



**International Labour Organization
International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC)**

**El Salvador
Child Labour in Fishing:
A Rapid Assessment**

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Preface

Unacceptable forms of exploitation of children at work exist and persist, but they are particularly difficult to research due to their hidden, sometimes illegal or even criminal nature. Slavery, debt bondage, trafficking, sexual exploitation, the use of children in the drug trade and in armed conflict, as well as hazardous work are all defined as Worst Forms of Child Labour. Promoting the Convention (No. 182) concerning the Prohibition and immediate action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour, 1999, is a high priority for the International Labour Organization (ILO). Recommendation (No. 190, Paragraph 5) accompanying the Convention states that “detailed information and statistical data on the nature and extent of child labour should be compiled and kept up to date to serve as a basis for determining priorities for national action for the abolition of child labour, in particular for the prohibition and elimination of its worst forms, as a matter of urgency.” Although there is a body of knowledge, data, and documentation on child labour, there are also still considerable gaps in understanding the variety of forms and conditions in which children work. This is especially true of the worst forms of child labour, which by their very nature are often hidden from public view and scrutiny.

Against this background the ILO, through IPEC/SIMPOC (International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour/Statistical Information and Monitoring Programme on Child Labour) has carried out 38 rapid assessments of the worst forms of child labour in 19 countries and one border area. The investigations have been made using a new rapid assessment methodology on child labour, elaborated jointly by the ILO and UNICEF¹. The programme was funded by the United States Department of Labor.

The investigations on the worst forms of child labour have explored very sensitive areas including illegal, criminal or immoral activities. The forms of child labour and research locations were carefully chosen by IPEC staff in consultation with IPEC partners. The rapid assessment investigations focused on the following categories of worst forms of child labour: children in bondage; child domestic workers; child soldiers; child trafficking; drug trafficking; hazardous work in commercial agriculture, fishing, garbage dumps, mining and the urban environment; sexual exploitation; and working street children.

To the partners and IPEC colleagues who contributed, through their individual and collective efforts, to the realisation of this report I should like to express our gratitude. The responsibility for opinions expressed in this publication rests solely with the authors and does not imply endorsement by the ILO.

I am sure that the wealth of information contained in this series of reports on the situation of children engaged in the worst forms of child labour around the world will contribute to a deeper understanding and allow us to more clearly focus on the challenges that lie ahead. Most importantly, we hope that the studies will guide policy makers, community leaders, and practitioners to tackle the problem on the ground.



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¹ Investigating Child Labour: Guidelines for Rapid Assessment - A Field Manual, January 2000, a draft to be finalized further to field tests, <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/ipecc/simpoc/guides/index.htm>

Executive Summary

This technical report contains the findings of an investigation into the worst forms of child labour in fishing; its purpose is to assess the extent to which children are involved in this activity in El Salvador.

The investigation was conducted using the rapid assessment methodology, which proved to be effective in achieving its purpose.

The results obtained provide an objective understanding of the work performed by hundreds of boys and girls who search the waters of our country each day for the means of earning a meager income to contribute to their family's precarious budget. These findings also help to define areas of intervention that will serve as the basis for formulating public policies aimed at eliminating or reducing this type of work, or attenuating the risks it entails.

The investigation was carried out in a sample of geographic areas known for the high concentration of children engaged in fishing (Table 1). Researchers evaluated important aspects concerning the times and places in which the fisherboys and girls interact, their working life, and the risks and dangers to which they are exposed.

Main findings:

Types of fishing identified

The main types of fishing identified include: trammel net, casting net, hook and line, mollusk extraction, oyster extraction, small fry gathering and fishing with explosives.

Table 1
Communities and worst forms of child labour in fishing

No.	Communities	Type of fishing
1	“El Coyolito”, canton of Quitasol, town of Tejutla, department of Chalatenango.	Trammel net Casting net
2	Muelle Artesanal, town of Acajutla, department of Sonsonate.	Hook and line Oyster extraction Small fry
3	San Juan del Gozo, town of Jiquilisco, department of Usulután	Trammel net Casting net
4	Isla de Méndez, town of Puerto El Triunfo, department of Usulután	Mollusk extraction Trammel net Explosives
5	Corral de Mulas, town of Puerto El Triunfo, department of Usulután.	Trammel net Casting net Mollusk extraction

Fishing towns

Fishing is carried out on the shores of lakes, bays, estuaries and gulfs located in the towns of: Tejutla, Acajutla, Puerto de la Libertad, Puerto El Triunfo, Jiquilisco and La Unión. In some areas such as bays, estuaries and rivers, crustaceans (such as crabs) are manually extracted, but only on a small scale.

Profile of the communities selected for the sample

The sample for this investigation was drawn from the following communities: El Coyolito (Tejutla), Muelle Artesanal (Acajutla), San Juan del Gozo (Jiquilisco), Isla de Méndez and Corral de Mulas (Puerto El Triunfo). These are poor communities belonging to townships whose residents rank as average on the scale of unsatisfied needs. They are also located in the region hardest hit by Hurricane Mitch in 1997, which had a devastating effect on the area’s agricultural economy.

The earthquakes that took place in 2001 wrought further damage on the basic infrastructure of these communities (housing, health centres, schools, streets and roads).

The economies of these communities depend upon small-scale fishing and in some cases, farming and livestock. Their residents lack the capital needed to engage in production,

which is why they dedicate themselves to plunder-style fishing as a strategy for survival. Given this situation, the work performed by boys and girls constitutes an important source of income.

The population of these communities is composed of large families (with an average of six members). In general, they are broken or separated families in which the father is almost always absent and often the mother leaves for long periods in order to carry out remunerated domestic work.

In such situations, the family's home is left in the care of a grandmother, aunt or oldest sister. More than 35 per cent of these families have migrated from other locations as a result of the war or due to the unavailability of work.

The risks and dangers of child labour in fishing

The boys and girls who participate in activities related to fishing are confronted on a daily basis with the following dangers and risks inherent in their jobs: Drowning, getting carried out by strong currents or lost at sea, sunstroke, attacks by sharks or other marine animals, bites and stings from insects or other land and sea animals, respiratory problems, blindness, hearing problems as a result of exposure to high water pressure when diving, addiction to stimulants (amphetamines), early alcoholism, wounds and disfiguration of the hands and body, arthritic deformation of the hands and feet, damage to major bodily systems, sexually transmitted diseases, physical and psychological mistreatment and sexual abuse, among others. In addition, there is the risk of disturbing the ecological balance of the areas' fisheries as a result of overfishing.

Description of the types of fishing in which boys and girls participate

- Boys and girls involved in fishing sometimes work in a team with adults and at other times work alone (such as when extracting mollusks).
- Some types of fishing are nocturnal (trammel net and casting net fishing).
- The hours of work are exhausting, ranging from 5 to 13 hours, with night fishing requiring the most time. Fishing with the aid of explosives requires the least amount of time, but is one of the most hazardous types of fishing.
- Mollusk extraction is an activity that boys and girls usually perform alone, without adults nearby to protect them. Child labour in fishing encompasses every aspect of the activity (preparation, transportation, operation, selection, storage and marketing).

Physical, biological and social profile of fisherboys and girls

- These children are adapted to their environment. They are initiated into fishing at an early age when, encouraged by their parents, older siblings, relatives or friends, they plunge into the water and learn to swim. Later they gradually become involved in fishing tasks (usually a 6 or 7-year-old child knows how to swim very well).

- The children range in age from 8 to 16 years (although some are younger and some older) and have calloused, scarred and deformed hands and feet. Generally speaking, their bodies show the effects of their early physical effort: wrinkled and burnt skin, and bleached hair from constant exposure to water, sodium and wind.
- Often their skin is infected with fungi and bacteria found in their working environment. In addition, they present clinical cases of slight, moderate or chronic malnutrition and some suffer from illnesses.
- Their school attendance is irregular and the majority drop out without having achieved a sufficient level of education to face the demands of their economic and social milieu.
- They express themselves using a limited vocabulary and live in unstable family groups, owing to their parents' frequent mobility in their search for employment.
- These boys and girls assume responsibility from an early age for supporting their families.
- Their expectations for the future are limited, given that they are restricted by the lack of opportunities available to them.

Relationship between work, incomes and forms of employment

- The types of fishing involving the greatest number of child workers are those that require the most hours of work per person, as well as those that require the most hours of work at night. Child workers have daytime, nighttime and mixed hours of work.
- The majority of the boys and girls interviewed reported that they learned their jobs over a period of from 3 to 5 months, and that if they fail to perform their jobs or if they make mistakes, they are physically or verbally mistreated, and in some cases not paid for their work.
- Many are own-account workers; others perform part of their father's or guardian's work. Still others work on the basis of a verbal contract, according to which they commit to fishing for another person, whether per day, per quantity fished or by dividing the catch proportionally between themselves and any other or others accompanying them.
- Forms of compensation include payment in cash, payment in kind or a mixed form of payment (cash plus a portion of the catch). The children usually hand over their earnings to their father, mother or the person in charge of the household.

Fisherboys and girls and school

Most of the children interviewed have had the opportunity to go to school, though not all of them remain there for long. Some 42 per cent of the sample do not attend school, claiming that the school is located too far away, that the hours conflict with their working hours, or that going to school implies a major expense. Some 96 per cent of those who have attended school reached the sixth grade, while only 4 per cent completed their basic education. None of the children investigated was studying at the secondary-school, or *bachillerato* level.

There is an inverse relationship between the children's level of education and their involvement in fishing; that is, the higher the level of education, the lower is their participation in fishing.

Roles within the family group

- The boys and girls studied are from large families. Some 50 per cent consist of from 5 to 10 members, which is more than the national average of between 3 and 5 members.
- Generally speaking, they are broken or incomplete families headed up by the mother, a grandmother, aunt or oldest sister.
- By cultural tradition, these female heads of household carry out reproductive (domestic) work, and the males, both children and adults, carry out productive work.
- Community work is normally carried out by adult men. Work related to fishing is, for the most part, carried out by men.
- Of the children interviewed, 18.1 per cent are female. Under orders from the adult women of the household, these girls attend to traditional domestic chores (taking care of younger siblings, keeping house, washing and ironing clothes, taking care of domestic animals, cooking, serving food to their siblings or to other relatives who make a living from fishing, shopping and carrying water). Their participation in fishing is limited to marketing the products obtained by their relatives.
- The socialization of these girls follows traditional guidelines of exclusion and distribution of tasks according to gender.

Conclusions

- Child labour in fishing is a purely depredatory activity—a family strategy of survival in which nothing more than labour is invested. It requires no qualifications, involving only the direct action of catching fish.
- The organizational base for this activity is the family structure, which dictates that the boys and adult men do the fishing.
- The participation of boys and girls in this activity is accepted, and is seen as natural, normal and convenient for both the family and the community.
- In the majority of cases, the income produced by the children is the main contribution to the family's sustenance.
- This means of generating income is threatened by natural phenomena (rain, winds, hurricanes, earthquakes) and by illnesses, since the purchase of medicines and related expenses affect the family budget, creating a spiral of debts that must be repaid in order to continue receiving credit from the community's businesses.
- The hazardous nature of the types of fishing described earlier are such that this work is considered to be one of the worst forms of child labour.
- Involvement in this type of fishing implies excessive amounts of physical, personal and collective danger, which permanently undermine the normal development of boys and girls.

- The more remote the fishing villages, the more difficult and inhuman are the conditions of child labour. The occupational risks inherent in this work are so hazardous that it is not possible to control their effects or to make them safe.

Recommendations

- Two main public policy approaches may be used to develop efforts aimed at reducing and humanizing child labour in the fishing industry. These are: to provide effective, pertinent and quality education to these children and to assist families. Along these lines, a “vocational guidance programme with a technical orientation” is recommended to:
 - bring about educational reforms aimed at providing vocational guidance with a technical or technological orientation;
 - provide comprehensive assistance to the families of fisherboys and girls;
 - design and establish an institutional support network for fisherboys and girls;
 - facilitate and promote the establishment of an association of fisherboys and girls;
 - participate in the design and reform of legislation pertaining to child labour in fishing.

The full text of this report is available in Spanish at
<http://www.ilo.org/public/spanish/standards/ipecc/simpoc/elsalvador/ra/pesca.pdf>