

Child labour project in Panama

Child labour: a difficult concept to grasp in the field

The sign posted in the main building of the plantation clearly announces: "No child labour".

"If we see a child, we send him home and the parents are fined," explains Ricardo, one of the managers, at the wheel of a 4x4 that drives the RHSF and IIECL teams through the exploitation.

"They do inspections and they fine if they find a child," confirmed one picker a few days later.



The soggy, bumpy tracks, broken up by tractors, go down between the plots of bushes with varnished leaves. Groves of slender trees, where monkeys sometimes play, provide the coffee trees with the shade they need. Vultures circling tirelessly in a blue sky, which can become covered in less than an hour with thick clouds pouring down tropical waterspouts.

The pickers, quick-witted men and women, fill the basket attached to their waist with red berries.

In a large clearing, a meadow and a long building on the ground floor, the school, appear. Children play ball, barefoot, "to save their shoes, which are very expensive for them," says Ricardo. Others, younger children, surround their teacher. The premises are dashing, with light-coloured walls and coloured furniture.

"This is a day-care centre and a primary school," explains Maria. "The older children, up to 14 years old,

go to the secondary school, which is a 15-minute walk from the coffee bean processing plant.

An NGO dedicated to the fight against child labour through education, Casa Esperanza, is working with the director of the primary school to address the particular problems of migrant populations. She therefore has privileged access to exploitation in order to carry out her fight.

As for the plantation, it "participates in EducaFuturo, a programme set up by the NGO Partners of the Americas, and boasts of having set up a school transport service. But... only "for the children of permanent workers".

A willingness shown by the management to refuse child labour, schools, no children visible at first sight in the fields, an NGO on the spot... The image is beautiful. However, an in-depth field study makes it shatter.

A less idyllic reality

Child labour associations generally agree: in Asian, African and Latin American countries, agriculture is child labour.

According to the International Labour Office (ILO), 60 per cent of all working children aged 5 to 17 are in agriculture, representing 129 million girls and boys. The Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as a young person under the age of 18. They can only work at age 12 in light work and under certain conditions, 15 in non-hazardous work and 18 in hazardous work. According to Conventions 182 and 138, hazardous work must be defined by States, but this is not always the case and each plantation has its specificities.

Associations met in Panama City by the RHSF and IIECL teams at the Ministry of Education at the beginning of their survey were clear: "There is child labour everywhere". And when there are secondary schools, for 12-14 year olds, "they are too far away".

The Ministry (MEDUCA) sets up programmes, including scholarships to encourage parents to send their children to school, and carries out "more and more inspections". But it is confronted with the realities of internal migrants such as the Ngöbe Indians and their culture, explain the associations: "They do not know their rights, the minors want to work to feel like 'little men', some are already married with a family, the young people have to help their parents economically...".

In addition, there is a lack of clarity at the highest level of government on the age at which a young person is allowed to work. "Everything is very general," acknowledges a representative of the Ministry of Labour. And getting the number of the law concerning child labour will be a struggle for RHSF and IIECL, both at the Ministry and with the coffee industry unions.

"According to the labour code, one cannot work before the age of 14. But in the family code, we talk about 12 years," they explain to the ministry. In agriculture, for "dangerous" work, "you are not allowed to work between 14 and 17 years old", unless you have special authorisation, according to a decree.

One NGO notes that Panama has signed the treaty on the "worst forms of child labour" and has issued a decree to this effect, i.e. hazardous work is prohibited before the age of 18. "But Panama's constitution sets the age at 15, and the constitution should take precedence over the decree...".

In the field, on the plantation visited for several days by the associations, the question keeps coming up: between the age of 14 - leaving secondary school - and 18, what do the young people of the migrant families living on the plantation do? No satisfactory answer is given. The teenagers met among the pickers all declare ages 14 and over. But all those interviewed declare that they have been working on the plantation for several years...

It is only on the last day that a member of the team will come across children under the age of twelve whose physique cannot fool anyone.

A coffee plantation: stack side, face side

A call, which could pass for a bird's cry, resounds from time to time in the bottom of a plot. The farm workers, who cannot see each other as soon as they move a bit apart, hidden by the foliage of the coffee trees, have adopted this rallying cry.

Guided in this way, the IIECL team came across a dozen men spreading powdered fertiliser at the foot of each shrub. In the cool of the morning, they are barely protected from the dew bathing the leaves thanks to rubbish bags transformed into makeshift protection...

Two days earlier, at 6 a.m., the management of the plantation presented RHSF and IIECL with the departure to work of the various teams designated to pick the berries, spread fertilisers or pesticides, and cut the lianas choking the coffee trees. The RHSF - IIECL team is tirelessly observing, questioning and cross-referencing information.

Visiting the chemical products room, the tools used to dispense them and the work clothes provided, allows Diane Mull (IIECL) to note the harmfulness of the products, to find out about the personnel in charge of handling them, to make sure that the protections provided are adequate...

Martine Combemale (RHSF), for her part, asks the farm workers about working hours, their remuneration (per basket, per bag, paid to each person or to the head of a group, a family, overtime...). She will later cross-check this information with the accounts department.

Another member of IIECL attended the departure of the fertiliser spreading team that morning. Yellow wax covering the men from head to toe, boots, gloves... All safety standards are respected.

Working and living conditions that are sometimes undignified



Two days later, Epinal's image is tarnished: the members of the team discovered at the bottom of the valley, temporary workers, are indeed telling another story. Suffering from the cold in their T-shirts wet by the dew, bare hands, equipped with a cup, the men draw from bags the fertilizer that sticks to their wet skin. "My wrists often itch," complains Augusto.

Two of them, however, are wearing yellow oilskins: "The 'permanents' gave them to us instead of throwing them away," they say laughing, showing the rough seams hiding the tears. The 'temporary' ones are not entitled to these protections.

Elsewhere, other farm workers are caught preparing an insecticide before treating a plot of land. Different chemicals, including an acid, are poured into a large canister and mixed with

a large spatula. The man in charge of this operation also works with his bare hands, not hesitating to plunge them into the liquid when the spatula falls in.

As far as accommodation is concerned, it is provided by the company. During the accompanied visit, the management had presented a "camp" where about ten families lived. A long, single-storey, cinder block building, painted ochre in colour, in the middle of a green meadow. On the long façades are the doors of each dwelling: one room per family. Inside, low sides sometimes covered with cardboard to insulate from the cold are used as beds. The walls and the floor are grey: the colour of the cement they are made of.

At one end of the building, showers, at the other end, rough fireplaces for cooking, made with wood fire or on a gas stove. A little further on, toilets consisting of a seat resembling the edge of a well.

Spartan facilities, but clean and quite common for this type of operation. Running water in public places, electricity...

Another "camp" discovered later by the RHSF-IIIECL team will show a completely different reality. Located near the river crossing the farm, the buildings are made of cinder blocks and corrugated iron. Each living room is at best in darkness: the openings are tiny, night falls around 6pm and there is no electricity. Moreover, running water is often cut off and you have to go and draw non-drinking water from the river. Finally, the children waded on a ground that is often muddy, the camp being installed in a valley bottom. And the rain falls in the single room through the corrugated iron sheets.

Excavate the hidden side

"This mission, Martine Combemale and Diane Mull assure us, is quite comparable to what we find in agriculture in developing countries: on the one hand the visible side, on the other hand the hidden side where forced labour and child labour, abusive working conditions, are very real".

"Only a thorough study can identify these problems, as the systems in place to check for failures in social responsibility are often ineffective," they point out. And the company's stated positions are just wishful thinking that will not reduce the risk of child labour.

Thus, in this particular case, the plantation's "values" include "defence of children's rights" and "respect for the dignity of work". It has been recognised for its actions in these areas both nationally and internationally.

The compensation jungle

Every Saturday in the mid-afternoon, in the humid heat, a line of men stretches out in front of the payroll office. On the other side of a bay window, a table is laid out. There are sheets of paper with the names of the employees. Finally... the employees receiving the pay.



"Very few women, few young adults... It is clear to the naked eye that the people waiting for their pay do not correspond to what we have seen working on the plantation, neither in number, nor in gender - very few women -, nor in age - very few young adults -", notes Martine Combemale.

"The plantation says it has so many workers. But in fact, it's only the heads of families, or the head of a migrant group," she explains.

All employees, but not equal

"In the plantations, different statuses coexist," notes Martine Combemale. "Generally, efforts are concentrated on permanent staff, who often have advantages, such as scholarships for children's education. Their case, in this plantation, is highlighted in their annual report. But their number does not exceed 50 employees, beyond which staff representatives are mandatory.

A second category of staff, temporary employees, have neither contract nor payroll, contrary to legal requirements. They therefore do not officially exist and have no social and legal protection.

"They are paid by the hour, and overtime is rarely paid at the right price ... when it is deducted," she points out.

The last and largest category, nearly 600 employees in the plantation studied, are the seasonal pickers. In spite of the law which obliges each employee working on a farm to declare himself or herself, only the head of the family or group receives the pay: "Children do not exist, nor do women, so the risk of abusive child labour is at its highest despite the management's assurance of the absence of child labour", notes Martine Combemale.

He gets 0.078 per 500 grams of coffee, regardless of the number of hours worked by the whole family or group.

Maximum risks

"Especially since seasonal and temporary workers have no pay slip, are paid in cash and simply have to sign that they have received the money, which does not allow them to check the accuracy of their pay and complain," she points out.

"Finally, in the event of an accident at work, these employees are not covered since they do not exist. The plantation manager may take them to the hospital, but payment will be made by hand and nothing will be recorded," she adds.

"It is therefore abusive, illegal work, a vehicle for child labour," she notes.

However, such a situation is not inevitable: some plantations, especially those organized as cooperatives with a strong independent trade union, respect the law and the risk of child labour is very limited.

The announced working time for the pickers is also confusing. It is officially eight hours, six days a week. But once the day's picking is over, it is necessary to wait for the weighing at the assembly point. This time is not counted. Not to mention Sundays, when the work of "temporary workers" is called for. They are not paid overtime and can refuse. But many accept in the hope of being hired as "permanent".

"The only respect of the law, with a management system adapted to the arrival of these seasonal workers, would limit the risks of abusive work and child labour without impacting the viability of the plantation as observed in other farms," insists Diane Mull.

Coffee: from obscure pickers to aroma artists



Antonio, 14, finishes filling a bag of coffee cherries on the slopes of the mountains near the town of Sereno, in the Volcano region of Panama. A 50 kilogram load will pay him less than three balboas (3 dollars).

Thousands of kilometres away, sitting in the warmth of a café in Paris, Paul smells the aroma of his "petit noir". Without suspecting the work done by pickers and roasters in the Tropics.

November. "The wettest month of the tropical rainy season," explains Pedro. The rain drowns out the mountain slopes. The coffee pickers' worst enemy, in the coffee plantations of the Volcano region in Panama's far north, is pouring down rain.

Poorly protected from the rain, with their rubbish bags floating on their torsos, Pedro and Roberto, both claiming to be 14 years old, like all the children interviewed, are struggling in the rain.

"The leaves are wet, the water runs down your arms, you're cold and the seeds are heavier in the basket..." attached to their waist, they complain. Moreover, they slip on the ground, which slips away under their tennis shoes. "There's always the risk of falling and hurting yourself," they explain. However, there are officially no occupational accidents on this plantation...

The coffee tree, a shrub that can grow to a height of almost 9 m, has been pruned to a height of 3 m. To make harvesting easier. Roberto, the tallest, takes care of the upper part, Pedro of the lower branches, often devolved to women, as in the past to young children. He puts one knee in the mud to keep his balance while bending over.

Today, the plots, or "streets", that have been designated for them are particularly steep. In teams of two, often in families, the pickers work around the plants, making their hands fly along the branches. The red berries, the "cherries", are then thrown into the basket, which contains 20 kilos of them.

From the "cherry" to the seed

Then they are transferred in big bags of at least 50 kilos when fully loaded, which the men, but often also young people as young as 14, put on their backs with a kidney stroke to carry them to the assembly point, sometimes more than a kilometre away. There, without shelter, they will have to wait until the end of the day for the weighing of their harvest. "We're cold, but we're fine," they reassure themselves, silent and patient. They will only be able to return to their homes once the trailer is loaded and pulled by a tractor to the processing plant.

The cherries - each containing two coffee beans - must be processed quickly, within six hours of being picked. They are first sorted to remove any impurities, or green cherries, that could affect the quality of the rest of the batch.

The "wet treatment", generally practised in Central America, involves plunging the cherries for several hours in basins of water to make them swell, before mechanically removing the pulp. The berries, still surrounded by a fine particle, are left in fermentation tanks for more than 24 hours. Finally, they are dried in the sun or in large rotating cylinders to reach a humidity level of 12.5 degrees. The thin film that still covers them is removed and they are sorted according to size, density, etc...

The coffee beans prepared in this way, known as "green coffee", are then roasted. On the spot for local consumption, or as close as possible to the place of consumption for exports, as roasted coffee has a shorter shelf life than "green" coffee.

Towards perfection in the mouth

The quality of the batches is regularly tested by a taster. In a room dedicated to this activity, small quantities of coffee are roasted at 220°. Then each batch is ground and the powder is placed in several bowls, into which hot water is poured to infuse the grind.

The taster, armed with a small spoon, breaks the film which then forms on the surface of the liquid, pushing the pomace to the bottom. He brings his face close to the containers and first smells the aromas that are released. It is important to do the same operation in several bowls because the expression of the aromas can be different according to each roasted batch.

The taster then takes a little coffee at the bottom of his spoon. He sucks it in with a very special hissing sound, to soak the taste buds on and under the tongue. Then he spits out the sample.

"It's all about testing the flavours, the acidity, the character, the length in the mouth", explains Claudio, who comes several times a week to the farm.

If the tests are satisfactory, all the beans for local consumption can then be roasted and packaged. This protects the aroma while preventing the coffee from humidification and oxidation: the packet contains a valve that gradually eliminates the gases that emanate from the coffee, while preventing air from entering the bag. This allows the product to be kept intact for one year.

At the end of this process, Paul can in turn smell the aromas of his coffee in Paris and taste it. "No sugar and no milk", Claudio would advise him. "Black as the devil, hot as hell, pure as an angel, sweet as love", would have added Talleyrand, a great lover of this beverage.

Paul will pay 2.5 euros for his "little black man". Antonio was paid \$0.078 per pound of coffee.

Cooperative bananière : social and solidarity economy project

Cooperative bananière: social and solidarity economy project committed to combating child labour and abusive working conditions.

Coobana : bananas, people and communities

"Nous must take care of the banana trees, but also hommes," says Carmen, one of the managers of the Coobana banana cooperative in northeastern Panama, soberly. A demand that covers an everyday reality, both in the management and in the tasks carried out by the farm workers, or in the life of the surrounding communities, as the French and American NGOs RHSF (Human Resources Without Borders) and IIECL (International initiative to end child labor) have noted.

The road winds its way down the Chiriqui mountain range. As you come out of a bend, the blue Caribbean Sea and an ocean appear below vert: the banana plantations of Changuinola, near the area where Christopher Columbus landed in 1503, on his fourth voyage.

In this plain in the province of Bocas del Toro, it is impossible to ignore what the main activity is. Vans filled to the brim with bunches of bananas and lorries loaded with cartons filled with thousands of these fruits for export crisscross the narrow roads hemmed with banana trees.

The plantations of Chiquita Brands International, one of the world's largest banana producers, are spread out, kilometre after kilometre. It trusts the markets and its power seems irresistible.

However, an economic and human success, Coobana (Cooperativa de servicios multiples bananera del Atlantico) is developing alongside this giant. With a farm of nearly 550 hectares of banana trees, this cooperative has triumphed over the worst difficulties to impose itself with quality products sold internationally, a real policy of social responsibility for its employees and a policy of aid to local communities.

At the end of the 1980s, the Panamanian state decided to sell its banana plantations, including one near Changuinola, to the private sector. About twenty employees, simple agricultural workers, decided to buy it. Faced with all the blows used by the competition, a real struggle begins to obtain funds and exploitation rights.

Thanks to a loan from the Boston Bank, the cooperative was launched in 1991 on three plots of 72, 76 and 80 hectares. Today, with some 500 employees, 220 of whom are members, Coobana produces several tons of bananas each year and 15 to 20 containers leave each week for Europe, bound for countries such as Great Britain, the Netherlands and Denmark...

In 2013, it increased its turnover by 7% to reach 7.5 million dollars in revenue, according to the Fresh Plaza site.

Men...

" Nous are all earning the same salaire ", says Julio Quintero, one of the founding members of the cooperative. " Les rights are the same for the temporary, the permanent, the responsables ", he adds.

Each of the plots or " fincas ", which are several kilometres apart, is organised from the same façon: the banana plantation, an administrative building, premises for tools and chemicals, and finally the packing shed.



The RHSF team examines governance and administrative services, which are transparent. " Le risk of child labour is limited because each person has a contract, a payroll and a bank account. In addition, the harvesting season is smoothed out over the year, which avoids massive arrivals of seasonal workers. Finally, wages are calculated on a per job basis, based on the legal minimum and overtime rates," notes Martine Combemale.

The "fair trade" approach also makes it possible to limit health and safety risks," emphasises Diane Mull.

Trade unions, like the regional delegation of the Ministry of Labour, have finally declared that they have found that there is no child labour.

In each " finca " is a representative of the banana industry union SITRAPI (Workers' Union for Independent Banana Producers). " La The presence of such a union helps to limit the risks, especially as it is very vigilant on child labour," acknowledges the director of RHSH.

At a meeting with the management of SITRAPI and its representatives working on the Coobana properties, RHSF and IIECL found that the only recriminations of the trade unionists were about wage increases, scholarships for schools or a bonus for Christmas?

Bananas...

In the banana plantation, the paths are generally well laid out, with no obstacles that could cause the farm workers to fall, and the dead leaves are used as fertiliser. The bunches, before the end of their growth, are surrounded by a bag impregnated with insecticides, a job carried out with protection and for which the staff are regularly trained, says Antonio, who is in charge of security.

"We have also replaced the aeroplanes carrying out large-scale pesticide spraying with helicopters to avoid spreading Nous too widely," he tells Diane Mull, IIECL director, as a ballet of planes snores over the competitors' plantations not far away. In addition, a dedicated site is under construction to make compost with all the green waste.

Handling is also constantly being improved. The bunches, once picked, are suspended from cables and pulled by mules, not men. In the packaging buildings the signs " produits chimiques " or reminding of the safety measures are clearly visible. Depending on the area,

everyone wears a helmet, hair protection, a mask, gloves... to wash the fruit, sort it, protect it with a preservative, place it in boxes, then on a pallet and in the lorries.

All year round. Because the banana tree is a strange plant. First of all, contrary to its appearance, *Musa paradisiaca* of its scientific name is not a tree. The visible part of this herbaceous plant is a set of leaves, which can be up to 4 m long and 1 m wide, partially overlapping each other. In the centre is a false trunk, formed by the petiole of the leaves.

When the banana tree has produced a bunch, it dies and must be cut down. But a shoot then grows very quickly on a rhizome, and this "fils" will in turn produce a bunch of up to 200 fruits three months later.

... and communities

As in all the banana plantations of the Changuinola region, some 85% of the agricultural workers in Coobana are Ngöbe, Amerindians. The stated objectives of the cooperative include "l 'improving social living conditions, following the precepts of sustainable economy of its members and employees, and encouraging change in its milieu", communities.

Improvement of services in the villages (replacement of wood ovens by gas installations...), schools, drinking water, construction of housing, setting up of women's associations to develop handicrafts (Nöba Bälen for chocolate products...) ... The cooperative is multiplying its actions to improve its environment.

For all its actions, the cooperative benefits from the Fairtrade International Fair Trade label, and the Rainforest Alliance label, an international NGO working to conserve biodiversity and ensure the livelihoods of local populations.

"Nos products are more expensive than those of the competition," admits Julio Quintero, "but our customers know, and appreciate, that we contribute to the well-being of communautés". "Certains points need to be improved, especially in the management system," says Martine Combemale. "Mais this is a quite remarkable example that demonstrates that social and solidarity responsibility measures can be put in place, that they can prevent abusive child labour, without damaging the economic efficiency of entreprise".