

Hope for Haiti's restavecs: South-South cooperation against child labour

About 600 miles off coast Florida and only a two hour plane ride from Miami, Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere where an estimated 300,000 children work as child labourers. Last month, the Brazilian government announced a programme to fight child labour in Haiti to be coordinated by the ILO's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (ILO-IPEC). The programme is part of a major new initiative to promote South-South cooperation in the fight against child labour worldwide.

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PORT-AU-PRINCE (ILO Online) – “My day began at 5.30 in the morning and ended when the last adult went to sleep...I worked seven days a week with no pay and no time to play...for any minor infraction, such as not answering quickly enough when my name was called, I was beaten without mercy”, remembers Jean-Robert Cadet, a former domestic child worker from Haiti in a public lecture held at the ILO in 2002.

Mr. Cadet was a restavec in Haiti in the 1960s and he luckily escaped from domestic servitude when his employers moved to the United States.

The literal translation of the Creole word restavec means "to stay with." For generations in Haiti, sending children to work in the household of a richer family has been a last and desperate solution for poor families. Unable to feed or educate their children, parents send them to stay with and work for other families in exchange for the promise of a better life.

When Mr. Cadet visited his home country 40 years later as the founder of the Restavec Children's Foundation that helps former slave children in the streets of Port-au Prince he still saw children in tattered clothes “hand in hand with children in bright uniforms crossing the street. The ones in tattered clothes are restavec who must return to their duties as domestic slaves after escorting their counterparts to school”.

Many of today's estimated 300,000 child labourers in Haiti work in domestic service. These restavec children are unpaid, undocumented, and unprotected. They are often physically, emotionally, and sexually abused. They are denied education and suffer many physical illnesses due to neglect.

Girls and boys start working at an early age in order to contribute to the households. Children and adolescents accompany their parents to the workplace, work with their siblings and on their own. Schools available are often in ruinous state, lacking of basic infrastructure need, from roofing to latrines. But things are also moving since Mr. Cadet visited the ILO in 2002. The ILO's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (ILO-IPEC) has been involved in the prevention and eradication of child labour, including child domestic work, in Haiti since 1999.

“ILO-IPEC's efforts have brought to public discussion the need to end the worst forms of child labour in the country, including child domestic work. And by ratifying ILO Convention 182 on the worst forms of child labour in July 2007, the Haitian government committed itself to prevent and eliminate the worst forms of child labour”, says Geir Myrstad, ILO-IPEC head of section, Programme Support, Reporting and Resource Planning.

Last December, the Brazilian government announced a new project coordinated by ILO-IPEC to assist the Haitian government as well as its workers' and employers' organizations in making tangible progress in the effective abolition of child labour.

“The project will carry out direct interventions to insert 200 working girls and boys into primary education to ensure they are not working as child domestic servants or at other kinds of hazardous informal activities. Special attention will be paid during all phases of the project to the special circumstances of girls as they are three times more likely to become a restavec than a boy”, explains Myrstad.

The project will support the rehabilitation of classrooms and also provide school materials and equipment to improve children's access to decent schooling. Furthermore, where possible, it will provide training and/or income generating alternatives to parents.

South-South cooperation against child labour

What's more, the strategy for the project is based on South-South cooperation principles, largely targeted at sharing good practices and lessons learned, as well as transferring and adapting successful experiences

developed by the government and civil society in Brazil in combating child labour, which have been implemented in the country with ILO-IPEC support.

Over the last decades, Brazil has gained considerable experience and consolidated good practices in the fight against child labour with a strong potential to be shared with other countries. Brazilian experts are expected to carry out field missions to Haiti for training, capacity building, and planning processes. The fact that Brazil leads the UN peace-keeping mission in Haiti provides a comparative advantage and an already ongoing peace/security and humanitarian presence.

Brazil has initiated its South-South cooperation programmes in the field of child labour in 2006, by financing a project on combating the Worst Forms of Child Labour in Portuguese Speaking Countries in Africa. With this project, Brazil became the first developing country to make funds available for the ILO-IPEC technical cooperation programmes.

Last December, Brazil and the ILO launched a new worldwide initiative to promote specific South-South technical cooperation projects and activities that contribute effectively to the prevention and elimination of child labour, particularly in its worst forms.

The objective of the ILO-Brazil initiative is to create a forum for South-South cooperation in the fight against child labour, including regional groups such as the Andean Pact, MERCOSUR, CPLP, and India-Brazil-South Africa Trilateral (IBSA) to foster horizontal cooperation between countries sharing successful experiences in the fight against child labour.