

# ECLTI Foundation helps child laborers in tobacco farms

by Sarah Perez-Oballes

DURING HARVEST SEASON, tobacco farmers get to bring home not just their produce, which they can sell for a little cash, they also get to 'harvest' illnesses like cough, colds, rhinitis, or even asthma.

This is because fresh tobacco leaves emit nicotine and dioxine, a highly toxic organic compound. Exposure to these substances can cause difficulty in breathing or wheezing.

These tobacco fields, unfortunately, serve as work places for hundreds of children too.

**Child labor in tobacco farms.** An ILO study on child labor revealed that 70% of child laborers are in the agriculture industry. Among the many agricultural enterprises, tobacco growing presents most hazards. Aside from the harmful substances tobacco leaves give off, 16 types of fertilizers are needed to produce quality tobacco.

Moreover, the flue-curing process for drying tobacco directly exposes the farmers to intense heat at long periods of time.

Despite this, minimal research has been done on child labor in tobacco growing in comparison to other agricultural and industrial sectors. This lack of attention toward involvement of children in the tobacco industry has prompted multinational tobacco corporations like Phillip Morris International, European trade unions, and tobacco-farmers in other countries to work against child labor. Thus, the Eliminate Child Labor in Tobacco (ECLT) Foundation was founded in 2001 in Geneva, Switzerland.

**Major tobacco producing region.** The Philippines has been chosen by the ECLT Foundation as one of the five pilot countries to implement the project.

It is also the first time for the foundation to work directly with the government of the beneficiary country. In other areas, say for example in Africa, project implementation is handled by NGOs.

The Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) in Region I has been tapped to lead and complete the ECLTI Project. It has taken bold steps to push for its successful implementation since it started in June 2003.

Northern Luzon is a reputed tobacco-producing region. A 1999 survey reported that the 1.20 million Filipinos of the 1.93 million involved in the tobacco industry come from Region I. In the same year too, the region has produced \$24 million worth of tobacco export.

Out of 62,417 tobacco farmers in the Philippines, 40,126 are from Region I. These farmers have produced a total of 40,000 metric tons of tobacco products.

The total tobacco production value of Region I is a staggering 95.61%, while that of burly tobacco production is 67%, and native tobacco production is 75%.

The numbers, of course, do not take into account the children who help out in farming during the tobacco season.

**Child laborers' profile.** Recent studies conducted by Don

Mariano Marcos Memorial State University (DMMMSU) show that family members including children, help in tobacco production in order to reduce labor cost.

Most of the children involved in tobacco production are male, 15 years of age, in high school level, and are unemployed.

Ilocano tradition encourages children to help out in their parents' livelihood activities, household chores, and farming duties. Categorically, there is nothing wrong with instilling a sense of responsibility and discipline in children. But when a young boy's duty of herding the goats or *carabao* at the day's end becomes his livelihood, and when his physical growth and academic development are hampered by such activities, the rights of the child are already violated.

Sadly, most parents are not even aware of this. And the children too just accept their fate. Oftentimes, the choice between day-to-day living and "not violating" children's rights is a difficult decision to make especially if the parents have no external financial support, or have very limited means. In such situations, living becomes a struggle and dreams turn into cinders.

The study conclusively states that it is not so much the culture that pushes children to work as the farmers' aspiration for an improved quality of life. The children, on the other hand, dream of finishing their college education, or at the very least, dream of buying personal items. It has always been poverty that has produced and sustained the presence of child labor in the Philippines.

**Stakeholders on the field.** This same problem prompted the stakeholders of ECLTI to visit Payocpoc Norte, Bauang, La Union recently. They wanted to witness firsthand the plight of its tobacco farming communities, especially the child laborers.

The group was headed by ECLT Program Director Marc Hofstetter who understood a little of the vernacular and the Ilocano culture owing to his previous work in Northern Luzon for the Red Cross.

After months of conducting random sampling surveys and assemblies in the provinces of Ilocos Norte, Ilocos Sur, La Union and Pangasinan, the time was ripe to meet the beneficiaries of the project. As Hofstetter put it, the study has now been transferred "from the boardroom to the (tobacco) fields."

**All for the child workers.** The ECLTI remains true to its objective: to eliminate the worst form of child labor in the tobacco industry. Even if sunset is forthcoming for tobacco growing, the ECLTI Project mission is to have the children see the dawn of a better future for their lives.

Scholarships will be granted to children of selected marginalized farmers, assistance will be provided for their parents through alternative livelihood programs to augment their means of living, farmer groups will receive technical training and financial assistance. In spite of the fact that the ECLTI Project only has a two-year implementation period, its success may indicate the continued support of the foundation.

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