

CHILDREN'S STORIES ON OCCUPATIONAL RISKS IN SUGARCANE FARMS¹

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Abstract

The 2012 statistics on child labor show that more than 62 percent of children working under hazardous conditions are found in agricultural work (de Castro, 2012). These hazardous conditions include doing tasks which are heavy, prone to accidents, and expose them to farm chemicals and other elements that can lead to health problems. An analysis of 18 cases studies on children's perception of their employment showed that the persistence of child labor has both economic and sociocultural roots. Poverty and lack of opportunities to augment household income form a strong push for families to socialize children into farm work even at an early age, however, parents' attitude toward work was also factor i.e., working in farm will inculcate a sense of responsibility in children. The children were also generally unaware of the long-term implications of their work in hazardous conditions, except for its impact on their schooling.

Key words: child labor in sugarcane farms, hazardous conditions, occupational health and safety

1 The article is part of a bigger study entitled, "Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Analysis on Hazardous Work of Child Workers in Sugarcane Farms," (2014) which was implemented under the ABK3-LEAP Research Program funded by the US Department of Labor. The author was the project director of the said study.

“The bulk of my work is loading sugarcane bundles into the truck. I carry 40 kilos of sugarcane with seven other workers to fill a truck. Loading takes place at night in any weather condition. It is the most difficult part of my job. I work even if it is cold or when it rains heavily.” (Danny, 16)

“I had an accident last year. I was cutting sugarcane when I accidentally stepped on a newly cut stalk and wounded my foot. I did not consult a doctor and only used herbal medicine. I continued to work the next day.....I often get sick with cough, fever, chills and headache about twice a month because of changing weather conditions.” (Jomar, 10)

Agriculture is considered one of the most hazardous work environments, alongside mining and construction, for both working adults and children. The children, because of their frail and developing bodies, are more vulnerable to occupational risks.

In the Philippines, the number of children engaged in child labor increased by 30 percent from 4.02 million in 2001 to 5.5 million in 2011 (Uy, 2012, as cited in OSHC-DOLE, 2013). According to the 2011 Survey on Children in the Philippines, more than half (2.99 million) of the total working children are engaged in hazardous work. And more than 62 percent (or 1.867 million) of the children in hazardous work are in agriculture (de Castro, 2012).

Behind these numbers, however, are young lives of children aged 5 to 17 years old that are continually put at risk because of their exposure to occupational risks, especially in agriculture.

The International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 182 considers hazardous work one of the worst forms of child labor. This is defined as --

- “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.
- Work that exposes children to physical, emotional or sexual abuse;
- Work underground, under water, at dangerous heights or in confined spaces;

- Work in an unhealthy environment, which may, for example, expose children to hazardous substances, agents or processes or to temperatures, noise levels, or vibrations damaging to their health;
- Work under particularly difficult conditions such as work for long hours or during the night or work that does not allow for the possibility of returning home each day.” (ILO-IPEC, 2011, p.xii)

Recent studies from other countries show that an increasing number of working children in agriculture experience serious occupational risks (ILO-IPEC, 2011). Children doing agriculture-based work are exposed to greater risks compared to children in other work settings. According to Castro and Hunting (2013), agricultural child workers in the Philippines are exposed to five times greater risk or they are five times more vulnerable to work-related accidents and injuries compared to child workers in other industries. The study also cited that the most significant risk factor for non-fatal injury is the use of farm tools. Available data, mostly from developed countries, show that majority of teenaged farm workers perform tasks deemed dangerous or hazardous by national health standards that often lead to work-related injuries. Moreover, accidents and chemical exposure result to health and safety risks. Other possible sources of work hazards are stress and noise in the workplace. In the Philippines, as in other developing countries in Latin America and Asia, more detailed occupational risk analysis for child workers are often scarce or are limited – generally having limited scope in terms of area and crop coverage, and mostly based on anecdotal data (O’Donnell, et al., 2002).

Studies on child labor in sugarcane production reveal that children are vulnerable to different occupational risks. They are not only engaged in cutting sugarcane, but they are also exposed to the hazards associated with planting, weeding, applying fertilizer, and hauling sugarcane. Work safety guidelines for young agricultural workers are part of the labor guidelines in developed countries like the United States, Australia, and Canada. In the Philippines, current occupational safety and health (OSH) standards and regulations are generally made for adult workers in formal work settings or industries. Guidelines regarding hazardous work of children in agriculture are also not crop-specific, making it difficult to identify what types of farm work are allowable or not for young workers. Thus, there is an urgent call to keep children out of danger and ensure a safer work environment.

This report primarily aims to surface the children's voices in relation to occupational safety and health concerns, which are often overlooked as adults tend to dominate the analysis and responses to child labor issues. Specifically, it (1) presents the children's perspectives on the work conditions in sugarcane farms, (2) describes the occupational risks children face in their work, and (3) identifies implications of the first two on children's wellbeing.

Data were obtained from case studies of 18 working children, and interviews of key informants. Supplementary tools like Time Use Matrix and Worksite Checklist were used to provide additional information.

The children included in the case studies are composed of 11 boys and seven girls. They come from the provinces of Camarines Sur, Bukidnon, Capiz, Iloilo and Negros Occidental. Their ages range from 10 to 17 years old. The average age when they started working in the sugarcane farm is 11.20 years old. The youngest age was seven while the oldest was 15 years old when they engaged in paid farm work. All children have experienced being injured or becoming sick because of their work.

The next section presents the data patterns summarized based on five themes: poverty situation, education, work conditions, occupational risks and children's perceptions. The discussion makes reference to specific children's statements and narratives, the children's names used have been changed for confidentiality.

1. Poverty situation

"Life is hard.... There is no other way but to find work for my family.....We do not have enough money for our daily needs and my school needs." (Jeng, 15)

The children's stories are characterized by struggles amidst poverty conditions and hope for a better future. Similar to telenovelas, their situation involves complex realities that are often considered beyond the sphere of normal childhood experiences. Literally and figuratively, they carry burdens inappropriate to their age and capacity.

The children's families are mainly dependent on agriculture for livelihood. Majority of the parents work in sugarcane farms, while a few work in rice and corn fields. Thus, their incomes are seasonal and often inadequate to meet basic family needs. For those who are in non-agricultural settings, most of them are in service-related jobs. The mothers of three

children (Jun, Elmo and Nonoy) are employed as domestic helpers, two in Manila and one in Cavite. Other working mothers take on jobs as house caretaker, laundrywoman, selling homemade chocolate bars, and bakery worker. On the other hand, many fathers engage in multiple jobs: sugarcane worker during harvest season and rice and corn farmer during off sugarcane season, or part-time construction and service worker whenever there are opportunities. There are also fathers who are not agricultural laborers but work as a welder, carpenter, driver or market butcher.

Many of the children from these families also contribute to their family income. Siblings of the working children also work in sugarcane farms, as domestic helpers, or as service workers in Manila or provincial cities. Most of their older siblings are married and have families of their own. These children also come from big families. Alvin's family has the biggest number at 14 children. Dolor comes second with 10 children. Caloy's family has nine children. Seven families have eight children each. This means that more children can help the family but, at the same time, there are also more mouths to feed.

There are also cases of single-headed households and families with absentee parents. Jeng's father died last year while Manuel's father died in 2011. Danny's father had to stop working after suffering a heart attack. Dolor's father also had a stroke that paralyzed half of his body. Recca's story is different. Her mother died five years ago, when she was eight years old. Her father got sick when she was 11 years old, with his illness suspected to be tuberculosis. Since then, Recca has been the family's breadwinner. Moreover, of the seven children, five died for unknown reasons - leaving only her and her youngest sister to care for their father and themselves. Jomar and Nonoy were abandoned by their respective parents. Jomar is an only child. When his parents separated, he was left with his grandmother. Now, he takes care of his sickly grandmother. Nonoy's father left them when the boy was eight years old. His mother works in Manila as a domestic helper, accompanied by his youngest brother. She has not provided support for Nonoy and his two sisters since 2011. The three of them have been adopted by different families.

When asked about their economic situation, all the children said that the family income can hardly provide for the family's basic needs. They need to work in order to help provide food for the family and for their own education. Despite taking on multiple jobs and with parents or siblings working elsewhere, their combined income is still inadequate for their basic needs.

2. Education

“ If I have another option, I would stop working and focus my time on studying so I could get higher grades. But right now, I need to work in the farm.” (Dolor, 15)

Almost all are currently enrolled, except for two 17-year old males who stopped in grade school. Renato stopped attending school when he was in Grade 2 due to financial reasons. Manuel repeated Grade 3 thrice. In Grade 4, he started working. He could not follow the school lessons at that time. So instead of repeating Grade 4, he just dropped out of school.

Many of the children experienced dropping out of school or repeating certain grade levels, although they are now all currently enrolled. Their reasons for dropping out were varied: getting sick, poor academic performance, delayed school entry, farm work and change of residence. Alvin stopped schooling for three years because of his knee pain due to diabetes. Danny was dropped by his teacher last year due to many absences. Jun repeated two years in primary school because of his poor grades. Jeng had to forego schooling several times because of farm work. Jerry also had to stop because they changed residence. Caloy dropped out of school for a year due to limited finances. Recca, on the other hand, started school when she was already eight years old because they moved residence. The major consequence of this is delay in their schooling. Thus, they are much older than their classmates. Alvin is 17 years old but still in Grade 5. Jerry is a year younger at 16 but is in Grade 6. Jeng is 15 but also in Grade 6. Jun is 15 but is in Grade 7. Danny is 16 and enrolled in first year high school. These four teenage boys and one teenage girl should have been in high school if they did not stop attending school.

All the children enrolled reported getting passing grades in school. Some of them are high achievers like Caloy and Nonoy. Caloy was a consistent first honor student in his elementary years. In high school, he worked hard to get high grades. From being in the top 20, he managed to be in the top 5 of his class. He is graduating from high school this school year. He is active in extracurricular activities as Corps Commander of the school's Citizen's Army Training (CAT), member of various school organizations, choir member, and participant in Math and English competitions. Nonoy also takes extra effort to maintain his high grades in school. He makes sure that he is not often absent and studies diligently every night, despite having no electricity at home. He is an active member of his school's baseball team. Even if he wants to join other group activities, he does not have enough resources to do so.

However, not all of the working children are like Caloy and Nonoy. Most of them find it hard to combine school, work and household chores. They expressed difficulty in understanding the school lessons, keeping up with the academic requirements and not having enough time to study. They are often absent from school, mainly due to sickness and work demands, some of them because of limited finances. Many find time to study at night, after finishing their work and household chores. Others resort to remedial measures in order to catch up with school work: do their assignments while in school, ask help from classmates, copy notes from classmates, or take make up exams. Some teachers give consideration, with a few of them having experienced being child workers themselves. But other teachers are also strict regarding absences and school requirements.

3. Work Conditions

“As I look at the sugarcane field under the scorching heat of the sun, I see my whole family and ask myself, ‘When will we stop working?’” (Annie, 13)

It is not hard to understand why these children started working at an early age. Many of their parents, relatives and siblings have worked in sugarcane farms before them. Sugarcane farming was and still is the main source of livelihood in their communities. As very young children, they accompanied their parents to the sugarcane farms. The farms became their playground while their parents work. As they got older and learned farm work, they helped as part of family labor under the pakyaw system. Mainly due to lack of family finances, they later opted to be part of the child labor force on the sugarcane farms. They worked alongside their parents, siblings, relatives and friends.

Some children started working as early as seven or eight years old, either working in their own small farms or in those of relatives, or as part of a pakyaw arrangement for bigger farms. For most of them, heavier (and paid) farm work started between 10 to 12 years old – or after finishing primary school. In about 40 percent of the cases, the children have been working for at least five years – making them ‘old timers’ in farm work.

The decision to work was influenced mainly by economic reasons. When Jun was 10 years old, he asked his mother to allow him to work. She arranged for him to work in a relative’s farm. Jomar’s parents separated when he was 10 years old. His grandmother told him that he needed to work. Recca

started to work when she was 11 years old. She replaced her father in the farm when he got sick. Since then, she has been the family's breadwinner. In Dolor's case, at first her parents did not allow her to work but they had no choice because her father had a stroke. She had to help her mother earn for the family. She started working when she was eight years old.

Both boys and girls are engaged in different stages of sugarcane production. The three most common farm activities for working children are weeding, planting and preparing planting materials. Other tasks are applying fertilizer, peeling sugarcane leaves, piling sugarcane stalks, and doing errands and preparing meals for co-workers. Older boys (aged 15 to 17) are engaged in more difficult (and more dangerous) tasks: cutting and carrying sugarcane, loading sugarcane bundles into trucks, weighing sugarcane, land clearing, canal trashing, burning sugarcane fields prior to harvesting, and driving trucks.

Jun does all farm activities from land preparation to harvesting. His work includes carrying about 45 kg. of sugarcane per load to fill two trucks. He has also driven a truck twice to transport sugarcane to the sugar mill. According to Jerry, he usually carries 30 kg. of sugarcane per load. Renato is also engaged in carrying and loading sugarcane. Aside from these, he also applies fertilizer and sometimes herbicide. He also fetches water and prepares meals for co-workers. Jomar, 10 years old, the youngest boy in the case study, is involved in weeding, planting, land clearing, cutting and weighing sugarcane, and doing errands. The youngest girl, Janet, is 13 years old and has been working in the farm since she was eight years old. She also does weeding, planting and applying fertilizer. She carries about a kilo of fertilizer which she applies to the field with her bare hands.

Manuel, 17 years old carries up to 20 kg. of sugarcane bundles per load; this is almost half of his body weight. He also carries two to four kg. of urea in a sack around his waist. Danny, 16 years old, carries about 40 kg. of sugarcane bundles per load.

Particularly in Camarines Sur, older boys like Danny and Jun, work at nights until early dawn to load sugarcane bundles into trucks. This is because the trucks are often only available during this period. The boys get additional income for their night work.

Those who are currently enrolled work on a part-time basis during school days. They usually work six to eight hours on weekends. But during harvest season or when there is a need to finish work in the field, some children work even on weekdays. Dolor regularly absents himself from

school every Wednesday to work in the farm for extra income. Jomar also incurs regular school absences during harvest season. He attends classes on Monday, but skips afternoon classes from Tuesday to Friday. Ando is usually absent on Mondays and Tuesdays due to his work in the farm. Caloy, on the other hand, used to work on Saturdays and Sundays before. But now, as CAT Corps Commander, he has to be in school on Saturdays. Thus, he can only work on Sundays. Jeng can only work on Sundays because she has to attend church on Saturdays.

During holidays, the children work almost daily, from four to six days a week. The work hours tend to become longer, from eight to 10 hours daily.

Renato and Manuel, who are both out of school, work full time in the sugarcane farms. Renato works from Monday to Sunday, for about eight hours daily. Manuel spends about seven hours daily in the farm, usually from Monday to Friday.

In terms of salary and work benefits, most of the children receive between PhP100 to PhP150 per day, with hardly any work benefit except occasional free meals from the landowner notably during harvest season. The children are paid on a weekly basis with wages ranging from PhP500 to PhP700 per week. Older boys who load sugarcane get higher wages. Alvin said he gets an additional PhP100 for loading sugarcane, while Jun and Danny get an extra PhP200 for night work. In Camarines Sur, gathering sugarcane (*pagtatambak*) is paid PhP3.00 per bundle. According to Danny, the owner pays PhP1,400 for every truck loaded with sugarcane (*pakyawan*). If there are seven workers, they get PhP200 each for the work done.

Renato who works every day reported that he gets PhP900 weekly, with an additional PhP300 for loading. The owner also provides free lunch and snacks. However, the owner deducts PhP20 to PhP50 from the salary for unacceptable behavior (like making mistakes in farm work). Dolor gets PhP120 daily. The owner allows for salary advances. However, her salary is sometimes paid in kind (rice). Janet is paid PhP700 weekly. She narrated that the owner occasionally provides free snacks. However, her salary is often delayed and she gets paid in kind (rice and canned goods from the owner's store).

The children's wages go primarily to family needs, sometimes as much as 50 to 80 percent. In many cases, the salary is given either to the mother or father. The child's share is either a portion of the amount or given in kind, when the child asks the parent to buy clothes or school

needs. The amount kept by the child, ranging from PhP30 to PhP300 weekly, is largely spent for school expenses and snacks. In a few cases, the child has extra money to buy personal 'luxuries' like cologne, lotion or slippers.

Seven of the children have multiple jobs mainly to meet the family's basic needs: Danny, Jeng, Elmo, Recca, Nonoy, Jomar, and Manuel.

- In addition to working in the sugarcane farm, Danny also works in corn fields from June to December. Danny is 16 years old and only his mother works because his father is sick. They are eight children in the family. His siblings also work as domestic helpers.
- Jeng also has two other part time jobs aside from farm work. She cleans a poultry farm, and she is also a live-out maid for a family. Jeng is 15 years old. Her father died last year and her mother does laundry. She is the youngest of eight children, but most of them are already married.
- Elmo also works in the corn fields during off sugarcane season. He is 15 years old. His father is a rice farmer, while his mother works in Cavite as a domestic helper. They are eight siblings, and three of them work in service-related jobs.
- Recca also works in the rice and corn fields of the same landowner. Sometimes, she spends Saturdays in the sugarcane farm and Sundays in the corn farm. At 13 years old, Recca is the family breadwinner, supporting her sick father and younger sister. Her mother died five years ago.
- On Saturdays, Nonoy works in the rice fields in the morning (7:00 am to 9:00 am) before going to the sugarcane farm. At 12 years old, he has to work to help his adoptive parents. His father left them four years ago, while his mother works in Manila as a housemaid accompanied by his youngest brother. He and two younger sisters were left behind and adopted by different families.
- During off season in sugarcane, Jomar takes on different jobs – work in rice fields, selling used bottles, and fruit picking. He is 10 years old, abandoned by his parents and lives with his sickly grandmother.

- In July to August, Manuel engages in slash and burn farming. He and his two younger brothers help their mother earn a living. Two older sisters are married. His father died in 2011. He is 17 years old.

To say that life is difficult for these working children is an understatement. Most of them look like ordinary children who enjoy playing and being with their friends. For most of them, being in school provides a new hope that life can be better. They work hard each day – notwithstanding the health risks involved.

4. Occupational risks

“Working in the sugarcane farm is hard and sometimes dangerous.”
(Alvin, 17)

Both boys and girls usually have 16 to 17 hours of daily routine, combining household chores, school and work. Wake up time is between 4:00 and 5:00 in the morning, while sleeping time varies from 8:00 in the evening to 12:00 midnight.

Only two among the 18 children included in the case studies did not report any work-related injury. All others had injuries. Five of them had multiple injuries at different times, while four older boys said they fell from the wooden planks while loading sugarcane. The most common injuries were cuts caused by sharp farm tools and/or sharp sugarcane leaves and stalks. Most of them suffered finger, hand and/or foot injuries.

Jun lost two fingers on his left hand, one in 2011 and the other in 2012. He had the first injury while he was weeding, and the second injury happened when he dropped his bolo while cutting sugarcane. He had a third injury: his foot was cut when he stepped on his bolo. He just went home and treated the cut with banana leaves and amoxicillin. He reported to work the next day, even if the wound was still painful.

Danny also cut his middle finger more than three years ago (when he was 13 years old) while cutting sugarcane. He applied *madre de cacao* (a local plant) as first aid and later went to a clinic due to the pain. His mother wanted him to stop working. But he went back to work after 15 days when he felt recovered. Last year, he fell from the wooden footbridge while loading sugarcane. This resulted in a dislocated joint which was treated by a *hilot* (local healer).

Annie got bruises from thorns and weeds while weeding. Her eyes also got sore and her hands became itchy because of the sharp sugarcane leaves. These healed after three days, even without medication.

Both Jerry and Elmo fell from a slippery footbridge while loading sugarcane. Jerry went back to work after a day. Elmo's fall resulted to a sprained shoulder that required him to rest for three days before going back to work. He was treated by a *hilot*.

Nimfa had recurring skin rashes and wounds which she got while peeling sugarcane leaves. Her mother applies ointment to her skin when it becomes dry and itchy to ease the discomfort.

Nonoy was cut by sugarcane leaves more than three months ago. Earlier, the fertilizer he was using got into the open wound which then became infected. He applied herbal medicines for treatment.

Rosanna did not report any work-related injury. However, she mentioned that one of her siblings wounded her foot while using an *espading* (a local term for a sharp tool) to do weeding.

The children also reported suffering cuts from various farm tools at different stages of sugarcane production. Caloy's hand was hit by a sickle when he was cutting cane tops. Janet's toe was hit by the hoe she was using for weeding. Manuel and Renato were both wounded by a bolo while cutting sugarcane. Aside from these implements being sharp, their weight and form are made primarily for adult use. There were also other factors that led to these injuries. Dolor was rushing to finish her work when her hand was cut by a bolo. Elmo said that the sugarcane bundle he was carrying was too heavy, thus, he fell from the footbridge.

The children and their parents generally regarded these as minor injuries. Treatment was usually through self-medication using traditional means like massage, herbal treatments and over-the-counter medicines like amoxicillin. The healing period ranged from one day to three days for body pains, one week for cuts, and up to 15 days for fractures or joint disorders.

These accidents were usually not reported to landowners because they were considered minor. Thus, the cost of treatment was generally borne by the family of the injured child.

All the children reported getting sick within the three months prior to the study. Common illnesses included fever, headache, cough,

body pains (shoulder, back), colds and flu. A few also mentioned “shaking knees” and *mabigat ang katawan* (heavy feeling or feeling sick). They considered these as work-related, mainly because of their exposure to extreme and changing weather conditions, as well as work fatigue.

Elmo, Caloy and Janet considered themselves healthy, since they rarely got sick except for an occasional cough and cold. On the contrary, Jun, Jerry and Rosanna noticed that they had become more sickly especially when working. Jun often experienced headache, fever and muscle pains. He had also been suffering from kidney problems for the last five years. Jerry reported occasional fever. Sometimes he felt that his knees were shaking from being too tired. He also complained of shoulder pain. Rosanna said that she felt sick for one or two days monthly. She also had a recurring fever for about a month. According to her, she and her two siblings were often absent from school due to illness. Annie said that she got sick due to being too tired and her body not being able to bear carrying heavy loads.

Dolor has urinary tract infection (UTI) since she was nine years old; she is now 15 years old. She suffered episodes of severe pain until it was diagnosed and treated only recently.. Dolor works with her younger sister who has deformed hands and feet. Alvin had a history of diabetes. Danny also reported that he had a boil due to exposure to weather changes while at work.

Several factors could explain why these children easily got sick. Not only were they exposed to work hazards like extreme weather, but there were also contributory elements like their poor health and nutrition, untreated or unhealed injuries/illnesses, previous ailments, exposure to sick family members, and being overworked. In addition, they used very minimal protective gear such as hats, gloves and boots while at work. Although they said that they wore long-sleeved shirts, jackets, long pants and improvised masks, these were apparently inadequate to protect them from work-related injuries and illnesses.

5. Children’s Perceptions and Aspirations

“I have worked in various farms for one third of my life.” (Jun, 15)

The children have mixed responses when asked if they considered their work on sugarcane farms dangerous. According to Recca, work in sugarcane is not dangerous. One just needs to get used to the work. She said

that she gets nervous about weeding, but it is less tiring than planting. Elmo disagrees with her, saying that work in sugarcane is dangerous because of the heavy load of carrying sugarcane, the use of sharp tools, improper handling of fertilizer, uncontrolled fires while burning the fields, extreme weather, the presence of snakes, and possible water contamination. Nimfa also mentions that carrying the heavy chemical sprayer can be dangerous.

Most of the children said that they do not have the time and resources to get involved in organizations and community activities. Their social life is limited to being with their friends: playing once in a while, chatting with their *barkada* (peer group), watching TV, playing billiards or basketball. A few of them, however, are able to join other social activities. Jeng is a member of the church choir. Rosanna is an officer in their school. Caloy is active in school activities. Manuel is a member of the inter-barangay basketball team, while Caloy is part of the baseball team. Janet once joined a dance group but dropped out due to expenses.

The children generally have three aspirations: to finish college, to have a stable job, and to help their family have a better future. For the boys, their dream jobs are to become an engineer, seaman, office manager, policeman, soldier or teacher. Some are contented to have a stable job as a welder, carpenter or live-in helper in Manila. Many of the girls aspire to become teachers. Recca wants to be a nurse, while Annie dreams of becoming a lawyer.

Most of the children want to continue working in the sugarcane farms for different reasons: to earn their own money, to be with friends, to save money for school, and because there is no other option at the moment. But they all agree that they do not want their younger siblings and future children to work on sugarcane farms because of the risks and difficulties involved.

When asked about possible improvements in their current situation as working children, their answers focus on three main themes:

1. Additional educational assistance

- Full educational assistance from the government
- Scholarships up to the college level
- Financial aid for school needs (school projects, uniforms, supplies, allowance, books)
- Better school facilities

2. Better economic opportunities

- Help for children of poor families
- Additional livelihood opportunities for parents
- Financial aid for poor families
- Lower prices of food commodities

3. Improved work conditions

- Increased wages for child workers
- Provision of protective gear while working
- Health benefits
- Better work facilities and provisions (rest period, work hours, first aid, free meals)

Implications to child labor

Economic and cultural context of child labor in sugarcane

Children are socialized into working in sugarcane farms. They are ‘born’ into it. Amidst poor economic conditions and hard work, many children still opt to work in the sugarcane fields. They work alongside their parents, siblings and friends. The sugarcane fields serve as their second home, and their co-workers are considered their extended family. Work in sugarcane farms offers the most feasible alternative for the children to help their families and earn some cash to continue their schooling.

The case studies point to specific family conditions that tend to ‘push’ children to work: single-headed households, large family size, few working family members, child-headed households, dysfunctional families, parents with low and seasonal income, sick parents, work in family-owned or family-managed farms.

Studies about child workers in sugarcane in other developing countries reveal that children are regarded as ‘helpers’ of their parents in the farm and part of the family work unit (Baas, 2009). Children work in the farms because they have to, they are expected to, and it is regarded as part of their development.

Need for protective measures for occupational risks

If working children remain in the sugarcane farms, what kind of protection do they need to mitigate the potential adverse effects of farm work? The children recommend the following: use of protective gear provided by landowners, health benefits, on-site safety measures like first aid stations, rest areas, source of potable water, toilet and wash areas. Current regulations for child labor need more strict enforcement: child workers must be 15 to 17 years old, working a maximum of eight working hours per day, working only on non-school days, and under parental supervision. In addition, protective measures must be in place such as the use of protective gear, provision of appropriate tools, and assurance of a safe work environment. Additional protective measures need to be provided like greater access to health services and benefits, health monitoring, training of service providers, education and advocacy programs.

Lessening the economic burden of children

Child labor thrives because the children feel that this is their way of helping to ease their families' financial problems. But should children carry such a burden? Part of their parents' responsibilities is to provide them with their basic needs, including education. Child labor cannot be eliminated unless their parents or guardians have alternative ways to improve their financial situation. Children should not need to work merely to provide for their families. While some children may opt to work for other reasons, certain conditions must be met regarding their safety in the work place. Aside from the parents, the government is also mandated to protect the rights of children.

Integrated support programs for poor rural households

Among the support programs mentioned by the respondents are those which address the educational needs of child workers (*Pag-Aaral ng Bata para sa Kinabukasan* or ABK, the 4Ps, Alternative Learning Systems or ALS, assistance from local government units and private entities). They recommend the expansion of such assistance in terms of scholarships beyond high school, increased school stipends, provision for books and school supplies, and additional slots for scholars. However, school assistance must be complemented by other program interventions that

aim to increase the socioeconomic assets of the rural poor, and not be dependent solely on welfare-oriented programs. These may include, but are not limited to, the following: parents' education, viable alternative livelihood for parents and guardians of child workers, health services and health monitoring for child workers and their families, educational assistance for children at risk (potential child workers), a work-study scheme for qualified children, and a community advocacy campaign on child labor and OSH-related agenda.

Aspirations for a better future

Most of the children interviewed seem to have a positive outlook about life in general. Despite their heavy workload at work, school and home – they find time to play and socialize with their peers. A few of them also strive to excel in school or join community activities. They express hope that life can be better in the future. For most of them, this serves as their prime motivation to pursue their studies. They tend to gloss over the hardships and the health risks involved in farm work.

But as children, the hard life that they experience beginning at an early age increases their vulnerability to both its short and long term consequences. There is a need to further investigate the psycho-social effects and more long-term health dysfunctions that may result from prolonged and chronic fatigue and deprivation.

Working towards a safer work environment for children

In many cases, child labor is invisible, unprotected and unregulated. In agriculture, health and safety measures are more complex compared to those of formal work settings – such as in manufacturing and construction – where safety standards and measures are more defined.

There is a lack of awareness about the non-physical consequences of occupational risks, as well as their long-term impact on children's health, education and general well-being. It is quite difficult for many of the children to link work-related conditions to more serious illnesses involving bodily systems such as respiratory, digestive, musculo-skeletal, and neuro-psychological, thus unknowingly affecting their long-term productivity.

Occupational risks have a greater impact on children and can have long-term effects on them. Children are more susceptible to risks due to certain developmental health factors (GOHNET, 2005; ILO, 2012): development of organs and tissues, rapid skeletal growth, higher chemical absorption rates, smaller size, greater need for food and rest, higher metabolic rate, lower heat tolerance, and greater susceptibility to infectious disease and parasites.

In addition to these developmental considerations, children generally lack awareness, experience and maturity to deal with occupational hazards and risks. Being young, they are also more likely to engage in adventure-seeking and risk-taking behaviors that can lead to accidents and injuries while at work.

Children's vulnerability to the consequences of occupational risks is made even greater because of the absence of worksite safety measures. In many of the worksites visited, there are minimal facilities: only makeshift rest places, no potable water source, no first aid provision, no toilet and leisure areas. There is also an absence of OSH-focused support programs. Thus, many of the child workers' injuries and illnesses are not treated properly or are left unhealed. Previous ailments prior to farm work remain undetected until these lead to more serious conditions. There is also no mechanism to monitor OSH-related conditions of children.

In summary, child labor is a complex phenomenon in many poor countries. Amidst modernization and technological advancement in agriculture, a greater part of farm production processes, including sugarcane production, continue to depend on manual labor. As a result, children from poor rural households are more exposed to varied work-related risks that have both immediate and long-term consequences. In the meantime that child labor cannot be totally eliminated, concerted efforts of different stakeholders must be harnessed to at least liberate children from engaging in hazardous work and make their work environment safe.

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