



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



BACKGROUND

Oil palm trees are cultivated in vast plantations in tropical regions throughout the world. Oil palm fruits grow four to five metres above the ground, along thorny leaf fronds. Fruit bunches, made up of thousands of oval-shaped fruits, weigh between 15 and 25 kilograms. Trees start to produce fruit after four to five years and reach the highest productivity rate when they are 20 to 30 years old.

The major oil palm producers are Malaysia (50% of world production), Indonesia (almost 30%), along with Cambodia, India, Philippines, Solomon Islands, and parts of Africa and Latin America.

The principal products are kernel oil and palm oil. Kernel oil, obtained from the nut, is used in foodstuffs such as cooking oil, margarine, cream, and pastry. Palm oil from the fleshy part of the fruit is used in industrial products such as cosmetics, soap, detergents and candles.

Oil palm cultivation includes sowing seeds, transplanting seedlings, harvesting, and transporting fruit bunches. Children primarily collect loose fruit, help carry and load bunches of oil palm fruit, and weed the oil palm fields. Men and, sometimes, boys cut fruit bunches down from trees using a long and heavy pole with a knife on the end (a “Malay”) or by climbing them to harvest the fruit directly. The use of the Malay puts a lot of strain on the musculoskeletal system. Girls and women are responsible for gathering and moving the fruit bunches. Child labour helps families meet daily fruit quotas of between one and two tonnes.

MAJOR SAFETY AND HEALTH HAZARDS

- Falling from trees
- Being hit by falling fruit bunches
- Injuries from cutting tools ranging from minor cuts to severe wounds
- Skin abrasions due to contact with oil palm fruit, and thorns (which can become permanently lodged in the hands)
- Eye damage from falling palm fronds
- Poisoning and long term health effects from pesticide use or exposure
- Musculoskeletal injuries from repetitive and forceful movements, and lifting and carrying heavy or awkward loads
- High levels of sun exposure which can result in skin cancer and heat exhaustion
- Long working hours
- Stress
- Snake and insect bites (especially mosquitoes and fire caterpillars, an oil palm pest)

THE SCALE OF THE CHILD LABOUR PROBLEM

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

The US Department of Labor reported in 1995 that:

- An estimated 60% of the children working on oil palm plantations in Malaysia were between six and ten years old.
- Juvenile workers were often not directly employed, but engaged through the contract system to spray, weed, and stack oil palm fronds on a piece-rate basis. Managers retained no responsibility for child workers not in direct employment.
- To reduce costs, contractors hired children at less than one US dollar for six to eight hours of labour. The prevailing adult wage rate was two to three dollars.
- Children started work as early as 05:30 and returned home not earlier than 15:00.
- Menial work for girls was longer than for boys. Girls performed domestic work as well as plantation work, especially when their mothers were employed on the plantations.
- With an ageing estate labour force, work by children was seen as a means to transmit some “skills” so that young people will be able to work

and take care of their elders.

- Only 16% of the plantations provided schooling.
- 78% of estate children drop out of primary school. Only 0.4% completed secondary education. Drop-outs then join the pool of unskilled workers.

A 2002 IPEC research study of 75 hazardous child labourers on oil palm plantations in Indonesia found that:

- 85% worked as palm pickers, collecting loose palm fruits, carrying sacks of palm fruits to carts, and pushing carts to a collection site.
- The average load carried was 10 kilograms over a distance of 250 metres.
- Nearly 75% did not have gloves, and most had suffered cuts, scratches and abrasions.
- Nearly 90% had no training before working.
- 68% experienced heat exhaustion at a “heavy heat stress level”.
- Average working time was more than four hours per day, without any regular break time.
- Over half worked because their parents ordered them to.
- Nine out of ten children were paid in cash, but parents received 84% of children’s earnings.
- Just over half of the children spent between 30 and 60 minutes travelling between their homes and the plantation.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

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