STREET CHILDREN

Problems
or Persons ?

Street Children

Problems or Persons ?

written by
Stefan VANISTENDAEL

THE AUTHOR

Stefan Vanistendael is Deputy Secretary General in charge of R&D in ICCB. He holds degrees in sociology and demography from the University of Louvain, Belgium. He first worked as a researcher in the Centre for Population and Family Studies in Brussels, before joining the ICCB staff in 1979.

Cover Photo : Young boy selling newspapers in Bogota (Colombie)
(Alain Pinoges / CIRIC)

CONTENTS

Page

Foreword   **5**

Introduction   **6**

The following 3 dimensions are necessary and sufficient to circumscribe the street children problem: age, a physical dimension indicating how much of the child's life goes on in the street, and a social dimension of marginality. A full description of the problem however requires a lot more information.

We do not know how many street children there are, but even according to the most restrictive definitions and estimations there could be hundreds of thousands of them worldwide.

Street children are found in all continents in certain urban areas. Most street children live in the developing countries.

Street children are not a new phenomenon, certainly not in Europe, but their numbers have increased and the problem has changed qualitatively.

We can not think here of causes in a mechanical sense. By definition the breakdown of the family is the most immediate cause of completely abandoned street children. Poverty is perhaps

the most widespread pressure on the family. The street children phenomenon is interrelated with many other issues, such as child labour or sexual exploitation. Unconditional acceptance of the child, combined with certain values and social skills, seem to be essential in making children resist adverse circumstances.

Response: Caring for Children, Families and Communities 19

There are a variety of responses to the problem: projects for street children, adoption, projects with preventive effects, and helping street children to survive in the streets. Our main concern should be to enable families and communities to take better care of their children.

Commitment: Sharing Responsibility 21

Streetworkers are frontline workers. They need a commitment of many others in society, who relate directly or indirectly to street children. We learn to see both the problem and the solution in concentric circles, with the child in the centre.

Transcendence: Discovering the Hidden Beauty 23

At some point we cannot escape the challenge to love, going beyond simple "technical help". As someone suggested: we can only help a person, if we look for beauty in that person. This applies very much to street children.

Foreword

to the 2nd edition

It did not seem necessary to change fundamentally the text of this booklet, the first edition of which dates from 1992. However, it is useful to mention certain perspectives, relating to new events, such as the opening up of some Eastern European countries or the International Year of the Family.

The street children phenomenon has become even more obvious to all in the context of Eastern Europe since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Sociologically, this tendence was foreseeable: the collapse of structures which held back - in a manner of speaking - the «candidates for the street» at the heart of a population which for decades had been educated not to take initiatives or responsibilities, was almost certain to lead to a considerable number of street children. Economic difficulties could not help but reinforce this tendency.

Nevertheless, the response to the problem is also being organised. Certain elements or factors mentioned in the first edition of the booklet, such as the family, have been confirmed; the International Year of the Family (1994) reaffirmed the crucial role played by families in society. Families which function well, which succeed in managing their difficulties, no doubt avoid a series of problems, even unintentionally, particularly in the field of street children.

The same reasoning can be applied, grosso modo, to the local communities within which the families live.

Little by little a consensus is materializing on the important, and too often neglected, role of the father in the family. Too often, men have formed an identity for themselves outside the family. It is urgent - also for their own happiness! - that they realise the capital importance of the family in their daily life, over and above any political rhetoric. The children can not help but benefit.

Within ICCB itself my colleague, Jean-Pierre Jung, has taken up and reoriented, in collaboration with UNESCO, ICCB's commitment to street children. This serves as a complement to the present booklet and is the subject of other publications.

Let us hope that one day publications on street children will no longer be needed!

Introduction

This text aims to bring together a series of ideas, impressions and reflections collected by the author who has been involved in the street children issue for over 10 years. The involvement has taken many different forms: direct confrontation in the streets, visiting projects, advocacy, participating on the board of a street children's movement, listening to street educators, reading about street children, getting a street youngster out of prison (in a legal way!), etc. It represents the views of someone who has closely followed the issue for a number of years, without being totally immersed in it. Street workers and street children may have different views.

The purpose of this text is:
- to bring together a lot of ideas which often are scattered;
- to contribute to thinking about related issues;
- to be a text on street children which is situated between journalism and scientific analysis;
- to present a short overview of the phenomenon for general use, particularly for those who have no time for extensive study.
It is obvious that such a text is open to criticism. If this text stimulates some people in their thinking or their action, and in doing so indirectly helps street children or youth, it will have served its purpose.

There is no bibliography added to this paper, for several reasons:
- Some of the best materials have never been published, but circulated as reports and documents.
- What is published is often popular, or scientific and does not correspond to the intermediary nature of this paper.
- Some of the best information comes from private conversations.

Definition:
Indicating Dimensions

As for many social realities, it is impossible to give a clear-cut definition of street children. We run the risk of including too many or too few children within a given definition. There is also the risk that a definition may be appropriate in one place and not in another.

Can we avoid this confusion? As in any good definition we want to **circumscribe** the reality with a **minimum number of elements**. We want to be able to see what belongs to the problem and what doesn't, with the smallest possible number of criteria. This is much more elementary than a full **description** of reality ! We have to be flexible, yet precise.

The solution proposed here is to indicate the **minimum** number of **dimensions** of the problem needed to circumscribe it. Such dimensions should be found in **all** situations involving street children. They are the **universal** aspects of the problem. But for each dimension we will have to see **how** it applies to a **specific situation**.

We propose 3 such dimensions:

Age

An old tramp in Paris may be living on the streets, but he is not a street child or youth. The age at which a person on the street is no longer a street child or a street youth will vary from culture to culture. Transition occurs within a certain age-range. This is not a purely academic question. It has implications for the approach to the problem be they only legal ones. The "age" dimension is **universal** to the problem. But the age or age-range where the concept changes will have to be **specified locally**.

A brief word on the **lower** age limit: knowing that some children are abandoned in the street immediately after birth, we could even put the lower age limit at zero.

For this document we will be referring to street **children**. Readers may interpret this as street children or street youth.

Physical dimension

To what extent does the child actually live in the street, in abandoned buildings, on waste land? This dimension is unavoidable if we want to talk about **street** children. If it were left out, we would include all kinds of marginalised children, street children or not. Again, the dimension is universal, but the way it applies to different places and children may vary. Some children will live day and night in the streets. Some may live there only during the day but go home at night. Such variations cover very different realities. When a child uses the street only occasionally for play he/she is probably not considered a street child.

Social dimension

To what extent does the child have a relationship with one or more responsible adults in a family or elsewhere? The word **"responsible"** is probably not very scientific, and yet it is necessary. A relationship with a caring parent or street educator is quite different from a relationship with a pimp; similarly, a responsible parent or policeman is very different from an abusive parent or policeman.

This social dimension makes the relationship of children to **"adults"** a reference for marginalisation, precisely because some street children may have excellent relations with other, highly responsible street children, but not with adults. Such children have a group they belong to. Yet we would call them street children.

This social dimension brings social marginalisation into the picture. Perhaps this is the most fundamental of the 3 dimensions, yet it is not sufficient on its own to circumscribe the reality of street children. Tramps are also socially marginal, as children in prison, children in armed conflicts, or children in closed brothels may be, but they are not street children.

It seems that the 3 above-mentioned dimensions are **necessary** and **sufficient** to **define** the reality of street children. They are **not** sufficient to **describe** it. A full description needs to bring in other aspects of the question, such as work, the reasons for being on the street, etc.

The former international Programme of Non-Governmental Organisations on Street Children and Street Youth briefly called Inter-NGO Programme (1982-85), managed to condense the different aspects of the problem into the following definition:

"A street child or street youth is any minor for whom the street (in the widest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwellings, waste land, etc.) has become his or her habitual abode, and who is without adequate protection".

This definition takes into account the 3 dimensions mentioned above, but it also fills in to some extent **how** the dimensions should be applied. It remains a sound and workable definition, but it may have to be adapted to local situations.

A final word about an oft-quoted distinction between children **of** the streets and children **on** the streets. The difference between the two has to do with variations in the physical and social dimensions. Children **on** the streets still have more or less regular family connections; some of them may even go to school. Children **of** the street have no, or hardly any, family ties left. They may be permanently on the streets. Usually the latter group is smaller but more complex than the former.

Numbers:
How Millions can be Marginal

It is very hard to give an estimation of the number of street children for several reasons:

- Their numbers vary according to the **definition** given.

- Street children are so **marginal** in our society that they are even physically marginal, pushed out into the streets. Marginal people are often hard to find in official records, and even harder to count, in spite of the best intentions.

- Emotions often run high in dealing with street children. This is not conducive to precise estimation.

- Beyond a certain level, numbers are hard to imagine concretely. For example, although people may have learnt in school the mathematical difference between 1 million and 10 million, some - even very well-informed people - will find it hard to apply such differences to reality.

In 1985 the Anti-Slavery Society produced an interesting estimation of the number of street children. The estimation takes the urban population between ages 5-15 in a number of countries. Then it presumes that 33% of those children are economically active. Of those economically active children 33% are supposed to be children on the streets. Of the latter, 33% are supposed to be children of the streets.

The underlying hypothesis of this estimation could be challenged. For example, it is somehow presumed that there are no street children in countries with, for example, an infant mortality rate of less than 25 per thousand. Or the estimation does not make a distinction between boys and girls. Nevertheless it remains one of the more careful estimations, arriving at a number of 7.7 million children of the streets for a world population of 4.461 billion.

More recent information from various oral sources suggests that the number of children of the street is probably lower than first believed. Still, there are many thousands of children of the streets worldwide. And there are dozens of millions of street children in the wider sense.

Three further remarks are in order here:

- It would be very difficult and time-consuming to work out a more precise estimation of the numbers of street children worldwide. One even wonders if it is necessary. We know that there is a massive problem worldwide, and this is perhaps sufficient **at that global level**. More accurate estimates can be useful **locally** or **regionally**, for the organisation of services.

- The numbers of street children are **growing**, and street children appear where before the phenomenon was unknown.

- From a humanitarian and policy-making point of view we know enough about numbers of street children in order to know that urgent action is required.

Location:
A Worldwide Challenge

A superficial observer might believe street children to be a Latin American problem, or an issue for developing countries only. This is not true. It is increasingly a worldwide problem.

In terms of **space** there is perhaps only one major specification we can give: the street children phenomenon is mainly an **urban** problem. Most street children are in Latin America, Africa and Asia, but they are increasingly present in industrialised countries, in big cities such as New York, Seattle, Toronto, Paris, Barcelona, London, Birmingham, Bucharest, Lisbon, Berlin, Rome, Naples... The type of street children, their age, and the reasons for being on the street may differ between rich and poor countries.

It is hard to say in which continent there are the greatest numbers of street children. Latin America has the reputation of having most street children. Is that so, or is it our perception of reality? And what does it mean? Does Latin America have the highest **proportion** of street children in a given age group, or does it have the **highest absolute** numbers of street children? The former may be true. The latter is by no means certain, as Latin America is by far the least populated of the developing continents, it has only 72% of the population of Africa, 53% of the population of India alone, and only 14% of the total population of Asia.

Whatever the size of the problem, it should be tackled **wherever it is present**. The "we have more than you" estimate, which can unfortunately be heard in some quarters, should never be used in advocacy on behalf of street children.

As with many problems related to marginality, what is visible does not often correspond to what the reality is. An issue such as that of street children has really to be **"dug-out"** in all respects, from a superficial analysis based on mere numbers to an analysis of what goes on in the lives of street children and in their environment.

History:
Not So New

The phenomenon of street children is not a new one. In Europe there are indications of the existence of street youth in the Middle Ages. There were certainly street children in the industrial revolution. There are many authors in European and North American literature who have written about street children: Andersen, Twain, Dickens, Gorki. The religious order of the Don Bosco Fathers (Salesians) was founded more-or-less in response to the problem.

The problem may not be new, but it has changed both qualitatively and quantitatively. A street child in 1890 in London is not the same as a street child in London a century later but the struggle is the same: survival in the street. The street has changed in many ways relevant to survival: there are cars, there is more light at night, waste disposal has changed, shopping habits have changed, etc. Both the threats to, and the possibilities for, survival in the street have changed. The social environment has also changed, from the law to the policeman, from households to the philanthropist or social worker, not to mention the tremendous increase in numbers of tourists on the streets.

Worldwide, numbers of street children have increased dramatically, but so has the world population. This will probably continue in years to come in spite of efforts to tackle the problem. This does not mean that efforts are in vain. Without them the problem would be much worse. But we do too little too late. We are simply running behind the phenomenon.

It seems that the street children problem has no regular evolution, and that it may evolve differently in various parts of the world. In Europe the incidence of street children seems to have fluctuated over time, but this is not necessarily the case in other parts of the world.

Even the attention given to the street children does not follow a regular pattern. Politicians, social services, legislators, scientists, churches, philanthropists, journalists... all have their own agenda and priorities. Marginalised groups, such as street children, cannot count on regular attention. This blurs the picture even more.

In 1913, the Street Children...

"A tightly knit gang is organised. It includes Sanka Viakhir, the son of a Mordovian beggar, a gentle, affectionate boy aged 10 who is always calm and hapy; Kostroma, an abandoned child with tousled hair and big black eyes who is all skin and bone (he was to hang himself at the age of thirteen in a colony of young delinquents to which he had been sent for stealing two pigeons). There is also Khabi, a little Tartar with a big heart and exceptional strength for his 12 years; Iaz, the son of the gravedigger and gardian of the cemetry, an eight year old child with a flat nose who never speaks but gapes like a fish and who suffers from epilepsy; and lastly, Grichka Tchourka, the oldest of the band, a thoughtful boy, enamoured of justice, always ready to fight and whose mother, a widow, is a dressmaker. In their district theft is not considered a sin, it is a habit and almost the only way to survive for the children who do not always have enough to eat."

Maxime Gorki, "Childhood",
Editions Gallimard, Paris, 1976.

Causes:
The Obvious and
the Less Obvious

It is too simplistic to apply a mechanical causality of A causes B to social phenomena, yet this is sometimes done. Also with street children. At best such thinking satisfies our laziness. Let us start with 3 remarks:

- **Firstly**, causality structures in social sciences are more like **networks** of interrelated elements, often with complicated feedbacks. This seems to tip the balance in favour of multipronged attacks on social problems.

- **Secondly**, when speaking of causes we mean **influences**; or the appearance of A **increases the probability** that B may appear. They have nothing to do with causes as we know them for certain physical phenomena.

- **Thirdly**, we should avoid the *"academic fallacy"* that we need to know the causes in order to act. Imagine what would happen after an earthquake if we only acted on causes...we would simply increase the disaster. It is sometimes most useful to distinguish between explanatory variables and action variables. Explanatory variables try to give the most complete explanation possible of the problem. This often includes causes upon which we cannot act. Action variables are variables which we **can** influence.

The reasons why children are in the streets rather than with their families may vary considerably, but the **immediate** cause is nearly always a dysfunctioning in the **family**. This is sometimes overlooked by jumping to deeper causes such as poverty. To put it differently: as long as the family holds together, there will, by definition, be no children of the streets. The disintegration of the family may be a slow process, and the detachment of a child from his/her family may gradually become a situation of total rupture.

The next question is: how and why do families fall apart? There is no simple reply to that question. **Poverty** can certainly put a family under considerable pressure. Poverty itself may have a lot of causes. Perhaps poverty is **the most widespread** pressure leading to family break-up. Yet it is not a sufficient explanation. Why do so many poor families **not** break up?

15

In spite of difficulties in analysing causality, we have to mention at least one "causal path", which is often mentioned in developing countries: exploitation of farmers and rural poverty - migration to the city - lack of means of subsistence in the city - father leaves family - mother cannot cope - child looks for a means of subsistence in the street. The latter is often reinforced by the arrival of a new man in the family who is violent to the child. In some parts of the world AIDS may disrupt traditional family systems thus creating great numbers of orphans. Some of these may end up as street children.

Social phenomena often interact in a network. So it is normal that the phenomenon of street children is inter-linked with many other problems. Two of the most common problem areas which overlap with that of street children, but are not identical, are working children and sexual exploitation of children; some people argue that street children are but a sub-category of working children. At first this seems to be true, as so many street children have some sort of work. Yet, the fact that street children spend a good portion of their time in the street confers on them very distinct characteristics which distinguish them from child labourers in factories, plantations, sweatshops, etc. This is particularly true with children of the streets, who have no family ties left.

Let us now reverse the causal perspective. Why is it that some children resist so well under adverse circumstances? The answer to this question is at least as important as the well-known explanation that children who have difficulties are victims of adverse circumstances. "Scientific American" published an interesting article on the former subject in April 1989. The article reports on a longitudinal study done in Hawaii over a period of 30 years. The study started with 698 infants and tried to find out how some individuals triumph over physical disadvantage and deprived childhoods.

I quote the conclusions of the article: *"Finally, in order for any intervention programme to be effective, a young child needs enough consistent nurturing to trust in its availability. The resilient children in our study had at least one person in their lives who accepted them unconditionally, regardless of temperamental idiosyncrasies or physical or mental handicaps. All children can be helped to become more resilient if adults in their lives encourage their independence, teach them appropriate communication and self-help skills and model as well as reward acts of helpfulness and caring."*

The conclusions of that study are perhaps not all that revolutionary, but it is good to see them confirmed by that type of study. And a very important point is: unconditional acceptance. Scattered evidence I have heard from ex-street children or fieldworkers confirms this finding.

We can not, however, conclude that in their lives all so-called "normal" children or adults have experienced unconditional acceptance. But the study

does suggest that when everything else falls apart such unconditional acceptance is extremely important.

The other conclusions in the article seem to point to the importance of certain **values and social skills.**

In addition, we must not turn a blind eye to other forms of prevention because:
- Morally, it is not acceptable to let people suffer when this can be prevented.
- "Unconditional acceptance" may be a very difficult form of prevention to practise even by committed social workers, so other complementary forms of prevention may be helpful.
- Prevention is usually much cheaper than cure.

We can not replace
society by a network
of social workers

"I have been working about twenty years with street children here in Brooklyn (NY). Perhaps it was more violent in the old days than now. But what really worries me is this. Twenty years ago I knew that there was a society out there that functioned more or less. Families, schools and communities, they all had their problems, but most of them could cope, could live with it. There was a society out there which survived relatively well. That helped to give some orientation in my work. Today all that has gone. Sometimes I feel we should put a social worker next to each child in school. But we can not do that. We can not substitute the ordinary functioning of families, of schools, of communities by an ever increasing number of specialised services, therapists, social workers. Ordinary society should somehow function, should be able to cope with most of its problems. We have to find ways in which families and schools and communities can function again, and can take care of children."

A social worker in Brooklyn, New York, 1989

Response:
Caring for Children,
Families and Communities

The most visible response to the street children phenomen is to set up a **project for street children**. More often than not the children will be contacted in the streets, where they live. They will be gradually acquainted with the project and, if the children so wish, will benefit from the services it provides: emotional support, counselling, training in a variety of skills, medical care, food and shelter, etc. All this is easy to say in words, but in reality it is a formidable task. A number of projects are run throughout the world along these lines. It is not always easy to know how successful they are for a number of reasons:

- A lot of projects are too recent to have the relevant data.

- Once a child leaves a project, he/she is not necessarily monitored by the project. So the project may not know about drop-outs who make good, nor about "successful" children who relapse as young adults.

- What do we call "success" in work with street children?

- And even if we can define our "success criteria" beyond doubt, what "success" can reasonably be expected? Let us make a comparison with physics. A light bulb uses less than 10% of its energy to produce light, hence 90% or more of its energy is wasted in heat. This is, therefore, an extremely ineffective way of producing light, yet we use millions of light bulbs every day and we do not think twice about it. But what would we think of a project that "saves" only 10% of the children it takes in?

Nevertheless, most projects will have real **success** stories to tell.

Some families **adopt** street children. This is perhaps as much a "vocation" as becoming a street worker. Such adoptions require very careful preparation. This can be an excellent solution from the child's point of view, but it will not be applied on a massive scale without creating new hazards for both the adopted children and their adoptive parents.

A lot of other social projects will have **preventive effects**, but they are not defined as street children projects, e.g., rural development, affordable housing for the poor, support to families at risk, work with children who are in danger of becoming school drop-outs, etc. It is hard to calculate how many children find a better life through these projects but they will be very valuable, particularly if they **reinforce the life of local communities**. Enabling communities and families to take care of their children should be at the core of the approach to the problem.

More and more concerned people look into the possibilities of increasing the **survival** possibilities (psychological, social, economic and physical) of the children **in the streets**. This includes projects for AIDS control, small businesses and cooperatives for street children, etc. The reason for this approach is twofold:

- There are already too many street children to adopt or to take care of in institutional projects.

- It builds immediately on one of the strongest assets of street children: their capacity for survival.

Time will show how cost-effective this approach proves to be and how well it works in the long-term. If it works well, it may confront us with another formidable challenge: what is the long-term effect of stabilising a large group of young people in the street? Are we reorganising society? It may be less important a challenge than letting the street children problem grow. We are faced with a dilemma : either we stabilise great numbers of children in the street, with unknown consequences, or we let the problem grow.

Commitment:
Sharing Responsibility

Ideally the commitment for street children in society should go in **concentric circles**. In the middle are the children. Then come the street workers and all those in direct contact with the street children, and so on, including in the end ministers and queens and presidents. Such concentric circles include "bureaucrats". For one thing many projects find that they need an administrator. Some bureaucrats can be effective in advocacy for street children, in making resources available, etc. Street workers are frontline workers. They should not be abandoned. They need effective bureaucrats behind them, even psychologically. Experience shows that one of the worst feelings for a street worker is the impression that nobody else cares.

Some people may think they have nothing to do with street children at all. They are usually mistaken, even if they do not meet street children in their lives. Respect and love for children, and more particularly an attitude which does not **exclude** children - a tough reality in certain classrooms ! - have a lot to do with how street children would have loved to be treated.

Up to now we have talked about street children as a problem. **But are they the problem?** It may be argued that street children are children who try to survive with intelligence and skill in very difficult circumstances. Some people may find them a nuisance, but street children may find adults a nuisance. It is because they are children that it is hard to claim that they are entirely responsible for the situation in which they have to survive. At most, their presence is a symptom of a disease. It is not the disease itself.

So where is the problem? Criticising the parents of street children is too easy. What did they have to go through? Building up our own guilt feelings is ineffective and it increases the risk of using street children for a good conscience. Saying society is responsible, is very abstract. Who is society? We are all society, including the street children. We find again the **concentric circles** mentioned before for the response. We find them now in the problem. So everybody **shares** some **responsibility**, and everybody is both part of the **problem** and of the **solution**, including street children, including us.

Perhaps society can be described in a rather messy, but also a realistic and

responsible, way without too many ideological clouds, by drawing such concentric circles around **all kinds** of difficult situations. It would show our **different degrees** of involvement and responsibility in the face of various social problems. It could be done locally, nationally, regionally and globally.

This approach based on **shared** responsibility, both for the problem and for the solution, combines two extremes: on the one hand we **are** involved, on the other hand none of us should carry all the problems of this world alone. The latter attitude would lead either to burn out, to a shallow form of commitment, or to self-deception.

Such an approach also highlights how strange, irresponsible and biased we are, when we define others, such as street children, as "problems". If we define street children as a problem, that says more about us than about street children. It says that we have the **power, luxury** and **pretension** of defining certain people as "problems". It may be done in a technical fashion in a plush and respectable environment of well-intentioned people. Yet it sounds almost like a witch-hunt. On top of that the identification of a group of people with a problem could mean that we close our eyes to the ramifications of the problem elsewhere in other parts of society.

It becomes evident in the end, that different groups of people must be able to express their view on a problem, and must be able to participate in solutions. It is dangerous when certain groups in society, be it politicians, clergy, social workers or scientists, have an exclusive right to define what is problematic. In that sense it is important that street children can speak out on their own behalf.

Transcendence:
Discovering
the Hidden Beauty

It is always hard to accept people as they are. As St. Augustine quite rightly said: "Love the sinner, not the sin". But how do you do that, when the sin - or whatever you call it - is completely unjust? How do you meet the real person? How do you accept and love him or her, be it the street child or the rich landowner who condemns a family to poverty? We can not give ready-made recipes. We can only give a warning and quote someone who has formulated the above-mentioned principle in a most convincing way. It is up to each one of us to find ways of "implementing" the principle.

A first warning. Many of us would love to have a clear-cut recipe for work with street children or even for friendship and marriage. We love the possibility of perfect manipulation, the guaranteed success. It may even give us the feeling of being effective, of having some control over life. Effective services are useful, of course, but they must not cut us off from the challenge to love. And love requires freedom, the absence of manipulation. The major "recipe" I have found for work with street children is "unconditional acceptance". And that "recipe" is in itself the denial of preconceived recipes, the denial of our desire to be manipulative. If we want to accept unconditionally we will have to be very **inventive**. In that sense, street children refer us back to basic human wisdom.

Let us try to improve services, let us try to improve society, but let this not become the price we pay for our good conscience, or the end of our real care and love. Otherwise the best of services will paradoxically create more marginals, or the warning of a monk becomes true: "They wanted to create structures so perfect, that they did not need to love anymore". A rather chilling perspective...

A **second** warning. In work with street children we have to get rid of many labels in order to reach out to the real person. Some see street children as some kind of romantic, free group of children. Some see them as victims of society, or as victims of the capitalist system. Some see them as criminals, and some

as the inevitable price to pay for economic growth. Some may see them as poor little children whom they can serve and who will make them "feel good". Experts may label them in many different ways. And the list can go on. But if we really want to reach out to street children, we will have to leave all such labels behind however much such labels suit us. Otherwise we will never meet the **real** child. And only a meeting between real persons can be fruitful. How lonely would we feel if we realised that people only saw us through the labels they give us?

Finally here is a quote from the Orthodox monk, Anthony Bloom, who encapsulates exactly what our orientation should be:

"Unless we look at a person and see the beauty there is in this person, we cannot contribute anything to him. One does not help a person by discerning what is wrong, what is ugly, what is distorted. Christ looked at everyone He met, at the prostitute, at the thief, and saw the beauty hidden there. Perhaps it was distorted, perhaps damaged, but it was beauty none the less, and what He did was to call out this beauty... This is what we must learn to do with regard to others. But to do so we must first have a purity of heart, a purity of intention, an openness which is not always there... so that we can listen, can look, and can see the beauty which is hidden. Every one of us is in the image of God, and every one of us is like a damaged icon. But if we were given an icon damaged by time, damaged by circumstances, or desecrated by human hatred, we would treat it with reverence, with tenderness, with broken-heartedness. We would not pay attention primarily to the fact that it is damaged, but to the tragedy of its being damaged. We would concentrate on what is left of its beauty, and not on what is lost of its beauty. And this is what we must learn to do with regard to each person..."

ICCB addresses

General Secretariat

ICCB, 63, rue de Lausanne
CH - 1202 Geneva, Switzerland
Tel. (41-22) 731 32 48
Fax (41-22) 731 77 93

Africa

BICE, 01 BP 1721
Abidjan 01, Côte d'Ivoire
Tel. (225) 22 87 07
Fax (225) 32 45 89

North America

ICCB Inc., 866 United Nations Plaza, Suite 529
48th Street & 1st Avenue
NY 10017 New York, USA
Tel. (1-212) 355 39 92
Fax (1-212) 754 46 74

South America

BICE, 1480, avenida 18 de Julio, apto. 1203
11200 Montevideo, Uruguay
Tel. (59-82) 48 48 84
Fax (59-82) 41 88 45

Asia

ICCB, c/o ASI, 1518, Leon Guinto Str.
Malate, 1004 Manila, Philippines
Tel. (63-2) 59 56 13
Fax (63-2) 52 21 095

Europe

BICE, 19, rue de Varenne
F - 75007 Paris, France
Tel. (33-1) 44 39 20 00
Fax (33-1) 45 44 83 43

BICE, 32, rue de Spa
B - 1040 Brussels, Belgium
Tel. (32-2) 280 03 91
Fax (32-2) 230 23 42

ICCB, M. D. Callagy, 13, Gonzagagasse,
A - 1010 Vienna, Austria
Tel. (43-1) 535 57 07
Fax (43-1) 533 55 88

ICCB'S Mission

The ICCB, founded in 1948, serves the holistic growth of all children, in a Christian perspective. It gives particular attention to the most deprived children, especially disabled children, child victims of the street, drugs, war and the sex trade.

The ICCB constitutes a network of consultation for research and action. According to the needs of children and drawing upon their capacities, the ICCB develops short, medium and long range projects. In all its actions, the ICCB takes care to promote spiritual growth, intercultural awareness and the rights of the child. It always takes the child's family environment into consideration.

Serving all children in a holistic perspective

iccb

International
Catholic
Child
Bureau