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El Salvador Lags on Child Labor

by LADB Staff

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Cutting sugar cane, working in fireworks factories or in the sex industry, and garbage collecting are among the most dangerous jobs in El Salvador. Another is harvesting mollusks in mangrove swamps, a 14-hour-a-day job that earns a worker about US\$1.40 a day, from which must be deducted the cost of smoking cigars all day to reduce mosquito and other bug bites and the price of amphetamines to stay awake throughout the seemingly endless workday.

That these jobs even exist is problematic as a labor issue. But what is most acutely problematic is that these are the jobs by which about 30,000 children earn their livelihood in El Salvador. These are the children at highest risk among the 223,000 kids who work for a living. Minister of Labor Jorge Nieto said that 67 of every 100 children in the country work.

The International Program on the Elimination of Child Labor of the International Labor Organization (IPEC-ILO) set up a program in the country in 1999. Since then, said IPEC representative Benjamin Smith, they have been able to rescue thousands from this work and increase by about 35% the number of working children who go to school. The program provides US\$8 million to the government. The government then finds sources of income for the parents of the kids so that the children do not have to work. US\$4 million has been invested in the education project that has resulted in the increase of 35% of children who go to school. The project does both "retirement" work and prevention, so that, over the life of the program so far, Smith estimated that about 9,300 children have been retired from high-risk work and another 17,000 prevented from entering these fields.

Nieto said that, in the remaining months of this year, three projects estimated to remove another 5,000 kids from dangerous work would be started in Sonsonate, San Vicente, and North San Salvador; all are located in sugar cane areas. A project to take children out of the sex trade has also been started and has reported "substantial" results according to the Labor Ministry (see NotiCen 2002-07-04). The project involves training for police, state attorneys, judges, and the International Police (Interpol). This will be augmented by "a program of specialized attention to victims of commercial sexual exploitation and their families," said Nieto. The program will be coordinated with the Instituto Salvadoreño para el Desarrollo Integral de la Niñez y la Adolescencia (ISNA).

The effort to save children from dangerous work began when El Salvador subscribed to Convention 182 of the ILO and created the national committee that works under its auspices. But El Salvador still does not have a national plan for the progressive elimination of child labor, according to Nieto. Of the high-risk work listed by the ministry, the least known, that of collecting mollusks in the mangrove swamps, is one of the most loathsome. A typical child prepares to go to work at four in the morning.

One such worker, in Usulután, El Salvador, sets off at about that time each day, usually without breakfast. Shoeless, in any weather, she reaches deep into the mud for the shells, all the while puffing a cigar to ward off mosquitoes. At some point each day, she runs out of cigars, and is usually covered with welts by day's end. On a good day, she will collect two baskets of the shells and will earn US\$1.40. There will, of course, have been no time to go to school. She will not have played with other children who, regardless of the availability of playtime, shun her because she stinks. Extracting her from this work is not as easy as plucking a mollusk from the mud.

The child will have psychological problems associated with the circumstances of her life, according to Nelson Amaya, a psychologist who works with these children. Her parents will typically be resistant to the idea of letting the girl off from work that puts food on the table. It would take Amaya several visits to a home just to get the parents on board with the idea that their daughter should be in school. Amaya said, however, that eventually he was successful in this case and that the parents now feel that the girl should go to school and the girl wants to make something of her life. The program is also helping the girl's seven siblings. Amaya says that, in this particular area, on a hacienda on the island of Espiritu Santo, 56 children will be rescued from this scenario. The efforts are not limited to these occupations.

Children working in coffee cultivation are also at grave risk of growing up illiterate, malnourished, and ill equipped to improve their lives. Benjamin Smith said that 1,956 children have been retired from dangerous work in this sector. El Salvador is not the worst country in the region for children at this kind of risk. The country is second only to Costa Rica in percentages of child workers who attend school. Legislatively, however, because of its lack of a national plan to deal with the problem of child labor, El Salvador may be behind Nicaragua, whose Asamblea Nacional last week partially reformed its labor code, prohibiting work for children under 14 years of age and bringing the code into line with the Código de la Niñez y la Adolescencia.

The change allows those between 14 and 16 to work with parental permission or under supervision of the Labor Ministry. The purpose of the revision was to reinforce the obligations of the state, parents, employers, unions, and families to keep children from work that would harm them physically, psychologically, and educationally. The modifications to the law specifically prevent child labor in bars, nightclubs, and unhealthy or dangerous environments like mines, garbage dumps, etc.

The AN also required the Labor Ministry to work with the Comisión Nacional para la Eradicación Progresiva del Trabajo Infantil y del Adolescente to revise, define, and update annually the list of dangerous occupations for young workers.

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