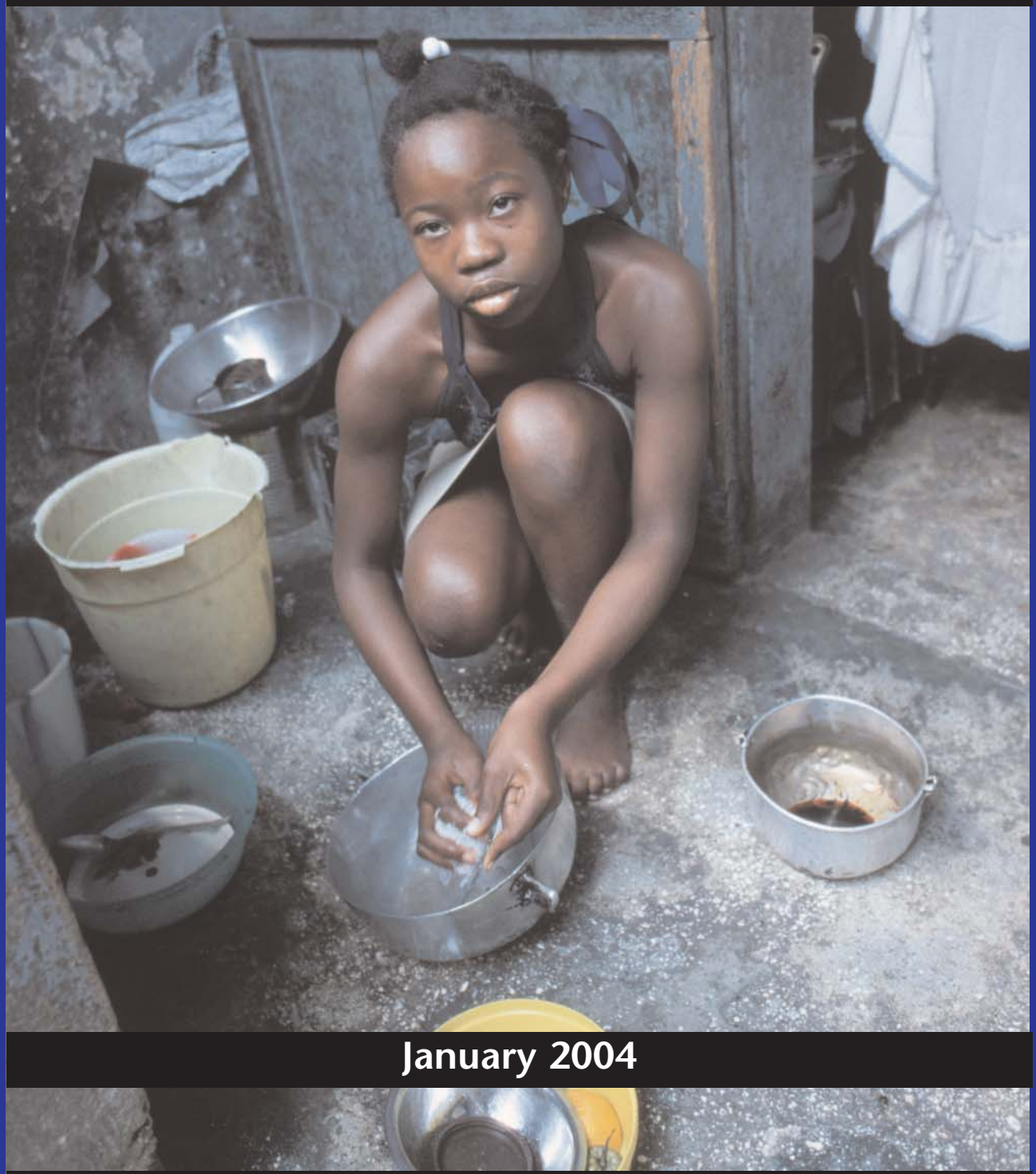
Haiti:
tarnished children



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INTERNATIONAL CONFEDERATION OF FREE TRADE UNIONS (ICFTU)

5, Bld. du Roi Albert II, bte 1B -1210 Brussels - Belgium

Tel.: +32 2 2240211
E-Mail: press@icftu.org
Web Site: http//www.icftu.org

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By Jacky Delorme, Journalist for the ICFTU

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Introduction

January 1st 2004 marked the bicentenary of the world's first black republic. It should have been a day of pride and celebration for the men and women of Haiti. It should have been a particularly unforgettable moment for Haiti's young people (40% of the population is under 15). Instead, it was a day like any other in this troubled country: marred by political violence and the suffering of many.

By the start of the New Year, anti-government demonstrations that had occurred week after week in the major cities across Haiti continued to draw large numbers of students. In fact, it is indeed students who constitute the main force of opposition. They are the most vocal body of opposition and have been the main targets of police repression and the brutal attacks waged by the chimères- the armed militia who are paid by the authorities and generally represent desperate youngsters recruited from the streets. In Gonaïves, where Haiti's Act of Independence was signed 200 years ago, violence once again brought the police face-to-face with members of the Cannibal Army; a gang of youths that had supported Aristide whilst exercising de facto rule over the city, until the assassination of their leader, Amiot Métayer, in September.

On 1 January 2004, just like every other day of the year, most of Haiti's children were suffering from hunger, illness, beatings, or simply a lack of affection. Few of them who would have heard the speech delivered by President Jean Bertrand Aristide that day, in which he listed all the social and economic achievements of recent years. But the reality is very different. Haiti is one of the poorest and most instable countries in the world, and the situation has been deteriorating even further over recent months. A United Nations report, published in 2003, compares the situation in Haiti to that of a country at war. As ever, it is the children who are subject to the greatest suffering. All given indicators on children them are cause for concern, for example those pertaining to infant mortality, literacy rate and malnutrition and so on.

The logical result is a high incidence of child labour in Haiti, and of the three categories examined, it was found that the worst forms of child labour, as identified by the core ILO Convention, are the most prevalent. The persistence or, as some would argue, the proliferation of child domestic labour is the main scourge. How can the descendents of people who were once enslaved accept the continued existence of a practice as intolerable as child domestic servitude? How can mothers abandon their children? Such questions are now at the heart of the debate on child labour in Haiti. The emergence of an international campaign to combat the exploitation of child labour, the organisation of numerous conferences, and the publication of articles, books and reports on the children, known as restaveks, have brought an extremely widespread practice affecting some 173 000 children into the public eye.

At the risk of making generalisations, a child in domestic service could be described as a boy or more commonly a girl under 18 years old placed by his or her parents, usually very poor and from the countryside, in the care of a slightly better off family in the city. This 'new' family accepts to take care of the child in exchange for domestic help. It is a practice that has formed a part of Haitian culture ever since the colonial era. It is seen as an opportunity for upward social mobility. But this is no longer the case today. Socio-economic changes and migration have led to the disintegration of old values and a weakening solidarity between members of the extended family. The response generally given to the two questions above is that the parents from Haiti's rural areas have few illusions regarding the fate of their children, but they live in such desperate circumstances that they see placing the child in domestic service as a preferable alternative. An organisation which assists children fleeing domestic service partially refutes this argument, and speaks of trafficking by intermediaries who trick the parents.

The street children, those who live, work and sleep on the street and those who work on the street but have a home to go to, form the second group of child labourers. They generally work as street vendors, shoe shiners, porters, beggars and prostitutes. Many have fled domestic service. Some of these street children end up becoming criminals. They often form part of gangs known as cartels or bases. It is from these gangs that the Lavalas (Aristide's party which translates as 'avalanche') regime recruits its henchmen, who are capable of fulfilling the most despicable assignments, including murder. The number of street children is rising sharply and currently lies at around 10 000 in Port-au-Prince.

The third category is composed of Haitian children or young men who migrate to the Dominican Republic. It would seem that there are trafficking operations exclusively targeting children who end up working as shoe shiners or beggars. The stronger amongst them often work as labourers in agriculture or construction. UNICEF and the IOM are currently attempting to gather information to support claims of trafficking. Without having to look very far, we managed to find many young people aged between 18 and 25 who live and work on the construction sites of Santo Domingo and maintained that it is not unusual to see young Haitians of under 15 years of age working as building labourers.

On the issue of the underlying reasons for child labour, the UNDP speaks of the informalisation of society at all levels. The formal economy is virtually non-existent (as is child labour in the factories). The majority of the population has to live by its wits. The state does not provide even the most basic social services. Education (mainly private) is poor. The courts do not function properly, laws such as those designed to protect children are not complied with, and those who employ children enjoy total impunity.

The authorities' staple response to any criticism of their lack of progress in combating the various forms of child labour is the lack of resources. They also denounce the freeze on international aid. But what they have been showing for several years is their inability to come up with even the first signs of a strategy or a global plan which at least aims to eliminate the most intolerable forms of child labour. Many observers, Haitians included, point to a terrible waste of financial and human resources. Others talk of inhumanity, and a deliberate aim to seize all power and all the privileges that go with it.

Children in domestic service

Children in domestic service, child domestic labour, timoun ki ret ak moun, timoun ka madann, ti domestik, restavek… These various designations drawn from the official language (French), or the country's vernacular (Creole), refer to a very widespread form of informal employment that is also, by far, Haiti's main source of child labour: the recruitment of child workers into domestic service by "host families". For the last twenty years, the Haitian authorities have officially recognised the practice of child domestic labour as a problem. 1984 saw the holding of the first national conference on this subject, followed by the adoption, in the same year, of a Labour Code integrating and regulating the situation of children in domestic service. But it is only in the last five to six years that the issue has truly come out in the open, partly as a result of the international campaign on the elimination of child labour, as well as the impact of a book released in 1998, which went on to become an international bestseller and has been translated into several languages: "Restavek: From Haitian Child Slave to Middle Class American". This autobiography by Jean-Robert Cadet is a denunciation: "Hundreds of thousands of children are enslaved by their host families. These children are known as restaveks (from "rester avec", in French, which literally translates as "stay with"). They must remain within earshot of the person they are bound to; as of the age of 4, they are made to sleep on rags under the kitchen table, they are beaten on a daily basis, they scrub the floor, fill and empty buckets of water and so on. They grow up to become shoeshine boys, delinquents or prostitutes."(1)

Similarly, Haitian Street Kids, Inc., a US NGO specialising in assistance to Haiti's street children and restaveks laments its estimates of "over 300,000 child slaves in Haiti, some as young as 3". The website run by this charity organisation (2) features a whole range of deeply moving photos and personal accounts. This gallery of portraits includes the photo of Dieusibon Délice, who is now 14 andis one of Haiti's most publicised citizens in the world. The tragic story of this child who has been the victim of the most gruesome forms of physical and psychological torture, including burns inflicted on his face and hand, has been given wide coverage by the international media, including Newsday, the Washington Post, Colors magazine, and a television documentary on French channel Antenne 2 (3).

The Haitian authorities, for their part, have been quite terse in their statements. We will later return to the stubbornness with which they attribute the persistence of this practice to the lack of resources, the country's great poverty, political instability (derived from the "irresponsibility" of the opposition) and the suspension of international aid. They have also been known to downplay the importance of this practice. This is highlighted by the following excerpt from a statement by Haiti's Social Affairs and Labour Minister at an ILO conference in 2002: "In our country, the main occupation children are involved in consists of small services provided to a host family who, in exchange for these services, provide them with lodging and food."(4)

Whilst charities seek to draw the attention of prospective donors and ministerial statements on the issue remain casual, one thing is clear: the lack of credible information on the reality for Haitian children working in domestic service - opens the way for all kinds of written or verbal statements on the subject. So much so that, apart from the odd private initiative taken by a few local or foreign NGOs providing direct assistance to the children, the only real progress made in the fight against this practice appears to be in the documentation of it. This may seem preposterous, but we are still at the stage in Haiti of formulating hypotheses on the causes of this practice.

A difficult subject to approach…

Following several postponements, a meeting was held in April 2003 aimed at examining the outcome of two studies carried out by Haitian and foreign consultants in 2001 and early 2002, commissioned by the Haitian Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, the UNDP, UNICEF, ILO/IPEC and Save the Children. Both looked into the roots of child domestic labour. A month later, the same venue hosted a conference on the "edification of juvenile domestic services in Haiti", which gave first lady Mildred Aristide the opportunity to present her own contribution with great pomp: a book on the origins of child domestic labour! It is hard to see this book as anything but a gross rehash of the two aforementioned studies and a opportunistic move to raise funds, which appears all the more misplaced in light of the repeated corruption charges currently levelled at the government.

In actual fact, any mention of slavery invariably leads to extremely heated statements in Haiti. The elite draws great pride from belonging to the country that was the first to abolish slavery (in 1804, that is, 50 years earlier than the United States). And yet, most of the elite is very hostile to the slightest mention of certain practices persisting which are similar to slavery, or even when a too frequent use is made of the adjective "slave". This clearly does not stop various Haitian organisations from using it. The National Coalition for Haitian Rights (NCHR) considers it "ironic that the restavek system, which in effect constitutes a form of human trafficking and slavery continues to exist in the very country where the first victorious slave uprising led to the creation of the first black republic". The issue becomes all the more delicate when foreigners are involved, particularly the French. For example, the documentary shown by French television channel Antenne 2 in early 2003 on the "Haitian child slaves" provoked angry reactions among many intellectuals and social workers. The former strongly condemned the sensationalist aspects of the documentary, while the latter regretted, above all, that it failed to show any of the preventive and follow-up actions, as limited as they may be, that have been implemented to fight against the practice. The social workers, at the same time, shared with us their satisfaction on seeing that the documentary at least provided an insight into their activities, and had pricked some consciences.

This incident had a considerable impact on our mission. Some of the interviewees were clearly reticent at the idea of once again talking to a journalist. Ahead of the programme completion in late 2003, the previous head of IPEC-Haiti was equally reserved in her analysis, arguing the difficulty of working together with the authorities on this "highly sensitive" issue, a problem intensified by a strong sense of national pride. Undoubtedly, an international tripartite organisation faces great difficulties in working in a country where there is no social dialogue, where it is probably complex to raise awareness among hard up employers' and workers' organisations on the fate of children working in domestic service; that the state is often the only social partner, and that too in the absence of any political framework or planning. Therefore, there are few prospects for any real progress.

Child domestic labour: facts and figures

In Haiti as in many developing countries, there is or rather there used to be a tradition of poor families, generally from rural areas, placing their children in the care of a member of the family, relatives, or even unknown persons in the city, who agreed to take on responsibility for the children, sending them to school or enabling them to learn a trade, often in exchange for their participation in domestic work. Many adults view this practice favourably. On numerous occasions, we have met with African businessmen and intellectuals (including trade unionists) who themselves have had such an upbringing, and consider to have largely benefited from this system. But this is not the issue being raised here. If anything, the cases addressed in this document constitute a serious departure from past practices, as has been witnessed in West Africa. Indeed, this form of placement based on solidarity and trust is disappearing globally as a result of the socio-economic changes, migration and, in more generally speaking, a weakening societal structure in developing countries.

At the risk of generalising, a child in domestic service could be described as a boy or more often a girl under 18 years old placed by his or her parents, usually very poor and from the countryside, in the care of a slightly better off family in the city, who accepts to take care of the child in exchange for domestic help. The placement does not entail any financial transaction and the work is not paid. Acceptance by the host family implies that they will provide the child with food, clothes and shelter, and in some cases schooling. By doing so, the parents hope to secure a better future for the child; even though they are not entirely unaware of the living conditions he or she will endure. The child has the lowest status in the host family, with no right other than keeping quiet and obeying. The head of the household subject the child to physical or psychological ill treatment. Girls suffer even greater problems. It is not uncommon for girls in domestic service to be "offered" for the sexual amusement of the sons and men of the family. In short, children in domestic service are often not even considered as human beings in their own right.

The most serious study into the extent of this practice was the Norwegian study carried out in 2001, as mentioned earlier. Its findings were based on an extensive survey (7,812 households) carried out by the Haitian Institute of Statistics and Information Technology with the help of outside funding. Three criteria were identified as constituting child domestic labour: the separation of children from their parents, children subjected to heavy workloads, and children who have not completed their schooling or are behind in their schooling. Based on these criteria, the study estimates the number of children working in domestic service to be 173,000, in other words 8.2% of the child population from the ages of 5 to 17 years. (6) Although this figure is lower than the estimates generally presented in recent years, it goes a long way towards highlighting that child domestic labour is a significant social reality in Haitian society. Practically one child in ten works as a domestic servant, which means that almost everyone is concerned by this practice; either because they belong to such a child's family, perhaps to a host family, or because they are acquainted with such families. In other cases, they may be orhave been a child domestic. To quote the words of a carer in charge of a children's home, "It ends up seeming normal, we get used to it. It is almost a part of our culture." The study provides various other important figures: 59% of the children in domestic service are girls, 41 % are boys. As far as the distribution by age group is concerned, the highest concentration of child servants is found in the twelve-year group.

Leslie

I am eleven years old. I don't remember how long ago my mum placed me in the care of my aunt. I'm the only one to sleep on the floor in her house. Every day, I get up at 4 o'clock. I do everything. I prepare breakfast for the children, I sweep the floor, I go to collect water. And when my aunt goes to work in the market, I carry on: I go for more water, I do the washing, and I wash the dishes… One day I had a quarrel with one of my aunt's daughters, and she whipped me for that. On another occasion I was watching television and the food that was on the cooker got burnt. I also got whipped for that. My mum lives in the province. She came to see me last Sunday, but it's very rare. I have given up asking her to take me back with her. I know she doesn't have enough money to feed me.

The tasks allocated to child domestics are usually the following: collecting water, sweeping up and washing floors, other household chores such as doing the dishes and washing clothes, minding the children and taking them to school, doing errands, helping out the host family with sales or other profit-making activities. The host family's own children may also carry out these activities, although to a lesser extent. Without generalising, it is obvious that these tasks are often too laborious and tiring. For example, a Belgian lady who adopted a 5-year-old Haitian girl last year told us that the adoption file mentioned the fact that the girl knew how to cook fish! At the Maurice Sixto day centre in Port-au-Prince, which welcomes hundreds of restaveks every afternoon for a few hours of lessons and games, one can draw a pretty clear picture of what most children must endure on a daily basis by listening to their personal accounts or simply watching them. Poignant stories like that of Leslie, whose face and limbs show traces of burns or blows, signs of malnutrition and exhaustion. And to think that this centre only concentrates to child domestics who have received the permission from their host families. Children who have fled from domesticity often share an even more terrible fate in the orphanage, or on the street.

Haitian idiosyncrasies?

It is difficult, as noted previously, to avoid drawing a comparison between child domestics in Haiti and West Africa, for example. It is a fact that a day in the life of a restavek is identical to that of a vidomegon, the name given to the child maids in Togo or Benin. But Haitian children are rarely the victims of human trafficking carried out by middlemen exploiting the naivety of the villagers which can precisely be the case in Africa. Haitian parents who entrust their children to placement families do so knowingly. Based on this observation, many call into question the "complicity" of the parents who rid themselves of extra mouths to feed or, even worse, sell off their children. The NCHR has a direct message in its campaign to eliminate child slavery: "The conscious silence around this practice does not change the fact that by tra-

ding in children as if they were mere objects, by exploiting their innocence and their labour, the parents and the host families are taking part in human trafficking and slavery."

Jean Lhérisson, coordinator of the qualitative study, has a totally different view on the matter. "It is often the most cherished child who is placed with a family. I can hardly imagine a mother waking up one day and saying: "Today I'll get rid of my child." It is not that they are unaware of the risks of placing their children in domestic service but rather because they believe that even if life is hard in the city, the child is more likely to work his way out of poverty and, consequently, save his entire family from misery." University student Irdèle Lubin shares this view: "Domestic work is a means of improving the child's welfare by placing him or her in the care of a person of better economic status."

The Maurice Sixto day centre

It is 2p.m. in Mrs Immacula's class. This is when the children are given their lunch. Everything happens in a quiet and disciplined manner. Once they have been served, the children sit at their desks, awaiting the green light from their teacher. For several of them this is the first meal of the day. Some of the children are tired of waiting, and doze off. We are at the Maurice Sixto day centre, which was set up by Father Miguel in Carrefour, one of the poorest neighbourhoods in the Haitian capital. With the help of volunteers, social workers and teachers, Father Miguel created a structure especially designed for receiving child domestics. "In total, 440 children attend the day centre. Every day, around 300 children take part in the activities we organise," explains 'Maman George', a tower of strength and generosity. "Some of them are exhausted when they arrive," she says, pointing to a sleeping girl. "Look at these pale stains on her hands. She's suffering from malnutrition. She gets almost nothing to eat from her "aunt". We have to make her come here every morning to line her stomach." Once the Creole class begins, we almost forget who these kids are. In their bright blue uniforms provided by the Centre, they look like any the other pupil. Besides, the classrooms are not any more rudimentary than those in most official or private schools in Port-au-Prince. Mr Lefevre, in charge of class four, is, however, quick to point out that "these children are seriously behind in their learning". On average, they should already be in class seven. Absenteeism is a major problem. In an effort to compensate for this, the classes are given throughout the year without interruption, even during the summer months. The task is, nonetheless, complicated. "They especially need more affection and slightly more tolerance than the other children," adds Maman George, alluding to the rigwa lashes, inflicted with a whip made of platted strips of nerves, to which many child domestics have been exposed. In addition to the activities especially designed for the children, the social workers employed at the day centre seek to maintain regular contact with the placement families, in particular when they notice something wrong, for example in cases of ill-treatment, absence, illness and so on. This is an aspect that Father Miguel considers as particularly important to his work, although also very difficult. "The atmosphere at the initial meetings is usually very tense. But as soon as the families realise that our aim is to improve the life of these child domestics, the relations start to improve. We may be criticised for doing things by halves, but we are realistic. Domesticity is a social problem, and its solution is beyond our means. We seek, above all, to offer a helping hand to these children and to instil the fact that domestic child labour is a scourge."

Nadine Burdet, child psychiatrist and founder of L'Escale, the only centre in Haiti for children having escaped domestic labour, has extensively looked at the reasons why certain women abandon their children. Her view that large and single-parent families are the main breeding ground for domestic child labour is shared by all those dealing with this issue. However, through her dealings with hundreds of children that have passed through L'Escale since its creation in 1997, she contests that domestic child labour is borne out of some Haitian habit. From the numerous conversations she has had with each one of these children, she notes that almost all of them mention that a lady came to fetch them, and that their mother had no prior intention of placing them in domestic service. More seriously, out of the twenty or so children who lived in the centre at the time of the interview in December 2003, she believes that several of them were taken without their parents' consent. Furthermore, she is convinced that a majority of the children in domestic labour have been handled by intermediaries somewhere along the line.

Whether or not it is a case of human trafficking, everyone agrees on one point: most host families nowadays are not part of the richer classes of society. Indeed, the demand for child servants is on the rise among families whose income is barely higher than the child's own family. According to the study conducted by Jean Lherisson, in the first half of the 20th century demand for domestic child labourers exceeded the supply: "Not everyone could afford to have a child in domestic service. It was the privilege of the upper classes. Food shortages were not yet an issue in rural areas, and parents were careful in choosing the right environment in which to place their children… The change in the relationship between supply and demand occurred at of the end of the 1940's. As a result of deep poverty amongst peasants, placing children in domestic service became a survival strategy." More than ever before, the city has become a trap for the naive. Nowadays, in downtown Port-au-Prince, people often use child servants as a means of managing at home. Working on a street stall, or any other activity for that matter, implies having to leave the home unattended for a few hours. Help is needed but the income is simply insufficient to hire someone. So they end up taking on the child of an acquaintance, or a relative in the countryside. The child's treatment will depend on the degree of the employer's satisfaction or good nature. The child is either kept on, yet sometimes sent back. In some cases, contact with the child's family is non-existent: the child may be lent or given to other families, or passed from house to house.

A variety of scenarios

After illustrating the big picture, it should be pointed out that there is a wide variety of types of placement and relations. On various occasions during our two visits, we roamed the streets of the capital's poorest neighbourhoods for hours on end in an attempt to collect information. We did this without any "scientific" approach, and, to some extent, quite naively to begin with. We were desperately trying to meet families with children working in their service. That, in itself, was the best way never to reach our goal. Then, we let ourselves be carried along by the simplicity and the warmth of the people, going from house to house, spending a few minutes at a time with the men and women who tried to explain the ties that linked them all together, and all of this amid the hustle and bustle of shouts and children's laughter. The outcome? At first glance, utter confusion, owing partly to our lack of experience as investigators, to our lack of understanding of the local culture and traditions, and to the overwhelming impression of confinement caused by the maze of narrow houses, stifling courtyards, alleyways and passages. But on reflection, one understands the diversity of backgrounds; single-parent families, families that have been reunited, those in mourning, uprooted or stricken by illness, where each child's rights and duties are set according to opportunity and need, and where it is difficult to know for sure whether the child in rags, scrubbing a pan a few metres away, is indeed a domestic.

This reinforces a disturbing conclusion of the study conducted by Jean Lherisson. Child domestic labour is part of a larger picture of "informal domestic work" involving a large number of boys and girls placed in the care of parents or relatives. They carry out the same functions, but without their status being specifically named in the day-to-day or official language, probably as a result of indifference or in an attempt to conceal the truth. Their "uncles" and "aunties" invariably deny having child domestics in their service, but it is difficult to ascertain their sincerity from our short encounters. On several occasions, we were faced with similar situations in which a child was presented to us as the nephew entrusted to the family by relatives gone to work in the Dominican Republic, or as the sole survivor of a family decimated by illness. According to this study, the living conditions of these children are actually often worse than those of children "in service":

An Uncle in New York

Jean is 13 years old and a keen writer. He spends 11 hours at the L'Escale centre and rather than playing with the other children, he takes refuge in a quiet corner with a big pad of A4 paper, his sole companion. "His dream is to become a writer," says Dr Nadine Burdet. "He's forever writing, on whatever he can. I bought him this pad. He writes all kinds of stories in it, intertwining elements of his own extraordinary life, of course. Jean stayed at l'Escale for the first time a few years ago. He had fled his bosses who were mistreating him. We managed to trace some of his relatives. His parents had passed away and his aunt and uncle explained that they were unable to take care of him. Then there was an uncle in the United States. All was well at last. Jean's uncle paid for his schooling. He would regularly send money. Some months ago, Jean came back to the centre. He was very upset; the money orders were no longer coming. His uncle had died in the attack on the twin towers in New York on 11 September. He worked there as a cleaner or something."

"Given the close family ties that binds him or her, the child cannot complain to his father or mother without running the risk of harsh punishment for lack of respect towards members of the family. The child is expected to help out with the household chores of a relative who is better off than his parents. In such a context, the abuse the child may be subjected to doesn't draw anyone's attention." Clearly, in Haiti as in Africa, what remains of the concept of extended family is slowly disintegrating. Indeed, whereas a person in the countryside attaches a lot of importance to it, the city relatives, who have their own issues (uprooting, different socio-economic constraints for example), have long given up on the institution, only reclaiming it out of interest.

(1) Taken from the French edition published by Editions du Seuil in 2002.
(2) (see www.restavek.org)
(3) No specific research was carried out into this young child. It is, therefore, likely that the list is incomplete.
(4) Excerpt of a statement made in June 2002 by Mrs Craan, Minister of Social Affairs and Labour, during the discussions on the Report of the ILO Resolutions Committee.
(5) It is hard to consider "L'enfant en domesticité, produit d'un fossé historique" by Mildred Aristide as anything but a gross rehash of the two aforementioned studies and a clearly opportunistic move.
(6) According to the latest update, the activities may resume in the early months of 2004 with a new team.
(7) These figures are very approximate, given the uncertainty regarding Haiti's population. The last census was carried out in 1982. In 2000, the World Bank estimated the population at 8 million inhabitants.

Trafficking of children to the Dominican Republic

Over the past few years, there have been regular reports in the Dominican press echoing rumours of the trafficking of Haitian children. Human rights organisations active on both sides of the border are also producing disturbing information on the exploitation of Haitian children in the Dominican Republic. (1) This comes as no great surprise. Tens of thousands of Haitians migrate to the neighbouring country every year. Many of them pay recruitment services and/or passeurs (traffickers) so that they can cross the border and look for work. Although child labour is not as widespread in the Dominican Republic as in Haiti, it is still relatively commonplace.

According to one of the most active and well-structured Haitian NGOs, GARR, a support group for refugees and deportees, all remaining doubts about the trafficking of children were dismissed in 2000 during the deportation campaigns. GARR "received" large numbers of very young unaccompanied children who were repatriated along with thousands of other clandestine Haitians. After talking to these children, GARR's social workers noted that they were all from the same villages in Haiti, that they worked on the streets of Santo Domingo and practically all slept in the same place. The NGO believes that it would have been impossible for these children to come unassisted to the capital, which is three hundred kilometres from the border, and avoid all the checkpoints stationed on major roads.

At the end of 2001, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNICEF commissioned an inquiry. The results were published in July 2002. The report, although considered to be an "initial diagnosis" with many omissions, given the difficulties in researching this clandestine problem, confirms that some 2000 children are trafficked across the border every year from the northern regions of Haiti alone. They become beggars, shoe shiners, street vendors, domestic helps and, in the case of older children, agricultural workers or labourers on building sites. The report makes no mention of the sexual exploitation of some of these children; but the worst is feared, given that the Dominican Republic ranks high among the world's sex tourism destinations.

Although the main subject of our report is child labour in Haiti, the extreme vulnerability of these migrants cannot go unmentioned. Indeed, the suffering of children exploited for economic gain is further exacerbated by the problems of being uprooted, along with the discrimination most Haitians endure in the Dominican Republic. The consequences can be dramatic, as recently seen near the border town of Dajabon. A Dominican farmer, convinced that he had caught a young Haitian stealing a papaya, wanted to take revenge by forcing the boy to eat several papayas, complete with their skins. When the boy's mother intervened, the man took out his gun and shot her dead with a bullet in the back. Integration into Dominican society is virtually impossible. Even children born in the Dominican Republic but of Haitian descent are deprived of a legal status. Hundreds of thousands of "Haitiano-Dominican" children living in the bateys (camps set up to house agricultural workers) or in the poorest neighbourhoods are deprived of identity papers and all claims to the rights that go with Dominican nationality, despite the Constitutional right of all those born on Dominican territory to nationality, and the protests led by numerous local and international human rights organisations.

During the second half of 2003, mass deportations occurred one after the other. On each occasion, children were separated from their parents. In August, around a dozen naked corpses were found in the border area near Pedernales (Dominican Republic). Some of the corpses were of children. An inquest was set up to investigate the tragedy. Human rights organisations contest the official version which claims that these Haitians died of starvation. A woman and two children had already been found dead in this area in July. The mother of the children, who was the only one to survive, reported that they had been abandoned there by two traffickers. The same organisations also claim that there are several mass graves in the mountains that straddle the border. This deserted area is a crossing point for small-time smugglers and hardened criminals alike, and is highly dangerous.

The joint IOM/UNICEF report confirms the existence of diverse networks involved in the migration of tens and thousands of Haitians every year, yet it does not shed much light on those structured or mafia-type trafficking operations which 'deal' solely in children. All the NGOs working with Haitian migrants are well aware that most of them cross the border individually and that others rely on buscones (paid recruiters). Some of these Haitian or Dominican traffickers are extremely well organised and leave nothing to chance.Hiding places are arranged near the border, drivers are hired to transport the migrants, and Dominican soldiers patrolling the border are bribed to let them cross. The IOM/UNICEF report also cements the view that much like the parents who send their children to Haitian towns to work as domestic help, those who send their children to the Dominican Republic are generally aware of what awaits them. It should be pointed out that villagers we met in Haiti do not see the trafficking of children as a bad thing. On the contrary, traffickers who Haitians refer to as passeurs are perceived positively, and the poorest families even consider them as benefactors. In addition, it is not uncommon for these villagers to withhold information about these traffickers, for fear that measures will be taken to curb such migration to Dominican territory. Such trafficking is seen as a solution to many of their day-to-day problems. It is a source of revenue, however modest, and frees the parents of the daily tasks involved in taking care of their children. As for the Haitians living in the Dominican Republic, most will avoid any talk on this subject and attempt to conceal their origins owing to the situation of illegality and insecurity they live in.

Since the development of the sugar cane industry in the Dominican Republic during the First World War, it has been common for Haitians to migrate from their home country..One would expect that many Haitians would have family in the Dominican Republic as a result of this trend, and that migrant children could be taken care of by their relatives in the neighbouring country. But the likely reality is one of estranged families and severed ties, particularly on account of the brutal mass repatriations during which families were frequently broken up.

The IOM/UNICEF report describes various scenarios: "On arriving in the Dominican Republic, the children are integrated into social or family circles. Some join their parents or relatives, or are placed under the "protection" of Haitian residents. Others are entrusted to passeurs or their helpers." All become part of some kind of moneymaking operation, although they may only make a tiny amount. "Those who beg on the streets are placed in the care of an adult, usually a woman, who organises the day's work. Agricultural labourers work under the supervision of a viejo, a Haitian immigrant who is well established in the country. The latter will decide together with the owner on the tasks to be entrusted to the children. He will also negotiate the child's wages, which he will pick up himself. In many cases, the earnings to be made

from such activities are also managed by the trafficker who organises the journey across the border." The report outlines some interesting facts and incidents, such as the case of a Dominican ambulance found to be carrying 15 children when stopped at the border; Dominican landowner Elias Pina's admission that she employs some 30 children on her land; and the 30 to 50 Haitian women who each have five to six children in tow in the streets of Santiago. In short, although the networks may be extremely complex, there is no doubt that the trafficking of children exists. Regardless of how difficult it may be to determine the scope of this problem, or how informal the trafficking operations may be, urgent measures must be taken to curb this phenomenon, which implies an urgent need for more in-depth inquiries.

(1) Organisations such as the NCHR also point to the considerable number of children taken from Haiti to the United States by unscrupulous individuals exploiting the administrative shortcomings (incomplete civil registry or a lack of border controls) and the corruption of state officials. These children are usually taken to work as domestic helps for members of the Haitian community in the United States.

Street children

The most reliable statistics were collated in 1999 indicate that there are some 7,500 street children in Port-au-Prince, and several hundred more in the other towns and cities. The majority of these children are boys. While certain observers consider these estimates to be highly conservative, others find the statistics exaggerated, and underline the confusion often made between street children, those children who live, sleep, and eat on the street; children who have found a means of earning some form of income on the street; and all the other children who do not attend school and spend their days on the street, but return home at nightfall. The first category includes many children who have fled domestic labour and children who have been deported from the Dominican Republic. The second category includes children who contribute to the economic survival of their family by working. However, this differentiation is perhaps misplaced in the context of the worst forms of child labour. The children belonging to these two groups often carry out the same demeaning tasks that are detrimental to the child's development: begging, shoe shining, washing cars, helping tap tap (shared taxis) drivers fill their cars and so on. Girls do not have as many "opportunities". Gender discrimination prevails even among street children. Apart from assisting street vendors or begging, the only other choice for girls is usually prostitution.

Although no research has yet been carried out into this specific form of human trafficking, prostitution appears to be rampant on the streets of Port-au-Prince, with a network of pimps targeting many under-age children. It is a known fact that many girls are sexually abused by their employers or the sons in the host family, and that, in most cases, when they eventually become pregnant (or ill, as a result of having what is usually unprotected sex), they are thrown out, and end up living on the street. A study conducted in 2003 into the living conditions of girls on the streets in the Haitian capital confirmed that prostitution is one of the girls' main means of survival. It would seem that from the age of 12 or 13, the majority of girls start practicing forms of sexual relations similar to prostitution. The study also highlights the risk of STD infection, not least that of HIV/AIDS. It should be recalled that outside of sub-Saharan Africa, Haiti has the highest incidence of HIV/AIDS in the world (6%). Furthermore, the study underlines the high incidence of pregnancy in young girls: "On average, girls become pregnant around the age of 11 or 12, in other words, at the very beginning of puberty. The fathers are usually under age too, but are rarely aware… Most of these girls still have their child with them, but others told us that their babies were stolen from them while they were sleeping."

The porters of Port-au-Prince

It is 11a.m. in Carrefour-Feuille, in downtown Port-au-Prince. Covered in sweat, Pierre Démosthène, aged 19, stops for a few seconds to catch his breath. Holding on to the 50 kg sack of rice he has been carrying on his head all the way from the main road, his eyes full of defiance, he gazes towards Morne de l'Hopital, a steeply sloping shanty-town where thousands of Haitians live in absolute poverty. It was very close to here that a landslide caused the death of an entire family a few weeks ago. Pierre still has a few hundred metres of steep alleyways ahead of him before he can deliver the sack and go back down in search of another delivery. In the meantime, he might have just enough money to buy himself his first, and more than probably only meal of the day that will consist of manje kwit (a local staple food sold by street vendors). This is how Pierre Démosthène lives. Two years ago, he left his parents and, in his words, "the earth that gives nothing to try his luck in the city. He earns between 40 and 50 gourdes (approximately 1 euro) a day working as a porter. It is not sufficient for decent shelter and food. But over the last few months he has been given some hope for a better future. While unloading trucks and communal taxis, he met a few drivers, including Zamor, who is currently the general secretary of the drivers' union, and also one of the leading forces within the Haitian Trade Union Coordination Group (CSH). Zamor and a few of his colleagues decided to make their contribution to the lives of these underprivileged kids. In June 2003, the union launched Moi Changé (I want to change), literacy and skills training project which includes the chance to take driving lessons. After carrying heavy loads on their heads, the only thing these young men dream of is becoming drivers.

The trivialisation of sexual relations is the norm. Several people we met who work in the field such as Roger Penin, founder of Maison Arc en Ciel, and his wife Daniel Pénette, also highlighted the young age at which children are drawn into having sexual relations. "On the streets, sex is uninhibited and the risk of contracting STDs is enormous. It is not unusual for children to wind up having sexual relations even before reaching puberty." According to Kettely Marseille, founder and director of the family support centre helping street girls to reintegrate into society through counselling and dialogue, the majority of these girls are at a disadvantage because of the gender inequalities that prevail on the street and elsewhere. "In the current economic context, the amount of resources that we have at our disposal to help girls reintegrate into society is absolutely minimal. As a result, we have a success rate of around just 25%. These girls often have harrowing pasts. Most have fled domestic labour and are not afraid to confide they don't ever want to work as cleaners or cooks again. And yet the reality is that we don't have anything else to offer them in terms of employment. There are no factories. Prostitution remains the easiest way of making some money for these girls. We avoid being judgemental in our centre; instead we try to make them change their minds. At the same time, we also try to raise their awareness and help them protect themselves. We have already recorded several deaths caused by AIDS, and we are aware that two of the girls currently attending the centre are HIV positive. They need our help. We ran a health and psychological support programme for these girls. It lasted for several months. The initiative had been made possible thanks to outside funding but it was suddenly cut off. So now we have to improvise to continue supporting these girls through to the end, many of whom are the victims of rape and other forms of ill-treatment."

For Kettelie Marseille, the intermittent nature of project funding is a genuine nightmare. She does not hesitate to

condemn the lack of accountability, both nationally and internationally. “The state is not indifferent to the issue of street children, but nothing changes on the ground. Aristide’s return in 1995 raised great expectations yet at the same time we missed a golden opportunity to solve the issue of street children once and for all, if only partially. The President had decided to organise a holiday camp for street children. The occasion was truly moving. There were 300 boys and girls, and more than 70 adults to supervise them. It was very beautiful and very expensive! Three months later, the dream had evaporated: the adults returned to their homes and the kids went back to the streets.”

Street children are also the ideal prey for gang leaders

Feuds between gangs (cartels or bases as they are known in Haiti) have claimed dozens of lives in recent months in Cité Soleil, the poorest and roughest neighbourhood of the Haitian capital. These gang wars mainly involve street children. The zenglendos (thugs) who do not hesitate to kill their victims before running away with the valuables are said to be as young men who are trained on the street. The same applies to the chimères. The “henchmen” of the Lavalas regime, who inspire as much fear among the population as the tontons macoutes did under the dictatorship of the Duvaliers, are generally street youths, ready to put up barricades, to lead violent counter-protests in favour of the regime, and also to kill in cold blood. These youths have no hesitation before engaging in violence similar to child soldiers in Central Africa.

On 12 December 2003, one of the most violent days in Haiti’s recent history, several eye witnesses including journalists, saw a dozen children brandishing guns close to the burning tyre roadblocks, shouting pro-Aristide slogans and terrorising the few people who had dared to venture into the city centre that day. It is common knowledge that these gangs of youths are manipulated by the government. Several policemen who resigned and now live in exile have denounced these practices, even providing details on the different rates paid for the different acts carried out. Various opponents have referred to the increasing “chimerisation” of the national police force, underlining the latest wave of promotions awarded to “a bunch of rogues recruited by Aristide” who have no real training. At the end of December, on the Department of Science’s campus, which has effectively become a stronghold of anti-Lavalas resistance since the 5 December attack (1), several students said they could no longer go home. A group of chimères had gone to their homes and issued threats against their parents. One of the students, who bore wounds on the arms and legs and was still in a state of shock, told us that his parents had been beaten with metal rods.

Several human rights organisations have condemned the recent turn of events, including the Justice and Peace Commission. Since mid- 2002, the Commission has been recording all the violent deaths that have taken place in the Haitian capital, and periodically issues open letters to the authorities, in which it indicates the latest updated death toll in an attempt to draw the government’s attention to the total impunity prevailing in the country, as well as to its own responsibilities in this area. The Director of Justice and Peace, Father Jean Hanssens, emphasises two facts: “First of all, violence is on the rise. The figures from the last count are the highest since the beginning of our initiative. 156 violent deaths in the last three months, and that is excluding the outbursts of violence that ravaged 2 neighbourhoods and claimed dozens of victims, and for which no precise count is available. Furthermore, the latest count shows a greater percentage of women (34, 3 of whom were pregnant) and young people (10) among those killed.

(1) A dozen people are estimated to have been wounded during these attacks. The university rector had both his legs broken while the lecture rooms and equipment were vandalised.

The poverty factor

"Haiti, the poorest country of the Americas." For how much longer will we have to hear this oft-repeated phrase about what was once the "pearl of the Antilles"? Unfortunately, the situation is going from bad to worse.

Many observers consider the humanitarian crisis in Haiti to be unprecedented. In March 2002, the alarm signals jointly sent out by several UN agencies based in Haiti were drowned out by the war on Iraq. According to UN experts, the statistics available for 2000 and 2001, which were used to draw up the World Report on Human Development, place Haiti on the same level as countries that have been experiencing a humanitarian crisis for many years. The figures speak for themselves; 42% of the population lives below the poverty line, as compared with 39% in the Democratic Republic of Congo; 56% of the population suffers from malnutrition, compared with 41% in Sierra Leone, 51% in Angola and 57% in Eritrea; 6% is infected with AIDS, that is, as many as in most countries of Sub-Saharan Africa (excluding southern Africa). United Nations' experts consider that the persistent decline in the poorest Haitians' living standards means that their situation rivals populations who have suffered armed conflicts lasting up to 10 years or more. Although more recent statistics are not available (which the experts also see as indicative of the depth of the crisis), the situation would seem to have clearly deteriorated since 2001, particularly given the combined effects of the rise in fuel prices and the devaluation of the local currency, the gourde, making the population even more vulnerable.

The authorities, observers, and everyone we met all agreed that the endemic poverty in Haiti is responsible for the practice of child domestic labour and all other forms of child exploitation. Unfortunately, the actual fall in living standards affecting most of the population has most probably led to an increase in child labour. There is also an obvious link between AIDS, poverty and child labour. According to the estimates of UNAIDS, there are some 200 000 AIDS orphans in Haiti and 20 000 children with HIV/AIDS. Yet for its part, the Arc en Ciel centre, which is the only organisation carrying out actions targeted at HIV positive children, considers that these estimates fall way short of the reality. Their means of subsistence are more than uncertain.

Many of Haiti's problems, particularly the practice of placing children in domestic service, are rooted in rural poverty. Unlike other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, the rural population of Haiti represents 65% of the total population (5 million of its inhabitants) and 80% of this rural population (4 million people) lives below the poverty line. Nothing has really changed in Haiti's rural areas since the 19th century. The people continue to work the land using archaic tools. Their tiny plots of land are often located on hard-to-reach hillsides and are damaged by erosion. In many cases, the sharecropping system is still used, whereby land (usually poor quality) is leased in return for 30% to 50% of the harvest. Given the difficulties in determining how much someone has harvested, it is normally the landowner who profits most.

The other woman (2)

"Landowners often start other families in addition to their "legitimate" family. They provide their "other woman" with land, free of charge, to cultivate with her children. Beyond any emotional link there may or may not be, it is a way of exploiting the sexual services and labour of poor women. The children born out of such relationships may eventually inherit something if their father takes the trouble to organise birth certificates for them. But the fathers rarely show any such interest in their enfants en dehors ("outside children"). It has been established that the determining factor for acute malnutrition in children is the social situation of the mother. They are mainly women on their own, who find it too hard to look after their children and, in some cases, end up placing them with other families. Yet the outside children brought up by their mothers are far from being the worst off. Their mothers live on small plots of land provided by their companion which they usually rent out to get hold of quick cash. They often do not have time to look after this crop-share land themselves, as they are surrounded by their young children and have no-one to help them. They feed their children on a little corn, bananas and leaves that grow close to the house. Their main means of survival are to offer small favours for cash in hand or to sell a day's of work in the fields for around 70% of a man's daily wage. These families live in small, one-room huts, without any metal sheeting or planks to protect them from collapse. The "outside children" who are placed with another family or lose their mother are sometimes taken in by an aunt from their mother's side or into the father's official family. These scorned children are the first to suffer difficulties in their host family.

We went into rural areas on three occasions. We first went to the mountains near Leogane, followed by the area beyond the Forêt des Pins, and then the Dondon region. On each occasion, we were confronted with the same picture; families living in utter destitution. Our meetings with the small farmers affiliated to the Haitian Trade Union Coordination Group (CSH) were very informative. They all spoke of the rapid deterioration in their already poor living standards. Only weeks away from the rainy season, the prospects of having a satisfactory harvest were once again remote. They didn't have enough money to buy good seeds or the fertilisers needed to feed the land already stripped of its goodness. In desperation, some had already started to cut their fruit trees or their nurse trees to produce coal to sell for a few gourdes – the money needed to buy the food that they can no longer produce.

Food security is and always has been an ongoing battle (1). But they all agreed that the situation has worsened over recent months and that it has reached the stage where they can no longer send their children to school. It should be pointed out that in cases where the child's education is compromised, it is rarely because the parents need their help (most of the small farmers we met were not able to sow their land; they had no work) but because they can no longer afford to cover the costs of schooling. Many feel that they have no option left but to immigrate to the Dominican Republic to find

work on the plantations.

The circumstances made it difficult to obtain testimonies about children being sending to towns, but a young couple heading for the border and another parent told us that they had been forced to entrust their children to acquaintances, in the hope that they would find a better life, something they considered themselves currently incapable of offering their children. When visiting the Forêt des Pins, we were struck by a particularly worrying case; that of a single mother and her 4 young children. Her home, a one-room straw hut without a door, was the only one in the community made of temporary materials. She was sat in front of it. It was a picture of overwhelming poverty. We later learned that the woman was a femme en dehors, an "outside woman", that is, the second (or third) woman of a man who is already married. It is one of the most striking forms of gender discrimination in Haiti. It is likely that this practice, which is common in rural areas, often leads to the children being placed in domestic service, although the only confirmation we were able to find for this hypothesis came from a report drawn up by aid workers dealing with nutritional deficiencies in a rural area of Haiti.

(1) According to figures from 1995, the purchase of food is the main item of expenditure (71%) of rural families.
(2) "Les causes agricoles de la malnutrition aiguë", Fabio and Anne-Sophie Sarmento Da Silva, July 2000.

The role of education

The destitute state of Haiti's education system is one of the main factors contributing to the perpetuation of child domestic labour. According to the Ministry of Education, the net school enrolment rate rose from 35% in 1990 to 65% in 1997, and the authorities boast all kinds of initiatives in this area (Infancy Committee, School Adaptation and Social Support Committee, National Committee for the Education of Girls, Universal Education Programme, National Education Plan and so on). But in practice, the situation is catastrophic. The state has left education provision to the private sector; 75% of the children attending school go to private education establishments. But the problem does not end there. According to the UNDP, there are no real checks to determine whether private or public institutions are adhering to state regulations where they exist. There are very few checks, for example, on teachers' qualifications, the education syllabus and the qualifications awarded by the schools. As a result, figures indicate that only 10% of the teachers providing basic education are suitably qualified and only a minority of the private schools adhere to the official curriculum.

Night schools

Martha and Jean have two children of their own and a swarm of other kids who constantly revolve around them. They set up a centre for street children in Port-au-Prince in 2001. "Day after day, we were being confronted with the terrible sights on the streets, which is home to so many desperate children who are victims of all kinds of abuse. We could no longer turn a blind eye to them and decided to try and do something to help them, like giving them schooling." The sombre room where they receive us serves as a Baptist church and a meeting room for the local RENAFANM group (the National Women's Network; a member of the Haitian Trade Union Coordination Group). In addition to this, it is also a community school for 150 children from the neighbourhood. In short, it is an informal school, without resources and virtually free of charge (the parents give what they can). Then there are also the children who come for evening classes at the end of their working day. They are restaveks (domestics). They are not allowed to attend classes during the day. But once there work has been done, their bosses lighten their consciences by letting them go to Jean and Martha's, to the night school. This type of school has clearly emerged as a result of child domestic service, which is widespread in Haiti. According to the specialists, these are the very worst types of schools. Yet they also recognise that they are a source of hope for tens of thousands of children.

Jean Lherisson's assessment of the Education Ministry is even more damning: "This ministry is nothing more than a huge bureaucracy, much more interested in sanctioning the performance of pupils through a set of state exams than improving their performance. Since it cannot offer free education, the state leaves schooling to the private sector, or, to be more precise, to individuals who are only interested in getting returns on their investment and making as much profit as possible, without any regard for the most basic principles of learning. Most private schools tend to prevent homelessness and juvenile delinquency rather than actually educating children." Such schools have been nicknamed borlettes, after a game of chance, by those who denounce the proliferation of these types of school and by parents who take care to enrol their children in quality schools.

The school enrolment rate, which was increasing up until 1997, is now in freefall according to a UN report, published in March 2003. The situation is most dire in the rural areas, which have traditionally been neglected by successive governments. Of the 2% of GDP devoted to education, which is already a very poor figure, only 20% is earmarked for rural areas, despite these being inhabited by 65% of the population. And yet it is chiefly children from the countryside who leave for the towns to work as domestics. So how can the authorities claim that they want to eradicate child labour?

It has been established that education is financed more by parents than by the state. Many observers see this as a confirmation of the theory that poor parents place their children in domestic service because they believe that this is a way of ensuring a better education for them. The UNDP speaks of a change from the child being seen as a resource, helping with work in the fields or working away from home, to child being viewed as an investment, in which many parents place their hopes.

The terrible situation of the education system is a vicious circle that leads uneducated and ill-informed rural families to miscalculate the risks involved in child labour. It is a similar situation for those who do send their children to school but do not know how to assess the value of one school against another and, in some instances, are deceived by the head teachers, some of whom are real crooks. And as many have told us, with great lucidity and simplicity, the same lack of education deprives them of the skills required to change the way they work and increase their productivity.

Teachers' unions have been pushing for radical reforms in education ever since the end of the dictatorship. In 1997, the Préval government falsely raised teachers' hopes by approving a package of measures that has never been applied. Teachers' demands have been met with all manner of attacks: their demonstrations have been violently repressed and some trade unionists have been assaulted, imprisoned, or forced to flee the country to save their lives. Unsurprisingly, their chief demand is wage-related. "Basic education teachers only earn the equivalent of USD 53 a month. The maximum is USD 130, but this amount is only earned by a small minority, only 2% of the teaching profession," explains Jean Lavaud Frederik, General Secretary of the CNEH, the National Confederation of Teachers in Haiti. He asked the question, along with members of other teaching organisations, of how a Haitian teacher lives, taking into account the daily outgoings of a family of five (2). This question led to a document full of figures which, no matter how you look at it, the balance is always negative. Trade unions are also pressing for improvements to their working conditions. They condemn the dilapidated state of the schools, the oversized classes, the absence of laboratories, libraries, playgrounds, teaching materials, running water and toilets (3).

Magali, teacher and trade unionist

Magali George, a member of the executive committee of the CNEH, works at a state school, Darius Denis, in the very centre of Port-au-Prince. The school is housed in an old wooden colonial type building on the point of collapse. Every square inch of it is exploited. Extra classrooms have been erected all along the courtyard walls using cement blocks and metal sheets. The same ramshackle property also houses another state school, the Charles Dubai. "It's quite common here," explains Magali. "We do not have sufficient infrastructures, so the two different schools share the same building." The two schools not only share the same premises but they also split their timetables. It works along the same lines as the double shift. Some of the pupils come in the morning and the others in the afternoon. To complicate matters further, Magali explains that she shares her time between the afternoon shift at this school and a morning class in a private school. "I earn double the money there, and wouldn't be able to get by without this job in the private school," she explains. There are sixty children in her class. The atmosphere is stifling and Magali struggles to make her voice heard over the sound of recitations coming from the classroom next door. At the end of the class she tells us about her pupils: "Although education is officially free, the Ministry asks for 50 gourdes a month for each pupil. But because the state does nothing and the schools are in a terrible state, the school heads ask for more. Many parents cannot pay. The children are often absent for long periods at a time, which explains why so many have to repeat the same year and why there are such big age differences between pupils in the same class. The children in my class are between 12 and 20 years old. Yet, however bad the situation is in the schools, it's much better than on the streets."

(1) The National Union of Trained Teachers (UNNOH), National Teachers' Council of Haiti (CONEH), the National Federation of Education and Culture Workers (FENATEC) and the High School Teachers' Union (GIEL).

(2) It is estimated that each working person in Haiti has to provide for 8 dependents, on average.

(3) Having spoken to him again in December 2003 between two anti-government demonstrations, the CNEH General Secretary explained that the teachers' unions had since broken off all dialogue with the government, which has been symbolically declared "unlawful" by all opposition forces. In a move seemingly giving even greater credibility to Jean Lavaud Frederik, the National Education Minister resigned mid-December.

Institutional shortcomings and bad governance

In April, the parliament passed a law prohibiting child domestic labour and the trafficking of children. Along with the subsequent creation of a brigade for the protection of minors a few weeks later, it is perhaps the only good news. Numerous Haitian and international organisations involved in the fight against child labour and child domestic servitude have been pressing for the elimination of Chapter 9 of the Labour Code for several years. This Chapter entitled "Children in Domestic Service", which was supposed to protect young people, in some way legitimised the practice. The sentence "no child under 12 shall be entrusted to a family to be employed for domestic work" (article 341) can also be construed to mean that children may be employed as domestic workers as of age 12. The provision whereby "…these children must have a continuous daily break of 10 hours" authorised the host families to make them work for the remaining 14 hours in the day. Chapter 9 has now been replaced by the new law, which defines and prohibits the different types of child exploitation and abuses.

But rather than applauding the introduction of this new law, legal experts and children's rights defenders see it as a determined attempt by the public authorities to maintain the status quo. This view is shared by Emmanuel Lacroix of the Haitian Coalition for the Defence of Children's Rights (COHADDE), which brings together around 30 organisations involved in promoting children's rights. "This law has many shortcomings. It contains no penal aspects, for example. Neither does it specify which judicial authority is responsible, nor the penalties applicable to guilty parties. Instead, it refers back to the law previously in force. But this law has been repealed by the new one!"

Emmanuel Lacroix could speak for hours about the shortcomings of the State in Haiti. He himself is an examining magistrate in charge of cases involving minors at the juvenile court of Port-au-Prince, the only one for a city of 2 million inhabitants. The court's lack of resources, the absence of structures suited to dealing with minors, and, in more general terms, the absence of a youth policy, are just some of the criticisms levelled by COHADDE. In its alternative report to that of the Children's Rights Committee of 2002, COHADDE has not weakened its questioning of the "progress" of the Haitian authorities' application of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Inter-Ministerial Committee which brings together the ministers for education, health, social affairs and women's affairs, and is supposed to work towards the promotion of children's rights, is, for example, deemed "inoperational".

There are many other bitter failures. In 2000, a helpline, SOS Timoun, was set up to deal with the complaints of children or other citizens who have witnessed violations of children's rights. This project is more symbolic than anything else, as it serves little purpose in a developing country where telephone connections are still rare and often unreliable. Meanwhile, the "meeting point" set up in one of the capital's poorest neighbourhoods, Carrefour, at around the same time for children in difficulty, no longer exists. The poor results generated by the 4-year ILO programme for the elimination of child labour (IPEC) also reflects the failings of the public authorities. The head of the programme, Sabine Manigat confirms, "We are under the impression that neither the politicians nor the elite members of society have any desire to put an end to child labour." Could this be some way of settling scores? Either way, many members of Haiti's civil society are voicing their disappointment. Several trade unions have censured IPEC's lack of consultation with social partners. Other observers consider that the initial project was too ambitious, although at the same time criticise the lack of concrete results. "It is good that child domestic labour is being documented and two or three help centres are receiving assistance, but it is by no means enough," a university professor told us.

In 2003, the ILO's Committee of Experts on the Application of Conventions and Recommendations (CEACR) was obliged to confirm the authorities' lack of progress, noting that they were incapable of providing it with a copy of the "National Plan to Combat Child Domestic Labour", which should have been adopted within the framework of the aid granted by IPEC (1). It should be pointed out here that Haiti has not yet ratified ILO Conventions 138 and 182 on the minimum age for admission to employment and the worst forms of child labour, but has ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Each time they have to defend themselves on the international stage, the authorities invariably bring up the lack of resources, the "political opposition's irresponsibility", the "inactivity on the part of civil society", the suspension of international aid and so on. But such excuses do nothing to detract from the damning reports of international organisations. The UNDP speaks of "erratic governance" resulting in "families with their backs against the wall living by their wits", and refutes the authorities' claims to be progressive by stating that "nor would governments from the recent "democratic era" seem to have much social conscience, if one compares Haiti to the other countries of Latin America and the Caribbean".

Haiti has one of the freest economies in the world, and it shows. The few factories that used to produce for the local market were not competitive enough; they had to close down. The formal private sector only employs a few thousand "privileged individuals" (2), who are exploited in the assembly plants where non-compliance with international labour standards is a constant feature. The government is pressing forward, unabashed, with its plans to create several export processing zones (EPZ) on the border with the Dominican Republic (3), enticing potential investors with Haiti's comparative advantage: its cheap labour. Human rights defenders including trade unions are speaking out against the devastating effects being unleashed by this neo-liberal policy. These include the expropriation of land from small farmers, devastation of good farming land, the proliferation of shantytowns and increased job insecurity for example.

In the towns and cities, the population rots in the dirt under the reign of chaos, insecurity and hunger. The most basic social services are either deficient or do not exist at all. As for the rural population, small farmers have to survive off their tiny plots of land, without any prospects of seeing any improvement for themselves or their children. In most cases they do not even have the 50 to 150 gourdes needed to enter their children in the Civil Register. Given the situation, is it really surprising that so many children work?

(1) CEARC: Individual observation concerning Convention no. 29 on forced labour. Publication: 2003.
(2) Of an active population of 4 million people.
(3) The first EPZ opened in August 2003.