



Assessing Labour Rights: Child’s Involvement in Cashew Production in Cambodia

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Introduction

One in ten children worldwide is engaged in child labour, with 70 % working in agriculture, mostly in rural areas (ILO & UNICEF 2021). Globally, countries can combat child labour by addressing it from both the “demand” and “supply” side dimensions, strengthening social protection, investing in education, and promoting alternatives to child labour (Thévenon & Edmonds 2019). Labour rights abuses continue to be a major issue, particularly in rural agricultural areas, where child labour is highly contentious because it prevents children from receiving an education and perpetuates inequality (ILO 2015; ILO 2023a). Although agriculture is the largest employment sector for child labourers (ILO & UNICEF 2021), little is known about the degree of child labour in this sector, particularly in cashew production (Stuckrath 2023).

Aims

As cashew is promoted to boost Cambodia’s exports and rural economy (USAID 2024), this study aims to examine its value chain with a focus on labour rights, farmers’ awareness, and the prevalence of child labour. More specifically, it seeks to map the cashew value chain and identify where development interventions are needed, to analyse farmers’ awareness of labour rights, and to assess the degree of child labour in cashew production in selected provinces.

Methodology

To investigate the awareness of labour rights and the prevalence of child labour, a mixed-methods approach was used to capture both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of the study. This provided a comprehensive understanding of the cashew nut value chain, labour rights, and child labour prevalence in Cambodia. Data collection included semi-structured interviews with 8 key informants (including NGO staff, agricultural experts, university representatives, and primary school teachers), a questionnaire survey with farmers, focus group discussions, and direct farm observations across Kampong Thom and Preah Vihear provinces.

The quantitative survey involved 122 small-scale farmers and covered a total of 145 children, of whom 47 % were boys and 53 % girls. These provinces were chosen because of their central role in Cambodia’s cashew industry and their well-developed agricultural systems.

The Mann-Whitney U-test was applied to compare differences between the two provinces, and a Binary logistic regression model was employed to identify factors influencing the prevalence of child labour in cashew production.



Figure 1: A map of Cambodia with selected study areas

Source: map generated from mapchart.net

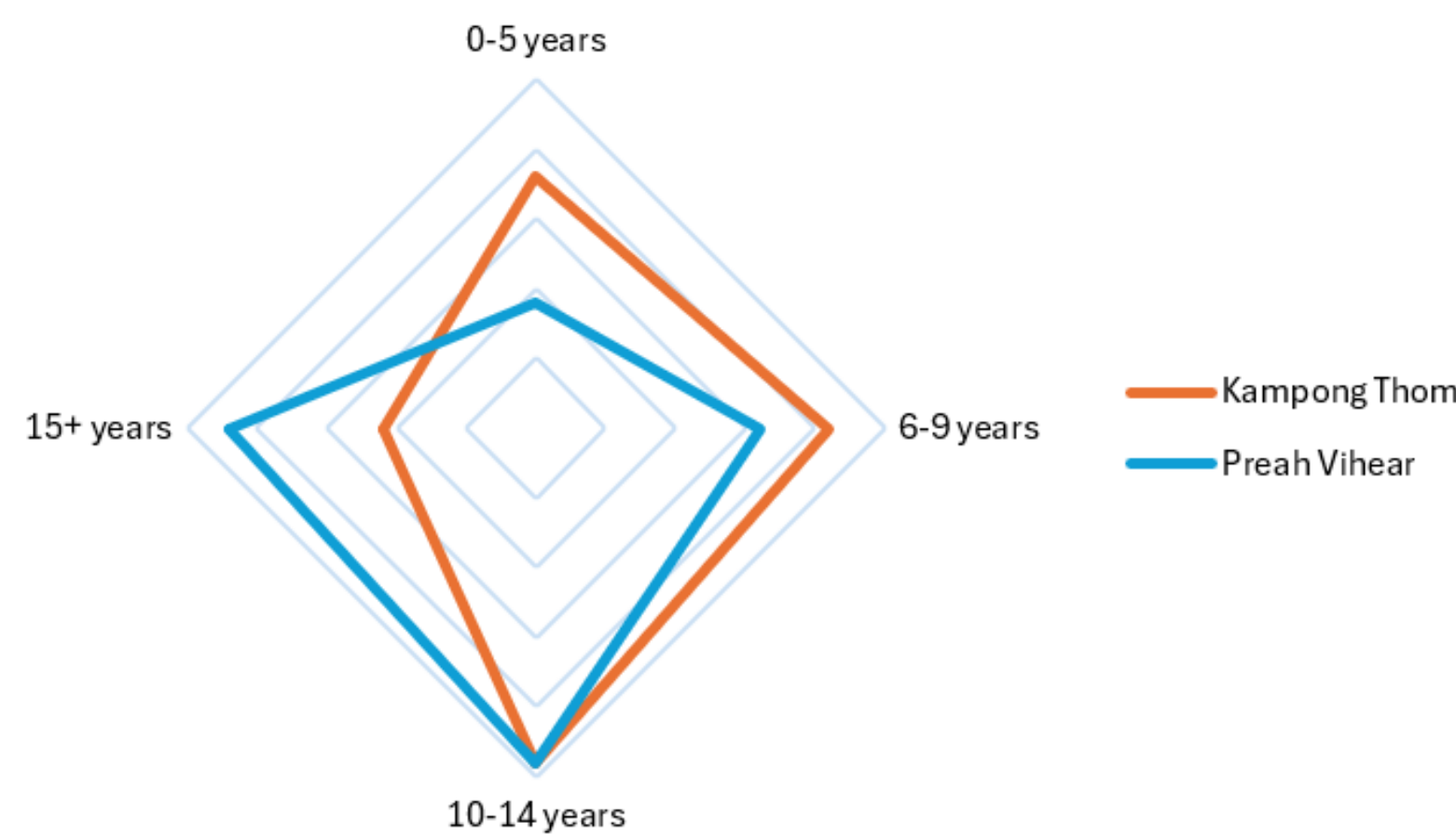


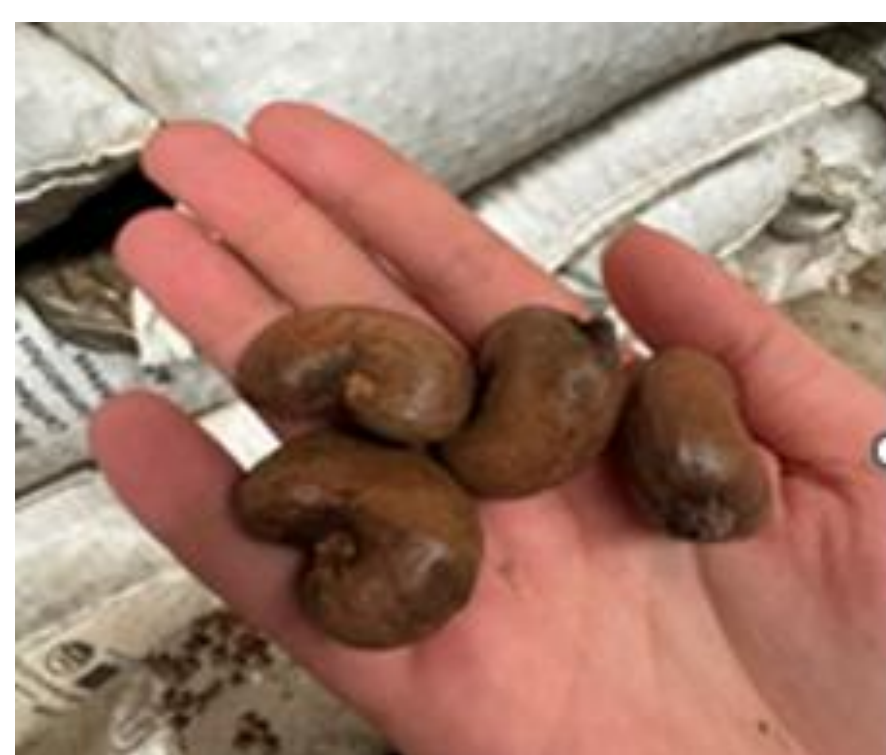
Figure 2: A visual representation of age distribution of children in both provinces

Results

Overall awareness regarding labour rights and child labour in both provinces was low, with Preah Vihear significantly less aware. Satisfaction regarding working conditions and labour rights was positive in both provinces. Farmers from both provinces agreed that there and no labour rights controls (Table 1). Key informants confirmed that, low awareness may lead to possible exploitation.

Based on the questionnaires filled in by parents, indicated that children rarely helped on farms, mostly during harvest, and were compensated similarly to adults, mainly with food or a share of produce (Table 2). However, key informants and school visits revealed a different reality: many children miss school for extended periods during harvest seasons to work on farms. This suggests that parental reports may significantly underestimate children’s actual involvement in the cashew value chain.

The Binary logistic regression was applied to identify factors influencing the prevalence of child labour. Out of 145 children, 45 were found to be potentially involved in child labour. The model showed that age of the child, whether the household hired external labour, and the absence of labour rights controls were significant factors increasing the likelihood of child labour. Older children were more likely to engage in farm work, a finding also confirmed by key informants. Furthermore, households employing external labour were more than six times more likely to involve their own children in agricultural tasks. Weak or absent labour rights inspections further reinforced the risk of children’s participation in farm work.



Figures 3-5: photos from data collection, and field observations

Table 1: Awareness and satisfaction analysis of cashew farmers regarding labour rights, and child labour

Category	Statement	All	Region		p
		M ± SD	Kampong Thom	Preah Vihear	
Awareness	I am fully aware of the labour right laws in Cambodia ²	3.60 ± 1.303	2.83	4.17	<0.001
	I provide my workers/ family members with information about their labour rights ²	4.02 ± 1.094	3.21	4.63	<0.001
	I have provided my workers/ family members training on safety practices ²	3.84 ± 1.116	3.10	4.39	<0.001
	I am fully aware of the concept of child labour ²	2.20 ± 1.135	1.77	2.53	<0.001
	I believe that child labour occurs in Cambodia ²	2.24 ± 0.693	2.38	2.13	0.033
	I am fully aware of the legal formalities labour comes with ²	2.67 ± 0.807	2.87	2.53	0.002
Satisfaction	I think my workers/ family members are satisfied with their current working conditions ²	1.67 ± 0.521	1.21	2.01	<0.001
	I am fully satisfied with the labour right laws governing the cashew cultivation ²	2.32 ± 0.763	1.96	2.59	<0.001
Effectiveness	I apply labour rights laws on my farm ²	3.26 ± 1.112	3.44	3.13	0.031
	There are labour rights controls in Cambodia ¹	4.79 ± 0.752	4.56	4.96	<0.001

Note: used scales for answering (very frequently = 1, never = 5)¹; (strongly agree = 1, strongly disagree = 5)²; level of significance = 0.05; bold= significant

Table 2: Extent and conditions of child participation in agricultural activities

Category	Statement	Item	All	Region			
			M ± SD	Kampong Thom	Preah Vihear	P	
Value Chain	They help on a farm		4.08±1.310	4.22	3.94	0.048	
	They help with	Seeding and cultivation	4.50±0.922	4.61	4.43	0.540	
		Harvesting	2.81±1.235	3.04	2.66	0.220	
		Drying	5.00±0.000	5.00	5.00	1.000	
		Packaging	4.81±0.760	4.52	5.00	0.011	
		Distribution to middleman/ AC	4.57±0.993	4.00	4.94	<0.001	
ILO measures	They carry heavy loads		3.03±1.242	2.91	3.11	0.415	
	They perform potentially dangerous tasks		4.86±0.441	4.70	4.97	0.023	
	They are trained to work on a farm		4.91±0.339	4.87	4.94	0.153	
	Safety measure on place to prevent injuries		5.00±0.000	5.00	5.00	1.000	
	Compensation	It is in form of	Money	4.74±0.928	4.48	4.91	0.289
			Food	4.29±1.338	3.35	4.91	<0.001
	Equal to compensation for adults	Part of the produce	1.52±1.314	2.22	1.06	0.007	
			1.81±1.315	2.74	1.18	<0.001	
Education	How often they	Attend school	1.00±0.000	1.00	1.00	1.000	
		Need to help on a farm instead of going to school	4.72±0.490	4.89	4.56	<0.001	
Household	They help with chores at home		3.06±1.344	2.76	3.37	0.010	

Note: used scales for answering (very frequently = 1, never = 5); level of significance = 0.05; bold= significant; AC = Agricultural Cooperative; ILO = International Labour Organization

Discussion

Inconsistent application of safety standards and lack of training, supported by observations, reveal serious concerns (ILO 2023a). Both provinces lack enforcement of labour rights, with Kampong Thom showing relatively higher awareness. Unpaid family labour is often normalised but remains exploitative (Thévenon & Edmonds 2019). Key informants highlighted that cultural norms frequently take precedence over formal labour laws, shaping local practices more strongly than legal regulations.

Survey results indicated a low prevalence of child labour. However, this finding does not align with insights from the literature review, field observations, or testimonies of key informants. While parents reported that children attend school regularly and only rarely help on farms, direct farm visits and school observations revealed otherwise. Teachers and local experts confirmed that during peak harvesting seasons, many children are absent from school for extended periods to work on farms. This suggests that parental responses tend to underestimate children’s actual participation in agricultural labour. Furthermore, children’s compensation, although different from that of adults, confirms their role as part of the labour force (ILO 2024b).

Conclusion

Labour rights are poorly understood and inconsistently applied, with awareness especially low in remote rural areas. Evidence of child labour was found in the Cambodian cashew sector, but inconsistencies between parental reports and field observations highlight the need for further qualitative research, particularly from the perspective of teachers and pedagogues. Children often assist in less visible tasks, sometimes with dangerous equipment and without training, and strong family labour dependency remains a key driver of child labour. Interventions must therefore operate at multiple levels, combining stronger government enforcement, support for cooperatives, collaboration with schools and NGOs, awareness campaigns, and engagement of international buyers to promote ethical supply chains.

Acknowledgment

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