

GUIDANCE ON SAFE AND DECENT WORK FOR ADOLESCENTS AND YOUTH

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Background

Mercy Corps believes that individuals everywhere deserve meaningful, productive, safe, and equitable work opportunities. Decent jobs contribute to individual well-being, the positive development of families and communities, as well as the economic growth of nations. Employment and other income opportunities provide more than a simple economic benefit – they can provide individuals with a purpose and a sense of status and belonging.

However, as families around the globe face economic hardships and severely limited work opportunities, many children and adolescents are thrust into work at an early age to supplement household income or to be sole breadwinners. In Jordan, 47% of Syrian refugee households say they rely partly or entirely on income generated by a child.¹ Economic shocks, displacement, natural disasters, extreme poverty, and conflict can drive families to extreme, desperate circumstances where all household members are forced to seek work out of sheer necessity. Some forms of early work are culturally acceptable in many contexts – for example, older children giving their parents a helping hand on a family farm or an adolescent engaging in light work after school. However, especially in insecure contexts, children and adolescents can be forced into hazardous, exploitative, and illegal work which violates international law; is physically, emotionally, and psychologically detrimental to their well-being; and prevents them from continuing their education.

Mercy Corps' Policies

Mercy Corps' Code of Conduct includes provisions that adhere to the international standards of the *UN Convention of the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC), a human rights treaty that sets out the civil, political, economic, social, health and cultural rights of children. This includes our commitment to safeguard children from exploitation, which includes child labor, in all that we do.

Our forthcoming 2016 *Global Child Safeguarding Policy* aims to reinforce that commitment with specific prohibitions on our employees and programs from participating in child labor – when children perform work that is likely to be hazardous or interferes with their education or is harmful to children's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development. Hazardous labor can include work with dangerous equipment, machinery, or tools; work underground, at dangerous heights, or in confined spaces; and work that exposes individuals to physical, sexual or emotional abuse.²

Additionally, Mercy Corps provides the following programmatic guidance on age-appropriate employability and employment interventions for adolescents and youth. Our programs must:

Adhere to international and local labor laws: Mercy Corps always strives to comply with national laws and international standards. The International Labor Organization (ILO) Minimum Age Convention sets

¹ *Small Hands, Heavy Burden*. Save the Children, UNICEF. July 2015.

² *Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action*. The Child Protection Working Group.



forth specific requirements on the age and type of work children under 18 should be permitted to do, as reflected in the chart below³:

	The minimum age at which children can start work	Possible exceptions for developing countries
Hazardous work Any work which is likely to jeopardize children’s health, safety or morals should not be done by anyone under the age of 18.	18 (16 years under strict conditions)	18 (16 under strict conditions)
Basic Minimum Age The minimum age for work should not be below the age for finishing compulsory schooling, which is generally 15.	15	14
Light work Children between the ages of 13 and 15 years old may do light work, as long as it does not threaten their health and safety, or hinder their education or vocational orientation and training.	13-15	12-14

Additionally, Mercy Corps adjusts program interventions to follow specific local labor laws and guidelines in each context. For example, Jordanian labor laws prohibit children under the age of 16 from working *except* as apprentices, who at age 13 may begin part-time training for up to six hours per day.⁴ For all employability, employment, and entrepreneurship programs, Mercy Corps country leadership and staff are responsible for staying abreast of and adhering to local labor laws and regulations, while keeping within internationally recognized standards, and modifying approaches and activities accordingly.⁵

Promote Productive, Safe, and Equitable Work Opportunities: Through an approach which supports sustained positive outcomes, Mercy Corps specifically promotes work that is 1) productive, 2) equitable, and 3) steady.

- *Productive work:* The inability to find decent jobs can drive individuals towards work that is dangerous, exploitative, and illegal, such as involvement in the narcotics trade, commercial sex work, or paid participation in militant movements. Although the types of jobs vary in any economy, Mercy Corps promotes legal, decent work which does not threaten the positive growth of an individual, community, or society.
- *Equitable work:* In many countries, a vast inequity exists between salaries and benefits for people with diverse characteristics and demographic profiles. This is especially true for female youth – where they perform the same duties and tasks as a male youth but with a lesser title and lower wages. Mercy Corps believes in equitable work, where salary and wages are based on responsibilities and tasks, regardless of gender, age, ethnic background, etc. We also promote appropriate opportunities that are accessible to adolescents and youth with disabilities.
- *Steady work:* Entering the labor market, or finding that first job, is often the most difficult part of productive participation in an economy. While multiple income streams, short-term, and seasonal work are often necessary (particularly in informal and/or agriculture-based economies) and desirable, we believe that enabling individuals to find steady income streams is critical to ensuring that they play a continual, active role in the labor market. When possible, Mercy Corps promotes work opportunities that are stable and secure.

³ This chart was retrieved from webpage on ILO Conventions on Child Labor, available at:

<http://www.ilo.org/ipec/facts/ILOconventionsonchildlabour/lang--en/index.htm>

⁴ <http://www.kinghussein.gov.jo/resources5.html>

⁵ When local labor laws are not in accordance with Mercy Corps’ child protection and labor policies, we conduct advocacy efforts to promote fair and decent regulations around minimum age and hazardous work.

Ensure Safe Work: In addition to productive, equitable, and steady work, we place additional emphasis on promoting *safe work* for adolescents and youth. This is particularly important for adolescent girls and young women and may focus on improving safety related to transportation, sanitation facilities, and the inclusion of female mentors and/or staff in the workplace. Mercy Corps focuses on the larger enabling environment and works with private sector partners (employers) to promote safe working conditions for their youth.

Promote Education and an ‘Earn, Learn, and Save’ Approach: Our priority is for all individuals to complete basic education; we therefore promote informal and alternative basic education initiatives that are flexible and respond to adolescents and youth with existing work responsibilities. While we do not encourage work that violates legal working age thresholds, we acknowledge that many adolescents and youth are already engaged in this reality. We encourage young people who are working to also learn and save at the same time. If young people can properly save, they will be better prepared to plan for their future. Work can also provide opportunities for learning, not only financial literacy but also integrating functional literacy and numeracy, life skills as a part of the work environment and incorporating linkages to alternative education opportunities where available for adolescents and youth to re-enter school after missing schooling for periods of time.

Promote Market-based Programs: All employability or employment interventions, such as vocational training, should be linked to concrete opportunities that have been identified in the labor market. Mercy Corps does not promote any informal or formal training without first conducting a proper market assessment to determine specific needs of potential employers and the local economy. Ideally, these assessments are youth-led so that young people can gain a firsthand perspective of their local economy, build relationships with potential employers, and strengthen their market research skills. Our interventions extend beyond supply-side training to ensure long-term jobs and placement opportunities post-graduation from training programs. We do not promote training for training’s sake.

Questions to be considered during the design of an employability component include:

- Do male and female youth have short and long-term opportunities to use their skills after the training?
- Are male and female youth expectations of the training and their job prospects afterwards in line with economic realities?
- Are the training skills in demand by potential employers?
- Is the program also addressing larger constraints (enabling environment for male and female youth employment, youth-focused policies, etc.)?

Ease the School-to-Work Transition: Mercy Corps often strengthens the employability of adolescents and younger youth (ages 14-19) who are not immediately ready to enter the labor market (due to age, gender, schooling, etc.) Therefore, this cohort should be engaged in both market-driven and transferable skills that will better position and prepare them to enter the workforce when the time is appropriate. In the absence of placing adolescents and youth in actual job opportunities, our programs focus on easing the eventual school-to-work transition. If we build employability and work readiness skills in adolescents and young people, they will be better positioned to make a successful transition to safe, equitable, and productive work. This means that we are 1) keeping children and adolescents in school as long as possible and 2) ensuring that they are participating in training (such as transferable skills) which increases their employability and eventual employment.

Additional resources:

- Mercy Corps [Code of Conduct](#) provisions addressing child exploitation and forthcoming Global Child Safeguarding Policy
- [UN Convention on the Rights of the Child](#)
- [International Labor Organization Conventions on Child Labor](#)
- International Labor Organization [International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labor](#)
- [US Department of Labor Country Fact Sheets on the Worst Forms of Child Labor](#)
- [Minimum Standards for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action](#)

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About Mercy Corps

Mercy Corps is a leading global organization powered by the belief that a better world is possible. In disaster, in hardship, in more than 40 countries around the world, we partner to put bold solutions into action — helping people triumph over adversity and build stronger communities from within. Now, and for the future.



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