



**International Labour Organization
International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC)**

**Bolivia
Child Labour in Sugarcane:
A Rapid Assessment**

**By
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Preface

Unacceptable forms of exploitation of children at work exist and persist, but they are particularly difficult to research due to their hidden, sometimes illegal or even criminal nature. Slavery, debt bondage, trafficking, sexual exploitation, the use of children in the drug trade and in armed conflict, as well as hazardous work are all defined as Worst Forms of Child Labour. Promoting the Convention (No. 182) concerning the Prohibition and immediate action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour, 1999, is a high priority for the International Labour Organization (ILO). Recommendation (No. 190, Paragraph 5) accompanying the Convention states that “detailed information and statistical data on the nature and extent of child labour should be compiled and kept up to date to serve as a basis for determining priorities for national action for the abolition of child labour, in particular for the prohibition and elimination of its worst forms, as a matter of urgency.” Although there is a body of knowledge, data, and documentation on child labour, there are also still considerable gaps in understanding the variety of forms and conditions in which children work. This is especially true of the worst forms of child labour, which by their very nature are often hidden from public view and scrutiny.

Against this background the ILO, through IPEC/SIMPOC (International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour/Statistical Information and Monitoring Programme on Child Labour) has carried out 38 rapid assessments of the worst forms of child labour in 19 countries and one border area. The investigations have been made using a new rapid assessment methodology on child labour, elaborated jointly by the ILO and UNICEF¹. The programme was funded by the United States Department of Labor.

The investigations on the worst forms of child labour have explored very sensitive areas including illegal, criminal or immoral activities. The forms of child labour and research locations were carefully chosen by IPEC staff in consultation with IPEC partners. The rapid assessment investigations focused on the following categories of worst forms of child labour: children in bondage; child domestic workers; child soldiers; child trafficking; drug trafficking; hazardous work in commercial agriculture, fishing, garbage dumps, mining and the urban environment; sexual exploitation; and working street children.

To the partners and IPEC colleagues who contributed, through their individual and collective efforts, to the realisation of this report I should like to express our gratitude. The responsibility for opinions expressed in this publication rests solely with the authors and does not imply endorsement by the ILO.

I am sure that the wealth of information contained in this series of reports on the situation of children engaged in the worst forms of child labour around the world will contribute to a deeper understanding and allow us to more clearly focus on the challenges that lie ahead. Most importantly, we hope that the studies will guide policy makers, community leaders, and practitioners to tackle the problem on the ground.



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¹ Investigating Child Labour: Guidelines for Rapid Assessment - A Field Manual, January 2000, a draft to be finalized further to field tests, <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/ipec/simpoc/guides/index.htm>

Executive Summary

The sugarcane-growing region of the district of Santa Cruz includes the municipalities of Santa Cruz de la Sierra, La Guardia, El Torno, Cotoca, Warnes, Portachuelo, Montero, Mineros and General Saavedra. This production zone encompasses over 78,000 hectares of cultivated sugarcane and the four sugar mills of La Bélgica, San Aurelio, Guabira and Unagro, which in 2001 produced more than 7 million quintals of sugar, valued at US \$110 million.

In the district of Tarija, sugarcane is grown in the municipalities of Bermejo and southern Padcaya. The area under cultivation extends to nearly 12,000 hectares and supplies two sugar mills, which produced 900,000 quintals of sugar in 2001, valued at approximately US \$15 million.

In these cane-growing regions of Santa Cruz and Tarija, the sugarcane harvest, or *zafra*, mobilizes a large contingent of workers and their families from May to October each year. Between 60 and 65 per cent of these families are from the districts of Santa Cruz and Tarija, while most of the remaining 35 to 40 per cent come from those of Potosí and Chuquisaca. Generally speaking, these are families that migrate temporarily in an attempt to alleviate their extreme poverty. As a result, one of the first challenges they must face upon arrival is the radical shift from their usual environment. Because they come from high-altitude regions with a dry, cold climate, these families are not prepared for the high temperatures, humidity, sudden changes of weather and tropical extremes characteristic of the sugarcane growing regions.

The Santa Cruz *zafra* mobilizes over 30,000 persons, nearly 7,000 of whom are children and adolescents under the age of 18. For its part, the Tarija *zafra* mobilizes 5,500 individuals, including 2,860 young persons under age 18. Overall, this productive activity directly or indirectly involves nearly 10,000 children and adolescents, in outright violation of current legal provisions, which not only establish 14 years as the minimum working age, but also prohibit children under age 18 from working in the sugarcane harvest.¹

As regards the ages of the children and adolescents directly involved in harvesting work, in both Tarija and Santa Cruz the youngest age observed was nine years old. In Santa Cruz, nearly 50 per cent were estimated to belong in the 9-to-13-year-old age group, while in Tarija, the participation of this age group was 60 per cent. When disaggregating by gender, the direct participation of boys is twice that of girls.

Most of the children and adolescents who participate in the sugarcane harvest, in both Tarija and Santa Cruz, usually live with their families, whether in single-parent, nuclear or extended families. Only 18.2 per cent of the boys and 4.8 per cent of the girls in Tarija reported living alone. In the case of Santa Cruz, 25 per cent of the boys reported not living with their families. This suggests that, in spite of being a segment of the population with a certain level of autonomy, owing to the income they generate, these young people

¹ Articles 126 and 134, Clause 16, Code of Childhood and Adolescence.

nevertheless maintain close family and community ties. The majority migrate to the harvesters' camps with other members of their families.

As for the involvement of children and adolescents in harvest work, certain differences were noted in the two districts with respect to the division of labour. In Tarija, there is a distinct division of labour: the adult males work as harvesters and cane cutters, whereas the boys, girls and adolescents, together with the adult females, attend to stacking, peeling and, to a lesser extent, cutting cane. They are thus considered harvesters' helpers, or *cuartas*. Last of all, there are the (mostly) girls and adult women who carry out domestic chores, either exclusively, or in combination with the above-mentioned activities. In Santa Cruz, the adult male's function is also that of harvester, or cane cutter—a job shared with boys, and especially with (mostly male) adolescents—leaving the domestic chores to the girls, female adolescents and women, who usually combine this work with tasks directly related to the harvest.

In the vast majority of cases, in both Tarija and Santa Cruz, employment contracts are verbal and are established by the contractor with the adult male harvester, or—in rare cases in which the man is absent—with adult women. Sheltered by such an arrangement between contractors and the harvesters, sugarcane operators are exempt from all contractual responsibility, contravening legal provisions that expressly prohibit the “contracting of workers through *enganchadores* [recruiters], private placement offices or other intermediaries”². In general, the length of the contracts is for the entire harvest season, although one-third of the men and women interviewed in Santa Cruz admit not knowing the length of their contract, which reflects a high degree of insecurity as far as labour stability is concerned. In Tarija, contracts generally include the provision of safety equipment, consisting of a piece of canvas with which harvesters are expected to fashion themselves leg protectors, or *guardachos*. Conversely, in Santa Cruz, only a third of the harvesters interviewed stated that they were given such equipment, along with work gloves, in some cases. Their contracts also include the provision of tools, consisting of a machete and, in some cases, a knife and a hoe. Lastly, they include housing, which in most cases refers to collective dwellings or makeshift shacks shared by several families.

Children and adolescents usually do not enter into any type of contract and are therefore not provided any type of protective equipment, nor are they considered eligible for any social benefits. This constitutes an effort to conceal the work of children, adolescents and, to a large extent, that of women, given that cane plantation owners and contractors state that they do not hire “minors” and that the latter's participation in the harvest is the responsibility of their fathers. The fathers, in turn, state that their children are only “helpers” or “*cuartas*” and that they themselves are the only harvesters.

The clear-cut division of labour noted above, in turn, determines the form of pay and level of earnings of the young people involved in the sugarcane harvest. In Tarija, there is a fixed, monthly wage for those who work as *cuartas*, and the amount for males ranges from 50 to 600 Bolivian bolivianos, or BOB (between US \$7.30 and 88.70; 1 BOB equals US \$0.147). Female *cuartas* earn up to a maximum of 300 BOB per month. In Santa

² Article 14, Decree 20255, 24 May 1984.

Cruz, very few report receiving a monthly wage, since they are paid per ton of harvested cane at a rate fluctuating between 14 and 17 BOB. However, the vast majority of children and adolescents are not remunerated directly, since they are considered “helpers”. Only the fathers or responsible adults bargain with the contractors. It should be noted that in Tarija those who perform domestic chores and help with the harvesting activities, but who are not considered *cuartas*, do not receive any type of monetary remuneration. The earnings of children and adolescents are largely devoted to covering basic necessities such as food and clothing; only 10 to 20 per cent is set aside as savings.

The specific modality of payment mentioned above applies only to the work of children and adolescents, since payment to adult harvesters in both Tarija and Santa Cruz is by harvested ton at a rate fluctuating between 14 and 25 BOB. According to overall estimates, the *zafrero* or harvester, together with his *cuarta* in Tarija, or his “helper” in Santa Cruz, harvests an average of 2 to 3 tons per day. This translates into a monthly income of approximately 1,200 BOB, which over the six months of the harvest comes to approximately 7,200 BOB. After subtracting expenses, harvesters return to their homes with around 5,200 BOB—a considerable amount if one takes into account that the annual per capita income of poor peasant families in Bolivia is US \$200.

The greatest risks identified by the children and adolescents involved in the sugarcane harvest are machete cuts and snake bites. The greatest psychological mistreatment they mentioned was the pressure to finish work assigned to them and the fear of not reaching established production quotas. As for the main negative aspects, they stressed the difficult conditions of the long working day, which lasts 12 hours, not including travel time from the camp to the sugarcane plantation. The girls mentioned the fact of having to do kitchen chores. At the other extreme, they identified the opportunity to work as the most positive aspect.

The way in which children’s and adolescents’ work is perceived varies depending upon the district and the actors interviewed. In Tarija, slightly more than one-third of the fathers and mothers stated that they were against the idea of their children working; another third said they did not agree but that they had resigned themselves to it; while the remaining third expressed their approval. In Santa Cruz, half of the fathers and one-third of the mothers interviewed approved of the fact that their children worked; one-third of the fathers and nearly half of the mothers expressed their disapproval. When asked why children and adolescents work, both fathers and mothers reported that it was mainly out of economic necessity and, to a lesser extent—according primarily to the mothers—because of the on-the-job training they received. Lastly, there was a notable reticence on the part of parents to recognize the risks inherent in their children’s involvement in this type of work. Yet, they eventually came around to recognizing the pressure to which the children were subjected in terms of the rigorous working days and inclement weather, as well as the risk of illnesses and accidents and, to a lesser extent, the neglect of their studies.

In Tarija, the average percentage of children and adolescents who do not attend school is 90 per cent. In Santa Cruz, the situation is less dramatic, though equally alarming: 55 per

cent of boys and 33 per cent of girls are excluded from the right to education. With respect to educational levels, in Tarija, 90 per cent of the children had not advanced beyond the fifth grade of primary school; in Santa Cruz, over 50 per cent of the boys failed to complete this level, though this figure was slightly lower in the case of girls. When asked about the reasons for the children's failure to attend school and low educational levels, the primary response was the lack of money and the need to work. In addition, and especially in Tarija, the lack of higher grade levels in rural schools was pointed out. The expectation of going back to school was virtually nonexistent in Tarija, whereas in Santa Cruz, on the other hand, it was quite prevalent. Lastly, the young people considered the quality of education to center upon the importance of doing homework and learning. Listed as negative aspects in Tarija were the distant location of the schools and the lack of money to attend them. Young people in Santa Cruz added to this list, mistreatment by teachers, fights and having to do homework.

Health problems affecting children and adolescents who work in the sugarcane harvest are closely linked to their living and working conditions. In general, they live in makeshift and highly overcrowded encampments without access to basic services such as drinking water and solid waste management systems. In addition, they are exposed for more than 12 hours a day to the harsh conditions typical of this kind of work and to the severity of the weather on the plantations—and all of this on a diet deficient in calories, proteins and minerals. These factors render this segment of the population highly vulnerable to infectious diseases and to respiratory and gastrointestinal disorders, not to mention frequent accidents at work.

The main problems relating to health care are the scarcity of health centers near the harvesters' camps and the lack of money to pay for the services they offer. For this reason, in both Tarija and Santa Cruz, most of the young people report that they handle health problems within the camps, visit health centres only for serious problems, and go to the few secondary or tertiary-level centres only in extreme situations.

Likewise, difficulties relating to the accessibility of schools also stem from their scarcity, especially those offering levels higher than grade five. In addition—and this is especially true of Tarija—the great distances between the harvesters' camps and the schools, among other factors, stand in the way of guaranteeing children and adolescents this fundamental right.

In general, the young people described their relations with their families as good and indicated that among the rights with which they were familiar were those of education, recreation, dignity and respect. In the case of Santa Cruz, they also mentioned the right not to work in the harvest. Although they had heard of these rights through the media, fathers, mothers and officials of public and private institutions linked to the problem declined to talk about compliance with them, or else clearly pointed out the failure to respect the fundamental rights of children and adolescents involved in the sugarcane harvest.

Both national and international legislation expressly prohibit child labour in sugarcane harvesting; yet, because the State does not implement specific policies to deal with the problem, in practice, there is a complete failure to comply with current legal standards.

Another important element in the defense of rights is civil society's capacity to organize and to take action. However, the sugarcane harvesters' organization is extremely weak, since, according to its own members³, the sugarcane harvesters' union [*Federación Sindical de Trabajadores Zafreiros*] lacks legitimacy, maintains only sporadic relations with the harvesters' camps, has no negotiating strategies for dealing with employers, and has not maintained the necessary relations with other institutions and therefore cannot rely upon their support.

Based on these conclusions, the report recommends that specific policies aimed at eliminating child labour be incorporated within the framework of national policy. Such policies would include:

- i. The promotion and protection of the rights of children and adolescents involved in the sugarcane harvest, through a strategy of mobilization and consultation with all parties concerned.
- ii. A hiring and inspection policy that allows the State to reassume responsibility for contracting sugarcane harvesters, as well as regulations to prohibit the involvement of children and adolescents in cane harvesting. In addition, the implementation of social and institutional networks to provide monitoring and inspection, enabling appropriate sanctions to be applied if needed.
- iii. A policy to restore children's right to education through scholarships aimed at ensuring that they remain in school in their communities of origin. Alternatively, the development of educational facilities in the largest harvester camps as a part of the responsibilities of cane producers, municipalities and the Ministry of Education.
- iv. Health-care policies that emphasize primary care as the basic level, with secondary and tertiary-level services as support. This would require a primary health-care programme with promotional components, such as: participation, mobilization, training, education, and disease prevention and control. The programme would function through a system to screen for diseases and refer patients to other support health-care systems, which, in turn, would require training mobile medical teams and health promoters at the grassroots level.

The full text of this report is available in Spanish at
<http://www.ilo.org/public/spanish/standards/ipecc/simpoc/bolivia/ra/cane.pdf>

³ *Taller de diagnóstico y estrategia de la Federación Sindical de Trabajadores Zafreiros.* [Diagnostic and strategic workshop of the Sugarcane Harvesters' Union]