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Written Joint Statement submitted by: Association Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII; Association Points-Coeur; Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul; Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd; International Catholic Child Bureau; International Institute of Mary Our Help of the Salesians of Don Bosco; New Humanity; International Volunteerism Organization for Women, Education and Development

Title: Preventing the Phenomenon of Children Living and/or Working on the Street.

The Association Comunità Papa Giovanni XXIII, the Association Points-Coeur, the Company of the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, the International Catholic Child Bureau, the International Institute of Mary Our Help of the Salesians of Don Bosco, New Humanity, and the International Volunteerism Organization for Women, Education and Development warmly welcome 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.

In many regions of the world, the phenomenon of children living and/or working on the street is unabated, while it is emerging in others where it was not known before. This phenomenon is one of the most complex, difficult and worrying challenges of our century, a real social emergency in cities all over the planet, created by a concurrence of factors that vary according to the geographic areas, cultures and histories of countries.

UN defines children living and/or working on the street as “boys and girls for whom ‘the street’ (including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) has become their home and/or source of livelihood, and who are inadequately protected or supervised by responsible adults”¹. It is also possible to distinguish between “children on the street” (children who spend time on the street but go back to their families for spending the night) and “children of the street” (children who live entirely on the street without any adult supervision or care). However, such definitions should be taken cautiously. In fact, it should be clarified that while “the street” is a situation in which the children live a certain period of their lives, 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.

Children working and/or living on the street are in different proportions boys and girls, girls being even more vulnerable to violence, sexual abuse and exploitation. Although children on the street are a well-known reality in many countries, it is difficult to provide a clear picture of them. These children spend intermittent periods with their families, or move from one city to another, depending on the time of year and their circumstances. Since many do not have identity papers or birth certificates, there are no official statistics on their number. For any given country, figures on children living and/or working on the street may oscillate with the source of information. In spite of the above-mentioned difficulties, UNICEF estimates a population of nearly 120 million children aged between 6 and 24 years².

Looking at the causes behind the phenomenon of children living and/or working on the street, while in developed countries there are stories of social ills and loss of values, such as hardship and family breakdown, drugs, alcohol, migration and social displacement, in developing countries, the causes

¹ See: M. Black, Street and Working Children: Global Seminar Report, UNICEF Innocenti Centre, 1993.

² UNICEF Report 2008.

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. The root causes can only be addressed through a detailed and region-specific analysis, but immediate factors for which children end up on the street are generally recognized as follows: low family income; homelessness; neglect and abuse; school failure; loss of parents due to armed conflicts, natural disasters, HIV/AIDS and other epidemics, and refugee problems. Evidence further suggests that the quality of family relationships plays a fundamental role.

The range of problems that children suffer once in the street presents some similarities across regions: poor education status, low self-esteem and emotional disorders, violence and exploitation by peers and adults, early and unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS, and drug abuse.

Children on the street are the extreme manifestation of deteriorating social capital and social exclusion. They are also an indicator of the dire need for social development and poverty reduction policies to improve the situation in the community at large, and to prevent more young people from becoming marginalized.

Children already facing the hardships of street life need immediate opportunities for human development, via special protection programmes designed to meet their specific needs and unique characteristics, but preventive interventions that focus on the broaden categories of orphan and vulnerable children and society at large are essential.

An integrated system of primary, secondary and tertiary prevention related to youth at risk is needed. Youth in primary risk are still attached to the family, school, society, but because of poverty or other factors their situation could be compromised in the future. Preventive programmes at this level should include family and child benefits and services, along with programmes targeted to poor communities such as school support, health promotion, recreation and social integration, vocational training, and support to family livelihood. Youth in secondary risk have weaker social ties and are already exposed to some form of specific risk (such as school dropout, abuse, child labour). Preventive programmes at this level should be focused on a specific target group and include specialized family support, protection and organization of working children, abuse prevention, dropout prevention, and other such services. Children in the street and of the street fall in the group of youth in tertiary risk for whom one or more of the previously mentioned risks are concrete realities. Their ties with society and family are seriously impaired. This is the place for rehabilitative programmes such as family-homes, drop-in centres, targeted health and education services, psychological and legal support, job training, children organization, and family and school reintegration through a continuum of care that involves many actors.

All the stakeholders, including NGOs and Governments, that are seeking to ameliorate the immediate needs of children living and/or working on the street would better maximize the effects of their resources by adopting a dual approach focusing on both the symptoms and the causes of this phenomenon. Around the world, successful programmes are those focusing on individualized attention and tailor-made services, on involving the community (including the schools), on tracing and counselling children’s families, on offering integration of services (health, education, training of skills, psychosocial counselling, HIV/AIDS education etc.), on providing financial packages and psychological training for extended impoverished families; on networking and institutional cooperation, and on children’s participation.

One other important aspect of prevention is to invest on education. Many vulnerable children, especially in least developing countries, belong to poor families that cannot afford a fee-payment school system for their children. Moreover, one of the factors pushing children on the streets is the lack of enrolment in schools and the high drop-out rate.

Hence, the undersigned NGOs, basing on their experience in the field and also upon the growing body of widely available research and evidence, would like to recommend to States and other stakeholders, for the prevention of the phenomenon of children living and/or working on the street, the following:

- To guarantee the right to education by making primary education in public schools compulsory and free of charge (including uniforms, shoes, books etc.);
- To develop and implement comprehensive national poverty reduction programmes which ensure the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of living for all individuals as a measure to tackle one of the main root causes of the phenomenon of children living and/or working on the street, in full respect of article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
- To ensure child registration immediately after birth that is free of charge and easily accessible without discrimination, and to raise awareness of the importance of birth registration at the national, regional and local level, as stated by the Resolution A/HRC/RES/13/20;
- To fully implement recommendation 2(e) of the Resolution A/HRC/RES/13/20: “to develop and enhance programmes, as appropriate, to support and educate parents and other caregivers in their child-rearing role so as to prevent sexual violence against children, taking into consideration the need to develop targeted programmes for families particularly at risk, as well as children without parental care”;
- To follow and implement the UN Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children without parental care and respect, in particular, the two basic principles of necessity and appropriateness;
- To 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;
- To prioritise funding of programmes for orphans and vulnerable children and specific interventions targeting children living and/or working on the street, that soundly include a prevention component.