

26<sup>th</sup> March 2018

## **FOR A HUMANLY RESPONSIBLE AGRICULTURE**

Mighty Earth, an American environmental NGO, recalls in its latest report published on 20 March 2018 that soya cultivation in South America today has disastrous effects on the environment, communities and workers.

Rapid deforestation, displacement of indigenous peoples, impact of pesticides on workers and populations, forced labour and child labour... The cultivation of this protein-rich legume is the cause of many ills in the main Latin American producing countries, Argentina, Paraguay, Brazil and Bolivia.

For Human Resources Without Borders (RHSF) and IIECL (International Initiative to end Child Labor), we must not neglect the impact of these practices in agriculture on forced labour and child labour. And humanly responsible practices are possible, with a commitment of the principals following the new legislation on the duty of vigilance with regard to their chain of subcontracting, and an integration of work and education.

### **In France: all concerned**

Mighty Earth points out that 75% of the soya produced in the world is used for animal feed and that more than one million square kilometres - or twice the size of France - are devoted to its cultivation.

In 2016, the European Union imported 27.8 million tons of soya beans from Latin America.

France, the fifth largest importer from EU countries, bought some 2.4 million tons that year alone. These seeds are used by feed producers or meat processors to feed livestock. The meat is then found in markets, supermarkets... and among consumers

In France, soya affects practically all sectors of the food industry. It is impossible to shop in a supermarket without buying products raised with Latin American soya (meat, poultry, fish), in which soya is incorporated (milk, sauce...), or in its state (roasted seeds, shoots...).

### **A humanitarian disaster**

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), between 2000 and 2010, South America lost 4 million hectares of forest each year due to the development of

soya cultivation. Impacted indigenous communities are forced to leave their environment and, often marginalized and discriminated against, they find themselves in a situation of great vulnerability.

Expelled from their lands, they lose their traditional means of subsistence (food crops, handicrafts...). To survive, they have no choice but to be employed in the informal sector, or to work for employers who have expropriated them, to grow products that they will not consume, without unions to defend them, paid not individually by the hour, but by the "bucket", which pushes the whole family to work to fill as many as possible, including children.

In Borneo, where excessive deforestation is practiced to produce palm oil, "thousands of indigenous people have been forced to migrate and have had no choice but to work on the plantations, with their children, for a miserable wage," says Malaysian anthropologist Dr. Welyne Jeffrey Jehom.

"Not counting migrants from Indonesia in forced labour situations. Many indigenous people have committed suicide in the region," she says.

### **Children forced to work**

The consequences are disastrous for children, many of whom work in agriculture around the world: according to the International Labour Organization (ILO), this economic sector accounts for 71% of child labour. And, all sectors combined (agriculture, industry, etc.), 152 million children, or nearly one child in ten, are in abusive work situations. Nearly half of them, finally, perform dangerous tasks.

Mighty Earth cites the case of Chaco, Argentina, where most soybean farms use glyphosate herbicide, sold by Monsanto under the Roundup name. In this region, where soybeans have become resistant to the herbicide, the use of agricultural chemicals has increased by 1000 percent in the last 20 years, according to World Bank figures.

Diane Mull, president of the NGO International Initiative to End Child Labor (IIECL), recalls that too often use is rarely done according to Monsanto's instructions, because most agricultural workers in developing countries lack adequate training and protective equipment: "For example, one of the requirements on the Roundup label is that it must not be used in or near fresh water to protect amphibians and other wildlife. But how does aerial or ground applications take into account drift due to wind, rain or runoff into streams? Do families and their animals drink from these water sources or eat the fish? What pesticide health and safety training has been provided to the workers on the farm and the families that live by or near the farms?».

“The risk of child labour increases when the parent(s) of the children work on farms that provides inadequate or no health and safety training for workers or offers inadequate or no protective gear thus increasing their chance to get sick or injured on the job. When the adult cannot work, pressure is placed on the children to offset the lost income. Further, adult workers receiving low wages accompanied with high demands for productivity encourage families to bring their children to work to increase their level of production. Because agriculture is often held to a reduced standard compared to other industries, the result is a higher incidence and risk of child labour in agriculture, especially when combined with poor quality and access to education often found in rural areas in developing countries,” says Mull.

Progress in eliminating child labour in agriculture has so far been limited, due to the particularities of this economic sector: non-application of national laws where they exist, low levels of unionization, seasonal work involving the sudden influx on plantations of large numbers of labour, often family labour, and a large share of informal work. In Argentina, for example, the Minister of Labour estimated in 2012 that 80% of rural workers were not registered.

These obstacles are particularly obvious in monoculture areas, such as coffee or bananas in Panama, cocoa in Côte d'Ivoire... stress NGOs in the field such as RHSF or IIECL.

### **Initiatives, hope is permitted**

Faced with the problem of forced labour and child labour in agriculture, international organisations, States, principals, trade unions, NGOs, consumers... design and test innovative, concrete and effective solutions to produce and consume responsibly. One of the major challenges of this century.

Thus, the United Nations has adopted Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to be achieved by 2030, aimed in particular at promoting sustainable agriculture, ensuring access for all to quality education, and eradicating child labour and forced labour.

"But we all have a role to play, by ensuring that what feeds us, clothes us, entertains us, that what we sell or consume, has not created misery, disease or destruction of an ecosystem on the other side of the world," reminds Martine Combemale, director of RHSF.

For example, in response to pressure from customers in France and other parts of Europe, agro-industries decided about ten years ago to stop buying soya from farmers who were deforesting in the Brazilian Amazon. At the same time, soya areas have increased by more than two million hectares, but in responsible agriculture, on degraded land.

### **Key points: subcontracting chain and education**

A year ago, France adopted very advanced legislation on corporate social responsibility (CSR), requiring companies to publish a compliance plan. This document aims to identify risks and prevent serious harm to the environment, human rights and the health and safety of people. This is not only in the company's activities, but also - and this is where the full value of this law lies - in those of its subsidiaries, subcontractors and suppliers, in France and abroad.

French principals in the agri-food sector must no longer ignore the reality and nature of the risks that exist in sectors such as soya or other agricultural products that are widely consumed in France (coffee, cocoa, bananas, etc.). They must ensure that the products they buy do not cause environmental damage, that agricultural workers are trained and equipped to deal with the health risks associated with the use of pesticides, that the human resources management system on plantations guarantees the protection of workers, prevents forced labour and child labour (fair recruitment, drafting employment contracts and individual pay slips for each member of the family, identification of risky tasks, introducing or improving worker health and safety, etc.), and that they have access to the information they need to ensure that the products they buy do not cause environmental or human damage...).

To do this, companies will not be able to carry out simple compliance audits, they will have to ask themselves, while also asking local communities, what their subcontractors have actually put in place to combat the country's risks, or linked to the direct and indirect impact of their activity, and their impact on forced labour and child labour.

But we will not be able to fight effectively against the scourge of child labour, nor allow a real economic take-off of agricultural communities, without going through a combination of training and education.

### **Agricultural school: integrating work into an education system**

A responsible human resource management system on plantations must ensure that work is not a handicap for children\*, but on the contrary becomes an asset for their future.

The first step is to list all the arduous or dangerous tasks on farms (use of sharp cutting tools, contact with pesticides, etc.) and to keep children away from them. In a second stage, it is necessary to determine, together with the stakeholders and the companies that place the order, the jobs of the sector for the future and the skills required.

So, instead of making children work in the fields at jobs that will keep them in a precarious situation all of their lives, it will be possible to train them to fulfill these jobs of the future. For

example, young people with very few qualifications (CM2 level) can be trained in quality analysis of the respective commodity that is being produced, such as cocoa pods, bananas, plantains, etc.

Realism is needed: in many societies, child labour is now deeply entrenched among agricultural populations. Children often leave primary school at the age of 12 and have no alternative but to go to work. Little has been done to clearly define what is hazardous versus what is light work...work that is age and task appropriate for a young person to perform.

Neither fair trade nor small plantations alone can make child labour disappear. It would therefore be pointless to call for the outright eradication of these practices. On the other hand, it must be ensured that the work done by the child, far from being abusive, is adapted to his or her age, in accordance with international law and national legislation, and that it contributes to developing his or her future prospects.

In the fight against child labour and forced labour, solutions are often within reach. But frequently it is inaction or not understanding what needs to be done or how to do it, more than economic realities, that paralyse their implementation.

Diane Mull, President of International Initiative to End Child Labor

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\*A child, according to the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, is under eighteen years of age. He may not perform hazardous work, according to International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions 182 and 138, when he is under 18 years of age. He can work in light tasks between the ages of 12 and 14. (Many countries place the age of work at 15 or 16. The way it is written is a bit confusing because there's no reference to children between 15 and 17.)