

Child Labour and Poverty Reduction in Honduras & Guatemala

October 2007

Since our arrival in Central America in 1974, Save the Children UK has contributed to the construction of a rights based framework, which has led to dramatic changes in the lives of children and young people.

This case study highlights our work in the Caribbean and Central America over the last five years and the changes we have inspired, and is a record of the lessons we have learned, the challenges we have identified and the recommendations we have for all those involved in development work and the defence of human rights, especially the rights of children.

Since the closure of our programme in the Caribbean and Central America (CARICA) in March 2007, the legacy of our work for children continues through the ongoing work of our dedicated partners throughout the region. This particular study focuses on the eradication of the worst forms of child labour in Honduras and Guatemala.

The programme

The programme on the eradication of the worst forms of Child Labour and Poverty Reduction in Honduras and Guatemala consisted of a set of social and political interventions aimed at improving the lives of children who work in domestic service, agriculture, and the production of fireworks. In addition to providing needed services and social reinsertion to working children, the programme conducted advocacy campaigns to promote public safeguards to protect children from exploitation. It fomented sustainable advances both at the level of individual children's lives and in the institutions of the countries where we worked.



A young girl (above) draws the house where she works as a domestic servant (right). The drawing (right) says "This is the house where I work".

The programme implemented a set of protection measures to improve the working conditions of child labourers and facilitated access to alternative activities, such as school. We ensured participating children's access to education, health services, and vocational training, as well as providing recreational opportunities. We encouraged our partners to create replicable models and develop and document good practices. We involved the children in all aspects of the programme, including our survey of public policy and its compliance with ILO Convention 182. Building on that review, children took an active role in developing and advocating implementation of child-friendly policies, including social auditing of their country's Poverty Reduction Strategy.

Why we did it

The programme emerged in 1995 in response to the growing problem of child labour. International concern over the issue had taken shape in the form of ILO



Convention 182, ratified by Honduras in 2001, on the worst forms of child labour. The convention provided an international framework from which to address the exploitation of thousands of children and adolescents in the target countries of Guatemala and Honduras.

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In Central America, families turn to child labour to survive. Hampered by high levels of unemployment and under-employment among adults and an elevated and accelerating rate of households run by single mothers, desperate parents push their children into the workforce. There are an estimated 1 million working children between the ages of 10 and 14 in Honduras and Guatemala.

Initial studies identified deep-sea diving, agriculture, domestic labour and fireworks production as some of the most dangerous economic activities exploiting children, prompting us to focus our programmatic activities on those areas from 2002 to 2006.

What we did

The programme implemented campaigns to raise awareness about the dangers of these forms of child labour. It introduced holistic protection measures, aimed not only at improving the child's working conditions but also his or her living conditions, primarily through access to educational opportunities.

Municipal investment in children

We established political forums for the advocacy of children's rights within 7 municipal governments in El Quiché, Guatemala. As a result, the municipalities formed Commissions for the Protection of Child Labourers (COPRONATS). We worked with communities and their participating children in pushing for public investment in child services and on the eradication of child labour.

Prevention

The programme developed and implemented a risk reduction strategy for young Mayan women and girls working as domestic servants.

Research

Our research in Central America included an assessment of the conditions and extent of child labour and analysis of public budgetary assignments for children's services (primarily in Guatemala and Honduras)

Support networks and participation

The programme promoted the organisation of support networks for child and adolescent domestic servants in Guatemala and Honduras. It gave children a voice in public policy formation and an active role in advocacy efforts. Within the programme, children made a significant contribution to project design and implementation.

Our partners

In Guatemala

Childhope Foundation implemented the project "Child and Adolescent Labour in El Quiché, Eradication of the Worst Forms of Child Labour and Reduction of Poverty." The project influenced the formulation, implementation and review of policies and social programmes aimed at eradicating the worst forms of child labour in 7 municipalities of El Quiché.

Asociación Conrado de la Cruz executed the project "Support of Indigenous Girls Working as Domestic Servants". The project implemented protection measures for Mayan girls working in other peoples homes and succeeded in moving some of the young women out of domestic service and into school or vocational training. It operated in Santiago Sacatepéquez, Santa María Cauqué, Santa Isabel II, Villanueva and the Parque Central in Guatemala City.

In Honduras

Tegucigalpa-based Sociedad Amigos de los Niños (Friends of Children Society) implemented the project "Support of Child Domestic Servants Reyes Irene Valenzuela" in the Honduran capital with the goal of improving working conditions and promoting alternative activities. The project provided girl workers with access to quality education and health services, vocational training, recreation, and legal support.

Consultoría para el Desarrollo Integral de Honduras (CDIH, or Consultancy for the Integral Development of Honduras) imple-

mented the project "Defence and Promotion of Children's Rights" in the municipalities of Naranjito, in Santa Bárbara, and Nueva Arcadia and Veracruz, in Copán. The project advocated for the rights of children employed in the production of fireworks.

Foro Social de la Deuda Externa y Desarrollo de Honduras (FOSDEH, or Social Forum on Foreign Debt and Development in Honduras) executed the project "Mechanism for Participatory Review of the Poverty Reduction Strategy from a Child Rights Perspective" in the Sula Valley of northern Honduras. The project focused on involving children in the review.

The Labour and Social Security Ministry of Honduras implemented the project "Strengthening the Regional Technical Sub-commissions for the Gradual and Progressive Eradication of Child Labour," bolstering the technical capacity of regional Labour offices in nine departments of Honduras. Officials were educated on the details of child labour legislation in compliance with the National Action Plan for the Eradication of Child Labour and with ILO Convention 182.

Save the Children Honduras was enlisted to execute the project "Dissemination and Defence of the Rights of Child and Adolescent Workers in the Towns and Barrios of the Municipality of San Lorenzo, Department of Valle." The project helped working children organise a public campaign promoting compliance with children's rights in the target communities, where children are employed in salt extraction, shell fish collection and fishing. Children also launched an educational campaign via local public access media.

Results

Direct benefits to children

More than 60 girls in Guatemala and 85 in Honduras withdrew from the domestic service labour force in favour of schooling or vocational opportunities. In Honduras, 400 teenage domestic workers and 800 child agricultural labourers were provided access to primary school or alternative education.

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Advocacy in public policy

In cooperation with Childhope, we influenced the Guatemalan government's plans for addressing child labour by providing research that helped them identify the most exploitative and dangerous forms of child labour in the country. At the municipal level, the programme influenced the development plans of 7 small and remote Guatemalan cities with a high incidence of child labour.

With Honduran partner FOSDEH, we conducted workshops to raise awareness of child labour in 4 cities and involved 1,236 children in a participatory audit of the country's Poverty Reduction Strategy, from a children's rights perspective. Municipal development plans in 5 Honduran cities were changed to include measures aimed at the eradication of child labour.

Networking

Save the Children UK joined with Save the Children Norway and the ILO to provide technical support for the strengthening of the Guatemalan Labour Ministry's regional office in Santa Cruz de El Quiché.

Participation

In Guatemala child domestic workers were organised, educated about their rights, and trained to replicate that learning with other children involved in domestic service. Hundreds of those girls, as well as child agricultural workers, participated in work committees and recreational activities in three municipalities. In San Lorenzo, Honduras, the children have participated in public demonstrations, recreational activities, and the creation of solidarity networks. In western Honduras, children formed networks and participated in sports and artistic and educational activities sponsored by the programme.

Advances against discrimination

Working children are often excluded from recreational activities, so the programme supported the participation of hundreds of indigenous children in El Quiché, Guatemala in academic and cultural activities such

as drama, guitar, marimba, and traditional dance. In Honduras, 1,160 child workers participated in non-formal alternative education programmes.

What we learned

Protecting Child Workers

A policy for eradication of the worst forms of child labour should condemn all forms of harmful work. An ambiguous stance will lead to incoherent policy and the perpetuation of the ignored forms of exploitation. Care must be taken when trying to improve the conditions of risk of working children that the work is not seen as acceptance or approval of child labour. The ultimate goal is to get the children out of risky employment and into school.

Child protection policies should be tailored to the age of the working children they aim to protect. The risks and needs of pre-teens in the workforce are different from those of older working children. Younger children are more susceptible to suffering permanent physical damage because they are being exposed to danger at an important stage of their development. Older kids face greater risks of a social, sexual and moral nature owing to normal tension with their parents, violent cultural influences, peer pressure and the vulnerabilities inherent in a life on the streets.

The programme's experience in Guatemala highlighted the differences between working with rural indigenous communities and in poor urban barrios. In spite of their extreme poverty, indigenous communities maintained more cultural and familial cohesiveness, providing their working children with a level of community support and protection not seen in poor urban areas. Any attempt to work with Mayan communities should embrace and work with local culture and avoid the imposition of preconceived Western notions that may conflict with that culture.

The "elimination" or "eradication" of the worst forms of child labour is a long range goal that cannot be readily imposed on a society. Honduran legislation has pro-



Young girl making fireworks in her family home, in direct contact with the gunpowder and without adequate protection from health risks

scribed child labour since the mid-20th century with no real effect. While adequate legislation is necessary, it does not in itself guarantee an end to the targeted practices. The abolition of dangerous forms of child labour should be seen as a historical process that chips away at the causes of child labour. It requires a multifaceted approach involving the economic, social, cultural, political and educational arenas, as well as the participation of a wide range of actors. The effort must involve employers, relatives of working children, state officials, the children themselves and, in many cases, the organisations that work with them.

Every strategy to combat child labour should contemplate providing alternative sources of income. While poverty reduction should be a focus of the work with national governments and counterparts, it is also important to develop alternatives for generating income for the community and family, or alternatives that relieve the conditions of economic hardship that force parents to send their children into the workforce. It is not enough to simply chastise those parents; they need alternatives. Simply removing a child from the labour force may prompt exposure to even greater risks, such as involvement in street crime or drug abuse.

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Direct action to meet the needs of working children should be balanced with efforts to educate the children's parents. Prevailing culture in the target countries has not traditionally put much weight on children's rights. Economic alternatives must therefore be accompanied by efforts to sensitize the parents to their children's rights.

Political Advocacy

While child labour has multiple causes, poverty is the most determinant factor. No policy of eradication of the worst forms of child labour can ignore the need for poverty reduction among the children and their families; and no plan can be successful on the national level if its objectives are undermined by state policies or macro-economic tendencies that deepen poverty, and therefore tend to perpetuate the exploitation of children. Even localised initiatives to address child labour have to take into account the macroeconomic context and its impact on the daily lives of participating children and families.

Developing an accurate understanding of the reality of child exploitation requires social research that exposes its mechanisms and their consequences for working children. It is necessary to have a good understanding of the basic human rights situation, causes, ages and rate of school desertion, existing organisational assets, etc. These studies should be of the highest quality to ensure their usefulness in political advocacy directed at national and international organisations that make decisions and investments that affect the lives of child labourers.

The programme found it useful to become involved with existing national processes seeking adjustments to macro-economic policy with a potential for reducing the incidence of child labour in the long term. Bringing high quality technical analysis to the table can facilitate entry into policy circles and thus increase opportunities to influence key decision makers. By working closely with economists from the technical unit of the Honduran Presidency, we were able to insert child rights and international

conventions into the previous government's platform for poverty reduction. But good intentions are not enough. In Honduras, for example, public officials were readily available to voice support for the country's National Action Plan on child labour, but there has been little progress with regard to official funding of the plan.

The reduction of the worst forms of child labour requires action on many fronts: poverty reduction; access to appropriate and accessible education and health services; technical and professional training for better job opportunities; recreational opportunities; legal protection; effective workplace inspection; awareness-raising among children, adolescents, parents, communities and employers; and more. Each one of these is important, so programming needs to engage a broad range of interested parties. The media, donor institutions, local and national governments, trade unions, employers, and NGOs must be involved.

In Honduras, the complete gamut of interested parties participated in Regional Technical Sub-Councils, prompting broad ownership over the process. Parents were sensitized to the legal rights of children and acknowledged becoming more aware of the existence of unacceptable working conditions for children. Reporters and church representatives got involved with the campaign, taking its message to a wider audience.

Poverty Reduction Strategies require special mention. In theory they have the potential to alleviate the extreme poverty that gives rise to the most dangerous forms of child labour. Providing adults with dignified employment opportunities can liberate their children from the workforce and open the door to education. Making sure the Poverty Reduction policies actually serve those ends requires the backing of an active civil society that will champion the cause of job creation and pressure the government to do the same.

The Honduran case unfortunately illustrates how easily poverty reduction funds can be diverted in the absence of an effective response and monitoring from civil society.

Participation and Child Labourers

As with all Save the Children programming, child participation in the different phases of the projects is essential. Sustainability can best be achieved by ensuring that the target group feels that its participation is valued and respected. The process empowers children to raise their voices on issues that affect them.

Children should help define the "worst forms" of child labour in the initial stages of the programme. For any attempt to curb the exploitation of children in dangerous jobs to progress, the target children must come to see their situation as unacceptable. They have to apply the definition to their own daily activities, and come to accept that there are better ways to meet their financial needs. This is no easy feat. What may be seen as a denigrating job by a group of researchers can to a poor child feel like a dignified way to contribute to the family income. Becoming a breadwinner engenders a certain amount of respect, even for the youngest child labourers. Involving the children in the definition of risky employment might easily turn up hidden dangers in a seemingly innocuous job. A participatory mechanism should be established for employing the children maintaining an up to date picture of the child labour situation.

When done right, child participation implies much added value for the children who take part. For many, it can be the first time their voice seems to count and serves as a tremendous boost to their self-esteem. The process can awaken and develop leadership qualities and abilities that children will employ for the rest of their lives. Genuine and effective participation, guided by adequate methodologies, should awaken in children an awareness of their position as social actors with rights. That realisation converts them into catalysts for positive change. The children become empowered to act on their own behalf and on behalf of their community. The community, on the other hand, is enriched by its children's input.

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Participation does come at a cost. Time spent participating in the programme means less time to earn money or study. The facilitating organisation can anticipate these losses and perhaps provide temporary alternative compensation.

Parents and community leaders should be encouraged to participate along with the children. These natural role models can be the best facilitators of the process if they are trained to do so. If they are not on board with the process, they can become the biggest obstacle to progress. Their active participation not only facilitates the involvement of children, but can also generate positive models of adulthood for the community's young people.

The participatory planning and consciousness-raising that occurs at the beginning of the process can generate expectations among the population that are easily frustrated. The facilitating organisation must be very clear about its proposal and expected results and engage in constant monitoring of the target population's expectations.

Methodology

Respect for local culture, especially when dealing with indigenous peoples, can at times be problematic. For example, promoting authentic gender equality implies introducing significant change in terms of traditional roles for girls and boys. The

a priori valuing of tradition and culture, without a critical analysis of its strengths and weaknesses, may perpetuate models of exclusion and discrimination.

Involving children in communications and other promotional activities provides them with an opportunity for growth. It also can be a powerful publicity tool. Exchanges among the children can be enriching and elevate their self-esteem.

For a coordinating organisation to function properly, the participating organisations it coordinates must take on the process as their own and build it according to their priorities, in a democratic and participatory manner.

Working with local organisations

Non-governmental organisations can play an important role in influencing national policies, especially in relation to Poverty Reduction Strategies and efforts to ensure some of those resources are invested in children.

The State has a strategic role to play. It is the principal guarantor of the rights of children and the best placed entity to generate the conditions to alleviate child labour, such as poverty reduction. Advocacy at the State level should promote the formulation of progressive public policies and the institutionalisation of procedures, models and methodologies that have proven successful.

One of the most important roles of the facilitating organisation is capacity building with local partners involved in the eradication of child labour. Support to these entities should include the development of planning, review, monitoring and evaluation skills.

Interaction between international organisations and community level NGOs can result in the development of practices and methodologies with potential for replication on a national level. In Honduras, for example, Save the Children UK used the knowledge acquired through its local activities and research to enrich the country's National Action Plan.

Save the Children and its partners succeeded in building relationships of trust with child labourers, leading to their active participation in the eradication process. Policy makers should as a matter of course listen to the ideas of children and promote their leadership in developing policies that affect children.

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Feedback:

If you have any comments regarding any of the issues highlighted in this case study or are interested in acquiring further information on "Child labour and poverty reduction in Honduras & Guatemala" or any of our other work in the Latin America and the Caribbean, Middle East and North Africa, and South East Europe region, please contact the LACMESEE Regional Office at lacmesees@savethechildren.org.uk

Learning case studies:

This case study is one of a wider series focusing on learning from experience in key areas of our programmes work. If you have ideas for topics we should examine in other learning case studies or any other comments please contact Gema Vicente at g.vicente@savethechildren.org