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Learning Instead of Earning: The Fight Against Child Labor in Ecuador and Uruguay

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Abstract

As some countries in the Global South have become marginal to the global economy, employment and labor standards have declined to allow these countries to be more competitive. This article compares the different strategies of Ecuador and Uruguay to address the exploitation of children for capital gain. Since the 1990s, Ecuador has made great progress in protecting their youngest populations from entering the work force prematurely. In contrast, Uruguay has made minimal efforts and advancements against the worst forms of child labor. This article also considers how the care for children is an ethical obligation that will positively contribute to global development.

I. Introduction

According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2024), slightly more than 1 in 5 children in the world's poorest countries are engaged in child labor. Child labor occurs in the formal as well as informal sectors of the economy. Many children work long hours under inadequate conditions for very low wages to provide for themselves and their family.

This article focuses on child labor issues in Ecuador and Uruguay. It examines the prevalence and severity of child labor in Ecuador and Uruguay from 1990 to 2022. Given the limited data available specifically on child labor, it also analyzes primary and secondary school enrollment and child mortality. It also reviews actions taken against child labor in Ecuador and Uruguay and analyzes some ethical aspects and dimensions of child labor in Ecuador and Uruguay.

This article is organized into six sections. Following this introduction, Section II reviews some of the literature on child labor in Ecuador and Uruguay. Section III analyzes the socioeconomic background of the two countries through statistics of gross domestic product per capita, life expectancy at birth, and adult literacy rates. Section IV examines some of the key facts related to child labor in Ecuador and Uruguay. Section V provides an ethical analysis of measures taken by Ecuador and Uruguay against child labor. The last section highlights the main point of the article and offers some suggestions for Ecuador and Uruguay.

II. Literature Review

There are several publications examining child labor in Ecuador and Uruguay, providing context on each country's sociohistorical and economic situation. The U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of International Labor Affairs publishes Child Labor and Forced Labor Reports for many countries across the globe, including for Ecuador and Uruguay, which include a country's legal framework on child labor, how laws are enforced, and what programs are in place. A report by Human Rights Watch (2002) examines widespread labor abuses, including harmful child labor, on banana plantations in Ecuador. Guedes Vieira (2018) covers specific issues of child labor in Uruguay.

- According to a report by the Bureau of International Labor Affairs of the U.S. Department of Labor (2023), Ecuador recently made significant progress in eliminating the worst forms of child labor. The Ecuadorian Ministry of Labor passed the Law Against Human Trafficking and Illicit Trafficking of Migrants, which tasks the Ministry of Interior with leading Ecuador's inter-institutional committee against trafficking in persons and defines government prevention and protection actions. The government trained labor inspectors and referred vulnerable children to social services. However, the report also states that the resources allocated to the labor inspectorate — including the number of inspectors, transportation, and equipment — are insufficient to conduct inspections in the informal sector.
- Due to changes in the trade preferential status of Uruguay in 2016, the last child labor report of the Bureau of International Labor Affairs is from 2017.[1] It states that Uruguay made minimal advancements against the worst forms of child labor in 2016. It also states that the Committee to Prevent and Fight Trafficking in Persons presented a draft of a comprehensive anti-trafficking law to the Parliament and began updating the hazardous work list for children but children in Uruguay continue to be engaged in the worst forms of child labor, including in garbage scavenging and recycling, as well as commercial sexual exploitation, sometimes as a result of human trafficking. The Government does not collect or publish comprehensive labor and criminal law enforcement statistics or implement sufficient programs to prevent and eliminate the worst forms of child labor.
- A news report by Human Rights Watch (2002) focuses on the widespread labor abuses, including harmful child labor, on banana plantations. The report states that Ecuadorian children as young as eight years old work on banana plantations in hazardous conditions. For example, children reported that they continued working while toxic fungicides were sprayed from airplanes flying overhead. With an average of $3.50 per day, which is approximately 60 percent of the legal minimum wage for banana workers, banana plantations also exploit children financially. The report provides some details on sexual harassment of girls aged 11 and 12 years old.
- Guedes Vieira (2018) is a dense and highly academic comparison of child labor in Brazil and Uruguay. While the information on Brazil is not relevant for this article, Guedes Vieira (2018) offers key insights into child labor in Uruguay. The formal Uruguayan definition of a child is anyone up to 13 years old, and an adolescent is anyone over 13 and under 18 years old. Guedes Vieira also explains how there is legislation in place that permits adolescent employment between the ages of 13 to 15 in specific circumstances. Guedes

[1] U.S. Department of Labor (2017).

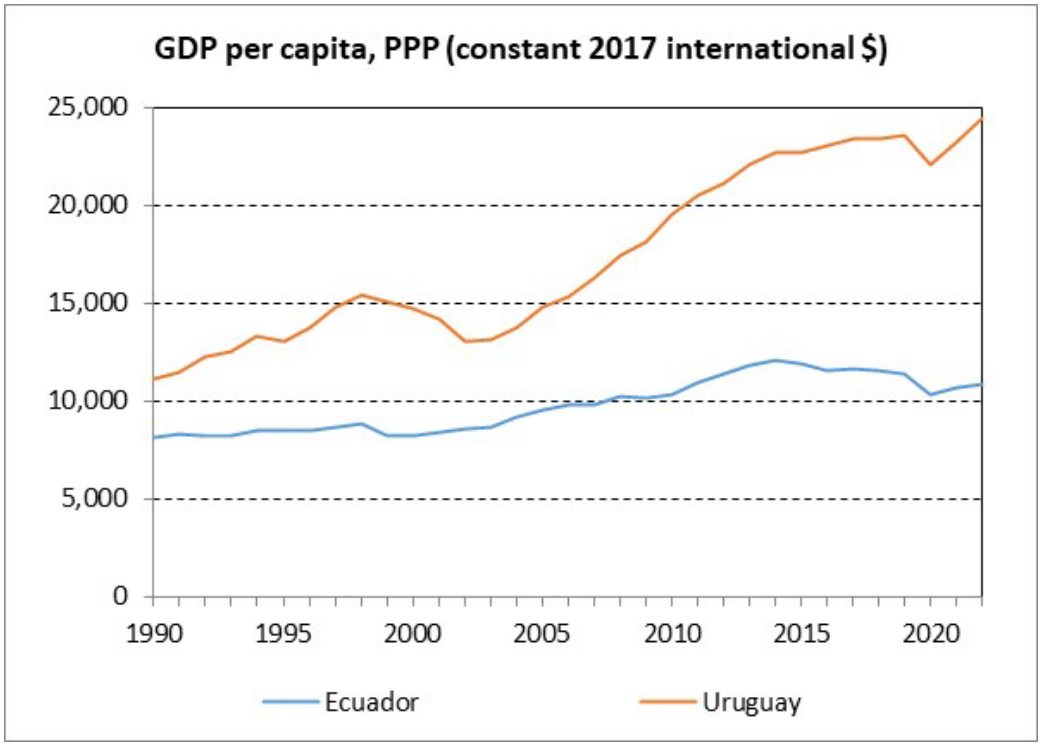
Vieira (2018) refers to a 2009 study, which concluded that around 9.9 percent of children and adolescents between 5–17 years old are involved in child labor.

III. Socioeconomic Background

Figure 1 shows GDP per capita, adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP) in constant international dollars. In 1990, Uruguay's GDP per capita was $11,113, which more than doubled to $24,427 by 2022. In contrast, Ecuador had a GDP per capita of $8,120 in 1990, which grew only slightly, reaching $10,859 in 2022. As seen in Figure 1, Uruguay had a dramatic increase in GPD per capita from 1990 to 2022, while Ecuador had a minimal increase. In 1990, Uruguay's GDP per capita was $2,993 greater than Ecuador, whereas in 2022 it was $13,567 greater, a dramatic increase in the difference between the two countries.

Ecuador's GDP per capita shows an overall slightly increasing trend from 1990 to 2014, followed by a decreasing trend between 2014 and 2020. Uruguay's GDP per capita has been more volatile, increasing relatively sharply from $11,113 in 1990 to $13,364 in 1994. It then declined marginally in 1995 and then grew again sharply during the next three years (1996–1998), followed by four years of sharp declines (1999–2002). Uruguay then experienced a prolonged (nearly two decades-long) period of strong economic growth: GDP per capita increased from $13,042 in 2002 to 23,553 in 2019.

Figure 1: PPP-Adjusted GDP per capita, 1990–2022

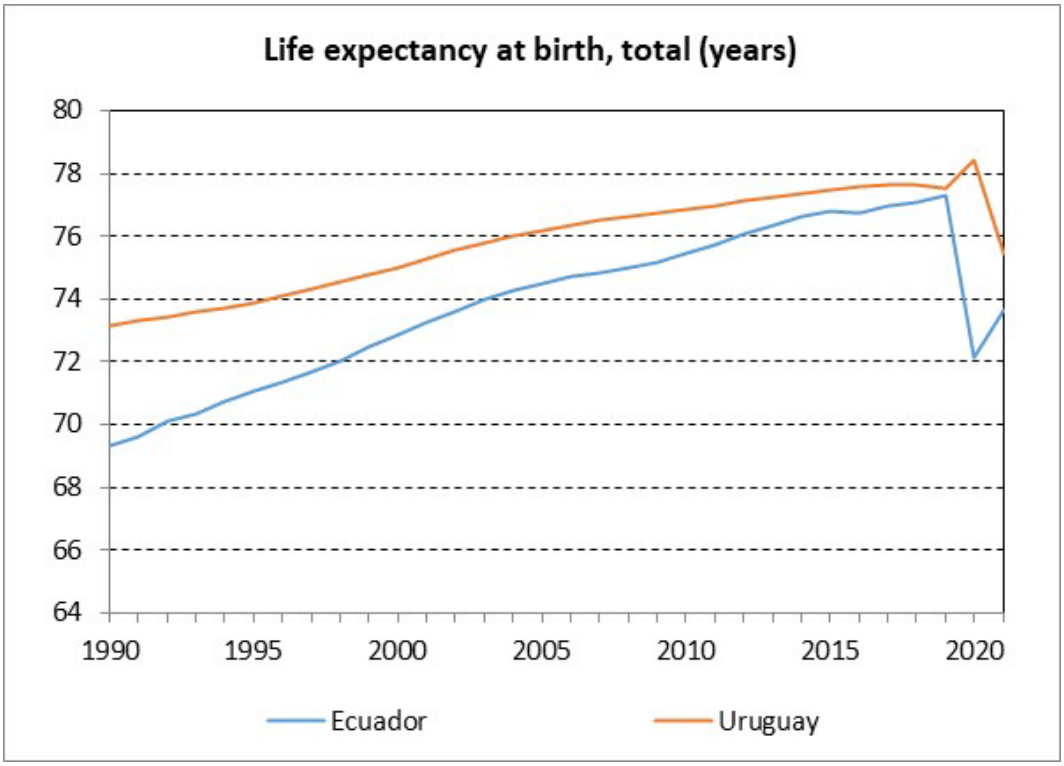


Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2024).

Figure 2 shows life expectancy at birth in Ecuador and Uruguay from 1990–2021. Both countries increased steadily until a sharp decline between 2020–2021, presumably because of the COVID-

19 pandemic. In Ecuador between 1990–2019, the life expectancy rose from 69 years to 77 years. Over the same time span in Uruguay, it increased from 73 years to 77 years. In 2019, the two countries almost had the same life expectancy with Ecuador's being 77.2 years and Uruguay's being 77.5 years. However, in the following years the countries' life expectancy moved further away from being equal.

Figure 2: Life Expectancy at Birth, 1990–2021

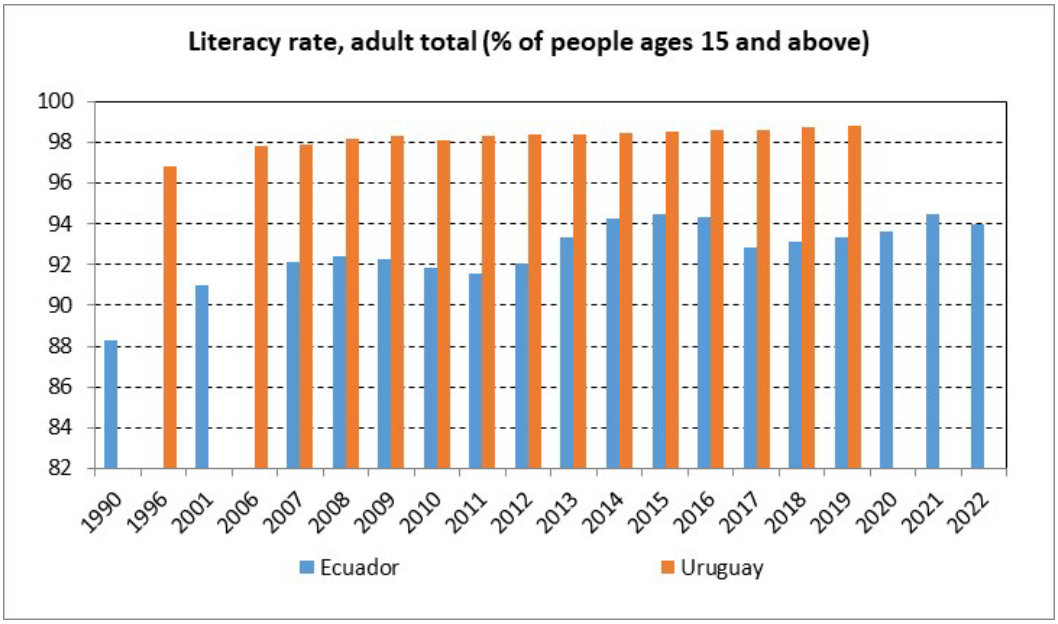


Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2024).

Figure 3 shows literacy rates in Ecuador and Uruguay for all available years. Ecuador's adult literacy rate increased from 88.3 percent in 1990 to 91.0 percent in 2001, and then to 92.1 percent in 2007. It then fluctuates around that level for the next six years, then increasing to about 94 percent during 2013 to 2016. It then decreased sharply in 2017 to 92.8 percent, after which it gradually recovered, reaching 94.5 percent in 2021, and then decreased slightly to 93.9 percent in 2022. Though there is less data available for Uruguay, the available data shows that Uruguay's adult literacy rate was consistently higher than in Ecuador, fluctuating between 97.8 percent and 98.8 percent during 2006 to 2019.

It is interesting to compare the trends across the three figures. First, Uruguay is always considerably above Ecuador, except that though Ecuador nearly caught up with Uruguay's life expectancy in 2019. Second, Uruguay's and Ecuador's GDP per capita grew farther apart, while the two countries' life expectancies became more similar. Third, in contrast to GDP per capita growing farther apart and life expectancy becoming more similar, the gap between the two countries in terms of literacy remained overall the same during the last two decades.

Figure 3: Adult Literacy Rates, all available years



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2024).

IV. Analysis of Facts

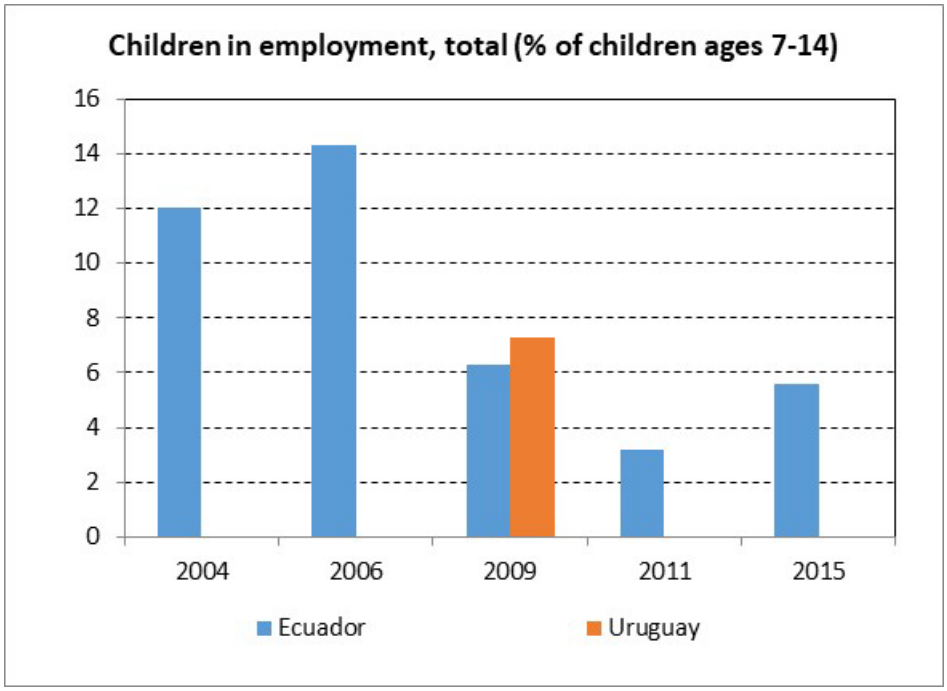
This section is divided into three subsections. The first subsection will examine the percent of children in employment in Ecuador and Uruguay. Given the limited data available on child labor, the second subsection will examine school enrollment while the third subsection will examine child mortality and the probability of dying among children and adolescents.

IV.1. Children in Employment

Figure 4 compares the percent of children ages 7–14 in employment in Ecuador and Uruguay for all years such data is available. Given that there are data for only five years for Ecuador and only one year for Uruguay, it is not possible to say much. Nevertheless, what is a bit surprising is that for the only year such data is available for both countries (2009), Uruguay, which consistently outperforms Ecuador in the three socioeconomic indicators examined in the last section, has a higher percentage of children employed than Ecuador. However, Ecuador's data shows a considerable volatility, which further complicates the comparison.

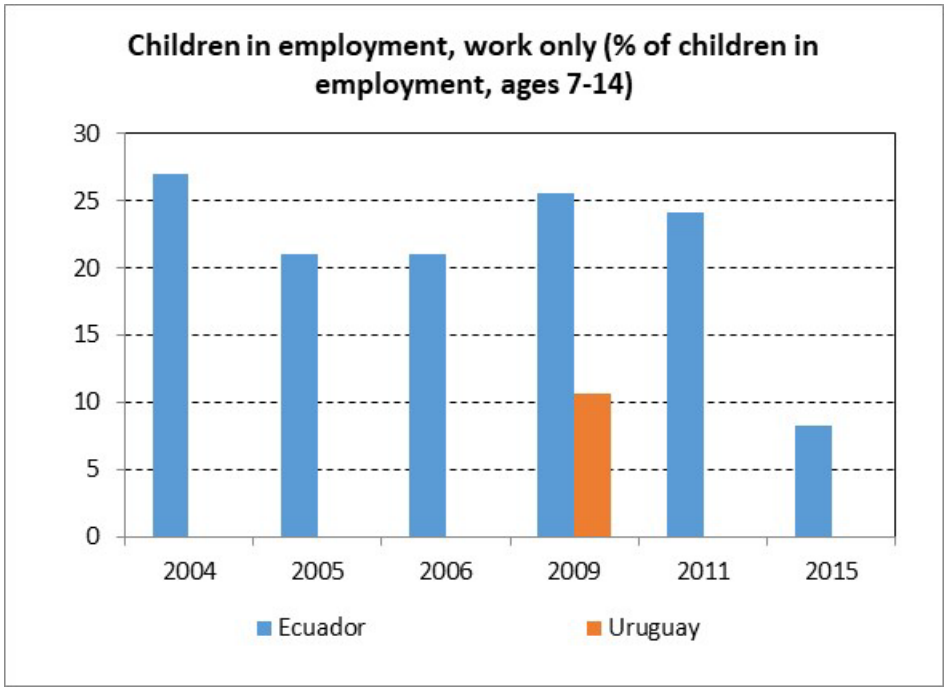
Figure 5 compares the percent of children ages 7 to 14 in Ecuador and Uruguay who were involved in economic activity for at least one hour in the reference week of the survey. The "work only" criterion refers to children who were only involved in economic activity and not attending school. This graph shows a more significant difference than Figure 4. In Ecuador in 2009, 25.5 percent of children in employment were working only, and not enrolled in schooling. This is a 14.8 percentage points difference from the 10.7 percent of children who were employed and working only in Uruguay.

Figure 4: Children in Employment, all available years



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2024).

Figure 5: Children in Employment, Work Only, all available years



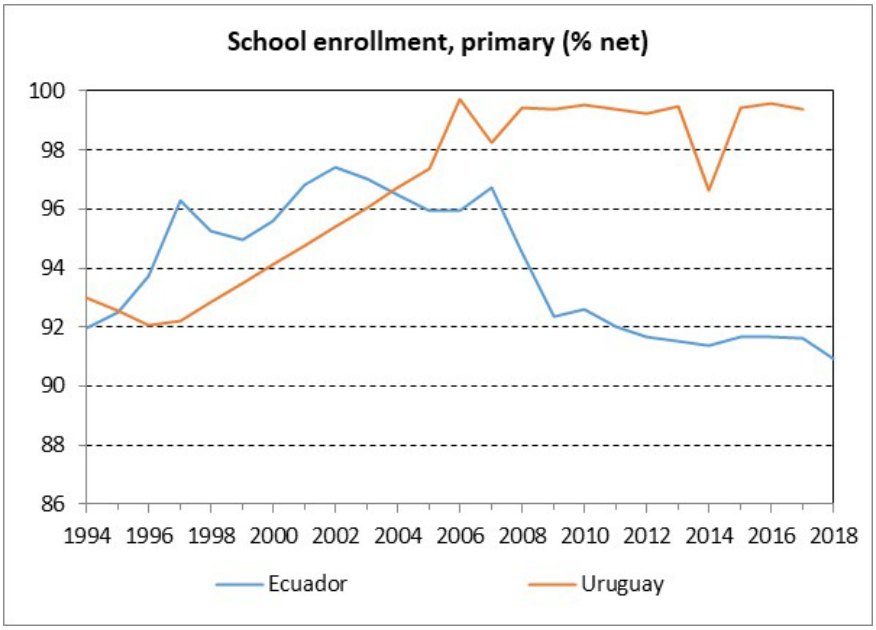
Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2024).

IV.2. School Enrollment

Figure 6 shows the percent of children enrolled in primary school in Ecuador and Uruguay from 1994 to 2018, including 2004 estimates for Ecuador and 1998 to 2004 estimates for Uruguay based on averages of existing data. The graph shows net enrollment which is the ratio of children of official school age who are enrolled in school, to the population of the corresponding official school age. From 1994–1996, Ecuador and Uruguay had relatively similar enrollment ratios of about 92–94 percent. In 1997, Ecuador's primary school enrollment jumped up to 96.3 percent while Uruguay's did not experience significant change.

However, Uruguay's enrollment then increased very sharply, reaching an all-time high of 99.7 percent in 2006, while Ecuador's primary school enrollment fluctuated between 95 and 97 percent during 1997–2007. Ecuador's primary school enrollment suffered a severe decline from 96.7 percent in 2007 to 92.3 percent in 2009, a very slight recovery to 92.6 percent in 2010, with further, more moderate declines for the next decade, reaching 90.9 percent in 2018, while Uruguay's primary school enrollment stayed at around 99 percent during the next ten years, with the exception of declining to 98.3 percent in 2007 and to 96.6 percent in 2014.

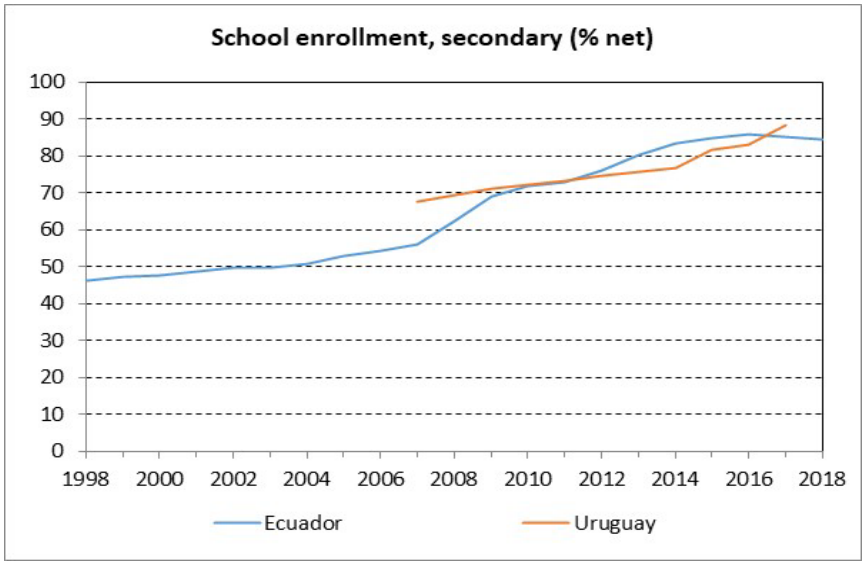
Figure 6: Primary School Enrollment in Ecuador and Uruguay, 1994–2018



Source: Created by author, using estimates for missing years based on World Bank (2024).

Figure 7 shows the evolution of net secondary school enrollment in Ecuador and Uruguay. Even though there is no data for Uruguay until 2007, Figure 7 shows that net secondary school enrollments were relatively close to each for all the years there is data for Uruguay (from 2007 to 2017). The fact that Ecuador's net secondary school enrollment has been slightly higher than in Uruguay during 2012 to 2016 is highly inconsistent with the two countries net primary school enrollments, as Ecuador's net primary school enrollment has been far below that of Uruguay during those years.

Figure 7: Secondary School Enrollment in Ecuador and Uruguay, 1994–2018

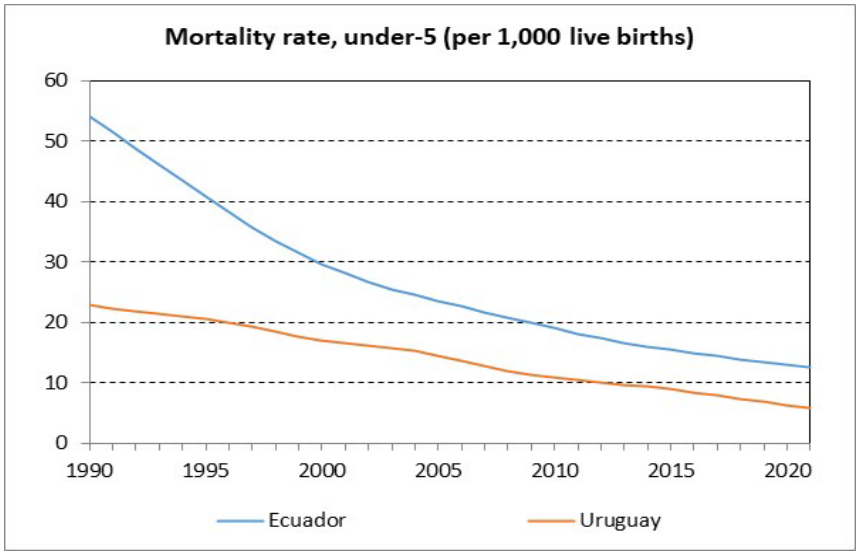


Source: Created by author, using estimates for missing years based on World Bank (2024).

IV.3. Child Mortality and the Probability of Dying among Children and Adolescents

Figure 8 shows that in 1990, under-5 child mortality has been much higher in Ecuador (54.1 deaths per 1,000 live births) than in Uruguay (22.9 deaths per 1,000 live births). However, during 1990 to 2014, Ecuador made much more progress in reducing child mortality than Uruguay, reducing the gap between the two countries from 31.2 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1990 to a gap of only 6.7 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2014. Though both countries continued to decrease their child mortality from 2014 to 2021, the gap between Ecuador and Uruguay remained at about 6.6 deaths per 1,000 live births.

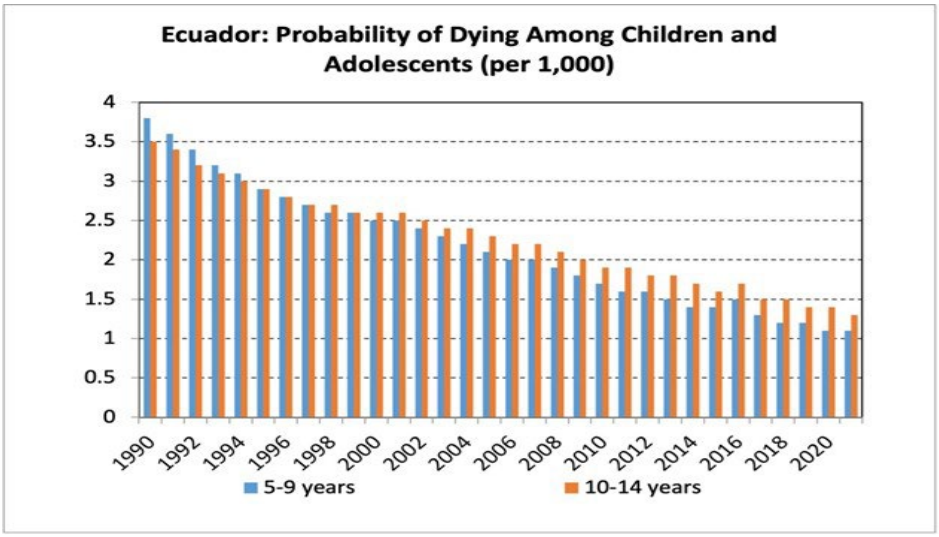
Figure 8: Under 5 Child Mortality, 1990–2021



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2024).

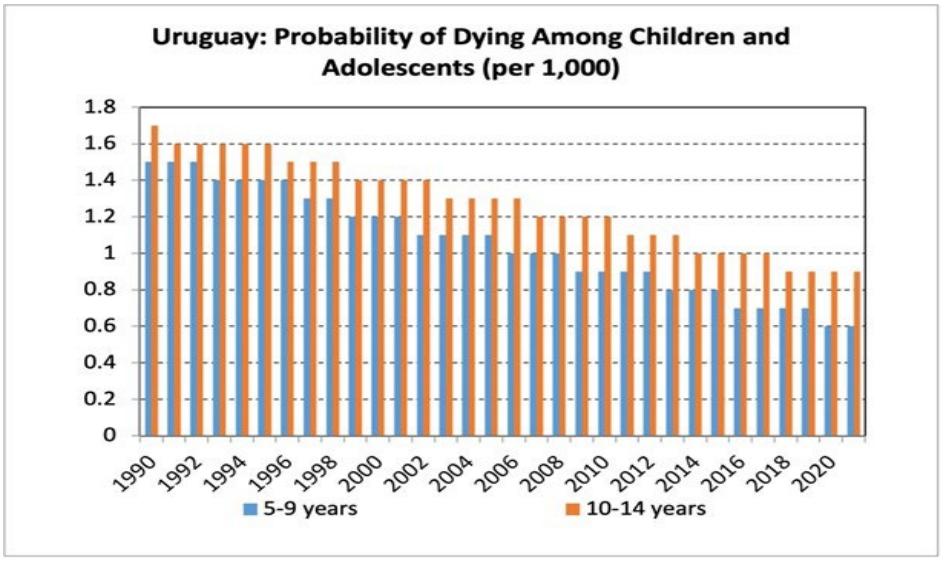
Figures 9 and 10 compare the probability of dying per 1,000 children, respectively in Ecuador and Uruguay. Although not significant for this article, the data is split to examine children aged 5–9 years old and 10–14 years old separately because the older group is considered to be adolescents. Both figures show a relatively consistent decline. However, Ecuador started the 30 year period with almost double the probability of dying per 1,000 children than Uruguay and closed the gap significantly by 2020. In both countries, for a majority of the examined period the 10–14 age group had a higher probability of dying than the 5–9 age group. In Ecuador, the probability of dying for both age groups remained close to each other over the observed period. This differs from Uruguay where the 10–14 age group consistently had a higher probability of death.

Figure 9: Ecuadorian Children Probability of Death, 1990–2020



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2024).

Figure 10: Uruguayan Children Probability of Death, 1990–2020



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2024).

Figure 9 shows the probability of children dying per 1,000 in Ecuador between 1990 to 2020. Over the 30 year period, the probability of dying for both age groups decreased by 2.7 for the 5–9 years old and by 2.2 for the 10–14 years old. The trend in the 5–9 years old was consistently negative, whereas the 10–14 year-old group had more variation. From 1990–1998, the younger age group had a greater or equal probability of dying as the older group, but after 1998 the 10–14 year old group remained consistently higher.

Figure 10 shows the probability of children dying per 1,000 in Uruguay between 1990 to 2020. Over the 30-year period the probability of dying for 5–9 year olds decreased by 0.6 and for 10–14 year olds decreased by 0.8. The trend for both age groups displays a unique pattern. Every three to four years, the probability decreased by approximately 0.1, and then remained consistent for another three to four years before decreasing again by 0.1. This caused the shape of the graph to be stepped. The 10–14 age group had a consistently higher probability of death over the period than the younger group. Both age groups had a low probability at the start of the time frame, and by the end decreasing even closer to zero shows that Uruguay improved this indicator.

V. Ethical Analysis

This section examines ethical perspectives on child labor in Ecuador and Uruguay. The first subsection will analyze what each country has done in the past to alleviate child labor, the work being done presently, and what future goals are. The second section will use the rights approach and the justice approach as ethical frameworks to analyze child labor in Ecuador and Uruguay.

V.1. Attempts to Fight Child Labor

As already mentioned in the literature review section above, according to a report by the Bureau of International Labor Affairs of the U.S. Department of Labor (2023), Ecuador made significant progress in eliminating the worst forms of child labor with passing the Law Against Human Trafficking and Illicit Trafficking of Migrants. While not all people who are trafficked are children, these efforts will help protect those who are from being exploited for child labor. A primary example of this would be young girls who are trafficked into prostitution, along with other children who were going to be forced into other forms of labor, like agriculture. While all forms of child labor are harmful, the worst forms create situations of such egregious abuse that governments are morally and ethically obligated to take action. That is why the many laws and policies that protect children from labor are more broadly about human trafficking. If Ecuador was not proactive against trafficking, the government would lack basic ethical integrity. Because, while although not all forms of child labor are necessarily to worst violations of human rights, all cases of human trafficking are absolute ethical and moral violations.

Additionally, the Ministry of Social and Economic Inclusion (MSEI) also signed cooperative agreements with municipal and provincial governments, civil societies and religious organizations to implement programs against child labor. The MSEI referred to 12,160 children and adolescents vulnerable to child labor and social services. All in all, Ecuador has ratified all key international conventions relating to child labor, and their laws and regulations follow international standards.[2]

Despite these recent improvements, there are still ways Ecuador must improve child labor conditions. As stated in the report by the U.S. Department of Labor (2023), the Ecuadorian

[2] This paragraph is based on U.S. Department of Labor (2023).

Ministry of Labor reported that the resources allocated to labor inspections are insufficient to regulate the informal sector. There are not enough inspectors, transportation, or equipment to conduct inspections in a sector that is already largely unregulated and difficult to control. Additionally, there are special programs required to deal with the highest risk children, such as migrants, LGBTQ+, indigenous, and Afro-Ecuadorian, who are susceptible to the worst forms of child labor. These programs also call for additional time, resources, and funding. Another shortcoming against child labor is the government's failure to conduct a nationwide child labor survey since 2012, which could improve their information and allow for the most productive actions to be taken. Lastly, the Ecuadorian government has not registered some industry-wide trade unions, one being the Trade Union Association of Agricultural and Peasant Workers. Labor unions are a critical part to identifying and reporting child labor as they hold workers and employers accountable.

Moving forward, the Bureau of International Labor Affairs recommends various actions for Ecuador to reduce and ideally eliminate child labor. First, improve referral processes and social services for children who escape labor, especially from the informal sector. More resources should be allocated to inspections and there should be a greater push for the collection of child labor data and investigations into criminal activity. Lastly, ensure laws and regulations are enforced consistently nationwide.

In contrast, Uruguay had made little advancements against the worst forms of child labor. As already mentioned in the literature review section above, the Committee to Prevent and Fight Trafficking in Persons presented a draft of a comprehensive anti-trafficking law to the Parliament and began updating the hazardous work list for children but children in Uruguay continue to be engaged in the worst forms of child labor, including in garbage scavenging and recycling, as well as commercial sexual exploitation, sometimes as a result of human trafficking.

Another problem is that there are several organizations and agencies who are responsible for regulating child labor. The Ministry of Labor and Social Security (MTSS) monitors the overall enforcement of labor laws, regulations, and issuing penalties for violations. The MTSS refers child labor cases to the Institute for Adolescents and Children (INAU), which leads the government's effort to assist children, including those employed and in the informal sector. The INAU then implements policies to prevent child labor, provides training on related issues, evaluates work permits, and supports child welfare.[3]

However, the government does not collect comprehensive labor statistics or implement sufficient programs to prevent and eliminate the worst forms of child labor. In Uruguay, children engage in the worst forms of child labor such as garbage scavenging and commercial sexual exploitation. Also, Uruguay does not yet meet the international standards of prohibition of forced labor. Moving forward, Uruguay needs to adopt a much more serious approach and use the agencies and organizations they have for action. [4]

V.2. Ethical Analysis of Child Labor

Historically, ethicists have developed theories to evaluate the world from ethical perspectives. The Markkula Center for Applied Ethics (2021) outlines a framework for ethical decision-making that includes six distinct ethical lenses that can be examined to assess the morality of an issue. The

[3] This paragraph is based on U.S. Department of Labor (2023).
[4] This paragraph is based on U.S. Department of Labor (2023).

three lenses that apply most directly to child labor are the Rights Lens, the Justice or Fairness Lens, and the Common Good Lens.

The Right Lens assumes that all people have rights and dignity by nature of being human. The most ethical decision is the one that best protects the rights of those impacted. This applies to the case of child labor because children, by the fact of being human, have rights and dignity. Therefore, through the Rights Lens, Ecuador and Uruguay have an obligation to protect children because of these inherent rights. While "rights" and "dignity" may be relatively conceptual, it is reasonable to argue that child labor, especially in their worst forms, which imply dangerous working conditions and exploitation, violate a child's rights. Additionally, the Rights Lens considers that humans have the right to choose freely what they do in life. However, until a certain age, children need guidance to learn how to make the correct choices for themselves.

Furthermore, since primary school is the first formal step of the schooling process, the children who are not enrolled in primary schools are put at a severe disadvantage. It typically is impossible to enroll in secondary school without having attended primary school, where children learn the fundamentals like reading, writing, and basic mathematics. Cycles of poverty start in the early life of children, and being in school is imperative to combat children entering and getting stuck in low wage work and often also harmful work. Hence, children being out of school could also be considered to be a violation of a child's rights.

The Justice or Fairness Lens assumes that the ethical action treats everyone equally, unless there are morally justified reasons to treat some differently. In the case of child labor, there are no morally justifiable reasons that some children live lavishly while others work long hours in dangerous conditions for low wages. Additionally, there are no morally justifiable reasons why adults get to work dignified jobs and not children. This approach asks what is fair? While this approach may be difficult to execute because people may disagree on what is just or fair, it is relatively obvious why child labor is not fair or just. Young people who enter the work force, formally or informally, are often exploited and have little other viable options. In most cases of child labor, the Justice Lens can be applied as it is unfair for children to being exploited.

The Common Good Lens examines which action is best for society. It considers the ethical action to contribute to the community we are a part of. This lens suggests that the interlocking relationships of society are the basis of ethical reasoning. Given that children being out of school is in the long-run also harmful to society (not only to the child workers), child labor is also unethical under the Common Good Lens.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, while child labor still occurs in both Ecuador and Uruguay, the severity and actions taken against it differ between countries. Ecuador has made significantly more policy improvements yet underperforms in school enrollment and has a higher probability of dying among children than Uruguay does. However, the children in Uruguay engage in some of the worst forms of child labor.

Moving forward, a first step that would be productive for both countries is a government initiative to collect data on child labor and related statistics every year. Collecting quantitative facts would allow for clarity on what further action needs to be taken. Additionally, each country needs to be more proactive about finding solutions to regulate the informal sector of labor. This is where many of the worst forms of child labor occur and therefore needs the most attention. Lastly, Ecuador and

Uruguay should more strictly enforce compulsory education and incentivize children to stay in school rather than prematurely joining the work force.

Overall, child labor is not only unethical but also does not set children on a path to achieve their fullest potential as adults. While it may provide cheap, unregulated work, child labor ultimately harms a country by disrupting children's security and nourishment. This often prevents them from becoming well-rounded, productive adults and instead may push them to the periphery of society for a lifetime.

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