



INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMME ON THE ELIMINATION OF CHILD LABOUR
SAFETY AND HEALTH FACT SHEET
HAZARDOUS CHILD LABOUR IN AGRICULTURE
COFFEE



BACKGROUND

Coffee is a major cash export crop and a key source of foreign exchange and employment for many countries. The value of the international coffee trade is second only to petroleum. Coffee farms and plantations are found in more than 70 tropical and subtropical countries throughout Asia, Africa and Latin America: the main producers are Brazil, Colombia and Vietnam.

At least 25 million people in the producing countries depend directly on coffee for their livelihoods - especially small producers.

Between January 1998 and December 2003 the price of coffee on the world market fell by more than half. Coffee producers, who are mostly smallholders, have often had to sell their coffee beans for much less than the cost of production. As a result, many smallholder farmers and their families have fallen below, or further below, the poverty line.

Producer-country exports capture less than 10% of the value of the coffee market, compared with 33% ten years ago. Falling coffee prices have destroyed the livelihoods of an estimated 25 million coffee producers globally. The steep decline in coffee prices has increased the pressure on producers to cut labour costs by using child labour, including family members.

Coffee is a tropical, perennial, bush crop, grown for its beans. Coffee growing includes soil preparation, sowing the seeds in nurseries, and transplanting, mulching and fertilizing, manual weeding and pruning, applying pesticides, irrigation, picking the berries and field processing. Field processing can use either the dry method or the wet method. The dry method involves drying the whole fruit in the sun after which the beans are separated from the pulp. It is the oldest and simplest method, requiring labour but little machinery. The wet method involves washing the fruits in tanks filled with flowing water. Machinery is used to remove the pulp from the beans before the drying stage. Coffee produced by this method is usually regarded as being of better quality and commands higher prices. Finally, the dried beans are bagged, stored in silos and transported to the processors.

Since large numbers of workers are required during the harvest, and very few during the rest of the year, seasonal labour contracts are usually the norm. Plantation owners hire - but often do not legally register - a large number of seasonal workers, who may bring their families to help earn a piece rate wage. The overall workforce composition varies by country, though women and children form an increasingly large proportion of workers on coffee plantations.

Children are engaged in all aspects of coffee production and are especially busy during harvest times. They begin to help their parents as soon as they are old enough to reach the lower branches of coffee trees and to recognize the berries which are ripe for picking. In addition to picking and sorting coffee berries, children often prune coffee trees, weed and fertilize the trees, sort coffee beans, and transport beans or other supplies.

MAJOR SAFETY AND HEALTH HAZARDS

- Injuries from cutting tools ranging from skin abrasions and minor cuts to severe wounds
- Injuries from contact with, or entanglement in, unguarded machinery or from being hit by motorized vehicles
- Hearing loss or impairment due to noisy machinery
- Musculoskeletal injuries from repetitive and forceful movements, and lifting and carrying heavy or awkward loads
- Poisoning and long term health problems from pesticide use or exposure
- Respiratory problems due to exposure to coffee dust
- High levels of sun exposure which can result in skin cancer and heat exhaustion;
- Snake and insect bites
- Long working hours
- Stress.

THE SCALE OF THE CHILD LABOUR PROBLEM

We have mentioned the various hazards that children face in coffee production. Here are some specific examples from around the world.

A 2003 IPEC assessment of coffee producers in Costa Rica determined that child labour is found on both large coffee plantations and family farms. Children worked eight hours or more per day and were exposed to some of the most toxic categories of pesticide.

A 1995 US Department of Labor report revealed that in Guatemala children as young as six years old help their parents harvest coffee. Boys carry sacks weighing between 34 and 68 kilograms for several kilometres to weighing stations. Women and children, hired as temporary workers for less pay, are quickly replacing men, who traditionally picked coffee on plantations as permanent employees.

The same report described six year-old children working on coffee plantations in Honduras during planting and harvesting seasons. During the planting season, which runs from June to August, chil-

dren make up approximately 20% of the labour force. In the harvesting season, which runs from November to February, this proportion rises as high as 40%.

Approximately 80 to 90% of the children work with their parents and are paid adult wages.

The report also discussed the situation in Kenya where children usually assist their mothers, who are paid on a piece rate basis. While some child workers live on plantations, most either walk to work or are picked up by trucks between 05:30 and 06:30 and returned between 17:00 and 19:00.

An IPEC assessment of child labour in Tanzania, published in 2002, showed that child workers are regularly recruited in the coffee growing areas during the picking season, and 60% of the working children were girls aged between ten and 14.

Children worked on average between eight and 10 hours per day, depending on the season;

Children work in the fields picking, pruning, spraying, and weeding without any protective clothing or equipment. Other hazards included snake and insect bites, and attacks by wild animals.

Approximately, 40% of the world's population regularly drinks coffee: 2 billion cups a day, of which only a quarter are consumed in the coffee-producing countries themselves. Five big coffee roasters each have sales of more than USD 1 billion annually. Together they buy almost half the world's coffee beans.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC)
International Labour Office
4, route des Morillons
CH-1211 Geneva 22
Switzerland

Web: www.ilo.org/childlabour
Email: hazardouschildlabour@ilo.org
Tel: (+41) (0) 22 799 81 81
Fax: (+41) (0) 22 799 87 71