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El Salvador: Chipping Away At Child-labor Numbers

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Despite El Salvador's ongoing economic problems, complicated all the more by last year's recession, the Central American nation appears to gradually be reducing the incidence of child labor, recent government statistics suggest.

Last month, the Ministerio de Economía (MINEC) and the Dirección General de Estadísticas y Censos (DIGESTYC) released a report that found that approximately 10% of Salvadoran children – roughly 189,000 people between ages five and seven – worked in 2009. A similar study carried out the previous year estimated the number of El Salvador's working youth at 190,525, meaning the incidence of child labor dropped 0.9% in 2009 despite a recession that saw the economy contract by a substantial 3.5%.

The study, which surveyed 20,000 households, used as its child-labor criteria any child who, whether paid or unpaid, worked at least one hour any given day during the previous week. It found that just 1% of children aged five to nine worked, compared with 10% in the 10 to 14 age bracket and 27% of children aged 15 to 17. Roughly 60% of El Salvador's child laborers live in rural areas, and 64% work on an unpaid basis helping their families, the report concluded. Nearly three-fourths of the country's child workers (73%) are boys.

Not surprisingly, the study found that incidences of child labor are highest in families with low education levels. In 69% of households where children work, the parents did not finish primary school. The research also concluded that 68% of households with child laborers are headed by single mothers.

Economy Minister Héctor Dada Hirezi, who helped present the findings June 9, called the reduction "satisfactory," especially considering it took place during an economic down year. Others were more critical, saying El Salvador ought to be more ambitious about cutting down on child labor.

"There has been a reduction, but it's probably insufficient," said Jesús de la Peña, a regional coordinator for the International Labor Organization (ILO) who was also present during the report's official release. "Efforts need to be multiplied, both in quantity and quality."

Cutting kids from the cane fields

With ILO assistance, El Salvador established a "road map" last December aimed at eliminating all types of child labor by 2020 and doing away with the worst, most dangerous kinds – child prostitution, cane cutting, and mollusk collecting, among others – by 2015. El Salvador is a signee of ILO Convention 182, known popularly as the Worst Forms of Child Labor Convention and originally drafted in 1999. The convention stipulates that participating countries "must take immediate and
effective measures to secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labor as a matter of urgency."

Both the Salvadoran government and ILO agree that, overall, the country has already made significant progress – particularly regarding the use of children in the labor-intensive sugarcane industry. Cane sugar is El Salvador's second-leading export product after coffee.

In 2004, the influential organization Human Rights Watch (HRW) drew international attention to the issue in its report, Turning a Blind Eye: Hazardous Labor in El Salvador's Sugarcane. The study explained that between 5,000 and 30,000 children, some as young as eight years old, were routinely employed on the country's cane plantations (NotiCen, July 15, 2004). The dangerous jobs not only cost children toes and fingers but also weeks, even months, of school, especially around harvest time.

In recent years, however, Salvadoran authorities have cracked down on cane-plantation child labor, as well as on other sectors deemed particularly dangerous for children, such as fireworks factories, mangrove-swamp mollusk fishing, and garbage scavenging. ILO statistics show that the number of children employed on sugarcane plantations dropped from 12,380 in 2004 to 3,469 in 2008, while in the fishing industry, the numbers went from 5,578 to 2,825.

**Shifting attitudes, lingering problems**

International pressure in the wake of the HRW report likely played a role. But there has also been a shift in people's attitudes toward child labor, Luis Enrique Salazar, executive director of the Instituto Salvadoreño para el Desarrollo Integral de la Niñez y la Adolescencia (ISNA), told Diario CoLatino. Salvadorans, he explained, are less tolerant of underage labor and now tend to agree that children should not begin working until well into their teens.

"This means that we have the cultural base, that our collective perception now considers child labor to be a national problem," said Salazar.

Throughout El Salvador, small groups marked last month's World Day against Child Labor, June 12, with modest demonstrations. In Santa Tecla, La Libertad, some 600 costumed children paraded through the streets carrying placards and demanding an end to child labor. The city's mayor, Óscar Ortiz, called it "a way to encourage the public to advance toward eradicating child labor so that more boys and girls have access to education."

In the capital San Salvador, several hundred children participated in a mural-painting event organized around the theme, "Yes to inclusion: eradicate child labor." The 34-meter-long group painting, sponsored by the government's Secretaría de Inclusión Social, adorns a military school.

But observers insist that, for all the progress El Salvador has made, child labor is still very much a problem and will remain so until the country can significantly reduce its root cause – poverty. As the MINEC/DIGESTYC survey indicated, poverty and child labor are inextricably linked. They are also self-reinforcing. Impoverished families rely on children for labor and/or extra income. By working,
however, those children receive less schooling and are therefore less employable down the line. At the same time, their free or underpaid labor depresses adult wages.

Government statistics are also far from exact. In Ciudad Delgado, for example, numerous children continue to work in dangerous fireworks factories, Mayor Tomás Minero told El Mundo. Many of the workshops are illegal, thus "there's no exact registry of children who work or have been working handling gunpowder," he said. Nevertheless, "surely children are still being used to make fireworks."

"There need to be mutually reinforcing efforts to ensure and extend access to basic universal education," said ILO general director Juan Somavia. "There need to be social protections in place and productive work opportunities so that parents can get out of poverty and stop their children from working. This coordinated focus is the key to guaranteeing a real and lasting impact." (Sources: Diario CoLatino (El Salvador), 06/12/10, 06/14-15/10; La Prensa Grafica (El Salvador), 06/09-13/10, 06/18/10; Diario El Mundo (El Salvador), 06/18/10; Ministerio de Economía/DIGESTYC report)

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