

Bitter Harvest: Child labour in Agriculture

Fields not factories

Most working children are found toiling in the fields and fisheries of the world, not in factories. This basic fact about child labour is often ignored in favour of an urban and industrial view of what constitutes "child labour". This urban image has its origins in the struggle against child labour in the last century in Europe. But even at the time, most children in Europe were working in the rural areas on family farms, where it was taken for granted. This neglect of agricultural child labour, linked to an unquestioned assumption that children working on farms and in fisheries are less likely to be at risk than urban workers, still prevails today. As a result of this cultural attitude, a false view of the child labour problem is promoted and legislation that would protect children fails to cover most agricultural settings where they work.

The neglect of rural child workers can be explained by at least four factors.

- (1) Those who study child labour problems and develop programmes to deal with it are usually urban based and are more likely to focus on city conditions, such as street children, that are visible and close at hand.
- (2) Rural areas are often remote, both physically and culturally, which inhibits urban-based researchers and programme developers from spending long periods of time there.

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- (3) In many countries, it is urban conditions which receive priority attention from governments, often reflecting willful neglect by powerful interest groups.
- (4) Many international and national policy makers assume that family based work in “idyllic” rural surroundings cannot possibly be harmful to children — indeed this type of “family solidarity” is viewed as entirely beneficial. The culture in agriculture is a most powerful factor in the age-old neglect of rural child labour.

International Legislation and Child Labour

One of the most important tools available to the ILO in the fight against child labour is the adoption of International Labour Conventions and Recommendations. The ILO adopted its first Convention on child labour in 1919, the year of its foundation. Over the years, a further nine Conventions on minimum age of admission to employment were adopted, covering among others agriculture and fishing. The most recent and comprehensive ILO standards on child labour are the Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138), and Recommendation (No. 146). Convention No. 138 requires a minimum age for employment or work, in principle to be applied to all sectors whether or not children are employed for wages. The Convention is a flexible and dynamic instrument setting various minimum ages depending on the type of work whilst encouraging the progressive raising of standards. The first principle of the Convention is that the minimum age should not be less than the age for completing compulsory schooling, and in no event less than age 15, and that the minimum age should be progressively raised to a level consistent with the fullest physical and mental development of young persons. Convention 138 remains a key instrument of a coherent strategy against child labour, whilst Recommendation No. 146 provides the broad framework and essential policy measures for both the prevention and elimination of the problem. Another ILO Convention that is crucial in protecting children against some of the worst forms of exploitation is the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29) which is one of the most fundamental and ratified Conventions of the ILO.

International Legislation and Child Labour

A good number of other international treaties are relevant to child labour. Foremost among these is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989. The Convention seeks to protect a wide range of children's rights, including the right to education and to be protected from economic exploitation. This Convention is the most ratified in history, with all but a few countries having now adopted it.

Child labour is to be discussed at the 1998 session of the International Labour Conference (where workers' representatives will form an important part of the debate) with the view of adopting a new Convention in 1999. The objective of a new Convention would be to strengthen the arsenal of international standards by focusing on the extreme forms of child labour as a matter of priority. The Convention would apply to all children under the age of 18 and would oblige member States to suppress immediately:

work performed by children in slavery

forced and bonded labour

exploitation of children for prostitution or other illegal sexual practices

the use of children for drug trafficking

the production of child pornography

the engagement of children in any kind of work which exposes them to health, safety or moral dangers, or prevents them from attending school.

How many children?

Accurate statistics on child labour are elusive. Recent ILO surveys suggest that there are at least 120 million children between the ages of 5 and 14 who are fully at work, and more than twice as many (or about 250 million) if those for whom work is a secondary activity are included. Of these, 61% were found in Asia, 32% in Africa and 7% in Latin America. Although Asia has the largest absolute number of child workers, the proportion of working children between 5 and 14 years is highest in Africa (at around 40%). Child labour also remains a problem in many rich countries and is emerging in many central and east European as well as Asian countries which are moving towards a market economy.

Data from countries with reasonably good labour statistics or special studies on children suggest, on the whole, that a far higher percentage of rural rather than urban children work, that they start earlier (at 5, 6 or 7 years) and that they may work more days and hours. Girls are particularly likely to start work earlier and to be denied access to education.

A recent ILO report says that in some developing countries, nearly a third of the agricultural workforce is made up of children. Only relatively recently have specific ILO country studies shown how much children contribute to world food production and agricultural commodity production.

In Bangladesh, fully 82% of the country's 6.1 million economically active children work in agriculture, according to a 1989 survey. As many as 3 million children, age 10 to 14, are estimated to work in Brazil's sisal, tea, sugar cane and tobacco plantations.

In Turkey, a 1989 study found that 60% of workers involved in cotton cultivation were 20 years old or younger. Children are believed to comprise a quarter of all agricultural workers in Kenya. And a 1993 study in Malawi found that the majority of children living on tobacco estates were working full or part-time (78% of 10 to 14 year olds and 55% of 7 to 9 year olds). The situation is by no means confined to the developing world. Entire families of migrant labourers (as in the case of Mexican migrant workers in the USA) help plant and harvest the rich world's fruit and vegetables.



International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC)

In 1992, the ILO established the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) to ensure the development and implementation of a comprehensive and coherent global programme of work on child labour. The immediate objectives of the programme are to:

- improve the capability of ILO member States to design and implement policies and programmes and to deal with the problem of child labour and the protection of working children.
- heighten the awareness of member States and the international community concerning the dimensions and consequences of child labour and national obligations under international labour standards.

IPEC is active in more than 30 countries through more than 500 Action Programmes but has a special relationship with "participating" countries. Each participating country is a party to a *Memorandum of Understanding* (MOU) with the ILO which requires the setting up of a National Steering Committee. In addition to the Government, trade unions, employers and NGOs are represented on the Committee. As of February 1997, the following countries had signed an MOU:

Argentina,	Bangladesh,	Bolivia,	Brazil,
Chile,	Costa Rica,	Egypt,	El Salvador,
Guatemala,	Honduras,	India,	Indonesia,
Kenya,	Nicaragua	Nepal,	Pakistan,
Panama,	Philippines,	Sri Lanka,	Tanzania,
Thailand,	Turkey and	Venezuela.	

In addition to countries which have signed MOUs with the ILO, IPEC has some activity or is carrying out preparatory work in many others.

Trade unions can get in touch with IPEC through its national coordinators in each participating country and the National Steering Committee, which always has a trade union representative.

Hazardous work and forced labour

Children who live in poor, rural communities face the greatest risks from hazardous and exploitative agricultural labour. The risks are many. Children pick crops still dripping with pesticides or spray the chemicals themselves. According to data from Sri Lanka, death from pesticides poisoning on farms and plantations is greater than from other childhood diseases such as malaria and tetanus. Children face poisonous snakes and insects, and cut themselves on tough stems and on the tools they use. Rising early to work in the damp and cold, often barefoot and inadequately dressed, they develop chronic coughs and pneumonia. The hours in the fields are long — 8 to 10 hour days are not uncommon.

Skin, eye, respiratory or nervous problems occur in children exposed to agro-chemicals or involved in processing crops like sisal. Children harvesting tobacco in Tanzania experience nausea, vomiting and fainting from nicotine poisoning. Frequent heavy lifting and repetitive strains can permanently injure growing spines.

It cannot automatically be assumed that children working on small “family farms” do not face these risks. In many countries, farms fitting this description produce much or most 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 to misuse chemicals, through lack of education and training in their handling.

Children are often included as part of hired family labour for large scale enterprises producing for export. Where a **piece-**

rate or quota system operates it is assumed children work, though they are not formally hired. The use of casual labour by contractors in plantations on a piece-rate system not infrequently involves children as cheap labour who may engage in dangerous tasks. Management can plead in such situations that they have no direct responsibility for the health and safety of child workers. With a dramatic rise in the use of **contract labour** worldwide the demand for child labour on farms and plantations is likely to remain strong.

Large numbers of children around the world are forced to work in the farm sector. Farming may account for more forced child labour than manufacturing. **Debt bondage**, found predominantly in South Asia and Latin America, is a form of modern slavery whereby, in return for a money advance or credit, a person offers their labour, or that of a child, for an indefinite period. Sometimes only the child is pledged, becoming a commodity in the process.

Debt bondage is commonly found in rural areas where traditional class or caste structures and semi-feudal relationships survive. Landless or near landless households, as well as migrant labourers, are particularly vulnerable to debt bondage because they have no alternative sources of credit. Debt bondage also occurs under land tenancy or sharecropper arrangements described above. When wages are insufficient to cover necessary expenditures such as food, tools or seed, tenants and sharecropper families often rely on the landowner for loans or other forms of advances.

In addition to reports of **forced labour** in the farming sector, there are situations of forced labour of children in the commercial fishing industries of Indonesia, Sri Lanka, the

Philippines, India and Pakistan. Forced labour in commercial agriculture may also be found in the harvesting of rattan in the Philippines, sugar cane and rubber in Brazil, and vegetables in Honduras and South Africa. Such cases also occur on small-scale farms.



IUF Draft Code of Conduct for the Tea Sector

The following conditions must exist for fair trade to be possible:

1. Freedom of association to be guaranteed. Recognition of independent democratic trade unions and the right to organise and bargain collectively.
2. Workers must be paid a living wage.
3. Guaranteed adequate housing, sanitation and safe water.
4. Weekly hours to be fixed at 40 hours over 5 days. Double time for overtime.
5. No child below the school leaving age or the national registration age, whichever is lower, should work on a tea plantation.
6. Health and safety standards:
 - provision of protective clothing
 - no use of banned chemicals
 - training in occupational health and safety
 - establishment of safety committees.
7. No discrimination on grounds of gender or race. Equal pay for equal work. Access to training and promotion should be available for women.

IUF Draft Code of Conduct for the Tea Sector

8. Vocational training and paid time-off for trade union education.
9. Casual, seasonal, piece-rate and task work should be discouraged, but where it is unavoidable, pay and benefits should not be less than those of permanent workers.
10. There should be paid maternity leave of at least 90 days, in addition to annual leave, with no loss of seniority. Paid paternity leave should also be granted.
11. Respect for workers and dignity of labour. Sexual harassment of women will not be tolerated.
12. Provision of welfare facilities and adequate social security provision especially retirement benefits.
13. Workers' children should have access to crèches and schools within reasonable walking distance.
14. Environmentally friendly production of tea should be encouraged.

What can be done?

Improving legislation and enforcement measures has been the traditional response to child labour. However, particularly in developing regions, effective legal protection does not often extend beyond urban areas and the formal sector. It is worth noting that the ILO Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138), explicitly excludes from its provisions "family and small-scale holdings producing for local consumption and not regularly employing hired workers". Most national legislation mirrors this view and excludes agriculture. Moreover, given the geographically dispersed nature of agriculture, child labour legislation and public sector labour inspection services cannot be expected to cover more than large commercial plantations, if that. Besides, would it be a cost-effective use of limited resources to try and go beyond this? Other means must be developed for protecting children on smaller farms.

In this regard, community education and mobilization are essential. The task is to direct messages about child labour to the wider rural community and to governments. A key to the design of public awareness campaigns must be the recognition that it is an illusion to regard agricultural child labour as necessarily more benign than urban child labour. On the contrary, work on the family farm may demand too much of children, requiring them to labour long hours that keeps them from school and takes too great a toll on their developing bodies. Such work can prevent children from exercising their rights and developing to their full potential.

It is also necessary to reach and educate rural communities about the alternatives to child work, in particular the importance of education for all children. Extending and improving

schooling for the poor — especially for girls — is the single most effective way to stem the flow of children into abusive forms of work.

Rural communities face the worst educational services. Special efforts therefore need to be made to ensure adequate school provision, allied to improvements in the quality, flexibility and relevance of education, so as to improve the demand for education from poor parents. Incentives must be found to break the rural tradition of child labour at the expense of child development.



Resolution concerning child labour on plantations
(Tenth Session, Geneva, 21-29 September 1994)

The Committee on Work on Plantations invites the Governing Body of the International Labour Office:

- (1) to request the Director-General
 - (a) to undertake a comprehensive study on child labour in the plantation sector;
 - (b) to intensify ILO efforts aimed at disseminating information on the international labour standards relating to minimum wage for employment, with a view to promoting their ratification and application by governments;
 - (c) to ensure that the issues related to the progressive elimination of child labour on plantations are given due priority in the work of the multidisciplinary teams;
 - (d) to seek an increased allocation of resources for IPEC to tackle the problem of child labour on plantations;
2. to call on member States:
 - (a) to ratify the Minimum Age Convention (No. 138);
 - (b) to give priority to progressive elimination of all forms of child labour on plantations in line with the Resolution adopted in 1979 by the International Labour Conference;
 - (c) to establish tripartite mechanisms for the formulation and implementation of educational policies essential for the long-term elimination of all forms of child labour;
 - (d) to give full support to ILO programmes on the elimination of child labour.

The National Confederation of Workers in Agriculture (CONTAG)

Most child labour in Brazil is found in agriculture where trade unions have also been active, more especially the National Confederation of Workers in Agriculture (CONTAG). CONTAG brings together 24 state federations and 3,200 trade unions which represent 9 million farm workers who belong to the Rural Workers Trade Union Movement (MSTR). CONTAG is responsible for the national coordination of actions related to the representation and defence of the interests of farm workers, including wage-earners (permanent and temporary) and small landholders (proprietors, squatters, tenants and sharecroppers). CONTAG's main activities involve guidance, organization and claims related to labour contracts (wages, law enforcement, etc.), agrarian and agricultural policies and development, social security, and health and educational policies. Its priorities are collective negotiations of labour contracts, agrarian reform, and the national organization of small landholders.

CONTAG's "Child Workers' Programme" started its activities in 1992/93 under IPEC. The activities were located in 88 municipalities of the States of Pernambuco, Paraiba, Rio Grande do Norte (northeastern Brazil), Mato Grosso (central Brazil) and Parana (southern Brazil). There are large numbers of rural workers in these areas.

The main objectives of the Action Programme were to produce and disseminate information concerning the rights of rural working children and to train unionists to improve collective agreement clauses. The project produced 10,000 copies of a booklet on the rights of rural working children, provided five training courses for 150 union leaders and monitors and produced seven radio programmes aimed at awareness-raising using its network of 160 local radio stations. The success of the radio programmes was greater than expected.

The experience in combating child labour in agriculture contributed to a growing awareness among trade unionists and community leaders. This Action Programme also brought together parents and working children to discuss the working and living conditions of children in rural areas.

What can rural workers and their organizations do?

The capacity of trade unions to perceive and respond to the problem of child labour depends, quite obviously, on their level of organization. But rather than wait until they have built themselves up to take action against child labour, workers organization can use child labour campaigns as a means of attaining their goals. Indeed, it is the attainment of basic trade union objectives — jobs, increased wages, improved working conditions, no discrimination of any kind in employment — that can help combat child labour.

The active involvement of trade unions in combating child labour requires a step-by-step approach which embraces:

- putting the issue on the policy agenda,
- developing structures,
- investigating and publicizing the various forms of agricultural child labour and those which put children at most risk,
- forming alliances with others, both within and outside the labour movement, to press for improved child protection measures and to advocate children's right to education.

Suggested action on the part of the IUF and its affiliates

The IUF shall:

1. Continue its general work in strengthening labour movements locally, nationally and globally, recognising that this represents an essential contribution to eliminating child labour and wider forms of social deprivation;
2. Continue to work with its affiliates to:
 - identify areas where children are at risk,
 - support initiatives of those facilities active in the area of child labour;
3. Link its work with that of other ITs, the ICFTU, WCL and others working towards similar objectives;
4. Join others (ITs, ICFTU, WCL, NGOs, etc.) in seeking to strengthen ILO Convention 138 and encourage affiliates to seek ratification by their governments of this Convention;
5. Draw up a more detailed resolution for the 23rd IUF Congress in April 1997 which can be circulated amongst affiliates in the intervening period and encourage affiliates to submit resolutions themselves;
6. Draw up draft guidelines or a form of code which can be agreed amongst affiliates and widely distributed to affiliates to help their own campaigns around this issue. These guidelines are incorporated in the resolution from the general secretariat presented to the 23rd Congress.

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The ILO Bureau for Workers' Activities (ACTRAV)

ACTRAV is responsible for relations between the ILO and workers' organisations, as well as for workers' education and other activities with trade unions. ACTRAV operates with the following main objectives:

- to support the establishment of free, independent and democratic workers' organisations;
- to encourage the organisation of workers and strengthen their capacity to participate in decision-making processes in order to defend and promote their interest;
- to ensure that ILO projects and programmes address the needs of workers and their organisations and to promote the active involvement of trade unions in the activities of the ILO.

In addition to ACTRAV staff at the Geneva headquarters of the International Labour Organisation, Regional Specialists on Workers Education are active in Africa, Asia and Latin America, and Senior Specialists on workers' activities have been posted to form part of multi-disciplinary teams (MDTs) in the field.

Promoting the implementation of international labour standards, and particularly the fundamental ILO Conventions relating to basic human rights and trade union rights, has a high priority in ACTRAV.

The 1998/99 Programme and Budget for ACTRAV stresses the importance of workers' participation in ILO activities to combat child labour. *"The objective of these activities is the translation of the workers' commitment to the abolition of child labour into concrete action, including campaigns for the ratification on Conventions Nos. 29 and 138, through close cooperation between the trade union movement and IPEC and other relevant ILO action programmes. Educational materials will be developed, awareness-raising activities carried out and support provided for the efforts of trade unions in this respect, particularly through the workers' specialists in the MDTs and the staff of the major programme in the field."*

In addition to regular-budget activities, ACTRAV manages a number of projects funded by external donors. Most projects are at the national level, some are regional or inter-regional.

The following projects deal with child labour:

Developing National and International Trade Union Strategies to Combat Child Labour

This project, funded by Norway, has the following objectives:

To cooperate with international trade union organisations on fighting child labour in certain sectors such as commercial agriculture; food, hotel and tourism; textile and clothing; construction building and brick kilns, mining and other areas where child labour is prevalent.

Project activities should strengthen the ability of trade union organisations to combat child labour in their own sectors.

The project has started by cooperating with the International Trade Secretariats and organising international and regional activities together with them. Later, national activities for different sectors will follow, and training material for each sector will be developed. The first activities are centred in Southern Africa; other sub-regions may be identified later.

The project will also assist international trade union organisations in developing and running some international campaigns against child labour. The object if this will be to demonstrate how the international trade union movement can support child labour action on the region, national or local level.

Workers' Education Assistance to Strengthen Trade Union Action on Women Workers in view of Child Labour in Selected South East Asian Countries (Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam).

This project has four types of activities:

- training courses
- development of material in local languages

- surveys on working conditions of women, on the impact of redundancies, and on perceptions on child labour
- awareness raising activities.

The target groups are trade union leaders, women worker activists and trade union representatives on the local level.

Workers' Education and Environment

This project, which operates mainly in Africa and Asia, has as one of its aims to assist trade unions to develop a strategy for sustainable development. The elimination of child labour is one of the indicators of a sustainable economy, and the training material on "Using ILO standards to promote environmentally sustainable development" introduces core ILO Conventions including Convention 138.

The following projects are relevant to rural workers:

AFRICA:

Workers' Education Assistance for Integrating women Members in Rural Workers' Organisations in Africa (Ghana, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe)

Workers' Education Assistance to Farm Workers' Organisations in South Africa

ASIA:

Workers' Education for Integrating Women Workers in Rural Workers Organisations in India

LATIN AMERICA:

Workers' Education Assistance to Promote Basic International Labour Standards for Rural Workers Organisations in Latin America (Latin America, Caribbean)

What can trade unions do to combat child labour ?

The following overlapping activities can be identified for trade union action:

Investigation: finding the facts at the local and national level, watchdog role in bringing abuses to light;

Institutional development: establishing sustainable structures like child labour focal points, units, committees, and networks with other organisations;

Policy development: developing and updating policies and plans of action;

Monitoring: making sure collective agreements and codes of conduct are being adhered to;

Raising awareness: workers' education and public information activities;

Campaigning: pressing for enforcement, public education, consumer action, etc.

Collective bargaining: establishing codes of conduct and joining the employers in joint policy statements and other forms of agreement;

Direct support to children: providing education and training, and alternatives to hazardous work;

Mobilisation: forming alliances with other civil society organisations;

Utilising the supervisory machinery of international instruments: trade unions can report to the ILO Committee of Experts, the Working Group on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, and the United Nations Committee for the Rights of the Child.

The international trade union organisations have an important role to play. For actions on the international level can complement action on the national and regional level.

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More information on this and other projects and on ACTRAV activities in general can be found on the ACTRAV home-page under <http://www.ilo.org>

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