

Children as part of the Research Team: A Case Study from Central America

Leslie Groves

extract

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1. Introduction

Honduras and Guatemala suffer from extreme levels of poverty. The reality of poverty and social exclusion leaves many children and their families with no alternative to involvement in child labour as the only means of survival. The rights of children working in the worst forms of child labour are systematically abused. Apart from their right to education and recreation, their rights to health, well being and a family are violated as are their basic labour rights. They work long hours far beyond the legal limit, with no time for rest and recreation. Girls working in domestic labour, for example, work an average 14 hour day, isolated from their families and friends and particularly vulnerable to psychological and sexual abuse. Children working in firework production handle dangerous substances in environments which lack the most basic health and safety provisions. Children in the agricultural sector are exposed to dangerous chemicals and handle dangerous tools and carry out heavy work beyond their physical capacity.

Engaging children and their families in tackling the reality of child labour as a survival strategy is crucial to finding alternatives. Action research is a useful strategy for effective programme design, implementation and evaluation. This case study explores the involvement of children in the design and planning of the Save the Children UK Central America and Caribbean Region (CARICA) Child Labour and Poverty Programme. The Programme aims to reduce the high levels of children working in hazardous and exploitative conditions in Honduras and Guatemala, through supporting the development of national and local policy as well as in developing direct action initiatives aimed at providing immediate support to working children.

2. Research aims and objectives

The aim of this particular piece of action research with children was to develop a strategic and operational plan for the Save the Children UK Central America Child Labour and Poverty Programme.

The objectives were twofold:

- To explore children's experiences of current Save the Children interventions
- To consult with children as to ways forward, either through improving current work or through developing new work

This case study builds on a succession of research experiences with working children in Honduras and Guatemala. I was employed as a consultant by Save the

Children UK to use participatory methods to engage children in programme evaluation and planning. The first visit was a mid-term review of the Central America Child Labour and Poverty Programme and the second visit was an end of Programme evaluation. Participatory methods were used for both pieces of work.

These prior experiences mean that the researcher already had links with the different projects in which the children were engaged and some of the children consulted had participated in the previous research. This supported the process in that a degree of relationship had already been established, which facilitated access and a level of trust in the process.