

The impact of pesticide exposure on child labourers in agriculture

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) held a side event during the conference (on 22 June at 13:00) to highlight the impact of pesticide exposure on children, and child labourers in particular. ILO News spoke to Paola Termine, ILO Technical specialist on child labour in agriculture, who is also coordinating the International partnership for cooperation on child labour in agriculture, ahead of the meeting.

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The Fifth Conference of the Parties to the [Rotterdam Convention](#) is taking place in Geneva from 20 – 24 June. The Conference brings together representatives from all over the world to discuss about pesticides and hazardous chemicals. Agriculture is a sector heavily dependent on the use of pesticides. It is also where many of the world's child labourers are found. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) held a [side event](#) during the conference (on 22 June at 13:00) to highlight the impact of pesticide exposure on children, and child labourers in particular. ILO News spoke to Paola Termine, ILO Technical specialist on child labour in agriculture, who is also coordinating the [International partnership for cooperation on child labour in agriculture](#), ahead of the meeting.

Why are FAO and ILO holding this special side event?

The main purpose of the event is to raise awareness on the use of pesticides and children's greater vulnerability to exposure, which is especially an issue for hazardous work in agriculture. This is a problem that affects both developed and developing countries as pesticides are widely used in agriculture worldwide. Participants to the event, which include FAO, ILO, WHO, IUF and national agriculture, environment and health stakeholders, will discuss ways of improving data collection on exposure to hazardous chemicals and how this information can be used for policy-making. Finally, the idea is to identify synergies between initiatives to improve occupational safety and health, to tackle hazardous child labour, including through the international partnership for cooperation on child labour in agriculture, and the Rotterdam Convention.

What is the Rotterdam Convention?

The Rotterdam Convention on the Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade – commonly known as the Rotterdam Convention – was adopted in 1998 and came into force in 2004. Its objective is to protect human health and the environment from the risks posed by pesticides and industrial chemicals. The Convention establishes a *right to know*, relating to the information concerning hazardous chemicals being traded, and a *capacity to decide* if the country is prepared to handle the risks and hazards of those chemicals. The Rotterdam Convention promotes shared responsibility and cooperative efforts among signatory parties (there are 143 parties signatories to the Convention) in the international trade of certain hazardous chemicals. There are currently 40 chemicals listed in the Convention, and the Conference of Parties decides on the inclusion of new chemicals to the list.

Are children more vulnerable to toxic exposures than adults?

Yes, and for various reasons. Children have a lower tolerance to toxic substances as they breathe, eat and drink more in proportion to their body weight. Their ability to discharge of toxins also differs from adults. Exposure to hazardous chemicals and pesticides can seriously affect their physical and neurological

development. At the same time, children have a lower capacity to assess risks. They may end up playing or working in or close to a pesticide-treated area simply because they are not able to read a sign. This problem becomes more evident when we consider that unfortunately children still constitute a significant part of the rural labour force in many contexts.

Is agriculture the most dangerous sector in this respect?

Agriculture is among the three most dangerous sectors to work in at any age in terms of work-related fatalities, non-fatal accidents and occupational diseases. It is even more dangerous for children. Numbers can help to put this problem into perspective. According to the [ILO's latest estimates](#), there are approximately 215 million child labourers in the world, out of which 115 million are engaged in hazardous work. About 59 per cent (or 68 million) of children engaged in hazardous work are in agriculture, most of them in developing countries. Pesticides are among the most severe hazards children and adults are exposed to in agriculture. It is easy to see why mitigating risks, promoting safer and healthier workplaces, safer technology and progressively reducing pesticide use will improve decent work for adults and the well-being of children.

Can you give us any concrete examples of how children might be exposed to pesticides?

The most visible example is of children working in the fields spraying chemicals. But there are other hazardous situations, for example when mothers spray pesticides with their babies on their back, or when children wash their parents' contaminated working clothes or protective gear and are exposed to residual toxics, or when pesticides are stored at home. Most children suffer from environmental exposure to pesticides by working, living nearby or passing through sprayed fields.

How can the Rotterdam Convention contribute to the elimination of child labour?

The present side event is an important opportunity to explore how synergies between ILO instruments (namely [Convention 138 on Minimum Age](#) and [Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour](#), but also [Convention 187 on the Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health](#) and [Convention 184 on Safety and Health in Agriculture](#)) and the Rotterdam Convention can promote safer and healthier workplaces for all workers and help reduce children's exposure to pesticides and hazardous chemicals. There are many measures that can make a difference. For example, the Rotterdam Convention provides for information exchange between Parties on chemicals and this information could be integrated into Hazardous Work Lists that define at national level those tasks and occupations that are prohibited for children under 18 years of age; more attention to substances that are hazardous for children can be used to protect children from exposure to such substances and safeguard the child's environment. The private sector also has a role to play by providing transparent information and appropriate training to workers, as well as workers' organizations in promoting safer workplaces. However the most important contribution would be through better awareness and collaboration to promote safer agriculture practices and technologies, such as integrated production and pest management, reduction of pesticide use and its progressive elimination, and development of safer alternatives.

How does reduction of the use of hazardous pesticides promote youth employment in agriculture?

Youth who have reached the minimum legal age for employment can be safely employed in agriculture if good safety and health at work are ensured. The elimination or substitution of hazards such as pesticides can help transform hazardous work of children above the minimum age into youth employment.