

World Day Against Child Labour 12 June 2007



An overview of child labour in agriculture

Seventy per cent of working children are in agriculture - over 132 million girls and boys aged 5-14 years old. The vast majority of the world's child labourers are not toiling in factories and sweatshops or working as domestics or street vendors in urban areas, they are working on farms and plantations, often from sun up to sun down, planting and harvesting crops, spraying pesticides, and tending livestock on rural farms and plantations. These children play an important role in crop and livestock production, helping supply some of the food and drink we consume, and the fibres and raw materials we use to make other products. Examples include cocoa/chocolate, coffee, tea, sugar, fruits and vegetables, along with other agricultural products like tobacco and cotton.

It must be emphasized that not all work that children undertake in agriculture is bad for them or would qualify as work to be eliminated under the ILO Minimum Age Convention No. 138 or the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention No. 182. Age-appropriate tasks that are of lower risk and do not interfere with a child's schooling and leisure time, can be a normal part of growing up in a rural environment. Indeed, many types of work experience for children can be positive, providing them with practical and social skills for work as adults. Improved self-confidence, self-esteem and work skills are attributes often detected in young people engaged in some aspects of farm work.

Agriculture, however, is one of the three most dangerous sectors in which to work at any age, along with construction and mining. Whether child labourers work on their parents' farms, are hired to work on the farms or plantations of others, or accompany their migrant farm-worker parents, the hazards and levels of risk they face

can be worse than those for adult workers. Because children's bodies and minds are still growing and developing, exposure to workplace hazards can be more devastating and long lasting for them, resulting in lifelong disabilities. Therefore the line between what is acceptable work and what is not is easily crossed. This problem is not restricted to developing countries but occurs in industrialized countries as well.

Agriculture is also a sector where many children are effectively denied education which blights their future chances of escaping from the cycle of poverty by finding better jobs or becoming self-employed. The rural sector is often characterised by lack of schools, schools of variable quality, problems of retaining teachers in remote rural areas, lack of accessible education for children, poor/variable rates of rural school attendance, and lower standards of educational performance and achievement. Children may also have to walk long distances to and from school. Even where children are in education, school holidays are often built around the sowing and harvesting seasons.

While great progress has been made in many countries in reducing hazardous child labour in other sectors, a number of factors have made agricultural child labour a particularly difficult one to tackle. These are:

Large numbers of children are involved in all types of undertakings ranging from small- and medium-sized family farms, to large farms, plantations, and agro-industrial complexes. Historically, child labour, either as part of "family teams" or as individual workers, has played a significant part in employment in plantations and commercial agriculture around the world. Girl child labour in agriculture forms a significant part of the workforce. Key gender

issues include how girls combine work in agriculture with domestic chores, resulting in reduced educational opportunities for them.

Children around the world become farm labourers at an early age. Most statistical surveys only cover child workers aged 10 and above. However, many children begin work at an even earlier age. Rural children, in particular girls, tend to begin work young, at 5, 6 or 7 years of age. In some countries, children under 10 are estimated to account for 20 per cent of child labour in rural areas.

The work that children perform in agriculture is often invisible and unacknowledged because they assist their parents or relatives on the family farm or they undertake piecework or work under a quota system on larger farms or plantations, often as part of migrant worker families.

Agriculture is historically and traditionally an under-regulated sector in many countries. This means that child labour laws – if they exist – are often less stringent in agricultural industries than in other industries. In some countries, adult and child workers in agriculture are not covered by or are exempt from safety and health laws covering other categories of adult workers. Children, for example, are generally allowed to operate machinery and drive tractors at a younger age in agriculture than in other sectors.

In rural areas especially, household income is insufficient to meet the needs of families. Children work as cheap labour because their parents are poor and do not earn enough to support the family or to send their children to school. Working children represent a plentiful source of cheap labour.

All of the above factors give agriculture a special status and make agricultural child labour a particularly difficult one to tackle. But it is precisely because of these factors – large numbers, girl child workers, hazardous nature of the work, lack of regulation, invisibility, denial of education and the effects of poverty – that agriculture should be a priority sector for the elimination of child labour. Unless a concerted effort is put in place to reducing agricultural child labour, it will be impossible to achieve the

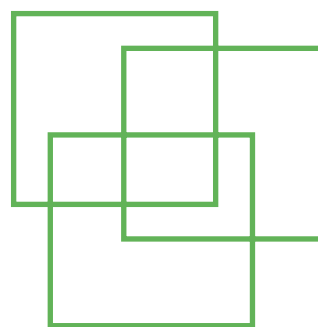
ILO goal of elimination of all worst forms of child labour by 2016.

For agricultural and rural development to be sustainable, it cannot continue to be based on the exploitation of children in child labour. There is growing consensus that agriculture is a priority sector in which to develop and implement strategies, policies and programmes to combat child labour and to put agricultural and rural development and employment on a sustainable footing. In order to scale up work on eliminating child labour in agriculture, the ILO is developing new strategies based on closer cooperation and collaboration with international agricultural organizations¹ including farmers organizations (employers) and agricultural trade unions (workers), and an expanded communication effort centred on the World Day Against Child Labour, 12 June 2007, which will focus on agriculture. IPEC will also seek to mainstream the issue into current ILO work on youth employment and rural employment and development.

International Labour Organisation (ILO)

International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC)

www.ilo.org/childlabour



¹ Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Fund on Agricultural Development (IFAD), the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR), the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP - representing farmers/employers and their organizations), and the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF - representing workers and their organizations).