

# Innovations in Education

## My Rights Matter: Using education to combat harmful child labor in Guatemala

### Child labor in Guatemala

Guatemala has one of the highest child labor rates in the Americas, with almost 17 percent of children working in agriculture, domestic work, or other fields. Often times, these children work in hazardous conditions which violate their human rights. Children working in agriculture use dangerous tools, carry heavy loads, are frequently exposed to extensive sun and rain, and are exposed to hazardous fertilizers and pesticides. Those engaged in domestic work spend lengthy hours doing household chores and taking care of younger siblings, or work as domestic servants and are often exploited physically and sexually. Indigenous groups have particularly high rates of child labor, which are due to poverty and the cultural belief that child labor is an important aspect of growing up.

While the majority of child laborers work and attend school, many have difficulty maintaining satisfactory academic performance. As a result, children tend to drop out due to the physical strain and demands associated with their work.



A child works carrying wood for consumption. He also attends school in San Marcos, Guatemala. Photo: Silverlight for CRS.



Edgar Cardona Garcla participates in My Rights Matter's Bilingual Intercultural Education project in the public school of El Porvenir Village, Comitancillo, Department of San Marcos. The accelerated education will allow him to catch up with his friends that are now in 5th grade. Photo: Silverlight for CRS.

### CRS' Approach

A CRS program, My Rights Matter or *Nuyatalil-Wolken*, is combating hazardous forms of child labor through education in rural indigenous communities in four municipalities in the Departments of Totonicapán and San Marcos in highland Guatemala. With funding from the U.S. Department of Labor, CRS has been implementing the program in partnership with the Asociacion de Conrado de la Cruz and Pastoral San Marcos since 2009.

My Rights Matter incorporates education about children's rights into various projects as well as advocacy, policy, and community sensitization activities. The program's goal is to educate children and adults on a child's right to education, play, and development; to participate fully in family, cultural and social life; and to be protected from hazardous influences such as abuse and exploitation. It has successfully raised awareness among children, teachers, parents, community members and local government authorities about the dangerous aspects of child labor common in the area. My Rights Matter teaches the community about various national and international

laws related to children's rights and sensitizes its messages to Mayan beliefs and practices regarding one's rights, obligations, community mutual help practices, and gender relations.

The program is advocating for children's rights with the following activities:

**The Active Rural School:** Working with schools to help students learn value and civic engagement through participatory and hands-on activities. The schools institutionalize student government to teach about civic participation and a democratic process. Elected students develop and implement a school improvement plan along with Parent/Teacher Associations.

**Bilingual Intercultural Education:** Educating students about Mayan culture to help them develop their identity and reduce stigma.

**Spaces to Grow:** Implementing after school activities in local schools to assist children with homework, engage them in games and hands-on educational activities, provide recreational activities for personal growth, and educate them about their rights.

**Community Sensitization and Participation:** Educating parents and communities about children's rights and education using various methods including radio and TV spots, community events, and home visits. The program encourages teachers to invite community members to their classroom to teach about Mayan culture, heritage and talents in the community.

**Certificate Program for Children's Rights and Child Labor:** Developing a base of social actors who will assume responsibility to develop child labor free zones in municipalities in accordance with national goals through a certificate program for civil society organization leaders and Ministry of Education supervisors.

## Results

As children and parents are becoming increasingly aware of the harm associated with child labor and adults are creating supportive environments for children, the amount of children participating in hazardous forms of child labor have diminished. On average, children's working hours have decreased from 24.3 to 6.9 hours per week. Also, children are now avoiding hazardous types of work, such as using chemical fertilizers, harvesting with machetes, and lifting



Children participating in My Rights Matter play during school break. The program provides direct educational support to working children and adolescents to remove them from exploitative work situations and promote their retention in school. Photo: Silverlight for CRS.

heavy loads. During the project period (2009-2013), My Right Matter supported 20,152 child laborers. The project withdrew 6,695 children from child labor and prevented 3,319 children from falling into exploitive child labor.

## Looking Ahead

The program has increased community awareness and understanding about the rights of children. There is an ongoing need to advocate for children and naturally the educational system plays a key role.

CRS also created a manual series for teachers to help them incorporate the project education models into lesson plans at school. The series has been given to the Ministry of Education for dissemination and use in teacher trainings in other regions.