

7-15-2004

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Kids Cut Cane in El Salvador." (2004). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9215>

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Kids Cut Cane in El Salvador

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: El Salvador

Published: 2004-07-15

Somewhere between 5,000 and 30,000 children in El Salvador, some as young as eight years old, are doing hazardous work on sugar plantations, according to *Turning a Blind Eye: Hazardous Labor in El Salvador's Sugarcane Cultivation*, a recent Human Rights Watch (HRW) report. "Child labor is rampant on El Salvador's sugarcane plantations," said Michael Bochenek of the organization's children's rights division. "Companies that buy or use Salvadoran sugar should realize that fact and take responsibility for doing something about it."

An estimated 35% of the population of El Salvador works in sugar, according to a 1997 estimate. One of the companies Bochenek had in mind was Coca-Cola, a major buyer from the country's largest sugar mill, Central Izalco. Sugar is El Salvador's second-largest export crop, behind coffee. It was produced on state-owned plantations until 1995, when a process of privatization began. Coca-Cola does not own any of these plantations; it is strictly a buyer. The company has rules prohibiting the direct purchase of sugar from suppliers who use child labor. But that prohibition only prevents Coke from dealing with a mill.

Bochenek said the rule ought to extend to the plantation that supplies the mill. "If Coca-Cola is serious about avoiding complicity in the use of hazardous child labor, the company should recognize its responsibility to ensure that respect for human rights extends beyond its direct suppliers," he said. The report found that the mill, Izalco, purchased sugar from at least four plantations that use child labor in violation of the law.

Coke spokesperson Lori George Billingsly said the company is working with the Salvadoran sugar industry for enforcement of existing child-labor laws and for stricter monitoring in the coming harvest. The company sent HRW a letter reading, in part, "We reiterate that The Coca-Cola Company does not condone child labor in El Salvador or anywhere else." Depends on the meaning of directly The form of Coke's denial, hinging as it does on the question of doing business "directly" with an enterprise that puts children to work under unsafe conditions, alerts organizations like HRW to a need to study and report on the issue.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have seen and reacted to this kind of tactic before in Africa, where chocolate manufacturers denied responsibility for abusive practices because they bought cocoa beans from commodity brokers, not "directly" from the farmers. Last year, under pressure from the NGOs, the manufacturers agreed to a plan for monitoring West African plantations to ensure compliance with minimum international child-labor standards.

The report points out that "Coca-Cola is absolutely not the only multinational that indirectly receives the benefit of dangerous child labor in the sugar sector of El Salvador." Also mentioned as beneficiaries are Amerop Sugar, Cargill, and Louis Dreyfus. Labor under dangerous conditions is illegal in El Salvador for anyone under age 18, and child labor of most kinds is illegal for those under

14. The law is generally not enforced, however, or circumvented by hiring children as "helpers" rather than as employees, rendering them ineligible for legal protections. Under this practice, children injured in the fields must pay for their own medical treatment even though the labor code provides that employers are responsible for on-the-job injury.

Bochenek said kids frequently suffer deep gashes from machetes. Fourteen-year-old Jesus Franco's legs are scarred from many such mishaps, from ankles to thighs, as are his hands. The same goes for his brothers and sisters, ranging in age from nine to 19. They all work in the cane fields. "I don't like doing it," Jesus told a reporter. "I just go for the money." Jesus' mother, Teodora Franco Lopez, said of her five children, "I wish they could do easier jobs, but we have to have the money." They miss three months of school during the harvest season because they spend as many as nine hours a day in the fields.

Perpetuating poverty

This kind of work, according to the International Labor Organization (ILO), is calculated to perpetuate poverty by keeping kids out of school so that they will never be suited to anything else and, since they earn less than adults doing the same work, by suppressing wages for their own parents. HRW interviews show that, in El Salvador, children start in the fields as early as age five, wielding little machetes scarcely a foot long. They are paid next to nothing, a benefit to plantation owners currently coping with a world sugar surplus and prices pegged at around US\$0.15 a kg.

Besides cutting themselves or being hacked by others in the dense cane where even fully grown adults cannot see each other a meter away, children also suffer burns from caustic fertilizer, which they spread by hand. Work in the cane fields is considered the most hazardous labor children do in El Salvador, more dangerous even than the garbage, prostitution, fishing, or fireworks industries, the other main illegal employers (see NotiCen, 2003-10-02).

Agriculture Minister Mario Salaverria denied that kids in the fields miss school. "Its an economic and cultural problem. The children are on vacation [at harvest], and they go with their parents to work." He stopped short of promoting the practice as a family-values enhancing activity, however. "We are developing a strategy for the next sugar harvest to verify that no children are doing dangerous work in the fields," he assured reporters.

Cut school to cut cane

The assertion this is a vacation-time activity did not comport with the HRW investigations, which also found that missing school often leads to older children dropping out of school altogether. Additionally, according to Jorge Castrillo of the ILO's International Program for the Elimination of Child Labor (IPEC), "child labor does not only affect the health of children, it mortgages and even embargoes their futures."

Seeking to mitigate the effect of the report, El Salvador's Ambassador to the US Rene Leon wrote to The Washington Post saying that, with the help of the US and Spain, "some 10,000 children and parents have been assisted and removed from dangerous jobs." Leon said his country "is working

hard to eradicate child labor and create an environment in which all children complete their education." The ambassador also linked the Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) to the effort, claiming that CAFTA "will be a powerful catalyst for strengthening institutional reforms and El Salvador's ability to ensure implementation of core labor standards."

CAFTA has been criticized elsewhere as being deficient in this very area (see NotiCen, 2002-11-14). Leon wrote the letter in response to a June 10 Washington Post article, El Salvador Scarred by Child Labor. He complained the article "contained no information about El Salvador's progress in eradicating child labor." Leon's letter was quoted in The Washington File, "a product of the Bureau of International Information Programs, US Department of State," according to its Web site.

The Washington File article also recounted programs of the US-funded Child Labor Education Initiative (EI), including projects totaling US\$7 million in El Salvador, Peru, and Bolivia that are "devoted exclusively to supporting education as a powerful intervention for combating child labor." Also, said the State Department's Washington File, the US Department of Labor "awarded US\$13.6 million in technical assistance grants aimed at strengthening labor law compliance in support of free-trade negotiations in Central America, and elsewhere in the world."

The government of El Salvador is simultaneously admitting to a problem with child labor, and accusing the nongovernmental organizations of using the issue as part of a campaign to defeat an already shaky CAFTA. In a news conference, Salaverria and Labor Minister Jose Roberto Espinal joined together to label the HRW report "tendentious and false." Salaverria said, "It is a campaign to keep our agricultural products out of the free-trade agreement with the United States."

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