

# WHERE HAVE ALL THE CHILDREN GONE?



Photo: Ronald Duncan

Child labour is still an important element in the economy of rural Colombia, generating over 40 percent of family income.

By ELSA RAMIREZ DE ALVAREZ

**P**ablo is 12. Like all children his age, he ought to be sitting on a school bench listening attentively while the teacher explains the mysteries of the alphabet. But Pablo, the younger son of poor Colombian peasants, has much too busy a schedule to be able to spend all day studying.

At sunrise, Pablo and his brothers and sisters hurriedly swallow a few mouthfuls of food and start earnestly into their chores. First they have to go down to the river to fetch water for the family. On the way back the boys fill their pockets with stones to be used as hunting weapons. Then they put out fishing lines so that the rest of the family will have a few small fish to eat. If they catch any big ones, they will hustle off to the market to earn the cash they need to replace the hooks.

The afternoon has to be spent hunting iguanas and quails with improvised sling-shots. While Pablo plucks the quails, his brother, Juan, ties up the female iguanas to force them to lay eggs. Then they have to

join the rest of the family in their hard labour in the fields—whether it be sowing, weeding, cultivating, harvesting, or storing. In the evening, before they collapse exhausted, they have to take care of their tools.

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In the middle of this kind of workday, which is enough to exhaust even an adult, little Pablo somehow finds the energy to spend a few hours listening to the lessons given by a teacher from the nearby village. Even if the family depends on Pablo's labour to survive, it still regards his education as essential.

Contrary to popular belief, neither farm work nor remoteness from the school significantly affects school attendance—during the first years of primary school. The change-over more often happens in adolescence when schoolchildren of 12, 13, or 14 enter the work force, dropping out of school to become day labourers. These are the conclusions reached by researchers from Xavierian University in Colombia, after a study of 2400 rural families, conducted with financial assistance from IDRC.

When data collected in interviews with heads of household were examined, it turned out that the rate of school attendance among rural children had increased perceptibly to 78 percent, despite the fact that their parents tended to delay registering them in school.

Although Colombia is categorized as a "developing country", its growth in the last 20 years has been tremendous. Per capita income increased almost 50 percent and a network of schools and health care services has spread to cover the whole country.

However, despite a government campaign to make education available to all children, it seems that those in the countryside are still at a disadvantage. It is in the rural areas that one encounters the lowest rates of scholastic achievement and the highest failure, dropout, and repeat rates.

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What is most responsible for this failure—or at least what is usually pointed at as the culprit—is the work the children have to do. Of Colombia's eight million rural people, almost two million are children 7 to 14 years old. Of that number, a little over one million have to work, either for pay in the labour market or to help out with the family's work on the land.

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#### ONE THIRD OF MINIMUM WAGE

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Normally at adolescence, a child begins to earn money by working. Child day labourers are usually paid much less than the legal minimum wage, generally about one third, and have to do a hard day's work—8 to 11 hours of continuous and exhausting labour—especially at harvest time.

The data from the survey of heads of household show that 44 percent of family income is generated from child labour. Nearly 17 percent comes directly from work by children under 14.

According to the researchers, a number of factors other than family duties play a role in how much schooling children get. These include the size of the family, the child's rank among brothers and sisters, and the socio-economic and educational levels of the family.

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#### AVERAGE SCHOOLING IS THREE YEARS

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Although primary school is free and obligatory for children 7 and older, more than half of schoolage children in rural areas are not registered in school, the study notes. However, as age rises so does school attendance, reaching a peak of 78.4 percent at around age 11. Attendance begins to decline from the age of 14 on. On average, children spend three years in school, and in the eyes of their parents this is scholastic suc-



Photo: Ronald Duncan

*Rural schoolchildren have to split their time between school and family work.*

cess. Only 15 percent of those registered in primary school get as far as the fifth grade.

There is a direct connection between family wealth and how long children stay in school. The dropout rate is highest among

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the most underprivileged; the children of the well-to-do are least often away from school for any length of time.

The number of children in a family plays only a secondary role. The level of education of the parents, on the other hand, is a much more important determining factor. A child from a small family whose father had only minimal schooling is just as likely to be put to work, either for the family or for an employer, as a child from a large family. But the more education the head of household has had, regardless of the number of children in the family, the more likely it is that the children will go to school. It hardly needs to be said that the most favoured children are those from small families (less than

seven), where the head of the household can read and write and the family is at the middle or upper socioeconomic level.

According to the researchers, one also has to consider some of the cultural values typical of a rural environment. In the cities the individual is paramount, whereas in rural communities people are valued as members of a family unit and as potential workers. Both of these values take precedence over studying. The value of education lies only in its eventual contribution to work.

The data collected during the enquiry are likely to be useful to the Colombian Government in redefining its education policies for the rural environment and bringing them more in line with rural realities.

"Don't forget that under the law all children have to be registered in school when they reach the age of 7, which is exactly the age where their work begins to be really essential to their families," say the authors of the study. "Helping children to reconcile the tasks assigned to them with the requirements of school life is a permanent problem for families. It is a problem that more appropriate government policies might be able to help solve." □

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*Elsa Ramirez de Alvarez was a member of the Xavierian University research team which carried out the study on the education of rural children. Other team members were Hector Maldonado, Benjamin Alvarez, Orfa Libia Montoya, and Ronald Duncan.*