

World Day against Child Labour, 12 June 2008

Education: the right response to child labour

“Every child counts...Over the last year, we have rescued more than 5,000 children from the streets of Hyderabad to enable them to regain their lost childhood”, says Leyla Tegmo-Reddy, ILO Director in New Delhi, India. The ILO’s International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) has been striving to rescue and rehabilitate migrant working children in the age group of 5 to 14 years, saving them from being trafficked or from getting involved in drugs and crime. ILO Online spoke with the ILO Director in New Delhi and Rani Kumudini who is the Project Manager in Hyderabad.

HYDERABAD, India – Keeping a sharp lookout around public places such as railway and bus stations has become a major task of the ILO project partners in this joint effort to identify newly-arrived unaccompanied children.

Fourteen-year old Romesh is one of the beneficiaries of the Andhra Pradesh State Based Project for the Elimination of Child Labour (ILO/IPEC-GOAP Project). He left his single mother and three younger sisters back in Bihar and travelled clandestinely for hundreds of miles by train to search for a new future in Hyderabad, one of the major cyber centres of India.

On arrival, he soon realized that the streets were not paved with gold and that making a living was not easy. He joined a group of ragpickers, starting work at the crack of dawn and toiling through until late evening, only to earn a mere Rs. 10 a day (US\$0.25).

Public places are the main points of entry for children who have left their homes in the villages to earn a livelihood in the big urban complexes. Many have had traumatic backgrounds due to domestic violence, or difficult family situations and abject poverty, and once here they are frequently picked up by unscrupulous gangs who recruit them into prostitution, begging, or other hazardous activities.

For those children who do find their way on to the streets, enforcement drives are undertaken to raise public awareness and rescue children from vulnerable situations.

The ILO, in one component of this project, has developed a support system with the railway unions, street educators from non governmental organizations (NGOs), and government law enforcement agencies to create child help-desks. Children living on the streets are approached by the educators, offered support and referred to help desks.

Many are referred to transit homes which provide temporary shelter, emotional support and psychological counselling for a few weeks. Children are given advice on how to protect themselves against a number of health hazards and other forms of exploitation. Insofar as possible, the first option is to try to reunite them with their parents, failing which they are admitted to bridge (transitional) schools or vocational training centres.

The multi-disciplinary teams under the project rescued Romesh during one of their daily enforcement drives. The street educators in the team befriended him and offered him a place in a transit home. During the first month, he received clinical counselling and felt relieved to be protected from the harsh physical environment. He accepted the rehabilitation process which took him to Boystown vocational school, with which the ILO collaborates closely. Romesh was rescued in July 2006 and by August he had started his training at Boystown, a vocational training provider. By end of July 2007, Romesh was placed in a prestigious automobile company as a skilled worker, earning around US\$ 100 a month.

Every child counts...

There are hundreds of such cases which have been resolved, together with the government, social partners and local NGOs, with support from ILO projects. In two years the three transit homes

under the project counselled 5,506 children, reunited many of them with their families and admitted some of them to transitional schools or into vocational training.

Community contact meetings in the slum areas and awareness-raising campaigns against domestic child labour in resident welfare associations across the city have led to the rescue of a large number of girl children, the main victims of domestic child labour.

Nine-year old Shanti was pulled out of school by her parents and sent to Hyderabad to work as domestic help in a middle-class home. She worked gruelling hours cooking, mopping, cleaning, and washing clothes. She was a virtual prisoner in the house and when the family members left for work, Shanti was left alone, locked inside.

As a direct result of awareness raising programmes, the apartment-owners' association raised the alarm and the enforcement team came to rescue her. When this information was leaked to the employing family, they hid Shanti in a neighbour's apartment. After a few hours of searching, the street educators were able to locate the traumatized child. She had been obviously mistreated because they found bruises on her body and she was suffering from malnutrition.

Shanti was brought to the girls' transit home in August 2006 where she underwent counselling and received psychological and emotional support from the caretaker. Once the authorities were able to obtain information on her parents, they were contacted and counselled on their child's welfare and well-being and the consequences of violations of Child Labour Regulation and Prevention Act, 1986.

Shanti was admitted to a transition school in September 2006 and mainstreamed into the regular school in June 2007. A criminal case was booked against the family who had employed the child and they had to pay compensation under the Act.

At any given time, there are over 100 children in each of the transit centres. The enforcement teams rescue about 15 children each day from various parts of the city.

The child help-desks at the railway stations are monitored by railway union workers who have been sensitized to deal with the young migrant children entering the city alone or those who are roaming the streets. The children are then referred to the NGOs collaborating in the project.

The project was implemented through the child labour agency of the government. The multi-disciplinary teams functioning under the agency brought their specialized experience to the development of the urban model which has also been replicated by the government in three other cities, Warangal, Guntur, Tirupathi, saving hundreds of children from being trafficked or abused.

Children on the streets or in hazardous work lose their childhood in the day-to-day struggle for survival and existence. They are forced to live the life of premature adulthood, striving to make some money to send back home. "Working with children living on streets is very challenging. When you are able to give them back their childhood and provide a better future, it is extremely rewarding", says Rani Kumudini, ILO/IPEC Project Manager, Hyderabad.

"The stories of Romesh and Shanti, two of over 122 million children engaged in child labour in Asia and the Pacific, prove that child labour is a symptom of inadequate or unbalanced socio-economic development, deficiencies in relevance and delivery of the education and social protection systems. As such we see that child labour cannot be effectively addressed in isolation from the broader context of development, education, poverty reduction, and enforcement. The Government of India is developing, with support from the ILO, Convergence-based Child Labour Models that aim to bring together a variety of education, child labour and social protection programmes for common impact at the family level. This is expected to go a long way in addressing the child labour problems of the type highlighted here".

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