

[El Salvador]

"You just got to be big enough to hold a machete.."

Children who harvest sugarcane

[8]



Preamble

“In Exchange for My Childhood”

Series on Child Labour and Exploitation in Latin America and the Caribbean

Article 32 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child recognizes “the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.” At the same time, Article 36 states the need to protect “the child against all other forms of exploitation prejudicial to any aspects of the child's welfare.” It has been more than 15 years since the Convention was adopted; however, the issue of child labour¹ continues to affect more than 200 million² children around the world. These children work under conditions that breach and put at risk the enjoyment of their fundamental rights, such as, their health, education and protection against any forms of exploitation and violence.

With this publication, World Vision wants to make a contribution in tackling child labor by making proposals and inviting the reader to learn about the life, family, feelings, experiences and context of the children who work in 13 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. We will build a close relationship with such children through a country context analysis, interviews, adult testimonies and portraits of the daily lives of working children and their families.

The stories are about different countries, with different protagonists who are devoted to different activities. Nevertheless, you will realize that the children who have allowed us to get into their lives have almost identical problems, aspirations and dreams:

- They work for the same reasons: Their families are in need, and they wish to contribute to family subsistence.
- They have the same dreams: To be able to study, help their families, make something useful and positive with their lives³.
- They experience the same physical and emotional pain, as a result of the work performed.
- They share the same fear: Adults – Once contact is established with adults, they maltreat, abuse and humiliate⁴ them.
- They come from very poor families that have suffered exploitation for at least two or three generations.
- They have been abandoned by their national systems of social assistance systems⁵.
- It is common for families to be numerous⁶, as well as for women to be the head of the household because of the father⁷ abandonment.
- They would love to study or attend school regularly, but they cannot go because they have to work, or they have actually lost their interest in school because of maltreatment⁸. Besides that, their school agenda is not adapted to their needs as working⁹ children and adolescents.
- Girls have to do workhouse activities, which makes their workload heavier.
- In addition, girls are vulnerable to sexual abuse.

“In Exchange for My Childhood” opens doors to the private lives of working children, urging us to commit – as an organization and personally – to the transformation of our society, so that life in all its fullness may finally be a reality for every child in Latin America and the Caribbean.

1 It should be clarified that not all the work performed by children infringes their rights, but only that work which does not allow them to enjoy their rights. See “Definitions and basic concepts” at the end of the booklet.

2 The United Nations Secretary General's Study on Violence against Children: Chapter 6, page 233; at: <http://www.violencestudy.org/r25>

3 The fact that there are many boys who want to be policemen and girls who want to be teachers attracts our attention here.

4 See the situation described by children in all booklets. Complementary reading: The United Nations Secretary General's Study on Violence against Children: Chapter 6; at: <http://www.violencestudy.org/r25>

5 See Brazil's booklet, situation described by Rafael

6 Example: Colombia's booklet, Alicia Bastos' testimony

7 Example: Bolivia's booklet, Margarita's testimony

8 Example: Guatemala's booklet, Rafael's testimony

9 Example: See the situation described in the Chile's booklet on children who work in the mountains and the influence of the seasons of the year on their educational process.

Interviews

Jorge: I started workin' here last year. Papa taught me how to do the work. I like it, but sometimes when the cane is burnin' it stings my eyes and makes my skin turn black. I wear long sleeves so the ajuate¹ won't make me itch like crazy.

Nery: I been comin' here with my mama to plant cane since I was nine. When I'm not here I help my mama sell some stuff at a school... My papa died six years ago. He was killed by some bad men...

Jorge: When the harvest is over, my papa plants corn and works at a stable. My mama washes clothes for other people. Sometimes things get pretty tough, but we still manage. During Holy Week [the week before Easter] we didn't have any money. There was no work and we had to rebuild our house an account of the earthquake. My papa and I rebuilt it. All we could afford to eat was beans and tortillas.

Oscar: I started plantin' cane last year. I like it. I don't think it's so hard. Nery taught me the work. I just had one accident, when Nery cut my head. But sometimes I cut my hand on the edges of the leaves.

Nery: That time I hurt my brother, I was cuttin' the cane and Oscar was behind me and I didn't see him and I hit him with the machete. He just needed some stitches. By the next week he was workin' again.

Jorge: No one makes me work here – I want to. I like it. It's better than bein' bored at home.

Nery: I like comin' here for the same reasons. But it's hard work cuttin' cane. You can get burned if you don't keep away from the fire.

Jorge: Ervin and Oscar don't get paid. Only Nery and I do, twice a month. Last time I got paid for 46 cuts. It's better pay than you can get for pickin' coffee. I can get a little more than half a dollar for planting cane, but for cane cuttiin' I get paid a little over a dollar and a half.

Nery: To work here we just gotta show the supervisor some I.D. It can be someone else's. That way we get on the pay list. We're not old enough to work here, but that don't matter. You just got to be big enough to hold a machete and do the work.

Ervin: I'm not on the pay list, but I come to help Jorge. I help him plant the cane...

Nery: When the four of us are working together we finish faster. But each person has to try to finish whatever they're assigned to do.

Jorge: I get up at three and leave my house at five so I can be here by six. We walk to work. Walkin' slowly, it takes about two hours, and walkin' fast takes about on hour.

Oscar: I get up at four. My mama makes breakfast for us.

Jorge: We also work on Saturdays and Sundays. We don't rest 'cuz that would mean we lose a day.

Nery: They bring us lunch from The Hacienda (company office buidling) around twelve.

Jorge: They always bring us tortillas with beans and salt. We can buy a little bag of chicken too, for less than a dollar. They deduct the cost from what they pay us.

Nery: We don't know how much they take from our pay for the food. They don't tell us.

¹ *Tiny hairs that fall off of the dry leaves of the sugarcane and irritate the skin.*

Oscar: I'm gonna buy somethin' good with my money -- maybe some clothes for Christmas. We always give our money to mama. I give some to my younger sister too, so she can buy churros [sweet pastries].

Nery: How much you think we've made by now, Jorge?

Jorge: You've made 21 cuts, so you'll get about three dollars for yesterday and today.

Nery: I'm not goin' back to school. I couldn't pass the third grade. It costs 10 dollars to enroll my three sisters and brother. You also gotta spend a lotta money on shoes and notebooks and clothes.

Oscar: Nery didn't pass 'cuz he's too lazy to study. I did -- I passed the third grade.

Nery: Let's go home, Jorge.

Jorge: No, I'm gonna stay and wait for lunch. I'm hungry!



Portrait

Jorge, Ervin, Nery and Oscar wake up well before sunrise. Rising from their rough-hewn wooden beds, they throw on their clothes and start their brisk pre-dawn walk to the field of sugarcane where they will work for six to eight hours, ending around noontime.

Jorge and Ervin are brothers, as are Nery and Oscar. Jorge and Nery, both 14, are best friends with contrasting personalities. Jorge is confident and garrulous whereas Nery is quiet and reserved. Ervin and Oscar, both 11, look up to their older brothers and like to work alongside them in the field.

The four boys live in the same rural village, about a two-hour walk from the cane fields where they work. Their lives have been shaped to a large degree by poverty, work and the basic needs of their close-knit families.

Jorge and Ervin live with their parents and two siblings in a three-room adobe house that Jorge rebuilt with his father after the structure was badly damaged by an earthquake in 2001. Their father works as a farm hand in the sugarcane fields or picks coffee during the harvest season. Their mother is a homemaker and contributes to the family income by washing other people's clothes twice a week.

Nery and Oscar have four other siblings. Their father was murdered six years before. Since then, as the oldest boy in their family, Nery has assumed the role of its primary wage-earner. His progress in school has been frustratingly slow as a result. But despite Nery's having to repeat third grade twice, his mother insists that he continue his studies. He knows full well, however, that he must continue working if Oscar and his other siblings are to have any chance of attending school themselves.

The boys begin their workday shortly after 5 am. The rising sun illuminates their sinewy frames and the surrounding whiteness of the sugarcane flowers. The work they do is meant for adults.

Nevertheless, they are joined in the fields by other boys and girls who are equally skilled at harvesting the stout and fibrous stalks that grow to six metres or more in height.

This cane field has just been burned to eliminate dry leaves and venomous snakes hiding in the crop. The water-rich stalks of the sugarcane, unscathed by the fire, can now be harvested with knives and machetes (long blades that can cut through thick vegetation).

The specific tasks that each child performs is determined by his or her age and gender. Older boys do the initial cuttings of the cane stalks, swinging their machetes just above the ground. The most skilled workers can cut about 500 kg. of sugarcane in an hour.

The girls gather and sort the harvested cane, setting aside the bud-bearing stalks for next planting. Younger boys cut the gathered stalks into smaller sections, which are then split and bundled for transport. Boys also participate in fertilizing and fumigating the fields between harvests.

After learning at an early age how to cultivate and harvest the cane, many if not most of these children will continue doing the same work for most of the rest of their lives.

For their labour in the cane field today, Nery and Jorge will receive about three dollars each.

By mid-morning, all four boys are starting to feel the strain of the hard work, soaring heat and biting insects. Perspiring heavily, their faces darkened by soot from the burnt cane, they fend off fatigue with jokes and laughter.

The boys looking forward to a lunch of tortillas and beans that will be served from the back of a company truck to all the field workers at noon. Then they will return home, bellies full.





Context

Sugarcane is one of El Salvador's principal crops. The country is home to approximately 7,000 sugarcane producers and six sugar refineries.

The sugarcane harvest season runs for about five months, beginning in November and ending in March or early April. The first three months coincide with closure of the public schools at the end of every academic year, whereas the last two months coincide with the start of a new school year.

Therefore, children who harvest sugarcane for the duration of the season are more likely to start the school year late, or miss it entirely. Children usually drop out of school at or around age 12 – about the same time when most children begin to work in the cane fields.

Sugarcane harvesting is considered one of the worst forms of child labour in El Salvador. According to a study by the International Labour Organization (ILO), approximately 5,000 Salvadoran children work as sugarcane harvesters, while another 25,000 are indirectly involved to varying degrees, e.g. accompanying and helping their parents with some harvesting tasks.

Sugarcane harvesting is difficult and dangerous, especially for children. It presents numerous hazards associated with the burning, cutting, lifting and carrying of sugarcane. Workers can also be over-exposed to toxic insecticides, fungicides and chemical fertilizers. Respiratory infections, allergies, and pulmonary disease may follow.

The hazards of sugarcane harvesting are not unknown to the parents of children who do it. Yet they still allow their children perform the work, precisely because they are poor and seeking to generate more income to meet their family's basic needs.

In the years following El Salvador's 12-year civil war in 1992, the country has pursued a neo-liberal economic model that has failed to elevate the living standards of impoverished citizens and children who are most likely to engage in work that exploits their vulnerability.

According to the Ministry of Economy's Department of Statistics and Census, 35% of Salvadoran families were living in poverty in 2004. And according to a 2003 study² published by the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, about 9% of Salvadoran children from the age of five to 17 were working in order to help support their families. That translates to more than 222,000 working children, of whom more than half – some 124,300 children – were believed to be working in exploitive and dangerous conditions.³

Child labour is concentrated in the following sectors: 47.1% in agriculture; 16.8% in industry; 14.2% in commerce; 13.2% in services; and 8.1% in other areas. Eight out of 10 child workers are male.

El Salvador still lacks institutions and programmes to safeguard the welfare of children who work in the sugarcane fields.

Beyond the physical hazards posed to children who do this work, there are also consequences associated with resulting violations of their rights to education, recreation and general welfare.

Working children indicate that they are not motivated to study and that they have problems attending class and doing their homework. This is entirely understandable, given the likelihood that they are fatigued and poorly nourished, and perhaps receiving little or no encouragement from their own family to stay in school. So they continue to live and work in conditions that threaten their own development.

² Title: *Entendiendo el Trabajo Infantil en El Salvador*.

³ Molina et. al., 2003, page 36.

Social Indicators El Salvador

Human Development Index	101/177
Gender-focused Development Index	76/177
Life expectancy	71,1
Per capita GDP	5,041
Total population in millions	6,8
% Urban population	59,5
% Population under 15	34,3
% Consumption by the poorest 20%	2,7
% Consumption by the wealthiest 20%	55,9
% of population living under the poverty line	48,3
% of population living on less than US\$1/day	19
% of GDP spent by the State on education	2,8
% of GDP spent by the State on health	3,7
% of population w/access to essential drugs	-
% Illiterate (over age 15)	14.2

*The World Health Organisation (WHO) specifies this percentage range as "intermediate access".

Source: 2006 Human Development Report, United Nations.

Conclusions

El Salvador's Constitution, Family Code, Labour Code, Education Act and Health Code all contain legislation regulating child labour. Furthermore, the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare as well as the Salvadorian Institute for the Integral Development of Children and Adolescents are entrusted with safeguarding the rights of child workers.

While the Constitution establishes 14 as the minimum age for children to engage in work, the Labour Code sets the minimum age at 12. In either case, the wisdom of the Government in allowing children to enter the workplace at age 12 or even 14 must be questioned.

Various national and international organisations in El Salvador are making efforts to contribute to the eradication of child labour through coordinated actions aimed at disseminating information and raising awareness about children's rights.

El Salvador has also ratified several Conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO) – including Conventions 138 and 182 – as well as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child that establish measures for protecting children and preventing their exploitation.

Yet in spite of the above-mentioned Codes and Conventions, child labour continues to flourish in El Salvador for precisely the same reasons that it prospers in so many other countries. Basically, poorest families require more income to meet their basic needs, and they can achieve that by allowing or compelling their children to enter the workforce and learn a trade.

Jobs performed by children must be adapted to their age level, physical development, and degree of maturity. Work that endangers their physical, mental or moral well-being -- either due to the nature of the activity or conditions under which it is performed -- must be prohibited and eradicated.



Interviews with adults



EUGENIA YANETH BARRIENTOS

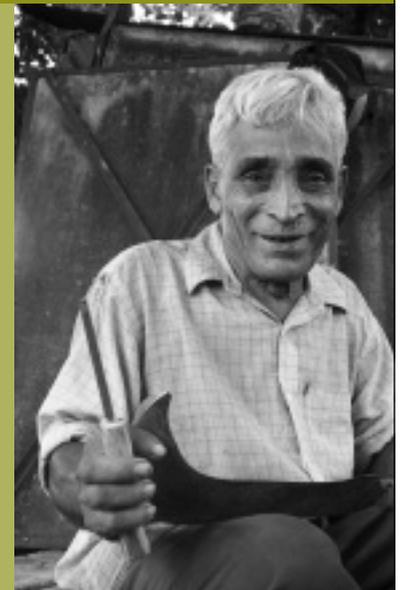
Sugarcane harvester and sister of Nery and Oscar

"I don't think this work is bad 'cuz when Nery and Oscar grow up they'll be able do the work they've learned as boys. I think it's good for them to start working while they're young 'cuz then they won't have time to think about bad things and fall into bad behaviours. I think the only way to have a future is to learn to work and to be decent men. I do tell Nery to stay in school though. This year he didn't want to go 'cuz he's 14 and he said he was too big to be in the fourth grade. But he's at school now. With the little bit he earns, my mother can buy food, clothes and shoes. He really likes to work to help my mother."

LEONIDAS FUENTES

Supervisor at the El Bebedero sugarcane farm

"There are more men working at this farm than boys. The boys who work during the harvest arrive here with their fathers. We hire the boys at age 16. What happens is that some boys tell you they're older than they really are. They do the same work as the men, but we try to give them more consideration and more time for the cutting. Sometimes we help them to complete their work. The biggest danger faced by the children is when the cane is burning and the smoke can damage their lungs. But I think it's good for the boys to work here because then they can help their families."



DOMINGA ARGELIA RAMIREZ

Mother of Jorge and Ervin

"I'm happy when my boys go off to work. It's good for them to learn a trade and not roam the streets like a lot of other kids. They don't do that – they're hard workers, and I don't believe that this work is harmful. Not at all – it's beneficial because it makes them responsible and they learn to value things. Jorge is a hard worker and responsible. When they pay him, he gives me all the money. This year he asked me to go with him to buy some shoes, pants and a shirt, because he didn't have any. Then he gave me the rest of his pay to buy underwear for his little brothers and sisters

It's true that it's exhausting work because it requires a lot of strength to endure the sun and handle the knife. But I see more dangers on the streets than I do in the sugarcane fields."



Definitions and Basic Concepts

For the purposes of this publication, "child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier."¹

- Worst forms of Child Labour according to ILO Convention 182²:
 - a) all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict;
 - b) the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution, for the production of pornography or for pornographic performances;
 - c) the use, procuring or offering of a child for illicit activities, in particular for the production and trafficking of drugs as defined in the relevant international treaties;
 - d) work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.
- Child Labour
Children's participation in economic activity that negatively affect their health and development or interfere with education. This means all children below 12 years of age working in any economic activities, those aged 12 to 14 years engaged in harmful work, and all children engaged in the worst forms of child labour.³
Occupation that denies children or adolescents their childhood, potential and dignity, and is damaging to their physical and mental development⁴
- Commercial Sexual Exploitation
The commercial sexual exploitation of children is a fundamental violation of children's rights. It comprises sexual abuse by the adult and remuneration in cash or kind to the child or a third person or persons. The child is treated as a sexual object and as a commercial object. The commercial sexual exploitation of children constitutes a form of coercion and violence against children, and amounts to forced labour and a contemporary form of slavery.⁵
- Work
Human activities, paid or unpaid, that produce the goods or services in an economy, or supply the needs of a community, or provide a person's accustomed means of livelihood.⁶

About Child Labour⁷

- Some Characteristics:
 - a) Children start working at an earlier age in rural areas rather than in cities
 - b) 80% of children work in an informal economy
 - c) Work prevents children from attending school or limits their academic performance
- Conditions:
 - a) Working hours are longer than the maximum limits established by many national laws for an adult worker
 - b) Low Income: 90% of child workers between the ages of 10 and 14, earn wages that are equal to or below the minimum wage, approximately 20% lower than the income of an adult with a 7th grade school level. Children are paid an even lower salary than that or are paid in kind.
 - c) Children do not have labour rights
 - d) Jobs are precarious
- Causes:
 - a) Poverty
 - b) Family violence
 - c) Social and cultural patterns
- Consequences of child labour at all levels:
Social and Moral:
 - a) Encourages inequality
 - b) Violates the fundamental human rights of children and adolescents
 - c) Leads to a loss of self-esteem, problems of social adaptation and trauma

1 *Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 1*

2 *ILO Convention No. 182: Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999, article 3*

3 *As opposed to Child Labour: Child work: Children's participation in economic activity - that does not negatively affect their health and development or interfere with education, can be positive. Work that does not interfere with education (light work) is permitted from the age of 12 years under the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 138. http://www.unicef.org/protection/index_childlabour.html*

4 *Extracted from: Guía Práctica para Parlamentarios, Número 3-2002, Erradicar las peores formas de Trabajo Infantil, Guía para implementar el convenio núm. 182 de la OIT*

5 *The Stockholm Declaration and Agenda for Action, First World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, Stockholm, Sweden, 1996, http://www.ecpat.net/eng/A4A02-03_online/ENG_A4A/Appendices_1_Stockholm.pdf*

6 <http://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ILO-Thesaurus/english/tr2454.htm>

7 *ILO, <http://www.oit.org.pe/ipec/pagina.php?pagina=156>*

Physical and Psychic:

- d) Chronic diseases
- e) Dependence on medicines
- f) Physical and Psychic abuse

Economic:

- g) Working children fall behind in school by an average of 2 grades or 2 school years in the long-term which means a salary that is 20% lower during their adult lives
- h) Loss of buying power in the national market
- i) The lack of an education (loss of school years) translates into an lower quality of human capital in society

The Position of World Vision on the Issue of Child Labour⁸

The experience of World Vision, given its work in developing countries among the most marginalized people, indicates that children will continue to work until there are feasible and sustainable alternatives for the family and communities. By ignoring this, we endanger the lives of children. In a world characterized by poverty and inequality among the rich and the poor, work is a reality and a need for many children.

Based on this perception, World Vision, is making efforts to abolish the most extreme and dangerous forms of child labour (exploitation), such as Sexual Commercial Exploitation, slavery, any form of work that involves very small children and any job that represents a danger for a child's physical, emotional or spiritual health.

World Vision has been a firsthand witness of the devastating results of attempting to eradicate all child labour immediately. In addition to recognizing the obvious problem represented by exploitative child labour, non-governmental organizations, governments and the corporate sector must avoid the automatic, though, comprehensible, temptation of demanding that child labour be immediately abolished. This may be a well-intentioned measure but may have disastrous consequences. For this reason, World Vision does not support punitive intervention, or boycotts of consumers or sanctions. Instead, World Vision defends a multi-disciplinary approach:

- To quickly eradicate the worst forms of child labour
- Convince the employer in the formal sector to improve conditions and shorten the number of work hours
- Establish alternate ways of generating income for families
- Improve access to good quality and adequate education
- Confront structural impediments that generate and aggravate poverty

These changes are possible only if long-term structural changes are introduced

The underlying causes of child labour are basically structural: generalized poverty, great inequality, deficient or inadequate education, malnutrition, the structure of the country's economy, consumption patterns and macroeconomic policy frameworks.

This does not mean that poverty automatically cause children to enter the workforce. However, it creates the conditions for this phenomenon to be more likely. In reality, the reasons for which child workers are preferred are not economic. Children are not as aware of their rights as adult workers are. Children are, therefore, easier to exploit.

When children are forced to work in order to survive, their interests may be better protected if employers are encouraged to cease exploitative practices. This type of transition focus requires the application of adequate health and safety conditions within the workplace, reasonable hours, meals, education and skills training.

Prevention, elimination and rehabilitation comprise the three columns of any strategy for eliminating exploitative child labour. Of these, prevention is the most difficult since it covers long-term solutions based on the family and the community in both a national and international environment.

Is education the answer?

One of the keys for preventing and resolving child labour is education. Although, education alone is not enough to end child abuse, it is key to a larger program that seeks to diminish poverty and other pressures that push children into the workforce.

In order for education to be an effective weapon in the fight against child labour, it must be mandatory and allow equal access for both boys and girls. It must be high quality, pertinent, free of charge and realistically flexible, for example, taking into account the agricultural harvest seasons and related needs for families who work in agriculture.

In areas where there is a high index of child labour as well as elevated high school drop-out rates, it is often discovered that the education offered is low level. An inadequate education inadvertently pushes children into the workforce, since by working they can learn a trade and learn skills to earn income.

It is possible to eradicate child labour. In the short-term, we must force ourselves to eradicate the most extreme forms of child labour. In the medium and long-terms, governments, consumers, children's rights groups should combine efforts in order to guarantee that children have the opportunity to develop their potential and satisfy their needs and fundamental rights as human beings.

⁸ By Melanie Gow- Policy and Advocacy- World Vision Australia, 2000.



World Vision International
Latin America & Caribbean Regional Office
P.O. Box 133-2300, San Jose, Costa Rica
Phone/fax: (506) 257 5151
www.visionmundial.org

Special thanks to:
Area Development Programme (ADP) Los Manantiales

Published by:
World Vision International
Latin America & Caribbean Regional Office
Advocacy and Communications Departments
San José, Costa Rica

Project and Editorial Direction:
Natalia Buratti and María del Mar Murillo

Original idea:
Kevin Cook and David Westwood

Editorial support:
Sergio R. López M. and Fanny Villalobos

Photos:
Frank Guevara and Baltazar Ventura

Original texts:
Cecilia Cerón and Katia Maldonado

Editors:
Kevin Cook
Thais Pardo

Graphic Design:
Fernando Otárola

English Translations:
Translations Department, United States