



Landelijke India Werkgroep
India Committee of the Netherlands

OPEN LETTER

Hyderabad, Udaipur, Washington, Utrecht, The Hague, 30 June 2010

Mr. Juan Somavia
Director-General International Labour Organization
4 route des Morillons
CH-1211 Genève 22
Switzerland

Dear Mr. Juan Somavia,

Greetings from the MV Foundation (India), Dakshini Rajasthan Majdoor Union (India), International Labor Rights Forum (USA), the India Committee of the Netherlands and the international campaign 'Stop Child Labour – School is the best place to work'.

We would like to bring to your esteemed attention the shocking results of two recent research projects into the issues of child labour and adult working conditions in cotton and vegetable seed production in India.

According to the research reports¹ more than half a million children in India below 18 years are growing cottonseed and vegetable seeds under hazardous conditions, including very long working hours and exposure to pesticides. Around 230.000 of them are below 14 years of age. They produce the seed on the land of small and marginal farmers to which multinational and Indian seed companies have outsourced their hybrid seed production.

The report also deals with gender and caste discrimination of the workers. Around 75% of the work is done by women, especially girls. Women are not only paid around 50 to 60% less than men but they often work longer hours for it. Generally official minimum wages are not paid. Dalits, the so-called 'untouchables' and Adivasi (tribals) constitute in most states the majority of the workers. Both studies by Dr. Davuluri Venkateswarlu covered more than 90% of total Indian cotton and

¹ Growing Up in the Danger Fields – Child and Adult Labour in Vegetable Seed Production in India
Seeds of Child labour - Signs of Hope – Child and Adult labour in Cottonseed production in India

vegetable production in the states of Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu for cottonseed and Gujarat, Karnataka en Maharashtra for tomato, pepper, okra and brinjal (egg-plant) seeds.

An issue that the reports do not directly deal with but which is being documented by Dakshini Rajasthan Majdoor Union (DRMU) is the extensive sexual assault, including rape, and oppression of female workers – mostly girls – who are migrating from Rajasthan to Gujarat to work in both the cottonseed fields and cotton ginning factories. This is both acknowledged in informal discussions with the contractors ('mates') and documented in more detail in a number of cases. Some of these cases are described in the attached document.

Through various interventions by some state governments, NGOs, local unions and companies – and in the past also the ILO - child labour in cottonseed production has, despite an increase in cultivated area, decreased with 25%. The decline is greater in areas where the MV Foundation (an NGO) and companies like Bayer, Monsanto and Syngenta have made efforts to eliminate it. Additional research has also shown that the meagre wages of agricultural labourers went up significantly in those villages which have been made 'free of child labour' by the MV Foundation in the state of Andhra Pradesh.

Looking at the enormous magnitude of child labour in the Indian seed industry and the violations of the labour rights of adults we strongly appeal to the ILO to take up this case with a sense of urgency. It is very positive that some NGOs, companies, unions and international agencies like the ILO and Unicef have shown that interventions can have a great positive impact. The impact is closely linked to a partial implementation of an important statement of the *Roadmap for achieving the elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour by 2016*:

'Considering that action to eliminate the worst forms of child labour is most effective and sustainable when it is situated within action to eliminate all child labour, including through area-based and sector-based programmes'.

However, the scale on which this has happened in the seed sector and the areas where seeds are grown is by far not sufficient to tackle the issue comprehensively, whether it is from an area-based and/or sector-based perspective.

We are looking forward to your response to this open letter and we are most willing to discuss with the ILO and ILO-IPEC about ways in which the problem of child labour and adult labour rights in the seed sector in India can be addressed. We are therefore also sending a copy of this letter to the director of ILO-IPEC.

Finally we request you to share this letter as well as the reports and cases with your partners in combating child labour in agriculture: the FAO, the WorldBank, IFAD, IFAP, IFPRI and IUF.

Yours sincerely,



Gerard Oonk, director India Committee of the Netherlands, *also on behalf of:*

Venkat Reddy, MV Foundation

Sudhir Kumar Katiyar, Dakshini Rajasthan Majdoor

Bama Atreya, International Labour Rights Forum

Sofie Ovaa, Stop Child labour – School is the best place to work

cc. Mrs. Constance Thomas, director of ILO-IPEC