

From child labourer to child advocate: How Rodel succeeded in leaving the mineshaft

More than half (53 per cent) of the 215 million child labourers worldwide do hazardous work. While their number is increasing among older children, aged 15-17, progress is being made for younger children, aged 5-14, says the latest ILO report on child labour "Children in Hazardous Work". Some of them succeed in leaving the dark tunnel of a mineshaft or other dangerous workplaces, as the example of Rodel from the Philippines shows.

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MANILA (ILO Online) – As the school year ends and millions of children in the Philippines look forward to their summer vacation, there are hundreds of thousands who will get no holiday – child labourers. These children – who are mostly from rural areas - have no choice but to keep working and earning to help their families, even if their workplaces are hazardous.

Rodel Morcozo used to be one of them. Every day, Rodel had to bend his back to carry a heavy wooden pan with sand and gold. His skin was sun-burned while his tiny hands were soaked in mercury-laden muddy water. He had to work for 8-12 hours to earn a maximum of US\$1-2 a day, searching for gold or selling cigarettes and candies around a small-scale gold mining site.

"I was so tired, so weak since I had to work at night and go to school the next day. At some point, I had to work full time, when my parents could not afford to send me to school anymore," recalls Rodel.

One day, the ten-year old boy suffered a 100-200 feet fall because his father had blasted the tunnel with dynamite. "I had to run and get out but it was too dark," remembers Rodel, who worked in the mines of Bicol in the Camarines Norte province, one of the poorest regions in the Philippines. "I felt so miserable, and then I realised that I did not like what I was doing. I just wanted to go back to school."

Mines such as this one produce a fifth of the world's gold by UN estimates. They also produce gems for our jewellery and rare minerals for our cell phones. They are generally remote and unofficial but often highly organized. The doubling of world-market gold prices in recent years has made such gold prospecting all the more attractive to the abject poor and all the more dangerous.

Not unexpectedly, a sizeable percentage of the workers drawn to these gold, gem, mineral mines and stone quarries are children – both girls and boys.

But times are changing

However, as the new ILO report on hazardous child labour shows, times are changing and there is plenty that can be done against hazardous child labour.

Rodel who is 25 years old now, is again a good example. Through the ILO, a scholarship from Senator Loren Legarda helped him to finish his education.

"The scholarship gave me a chance to leave the dark tunnel," Rodel said during a press conference organized by the ILO last April in Manila. "Now I can see the fulfilment of my dream to find a decent job and help other children to get out of child labour."

Rodel became a child advocate at an ILO summer youth camp ten years ago. "My number one aim was to end child labour in the Philippines. I joined the first ever Global March against Child Labour. I marched on the streets holding a banner on Let's Work Together against Child Labour," Rodel explains.

Today, he is working for Senator Legarda in Manila, but he still regularly goes back to his hometown to speak out against child labour. He also sends his younger siblings to school, to help keep them out of child labour.

"If we allow children to work, they will remain uneducated. If child labourers do not get a chance to return to school, then nothing will happen to this country because they are considered the future of this nation," Rodel says.

There are at least 2.4 million Filipino children going through what Rodel experienced 15 years ago, says Lawrence Jeff Johnson, Director of the ILO Country Office for the Philippines, citing April 2010 working children data from the Philippine Labor Force Survey.

More than 18,000 children, mostly aged 10 to 14 years old, work in the mining and quarrying industries in the Philippines, according to data of the National Office of Statistics. The dropout rate for elementary students is still increasing – from an average of 5.99 per cent in 2007-2008 to 6.28 per cent in 2009-2010.

The most cited reasons for children dropping out of school are a loss of interest in education and not enough money in the household to support their education. "Poor families have no choice but to send their children to work in order to survive. Children that combine work with school often drop out, as child labour interferes with their learning. And children who have poor access to education often work to meet immediate family needs, and for lack of a better alternative," Johnson explains.

Johnson and others also point out that the global economic crisis had an impact on efforts to reduce poverty globally, increasing vulnerable employment.

"The root cause is still poverty," says Lourdes Trasmonte, Undersecretary for Labor Standards and Social Protection of the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) in the Philippines. "Children are brought in to work because that is the only asset the family has."

With the support of DOLE through the Philippine Program Against Child Labor, the ILO's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), seeks to remove children from hazardous work by providing their parents with the opportunity to earn and support other members of the family with alternative sources of income.

"If the parents have work and social services are accessible to them, the children can be removed from child labour", Lourdes Trasmonte says.

According to the new ILO report on hazardous work, to focus solely on extricating a young child from an abusive work situation or shielding a working youth from workplace dangers, is a short-sighted strategy.

"By seeing child labour in a larger life-cycle context, it is obvious that strategies to combat child labour must be closely linked to efforts at both ends of childhood: on the one end, to give young children a good start in life, and on the other end to give older children and their parents a chance to get decent work," concludes IPEC Director Constance Thomas.