LATIN AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT


Santiago, Chile, 28 November to 11 December, 1965

SUMMARY of

the Report Prepared by Surinam

Introduction

This country, though located in South America belongs more properly, from a historical, ethnological and sociological standpoint to the Caribbean area.

The total area of Surinam covers 162,560 sq. kms.

According to the 1964 census the total population numbered 324,211 of which approximately 90 per cent lives in the fertile coastal area of 9,000 sq. kms.; 68.5 per cent of the population lives in Paramaribo and environments.

The population is young: 55.97 per cent is under 20 years of age.

In 1962 the average per capita income was US$ 290.

In the country there are four major ethnic groups; there is no racial discrimination but note must be taken of these due to major differences in way of life, education and food habits. These groups are: Creoles (African and mixed African origin, living in the coastal area and more or less influenced by European culture; Christians; they constitute 35.5 per cent of the population); Hindostanis (descendants of immigrants from former
from former British India; mostly Moslems or Hindus, they constitute 34.8 per cent of the population; Javanese (descendants of immigrants from the former Dutch East Indies, they are Moslems and constitute 14.9 per cent of the population); and Bushnegroes (descendants of 18th and 19th century maroons who live in a manner similar to the African and who constitute 8.5 per cent of the population).

Unemployment in all sectors reaches 10 per cent and the Development Plan includes measures to offer job possibilities to youth, especially in agriculture, bauxite mining and the attendant industries. Efforts are also made to overcome the prejudice against manual labour.

Housing

There are no shanty towns but housing is nevertheless inadequate; too many people live in one or two room houses which are often old slave quarters with very indifferent sanitary facilities.

Efforts have been made to provide housing for low income groups on a hire purchase system which so far has not attained success.

Too high a proportion of the population lives in or around Paramaribo so it is planned to establish industrial centres West of the area.

Health

From 1951 to 1961 the birth rate rose to 46.4 per thousand.

The death rate for the same period has dropped to 8.5. Infant mortality has also declined and is at present about 43 per thousand.

The most common causes of infant mortality are digestive diseases and birth accidents due to the lack of adequately trained midwives.

Malaria and yellow fever have been conquered in the coastal area and campaigns still continue.

Leprosy is almost controlled, 2 out of the 3 leprosaria have been closed down; a special school for lepers is no longer necessary.

Parasitic infestation is common: schistosomiasis, hookworm and other worm infestations are prevalent.

Yaws and trachoma still occur in rural areas and in the interior.

A polio oral vaccine campaign checked an outbreak in 1963; another campaign is under way at present.

Typhoid, paratyphoid and dysentry are very rare; particularly for a tropical country.

The incidence
The incidence of tuberculosis is low and mortality figures are regressing. Prevention programs and tuberculin sensitivity tests are carried out; in the coastal area chest X-Rays are performed.

There are no complete figures on physically handicapped children; nor are there special establishments therefore, save a school for deaf children run by a Catholic Mission.

It is estimated that there are 890 mentally handicapped children who should attend special establishments; only 105 attend a special school though efforts are being made to increase the number of specialized teachers. Advanced plans exist for a home for the severely handicapped.

Free medical care is provided for the bushland and rural people (though in care is inadequate due to an insufficiency of physicians) and for the poor of the town.

The School Medical Service of the Bureau of Public Health provides free medical care for children; the School Dental Service is also free; both are handicapped by lack of staff.

Independent public health work is also done by the Red Cross, Green Cross, White-Yellow Cross and the Foundation for Deaconess Work.

Nutrition

Creole, Hindostani and Javanese diet is adequate as to calories, vegetable proteins and some minerals and vitamins. Animal proteins however are deficient. Among Hindostanis and Javanese this is due to religious prohibitions against beef or pork; amongst Creoles there are often somewhat mysterious taboos.

There is a modern milk plant in Paramaribo and poultry and meat production have somewhat improved.

UNICEF powdered skim milk is distributed by the Bureau of Public Health to children up to 14 years, to pregnant and nursing women, etc. In addition, there is a school meal program for undernourished children.

The nutrition picture differs where Bushnegroes are concerned. These people are mainly hunters and fishermen and only plant a little cassava, rice, corn, yams, sugar cane and fruit. As fish and game diminish their diet becomes largely vegetable in origin with no greens included. For children the protein problem is overcome by long nursing (1 to 2 years). The diet of these people should be improved and the necessary nutrition education imparted. The Government already has an experimental farm in the interior.

Education

At present almost all children aged 6 to 14 years receive elementary education. Illiteracy is practically non-existent among the younger generations.

/The linguistic
The linguistic situation is crucial. A high proportion of children start school with no knowledge of Dutch (the official language), as they all speak "Negro-English" or Sranang Tongo, Hindustani, Javanese, etc. Thus children must start school work in a foreign language. An effort has been made to overcome the difficulty with infant schools where the elements of Dutch are taught. In secondary education the problem is increased by the fact that English, French and German or Spanish are compulsory.

The National Development Plan proposes an over-all reform to get away from the excessive intellectual emphasis of education to the detriment of the child's preparation for life.

Primary education completed, children may: (a) attend a post-elementary school with a 2-year curriculum; or (b) attend junior high school for 3 or 4 years.

The first of these 2 alternatives is unsatisfactory - most of the unemployed have received this type of education. The second alternative offers three possibilities upon completion: (a) to enter practical life (b) to seek vocational training; or (c) to enter a 3-year senior high school. The latter, upon completion permits enrollment at the Surinam Medical School or at a Dutch University, as at present there is no university in Surinam though the plans for one are very advanced and it is hoped that it will open within a year.

The National Development Plan includes a complete change in the basic structure of primary and secondary education, in which the last grade of elementary schooling will provide vocational training for all who will attend no other school, and in which different levels of technical, normal and commercial schools are incorporated. High school will also provide these services as well as leading to under-graduate and graduate studies at the University.

Family organization

This differs widely amongst the several ethnic groups; there are also considerable differences between urban and rural dwellers.

Amongst Creoles the family may be constituted by anything from one marriage relationship to a situation where the mother and children of one or more unknown fathers live with her mother. The bonds between mother and son are very strong, the former often denying herself for him. Sons are pampered and so often do not work hard. Girls are brought up more strictly and expected to help in the home. If there is a marriage, or if without it the union is firm, the father accepts responsibility for his children - not otherwise.

Amongst Hindostanis the main family groups are the old joint family (married sons living with their parents) and the new nuclear family. In all cases the children (many cousins together) are well cared for. Sons
may be expected to work in the house or in the parental enterprise but efforts are made to give them a good education. Daughters are very strictly guarded, but gradually they are being given better opportunities.

Amongst the Javanese the family may consist of spouses and children alone, or include parents and relatives of either spouse. The man is the head of the family but the woman takes charge of the finances. Children are much loved and sheltered. Girls help in the home and boys assist their father but such activities are not forced.

The Bushnegro family is matrilineal – a man may have one or more wives – each wife has her own home and she and her children belong to her mother's family. This is not a matriarchy as the woman has no say in tribal affairs. Children are expected to help their parents but are kindly treated.

Protection

This is under the Ministry of Social Affairs through the Children's Protection Service. This agency seeks foster homes for neglected children, submits reports on divorce cases, etc., supervises Government aided Children's Homes, etc. It is also responsible for the 2 Reformatories (1 for boys and 1 for girls).

The Ministry of Justice has drafted many laws for child protection, some of which have already been enacted. The Children's Police makes reports on offenses by children, supresses disorderly conduct and enforces child protection legislation.

The Ministry of Public Health and the Ministry of Education also do welfare work within the sphere of their activities.

There are boarding schools and orphanages which belong to religious organizations and which receive a small Government subsidy; they are Government supervised.

There are several youth organizations the strongest of which are the Scouts. The Ministry of Agriculture runs "4-H Clubs".

Efforts are being made to encourage sports, particularly foot-ball and to provide playing fields, etc.