



# INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMME ON THE ELIMINATION OF CHILD LABOUR

## SAFETY AND HEALTH FACT SHEET

### HAZARDOUS CHILD LABOUR IN AGRICULTURE

## AN OVERVIEW



## BACKGROUND

The majority of child labour is found in agriculture, whether in subsistence farming or commercial agriculture. These children often undertake what is termed “hazardous child labour”, that is work that could result in them being killed, injured or made ill. Children - defined as those under the age of 18 - should not undertake hazardous work.

Agriculture is one of the three most dangerous sectors in which to work along with construction and mining. However, there are no figures for work-related child fatalities, accidents or ill health in agriculture. The ILO estimates, though, that some 22,000 children are killed every year at work. Furthermore, every year there are 270 million work-related accidents and 160 million cases of ill health due to work: it is clear that child labourers figure amongst these statistics.

Although these figures give an idea of the magnitude of the problem, official data on the incidence of occupational accidents and diseases are imprecise and notoriously underestimated in many sectors, irrespective of the level of development of the country. This situation is more acute with regard to occupational diseases. Accidents can be readily identified at the moment they occur, while occupational diseases require medical diagnosis.

The long-term goal must be the elimination of all forms of hazardous child labour in agriculture. The key priorities are to prevent children from starting hazardous work, and the removal of children from existing hazardous workplaces and their placement into schools and/or skills training. However, the reality is that many children continue to work in hazardous and unhealthy conditions and so are at risk. Therefore, while this situation persists, we need to prevent and reduce child deaths, accidents and ill health at work. This fact sheet provides relevant information on this issue.

## THE NATURE OF AGRICULTURAL WORK

Agricultural child labourers work on all types of undertakings ranging from small- and medium-sized family farms, to large farms, plantations, and agro-industrial complexes. Historically, child labour, either as part of “family teams” or as individual workers, has played a significant part in employment in plantations and commercial agriculture around the world.

Children’s work is often invisible, mainly because they assist their parents in task or piecework. Since this



work is not recognised, nor easily recorded in statistics, it goes largely unnoticed.

Child labour also interferes with children’s schooling and education.

The demand for agricultural labour fluctuates with the seasons and this is reflected in the nature of the workforce. Hours of work tend to be extremely long during planting and harvesting. During rush periods, field work can go from dawn to dusk, with transport time to and from the fields in addition. The intensity of the work offers little chance for rest breaks and the length of the working day offers insufficient time for recuperation.

Much agricultural work is by its nature physically demanding, involving long periods of standing, stooping, bending, and repetitive movements in awkward body positions. The risk of accidents is increased by fatigue, poorly designed tools, difficult terrain, exposure to the elements, poor general health and, often, malnutrition.

Although technological change has brought about a reduction in the physical drudgery of agricultural work in some areas, it has introduced new risks, notably associated with the use of sophisticated machinery and the intensive use of chemicals without appropriate safety and health measures, information and training. Unsurprisingly, the levels of fatal and serious accidents and illnesses are high.

One of the most distinguishing characteristics of agricultural work is that it is carried out in a rural environment where there is no clear distinction between working and living conditions. As a result, agricultural workers, their families, and child workers face extra dangers such as exposure to pesticides from spray drift, as well as pesticide-contaminated water and food.

# CHILD LABOUR AND POVERTY

It is now widely acknowledged that the problem of child labour cannot be tackled in isolation from that of rural poverty, particularly that of waged agricultural workers and small farmers. Basically, children work as cheap labour because their parents don't earn enough to support the family or to send their children to school. The use of child labour creates a cycle of poverty, puts children at risk, and affects their future since their access to education and training is greatly reduced. The prevalence of child labour in agriculture undermines sustainable agriculture and food security as it maintains a cycle where household income is insufficient to meet the needs of families. Measures have to be taken to improve workers' wages and farmers' incomes so that their families earn enough to live on without requiring their children to work.

## HIGH-RISK GROUPS

Two groups are particularly at risk: children of migrant and seasonal workers, and girls.

The children of migrant and seasonal waged workers often work as part of a family team, even though the parent is the only one directly employed on the farm or plantation. This is particularly the case where schools and childcare are unavailable or unaffordable. If families move on a seasonal basis, or the work involves long hours, it can be difficult for children to gain even a basic education. Furthermore, the migrants and their families may be from a foreign country and have little or no knowledge of the local language(s). Children of migrant and seasonal workers often live in substandard housing and have poor welfare and sanitary conditions. They have a higher risk of contracting parasitic and infectious diseases, and malnutrition is not uncommon. Migrant labour camps are often located in or near the fields, and workers' living quarters may be especially exposed during pesticide spraying.

Girls often work in the fields, but also have domestic chores, thus bearing a double burden of work. Lack of affordable childcare and educational opportunities also forces many women to take their children with them to the fields. Children begin helping their mothers from a young age, exacerbating the problems of child labour. Girls may be especially at risk from sexual harassment.

## LEGAL STANDARDS

Eliminating child labour is an essential element in the ILO's goal of "Decent work for all". The policy framework for ILO IPEC's work to eliminate child labour is based on the UN Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (1998); ILO Convention 138 concerning Minimum Age for Admission to Employment, 1973, and its accompanying Recommendation 146; and ILO Convention 182 concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour, 1999, and its accompanying Recommendation 190. Conventions 138 and 182 are two of the ILO's core Conventions and are included within the scope of the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work.

Convention 182 is especially important as it defines the worst forms of child labour which are targeted for abolition. Hazardous child labour is identified as one of the worst forms of child labour in Article 3 (d) as, "work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children". Convention 182 Article 2 states that the term "child" shall apply to all persons under the age of 18.

The aim of eliminating hazardous child labour is supported by ILO Convention 184 on Safety and Health in Agriculture, 2001, which specifies that anyone below the age of 18 should not be involved in dangerous agricultural work. Young workers, 16 to 17 years of age, may carry out certain hazardous tasks but only as part of their training and under strict supervision.



# COMMON HAZARDS IN AGRICULTURE

Whilst children working in agriculture are exposed to broadly the same hazards as adult workers, the risks of them having fatal or non-fatal accidents or suffering ill health are, however, much greater. They are more vulnerable due to a variety of factors: they lack work experience and do not have sufficient knowledge of the hazards and risks they face, nor of risk prevention and control measures. Their bodies and minds are still growing and developing. Frequent awkward or heavy lifting and repetitive strains, for example, can permanently injure growing spines or limbs, especially if poorly designed equipment is being used. Skin, eye, respiratory or nervous problems occur in children exposed to pesticides, and children are vulnerable at much lower levels of exposure than adults. Chronic long-term health effects from exposure to pesticides can remain undetected until the child is an adult. Children may also experience mental conflict because they are expected to work like adults, while still behaving obediently.

## ILL HEALTH/DISEASE - IMMEDIATE AND LONG-TERM

The most common examples of ill health and diseases are:

- Death, poisoning, work-related cancers, and reproductive and behavioural problems arising from exposure to pesticides and other agrochemicals
- diseases passed from animals to humans, such as rabies and bovine tuberculosis
- hearing damage or loss from noisy machinery
- crop and animal dusts, fibres, mists, fumes, gases and vapours, and micro-organisms can cause respiratory and/or skin or eye problems; agricultural workers are frequently affected by asthma at rates above national averages
- poor hygiene and welfare conditions such as the lack of drinking water, washing and toilet facilities, and sub-standard accommodation
- thermal stress and fatigue caused by high temperatures, such as those found in the tropics and in glasshouses, or by low temperatures when working outdoors, in poorly heated or unheated packing/processing areas, or in cold stores

- work-related stress
- violence at work
- harassment by management, supervisors, and other workers
- sexual harassment
- long working hours, lack of days off, or inadequate rest periods
- risks from drugs, alcohol and tobacco
- risk of infection with HIV/AIDS

## ACCIDENTS - FATAL AND NON-FATAL

The most common examples of accidents are:

- cuts and wounds from knives, machetes, crop stubble, and plant stumps
- being struck by a moving vehicle, such as a tractor, harvester, or forklift truck
- being trapped by something falling, collapsing, or overturning, such as bales, crates, and shelving
- falls from a height - from working platforms, ladders, bales, and trees
- slips, trips or falls on the same level, including falling under moving vehicles or trailers
- contact with, or entanglement in, unguarded or poorly guarded machinery
- contact with electricity - due to defective fixed installations or portable tools, extension cables, and so on - resulting in electrocution and/or burns
- asphyxiation in, for example, water, grain, or animal slurry
- injuries from farm animals, including being bitten, butted, gored, or trampled
- musculo-skeletal injuries and disorders due to:
  - handling, lifting and carrying heavy and/or awkward loads and tools
  - repeated movements resulting in repetitive strain injuries
  - poorly designed tools and machinery
- vibration and jolting when working on tractors or other self-propelled machinery
- being bitten by snakes or other poisonous insects, and even attacks by wild animals

## WHAT CAN BE DONE TO TACKLE HAZARDOUS CHILD LABOUR?

Whilst elimination of hazardous child labour in agriculture is the main goal, many children continue to work in dangerous and unhealthy conditions. To improve levels of safety and health protection for these child labourers (pending their removal from the workplace) it is important to work at both the national and the workplace level. In particular, to help agricultural employers, waged agricultural workers, and self-employed farmers to identify hazards, assess the risks arising from them, and to determine and implement appropriate risk prevention and control measures, especially for child labour.

Many children work on small “family farms” - either directly for their parents or for relations - and often face the same hazards and risk levels as children employed in larger enterprises. Small does not automatically mean safer. In many countries, such farms produce much of the agricultural grains and/or fresh produce, and they may be mechanized with small machines and make heavy use of pesticides. Small farms are as likely as larger commercial enterprises, for example, to misuse chemicals, through lack of education and training.

IPEC has established a set of proposals for action for each of the concerned groups:

### Governments

- Draw up, carry out, and periodically review a coherent national policy on safety and health in agriculture which includes laws, programmes, and activities on the elimination of hazardous child labour;
- Establish a mechanism of inter-sectoral coordination among relevant authorities and bodies for the agricultural sector and define their functions and responsibilities;
- Ensure that the minimum age of employment for hazardous work in agriculture is 18;
- Ratify and implement ILO Convention No. 184 on Safety and Health in Agriculture - linked to Conventions 182 and 138;
- Regulate labour contractors and subcontractors who hire and supply labour, especially child labour, to farms and plantations.

### Employers

- Carry out workplace risk assessments identifying hazards, evaluating risks arising from them and determining prevention/control measures;
- Implement the preventive & control measures identified in the risk assessment to ensure that all agricultural activities, workplaces, machinery, equipment, chemicals, tools, and processes under their control are safe and comply with legally prescribed safety and health standards;
- Take immediate steps to stop any operation where there is an imminent and serious danger to safety and health and to evacuate workers as appropriate;

- Ensure good living conditions for the families they employ.

Self-employed farmers with children who are family members working on their farms

- Carry out workplace risk assessments to protect the safety and health of their own children or children of the extended family working on their farms;
- Implement the preventive and control measures identified in the risk assessment to ensure that all agricultural activities, workplaces, machinery, equipment, chemicals, tools, and processes under their control are safe and comply with legally prescribed safety and health standards;
- Take immediate steps to stop any operation where there is an imminent and serious danger to safety and health and to evacuate their family members as appropriate.

### Trade unions

- Negotiate no child labour clauses - including labour supplied by contractors and subcontractors - in collective bargaining agreements with employers;
- Use union education and training courses to (i) raise awareness of the child labour problem; and (ii) identify what union members, worker representatives, and officials can do to improve workplace safety and health standards for children;
- Strengthen the roles of worker safety & health representatives and worker representatives on joint worker-management safety and health committees in preventing or reducing child fatalities, injuries and ill health;
- Play an active role in national, tripartite safety and health committees, programmes etc. to promote the elimination of hazardous child labour.

Research Institutes and Universities could undertake research on the extent of the problem of hazardous child labour in agriculture and the effects of hazardous work on the safety and health of the children involved. Non-governmental organizations could help raise public awareness of the child labour problem and develop programmes to involve communities in protecting childrens' safety and health, and in monitoring and work with governments, ILO, employers, the self-employed, and trade unions on programmes/projects to eliminate the use of child labour in agriculture.

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

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