



FULL STORY

Programme launched to combat worst forms of child labour -US labour department to provide US\$2M grant

By Miranda La Rose

Thursday, February 2nd 2006

A United States Department of Labour US\$2 million grant is being used to fund Educare Guyana, an initial three-and-a-half-year remedial education programme to combat the worst forms of child labour (WFCL) in Guyana.

Partners of the Americas in conjunction with the National Steering Committee on Child Labour will execute the programme. It stems from several studies conducted by the University of Guyana in 2003 and the Bureau of Statistics over the past three years at both the national and regional levels, the steering committee's chairperson, First Lady Varshnie Jagdeo said at the launching of Educare Guyana at the Ocean View Hotel at Lilliendaal yesterday.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) defines the worst forms of child labour as children exploited through slavery and exposed to trafficking in persons; activities including armed conflict, children engaged in illicit and illegal activity, such as commercial sex, which includes pornography and prostitution; children exposed to extremely hazardous work, including exposure to dangerous machinery, chemicals, exploitive working conditions such as sweat shops in garment factories; and work that results in significant loss of school attendance time (up to 33% of lost contact time - eight days in any 20-day period).

Minister of Labour, Human Services and Social Security, Dr Dale Bisnauth, who launched the Educare programme said that nationally there are legal frameworks to deal with interventions on all forms of child labour.

He noted the amendment to legislation that sets the minimum age for work at 15 years, which also makes it possible to penalise parents for involving their child or children in child labour.

Bisnauth also noted that at present the Ministry of Labour was training its inspectors to detect infringements of the labour laws; and currently the Labour Ministry and the Ministry of Education were monitoring truancy.

He noted, too, that another intervention of the government was the establishment of the National Steering Committee on Child Labour to recommend policies and programmes that would eliminate child labour in all its forms.

Mrs Jagdeo said that based on the findings of one rapid study conducted at Parika, it was found that a significant portion of the school population was engaged in various forms of WFCL in the area.

A skills training programme has been introduced, involving some 70 children between the ages of 11 to 14 years with the objective of providing them with a variety of skills that would enable them to become numerate and literate, build their self-esteem and lay the foundation for them to continue higher education. The Varqa Foundation is managing the skills training project, which teaches motor mechanics, cookery, carpentry and basic numeracy and literacy skills.

Parika is seen as an industrial centre and a gateway to the interior and to other parts of Guyana and as such was chosen for the rapid survey.

She said the studies revealed what many Guyanese did not know about child labour or took it for granted.

This includes begging on the streets, selling at markets, working as porters or stevedores at the wharves, cleaning tables in beer gardens and restaurants, and working in farms to supplement the family income but at the same time putting their well-being at risk.

She added that chores done at home should not be confused with child labour, as child labour also tended to force children prematurely to contribute economically to the home.

The funds being provided by the US Department of Labour, she said, would assist in the development of the skills training project at Parika for children and their parents who need to earn to ensure their children's welfare. One of the objectives would be to also work with parents to set up micro enterprises.

US Ambassador to Guyana, Roland Bullen said Educare Guyana, which represents a partnership and cooperation between the Guyana and US governments and non-governmental organizations, would raise awareness of child labour, engage policymakers about their important role in fashioning Guyana's response, and advance school attendance as an alternative to work.

He said child labour, even when not in its worst forms, might expose children to hazardous conditions and impede their effective development. As a global problem that

demands a worldwide response, he said that the ILO has estimated that more than 211 million children between the ages of five and 14 years work.

Most troubling, he said, was that the ILO has estimated that 171 million children work in hazardous conditions and an additional 8.4 million are involved in the worst forms of child labour.

The initial planning for the programme has sparked a positive dialogue among the many key stakeholders including government, schools, families, and civil society in the country. And he said that as the dialogue evolves, he trusted that parents, teachers, children, policymakers and concerned members of civil society, would stand together to ensure that Guyanese children are protected from hazardous forms of work and are educationally well-positioned to reach their full potential and contribute positively to the Guyanese society.

In brief remarks, Programme Director Ed Denham called for a national debate on child labour: what is and is not acceptable, how cultural norms and child labour may be viewed, what breeds child labour, whether poverty is part of the problem and how the problems involving child labour can be alleviated.

Denham, who previously worked on the Guyana Education Access Programme (GEAP) in Linden, said the next level would be to engage the policymakers at every level to reach agreement as to how the problems could be tackled.

He noted the need for national and regional NGOs and Regional Democratic Councils among others to develop programmes to combat child labour.

The programme, he said would concentrate on two distinct groups - those currently engaged in exploitative or worst forms of child labour and those who are at risk of becoming child labourers.

Denham said the project is also hoping to work with four regions on a school attendance programme and the first step is to create a database of the children who have dropped out of primary school in the last two to three years with the objective of re-enrolling them in the formal education system.

While there are laws in Guyana, which is a signatory to the ILO conventions dealing with the worst forms of child labour and the minimum age of waged workers, he said that it was important not to criminalise children and poor families.

He said if this were done there was a fear of the victims not participating in the programme.

He noted that while attendance in schools in some parts of Guyana might be good there were other areas such as in the hinterland where children and parents are challenged.
