



FULL STORY

Coming to grips with child labour

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EXPRESS EDITORIAL

The Ministry of Labour co-sponsored a march involving young children around the Queen's Park Savannah in Port of Spain on Monday, as part of its activities marking World Day Against Child Labour. Minister Danny Montano issued a statement in which he drew attention to the issue as it is known to exist in the soon-to-be-abandoned Beetham Landfill site, on the entrance into Port of Spain along the Beetham Highway.

Apart from this obvious and well documented case, a major question remains as to how pervasive the scourge of child labour is in Trinidad and Tobago. This is perhaps understandable given the fact that a National Steering Committee established in 2004, for the Prevention and Elimination of Child Labour in Trinidad and Tobago has not yet wrapped its hands fully around this matter.

Highlighting the committee's mandate, the Minister said it involved developing a national approach to combating this phenomenon locally. Much discussion has taken place in recent years on the increasing observation of school-age children being involved in various activities which appear to keep them out of school, which is where essentially they ought to be.

That the Ministry has sought to place significant emphasis on the existence of this development in our midst suggests, however, that it may be more prevalent than is obvious. In his statement, the Minister has noted what he said were "significant achievements made by Latin America and the Caribbean" in the worldwide decrease in what the experts refer to as the worst forms of child labour. This is a point noted at this year's annual meeting of the International Labour Organisation, now in session in Geneva, where the latest international report on child labour is among the major items for general discussion.

In that report, the ILO has noted that the significant progress being made on this front includes the positive developments in such countries as Brazil, Tanzania and Turkey. In Trinidad and Tobago, as indeed in other countries around the world, there are arguments as to what properly constitutes child labour, not necessarily in its worst forms, but in ways, nevertheless, that tend to rob children of their childhood. And this includes the right to decent education.

Some perspectives are premised on the continuing necessity for even young children to be involved in helping to buttress family incomes. This speaks to a larger issue about vulnerability among sections of the population. It also opens the window to those families in which some members continue to be "at risk". Both of these descriptions, it is widely acknowledged, are increasing and at the same time the society in general is deemed to be doing ever better on the macro-economic account.

"We need to protect our children from this fate," Minister Montano said in his statement on the issue of child labour, adding that as a society we should continue to work towards ending it and, in so doing, invest in a more promising future for us all.

Those situations which conspire to create the conditions that force young children to prematurely become breadwinners have to be aggressively addressed, as indeed the national steering committee sets about putting in place its policy on the prevention of child labour in this country.