

Editorial: No child wonderland

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Child labor exploits the youngest and most vulnerable members of society. A June 23-25 three-part special report of Sun.Star Cebu brings to the surface a social problem that remains largely invisible except to its victims. (Sun.Star file photo)

It would not be an exaggeration to speculate that all Filipinos tag the year 2016 with significance. Next year, voters will choose the country's next president.

Unknown to many, 2016 is also the “global deadline for ending the worst forms of child labor,” reported Cherry Ann T. Lim in the first part of Sun.Star Cebu's June 23-25 three-part special report, “Breaking child labor”. Child work is legally allowed; what's not is child labor, defined as “any work performed by a child that subjects him to exploitation or is harmful to his health and safety or physical, mental or psychosocial development”.

Stamping out a problem becomes a problem when one cannot even see the problem. In “Invisible workers,” Lim reported that the government's estimation of 2.1 million Filipino child laborers is off the mark. Those stakeholders cannot monitor, they cannot assist. The invisible ones include children involved in commercial sexual exploitation, admitted the Department of Labor and Employment (Dole).

Back to school

Cebu is part of Central Visayas, which is the sixth region out of 17 regions with the highest number of child laborers, according to the 2011 Survey on Children of the National Statistics Office and the International Labor Organization. In “Is enrollment a guarantee against child labor?,” published on June 23, Lim reported that aside from assisting poor parents in their

livelihood, stakeholders give incentives to parents for keeping their children in school. In Barangay Adlaon, government and non-government stakeholders went to the fields to bring back child farm laborers and tutored slow learners. Adlaon was chosen by the Cebu City Government as its most child-friendly barangay in 2014.

Communal vision

Education is not only crucial for making children and their parents aware of education's role in their welfare. The entire community must change its mindset about child labor. In "Beyond the fields," the second part of the special report that was published on June 24, the NGO World Vision Development Foundation Inc. and local government partners focus their advocacy on families and communal institutions, such as Community Watch Groups and the Barangay Councils for the Protection of Children.

In Barangay Caputatan Norte in Medellin, the Barangay Children's Association (BCA) has members and officers that are child beneficiaries of the World Vision program, ABK3 Leap project. In their teens, the BCA officers are also "little teachers" who voluntarily give "catch-up sessions" on English and Math to children in the sitios and speak out against child labor. The ABK3 project also encourages families to save through Community Managed Savings and Credit Associations (Comsca).

Through this holistic approach, the World Vision and its partners are whittling down the most exploitative and hazardous forms of child labor. The 2011 Survey on Children locates 55 percent of child laborers in farms, exposed to chemicals, sharp tools, and heavy loads.

Helping little helpers

Invisible laborers are only half of the problem of child labor; the other half, their employers, is also invisible. That explains why there are few cases filed under Republic Act (RA) 9231 and no conviction yet in the country.

In "Boss-busting blues," the last part of the special report published on June 25, certain forms of child labor, like agriculture and pyrotechnic production, have parents involving their children to hasten the work or meet quotas. The children are not paid. Thus, employers can shrug off any accountability to the "invisible" child laborers. Despite an aggressive inter-agency campaign against child traffickers, government resources have yet to assess all firms for their compliance with labor laws, which, among others, prohibit the hiring of child laborers.

Also challenging Philippine stakeholders in meeting the goal of reducing the worst forms of child labor by 75 percent in 2016 is the clash of education and labor policies and the poor prospects of children for future employment. In "Lack of foot soldiers, incentives," Barangay Duljo-Fatima officials were too busy with the 2012 elections to join Dole's Child Labor-Free Barangay Campaign. Such obstacles prevent the country from honoring its obligation to put children's welfare first.

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