



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



BACKGROUND

Tea is one of the major cash crops of the world, and the chain of production and distribution is global. However, world tea prices have fallen dramatically over the last few years: the global price index for tea declined by 25% between 1998 and 2001 alone. The result has been the impoverishment of many workers and farmers, and increased pressure to use child labour.

Tea is a perennial crop and the bushes are long-lived. Tea growing requires a protected, well-drained habitat in a warm climate with ample rainfall, and it is often grown at altitude. Irrigation is necessary during dry periods. The major producers are China, India, Kenya, Malawi, South Asia and Latin America. Tea is most efficiently and economically produced in large plantations. Five kilograms of green tea produce one kilogram of processed, black tea.

Tea growing is labour intensive and includes preparing land for new bushes, transplanting seedlings, applying mulch around the bushes to conserve soil moisture, applying fertilizer, manual weeding coupled with an increasing use of chemical herbicides (pesticides), and leaf plucking. When the plants are two years old, they are pruned to form a flat top: only leaves growing above this level are plucked. Workers pluck the leaves by hand and put them into baskets that they carry on their backs. Plucking is a year round activity but is most intense during the rainy season(s). The tea leaves are then transported to factories for processing.

During harvesting, a large number of seasonal workers are hired, but often not legally registered. In India over 1.5 million workers work on tea plantations. In Africa, male migrant and seasonal labour represent the majority of workers, while in Asia women constitute over half the workforce. Children often come to the fields with their parents and pluck leaves and help carry crops. In doing this, they are often not considered as employed labourers on the plantation.

MAJOR SAFETY AND HEALTH HAZARDS

- Cuts to hands, legs and feet from the sharp edges of tea leaves
- Falls, sprains, fractures, bruises, cuts, and burns especially during clearing, uprooting, and pruning
- Musculoskeletal injuries from repetitive and forceful movements, bending, and lifting and carrying heavy or awkward loads
- Injuries from cutting tools
- Exposure to harsh climatic conditions
- Snake and insect bites
- Poisoning and long term health problems from pesticide use or exposure
- Long hours of work
- Stress and harassment by supervisors

THE SCALE OF THE CHILD LABOUR PROBLEM

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

The US Department of Labor reported in 1995 that on some plantations in Brazil:

- Workers were not formally registered, and the cost of provided meals and pesticides were deducted from their pay;
- Children were exposed to pesticides. They were not supplied with protective clothing or equipment to protect them from the sun or snakes in the fields;
- No schools were located near the plantations.

The same report, in covering India, revealed that there were children who would be born, live and die on the tea estates. They traditionally began working by helping their parents pluck and sort tea leaves, and by carrying baskets of harvested tea. Once they reached the age of 12, they were given their own basket, earning half of what an adult labourer earned.

Finally, the report revealed that estates in Zimbabwe employed a large number of children, often ten to 12 years old, on part-time and piece-rate bases. They began work at 05:30, walked five to eight kilometres to the tea fields, and plucked tea leaves until school began at 13:00. If they failed to pluck the minimum daily load, they were forced to work on Saturday as a punishment.

Clinic staff reported frequent cases of children with abdominal pains and cuts on their hands, legs, and

feet from the sharp edges of the tea leaves.

A 1996-1997 survey by the Employer's Federation of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) of 161 tea estates "employing" 2,070 child labourers between the ages of 14 and 16, found that the main safety and health hazards were unguarded machinery, exposure to fertilizers and pesticides, accidents due to uneven and sloping terrain in the fields, and exposure to extreme weather conditions.

In 2002, IPEC conducted an assessment of tea estates in Lushoto and Rungwe districts of Tanzania. The main findings were:

- Children were working without proper clothing to protect them against the rain, cold weather, the terrain or snake bites. They had no warm clothing, raincoats or boots, as a result of which they suffered from cold related health problems, especially during heavy rains. Due to lack of boots, they also suffered leg injuries from thorns and protruding tea stumps.
- Their basic clothes were always dirty, which increased the risk of infection.
- The average working day for children engaged in plucking and carrying green tea leaves was eight hours.
- 13 year olds carried up to 20 kilograms of green tea leaves, and 14 year olds up to 30 kilograms, from the fields to the weighing stations, often for distances between one and four kilometres.
- In Rungwe district, they were exposed to toxic herbicides (a class of pesticides).
- Sexual harassment of girls was reported as a problem.

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