



IPEC

International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour



Tripartite social forums for banana and flower production in Ecuador

In Ecuador, child labour is prevalent in the banana and flower sectors, although it has at times been difficult for companies in these sectors to acknowledge this.

Banana production

The Social Forum for the Banana Production Sector, (el Foro Social Bananero), set up in 2003, was the banana industry's response to a 2002 report by the human rights advocacy group Human Rights Watch, about child labour and obstacles to trade union membership in Ecuador's banana plantations. The report resulted in international pressure for banana certification, particularly for the American and European markets, to guarantee that bananas are produced without child labour and labour rights are respected.

The ILO subsequently became involved in the Forum,¹ helping to develop it into a tripartite initiative based on social dialogue with effective trade union participation. The principal trade union involved is the Federación Nacional de Trabajadores Agroindustriales, Campesinos e Indígenas Libres del Ecuador (FENACLE).² An ILO baseline survey on child labour helped the Forum get underway and led to the banana producers acknowledging that child labour was a problem in their sector. The ILO's participation in the Forum, along with that of UNICEF, has helped to reduce tensions among banana producers, exporters and workers and to build consensus among these groups on the need to join forces to combat child labour. In May 2004, a Banana Sector Plan for the elimination of child labour was launched.

Activities carried out by the Forum to date include:

- carrying out a series of awareness-raising activities on child labour for trade unions, entrepreneurs, families and children;
- setting up a child labour inspection and monitoring system in the provinces of Guayas, El Oro and Los Rios, where the main banana producers are located;
- playing an important role in getting banana companies to agree to labour inspections on their farms and plantations.

¹ Membership: government representatives from the Ministries of Labour, Agriculture, Education, and Social Security; producers/employers – AEBE, Dole, Noboa, Wong, and the Corporacion para la Promocion de las Exportaciones e Inversiones (CORPEI); trade unions – The Federación Nacional de Trabajadores Agroindustriales, Campesinos e Indígenas Libres del Ecuador (FENACLE); NGOs – one voting representative but other NGOs also attend meetings; ILO and UNICEF are official advisers to the Social Forum and attend meetings.

² In addition, FENACLE, along with the business association EXPOFLORES and the NGO DYA, has been one of the main executing agencies of the Time Bound Programme in Ecuador.

Spin-off activities include private sector initiatives to improve family and community living standards in banana producing areas, which reflect the increased emphasis on social responsibility fostered by the Forum's activities.

Cut flower production

In 2002, following Ecuador's ratification of ILO Convention No. 182, EXPOFLORES, the country's association of flower producers and exporters, became a signatory of a statement on eradicating child labour. International and consumer concern about the use of child labour in flower production in Ecuador and Colombia provided additional impetus for setting up the Social Forum for Flower Production (el Foro Social Florícola)³ in 2005.

The ILO played a proactive role in the creation of the Flower Forum, ensuring that it was tripartite in nature from the start, and continues to provide resources and technical assistance. An ILO baseline study helped companies to evaluate the extent of child labour in plantations and has provided the basis for the development of an action programme on the elimination of child labour for the cut flower industry. As in the banana sector, one of the Forum's main successes is the promotion of social dialogue by getting government, companies and trade unions together around the same discussion table. An increasing number of flower growers are now enforcing regulations in their enterprises regarding child labour.

Central to the strategy of the efforts against child labour in the cut flower industry is the transition of children above the minimum age for employment from hazardous work, such as the application of pesticides, to non-hazardous aspects of flower production. Once they are engaged in non-hazardous work, a key challenge for the Forum has been to ensure that children do not work in excess of the limits on the number of hours worked prescribed by the Ecuadorian Labour Code.

Lessons learned from these two Forums include:

- The Forums are useful in developing social dialogue and consensus building between business and labour interests.
- Child labour provides a relatively easy area to achieve dialogue-based consensus, which could in turn stimulate consensus building on other labour topics that are also linked to the child labour problem.
- There is growing understanding that solving social problems is not solely a government task and that tripartite activities may be the most suitable way for dealing with the problem of child labour.
- International pressure is an important factor in spurring action on child labour. It would be difficult to establish similar forums in sectors that are not subject to such pressure.
- A period of capacity building and strengthening of the actors involved was an essential prerequisite for creation of the Forums. The role of the ILO and other international organizations in providing support for capacity building was crucial.

³ Membership: government representatives from the Ministries of Labour, Agriculture, Education, and Social Security; producers/employers – EXPOFLORES, the country's association of flower producers and exporters acts as the representative for the flower industry; trade unions – two representatives appointed by the federation of unions; NGOs: one voting representative but other NGOs also attend meetings; ILO and UNICEF are official advisers to the Social Forum and attend meetings.

- Strong Ministerial support, especially during the process establishing the Forums, is also critical.

Final Output Reports provide IPEC with more detailed information on the specific actions undertaken by the executing agencies, as well as their results and recommendations.⁴

EXPOFLORES has also created FlorEcuador, a certification program for companies that meet the social and environmental requirements. It has partnered with UNICEF in gaining international recognition for products that meet the certification standards.

Another tripartite organization working to eliminate child labour in Ecuador is the National Committee for the Progressive Eradication of Child Labour (CONEPTI). It promotes social dialogue through the participation of representatives of the Ministry of Labour, EXPOFLORES, and the Frente Unitario de los Trabajadores (FUT), a central organising body for the trade unions CEDOCUT, CEOSL and CTE⁵, which also participate in the Banana and Flower Social Forums.

⁴ For example, see Expoflores 2008 report at http://www.expoflores.com/galeria/florecuador/Informe_Final_de_2008%20.pdf

⁵ CEDOCUT – Confederación Ecuatoriana de Organizaciones Clasistas Unitarias de Trabajadores, CEOSL – Confederación Ecuatoriana de Organizaciones Sindicales Libres, CTE – Confederación de Trabajadores del Ecuador.