

## **Child labour in stone quarrying: The problem**

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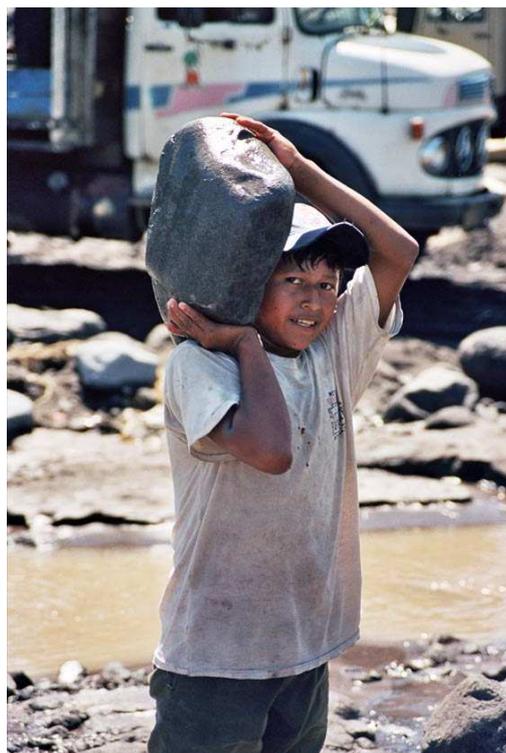
Quarrying stone for construction material or to make gravel is hard and dangerous work, particularly for children. But for many poor youngsters whose families are involved in this activity, there is no other choice. Family earnings from quarrying may be barely sufficient to cover basic needs and money earned by children can be an important part of a household's income. It may even mean the difference between eating and not eating on a given day.

Work in stone quarries hazardous labour – Children carry loads far too heavy for their body size; they risk accidents from the use of explosives and they are constantly exposed to fine dust that can cause chronic respiratory infections, notably silicosis. They may be injured by flying shards of rock that can cause severe eye injury, develop skin problems resulting from prolonged periods working in intense sun and heat, and suffer dehydration.

The following descriptions of children in who work in quarries are taken from several countries where IPEC has worked or is currently working to remove children from child labour this sector. While the hazards and processes are fairly similar from country to country, the family situations, working conditions, ages and gender of children involved vary according to local traditions, the level of poverty, the regulatory environment or other employment or schooling alternatives.

### **Guatemala**

Demand for gravel from Guatemala's thriving construction sector in recent years has encouraged many poor families to set up camp along the publicly owned shores of the country's lakes and rivers to eek out a living crushing stones. The volcanic stones found in Guatemala's river and lake beds produce low quality gravel that sells for about 60 quetzales a cubic metre, or US \$7.50. Not much when you consider that it takes an adult male about two days to produce a cubic metre. For a 13-year-old boy, it takes about three days.



The work is arduous and there are virtually no safety measures in place. Older children carry heavy stones from the riverbank to the work sites and break stones with hammers and sledgehammers. Children as young as 5 years old break rocks and gather gravel into piles. Adults and children typically work more than eight hours a day, six or seven days a week.

In some areas there is no potable water near the camps because the rivers and ground water are contaminated by pesticide and herbicide runoff and industrial and residential waste. In some camps there are no latrines and diseases, including malaria and dengue, are a serious problem. Children are also known to suffer from respiratory infections, diarrhoea, skin diseases, back pain and headaches.



As demand for gravel fluctuates, families can go several days or more without a sale. On top of this, stone crushers may have to pass through private land to access their camps and be forced to pay a monthly fee equal to almost two days of work for an adult.

### **Nepal**

In Nepal, quarry children tend to start work crushing stones or extracting sand and clay along with their families from somewhere between ages 10 and 12. About half of these children will continue to combine work and schooling, working after school and on school holidays. The majority come from families of at least six members with parents who are illiterate (particularly the mothers). Most of these children also belong to underprivileged castes – the *dalits* or *janajati*.

### **Madagascar**

Children working in stone quarries come from families whose parents work at these sites. While most started school, they tend to drop out by adolescence. Girls and boys start out performing the same tasks: collecting stone blocks, sorting, making gravel and shovelling it into piles. As they get older, boys pick up the better paid job of cutting stone blocks. At age 16 the boys work as adults and are paid separately from their parents.

The work week is long – in general six 8-11 hour days. There are no security measures put in place by the pit owners and the miners are generally ignorant of the health risks they face. At some sites, children are forced to work under a quota system and face verbal and physical abuse or withholding of food in case they miss their quotas.

These children come from very poor families. The parents generally do not consider that their children are involved in a “worst form” of child labour. In their view, quarrying is

preferable to many other small jobs because it pays better. For this reason they also see it as a good alternative to education.

**Sources: ILO project documents**

**Photos: ILO**