 Reading time: 7 min.

Child labour is not a reality of the past, unfortunately. There are still around 160 million children working in the world, and almost half of them are employed in various forms of hazardous work; some of them start working at the age of 5! This keeps them away from education and has serious negative consequences on their cognitive, volitional, emotional and social development, affecting their health and quality of life.

Before discussing child labour, it must be recognised that not all work performed by children can be classified as such. The involvement of children in certain family, school or social activities that do not hinder their schooling not only does not harm their health and development, but is beneficial. Such activities are part of integral education, help children learn skills that are very useful in their lives and prepare them for responsibilities.

The International Labour Organisation's definition of child labour is work activity that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity and is harmful to their physical and psychological development. These are jobs in the streets, in factories, in mines, with long working hours that many times deprive them of even the necessary rest. These are jobs that physically, mentally, socially or morally are risky or harmful to children, and that interfere with their schooling by depriving them of the opportunity to go to school, forcing them to leave school early or forcing them to try to reconcile school attendance with long hours of hard work. This definition of child labour is not shared by all countries. However, there are parameters that can define it: age, the difficulty or danger of the work, the number of hours worked, the conditions in which the work is performed and also the level of development of the country. As for age, it is commonly accepted that someone should under the age of 12 should not be working: international standards speak of a minimum age for admission to work, i.e. not less than the age at which one finishes compulsory schooling.

Recent statistics speak of around 160 million children working, and this figure in reality may be considerably higher, as it is difficult to calculate the actual situation. Concretely, one out of every 10 children in the world is a victim of child labour. And one must bear in mind that this statistic also includes degrading work – if one can call it work – such as forced recruitment in armed conflicts, slavery or sexual

exploitation. And it is worrying that the statistics show that there are 8 million more children working today than in 2016, and that this increase is mostly found in children between the ages of 5 and 11. International organisations warn that if the trend continues like this, the number of children employed in child labour could increase by 46 million in the coming years if adequate social protection measures are not taken.

The cause of child labour is mainly poverty, but so are lack of access to education and vulnerability in the case of orphaned or abandoned children.
This work in the vast majority of cases also entails physical consequences (chronic illnesses and diseases, mutilation), psychological consequences (from being abused, boys become abusers; after living in hostile and violent environments they themselves become hostile and violent, they develop low self-esteem and a lack of hope for the future) and social consequences (corruption of customs, alcohol, drugs, prostitution, offences).

This is not a new phenomenon, it also happened in Don Bosco's time when many boys, driven by poverty, sought expedients for survival in the big cities. The saint's response was to take them in, provide them with food and shelter, literacy, education, a worthy job and make those abandoned boys feel that they were part of a family.
Even today, these boys show great insecurity and distrust, they are malnourished and have serious emotional deficiencies. Today, too, we must seek them out, meet them, gradually offering them what they love in order to finally give them what they need: a home, an education, a family environment and in the future a worthy job. An attempt is made to get to know the particular situation of each one of them, to seek out family members in order to reintegrate the boys into the family when possible, to give them the opportunity to leave child labour, to socialise, to attend school, accompanying them so that they can realise their dream and life project thanks to education, and to become witnesses for other boys who find themselves in the same situation as them.

In 70 countries around the world, Salesians are active in the field of child labour. We present one of them, that of the Dominican Republic.

Canillitas was the name given to boys who were street vendors of newspapers, who due to poverty had trousers that remained short, leaving their *canillas*, or legs, uncovered. Similar to these, today's boys have to move their legs in the street

every day to earn a living, so the project for them was called *Canillitas con Don Bosco*.
It started as a Salesian oratory project, which then became a permanent activity: the *Canillitas con Don Bosco Centre* in Santo Domingo.

The project started on 8 December 1985 with three young people from the Salesian environment who dedicated themselves full-time, giving up their other work. They were clear about the four stages to follow: Search, Reception, Socialisation and Accompaniment. They started looking for young people on the streets and in the parks of Santo Domingo, contacting them, gaining their trust and establishing bonds of friendship. After two months, they invited them to spend a Sunday together and were surprised when more than 300 youngsters showed up at the meeting. It was a festive afternoon with games, music and snacks that prompted the children to spontaneously ask when they could return. The answer could only be: “next Sunday”.
Their numbers grew steadily, after they realised that the welcome, the spaces and the activities were just right for them. The camp organised in the summer was attended by about a hundred of the most faithful. Here the boys received a *canillitas* card in the camp, to give them an identity and a sense of belonging, also because many of them did not even know their date of birth.
With the growth in numbers of the boys came the growth in expenses. This led to the need to seek funding and implicitly to make the project known to these boys.

On 2 May 1986, the Salesian community presented the project to the Salesian superiors of the Salesian Province of the Antilles, a project that received unanimous support. Thus, the *Canillitas con Don Bosco* programme was officially launched and continues today after almost 38 years of existence. And it not only continues but has grown and expanded, being a model for other initiatives. This is how the *Canillitas con Laura Vicuña* programme was born, developed by the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians for working girls, the *Chiriperos con Don Bosco* programmes, to help young people who, to earn a living, did any little job (such as carrying water, throwing away rubbish, running errands…), and the *Apprentices with Don Bosco* programme, which takes care of minors who worked in the many machine shops, exploited by certain entrepreneurs. For the latter, the Salesians built a workshop with the help of some good industrialists and the First Lady of the Republic, so that they would be free to learn a trade and not be at the mercy of injustice.
As a result of this success, all these initiatives and others have merged into the

Network of Boys and Girls with Don Bosco, currently composed of 11 centres with programmes adapted to the age groups of the children, which have become an example in the fight against child labour in the Caribbean country. The following are part of this network: *Canillitas con Don Bosco, Chiriperos con Don Bosco, Aprendices con Don Bosco, Hogar Escuela de Niñas Doña Chucha, Hogar de Niñas Nuestra Señora de la Altagracia, Hogar Escuela Santo Domingo Savio, Quédate con Nosotros, Don Bosco Amigo, Amigos y Amigas de Domingo Savio, Mano a Mano con Don Bosco* and *Sur Joven.*
The network has carried out programmes focused on developing skills in children and young people, fostering their integral formation and growth. It has directly accompanied some 93,000 children, adolescents and young people, reached more than 70,000 families, and indirectly had more than 150,000 beneficiaries, working with an average of more than 2,500 beneficiaries each year. All this has been achieved on the basis of Don Bosco's Preventive System, which has led boys and young men to recover their self-esteem, to be protagonists of their own lives in order to become "upright citizens and good Christians".

This work has also had a socio-political impact. It contributed to the growth of social sensitivity towards these poor boys who did what they could to survive. The echo of the Salesian programme in the media of the Dominican Republic gave a group of *Canillitas* the opportunity to participate in a session of the country's National Congress and in the drafting of the Code of the System of Protection and Fundamental Rights of Children and Adolescents of the Dominican Republic (Law 136-03), promulgated on 7 August 2003.
Subsequently, several agreements were signed with the Professional Technical Training Institute, the National Council for Children and Adolescents, and the School of the Magistracy.
Thanks to the support of many businesspeople and civil society, partnerships and interrelationships were established with UNICEF, the International Labour Organisation, the national government, the Coalition of NGOs for Children of the Dominican Republic, and even made it to the Conference of the Americas at the White House in 2007, with a reception by President George Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

Salesian work has contributed to the reduction of child labour and the increase of education rates in the country. The Salesian missionary promoter, Fr Juan Linares, was named the Dominican Republic's Man of the Year in 2011, and for 10 years was a member of the board of directors of the National Council for Children and

Adolescents, the governing body of the National System for the Protection of the Rights of Children and Adolescents.

Recently, a documentary, *Canillitas*, was made to inform, denounce and raise awareness about child labour. The short documentary reflects the daily life of six child workers in the Dominican Republic, as well as the work of Salesian missionaries to change this reality, thanks to education.

We present the film's fact sheet.

Title: Canillitas
Year of production: 2022
Running time: 21 minutes
Genre: Documentary
Suitable audience: Everyone
Country: Spain
Director: Raúl de la Fuente, 2014 Goya Award for "Minerita" and in 2019 for "Un día más con vida"
Production: Kanaki Films
Versions and subtitles: Spanish, English, French, Italian, Portuguese, German and Polish

Online version:

(Article written with material sent by Missiones Salesianas in Madrid, Spain)