



IPEC



International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour

Private Sector contributions to combating child labour in sugarcane in El Salvador

Background and initiation of industry involvement

El Salvador ratified ILO Convention 182 in 2000 and determined that child labour in sugarcane harvesting constitutes one of the worst forms of child labour in El Salvador.

With support from the U.S. Department of Labor, the International Labour Organization's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) launched a project in 2002 to support of El Salvador's Time Bound Programme to eliminate the worst forms of child labour, including in sugarcane.

From the outset, the Salvadoran sugar industry was an essential contributor to efforts to tackle child labour in sugarcane. ILO-IPEC engaged the Salvadoran Sugar Association as one of its main implementing partners. The Sugar Association is a member of the national employer's association ANEP, which participates in the National Steering Committee on Child Labour, together with workers' organizations and government.

Because they are associated with industry and have built considerable good will as a result of funding social development projects in the sector, the partnership with FUNDAZUCAR, the Sugar Association's charitable foundation, has been fundamental to IPEC's success in withdrawing to date some 7,300 children from sugarcane. In addition, 13,000 children at risk of entering work in sugarcane have been prevented from doing so.

IPEC engaged FUNDAZUCAR to carry out the baseline research that was critical to informing the design of interventions and established the original target group to be assisted. Their good name allowed access to farms that otherwise would have resisted efforts to register child labourers, and their staff in the field provided access to education, income generation and other social services that enabled families to do without child labour.

Non-formal education centres were set up to provide complementary educational activities, tutoring and recreational and cultural activities for children withdrawn from work or at risk of child labour. FUNDAZUCAR donates supplies – notebooks, pencils, athletic equipment, etc. – and helps to train teachers so that child labour concerns are included in the curriculum. In cooperation with government labour inspectors, community leaders and teachers have been trained in child labour monitoring, and community networks have been created to track the extent of the problem. Between 2004 and 2006 FUNDAZUCAR created 31 of these centres, all of which have since been formalized by the Ministry of Education and incorporated into the National Education Programme, an important step for ensuring their sustainability, and reflecting propitious collaboration with Government.

FUNDAZUCAR continues to set up education centres, and in 2007 it began a new project with the ILO in the departments of San Miguel and Usulután. It consists of: data gathering; educational centres to provide remedial support in core subjects and recreation aimed at building self-esteem; awareness workshops for parents and local actors in order to increase consciousness and commitment to the reduction of child labour; and efforts to identify child labourers and mechanisms to verify that sugarcane is child-labour free.

By May of 2009, 394 children had been withdrawn and 985 prevented from entering child labour in sugarcane production. In 2007-2008 FUNDAZUCAR also worked directly with the National Education System and the ILO in training 102 teachers and school directors in child labour issues.

The Sugar Association issued a directive in 2003 banning the use of child labour in its nine mills as well as on plantations that supply the unprocessed cane. Farms or cooperatives that still use child labour are fined through a reduction in cane prices whilst repeated violations can lead to an end in the business relationship with mills. A child labour monitoring system has also been set up by the mills. Each mill has hired social workers, who help to raise awareness on child labour and collaborate with Labour Ministry inspectors to identify child labourers.

The supply chain dimension and The Coca Cola Company

In the midst of this growing industry response to the problem, in June 2004, the human rights advocacy organization Human Rights Watch (HRW) published a report on child labour in sugarcane plantations in El Salvador. It stated that children harvested sugar used to make Coca-Cola in El Salvador for domestic consumption, among other products.

In interviews with HRW, IPEC staff attested to the presence of child labour on sugarcane plantations in El Salvador and provided information on the conditions and hazards faced by children. These include injuries from sharp cutting tools such as the machete, hazards associated with sun exposure, musculo-skeletal problems, respiratory problems, pesticide exposure, insects and snakes, and psycho-social effects such as low self esteem. The negative effect on the ability of children to achieve a basic education is also disastrous.

Sugarcane in El Salvador is mostly produced by cooperative farms, formed after an agrarian reform some 25 years ago, and children of cooperative members are among the child labourers found on these plantations. The cooperatives sell the harvested sugarcane to any of nine sugarcane mills in El Salvador. One of the largest mills is an authorized supplier of sugar to The Coca-Cola Company. Coca-Cola is a major purchaser of sugar in El Salvador.

Following the release of the report, Coca-Cola sent a team to El Salvador to investigate the problem. During these consultations, IPEC informed the team of the ongoing national efforts to eradicate child labour in sugarcane through increased enforcement and the provision of educational alternatives for children, alternative income-generating options for parents, social mobilization, and awareness-raising. IPEC also shared with Coca-Cola quantitative data from research surveys and regular updates on progress in the sector, and accompanied them on visits to sugarcane plantations.

The Coca Cola Company's Supplier Guiding Principles programme, which prohibits child labour, does not cover sugar farms providing cane to its authorized mill in El Salvador. Coca-Cola considered a number of possible responses to the HRW report, including ceasing the purchase of Salvadoran sugar and acquiring its sweetener from other sources in which the prohibition of child labour is assured. The Company chose to continue to source sugar from El Salvador and initiated a project aimed at combating child labour in sugarcane. IPEC and the Salvadoran Sugar Association provided guidance to the design of the initiative, which provides children above the minimum age for work with safe, alternative sources of income while enhancing their technical skill development and keeping them in school.

Initiated in 2006, the programme required the 30 participating children to attend school instead of cutting sugarcane. To supplement their school curriculum, the programme brought in an agricultural technician to teach the children how to plant vegetables and manage the project-funded greenhouse and orchard. In 2007, the children grew and harvested 1,350 pounds of tomatoes, as well as producing chillies, eggplant, corn,

cucumbers, yucca, tomatoes, cabbage and green beans. The project is on track to be self-sustaining by 2008, using the income derived from the sale of its vegetable products.

As important as this direct action is, the sustained advocacy for greater attention to the child labour problem in sugarcane carried out by Coca-Cola among stakeholders in El Salvador is likely to have a greater long-term impact. It contributed to a more robust response by the Salvadoran sugar industry and other business groups, and the Salvadoran government. Marked declines in the levels of child labour in sugarcane are evidence that this increased response is taking effect.

While there have been significant gains in the reduction of child labour in sugarcane production, more must be done to ensure that this progress is sustained and increased over time. Sugar cooperatives continue to struggle, many farming families are mired in poverty, and core labour rights are not sufficiently upheld. The prohibition of child labour is inseparable from other core labour rights that are not fully realized in El Salvador. Respecting adult workers' rights to decent working conditions and pay will allow them to better provide for their families, reducing the pressure on the children to work. The rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining are also crucial to eliminating child labour. Through achieving better working conditions and pay for workers, unions decrease the need for working families to also employ their children and increase their ability to cover schooling costs. They can also play a direct role in the elimination of child labour, particularly by monitoring work places for child labour and other core labour rights violations, including the child labour issue in collective bargaining agreements, and increasing awareness. In addition to the insufficient support for core labour rights, access to quality education and other basic social services is still inadequate, so there is a lack of viable alternatives to child labour. Resolving these root causes of child labour in El Salvador is not a simple task, but one that is critical to eliminating child labour in sugarcane in El Salvador.