

Child Labour and its Gender Dimensions in Sugarcane Growing in Uganda

Policy Brief - October, 2020

BACKGROUND

Sugar is a pervasive commodity, known to be found in all households, globally. Yet, what is not so known is the exploitation of children in sugarcane growing to produce it.

Global March Against Child Labour (Global March) has identified addressing child labour in agriculture, paying attention to its not so “popular” sub-sectors such as sugarcane, as the key priorities that need attention, intervention and resources if the world is to make significant progress towards zero child labour by 2025.

In 2019, Global March initiated its work on child labour in sugarcane sector, by simultaneously conducting research on the issue in India and Uganda. This brief pertains to the research on *Child Labour and its Gender Dimensions in Sugarcane Growing in Uganda*, particularly in the Busoga region, carried out in collaboration with Global March’s local member, the **National Organisation of Trade Unions (NOTU)** and independent consultants. This brief highlight key findings, recommendations and calling for action.

Uganda, sugarcane and child labour

Uganda is one of the largest producers of sugar in East Africa, with nearly 50% being produced in the Eastern part of the country. Sugar and confectionery are amongst the top 10 goods exported from Uganda contributing over USD 100 million to its exports¹.

Child labour is present in Uganda with 2.048 million children engaged in some form of child labour, constituting 14% of all children nationally². There are more boys than girls in child labour, i.e., 15.4% versus 11.9%. Child labour is concentrated in rural area vis-a-vis urban areas, with about 92% of working children engaged in agriculture³.

Evidence of the wide presence of child labour in the production of sugarcane in Uganda is found across national news articles, reports and USDOL’s annual lists of good produced with child and/or forced labour since recent years.

In neglected sectors as the agricultural one and in particular in sugarcane, the current ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is pushing and/or keeping many children in work due to school closures, increased vulnerability of families and other factors.

ADDRESSING CHILD LABOUR

Challenges

- **Lack of segregated sub-sector data.** No up-to-date and detailed study on the nature and magnitude of child labour in the agriculture and sugarcane sub-sector
- **Poor enforcement** of the legal and policy framework at district level and **scarce of labour officers** as there are 83 labour officers out of the required 134⁴
- **Under-resourced labour units.** At the district level and national child labour unit
- **Inadequate coordination** amongst Ministries / departments

Opportunities

- **Strong legal and policy framework** on child labour. The Government of Uganda has ratified and domesticated a number of instrumental United Nations and Conventions (including ILO Convention 138 on Minimum Age and ILO Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour) into national legislation and policies which guide the country’s efforts on child labour elimination.
- Uganda’s **participation as a Pathfinder Country of Alliance 8.7** is a welcome and well-received step that provides an opportunity to make further progress on reduction of child labour.

¹ <https://globaledge.msu.edu/countries/uganda/tradestats>

² Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), [Uganda National Household Survey \(UNHS\) 2016/17](#)

³ USBOS, [National Labour Force Survey \(NLFS\) 2016/17](#)

⁴ Key informant interview, Principal Labour Officer Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development, 2019

KEY FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH

Child labour in sugarcane growing is prevalent in Busoga sub-region, at out-grower level

Smallholder farmers struggle with increased poverty and presence of shrewd businessmen. As sugarcane production highly depends on human labour, the use of children as a cheap source of labour is prevalent.

Child labour is present sugarcane production and its supply chain in direct and indirect ways

In the production stage, child labour occurs in planting, weeding, cutting and loading. In the transportation, children are involved in carrying sugarcane from the farms to the trucks or main roads. Indirect ways of child labour are found in vending food items and other necessities sold to the sugarcane workers.

Child labour in sugarcane production is hazardous and has consequences

Growing, planting, harvesting and transporting sugarcane are among the hazardous activities on the national list of the hazardous occupations and activities not permitted for employment. Among other direct and indirect hazards of child labour are:

- **Physical development/health** – exposure to pesticides (NPK), accidents caused by falling off loaded trucks of sugarcane, snake bites during harvesting, use of sharp tools
- **Moral development** – exposure to violence and juvenile delinquency, de-value education
- **Education** - absenteeism, poor school performance, school drop-outs, skip lunch time
- **GBV and sexual/reproductive risks** - sexual abuse (defilement), child pregnancies and contracting HIV/AIDS mainly for girls
- **Trafficking**

Child labour in other sub-sectors is also present in Busoga sub-region

Child labour was found in many fish landing sites located in the research area where children engage in fishing, mainly done by boys, loading and unloading, net sorting and boat cleaning. According to respondents, child labour is also found in rice and coffee production, scrap collection, mining, street vending and child domestic work.

There is limited understanding of child labour at community level

Not clarity on the definition nor implications of child labour as well as the laws around it was found among parents, employer-farmers and teachers, contributing to child labour not being reported to authorities or institutions like NGOs working in the area.

Inadequate enforcement of existing laws on issues related to child labour

Corruption across the different stakeholders and political interference by community leaders are according to respondents the major reasons for challenges in implementing and enforcing different laws on child labour.

There is lack of law regulating sugar industry

There is no comprehensive law regulating the sugar industry, resulting in disharmony among the players. The Sugar Bill 2016 is yet to be finalised and approved; however, it does not have any provision relating to child labour.

Push and pull factors of child labour in sugarcane growing

Push factors include:

- **wide-spread poverty**, 42% in the Busoga sub-region, among large extended families in need for additional income for survival;
- **food insecurity** among rural families that sold or rented, most or all of their land to sugarcane growing investors;
- high **school drop-out** rate due to non-affordability of education by poor households;
- **cultural norms and traditions** that frame gender and domestic violence, polygamy and orphanhood in addition to lack of decision making, access and control over resources, like land ownership, by women and (their) children.

Pull factors include:

- **high demand for labour** due to the booming sugar industry;
- children are a **cheap source of labour** and submissive workers.

Gender-based differences and challenges with respect to lived labour realities and its relation to child labour

Who does what?

Boys

- Land preparation, seed cutting chopping, transporting and planting, weeding, harvesting, loading and transporting sugarcane.
- Socially constructed masculine activities, physical and time demanding with implications in their safety, health and education.

Girls

- Planting ridges, seed cutting, weeding and tying sugarcane into bundles, in addition to the designated household chores.
- Socially constructed feminine activities, less physically labour intensive and of domestic nature resulting in an underestimate of its existence and extent.

*Socialisation and acceptance of the **gendered division of (child) labour** lays the foundation for:*

Boys to grow up knowing that they will acquire the head of family status, with power to make decisions and control resources, pushing them to sometimes to start working at an earlier age, not valuing education or being attracted to generate a quick income.

Girls to be prepared to take on the responsibilities of mothers or housewives, having limited access and control over resources throughout their lives, which places them at greater poverty vulnerability in comparison with boys and men.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STAKEHOLDERS

<i>Knowledge gaps</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducting national level study on child labour in sugarcane growing to have data on number of children on sugarcane sector, including sex disaggregation, activities that children perform and the forms of child labour
<i>Implementation gaps</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enforcing of national and district child labour laws, bylaws and ordinances • Enacting/revising national law(s) towards corporate responsibility
<i>Capacity and resources gaps</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allocating of sufficient budget to child labour units and to district labour officers • Strengthening child labour monitoring and prevention mechanisms at the community • Strengthening the district anti-child trafficking task force interventions • Strengthen capacity for village level law enforcement agents • Raising awareness and sensitising community members on child labour
<i>Education gaps</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing school capitation grant budget allocation • Promoting guidelines for supplementary school requirements • Introducing apprenticeship programmes of work in sugarcane growing • Improving access to free government aided vocational skills training
<i>Livelihood gaps</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing access to community livelihoods support schemes • Providing psycho-social support care and promoting child friendly services • Promoting Village Saving and Loans Association (VSLAs)
<i>Coordination /collaboration</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthening stakeholder collaboration in eliminating child labour among Ministries at the national level and departments at the district level as well as between levels • Soliciting the support of sugar companies to address child labour at out grower level

CALL FOR ACTION

1. Carry-out a nation-wide study on the nature and magnitude of child labour in the agriculture and sugarcane sub-sector including sex disaggregation, activities that children perform and the forms of child labour
2. Develop practical sub-sector plan on child labour in sugarcane to address its hazardous nature to identify, withdrawal, rehabilitate child labourers
3. Strengthen the national Child Labour Unit and at district levels the Labour Officer via greater resource allocation
4. Increase capitation education grants to meet education costs of children from vulnerable communities
5. Engage companies and bring attention to their accountability on child labour in the formal and informal part of their supply chains