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Child Labour and the Hazelnut Harvest in Turkey **Report on a fact-finding mission to Turkey** **5th – 9th September 2011**

HAZELNUT REGION

They are proud of their hazelnuts. On Turkey's Black Sea coast, the hazelnuts can't be ignored. Not only do you see many plantations and orchards while driving through the region, but there are plenty of places on the streets of Ordu and other cities where the harvested nuts are drying in parking spaces and on strips of land beside the road. Older women and young children peel the hazelnuts and give the peeled batches of nuts another shake. Buyers have offices and warehouses at several locations in the city where you can sell your harvest by the bag.¹

The hazelnut is the symbol of the city of Ordu – images of the nuts are even forged into the iron fence which runs alongside the coastal road. It's a natural choice, with more than 200,000 owners of hazelnut orchards in the region. For the majority of these owners – about 80 – cultivating hazelnuts is not a main activity; it is an extra income. For the remaining 20%, the hazelnut industry is a full-time job. Together they represent 75% of the hazelnut supply in the world.

The most important union of hazelnut growers in the region is *Findik Üreticileri Sendikası*, affiliated with the rural farmer's organisation *Çiftçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu*. This confederation is in turn affiliated with the international farmer's organisation *Via Campesina*. The point of contact for the union and federation, Kutsi Yaşar, is a reliable and involved informant on the hazelnut situation in the region by the Black Sea. He tells us that until at least 30 years ago, only local labour was used during the hazelnut harvest. Everyone helped each other with bringing in the harvest. Since then, however, the situation has completely changed.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the Turkish army believed that the Southeast region had to be 'cleansed' of what they considered to be insurgent Kurdish rebels. After the PKK was established, they appeared to be better organised. Over 4,000 villages were destroyed by the Turkish army during the struggle. Without any means of support, the mainly Kurdish population was forced to flee to cities in the region or to other cities as far away as Istanbul. More than 800,000 people were on the move. Without livelihoods, these refugee families found employment as migrant workers for the harvest in the region. At times when there was less work available nearby, they looked further away, towards the Black Sea. So most of the labour is now performed by temporary seasonal workers, mainly Kurdish people from the southern part of the country.

HARVEST WORK

The majority of migrant families travel the whole country looking for work and contribute to the harvest of various seasonal products such as tomatoes, tobacco, apricots, pistachio nuts and hazelnuts. They stay at

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If you're not happy with the current price, you can wait for a better one; well-dried hazelnuts keep their flavour quality at least a year.

the same place for about one month on average before moving on. A small number of these migrant workers work at cultivating the crops for a longer period. In the cotton sector in the south, it is not unusual for them to work on almost the whole cultivation process, for a period of 7 to 8 months. In return for their hard work, they receive 30% of the harvest in kind. From this profit, however, they must pay the wages of the extra cotton pickers required, so very often not much is left. Near Şanlıurfa, close to the Syrian border, increasing attention is being paid to providing better housing for these families close to the fields where the crops are produced. The government has started building semi-permanent houses for the workers there.

The hazelnuts grow along the Black Sea Coast, in the provinces of Ordu and Giresun. Migrants can be busy with the harvest for about 4 to 6 weeks there. First at the coast, then 20 to 30 kilometres further on in the mountains, as the hazelnuts mature slightly later at orchards in higher altitudes (where it's colder) than at the lower-lying, warmer orchards. 30% of the migrant families live on the farms and 70% at camps. There are no formal employment arrangements. Sometimes ongoing relationships arise between the farmers and the families, whereby these families contribute to the harvest with the same farmer for successive years, and often stay on the farmer's property. But for most of the families, the employment is organised through intermediaries, the subcontractors.

SUBCONTRACTORS

Discussions between the landowners and the subcontractors often begin during the winter months. We learned this from our contacts, but it is also stated in Deniz Pelek's thesis on seasonal workers.^[2] The landowner indicates how many people he will need to pick the hazelnuts, and the intermediary begins to look for them, often within his own family or social network. He sometimes provides loans to these people, as most of the workers do not have any other income during the winter months. This means that the workers are actually forced to work for the subcontractor in order to pay back their loans. The subcontractor ensures that the required number of people are available to work for the different landowners at the right times. He also mediates in any disputes that may arise. There is no direct contact between the workers and the landowner. All discussion with the landowners about wage, stay and working conditions is done by the subcontractors.

At the end of the season, the landowners pay the agreed amount to the subcontractor. The subcontractor then pays the workers (keeping 8 to 10% as a commission fee) and any loans are settled along with interest. An intermediary places dozens and sometimes hundreds of employees per season. These intermediaries are not registered anywhere and do not pay taxes on their income. They are not monitored, so there are no checks to ensure that they are adhering to the law or to international labour standards.

Prior to the harvest season, wages are determined by a commission made up of different government representatives and representatives of the hazelnut industry.^[3] However, no checks are made on the wages which are actually paid. In practice, the workers from the local region earn about 45 TL (45 Turkish Lira, equal to around €18) for 8 working hours during the harvest period. Contracted migrants, such as Georgians, receive 38 TL a day and Kurdish seasonal migrants get 28 to 30 TL a day. An important difference is that not only are Kurdish people paid considerably less, but they are required to work about 11 hours a day. The children work these long hours too, and are often paid even less than adults. When a meal is provided, 3 TL is deducted from the wage.^[4] In practice different amounts are paid by different landowners. Payment arrangements are, as stated earlier, made with the subcontractor and not with the worker himself.

[2]

Deniz Pelek, Seasonal Migrant Workers in Agriculture: The cases of Ordu and Polatli, Thesis for Bogazici University, 2010.

[3] Ibid.

[4] TL 1 = €0.40

CHILD LABOUR

Most farmers wait to harvest until the hazelnuts are mature and have fallen on the ground, meaning that harvesting is then just a matter of picking them up. Pulling the nuts from the branches is another option. The branches are fairly flexible, so with a bit of teamwork the children are able to make a considerable contribution. The farmer or one of the other workers then goes around the trees once more using a knife attached to a pole to cut off any remaining bunches of hazelnuts. This type of work is very simple, which is the reason why farmers want children to do it. They are good at picking and are fairly subservient. As a result, children are often more productive than adults.



Several workers indicated that they needed their children to help with the work as otherwise they would not have enough to eat. The wages are so low that they are not enough to support a family. In addition, during the various agricultural harvest periods workers must earn enough to support themselves for the whole year. They often have no other income. For that reason, these workers feel 'forced' to allow their children to work alongside them, thus keeping them out of school for longer periods.

At a farm we visited, a 14-year-old boy was participating fully in the work. Girls of 15 and 18 years old, to whom we spoke at length, stated that they had been working at harvesting at this farm for many years already. Our questioning repeatedly confirmed that children aged from 12 to 16 years commonly participate in the harvest work. When we visited camps during the daytime, there never seemed to be any children aged from 10 to 18 years around. They were at work. Subcontractors confirmed that children, as part of a family commitment, are in high demand with the farmers. We were told of arrangements where subcontractors agreed that two of every six workers supplied would be children. There is no monitoring by the labour inspection board. At the beginning of the season, the government emphasises that children under the age of 16 are not permitted to work, but there are no actual checks done to make sure that the law is being obeyed.



It's not only the older, working children who have a hard time. Children up to the age of 10 travel with their parents and remain at the camps during the periods of seasonal work. That means that these children aren't going to school either. Conditions in the camps are often poor and there are few recreational possibilities for the children. A few of the mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers keep an eye on them. The older girls (aged 9 to 11) help out by taking care of their younger brothers and sisters and by cooking.

Teachers belonging to the Turkish teachers' union *Eğitim Sen* in Adiyaman stated that at their schools, hundreds of school-aged children are absent from school for at least three months of the year, sometimes up to six months, and consequently fall behind in class. They are unable to make up for this, even when they attend another school in the working region, because of the difference in educational methodology and systems. Furthermore, families often don't stay at the same place for more than one month, making it difficult for the children to enrol at local schools.

There is no trade union for farm workers in Turkey, and we were not able to find any information about any organisations representing the interests of migrant workers. There was an association of subcontractors (*Mevsimlik Tarım İşçileri*) which claimed to be defending the interests of the workers. However, the workers themselves were not represented within this association. We had the feeling that the subcontractors, above all, worked to defend their own interests, which tend to conflict with the interests of the workers. The workers are kept totally dependent on the subcontractors and are forced to cede 8 to 10% of their low wages to the subcontractor.

Within the established trade union movement there is hardly any knowledge of, let alone involvement with, seasonal migrants and the related child labour. Only one progressive trade union for the petrochemical industry in the southern province of Adiyaman (*Petrol İş*), is at all involved in the issue of child labour in migrant families.



TURKISH GOVERNMENT

The attention western Europe has given to the bad living and housing conditions of the migrant workers in Turkey has clearly had results. The Turkish Government has acknowledged the problem. The Government came up with a plan to improve the situation in the camps. It has installed fences at several locations to create more protected camping spots and has also invested in facilities. There are now taps supplying clean drinking water, sanitary facilities and recreation areas. However, at the places we visited, the water supply for the toilets and showers was not working. In addition, there were insufficient numbers of these for the large number of workers who were staying at the camps. Nevertheless, the occupants appreciate these sheltered facilities. Dialogues with occupants and potential occupants about the services provided and the maintenance of the camps seems to be totally lacking. The occupants did not have any say in the developments and don't feel a sense of responsibility for the facilities provided to them. No child-focused activities are organised.

On a national level, a state commission (METIB) has been set up to investigate the issue of child labour in seasonal migration. The regional supervising bodies for seasonal work, the SMFWs, have set up policies which have to be further expanded in the regions. But there are not even accurate statistics on internal migration levels in Turkey. The responsible authority, the ISCWR, has not been able to compose a reliable overview.

In the longer term, only strong economic development in the southern regions offers a real solution for the Kurdish seasonal workers. In the province of Şanlıurfa, on the border with Syria, \$22 million has been invested in a hydroelectric dam project for agricultural development of the whole region using appropriate irrigation systems. It is expected that this will mean more work available for inhabitants of the region and that fewer families will be forced to look for seasonal work in other Turkish regions.

CONCLUSIONS

1. There is no doubt that child labour is commonly used for the hazelnut harvest (among other crops). This results in a considerable amount of absence from school – not only by the children who are working, but also by the younger children who must travel with their parents and are consequently unable to attend school either.
2. The wages, especially those paid to Kurdish seasonal workers, are low and contribute to the continuation of child labour. The difference in remuneration, employment and working conditions between the different population groups is contrary to the non-discrimination principle, one of the fundamental labour rights of the ILO.
3. The Turkish Government has acknowledged the child labour issue, but the government's response is currently limited to providing some facilities in the camps. There was no sign of actual monitoring or attempts to combat child labour by the public authorities.
4. The workers are highly dependent on the subcontractors, to whom they have to cede 8 to 10% of their income. These subcontractors are not registered and are not monitored by the government, which can lead to abuses such as child labour, low wages and bad working conditions.
5. With the exception of education union *Eğitim Sen* and petrochemical workers' union *Petrol İş*, the established trade unions give scant attention to the issue of child labour in seasonal migration. Other organisations which are committing themselves to the seasonal migrants are not noticeably present, if there are any.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. More international attention needs to be given to the situation of migrant workers in Turkey and their children who work and travel with them.
2. Besides organising better accommodation, the Turkish government needs to take more responsibility for assuring the children's right to education and protecting them from having to work. This can be achieved through structural improvements, such as: 1) providing sufficient and accessible educational facilities; 2) ensuring thorough labour inspections in fields and in orchards; 3) ensuring parity of wages and working conditions for local people and seasonal migrants; 4) regulating and monitoring subcontractors; and 5) strengthening the economic position of the migrants in the regions of origin.
3. Companies (both Turkish and international ones) which buy and process hazelnuts must include clauses in contracts with their providers, requiring that child labour is being eradicated from all their activities as well as from those of their suppliers, and that the rights of the employees and the workers is respected. Not only should companies supervise their supply chains to ensure compliance with these requirements, but they also should implement and stimulate suitable measures to put a structural solution in place and should communicate in a transparent way about this to all stakeholders, including consumers (supply chain responsibility).
4. Together with the teachers' union *Eğitim Sen*, an action plan could be implemented in order to fight school absenteeism and child labour. There is potential here for cooperation with the Dutch and German teachers' unions and committed NGOs in Turkey.
5. Are there possibilities for the self-organisation of migrant workers? This should be checked. It may be possible to work together with progressive farmers' organisation *Çiftçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu* and with *Petrol İş*.

6. Consumers and trade unions in countries which purchase Turkish hazelnuts must confront the buying and processing companies about their responsibility for the supply chain.
7. In order to achieve structural improvement in the seasonal workers' situation and to be able to eradicate child labour, the various involved parties such as companies, national and local authorities, trade unions, schools, local organisations and the workers in the chains themselves must start a dialogue with each other and should cooperate wherever possible. Each player has its own role and responsibilities and should take the initiative to bring about change.

MEMBERS OF THE DELEGATION

The delegation of FNV Bondgenoten (Dutch federation of trade unions) consisted of trade union official Çelil Coban and stewards Mail Urker and Dick de Graaf. Leonie Blokhuis from the campaign 'Stop Child Labour – School is the best place to work' joined the delegation. The delegation was very moved by the very generous hospitality shown by Turkish colleagues whom they met during the trip.

Dick de Graaf, FNV Bondgenoten

*Leonie Blokhuis, Stop Child Labour – School is the best place to work
November 2011*