

TOWARDS PROGRAMMING FOR STREET CHILDREN

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INDIA

A PAPER PRESENTED AT THE SEMINAR ON

"STREET CHILDREN IN THE THIRD WORLD. ON THEORY AND PRACTICE"

April 20-21st 1989, Amsterdam University
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Most of the major cities in developing countries are witnesses to street children. They are everywhere either selling peanuts, sweets, newspapers, flowers, cleaning parked cars or keeping a watch on them, begging, working in tea shops, garages and rag picking. There are also shoe blacks and coolies and in some instances victims of prostitution and drug peddlers. We are so used to seeing these children that it does not bother us, we take them for granted as part of the urban scenario. Some of them are destitute or abandoned who spend most of their time on the street and also sleep on streets and in public places, others live with their families either in slums, shanty towns or pavement; others drift between the two alternatives, occasionally leaving home for a short while to live on the streets or vice versa. Majority of the street children are working children who are thoroughly exploited and oppressed. These children do not even feature in any statistics. Therefore they are not within the concerns of any legislations neither subjects of any policies nor are they beneficiaries of any programmes.

THE ISSUES

The children of South Asia share a common fate. They come from primarily an agro-based economy with marked rural poverty; a populace with low literacy and a high dependency ratio; children below 16 years constitute over 40% of the population; a significant adult underemployment and unemployment ^{and} increasing (child-labour).

Statistics of the extent of child labour in the region do not speak the truth. In India the official figures are 18 million whereas

they may be anywhere between 44 to 100 million. Pakistan's official estimates are 3.2% of the population whereas according to ILO it could be over one-third of the adult population (highest child-adult ratio after Indonesia & Bangladesh). No national surveys have been conducted to gauge the extent of child labour in Bangladesh and Srilanka. Whereas in Nepal child labour is not even admitted to be a problem. The reasons for this discrepancy are (a) due to what "officially" is considered "work". If the definition does not include children working in the informal sector it completely ignores ^{large} percentage of working children population. (b) by ignoring or not admitting we have child labour it does not become an issue to be tackled by the state. (The reason for discussing child labour is because it is closely linked to street children issue).

Last year while I was doing a study on the Situational Analyses of Street & Working Children in the Union Territory of Delhi, as part of the study I interviewed number of local administration officials regarding the extent of child labour and estimates of street & working children in Delhi. In the labour commissioner's office an official stated there are no working children in Delhi. Before I could react to this information a boy of ten years walked into the room and served us tea. Soon after the child left the room he modified his statement by saying, 'officially there are no child workers'. Similarly while talking to officials in other departments regarding street children the common reaction was "street children-who are they"? There are no national estimates in the region as to how many street children there are. There are some statistics with regard to the capital cities of India and Srilanka. The recent study quoted earlier, estimates there are

100,000 street children in Delhi.*¹ Whereas the Srilankan Child Care Co-ordinating Committee survey estimates there are around 2000-3000 street children in Colombo city.

The principle causes of child abandonment and in many cases of child neglect, abuse and exploitation are certainly related directly to the rapid advance of industrial growth and the persistence of rural and urban poverty. The cycle for the family is usually migration to the city profound urban slum poverty, and family disintegration beginning first with the abandonment of the family by the father. Subsequent consequences are the pressures on the deserted women, dependency of abandoned mothers on several male partnerships and the rejection of these mother's children by the so called "step fathers". Violence is common in the lives of children whose families are trying to survive under any or all these conditions, and is a principle reason for children fleeing their home in favour of the streets.

Ten years old Salim is a new entrant to Delhi. It is little over a year since he ran off from home. If you ask him about home and why he ran away, he becomes pensive, his eyes become troubled and you feel you should not have asked. Salim revealed that when he was around five his father went away and never returned. His mother married again, he has a younger brother, one step brother and sister. Salim never went to school he was forced to work at a

*1. Ministry of Social Welfare, Government of India is in the process of conducting seven studies on Situational Analysis of Street children in seven major cities of the country.

cycle repair shop. He does not know how much he earned, his step father collected the wages. Salim said "there was never enough to eat; I was always hungry. My step-father drinks and he then starts beating me and my mother. One day he hit me so much that I fainted. My mother kept crying and saying why don't you go away. A week later I boarded a train and I did not know where it was going. My only thought was of getting away from home. It brought me to Delhi".

PROBLEMS FACED BY CHILDREN

(A) Harassment

Street children who are self-employed such as porters, vendors, rag pickers and shoe blacks are harassed by police and municipal authorities because they do not have licences to work.* Money is also extracted from them on regular basis, of course by paying the officials the children get some respite from their harassment. The other major problem faced by street children is that they are often nabbed by police for crimes they have not committed. They are mercilessly thrashed and sometimes put in lock-ups under charges of vagrancy, gambling or street brawls or sent to remand homes. Street child vendors are also harassed by adult vendors who do not appreciate children taking their business. Sometimes they are shooed and beaten off from 'choice spots'.

(B) Drug Abuse

A street child is an easy victim for drug peddlers. They earn and so have the money to spend on drugs. The peddler's modus

*The Child Labour Laws in the region pertains only to children working in the formal sector.

operandi is to befriend the children when they seem to be low and unhappy. They persuade them to take one puff of the smack telling them it would make them feel better. After taking drugs which are given free by the peddler for a week or so, the child gets hooked on to it. Consumption of drugs makes the child lethargic and so his earning capacity decreases but his desire for drugs keeps increasing. Ultimately he is forced to peddle drugs to get his daily quota of smack or hashish. Some children are also drawn into taking drugs by their peers who encourage them to try it. For Vijay a ten year old ragpicker, that is what happened "my friends used to take smack, they once told me to try it. They said I would feel very nice and I would get the sensation that I am floating and everything would look beautiful. I tried it and I felt good, so I kept borrowing from them, until they stopped giving me. But then I was desperate so they showed me the man who sells it. Today I find it difficult to give up drugs".

(C) Other Difficult Situations

Street children are easy victims of prostitution. They are forced into it by adults, who are gang leaders and sometimes pose as guardians of these children. Some of them get entangled with the underworld thugs. If a child is strong he/she is able to withstand the pressure, or if he/she is lucky to get timely help, they survive. Otherwise the child dies a slow death unnoticed, forgotten.²

STREET GIRLS

The life of a street girl is as difficult as of a boy. But she is more vulnerable than a boy because of her gender. Her life

on the street is twice more exploitative and oppressive than of a boy.

When she is very small she tries to get away from being singled out by dressing up as a boy. Street girl's freedom comes to an end by the time she is 10 years old.

LIFE ON THE STREET

Independence and freedom are the two things tressured most by these children but in the case of a girl it is snatched away from her by child molesters and pimps. She becomes a victim of prostitution. To save themselves (as long as they can) from this plight most often young girls attach themselves to single women with children. But here to we have instances of women using the young girls to pimp for them and later force them into prostitution. These girls are of use value to pimps and brothels until they are 17-18 years of age after which they are not prized so much. The poor girls by then are completely shattered emotionally and physically a total wreck.

Identifying destitute girls children are a problem. It is difficult to find them alone. Usually they move about in groups for reasons of security. Late in the evenings girls are more visible in commercial areas, market places and stations. One can only presume they are into prostitution. In terms of numbers they seem to be much lower than street boys. 'According to Tahmina Saeed's article "A Prohibited Reality" published in Ideas Forum, she mentions that in Bangladesh child prostitution in very much a fact. The hotels in cities hire pimps to wait at bus stands, railway stations and harbour to lure girl children, who seem to be unaccompanied and are runaways, promising them good employment, they are taken to hotels

or brothels. Tahmina Saeed goes on to report that on a normal day these little girls are used by two to ten men. When they contact venereal disease they are thrown back on to the streets. If they get pregnant abortions are performed or the babies are sold to baby racketeers.³

This story is similar to what takes place to destitute abandoned street girls in India, Srilanka, Nepal or Pakistan. The situation of street girls who may be living with families or guardians are equally precarious. Since they spend a good number of hours on the street they are faced not only with police & municipal officials harassments, but also dangers of being sexually harassed.

Kamla thirteen year old pretty looking rag picker used to be constantly teased and accosted by men while she used to pick rags at one of the central market. The companions used to run off leaving her behind. Once a man saved her from the other men. He befriended her and soon after Kamla was not to be seen. Her friends mentioned that she had got married and gone off with her husband. Kamla is yet another child exploited by unscrupulous adults. Her grandmother (with whom she used to live) was not upset with the incident, for her it was a relief.

In South Central Asia the status of women is deplorable. They are discriminated and suffer social injustices. In a society where male children are prized the situation of girl children are pathetic, being unwanted they are seen more as burdens to the

families. In situations where the family is broken the brunt of child abuse & neglect are borne by the girls. There are instances of sexual abuse by step fathers or lovers of their mother. It is only when the child has no other recourse but to escape from her family that she comes on to the streets.

The information and knowledge regarding street girls are so limited that there is a great need to do situational analyses of street girls in major cities of the world. It would help in understanding the magnitude of the problem and also for future policy formulation and programming purposes.

THE CHALLENGE

At Global level, the issue of street children first appeared in the wake of the International Year of the child in 1979. The International year of the child called upon governments and nations to put children at the centre of the world's concern. The conditions of street children by its scale, its extremes of suffering and above all by its very familiarity is symbolic of society's neglect. They are a mirror of modern urban life, whose nature they accurately reflect. It is this which makes them so disturbing and compels action. Our responsibility towards them is unavoidable.

While discussing street children issues and what needs to be done to draw them into the mainstream of our society, we have to first relook at street children and our perceptions about them. Perhaps a number of stereo typed images we have about them have to be first erased. Unless we see them as they are i.e. as hard working useful citizens of our society not dependents or parasites of

society but exploited, oppressed child workers who through their cheap labour and sweat are actually subsidizing the cost of living of city dwellers. Once we have cleared ourselves with this misconceptions, our plans would be realistic.

Traditionally while planning programmes for street children we were concerned about disciplining, protecting and controlling them as they were perceived as deviants and delinquents. Therefore, we adopted institutional care approach. A number of 'homes' were established which were actually smaller versions of prisons with added facilities like education, vocational training and medical care. Studies have proved beyond doubt that institutional care is not the best although it has some positive elements it has not proved as an effective strategy to solve the issue of destitute, abandoned & abused children.

It is important that we develop an alternative approach to institutional care if street children are to benefit from it.

NATIONAL GOVERNMENT RESPONSES

Within the national governments there are often special ministries/departments which are assigned the responsibilities for programmes and services for destitute children. Quite often these programmes and services are focussed on orphaned and abandoned children and delinquents. The emphasis in approach of these programmes and services is generally institutional. No efforts are generally made to develop services for prevention of destitution or abandonment or even delinquency. Street children as a category because of their special situations, characteristics, needs, do not get included in any of the welfare or development programmes and as a result these

children do not have access even to basic services required for protection, growth and development. Therefore, the ministries which have the mandate for reaching out to abandoned, orphaned or delinquent children ought to broaden their focus of their programmes so that street children can participate and avail the benefit of such interventions initiated and supported by the government. Because of the very special situations and needs of the street children, such ministries should consider even developing special or exclusive programmes for street children which could be implemented with the active cooperation of State Directorates of Social Welfare, Municipal Corporations and NGO's ^{who} are actually involved in service delivery programmes with the active support of local governments and urban bodies. Such a cooperation is all the more important particularly since the services that are envisaged for street children would be primarily non-institutional and community/street based.

As interventions for street and working children will be new, both in terms of the group of street children per se and in terms of approaches and strategies, the national ministries should set up mechanisms for effective monitoring of programmes and activities for street and working children in their respective countries.

Policies and programmes focussed on destitute children developed and implemented by the national/state governments, especially the institutional programmes efforts should be considered for adapting existing schemes, for building access for street children to services and facilities that are provided by child care institutions, which at the movement, given the policy and the traditional approaches,

might be focussed exclusively on destitute children and more specially for children residing in these institutions. Also the existing child care institutions and other institutional programmes could be motivated and facilitated to develop outreach or extension services which could be initiated at the community levels (especially slums) so that interventions are available both for the prevention of street children and welfare of the children who are already on the street.

MUNICIPAL CORPORATIONS OF METROPOLITAN/CITIES

The street children are primarily a phenomena of the metropolitan cities. While the causes of family disintegration and subsequent child destitution are mainly rural based and more specifically rural and urban poverty based, yet such destitute children end up in urban areas and metropolitan cities and struggle for survival and livelihood, engaged in various trades and occupations which are street based.

Based on the experiences in other developing countries and more specifically the city administrations of metropolitan cities of these countries, it has been established that the most effective and relevant way the city administration could intervene is by identifying existing NGO's both those who are directly involved in programmes and services for street children, and those who are involved in programmes generally for children in the cities, support and facilitate them for formulating approaches and services for street children.

Therefore, while the municipal corporations could initiate development of data base with the help of secondary data and special studies if necessary to assess the magnitude and dimensions of the

problems of street children, the actual service delivery should be undertaken by NGO's.

The following steps could be considered by the Municipal Corporations:

1. Municipal Corporation should get to know the magnitude and dimensions of the problem of street children in the city, either through compilation of secondary data or by initiating or supporting studies on street children in the city.
2. While it will be useful to arrive at more or less the exact number of street children in the city, however, it is important that major locations which are known to have high concentrations of street children and major occupation/activities which are known to engage street children ought to be identified to facilitate formulation of focussed interventions.
3. The Corporation's institutions providing basic services - health, education, recreation etc. should be so sensitised with a view to adapt them for facilitating access to these by street children.
4. If the institutional services even with efforts are not able to reach the target groups of street children, then efforts should be undertaken to set up such services in locations and make them available at a time when they are effectively accessible to street children.
5. Facilities that are set up by the corporations for the welfare of the urban poor-slum dwellers, pavement dwellers etc. such as community centres, school buildings, health centres, hospitals, parks, etc. should be made available for street children and programmes for street children.

6. In the monitoring mechanisms developed by the Municipal Corporations to periodically assess the delivery of basic services to the urban poor, street children should be formally stated as one of the priority target groups among the urban poor.
7. As many of the street children are engaged in a considerable way in ragpicking, street side eating places, as shoe-blacks, porters/coolies etc. efforts should be undertaken by the municipal corporations for facilitating such occupations and preventing exploitation and harassment of children engaged in such trades.
8. As among the larger group of street children, the girls are the more vulnerable and the exploited ones and have relatively a greater danger of being used in the prostitution trade, the appropriate departments of the corporations should be advised to facilitate identifying young girls on the streets so that appropriate interventions are developed for referring them to NGO's working in this area.

Child welfare institutions and other programmes and services for children in general, which come under the Municipal Corporations should be so adopted so that programmes and services could be designed to facilitate interventions for prevention of street children and for initiating community based and street based programmes for the welfare of street children.

NON GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONS ROLE

While there are a few NGO's who are involved directly in programmes and services for street children, there are several more NGO's who are involved in programmes for children in general, who need to be sensitised so that within their overall concerns for children,

they are led to developing specific interventions suited to the needs of street children. Hence, facilities and opportunities should be developed, for the orientation of NGO's personnel for understanding the special problems of street children, so that a greater awareness is created among them, and a suitable attitude alongwith relevant knowledge and skills are communicated for equipping them appropriately for working effectively with street children.

Recently there has been mushrooming of projects for street children. It is the 'in thing' and therefore we have all kinds of organisations and projects involved in programming for street children. There have been instances where organisations have chalked out territories for their interventions and are in direct competition with others in getting maximum number of children involved in their project. The methods used are questionable. This has risen because there is a lot of money available for street children projects. The issue then becomes "Projects" and its survival, children come second. In situations like this it becomes very important to the organisation to have an x number of children and to run activities -

- (a) for their security
- (b) to prove to the donor agencies that they have 'numbers' and 'activities'.

The importance of building up close relationship with the children and getting to know their life history, helping them out in emotional crisis becomes a low priority. To motivate children to keep in touch with their families and if possible to send them back home as well as counsel the parents, facilitate in alleviating the family crisis, is another area that is not tackled.

The attitudes of persons involved with these children and their perception about them determines their approach and strategies in programming for street children. If the perception is that these children are delinquents or are potential delinquents the attitude is to make them "good children". Unconsciously one would start disciplining the children, put controls on their life styles etc. One also becomes very preoccupied with "planning activities" most often the traditional way, so much so one misses out on what the child really wants.

Working with street children has made me realise that principles of 'peoples participation' can be applied very effectively. The children are able to discuss and plan the services they require. We have organised Bal Sabhas (Children's council) where all the children we are involved with (earlier we used to have only representatives but later the children decided all would attend) attend the meeting; during which various issues which are of primary importance to them are discussed.

'Butterflies' is trying to develop a cooperative model/approach in programming with street children. All the services right from food, shelter, education, counselling, trade skills, health, saving, loans, work to legal aid will be on the basis of membership to the cooperative. We have started the process in one contact point and based on its success we will expand it to cover other areas.

PROGRAMMING FOR STREET GIRLS

If the child is very young and is a destitute abandoned it would be advisable if the child can be placed with foster parents. The life of a street girl being so short the interventions have to

be made very early before further damage is done to her psychologically and physically. If the girl wishes to go back home she must be sent back but after ascertaining if the parents would welcome her back. It would also be important to find out if the family situations are conducive enough for this child to live in. If the family is going through a crisis financially or it is breaking up, efforts have to be made to help the family tide over its crisis and until such time the child would have to be placed in foster care/short stay homes.

The present institutional care services are much to be desired. The personnel in these institutions perceive these children as immoral and therefore are virtually treated as deviants. These homes are no better than little prisons. Teenage girls when they attain 18 years of age, the authorities arrange marriages for them. Some kind of enquiries are of course made about the potential grooms, but one wonders what motivates these men to marry these girls. What happens to them after their marriage one does not know. The case file is closed after one year of the girl being "rehabilitated".

Short stay homes may be an answer, where the girls could come and stay for a period until they decide what they want to do and give them all the support they require during that process. It must be a place where they are respected and not made to feel that they have committed a crime. The personnel managing the Short Stay Homes must be extremely sensitive and accept the children as they are, help to heal their emotional wounds and facilitate in their growth and development.

It would be equally important to run non-formal education classes where they are taught not only the three R's but information is also shared on various issues like health, family planning, services available for street children, legal rights etc. Facilities must also be there to train the girls in trade skills that have a market value. The Short Stay Homes should also have facilities for legal help, counselling, saving schemes, loans and job placements. Girls who do not want to stay in the Homes should still be allowed to avail of the facilities. An outreach programme would have to be built in the system to reach out to as many girls as possible on the street.

Whenever we talk of street children we usually mean boys. Boys are more visible and they also seem easier to work with. Therefore, we tend to ignore girl children. Involvement with street girls cannot be at superficial level, the very fact they are the most vulnerable, the involvement and relationship has to be on a long term basis. We may be able to reach out to only small numbers but how many of us are willing to commit ourselves to these girls children?

CREATION OF PUBLIC AWARENESS

It is very important that public i.e. parents, communities, educationists, police and children are made aware of the existing National Child Labour Act(s) and its implications.

Moreover the public at large and the communities are not aware of the phenomenon of street children in general and much less about the special characteristics and needs of street children. With the help of mass Media and community education programmes, a greater

awareness and sensitivity needs to be built in the public and the communities. Such an awareness, it is hoped will contribute to a greater participation by public and communities in programmes and services for street children, and also for the community to play a greater role in preventing the rapid growth of this problem by giving community support to 'families at risk'.

Although it is important to have media focus on the phenomena of street children, the media also has a responsibility in not distorting the issues or glorifying and romanticising the plight of street children. Of recent there has been a spurt of media coverage- newspaper writeups, T.V. documentaries, Audio visuals and cinema, and also research studies on the subject. What has it led to-greater awareness of street children & their problems? greater sensitivity? greater benefits for the children? The children are still where they are on the streets. The public still ignore them, the governments do not consider street children a major issue and if they do the perception still remains of the street child being a delinquent, a deviant.

Media persons and researchers have a responsibility in seeing that something positive comes out of their efforts. Their responsibility does not end with documenting their lives and analysing their situations.

CONCLUSION

We need to respond to the problem of street children now, before it grows in magnitude and becomes difficult to handle. The street children are children first and hence need all our sympathy and support in their process of development and growth and their

struggle to be respectable and contributing citizens. The national government, the state government, the municipal corporations and NGO's have a very specific role to play and to contribute to the improvement of the quality of life of these children. So does every member of the public have a responsibility to contribute meaningfully to improve the lot of these children. We need to act now.

We must remember the children on the street are there not as a choice but due to adult irresponsibility. They struggle for survival and opportunities in harsh urban environments with a hope to become one day acceptable citizens of the country. The challenge is to all of us to create an environment and conditons that will help them grow.

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