



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

**Guatemala
Child Labour in Garbage Dumps:
A Rapid Assessment**

**By
Fernando García
Vilma Duque**

May 2002, Geneva

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.



Frans Röselaers
Director
International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC)
International Labour Office
Geneva, 2001

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 Summary¹

When children go digging through the refuse at the main garbage dump of Guatemala City, they are not doing it for fun. It is within garbage dumps such as these that children and their families struggle to find the means for survival. That such a reality exists reveals the high levels of poverty and social and political exclusion in which the majority of the population lives. It is in this context that the analysis of the worst forms of child labour—which include the task of manually sorting through waste material—must be conducted.

Poverty and marginalization compel some families to turn to child labour as virtually the only option for survival, given their need for the earnings derived from their children's labour. This need has led them to perceive child labour as a normal activity. The rest of society, apparently, views it in much the same way. One often hears the argument that it is better for such children to work, than for them to become idle and lazy. Very few, even among the more highly educated segment of the population, defend children's rights to education and to be protected against exploitative work.

In Guatemala, out of an estimated total population of 11.5 million inhabitants, 51.6 per cent are 18 years old or younger. Also significant is the fact that nearly 6 million are poor, and half that number live in extreme poverty². Yet, poverty affects some groups more than others; hence, one cannot equate the poverty of the urban with that of the rural population, of adults with that of children, of *ladinos* [persons of Spanish-Indian descent] with that of indigenous people, or of men with that of women. In rural areas, the poverty rate is almost triple (75.6 per cent) that of the cities³ (28.8 per cent). This has driven poor people to migrate from rural areas to the cities in search of better living conditions.

Many migrants from the country to the city are rural families who, faced with the lack of employment opportunities, turn to occupations in the informal economy. The meager income typically generated by such marginal activities does not permit these families to rent homes; consequently, they are faced with no other alternative than to live in improvised dwellings on hillsides and ravines. In Guatemala City there are currently between 176 and 220 such slums, and the families inhabiting them are ill prepared for employment. This is why many head straight for the garbage dumps to live, dedicating themselves to the various tasks associated with the collection and manual sorting of waste materials.

¹ Owing to the situations encountered in the field, it was very difficult to separate from the interviews two 18-year-olds who shared the same type of work and lifestyle as the rest of the adolescents interviewed, who were under the age of 18.

² United Nations System in Guatemala: *Guatemala: la fuerza incluyente del desarrollo humano, 2000* (Guatemala), p.43.

³ ILO-IPEC and Agencia de Cooperación Española: *Informe Nacional sobre Trabajo Infantil en Guatemala* (Guatemala, 2000), p. 14.

Compelled by poverty to work from an early age, these children lose the opportunity of access to education, health and recreation. The average educational level (excluding pre-primary education) for the country as a whole is a scant 3.5 years. In urban areas this average increases to 5.3 years, but in rural areas it drops to 2 years⁴. In regions with a predominantly indigenous population, education rates drop to their lowest levels. When disaggregating by gender, it is found that out of every eight girls who begin primary school, only one finishes sixth grade⁵.

Health, like education, is one of the main indicators of human development. Guatemala continues to register one of the highest rates of infant mortality in Latin America. Data from the Maternal and Child Health Survey [*Encuesta de Salud Materno Infantil (ENSMI)*] indicates that in 1999 the infant mortality rate was 45 per 1,000 live births and 59 per 1,000 for children under age five. Yet, the main causes of infant mortality are illnesses that could be prevented. Among those who manage to survive, 46.4 per cent of children under age five suffer from chronic malnutrition⁶. These conditions compromise the future of many children who, from an early age, are faced with severely limited prospects for development.

The *guajero* families (those who work and make a living by scavenging in garbage dumps) are by no means exempted from the situation of exclusion that prevails in Guatemala. These families are among the broad segments of the population who have seen their prospects for improving their living conditions permanently reduced. In this context, the worst forms of child labour—such as the work performed by child scavengers—are rooted in great social inequalities that generate a vicious cycle of extreme poverty.

Given the scarcity of government measures to deal with the consequences of poverty, the rubbish landfill of Guatemala City has become home to the poorest of the poor. The garbage dump offers them not only a place to live, but also a means of generating income.

In carrying out this study, interviews were conducted with 167 children, adolescents and adults who worked in the Guatemala City Landfill [*Relleno de Guatemala*]. Of the persons interviewed, 70 per cent were between the ages of 7 and 18, and the average age of the remaining 30 per cent was 22.6. The youngest boys and girls interviewed were between the ages of 7 and 9.

The majority of those interviewed (60 per cent) were from Guatemala City; the rest were from other parts of the country.

⁴ Author's own estimates based on data from INE: *Encuesta nacional de ingresos y gastos familiares 1998-1999*, Table 14, p. 58.

⁵ MINUGUA: *Informe de Verificación. Situación de la Niñez y Adolescencia en el marco del proceso de paz de Guatemala* (Guatemala, December 2000), p. 17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

The interviewers identified the respondents' ethnic background on the basis of physical characteristics. Accordingly, 76 per cent of the persons interviewed were *ladinos* and 23 per cent were indigenous people.

The majority of the children and adolescents interviewed reported that they lived with their families and that, in general, their fathers or their mothers were the ones who had brought them to work in the garbage dump.

More than half of the boys and girls interviewed who were under age 13 (53 per cent) said that they did not attend school. This statistic is distressing enough, but the percentage gets worse as the children's ages increase. Seventy-four per cent of adolescents between the ages of 13 and 18 reported that they did not attend school. For children to attend school and stay in school requires an enormous effort on the part of parents. The *guajero* children have the additional problem of being ostracized by their schoolmates and even by their teachers, since, because of the work they do and their living conditions, they smell bad and are more poorly dressed than the other children. This, of course, only serves to aggravate the situation.

Another interesting fact is that only 8 per cent of the *guajeros* live within the garbage dump. A third (32 per cent) live in neighbourhoods adjacent to the dump, while the remainder (60 per cent) live in outlying areas. Their dwellings are made of flimsy materials and the families who inhabit them live in overcrowded conditions.

With respect to health, the boys and girls who work in the garbage dump suffer from various illnesses and disorders associated with their living environment; the most frequent complaints include: cuts, wounds, eye irritations, headaches, skin irritations, burns, and respiratory problems.

Lastly, it is important to note that when the families of these boys and girls benefit from some form of assistance, such as scholarships, they usually do end up sending their children to school. Nevertheless, this only addresses the initial aspect of the problem. The main challenge is to provide the right conditions for children to study, which is the more difficult obstacle to overcome.

The dwellings of *guajero* children do not offer an appropriate environment for studying. In addition, some of these children require special learning support and other types of assistance to help compensate for the deficiencies created by their environment. Some NGOs have successfully intervened in the process, offering academic support in order to help keep the children in school.

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