

Child labour in salt mining: The problem

In addition to the strain of the physical effort required in salt mining and harvesting, constant exposure to salt is unhealthy for children. Salt is corrosive. It causes skin on the hands to crack and discolouration of the iris that can damage vision.

Some of the common hazards associated with salt mining include:

- injuries from improper use of tools designed for adults and carrying heavy loads;
- fatigue, exhaustion, muscle pain (from bending over/standing up when gathering salt in hot weather);
- severe dizziness, particularly in hot weather;
- cracked skin and hands and feet from handling salt and walking on it barefoot; and
- blisters from walking on salt flats.

The following descriptions of children in salt mining areas are taken from several countries where IPEC has worked or is currently working to remove children from child labour in this sector.

Niger

Salt mining is a seasonal activity that takes place for three to four months in the dry season after agricultural crops have been harvested. Children work alongside their families using traditional, labour intensive processes to extract and distil the salt. Children participate in all stages of the salt production cycle – extraction, transport of ore and fuel wood, cooking/distilling, etc. However, they tend to be more involved in the extraction of the ore, where, in

addition to arduous digging, scraping and lifting, they breathe in dust and their skin becomes cracked, especially during cold periods. Most work at least eight hours a day on average, which often leads them to drop out of school.

Senegal

In Senegal, the river delta where the Saloum meets the sea is one of the prime areas for salt harvesting. Canals capture the sea salt during high tides, leaving thick layers salt. When the accumulation gets close to two metres deep, the canals are closed off and the harvesting begins.

In some areas in the interior of the country, salt mining is a dry season activity that is carried out by entire villages in alternation with agriculture.

Salt harvesting is a tradition that involves entire families. It is a collective endeavour carried out with a clear division of labour between men and women, girls and boys. However, both girls and boys find the work harsh and an unpleasant alternative to school. Salt mining is hard work for very little money. Salt workers toil under the hot sun without any protection. The boys generally dig the pits, maintain them and fill sacs of between 18 and 25 kg (worth 10 to 15 Fcfa each). Girls, generally accompanied by their mothers, help pile the sand, put it in bags and transport it. In some places girls carry loads of salt on their heads in tubs for up 15 kilometres to the nearest pick-up point.

The head portage of salt is also hazardous for children: it can lead to

chronic headaches, bone deformations
and asthenia (sudden loss of strength).

Sources: ILO project documents