

Belize

Government Programs and Policies to Eliminate the Worst Forms of Child Labor

On November 11, 2000, the Government of Belize announced the launch of a Program to Eliminate Child Labor (PETI) in the Northern District of Corozal, which is the country's primary sugar cane area.¹⁷¹ The project is being implemented by the National Organization for the Prevention of Child Abuse (NOPCA), and is co-sponsored by USAID and FUNPADEM, a regional organization promoting peace and democracy in Central America.¹⁷² PETI includes measures to rehabilitate working children and return them to school, and to gather information on social conditions contributing to child labor.¹⁷³ Before the program announcement, the Government had established a National Committee for Families and Children, including a subcommittee to specifically address child labor.¹⁷⁴ The Government of Belize is also conducting a national child labor survey, funded by USDOL with technical assistance from ILO-IPEC's SIMPOC, to collect qualitative and quantitative data on the nature and extent of child labor in the country to support effective interventions against child labor.¹⁷⁵

Since 1988, the government has had a National Apprenticeship Program, which provides young persons (between 14 and 18 years) who are no longer in school with work experience and a stipend.¹⁷⁶ Out of concern for high dropout rates and limited school access, the 1990s was declared

¹⁷¹ PETI is a 1-year pilot project that, according to Valdemar Castillo, Minister of Sugar Industry, Labor and Local Government, is intended to provide an information base from which all relevant organizations and individuals can work in order to adopt a coordinated approach to the elimination of child labor. PETI staff members are interviewing and surveying families in the Corozal District to collect information. *See* U.S. Embassy-Belize, unclassified telegram no. 122, January 2001 [hereinafter unclassified telegram 122]. *See also* U.S. Embassy—Belize, unclassified telegram no. 1245, November 2000 [hereinafter unclassified telegram 1245].

¹⁷² Unclassified telegrams 122 and 1245.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ The Committee includes relevant government personnel and representatives from UNICEF, the Pan-American Health Organization, the Belize Family Life Association, and the National Organization for the Prevention of Child Abuse. *See* U.S. Embassy—Belize, unclassified telegram no. 771, July 2000 [hereinafter unclassified telegram 771].

¹⁷⁵ Through SIMPOC, data will be collected and consolidated into a database on child labor. SIMPOC staff will support the Belize Central Statistical Office through capacity-building training to enable government officials to independently produce and analyze data in the future. In addition, the data being collected presently will be analyzed to determine priority target groups for future child labor programs. *See* USDOL-Funded IPEC Projects/Programs, *Technical Progress Report No. 2: Child Labour Survey and Development of Database on Child Labour in Belize*, Project No. CAM/99/05P/051 (Geneva, April-June 2001).

¹⁷⁶ Ramon Puck, "Belize Forced Child Labour Presentation," paper presented at the Americas Regional Forced Child Labour Symposium, Panama, June 25-27, 2001 [hereinafter Puck, "Belize Forced Child Labour"], as found in U.S. Embassy official electronic correspondence to USDOL official, September 24, 2001.

an “Education For All” decade in Belize, and with the support of the World Bank and a number of foreign assistance agencies, the government has worked to improve universal access to primary school as well as the quality of the educational system.¹⁷⁷

Incidence and Nature of Child Labor

In 1999, the ILO estimated that 1.97 percent of children between the ages of 10 and 14 in Belize were working.¹⁷⁸ In rural regions, children are found working on family plots and businesses after school, on weekends, and during vacations¹⁷⁹ and are involved in the citrus, banana, and sugar industries as field workers.¹⁸⁰ In urban areas, children shine shoes, sell newspapers and other small items, and work in markets.¹⁸¹ Teenage girls, many of whom are migrants from neighboring Central American countries, are reported to work as domestic servants, and some are rumored to work as bar maids and prostitutes.¹⁸² There are also reports of child trafficking and trafficking for purposes of prostitution.¹⁸³

Education in Belize is compulsory between the ages of 5 to 14.¹⁸⁴ Education is free, but related expenses, such as uniforms, are a financial strain on poor families.¹⁸⁵ In 1994, the gross

¹⁷⁷ UNESCO, *The Education for All (EFA) EFA 2000 Assessment: Country Reports—Belize* [hereinafter *EFA 2000 Assessment*], at http://www.unesco.org/wef/countryreports/belize/rapport_2_3.htm.

¹⁷⁸ *World Development Indicators 2001* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2001) [hereinafter *World Development Indicators 2001*] [CD-ROM].

¹⁷⁹ It is common for children to work on family plots or sell family produce after school or on the weekends. Different ethnic communities take varied approaches to child labor. The agrarian-based Mennonite community, for example, shifted its school year so that an extended school vacation would coincide with the harvest. Similarly, the Mayan community has attempted to balance agricultural work and school for its youth. Within the ethnic Chinese immigrant population, children routinely help in family shops and restaurants. According to Belizean union leaders, these are not examples of exploitation but rather acceptable aspects of child work tied to the family structure. See unclassified telegram no. 771.

¹⁸⁰ Immigrant and migrant children are particularly susceptible to work in the rural agricultural sector. In the past few years, the northern Commercial Free Zone, which caters to cross-border Mexican trade, has developed a booming commercial sector, and children work in trading, sugar cane harvesting, transportation, and other sectors. See Puck, “Belize Forced Child Labour,” at 5. In addition, the Corozol District is cited as a region with particularly high levels of child labor, including cane farming. See unclassified telegram 122. See also UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, *Consideration of Reports Submitted by States Parties Under Article 44 of the Convention: Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, Belize*, CRC/C/15/Add.99, May 10, 1999.

¹⁸¹ No figures are available for the number of children working in the informal sector. See unclassified telegram 771.

¹⁸² Unclassified telegram 771.

¹⁸³ *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2000—Belize* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, 2001) [hereinafter *Country Reports 2000*], Sections 6c, 6f, at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrprt/2000/wha/index.cfm?docid=708>.

¹⁸⁴ After children finish their primary education, they may enter a secondary school, the government-run apprenticeship program, or a vocational institution. However, these programs have room for only about

primary enrollment rate was 121 percent, and the net primary enrollment rate was 98.9 percent.¹⁸⁶ Primary school attendance rates are unavailable for Belize. While enrollment rates indicate a level of commitment to education, they do not always reflect children's participation in school.¹⁸⁷

Child Labor Laws and Enforcement

The Labor Law sets the minimum age for employment at 12 years of age, and children between the ages of 12 to 14 may only participate in light work after school hours.¹⁸⁸ The Labor Law applies to all employment in the formal sector, but not to self-employment or employment by family members.¹⁸⁹ The minimum age for employment near hazardous machinery is 17 years.¹⁹⁰ In 1998, Belize passed the Family and Children's Act, which consolidated previous legislation regarding the protection of children in the formal sector. According to the Act, children (defined as persons below 18 years of age) are prohibited from employment in activities that may be detrimental to their health, education, or mental, physical, or moral development.¹⁹¹ The Constitution prohibits forced or bonded labor.¹⁹² Trafficking in persons is not specifically illegal, but prostitution is prohibited in Belize.¹⁹³ Belize ratified both ILO Convention 138 and ILO Convention 182 on March 6, 2000.¹⁹⁴

half of the children finishing primary school, and competition for spaces in secondary school is intense. See *EFA 2000 Assessment* and *Country Reports 2000* at Section 5.

¹⁸⁵ *Country Reports 2000* at Section 5.

¹⁸⁶ *World Development Indicators 2001*.

¹⁸⁷ For a more detailed discussion on the relationship between education statistics and work, see *Introduction* to this report.

¹⁸⁸ According to a State Department official, children under age 14 are not known to be working in industry jobs or as wage earners; instead, they tend to be active on family farms. See *Laws of Belize - Labour Act*, Chapter 234, Section 169, as cited in Dorothy Rozga, Liaison Officer, UNICEF-Belize, letter to Sonia Rosen, ICLP official, May 1995 [letter on file]. See also *Country Reports 2000* at Section 6d.

¹⁸⁹ Unclassified telegram 771.

¹⁹⁰ Inspectors from the Departments of Labor and Education enforce this regulation. See *Country Reports 2000* at Section 6d.

¹⁹¹ *Official Gazette, Acts* (BLZ-1998-L-50986 Families and Children Act, 1998, No. 17 of 1998), 91-173, as cited in NATLEX database: Belize at <http://natlex.ilo.org/natlexnewfaceE.htm>.

¹⁹² Constitution of Belize, 1981, Article 8(2), at <http://www.georgetown.edu/LatAmerPolitical/Constitutions/Belize/belize.html> on 10/16/01.

¹⁹³ The Ministry of Human Development, Women and Civil Society, the police department, and the Ministry of National Security and Immigration investigate cases involving trafficking of children. Incidents of trafficking in children for the purpose of prostitution are infrequent. See *Country Reports 2000* at Section 6d. See also Government of Belize, Ministry of Human Development, Women and Civil Society, *The Complicated Truth About Prostitution*, at http://www.belize.gov.bz/cabinet/d_balderamos_garcia/truth.html

¹⁹⁴ ILOLEX database: Belize at <http://ilolex.ilo.ch:1567/english/>.

NOTE: Hard copies of all Web citations are on file.