BRAZIL:
The Fight for Childhood in the City
by Anthony Swift
INTERNATIONAL CHILD DEVELOPMENT CENTRE

The UNICEF International Child Development Centre, often referred to as the Innocenti Centre, was established in Florence in 1988 to undertake and promote policy analysis and applied research; to provide a forum for international professional exchanges of experience; and to advocate and disseminate ideas and policies towards achieving the goals of child survival, protection and development. On a very selective basis, in areas of programme relevance, the Centre also provides training and capacity strengthening opportunities for UNICEF staff, concerned government officials, and the staff of other institutions with which UNICEF co-operates. The centre is housed within the Specola degli innocenti, a foundling hospital that has been serving abandoned or needy children since 1445. Designed by Filippo Brunelleschi, the Specola is one of the outstanding architectural works of the early European Renaissance.
BRAZIL:
The Fight for
Childhood in the City
by Anthony Swift

Innocenti Studies
## CONTENTS

Preface .................................................................................................................. 1

Street life in Brazil ................................................................................................. 3
  Remaldo’s story .................................................................................................... 3
  Poverty and family crises ...................................................................................... 4
  The families of children on the streets ................................................................. 6
  The child and family relationships ..................................................................... 6
  Case I: Marigot – Living on the streets ............................................................... 7

The seeds of change ................................................................................................. 8
  Cold charity: the years of oppression .................................................................. 8
  The growth of alternatives ................................................................................... 10
  Case II: Ana – The Passage House ..................................................................... 12
  Working with street girls ..................................................................................... 12
  The learning process ............................................................................................ 14

Children’s rights: from minors to citizens ......................................................... 17
  The beginning of a process .................................................................................. 17
  The debate begins to open up .............................................................................. 18
  Under the new constitution ................................................................................ 19
  The challenge of the new law ............................................................................ 21
  Changes go into effect ......................................................................................... 22

The Golds programme ........................................................................................... 24
  Support for the Street Child ................................................................................. 24
  Support for children on the street ....................................................................... 27
  Communal Educational Workshops ................................................................... 29
  Case III. Nel Sefisa – training for a profession .................................................. 29
  Case IV. Denise – children should know their rights ......................................... 30
  The Golds programme under siege .................................................................... 31

A deeper understanding of the problems ........................................................... 33
  The quality of childhood ..................................................................................... 34
  “Turks” and gangs ............................................................................................... 36
  The adventure ethic ............................................................................................. 37

Gearing up for change .......................................................................................... 39
  Opposing forces ................................................................................................. 40

Sources ................................................................................................................... 42

*Note: Throughout this publication, the CcS$ is converted
at the rate of Cc $100 to US $1, as in October 1990.*
PREFACE

This publication represents the second report, tailored to a non-specialist audience, resulting from an extensive case study on Brazil, one of five country case studies selected as the first project of the Urban Child Programme of the UNICEF International Child Development Centre (ICDC). Anthony Swift, a journalist and author of a recent book on children, Broken Promise: the World of Endangered Children (ISBN 0-340-59066-6), travelled to Brazil in October 1990 after having been briefed about the project by the ICDC Urban Programme team. He visited street children's projects in Goiânia, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Recife. These he met with local government authorities, interviewed representatives of government and non-governmental organizations and spent time with street educators, children, and in urban communities. In Brazil he discussed key issues with UNICEF officers and with selected researchers, thus acquainting himself with the initial results of the larger case study. A subsequent publication, designed for the professional and academic community, will report more fully on the results of this project in Brazil.

Responding to needs expressed by UNICEF Country Officers (for understanding better the many phenomena of urban children in especially difficult circumstances, and for analyzing existing programme approaches and policies) this first ICDC urban child project launched studies in the Philippines, Brazil, India, Kenya and Italy. The first three countries were chosen for their innovative programmes on urban children and communities. Kenya exemplifies the growing problem of children living in the periphery of urban slums of Africa. Italy represents the project's "conscience" by reminding us that economic growth alone provides no assured safeguard for children. Children need to become much more central as the concerns of policy-makers before real progress can be made even in high-income settings.

Each technical country case study in this urban child project has selected a particular focus, which will be partly reflected in the reports for non-specialist audiences. The Philppines and Brazil studies, for example, focus explicitly on street children and how they relate to the community. Studies in India, Kenya and Italy focus more on disadvantaged children in the community and their relationship to work, education and the street. They all discuss the problems of institutionalization, and include a concern for the problems faced by young girls, highlighting differences from those faced by boys.

The first aim of the project is to develop a fuller understanding of the current problems facing children from both milieus. By analysing various levels of causes for their abuse, abandonment, mistreatment and neglect. This objective requires going back to the children's families and family histories to trace the roots of deterioration that led to their present situation at home, in the streets or in institutions. It also requires understanding what led people within such families to move apart, lose family connections and become socially isolated. Which factors led to the demise of self-esteem by parents and children and to the downward spiral of severe distress? Which combination of factors seemed to lead certain families or certain children in those families along this path?

Low income is obviously part of the story, especially in slums in developing countries. But poverty is compounded by a sense of powerlessness, of exclusion, of lack of a rightful place that accompanies the failure of some of their expectations and their lack of access to resources they need or consider their rights. Lack of employment, for example, if other members of the family are earning enough for survival, may be extremely damaging to self-esteem and lead to heavy drinking, drug addiction and the abuse of others. The effects on children of single-headed households with heavy loads of adult work and responsibilities vary according to the social context and the number of children involved. It may lead to the serious social isolation of single children in Western countries to the neglect and isolation of children who start working at an early ages in developing countries.

Families in cities obviously live in close contact with one another. The extent, however, to which they actually interact constructively and have their own effective support systems in moments of need, be they extended family or friends, makes a considerable difference in the quality of their life, and of the lives of their children. Community cohesion and community spirit provide an important safety-net for children. In many of today's cities, this safety-net is failing.

In order to establish fully the connection between urban children and especially difficult circumstances, their families and the problems they are encountering, one also needs to address the effects of social change on families and individuals. This ranges from understanding the qualitative deterioration of family ties in different parts of the world to identifying changes in expectations, personal roles and attitudes that are common in many countries. The project, furthermore, while not strictly a comparative analysis, has sought to identify and highlight common problems such as
overcrowding, pollution, the growing presence of drugs and AIDS, urban violence, national and international migration, and the lack of a sense of belonging, that transcend the North-South divide.

While analyzing the problems with a concern for identifying urban children, families and communities at greatest risk, the project has also been engaged in assessing existing, and considering possible, interventions aimed at reaching disadvantaged children more preventively in the future. One form of prevention is obviously to support and strengthen the families that must need help before their situation gets out of hand. An essential step may be to provide them, and their communities with a stronger voice both in identifying and helping to solve their own problems, but without letting the government off the hook. Pressure needs to be put on both national and municipal governments to enable them to realize the important advantages, politically and cost-wise, of supporting families for the sake of their children rather than leaving it to institutionalize those same children and thus take full responsibility for their upbringing and often poor social reintegration.

The Philippines presents a good example of how an urban community participatory approach can offer preventive solutions by specifically involving children and families in difficult circumstances. Another preventive approach, illustrated by the Brazil case, is to identify the strategy that will facilitate a shift in the existing vision of the role of children in cities and in the nation as a whole.

Both Brazil and the Philippines illustrate the potentially creative interaction that can be established among children, families, communities and policy-makers – but which needs to be closely supported to avoid tokenism or misutilization. The Brazil case shows how the public image of children can be significantly transformed and subsequently translated within the government in concrete technical support. The case raises important issues of long-term implementation.

From the beginning the project has been concerned about children as full participating actors in these processes. This means involving them in the analysis of their own and their families’ difficulties and needs, in discovering how they use their time and how they view and use the city where they live. By doing so one gives them a stronger sense of personal esteem and responsibility that helps them become effective citizens.

We hope this series of publications will help illustrate the real everyday lives of urban children and their families, showing not only the deteriorating quality of their lives but also the clarity of their observations, the ingenuity and courage with which they face the most adverse circumstances, and the potential for action that they offer to planners and policy makers facing the dramatic demands of the cities of the future.

Cristina S. Blanc
Senior Programme Officer
Urban Child Programme
UNICEF/ICDC
Florence, Italy
April 1991
REINALDO Morais is 18. His experience of street life spans much of the decade in which the “problem of the children” became the rallying point of a remarkable social movement in Brazil. The initial reaction of the authorities to the plight of poor children onto city streets was to intern them in repressive boarding institutions. Innovative non-governmental programmes sprang up and united into a national political force, in which children themselves came to play a prominent role.

With the country’s shift towards democracy and the election of a President, declaring support for children’s rights, the social movement has helped produce unprecedented legislative and constitutional change. The Child and Adolescent Statute elevates the status and rights of the child, overrules established public policy, and provides a framework in which government and the voluntary sector can offer faster, better responses to the needs of the country’s children.

Reinaldo’s story reflects some of the problems the children face. In his case, effective assistance has come from a state programme that anticipated the new legislation, throwing out old practices and adapting approaches pioneered by non-governmental organisations.

Reinaldo’s story

“I have been on the streets since I was 10. We were seven children and my father died when I was four. My mother wasn’t interested in me. I lived with my grandmother in Goiânia. I liked her but I was too much of a responsibility for her. She would send me to my aunts. They would beat me and I would run away to my grandmothers. And so it went on.

“I was nine when I ran away for the first time. I had already been hanging around on the streets and I found the street children were not as violent as people said. They treated me well. I thought: ‘They treat me much better than my aunts.’ So I decided to stay, but I was hit by a car and the judge gave me back to my aunts. For three months I was well treated. But then everything began again. It was easy to go back to the streets – I already knew the way.”

Reinaldo sports imposing Pierre Cardin sunglasses – not his own, borrowed. He builds himself erect as he tells his story and delivers himself with the same forthright style of Brazilian, conscious of telling a piece of history. But he also makes sudden, compulsive movements, perhaps a legacy of taking drugs.

Why did he leave the streets when his brothers didn’t?

“We are not different. A child mistreated at home only stays at home because he doesn’t know the street children, he is afraid of them because of what people say. If he gets to know them he will feel much better staying on the streets than at home. When I went there, at the age I was then, it was paradise compared to being with the family. The strongest thing was the friendship, the group. Nobody mistreated you, nobody beat you up, except the police when they arrested you. It was nice there. If I thought of going home it had to be to my grandmother’s house. I could never think of going back to my mother or aunts. When I was 13 my mother married a military policeman and this guy would scold me and threaten me, so I moved further away from my mother.

“I also liked the drugs. We had to rob to get them. We did pickpocketing and breaking into stores as a form. Sometimes even into drug stores. To me it was paradise. I didn’t know what it was.

“When I was 12, I met an 18-year-old prostitute in Goiânia and I liked her. I broke into a house with her. She said the police were after me so she took me to São Paulo, hitchhiking rides. Near São Paulo, she went off with some other guy and I was left alone. I stopped ripping off and got work in a five-star hotel the St. Raphael. But after nine months I started feeling very lonely. So I got a ride to Brasilia. There I had no place to go. So the only things I made friends with were street children.

“At that time I was already very experienced so it was easy to be in this group. So I started all over again, sniffing glue, cocaine, shooting drugs and taking pills, all kinds. Robbery. I did that for three years. I was arrested many times. The police would beat me. Every time I would feel so much hate and anger in my heart that I wanted to do worse things. My fantasy was to have very strong weapons and to destroy the police. I didn’t think. I was very much addicted and every time I was beaten up I became more angry at my life.

“Then I was a real buntie and I was a nice person. I had stopped robbing. His mother treated me very well – she had eight kids, though. But I got some experience in my life of not
using any drugs.

“When I was 15, I started feeling very lonely again and decided I had to come back to Goiânia. My grandmother had moved away from her house. Again, the only friends I could find were street thieves. So I moved back into the life of drugs and robbery. Some of the drugs were things like heroin which I don’t use now. I cut my last one about ten years ago. I worked as a drug seller and a street fighter. I was a drug addict and a thief. I sold drugs and did heroin. I made friends with some drug dealers and became a drug addict.

“The next morning I remembered nothing. The pills make you speed—very nervous and fast.

“My experience on the street was one I don’t wish for any child. I didn’t know that before, but now I know.”

“I was arrested several times. In the cell I would sing. I started to think about my life. I had done that before. I had been in several government boarding homes. It was very difficult to help me there. I would fall into the drug thing and they would think I had no possible salvation. Then I would run away.”

“The turning point for Reinado came when the authorities in Goiânia turned the old institution into an open access centre for street children.

“When this centre was opened up I started coming here. I got my ideas better organised. I was either going to drop out of the kind of life I was leading, or I was going to start it all over again. I had to make a choice.

“I was still doing robberies when I came here. The first director was a real good friend. I used to do a lot of robbing but he was very nice to me. They understood that I was under drug effects and really helped me to gain strength and I stopped sniffing glue and using drugs and just kept to cigarettes and marijuana. As time went by I said: I’m going to study now. I asked for school. They gave me school. I even stopped going to the street. Then they trusted me and got me a job in the bakery. I stayed there for a while—they liked me a lot there.

“Well it’s much easier working and studying and still using drugs. It would have been too easy for me to go back to my old life—so I decided to stop sniffing marijuana. It was very difficult at first. I also stopped drinking and smoking beer for a while. That was difficult for my friends to accept. In the beginning they would fight me. But today they accept and respect me. Two or three try to follow me. I can now say that I won’t go back into drugs.”

“One of the great advantages of the centre for Reinado is that it has helped him to make progress while staying close to the people he most values—the other adolescents, his “colleagues”.”

“We discuss everything together. I lived on the street for so long that these people are my brothers and family.”

Reinado also values the change in attitude of the staff. “Everyone here treats me so well today.”

Another important advantage is the openness of the centre. “Being able to go to school outside of here is very good. I go at night regularly, just like anybody else, and I am now at the end of the first grade.”

Reinado is now one of the five member representative council elected by the adolescents at the centre to represent their views to the administration. “Before any decision is made affecting us, the director of the place meets with us to decide what to do. In the past, for instance, the staff of other programmes would use the soccer pitch when they wanted. Now we manage its use.”

Reinado has moved on from the bakery to a job as general office assistant for an independent street children’s movement. “They trust me. I open the office and I am responsible for it for much of the day.

“Right now we are working on the new Child and Adolescent Services. We are getting all the children on the streets—working and street children—and those in private and state schools so come to the stadium for a special celebration. We are going to disseminate the stature to all the children.”

“Was this politician’s attitude?

“I think it will be very difficult for the rights of the children to be complied with. If there is a change in government, it may not happen. But there is a lot of strength in communications. If we make it, it will be great.”

Looking back, Reinado sees the street “paradise” in a different light.

“My experience on the street was one I don’t wish for any child. I didn’t know that before, but now I know. I don’t know anyone who hasn’t been arrested. Many of my friends have died—been shot, or run over by cars. Others caught diseases on the streets. One is disabled, some are in detention, others are totally useless for life.”

And what about his own future?

“Now I want to rent a room for myself and be independent. Many say I am going to suffer. But I want to be a person who lives by himself. I support myself—I want to have food, clothes, buy my own things. It’s an experience. I have a lot more than others do. I can do it. I want to finish my studies. I want to get to know other places. It’s not that I dislike Goiânia—I like it. But I want to grow, improve. There will always be a little discrimination here so I want to start in a different place.”

Does he see his grandmother still?

“Yes, but I haven’t got the courage to go back home to my mother. I see my grandmother every two months. I like her very much—she was very good to me but it was too much for her. She just couldn’t cope.”

Poverty and family crisis

The crisis at unprotected children and adolescents in Brazil has developed within a process of rapid industrialization and, in the past decade, great economic instability.

The country is the world’s eighth economic power in terms of GNP. But the distribution of wealth has been strongly skewed in favour of powerful minority, leaving half the population with only 14 percent of total income. Crises in the country’s economy, to which the poor are
particularly vulnerable, are reinforced by a foreign debt of US$15 billion and marked by bouts of galloping inflation. The current inflation level is 18 per cent a month despite a programme of economic stringency.

In 1987, 41 per cent of families, including 30 million children, were living below the poverty line; the situation has since worsened. There are huge regional imbalances: in the north-east, the percentage rises to 63 and more than 16 million children are growing up in impoverishment. Though poverty in rural areas is more acute, the greatest concentrations of poor children are in the cities.

A problem defined as urban has roots in rural poverty, neglect, and the enforced, even violent, displacement of large numbers of families from the land. Between 1960 and 1980, 40 million farming and rural labouring families either abandoned or were expelled from their land, migrating to urban centres. Whereas 75 per cent of Brazilians lived in the rural areas 30 years ago, the same percentage now live in the cities.

Most of the rural migrants have joined the ranks of the urban poor, producing a rapid proliferation of squatters and slum communities, the more settled of which are known as favelas. They are still growing, but now at a slower rate. Valério de Oliveira Neto of the Luís Feroz Centre in the country’s north-east describes life in the urban slums as being for many people “...the final stage in a process of destruction of the very important ties in an individual’s life — cultural, social and psychological ties. Often the family is destroyed, the community is destroyed, the relationship with the land in the interior has been destroyed. The whole process is very destructive.”

Indian and black migrants from the north and interior can experience the transfer to the cities as a particularly severe onslaught on their cultural identity.

The impact of this process on children only began to be reflected in systematic studies at the very end of the 1970s. During the 1980s, an increasing preoccupation with street children has produced more academic research into their predicament. But according to Irma and Irene Rizzini, of CESME at Santa Ursula University in Rio de Janeiro, there has been a conspicuous absence of studies of rural children. Irene Rizzini offers as explanation the fact that children in the rural areas present no problem to the rest of society.

“We know from the statistics that the situation of working children in rural areas is more terrible than in the cities. But there, children are part of production — working with their families, though gaining no salary or education. In the cities, they become a problem — they are out in the community and not in their families any more. They become violent and criminalized, some are killed. People are anxious about what they will do when they grow up.”

In rural areas children work with their families. In the cities they are out in the community and become a problem.

Both the experience of community workers and academic studies show that the majority of children on the streets in Brazil are workers and see themselves that way. They help their mothers and siblings by following one of the common street occupations: petty trading, paper-picking, car washing and watching, shoe shining, or begging. Many return to their families at night, or at least
with some frequency, and hand over much of their earnings. The numbers of children dislocated from their families and living, as Ronaldo did, in the sub-culture of the street is a minority, though a considerable and highly visible one.

While there are no accurate numbers, relevant statistics indicate the scale of the problem. As already noted, at least 41 percent of Brazilian families live below the poverty line. Currently some 3,000,000 children between the ages of 10 and 17 are in school; of these, 14 percent neither work nor have household responsibilities.

The families of children on the streets

Despite a considerable number of studies of children on the streets, there has been no academic inquiry into why some children either abandon or are abandoned by their families, or take up formal or informal employment. A case study undertaken by the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences in Rio de Janeiro (FLACSO) for UNICEF as part of a five-country examination of the Urban Child and Family in Especially Difficult Circumstances is a first step in remedying this situation.

The qualitative part of the FLACSO/UNICEF study, conducted by sociologist Ada Alves in the city of Goiania, distinguishes between children who live on the streets and those who have little or no contact with their families: "street children" and "children who work on the streets: working children." The latter are categorized by occupation, and a further distinction made between those who work as market porters and bus terminal unloaders, and those who wash cars, shine shoes and collect paper. The latter are seen as leading a lifestyle akin to "street children" and were therefore identified as "borderline." The study identified 42 children living on the streets and 60 in street occupations, both in the city centre and in the suburbs. The researchers traced their families to secure responses to questionnaires by children and parents.

All the families were poor, with an average monthly income of around Cr$3,500 ($US25) per head—half the monthly minimum wage; all also lived in very cramped conditions, with a third living in less than 20 square metres.

Three-quarters of all the families interviewed were migrants. Among those of the "borderline" group, all were migrant and among those of the "street children," 75 percent. Unemployment was higher among migrants than non-migrant families.

The study found that the large majority of the mothers had been or were in stable relationships with their partners and 51 percent were married; but the number of children of those in stable relationships was higher among those of the "street" and "borderline" children. Where children were from broken families, in most cases the head of family was a single mother. In the families of "working children," the father was generally the main breadwinner, in those of "street children," the mother. Here again the "borderline" workers were closer in profile to the "street children." While few of the street children contributed anything to their families, most working children were regular contributors, accounting for up to 30 percent of family income.

The child and family relationships

Wilson Munt, who conducted psycho-social aspects of the FLACSO/UNICEF study, interviewing families in depth, considers the contributions of street children to their families to be expressions of solidarity. Children saw themselves as helping their families or helping their mothers.

The working children in the study sample were aged from six to 13 but in many poor families children start generating income from as young as four. "This enables families to maintain a structure without the children of impoverished families would be street children. The link is that they consider themselves stronger as a family," says Munt. Child workers who do not contribute from their earnings to their families don't feel solidarity and are most likely to become "street children." But the pooling of income is just one expression of solidarity—"it is the fruit of several investments—personal, emotional and material."

It is worth noting that the feelings of solidarity of some children with the family can withstand the most adverse onslaughts of poverty. As the economic crisis in Brazil bites ever deeper, street educators in Rio are seeing an increasing number of whole families living on the streets. Such is the case of Marcus and her family (see Case 1), who could not afford even the most miserable slum house.

In looking at relationships within families, the FLACSO/UNICEF study detected a lack of structure in many of the families of street children, as well as in those in borderline occupations.

In both working and street children's families, the mother was seen as the most important member of the family; in most street children families the mothers made all the decisions. Generally the mother was seen by the children as the person they could most talk to most, rely on most to help them, whereas fathers were seen as neither talking with their children nor helping them, nor
Case I:
Margaret – Living on the streets

Margaret’s family moved to the streets of Rio de Janeiro 10 years ago after her father left home.
“My mother had no way to support us. We were four girls. We sold street food on the streets. One day we didn’t have enough money to get home and my mother decided we should sleep where we were. We stayed for a while to make more money, and when we did go home we found the house broken into. We stayed on the streets after that.

Then my mother gave birth to the streets to another girl. She didn’t take care of herself in the 40 days after the birth and got a problem in her head. She went away with the baby for three years leaving me to look after my younger sisters. Then she came back to us.

Margaret experienced many of the hazards of street life, including the insult of passers-by, arrest, violence and extortion at the hands of the police. She describes street life as an environment of violence. “Being hungry is violent, sleeping on the cold ground, prejudice from society – there are many ways a child can be subjected to violence. On the street I would approach a person to sell sweets and they would spit at me. Not being able to fight back on the street, that is violence. The fact that I’m black made it worse.” She resorted to prostitution: “I had to fight to support my younger sisters and there is always a man offering money for sex.”

Despite her mother’s prolonged absence, she describes having been spared some of the worst experiences of street life by her mother’s presence. “Some colleagues of mine were raped by the police. I never happened to me because I am not a street girl. The best thing is to be sent to your mother. We can die hungry or cold but if we have our mother we are protected.

“The worst things happen to children whose mothers are far away or who have no mother. Many children on the street don’t even have mothers – their mothers have died. They have to find their own way to eat. A hungry brother or sister – they try to get money in the street, and then they become street kids.”

Margaret was six when her family took to the streets. At 12 she learned about a street programme, the Associação Beneficente São Martinho, part of the Catholic Church’s Pastoral of the Minor. “I discovered there was a group which gave lunch at the cathedral. Then I started to get along with the people from the Pastoral. They decided to put me in the course of preparation for the working world. I wanted to be helped. I struggled to win their attention and assistance. On the streets there was nothing nice. I only got to know what nice was when I got to know São Martinho.”

Margaret progressed in the programme. Now at 16 she is training to work with street children and has been helped to acquire a small house, where she lives with her mother and sisters.

The study explored the children’s relationships, not only with parents, but with siblings, neighbours and other children. Street children had more difficulties in relating to people in general but the relationship with the father was the most problematical. None of the 42 street children questioned thought their father was to be trusted.

In a culture where the father traditionally had a very prominent and powerful family role, and is an important role model, fathers of street children were in many cases absent and even unknown to the child. Where the father was part of the household he was likely to be unemployed and never to have worked, also to be illiterate. Not only was he mistrusted but even despised by the child.

A social worker attributes the failure of fathers to attract their children’s esteem to the generalization associated with the impact of urban poverty on traditional family links and relationships. The father’s status as the main breadwinner and head of the family may be lost as he finds himself under- or unemployed or working in the informal and poorly paid informal market. He works long hours but can afford little. The wife also has to go out to work. Both may travel long distances to work, leaving the children unprotected and unsupervised. Unable to fulfill his responsibilities the man may abandon the home, increasing the need for the children to contribute to the family income.

The vulnerability of the families of the street children was further accentuated in the study by their living in poverty, their poverty compromising security, relationships within family and neighbourhood, whereas the families of working children had the more positive concerns of education and work.

The families of the street children generally had no less access to education, in terms of the availability of school places, or to work. It seems, rather, that they did not see education or work as means to overcome their difficulties. It is commonly assumed that street children abandon school when they go to the streets, but all the children in the study who took to the streets were already out of school by the time they did so.
THE SEEDS OF CHANGE

The growth in the numbers of children living or working on the streets reflects the longstanding failure of Brazilian social policies to serve the poor. Policies to assist children and adolescents introduced during this century fall into two main groups. One comprises the basic social services of health and education, which it was the duty of the state to provide, and to which all children should have had right of access.

In fact a great number of children in the urban peripheries and the poorest rural areas have always been excluded from their benefits. The failure was not just that of parents failing to send their children to school. Many poor, particularly poor migrants, children were denied admission to school on grounds such as not having birth certificates (for which a fee had to be paid), or not applying at the official starting age.

The second type of social policy dealt with poor citizens not as having rights but as deserving of charity and compassion from the dominant elite. The delivery of this compensatory assistance was highly centralized and unrelated to local needs. It was often used to manipulate political support and reward political loyalty.

The shortcomings of service provision was reflected in high infant mortality and child malnutrition rates. In the mid-1970s, when the economy was growing, 33 per cent of Brazilian children suffered some form of malnutrition. In the north-east, the levels reached 61 per cent in the cities and 71 per cent in the rural areas; 22 per cent of the latter in moderate or severe form.

The reverse side of this coin of inadequate compensatory policies was a harsh repression of poor children and adolescents whose behaviour was seen as divergent from legal and moral standards. The poor, grossly exploited and left to survive on the margins of the economy, were offered social assistance. Anyone, including children, who rebelled, was arrested or crime was severely punished.

Violence towards poor children in Brazil has not been limited to the state; it has been liberally meted out by anyone who has felt threatened by them.

During the years of military rule between 1965 and 1985, two laws were elaborated concerning the rights of children and youth, underpinning the twin approaches of assistance and repression. The first, enforcing the National Policy for Child Welfare, provided for assistance to needy children and was very repressive in relation to delinquent adolescents. And in 1979, the International Year of the Child, the Minors’ Code was enforced, completing the legal framework for the National Policy of Child Welfare. The laws regarded children not as people, nor as citizens, but as objects of intervention on the part of the state.

The structure for dealing with children over the age of seven and who were in irregular circumstances—anything from being abandoned to committing homicide—was a central policy-making body known as FUNABEM (the National Foundation for Children’s Welfare). In turn, FUNABEM funded and dictated the practices of state-level foundations called FEBEM. To complicate matters, FUNABEM also ran its own institutions in some places, notably in Rio de Janeiro.

Identification of children in irregular circumstances fell largely to the police, although any adult could deliver a child to FEBEM, and decisions over their fate were made by children’s judges. The outcome was wholesale classifications of unprotected children according to a scale of negatives—labelling them as needy, abandoned, offenders, exhibiting either mild or severe anti-social behaviour—and their consignment to places of compulsory confinement.

Referred to as boarding schools, these institutions were often barracks-like, under-funded, lacking in basic equipment and poorly staffed. They rapidly developed a reputation for the systematic violation of human rights, and the criminalization of children.

The whole system was inherently corrupt and violent towards the child. Police officers arresting children often beat and even tortured them, and children were commonly held temporarily in jail with adults. Inefficient processing of their cases resulted in their being held in antiquated overcrowded, prison-like screening centres, in some cases for as long as a year or more. They had no legal or other representation. Many adolescents—usually the more adventurous or street-wise—escaped or bribed their way to freedom, only to be picked up in the streets again at some later date. Rising levels of criminality were met with increasing public intolerance and violence towards street
children, and the emergence of extermination groups.

The killing of children and adolescents became the focus of numerous independent studies in the country in 1988. A year earlier a public radio station in São Paulo broadcast a report which, thoughartial, was attributed to the so-called “Justice Committees” – groups previously said to be composed of ordinary policemen or security guards working for local businessmen in an attempt to contain crime levels.

In 1986, Rebeca de Souza, a street educator in a São Paulo suburb, said of his greatest concerns was to get a safe house where children on the death lists of local justice committees could be housed until the heat had passed. When he was killed, he was overwhelmed by the desire to keep children out of a FEBEM institution, on occasion he was all too keen to leave one inside, for reasons of safety.

Children have also been killed by the police investigating gang activities, as well as killed by gangs involving them in drugs-running. A school inmate boy interviewed in 1988 responded to the question of what he thought he would be doing in 10 years’ time by saying, matter-of-factly: “I think I will be dead.” Within months he was killed by the gang behind him. Another boy was later shot dead by police, who caught him in the act of stealing a coconut from a palm tree.

The low value placed on the lives of children of the poor has historical roots in attitudes towards African slaves, according to Ivan dos Santos, executive secretary of the human rights organization, the Centre of Coordination of Marginalized Peoples (CEAP). “There were cases of slave owners cutting umbilical cords and letting the children die so that the mothers could be freed out of centuries,” he says, adding: “The majority of children dying now are black.”

People who work with street children say that the children come to identify strongly with the violence they experience. A simple illustration: the emblem used on the squad cars of one city police force – bayonets rifles rammed diagonally through a human skull – was smeared in the graffiti of street children on institutional walls.

Despite the reputation of FEBEMS, many children who were lodged in them at the insistence of not of the courts but of their own parents. Izabel Rizzini worked for six years in public and private institutions for children and adolescents in Rio de Janeiro in the 1980s. “I saw mothers – desperate mothers – saying ‘I can’t give my child food or milk, please take her. Even if it is not so good, it’s better than being with me.’” There were also those who tried to take their children in because they could not control them, but
diametrically opposed to the tacit acceptance of poverty and human suffering. Their motivations differed also from that of many professional workers who pursue careers in social services, and to the social engineers who approach child criminality and child labour as wrinkles to be ironed out of the prevailing system.

Many are inspired by a vision of an alternative society, one in which human life has a value in itself and justice and compassion are fundamental guiding principles. They derive their sense of purpose by actively applying such principles in their everyday lives. Their philosophy is, in a non-violent sense, revolutionary. Senior educator Isoldo de Deus refers to his “insular life”, indicating a life choice related to the poverty in his country, of which his concern for and work with endangered children is a central expression.

The work of these pioneers is essentially experimental and non-dramatic. It counters children’s feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness by offering a sustained experience of trust and friendship. It also helps the child to see that the experience of poverty, far from being shameful, can be a valuable insight into the nature of a society that chooses to present itself through glittering images of material success. A street child in an alternative programme in Rio asked whether there was anything he valued about street life; replied: “Yes, the suffering we go through on the street. When I am an adult I will know about that suffering.”

Another key component is to give the children the experience of being able to work in solidarity with others to change society for the better. It is a kind of alchemy, which converts deprivation into an advantage. The program in Rio and the role of victims into that of activist against injustice.

It is this revolutionary perspective that explains the thoughtfulness, imaginations, courage and selflessness of much of the pioneers’ work and altruism certainly as crucial to their success as any technique they may employ. Rudimentary as this analysis is, it has obvious relevance to attempt to supply what are seen as the lessons of the alternative programmes on a broader scale: Many of the pioneers within the popular movements are progressive activists within the churches, particularly the Catholic Church, acting under the umbrella of the Church’s Pastoral. But there are also many secular community activists with political or other allegiances. Some are simply concerned individuals.

Sister Adina Chaman Fadul, Roberto José dos Santos and others started the “Meet The Street Children” Programme of the Benevolent Association of São Martinho.
in Rio de Janeiro after despairing of working within FUNABEM institutions. "There was nothing we could do there," said Sister Adna, who had joined FUNABEM as a volunteer.

The children in the institution were aged between 13 and 18. "Some were thieves or misfits, like throwing stones on the road, and they were mixed up with others who had committed serious crimes. The building was designed for 250 children but never had less than 500. There was no educational programme. They were spanked constantly."

"In talking to the children, I could see the reference point was the street. None talked of their homes and only one spoke of his parents. So I realized they had a different reality from those in the middle and upper-class schools I had always worked in. We could show our place was the street, if only to ensure that these children wouldn't come into the institution we had just left."

To begin with, Sister Adna and her colleagues started informally approaching street children in the city centre, with no particular plan or commitment to forming an organization. "We were just worried about them being so many destitute children. Having created a link with them we felt we couldn't abandon them."

Many of the alternative processes, particularly those responding to street children, started in this very low-key, intensive way. Structures created by adults who aimed to ensure that children's needs were met, and who wanted to understand and work towards their needs, were created and developed in a way that enabled them to develop and develop the necessary ways forward, in a process intended to be empowering. Only after three years of building a relationship with children on the street didbat the Sao Martinho programme begin to develop training and educational programmes.

The approach of the alternative programmes was accomplished through the development of the role of the street educator, based on the teachings of Paulo Freire. "The educator at FUNABEM was the owner of knowledge," says street educator Joao de Deus. "He taught children what to do and how to do it, but the street educator works together with the child. It is a growing process in which there is an exchange of knowledge, a mutual learning and growing together in a way that liberates the educator as a human being and citizen and child."

The street educator tries to recognize what is of value in the child's existing reality and help him to discover his or her own and cultural codes. The educator does not introduce sudden changes into street children's lives. When the child is no longer satisfied with what he is doing, he is motivated to ask for other activities.

A firmness is not restricted to the child's capabilities. It is also used to encourage the child to explore his or her general experience, including family and street experience. Many street children in Brazil are black and their cultural identity is often, although not always, the dominant consumer culture of the city. Joao de Deus, originally a government institution in the mid-1990s was seen as doing something subversive.

The Sao Martinho "Meet the Street Children" programme's first addition to its street work was to provide access for children in the city centre to the stadium. It also established an open access day centre with a flexible function. The centre is physically structured so that children gain progressively access to its facilities as they move away from the street-child identity. An upper floor where education and preparation for work activities are oriented and only children who have committed themselves to an activity have access to the floor. Each step is the programme is very much at the child's initiative, even the first step to make use of the centre.

"Any child can come into this centre," says Roberto José de Santos. "But the first impulse of the educator is not to bring the child here. Usually the child discovers this place through other children. Through the street educator, the child experiences a different kind of relationship in what has been made available to him. Without the educators to say anything, he begins to discover that the street is not so good for him."

But what do children, who have experienced only rejection and violence from the adult world, make of this contradiction of adult educators trying to help them? "It is long-term work, with the child constantly measuring our capacity to love him truly and testing us in every way he can. First of all, he tries our patience - we've had children throwing stones at our car because they say we live off them. They try to see if we really mean what the limits we see. Particularly in relation to the police who the children are against. By not showing fear or running away, the educator proves to the child that he wants to have a real friendship different from the other relationships they have had.

"When the child comes to the centre he gets a lot of motivation to start doing other activities. It's the same process that took him to the streets but in reverse. Though
Case II: Ana - The Passage House

When Ana Vasconcelos first made contact with girls living by prostitution, she found that talking to them on the street in the usual manner of street educators was very difficult "because of the violence of the situation."

The girls would praise her for food. "I realize it was very hard to talk when you are hungry. Passersby would interrupt us to demand food. They would shout, 'Are you looking for such girls?'"

"The girls would say, 'We are all going to die and go to hell. And why I would ask, are you going to hell?' They replied, 'Because this is the passage to hell. We all are going to hell because we are all bad.'"

So I suggested we construct a place from where they might go to heaven. "Going to heaven means to come back to ourselves, to reconstruct ourselves."

Like other open access centres, the Passage House is for some a place of temporary respite from the street, while for others it is the beginning of transition away from street life. Rules are devised with the children's participation and include a ban on bringing any glue, drugs, or knives into the house. Food is provided but the girls cook for themselves and do the cleaning. Education is available and there is support, training, and placement in a community house in one of the poor areas for those who want to leave street life.

Above all, the Passage House creates an opportunity for the girls to reflect and start talking about their lives. "They don't have to give up street life but continuity is emphasized - the teacher tries to emphasize the value of finishing what you start."

The girls need limits - even limits to kill themselves. "Some girls don't even know their physical sizes. They sprout, they feel like water sprinkling over the seats. At first, they are very provocative and aggressive. There may be a confrontation - often that is when the real work can begin - it depends on the skill of the educator. Slowly they learn to trust us, but then they often regress - they kick their thumbs, some of their facial distinctive features, and start talking like babies."

The Passage House provides opportunity for the girls to work through their experiences and gain insights into what has happened to them - both in terms of their personal journey and the identity foisted on them by society. "We help the girls transfer guilt from themselves. They are in difficulties because the government does little for children. They understand that prostitution is morally wrong."

"If you ask how many girls really change their thinking in the sense of realising citizenship, it is very few but our programme is very young," says Ana Vasconcelos. "Last year we had 16 girls who really changed and who are now workers. We are working with 60 in an intense way. Many just come to us for information. Every girl gets something. They learn to take better care of their health, they learn about their bodies, about pregnancy, about safety - we advise them to sleep in groups, not alone. So all the girls change a bit. I believe most of them can change - 70 per cent can."

"The others - generally the older ones of 17 or 19 - will never become revolutionary women in society. But they will behave differently towards their daughters."

Working with street girls

Ana Vasconcelos runs The Passage House, a centre for girls on streets in Recife (see Case I.) She started the work after she realized that street girls were being left out because they were regarded as too difficult to work with. Like Sister Adna, she began by going to the streets "to meet the girls and understand what they wanted to say."

For boys, she suggests, taking to the streets is not at odds with all the values associated with masculinity. Boys are meant to be adventurous, and there are plenty of Rambo-like role models in popular fiction for them to
identify with. For the girls, brought up in a society that offers conflicting images of the home-oriented saint and morally desirous where, taking to the streets is an anathema of cultural positives. This leaves them with an even lower self-esteem than the boys. In Roque, girls are excluded from the boys' gangs and exposed to abuse by them. They also see each other as rivals and often clash violently, and are particularly vulnerable.

"They don't know who they are," says Ana, "They repeat the judgements of others. They say, 'We are the guilty, people don't like us.' So the first thing was to help them to be in touch with what they are saying. I would tell them: 'What are you saying? Why are you bad? Look at that boy - he does the same things as you but you don't think him bad. Why not?'"

Ana believes the task of the girls is re-establishing their identity is often complicated by a failure in the relationship between mother and child. This may have been achieved through the oppression of the mother's own mother and grandmother, leaving her identity crushed and defensive. More immediately the failure may be the result of the girl being abandoned or placed in residential domestic work at a young age.

"When the girls at The Passage House draw houses they always draw mothers in the house," says Ana. "One girl draws her mother as a woman without a head, directly symbolising the lack of love, identity, reciprocity. This girl has never met her mother. She looks for her mother in anybody who comes close to her." Ana sites mothers like this girl's as abandoning them in a particular way. "The mother did not help the daughter understand what it means to be a woman. But the mother could not do that because she also didn't know - she was as lost and abandoned as the girl, so she had nothing to teach her."

"So the problem is abandonment - even if you have food or a home you can be abandoned. You can be lost because nobody has helped you find out who you are, what your culture is, or what society is." Ana believes that migration can greatly increase the identity crisis of girls, who tend to be more restricted to the home and have nothing to grasp on to.

"Even though at some level the girls understand that their mothers are also lost and have no identity, they tend to regard them as the bad mother who didn't help or teach them anything. They forget the bad mother and fantasise a good mother - one that never abandons their daughters, one that is able to help them to grow up. They live in the fantasy of meeting this mother in some way - only this mother is going to give them back to themselves. I need
to meet my mother so I will know who I am – because I can only know who I am if my mother teaches me who I am.”

In contrast to the old centrally-planned state programme for children on the street, the alternative non-governmental projects demonstrated the scope for a variety of interventions in the child’s trajectory from family to street. Some tried to establish alternative school and health programmes, or worked with very violent children in the slums, or offered support to vulnerable families to stem the flow of children to the workplace and the streets.

“We try to hold the flood right at the spring, rather than where the river flows into the sea.”

Some focused on trying to create work opportunities for children. Some chose to work at the point of crisis – with the child already on the street and separated from his or her family.

Júlio de Deus and his wife Gildecy have for many years lived and worked in a peripheral area of São Paulo with the kind of children who would normally be candidates for the street: “We try to hold the flood right at the spring, rather than where the river flows into the sea and you can’t hold it,” says Júlio.

The children in his Community Association of Street Boys and Girls elect office bearers from among themselves and hold regular meetings to discuss issues that bear directly on their daily lives – anything from organizing recreational activities to violence in the home, criminality, work, drugs, the killing of children – and they establish policies and identify courses of action. They have held demonstrations in the city centre against the killing of children. They have also gone on camping trips into the countryside.

The learning process

With most of the children not attending school – as Júlio would put it, having voted with their feet against official education – they have instead turned to their own slam environment as their classroom, exploring its origins and what goes on in it.

The aim of this learning process is to replace disdain with understanding, and engender in the child an identification with the rest of community. Action against the environment yields to the possibility of working within it for change. Changing attitudes and behaviour in the children in turn may make possible changes in community attitudes towards them.

While some alternative programmes seek to change the perspective of the child or adolescent, others have tried to mobilize the community around parental concern for their children as the main instrument of change.

A community schools programme in Reíche set out not to substitute for government education but to equip children for admission to state schools. The schools are located in the favelas, making attendance easier. The teachers are from the communities, and are given special training by the programme. Their approach is far more reinforcing of the child than that usually found in government schools. Parental and community involvement is actively encouraged. There are outings, events and parties.

One basic hallmark of successful programmes is that children seek them out and introduce other children to them. Margaret, for example, used to be a drug dealer. At one social project, she introduced another child to the project. She helped the child to go to school and take part.

A teacher from the alternative schools in Reíche talked of the children’s demand for the programme. If she was late for school, the children would come to her house asking, “What’s wrong? Is there no school today?” and insist she go with them.

Theresa Pires, a psychologist and educationalist, tells a story that suggests a wide identification of street children with alternative programmes. Some children she had got into conversation with in the centre of Rio asked her where she was going. She said, “I am off to a meeting of the street children.” One of the boys asked, “What’s the problem?” She said, “They are meeting the Minister for Education.”

Some of the children then asked, “Why can’t we be there?”

An important part of the work of the alternative programmes has been the finding of ways so to equip children to earn a living, as an alternative to criminality rather than as an end in itself. Even with training, many youngsters still face a future of unemployment, a replay of the experience of their own parents. The aim is rather to give the children a safer basis for survival so that they can gain an opportunity to develop their role as citizens who, having experienced the failure of society, can work to change it. They are emancipated not so much in terms of a personal escape from poverty but in becoming part of a broad effort to defeat poverty. “Once children have an understanding of the values of life they have no option but to engage in the effort to transform society,” says Roberto José dos Santos.

“We are not out to integrate the child; we try to socialize the children – within a process of struggle, self-esteem, and value for the things he has – to have a critical understanding of the society, and believe that he can work effectively for change,” says Roberto.

Though at the outset alternative programmes were localized, long-term and intensive in character, they became affiliated to movements such as the Minors’ Pastoral and the National Movement of Street Boys and Girls.
Girls. They began to enjoy public representation and have enabled children themselves to increase the scope of their social action, with telling consequences in the push for constitutional and statutory reforms.

In the 1980s the alternative programmes and the movement that grew out of these not only pioneered new approaches to responding to deprived children but they had a major impact on public opinion.

"One of their great successes was to demonstrate that these kids are susceptible to change in the right direction," says Theresia Penna Ferme. "They also pose a challenge to the government school system — by showing what it does and fails to do by excluding children. These programmes have mobilized society very forcefully and shown them that there are children in very bad situations and that something has to be done about it."

Nevertheless, in themselves they do not and cannot constitute an answer. "I think of the non-governmental programmes as candle-points of illumination in the dark," says Anis Vasconcelos. "We can get big results because we work with small groups. But the problem of the children is so big, it cannot be fully tackled by the political and economic circumstances that promote children's dislocation from their families. Thus change. For that government commitment is needed."
CHILDREN'S RIGHTS: FROM MINORS TO CITIZENS

In the 1979 review of policies — which produced the 'Minors' Code' — the military government had counted on co-operation from UNICEF in implementing action. However, the proposed programme of assistance was repudiated by the popular organizations. This rift, together with the increasingly apparent failure of centralized programming in a country as complex as Brazil and the successes of alternative projects, prompted UNICEF to assume the role of mediator. Working closely with FUNABEM, UNICEF helped elaborate an "Alternatives for Street Children" Project. The aim of the project was to identify, register, survey, and disseminate the work of successful community-based activities so that existing government programmes could be improved and new ones elaborated.

This could be no easy process. At the time there was little love lost and much suspicion between the authorities and community organizations. "People who wanted to do social and educational work with children, of a kind that was enraging and based on the notion of citizenship and rights, felt that they had to work in spite of and not because of the law," says Antônio Carlos Nunes da Costa, formerly a manager of public policy and now UNICEF's National Project Officer. But the military regime, reeling out of conviction and ideas, was beginning to show some tolerance to the surging of the popular movement.

Through the Alternatives for Street Children Project, UNICEF guided the government's go-ahead to work with the popular movement. This made easier for progressive people within the government to learn from the new approaches. Reservations on the part of the popular organizations included reluctance to be entered in a central register to which the military authorities would have access. There were also fears that the ultimate outcome of the project would be one of the government relying on community initiatives as a substitute for developing an effective programme of its own.

UNICEF maintained close contact with the Catholic hierarchy, which was in increasingly open opposition to the dictatorship. This contact grew and embraced other fields of activity, allaying misapprehensions and offering reassurance to the popular organizations that they could trust UNICEF and the Project.

The beginning of a process

Despite difficulties in the period 1982-84, many promising programmes were identified. Their most attractive features were their democratic style of management, their capacity to respond to needs, their low costs compared to the government’s programme, and their ability to mobilize local communities for broader changes than more assistance to the immediate needs of children.

An important achievement was the first meeting of Alternative Communal Assistance to Children in Latin America, which UNICEF promoted and financed. "The meeting provided the first overview of the network of community organizations working for street children. It was reported widely in the media, and helped make alternative programmes for street children a household concept throughout the country," says Antônio Carlos.

Another important outcome of the meeting was the emergence of a group of religious and community leaders involved in successful programmes. These were an important resource for anyone wanting to work with children and received many invitations to give talks throughout the country.

During this phase the word "minors" began to be dropped from the activist terminology in favour of the phrase "street children".

"The street child assumed a symbolic dimension because the presence of boys and girls on the streets allowed people to question the living conditions of people in the urban peripheries, and this opened up other questions relating to children working in the rural areas. The "street child" began to be seen as a symbol of the contradictions within, and a condemnation of, the Brazilian development model," says Antônio Carlos.

The years 1984-86, with the military withdrawing from government in 1985, saw a general opening up of discussion about unprotected children and a stronger mobilization of the organizations working with them. The emerging leaders were securely linked with grass-roots communities and eager to build up an ability to represent their interests at national level. With its greater experience of power structures and processes, UNICEF provided valuable counselling.

The popular programmes established first local, and then state, commissions. In 1985 the state commissions
organized and elected the first National Commission of the National Movement for Street Boys and Girls.

In May 1986, the first national meeting of street boys and girls was held. It was a triumph for the principle of involving children in social reforms, affecting their circumstances. Representatives from street and working children's groups from all over the country assembled in Brasilia for the conference. The event resulted in a blaze of publicity and had a great impact on the consciousness of people working in this area, as well as on public opinion.

The event resulted in a blaze of publicity and had a great impact on people working in this area, as well as on public opinion.

"Brazilian society was accustomed to looking at these children exclusively as needy, seeing what they did not have, what they did not know, what they were incapable of — a totally negative profile compared to supposed, middle-class norms," says Antônio Carlos. "The Street Children's Movement represented children in positive light, emphasizing what they could do, what they did know, what they could offer the country."

The meeting had another important message: it revealed the existence of a widespread national movement that had grown out of the joint governments/UNICEF Alternative Street Children Project. This movement was not affiliated to any church and was well-diffused throughout the country, something the government termed a "critical and transforming approach to reality."

This movement, now organized and consolidated, was well placed to participate between 1986 and 1988 in the country's historic shift towards democracy, marked by the inception of a constituent national assembly to draw up a new constitution.

Elections to the assembly installed a very strong and vocal minority of congressmen committed to the ordinary mass of the people. They worked together with the popular movements in elaborating a methodology for formulating the constitution and were able to introduce an unprecedented measure that allowed direct democratic participation in the drafting process by the population at large. Any citizen was permitted to present a popular amendment for which they had managed to secure 30,000 registered voters' signatures.

The debate begins to open up.

In 1984, UNICEF sought government agreement to a joint agenda of realistic goals for the UNICEF-assisted programme of cooperation for children and adolescents in dangerous and difficult circumstances. The agreed target was to reduce the levels of violence to which children were exposed, and to find ways to help Brazil provide better protection than had been the case in the past. As a foundation for this work, UNICEF and the government applied a set of standard social indicators to define more clearly the scale and nature of the problems faced by children.

In the view of UNICEF's Representative in Brazil, John Dornbush, the drafting of the constitution, coinciding with the country's political transition towards democracy, provided an ideal opportunity to secure democratic involvement in establishing a framework of children's rights that might underpin improved public policies.

The new consensus, political and programmatic, recognized the need to get away from monolithic top-down, programmes decided at federal level for local implementation. The methods of the past had to be discarded because they did not work; the country was too large for a handful of people to develop meaningful and useful answers to the problems faced in 4,500 municipalities, some of them larger than certain European countries. The emphasis had to be on decentralization and democratizing the process.

UNICEF's work was to help open up dialogue as much as possible. In response to a Brazilian Government request, UNICEF supported the establishment of a National Commission on the Child and the Constitution, for the determination of children's rights issues in Brazil. This was made up of the Education Ministry and six other officials related to social issues, as well as seven national NGOs. UNICEF also used its resources to support publications, meetings and provide other forms of technical assistance. The breadth and intensity of public concern about children was reflected within Congress by the setting up of an all-party group (Frente Parlamentar de Direitos do Criança) to champion the cause of child and adolescent rights. At government level, a body of progressive leaders in the management of public policy, the National Forum of State Officials of Public Policies for Children and Adolescents, emerged, and played an important part in mobilizing state governments and representatives. In the public arena, the National Movement of Street Boys and Girls linked hands with a broad spectrum of professional and other organizations.

The role of the National Commission of the Child and the Constitution was to receive submissions on the problems of the children and work out how a constitution might define their rights in a way that would ensure new and better policies. UNICEF helped the government establish a small secretariat to support its work.

"The Commission itself was a remarkable achievement for a country coming out of 25 years of military control of government with no government tradition of working with organizations representative of society," says John Dornbush. Among its non-governmental members were the National Street Children's Movement, the Minors' Pastoral of the National Council of Catholic Bishops, the National Order of Attorneys, and the Pediatrics Association of Brazil.

While the people who worked in NGO movements were skilled at running projects, they did not know much about change through legislation and legal rights.
Meanwhile, the government ministries represented on the Commission had more technical information, but were not able to mobilize society. Thus they needed to do if they were serious about getting legislation with the Constitution that laid the groundwork for real improvements for children. "It was a trying period for the participants in the process," says Donohue. "But each side realized it had to depend on the other to reach the objective of really serious legislation in the Constitution which would protect children in the future."

There was a massive mobilization of organizational and public interest in the formulation of the children's section of the Constitution, resulting in the presentation for inclusion of two amendments – one from the popular movements, the other from progressive state officials. These amendments formed the foundation of an alternative draft to the chapter on the Child and Adolescent. This was drawn up by the National Commission with the help of constitutional lawyers committed to children's rights. A first version was supported by pursuant signed by 1,300,000 children and adolescents and a subsequent version by 200,000 adults.

John Donohue describes the event of the presentation of the petitions to the national assembly as a moment he will never forget. He was invited as a courtesy to sit at the table with the people charged to write the constitution. "We went into a hall with just over 400 people in it and by the time we finished we realized we were sitting in a room with more than 1,600,000 Brazilians. For me that was a point in the process that made the clear statement that this was not just a repeat performance of a legislature writing out a constitutional text—the seventh in Brazil's history. This part of the text on children and adolescents had really involved people in ways that no one would have imagined possible even a year before."

Under the new constitution

Article 227 of the Constitution makes it the duty of the family, society and the state to assure with absolute priority, the rights of children and adolescents to life, adequate food, education, leisure, occupational training, culture, dignity, respect and freedom and in addition, to save them from negligence, discrimination, exploitation, violence, cruelty and suppression.

The Chapter on the Rights of Children and Adolescents was approved by the Constitutional Assembly in May 1988, with a majority of 415 to 8.

In October 1988, the new Brazilian Constitution was promulgated. One of its major features was the strong emphasis on the devolution of power and responsibilities from central government to state, and state to municipal government. Another very important gain was inclusion in the constitution of mechanisms for funding the development of education with the Union obliged to apply at least 18 per cent, and the municipalities 25 per cent, of their tax revenues to this end.

A major disappointment of the constitution, and one
that has great relevance to the problems of disadvantaged children, is that it failed to tackle the thorny issue of land reform, necessary to improving the lot of poor rural families and thus reducing the exodus to the cities.

The triumph of the constitution was followed by the even greater triumph of the Child and Adolescent Statute, the enabling legislation needed to ensure that the constitutional changes regarding children are put into practice. This was achieved with the approval of the legislation in both houses of the National Congress with the utmost support of the leaders of all parties. The legislation came into force in October 1990, almost exactly two years after the constitution's passage.

Building on the momentum that helped elaborate the constitution, the popular movements and programmes in favour of children formed a united front—the DCA Forum (The National Forum of Non-governmental Organizations for the Protection of Children and Adolescent). This was the result of a three-day meeting of the 13 main non-governmental organizations. UNICEF continued to play a facilitating role as before.

Brasilians have extensive experience of progressive constitutional measures not being applied and the DCA Forum was eager to ensure the Child and Adolescent Statue would be an effective instrument for securing the de facto rights of children.

The Forum created a writing group composed of jurists, people from the social movement, educators, social workers, militants of the popular movement, priests and other religious people. The leadership of the group was with the non-jurists, while the jurists sought to interpret the popular interests. The jurists elaborated a draft of the new law. Afterwards they composed a draft document providing criteria for the inclusion of suggestions from individuals and organizations representing the public. The guiding principle was the "Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child." The first draft of the statute was revised many times in response to suggestions. It was returned back to the popular movement through many meetings, seminars, congresses and study groups. The writing commission then met again to re-examine the various versions and present the different final texts to parliament.

Again there was widespread participation and representation from the children in the National Movement, who met and discussed the issues within each project and then at regional and state levels, where delegates were selected to go forward to a second national conference in Brasilia. In Brasilia more than 5,000 children met and some invaded the congress and presented their demands. The key word was citizenship.

Jude de Deus was one of the organizers of the meeting. "The day the children occupied the senate was the most important day of my life," he recalls. "They ducked under the arms and between the legs of policemen who tried to stop them. The Senate security tried to keep..."
them not but they got in every way they could. There was a
session going on. The children made a statement de-
nouncing the attitude of a judge who had tried to stop them
meeting in Brasilia and denouncing the killings of children
by justice committees in Recife. It was very strong. There
were congressmen crying who gave up their seats to the
children. The children held hands around the senate in a
huge circle and hugged the buildings.

The Catholic Church also staged, among other events,
a national congress in Belo Horizonte of the Minor's
Pastoral which thousands attended.

There were many other initiatives in support of the
status: a campaign of letter writing to congressmen,
petitions, a demonstration in Congress of children's
drawings, a campaign in which artists, film, television and sports
stars spoke out in favour of the statute, and a campaign
to secure the backing of businesspeople and entrepreneurs.
Journalism also played a crucial role, writing articles
which broadened understanding of the children's
predicament, welcomed the new statute and denounced
violations of children's rights.

The draft statute that went before congress for its
approval broke with all traditions—it was not the work of
judges but of a very large number of concerned Brazilians.
It was adopted unanimously and the new President of the
Republic, Fernando Collor, gave it his immediate
endorsement.

The President's repeated identification with the child-
ren's cause—and he is the first Brazilian president to do
so—is seen in sugar well for the first time. In the difficult phase
of implementing the new statute in the harsh social
and economic realities of Brazil.

On coming to office, President Collor undertook a
number of responsibilities in the field of children's and
adolescents' rights. He promised to support the
International Convention. He made it a commitment to
declare the child a priority in his government and he attended
the World Summit for Children at the General Assembly
of the United Nations.

The challenge of the new law

The changes in the constitution and law relating to
children and adolescents are as unlike other laws in their
consequences as they were in their making.

Consonantly, changes in law express changes in
practice as are designed by the powerful to underpin the
status quo. But these laws originated in a groundswell
among the most disadvantaged members of society, the
justice of whose cause gained some recognition throughout
society. As in the case of the UN Declaration on the Rights
of the Child, they are inspired by a progressive vision and
represent changes inspired to rather than achieved. But
they go farther. They not only provide a blueprint of
change; they provide some important measures by which
it may be accomplished.

Implementation will occur over a period of time,
requesting as it does a revolution in many traditional
parental, public and official attitudes and responsibilities.

Ultimately full implementation demands a rededication
of resources within the country. In the weeks in which the
statute came into effect, newspapers were giving sharp
definition to the context in which such changes must take
place, with front-page headlines announcing that 52
million people in Brazil were now living below the
poverty line.

Meanwhile the new legislation was having an
important immediate impact, including the dismantling of
established governent services for endangered children

and youth to make way for totally new structures.

Below 14 October 1990, it was the child abandoned,
or outside school and learning on the streets, who was
regarded as being in an irregular situation. Despite progress
in some states, such a child was still most likely to be
detained by the police, brought without representation
before a judge, and subsequently institutionalized. Under
the new law, the only party not in an irregular situation
would be the child. Others—starting with the parent or
the failure of the state to give adequate support to the
parent, the education system, the police, the judge, the
judicial system—would be providing legal representation,
and finally the institution itself would be failing to meet
the requirements of the law.

Children and adolescents are no longer defined as
passively dependent on parents, society in the state,

...
The recommendation for children will now have a home environment. No more than 10 children may be housed in a unit.

Social cases which under the old Minors' Code were referred to the Minors' Judge. Their functions are to see that children's rights are respected, with the aim of reducing the displacement of children from their families and community. Candidates must be expected - that is, have an established track record of working with children or have qualifications related to child care. The statute requires that all non-governmental organizations working with children are registered with the Councils and meet certain basic requirements.

In a 96-day gap between the law's approval and its coming into effect, hundreds of meetings, workshops, seminars and information campaigns concerning its implementation were held all over the country. Even so, D-day found different parts of the country in widely different stages of preparedness. While in some states FEBEM had continued to operate on the model conceived under the military dictatorship, others had to assimilate into their programmes certain NGO innovations - for instance, the use of street educators.

Changes go into effect:

The screening centre for adolescent offenders in Brasilia was in the process of being refurbished and undergoing a change of identity. The grim, cramped cells, with their built-in concrete beds, had not yet been worked on. The walls were still embalmed with the graffiti of the years of oppression - Rambos and praise figures, weapons, skulls and other images of violence and defiance, chiming with naive expressions of nostalgia for home.

The institution looked curiously empty now that the number of adolescents who could be detained by the police was substantially reduced. A clutch of youngsters brought in by the police, including one detained for homicide, were the only signs of violence and lacked three of the ankle and wrist chains of the recent past - another requirement of the statute. The children in the centre's enclosed compound looked far more at ease, if taciturnly so, than the staff, who were having to undergo major shifts in attitude and practice.

At the office of the Federal District Secretary of Social Welfare Programmes in Brasilia, officials explained that there were no screening centres, one for adolescents, the other for younger children. Both were no longer known as screening centres but as "shelters", being places for young people who had nowhere else immediately to go. "The accommodation for the children will now have to be adequate, with more of a home environment. No more than 10 children may be housed in any unit within the shelter. Kitchens must be created to ensure adequate food is provided. The staff are now to treat the children with respect, not with violence as has happened in the past," said a spokesperson.

All the traditional assistance programmes, according to officials, were in the process of being adapted to the new reality, with an increased emphasis on preventive measures aimed at keeping children in their families and communities and preparing adolescents for work.

One new measure was economic support for at-risk families. A budgetary application had already been made, and the aim was to generate some kind of income-producing activity within the family to obviate the need for the child to go out to find work. The criteria by which families would be selected for assistance and how much each would be granted was still very much under disc...
However, some allocations, averaging $35,000 (US $1500) had already been granted, in one instance to buy a sewing machine. The whole idea was still under review, and it will clearly take time for each state to develop a programme that attempts to meet the basic requirements of the law and local conditions.

Nevertheless, several states had already initiated important reforms in the way children and adolescents were dealt with by the FEBEMs, the police, and the courts, while São Paulo and Goiás had already radically revised their policies and programmes for children at risk and were well positioned to adapt to the changes. Without disposing of the old structure, the Secretary of the Minors of the wealthy megalopolis of São Paulo had built up a parallel alternative programme for disadvantaged and endangered children. When the new statute was promulgated, all the children interned in FEBEM were released and either returned to their parents or sent to one of 40 new integrated state projects, marking the ending of an era.

In Goiás, the FEBEM had been dismantled two years before. Using what was best in the government structure, the state drew heavily on the lessons of the alternative projects to create a programme that in many respects anticipated the new statute. This publication has elected to look at the Goiás programme in some depth.
THE GOIÁS PROGRAMME

In 1986, a small number of experts working within the government’s child care programme in Goiânia, state capital of Goiás, began to cohere into a multi-disciplinary team. They identified strongly with the programmes of the Popular Movement and were dissatisfied with major failings in the government system. The different branches of the government programme — including the Legiarios Foundation (which provided for children up to the age of six), the Social Work Secretariat (serving children aged 7–12), FEBEM and a state-controlled enterprise providing occupational training — were working in a fragmented way. There was a high degree of duplication and the problems of disadvantaged children and youth were not being met.

The population of the state at that time was 4.6 million people, a third of whom were between the ages of five and 17. Half a million of these, the majority in urban areas, were from very poor families. So a large number of youngsters were at risk of abandonment, denial of education, or early entry into the labour market.

As elsewhere, the schooling system was failing to incorporate and retain poor children. Sixty-five thousand children between seven and 14 had never gone to school or had been expelled. Only 60 per cent of children entering schools completed fourth grade and almost half of the children aged 7–9 were illiterate. Child labour had been increasing steadily since the beginning of the decade, with over 90 per cent of working children in unregistered employment.

The team seeking changes produced an analysis of the situation which was taken up by a candidate for state government. He called for a review of the state’s social policy and the elaboration of a new programme in which areas: comprehensive educational provision allowing for community participation and involvement of the family. Deployed with different branches of the government programme, the team established change groups to work for internal reform and develop co-ordination.

A consultation and advisory council was established in this period: the Goiás Council for Minors’ Policy. It broke ground in bringing together representatives of government organisations, including those from the departments of education, health and justice, with representatives of civil and church organisations, among them the Minor’s Pastoral, parents’ associations, day-care associations and university and trade associations.

When the institutional reform was underway, much groundwork had been done. “Nothing stopped. We changed our tyres running,” said one of the original team members.

In May 1988, well ahead of the constitutional and statutory changes, the Social Promotion Foundation was formed to manage and monitor the Integrated Programme of Support to the Minor. At the same moment, FEBEM was abolished and its functions were subsumed into the new foundation. With the loss of FENABEM funding, a special fund was set up, drawing money from a variety of sources including a lottery and private donations, to augment state budgetary allowances.

There emerged two major focuses of the new foundation’s state programme — “children in need” and “children in a situation of risk”.

In the latter case, a distinction was made between “the child on the street” who is working and still in regular contact with his or her family, and the “street child” who has little or no family contact and so is at higher risk. In Goiânia alone, 4,000 working children and 170 street children were registered with the Foundation in 1989.

FEDEM was abolished and its functions were subsumed into the new Social Promotion Foundation of Goiás

Assistance to street children has two main goals: to provide for immediate basic needs, and to equip them to become integrated into society as citizens and independent workers with a developed critical awareness of their rights and responsibilities.

A major thrust of the new programme is to prevent the institutionalization of street children and instead either reintegrate them with their families or involve them in alternative open projects.

The instruments of the programme are an assessment centre, CETI, a skills training and recreational centre, CPM, and a night shelter, CAM.
CETI - the assessment centre. CETI is the first door to state assistance for children in situations of risk - abandoned children, street children, lost or runaway children, children detained by the police, shoplifters, abused and unwanted children.

Under the new system, the Social Promotion Foundation determines child and adolescent policy at an executive level, even police action concerning street children is subordinate to its control. No child may be arrested and taken to the Police Department, as in the past, without being taken first to the CETI.

The CETI operates 24 hours a day every day. It offers a record on each child brought in, including a note of his or her condition on arrival - provides immediate assessment of the child's situation and referral elsewhere. It is staffed by a multi-disciplinary team of a social worker, psychologist and a lawyer. Children are brought in by police, members of the community or parents and sometimes come of their own accord. Most are from families in conflict "arising from situations of absolute poverty." Parents also come to CETI for advice.

Children and adolescents are brought in for a wide range of offences and predicaments, the most common being being alleged theft, breaking-and-entering, loitering and being lost, or running away from home. The cases on hand during a brief visit included a drunken mother picked up by the police for repeatedly allowing her infant to fall to the ground; a youth accused of an attempted robbery and another of fighting; and a father whose wife had left him and who wanted his children taken into care.

In the past the vast majority of these children would have gone through the Police/FEBEM Court system. Now only 10 per cent of those accused of serious offences, including robbery, homicide and rape, are referred to the police department. Most are subsequently directed by the courts to a programme of "watched liberty" rather than detention. Children and adolescents involved in criminality are no longer referred to as "offenders" but as "minors in conflict with justice" and they receive legal representation. Where an adolescent is sent to the police department, CETI contacts the family.

"At the moment we have 10 children at the police department awaiting the judge's decision. The reasons are robbery, homicide and fighting. For a city like Goiânia, with a million and a half inhabitants this is a very small number," says Dolce Almeida, CETI's director.

Another achievement of the CETI has been to greatly reduce violence towards children and adolescents by police and others. They accounted for only 0.3 percent of cases in the first half of 1989. Any signs of violence on youngsters brought to the CETI are questioned and wherever appropriate the child is referred to a legal-medical institution for medical diagnosis. Formal complaints are made and have led to the sacking of policemen. CETI also has a representative, a physical education teacher, within the police department and provides follow-up psychological assistance to adolescents under police care. In the near future it will maintain 24-hour expert advice for children in police care. Recently the CETI followed up the death of a child in the cells, said by the police to have committed suicide but found to have been killed by another adolescent.

"We insist early on that the Minors' police should be humanized. The chief was changed. Also a teacher has been appointed to head the Secretariat of Public Security - someone known to us from the university," says Elize Marzialdo de Sá, Director of the child division of the Foundation. The Foundation has tried to instil training
for the police, in their work with children and adolescents, and has police participation in its own street education work. Working to change police attitudes is seen as long-term. "Let's be very clear that beneath the surface there is competition for possession and assistance of the child—the police through repression and the Foundation through education. And of course we want to win this battle."

The Foundation takes heart from an isolated experience in one of its community-based programmes, the Núcleo de Apoyo Comunitario, in which a community centre managed by a local resident's association and the local police station work in the same complex, with the police taking a good-neighbour approach to their work. "It shows we could have a different police if the state really wants to," says Elena.

In 1999, CETI responded to 5,530 children and adolescents, of which 1,639 were new cases, the balance having registered on one or more previous occasions. The highest proportion (38 per cent) were referred to their families, while 22 per cent went to the CFM/CAM programme for street children, and the rest elsewhere. The Foundation explains the high number of referrals by the fact that the children are referred to spin programmes which they are able to leave, and children are still adjusting to the new approach which relies on their voluntary participation and commitment.

"Children drop out and decide to come back and try it again," says Dulce Almeida. "We are not worried about this. We see it as part of the process—we worry if the number of first-time clients grows." Even so, she believes drug addiction contributes to children dropping out of the programme and that special provision for drug addiction is greatly needed. There was also a need, she felt, for a centre for very small minority of children with severe personality disorders.

Night shelter and day shelter: The CAM is a night shelter for street children, while the CFM operated during the day. It was in the latter that Renato Moreira, whose story opened this report, found effective help. Adolescents of between 13 and 18 years old went involved in the CFM programme through contact with the Foundation's team of street educators and by referral from the CETI. Staffed by a multi-disciplinary team, it attempts to provide a "whole educational environment" in which the adolescents acquire self-esteem and respect for others, as well as social skills, educational and work skills, and an understanding of his or her rights and social responsibilities. Relations between staff and the adolescents are generally relaxed and friendly. Educational opportunities range from basic literacy and mathematics to reintegration into regular schooling. Training offered in the centre's workshops is intended to provide education for work and education through work. The former provides some basic work skills—ceramics, gardening, sewing, book-making, shoe making, silk-screen or batikery. The latter uses work as a means for developing respect for self and others, as well as for learning about the world of work. The youngsters work in groups of eight and are paid at the rate of half a minimum salary, which is less than they earn on the streets.

The theory of education for and through work has been elaborated in a paper by Antonio Carlos based on the teachings of Paulo Freire and involves the "principle of the three participations—the participation in the management of work, in the product of work, and in the knowledge related to work". Participation in the product of work refers to the return, either in cash or kind. Products of the workshops are of a high quality and the CFM is beginning to sell them, with the profits going to the adolescents. The youngsters are also able to make their own clothes and shoes.

The CFM offers a range of occupational activities, including handicrafts, library, cinema, dance and physical education and sports. When educational activities end at 3pm, leisure facilities take over—team sports or just sitting around chatting. Three meals a day are provided. In 1990, 3,850 children and adolescents were making use of the CFM's leisure facilities and some 50 were attending on a regular basis.

The adolescents have a say in the rules and activities of the CFM through general assemblies and the election of a representative council. In learning to collaborate with each other and the educators and through discussion, they develop a sense of the rights and duties of citizenship. The centre encourages family contact and in a few cases were obtaining positive results.

Towards the end of 1990, the night shelter was undergoing renovation and the CFM building was destined as a night shelter. It was also no longer quite so open as it had been at the outset.

Its director, Aires Alencar, a psychologist, explained that children involved in the programmes couldn't come and go as they liked. The few who were really trusted—"who respect their own lives and the learning process"—were allowed to go out, say to a cinema, on their own at night and others could go accompanied by a street educator. All had to be in again by 10pm. Adolescents thought likely to rob people were not allowed out. Weekend trips were often arranged. Sometime children failed to come back. Those who failed to return on time but turned up later demanding to be admitted would be let in. This increased restriction on the children 'coming and going' was blamed partly on having to accept more problematic adolescents referred to the CFM by the courts.

Six of children in the CFM attended regular school in the community in the evenings and one was completing the second grade, but was rarely. A few children also went regularly to work. Renato Moreira, who has started
working in the CFM's bakery, and sent out to do the cleaning in his work and in the evening to study. Employment had been found for him through the Foundation's Pro-Youth programme which establishes work opportunities at the formal work market.

"The child comes in from the streets totally undisciplined and often with an identification with violence," says Anna Alencar. "Change is gradual and not imposed. The children must earn it because they want it. They must express the change or they'll continue on the street. The meaning of discipline here is to learn to respect others, your own work, your own life. The child on the street works everything at once - new clothes, new shoes, and noodles to get them. Here he goes through change until he earns the need to work to get his own shirt and shoes, or whatever."

Her own estimate of the programme was that it had made a good start "but we have a long way to go." Staff evaluating the CFM's work noted in the course of a year a decrease in the rate of thefts and improvements in the children's health status, a decrease in violence and a more realistic attitude to money.

Support for children on the street

Children obliged to work or beg to underpin the survival of their families are often denied an education and the chance to develop work-gain disciplines and skills. They risk becoming street children and, in turn, are destined for an adulthood of unemployment or street occupation. This process is already exacerbating the problems of child workers in Brazil and other countries, where there is a low preparation to compete with adults in the next generation of child work workers.

There are two main approaches to helping children and adolescents on the street. One is an emergency programme to try to improve the conditions of those already working on the streets. The other aims to improve the children's employment prospects by providing education and training. This is achieved through Communal Educational Workshops (CEEs), one of the most ambitious components of the overall work of the Social Promotion Foundation.

The emergency programme: One of the most ambitious components of the emergency response is essentially preventive and aimed at the large number of children aged between 7 and 14 who drop out of school. Its primary goal is to reintegrate them into school and to strengthen family solidarity. Where a return to formal schooling is not possible, non-formal education and work training opportunities are provided.

The work is carried out by multi-disciplinary teams operating from community-based schools. They investigate...
The aims of the OEC is to develop children into thoughtful, skilled, economically autonomous citizens.

At the root level, the educators try to help children to improve the quality of their work, build their self-esteem, and encourage them to reflect on their situation in relation to the rest of society and how they might improve on it. They try to help them see that the work they do as children won't serve them as adults and that without preparation for the job market, they will remain underemployed.

The Little Workers' House, a day center, is situated within easy reach of children near the center of town. It attempts to offer a variety of recreational, informal education, and support activities. It provides two meals a day, shower facilities and medical and dental treatment.

In 1980, 865 children and adolescents responded to this programme. 32 benefited from school enrichment activities, 41 were referred for work initiation training, 78 to work training, and 96 to formal employment.

The Little Workers' House also operates a Pre-Youth programme that seeks to balance work with training and educational activities, either through conventional schools or through one of the Foundation's Community Education Centers, and assists entry into formal employment. The programme contacts families to seek their involvement.

Some interest has been made in formalizing the children's street working role, to dignify it in the minds of both the child and the public and introduce some protection. Children are given uniforms and followed up in the street by the education. A system of licensing and restricting the numbers of children who may work as traders in the bus station has been introduced. A new occupation has been introduced of Passage Advisor, a paid and uniformed child traffic assistant, who helps regulate city parking and

...
Case III: Nei Seitosa – training for a profession

Fourteen-year-old Nei Seitosa attends the OEC regularly and, among other things, is learning to be an electrician. He comes from an industrious family in which all the children work, either full or part time, as do both parents.

"It was my mother who heard about this place. She came here every day at 4 am to get me an opening. It took her a long time to manage it. She wanted me to come here because here we can get qualified for a profession."

"I used to study in the morning in the public school and deliver food full time business during the lunch period. Now my younger brother does that job. My father works as a painter. But still we all have to work to get enough money to live. I work to get some income to help my mother and brothers.

"I liked school. But this place is better. Here we have sports, classes, many different things. At school we just study. Here, we travel. We went to a city near here full of mineral waters and waterfalls." Nei studies at the OEC in the morning. He has his lunch there and heads across town to work as an office boy. He earns C$500 a month (US$40). "I think that is OK. I give it all to my mother. She buys food for us and all of my brothers do the same."

Children involved in the programme are taken on visits to industries and companies to see how they operate and employees are encouraged to provide them with work opportunities. In 1989 the Pro-Youth programme employed the support of 330 companies. Just under 3,000 children were served by the programme of whom 1,281 received work training. All attended Community Education Centre Courses and 70 were found jobs on reaching majority.

Community Educational Workshops

The Community Educational Workshops (OEC) were both seen and working children between the ages of 12 and 18. The criteria for admission are that the family must have an income below three minimum wages; the child must be lagging behind or have dropped out or been expelled from school, and must be in some form of part-time employment. Students are drawn from the local community and referred from the CFS and the Little Worker's House.

The OECs are well-designed, well-equipped spaces consisting of four classrooms and a large hall in which three have been built, one in an existing town, two at a poor community of Garaya and one outside near the city centre. Each child is allocated a space and is given a desk and a chair. The OECs are open from Monday to Friday, from 8 am to 5 pm. The sessions are divided into morning and afternoon shifts. Both shifts are provided with two meals. The children are paid half the minimum salary to attend, again not a substitute for what they might earn outside but a facilitating payment. They receive medical and dental care.

There are six workshops: electricity, carpentry, metal work, industrial sewing, beauty and hygiene, and food production. Supplementary education is also provided, taking children over a two-year period to the fourth grade and providing them with a diploma that enables them to enter fifth grade of formal school. In 1989, 211 children attended these classes.

The teachers and educators have been carefully selected. They are paid more than teachers in formal schools and are given additional training in the methodology and aims of the programme. They are backed up by a multi-disciplinary team of social workers and a psychologist who are available to the children and work directly with them in the classrooms and workshops.

The aim of the OEC is not to produce workers to fill jobs but to develop children into thoughtful, skilled, economically autonomous citizens capable of contributing to social change. As in the other centres, the workshop learning is not purely skills oriented but uses each skill as a window into the processes and relationships of the working world, inculcating the principles of education for and through work.

The exploration of issues by the children begins in small workshop classes and debates in the general assembly, in which all participate. The children have a say in the rules and regulations of the OEC and of their own classroom groups.

Each classroom group elects a representative who meets with the director and multi-disciplinary team. There is also plenty of scope for informal contact. In the workshops the children learn about raw materials and their procurement, production processes, tools, the calculation of production units, market pricing, and marketing, work relationships and workers' rights. They receive talks from labour leaders and professional people and are taken on tours of companies.

Products of the workshops are sold in the district markets. The profit goes to a central fund and decisions of how to use the money are arrived at in discussion between the students' representatives, the director and the multi-disciplinary team. The accounting is open so that children understand that management must be a clear act and money spending must be a clear act too."

As the new Child and Adolescent Status came into force it was on the agenda for discussion by the children.
Another important area of investigation is the local community, its history and the relationships between its members - between the generations, the sexes, neighbours and with employers and the authorities. "We start from the child's reality and move out from there," said a teacher.

The educational approach requires active participation by the students, their families and the community and the OEC to work in a number of ways.

On the wall of the cookery class, the ingredients of "A Very Nutritious Salad" are spelled out — "Friendship, courtesy, love, unity, seriousness, enthusiasm and respect" — and students are taught, "Always put attention in everything you cook."

The teacher is from the local community. The children are taught a range of culinary skills, including preparing potluck, something from which they can earn money and even make a living. "Coming to teach here was the best thing that happened in my life. And OEC was the best thing that could happen to the community," says the teacher. "The community was there in the evening and during holidays for leisure, parties, sports, supplementary education, parents meeting — it's a community centre."

The number of street children referred to the OECs is small but increasing. Increasing the number is one of the major challenges of the Foundation's programme and it is closely related to another challenge: that of improving the outreach work in the slum's families.

Where possible members of the OEC's multi-disciplinary team visit families and community organizations to support their participation in the programme. Parents are encouraged to join one of three parent groups which meet regularly and where the work of the OEC is explained and issues discussed.

Another purpose of the group is to give parents the opportunity to form "survival groups." These make use of the OEC facilities to increase their income and to reduce dependency on their children earning. So far, two groups operate in this way — a sewing and a baking group.

Nevertheless, the Director of the OEC felt that while the work inside the centre was very advanced, the outreach work to the families was "far from satisfactory." This was partly due to lack of resources and partly the difficulty of involving people who were themselves out at work much of their waking time.

Family support for the adolescent in OEC is seen as important. "Without our work can be like putting a bolt in a spring only to see it undone all the time," said the director. "If the family doesn't come here, or have the knowledge to reinforce what we are doing with the child or a group of its value, the work can be jeopardized."

"We have to make the family understand the project is not a favour, not a donation but a victory, one which needs their support."

Outreach work is also important to reaching parents who might not send their children to the OECs in the first place. Otherwise, places tend to get these families where the parents, like Nni's mother, are the most resourceful, persistent and well-organized, at other worse-off families, (see Case III & IV).

The OECs' community base means that they could have a valuable preventative role in taking children in before they drop out of school or become fully engaged in criminal life. Key to their fully realizing this potential will be a sustained political will to ensure that they have the resources to improve their outreach and build more OECs as planned.

Another and last of their success will be what happens to the children who complete the course. Until now

---

**Case IV: Denise — children should know their rights**

Denise is studying biology, and like her mother: "I don't like school very much — this place is much better. The only problem is that you can stay only two years."

Denise particularly values meetings with the OEC's executive staff members and refers to the director and social worker by their first names. "In school they don't talk to us very much and gave us little support. They would turn their backs the other way when we passed by, but here we can talk to Ultra, the director, and all the others."

As for what she valued, she said: "Discussing the education of children and children's rights and duties."

---

What about their rights?

"There are many lost children on the street and they should know every right they have. Sometimes they are starving while other people throw away their food. We should take better care of them, because there is no way they can live on the streets."

Did she know any street children?

"Yes I know many."

Same people say street children are bad.

"Absolutely not! They have no other place to live. They try to understand the adults and the adults don't try to understand them."

---

30
students have graduated it is impossible to know whether they will successfully transfer in the job market. Some employers have already expressed a strong interest, notably for carpenters. OEC intend to follow up adolescent graduates for at least six months.

The Goiás programme under siege

As the Child and Adolescent Status came into being in October 1990, the Social Protection Foundation programme in Goiás was facing a number of challenges, some of them critical and likely to be experienced by other state programmes.

Problems still arose from having had to absorb the staff and ad hoc buildings of the old government-run child care. Reinaldo Moreira’s criticism of the CPM, housed in the old EMEB boarding school, is voiced in this predicament. The building is drafty, run down and institutional, and some facilities, like the swimming pool, have gone out of commission.

"I wish they knew how to make children more welcome here," said Reinaldo. "Sometimes, just as they have this bird in their hands, then they let it fly away."

"I wouldn’t leave the boy alone here in this dull place. It should have more attractive things. They take the children for a trip. But I feel if they were wise they would have lots of leisure here, food, education, movies at the weekends. I think children would be more ready to stay. They would slow down the best thing for them was not the streets. The drug for them is an illusion. I would want to show them that on the other side, in the real world, there are things that are interesting too.

"Some of the staff are - they look at a child who is making a mistake and then they tell you they are thinking. 'This child is good for nothing!' So I think they should select employees who work with children very carefully and train them very well.

"I would organize the children to help make the place more, form them into teams on a roster - one to keep the gardens nice, another to organize the cooking and so on. Children who refuse to participate in this work couldn’t come here. So they would have responsibilities and make sacrifices, but in return they would also have their leisure."

These criticisms are made in the context of a strong affirmation by Reinaldo of the CPM’s achievements, not least in its own case. Furthermore, his thoughtfulness, concern and the freedom and clarity of his criticisms reflect success in terms of the CPM’s citizenship goals.

The Foundation decided at the outset that the retraining of staff as the new approaches to working with children was more important than a restructuring of the buildings. Two years later some of the staff had made considerable progress in adapting to the new concept, while others had clearly never changed. There was in particular a shortage of staff with the qualities and skills to do the all-important outreach work.

The programme was also facing practical problems as the result of a major cash-flow crisis. None of the Foundation’s staff, including the director, Eime Maranhão de Souza, had been paid for three months. The teachers at the OEC had staged short strikes, giving the children experience of a work conflict. It says much for their commitment that the staff continued to present enthusiasm. An electronics teacher said: "I’d like to say that the project here is very beautiful. But we have no structure and no maintenance. The government advertises its concern for children but doesn’t really maintain the funds. Things continue because we are committed and really love what we do." Only at the end of October did staff receive their August pay.

While the OEC had the food and raw materials to continue, other parts of the programme were more critically hit, notably the Little Worker’s House. The project’s director and educators said it was becoming very difficult to do crucial follow-up work with the families, gain their support for children in the work-training schemes and
more difficult to attract children to the house. "To make an impact you must see a family quite often," said the director, "but we have no transportation. I was supposed to do eight visits yesterday and managed one."

Even with the most thoroughly equipped programme, working with children already on the street presents great difficulties. The street educators at the Little Workers House conservatively estimated that they were gaining results that satisfied them with just five per cent of the children they established contact with. "We consider it satisfactory when the children get into school, when they become aware that it is necessary to study, when they really become part of their family again, when they try to get into the formal work market, when they achieve the basics for a dignified life. The life of a citizen."

So what is the prognosis for the other 95 per cent? "Put that way it sounds very dramatic, because we would prefer if 100 per cent could achieve what we hope for them. But if they are still unemployed when they are 18 years of age, they become underemployed adults."

The cash crisis is part of a wider underfunding problem the state has suffered at the hands of the previous federal government for political reasons. The state government is also criticized for rapidly expanded social care provisions without allowing adequately for maintenance and running costs. Compounding the problems was a crisis in the state bank that meant a number of programmes did not receive funds due to them.

The Foundation had made several independent applications for funding from international banks and other sources, without success. Various measures were being taken to meet the crisis, and Enlene Maranhão de Sá believed that, without some federal intervention, important programmes might have to close.

Also worrying to the Foundation was the election for state governor in October 1990, with the winner due to assume power in March 1991. The continuity of development initiatives in Brazil are particularly vulnerable to political changes which can result in the replacement of key state officials and important policy changes. Enlene Maranhão de Sá was concerned that even comparatively uncontroversial changes in policy could also have far reaching consequences.

An independent evaluation of the Foundation's work, funded by UNICEF, noted that its considerable successes are attributable in great measure to the strong political backing it has enjoyed. "The police reduced the violence towards children not because they were more aware but because we have had the political backing to stop them," says Enlene Maranhão de Sá. Now, with the political uncertainty created by the election, street children have noted an increase in police action against them.

The Foundation believed its programme would draw strength from the provisions of the new statute. It was ensuring that the legislation was debated and understood as broadly as possible. But establishing some of the mechanisms required by the statute — particularly the Councils for the Rights of the Child and Adolescent and the Guardianship Councils — would take some time.

One advantage was that the existing Guías State Council for Minor Policy, with its established mix of government and non-governmental representatives, already had some features of the state-level rights council envisaged in the statute. "We are already discussing how it is to be transformed into this new council."

32
A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING
OF THE PROBLEMS

WHILE there are some studies of children on the street and in institutions, there has been little systematic research into what happens to children in the family and school context to inform new government responses to endangered children.

There are projects being formulated, for instance, around the tweaked notions that the displacement of children onto the streets, or into informal employment, is simply a consequence of poverty and that the answer is one of adjusting the poverty of individual families so that children can remain at home and attend school. An associated assumption is that children who do not go to the streets, but stay in their families are invariably better off.

One of the voids in research, points out Irene Rizikl of CRSMR at Santa Ursula University, remains that of the analysis of child abuse in the home.

The lack of a body of formal knowledge about parental abandonment of children, child abandonment of the home, or why children leave education and work, is arguably less critical for the alternative programmes than for policy-makers. They have been fighting a rear-guard action, not trying to work in. More importantly, many comprise long-term commitments by individuals to relatively small numbers of children. They are able to develop their own knowledge of the subtleties of each child’s circumstances and provide a high degree of individual attention.

This is less true of programmes adapting existing government structures, and staffs, to the new approaches. Here, the hope for success must rely on the quality of training rather than the exponential development of individual officials. It is no accident, for instance, that the best developed in Ghana’s already advanced programme is the time-consuming, all-important linkage to families and the community. The old system provided no tradition and no back of people with the skills for this work.

The FiLACS/UNICEF study of street children and their families suggests just how important knowledge about families can be in planning programmes that either try to keep children at risk integrated in their families or help them effectively once they are on the streets. Though the study did not set out to make policy recommendations, the findings of the qualitative research indicate, among other points that:

- Children rarely arrive in situations of risk for reasons that are purely economic. There are other disempowering and/or marginalizing factors whose clearer definition might indicate suitable preventive interventions.
- The reintegration of children into their families is probably not an option for most children who have already become involved in groups and gangs; it is something they themselves discount;
- Most need to be known about street gangs and the possibility of taking them as a starting point in working with street children.

The qualitative part of the study comprises interviews from a psychological and an anthropological perspective. One aim was to throw light on the reasons, given the poverty of families, that more children don’t end up on the streets with little or no family protection.

A small number of carefully selected street and other unemployed children and their families were identified and interviewed during the study. The psychological inquiry, conducted by Wilson Muyu, identifies an “expelled void” at the heart of street children’s experience of family life.

In his in-depth socio-psychological exploration of what happens in six poor families, Muyu considers the family as a group. He argues that people need to stay in groups that help them satisfy their needs and abandon those that don’t. Furthermore, commitment to a group is both reflected in and strengthened by participation in its activities. “What I call a well-integrated family,” he says, “is one in which all assume some kind of responsibility. They invest energy in cooking, cleaning and making arrangements for feeding themselves.”

He discounts the degree of poverty within poor families as in itself determining whether they will hold together or not. Of the two poorest families, the one of a street girl who had been sexually abused at home, the other of a boy working as a market porter — the former showed almost none of the aspects of a successful group while the latter enjoyed the strong commitment of its members. The composition of the family is also discounted as determining whether it works as a group, as is the physical presence of both parent figures in the home.

What was of great significance was the quality of the relationship between parental partners. Even where the
mother had no immediate partner but believed in the possibility of a rewarding relationship that she would "invest in the family structure and play the role of leader, which didn't happen in the families of the street children."

In only two of six families was there family cohesion. In one of the others, there was "the clear sensation that it was an empty place, with each member being there on his or her own. The children had nothing to get or hope from the mother. Of those who had gone to the streets, the mother simply said there was nothing she could do, as if she was an observer and not part of the process. She spoke of the suffering of her children on the streets with pseudo concern, and was much more anxious about her suffering than that of her child."

In fact she had good cause. "One of the things that surprised me most was that the parents' life stories were even more tragic than those of their children on the streets." says Wilson. "For instance one mother had been raped when she was nine by a 50-year-old person. At 13 she was forced to marry a man who spanked her and beat her up. She split from him and joined up with another man with whom she had two children, these later went to the streets. For three years she had what she considered the good times of her life and then she discovered that her husband had been with another man. So there was a thing in that both men started behaving aggressively towards her. She took up with a foreman, who was a kind of vandal and he tried to teach her children how to rob."

"When you see the life of a mother like this, it demands that she be affectionate in order to be a woman woman. What was clear in such cases was that the lives of each man and woman had been without pleasure. Their relationships were a mechanical means to create the minimum possibilities for survival."

In two of the families there was too much between the parents on the beat, that led to injuries and murder attempts.

In another single-parent family, the mother would leave for work six days a week at five in the morning, and arrive home at nine at night. There were 10 children, the oldest two of whom were living elsewhere. Of those living at home, none would take responsibility and the household was chaotic. The eldest child, a boy of 16, was away much of the time working and studying. The next oldest child, a sister and brother, were on the streets. The younger children spent much of the day out of the house, coming home just to sleep. But the house had all the domestic appliances, including television, and the mother was proud that she worked hard and earned a good income. "She said: 'I give my children everything I can – why can't they stay home?" As for the children, they said home was very bad." At the end of her interview, the mother asked Wilson if she might help place the children in an institution. Wilson refers to the process in such families as "the expelling dynamic" whereby the street becomes much more attractive for children than the home.

The anthropological term, Aron Vogel and Mario Antonio Mello, also found that the departure of children from their families for life on the streets could not be

The quality of childhood

However there is often an exorbitant price to pay, the loss of childhood time and, for many children, the denial, or undermining of the chance of getting an education. The damaging nature and injustice of this loss is reflected in the statements of both adults and children. "Parents should work more so that children can stay home more," complains a 10-year-old shoe-shiner, while adults will often attribute children going on the streets to their having been denied a childhood.

Such judgements must be given more to receive an idea of what childhood should be other than what it could be ever be in the households in question. The childhood denied them is that of the consumer society, in which parents provide for their children, having time and space to play with them, and children are absorbed by material acquisitions, pleasures and acquiring skills that will assure their ability to become consumer themselves. Television reaches a wide audience in Brazil. The childhood projected through is a normal and universal in 19 years away from
anything realizable by poor families in the neglected
propherities of the cities.

The parents in such households, deprived of the
chance to translate free time into productive development
opportunities for their children, are likely to equate
unemployment with idleness. If the child were not working,
there would be conflict in the home and, outside the home,
the probability of the child getting into mischief. From the
child's point of view, work may offer a welcome escape
from loneliness and boredom. "Work is fun," says one
street trader. "I make new friends and colleagues. I go
back home with news to tell."

Another parental purpose in the child's going out to
work is the possibility that he/she will learn something
about earning a living. To realize the work generally done
by children is a launch-pad to nothing but an adulthood of
poverty and insecurity. Furthermore, this slight hope of
acquiring an advantage for the child is counterbalanced by
dangers. Children on the streets often suffer from the
systematic reenforcement of a poor self-image. They risk
falling into bad company, and being beaten and mugged
by street children, as well as abused by adults. Instead of
contributing to the home, the child may be lost to the
influence of a gang, with repercussion shame to the family.

The risk is no doubt heightened where the child
experiences the home as violent or empty, or associates
with servicemen. Such dislocations happen without
apparent parental negligence or abuse.

Family values and survival strategies of the rural
areas do not translate well to the city. One father tried
to direct the family to invest their collective energies in
the development of the oldest son, who was a talented soccer
player. This son he argued would be the salvation of the
whole family so his brothers must work to produce his
chances. But this survival strategy of the father was
experienced by the brothers as unfair, regulating the
sacrifice of their aspirations to their brother's realization
of his. One brother left what otherwise appeared to be a
good home to take to the streets.

An underlying theme in the statements of the parents
of children who went to street life was their impotence to
control them, whether they worked or stayed at home.
Several referred to the fact that the children were left alone
too much. The statements of the children reflected a
broader indictment of family impotence. One father
specifically referred to the loss of authority over the son
who had gone to the streets as a loss to another sphere of
influence: "Now I can do nothing, because he has got the
courage of the city."

Parents expressed their sense of impotence in relation
to the gangs. A mother whose son returned home
periodically said that members of his group would come
and whistle outside his home and he would go. So afraid of
this whistle was she, that she claimed him to prevent him
from going. But when he was again whistled for, he somehow
unswerved himself and was gone.

Among the statements by street children of their
families, some focused on the failure of parents to fulfill
conventional roles. The father was unemployed and might
also drink heavily. He was idle, and hung around the
home, bothering the children. The children expressed
exasperation at the indifference to them of their fathers'
attitudes. They had an expression to describe the way in
which their fathers waited their time with meaningless
advice and nagging. For some, a very important reason for
taking to the streets was to get away from such "rent
collecting", as they put it.

Street children also refer to the failure of their fami-
lies to provide the goods that assume such importance in
the context of the city. One street child said: "I made up
my mind. I left home to work because first everybody only wanted to watch television, secondly no-one understood me, thirdly they were always worrying about money. I wanted to have things and there were nothings to have, I wanted my own money and there was no money to be had.”

**“Turf” and gangs**

The streets, however, are not an open repository for any child who wants to leave home. The city is divided into “turf” under the control of different gangs. No child interviewed in Ghana believed it was possible to survive on the streets without belonging to a gang. The gangs are divided between children, actively recruiting some and rejecting others as “home children”, not suited to the rigours of street life, even if they were siblings of gang members. The basis for this discrimination remains unclear but there are hints that resentment or rebelliousness were valued qualities.

The transition from home to gang is often marked by what appears to be an act of initiation. A gang will take away a working child’s shoe-shine box or sales tray — the means by which he contributes to the home and defines himself as a working child. Parents want their children not to react if they are robbed or challenged by street children and to have as little to do with them as possible.

Another part of initiation is the invitation to get the taste of the city. One boy told of his first outing with the group. They watched TV at the entrances of the stores and moved around by hugging on the backs of buses. They sniffed glue, went to eat and even went to a hotel. “Sleeping in a hotel, between clean sheets and in a bed to yourself, or with a girl to share it when you are only 12 or 13, is heady stuff for a child from the marginal areas,” says Arno Vogel.

The researchers proved what it is that the gangs offer that the families are unable to provide. Firstly the gang provides the means of survival — training new recruits in the arts of begging and stealing. By these means the child acquires goods unobtainable through the family, or through available work. The gang shows children that the fruits of the city denied to the poor are accessible to those with the courage to seize them.

Significantly, the goods coveted by street children are those most emblematic of success in city terms — the brand-name designer products of TV advertising, lesser products are referred to as “false goods”. Both the choice of goods and “use and dispose” style of consumption reflect prime values of the consumer culture. “It’s easy come, easy go,” says Arno. “They use the clothes till they are dirty and then throw them away and get others. It’s the reverse value to conserving children’s cast-offs for younger siblings to inherit. Street children don’t have working clothes — they wear their best clothes all the time.”

Gang life offers practical training in fight and protection, companionship and a sense of belonging with few controls. There is plenty of scope for fun, for daydreaming, for a life free of quotas and discipline to test each day. There is also freedom to experiment with sex and drugs.

Freedom of movement and action is part of a system of values and rules that stress group cohesion and the
courage and independence of the members. They are the
values of the running pack. Prime rules are that you remain
silent about the gang’s affairs, stand on your own feet, and
ever say anything is difficult, because in the streets
nothing is difficult. Members must also never interfere by
word or action in anything another member wants to do.
Saying of the children recognize the operation of
poetic justice on the streets, according to which whatever
you do to others can be done to you. Everything you do
is known to have a “vital”, a come-back. The children
also have no illusion about the hazards of the life they are
embracing. “They know they are exploited criminally and
sexually,” says Amo. “They know they risk being beaten,
arrested and killed. They know who kills. Even so they
think it is a very adventurous kind of life.”
The children aspire to and admire those who are
“vital” — that is audacious, sharp, cunning, self-reliant,
silent. Some give these nicknames indicating autonomy,
solidarity and forthrightness — King, Renato, Cat-suank.

The adventure ethic

Through gang membership, the children replace the work
ethic with an adventure ethic through which they have a
taste of themselves as urban pirates who are more or
not at citizenship — but to conquer the city. Through their
adventures they develop a very strong sense of
identification with each other.

Whatever the circumstances of children leaving home,
they talk of their acceptance of street life as if it were a
positive choice. And clearly one of the triumphs of the
gang is its ability to “recycle positively the resentment,
and revolt originating from the family well’s collapse.”
Even the few children who had returned to their families
spoke, as did Reinaldo Moreira, of having a great sense of
solidarity with and nostalgia for the gang.

At the same time the street adventure cannot be
sustained without the help of drugs. The children say they
stuff glue because it makes them feel good, daring,
cunning, “like the Hulk.” Children in a society in Recife said
that they took drugs to psyche themselves up before going
to bag-snatching and robbing in the city center. “We go there,”
said one child, “to live or die.” But glue has other
great virtues — “it takes away the cold and hunger” and “makes
you feel everything is just fine.”

Generally the children understand that the life they
lead on the streets belongs to a certain period of their life
and is short-lived. But none of those interviewed said they
wanted to go home when their street time was up. Instead
they wanted the conventional family life of the city.

“They would like to marry, have a house, have regular
work and rear children,” says Amo Vogel. “So the idea of
a family was strong. But even those who were respectful
of both parents would say, ‘but father and mother didn’t
know how to live. Look they had too children. I want
children but two, three at the most.’

Many of the programmes that try to work with street
children share the parents’ view that the gangs are the
energy and wholly a bad influence. Amo Vogel believes
that unless they begin to recognize their achievements
and take account of them in their approach to working
with street children, they will often be doomed to
frustration.

“What actually happens in the shop-in centre for
street children is that gangs use them as safe houses in
which to take cover and regroup. The people working in
the centres are referred to as aunts and some are easy to
manipulate. It’s as if you had some aunties in town. When
you do something wrong you go to your aunt and she will
give you something to eat and take care of you, put you
under the shower and then call the car to take you to the other
center where your group is. That happens. From a distance
it’s funny but it’s a very difficult situation because these
aunts are there and desperate — they ask us, ‘Do you think
this all works? What’s the use of it?’

None of the researchers in the FLACSO/UNICEF
study believe they have produced a definitive statement
about street and unemployed children in relation to
their families. There is rather a first concern and revealing
look at this area in Brazil.

Much remains to be done. Why, for instance, does the
expelling dynamic in some homes in many cases affect
only some children and not others? Under the stresses of
poverty, do some families selectively abandon or expose
some of their children to the hazards of street work while
educating others? Are the children who abandon the
family more adventurous and more intelligent, or simply
more problematic? Are the ones who stay at home more
submissive or more loved? What is the long-term fate of
the child workers — is their life any less nasty, brutal and
short than those who go to the streets? How does the
failure of the school system to incorporate the children of
the poor contribute to their going to the streets or into
underemployment? And what is the experience of girls
who go to the streets?

Ana Vasconcelos of the Passage House is keen to
understand more about the trajectory of girls children from
their families onto the streets. Among street children
there are significantly fewer girls than boys. But this
shouldn’t be taken to indicate that the overall position of
girls in a poor urban setting is better than it is for boys.
“One possibility,” says Ana Vasconcelos, “is that many
girls are in family homes working as maids, or maybe they
are in organized brothels. We don’t know for sure. But
what I believe is that the girls will do their best to stay
home. They want to stay home and help their mother and
will suffer more than the boys in order to stay.”
GEARING UP FOR CHANGE

At the time at which the research for this document was undertaken, government agencies in Brazil were overwhelmed by the changes needed to meet the requirements of the new statute. 

"It is a law basically designed for a new society," said Regina Helena Pedrosa. She is one of a number of people who have moved from the popular movement into government to assist in the transformation of policies and practice. Formerly President of the National Front for the Defence of Children's Rights, she is now a consultant to the President of the Foundation of Brazilian Children for the Child and Adolescent (FCBA).

"As the old adage of 'use it or lose it' is familiar, the federal system simply disappeared and everything returned to the municipalities and the states," said Regina.

The transfer of authority, authority and responsibility have been greatly complicated by the radically different approach required to respond to children at risk. Some of the old institutions designed to take 5,000 children and had 2,500 employees, notably in Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. "These are our families which we are now trying to knock down, with the new approach of keeping children in their areas and in small groups, whenever possible instead of forcing them into large city centres,'" said Regina.

There were 4,500 municipalities. Under the old system they could only handle the problem of the children, passing on to the large institutions. Now they are having to prepare for these new responsibilities of identifying, planning and executing policies.

Regina confirmed that an immediate challenge for FCBA, since having to absorb all the staff of the old system, is coordinating the JB and enforcing the new policies in the municipalities. She said:

- Getting the message that the statute was not just another law, but something that made it obligatory for officials to respect the rights of children and adolescents in every field of life, race or socio-economic background.
- Getting the message that it was not just the children that were affected but all children.
- Getting the message that the institutions were not the problem but the children within them.
- Getting the message that all children are affected and not just children in institutions or on the street.

Power of persuasion in bringing about these changes was new reinforced by sanctions allowing children to be declared "abandoned" and be removed from their families. Judges are now being sanctioned and given personal reprimands. The new law has proven to be effective in reducing the number of children being placed in institutions.

Several organizations were vigorous in campaigning against violence against children. The National Movement of Street Boys and Girls was opening up lines of communication with the police to try to increase understanding of and identification with the problem of violence against children. Violence was being exposed as a threat to both the children and society.

The movement had produced a dossier on the killing of children and adolescents by police and other violent groups. The dossier had sparked major international media coverage, and prompted a direct inquiry from the President of the Ministry of Justice. An official emergency committee on violence, composed of representatives of the Ministry of Justice, the FCBA and the General Prosecutor of the Republic, was set up to investigate the problem. Some government and NGO workers expressed concern that the sudden release of adolescents from closed institutions before alternative structures were in place might in the short term produce an increase in community violence towards children.

Organizations within the popular movement were adjusting their rights to the new and long-term implications of the new statute, and to what kind of relationship they would have with government. Some recommended a withdrawal from all direct assistance to children whose parents had been discharged in the context of a case failing to recognize its responsibilities. Now that rights...
had been established in law with all-party endorsement, the popular movement should switch to pressuring government to provide adequately for the health and development of all the nation’s children.

Others thought that non-governmental organizations should continue to do innovative and explorative work in housing, health, street children projects or community schools, but balance such work with monitoring public policy and lobbying government. None doubted that lobbying had become an important new part of their responsibilities, or that while embarking upon a partnership with government they had to be careful to preserve their independence.

“We made a big step but we have no illusions that insurgencies will continue, especially those that result from the social economic structure,” says Roberto José dos Santos. “The problems are very complex — they start partly in the rural areas, with the neglect of the rural workers and their families. The authorities in Brazil lack the courage to make real agrarian reform. The great landowners control the politics and economy of the country. We still have a lot of migration into the cities, on the one hand. On the other, the swelling of the cities creates areas of great impoverishment whose violence has a free hand.

“Peripheric areas of the major cities come under the control of marginal powers — gangs of drug traffickers and extortionists. The dividing line between organized crime and some sectors of police is very fine. So families are subjected to an atmosphere of terror.” Some city areas have become no-go areas, controlled by gangs and beyond the reach of both law and assistance.

Ivanter Don Santos had just been sworn in as one of the 12 NGO representatives on Rio de Janeiro’s new collaborative Council for the Rights of the Child and Adolescents. A former street child and one-time member of a FUNAMBEM institution, he is now the executive secretary of the human rights organization, the Centre for Co-ordination of Marginalized Peoples. He believes that, while the President and the government were keen to nail their colours to the mast of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and made Brazil the first country to adopt its terms, they be less euphoric about the social and economic consequences of implementing the statute.

“We cannot expect one law — even a good law like this — within an unjustly structured society can solve the problems from one day to another.”

This perception was not restricted to non-governmental workers. Said Regina Helena Pedrosa:

“Brazil is a very wealthy country the problem is income distribution — it is a skewed distribution that makes the rich richer and poor poorer. Fifty to sixty per cent of everything owned in the country is held by two per cent of the population. What must be done now is a more serious practice of democracy in the sense that people begin to force the government to do what it should do — which is to address these problems.”

Meanwhile the deepening recession, the country’s international debt problems, and its salary squeeze in the fight against continuously mounting inflation left the government with little immediate room for maneuver. Pressure on the poor and demands for more fundamental reform were likely to increase rather than diminish.

Opposing forces

Despite the all-party adoption of the statute, there were powerful forces within Brazilian society opposed to its implementation. In particular, there was a strong opposition to the law from among the judges. One explanation of the unanimous political support for the statute is that it was adopted in an election year when few representatives would wish to cross swords with the well-entrenched popular movement.

Was there not a danger of a major reversal? Were public expectations not being raised in an economic context in which investment in extensive reform was least likely? Would the new programmes for children, being formulated in the face of considerable difficulties failed to reduce inequality in society? Could there not be a public backlash and political reversals?

Several observers felt that reversal is possible. Valdemar de Oliveira Neto of the Luiz Freire Centre, believes that with the growing recession, 1991 could be a major threshold year for the democratization process in Brazil. But he argued that, because of the strength of public opinion and the organization of the popular movement, the government would try to be really strong on the question of children, education, health.

UNICEF’s Antonio Cardoso sees the 1990s as a time in which, the legislative battle of the 1980s yields to the implementation of the statute as a “project of society”.

“The social movement in Brazil today in general is not advancing. The economic recession puts the labour forces in a defensive posture. The women’s movement peaked in the mid-eighties and is still at the nineties with a greatly diminished profile. Residents’ associations, once very active, have, with the recentralization of the country, been repressed by political party life. Their leaders have lost credibility and fame because of party divisions. Landless workers suffered a great setback in their fight for agrarian reform in the constitution. In terms of such reforms the constitution may be even more backward than the legislation of the military regime.

“The children’s movement alone, which was perhaps the weakest point of the social movement at the beginning of the 1980s now has an accumulation of victories and a new perspective for very interesting action in the decade of the 1990s.”
On the government’s side, the President of Brazil had so far met all of his clearly stated commitments to the promotion of children’s rights. However, the social welfare branch of the State had never been so fragile as it was in the immediate stages of the transition to the new reality. The old FUNABEM/FEBEM system had been abandoned but the new structures were not yet in place, though there had been important isolated innovations such as those of Goiás and São Paulo. The growing recession made it all the more urgent that change-over be accomplished.

Implementation of the statute required a deep institutional, administrative and technical reorganization and profound changes in the understanding and actions of the people who worked directly with children. Public participation in the policy-making councils introduced a new principle into public policy—that of public control over state actions. Justice, health and education provisions would all be affected. Public participation needed to be extended to social spending policy.

A major difficulty that would face the new participatory councils was securing popular involvement. Education, for instance—currently denied to four million school-aged children—was now a legally enforceable right. But persuading people to assert this right faced an established tradition of non-participation and passivity among the popular layers of society who had never had a citizenship role.

“We don’t believe that the statute is like a magic wand that will instantly transform reality, but it has stopped being a tramp, a symbol of struggle of certain progressive sectors, to become a tool and a weapon in the ongoing political struggle,” those who want changes have in their

bonds in this statute a most modern instrument to work on reality,” says Antônio Carlos.

“We don’t believe that after the statute is enforced, we can go home, mission accomplished. In fact we know we are at the very beginning of a new stage of work and struggle. We are engaged in a marathon rather than a hundred-meter dash and looking, not at tomorrow, but the next decade.”

Of particular interest in the case of Brazil will be the continuing role of those children who helped bring in the new legislation and triggered a surge of public awareness of the courage and potential of children to make a valuable contribution, given the chance. More Brazilians than ever before are concerned that they should be assured of that chance, and not just at the moment of crisis, but pervasively, before their families are destroyed and their rights become acquired. Many children with experience of poverty have learned that disasters lie not just with being poor, but with being the endangered child, but with the impoverishment process. Like Margarete, with her aspiration to be a street educator, they introduce some reassurance that today’s marathon has some potential to become tomorrow’s relay race. “I am a person who has suffered on the streets,” she says, “and I want to be an example of what can be achieved. I will work with girls. I will be a mentor and help them fight and defend themselves against all we suffer on the streets.” A keen student of the implications of the new Child and Adolescent Statute, she observes, “Many things hurt a child, including not having the right to be a child—because it’s only recently we got this right. Now let us see if this statute makes things better.”
The following is a list of the main sources used in the compilation of this report:


SOS Meninas, by Ana Vasconcelos, Centro Brasileiro da Criança e do Adolescente – Casa de Passagem, 1980

The impact of alternative programmes for street children: An evaluative study, Thersesa Perna, Higha, Stone and Juan Tripboy, Brasilia UNICEF 1986: draft manuscript


Exterminio de Crianças e Adolescentes no Brasil, CEAP, Rio de Janeiro 1990


Much of the historical perspective was provided by Antonio Carlos Gomes da Costa, UNICEF’s National Project Officer

Photo credits:
Cover: Anthony Swift
Page 5: Pela Praia da Costaço, São Paulo
Pages: 9, 10, 23, 35, 36: Claudio Filippini, UNICEF
Pages: 11, 13, 16, 26, 27, 29, 39, 41: Anthony Swift
Pages: 19, 20: Paolo Mac Donell
