

Future harvests without child labour

The vast majority of the world's working children are not toiling in factories and sweatshops or working as domestics or street vendors in urban areas. They are working on farms and plantations, often from sun-up to sundown, planting and harvesting crops, spraying pesticides and tending livestock. Peter Hurst of the IPEC Programme describes IPEC action in reducing child labour in agriculture.

01/17/2008

GENEVA – For many, the thought of growing up on a farm evokes images of an idyllic childhood with girls and boys working alongside their parents or grandparents in the fresh air and being taught the values and satisfaction of work. The reality, however, is often altogether different. Around the world today, millions of children are harshly exploited on farms and plantations of all types and sizes, toiling in poor to appalling conditions and performing dangerous jobs with little or no pay. Many of these children carry out work that endangers their safety, health and even lives, and deprives them of an education.

When children are forced to work long hours in the fields, their ability to attend school or skills training is limited, preventing them from gaining education that could help lift them out of poverty in the future. Girls are particularly disadvantaged, as they often undertake household chores following work in the fields.

Irrespective of age, agriculture is one of the three most hazardous sectors – along with mining and construction – in terms of fatalities, accidents and ill health. According to ILO statistics, half of all fatal accidents occur in agriculture (ILO, 2000, p. 3), the potential hazards are numerous and levels of risk high. In many situations, children are forced to work long hours, use sharp tools designed for adults, carry loads too heavy for their immature bodies and operate dangerous machinery. They are exposed to toxic pesticides, diseases and harsh weather. They may also work in unsanitary conditions and suffer harassment and psychological abuse. The list goes on and on.

Not all work that children undertake in agriculture is bad for them or would qualify as work to be eliminated under the ILO Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138), or the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182). Age-appropriate tasks that are of lower risk and do not interfere with a child's schooling and right to leisure time are not at issue here. Indeed, many types of work experience for children can be positive, providing them with practical and social skills for work as adults. Improved self-confidence, self-esteem and work skills are attributes often detected in young people engaged in some aspects of farm work. The ILO, in partnership with international agricultural organizations, is promoting decent youth employment in agriculture (see sidebar).

Promoting decent youth employment in agriculture

A key element of IPEC's work is promoting youth employment in agriculture within a decent work framework as a means of reducing child labour. The creation of youth employment in this sector could help end child labour, promote rural employment and development, and help reduce poverty by raising incomes. But many young persons do not want to work in agriculture because the pay is often low, the hours are long, the work is arduous and dangerous and career prospects are perceived as minimal.

To attract youth (15+) into this sector, the work must be based on appropriate training, good employment and career opportunities, decent employment conditions with decent levels of remuneration and good health and safety standards. The challenge will be to put these conditions and standards in place. Another issue that will need to be addressed is how to find safe and creative ways for youths who have attained the minimum age for employment (as defined in ILO Convention No. 138) to work in agriculture without it interfering with education.

Child labour is another matter, however, and given the inherently hazardous nature of many types of agricultural work, the line between what is acceptable work and what is not is easily crossed. This problem is not restricted to developing countries – it can occur in industrial countries as well. Whether child labourers work on their parents' farms, are hired to work on the farms or plantations of others, or accompany their migrant farm-worker parents, the hazards and levels of risk they face can be worse than those for adult workers. Because children's bodies and minds are still growing and developing, exposure to workplace hazards can be more devastating and long lasting for them, resulting in lifelong disabilities. Exposure to pesticides and other agrochemicals, for example, is particularly harmful to children. And children's inexperience and lack of mature judgement can heighten their risk of accidents and other types of physical and psychological harm.

While great progress has been made in many countries in reducing child labour in many sectors, a number of factors have made agricultural child labour a particularly difficult one to tackle. These include: large numbers, starting work young, the hazardous nature of the work, lack of regulation, the invisibility of their work, denial of education, the effects of poverty, and ingrained attitudes and perceptions about the roles of children in rural areas.

“The rural sector is often characterized by lack of schools, schools of variable quality, problems of retaining teachers in remote rural areas, lack of accessible education for children, poor/variable rates of rural school attendance, and lower standards of educational performance and achievement,” says Michele Jankanish, Director of ILO-IPEC. “Children may also have to walk long distances to and from school. Even where children are in education, school holidays are often built around the sowing and harvesting seasons.”

The ILO Global Report: The end of child labour: Within reach, which was discussed and endorsed by governments and employers’ and workers’ organizations at the International Labour Conference in 2006, calls for the elimination of all worst forms of child labour by 2016. Reaching this target will only be possible if greater efforts are made to reduce child labour in agriculture, the economic sector where 70 per cent of working children are found – over 132 million girls and boys aged 5-14 years, many of them engaged in hazardous work.

“For agriculture and rural development to be sustainable, they cannot continue to be based on the exploitation of children in child labour. Unless a concerted effort is put in place to reduce agricultural child labour, it will be impossible to achieve the ILO goal of elimination of all worst forms of child labour by 2016,” concludes Jankanish.

Ways forward

To scale up work on eliminating child labour in agriculture, the ILO has developed a new International Agricultural Partnership for Agriculture Without Child Labour with key international agricultural organizations, namely the:

- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO);
- International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD);
- International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR);
- International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP) – representing farmers/employers and their organizations;
- International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers’ Associations (IUF) – representing workers and their organizations.

International agricultural agencies and organizations can play important roles in eliminating child labour in agriculture, especially hazardous work. These organizations represent an important conduit to the national level because of their close contacts with national ministries or departments of agriculture, agricultural extension services, farmers’ organizations and cooperatives, agricultural producer organizations, agricultural research bodies and other organizations.

Launched on World Day Against Child Labour 2007 with the signing, at the International Labour Conference (ILC), of a Declaration of Intent on Cooperation on Child Labour, the Partnership’s initial objectives are to:

1. Apply laws on child labour
2. Take action to ensure children do not carry out hazardous work in agriculture
3. Promote rural strategies and programmes aimed at improving rural livelihoods, and bring child labour concerns into the mainstream of agricultural policy-making
4. Overcome the urban/rural and gender gap in education
5. Promote youth employment opportunities in agriculture and rural areas

Promoting rural employment as a means of poverty reduction

IPEC is also mainstreaming elimination of child labour in agriculture into the ILO’s report for the 2008 ILC discussion on Promoting rural employment as a means of poverty reduction.

In many instances, rural working children represent a plentiful source of cheap labour. The prevalence of rural child labour, especially in agriculture, undermines decent work and employment for adults and weakens rural labour markets, as it maintains a cycle where household income for both farmers and waged workers is insufficient to meet the economic needs of their families.

Rural poverty also drives girls and boys in the countryside to migrate to towns and cities where they often end up as urban child labourers or urban unemployed or underemployed – exchanging their rural poverty for urban poverty.

Child labour also undermines efforts to promote rural youth employment under decent conditions of work. Children who have reached the minimum legal age for employment in their country (14 years of age upwards) continue to work in exploitative and hazardous child labour with poor future job and economic prospects.

It is now widely acknowledged that child labour cannot be tackled in isolation from addressing the problem of ending rural poverty.

Building the capacity of stakeholders

As a proportion of all IPEC projects and action programmes to date, those focusing specifically on agriculture account for less than 15 per cent. However, several important multi-country pilot projects in commercial agriculture in Africa and Latin America have been carried out in the past five years and a number of other recent IPEC projects in rural areas in these and other regions of the world have components focusing on the elimination of child labour in agriculture (see sidebar).

These agricultural projects have a strong community focus: they generally aim to build the capacities of stakeholder groups to tackle child labour issues, raise awareness at the village/community level and involve community members in activities such as child labour monitoring, for example. The projects also bring in employers' organizations and trade unions wherever possible with a view strengthening social dialogue between these groups. They may also involve non-governmental organizations.

A recent trend in efforts to eliminate child labour in agriculture has been the emergence of multi-stakeholder initiatives concerning a specific crop and involving stakeholders along the food/commodity supply chain for that sector. Some focus mainly on direct action to assist children and their families, awareness raising and capacity building of local agencies. Others concentrate efforts on a national and global level and feature codes of conduct and labelling schemes to pressure exporters and suppliers to ban the use of child labour and monitor its elimination. IPEC has supported several such sectoral alliances in the past few years, including those created in the banana, cocoa, and tobacco industries.

Work with employers and trade unions

IPEC and ACTRAV have been cooperating at field level in Ghana, Kenya and Uganda, in association with national agricultural trade unions, to train groups of farmers and farmworkers as trainers on the elimination of hazardous child labour in agriculture.

The trainers have then run training sessions, and given awareness-raising talks on child labour on their farms, and in their villages and communities for their fellow farmers and villagers, chiefs, district level officials, companies, outreach growers, labour contractors, agricultural producer organizations and so on.

IPEC and ACTEMP have been cooperating on capacity-building of employers' organizations on child labour in commercial agriculture. IPEC has facilitated three training workshops for employers' organizations; the most recent one organized as a joint ACTEMP-IPEC-ILOITC initiative.

Training for employers' staff – especially project staff running national activities on capacity building on child labour in commercial agriculture, but also in sectors such as mining – has been provided for Azerbaijan, Ethiopia, Ghana, Malawi, Moldova, Mali, Mongolia, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Georgia, Kenya, Nepal, Philippines, South Africa, Swaziland, United Republic of Tanzania, Turkey, and Zambia.

Having contributed to the substantial inroads made in eliminating child labour in many other sectors, IPEC is now in a better position to direct its resources at the immense and complex task of eliminating hazardous child labour in agriculture.

Sugaring the pill: IPEC-SIFI partnership

Rudy, from the Philippines, is the fifth in a family of seven children. At 15, he dropped out of school to help his father on the farm. His two elder brothers had died in a tragic accident shortly before.

Rudy felt duty bound to help provide for his younger siblings. "I was afraid that my younger brother and sister would also have to quit school and start work because we didn't have enough money," he says.

According to a survey conducted in 2001, more than 60 per cent of working children aged 5 to 17 work on farms in the Philippines. Many of them work for long hours under the scorching heat of the sun and risk harm from "spading", the local name for the large heavy machete used in cutting sugarcane. They are also exposed to chemicals and fertilizers which they handle with their bare hands.

In 2006, IPEC partnered with the Sugar Industry Foundation, Inc. (SIFI) to address child labour in Western Visayas. SIFI is a foundation in the Philippines where sugar farmers, sugar mill owners and representatives of farm labourers come together to address the concerns of sugar workers.

Under the IPEC-SIFI programme, working children were given technical skills training and scholarships for further schooling while over 100 family members working on sugarcane farms participated in seminars to enhance their business skills.

Rudy joined over 80 others who were given skills training. After a 75-day, on-the-job training in a company that leases heavy equipment for construction work, Rudy was hired by the same company as a mechanic assistant. As Rudy is under age 18, tasks and conditions are still to be monitored since he is not to do dangerous work according to ILO standards on child labour.

But he is no longer afraid that his two siblings may quit school to work in the sugarcane fields. "I am happy that I can give money to my parents to send my younger brother and sister to school," he says.