



Involvement and Working Conditions of Youth in Sugar Cane Cutting in Belize

A study commissioned by Fairtrade International
and undertaken with the Belize Sugar Cane
Farmers Association

July 2018

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Acknowledgements

Fairtrade International commissioned this study, with the permission of the Coordinadora Latinoamericana y del Caribe de Pequeños Productores y Trabajadores de Comercio Justo (CLAC) – the Fairtrade Producer Network representing farmers and workers in Latin America and the Caribbean. The Belize Sugar Cane Farmers’ Association (BSCFA) carried it out. Since 2015 BSCFA has been working to support Fairtrade’s *Youth Inclusive Community Based Monitoring and Remediation (YICBMR) System* on child labour in Belize. Data collection, analysis, and initial report drafts were carried out by the BSCFA’s youth monitors (aged between 18 and 24), Emmanuel Hall, Neima Keme, Graciela Murillo, Yelissa Nah, and Dean Sosa. The data checks and report editing were done by Zune Canche, Protection Focal Point and Senior Accountant/Manager, BSCFA and Jesse Hastings, MEL Manager at Fairtrade International. Further data checks and editing on data graphic presentation were done by Arisbe Mendoza Escalante, Head of MEL, at Fairtrade International. Kyle Freund, Media Manager, at Fairtrade America, edited a version of the report. CLAC and the producer organizations in Belize were given a draft and asked for comments. Most of their comments have been incorporated into this report. The report’s final analysis and writing was done by Anita Sheth, Senior Advisor, Social Compliance and Development at Fairtrade International. Final copy editing was undertaken by Martin Hickman, Canbury Press

We thank the many sugar cane farmers who gave permission to meet and interview cane cutters working on their farms. All interviews were undertaken after receiving informed consent from the participants. We also thank the youth cane cutters who took part in this study and suggested ways of improving their well-being.

All major instances of non-compliance on child labour identified by this study have been reported to Fairtrade International and addressed by the relevant producer organization.

Abstract

This study has two purposes. Firstly, it aims to research an understudied aspect of sugar cane production in order to better understand the experience of youth cutting sugar cane, defined in this study as persons between the ages of 14 to 28. Secondly, by closely partnering with a smallholder sugar cane producer organization, it aims to enable communities themselves to address child labour issues (with support from Fairtrade).

The paper discusses its findings and the advantages of empowering Fairtrade producer organizations, especially young people aged 18 to 24, to lead and respond to research on their own well-being.

Introduction

“There are 541 million young workers (15-24 years old) globally. They account for more than 15 percent of the world’s labour force and suffer up to a 40 percent higher rate of non-fatal occupational injuries than adult workers older than 25. They include 37 million 15-17 year olds in hazardous child labour.”¹

Child labour in sugar cane production is pervasive across the world (Schwarzbach & Richardson, 2014). Multiple studies and news coverage in three continents (Africa, Latin America, and Asia) have identified children as young as five years old working on sugar cane farms (International Labour Organization, 2017). Many countries use indentured child labour in sugar cane production, according to the List of Goods Produced by Child and Forced Labor published by the US Department of Labor. Children are often introduced to cane production by family members running their own farms. Others are employed directly or indirectly by job contractors or adult workers. Many of these children are denied a quality education. They are also exposed to multiple workplace hazards, including heat stroke, insect and snake bites, machete cuts, kidney problems, and respiratory ailments (International Labour Organization, 2017).

The ILO recognizes that evidence-based data is needed on the use of child labour in the sugar cane industry in order to develop effective policy for its elimination. It blames the use of child labour on sugar price volatility, unfair competition, weather fluctuations, and informal arrangements in production which make it difficult for smallholder farmers to cover the cost of production. However, the ILO notes that there is little data on “the exact incidence of child labour in sugar cane production” because “most countries do not gather industry specific data.”² “This lack of global estimates,” the ILO points out, was identified “as a central issue by sugar buyers who stress the importance of having accurate intelligence to engage supply chain partners”³ to address such issues as child labour.

Fairtrade International, working with the Belize Sugar Cane Farmers Association (BSCFA), a Fairtrade certified small sugar cane producer organization, decided to address this absence of data. In 2016, Fairtrade International commissioned a study to be undertaken by BSCFA’s youth monitors on the *Involvement and Working Conditions of Youth in Sugar Cane Cutting in Belize*. What was (and is) unique about this study was not just that it would examine an under-researched aspect of sugar cane production in Belize, but also that the data would be collected and analyzed by youth monitors from the sugar cane producer organization. Fairtrade International was enthused at the prospect of working with a Fairtrade small producer organization that since 2015 has actively monitored and responded to child labour risks by its own members.

¹ ILO, World Day for Safety and Health at Work, April 18, 2018, see link:

<http://www.ilo.org/safework/events/safeday/lang--en/index.htm>

² ILO, Publications (2017), “*Child Labour in the Primary Production of Sugarcane*,” p. 9, Geneva

³ Ibid

Belize sugar cane sector

Belize is a small country in Central America that borders Mexico and Guatemala. In 2016, its population was 378,000 people, up 2 percent from the previous year. According to the UN, 37 percent of the population is under 15 years old (133,821 in absolute numbers), 60 percent is aged between 16 and 64 years and 3 percent is over 65.

Agriculture is the most important sector of the economy for income generation, employment, food security and poverty alleviation. It makes up more than 13 percent of GDP and 66 percent of foreign exchange earnings, and employs one in 10 workers.

Sugar is the country's biggest agricultural exports⁴. Sugar is produced in the northern districts of Corozal and Orange Walk, mostly on small farms. The population of the two districts is a little over 100,000 — about 40,000 of whom depend directly or indirectly on sugar.⁵ Sugar cane is milled at *Belize Sugar Industries* (BSI). In 2017, BSI produced 144,000 tons of sugar, with roughly 15,000 tons going to the local market. About 10,000 to 15,000 tons of sugar was exported to the US but the bulk (more than 100,000 tons) went to the European Union — the primary buyer of Belize's exports.⁶

Belize recognizes that children and young people are critical to its development. It was among the first countries to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), in May 1990. Since then Belize has also ratified the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict, and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, as well as other Inter American Conventions on the rights of the child. It also ratified ILO Convention 138 (Minimum Age of Employment) and ILO 182 (Worst Forms of Child Labour).

The 2013 ILO and Government of Belize's National Child Activity Survey (released in 2015) shows the rate of children's employment in agriculture is increasing, with Corozal having the second highest rate and Orange Walk the third highest. Since this study did not investigate worst forms of child labour other than those formally defined as 'hazardous'⁷, information on the type of work children do and under what conditions is still largely unknown.⁸ The study estimates that 5,565 children work (5 percent), of which 3,528 are engaged in child labour (3 percent). Some 60 percent of working children (3,381) do hazardous

⁴ The National Encyclopedia, Belize — Agriculture,

<http://www.nationsencyclopedia.com/economies/Americas/Belize-AGRICULTURE.html#ixzz4Msk4Hp5u>

⁵ Breakdowns of the number of people who are directly or indirectly dependent on sugar industry are not known.

⁶ The Reporter, "[Sugar production up but concerns linger over changes in EU market regime,](http://www.reporter.bz/business/sugar-production-up-but-concerns-linger-over-changes-in-eu-market-regime/)" January 26, 2018

⁷ ILO Convention 182 Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour defines two components for this category of child labour. The first is what is referred to as pre-automatic definitions; examples would include, all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour, including forced or compulsory recruitment of children for use in armed conflict etc. The second refers to work which by its nature, or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children ('hazardous child labour').

⁸ ILO, "Report of the National Child Activity Survey: Belize 2013, published 2015.

<http://www.ilo.org/ipecinfo/product/download.do?type=document&id=26817>

work. Over half of working children are employed in two industries: agriculture and trade/repairs. Among children aged 5 to 14 who work, 24 percent do so in agriculture. Three-tenths of the working children say the main reason they work is to boost their household's income and 18 percent worked mainly to help the family business.⁹ Like many other sugar cane producing countries identified on the List of Goods Produced by Child and Forced Labor published annually by the US Department of Labor, child labour is a known risk in Belize.

Belize's Program of Action to Eliminate the Worst Forms of Child Labour is presented through the *National Plan of Action for Children and Adolescents, 2004–15*, more recently updated into the *Children's Agenda (2017-2030)*.¹⁰ While making children's rights central to the country's development and aiming to protect every child from abuse, neglect and exploitation, Belize has not addressed the worst forms of child labour. It does not have a definition for light work, nor has it adopted its Hazardous Child Labour List into law. Belize's *Families and Children Act (2000)* defines a child as "a person below the age of 18".¹¹ Article 7 of this Act prohibits children under 18 from being employed or engaged in any activity that may be detrimental to their health, education, or mental, physical or moral development.¹² Yet, children under the age of 14 years who have obtained a Social Security ID Card are permitted to work, and some cut cane. There is a legislative contradiction between the legal age for compulsory school attendance (age 14) and the minimum age of employment in sugar cane production. Children over 15 who have completed primary schooling have few employment opportunities in the sugar cane growing areas of Corozal and Orange Walk.

According to the ILO, both push and pull factors drive children to work in sugar cane production. Push factors including rural poverty, economic shocks, a shortage of education and a lack of decent work opportunities for young people. The pull factors are a demand for unskilled or cheap forms of labour, and the seasonality of sugar cane production.¹³ The List of Goods Produced by Child and Forced Labor published annually by the US Department of Labor states that the Government of Belize has made only "minimal advancement in efforts to eliminate the worst forms of child labour" (United State Department of Labor, 2015; United States Department of Labor, 2016). Experience shows that child labour must be addressed through a multi-faceted effort including better data, awareness-raising, legislation, community engagement and public-private-NGO partnerships (International Labour Organization, 2017).

Belize Sugar Cane Farmers Association

Founded in 1959, the Belize Sugar Cane Farmers Association (BSCFA) has 3,700 members in 18 branches spread across Orange Walk and Corozal. Between Fairtrade certification in 2008 and 2015, BSCFA earned over approximately US\$3.5 million a year in premiums. It has used these monies to improve productivity and support dozens of community projects (Fairtrade Foundation, 2018), including schemes to increase children and youth well-being in and around its operations. As well as providing livelihood and

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Government of Belize, *Children's Agenda 2017-2030*, April 2017. Can be read here:

<http://humandevlopment.gov.bz/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Childrens-Agenda-2017-2030.pdf>

¹¹ Government of Belize, *Families and Children Act, Revised Edition*, enacted December 31, 2000

¹² Ibid

¹³ ILO, Publications (2017), "Child Labour in the Primary Production of Sugarcane," pp. 23-25, Geneva

community projects, BSCFA contributes to overall sugar cane production in Belize, which supports an estimated 40,000 to 50,000 Belizeans (Fairtrade Foundation, 2018). In 2015, two additional Fairtrade producer organizations were established: Progressive Sugar Cane Producers Association (PSCPA) and Corozal Sugar Cane Producers Association (CSCPA).

All three smallholder sugar cane farmers' associations in Belize are subject to the following criteria in the Fairtrade Standards on child labour and child protection, which prohibit employment of children under the age of 15. No child under the age of 18 years can be involved in work that is likely to damage their physical, social, mental, psychological and spiritual development. Fairtrade Standards consider cane cutting to be a hazardous activity. However, Fairtrade allows children to help out on the family farm under strict conditions: Children only work after school or during holidays, the work they do is appropriate for their age and physical condition, they do not work long hours and/or under dangerous or exploitative conditions, and their parents or guardians supervise and guide them.¹⁴

Fairtrade International (FI) and its Latin America and Caribbean producer network (CLAC) have been working closely with BSCFA since 2014, when a Fairtrade audit uncovered evidence of child labour on two BSCFA farms. Farmer members agreed to address the issue head-on, investing part of Fairtrade premiums to build a monitoring and remediation system. BSCFA has subsequently become a leader in tackling child labour and has also urged that it be addressed by the government and sugar industry. For example, BSCFA's farmers have organized awareness-raising workshops, developed child labour and child protection policies, and trained members and youth monitors. They have also embraced Fairtrade's rights-based approach to reducing child labour, which includes implementing Fairtrade International's *Youth Inclusive Community Based Monitoring and Remediation (YICBMR) System for Child Labour*. YICBMRs recognize that those on the front-line – local communities, farmers, cane cutters and youth – must be engaged and empowered from the beginning to identify and fight child labour (Fairtrade International, 2015).

The FI/CLAC/BSCFA partnership on child labour has achieved many things. BSCFA launched the first-ever multi-stakeholder forum on child labour in Belize's sugar cane sector, with participants from farmers groups, the Government of Belize, the US, Mexico and Honduras, the ILO, UNICEF, industry and civil society organizations, and educational institutions. BSCFA also lobbied the Government of Belize so effectively that in 2017 the Ministry of Labor announced the activation of the Labor Advisory Board, Tripartite Body, National Child Labor Committee, and Interest-Based Bargaining Stakeholders. These bodies represent an important step toward addressing child labour.¹⁵ Fairtrade International and CLAC also support the Progressive Sugar Cane Producers Association (PSCPA) and the Corozal Sugar Cane Producers Association (CSCPA). All three Fairtrade sugar cane producer organizations, along with CLAC and FI, sit on a Technical Advisory Committee as part of an EU-funded project (managed by the National Authorizing Office in the Ministry of Economic Development) to study child labour and youth well-being in sugar cane. All three Fairtrade producer sugar cane farmers associations (BSCFA, PSCPA and CSCPA)

¹⁴ Fairtrade Standards for Small Producer Organizations, Child Labour and Child Protection sections, can be reviewed here:

https://www.fairtrade.net/fileadmin/user_upload/content/2009/standards/documents/SPO_EN.pdf

¹⁵ Fairtrade America, Fairtrade Farmers Spur Nationwide Changes on Child Labour in Belize," 17 March, 2017; <http://www.fairtradeamerica.org/Media-Center/Blog/2017/March/Child-Labor-in-Belize>

identify and respond to child labour issues on a continuous and improving base, with the aim of improving the welfare of children and youth.

Involving young people in research that concerns them

Since 2010 Fairtrade International has been collecting information on children and young people who live in and around¹⁶ producer organizations throughout the world. It has done so by employing the guiding principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, especially Article 12, which states that children have the right to express their views in all matters affecting them and that their opinions are given weight in keeping with their maturity and evolving capacity.

In 2016, working with BSCFA, Fairtrade International's Social Compliance and Development Senior Advisor sought to look further into the experience of cane cutters aged between 14 and 28 in Belize. The primary reason for this was that the data generated by the BSCFA's YICBMR system on child labour showed that some young people were cutting cane, which presented a risk that needed targeted stakeholder attention.

As a result, Fairtrade International commissioned a study on youth involved in cane cutting in Belize and selected BSCFA to do the survey. Both engaged youth monitors to conduct the primary research and initial analysis for this report, recognizing them as both social agents and experts in the subject matter. Their use minimized the unequal power relations between adult researchers and the young participants in the study.

Study Objectives

BSCFA and Fairtrade International using the data generated by the YICBMR system on child labour (as context) identified the study objectives as follows:

- a) Generate data on the involvement and working conditions of youth aged between 14 and 28 in sugar cane cutting
- b) Generate recommendations from youth cane cutters to improve their working and living conditions

¹⁶ The term "in and around" is used to signify communities of people, some of who are members and some who are not members of the Fairtrade Producer organizations that live in the areas where the Producer organizations are located. We interviewed children and young people using an area-based approach, as opposed to interviewing only children and young people of Fairtrade members of the Producer Organizations.

Sample size

There are estimated to be just over 3,000 cane cutters of all ages in Belize.¹⁷ This study interviewed 306 youth aged 14 years to 28 years in Orange Walk and Corozal. Seventeen youth were randomly selected from each of the 18 sugar cane producing communities in Orange Walk and Corozal, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Youth in Sugar Cane Communities Surveyed (N=306)

<i>Name of District</i>	<i>Name of communities and number of interviews conducted</i>
Orange Walk	Douglas (17), Guinea Grass (17), Orange Walk (17), Progreso (17), San Estevan(17), San Jose (17), San Lazaro (17), San Roman (17), Yo Creek (17)
Corozal	Caledonia (17), Corozal (17), Libertad (17), Louisville (17), Patchakan (17), San Joaquin (18), San Narciso (17), San Victor (17) and Xaibe (16)

In the community of Xaibe only 16 youth cane cutters were identified within this age bracket and to adjust for this, BSCFA interviewed 18 youth cane cutters from San Joaquin. The youth cane cutters identified for interview worked on sugar cane farms. Of the 306 interviews conducted, only one youth cane cutter was female.

Research Team

The Protection Focal Point and five youth monitors that operate the YICBMR system on child labour were selected as the BSCFA's research team. As agreed between BSCFA and Fairtrade International, the research team was advised that it would not have to share the data with BSCFA management prior to submitting it to Fairtrade International.¹⁸ However, Fairtrade International pointed out that the team could use unpublished interim results to plan its work, including advocacy with government and other stakeholders, after discussing them with the BSCFA's senior management. After agreement was obtained on the terms and conditions of the research, including the confidentiality of managing the information collected, BSCFA and Fairtrade International signed a contract to carry out the study.

All non-compliance issues on child labour identified by this study have been addressed by BSCFA in line with Fairtrade Standards and Fairtrade International's relevant protection policy. The Protection Policy for Children and Vulnerable Adults requires us to "Act to Protect" on any information or suspicion of

¹⁷ Information provided verbally to Fairtrade International by the Sugar Industry, 2017

¹⁸ For each child identified in child labour while the data was being collected, Fairtrade International requested a direct reporting to the organization so joint assessment could take place on each case and actions could be taken by the BSCFA's Protection Focal Point to safely withdraw them.

child and/or forced labour, including gender-based violence. Upon receiving allegations of child or forced labour, Fairtrade undertakes an assessment to validate them. If validated, the worst forms of child labour, including hazardous labour or forced labour, are reported to the relevant protection agency in Belize for follow up. Producer organizations that have protection policies and training on a rights-based approach are expected to monitor and respond to the on-going risks. A producer organization that does not have either a protection policy or the correct training will be informed of the general risks and supported to obtain both.

Prior to the start of the study, this research team had undertaken a targeted training conducted by UNICEF Belize. Fairtrade International re-trained the research team on conducting rights-based interview techniques. The BSCFA research team agreed to abide by Fairtrade International's Protection Policy for Children and Vulnerable Adults and agreed to inform the organization if youth cane cutters were identified in the worst forms of child labour and/or forced labour. Following this, the research team developed the survey questions and with the assistance of Fairtrade International piloted it with six youth cane cutters in Yo Creek. At the end of each pilot interview, the youth cane cutters were asked to comment on the length of the interview and relevance of the questions asked, and if any questions that should be added or removed. The research team then adjusted the surveys based on the feedback.

Method

The study used face-to-face semi-structured interviews, with each interview lasting approximately 50 to 60 minutes. All interviews took place on the farms while cane cutters were at work during the harvest season. Permission was sought from each cane cutter using informed consent forms. Where the group leader or farmer was present, the research team sought permission from them before seeking consent from the youth cane cutters. Two members of the research team were present for each interview; one asked questions and the other recorded responses. As the research team consisted of the five youth monitors on the BSCFA's YICBMR system on child labour, they were already familiar with the issues and were able to quickly engage the youth cane cutters in meaningful conversation.

The fieldwork began in September 2016 and ended in February 2017. The data was analyzed between September 2017 and February 2018. (The delay was due to the BSCFA team being involved with other work projects.) This report was drafted, edited, and completed between March and May 2018. BSCFA paid the salaries of the research team. Fairtrade International funded all other costs.

Data Interpretation and Limitations

We sought to interview roughly 10 percent (n=306) of the 3,000 cane cutters in Belize. However, given the informal nature of cane cutting, finding a statistically-representative sample proved difficult, especially among youth workers.

Demographic information on cane cutters, such as age, location of work involvement and the like (while presumably available from employers) was not aggregated or readily available. Without a comprehensive list, the research team could not use random sampling.

Instead the research team travelled by car around the 18 selected communities during the harvest. The researchers stopped at farms when they saw cane cutters. When they could not identify or locate youth cutters, they moved on to other farms.

Fairtrade International initially requested the research team interview workers aged between 16 and 24 (the United Nations definition of youth) using a quota sampling and snowballing method. However, given the above constraints, the researchers had difficulty satisfying the original research sample targets, so the age bracket was expanded to 14-28.

While this snowballing method allowed the research team to identify and study a good number of youth cane cutters who were aged 14 years to 28 years, this study does not make inferences about the total population. Put differently, because we do not know how many cane cutters aged between 14 and 28 exist in Belize, it is unclear if our sample size is too large or too small to properly represent the situation.

To compensate for this, we give the findings from our sample (n=306) as a number of the total cane cutters of all ages in Belize (n=3000). It is important to bear these constraints in mind when interpreting our results.

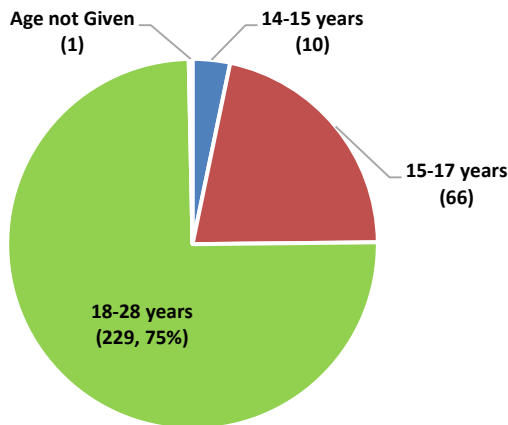
Key Findings

Demographics

Age of the cane cutters

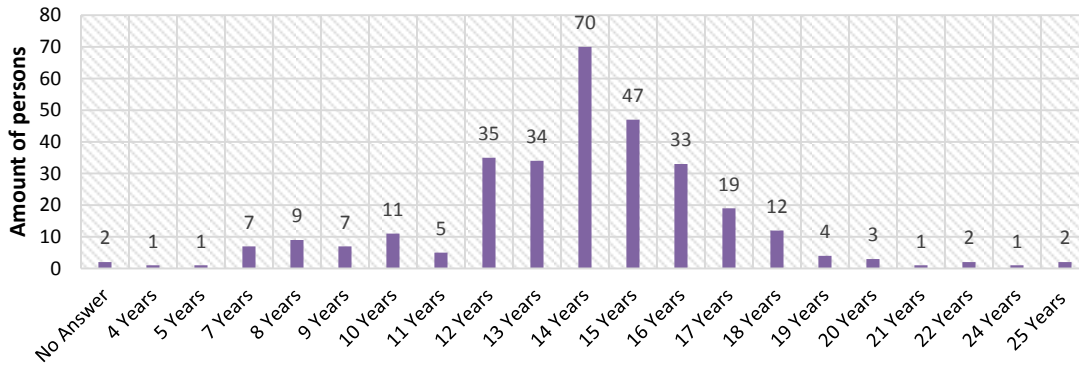
Of the 306 cane cutters aged between 14 and 28 interviewed for this study, the majority, 75 percent (229), were over 18 years. However, 10 cutters were 14 years, while 66 cutters were aged 15-17 (Figure 1). Therefore, it could be said that 76 of all cane cutters in Belize estimated to be slightly over 3000 were engaged in hazardous child labour (the key indicator for hazardous labour being this age bracket's use of machetes).

Figure 1: Age of surveyed cane cutters (persons between the ages of 14 to 28)



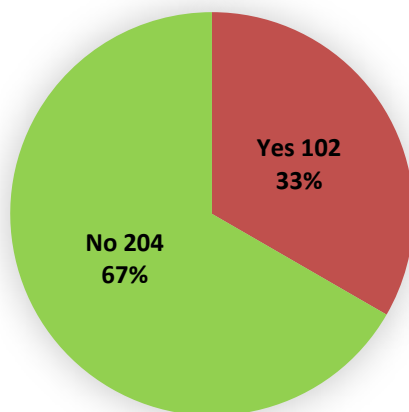
Each interviewee was asked at what age they first cut cane. Nearly 60 percent of cutters reported that they first cut cane aged between 12 to 15, and most commonly 14 (Figure 2). The research did not ask if interviewees were employed to cut cane or whether they were accompanied by parents or guardians to learn about cane cutting. The minimum age of employment in Belize is 14. At the time the data was collected the Government of Belize had not formally released its Hazardous Child Labour List and as such the official status of cutting cane as a hazard was not known.

Figure 2: Age when first cut cane



This study explored the connection between young cane cutters and parents who are sugar cane producers, and whether or not the youth cane cutters were themselves sugar cane farmers. A third of the youth surveyed (102, 33 percent) indicated that they had a parent who was a sugar cane farmer; while only seven cane cutters noted that they themselves also produced sugar cane. Two-thirds (204) of youth cane cutters reported that neither parent was a cane farmer (figure 3).

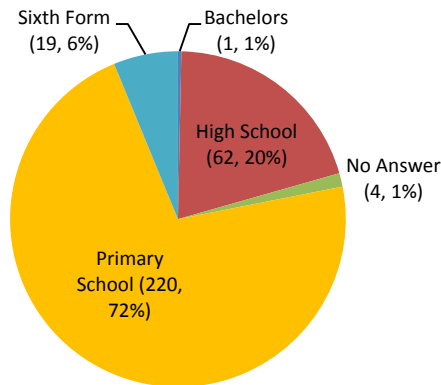
Figure 3: Parent or guardian who is a sugar cane farmer



Educational levels

The minimum age for completing primary education in Belize is 14 years. Almost 99 percent (302) of the youth interviewed said they completed schooling. Of those, 72 percent had a primary school education, while the remainder had secondary and/or higher education (figure 4). Education past primary school must be paid for by students and/or their families.

Figure 4: Educational levels completed



Reasons for cutting cane

As noted in the introduction, sugar cane production is the primary source of income in northern Belize, with scant other employment opportunities for youth. Almost all (303) of the 306 youths surveyed were sugar cane cutters (the remaining three did not specify). However, half also did other work on the farm, such as planting, fertilizing, spraying herbicides, burning cane, driving trucks, and cleaning fields (Figure not shown). Cane cutting is a seasonal job.

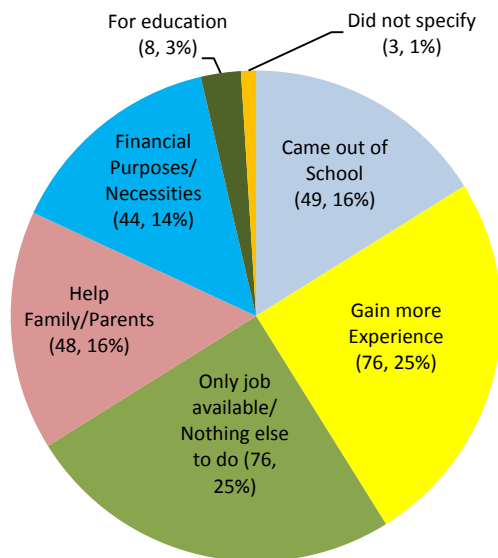


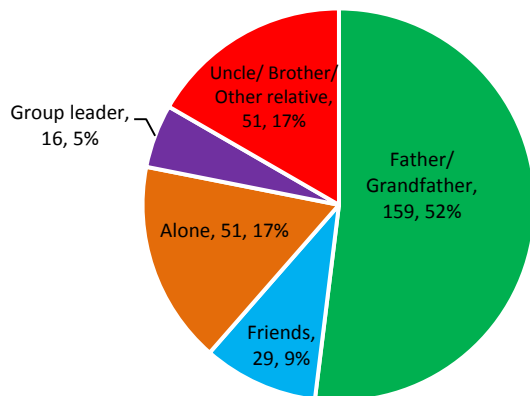
Figure 5: Reasons for cutting cane

Cane cutters were asked their primary reason for first doing so. Sixteen percent of participants for this study reported that they first cut cane because they needed to earn an income after leaving primary school; a similar percentage said their primary motivation was financial or to help their family (Figure 5). Only 28 percent of those surveyed stated specific reasons such as 25 percent to gain work experience and 3 percent for educational purposes to pay for schooling. This indicates

that youth cane cutters are working chiefly for financial reasons. Most respondents, 61 percent (187), said they liked cutting cane. Some 35 percent (108) did not like to cut cane, while 4 percent (11) did not respond to the question.

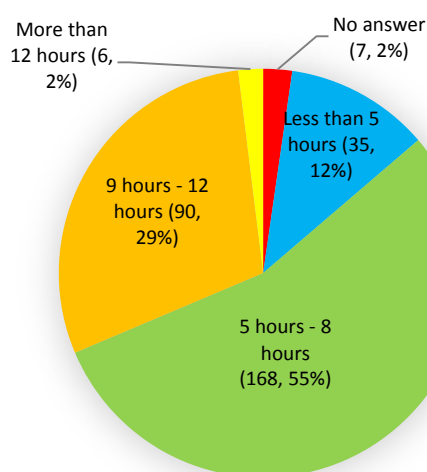
The results showed that cane cutting was an intergenerational activity passed down by males of different generations, most notably from father to son and from grandfather to grandson. When asked who took them to first cut cane, 52 percent of cutters said their father or grandfather, while another 17 percent of mentioned an uncle, brother, or other (usually male) relative (Figure 6 below).

Figure 6: Introduction to cane cutting



Working conditions

The vast majority of the Belizean cane cutters surveyed lived in or around where they cut cane. 80 percent reported that they lived nearby all year round, while only 2 percent reported that they lived in the area for only 3 or 6 months of each year. 18 percent of those surveyed didn't answer this question (Figure not shown).



Hours of work

84 percent of the youth surveyed worked 5 hours or more a day. 55 percent worked 5-8 hours and 29 percent worked for between 9 and 12 hours a day (Figure 7). Most cutters (90 percent) had no other jobs during the cane cutting seasons.

Wages

Bze\$90–180 (US \$45–90) was the most common range given for weekly pay in all branches with

Figure 7: Hours per day cutting cane

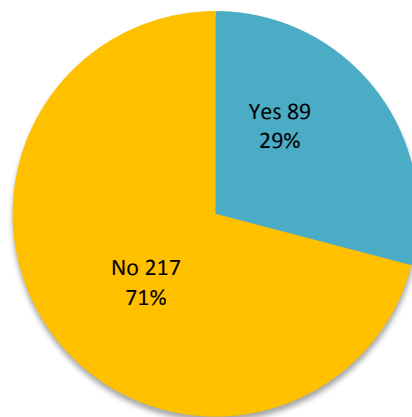
the exception of Yo Creek and San Jose, where respondents gave ranges of BZE\$0-90 (US \$0-45) and BZE\$180-290 (US \$90-145) as the most common answer.

At an average of 6.5 hours work per day, six days per week of work, BZE\$135 (US \$67.5) per week works out at BZE \$22.50 (US \$11.25) per day — approximately BZE\$3.46 (US \$1.73) an hour. This average pay rate is also what adults over 28 years of age are paid. (While we present wage rates by week and by hour, cane cutters get paid by the amount of cane they cut per day during the seasonal harvest periods. We have assumed that the amount they cut per day represents the wage rates provided by them in the survey.¹⁹)

As noted in Figure 4 above, cane cutters began cutting cane primarily for financial reasons, such as helping with family expenses and getting work experience. Along these same lines, the vast majority of cane cutters reported that their earnings were used for immediate financial needs, especially to help parents to cover house expenses or personal needs (77 percent), or for school expenses (10 percent). Only 12 percent were able to save or invest any of their wages (Figure not shown).

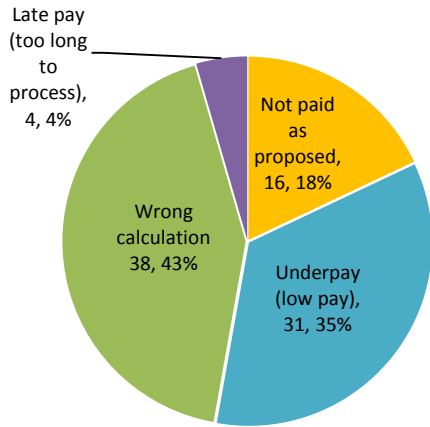
While 71 percent (217) reported that they did not experience a problem with their wages, twenty-nine percent (89) of those surveyed stated that they experience problems with their wage payments (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Experience problems with wages (n=306)



¹⁹ According to feedback received by the Producer Organizations, they indicate that cane cutters in the region are generally paid an average of BZ\$8 (US \$4)/ton; on average a cane cutter works for 6 hours per day, and cuts roughly a ton per hour.

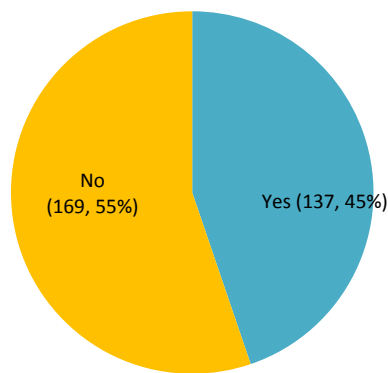
Figure 9: Problems with wage payment (n=89)



Of these 89 who reported problems, 43 percent (38) of them mentioned that their wages were miscalculated and 35 percent (31) said that they had been underpaid. A smaller number reported late payment or not being paid as proposed (20 percent of this cohort) (Figure 9).

Most respondents, 55 percent (169), did not consider that cane cutting gave them a decent livelihood (Figure 10). Most often cutters complained that the work was seasonal and that as a result their income was not steady (53 percent). Of the 45 percent of cutters surveyed who believed that the job provided a decent livelihood, the majority (44 percent) said they liked the hard work and the opportunities for socializing with other cutters and to catch up on “the news”. None of the youth participants mentioned wages and working conditions as determinants of a decent livelihood.

Figure 10: Cane cutting perceived as a decent livelihood



Cane cutters were asked who they would discuss any work-related issues with. The majority (63 percent) said that they would speak to their group leader, while 12 percent said their boss and 10 percent said the owner of the cane field. 6 percent reported that they would discuss their issues with a family member. 7

percent of them did not have any issues to discuss or would not discuss a work-related issue with anybody (figure not shown).

Occupational Health and Safety

As indicated by the ILO, Occupational Health and Safety issues (OHS) address workers’ right to work in a safe environment and free from hazards and exploitation. Sugar cane cutting is frequently considered a hazardous job, not just for youth but for adults as well. Workers are exposed to multiple hazards including the use of sharp implements (knives/machetes), carrying heavy loads, and exposure to fires/smoke, pesticides, snake bites, wild animals, working unprotected in the sun for many hours and other issues (ILO 2017).

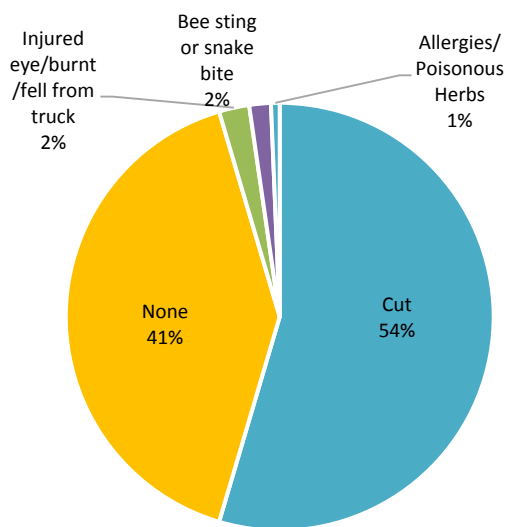


Figure 11: Injuries

The study findings indicate that a majority of youth cane cutters in Belize face several hazards at work. Fifty-nine percent of those surveyed reported that they had suffered from injuries when cutting cane, with the most common injury being cut by a machete. The survey did not ask participants to define the severity of the cuts. Other injuries included eye injuries, bee stings, allergy attacks, burns, exposure to poisonous herbs, falls from cane trucks and snake bites (Figure 11). In 12 out of 18 branches, more cutters reported experiencing injuries than those that did not.

A lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) may be contributing to the high rate of injury among cane cutters. Protective gear such as boots, hats, gloves, and shin guards reduce the number of injuries and often their severity. Because the survey did not explore if these PEP findings applied to adult cane cutters aged over 28, comparisons cannot be made between PPE provision for young and older cutters. Only a small minority (26 percent) of youth cutters reported being given PPE by the group leader (Figure 12), while some (less than 10 percent) said they bought their own PPE. They reported that group leaders usually only gave them a machete and file. In only 3 branches – Caledonia, Guinea Grass, and San Jose – did a majority of cane cutters report that they received PPE from the group

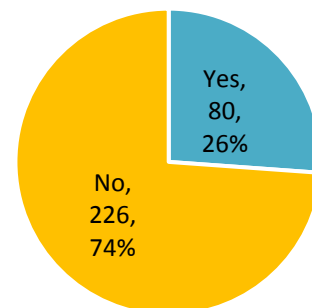
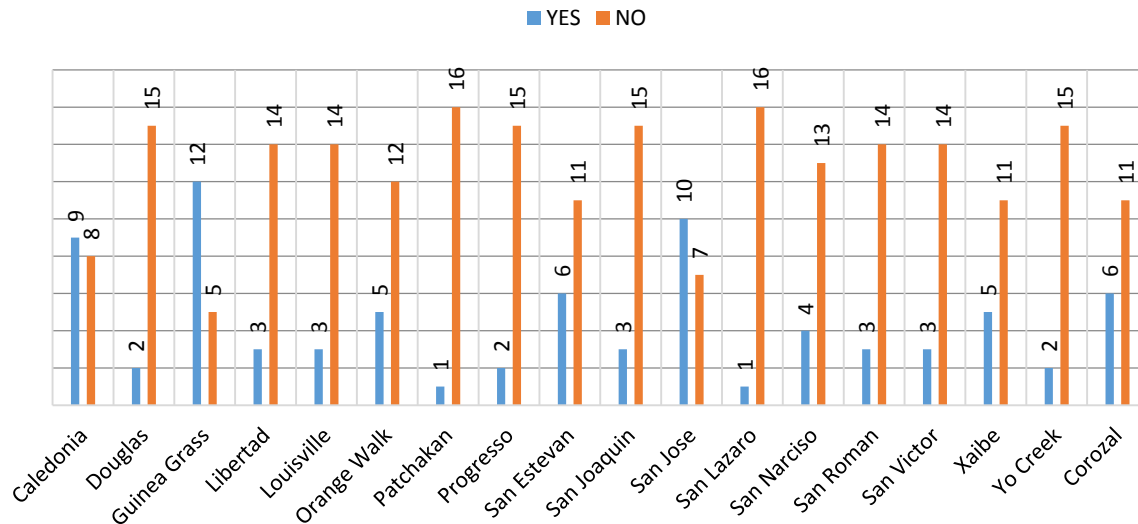


Figure 12: Provided with PPE

leader (Figure 13). The survey did not check whether the provision of PPE was different for temporary or permanent cane cutters.²⁰

Figure 13: PPE provided by Group leader



Cane cutters were asked if they had access to shelter in the cane fields that protected them against the sun or rain. As is the case with adult cane cutters, the majority of those surveyed (83 percent across all branches) mentioned that they did not have access to any form of shelter, while the remaining 17 percent did (figure not shown). However, some of those said the shelter was trees. Only 36 percent of cane cutters reported that they had a place to eat meals, while most, 64 percent, did not (Figure not shown). Some cane cutters who work only in the morning may go home to have their lunch.

Given that cane fields are most commonly located on the outskirts of villages, and that no infrastructure is provided, most cane cutters (adults and youth) do not have access to toilets. This is not only true for Belize but is the case for all smallholder sugar cane farms through the world. Only five cane cutters surveyed out of 306 (2 percent) reported having access to bathroom facilities while the rest did not (Figure not shown).

²⁰ Response from producer organizations indicates that producers are not required to provide PEP, but are expected to encourage the use of them.

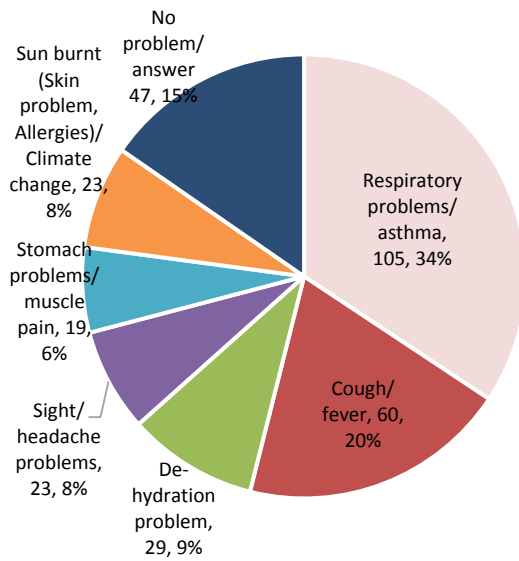
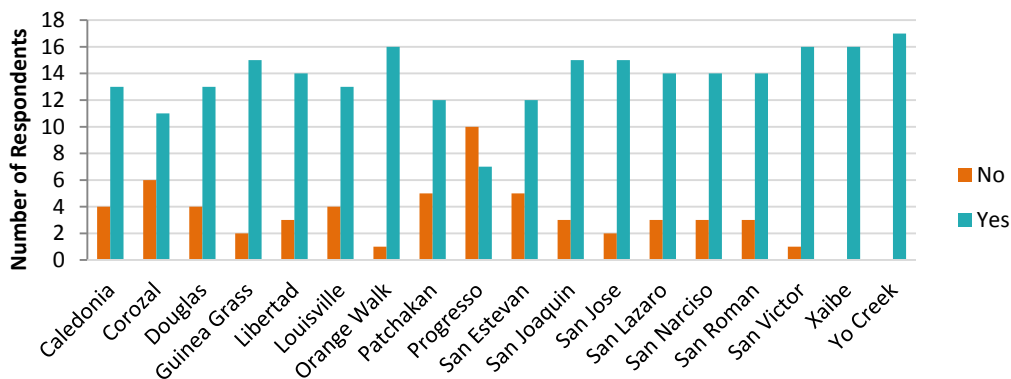


Figure 14: Cane Cutter health problems

The environment on farms put workers at risk. A majority of those surveyed (54 percent), across all branches, said they suffered from respiratory problems due to the ash they breathed while cutting cane. This is a common problem for sugar cane cutters throughout the world when cane is burnt to clear fields. In Belize, fevers and dehydration were also common (Figure 14). When asked if they went for periodic health checks, 270 of the 306 cane cutters interviewed said they did not (figure not shown). Fairtrade standards do not stipulate health checks and such hazardous conditions may be common to global sugar cane cutting. However they do demonstrate the considerable risks of injury and ill-health faced by these young workers in Belize.

Eighty-one percent of those surveyed reported that they had access to clean drinking water (Figure 15). All cane cutters in the branches of Xaibe and Yo Creek reported having access to clean drinking water.

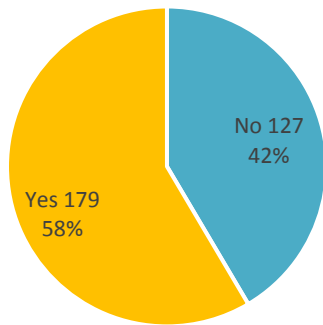
Figure 15: Access to clean drinking water



Check on labour conditions

Cane cutters were asked if anyone came to inspect their labour conditions. Nearly 60 percent (179) said that someone had visited their place of work to check on their labour conditions, while 127 indicated that no one checked (see Figure 16).

Figure 16: Does anyone visit you to check on your labour conditions?



Cane cutters' wishes for the future

While cane cutters stay in their jobs primarily for economic reasons, they do not generally want to pass it down as an occupation to the next generation. When asked if they would want their children to become cane cutters, the majority of youth interviewed (88 percent, or 270) said they did not (figure not shown). When asked *why* they didn't want their children to become cane cutters, they said it was because it was hard work with little money (37 percent). Other answers were that their children needed to study (32 percent) or that cane cutting was a bad experience overall (20 percent) (Figure 17).

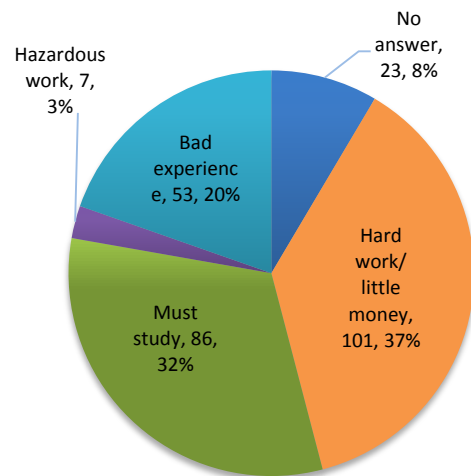


Figure 17: Youth and the next generation of cane cutters

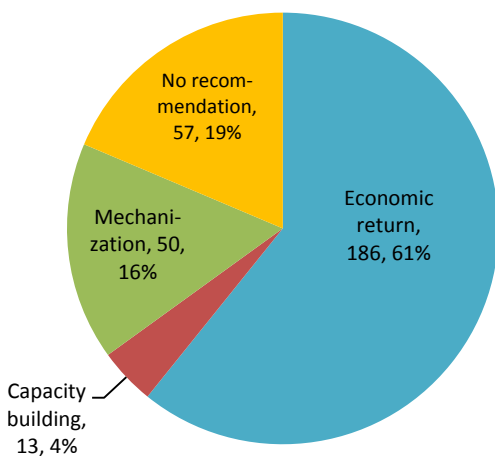


Figure 18: Cane cutting as a decent employment

When asked how cane cutting can become a decent job, cane cutters predominantly mentioned economic interventions (61 percent), especially pay rises. A minority also suggested mechanization (16 percent) to ease cane cutting and providing equipment to minimize hazards and improve working conditions. 19 percent of those surveyed had no recommendation and 13 percent said they needed training and capacity building (Figure 18).

Gender

Most of the cane cutters interviewed were male and the study wanted to understand male views on female contributions to sugar cane production or harvesting. Some 27 percent (83) of male respondents said that females cut cane, plant cane and do most types of field work. The reasons were thought to be to help their partner (husband), to earn income or because they were single mothers. 21 percent (65) of mainly male (305) youth cane cutters said they did not know and 20 per cent (55) preferred not to answer the question (figure not provided).

Recommendations made to Fairtrade

When asked how Fairtrade sugar cane producer organizations could ensure that cane cutters' voices were heard, a large minority of those surveyed (39 percent) said they would like to be heard and have their opinions considered. Other suggestions included that Fairtrade should form youth organizations to represent cane cutters (11 percent), conduct interviews and surveys with them (7 percent), and invite them to Fairtrade meetings (6 percent). Thirty-four percent of those surveyed, or 102 respondents, had no idea/no answer to this question while three percent said they did not want their voice to be heard by the producer organizations (figure not shown). Likewise, when asked how Fairtrade can involve young people in decision-making, 39 percent said that Fairtrade should invite youth to participate in discussions, with a further 16 percent saying that youth groups should be created to amplify their voices. Nineteen percent suggested some sort of capacity-building (either general support or educate/train youths). Twenty-six percent did not know or answer this question (Figure 19).

Discussion

While there are limitations to generalizing these findings due to the methodology used, this study nevertheless provides insight into working conditions of youth cane cutters in Belize. Most of those interviewed (229, or 75%, out of 306)²¹ were aged between 18 and 28 and nearly 99% of them had completed at a minimum primary schooling (at 14 years), with some even obtaining a bachelor's degree. But the data also indicated that 76 of all cane cutters interviewed (n=306) for this study

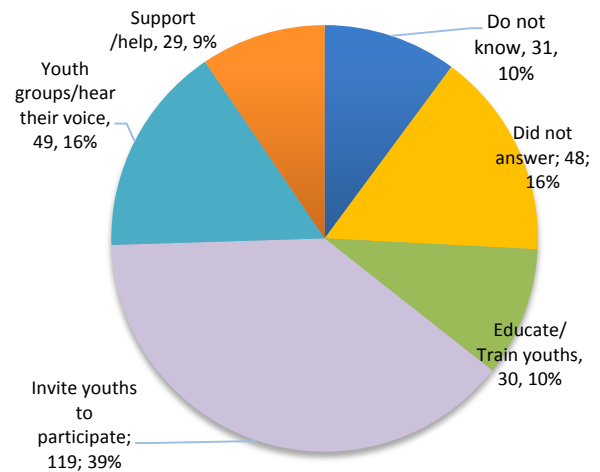


Figure 19: Recommendations made to Fairtrade

²¹ Equivalent to approximately 2.6% of all cane cutters in Belize

were aged 14 years to 17. Some 60 percent of cutters reported first cutting cane between the ages of 12 to 15 years. The most common age was 14. If these 14 year old youth had obtained a Social Security ID Card they would be considered by Belizean legislation to be of legal age to cut cane.

Fairtrade Standards, however, prohibit the employment of children under the age of 15 and prohibit work done by children under 18 years for any work that could be classified as hazardous child labour under ILO convention 182. Sugar cane cutting uses machetes (which the ILO has classified as a dangerous tool), meaning this would be considered a hazardous form of child labour and therefore not be permitted.

Belize faces many of the same problems as other countries where cane cutting is a mainstay of the economy. Child labour is widespread in the sugar cane industry in Central America, including in Belize's regional neighbors such as Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico (International Labour Organization, 2017; USDOL List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor).

The survey found that youth cane cutters, defined in this study as persons between the ages of 14 to 28 years, began cutting primarily for financial/economic reasons, including earning money for their families. Only 28 percent stated specific reasons for cane cutting, such as to gain experience in a career or to pay for school expenses.

Introduced to cane cutting by male relatives – often their fathers or grandfathers, youth cane cutters worked on average 6.5 hours a day for a minimum wage. While most cane cutters reported that they did not experience a problem with their wages, when asked if they were satisfied with their wages, 71 percent (217) reported being dissatisfied. Some indicated that they were not being paid what was promised by the group leaders upon being hired. Others felt that the pay did not properly reflect the amount of work done, meaning that the person in charge of counting the cane cut did not properly count or had miscalculated.

Seemingly few migrant workers were employed to cut cane, because 80 percent of those surveyed lived in the local area all year. Sugar cane farms in Belize may thus not depend on seasonal migrants because of a large locally-available pool of labour and/or limited occupational opportunities for those Belizeans, especially youth, living in the northern sugar cane growing areas.

Health and safety for those working on Belizean sugar cane farms appeared to be poor. 59 percent of youth cane cutters surveyed had suffered injuries, mostly machete cuts (their severity unknown); 85 percent of those surveyed reported health problems including respiratory problems, dehydrations, and cough/fever.

These findings are particularly noteworthy as young people interviewed are less likely than adults to assess risks and because they are still growing and are more prone to being hurt by hazards (International Labour Organization 2017). However, in this study, most young people said that they (86 percent) did in fact speak up if they experienced labour issues to the group leader, boss or owner of the farm. For those who do not speak to their direct employers, they said that they discussed these problems with a family member.

Most of the risks to safety and health in sugar cane production came from cutting cane. When youth cane cutters were asked how Fairtrade sugar cane producer organizations could ensure that cane cutters' voices were heard, 39 percent of them said they would like to take part in Fairtrade or producer organization discussions, with some even suggesting that Fairtrade should organize them into youth organizations and provide them with training and capacity building.

This suggestion of actively engaging with youth (18 to 24 years) has also been recommended by the ILO, which notes that "young workers should receive basic OHS training before being assigned to perform job tasks. Young workers should be fully trained in their job tasks and provided with appropriate on-the-job supervision. The right of young workers to refuse to perform work that presents an immediate danger to their safety and health must be protected."²²

If we are to maintain the interest of youth in earning a living from the land, we must increasingly protect their rights to decent and safe jobs in agriculture. As these young people (88 percent) noted, they are not interested in handing down cane cutting as an occupation to their children because of the low returns and hard, demanding work and want their children to make a better living. The question that Fairtrade and other organizations and governments face is: who will be doing this work in the future?

While some of the youth suggested cane cutting could be mechanized, that is not without problems. Child labour could still pose a problem even if farmers use machines to harvest cane, as children and/or some young people could drive the tractors and therefore experience injuries. Furthermore, not all farmers can afford to own or rent these machines.

The BSCFA staff and the youth monitors that collected, analyzed and reported on this data indicated that one way to increase well-being for youth (18 to 24 years) cane cutters was to undertake the following steps. These steps were discussed with the other two producer organizations, PSCPA and CSCPA, who agreed to:

- a) Extend BSCFA's Internal Control System²³ used to identify and respond to child and forced labour risks to cane cutting during harvest periods;
- b) Extend training on child and forced labour to group leaders who recruit cane cutters and to cane cutters themselves, including the need to promote the use of PPE to all cane cutters;
- c) Work with the sugar industry and other producer organizations to generate a hazardous child labour list and a light work definition for sugar cane and submit it for consideration to the Government of Belize;
- d) Campaign and raise awareness on child labour in cane cutting, especially risks to health and safety, including calling upon the Government of Belize to implement the relevant labour law and penalties for child labour use and close the legal gaps between the age of completion of

²² ILO, "Generation: Safe and Healthy," Campaign World Day Against Child Labour, April 28, 2018

²³ Given the many and various types of agricultural set ups, including some which use seasonal workers, it is not always possible to undertake audits on these sites or monitor hiring practices at all times. To minimize the risk caused by the impossibility of auditing all farms and/or plantations at all times, Fairtrade certification requires certified organizations in some cases to be responsible for the labour practices of its members. This means that organizations must have community based internal controls to guarantee the prevention of hired child labour and to ensure that if children are working, they are doing so in a manner that is acceptable as defined in relevant Fairtrade Standards.

- schooling and minimum age of employment in cane cutting as indicated by the International Labour Convention 182 on the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour;
- e) Continue to collect data on involvement in sugar cane cutting during harvest seasons to identify risks to child and forced labour;
 - f) Work with group leaders to enable cane cutters to participate in events hosted by all producer organizations and industry, including workshops on decent youth employment.²⁴

These suggestions for next steps were discussed with all stakeholders in Belize in August 2017. They were also used to lobby the Government of Belize to support child labour awareness in the country, to release a Hazardous List for Child Labour for the sugar cane sector, and to close the legal gaps between the age of completion of schooling and minimum age of employment in cane cutting, including a definition of light work. In the last year, the three Fairtrade sugar cane producer organizations, who sit on the Technical Advisory Committee on an EU-funded child labour and youth well-being study, are supervising the implementation process of the study. When it is released, it is expected to suggest a Hazardous List for Child Labour and light work definition for youth in the sugar cane sector.

These suggestions illustrate how gaps between research and changed practice may be bridged. The value of engaging involved producer organizations, such as BSCFA, in designing this research, collecting and analyzing the data and generating suggestions on the findings shows that when producer organizations are enabled to lead, they act as agents of positive change, accelerating transparency and problem solving on labour issues. Within the context of child labour, especially in the sugar cane sector, this is a powerful finding.

Conclusion and Recommendations

There is little, if any, prior research on working and living conditions of cane cutters anywhere in the world. This is certainly true of Belize. This study attempts to address this gap by focusing on youth cane cutters aged 14 to 28. While manual cane cutting is as old as sugar cane itself, the seasonality, informality and family nature of this casual labour makes it difficult to study. Cane cutting is a job which individuals do alongside other jobs. Half of the 306 cane cutters surveyed indicated that were involved in other jobs ranging from planting, to cleaning the field and driving the trucks transporting the cane. In fact, seven cane cutters noted that they were also cane farmers. Further research is needed to better understand how the informality of cane cutting and the family nature of the business affect living and working conditions of cane cutters in general, and especially youth cane cutters.

This study is the first of its kind in Belize to generate insight both into the working conditions of youth aged between 14 and 28 in sugar cane cutting and their recommendations for how to improve those conditions. Its value is immediately apparent in the suggested next steps, which propose change within the producer organization and beyond it to the sugar industry and Belizean government. In this sense, this study, despite its limitations, converts discovery into practical and wide-ranging advice.

As a result of the next steps suggested by the BSCFA research team and agreed to by all small producer organizations, Fairtrade producer organizations are already lobbying and working with the sugar cane

²⁴ BSCFA has reported already implementing these suggested steps.

industry to develop and draft a hazardous child labour list and light work definition for sugar cane, for submission to the Government of Belize. These producer organizations should continue to be supported in their long-term goal of ensuring that sugar cane from Belize is removed from the US Department of Labor's List of Goods Produced by Child and Forced Labor.

Furthermore, Fairtrade producer organizations should work with the various stakeholders of the sugar cane industry and call for the legislative gaps between age of primary school completion and the age of employment in the sector to be addressed as a matter of urgency. Additionally, awareness should be raised on decent youth employment with all employers in north Belize, including the local and district level governments. All cane cutters should promote the use of protective gear and ensure that they have access to adequate clean drinking water and improved working conditions. They should be given a voice and supported to express concerns they have with their employers (group leaders and farmers). Producer organizations and the sugar industry in general should create spaces through workshops or trainings to reach youth cane cutters and explain Fairtrade Standards and other relevant laws for the production and processing of sugar cane to them. Since cane cutting is often an intergenerational activity, handed down from father to son and grandfather to grandson, training should be targeted at males. The Internal Control System established by some of the producer organizations to assess and respond to risks of non-compliances of Fairtrade Standards should extend to cane cutting and should include direct interviews with cane cutters.

Engaging producer organizations and young people to design, collect and analyze this study, and generate suggestions on its findings, shows that when producer organizations are enabled to lead, they act decisively as agents of positive change, accelerating transparency and problem solving on labour issues.

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