



International
Labour
Organization



International Year
of Cooperatives

Cooperatives Build
a Better World

► Eliminating Child Labour and Improving Occupational Safety and Health in the Coffee and Tea Supply Chains in Uganda through Cooperative Development

May 2025

► An overview of research findings

This brief summarizes the findings of an assessment conducted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) on the current and potential role of cooperatives in supporting their members prevent and eliminate child labour and improve Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) in Uganda's coffee and tea supply chains, with a focus on women empowerment. It also provides recommendations for national and sectoral ILO constituents and other stakeholders on strengthening cooperatives to play a more active role in promoting decent work.¹

The ILO mandate

As recognized in the [ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work](#), the abolition of child labour², the right to a safe and healthy working environment³, and the elimination of discrimination

at work are universal human rights. These rights are essential for human dignity, well-being and the foundation of inclusive and just societies. They are inseparable, interrelated, and mutually reinforcing.⁴

A cooperative is defined as “an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically- controlled enterprise.”⁵ Efficient member-based organizations such as cooperatives play a vital role in improving working conditions within their business and at the community level. This is particularly important in rural areas, where agriculture is a dominant economic activity, and public services are often limited.⁶

Cooperatives have the potential to be key drivers in promoting Occupational Safety and Health (OSH), non-discrimination and preventing and eliminating child labour within agricultural supply chains. Often connecting producers with buyers, cooperatives can leverage their structure and the economies of scale it generates as well as proximity to community members to ensure that agricultural products are grown and harvested under decent work conditions.

Although data is limited, existing research underscores the important role agricultural cooperatives can play in reducing child labour. Membership in cooperatives

¹ The assessment was jointly conducted by the ILO's [ACCEL Africa Project Phase 2](#), the [CLEAR supply chains project](#), the [Vision Zero Fund](#), and the [Cooperative, Social and Solidarity Economy Unit](#).

² Child labour is defined as work that is mentally, physically, socially, and morally dangerous and harmful to children and also interferes with their schooling by depriving them of the opportunity to attend school, obliging them to leave school prematurely and requiring them to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work. The prevention and elimination of child labour are anchored in the ILO Convention on the Minimum Age for Employment, 1973 (No. 138), the ILO Convention on Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182) and the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child. These international legal instruments emphasize freedom from child labour as a human right and the elimination of child labour as a universal and fundamental value.

³ This means that every worker has the right to be protected from hazards and risks that can cause injury, illness, or death in the workplace. Additional information can be found [here](#).

⁴ [Resolution concerning the third recurrent discussion on fundamental principles and rights at work](#), 14 June 2024.

⁵ [ILO Promotion of Co-operatives Recommendation](#), 2002 (No 193) or the Statement on the Cooperative Identity by the International Co-operative Alliance (1995) [ICA Statement on the Cooperative Identity](#).

⁶ [Agricultural cooperatives and gender equality](#), FAO, 2012.

has shown to help decrease reliance on child labour by mitigating income volatility and improving farm livelihoods.⁷

Coffee and Tea Grower Cooperatives in Uganda

The cooperative movement has been active in Uganda for over a century. Over the past 15 years, the cooperative movement has grown significantly.⁸ By September 2024, Uganda had 45,948 cooperatives registered with Ministry of Trade Industry and Cooperative (MTIC), the government institutions responsible for overseeing the cooperative sector in accordance with the Cooperative Society Act of 1991.⁹ Among the registered cooperatives, 888 operated in the coffee supply chain, while 38 were involved in the tea supply chain.

Coffee is a vital crop for Uganda's society and the economy.¹⁰ It is produced across most districts in Uganda, supporting livelihoods for around 12 million people.

In the 2019/20 season, 23 per cent of coffee farmers were members of organized farmer groups or "cooperative societies". These cooperatives or groups provide members with access to inputs, financing, and training. They may also facilitate direct commercial relationships with exporters.¹¹

A recent ILO study "[Mapping the coffee value chain in Uganda](#)" indicates that, in Uganda, several coffee exporters seek to establish direct buying relationships with cooperatives, as they are considered to be more efficient and consistent on quality than traders. About half of exporters' buying transactions are with cooperatives and the other half with traders.¹² Currently, around 50 per cent of Uganda's coffee production is sold through organized producer groups or "cooperative societies".¹³

Uganda's tea production operates under two main models: as companies which own big plantations, process the tea in factories and are responsible for marketing; or as out growers on family farms who sell their tea leaves to the large companies. Close to 80,000 farming households are involved in tea production and it supports over 200,000 skilled and unskilled workers.¹⁴

Child labour in the Ugandan coffee and tea supply chains

In 2023, the ILO published the study "[Identifying productive strategies for inclusion and economic empowerment in the eradication and prevention of child labour in Uganda: Mapping and analysis of the coffee and tea supply chains](#)", which included a child labour survey conducted in the districts of Mbale, Buikwe, Kikuube, Kabarole, and Bushenyi. Findings confirmed the presence of child labour in Uganda's coffee and tea supply chains, with some forms being visible while others were disguised as family work or described as "children assisting parents."

The study found that the prevalence of child labour varied significantly between the two sectors. In the coffee supply chain, child labour ranged between 20 and 75 per cent, depending on location, whereas in the tea sector, it ranged between 5 and 10 per cent. This disparity is largely due to the seasonal nature of coffee production and its longer supply chain. In contrast, the tea supply chain operates year-round with fewer actors.

The study also noted that most children engaged in the coffee and tea sectors performed casual farm and off-farm work, particularly those aged 5–14 years. Among older children (15–17 years), there was a broader range of work activities. Farm tasks mainly involved weeding, harvesting, and planting. Over 70 per cent of children surveyed reported participating in these activities, with higher involvement in coffee than in tea. It further revealed that 83 per cent of children in coffee and 58 per cent in tea worked for five or more hours per day. Additionally, 14 per cent of children in coffee and 13 per cent in tea were found to be involved in hazardous activities such as spraying pesticides.

Most children in these sectors worked primarily for their parents—77 per cent in coffee and 79 per cent in tea. Child labour hiring was significantly higher in coffee-growing households (45 per cent) compared to tea-growing households (16 per cent). A gender breakdown showed that male-headed households were more likely than female-headed households to hire child labour.¹⁵

7 See the study "Understanding Children's Work Project (UCW), Farm cooperatives, household vulnerability and agricultural child labour in Rwanda. Policy Appraisal" indicated that child labour among farm households belonging to agricultural cooperatives is about one-third lower than child labour in other farm households, even when controlling for other household characteristics. More information available [here](#).

8 As of February 2020, the cooperative movement in Uganda comprised of 21,346 registered cooperative societies. In January 2011, it accounted 10,746 societies registered. More information available [here](#).

9 The Cooperative Societies Regulations provide detailed guidelines for the governance and management of cooperative in Uganda. They are organized into a hierarchical structure, with primary (cooperative) society at the base, followed by (cooperative) unions and then the national apex organization which the Uganda Cooperative Alliance (UCA). UCA is formed by unions while unions are formed by primary cooperatives.

10 Coffee is produced across most districts in Uganda, supporting livelihoods for around 12 million people. More information available [here](#).

11 Mapping the coffee value chain in Uganda, ILO 2024. Available [here](#).

12 Nalunga 2021. As seen [here](#).

13 Sources: UCDA 2021a; Rainforest Alliance 2021; Nalunga 2021; IDH 2020. As seen [here](#).

14 Identifying productive strategies for inclusion and economic empowerment in the eradication and prevention of child labour in Uganda: Mapping and analysis of the coffee and tea supply chains, ILO 2023. Available [here](#).

15 Factors that exacerbate this include deficits in respect of other elements of decent work, lack of access to OSH services (services for the identification, measurement and control of hazards, occupational health services, training on OSH, etc.), employment status; working conditions, especially working hours and wage structure, lack of effective social protection coverage, and level of organization—not only of workers—but also of employers and producers.

Occupational Safety and Health in the Ugandan coffee and tea supply chains

In agricultural plantations, the prevention and management of OSH risks are still in their early stages. Producers and workers face numerous OSH hazards, such as working on sloping landscapes, which increases the risk of falls and fractures, and lifting sacks of coffee, sometimes weighing up to 100 kilograms, which can result in hernias. They are also exposed to psychosocial risk factors including long working hours and job insecurity.

Specific groups of workers face additional challenges to occupational safety and health, as they are more likely to be exposed to occupational hazards and have a low capacity to cope with consequences of such exposure. Such factors includes other key elements of decent work, such as effective access to OSH services (services for the identification, measurement and control of hazards, occupational health services, training on OSH, etc.); working conditions (long working hours, wage structure); effective social protection coverage (especially those branches that have an impact on OSH such as health protection, sickness benefits, employment injury and maternity benefits); or level of organization of employers, workers, producers. Women for instance, often shoulder a double or triple workload and are at higher risk of violence and harassment in the workplace. When accidents occur, workers often downplay their severity and, when available –which is often not the case–, they do not seek professional medical attention.¹⁶

Methodology

The ILO assessment focused on 32 coffee and tea farmer organizations and cooperatives from the districts of

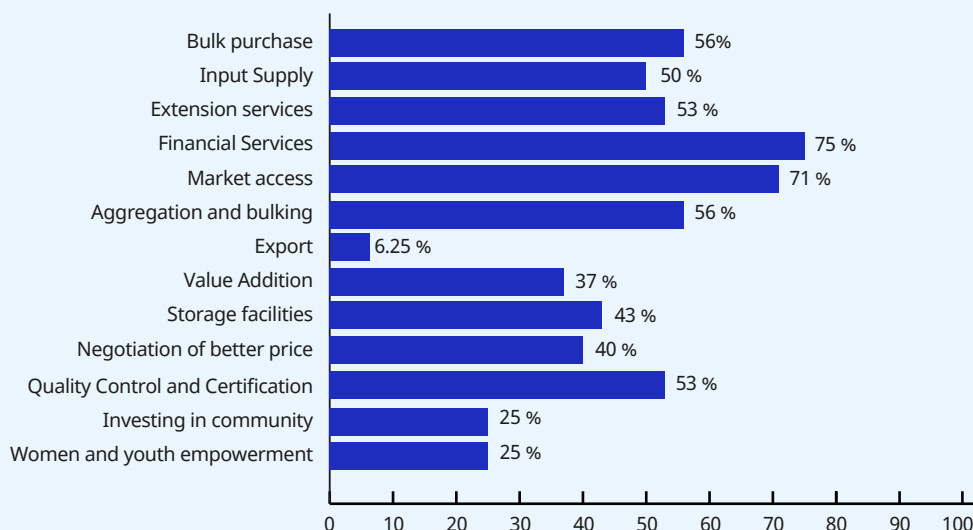
Mbale, Sironko, Bulambuli, Manafwa, Masaka, Kalungu, Kabarole, Hoima and Kikuube, representing a total membership of 15,280 producers and farmers (8,517 men and 6,763 women).¹⁷ In addition, interviews were conducted with 63 key informants from national and district level government ministries, employers and worker's organizations and relevant partners.

Research findings

Key findings on cooperatives' structure, governance and services provided

Half of the cooperatives interviewed reported having **leadership structures** that supported effective decision-making and management. A similar percentage engaged in **bulk purchasing** for their members, allowing them to **negotiate better prices** for essential inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides, and had established **quality control measures** to ensure that their products met **market standards**, thereby enhancing their competitiveness. In terms of **skills development**, 53 per cent of the cooperatives provided training for their member on topics such as modern agricultural practices, financial literacy, and business management. Many also facilitated mentorship opportunities, enabling farmers to share knowledge and good practices. While 75 per cent implemented savings and credit schemes, providing members with access to affordable loans, only 25 per cent of the cooperatives were engaged in **social initiatives** benefiting the wider community, such as health programmes, educational support, and infrastructure development, and 16 per cent had special programs for women on financial services.

► Graph 1. What types of services are cooperatives providing to their members?



Source: Own elaboration.

¹⁶ Additional information on OSH in the coffee supply chain can be found [here](#).

¹⁷ 16 coffee cooperatives, 6 tea cooperatives, and 10 coffee and tea cooperatives.

Key findings on child labour

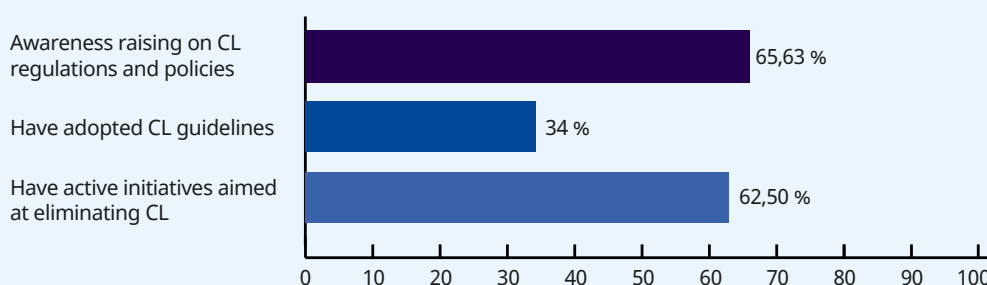
Uganda has adopted laws and policies against child labour and, in some cases, cooperatives have acted accordingly, setting up structures to support their members prevent and address child labour. Cooperatives implement programmes to sensitize and train the community and members on risk of child labour, develop guidelines on child labour, and monitor child labour in collaboration with local governments.

During interviews with cooperatives and their members, respondents identified the key challenges faced by the coffee and tea sectors in efforts to eliminate child labour. These include high levels of poverty in the coffee and tea growing regions (78 per cent of the interviews identified this as a cause), lack of knowledge (72 per cent); cultural norms (19 per cent), and weak enforcement of child labour laws (13 per cent).

Findings revealed that cooperative members often lack awareness of government regulations or cooperative-led programmes to combat child labour. Several cooperative leaders said to be unaware of programmes specifically designed for this purpose.

In addition, some cooperative members failed to understand the harmful long-term effects of child labour on children and their communities. They did not appear to fully recognize the value of education or understand the importance of compliance with child labour laws, in some cases due to practices embedded in local cultural perceptions. Cooperative leaders said that efforts to engage parents in prevention initiatives often faced resistance, as parents view child labour as an economic necessity, and that makes it difficult for cooperatives to implement meaningful interventions in this area.

► Graph 2. Organizational Involvement of Cooperatives in the Elimination of Child Labour



Source: Own elaboration.

Women empowerment



Female coffee worker, Bukomasimbi, Uganda. © ILO, 11/2023.

Women represented 44 per cent of the members in the 32 cooperatives and farmer groups assessed. Among these cooperatives:

- 72 per cent ensures women hold a position with the cooperative management, and 41 per cent of the management positions are filled by women (95 out of 234 management positions). In 12,5 per cent of these cooperatives, the position of treasurer is reserved for women, reflecting a deliberate effort to increase their representation.
- 34 per cent said to have adopted a gender policy.
- 16 per cent said to implement programmes to support women's empowerment.

Women in these cooperatives are involved in various activities, including member mobilization, training of new members –particularly women– selling coffee, inducting new members, providing advice to different committees, and overseeing quality control, such as sorting and drying coffee. In spite these advancements, there is still room for further improvement.

Key findings on OSH

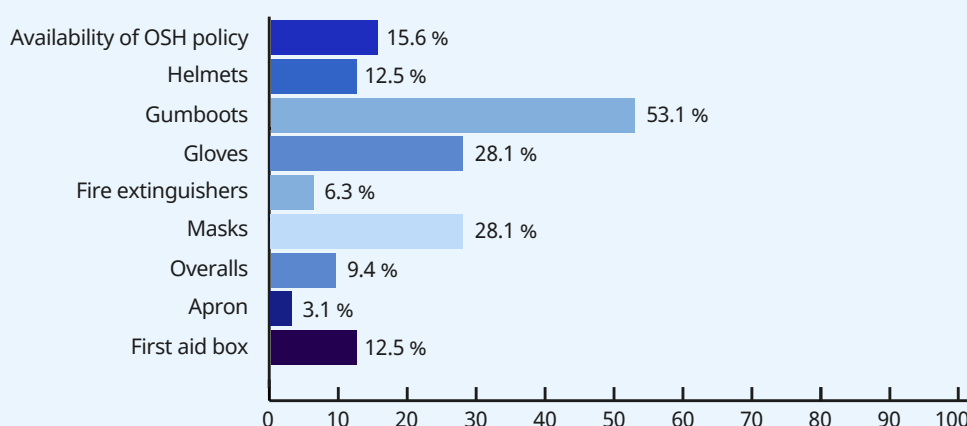
Interviews revealed that only 25 per cent of cooperatives were aware of the OSH Act (2006).¹⁸ Key informants noted that the government's capacity to enforce OSH standards is very limited, and cooperatives lack the resources to provide any support. Only 12.5 per cent of cooperatives reported ever receiving a visit from the Ministry of Gender, Labour, and Social Development.

Both cooperatives and their members demonstrated low awareness of OSH issues. When asked about OSH, nearly half of the cooperatives associated it solely with providing or using PPE, indicating a limited understanding of OSH management systems. As a result, OSH is often perceived as a "cost". Given the challenges of low yields and fluctuating coffee prices,

investing in safety equipment or improved tools is not considered a priority. In some districts, it was mentioned that traditional farming practices further contribute to the neglect of OSH, with little recognition of the long-term implications to workers' health. Cooperatives also cited financial and human resource constraints as significant barriers to implementing OSH programs, with insufficient knowledge and lack of funding being the most frequently mentioned challenges.

However, 15.6 per cent of cooperatives reported having adopted an OSH policy within the cooperative, and many also mentioned providing some form of safety equipment to their members.

► Graph 3. What safety equipment are cooperatives providing their members?



Source: Own elaboration.

Conclusions and recommendations

Addressing challenges related to child labour and OSH requires the collective action of multiple stakeholders including governments at national and district levels, employers and workers' organizations, international organizations, NGOs, cooperatives, partner organizations and the communities at large.

Given their strong presence, cooperatives can play a crucial role in advancing fundamental labour rights and improving working conditions in Uganda's coffee and tea supply chains. As value-based and principle driven organizations, cooperatives are well positioned to promote respect with the fundamental principles and rights at work among their members, engage with their communities and undertake joint initiatives with other community actors to advance the fundamental principles and rights at work. However, it is clear that

they are faced with a number of challenges which hinder them from realizing their full potential.

Enhancing cooperatives' capacities to ensure that Ugandan tea and coffee is produced under safe and healthy working conditions and free from child labour, is essential for the sector's profitability and long-term viability. This contributes to more productive members and sustainable businesses, helping to prevent supply chain disruptions and mitigate reputational risks.

Below, a number of recommendations for strengthening cooperatives and supporting them in playing a stronger role.

Recommendation 1: Strengthen cooperatives' governance and leadership structures. Working to enhance cooperatives' transparency, accountability, and decision-making processes is key for supporting them in providing better services to their members and improve their access to

¹⁸ In Uganda, all OSH matters are under the docket of the MGLSD, Department of OSH. The implementation of OSH is guided by the OSH Act, 2006; Employment Act, 2006; and the Workers' Compensation Act, 2000.

markets by ensuring coffee or tea is produced in alignment with market requirements.

Recommendation 2: Conduct awareness raising activities targeting cooperatives and members. ILO constituents and other stakeholders can play a large role in educating communities, farmer organizations, and cooperatives about child labour, OSH, and related policies and legislation. Cooperatives can be a key actor for disseminating the messages among the producers and following up on changed attitudes and practices.

Recommendation 3: Train cooperative and farmer organization leaders on child labour, OSH and governance. Providing targeted training on child labour prevention and improved OSH management. Implementing a training of trainers approach, in which cooperative leaders are trained on these topics, can lead to multiplier results, with them training producers in turn. Consider providing comprehensive information on biological, chemical safety, ergonomics, and use of machinery and personal protective equipment. Similar training on cooperative management and governance should be carried out as these weaknesses impact the level of members' engagement and the effectiveness of the cooperatives.

Recommendation 4: Adopt institutional policies and tools to address OSH and child labour. Cooperatives should adopt clear institutional policies on OSH and child labour, with defined objectives and a structured framework to guide their actions. These policies could include awareness-raising and training activities to ensure cooperative members are informed about OSH standards and national child labour laws, and to promote preventive measures by supporting members in identifying and managing OSH risks, for instance. Cooperatives should develop and adopt protocols to guide members on how to address cases of

child labour—such as referrals to child protection services—and occupational accidents, including immediate care. To ensure effective implementation of the policy, cooperatives should designate focal points or committees responsible for providing guidance, monitoring progress, and following up on reported issues.

Recommendation 5: Strengthen employers and union engagement. Mobilize cooperatives and farmer organizations to join employers' and workers' organizations, as appropriate. Membership in these organizations would enable them to benefit from a greater representation in social dialogue processes, access services offered by these organizations, including accessing information to negotiate collective bargaining agreements that include provisions on child labour prevention and OSH improvement.

Recommendation 6: Support cooperatives in complying with child labour and OSH regulations, through strengthening the ability of the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development to carry out inspections with cooperatives and provide support services to cooperatives.

Recommendation 7: Promote women participation. Increasing women involvement in cooperatives, both as members and in leadership roles, can enhance community development, making it more resilient and adaptable sector to market changes. Empowerment programmes should address key barriers such as limited access to education and OSH training, cultural and social restrictions, and financial exclusion. When women have access to opportunities that can strengthen their livelihoods, they can play a key role in improving OSH conditions and reducing child labour and contribute to inclusive and sustainable development within the sector.



International
Labour
Organization



8.7
Accelerator Lab

VISION
ZERO
FUND



Co-funded by
the European Union

For more information, visit:
[CLEAR Supply Chains](https://clearsupplychains.org)
vzf.ilo.org