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ILO Lauds Dominican Republic's Effort to Eradicate Child Labor

by Crosby Girón

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The steps taken by the Dominican Republic to eradicate child labor served as a good example during a meeting by the International Labor Organization (ILO) in Colombia in late February. These actions include Decree 144-97, which was enacted to set up local, provincial, and municipal committees to prevent and eradicate child labor.

Local media reported that the Unidad para Combatir el Trabajo Infantil, a Ministry of Labor dependency to combat child labor, explained its good practices (Buenas Prácticas para Prevenir el Trabajo Infantil) in Colombia. The Ministry of Labor said these policies have been applied through the 43 local committees that have been set up "so that local communities can rally around the issue and can be empowered in the fight against child labor."

During the meeting, programs implemented by different countries, including Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Chile, Panamá and the Dominican Republic were debated. Vice Minister of Labor Gladys Azcona de la Cruz said only Ecuador has carried out a similar program that seeks to involve the community in the fight against child labor in rubbish dumps.

The Dominican Republic is currently implementing a project to eradicate the worst forms of child labor. The main actions focus on frequent meetings with municipal representatives to prevent children from being exploited at a local level. This project is part of the Plan Estratégico Nacional, which includes actions by the aforementioned local, provincial, and municipal committees.

The Third Global Conference on Child Labor will take place in Brazil in October, and time is running out for governments to meet the targets set for eradicating the worst forms of child exploitation such as prostitution, drug trafficking, and participation in armed conflicts. The ILO has admitted that "this is a huge task."

Nevertheless, seven of eight countries in the subregional block have met their obligation to update their statistics on children forced to do hazardous and pernicious jobs, classified as the worst forms of child labor, as well as other forms of exploitation, every two years.

What do the statistics show?

In early 2012, the Dominican media published the most recent statistics on child labor: an army of 380,000 children was going out to work on a daily basis instead of going to school. Fifty-six percent of these children (212,000) were performing hazardous tasks—such as construction work—that is 8% of all children and adolescents between 5 and 17 years of age.

These statistics were published by the Oficina Nacional de Estadística (ONE), the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and the ILO in the report "Dynamics of Child Labor in the Dominican Republic," which provides the most up-to-date statistics on child labor in the country.
Despite the magnitude of the problem, the Dominican Republic is not the worst-ranked country in the region. The ENHOGAR 2009-2010 survey showed that child labor is diminishing, although figures "continue to be above the Latin American average."

At the top of the deep problems facing children in the Dominican Republic is poverty and extreme poverty, which have increased in the past decade, according to statistics published by international organizations.

**Work that doesn't get anyone out of poverty**

All work carried out by children and adolescents has an economic context and therefore benefits someone. And, although poverty has been accepted as one of the main causes of child labor, not all jobs carried out by children are considered "harmful" for this demographic group.

This is the criteria used by many parents to involve their children in work as "a strategy to boost the family’s income," even though this contribution does not determine whether the family will be able to break the poverty cycle.

In the aforementioned survey, almost 40% of children who work do so for their parents or other relatives within the household; almost 15% work for a family member who lives in a different home; and 12.4% work for "a friend of the family." It is clear that child labor occurs mostly within the home and accounts for 66.4% of all children who are working.

Another important fact revealed by the survey is that most parents (more than 70%) said that it would be better for children to "concentrate on their studies," while 19% of adults said that children had to combine studying with a remunerated activity. Only 1% responded that children should focus on working.

Regarding the money that an underage worker can bring home, it is important to mention that a child’s contribution to the household is about 10% of its income. The survey indicated that, on average, child workers bring home about US$2 a month.

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