architecture, closing these implementation and measurement gaps is likely to matter as much as the design of any single new scheme.

Ultimately, ending child labour will require more than any single welfare instrument. It requires sustained economic growth that raises adult wages, credible enforcement of child labour law, expansion of quality schooling, and social protection systems robust enough to catch households before a shock pushes a child out of the classroom and into work. The schemes examined in this paper are necessary components of that broader effort, even where they are not, on their own, sufficient.

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