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A fisheries community in the Tonle Sap region in Cambodia. Children often have to stay in the fisheries overnight.
Photo: L. Bullerdieck

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Development cooperation

Reducing child labour in agriculture through agricultural projects

According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), a large share of child labour takes place in family-based agriculture. However, most agricultural projects do not address child labour, even though they have the potential to contribute to its prevention and reduction. Raising awareness about project impacts on child labour and the inclusion of child labour issues in the planning, monitoring and evaluation process of agricultural projects is one promising way to tackle child labour in agriculture, as emonstrated by a study in Cambodia.

Sixty per cent of the 168 million child labourers in the world are working in agriculture, one of the most dangerous sectors for children to work. In total, 50 million children are performing hazardous work or are working under hazardous conditions in agriculture (ILO/IPEC, 2013). Children in rural areas are often very young (5–7 years) when they start to work as their families depend on the support of every family member (FAO, 2010:1). This also applies to Cambodia, the case study of this article. Cambodia is still one of the world's poorest countries and has a predominantly rural population, with half of its workforce employed in agriculture. In Cambodia, 51.1 per cent of the child labourers are working in agriculture, taking the various sub-sectors crop production, livestock, fisheries, aquaculture and forestry (ILO, 2013:76) into account.

Child labour in Cambodia

- 19 % of the four million children between 5 and 17 years are working (ILO, 2013:26)
- 10.9 % of all working children are child labourers, 6 % of them are engaged in hazardous work (ILO, 2013:26)
- 48.6 % of the child labourers are unpaid family workers (ILO, 2013:72)

Children's work in agriculture is ambiguous. While it can help the children to learn skills and can contribute to generating their families' income with positive impacts on their livelihoods, rural work is physically demanding and implies serious hazards and risks for children's health and development. Hazards include e.g. the use of sharp tools or dangerous machinery, exposure to UV radiation and extreme weather conditions, carrying heavy loads, repetitive movements or the use of agrochemicals. Furthermore, much of the agricultural work is seasonal and often incompatible with school calendars, so that children miss school regularly or their working activities force them to drop out.

Distinguishing between child work, which may have positive impacts on the child's future, and child labour, which is harmful to a child's development, is not always as easy and straightforward as it may seem. The definition of child labour encompasses the complex concepts of childhood, work and labour and, referring to the international conventions on child labour, comprises different criteria like the age of the child or the working environment (see Box below).

International legal framework on child labour

The ILO Minimum Age Convention No. 138 (1973) marks out the minimum age for different types of employment: age 13 for light work, age 15 for ordinary work, and age 18 for hazardous work. The ILO Convention No. 182 (1999) defines the worst forms of child labour. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) introduces the child's right to education and, when talking about child labour, refers to work that interferes with children's schooling.

How is child labour defined?

Child work turns into child labour when children:

- are too young for the work they are doing,
- work too many hours (for their age),
- undertake work of hazardous nature or under hazardous conditions, and/or
- work under slave-like conditions.

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Child labour is defined as work that impairs children's well-being or hinders their education, development and future livelihoods. It is work that is damaging to a child's physical, social, mental, psychological or spiritual development (FAO/ILO, 2013:7)

Challenges in addressing child labour in family-based agriculture

In recent years, the issue of child labour linked to commodities with an international value chain like cotton or cocoa has received some attention by politicians, retailers and consumers. As a result, international and national legislations and policies have been implemented, trying to address especially the worst forms of child labour in plantations or cocoa farms. But child labour taking place in family-based subsistence agriculture has been largely neglected. However, tackling this issue is an urgent, yet complicated challenge for three reasons:

- Firstly, family-based agriculture is mainly informal and rarely covered by national labour legislation (FAO, 2013:12).
- Secondly, child labour in family-based agriculture is mostly invisible because of frequently remote workplaces and blurred boundaries between workplace and household (FAO, 2013:12).
- Thirdly, parents are often little aware of the negative effects of child labour and lack alternatives.

This became evident in Cambodia. Although a national legislation on child labour exists, it does not sufficiently cover child labour in a family-based working environment. Child labour in this context is mostly invisible in contrast to work on bigger plantations or in factories, as experts in Cambodia indicated. In addition, discussions with farmers proved that many parents rely on the work of their children due to their economic situation but are not always aware of the negative effects specific agricultural tasks have for their children.

Agricultural projects should share responsibility

The main cause of child labour in family-based agriculture is persistent poverty in rural areas. In Cambodia, poor smallholder farmers often rely on the work performed by children in order to meet immediate needs for survival. Therefore, reducing rural poverty is closely related to and a precondition for reducing child labour in agriculture. As agricultural projects aim to improve the livelihoods of smallholder farmers and to reduce rural poverty, they play a crucial role in reducing child labour in family-based agriculture. Furthermore, agricultural projects may contribute to keeping children out of child labour and to reducing the hazards child labourers in agriculture are exposed to by awareness raising and training.

Although the majority of agricultural projects do not explicitly address child labour, most of them will have intended or unintended, direct or indirect impacts on child labour. While agricultural projects can have an influence on reducing the hazards that working children are exposed to in agriculture, activities of agricultural projects can also lead to more labour demand in the project area, which might be compensated with child labour.

The Cambodian case

The research looked at six projects implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and different bilateral donors. The projects ranged from supporting fisheries in the Tonle Sap region to improving food security, livelihood and market linkages. In all projects visited during the research in Cambodia, children worked in family-based agriculture. Their tasks ranged from preparing the land and transplanting seedlings through weeding, herding and taking care of chicken to feeding animals and fishing. Hazardous work was mainly associated with spraying agrochemicals or staying in fisheries overnight. But the main problems are that children start working below the legal minimum age and that they work too long. Cambodian legislation does not address child work in family-based agriculture but limits the permitted working hours by children aged over twelve years according to the international conventions. Nevertheless, the research showed that children below twelve often work two to five hours a day in family-based agriculture, which is significantly more than permitted under Cambodian law.

Agricultural projects in Cambodia focus mainly on improving the income situation of smallholder farmers by introducing new agricultural varieties or production systems (e.g. chicken raising). Some of these new agricultural technologies are labour-intensive. However, a number of regions have a shortage of labour, especially those bordering on Thailand and Vietnam that are suffering from workforce migration. This is partly compensated by the work of children. In consequence, the new technologies resulted in an increased labour demand for children.

Apart from that, children generally benefit from the improved income situation of smallholder farmers thanks to activities of agricultural projects in Cambodia. More income enables smallholder farmers to spend more on the nutrition of their children and invest more in their children's education. Therefore, the picture that emerged concerning the impacts of agricultural projects on children in Cambodia was ambiguous: positive and negative impacts often go hand in hand. However, most of the project staff visited during the research were not aware of the impacts of their activities on children and did not integrate them into the planning and monitoring of the project.

Recommendations for agricultural projects

Against this background, it is important for agricultural projects to realise that their activities influence the working situation of children and to assess to what extent and how they influence the working situation of children. Even if the reduction of child labour in family-based agriculture poses a severe challenge and is not the central thematic scope of agricultural projects, there are some entry points for promoting the reduction of child labour that do not require specific knowledge or greater expenditures:

- Awareness raising: Awareness raising amongst project staff and smallholder farmers concerning the harmful effects of child labour on children's development can e.g. be integrated into trainings.
- Integrating child labour considerations into planning, monitoring and evaluation (P, M&E): The integration of child labour considerations into P, M&E enables agricultural projects to determine at an early stage the extent of their impacts on child labour and whether preventive and corrective actions are required. Furthermore,

considering child labour concerns in M&E systems allows the identification and dissemination of good practices in order to respond to child labour in agriculture.

- Reducing hazards: Agricultural projects should at least ensure that their activities do not lead to children undertaking hazardous work. This is of high relevance when supporting smallholder farmers with agricultural inputs such as fertilisers or pesticides, or agricultural tools and machinery.
- Promoting positive impacts: Activities that contribute to the reduction of child labour in agriculture should be disseminated and up-scaled.
- Considering children when designing trainings: Training modules directly addressing children (e.g. Junior Farmer Field Schools) might be a useful approach to provide children and youths with skills for their future employment. However, it must be ensured that these trainings do not interfere with the children's well-being and their right to education, which would open the door to child labour.

What should be kept in mind?

Children contribute to their family's income with their agricultural work, and an increased family income often means better education and nutrition for the children. When thinking about improving the situation of children by implementing certain activities, agricultural projects should bear the complex interplays of their potential impacts in mind.

For instance, just because labour saving technologies might reduce the demand for child labour in one particular area of activity, a child will not necessarily attend school instead of working. The child's labour force might be used in other areas of agricultural activities, unless parents are aware of the benefits of education and unless quality education is easily accessible and affordable. And above all, merely reducing the working hours of children without offering economic alternatives for smallholder farmers to compensate income losses will probably negatively influence their livelihoods and consequently their children's situation.

The data on the impacts of agricultural projects on child labour in Cambodia was collected in the context of the development of a "Handbook on Planning, Monitoring and Evaluating the impacts of agricultural projects on child labour in family-based agriculture" commissioned by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). The research team from the Centre for Rural Development (SLE) of Humboldt University, Berlin, took part in a three-month research visit (August-October 2014) to Cambodia to elaborate and field-test the Handbook.

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