

STREET CHILDREN – AN OVERVIEW



by Tyrrell Cooray

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My name is Raja. I have a brother Sujith, older to me and a sister, Renuka younger to me. My mother, brother and sister moved away from my father about ten years ago. They began to live on the streets. I was with my father for a few years but life was intolerable. Then I joined my mother. We all live on the streets now. I have had six years of schooling. My brother had only two. My sister has never been to school and she is now following classes to make her ready to go to school. I am now 15 years and my brother is 16. We cannot get back to school now. We are now learning a trade in a workshop. We will have our own workshop when we grow up. My mother lives on the charity of other people. When we have a little free time after trade-classes we collect old tin cans and sell them to supplement the family income. We have some money we get while we are learning a trade. Last week the few clothes my brother and I had were stolen. I have a step-father and he ill treats us.

Raja, Sujith and Renuka the names are fictitious but the words are those of a child aged 15 years who live on the streets of Colombo, represent the hundreds of street children in Sri Lanka and of the millions in the world.

Accurate and even recorded statistical data are not available to

assess the magnitude of the problem or the proportion of street children, whether they be children on the street – working children who still have family connections of a more or less regular nature or children of the street to whom the street is the home.

For practical purposes the concept of street child is understood as any minor who appears to be without adequate protection in that the street has become his/her usual abode.

Public attention in our country was focussed on the beggar and vagrant problem for the first time in the early part of the century. According to Sessional Paper XLIX of 1906 there were nearly 700 homeless vagrants mainly of South Indian origin who had been displaced from the estates. The first House of Detention was established on 1 April 1913. In the year 1941 on inter-ministerial conference was held to discuss the beggar problem which was they described as a "social nuisance". An investigation into the problem was mounted in the middle of 1941 but was abruptly terminated in view of urgent matters connected with the war effort.

The House of Detention came to be administered by the Department of Social Services which was established on the recommendations of the Social Services Commission of 1947.

A study done by Redd Barna in 1986 on the situation of 228 street children in three main areas in the city of Colombo where street children concentrate showed that 63 per cent of them belonged to the 11-15 years age group. Most of the children were in the critical school going age of 6 to 15 years.

FINDINGS

Some of the main findings of the survey are (1) the majority of the street children are drawn into the street world from the poverty stricken areas of the city and its suburbs. (2) the problem in the family environment and related economic difficulties have pushed a considerable number of children into the streets. (3) most of the parents were engaged in extremely low income jobs that do not provide them with the capacity to support families (4) large number of street children have not a formal education (5) many street children are engaged in occupations which provide them with meagre daily income for which they had to toil hard (6) many children want to learn and acquire skills and engage in productive professions (7) many of them want to learn and engage in productive occupations.

A survey mounted by the Colombo Municipal Council in April 1988 showed a total of 1651 persons on the streets of Colombo of which number 1148 were single individuals while 503 were in family units.

There is no legal provision in Sri Lanka which entails a prohibition on begging. However some of the provisions of the Vagrants Ordinance implies a prohibition on begging. The Ordinance says "every person being able to maintain himself by work or other means, but who shall wilfully refuse or neglect so to do, and shall wander

abrad or place himself in any public place, street, highway, court, or passage to beg or gather alms, or cause or procure, or encourage any of his family so to do, excepting priests and pilgrims in performance of their religious vows shall be deemed an idle and disorderly persons. Such persons are liable to be punished."

PROJECTS

Agencies and projects in different parts of the world address the issue of street children and street youth in different ways. In our own country The House of Detention at Gangodawila and Ridiyagama (Dept. of Social Services) and the House of Detention formerly at Koggala and presently at Hikkaduwa (Dept. of Probation and Child Care) are the only government sponsored institutions offering residential facilities for those who fall into the category of vagrant. The definition of the term vagrant under the provisions of the House of Detention Ordinance is (a) any person found asking for alms (b) any persons not being physically able to earn, or being unwilling to work for, his own livelihood and having no visible means of subsistence. A non - governmental agency - Badulla Social Services District Committee offer a sort of night shelter and rehabilitation facilities for street families.

The House of Detention at Hikkaduwa is exclusively for children while Gangodawila offers facilities for children and older groups. These institutions offer rehabilitation measures to those who come into residence with a view to integrating them into the wider society.

Save the Children Fund (UK), Redd Barna (Norwegian Save the Children Fund), the Colombo City



Mission a group of religious nuns (the Sisters of Perpetual Help) and the Dept of Probation and Child Care Services offer non-residential facilities for street children. Redd Barna the City Mission and DPCCS work in Colombo, UK Save work in Colombo and Kandy and the religious nuns work in Negombo. Activities include day care for under-fives, literacy classes for non-schoolers and school drop-outs, skills development for older children, health care, and income generation. Programmes are designed and implemented by these agencies as re-educational strategies to alter attitudes of dependency and wean these children away from negative ways of life. A way out is offered to hundreds of helpless victims of circumstances. A fair chance is given to them to escape permanently from their current state of dependency and shape their own future. Another objective of these programmes is to change the attitude of harsh indifference of the wider society and get a humane response.

These programmes are based on the voluntary participation of street people and there is no coercion. The facilities are provided on a non-residential basis. They use an enabling strategy based on participation. The beneficiaries of the project will not receive charity but will become partners in the form of aided help - help. Of course, the starting point are the immediate needs of the child - food, shelter, protection, care and an opportunity for a better future.

An attempt is made to answer the requirements of the child in the most urgent areas including safety, health, nutrition, emotional devel-

opment and vocational training. Access is facilitated to schooling and medical assistance. The project would teach the children an honest job and enable them to earn a reasonable wage that would carry the child into adulthood. These programmes aim to develop in the youngest the capacity to judge the adult world around him/her critically.

These agencies offer shelter, care, education and training, in various combinations. They are aware that these street children and street youth have been deprived - perhaps cruelly cheated - of some aspects of normal childhood and early development and an attempt is made to restore to these victims of circumstances in some measure those aspects.

These combinations are part of the total attempt to assist and guide the family in the building of a dwelling with regular employment and a home of their own.

SIZE OF THE PROBLEM

What is evident from studies and from the experience of people working with street families is that this is a mounting problem. The children inhabit the streets in search of money to support themselves and frequently to assist in the support of their families as well. Poverty, difficult living conditions in the home and family fragmentation could be identified as the main causes of their being on the streets.

The majority of street children have families. But these families are unable or unwilling to meet the basic needs of their offsprings. As a consequence the older boys and the girls must leave their home to look for some way to produce income. They have to spend long hours working and living on the

streets. These children have their own troubles. It is not comfortable to sleep on the hard, dirty pavement. While they are on the streets they are without the protection of the family and the community. They are therefore, very vulnerable not only to economic exploitation but they are exposed to sexual exploitation as well and serious physical and moral dangers. The situation of the girls in its scope and gravity are more pronounced than that of the boys.

These marginalized children are often seen as petty thieves, hooligans, good – for nothings, ruffians and parasites. This may be true in certain cases but certainly not true in all cases. They are struggling for survival, they are carving for affection, they have no aim in life and they are trying to identify with their parents, family and community. Street children and street youth live from hand to mouth, from one moment to the next. As a result some of the areas in which they are totally lacking are respect for property, self discipline and the idea of planning over time. On the streets these children meet their peers and this allows compensation for emotional and other forms of deprivation. The street allows a variety of experiences. All this means that these children mature too quickly for their age and emotional level.

The removal of a child from his/her accustomed environment can be a response. This has been a conventional response at that. To separate a child from his home and community and to place him/her in a situation of total dependency can only increase his/her social isolation. Moreover he/she will lose even the street skills that help him/her make his/her way in a harsh and often hostile world. He/she will return to the same situation in which he/she was and he/she will be less



able to deal with it. Marginalized children need more access to more of the community and its resources.

An alternative response is to discover ways to help street children lead a productive and healthy life in their own environment. Their ties to family and community could be reinforced and this would break their isolation. They could be provided with the means and the services necessary to develop their own initiatives and build a future for themselves.

OUTCOMES

It is a productive exercise to make provision in all programmes for the children to be heard and to participate to some degree in the planning of activities for them. This course of action helps them in breaking down their sense of isolation and allows them a place for them to develop their own initiatives. The thrust then is not to direct the children but gently guide him into positive opportunities and this is what any wise parent would do.

There are people who care about these children. There are people who believe that all children irrespective of where they are have a right to a happy childhood. The work these people do is demanding. This work demands considerable interest time and dedication. Work with street people require a rare degree of courage, initiative and perseverance. Any programme, strategy or mechanism established to help these children must enjoy credibility by both the community in which they are situated and the children they serve.

Work with street children in many parts of the world not including our

own country has shown that a community – based approach is possible – an approach that helps children develop and succeed in the context of their own families and communities. There is no need to be bound to a narrow model. There is a great deal of flexibility possible. Of course, within diversity these are commonalities.

We would identify some outcomes one would expect to be produced in work with street children. These outcomes could be grouped as (1) physical outcomes such as (i) improvement in general health obtained mainly through adequate nutrition and access to curative and preventive health care, and (ii) access to shelter and clothing (2) emotional outcomes – access to adults accepted by the child and who serve as positive role – models to whom the child could relate and with whom he/she could establish feelings of affection and respect for adults who would stimulate his/her self-esteem and identity. (3) educational/intellectual outcomes such as (i) school attendance until at least functional literacy and other skills for independent living are attained. (ii) development of a critical capacity sufficient for questioning and judging reality and judging the world around him and finally (4) economic outcomes – improvement of income through organized work while providing protection against exploitation and moral dangers with the added result of contributions by the child to the improvement in the material quality of life of the family.

The thrust in a programme strategy for street children is to help children take themselves from marginalization to full participation and personal development.

Street children have to be given a chance to help create themselves.

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The question is do we have to offer services to these young people or do we have to serve them?

Security and a healthy environment coupled with proper understanding of their problems can make a street child or street youth to be indistinguishable from his more fortunate contemporaries. It is said that when nature and nurture are reconciled, youngsters with the grimmest histories can show an astonishing power of recuperation.

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