



## Family farms and child labour

Many children work on their parents' farm or holding, or those of close relatives, often on a regular basis after school, at weekend, during school holidays, or even full time even though they are still not of the minimum age to work legally. In some countries, children are sometimes sent or "loaned" by their parents to live and work on a relative's farm in another part of the country.

The family farm is both an enterprise and a homestead on which children and the elderly are likely to be present. In some parts of the world, farm families live in villages surrounded by their farm land. The family farm combines family relationships and childrearing with the production of food and other raw materials.

It is often assumed that family farms are small-scale, subsistence-type enterprises/holdings. In reality, they range from small, subsistence and part-time holdings worked with draught animals and hand tools to very large, commercial, family-held corporations with numerous full-time employees. The terms "commercial agriculture" and "family farm" therefore are *not* mutually exclusive.

Similarities between child labour in commercial agriculture and subsistence agriculture:

- Much of the children's work involves heavy labour
- Work often involves carrying heavy loads
- Working hours are long
- Some of the work is detrimental to schooling
- There is seasonal, higher demand for work, e.g. harvesting

The size and type of operations determine the demand for labour from family members and the need for hired full-time or part-time/casual

workers. A typical farm operation may combine the tasks of crop production and harvesting, livestock rearing and handling, manure disposal, and grain and crop storage. It may also require the use of heavy equipment, pesticide and fertilizer application, machinery maintenance, construction and many other jobs.

It is often assumed that family-based work in rural surroundings cannot possibly be harmful to children – indeed that this type of family solidarity is entirely beneficial. However, it cannot automatically be assumed that children working on small family farms do not face risks similar to those faced by children working on larger commercial farms. With the increasing commercialization and industrialization of agriculture and the restructuring of large commercial plantations into smaller individually owned farmed units in a number of countries, the assumption that children who work with their parents are somehow less at risk seems highly questionable. In many countries, small farms produce much or most of the agricultural grains and, or, fresh produce, and they may be mechanized and make heavy use of pesticides. Small farms, for example, are as likely as larger commercial enterprises to misuse chemicals due to lack of education and training in their handling.

As agriculture in many countries has become increasingly market and export-oriented, the intensification of production has both broadened the range of hazards and heightened the degrees of risk for all workers – child and adult alike.

The "family farm" element in agriculture, which is universal and bound up with culture and tradition, often makes it difficult to acknowledge that children can be systematically exploited in such a setting. The fact that children work on family farms can be perceived as "family

solidarity". Although this can be the case, it is important to take a closer look and examine working conditions (which may well be hazardous) and the amount of time that may be devoted to work and thereby lost to education, particularly by girls.

**International Labour Organisation (ILO)**

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

[www.ilo.org/childlabour](http://www.ilo.org/childlabour)

