



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



BACKGROUND

Tobacco is a valuable cash crop, and is the most widely grown non-food crop in the world. It is produced in approximately 100 countries and on every continent. It is an annual plant, reaching a height of one to one and half metres and is grown for its leaves. High quality tobacco requires a warm climate and rich, well-drained soil, and so most of the world's tobacco is grown in tropical and sub-tropical areas.

Tobacco production is labour-intensive and includes clearing bushes and thickets, levelling termite mounds, mechanical or manual field cultivation to create ridges for the crop, sowing seeds in the nursery and later transplanting the seedlings in the field, irrigation and watering, weeding, and the application of pesticides. Harvesting takes place over several weeks and is generally performed by hand, although machines are used in the more heavily industrialized countries such as Canada and the USA. After harvesting, the leaves are cured in barns using hot air and smoke from fires passed along large pipes called flues. This process takes several days and must be constantly supervised. The cured leaves are then graded and bundled before being machine compressed and baled in waterproof tobacco paper lined with tar. The paper is highly inflammable.

MAJOR SAFETY AND HEALTH HAZARDS

- Injuries from cutting tools ranging from minor cuts to severe wounds
- Injuries from contact with, or entanglement in, unguarded machinery or being hit by motorized vehicles
- Poisoning and long term health problems from using or being exposed to pesticides
- Musculoskeletal injuries from repetitive and forceful movements, bending, and lifting and carrying heavy or awkward loads
- Heat exhaustion
- High levels of sun exposure which can result in skin cancer
- Snake and insect bites
- Green tobacco sickness can make workers nauseous. It is caused by nicotine and other substances being absorbed through the skin from contact with wet tobacco leaves.

THE SCALE OF THE CHILD LABOUR PROBLEM

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

A summary of studies by the Foundation for the Elimination of Child Labour in Tobacco revealed the following facts about tobacco production in Malawi:

- On tobacco estates, 78% of children between ten and 14 years of age work either full-time or part-time with their parents. One in five children less than 15 years old worked full-time and a similar number worked part-time. Children are usually not employed directly on the estates but work to fill quotas as part of a tenant family: without the child labour, the family cannot meet the quota.
- A study in Thyolo district found that children between six and 14 years of age accounted for 8% of all regularly working household members in male-headed households and 29% in female-headed households.
- About 43% of the estates have children as direct labourers; 46% engaged children as casual labourers. Only 8% of owners and managers provided wage rate information for child employees working as direct labourers; 15% provided wage rate information for children employed as casual labourers.
- There seems to be no discrimination between male and female children as far as child labour is concerned.

An IPEC study in 2001 of tobacco growing in Iringa and Urambo districts, Tanzania, found that:

- Children lacked protective equipment, including warm clothing during the rainy and cold seasons. Due to the lack of boots, they were injured by thorns and tree stumps (especially when walking barefoot to fell trees in thorny woods in order to get logs for curing tobacco). They suffered from headaches, fevers, nose bleeds, and sunburns from scorching sun, as well as from fungal infections on toes and fingers through working in stagnant water.
- The two main sources of accidental injury were fires during

curing and the use of sharp implements. Fires resulted in burns and even fatalities. General health effects included eye inflammation, coughs and tuberculosis due to tobacco fumes and smoke from burning logs in curing sheds, dry skin and anaemia from exposure to excessive heat, other skin problems from using bare hands to apply chemical fertilizers, and chest pains and respiratory problems from inhaling fertilizer dust.

- They carried out repetitive work, such as hoeing.
- Carrying water for the seedbeds in Urambo district often involved children walking five to ten kilometres.
- Children regularly worked from eight to 14 hours a day, with shifts of 18 to 20 hours during harvest time as they worked in the fields during the day and in the barns curing tobacco throughout the night.

A 2002 IPEC assessment of working conditions in Lebanon showed that at least a quarter of the children working on tobacco plantations had been injured at least once during their work. Cuts were the most common source of injury as the children do not have gloves or special work clothes: this was especially prevalent among children under five years of age while putting the tobacco leaves on threads using special steelheads.

Children walked long distances to the fields, taking 15 to 30 minutes for the journey, and were afraid of insects and snakes during their walks through the fields. They worked an average of six hours per day.

A US Department of Labor report, published in 1995, revealed that children working on tobacco plantations in Zimbabwe were exposed to heat and fire from boilers as well as steam, smoke, and dust from drying sheds. Those planting and weeding tobacco were also exposed to ethylene dibromide, a toxic pesticide.

The same report mentioned that in South Africa, children on tobacco farms were seen spreading pesticides with their bare hands and that many of the children working in Brazil's Santa Cruz do Sul, the "national capital of tobacco", were children of migrant workers. They sorted tobacco leaves and sprayed pesticides to help their families increase daily earnings.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT:

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