



**International Labour Organization
International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC)**

**El Salvador
Child Labour in Sugarcane:
A Rapid Assessment**

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Preface

Unacceptable forms of exploitation of children at work exist and persist, but they are particularly difficult to research due to their hidden, sometimes illegal or even criminal nature. Slavery, debt bondage, trafficking, sexual exploitation, the use of children in the drug trade and in armed conflict, as well as hazardous work are all defined as Worst Forms of Child Labour. Promoting the Convention (No. 182) concerning the Prohibition and immediate action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour, 1999, is a high priority for the International Labour Organization (ILO). Recommendation (No. 190, Paragraph 5) accompanying the Convention states that “detailed information and statistical data on the nature and extent of child labour should be compiled and kept up to date to serve as a basis for determining priorities for national action for the abolition of child labour, in particular for the prohibition and elimination of its worst forms, as a matter of urgency.” Although there is a body of knowledge, data, and documentation on child labour, there are also still considerable gaps in understanding the variety of forms and conditions in which children work. This is especially true of the worst forms of child labour, which by their very nature are often hidden from public view and scrutiny.

Against this background the ILO, through IPEC/SIMPOC (International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour/Statistical Information and Monitoring Programme on Child Labour) has carried out 38 rapid assessments of the worst forms of child labour in 19 countries and one border area. The investigations have been made using a new rapid assessment methodology on child labour, elaborated jointly by the ILO and UNICEF¹. The programme was funded by the United States Department of Labor.

The investigations on the worst forms of child labour have explored very sensitive areas including illegal, criminal or immoral activities. The forms of child labour and research locations were carefully chosen by IPEC staff in consultation with IPEC partners. The rapid assessment investigations focused on the following categories of worst forms of child labour: children in bondage; child domestic workers; child soldiers; child trafficking; drug trafficking; hazardous work in commercial agriculture, fishing, garbage dumps, mining and the urban environment; sexual exploitation; and working street children.

To the partners and IPEC colleagues who contributed, through their individual and collective efforts, to the realisation of this report I should like to express our gratitude. The responsibility for opinions expressed in this publication rests solely with the authors and does not imply endorsement by the ILO.

I am sure that the wealth of information contained in this series of reports on the situation of children engaged in the worst forms of child labour around the world will contribute to a deeper understanding and allow us to more clearly focus on the challenges that lie ahead. Most importantly, we hope that the studies will guide policy makers, community leaders, and practitioners to tackle the problem on the ground.



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¹ Investigating Child Labour: Guidelines for Rapid Assessment - A Field Manual, January 2000, a draft to be finalized further to field tests, <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/ipecc/simpoc/guides/index.htm>

Executive Summary

Child labour in agriculture is one of the most common practices found throughout the world. In El Salvador, it is customary for children to accompany their parents to work in the fields. However, some types of work endanger children's physical and psychological integrity and, given their intensity, hinder their physical and intellectual development. Combating the worst forms of child labour is one of the priorities of countries, such as El Salvador, that have signed and ratified Convention No. 182 of the International Labour Organization for the Immediate Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour. Achieving this objective requires that the problem be recognized and studied, and that the political will be forthcoming to ensure compliance with the corresponding legal provisions.

Among the series of rapid assessments financed by IPEC last year concerning the worst forms of child labour is that of boys and girls who work on sugarcane plantations, often accompanying their parents. The characteristics surrounding the cultivation of this crop and the dangers inherent in it are such that, according to the definitions contained in Convention No.182 and Recommendation No.190, it is considered one of the worst forms of child labour.

The overall objective of this study is to obtain information concerning the magnitude, nature, causes and consequences of child labour in the sugarcane industry and to support the development of programmes to combat it. It employs the Rapid Assessment methodology advocated by IPEC and developed jointly by the International Labour Office (ILO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and is structured according to IPEC guidelines.

The specific objectives of the study are:

- To identify and describe the conditions surrounding the work of boys and girls involved in sugarcane cultivation, emphasizing such relevant aspects as quality of life, living conditions, hours of work, income, labour processes and their physical effects, relations with employers, etc.
- To identify the risks involved in harvest work, including the most frequently occurring accidents and illnesses.
- To identify and describe the work carried out by boys and girls during and after the harvest season.
- To explain the legal, social and economic reasons motivating and maintaining this form of child labour.
- To identify some of the characteristics of child workers, including information regarding their families and communities, migration patterns, work history and the factors that push them to work in this sector.

The first part of the report provides an overview of the context of El Salvador and the sugarcane industry. Following this is a presentation of the methodology used, as well as a description of the research findings and their subsequent analysis. Lastly, the report

provides some recommendations for addressing the most important issues relating to child labour in this sector of the economy.

National context

El Salvador is the smallest country in Central America with a surface area of 21,000 square kilometers, a population of nearly 6 million, and a growth rate of 1.7 per cent. It has experienced the effects of a war that lasted more than 10 years, a negotiated peace, a neo-liberal orientation, and recently, two major earthquakes that further aggravated the conditions of poverty in which more than 60 per cent of the population live. Currently, more than one million Salvadorians work outside the country and send remittances back to their families from abroad.

The average age of the population is 24, while an estimated 41.9 per cent is under the age of 18. Some 45.6 per cent live in urban areas, while 54.4 per cent live in rural areas. With respect to gender, 50.9 per cent of the population is female and 49.1 per cent is male.

In 1994 El Salvador ratified 14 ILO Conventions dealing with labour standards and the protection of children from exploitation and risks to their physical, psychological and moral integrity. This year also marked the beginning of IPEC's operations. El Salvador is endowed with a judicial, legal and institutional framework that protects children and guarantees their rights in all circumstances. These principles are laid down in the country's Constitution, Labour Code, and Family Code, and serve as guidelines for the Salvadorian Institute of Child Protection [*Instituto Salvadoreño de Protección al Menor*, ISPM], which was established in 1993.

Statistics concerning child labour in sugarcane cultivation

According to studies carried out by the Salvadorian Sugar Foundation [*Fundación Salvadoreña del Azúcar de El Salvador*, FUNDAZUCAR] and by Radda Barnem, 47.1 per cent of the 233,700 boys and 185,000 girls who worked in 1999 were employed in the agricultural sector. The data compiled for this assessment indicate that an estimated 5,000 boys and girls participate directly in the sugarcane harvest, or *zafra*. According to the sugarcane producers interviewed, children account for between 27 and 30 of every 100 workers in a team, or *cuadrilla*. It is believed that some 25,000 children are indirectly involved in sugarcane cultivation, most often accompanying their parents or relatives and helping them carry out the various tasks related to harvesting.

Characteristics of the sugar-producing sector

Sugarcane is one of three traditional export crops that generate a significant percentage of foreign currency and jobs. Currently, there are about 7,000 sugarcane producers who cultivate a total of approximately 100,000 *manzanas* [one *manzana* is roughly equivalent to 1¾ acres or 0.71 hectares]. Of these, 40.1 per cent are independent producers and 59.2 per cent are partners in one of the 473 cooperatives in the sector or in other partnerships. The cane is processed at 10 mills.

This study was carried out in the six districts of Sonsonate, Santa Ana, La Libertad, San Salvador, San Vicente and San Miguel, where six of the largest mills are located. The mills purchase the output from farmers—either individuals or cooperatives—with whom they negotiate prices and delivery conditions. Many producers travel great distances to deliver their output to a particular sugar mill, whether by agreement, contract or tradition.

General methodology

For the purposes of data collection, three questionnaires were developed: one for children, one for parents, and one for employers. The children were contacted in the plantations early in the morning, parents were visited in their homes, and the owners were consulted in their homes and fields. Interviews were conducted with 146 boys and 22 girls; 30 heads of household (19 men and 11 women) and 30 employers of child workers. Researchers also interviewed persons connected with the sugar sector and with the children, such as teachers and staff of health units located in the sugarcane growing regions. Children and adults were present at all the plantations visited.

Children's working environment

Sugarcane plantations typically offer little shade, since the crop needs plenty of sun. This situation is exacerbated by the practice of burning the cane in order to facilitate the task of cutting and to remove the down from the leaves, or *ajuate*, which is a skin irritant. The mills generally provide very little infrastructure for workers to rest, although some cooperatives do have recreational facilities for the partners' children and there are streams near some of the plantations where children can wash off the sap, sweat and dust clinging to them after a days' work.

Main findings of the investigation

Work

Boys' participation in sugarcane cultivation is higher than that of girls, since men traditionally work in the fields. Of the girls and boys interviewed, 92.7 per cent work near their homes, with the exception of those who travel to San Miguel from other districts, such as Usulután, and who use the public transportation before five o'clock in the morning.

Of the boys and girls interviewed, 68.5 per cent were between the ages of 7 and 14. Boys made up 86.9 per cent of this age group. The age at which 58 per cent of the children began working was between 7 and 10 years old. Ninety-eight per cent of the children get up at five o'clock in the morning and begin their work by helping with household chores. The working day at the plantations starts at six and ends between noon and four o'clock in the afternoon. Girls work an average of six hours per day and boys work an average of five hours. The average number of days worked is 6 days per week for 47.3 per cent of the children, 7 days for 32.7 per cent, and 5 days for 17.9 per cent.

In general, children go to work in the fields with their parents. Some 85.1 per cent of these children receive wages ranging from US \$3.20 to \$3.26 per day. Children who help others, but who are not paid directly by the producer, earn between US \$0.57 and \$2.57 per week. They receive this money from the older children whom they help. Children under age 12 do not receive pay from the owners; however, their parents usually give them some money. Non-remunerated work is considered to be “help”. In addition to the sugarcane harvest, some children perform other types of work the rest of the year. When at home, boys and girls carry out differing domestic chores.

The majority (68.5 per cent) of the boys and girls reported that they gave their earnings to their parents. There were only a few cases in which the child’s income constituted the family’s sole source of sustenance; in most cases, it was only part of the household income.

Work in the plantations is broken down according to gender. The girls sow, pick up the ends of cane that have been cut without burning, stack the cut cane into neat piles for later transportation in tilt-bed trailers, and haul cane. A number of the older girls (36.4 per cent) cut cane. Cutting the cane is facilitated by a technique involving a hook-shaped stick that the children fashion for themselves; they then separate the cane to be cut and fasten it securely before striking so as to deliver a well-aimed blow.

The majority of the boys (65.5 per cent) cut cane. The rest (35.5 per cent) chop the cane into small pieces for various uses, gather and stack cane, and make handles for carrying it to where it will be collected. They also pick up the ends of the cane, comb, fertilize and, in one case, fumigate. The smallest children also sow—although this is considered to be exclusively a girl’s job. Cultural patterns dictate that it is unacceptable for boys to perform less dangerous jobs, such as sowing cane, as this detracts from their masculinity.

The tools used include: *cumas* (a type of curved knife), machetes, hoes, shovels, hooks, rakes, fumigation pumps and files. These tools are dangerous, given their sharp edges, as well as being heavy, since they are made of iron and have wooden handles.

Some employers disapprove of children working, owing to the dangers inherent in the job; 66 per cent feel it is very dangerous and that it requires a high degree of responsibility. Nevertheless, they cannot prevent parents from bringing their children, as the latter must become familiar with the work and learn it well in order to minimize risks.

Education

The harvest period begins when children are on holiday from school and ends 3 months after the start of the school year—a period during which an extreme effort is required of those who both study and work. Once the harvest is over, 22 per cent of the children report working in other remunerated activities. The remaining children help their families.

Of the 168 children interviewed, only 66.1 per cent attend school. Of these, 71.2 per cent are boys and 31.8 per cent are girls. The girls are generally the first to drop out of school when the family faces economic problems or needs help with domestic chores at home. Only 78 per cent of the girls and boys interviewed can read and write; the percentage is higher among children aged 14 to 17.

Of the children interviewed, 27.9 per cent were enrolled in first to third grade, 50.5 per cent in fourth to sixth grade, and 20.7 per cent in seventh to ninth grade. Only one child was enrolled in secondary school. Of those interviewed, 68.5 per cent reported not missing classes, while teachers reported this figure to be, on average, closer to 50 per cent. Most frequently, when children leave school, it is at age 12—the age at which they can be hired. The majority (80 per cent) of parents approved of their children attending school—provided they continued to work. The reason given for dropping out of school was the need to work in order to contribute to the family income.

Health

The exhausting workdays under the sun, the use of sharp tools, exposure to insects, uncomfortable positions, excessive loads to carry, and other factors jeopardize the health of boys and girls. The most frequent afflictions are headaches, back problems, cuts and skin irritations. These problems are treated in 51.4 per cent of the cases at health clinics, and in the remaining cases through private medical consultation, or through an acquaintance, pharmacist, folk healer (or *curandero*), social worker, or cooperative clinic.

The children's inadequate clothing exposes them to wounds from the cane leaves and to skin irritations from the down released by the plants. Given that many children do not wear shoes, they risk stepping on splinters on the ground, or on glass or tin cans, which can cause infections or tetanus. Scars from wounds caused by tools, as well as blisters and calluses were noted on the boys. Other dangers to which children are exposed include: harmful sun rays, since the children do not use any form of protection; dust and ash produced by the burning cane, which can cause respiratory problems and allergies; and, a large number of insects that bother the children at work when their bodies become covered with molasses.

Family environment

In the 30 interviews conducted with parents, researchers learned that family units are composed of an average of four children under the age of 18. Some 64.1 per cent of parents allow their children to work out of economic necessity, and are aware of the dangers involved.

It was found that some 40 per cent of the boys and girls interviewed do not live with both parents. The main reasons given were abandonment by the father (32.9 per cent) and death of the father (20.5 per cent).

The ages of the parents interviewed ranged from 31 to 40. Some had begun working as early as age 5 and two-thirds had begun working before age 12, so it is no surprise that they reproduced the same pattern in their own families. In general, 80 per cent of the heads of family (male and female) are married or live with a partner; among widowed or separated heads of household, women account for a greater percentage than men. Of the fathers interviewed, 75 per cent can read and write; among mothers, this figure is 50 per cent.

Some 63 per cent of heads of family are day labourers, 17 per cent are peasant farmers, 3 per cent are bricklayers and 17 per cent work in whatever jobs they can find. Mothers limit themselves to domestic chores and raising animals. The employment contracts of 93 per cent of the heads of family (whether male or female) are temporary. The latter are paid in cash on a bi-weekly basis, and for the most part receive no extra benefits.

Half the heads of family interviewed live in rented housing. Only 13 per cent own their own home, while the rest live with relatives. About 50 per cent of the homes are supplied with well water or with water from another source; two-thirds have electricity and latrines. Some 66 per cent are made of adobe and *bajareque* (walls made of cane plastered with mud and chopped straw) and have a single room.

In spite of the harshness of the work and the adverse conditions in which children live, they nevertheless expressed the desire to overcome their situation and hope to work in other jobs when they are older: the girls want to be secretaries, seamstresses, teachers, doctors, cosmetologists, housekeepers and *maquila* (or in bond industry) workers. The boys would like to become engineers, tractor mechanics, agronomists, doctors, teachers, electricians and drivers, among others. The pastimes of the boys are playing ball, flying kites made of air-filled plastic bags and swimming in the river. The girls like to play in the river when they go there to wash clothes.

Main recommendations

- Form a multidisciplinary working team, composed of members from the public and private sectors and from non-profit NGOs, whose mission would be to carry out initiatives aimed at eliminating child labour in the sugarcane industry.
- Develop a programme to encourage cane producers and families to gradually eliminate child labour in sugarcane.
- Support initiatives through *Programas de Servicio y Proyección Social* (community service projects carried out by university students) and design local development projects in the sector.
- Develop a plan of action specifying the steps necessary for eliminating children's involvement in the sugarcane sector and provide alternatives to children and their families.
- Monitor compliance with current legislation and with instruments addressing child labour issues.
- Establish and publicize a code of principles for strengthening efforts to eliminate child labour, keeping in mind that this should be a gradual process.

- Solicit the support of health units and educational centres to obtain statistical data concerning specific cases of children working in the sugarcane harvest.

The full text of this report is available in Spanish at
<http://www.ilo.org/public/spanish/standards/ipecc/simpec/elsalvador/ra/cane.pdf>