

# CHILD LABOR AND FOOD INSECURITY IN CHIAPANECOS CHILDREN, A CASE STUDY

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— *Abstract* —

The article presents results of a research on child labor, which *aimed* to identify the risk factors of child labor and food insecurity in Tzotzil children, in the state of Chiapas; for which a case study was conducted during the period 2015-2016. For this, a qualitative cross-sectional investigation was carried out during the period 2015-2016. The *results* show that girls and boys come from poor municipalities bordering the municipal district of San Cristóbal de Las Casas: Chamula, Chenalhó, Zinacantán, Oxchuc, Teopisca, Simojovel, San Juan Cancún, Amatenango del Valle and Chanal. The environment in which children work in the region exposes them to suffer diseases of all kinds, which, together with the unhealthy conditions and the food insecurity to which they are subjected, makes them even more susceptible. One of the conclusions of this research is that it is dedicated to the efforts of the various international, national, state and non-governmental organizations involved in mitigating child labor but have not yet achieved the desired results.

**Keywords**

*Child labor, food insecurity, poverty.*

The participation of children in family chores has existed in the history of mankind; however, the conceptualization of child labor has its origin in the Industrial Revolution, a movement with countless social and economic transformations that took place with the development of modern industry (Giddens A. 2009). These social and economic changes referred to by Giddens, have spread throughout the world, appearing with it generations of the working class, a fact that has been breaking the harmony of production processes.

The meaning of child labor today at the international level, is the product of the indicators of the Resolution of the Eighteenth International Conference of Labor Statisticians, in Geneva 2008, seen in the Workshop on Analysis of the Child Labor Module, which recognizes child labor as the participation of a girl, a boy or a teenager in a productive activity that takes place outside the law, whether below the minimum age for admission to employment according to the national legal framework; prohibited by its nature or exposure condition, being dangerous and unhealthy and that can produce negative effects, immediate or future, for their physical, mental, psychological or social development, and that for long hours, limit or prevent the enjoyment of their human and labor rights, especially assistance or permanence in school. And it makes a distinction with the training activities required by children and adolescents to obtain the necessary skills that allow them to prepare and develop the necessary competencies that adult life implies (ILO, 2016).

The International Labour Organization (ILO) warns of considerable differences among the many forms of work carried out by children. Some are difficult and demanding, others are more dangerous and even reprehensible from the ethical point of view. In the framework of their work, children perform a very wide range of tasks and activities.

In this regard, the ILO considers that in order to define child labor, it must first be taken into account that not all the tasks carried out by children should be classified as child labor, therefore, we must learn to differentiate which are the activities that are considered as such. In general, the participation of children or adolescents in jobs that do not threaten their health and personal development or interfere with their education is considered positive. Among other activities, such as help at home, collaboration in the family business, extracurricular tasks, or work activities during the holidays to contribute to family expenses and thereby mitigate poverty a bit; these types of activities are considered beneficial for the development of children. Also, it is considered that it helps them prepare to be productive members of society as adults.

In this context, the term "child labor" is usually defined as: all work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is detrimental to their physical and psychological development. In this sense, the ILO calls child labor those activities that are dangerous and harmful to the physical, mental or moral well-being of the child; those that interfere with their schooling since: it deprives them of the possibility of attending classes; it forces them to leave school prematurely, or requires them to combine the study with a heavy and time-consuming work.

### REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

The regulatory framework in Mexico, as in other parts of the world, on the protection of children against child labor is based on the *Convention on the Rights of the Child of the United Nations*, ratified by Mexico from September 1990 and later in 2000, as well as *ILO Agreement 182*, on the worst forms of child labor. Specifically, Article 32 of the Agreement obliges States to take legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to address child labor (UNICEF, 2006). Therein lies the importance of the Mexican State taking seriously the responsibility of overcoming the international backwardness it faces by maintaining only a welfare policy and lacking a National System for Guaranteeing the Rights of Children, without which government actions and programs will continue without change the difficult reality that most girls, boys and adolescents in Mexico experience (REDIM, 2016).

### CHILD LABOR AND ITS RELATION TO FOOD INSECURITY

Studies show that the decrease in economic income in families is directly proportional to the increase in child labor, mainly in places with high marginalization. Poverty and the poor are defined (...) based on economic and homogenizing criteria. This situation has resulted in imprecise characterizations (Jiménez & Gómez, 2012, page 14). Poverty, scarce financial support for education, lack of decent work for adults, regional inequalities and social exclusion of marginalized groups (INEGI, 2004, pp. 20-21) are causes and consequences of poverty and marginalization prevailing in the country.

Different studies have shown the association between food insecurity and adverse factors, such as inadequate consumption of energy and nutrients, decrease in food supplies in homes, emotional problems in children, and obesity (Rose D, Oliviera V., 1997).

The term "food security" has been defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) as follows:

There is food security when all people have at all times physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food to meet their food needs and food preferences in order to lead an active and healthy life "(World Food Summit, 1996).

Although FAO (2015) reports that hunger rates are below the 5% threshold in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Mexico, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and Uruguay. It is clear that in the entities of the South-Southeast of Mexico these figures are very far from being true since for decades the states of Oaxaca, Guerrero and Chiapas have occupied throughout history the disgraceful first places in the low rate of human development and high degrees of marginalization indexes, consequently they are the poorest entities.

According to the National Council for the Evaluation of Social Development Policy (CONEVAL), the population living in poverty in Chiapas is 74.7% in 2012 and 76.2% in 2014, a figure that shows that Chiapas is getting poorer; consequently, its food insecurity situation is accentuated even more. This information indicates that progress in reducing various social needs has not been presented for Chiapas, Guerrero and Oaxaca.

The information from the Child Labor Module 2015 (MTI) reveals that Chiapas has a total population of 5,277,524 inhabitants, of which 49.25% are men and 50.75% are women. Of the total of its inhabitants, 29% (1,530,205) are children and young people between 5 and 17 years of age, of which 10.37% (158,776) of children and young people only 3.4% (5,403) develop their activities under permitted conditions, while 153,363 (96.6%) do so under conditions not allowed, of which 99,231 (64.7%) do so in hazardous occupation and 54,132 (35.3%) under the minimum age. To this data we should add the 136,783 children and young people who perform domestic work in unsuitable conditions; it is striking that in this particular indicator, women represent the highest percentage (51.4%).

Of the 153,363 working children, 61% carry out their activities in the primary sector, 7.6% in the secondary sector, 30.8% in the tertiary sector and the rest (0.6%) not specified. Regarding the duration of the usual workday, 27.6% of children and young people of both sex, work up to 14 hours a week, 27.5% more than 14 up to 36 hours, 20.6% more than 36 hours and 24.2% do not have a work schedule. Of the child labor carried out by children and young people from Chiapas, most do not receive income (64.3%), 25.5% receive up to a minimum wage, 8.3% up to two minimum wages and only 2% earn more than two minimum wages. It is important to consider that we could add to this data qualitative information that specifies the particular conditions of each child and young person who performs some type of work (MTI 2015, INEGI).

Based on these figures, we can show the relationship that child labor has with food insecurity, since both are directly related to poverty; that is why the present investigation *aims* to identify risk factors of child labor and food insecurity in Tzotzil children, from the state of Chiapas; for which a case study was conducted during the period 2015-2016. The investigation was carried out in the municipal seat of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas; because it is the city with the greatest number of tourists and, consequently, where is tangibly observed the greatest concentration of children working, children who come from the neighboring municipalities of the region.

## METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in the municipal seat of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas; prior to the interviews, government and non-governmental organizations were visited, which referred to carrying out studies on street children; and commented that they had identified children from municipalities around the Capital, including: Chamula, Chenalhó, Zinacantán, Oxchuc, Teopisca, Simojovel, San Juan Cancúc, Amatenango del Valle and Chanal.

To analyze the problem of child labor in the V Tsosil-Tseltal region of the state of Chiapas, it was necessary to identify the risk factors of child labor and food insecurity in Tzotzil children in the state of Chiapas; for which a case study was conducted during the period 2015-2016. For this, on-site visits were made to the municipal seat of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, with the purpose of meeting the girls and boys personally, the causes for which they are forced to work, what they eat during and after their day of employment, where they sleep, their origin, with whom they live, among other variables that provide elements of analysis.

To locate the work areas of the children under study, a mapping was carried out, as a result of which 9 zones were established in the municipal capital; which were formed as follows: Central Park, Arco del Carmen, Santo Domingo Park, Andador Real de Guadalupe, Municipal Market José Castillo Tielmans, Ant Market, Popular del Sur Market, Mercalito and Zona Norte Market.

Once the work areas were located, each of them was explored to identify the environment in which the children live and work; for this, it was necessary a preliminary approach to the interviews (*primary source*), which consisted of creating an atmosphere of trust and at the same time identifying key informants, who subsequently gathered groups of children from each established area to participate in the study. During the interviews and the analysis of secondary sources, we sought to gather as much information as

possible about the factors that force them to work at such an early age, as well as their socio-demographic conditions.

To carry out the data recollecting process, a *semi-structured interview guide* was designed which allowed deepening into the categories of this research: health, food, education, leisure time, definition of child labor and working hours. The inclusion criteria were: children working in the municipal capital of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, who expressed their willingness to participate in the study and who also spoke Spanish, regardless of whether they spoke an indigenous language, and who had an age that oscillated between 11 and 14 years of age, since in previous visits it was identified that children of 10 years and less, could not express themselves with the clarity required to respond to the items of the interview. The primary information was collected through the nine groups of children (31 children in total) in their respective work areas.

## RESULTS

Nearly 60% of boys and girls (mostly boys) have been incorporated from an early age into economic activities as companions of their parents or siblings; therefore, they perceive child labor as a natural and optimal activity for their age. Most of the children mentioned that they are directly responsible for their inclusion in the workplace; however, it is a contradictory response when compared to when they were asked if they work compulsorily, since 90% reported being forced to work by their parents or guardians; they also commented that most of the profits are given to their parents. 40% believe that it is okay for children to work, since that income allows them to cover part of their basic needs such as food, support the family in life projects, such as building their house, or generate savings for health emergencies, as well as covering educational expenses, among others.

The reality shows us that the income received in each working day are sufficient only to survive, since they must cover the quota assigned by the father or his employer, which ranges between 80 and 100 pesos per working day, which shows that they hardly achieve collect an extra amount that allows them to buy food and personal items such as clothing, shoes, medicines or personal hygiene products.

Regarding education, despite the fact that the children claim to attend school, the data obtained from the public institutions themselves show that there is an assiduous absence, due to the lack of interest on the part of the parents and the children themselves; in addition to this situation, the

frequent suspension of classes due to teacher and community problems, accentuates this problem. In summary, the children expressed that they learn little or nothing in school, which can be due to two causes: First: the work actions mentioned by the teachers and secondly: by the frequent absence that the children present during the school year, derived mainly from the need of economic resources to pay for family expenses, as well as the parents' ignorance about the importance and benefits for their children, as well as that of their own families.

Regarding the health of children, environmental exposure in their working hours makes them more susceptible to suffer diseases of all kinds, caused by factors such as rain, cold, sun exposure and unsanitary conditions, which trigger: colds, flu, cough and those of a respiratory nature; as well as skin diseases expressed in fungi, symptoms such as redness, irritation, inflammation, burning, pruritus and possible allergies, in this respect 90% of the interviewees show skin injuries apparently derived from the long and exhausting work days under the sun, combined with the cold of the region, which reaches very low temperatures in some seasons; on the other hand, derived from unhealthy conditions are susceptible to suffering gastrointestinal diseases, lice and other types of parasites.

Children who mentioned working longer or performing excessive loads (60%) reported that it causes pain in legs, feet, knees, waist, head, etc. This dynamic to which they are subject over time predisposes them to impairments in the development of the musculoskeletal system and can, in the worst case, cause them some disability. It is evident that fatigue prevents them from having the strength to develop their cognitive abilities and generate skills that help them face adult life, as well as achieving better job opportunities. Added to this, poor care in their home can worsen their situation.

Even though the V Tsotsil-Tseltal region is highly productive in fruits and vegetables; the children under study lack access to these foods due to lack of money, since 70% of the children interviewed reported having one or two meals a day, which consists mainly of the intake of beans and many tortillas; the high consumption of junk foods (*chicharrín, frituras, volovanes*, bottled sodas, etc...) in which they invest a small part of the sales draws attention. They also said that they only eat meat when some people give it to them (already prepared), or when institutions feed them (mainly non-governmental).

Given the state of food insecurity in which these groups of children survive, the risk of malnutrition is high; however, this would be the least of the



problems if we consider that the complications they bring, such as fatigue, lack of concentration in classes for those children attending school, dental problems, little or no subcutaneous fat to mitigate the cold of the region, little immunity, among others, entails a low response capacity to face the constant risks to which they are exposed.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is to be expected that a federative entity such as Chiapas will present social problems of this nature, since it has occupied the last places in social welfare for decades, for which reason they are reflected in the lack of public services, lack of employment, marginalization, and consequence low human development index. Child labor is observed throughout the region; however, most of the cases are concentrated in the municipal seat of San Cristóbal de Las Casas; that is why the study took place in this city.

Despite the efforts made by the various international, national, state and non-governmental organizations that work to mitigate child labor, they have not achieved the desired results; since this problem is multidimensional; social, cultural and economic factors intervene, such as poverty, marginalization, illiteracy, among others. An additional factor is the lack of awareness among heads of families, as they see each of their children as another workforce, with what they try in volume, to reduce the poverty in which they are immersed.

Although the regulative framework on the rights of girls and boys in the Constitution of many countries is more complete each day, it is not enough, first, because it does not guarantee that it is applied as it is proposed, on the other hand, because there are still no ways for all children to assert their own rights, above all, because they do not know them and in many of the underdeveloped countries nor parents know of the existence of these rights, nor others that their Constitution grants them.

In short, the causes that foster the phenomenon of child labor and the insecurity to which girls and boys are exposed in the V Tsosil-Tseltal region of the state of Chiapas, despite being of a multifactorial nature, it can be asserted that it is as a result of the situation of poverty in which they find themselves, consequently, the parents of these girls and boys see in their children another labor force that can contribute to family spending, thus promoting child labor and in turn exposing them to suffer food insecurity, health risks, delay in their education and especially *the right to enjoy their childhood*.

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