

# World Day Against Child Labour

## 12 June 2007



## Hazardous child labour in agriculture

### What poor health and safety means in practice for child labourers in agriculture

- Bangladesh is a primarily rural country and for many children working to help grow, harvest, transport or sell farm products is a normal, everyday role from the earliest days of childhood. They are regularly exposed to farm machinery and tools that often result in devastating injuries. About 50 children a day are injured by machines, and three of them are injured so severely that they become permanently disabled.
- In Zimbabwe, the wheels of a tractor which had been standing over night had become bogged down in the mud. The following morning, a 12-year-old boy started the tractor, revved up the engine to free the wheels, trying to move in a forward direction (when the safe procedure would have been to try to reverse out). The wheels remained stuck, that is, resisted movement, and the tractor reared up on its front wheels and overturned backwards, fatally crushing the boy beneath it.
- In 2000, an 11-year-old girl, illegally employed on a farm in Ceres, Western Cape, South Africa, fell off a tractor, resulting in the amputation of her left leg.
- In 1990, a 15-year-old migrant farm worker in the USA was fatally electrocuted when a 30-foot section of aluminium irrigation pipe he was moving came into contact with an overhead power line. Two other child labourers with him sustained serious electrical burns to their hands and feet.

70 per cent of working children are in agriculture. From tending cattle, to harvesting crops, to handling machinery, to holding flags to guide planes spraying pesticides, over 132 million children aged 5-14 years old, help

produce the food and drink we consume and the fibres and primary agricultural materials that we use. Child labour in agriculture is not confined to developing countries; it also poses problems in industrialized countries.

A large, though uncertain, number of the 132 million girls and boys carry out "hazardous child labour"<sup>1</sup>, which is work that can threaten their lives, limbs, health, and general well-being. Irrespective of age, agriculture – along with construction and mining – is one of the three most dangerous sectors in which to work in terms of work-related fatalities, non-fatal accidents and occupational disease.

Child labourers are susceptible to all the hazards and risks faced by adult workers when placed in the same situation. They are at even greater risk from these dangers because their bodies are still growing and their minds and personalities still developing, and they lack work experience. So the effects of poor to non-existent safety and health protection can often be more devastating and lasting for them. Also, a feature of agriculture that sets it apart from most other forms of child labour is that the children usually live on the farms or plantations where they work. This exposes them to additional risks.

The health and safety hazards and risks they face include:

***Hours of work tend to be extremely long during planting and harvesting***, often from dawn to dusk, excluding the transport time to and from the fields. The intensity of the work offers little

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<sup>1</sup> Hazardous child labour is the largest category of the "worst forms of child labour" defined in the International Labour Organization's Convention No. 182 on Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour.

chance for rest breaks, and the length of the working day offers insufficient time for recuperation or leisure.

***Much agricultural work is physically demanding and strenuous.*** It can involve long periods of standing, stooping, bending, repetitive and forceful movements in awkward body positions (see cutting tools below), and carrying heavy or awkward loads - baskets, bundles of crops, water containers, etc. - often over long distances.

***Children must often work in extreme temperatures.*** They may work in the hot sun or in cold, wet conditions without suitable clothing, footwear or protective equipment. In hot conditions, they may get dizzy from dehydration because they do not have access to drinking water.

***Child labourers use dangerous cutting tools,*** including machetes, knives, scythes, sickles, etc. to cut crops, hay, weeds, and brushwood. Cuts are frequent and even more serious injuries can be sustained, such as amputations. Repetitive and forceful actions associated with cutting can also harm their musculoskeletal development.

***Children risk falling and injuries from falling objects.*** Child labourers are especially used to help harvest crops. They may fall off ladders or even out of trees while picking high-growing fruit, and may also be injured by fruit pods falling from trees.

***Skin problems are common.*** Many of the crops children work with are abrasive, prickly or contain skin irritants that can provoke allergies, rashes, blistering, etc.

***Child labourers are at risk of being injured or killed by farm vehicles and heavy machinery.*** This includes operating powerful machinery and equipment, tractor overturns and being hit by tractors, trailers, trucks and heavy wagons used to transport farm produce; climbing on or off trailers or other machines whilst these are still in motion, slipping or missing their footing, and falling under them and being crushed or run over.

***Exposure to loud noise can harm hearing.*** Excessive exposure to noisy machinery can lead to hearing problems in later life.

***Many child labourers also mix, load and apply toxic pesticides,*** some of which are extremely poisonous or potentially cancer-causing, whilst others may adversely affect brain function, behaviour and mental health, or can harm both female and male reproduction later in life. Lack of proper pesticide storage facilities or systems for disposal of empty pesticide containers can result in child poisonings or even deaths when containers are used for other purposes.

***Child labourers are often exposed to high levels of organic dust*** especially when harvesting or storing crops, preparing feed for farm animals, and sweeping up in workplaces. Breathing organic dust can result in allergic respiratory diseases, such as occupational asthma and extrinsic allergic alveolitis (hypersensitivity, pneumonia).

***Child labourers are at risk of injury and diseases from livestock and wild animals.*** Herding, shepherding and milking farm animals can be risky and children are frequently injured by being jostled, butted, or stamped on by farm animals. Working barefoot in fields or around livestock also exposes them to cuts, bruises, thorn injuries, skin disorders, or even catching water-borne diseases, especially where soils are wet and sticky.

**International Labour Organisation (ILO)**

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

[www.ilo.org/childlabour](http://www.ilo.org/childlabour)

