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Paraguay's Efforts to End Child Labor Face Uncertain Future

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Two weeks before businessman President-elect Horacio Cartes' Aug. 15 inauguration, no one yet knows what his policy regarding children will be, even though, since his electoral win in April (NotiSur, May 10, 2013), national and international children's advocacy agencies have urged him to make some commitment to the most powerless and neglected sector of society.

Before the election, however, Cartes had told the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) that he was willing to increase funding for prevention and treatment programs to eradicate child labor as part of the "20 commitments to improve the efficiency of investment in children and adolescents," a joint program sponsored by the UN agency and the national Frente por la Niñez y la Adolescencia. He had also told representatives of UK-based Save the Children and Paraguay's Global Infancia that he was ready to eradicate child domestic labor.

However, in contrast with his later silence on the issue of children, Cartes has let it be known that, as soon as he is sworn in, he intends to back a program to transfer state assets to private capital, beginning with privatizing the Administración Nacional de Electricidad (ANDE) and Asunción's Aeropuerto Internacional Silvio Petirossi, the country's most important airport.

In light of reports from the state Dirección General de Estadísticas, Encuestas y Censos (DGEEC), the International Labor Organization (ILO), and Partnership for Educational Revitalization in the Americas (PERA)—an Inter-American Dialogue program—in May and June various social organizations launched the national campaign Termina con el Criadazgo (small children working as domestic servants) to end the practice.

Poverty at root of child-labor problem

The studies found that in Paraguay at least 47,000 children of both sexes (2.5% of the population between 5 and 17 years of age) work for families without receiving any remuneration. Their parents turn them over to a family to do domestic work—wash clothes, clean, cook, and care for the family's children—in exchange for housing, food, clothing, and, at times, education.

"We are talking about a problem directly related to poverty and about children of up to 17 years of age who are vulnerable and likely to be victims of all kinds of violence—physical, emotional, sexual, and work-related—since their work is made invisible, hidden from the eyes of the citizenry, many times in isolated places or away from their homes," said Andrea Cid, a UNICEF expert, in explaining criadazgo.

Cid said the UN agency told Cartes that it considers it necessary to eliminate "the little maids," that is, "children who when they are lucky enough to be sent to school cannot do well because they are exhausted," a practice that affects minors who work long shifts seven days a week.

The DGEEC survey found that 23.5% of Paraguayan children and adolescents of both sexes (slightly more than 436,000) between the ages of 5 and 17 carry out some economic activity, mostly in rural areas. More than 211,000 are under the age of 13, the minimum legal age for children to work.
Regarding domestic work, 66.5% of the children said they work an average of 9.2 hours a day. The state agency said that, as might be expected, domestic work is most often carried out by girls, who work almost twice as many hours as boys (11.6 hours compared with 6.2 hours). The study also found that 21.3% of the minors did work considered "dangerous." The majority of children doing such work are between the ages of 14 and 17, followed by those between 10 and 13, and, finally, those from 5 to 9 years of age.

The DGEEC defines dangerous or at-risk work as "anything done by those under age 17 in certain domestic chores, handling cargo and/or operating heavy machinery, working long shifts, working at night or in extreme climatic conditions," and says specifically that "such practices should be prohibited or abolished."

SERPAJ investigation ties land-tenancy issues to child labor

An investigation carried out last June by Servicio Paz y Justicia (SERPAJ) at the request of the Instituto para el Desarrollo Rural de Sudamérica (IPDRS) correlated child labor with poverty exacerbated by rural emigration and the land-ownership regime (NotiSur, Jan. 20, 2012), one aspect of which is the phenomenon of foreignization of rural properties (various sources say that some 20% of Paraguay's arable land is in foreign hands, primarily Brazilian). The investigation came to the dramatic conclusion that, "with almost 1 million hectares dedicated to pasture and 10.5 million head of cattle, each animal occupies 1.7 ha, while more than 310,000 families do not have even 1 hectare, and many others emigrate to urban areas where they have no roof over their heads." That has led to children becoming a source of cheap labor.

"In 1970, the majority of the Paraguayan population was campesino, with 37% living in urban areas and 63% in rural areas. In four decades," said SERPAJ, "that situation had changed drastically and is practically the reverse; last year, 60% of the population lived in urban areas."

The SERPAJ study found that the country-to-city migratory flow led to significant changes in occupations and work activities of adults, as well as increasing child labor and criadazgo. In the mid-20th century, 49.5% of the economically active population (EAP) worked in agriculture and ranching, while 29% were employed in the service sector and commerce. Last year, the proportions had reversed: 26.7% of the EAP were employed in agriculture and ranching and 52.4% in the service sector and commerce. The secondary sector (manufacturing and construction) remained practically unchanged, between 17.5% and 18.1%.

"The transformation from a campesino to an urban country was not accompanied by industrialization or the creation of employment in the secondary sector," said SERPAJ. Official 2010 statistics indicate that, at that time, slightly more than 600,000 families lived in the countryside, 310,000 with no land to work.

"The land problem has deep, historical roots, and its consequences are still dire and lacking effective answers from the democratic governments in office since 1989, when the dictatorship of Gen. Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989) was overthrown. For example, in October 2012, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) annual report estimated that 25% of the Paraguayan population suffered from hunger, primarily in rural areas and indigenous communities," says the SERPAJ study.
Children who work do not get education

The overview ends with a disturbing picture of the educational situation, with more than 50% of students not completing the "basic cycle" of schooling. The PERA report says that, in addition, an important sector of the population has no access to formal instruction. Only three of 10 students who entered the first grade of primary school in 1999 finished the nine years of basic education. Of those who managed to enroll in secondary school, 30% repeated at least one grade. Also, "an important number" of adolescents between 13 and 17 years of age are not enrolled in the grade level that corresponds to their age, putting Paraguay among the countries with the lowest net level of secondary schooling in the region. The latest data available (2010) shows that some 60,000 children between the ages of 5 and 11 are not in school. And, slightly fewer than 170,000 adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 are outside the educational system.

During the presentation of its work on May 2, the DGEEC pointed out what is quite obvious regarding statistical studies: "The objective of the survey was to generate information and data on economic, scholastic, and domestic activities of children and adolescents within their social, demographic, and economic contexts. The goal is for the study to assist in drawing up policies and programs aimed at children and adolescents, above all in confronting child labor and especially dangerous child labor."

On July 10, when a journalist with the Asunción daily La Nación asked the coordinator of Cartes' working teams for his opinion of the DGEEC’s work, he received a worrisome response, "It is not part of our consultation material."

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