

# Connecting The Dots: Achieving Universal Education Through (SDG 4.1) The Eradication of Child Labour (SDG 8.7)

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## Abstract

“Education is the single greatest tool for achieving social justice and equality” (NEP, 2020). Education aids in fighting against poverty, a root cause of child labour but access to education is hindered by child labour. This paper aims at exploring the interconnectedness of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.1, (ensure universal education) and SDG 8.7, (end all forms of child labour). Achieving SDG 4.1 is intricately connected to SDG 8.7. A comprehensive approach that understands the interconnectedness of SDGs 4.1 and 8.7 is important for creating conditions in which children are protected, educated, and empowered to reach their full potential. This is a qualitative study involving the technique of document analysis of legislative frameworks, government reports, and academic literature. This paper digs into how labour laws and education legislation such as the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act (2016) and the Right to Education Act (2009) work together to combat child labour and promote education.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development Goals, Education, Child Labour, Interconnectedness

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## I. Introduction

Global Call for Action:

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a universal appeal, a global call for action. The agenda of SDGs goes beyond economic growth, it aims for more equitable societies and a healthier planet. These goals seek to bridge the divide between domestic and international priorities, they are oriented towards both local and global levels. Locally they encourage us to think about how we can contribute as communities to our nation's growth. Globally it is directed towards promoting partnership and cooperation. It is unique in the way it reaches out and urges all nations regardless of whether they are developed or developing, rich, poor, or middle-income to foster prosperity all the while focusing on the conservation of the environment. At the heart of this agenda is the principle, 'Leave No One Behind'. It entails that development, in its broadest sense, must be inclusive. Development should include all the people in all the places especially the vulnerable and the marginalized.

Education for Sustainable Development:

This broad view is reflected in the growing international consensus on Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) as a key part of sustainability and an important element of quality education. SDG 4 states, "Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all" and includes a set of associated targets. SDG 4 is interconnected with many of the other development goals such as SDG 1 (No Poverty), SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 12 (Sustainable Consumption and Production), and SDG 13 (Climate Change). Achieving SDG 4 would help in achieving all these other SDGs likewise achieving SDG 4 is dependent on achieving these interconnected SDGs.

## II. Literature Review:

Legal Foundations and Frameworks:

The right to education was a debated topic of discussion, during the drafting of the Indian Constitution. The Constituent Sub-Committee on Fundamental Rights initially recognised the right to primary education as a fundamental right. However, this suggestion was rejected instead the right to education was placed under the Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP) by the Advisory Committee of the Constituent Assembly. The Acharya Ramamurti Committee recommended including education as a fundamental right, in 1990. It was the

first official recommendation. Later political changes and policy shifts influenced the course of free and compulsory education.

Mohini Jain v. State of Karnataka (1992) is a landmark case that paved the way for the advancement of the provision of free and compulsory education. The Supreme Court of India for the first time acknowledged education as a fundamental right in the judgement of this case. It declared that the right to life and dignity under Article 21 cannot be assured unless it is accompanied by the right to education. And that the state government is under the obligation to strive to provide educational opportunities to its citizens at all levels.

The Supreme Court refined and narrowed the scope of this right in J P Unnikrishnan vs. State of Andhra Pradesh, (1993) case. The Court stated that the right to education must be understood bearing in mind the DPSP in Part IV of the Constitution. The right to education is implicit in the right to life and personal liberty (Article 21). However, several articles in Part IV expressly speak of it. Articles 41, 45 and 46 are conceived as such pushes for the right to education. Hence the content and parameters of the right to education have to be determined, considering these Articles. The right to education, understood in the context of Articles 45 and 41, meant: (a) every child/citizen of this country has a right to free education until he completes the age of 14 years; and (b) after a child/citizen completes 14 years, this right is bound by the limits of the economic capacity of the state.

The 86th Constitutional Amendment Act, of 2002, introduced Article 21-A, thereby making it a Fundamental Right. Different from the other fundamental rights, the right to education required an enabling legislation to become enforceable. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, serves as this essential legislative mechanism. The RTE Act came into force on April 1, 2010. It ensures every child's right to a full-time elementary education that is both satisfactory in quality and equitably delivered by formal schools meeting specific standards. The RTE Act provides for free and compulsory education until the completion of elementary school education. 'Free education' under RTE means no child should be charged fees or face any costs that may hinder their access to elementary school education. Unless parents voluntarily choose to enrol their child in a private school, not supported by the government. Furthermore, the RTE Act by incorporating 'compulsory education' puts an obligation on the state government and local authorities to guarantee admission, attendance, and completion of the elementary school education of all the children between 6 and 14 years of age. India has embraced a rights-based approach with the implementation of the RTE Act. The National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020," highlights the role of education in fostering an inclusive and equitable society by declaring "Education is the single greatest tool for achieving social justice and equality". To effectively translate this policy into action, it is essential to address educational barriers by improving educational opportunities and facilities for children.

While existing literature extensively covers the legal frameworks and policy evolution of both education rights and child labor prevention in India, there remains a significant research gap in understanding the practical implementation challenges. Additionally, limited research exists on the interconnectedness between SDG 4.1 and SDG 8.7 in the Indian context. Furthermore, most studies focus on formal sector child labor, leaving a knowledge gap about the informal sector and domestic child labor situations.

### **Problem Statement:**

Child labour is one such barrier to education attainment. The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act of 2016 is a legislative stride towards addressing this issue. Nevertheless, despite legal strides, substantive challenges arise in the actual enactment of these policies. These challenges point towards a dire need for comprehensive solutions that go beyond addressing child labour—they must guarantee that every child has the opportunity to receive a quality education. We could gain a deeper understanding of how achieving universal education is interconnected with eliminating child labour, by examining the ground reality.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

Connecting the Dots: Child Labor and Universal Education

This paper endeavours to connect the dots of a critical issue, the problem of child labour that poses a challenge to the achievement of universal education. It is imperative to understand the link between universal education and child labour in order to achieve SDG 4. Child labour often deprives children of their right to education, trapping them in a cycle of poverty and exploitation. Education plays a crucial role in breaking the vicious cycle of poverty and empowering them with the necessary skills and knowledge to realise their full potential. Achieving one goal aids in accomplishing the other. Therefore, achieving Goal 4.1 ("ensure by 2030 that all girls and boys complete free, equitable, and quality primary and secondary education") is dependent on achieving Goal 8.7 ("end child labour in all its forms by 2025"). We could endeavour to create a more inclusive and equitable society, by connecting the dots between these two SDGs.

### **Research Objectives:**

- To analyse the interconnectedness of between Goal 4.1 and Goal 8.7
- To examine the existing legislative framework for education and child labour in India
- To identify the challenges and barriers in achieving these goals

### **III. Methodology:**

This is a qualitative study employing documentary analysis to examine the interconnectedness between Goal 4.1 of achieving universal education and Goal 8.7 of eradicating child labour through existing documents and literature. Document Analysis is a qualitative research technique which involves examining documents to understand, interpret and come to a conclusion.

Document analysis source:

Legislative frameworks - The Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016, The Right to Education Act, 2009, were analysed to understand the legal foundation for elimination of child labour and promotion of education.

Government Reports-Census data, Parliamentary Standing Committee Report, National Child Labour Project Report, were examined to assess effectiveness of policies

Other Reports such as News Reports, Case Studies, International Organization Reports (ILO, UN), were reviewed to gain global and perspective and to gather data.

Academic Literature- Open access journals, Google Scholar articles were analysed to identify theoretical framework

Documents were selected based on their relevance to child labour and education, care was taken to ensure credibility of data by choosing recent reports and document and making sure of the reliability of the source and cross-checking data with different sources.

Each document was reviewed to understand the context and reports were compared to identify synergies, challenges and gaps, between policies aimed at eliminating child labour and promoting education access. The findings were then interpreted in the context of Indian socio-economic conditions highlighting barriers such as poverty, gender disparity and implementation gap.

This study acknowledges the following limitation: The recent available government data on child labour at national level is the 2011 census, some documents were not available publicly, primary focus of the study is on child labour in formal sectors as only limited is available on child labour in unorganised sectors.

### **IV. Results**

The Harsh Reality:

Recent surveys by Khan and Lyon (2015). from seven South Asian countries show that approximately 30 million children are in employment, with 17 million involved in child labour and 50 million children out of school. There is substantial variation across these nations concerning child labour. India records the highest number in the 5–17 age group, with 5.8 million child labourers. A majority of working 7–14-year-olds in India are engaged in family work. Work negatively affects children's education. Notably, children in employment are less likely to attend school compared to their non-working peers. The situation of out-of-school children presents a formidable obstacle in the South Asian region. In fact, three countries alone have over 24 million children aged 7–14 who are not enrolled in school, with India accounting for 12.3 million of them.

The data reflect a harsh reality: a significant number of children are trapped in a distressing cycle of poverty, which perpetuates child labour and vice versa and keeps these children out of school and away from educational opportunities that could facilitate socioeconomic advancement. Consequently, many children are still vulnerable to exploitation and live in abject poverty, trapped in dangerous conditions, working jobs unfit for their age as bidi rollers, in manufacturing industries, as agricultural labourers, as domestic workers, or even being subjected to the horrors of the sex trade. Such lost opportunities for becoming professionals like doctors, lawyers, scientists, athletes, or teachers are lamentable when these young individuals could instead be contributing positively to society, realising their potential as future pillars of society.

The Tragic Cycle

Child labour significantly impedes access to education by forcing children into work, which typically prevents regular school attendance. This results in higher dropout rates and limits educational attainment. Financial pressures compelling families to favour immediate income over long-term educational prospects also perpetuate disparities in access to education. The cycle of poverty, perpetuated by child labour, leads to limited educational opportunities for future generations. How can we address this issue and aid those children left behind? By making education accessible and inclusive, we empower them. We must find ways to make education more accessible and inclusive to empower them.

### Breaking the Cycle: Addressing Child Labor

The framers of the Indian Constitution included provisions to secure compulsory elementary education and protect children from harmful economic activities. Building on these foundations, the National Policy on Children Resolution was adopted in August 1974, outlining a framework to safeguard children from neglect and exploitation. In alignment with constitutional provisions such as Article 24, which prohibits the employment of children in hazardous industries, and Article 39(e) and (f), directing policy towards protecting workers' health and children's youth from abuse, various committees have been set up to formulate a child labour policy. In 1979, the Gurupadswamy Committee was formed to study the issue and propose solutions. Following their report in 1979, the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act was enacted in 1986, prohibiting the employment of children in specific hazardous occupations and regulating working conditions in others. Over time, the list of hazardous occupations expanded based on Child Labour Technical Advisory Committee recommendations. The Child Labour (Prohibition & Regulation) Amendment Act (2016) prohibits employment of children below 14 years in all sectors. And adolescents aged 14–18 are prohibited from engaging in hazardous occupations.

The government started the National Child Labour Project (NCLP) Scheme in 1988 to rehabilitate working children. Originally it was aimed at 12 districts with high incidences of child labour, it then encompassed 312 districts across 21 states. The scheme entailed withdrawing children from dangerous occupations and providing non-formal education, vocational training, midday meals, a monthly stipend of Rs. 150 per child, and healthcare services provided by a doctor for a group of 20 schools. The National Child Labour Project (NCLP) has rescued approximately 1.2 million children since its establishment in 1988. NCLP was integrated into the Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) Scheme in 2021.

#### Progress and Setbacks:

India experienced a significant decrease in child labour, between 2004–05 and 2009–10. There was a 45% decrease due to initiatives like the Right to Education Act, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA), and the Mid-Day Meal Scheme. These programmes encouraged children to go to school, by providing incentives. The decline continued, and the number of child labourers fell from 12.6 million to 8.22 million (a 65% drop) between the years 2001 and 2011.

However, the progress achieved over the last few decades is now at risk. Post-merger of NCLP with SSA, many children have slid back into child labour, especially during the COVID 19 pandemic lockdown. One case exemplifying this setback involves Vignesh, a thirteen-year-old who was rescued from a brick kiln near Musiri and provided with bridge education and vocational training in a special centre in 2017. Tragically, by 2022, he found himself back at the kiln, toiling alongside his parents after the centre's closure. (Rajan C, 2022). Similar stories may abound, yet compelling data remains elusive. The Indian government lacks current statistics on child labour since NCLP's merger with SSA. The most recent figures are from the 2011 Census, showing over one million affected children. According to reports from Parliament Standing Committee meetings on Labor shared with the Labour Ministry, no records have been kept since NCLP's absorption into Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan in 2016. (Jigeesh, 2022)

There is a long way to go before reaching the goal of ending all forms of child labour by 2025. A Parliamentary Standing Committee, led by Bhartruhari Mahtab, a senior MP from the Biju Janata Dal (BJP), presented an exhaustive evaluation of India's policies against child labour on December 20th, 2023. The report entitled "National Policy on Child Labour: An Assessment" cautions that India's achievement of this Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) is currently untenable without substantial intervention. The committee urges coordinated efforts across central and state ministries and substantive policy and legal reforms to prohibit child labour more effectively. It calls for including sterner penalties for illicit employment—to serve as a stronger deterrent.

## V. Discussion

### Findings and Interpretation:

This study set out to find the interconnectedness between Goal 4.1 and Goal 8.7, the challenges to achieving the goals reveals the gap between the intent and implementation, while India has strong legislative foundation and framework to promote education and to combat child labour, there is also serious implementation gap. The decrease in child labour number between 2001 and 2011, after the introduction of schemes like MNREGA and Mid-day meal not only reflects the interconnectedness of education access and child labour, but also highlights the impact of poverty alleviation programmes in eliminating child labour. There is also lack in monitoring programme implementation since the merger of NCLP with SSA, this is reflected by the lack of availability of statistical data post-merger. The case study of Vignesh exemplifies the cyclical relationship between child labour and education access. The lack of monitoring has led to stagnation and implementation gap, which requires immediate attention in order to be on track and achieve Goal 8.7 of ending all forms of child labour by 2025.

## Future Directions

To effectively address child labour, there is a need to update existing laws to address current challenges and strengthen enforcement mechanism by providing for stricter punishment in case of violation. It is crucial to gather comprehensive data on the issue and share the insights, including district-specific labour survey results and raw national census data, with the public. The national policies and state policies should be aligned with SDG. There should be better coordination between different government departments. It is equally important to ensure that children rescued from labour receive proper aftercare services to prevent them from re-entering the workforce, which requires enhanced monitoring and evaluation of programmes.

Additionally, we must strive to dismantle educational barriers for refugee children and those from marginalised communities by adequately training teachers, providing gender-specific sanitary facilities, and increasing school numbers, particularly in densely populated slums where poor infrastructure curtails education access. Equalising and widening access to education is paramount, especially for children of lower social standing. Investing in resources for learning will contribute to eradicating child labour and advancing universal education. This requires the efforts of various stakeholders and strengthened implementation at local level. For any programme to be successful it should have people's support, the more the community becomes aware and involved in a programme the higher the chances of it becoming successful. Community participation in monitoring would enhance community awareness and role of civil society such as voluntary organisation and NGOs would help with enhanced stakeholders' engagement. Further research in a comprehensive manner with focus on state wise data and on unorganised sector is needed

## VI. Conclusion:

In conclusion, India's pledge to achieve sustainable development goals urgently calls for addressing the persistent bane of child labour that robs millions of children of their right to quality education. A comprehensive strategy linking legal frameworks, economic development, social protection, child rights, poverty mitigation, and education is vital. Aligning these strategies with the 2030 Agenda and fostering collaboration across different sectors can significantly advance the country's progress towards nurturing an educated and empowered generation, which is indispensable for building equitable and inclusive societies.

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