

INVOLVEMENT AND WORKING CONDITIONS OF YOUTH IN SUGAR CANE CUTTING IN BELIZE

Response from the commissioning agency Fairtrade International

THE STUDY AT A GLANCE

INTRODUCTION

Since 2012 Fairtrade International, working with Producer Networks and various producer organizations, has been supporting the piloting of producer-centric, self-governing systems, called *Youth Inclusive Community Based Monitoring and Remediation Systems* (YICBMR), to mitigate and respond to child and/or forced labour risks in various parts of world involving commodities such as sugar cane, cocoa, vanilla, coffee, flowers and gold.

Child labour in sugarcane production is pervasive across the world. Multiple studies have identified children labouring on sugarcane farms. According to the ILO, both push and pull factors drive children to work in sugar cane production. Push factors include rural poverty, economic shocks, a shortage of education, and a lack of decent work opportunities for young people. The pull factors are a demand for unskilled or cheap forms of labour, and the seasonality of sugar cane production.

The ILO recognizes that evidence-based data is needed on the use of child labour in the sugar cane industry, in order to develop effective policy for its elimination. However, the ILO notes that there is little data on “the exact incidence of child labour in sugar cane production” because “most countries do not gather industry specific data.” A 2013 study by the ILO and Government of Belize, publicly released in 2015, estimated that 5,565 children worked, of which 3,528 were engaged in child labour and 60 percent of them were engaged in hazardous work, but the study provided no specific data for the sugar cane sector.

Fairtrade International, working with the Belize Sugar Cane Farmers Association (BSCFA), a Fairtrade-certified small producer organization, decided to address this absence of data. Beginning in late 2014, Fairtrade supported a sugar cane producing organization in implementing a due diligence and response system on child labour in northern Belize, where sugar cane is cultivated. After a year of piloting this system, the producer organization presented findings to the sugar industry and relevant government in Belize. Early in 2016, BSCFA hosted the first Stakeholder Forum, *Working Together to Eliminate Child Labour in Sugar Production – Partnership for Action and Results*, to discuss joint programme strategy and seek partners. One of the several outcomes of this stakeholder deliberation was that research be undertaken to explore risks in cane harvesting.

Taking up the suggestion with the agreement of CLAC, the Fairtrade Producer Network representing farmers and workers in Latin America and the Caribbean, Fairtrade International commissioned the BSCFA to conduct research to gather data on the involvement of youth – defined in this study as persons between the ages of 14 to 28 – in sugar cane cutting, and generate recommendations from them for improving work conditions. Their experience provided unique insights and valuable recommendations

RESEARCH METHOD AND TEAM

The method used for gathering information was face-to-face, semi-structured interviews of approximately 50 to 60 minutes each. All interviews took place on the farms during the cane cutters' work day in the harvest season. A total of 306 sugar cane cutters aged 14 to 28 were interviewed, representing roughly ten percent of all cane cutters in the regions studied. However, because the total number cane cutters in this age group is not known, it is unclear if the sample size is too large or too small to properly represent the situation. Nonetheless, given the absence of data on the involvement and working conditions of young cane cutters in sugar cane production in Belize, this study, despite its limitations, converts discovery into practical and wide-ranging advice.

The BSCFA hired young people already involved in data collection on child labour through YICBMR. A few of these young people are former cane cutters, or accompanied their parents when young to cut cane. They were involved in the design of the surveys, data collection and analysis, and draft report-writing.

Any non-compliance identified through this study has been addressed by the BSCFA in accordance with Fairtrade Standards and in alignment with Fairtrade's Protection Policy. Research team salaries were paid by BSCFA with Fairtrade International funding all other costs.

KEY FINDINGS

In this section, we present a summary of the main research findings, followed by Fairtrade management responses to the findings in the next section.

- 1. Starting young** - While 75% of the 306 cane cutters aged 14 to 28 interviewed for this study were over the age of 18 and 99% of them at least completed primary school to the age of 14, nearly 60 percent of those interviewed first began cutting cane between the ages of 12 to 15. The most common age for first cutting cane among those surveyed was 14 years. The research did not ask if interviewees were employed to first cut cane or whether they were accompanied by parents or guardians to learn about cane cutting. Half of those surveyed engage in other work, such as planting, fertilizing, spraying herbicides, burning cane, driving trucks, and cleaning cane fields.
- 2. Family Influence** - Results show that cane cutting is often an intergenerational activity, most notably between father/grandfather and son/grandson. Fifty-two percent indicated that their father or grandfather introduced them to work cutting cane, while another 17 percent indicated it was an uncle, brother, or other relative (most often male). Thirty three percent reported that their parent or guardian is a sugar cane farmer.
- 3. Local vs. migrant labour** - The vast majority (80 percent) of cane cutters surveyed live in or around the fields where they work, contrary to other countries such as Brazil and Pakistan where cane cutting is often done by migrants.
- 4. Poverty and lack of alternative employment** – Sugar cane production is the primary source of income in northern Belize. While 61 percent liked cutting cane, 25 percent indicated that cane cutting is the only job available. Sixteen percent reported that they first cut cane because they needed to earn an income after leaving primary school and a similar percentage said their main motivation was financial or to help their family. Twenty-eight percent stated specific reasons for cane cutting, such as to gain experience in a career or to pay for school expenses.

5. **Wages** – While the research presents wage rates by week and by hour, cane cutters get paid by the amount of cane they cut per day. These youth report working an average of 6.5 hours work per day, six days per week, getting BZE\$135 (US \$67.5) per week, which works out at approximately BZE\$3.46 (US \$1.73) an hour. The legally mandated minimum wage in Belize is BZE\$3.30 (US \$1.65) an hour. Seventy one percent reported that they did not experience a problem with their wages. Those that did have a problem indicated that their wages were paid late, not paid as proposed, or miscalculated. On this latter point, the study did not ask if these cane cutters logged their work correctly and at the time they completed the cutting.
6. **Decent livelihood** – Fifty-five percent of cutters did not view cane cutting as a decent livelihood. The other 45 percent reported that it did support a decent livelihood and that they like the hard work and opportunities to socialize with peers.
7. **Occupational Health and Safety** – Fifty-nine percent of youth cane cutters had experienced some form of hazard while cutting cane. They indicated that they had suffered from injuries, the most common being machete cuts. The survey did not ask participants to define the severity of the cuts. Fifty-four percent of those surveyed said they also suffered from respiratory problems due to the ash they breathed while cutting cane. Twenty-six percent of workers were provided with Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). It is not clear whether cane cutters, as stipulated in their contractual agreement, are supposed to ensure their own PPE.

As part of the research process agreed with CLAC, the BSCFA shared the research findings with other sugar cane producer organizations, the Progressive Sugar Cane Producers Association (PSCPA) and the Corozal Sugar Cane Producers Association (CSCPA), and worked with them to agree on recommendations to enable well-being for youth (18 to 24 years) in the sugar cane sector. Among the recommendations made, the key proposals for producer organizations are as follows:

- a) Extend training on child labour to group leaders who recruit cane cutters, and to cane cutters themselves, including the need to promote the use of PPE to all cane cutters.
- b) Work with the sugar industry to generate a draft hazardous child labour list and a light work definition for sugar cane, and submit it for consideration to the Government of Belize.
- c) Campaign and raise awareness on child labour in cane cutting, especially risks to health and safety. This should include calling on the Government of Belize to update and implement the relevant labour law, including penalties for child labour use and closing the legal gaps between the age of completion of basic schooling (age 14) and minimum age of employment in cane cutting as indicated by the International Labour Convention 182 on the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour.
- d) Continue to collect data on involvement in sugar cane cutting during harvest seasons to identify risks of child and forced labour.
- e) Work with group leaders to enable cane cutters to participate in events hosted by producer organizations and industry, including workshops on decent youth employment.

RESPONSES TO THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

Through this study, Fairtrade has generated evidence-based data on what is possible in terms of learning and understanding from young people themselves, through the support of committed small producer organizations, about their involvement and working conditions in sugar cane harvesting, including suggestions made by them to enable decent work opportunities for their generation now and into the future.

While the study has identified several limitations and asks for caution in terms of interpreting and generalizing findings for all youth cane cutters in Belize, it nevertheless provides many interesting

snapshots through its innovative methodology: by youth, on youth and for youth. For example, it shows that ninety-nine percent of cane cutters obtained at least a primary education (completed at age 14), but they lacked employment opportunities in areas where they live to support themselves and/or their families, or even to pay for further education. Some indicated that they cut cane to learn a skill. These findings, in particular, are relevant to the work currently being undertaken by governments and other stakeholders, including Fairtrade, to achieve Goal 8 of the Sustainable Development Goals, namely to promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.

According to data estimates provided by the ILO, the rate of persons unemployed between the ages of 15 to 24 (defined as youth) in 2017 in Belize is 16.59 percent. While enabling children and young people to support family farming under strict conditions, Fairtrade standards are in alignment with the relevant ILO conventions, which prohibit anyone under the age of 18 from cutting cane because of the possible negative impact and risks of the use machetes, burning of cane fields, long hours working unprotected in the sun and so forth. In responding to the study findings, Fairtrade small producer organizations have shown their understanding of these aspects of the Fairtrade Standards in recommending that child labour training be extended to group leaders who hire cane cutters and cane cutters themselves, and working with the government of Belize and sugar industry stakeholders to develop new legislation and enforce current relevant labour laws.

Fairtrade has always believed that one of the primary challenges in addressing child labour is to acknowledge it. This study illustrates the leadership role taken by these small producer organizations not only to face child labour head-on, but to enable research on decent conditions for youth employment, including generating suggestions from young people themselves. Fairtrade farmers have been concerned for some time about the next generation, recognizing that to reduce poverty and enhance economic growth and well-being in their communities, they need to solve the lack of opportunities for young people to find decent jobs or engage in business in their sectors.

The first place to start to achieve decent youth employment and business opportunities for young people is to ensure a living income for farmers, and eventually to be able to pay a living wage for workers. With the substitution of cane sugar by beet, high price volatility for sugar cane and the fact that they sell only a small percentage of their products on Fairtrade terms, small producer organizations in Belize face particular obstacles to their vision of enabling the next generation of farmers, workers and traders.

For several years now, a growing consensus has emerged across many industries that it is fundamentally unfair, as well as unsustainable, that most farmers earn less than a living income to cover the cost of sustainable production. Fairtrade International has recently developed a Living Income Strategy, which it is testing in cocoa in West Africa. Information from these pilots will prove important in helping us understand within these commodity contexts how to create an enabling environment where the price, within a holistic approach, becomes recognized as a critical element in reaching a living income for small producer farmers and a living wage for workers. Other elements of importance include building Fairtrade sales, achieving sustainable yields, improving cost efficiency, and fostering the grounds where policies and market systems support the much needed changes.

REFLECTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Fairtrade commissioned this study because it wanted to support producer organizations in understanding youth involvement and working conditions in cane harvesting.

Since 2014, small sugar cane producers in Belize have invested time and resources to identify and respond to child labour risks in their agricultural sector. They are committed to being human

rights enablers, working upwards from the bottom of the supply chain and in partnership with all industry stakeholders, including national, regional and international governments. A key goal is to get sugar cane from Belize removed from the US Department of Labor's List of Goods Produced by Child and Forced Labor, based on set criteria. In fact, in mid-July 2018 these Fairtrade producer organizations received an orientation from the US Department of Labor on the exact process for this.

Fairtrade, like any other third-party auditing or monitoring system, cannot and does not guarantee that a product is produced without child or forced labour. This is so for two main reasons. First, the means used to identify child labour is important in determining its existence; whom we ask matters considerably. Do we ask the child or/and the proxy respondent of the child? If we ask both and their responses differ, how do we resolve? What if the child has misunderstood the question and the proxy is not forthcoming? On the other hand, if a child is seen at 11 a.m. in a field, carrying a farm tool, do we assume this is child labour? What if this child is attending evening school and is giving the tool to an adult who has asked for it? What if the child claims to be a certain age, but is unable to prove it because they have no birth certificate? Even the most trained and knowledgeable auditors/monitors, who triangulate information from a number of sources to make a determination, must rely on proxy indicators. Second, without auditing/monitoring every day of the week, every week of the month and every month of the year, year upon year, no system can guarantee the full compliance status of standards, company codes of conduct and/or sourcing rules. What one can state when an audit or monitoring investigation has occurred is that non-compliances to the relevant child labour aspects of the standards were or were not identified. But even an unannounced audit or monitoring investigation taking place between set hours cannot issue guarantees on what is occurring outside this time bracket. What Fairtrade does guarantee is that if child or forced labour is identified in our operations, then we act to protect impacted persons as required through Fairtrade International's Protection Policy for Children and Vulnerable Adults. Non-compliances can also lead to suspension or decertification.

For these reasons, among others, in 2011 Fairtrade adjusted the child labour and child protection aspects of its standards for small producer organizations. If the organization has identified child labour as a risk, it must implement relevant procedures to prevent children below the age of 15 from being employed for any work and children below the age of 18 from being employed in dangerous and exploitative work. One of the ways producers can address these risks is by establishing producer-centric, self-governing monitoring programmes to mitigate and respond on a continuous basis to child labour. Fairtrade also added a Business Development and Empowerment section to these standards to enable producer organizations to choose their own development goals and fund them in whole or in part through the Fairtrade Premium. In fact, when Fairtrade's certification company, FLOCERT, identified child labour as a risk in Belize sugar cane production in a 2014 audit, these small producers as part of their corrective actions set up an internal control system to monitor and respond to child labour risks. But they went further; through the Business and Development aspects of the standards, they chose the increased well-being of children and youth in and around their producing areas as their development goal, and funded it. To achieve this goal over a six-year time frame, they established and operated the *Youth Inclusive Community Based Monitoring and Remediation System* on Child Labour. This system has been piloted in a number of their communities, with more to come in the coming years.

Fairtrade also released a revised Trader standard in 2015 that required all supply chain actors by 2017 to be aware of and comply with national labour law in the countries where they operate, as well as complying with fundamental ILO conventions. Furthermore, Fairtrade included Voluntary Best Practice sections in these standards, to enable actors to take additional steps if they choose to foster even fairer trading conditions, achieve best practice and contribute to greater sustainability in the entire supply chain. For example, they can choose to work with and support the capacity strengthening of producer organizations to mitigate risks, and source from vulnerable

populations. Towards this end, for the past year Fairtrade International and CLAC have piloted and worked with a supply chain actor in signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to address child and/or forced labour risks in Belize.

Fairtrade works in many regions where child labour risks exist, because we feel that is where our work is most needed. It was exactly to support marginalized and vulnerable communities to strengthen their positions in global trade, in order to overcome poverty, inequality and economic hardship, that Fairtrade was established. Through this study, we see the impact of Fairtrade and we are encouraged to learn that producer organizations in Belize are not only generating evidence-based data to shine a spotlight on where child labour risks exist, but also working to address it in partnership and shared responsibility with sugar industry stakeholders in Belize and beyond. In supporting this research and analysis, and factoring the findings into their future work, these small producers' organizations are illustrating their interest in and commitment to ensuring a next generation of sugar cane farmers, workers and traders.

Fairtrade International, working through the Producer Network, CLAC, will continue to support small producer organizations in their efforts to address child labour, while at the same time continuing to research and study the interconnections between poor labour practices and a lack of living income for farmers to cover the cost of sustainable production. This is not to say that farmer income is the only determinant of poor labour practices, but it is a key one. In the meantime, the Fairtrade Premium, along with additional funding sources, is critical to supporting future plans to mitigate and respond to such labour risks in sugar cane production in Belize and beyond.