THE ALTERNATIVE AFRICA

STREET CHILDREN IN ACCRA, GHANA

THEIR PLACE AT THE GLOBAL TABLE

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Washington
June 1998
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"You don’t know much and that’s a fact."
(from “Alice in Wonderland” by Lewis Carroll)

"Umntu Ungumntu Ngabanye abantu” (A person is a person through another person)
The philosophy of ubuntu.

“There is no chance, I repeat no chance, that Zaire’s numerous creditors will ever
recover their loans.”
(Erwin Blumenthal, Head of The Central Bank of Zaire, 1980)

The Case

The experiences in this paper are real and come from the slums of Accra in Ghana, slums
that are full of rabbit energy and bustle and, in the words of William Boyd, “remorseless
physicality”. I am personally acquainted with the lives of street children in many African
cities, but my true intellectual and emotional understanding of their situation comes from
Accra. I am also conscious of the fact that it is too easy for many of us involved as
practitioners in social planning in the African continent to talk of “the African street child”
or “the African street baby”. Professor John Iliffe, the Cambridge historian, calls his book
“Africans: The History of a Continent”. You will notice that he doesn’t say “The
Continent”, nor does he say “The Africans”.

When I talk of street children in Africa in the margins I am really talking of Ghanaian street
children in the margins. But then I break my own rule and call my experience “The
Alternative Africa”. I do so deliberately. Firstly, Africa is no longer primarily a rural
continent; it is rapidly developing into the most urbanised continent in our world.
Secondly, the age of the population of Africa will surely see the demise of the position of
the elders and the wise old people. A few years into the millenium half of Africa’s
population will be under the age of sixteen. I have no other way to express what I see and
live among other than to coin the phrase “The Alternative Africa”.

The children I know in the slums in which I work have no voice. My case for them is
simple. Give them a voice before they take it violently. Give them a forum in which they
have an agreed, recognised and legalised percentage. I go one step further: give them a
forum where they have an equal share in decisions that are made concerning their future
and the future of their country. At present they don’t get near the crumbs, let alone the
table of the rich man.
It was very noticeable that the Chief Economist of the World Bank, Joseph Stiglitz, writing in The Guardian (UK) on 18 May 1998, stayed entirely in the construct of Bank to Government. It is clear from his piece that he cannot see any other way to devise a new development strategy other than using an old worn-out one. If I may be forgiven for playing on the word “forum”, it can either be a “market place” or “a hole”. Sometimes economists who preach “the market place” get stuck in “the hole”.

I would like us to be daring enough to explain to governments and to ourselves that the donor, the government and, in my case, the street child, are equal partners around the global table. I think in Africa’s case we will have to recognise this eventually. The weight of demographic evidence is surely pointing to the day when we will have to negotiate with the very young people in difficult situations. I am asking that we start sooner than later.

Before I came to Washington I approached half-a-dozen agencies who, like myself, work for children in the margins in Africa. I asked them if they had points they would like me to raise. I have to report that the consensus was to respect the convention on the rights of the child and allow free access to health care, education and social welfare regardless of any problem that any country had concerning debt, good or bad governance, democratic or despotic regimes. There is, I argue, the need for a great urgency to lift African children from the margins (from “the hole”) and let them sit at our table with a true voice.

The Director of the Von Hugel Institute of St Edmunds College, Cambridge, Dr Francis McHugh (for whom I still work in an associate capacity) propounds from the ethics’ viewpoint a most important theory of “exclusion”. The poor in any society are excluded by the very society they are from. Everything conspires against them reaching a point at which they acquire the ability fully to determine their own lives. The rich, on the other hand, exclude themselves. They make their own rules. They determine the rules for themselves and others, and particularly for the poor. Such “exclusions” have to be challenged. At present if I look at the children in the margins in Africa I would have to say that they will clearly never be masters or mistresses of their destiny but rather the clients of that destiny. And in the way of all the poor they will have to be more or less patient with their lot.

The Reality

Let me put a face on the Alternative Africa. His real name is not Kwame, but he is a real child. His story shows how a child in a village can finish up on the streets of Accra. His village is about 170 kms north of the capital. He was in Junior High School, Class 1. He was 14 years old. He knew that his father, who had no real farm of his own and who worked for a big cocoa farmer whenever there was work available, was in severe trouble in paying school fees. Three times Kwame had taken home a note from the headmaster. He knew what was in the note. In Ghana if you don’t pay you are excluded from school. He knew that there would be no fourth note. He knew that the following Friday he would be told “Stay at home”. He spoke to some schoolmates. He borrowed some money and at 4 o’clock on the Thursday morning of that week he walked the eight miles to the bigger village which had a lorry station, bound eventually for Accra. He arrived in
Accra on the Thursday night - alone, tired, utterly confused. He was still a village boy. He slept in the lorry park on the north side of Accra that night and in the morning he looked around for anyone who might speak his language or come from his district. Within the first week he discovered that the streets are rough. He was beaten by other street boys, by city guards and by police. By the end of the first week he had found three other boys from his area, just a little older, and he joined them and 200 others in their street dormitory area. This is an open courtyard, and is what can best be described by those who know Charles Dickens as a Fagin’s kitchen. His first job didn’t come for ten days and, on the street with so little money around, solidarity in caste terms is something of a dream world created by novelists and film makers when they confront the problem of street children. Kwame was in reality alone, hungry, and still a village boy.

He got a job as a refuse carrier in the markets, which meant that he worked at 3 o’clock in the morning, at 11 o’clock in the morning, and at 6 o’clock in the evening, but he started to earn some cash. He also started to learn that on the street you hit first and talk afterwards. He discovered the power of a gang (called a “base” in Accra). He became sexually active. He tried marijuana but didn’t like it, so he settled for the odd snatch at the local hard liquor. Within a month he was angling to become a shoe shine boy. He was by then a street boy. The village had gone. He had joined the Alternative Africa. He was, and is, a person of the new subculture, of the new ethnicity.

Today Kwame is a shoe shine boy. He thinks seriously from time to time of getting an apprenticeship, but now as a shoe shine boy he earns enough to eat well on the street, to be a minder of a girl two years younger than him (he is now sixteen). He is our friend and we, at CAS, hope that we reciprocate that. He is a new African.

I am aware that such a label may seem to fall into the trap that Judith Ennew warns us about in her article in “Africa Insight” (1996, Volume 26, No 3, page 204). She says: “It is difficult to see what, apart from geography, makes a Cairo shoe shine boy, a 10-year old domestic servant in Lagos, an Afrikaans schoolboy and an Ethiopian youngster herding camels, fall under the same rubric of The African Child.” We would have to agree, given such a group. But the rubric of new African in my terms comes from the streets, from the cities. It comes from urban, and I think all over our continent today we have the absolute need to be aware of what the urban world can do to our children.

Street children are here on our streets. They have rights and needs. We have to be open-minded and flexible in our dealings and alliances with them. In the words of the late Fr Arnold Grol, writing in 1983 about street children in Nairobi, we have to show them “affection, care, service and love”. It is only in that way, says Grol, “that you can start having a real human and brotherly relationship with them. Without respect and affection you cannot have a lasting influence on these children.” I think it is there that we would concur fully with Ennew in recognising that children are individuals.

Fifteen years on from the article which acted as an apologia by Arnold Grol, Catholic Action for Street Children (CAS) in Accra tries to react in the same way. Its partner organisation, Street Girls Aid (SAID) does the same but with particular reference to the girl child who is in serious trouble on the streets. CAS and SAID, started in 1993 and 1994
respectively, are two local NGOs working on the streets with street children. I will return to these two programmes in the part of this paper which deals with the evaluation of policies employed by government and non-government agencies in Accra.

Life on the Streets

Criticism, like charity, begins at home. To me and to many of you present at this seminar I have to say that as social scientists in Africa we have been, and still are, exceedingly slow at acknowledging that street children are here. Surely we have to admit that this is not a very happy situation. The children are not going anywhere, least of all away. They have come to stay. When I was a young priest in northern Ghana I had to learn local languages and customs and I was told for the first year of my work to look and listen and learn, but not to speak. And yet as social scientists we do not want to look or listen or learn and we are very quick to talk about street children. They are a new culture. Some say “subculture”. I used that phrase myself initially. Now I say they are part of the new Africa, the Alternative Africa. If “culture” upsets you, then they are part of the new ethnicity, but again it is no use as social scientists to see the impotently about “terrible” situations on the streets. We need to look for resolutions to some of the problems.

Let us examine two factors that go into the make up of Kwame. Our children are arriving on our city streets because of a combination of poverty and the breakdown of traditional family structures. My colleague in Accra maintains that the main reason for children arriving on the streets is the breakdown of the family structure. However, I see the sheer poverty of their situation as the prime cause. Our urbanisation levels in Africa ensure that rural poverty is transferred to our streets with mind-numbing regularity and rapidity. Secondly, we need to ask: “Who are these Kwames?” We all know the classic divisions of children “on” and children “of” the street. I have no wish to get embroiled in academic arguments of whether or not our approach to our children has been dominated by Latin American models. I prefer to leave that to senior academics like Ennew, Rizzini, Ebin and Diaw. I have to say that I have never felt threatened or dominated by any of the Latin American thinking about children on the streets. I find, for example, that people mis-use Paulo Freire and fail to see that he was one of the first to accept participatory development from children as well as adults. In Accra, we would have to say that 50% of all street children in the city actually live, sleep and conduct their social life on the streets. As social scientists we must be wary of thinking that just because a child goes back to a recognised domicile at night he or she is not a real street child. That is a very dangerous attitude to take. When you are on the street you are a different person.

It is to Madeleine Dunford, writing in 1996 about street children in Kenya, that I am indebted for the creation of a third way of looking at the problem. She calls this new, more shadowy, group children “for” the street (Occasional Papers, No.58, “Tackling the Symptoms or the Causes”, Centre of African Studies, Edinburgh University). What does she mean by that? I think an example from one of the slums I have worked in for the last 10 years will help. In East Mamobi, in Accra, in the lane where I helped start a maternity clinic and where now we have a Refuge for street girls, I counted 43 children of early primary school age in September 1997. None of them, as far as I could see, moved very far from their own tiny area in that particular slum. None of them goes to school. All are
illiterate. All need to be fed. They are all ready “for” the street. Their parents and guardians will have no option but to let them go on the streets, either willingly or unwillingly, in order to hustle for their own daily subsistence. This third category is perhaps the most worrying.

There is at this point the need to address one of the real players in the child’s life on the streets, and that is the street itself. Even experienced commentators like Fabio Dallape have in my opinion failed to take on board the fact that the street is a living entity. He says: “The term “street children” is inappropriate, offensive and gives a distorted message.” (“Urban Children: A Challenge and an Opportunity”, Childhood, Vol 3, no.2, 1996). Authors are very quick today to toss out expressions like “streetism” which is as inaccurate as it is ugly-sounding. We have to give to the streets, the street corners and the shanty groupings the same significance, importance and recognition that we give to paths, lanes, tracks, hamlets, dwellings and villages when we approach rural appraisal and learning about things rural in Africa. I tell my workers that street mapping is a very important exercise, that the whole social relationship on the streets is vital to the life of the children who are working and living there. Whether we like it or not, whether we want to use the word “street”, whether we feel it is an insult, it is where these children are. May I be forgiven for poking just a little fun - a little serious fun - at the Junior Mayor of Bloemfontein? In 1997 all he could talk about was that he did not like the name “street children” and that people in Africa wanted to call them “community kids”. Delappe himself talks of the need for workers to study the community first. Neither of them tells us what they mean by community, and neither of them accepts the major role that the street and its whole social implication has for each child. I think downtown urban anywhere in the world has mighty important things to tell us. I think we dismiss “street” too easily - in my case in Ghana - for our own good. At present, I deliberately use the expression “street children” because I wish to accord great respect to the importance it holds in their young lives. For half the children I live among, street is home. I have no wish to trap them, as Christina Szanton Blanc says, “by labelling, stigmatisation, and victimisation” (Childhood op.cit.). Perhaps I could steal a line from the title of one of her publications of 1994, “Urban Children in Distress” (Reading: Gordon and Breech). Could I say “urban children in distress on the streets” and wonder if some of the commentators on Africa would come along with me? If we give these children credence and rights then the streets will be taken as “their place”.

The danger for all of us working with street children is to forget what life is like on the streets. I would like to describe a day in the life of a boy, so let’s go back to Kwame. For the purposes of the description, let’s make it a day in the dry season. I say that because in the rainy season you will come across a phenomenon that still makes me pause in anger. It is the picture of what I call the human horses. Very often children in the rains seek whatever little shelter there is and stand up, huddling close to each other. They then fall asleep, like horses. But let’s look at a dry season situation. Kwame, you will remember, has become a full member of the Alternative Africa. At 16 years old and a shoe shine boy he is already a leader on his own particular street corner. He still sleeps in that open courtyard. His first problem when he sleeps is what to do with the money he has earned. His second problem is what to do with his shoe shine box. Recently Kwame switched from saving his money with local money savers to putting it into the safe-keeping of the
house mother of the Refuge for street children which CAS runs. His shoe shine box is more important, so at night the boxes are placed under the protection of the street boy who is the night watchman for that particular corner. This night watchman is paid by the street boys to make sure that other street boys do not come to steal from them when they are asleep. The box is the symbol of his job. It has a handle and a piece of rope to enable him to throw it over his shoulder. It contains his brushes, his cloth, his polish and, because every shoe shine boy is a cobbler in embryo, it contains hammers, nails, patches, spare heels, bits of rubber, glue and everything else to enable Kwame to mend your shoe or sandal where you stand on the street. It is his most precious possession and if you touch a shoe shine boy's shoe box you will find the retribution to be swift, violent and very messy.

Kwame will get up at daylight. He will need to pay for water to wash and he will need to pay the same price again for the dubious privilege of using a pit latrine for his toilet needs. By 6.30 am Kwame will be looking for the women who sell food on the streets. If he has kept enough money from the day before he will buy some rice water or some local porridge and a piece of bread, and then he will join the crowds as they begin to move around the city. The first thing to remember about shoe shine boys is that they walk enormous distances every day because everyone they pass is a potential customer. The second thing is that they all have their own areas to work in. Some of the worst fights I have seen were between shoe shine boys who crossed over into somebody else's territory. By midday in the dry season it is beginning to get not just very hot but, because of the west coast, equally humid. Kwame will normally eat in places he has used before. Street children eat very well in terms of quantity. Like most poor people in the world they spend 70% of their income on food. The problem of eating on the street is with the hygiene and cleanliness of utensils, the servers and the cooks. At some point in the day he will surely find some shade to collapse in. (Many of them have started to use the CAS Refuge in order to flop out.) By late afternoon, when the city turns itself around, they will be back in the crowds looking for customers. As far as I know, Kwame has two girlfriends. As far as I know, he has not fathered any children yet, nor to the best of my knowledge has he suffered from a severe bout of venereal disease. He is lucky. Kwame will go to see one of his girlfriends. He will also meet the other shoe shine boys in his gang. He will have earned, if it has been a good day, £1.50 sterling. If it has been a bad day he will be hungry. He will give some money to whichever girlfriend he meets. If he is not too tired he may go to one of the ramshackle video viewing places. He doesn’t smoke much marijuana even though it is quite cheap and he can’t afford to go to the cheap disco joints that are beginning to mushroom. The chances are that Kwame will be fast asleep by 10 o’clock, having first paid the watchman, spent some more money to wash and checked that his box is safe.

I make no apologies for abusing the principles of the process of induction. In Accra we are already into the second generation of street child. We have thousands of street babies. I expect this is the case in virtually every major African city and town.

Let me tell you the story of a girl child called Comfort, though her real name is not, of course, Comfort. When our workers found her in 1997 she was 13 years old, anaemic and seven months’ pregnant. They found her sleeping on a rubbish heap behind one of
the markets in central Accra. Like many of the 20,000 children, including 6,000 girls, living on the streets of Ghana's capital, Comfort had come to the city from a village to earn some money and survive. She started work doing one of the lowest jobs, selling polythene bags of iced water in the markets during the day. At night, like so many other girls on the street, she acquired a minder - a young man. She gave sex for security and some extra money. He made sure that she understood she was his property. A year later she was pregnant. Her minder had gone. A week after the social workers found her she went into labour on the rubbish tip and by chance an older woman saw another social worker, raised the alarm, and Comfort was able to have her baby safely in a clinic next to the Refuge of Street Girls Aid. She was very lucky. Her baby is truly beautiful. Today Comfort is back on the street with her baby, trying hard to survive. It is clear that for an unskilled, uneducated child-mother she faces a very tough way ahead.

All street children are vulnerable. Girls on the street are more vulnerable than the boys. The most vulnerable girls are those who are pregnant. And the most vulnerable children of all are the street babies.

Comfort is of course somebody's daughter. She could be anybody's daughter. Comfort could be your daughter.

A year ago we asked 80 girl mothers like Comfort what they wanted for their children. They all said two things: (1) "Not to be like us living on the streets or in the shanties" and (2) to receive a proper schooling and education. There isn't much hope for Comfort to have a better life. Comfort, though, has hope that her baby will have a life very different to hers.

Whose responsibility is it to help Comfort get what she wants for her baby? Could it be that as social scientists we have to be agents provocateurs with governments, NGOs and multi-national development agencies?

Rights, Needs and Survival Strategies

All of us surely agree that children's rights are important. Likewise, we would agree that the most important right of a child is to be a child, to have adults take responsibility for you until you can reasonably take it for yourself. Officially, according to both the UN and the Constitution of the Fourth Republic of Ghana, Kwame is a child. He is under 18. Comfort is a child. Clearly her baby is a new child. Of the three, only Comfort's baby fits into our nice neat statement that the most important right of a child is to be a child. The other two, in all respects except emotional vulnerability, are not children any more. They are small young street people. The new culture that they are in demands that they leapfrog from very young child to "adult" with virtually no steps on the way. That is part of the new tribal land which is a street, a slum, a dungheap, a shanty town. At this stage I would like to raise something that I think will be controversial. I bring it up not for the sake of being controversial but because, in my own development with the children whose lives I have shared in for the last 10 years, I have reached a point bewyond which I cannot go at present. I wish to state that every street child has the right to be a street child.
Paradoxically, let’s go back to the village. Kwame in his village had the right, and exercised it, to be a village child. He went farming in due season. He hunted in due season. He learned to dance according to festival and tradition. He ate as he was bid. His sister carried the water in the morning. He swept the compound. Nobody disagrees with that. Everybody says: “But that is plainly obvious.” So, why is it that when we come to look at the street children in our cities we do not accord them the same respect and say they have the right to be street children? To sleep in their recognised areas? To eat on the same street corner? To work in the same jobs? To hustle? To survive? If I say to a street child “I am trying very hard to ensure that I respect you every day”, I am really saying “you have the right to be on that corner”, because if he or she hasn’t what am I respecting? A fraud? A fake? Or a real, young child?

I have no wish to stifle the debate with the semantics of rights and duties, but I do have to repeat that if I wish to follow the example of Ndugu in Kenya and offer love, care, affection and respect for each child, then at this point in my life I am saying that a street child has the right to be just that. This experience of the right of street children automatically makes me flexible in my approach to them.

81% of all children met by our workers on the streets are illiterate or semi-literate. Most street children we meet are automatically self-contained. All street children need to eat, wash, use toilet facilities and buy sufficient articles of clothing. This leads me to say that street children need a chance to become literate, a chance to hustle and work rather than beg and the opportunity to have a safe, dry place in which to sleep.

There is one need, however, that is paramount. Our experience shows that a street child is most vulnerable and in greatest need when he or she is sick. So, I would like to talk about the health strategies that we are currently trying to employ on the streets of Accra. We realised that street children, like all poor people in Accra, self-medicate. If the Structural Adjustment demanded by the World Bank and the IMF has done anything in the health sector it is in forcing the poorest to avoid proper medical care. You can’t have a cash and carry system if you haven’t enough cash. We also realised that our street children were suffering from all the normal sicknesses, so in order of importance they catch malaria often, and have respiratory and diarrhoeal diseases. They also have, in Accra at present, a high incidence rate of STDs. Of HIV and AIDS I am not in a position to comment. We started our own very ad hoc health post in a tiny room in one of our Refuges, but now, in the first half of 1998, I can report that we have a mobile health unit run by the Salvation Army of Ghana in close collaboration with ourselves.

Ghana is a very peaceful place. Ghanaians, as we have seen on the international stage, are very gifted in both making peace and in keeping it. Ghanaians prefer palaver to physical violence. This forum would be called a durbar in Ghana, a word imported by the colonialists from India to describe a traditional phenomenon they found in the villages. There everybody, from a chief and his linguist to the lowest inhabitant, sat in a circle and once you sat in the circle you had the right to speak. Everybody exercised that right. On the street it is different. I sometimes call it “South Bronx comes to Africa”. On the street you hit first and possibly discuss afterwards. The basic survival strategy for every street child is to ensure that you are strong and physically rough and tough. The worst
The girl children have to adopt extra survival strategies. Once the age of puberty has been reached many of them will have boy minders who will demand sexual favours as payment for protection. Many small girls will use sex for survival in terms of supplementing their income. It is too easy to call them prostitutes. A prostitute is for me a professional sex worker. A 14-year-old who offers sex for food and a few shillings to buy a length of cloth is not a prostitute. In the words of Wendy Jones, artist and author, she is one of the girls who “touch men for money for food”. It is our experience that the girls, unlike the boys, always live and operate from within a group. These groups have strong hierarchical structures which cannot be ignored. The most important element for survival in terms of a child maintaining some form of balance is the fact that in Accra at present almost every street child hustles and works to survive. We have not yet got to the stage where the majority of children on the street sit around all day doing nothing with their vast quantities of energy left to simmer. Our experience at present is just the opposite and that is another vital factor for us to take on board.

The Challenges to Ourselves: Reality or Pretence

Can we answer one question? Do we adopt the ostrich attitude and pretend that street children do not pose a problem for our continent, or do we accept the reality and live with them? It is easy as social scientists to say that children are the makers of their own development; to say that they are not objects, but that they are subjects; to say that we must listen to children. It is easy to criticise social workers on the streets of our cities and say they they rarely ask the children about their lives. The reality is that most of us never bother to ask any child in Africa anything about their own development. If a child in a village has never been asked what he or she thinks about an issue for development you can be sure that the child on the city street is even less likely to get a hearing. The pretence is to talk about child participation. The reality is actually to work in the urban slum and respect the child enough to take on board the ideas he or she has.

I would like to say two things about governmental strategies in Ghana in relation to the children. Perhaps they will be of some assistance when you consider the situation in other countries. The first point concerns the strategy on the national level. In 1996 the Government of Ghana successfully trained 30 young social workers in its School of Social Work in Accra, to the basic level of a Diploma. Our own agencies approached the Government and asked if ten of them could be seconded to us with pay to work on the
streets alongside the children. We were told that it was impossible - none of the 30 was able to be employed by the Government due to the IMF regulations concerning public sector employment according to the rules of the current Structural Adjustment Programme in operation in the country. Cynically you could say that the IMF and the World Bank had faithfully followed one of the apostles of monetarism, Hayek, who considered social welfare to be nothing more than “a semantic fraud”. In reality the Government of Ghana was powerless. It is far too easy for people to ask “What is your Government doing?” when that same Government is unable to provide young, committed workers for its own street children. Today our two agencies employ 17 of the 30 with no help from anyone, least of all the IMF. Unless and until the Governments of this continent are allowed to treat social welfare as a necessary part of public spending and public commitment then Ghana’s example will go on being multiplied.

I must, however, report that on a national level some of the inertia we experience is not the fault of Structural Adjustment or lack of public spending. In November 1995 we were party to the preparation of a document called “Street Children in Ghana: Policy Framework”, presented to Government through the Department of Social Welfare. Now, at the end of March 1998, this document is still called a draft document. It has no teeth. It cannot be used to stir other departments into action.

On local levels there is much suspicion about street children. I have been called by one of the District Chief Executives in Accra the priest who has brought criminals to the area when describing the work of our Refuge. The “criminals” are, of course, street children. The blame for such a mentality lies with both of us: on the man in question for his intransigence in accepting that there is a problem and that it is here to stay on his streets, and on myself and my workers for losing patience in trying to open his mind to the fact that these children need the care and friendship of committed adults.

What we find on a daily basis is that the local government is failing to give us the space to try and reinvent facilities for street children, though this would in fact cost them nothing to implement. One of the striking features of the Ndugu Society in Kenya was its ability at an early stage to persuade the then Minister of Education that its alternative schools were not a threat but the only means to offer literacy to children. We have a close relationship with the Mayor of Accra and from the beginning we have acknowledged that he has no money to help us pay wages but that he does have political power, and at times he has used that in favour of street children. The first creches for street babies in the city were built on an illegal site on the edge of a shanty. They became illegally “legal”. Openness of mind which allows the child’s rights to be considered will, as I have said, always lead to flexibility. I suppose on the question of education and health I would classify myself as an old disciple of Ivan Illich. But in order to make use of street corner literacy, street corner health posts and street corner creches for street babies, we need political permission. In my dreams I imagine the Government of Ghana giving me five years of complete freedom in order to make alliances with the street children and so form policies that will help all of us care together. In this same dream I ask the Government to judge after five years in the full knowledge that the street children would have persuaded all of us to reinvent our approaches to them.
For ourselves at CAS and SAID, we are advocates who act for the wellbeing of street children. This means that we see our work as completely street based. It is not my place in this seminar to start a discussion about agencies around the world who work with street children through a more institutional approach. Our workers are on the streets every day, all the time, with one thing in mind: to meet and talk and greet and, where possible, become friends with the children of that street corner. It is only then that all the wonderful theories of participatory development can become reality. We have a Sponsorship Scheme in place for those children who wish to leave the streets. As I write I would have to say that only about 2% of all the children we live with take advantage of it. It is a scheme which is not imposed by us upon the children. The child has a right in our forum to say “I wish to leave the street through this scheme”. Equally he has a right to say “I don’t want to do that.” The decision belongs to the child.

Sponsorship is not seen as the magic formula by which all street children will vanish from the slums between breakfast and lunch. It is expensive. For example, the average cost of an apprenticeship in our sponsorship scheme is around US$800 per year for three years in most cases. The question therefore asked (and is currently being asked by some European donors) is whether this represents good value or cost effective expenditure for a project that is constantly under financial pressure. We have tried to use various methods of cost effectiveness analysis to try to answer that question. As so often the answer you get is determined by the assumptions you make. On minimal assumptions about the difference in potential earnings on the street, and in motor mechanics/light engineering as a fully trained operative in the private (formal) sector, we compute an internal rate of return of over 37% - far higher than any estimates that we have seen for university or secondary education.

For us, however, no street worker means no agency for those children. It is very hard and very demanding and our own young Ghanaian Social Workers, trained and untrained, put us to shame.

I have mentioned Ivan Illich above. One of his great ideas was to promote the need to have street corner classrooms and street corner health facilities. I would like to reinvent him and say that the real need we have in Ghana is for street corner literacy programmes for our children and young people. We have a whole new generation of illiterates growing up in our towns and cities. Current economic constraints ensure that free universal compulsory schooling is not rushing to meet us. We need desperately to ensure that our young children receive the opportunity to acquire basic literacy skills. As previously mentioned, in a few years half our population will live in towns and cities. At the same time half our population will be under the age of 16. In Ghana that will mean that the illiteracy rate amongst children and young people in the poorest parts of our cities will be enormous.

Conclusions

I have three conclusions to make:
A. Both Arnold Grol and Fabio Dalappe taught us from Nairobi that we have to show affection, care, service and love in our dealings with street children. I would like to steal an idea from Judith Ennew. In "The Handbook of Children's Rights", edited by Bob Franklin (Routledge 1995), she wrote a piece which contained a section entitled "The Unwritten Rights of Street Children" (pp 210-213). In the same year a small organisation in France, called Repper, produced the Charter of Rufisque (Senegal) for street children. Repper allowed me to translate this Charter. I would like to conclude with its ten propositions because I think they match what all of us are searching for when we try to follow Arnold Grol in loving the children of our streets.

1. The street child must be regarded as a child, not as a delinquent or an anti-social being, or as someone who is sick.

2. Every adult must first listen to the child to hear what he or she wants before speaking. The role of the adult is to help the child make the distinction between dream and reality.

3. It is the street children themselves who decide what concerns them both individually or as a group.

4. The adult makes a simple contract with the child. This contract must be scrupulously guarded: it is a basic necessity not to lie to the child.

5. Whenever it is possible, the first principle must be to help the child reunite fully with his or her family.

6. When we find a foster home for a child we must ensure that it is not so luxurious as to make him or her forget what conditions he or she must face in adulthood.

7. Large institutions are not the answers for street children.

8. We must attach great importance to making sure that street children preserve the values of the streets. Values such as strong will; the ability to make do in every situation; the spirit of initiative; the sense of community with other children.

9. The street child must be brought up in the beliefs of his or her parents or family. All forms of proselytism are forbidden.

10. The street child must know that from the time of the first encounter with one of our workers we will never abandon him or her.

B. Equal partners with equal power around a global table will not come about without the political good will of (a) the rich world and (b) recipient governments. It is clear to us, in the margins in Africa, that NGOs, big or small, and particularly indigenous NGOs, are quite often regarded at best as agencies to pick up a bit of the slack in social welfare programmes and at worst as political nuisances and potential political enemies. If
we sit at the global table with both equity and equality then I submit that neither powerful donors nor recipient governments will be able to ignore us.

C. Unfortunately, harsh reality doesn't merely beckon. It grips us. The full story of Erwin Blumenthal, mentioned at the beginning, was that his statement was part of his resignation as Head of the Central Bank of Zaire in 1980. A year later, in 1981, the IMF deposited the largest loan ever granted to an African government in the Bank of Zaire. I have to ask why the IMF would ignore the advice of one of its senior managers and go ahead with such a high risk. As Archbishop Ndungane of Cape Town says: “It’s not as if we still have to wait to assess the accountability of the recipient country - the 15-16 years since the loan was made has vividly illustrated the value of the loan financially, socially and, the most regrettable of all, in terms of human lives.” If we allow our new century to become an age of economic irresponsibility, dogged by political chicanery which is at times mutual, then what price equal partnership at the global table?

I used the proverb “A person is a person through another person” from the philosophy of ubuntu, from the central and southern part of the African continent. It is a philosophy which brings a unique understanding to the value of the human being. If it had been applied in the days of the mass drive to make loans to developing countries much misery would have been prevented. But it is a philosophy which depends entirely on the interaction between all persons or interested parties.

Finally, to ensure that I do not give the impression that I live in Camelot or have indeed found the Holy Grail, I quote “Alice” against myself. “You don’t know much and that’s a fact.”

Fr Patrick Shanahan
Washington: June 1998
SUGGESTED READING


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