



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



BACKGROUND

Sugar is both a global commodity and a staple food in some countries. The world's total sugar output rose from 73 million tonnes in 1970 to 136 million tonnes in 2002, and sugarcane is a major source. Sugarcane is grown mainly in Asia, South America and the Caribbean. South American production is dominated by Brazil and an increasingly efficient Colombian industry. Asian production is split among some 40 countries, including India and China.

Sugarcane is a perennial crop that is cultivated in tropical and sub-tropical regions. Its thick stalks reach six to seven metres in height, forming a dense canopy. The cane is harvested for its sap from which sugar is processed. By-products include molasses and bagasse. Molasses is used in the production of rum and other alcohols, as well as livestock feed. Bagasse, the waste fibrous residue, is used principally in paper and wallboard production and as a heating fuel source. It is used to a lesser extent in the production of chemicals, plastics, paints, synthetics, fibre, insecticides and detergents.

Sugarcane growing includes preparing the land for planting, planting new cane setts (pieces of cane, 45 centimetres long), applying fertilizer and pesticides, irrigation, weeding and harvesting. Fields are often burnt prior to harvest (without destroying the cane) to eliminate weeds and destroy snakes and other pests. The cane is usually cut by hand using machetes, though machine harvesters are also used. The cane, which is heavy to carry, is then stacked at the edge of the field awaiting transport by vehicle to the sugar mill for processing.

Children help with all aspects of growing and harvesting; tasks vary by region, age, and sex.

An increasingly apparent trend concerns the commercial relations between large multinational enterprises (MNEs) with large sugar plantations, and smaller, "outgrower" farmers in the regions of their operations. The outgrowers are contracted by the sugar companies to grow cane which the MNE-owned factories process in their mills. In some cases, MNEs provide bulk-purchased inputs such as fertilizers and technical soil tests, as well as the transportation of harvested cane from outgrowers to the factory. The outgrower farmers often hire children as part of the labour force.

MAJOR SAFETY AND HEALTH HAZARDS

- Injuries from machetes ranging from minor cuts to severing of body parts
- Cuts and abrasions from cane leaves, stalks and stumps
- Musculoskeletal injuries from repetitive and forceful movements, and lifting and carrying heavy or awkward loads
- Poisoning and long term health problems from using or being exposed to pesticides
- Injuries from contact with, or entanglement in unguarded machinery or being hit by motorized vehicles
- High levels of sun exposure which can result in skin cancer and heat exhaustion
- Respiratory problems from smoke
- Snake and insect bites
- Long working hours and stress

THE SCALE OF THE CHILD LABOUR PROBLEM

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

A 1995 US Department of Labor report revealed that in Brazil:

- On one plantation, over half the children had suffered some type of occupational accident. Knife wounds on the arms, hands and legs accounted for over 85% of the accidents. Other health problems included respiratory, skin, and stomach problems; back, leg, and arm pain; headaches from prolonged exposure to the sun; conjunctivitis; and mental and physical stress from having to meet high daily production quotas. Repeated injuries can cause irreparable damage, limiting the ability of labourers to work later in life.
- Roughly 90% of the children and 40% of the adults were unregistered workers. Thus, employers generally did not provide children with boots or protective clothing. Most wore rubber sandals or worked barefoot;
- Children were paid much less than adults. Payment was typically made to the head of the household. None of the children received any formal training; they usually acquired their skills from family members;
- Over 40% of the children worked more than 40 hours per week. On one plantation, children woke up at 04:00 and went to work without eating breakfast. They carried candles with them so they could work in the pre-dawn hours.

In the Dominican Republic many parents bring their children to work, where they may perform a variety of tasks, including the application of fertilizers. Many workers are Haitians and they are not considered part of the Dominican workforce. So, labour inspectors may not record Haitian children when they are found working.

A 2002 IPEC investigation of working conditions in El Salvador showed that:

- Children work very long days, waking at 05:00. Those who

went to school finished work around midday, while others continued working until 15:00 or 16:00. On average, boys worked for five hours and girls six hours. Girls were engaged in preparing the land and planting the sugarcane. Boys cut the harvested canes, sliced them into smaller pieces, and fumigated the fields with chemical pesticides;

- Children typically did not wear gloves or any other kind of protective clothing. Only few wore shoes. Exposure to scorching sun was a problem as there were few or no trees to provide shade on most plantations.
- Injuries from cutting instruments such as machetes were the most common ones. Agricultural tools were often too heavy and awkward for children to use properly, resulting in injuries, back, shoulder, neck and arm problems. Other health complaints included blisters, headaches, respiratory problems, and eye irritations.

In the Philippines, children weeded, cut cane, and applied fertilizers. In one area, children began to weed at seven or eight years of age, and began to cut the cane at age 12. Health problems ranged from injuries from using sharp knives to pesticide poisoning.

A trade union investigation into child labour in Mayuge district, Eastern Uganda, conducted in 2002 found that children who worked on outgrower sugar farms were involved in cutting cane, tying it into bundles of ten, transporting them to the roadside from fields, and putting them into heaps of 50 bundles. The children were paid Uganda shillings 700 per heap (less than 50 cents US) and on average could only make two heaps in a 12-hour day. The problems faced by these children included exposure to hazardous pesticides, cuts and abrasions from cane trash, injuries from lifting heavy loads, long working hours, over-exposure to rains and hot sun, and snake and insect bites. The investigation further noted the incidence of harsh supervision.

A 2002 IPEC investigation in Bolivia revealed a number of health and safety problems. These included accidents from machetes when cutting cane, the risk of snake bites, work days of up to 12 hours, and psychological problems arising from the piece rate nature of the work. The long working hours were compounded by the travelling time to and from the fields.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

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