

Written Statement submitted by the Association Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII

Title: Restoring Dignity of Children Living and/or Working on the Street. Recommendations drawn from a grassroots experience.

The Association Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII (APG23) is on the forefront in the fight against the root causes that generate the phenomenon of children living and/or working on the streets, and in offering responses aiming to restore their dignity.

APG23 warmly welcomes the initiative taken by the Human Rights Council to tackle during the Annual Full Day Meeting on the Rights of the Child at its 16th Regular Session, the issue of children living and/or working on the street.

This phenomenon is one of the most complex, difficult and worrying challenges of our century. In spite of the difficulty to quantify the exact number of children that live on the streets, UNICEF estimates a population of nearly 120 million children aged between 6 and 24 years¹. The phenomenon of street children is a real social emergency involving cities all over the planet, created by the concurrence of factors that vary according to the geographical areas, cultures and histories of countries. In developed countries, behind this phenomenon, there are stories of social ills and loss of values, such as hardship and family breakdown, drugs, alcohol, migration and social displacement. In cities of developing countries, the causes are mostly linked to extreme poverty, an unregulated process of urbanization, mass exodus due to famine, war and drought, and a high mortality rate of parents due to scourges such as AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis that overwhelm and stretch the “extended family” coping mechanism.

Children on the street are in different proportions boys and girls, girls being even more vulnerable to violence, sexual abuse and exploitation. Their human rights are systematically violated on daily basis. There are children who spend time on the streets but go back to their families for spending the night, and children who live entirely on the streets without any adult supervision or care. For this reason, any definition of this phenomenon risks to be partial: the international community has widely accepted the useful definitions proposed by Amnesty International of “children on the street” and “children of the street”, but these definitions should be taken cautiously. In fact, it should be clarified that “street” is a situation in which such children live a certain period of their life but it does not constitute their identity. They are just children, with their dignity and rights, and for no reason they should be labelled as “delinquents” or “beggars”. Too often stigmatisation is attached to the condition of being on the street.

APG23 has a consolidated worldwide experience of sharing life with children living and/or working on the street, especially in Africa and Latin America. One of the longest practices has been rooted in Zambia.

Zambia has a population of about 13 million people², almost half of which is under 15 years of age and 81.5% lives on less than \$2 per day³. Scourges such as malaria, tuberculosis and AIDS mow down the population. The prevalence rate of HIV among the adult population is 14.3%⁴, confirming AIDS as one of the reasons for the rapid growth in the number of orphans. The last census of 2006 with evaluation criteria that take into account only the children who live on the street, was about 13,000 youth, but with an alarming warning of a host of youngsters at risk. The phenomenon of orphans and street children in Zambia has crippled even the “extended family”, the traditional model of social solidarity that has always been the Africa’s way of facing the emergency of orphans.

For several years the government has provided free access to primary school, but nothing comes of it if the child is deprived of necessities such as uniforms, shoes, notebooks, and parents are asked to pay extra-fees to schools⁵. These costs are still financial barriers for those families who already stretch to secure one meal a day, so parents keep their children at home, where they are useful in small chores, including walking around the streets with a bowl on the head, improvising themselves as sellers of fruit, peanuts or pancakes. By doing so, the road reveals itself immediately as a resource from which to carry on and after that street life is easily embraced. At the first moment of trouble at home (from the death of a parent to a trivial quarrel), children may be dangling in the street looking for a handout, to live by their wits, to spend the night out, to inhale “glue” to suppress hunger, to suffer sexual abuse, victims of a ruthless environment and unscrupulous people who rob their human dignity and childhood.

¹ UNICEF Report 2008.

² UNFPA Overview 2009.

³ UNDP Report 2009.

⁴ Zambia Country Report submitted to UNGASS, 31 March 2010.

⁵ For example, the PTA fees (Parents Teachers Association).

For all these reasons, measures should be taken "to remove the root causes", for example not only by acting directly on the children, providing for basic needs (food, shelter, education), but also by working on family relationships and social networks, trying to analyze and respond to distress, reconstructing the breakdown that has caused it and together building a better future. APG23 fieldworks with street children in Ndola, Copperbelt province of Zambia, since 1997, with the ultimate goal of restoring their dignity, promoting and supporting their growth and self-realization as responsible and economically independent citizens.

The APG23, through the programmes of Cicetekelo Youth Project (CYP) and Rainbow Street Children Service, focuses on capacity building for vulnerable children and other vulnerable households to uplift their well being and attain self-reliance, and subsequently contribute positively to national development. In line with its mission statement of working to restore and maintain the dignity of children on the street through education, economic, spiritual, social and moral development, the programme carries out several interventions that range from educational support (in terms of education in community, government and private schools, supported by outreach programme in schools) and professional skills training (3 years courses in carpentry, auto-mechanic and agriculture), to psychosocial counselling, skills training, nutritional support, sport and recreation activities and medical support that includes also health education, especially on HIV and AIDS, family counselling and empowerment. Reintegration of children into their families is also a fundamental aspect undertaken by the programme in line with its objectives. The strategy adopted by APG23 can be summarized as follows:

1. Intervention in compounds for preventing new children ending on the street in collaboration with the Development Residential Committee, District Social Welfare and other social communities;
2. Day and night monitoring outreach programmes on the streets;
3. Daily care and listening centres to provide first assistance, counselling and building-up relations of trust;
4. Short-term residential centre in order to rebuild the bonds with the original family and assess the social situation;
5. Integration in long term residential or day care facilities of children whose education cannot be guarantee by the family of origin;
6. Activities for improving the economic status of families, e.g. micro-credit programmes, Income Generation Activities, etc;
7. Social and family reintegration.

Most institutions in Zambia dealing with children on the streets have focused on the symptoms of this phenomenon, rather than on the root causes of it. APG23 has adopted the methodologies, technologies and strategies which focus on prevention, assisting and supporting vulnerable children in their families/homes and local communities with the intent of reducing the likelihood of them getting and living on the streets. Thanks to its long experience, APG23 has been able to carry out an analysis of the situation of street children. The conclusion of such analysis is that the target interventions should address the root causes of the phenomenon, which is mainly as a result of high poverty levels and breakdown of social structures. Such interventions should not be only immediate and on the child or youth, but should act at 360°, allowing wider eradication of the causes of hardship.

In light of this grassroots level experience, APG23 would like to suggest to States the following recommendations in formulating policies tackling the phenomenon of street children:

1. All States should guarantee the right to education by making primary education in public schools compulsory and free of charge (including uniforms, shoes, books etc.);
2. Any intervention of Governments to remove children from the street should be taken with the principle and aim to restore their dignity and protect their rights, and not with the logic of a security approach;
3. Family interventions need to include medium and long term plans to make sure that parents/guardians are supported and do not find themselves alone at any moment, putting at risk the healthy growth of their children;

4. In case of children without parental care, States should follow the proposals of the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children and respect, in particular, the two basic principles of necessity and appropriateness;
5. Any policy on street children should have a multisectoral approach, listening first to the children themselves;
6. Each State should undertake a comprehensive country study on the phenomenon of children living and/or working on the street in order to have complete and disaggregated data as well as qualitative information on the root causes and to be able to address better intervention strategies.