

THE URBAN CHILD
in difficult circumstances



ITALY:
*Too little
time and space
for childhood*

by Ray Lorenzo

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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

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This publication is one of a series designed to bring to a non-specialist audience some aspects of the data and conclusions of technical case studies on *The Urban Child and Family in Especially Difficult Circumstances* undertaken in Brazil, India, Kenya, Italy, and Philippines under the auspices of the International Child Development Centre.

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PREFACE

THIS publication represents the third report, tailored to a non-specialist audience, resulting from an extensive case study on Italy, one of five country studies selected as the first project of the Urban Child Programme of the UNICEF International Child Development Centre (ICDC). The Italian case study has been carried out in close collaboration with ICDC's host organization, the Istituto degli Innocenti, a foundling hospital that has been serving abandoned or needy children since 1445. The research will result in a series of expert as well as non-specialist publications, both in Italian and in English, under the overall co-ordination of the UNICEF International Child Development Centre's Urban Programme.

The author of the *Innocenti Study*, Ray Lorenzo, a social scientist with extensive experience working with and for children in cities throughout Italy, has had access to national data and to the reports prepared for the Istituto by urban research teams in the three cities selected for study (Naples, Palermo and Milan). He has travelled to each of these cities under the Istituto's guidance, in order to meet programmers in government and non-governmental organizations and to collect testimonials from them and from children themselves about the quality of their lives in these urban areas and the problems they face.

Responding to needs expressed by UNICEF Country Offices and by the Istituto degli Innocenti for understanding better the growing phenomenon of urban children in especially difficult circumstances and for analysing existing programme approaches and policies, the first ICDC Urban Child project launched studies in the Philippines, Brazil, India and Kenya, and initiated its collaboration with the Istituto degli Innocenti for a study on Italy. Whereas the first three countries were chosen for their innovative programmes on urban children and communities, Kenya exemplifies the recently growing problem of children living in the proliferating urban slums of Africa.

Italy constituted a special challenge because it introduced in the project a North-South dimension. Owing to the rapid industrialization and economic growth of the past few decades, Italian children have certainly fared better. There has been a sharp drop in mortality rates and a significant increase in access to education and child care facilities. At the same time, however, severe forms of disaffection and problems among Italian youth have also emerged, which appear to be poorly understood and inadequately addressed both by government and the public as a whole. In many respects, Italy represents the project's "conscience", a projection for Third World countries of potential problems that lie ahead. It constitutes a vivid reminder that economic growth alone cannot guarantee the well-being of a nation's children. Indeed, children in cities need to become much more central to the concerns of policy-makers and of the society as a whole 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 is only partially reflected in these reports for non-specialist audiences. In the Philippines and Brazil, for example, the focus is explicitly on street children and how they relate to the community, work and education. The studies in India, Kenya and Italy are more directed towards disadvantaged children within urban communities, the type of deprivations they experience in both the North and South, and their relationship to work, education and the street. All the studies look into the problems arising from institutionalization and share a concern for the particular problems encountered by young girls as opposed to those of boys.

Whilst a significant component of the project has been to identify urban children, families and communities at greatest risk, another important facet has been the assessment of existing policies, and the consideration of possible new interventions aimed at reaching disadvantaged children more preventively in the future. One form of prevention is obviously to support and strengthen the families that most need help before their situation gets out of hand. This means enabling communities to have a greater say in identifying their own problems and helping to solve them, but without letting governments off the hook. Pressure needs to be exerted on both

national and municipal governments to convince them of the important political and economic advantages of supporting families and to plan cities for the sake of their children rather than having, later on, to institutionalize child casualties and thus take full responsibility for their upbringing and often poor social reintegration.

Italy is representative of the “inconsistencies” that can arise in a complex industrialized setting. On the one hand, innovative preventive programmes have been developed in the areas of early child care and support to disaffected urban youth. These programmes, especially in the North, assist the children’s families by using flexible participatory models which are neither “welfarist” nor “therapeutic”. Furthermore, northern Italian cities have developed interesting ways of formally structuring the cooperation between urban voluntary organizations and municipal governments. Southern cities, on the other hand, have attracted a plethora of active and creative non-governmental organizations which have often operated, however, in a fashion quite distinct from the local administrations. But the problems of deprived and poor Italian urban children, caught in the vortex of this very rapidly changing society and with hardly any voice in an adult-defined world, are still being very inadequately addressed at both government and societal level.

Each of the other studies emphasizes different and innovative alternatives. The Philippine case provides a good example of how an urban community can involve children and families in difficult circumstances in the identification and preventive resolution of the children’s worst problems in close co-ordination with the municipal governments. A different preventive approach is illustrated by the Brazil case, which analyses how the public image of children can be significantly transformed and subsequently translated into concrete technical support to municipalities from within the government.

This study, much as the other *Innocenti Studies*, has been made possible by the information base which has been created through careful reporting of different aspects of the situation of children and of most innovative programmes in each of the five countries and twenty cities selected. The author of this piece is thus especially indebted to the urban teams that produced the Italian reports and introduced him to the programmes, administrators and children in each of the cities he visited. He also benefited from extensive consultations on the Italian research with Laura Solito, and on its integration with the international project with Cristina Blanc. Finally, it was a new and mutually beneficial experience for the ICDC international urban team and the Istituto degli Innocenti’s national team to work together on this study. Both teams are looking forward to seeing the results of their work bear fruition.

We hope this series of popular publications will continue to help illustrate the real everyday lives of urban children and their families, showing not only the – at times – severely deteriorating quality of their lives, but also the clarity of the 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.

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TROUBLED CHILDHOOD IN ITALY TODAY

AT this moment, in Italian cities there are at least one million children living in difficult, often unhappy, circumstances. Many are living in poverty, in families with very low incomes, in inadequate housing, in neighbourhoods blighted by environmental degradation. An equally large number of children, though their circumstances are not poor according to statistical definitions, are suffering new forms of deprivation: loneliness in single-parent or problem families; alienation from their communities because of the nature of their home or city environment, or because they are living in institutions; a lack of comprehension at school and a sense of marginalization in society. Evidence points to an increase in the numbers of children experiencing either physical or psychological abuse – or both – in these settings.

Worst of all, a combination of economic poverty and these other forms of deprivation are damaging hundreds of thousands of childhoods in the ancient centres of many southern cities, and in the newer high-rise ‘ghettos’ on the outskirts of cities in both southern and northern Italy. Increasingly, significant numbers of children are becoming involved in criminal activities and drug abuse.

This text is based primarily on the data gathered and the reflections generated by three teams of researchers – in Naples, Palermo and Milan – involved in a joint project of the Istituto degli Innocenti and UNICEF. The project was established to examine the many predicaments of the ‘urban child in difficult circumstances’. The aim of this publication is to contribute to a better understanding of such children, and to the development of strategies which can guarantee sufficient time and place for childhood in increasingly hostile and indifferent adult city environments.

The stories of the three children which follow do not claim to depict fully the complex universe of endangered childhoods in Italy today. They come from the three cities selected by the project’s research group for detailed analysis. These stories contain elements – ‘threads’ – which, when further described and analysed in their environmental, social and institutional contexts, illustrate some of the general and specific situations of the ‘Italian child in difficult circumstances’. Procolo from Naples, Luisa from Palermo, and Marco from Milan are children who, through no fault of their own,

are being denied the right of every child to grow up and participate to his and her full potential in a healthy, loving, and nurturing world.

The stories of Procolo, Luisa and Marco

Procolo is one of the more than 35,000 child workers who live in and around Naples. He is 10 years old, but he barely remembers his birthday which was not celebrated this year in his crowded home in Naples’ fishing port of Pozzuoli.

Every morning Procolo gets up at 4 am. He catches a ride on a neighbour’s jalopy down to the bustling fish market, where for many hours he unloads heavy, smelly crates of fish. He belongs to a team of young workers, many of whom are smaller than the cases of imported fish they load and unload. One cold morning, Procolo absent-mindedly slid his tired hand over the slippery, wooden tunafish cutting block, and a heavy blade sliced off his index finger. It doesn’t make the work any easier.

Procolo’s home is on the edge of the port, between the city and the country. His solid, hard-working family tries to make ends meet through odd jobs. His mother works seasonally as a fruit-picker. But most of her time is spent trying to raise her family with dignity and respect. She supplies the essentials: woollen underwear (necessary in the damp, cold apartment-garage), and fresh produce for dinner. His father is a strong and able fisherman but barely manages to bring home a good catch these days from the polluted seas around the Neapolitan coast. He rarely speaks to his family, accustomed to the long, silent days at sea.

In Procolo’s home, schooling is seen as unnecessary, and play and entertainment useless. Procolo is a premature adult. He knows hard work and cold hands and feet. He often drinks wine with his father’s friends in the port tavern. He is missing the joys and ‘sweet turbulences’ of childhood. But, nevertheless, he is still a child.

Eighteen-year-old Luisa grew up in one of Palermo’s new peripheral neighbourhoods – a poorly constructed and socially anonymous environment. Her paralyzed father, injured at work, has never been in employment since Luisa was born. Her mother is a housewife. Luisa has an older, heroin-addicted brother, and a younger sister still

in primary school.

During junior high school, Luisa began to attend classes irregularly. She was already behind her grade level and she found it very hard to relate to most of her teachers. She loved to dance and sing and, at that time, aspired to become a hairdresser. But life seemed very hard to Luisa – so difficult that at times she wanted to die.

At the age of 15, she met Giuseppe, a 25-year-old labourer. A few months later she ran away from

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decide to become pregnant; she
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married'*

home. She began living with Giuseppe as a couple, together with his family, and dropped out of school.

In the poorer quarters of Palermo, this kind of case is not uncommon. As a deliberate policy of escape – *fuitina* – a young girl may decide to become pregnant; she then has the 'right' to 'get married', although legally marriage is not allowed before age 18. Poor families often encourage their daughters in this choice, since it frees them from the traditional obligation to give a dowry and hold a wedding feast. In Palermo's neighbourhoods there are many child brides. Luisa is one of these.

How has Luisa's choice affected her life? Since her 'marriage' she is unable to leave the crowded apartment on her own because Giuseppe and her father-in-law are very jealous. Luisa is very beautiful. She is also very unhappy. At 18, she already has two young children and is expecting another. Whenever possible, for example when her in-laws allow her to run errands or do the shopping, she goes back to her school to visit the one teacher she liked. She confides to this woman that she misses school and that "married life is not nearly as fascinating as she had imagined".

Away north in Milan lives Marco, aged nine. He and his mother, a computer programmer, and his 17-year-old brother occupy a sound, spacious but disorderly apartment near Milan's central station. His father hasn't lived with the family for five years.

After he left home, his father spent most of his time harassing Marco's mother and grandparents who insisted that Marco shouldn't see him. They said he was violent, that he wanted to hurt Marco and his mother. When he was very little, there were times when his father beat up his mother. At one

stage, his father disappeared for several months. His grandmother said he was in jail, that it served him right for what he did to his wife. But Marco found this hard to believe because his father used to be so nice to him, and gave him gifts.

Last year, Marco became frightened too. He was afraid to go out and walk to his soccer training, not only because he might meet his father, but for many other reasons which he found difficult to express. The neighbourhood in which he lives is not the best. The streets are congested and there is no safe place to play. The one little park is filled with syringes discarded by junkies.

Marco has found it very difficult to cope at school. He has not been able to concentrate since last year. Sometimes he hits his schoolmates, when they tease him about his family. And his teacher has sent him several times to the principal's office. He can't understand this: he finds words as painful as beatings.

About eight months ago a good thing happened to Marco. He met Paolo (from the Domestic Aid for Children Project), who became his "good, big friend". Every day, after school, they meet up and go to the parish centre to soccer practice, or just 'hang out' together with his friends. Some weekends they go to the zoo with his mother and brother, or to a park outside Milan. One day a week, Marco and Paolo meet Marco's father at the Community Health Centre. A psychologist, Susanna, and a social worker, Giuliana, are present.

His father was really hostile at first, but in the last few months he has been more reasonable. He has stopped harassing Marco's mother and she no longer seems so anxious about them seeing each other. Even Marco has begun to feel more secure, he's started coming home from the parish centre by himself. When his father yelled at him at their meeting last month, he didn't cry but was able to answer quite calmly.

Marco is still a child living 'in difficult circumstances', but with the help of Paolo, some of those circumstances are becoming less difficult, and Marco's childhood is on the road to repair.

The 'economic miracle' and its impact on family life

Until the second World War, Italy was essentially an agricultural nation. Although there were many medium-sized cities, and a highly developed urban culture with roots in the mediaeval period, the majority of Italy's population was rural. During the War, the few large industrial urban centres, located almost exclusively in the North, were heavily bombed and damaged. In the South, Naples, Palermo, Bari, and Taranto were also devastated by Allied and Nazi bombing. After the War, the newly formed parliamentary Republic embarked

The story of Procolo is adapted from material by Luciano Sommella, in I Minori in Italia, First Report of the National Youth Council, 1989.



on a policy of urbanization and industrialization, which significantly changed the demographic, economic and cultural state of the nation.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Italy experienced a period of economic growth unprecedented in its history. The country's GNP increased by an average of 6.5 per cent a year, while income per inhabitant grew at 5.8 per cent each year. This period is justly known as the Italian 'economic miracle'.

This 'miracle' launched Italy into the exclusive company of the world's great industrial powers. The northern cities enjoyed enormous public investment, drawing large numbers of people in from the countryside, particularly from the South. The southern rural and urban areas were penalized in this process. Today, nearly 65 per cent of Italy's population lives in urban centres. Consumption has soared, and nearly the entire population lives in, or is influenced by, an urban culture.

This process of modernization, typical of most Western nations, transformed the demographic and socio-cultural make-up of Italian society. During the period 1950–1990, there was an almost continual drop in the Italian birth rate. Whereas in 1960 there were 931,000 live births, in 1990 there were only 568,000. This extraordinary decline in fertility (Italy has the lowest birth rate in Western Europe, and in several of its regions, a rate as low as any in the world) has brought Italy beyond the threshold of 'zero population growth'. Demographers predict that, if existing trends hold, Italy will experience a population decline of six per cent over the next 30 years.

Children and young people under 17 years of

age comprise a continually decreasing proportion of society. In 1950, this age group constituted 29 per cent of the total population; by 1990, their share had dropped to 21 per cent. In some northern regions (where the modernization process is further advanced than in the South), the figure is below 15 per cent. Italian society is ageing at such a rapid rate that, in terms of numbers, children's capacity to influence government financing and social policy is dwindling. Since children risk becoming in the near future an 'endangered species', the relative value of each child to their families and to society is likely to increase; but the pressures of modern living, rising costs, and parental stress will

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and attention*

also leave them in greater need of love and attention. This phenomenon, if not adequately taken into account, could have significant negative effects on children's well-being and their future prospects as adults.

The sharp drop in the birth rate has not been accompanied by a reduction in the number of new families. Thus, the typical Italian family is becoming smaller. The trend, especially in northern urban centres, is for couples to have fewer children (the

average family size is 2.7), and to bear them at a relatively older age. This decrease in family size reduces the child's chances of peer contact within the home and places an additional responsibility for the child's socialization on the community.

At the same time, the traditional bonds which linked the family nucleus with the extended family and the residential community have been breaking down. Mobility, career pressures and the changed environment of urban living have contributed to

The solitude of children within smaller and more isolated family units has been aggravated by a 'loss of the public realm'

the increasing isolation of nuclear families. Their smaller numbers of children ought to enable parents to offer more individual attention and greater economic support to their offspring. This is often, but not always, the case. Some families are unable to cope with a new cultural climate requiring different role models, as, for example, when mothers work and fathers join in domestic activity.

Parents may also falter in the face of rapid technological advance. They find themselves less able to guide their children's education or programme their future development. This is especially true among culturally deprived, poorer families. Meanwhile, among middle-class parents with

high expectations and little time left over from the demands of job and career, the child whose birth was long postponed sometimes becomes a 'mysterious problem', requiring expert advice from an early age.

The solitude of children within increasingly smaller and isolated family units has been further aggravated by what can be termed a 'loss of the public realm'. Italian urban policy in the 1960s and 1970s was characterized by the construction of new high-rise housing complexes on city outskirts. These anonymous neighbourhoods, usually unconnected to the historic urban fabric, rarely provide outdoor spaces for socializing and children's play. At the same time, industrial and transportation policies have favoured the car, creating unbearable levels of traffic congestion, accidents and air pollution in all major urban areas. These dangers, together with a flourishing rate of street crime, have literally locked young children into their homes – homes which, as we have seen, may be insensitive to their needs and unable to provide for them.

In Italy, as in most modern societies, an interesting paradox has developed regarding young people. Whereas biological and cognitive maturity is reached progressively earlier in life, social maturity is achieved progressively later. In Italy, some experts have described this phenomenon as 'eternal adolescence'. The statistics are startling. At present, 98 per cent of all Italians under the age of 20 years officially live with their families, a much higher proportion than in all other European countries. Whereas over three-quarters of all males between the ages of 20 and 24 years in Italy live



with their families, only 52 per cent in France and 26 per cent in Denmark are doing so. Overall, the proportion of 76 per cent in Italy is double the European average.

These 'children' are, for the most part, still completing their studies or are unemployed. Recent Italian legislation (1984) has penalized families with unemployed children, granting tax rebates exclusively to families whose children are still in school. (This policy bears heavily on poorer, larger, culturally deprived families usually residing in the South, as we shall see in the following section.) Thus, young people with a non-existent productive role and limited political power are increasingly dependent on their families for economic and psychological support – families which are increasingly unable to provide this.

Economic development has undeniably contributed to marked improvements in the physical well-being of the majority of Italian children. Infant mortality rates showed an enormous drop from 28 per 1,000 live births in 1972 to nine per 1,000 in 1985 – comparing favourably to Western European standards. In the same period there were significant advances in the quality of post-natal care; the number of infant deaths due to pneumonia, for example, declined from 3,580 in 1970 to 207 in 1985. Better hygiene has spearheaded a reduction in the number of deaths due to gastroenteritis in the first year of life, from 1,745 (1970) to only 35 (1985).

At the same time, however, what is referred to in Italy as a 'new poverty' – depletion of the caring human fabric – caused by a process of cultural change integral to the modernization of society, has had a negative impact on the psychological well-being of many Italian children. An increasing number of middle-class children, such as Marco in Milan, are being referred to social workers for psychotherapy. Several surveys in Milan have indicated a significant increase in cognitive and emotional disturbances in all child age-groups, notably in pre-adolescence.

As far as teenagers are concerned, many indicators of problem circumstances – drug and alcohol abuse, criminal activities, truancy from school – are on the rise in all social classes; these problems are partly attributable to the 'new poverty' of social alienation and non-participation. The age range at which there is greatest risk of mortality has shifted from early childhood to the adolescent period. Sixty-seven per cent of deaths between the ages of 15 and 17 years are due to traffic accidents. The news reports of juvenile deaths in week-end traffic accidents – often linked to drug and alcohol use and reckless, violent behaviour – read like war casualty lists.

The mass media in Italy has recently dedicated great attention to the problem of child abuse. Data

indicate that the incidence of child-battering and sexual abuse of children is increasing in all social classes. However, it is not clear whether these data truly represent an increase or, rather, reflect a new cultural attitude: a greater willingness to report excesses in parental behaviour traditionally shielded by privacy and silence. In this context, it is worth noting that whereas the number of children in Italy is decreasing, public interest – as reflected in the mass media – in their well-being appears to

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be growing; although unfortunately this often leads to an overemphasis on extreme and sensational individual cases. The new degree of public concern may reflect the economic principle of placing greater value on rare or diminishing resources.

**Children of traditional poverty:
the other Italy**

As is evident from the stories of Procolo and Luisa, many Italian children are not experiencing the benefits of the 'economic miracle'. Economically and culturally, Italy can be divided into two distinct parts: the North and the South. Economic development in the post-War period has primarily benefited the northern and central regions. (Rome might be considered the 'dividing line')

The statistics show striking differences in average family incomes between northern and southern regions. Campania, whose capital is Naples, has an average family income of L1,922,000 (\$1,540) a month (1988) as compared to Lombardy (capital, Milan) with L2,663,000 (\$2,130). Average income in the autonomous region of Sicily (capital, Palermo) is even lower: L1,826,000 (\$1,460) a month. In Sicily, therefore, the average family income is nearly 35 per cent lower than that in the Lombardy region. However, taking into account the much larger family size typical of Sicily (and Campania), the realistic differential is 61 per cent. The probability of being a poor child is therefore much higher in the South than in the North.

Levels of unemployment are significantly higher in the South, particularly among young people seeking first employment. In Naples, for example, 31 per cent of the total potential workforce has never been employed. In some neighbourhoods in Naples and Palermo, nearly half of the adult population is unemployed. The South has been the

recipient of large-scale national economic aid programmes, such as the *Cassa per Mezzogiorno* (the Development Fund for Southern Italy). Unfortunately, these programmes have not been effective in developing the region's productive base. In cities such as Palermo and Naples, they have instead created a situation in which large proportions of the population are employed in the tertiary sectors, mainly in government bureaucracies. Few attempts to modernize farming in the South have been successful, and the region's inherent agricultural potential has been permanently compromised.

Underdevelopment and unemployment in southern Italy pose additional economic problems to southern families, already at a disadvantage because of their larger size than those in the North. Although the southern region has also experienced the demographic trend already described at a national level, the declines in the birth rate and family size have been far less marked. There are pockets in the cities of Naples and Palermo where family size is close to that of pre-industrial times. In the Scampia district in Naples, almost 14 per cent of all families consist of nine or more members. In the Danisinni quarter in Palermo, over 50 per cent of all families have more than three children.

Children continue to represent a considerable share of the population of southern cities. In Palermo, children under the age of 14 years make up 26 per cent of the population, whereas in Milan they comprise only 11 per cent. In some southern districts such as Scampia, the proportion of children in the population is similar to that of many developing countries: over 50 per cent of the 100,000 inhabitants are in the 0–25 age bracket. In the Borgo Nuovo quarter in Palermo, children aged 0–17 comprise nearly 37 per cent of the population.

Health and educational statistics also depict

Underdevelopment and unemployment pose problems to southern families, already at a disadvantage because of their larger size

grave social differentials between North and South. Infant mortality rates in Naples are amongst the highest in Western Europe and are several points higher than the national average. In the South, schools are more crowded, buildings more



dilapidated, demotions and drop-out rates higher. Social services for children and families, less frequent in the South, must serve greater numbers of clients, with generally more serious problems.

General statistical portraits cannot, of course, illuminate the full situation of children in Italy. Median data often obscure important peaks and gaps. In fact, pockets of poverty may be found in cities like Milan where average incomes are very high. The numbers of poor children in northern cities are lower, but their conditions can be just as dramatic. To understand the complex universe of children in difficult circumstances we must look beyond the statistics, trying to identify what went wrong to deprive some children of healthy and happy childhoods. This may help us see how deficiencies in their lives can be tackled and – perhaps – made good.

ENDANGERED CHILDHOODS: PUTTING TOGETHER THE PUZZLE

THERE are many possible different angles from which the situation of children in Italy can be analysed. The pieces of the puzzle must be carefully selected. The places in which children grow up need to be clearly examined. The relationships they develop – or fail to develop – with adults and other children must be considered. Age is also a very important factor, since events can have very different impacts at varying life stages. Problems have a tendency to accumulate and overlap. The context of children's lives – homes, neighbourhoods, schools – is also important. Problem activities – child labour, drug use and crime – in which some children become involved need to be viewed against the environment in which they develop.

Society's responses to these problems (explored in subsequent chapters) can be successful only if there is a clear understanding of the inter-relationships within the web of forces bearing upon childhood in space and time. In addition, there are new and special situations – the increased presence of migrant children of non-Italian origin, for example – which render the task of understanding and intervening even more complex.

Children at home

The most important influence upon childhood is the home and family. All of the social sciences indicate the links between the lack of a supportive, loving home environment in early childhood and deviant or anti-social behaviour in later life.

In statistical terms, the family in Italy appears to be in good health. Marriage rates are on the rise and Italy is the EC country with the lowest divorce rate. The number of families, according to the General Register Office, doubled in the period from 1951 to 1981, while overall population increased only 19 per cent. However, the implications of these statistics are not exclusively positive. The smaller size of families can bring problems of social fragmentation. In many northern cities, households with a single child and both parents employed full-time are common. This means that families must be able to call upon other care-givers, among relatives, neighbours, and from institutional sources. The onus on these care-givers is not insubstantial.

Children have basic needs in early childhood which go well beyond material factors. In the family, a child learns to love and be loved – an impor-

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A child learns to love
and be loved*

tant accomplishment which influences the child's loving capacity towards others outside his or her family. In the family, love does not have to be earned: the child is loved solely on the basis of his or her existence. Outside the family, unquestioning love is a rarity. Thus, whoever they are, the child's primary care-givers must help the child to acquire confidence and learning skills which will render him or her lovable to others.

A young child also requires the presence of one or more adults to help him or her interpret and relate to the world around, and to overcome the natural insecurities involved in confronting new and constantly expanding realities. A child also needs to be taken seriously. A parent or any other primary care-giver must be able to understand and respect the child's feelings, ideas, and perceptions.

These difficult tasks are rendered even more difficult in families experiencing economic hardship. Mrs. L. emigrated from southern Italy to Milan in the mid 1970s with her husband. She is the mother of five children between the ages of 12 and 18. When they were younger, she often worked as an office cleaner in order to supplement her husband's meagre salary as a labourer and his intermittent periods of unemployment. Her working hours – early mornings and evenings – clashed with the domestic demands of raising a large family. Also, Milan lacked the support networks – relatives and friends – which in her home town could have aided her as a young mother.

The pressures on Mr. and Mrs. L. contributed to an atmosphere of tension in their crowded basement apartment, which often exploded into violence, mainly towards their oldest daughter. Dur-

ing that period, Mr. L. spent long periods away from home – at times emigrating to Germany in search of employment or disappearing after frequent family quarrels. Unable to fulfil, alone, her children's material and psychological needs, Mrs. L. reluctantly committed them to institutional care. For over five years, the family was divided: the boys in one residential home, the girls in another.

Data on child abuse, from a recent study carried

The trauma of emigration – the loss of identity, of support networks, the difficulties of making good – can destroy family cohesion

out in the city of Milan seem to indicate that the L. family's case is not uncommon. While 23 per cent of all reported cases of domestic violence occur in broken homes, a family's socio-economic conditions and cultural background appear to contribute even more significantly. Only 45 per cent of fathers and 21 per cent of mothers in reported child abuse cases are in stable employment, and a large percentage have not completed primary school. It is interesting, in the Milan context, that 76 per cent of reported abusive fathers were born in southern Italy. The trauma of emigration – the loss of cultural identity, of traditional support networks, the difficulties of making good – exert strong pressures on family cohesion.

Families in large southern cities are exposed to much higher numbers to economic hardship and environmental degradation than are those in northern centres. In many southern city quarters, children are exposed to health hazards rarely seen in modern nations. Some neighbourhoods lack running water, in others (especially on the outskirts) sewerage systems consist of open-air trenches. The 1973 cholera epidemic in Naples illustrates the extent of the public health hazard.

Overcrowded housing conditions contribute to these risks; in several neighbourhoods of Naples, almost half the children report sleeping with three or more persons per room. Vaccination levels are also low; in the Scampia neighbourhood, for example, 47 per cent of children have not been immunized against the major infectious diseases. The area has national record levels of infectious disease (hepatitis, salmonella, dysentery), and of parasitic infestations and skin disease (lice and scabies). While the figures for Scampia undoubtedly represent the extreme case even for Naples, health conditions for families and children in the South generally are much worse than those in northern cities. A further compounding factor is the lack of accessi-

ble, public family health clinics in southern cities. In 1985, there were 0.13 family health clinics per thousand inhabitants in the North, but only 0.05 in the South. Regardless of the relatively high child population in the South, the differential development of these services continues to worsen.

The poor condition of many homes also represents life endangering conditions. After the serious earthquake of November 1980, a comprehensive inspection in central Naples revealed that almost 100,000 apartment units were structurally unsound. Several reliable sources have intimated that many of these units were already precarious before the tremors. Building cave-ins in the densely populated back alleys of the ancient centre of Palermo – heavily bombed in the second World War – occur with such regularity that a large proportion of the population has abandoned the area. Unfortunately, many of the abandoned, crumbling buildings have been occupied by illegal immigrants, mainly from Africa; but few of these, for the most part young males, have children.

Families relocated from these unsafe dwellings often do not find much better accommodation on the periphery. High-rise structures are often occupied before completion by concentrations of large, desperate, problem families. The conditions they sought to escape are reproduced; sometimes they are even worse. The end of 1991 was marked by two family tragedies involving very young children on the edge of Palermo and Naples. Ivan, an eight-month-old gypsy (Rom) child froze to death in his family's trailer, illegally encamped along with 300 others in Palermo's historic Bourbon gardens, 'la Favorita'. Weeks later, Salvatore (aged five), Carmela (aged three) and Luigi (aged one) burned to death in a mobile home on the edge of Naples. Their father had locked them in, with their mother (who miraculously survived), for reasons unknown. A short-circuit in an illegal hook-up to an overhead power line seems to have caused the fire. Estimates place the number of Naples families living in hazardous situations, many awaiting permanent relocation since the 1980 earthquake, at nearly 2,000.

Families experiencing these kinds of pressures cannot hope to provide adequately for their children's material and psycho-social needs. Alternative care and support services – nurseries and pre-school programmes – are essential to the well-being and nurture of their children in early life.

Children of pre-school age

In modern nations the responsibility for children's socialization and education is shared between the family and institutions. According to Italian law, free public day-care services are available to all families requesting them for children between the



ages of three and five. In fact, Italy's public pre-school programme is among the most extensive in Europe, with over 85 per cent of the eligible population enrolled. (Only France and Belgium exceed Italy in this regard.) A recent poll of experts carried out by the US periodical *Newsweek* praised the achievements of one of Italy's northern regions, Emilia Romagna, in the area of pre-school education and identified one of its kindergartens as "One of the World's Ten Best".

Public (municipal) nurseries, a more recent development (the relevant national law was passed in 1971), are less common and are accessible to working families or families with special needs. Costs are shared between users and the public administration on the basis of family income. To date, public nurseries serve slightly over five per cent of the eligible population in Italy. But once again, statistics reveal poor geographical distribution: some north-central cities provide services for nearly 30 per cent of the population, whereas Palermo manages to provide for less than one per cent. In 1986, northern regions as a whole served nine per cent of the eligible population, while southern regions served only 1.8 per cent.

Clearly, in many places in the South, child care facilities are lacking. It is often thought that mothers from disadvantaged backgrounds are reluctant to place their very young children in nurseries, and instead count on relatives or neighbours when the need for child care arises. This assumption is belied by the high numbers of children from needy families in Naples and Palermo who are committed by their families to residential institutions. A separation from her infant child during working hours would surely be more acceptable to a mother than an arrangement which permits only weekend visiting. But for many families in Naples and Palermo, few alternatives exist.

In Palermo, for example, until 1987 there was only one functioning public nursery for a population of 800,000, in spite of the fact that 26 centres had been constructed. In 1989, finally, permanent staff for 13 of these nurseries had been hired, but as of today only very few have effective programmes. In Naples, conversely, there has been a reduction in services. Of the 14 public nurseries functioning in 1980 (around 400 infants served) only seven are presently in operation. Thousands of working mothers, many without husbands (emigrated for work, in jail, or otherwise absent) have nowhere other than their homes to keep their children while they are at work. In many of these families, the burden of caring for very young children falls on older daughters, many of whom are forced to drop out of primary or middle schools.

Day-care centres for pre-school children (aged

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three to six) operate comprehensive programmes which qualify them as both social services and educational institutions. They are designed to provide pre-school preparation and an alternative to home care. Services include lunch programmes, play opportunities, and shelter. Again, not only the quantitative but the qualitative differences between facilities in northern and southern cities are striking; typically services function most poorly where they are most needed.

In Milan, for example, public and private day-



Children in school

In Italy, compulsory education begins at six years and ends at 14. Since the second World War, there has been a huge investment in universal, public education in Italy: in 1985, for example 6.7 per cent of Italy's GNP was spent on public education. In terms of illiteracy rates, the investments have been a success: in 1951, one-tenth of the population was illiterate, and by 1971, the proportion had dropped to one-twentieth.

Whether or not a child successfully completes school has a significant impact on his or her future life. This fact alone underlines the tremendous task faced by any nation's educational system. Since a child's family background also contributes considerably to success in school, the educational system is doubly important for those children coming from disadvantaged families.

In purely numerical terms, the Italian school system should be capable of educating all the nation's children. In fact, Italy has the highest ratio of teachers to students in Europe. However, this abundance of personnel has been offset over the years by insufficient classrooms, necessitating the practice of 'half-day shifts', whereby children spend only four hours a day in school. The decrease in the number of school-age children in the last decade has resolved the problem of half-day shifts in northern Italy. In the South, over 170,000 children (around 10 per cent) still attend school for only half the day, even though the actual number of students dropped by 230,000 between 1981 and 1987. The problem of part-time school attendance creates special difficulties for poor and working families in organizing their and their children's daily schedules, since siblings are often obliged to attend different shifts.

The number of teachers available for primary

care centres are attended by 100 per cent of the child population in this age group. In this city, the value of these institutions for children's socialization and future educational performance is widely recognized. In Naples and Palermo, this is not the case. Whereas few southern families recognize the educational value of public pre-school programmes (many well-to-do families choose private alternatives), the majority of families are in need of a custodial service for their children. Unfortunately, in many cases day-care centres are inadequate and poorly programmed. In the Scampia neighbourhood, for example, with 2,040 children of pre-school age, several centres have been closed recently and the remaining seven have waiting lists for over 200 children.

The case of Palermo is even more dramatic. Hot-lunch programmes (often the service most sought by needy and working families) have been interrupted due to administrative or political problems. In Naples and Palermo neighbourhoods, it is common to find centres which have been temporarily closed due to programme or budget difficulties vandalized by local youth and rendered permanently unusable. In the meantime, thousands of young children reach primary school unprepared and unfamiliar with the classroom environment.

Children living in difficult circumstances suffer most from shortcomings in the educational system and the classroom

schooling is, unfortunately, no guide to quality of instruction. Most are not highly qualified from an academic point of view, and are not rewarded for extra qualifications, good quality teaching, or demonstrated motivation, only for seniority and length of service. The Italian school system is also showing the negative effects of increasing bureaucratization, with many teachers employed in non-teaching positions. There is limited attention to the needs of children beyond the prescribed

curriculum; yet the role of the teacher is of great importance in this key phase of the young child's socialization and development. Until very recently, a child retained the same, single, teacher for the whole of the five-year primary period. Children with a poorly motivated or unsympathetic teacher could be permanently set back.

Children living in difficult circumstances suffer most from poor classroom conditions or shortcomings in the educational system. A child from a large family on Palermo's periphery, whose parents are illiterate and who has no space at home in which to study, needs special attention at school. Girl children from such an environment are likely to be especially disadvantaged. Families often assign very little importance to the education of a girl since her future is primarily seen as dependent on a 'good marriage'. In addition, since her working mother needs help with the household chores, her homework time is taken up with cooking, cleaning and caring for younger brothers and sisters.

Another disadvantage lies in the cultural gap between the school and family life. In most poor and working-class homes in Naples and Palermo, the local dialect rather than Italian is usually spoken at home. Thus, 'language problems' or learning disorders are often noted in these children at an early age, and often pursue these children through their entire school careers.

Some boys develop restless or aggressive behaviour, which leads to further difficulties at school. Such is the case of eight-year-old Giovanni from Palermo, suspended for several weeks for choking a classmate who had insulted his 'fiancée'. In adult Palermitan culture his behaviour would have been considered 'the honourable thing to do'. His teacher did not agree. However, the fact that she did not want to hear Giovanni's side of the matter prompted him to drop out of school. He is now working, guarding parked cars on Palermo's central avenue.

In the neighbourhoods surveyed in Naples and Palermo, the figures on school-leaving and school failures indicate just how widespread these problems are. In the Scampia neighbourhood, almost seven per cent of all primary students have dropped out of school and 11.5 per cent are at least two years behind their age group. In one primary school, 13 of the 20 children who had left school before the 5th grade were girls. In Giovanni's school in Palermo the situation is only marginally better: six per cent of the enrolled children had abandoned school and nearly 10 per cent were two years or more behind.

Families interviewed in one part of Naples consider school alternately a "waste of time" or a "parking lot for problem children". These parents were not referring to education in general – which they consider important, but rather to specific schools. They almost unanimously stated that the

schools in question "do not understand our children's problems". They tend to characterize school by reference to specific teachers or their children's "bad company", rather than by study programmes or subject areas. These comments, although confined to one geographical area, typify the communication gap between parents – particularly uneducated parents – and teachers. Community participation, institutionalized in Italian schools in 1975, has purely political connotations and does not usually involve parents in matters to do with teaching or the curriculum. Parents occasionally meet with

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teachers, but usually to listen to evaluations of their children's performance. Useful interchange is limited and constrained by the fact that few teachers live in, or are familiar with, the culture and environment of their less privileged pupils.

Interviews in Naples with children who have abandoned school reveal that they often had poor relationships with "unfriendly teachers". They described subjects as "boring or difficult", and declared that they had felt "alone and unhelped by their teachers". Several children indicated fear of drug-pushing and violence in schools as their principal motives for leaving.

In Milan, the figures on school abandonment are considerably lower. In fact, the official city-wide figures for 1988–89 reveal that less than one per cent of primary students dropped out. This sharp contrast with Naples and Palermo is accounted for by both institutional and cultural factors. The city offers better services (less crowded schools, higher teacher-student ratios, after-school programmes) for significantly fewer problem children. At the same time, parents with a higher level of education are less willing to allow their children to leave school. In Milan, only two per cent of the primary school population are officially behind grade level as compared to 18 per cent in middle schools; this may indicate that Milan schools, unlike their southern counterparts, practise a more liberal system of grading in these important, formative years. A child forced outside his or her peer group, made to feel different and marginalized, is more likely to find the jump outside the system easy to make.

Having made that jump, however, a child's relationship with school may linger. A group of junior high school students from the Borgo Nuovo

quarter on the edge of Palermo report that many of their classmates who have left school often return to the school grounds during lessons to “harass the teachers or just to hang around”. Some of the children still in school thought that “jealousy” towards teachers and other students was the basis for this aggressive behaviour. One described them as “lonely and sad”. Their aggression may reflect an attitude of resentment towards an institution which did not show willingness to understand their

*The child who breaks his leg or
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problems and has not helped them. For these children, the street is the only place to go.

Children at 'play' on the street

Naples' historic Spanish Quarter (built during the period of Spanish domination in the 16th and 17th centuries) is a dense maze of narrow streets, dead-end alleys and steep, narrow staircases enclosed by decaying six- to eight-storey *palazzi*. In the narrow canyons formed by the streets and courtyards, the sun touches the pavement only at midday. At street level are the typical *bassi* (one- or two-room apartments, usually damp), whose only aperture, often a combined window and door, opens directly onto the heavily trafficked *vicoli* (back alleys). In this poor neighbourhood, heavily afflicted by organized crime and drug-dealing, live nearly 6,500 children under 14 years of age.

This area of almost one square kilometre does not possess a single space – park, playground, or gymnasium – set aside for children. In the narrow streets and tiny squares children compete for space with vendor carts and automobiles. It is not uncommon to see pre-school children playing unattended on the single steps in front of the *bassi*, in dimly lit courtyards, between parked cars, poking about in piles of forgotten building materials from never-completed rehabilitation projects, scraping sticks between ancient cobble stones in search of earth, mud, or insects. For older children, play consists of an improvised soccer match wherever, by chance, several car-lengths of ‘open space’ are available. Adventure consists of driving motor-scooters at breakneck speed amongst shoppers or up and down slippery stone steps which connect streets on the steep hillsides. In this game there is often a thin line between play and crime. Many of the scooters are ‘borrowed’ and children admit that driving skills

acquired this way come in handy later for purse-snatching or just to avoid capture.

In the Spanish Quarter, space is a luxury. Apartments are tiny, alleyways narrow, central courts are postage-stamp size. In the ‘negotiations’ between passers-by and ball-players, between napping fathers and laughing children, between motorists and mud-pie makers, tempers often flare and harsh words are exchanged. Yet the natural urge to play which is the very essence of childhood cannot be suppressed. The scaffolding and temporary buttresses which, since the 1980 earthquake, span many streets from ground to rooftop, have become adventure playgrounds forgotten by the planners. The child who breaks his leg or loses his life on these ‘jungle gyms’ is a vandal in the public eye, not a child exercising the right to play. Official placards declare: “Prohibited to climb”.

The ground plans of the new, peripheral neighbourhoods of Naples – or Palermo or Milan for that matter – give the impression that there are plenty of play places for children. In the Scampia district in Naples, official plans showing open space seem to paint a young child’s paradise. The green shading, in reality, represents alternately dusty and muddy fields filled with scorched automobile skeletons and industrial or domestic refuse. Before the parks





could be laid out, the allocated construction funds had already been spent. In such areas, children's play is not restricted by a lack of space, but rather by its quality.

The outskirts of Palermo and Naples are infested by packs of stray dogs attracted by the abundance of food to be found in legal and illegal dumps. In Borgo Nuovo (Palermo) and Scampia, rabies is one of the most frequently reported childhood diseases. Another ever-present danger, not only in peripheral 'wastelands', but also in most of Italy's urban parks, is the numbers of used syringes. Parents' and children's fear of infection with HIV, the AIDS virus, reduces their willingness to use parks even where they exist.

The automobile is a major inhibitor of children's play in Italian cities. People's almost exclusive dependence on private means of transport packs streets and sidewalks, pollutes the air and increases the incidence of accidents. Children in many cities are unable to play in the immediate vicinity of their homes because sidewalks and courtyards have become parking lots. Especially in middle-class neighbourhoods, parents do not allow children to walk to parks or schools, preferring to take them by car – thereby exacerbating the problem. A recent survey revealed that 90 per cent of accidents involving children as pedestrians occurred within 100 yards of their homes.

Almost 2,000 children in Milan were surveyed recently by a youth association, *Arciragazzi* (ARCI: Italian Cultural Recreational Association; *ragazzi*: youth) concerning their uses and perceptions of the city. The association found that primary school children want to play outside their homes but are unable to. The children report that their parents

limit their use of the city primarily out of fear of 'bad encounters' and traffic. Only half of all children are permitted to play unaccompanied by adults. The percentage drops considerably when girls alone are considered; males are allowed more freedom of movement.

In poorer families, parents are less able to control their children's use of city spaces. Economically, they cannot offer the costly, organized alternatives – private lessons, sports facilities, babysitters – which middle-class families utilize. They often lack time to accompany children. Areas such as Scampia or Borgo Nuovo are certainly more dangerous than those surveyed in Milan, yet the streets and abandoned lots are filled with chil-

Poorer families cannot offer the costly alternatives – private lessons, sports facilities, babysitters – which middle-class families utilize

dren. Again there is a discrepancy concerning girls. Whereas only 21 per cent of boys report "spending much time at home", 63 per cent of girls do so. Many girls in the Scampia district admit fear of street violence as their major reason for not going out or attending school.

Young children must "get tough" in order to survive in the streets. A large percentage of boys admit belonging to street gangs which guarantee safety, at least on their "turf". In order to play or to earn money in such streets, a child needs protec-

tion; unfortunately, the only available form in most situations is self-defence. The alternative for children unable to protect themselves is not to go out.

Children at work

A recent Italian feature film entitled “*Ragazzi Fuori*” (“Youth on the Outside”) about the life of juveniles in Palermo contains a telling passage. One of the boys, Carmine, is arrested by the police for selling potatoes without a licence. Carmine, 17 years old and the father of two children, is by Italian law entitled to work since he is over 15 years of age. Unfortunately, he never finished primary school and therefore cannot qualify for a vendor’s licence. His little three-wheeled truck and merchandise are sequestered by the police. To get them back he must pay a stiff fine.

The only quick way for Carmine to acquire funds in Palermo is drug-pushing. Carmine’s initiation into this business goes wrong. He is set up, his customers are police agents, and he winds up in Palermo’s juvenile detention centre, Malaspina. This fictional film reflects the real-life conditions of many Palermo youth.

The legal minimum age of employment in Italy is 15 years of age. This limit has been set to coincide with the conclusion of obligatory education. There are exceptions. Children from 14 years of age can work seasonally in agriculture, or part-time in family businesses if their labour is not strenuous and does not interfere with their schooling. The national law regarding the employment of minors (14–18) regulates daily hours and rest periods according to the type of employment. It also sets lengths of paid vacations, requires free preventive medical assistance and periodic check-ups, as well as mandatory on-the-job training.

The number of young Italians engaged in these types of employment appears statistically to be declining. Meanwhile the number of out-of-school youth who list themselves as ‘unemployed’ has risen from 33 per cent in 1977 to 55 per cent in 1984. There has been an equally significant reduction in the number of young people who are actively seeking employment.

There seem to be several dynamics at play here. One is that in a limping economy and contracting labour market, employers are unwilling to take on and train new staff; another, that Italian schools have been historically incapable of preparing students for a rapidly changing job market. This is especially true in trade schools whose programmes lag behind industrial technological developments.

Another dynamic at work seems to be the evolution in socio-economic and cultural ‘appetites’. Acquired behaviours and values, particularly those associated with consumer tastes, preclude entering the job market. Many young people prefer to re-

main dependent on families who can guarantee them a higher standard of living than they could earn on their own. In Milan, the number of youth applying for work permits decreased by 14 per cent between 1985 and 1988.

In southern cities another more insidious influence keeps young people away from the legal job market. There is considerably less control of employment regulations by state labour inspectors in the South. In cities like Naples or Palermo, with their weak industrial bases and unjustifiably large, parasitic tertiary and service sectors, there exist large illegal labour markets which employ many tens of thousands of persons without regard to occupational legislation. Workers in this sector are hired without contracts, without social security and at very low wages.

To get an idea of the dimensions of this phenomenon, consider manufacturing in the city of Naples. This city is one of the largest producers of shoes in Europe; yet it does not possess a single modern industrial shoe-making plant. A short walk around the Spanish Quarter reveals that the majority of employees in the numerous mini-factories producing perfect replicas of Louis Vuiton bags, designer jeans, paper flowers, chocolate easter-eggs or fur coats are young people above the minimum legal working age. They are mostly girls, and they are, almost certainly, illegally employed.

This situation has existed in Naples even in Italy’s most booming economic periods. Now, with the deepening recession, the phenomenon is expanding. Employers who once hired adults (illegally) are increasingly tempted to hire youth and children who are willing to work at much lower salaries. Several years ago, the spread of a myste-

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rious ailment afflicting children – found to be linked to toxic glue used in leather piece-work – demonstrated the extent of child labour in this sector. In a recent ‘dragnet’ on Naples’ periphery, investigators discovered that 40 per cent of employees in a large supermarket were youngsters without work permits.

While the number of legally employed youth is declining, it appears that the number of illegally employed children is on the rise. A conservative estimate (Treau) placed the number of children employed in Italy between the ages of 10–15 at 350,000–450,000 in 1982. In the more well-to-do

north, children are primarily employed in agricultural family businesses. A survey of middle-schools in the Lombardy Region in 1976 estimated that 21 per cent of all students worked, year-round, in family enterprises.

In the south, the situation is – predictably – more dramatic, both numerically and qualitatively. A recent (1988) study by the Catholic Action Organization placed the number of children (8-14 years) employed in the hidden economy at 90,000

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in the Campania Region. In Naples alone, the estimated 35,000 working children represented more than 13 per cent of the total population in that age-group. Most of these children do not attend school and consider 'work' their primary activity. The same survey found that more than 25 per cent of Neapolitan children undertake some form of extra-scholastic employment. The great majority of these children do not work with their families, who are often themselves unemployed.

The conditions in which these children work leave much to be desired. At every major traffic intersection, small vendors offer motorists tissues, cigarette lighters, contraband cigarettes, band-aids, or clean windshields in the scorching sun or pouring rain. The air pollution in these 'work-places' – according to official documents – is a permanent health hazard. Between 3 am and 4 am, the wholesale markets of southern Italian cities are invaded by thousands of children competing to load heavy crates of fruit at L150 (12 cents) per piece.

The Catholic Action survey revealed that 23 per cent of working children in Naples earn less than L10,000 (\$8) a week and only 18 per cent said their incomes exceeded L18,750 (\$15). Some children are more fortunate in that their jobs might be considered as apprenticeships. Most of the mechanics-helpers in Naples's ancient 'Street of Carriage Repairs' – behind its famous School of Architecture – are under 14 years of age. The architecture students and professors are often served coffee in their classrooms by young children who should themselves be in the classroom.

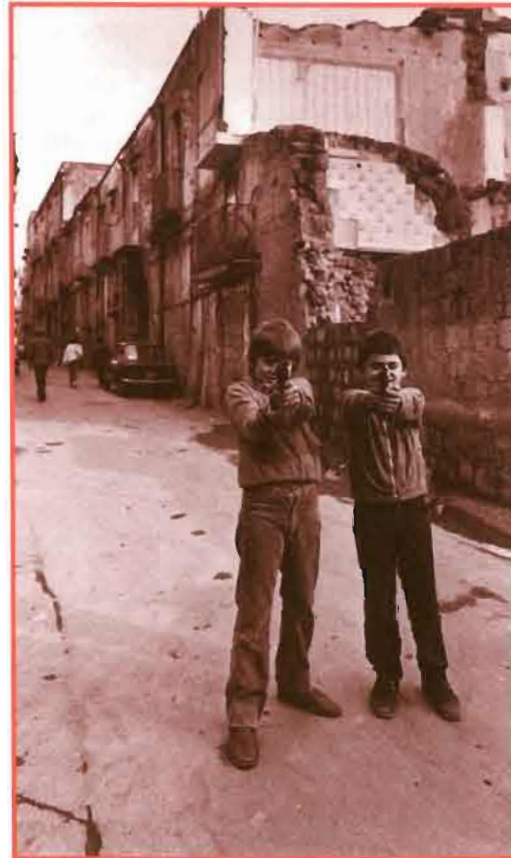
Many families in southern Italy traditionally consider work as a viable means of socializing their offspring to the values of 'obedience, sacrifice and thrift'. Contrary to the popular opinion which identifies the need to work as a primary reason for school leaving, the view of a well-known Italian sociologist, Giovanni Sgritta, is

that in most cases, children enter the labour force after schools have effectively closed their doors on them. Most parents of working children would agree, and many must hope that "hard work" will prevent their child's further marginalization.

Unfortunately, their hopes that their children can enter solid jobs can rarely be fulfilled as traditional apprenticeships have been replaced in many cases by outright exploitation. In such situations, children who have been undervalued by their schools find themselves underpaid by their bosses and unable to learn and advance in the work place. They therefore often make the choice of emulating a value system – competitive and exploitative – in an environment they know and feel they may have some chance of controlling: the street. This is where some children finally acquire recognition and a kind of brief economic security: by resorting to crime.

Children and crime

Children who have taken the step beyond illegal employment to crime often talk along these lines: "Life these days is really hard and to live it you need lots of money. When you realize you can't take the pressure any more, the temptation explodes inside to have everything that's always



been denied you. Purse-snatching, theft and apartment break-ins are the next step.”

Salvatore, 16 years old, is presently detained in the Filangieri Juvenile Re-education Centre in Naples. He concurs: “You need loads of money to live. When I was younger, I started to work but the pay was low and the work was heavy. I worked the night-shift in a bakery. I’d go to work at 9 pm each evening and finish at daybreak. The L62,500 (\$50) I earned each week just wasn’t enough, I had to

The popular press in Italy is increasingly filled with headlines and photos depicting “child monsters”

give most of it to my mother. A friend of mine told me he’d snatched a purse and it sounded easy. I tried the next day and it went smoothly. So I started stealing things on my way home from work each morning. With some friends, I moved on to burgling apartments. Then, one day, while robbing a store I was identified by a kid who knew me. That’s how I wound up here.”

The story of Salvatore is the story of thousands of Italian children. At a recent conference sponsored by the Centre for Christian Solidarity at Alluminiere, researchers from prestigious social research institutes (CENSIS, ISPES, LABOS) estimated that 780,000 Italian children are “in danger of becoming involved in criminal activities”. Of the estimated 100,000 members of criminal organizations in Italy, between 40,000 and 60,000 are youth, according to CENSIS research. Recent figures place the number of minors arrested each year at approximately 21,000. Italian police sources estimate that 90 per cent of the offenders in reported crimes go unidentified; therefore the number of youth involved in criminal activities may be as high as 200,000.

The researchers maintain that the children themselves are not to blame, but rather that uncertain, unstable family and social conditions, ineffective school systems, and the absence of job opportunities are at the root of the problem. Yet, the popular press in Italy is increasingly filled with headlines and photos depicting “child monsters”. When two 17-year-olds, on contract to the Mafia, shot and killed two of their peers and seriously wounded three others in Gela, Sicily, the TV and newspapers were filled with images and superficial analyses of this “phenomenon” for many days. It is also questionable whether the vandalization of a day-care centre in Bologna by a group of ten-year-olds merits extensive national coverage. Yet, as Luciano Sommella, sociologist and Director of

Re-educational Institutes for Youth in Campania warns, it is difficult to remain objective in the face of this apparent explosion of a new, violent form of juvenile delinquency.

Sommella insists that the romantic, picaresque image of the Naples street urchins or *scugnizzi*, so often characterized in literature and cinema as “self-reliant, expert confidence artists, pick-pockets or petty thieves”, is no longer accurate. Today, Naples’ children of the streets, like the children of many another disadvantaged, chaotic metropolis, emanate anger and diffidence. Struggling for survival, their crimes are no longer cunning, but violent and hastily carried out in a manner which is often gratuitous.

The process whereby such children can become transformed from purse-snatchers to killers is vividly described by Tonino, 17 years old and presently serving a 37-year sentence in a state prison for manslaughter: “I left school when I was eight years old. My teacher yelled at me continually for not being able to write in Italian. For spite, I pulled my first theft. I robbed my teacher’s purse. I was expelled from school and my father beat me viciously. I was used to his beatings, in fact, every time I did something bad, he would chain me to a chair in the basement.

“Between the age of eight and 11, I continued to steal together with my friend *O’Macone* (‘the kid’). They put me in a home and I escaped several times. At 13, I was out and my profession was exclusively *mariuolo* (thief). We didn’t do it for the money. I usually gave most of it away or lost it gambling. If there were adults at our all-night card games, they would take everything, whether we won or lost.

“O’Macone and I got involved with two older men in our first armed robbery – a big job in a jewellery shop. I was outside in the get-away car, O’Macone was inside with the others. They had given him the gun. I heard shots and I was scared to death. The three came running out and O’Macone still had the gun in his hand. The jeweller had shot first and, in his hurry to get away, O’Macone bumped into a jewellery case. The gun went off and – *scalogna* (bad luck) – the bullet hit the jeweller in the heart. We were killers! The newspapers painted us as the most organized, vicious criminals in Naples, and we were only 14 years old – just kids. Thirty-seven years! I still can’t manage to grasp what 37 years of prison means.”

In Italy, children like Tonino are increasingly falling victim to adult exploitation. Organized criminal organizations – like the Mafia in Sicily or Camorra in Naples – recruit thousands of children and young people into the web of their activities. In Palermo, recently, a ten-year-old was intercepted in the act of selling heroin. In the Scampia district alone, an estimated 500 children are employed as



couriers by adult criminals. These *muschilli* (fruit-flies) are tiny, quick, and, like their namesakes, difficult to catch. The Mafia knows that they are unpunishable by Italian law and exploits this fact, assigning them the most risky, up-front roles in crime. Children who a decade ago might have been, at worst, snatching handbags are today pushing or transporting drugs, carrying or hiding firearms. Overnight, Tonino and O'Macone were transformed from petty thieves to killers. They never imagined that this could happen, but their bosses had calculated the possibility and exploited their innocence.

Still, the fact that many thousands of Italian children are willing to be exploited in this manner is very difficult to accept. Why do so many young people have such an amorphous, confused relationship with legality and civil society? Luciano Sommella, who knows Naples' problem children and youth well, offers a convincing analysis of

their problem personalities. These children are marked by a loss of feeling for themselves and others. In an environment of decay and abandonment everything is confused, indefinite, uncertain.

Many of today's children in Naples were infants during the earthquake which rocked the city in 1980. The ineffectiveness of institutional responses to this tragedy – as of today 35,000 families are still on the waiting list for housing and fewer than 10,000 units have been assigned – exacerbated the already precarious living conditions of many families. As in the case of *O Ciciniello* (see story on page 20), many such families have had little time to love their children. Billions of dollars for earthquake reconstruction found their way into organized crime bank accounts. This abundance of capital contributed enormously to the expansion of drug trafficking and other criminal activities (gambling, arms traffic, extortion) in Naples, where the Camorra greatly expanded its

The story of “O Ciciniello” Naples

Little Gaetano, nine years old, is like his nickname “O Ciciniello” a tiny, savoury fish whose size and speed permit him to be caught only in the finest of nets. *I cicinielli* never have a chance to grow up; they are eaten as infants, fried in batter in large batches in the Neapolitan manner.

Gaetano was born literally during the earthquake which hit Naples in 1980, destabilizing its already precarious social and economic fabric. At the time, his family lived in a *basso*, a traditional, one- or two-room, street-level apartment, converted from an artisan’s workshop or stable in the many 16–17th century buildings in the Spagnoli quarter in the heart of Naples. With their home declared uninhabitable, O Ciciniello, his two older sisters and his mother, were obliged to move on.

In the space of nine years, they stayed in seven different locations: in pre-fabricated containers deposited by the city administration in a poverty-stricken neighbourhood; in a shelter for the homeless improvised in a run-down hotel in the red-light district; in an illegally occupied unfinished high-rise on the periphery of the city; and then back to a container ‘encampment’ on the edge of the infamous Scampia district. In the meantime, his father – broken by these migrations, the lack of employment, and interminable bureaucratic humiliations – gave up and left for Germany.

Gaetano’s mother looks older than her 45 years. During this long period of moving, working, and trying to manage her family, she has become tired and near to collapse. She has also undergone a number of abortions over these years. Now she struggles to support her family by washing sheets for various cheap hotels and rooming houses in the Scampia district.

O Ciciniello has been forced to become an adult before his time. Compressed in his nine years are enough experiences to fill a lifetime. At the age of three, he played in the street outside his home without any parental guidance. His toys were the rubble left by the earthquake and unused reconstruction materials. At five, he was self-sufficient, often returning to his mothers’ trailer after dark, having eaten whatever he managed to find. He and his friends formed a gang based on three rules: loyalty, courage and *cazzimma* (boldness, intelligence). They had a secret hiding place where they kept the treasures of their raids: toys, pocket radios, bracelets, necklaces, belts and rings.

At six, O Ciciniello began to make excursions

outside his neighbourhood: the whole city was his playground. He moved about on ‘borrowed’ roller-skates and bicycles, or an occasional motor scooter. His *cazzimma* won him leadership in his band and cost him several months in hospital: 15 stitches in the head and a fractured leg. But these incidents did not keep him down. On his second release from hospital, he decided to ‘go into business’: selling contraband cigarettes on the muddy corners near his trailer home.

In the meantime, he and his friends developed a new game: sling-shooting sharpened stones at cars, neon signs and street lights in the area. When their game escalated to targeting passers-by, preferably old ladies and transvestites, the neighbourhood rebelled. After a terrible beating from several of the area’s ‘good’ teenagers, Gaetano again spent several days in hospital.

At six-and-a-half, Gaetano was enrolled in a public primary school. But by the end of the first year he had attended only 15 days. He was obliged to repeat the first grade, and due to his mother’s indigence he was transferred to a day-time institution where he was under the supervision of the Carmelite sisters. His behaviour caused chaos in the convent and he established himself as the leader of a second gang. For O Ciciniello, this school was a prison – removing the “little fish from the water” – his neighbourhood.

At 5 pm every day, he went out on the street, and his nocturnal activities became markedly more illegal. He began as a ‘look-out’ for auto and apartment break-ins; then moved on to ‘assistant pimp’ in an extensive racket of child prostitution. By the age of eight, O Ciciniello was pushing hard drugs – heroin and cocaine. While officially enrolled in the second grade, he could not read or write his own name and never attended class. His ‘school’ had become the street, his teachers mature criminals, pimps and prostitutes, drug pushers and addicts; his hours exclusively ‘after eight’. His main area of knowledge was the material value of human life in sex and drug trafficking.

Having resisted for as long as two years, O Ciciniello has now begun ‘shooting up’. At times he can be heard singing the refrain which he and many children in Naples learn very young: “They say that hand-cuffs are made of steel, but to me they seem like golden bracelets. They say that jail is a prison, but for me it’s a vacation.”

Adapted from Luciano Sommella in *I minori in Italia, The First Report of the National Youth Council, 1989*

activities during the 1980s. In parallel, conspicuous consumption increased even in the poorest of quarters. Children of the Camorra culture attribute an absolute and immediate value to money. Sommella warns us that this may contribute to a rise in the number of *muschilli* in the near future.

Many children acquire the materialistic appe-

tites of their elders early on. “Life is being on top, and not giving a damn about others.” This can be witnessed not only in the poorer city areas but also in those that are well-to-do. Recently, Italy was shaken by the case of a 19-year-old boy from an affluent town in a northern agricultural region who, together with two friends, killed his mother and

father in order to take possession of their 'fortune'. The boys, who spent the night after their crime in a local disco, openly admitted their love of fast cars, fine clothing, and quick spending.

Many 'endangered children' also attach great importance to prestige. Children who cannot acquire recognition in their families or in school can acquire kudos amongst peers and criminals through their willingness to take part in risky or dangerous activities. The 'game' of manoeuvring a stolen motorscooter through a crowded marketplace or snatching a purse on a rush-hour bus are first steps. Making a pact with a local Camorrista to act as look-out or courier are sure passports to recognition in many of Naples' or Palermo's quarters. In the consumer society, prestige is also judged by appearance – expensive clothes and designer accessories – and by superfluous, thoughtless spending of money. Like Tonino, many children acquire resources as required, and squander them without any thought of tomorrow.

Finally, these children appear to possess a quality of autonomy, like the *scugnizzo* (street urchin). Children who are not in school and without family direction appear to be freer to manage their own time and space than other children. They are masters of their confused and chaotic city environments and use them for what they perceive as their own purposes. Sommella points out that this perception is dangerous and fallacious. Official data show that these children's sense of autonomy is an illusion, and that the reality for many is slavery to organized crime and drug addiction.

The number of girls involved in criminal activity in Italy is almost insignificant in comparison to boys, but their numbers are rising. In 1985, girls represented only 6.5 per cent of imprisoned minors. In 1987, the percentage had risen to 13.9 per cent. The restrictions imposed on the movement of young urban girls, especially in the more traditional South, by parental control, domestic obligation, and fear of street violence, inhibit their involvement in crime: their cultural marginalization affords them some protection.

The increase in female juvenile offenders is symptomatic of an evolution in the 'culture of crime'. In the Naples region recently, several women were arrested and identified as important figures in the Camorra hierarchy. This is not a victory of women's liberation: several of these women were managing their imprisoned husbands' 'businesses' during their absence.

A more detailed analysis of crime data reveals, however, that in one minority social group, young girls are more frequently arrested than their male peers. The number of gypsy girls arrested in Milan in 1990 was twice as high as the number of gypsy boys. This appears to be similar to the ratio at national level. Nearly half of all girls imprisoned in

1987 were foreign-born (mainly gypsies). The gypsy culture, even more than the traditional Italian culture, is male-dominated. Due to the collapse in demand for their traditional economic activities, such as black-smithing, the male gypsy in Italy rarely works. The task of supporting the extended family is almost exclusively left to women and children, who engage in begging, selling trinkets and increasingly in street theft and apartment break-ins. Unfortunately, the female child is a double victim in this picture.

A final area of criminal activity which calls for analysis, but for which very little data is available, is child prostitution. One of the few relevant research projects in Italy revealed that 10 per cent of

*These children's sense
of autonomy is an illusion;
the reality is slavery to
organized crime and
drug addiction*

prostitution in northern Italy involves girls between the ages of 10 and 15. Thirty per cent of all prostitutes in the regions studied are between the ages of 16 and 18 years. The victims of this tragic situation are also regarded as the perpetrators of the 'crime'. Under Italian law, adults who use child prostitutes are not punishable for corruption of minors; the blame falls entirely on the child. Here, female children are again the major victims.

Children and drugs

In the last decade, illegal drug use has become a phenomenon of serious proportions in Italy. A recent survey by an Italian news magazine identified the 'drug problem' as the most pressing social challenge of the 1990s. This multi-billion dollar industry affects the lives of users, their families, their communities, and the lives of non-users also. The recent rise in street crime, burglaries and violent aggression, as well as the explosion of organized crime killings, can be attributed in large part to the expansion in the illegal distribution and use of hard drugs, heroin and cocaine in particular.

It is hard to estimate the number of young children and teenagers whose lives are influenced by these drugs. At first glance, official figures seem to be reassuring. Only a small percentage of registered heroin addicts (those who are in treatment in private and public rehabilitation programmes) are under 18 years of age. Further, official national data on drug-related crimes reveal that less than 2.5 per cent of those arrested for drug-dealing are minors. A closer look at the evolving

drug situation, however, reveals great reason for worry regarding children.

Drug use is one of the range of 'difficult circumstances' which can affect the childhood of youngsters already facing other deprivations – poverty, family problems, school failure – and influence choices in later life. Surveys reveal that the majority of those imprisoned for drug-related crimes have not completed middle school. In Na-

In Naples, recent figures indicate that more than 20 per cent of registered addicts began using drugs before the age of 15

ples, the most recent figures indicate that more than 20 per cent of registered addicts began using drugs before the age of 15. According to experts in drug rehabilitation, the age at which drug-use is initiated influences the prospects of detoxification; younger users have more difficulty in freeing themselves from addiction.

The number of registered addicts in a young age-group is a poor indicator of the degree to which children are involved in drugs. Only a small fraction of young drug addicts enter rehabilitation. The law requires that minors must have the written

approval of at least one parent to enter such a programme, and children may be unwilling to inform parents of their problem until it is too late.

An indicator which betrays more about the relationship between young people and drugs than the numbers of registered addicts is the increase in young people institutionalized for drug-related crimes. In 1989, only 0.59 per cent of registered addicts in Milan were minors. Yet, in the preceding four years, the proportion of juvenile offenders institutionalized for drug-related offences rose from 14 per cent in 1986 to 31 per cent in 1989. Many of these children are not addicts, but their lives have been gravely influenced by drugs.

In Palermo and Naples, the number of children and families in direct, intimate contact with drugs is dramatically higher than in Milan. One juvenile court judge in Palermo has noted a significant increase recently. "Each day amongst my cases, I meet at least one new 15-year-old who regularly uses hard drugs."

Children whose families are deeply involved in the drug business, who grow up in a drug culture, cannot be expected to remain uninvolved. Such a case is 15-year-old Giuseppe, arrested together with his two sisters last year, now institutionalized. Months later, his father and brother were arrested. Every member in Giuseppe's family has been, at one time or another, in jail for drug pushing.

The phenomenon of entire families involved in drug dealing is an extremely complex problem to



deal with. In Naples' Spanish Quarter, a significant part of the population is in some way involved in drug trafficking. Several 'clans' have their base in this area and have supplied, until recently, a significant part of the city-wide traffic. Numerous families work in the drug sector, preparing doses and distributing them through young children and grandparents who are treated more leniently under the law.

The possibility of giving their children material benefits by engaging in the drug business seems to have clouded the vision of these adults. Their own offspring and those of their neighbours become entrapped in the drug culture, to disastrous effect. The suffering of their addict children and occasional deaths by overdoses are beginning to open their eyes. After the deaths of four boys in the Spanish Quarter from drug overdoses, an association of mothers ('Mother Courage') was formed which has been active in the neighbourhood, informing other parents and pressuring the local administrations for adequate community social services to deal with the problem.

The great majority of parents are not directly responsible for their children using or selling drugs. They face a variety of what seem intractable problems and often feel helpless in confronting situations which afflict and stigmatize their families. Recently, a woman unable to cope with the suffering and demands of her three heroin-addicted sons killed herself on the edge of the Naples metropolitan area. Her act dramatized the pressing question which plagues many mothers, as well as legal and religious authorities, social scientists and activists: Why are more and more children "getting into drugs"? And what can be done?

Easy availability and an expanding market are the starting point for many youngsters. How else can a 12-year-old in a Palermo slum – or an adult, for that matter – earn \$200 or more per week? This

The chance of giving their children material benefits by engaging in the drug business seems to have clouded these adults' vision

much money offers the opportunity for recognition and goods otherwise denied and outweighs the risks involved. Children from poor homes most frequently engage in selling drugs before they begin to make use of them. Sometimes they find it necessary to demonstrate a willingness to 'shoot up' to gain recognition in the *giro* (circle) of pushers. Other youngsters give way to curiosity, depression, boredom, or to the desire to escape a meaning-



less existence. Once addicted, \$200 a week is not enough even to support the habit. When the addiction to hard drugs takes hold, a child soon forgets the 'benefits' which lured him into the *giro* in the first place.

The use of illegal drugs – heroin and cocaine, together with synthetic hallucinogens like LSD or ecstasy – is by no means confined to children in poor socio-economic groups. In Naples, neighbourhoods with the highest number of registered heroin addicts are middle- or upper-class. These figures are probably misleading since families in these areas are likely to be more willing and able to seek help, but are nonetheless significant.

For well-to-do youngsters, experience with drugs is usually the reverse of their poorer counterparts', with use preceding commerce. They are often the clients of youth from poorer neighbourhoods. Tonino from the Scampia district relates that his first clients were wealthy young girls, students or runaways. He stresses the fact that they were his friends, that they often 'shot up' together. They would talk about their problems together, he felt good in their company. When asked how his

clients managed to support their habit, he replied: "They would steal from their families."

Children and violence

A spiral of violence extends through the lives of many Italian children. In the home, in school, in the street, at work, in films and television programmes, children are the witnesses, victims, and consequently the perpetrators of violence. This violence

*Children who witness their
parents' fights or suffer
violence from them
undergo enduring psycho-
logical traumas*

can take many forms.

Physical abuse of children is the most insidious and evokes the greatest public indignation. In the spring of 1987, a four-year-old Palermitan girl died as the result of beatings received from her father and mother. The civic consciousness of a city which had done little for its children was outraged. The mass media described the young victim's parents as "monsters" and "abnormal". While not understating the gravity of the murder by parents of their own child, the abnormality of this crime should not be allowed to obscure the fact that less serious and visible acts of child abuse within Italian homes are widespread and demand attention.

A national child abuse hot-line, *Telefono Azurro*, reports a steady rise in reported cases, but notes that this increase may be due to the dissolution of a wall of silence which traditionally meant that people "washed their dirty linen at home" and kept family matters secret. The exact numbers of battered children are hard to calculate – the number of reported cases in Italy is 30,000; but according to the director of the hot-line, this is "only the tip of the iceberg".

The use of the hot-line is more widespread in

northern Italy. In the South, cases are reported more commonly through schools, social services, and law enforcement agencies. Southern statistics are therefore biased in the direction of disadvantaged, poor families in which indicators of physical neglect (such as poor cleanliness or health), or social neglect (little parental control, low school attendance), are most frequently reported. Expert sources indicate, however, that cases of physical and psychological abuse are equally distributed throughout all social classes in all parts of Italy.

Children who live in violent homes, witnessing their parents' fights or physically suffering their parents' violence, undergo psychological traumas whose effects can endure for years. The majority of abusive parents were themselves abused children. This mechanism – the victim imitating his or her persecutor – is present in the life stories of many abused children and their families.

Sexual abuse of children is among the most offensive forms of physical cruelty. The sexually-abused child becomes an object which an adult can use as he or she wishes. Parents, schools, society continually make choices for children often without their consent, but this 'choice' is – in the public consciousness – by far the most damaging. The indications are that this type of abuse is significant. In Palermo, for example, 14 per cent of reported child abuse is sexual. Twenty-four per cent of prostitutes interviewed in northern Italy reported having been raped as children, 10 per cent by members of their family or relatives.

More subtle forms of abuse towards children – of a psychological nature – are increasingly evident in the modern, affluent family. One teacher from Palermo asks: "Can't we consider abuse the practice of compelling one's child to attend the best schools, or a specific health club or dance school, not only to gratify oneself, but as a sign to others that you've attained social status?"

Outside the family, in the public sphere, children also experience daily acts of violence. The violence of cities – crime, air pollution, traffic congestion, lack of open spaces – assails young children or forces them into their homes. Inside the

'What is peace?'

A teacher in a middle school on Naples' outskirts asked her students: "What does the word 'peace' mean to you?" A selection of their answers offers an insight into children's perceptions:

"I only know war. When my mum and dad are at peace, it usually means that they are just resting before the battle."

"Peace is like being able to fly, it's only a fantasy."

"Peace is trampling on the grass around my housing project where the signs say **No Children Allowed**."

"Rambo is the King of Peace, man."

"I think it's really important, but I don't know where to find it."

"I like the peace of my motorscooter. When I'm flying up the steps of some back alley I'm at peace."

"Peace is similar to a caress. I felt it once, but it disappeared long ago".

Adapted from case material by Luciano Sommella, La ballata del Filangieri.



home, the world as communicated by television replaces interaction with real people in real environments. The national television viewing average is three hours per day, during which children are exposed to gratuitous violence in which the traditional lines between good and evil are often clouded. Rambo may not be the 'King of Peace' for millions of Italian children (see *What is peace?* inset), but he is certainly a revered role model.

When children arrive at school scarred by difficult family experiences and confused by the value system imbibed by thousands of hours of television viewing, there should be some effort to aid them, to understand their background and treat them as human beings. Yet, in most cases – especially the most difficult ones – this does not occur. These children of violence are expected to fit into society's conception of a "normal, good student". The practice of considering these children socially handicapped or different is a form of violence in their regard. In modern, better-staffed schools, the approach is usually softer. But especially in those schools (in southern cities, in particular) where the system itself is handicapped, this violence can be of a more explicit form.

Marco, a Palermitan boy of 12 years, related his observations on violence in his school: "I remember a particularly violent scene that happened when I was in the third grade. There was a little boy in the first grade called Marcello. He didn't behave very well and his teacher couldn't stand him. He was bounced around from class to class because no teacher in the school could put up with him. One day he happened to be in my class and my teacher made him stand behind the blackboard. When she spoke to him she called him names like "ugly Marcello" or "dopey". Naturally, Marcello was

treated badly at home when the teachers reported to his father what he had done at school. I'll never forget the time when his mother came to school to ask the teachers to be less hard on him since he was having nightmares. The teachers began to laugh and tease him. For me, that was violence."

Migrant children

In northern Italian cities such as Milan, the majority of children in difficult circumstances are from families of southern Italian origin. The separation from cultural origins and traditional social networks integral to migration, together with economic hardship, can have a major impact on the quality of life for migrant families and their children. While Italian social and educational policy in the last three decades has accomplished a great deal in helping these Italian migrants to adapt to their new environment, to date there is no national policy which serves effectively to integrate and

"His mother came to ask the teachers to be less hard on him since he was having nightmares. The teachers began to laugh and tease him"

relieve the plight of more recently arrived non-Italian immigrants and their children.

The phenomenon of large-scale migration to Italy is relatively new compared with that to other Western European nations. Data on the extent of the phenomenon are not available. The Ministry of

the Interior estimates the immigrant population in Italy to be slightly less than one million. Of these, approximately 110,000 are estimated to be children. Most of these children are thought to reside in the north-central regions; official estimates report that 25 per cent of the immigrant population in these areas are children.

In northern cities in the industrial belt immigrants are more likely to find employment, settle,

*Over 70 per cent of
gypsy children in Florence
work, begging or selling roses
in restaurants, or
washing windshields*

and form (or re-form) families than in southern cities or Rome where their conditions are more precarious. However, data on the well-being of immigrant children as a group are not available. Their conditions, in general, are likely to be similar to the disadvantaged Italian children described earlier. Their families are mostly poor and live in sub-standard and overcrowded housing; in addition, they are likely to experience marginalization because they are not Italian.

The director of one of the few child-care centres in Italy dedicated to the integration of immigrant and Italian children, the Celio Azzurro Centre in Rome, described the difficult situation of immigrant families in Italy's capital. "Since many of these immigrants have no legal residence, they are not eligible for social services such as public day-care for their children. Many of our families, primarily from East Africa, who were housed previously in a welfare hostel were recently transferred to temporary housing around 40 kilometres from Rome because their hostel was condemned. You can imagine their difficulties in organizing their families' lives at this point. Several families have decided to place their children in residential social assistance institutions. I can assure you that this is not an isolated case."

Transmigratory immigrants – gypsies – have

been present in Italy longer than other immigrant groups, yet their living conditions continue to be among the worst. An interesting joint study by the Istituto degli Innocenti and UNICEF ('The Migrant Child Project') offers for the first time detailed quantitative and qualitative information concerning the life situations of gypsy children, of whom there are approximately 10,000 living in Italy. Birth rates in the gypsy population are extremely high. Children under six years old make up 25 per cent of the entire European gypsy population; in Italy the same percentage is assumed.

Health conditions in nomadic encampments are alarming. The rate of sickness among foreign gypsy children is very high, primarily from respiratory and gastro-intestinal disorders. The great majority of gypsy encampments in Italy are without sanitary facilities such as running water or sewerage. Gypsy families in Florence, which average five members, live in trailers or shanties covering around 15 square metres. Thirty per cent of the children live in dwellings without electricity and 41 per cent without running water or toilets. The average life expectancy of a gypsy is only 46 years.

The school attendance rate of gypsy children surveyed in Florence is only 30 per cent. Yet their literacy rate of 70 per cent is a marked improvement over that of their parents (40 per cent). Most of the children declared that they liked school. Over 70 per cent of gypsy children in Florence work; in almost half the cases they work every day, begging, selling roses in restaurants, or washing windshields come rain or shine. (The high rate of criminal activity by gypsy children reported at a national level was not found; certain tribes are responsible for most of the crime attributed to 'gypsies' in general. The Florentine encampments were not of these tribes.)

In the survey, the children's opinions of those of other nationalities offer an indication of the difficulties of cultural and racial integration in Italy today. The children were shown pictures of different ethnic groups and asked to select a playmate. Their first choice was the German child, followed by the Italian child. Moroccan and Chinese playmates were selected much less often, while the poor Senegalese child came a distant last.

CHANGING RESPONSES TO CHILDREN'S PROBLEMS

CHILDREN represent, to a great extent, the future of all societies or nations. The numerous problems of troubled childhood described in this publication offer reason for concern regarding Italy's future. The ever-increasing number of children and youth living on the margins of society, rejected by it and rejecting of it, diminish the productive capacity of the nation and impose high social budgetary costs. But the immediate individual costs are borne by the children themselves in their daily psychological and physical hardships, and in the denial of their right to enough time, space, and care in childhood.

Why has a modern, industrialized nation such as Italy, in spite of having adequate material means, been unable to create the prerequisites for happy and healthy childhoods for its entire population? To understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to analyse its origins and recent evolution. One angle to consider is cultural and legislative attitudes towards childhood. It is also particularly important to understand the political and administrative processes through which legislation becomes policy. In legislative terms, the child is now recognized as a person, a subject, and a citizen with rights; but in the present period of social budgetary contraction and with mounting problems of children 'in difficult circumstances', more needs to be done with fewer means of public investment to improve children's lives.

Overcoming an adult-centred world view

Until recently, Italian laws regarding children and minors were governed by an adult-centred philosophy. Childhood was viewed primarily as a passage to be travelled on the way to adulthood.

Within this perspective, children's well-being, or the lack of it, and any anti-social behaviour its absence inspired, were reasons of concern for society only so far as they influenced the chances of their eventually becoming good, productive adult citizens. Educational and corrective institutions adopted authoritarian approaches almost exclusively, seeing their task as to mould the child into society's model of an acceptable adult. The specific needs or problems of children who could not, for one reason or another, fit the mould were not considered in such a system. Rather, the societal

response was to punish, and often to marginalize, the 'problem child'. Many of the children encountered during the course of this study, and their numerous peers, still fall victim to this philosophy. Formally, legislation has relegated these attitudes to the past; in practice, they still survive at an operational level.

Until 1967, legislation decreed that minors were "dependent variables" in relation to their families. In the eyes of the law, children therefore possessed no intrinsic rights as individuals and were regarded as objects rather than subjects. Responsibility for children was exclusively assigned to two bodies: family and state. Where families executed their responsibilities inadequately, the only response produced by the state was the institutionalization of the child(ren).

This legal framework offered no space for preventive policies to assist families in raising children, and offered no other opportunity for the education or socialization of children than the school or the corrective institution. Until the mid-1970s, the concept of a publicly run social or recreational centre for children was unknown. Parish halls (*oratorio*), and a limited number of private associations, offered the only structured opportunities for children to meet, play, and learn, outside

Educational and corrective institutions saw their task as to mould the child into society's model of an acceptable adult

the school or the family.

Many social theoreticians in Italy indicate the year 1967 as an important turning point for the societal and legal image of children. Previously, adoption was practised primarily to resolve the problems of couples without children. With the approval in 1967 of a new adoption law, the focus was inverted: the needs of children without families became central. The law specified that adopting couples must demonstrate affective and educational capabilities with regard to children. No longer seen as a biological or an *a priori* fact,

parenthood was, rather, recognized as a social phenomenon acquired through a demonstrated capacity to transmit love and education to children. This affirmation, in legislative terms, opened the door to policies and programmes for children and youth characterized by attention to educational processes and preventive and curative measures.

Other laws followed, notably that of 1975 on Family Rights, and the 1983 Law on Special Adoption, which contributed further to this evolution.

*The child was recognized as
a legal subject whose
conditions and well-being could
be improved by preventive
programming*

The child was becoming recognized as a legal subject whose conditions and well-being could be improved by preventive programming at individual, family and community level. The 1983 law, in particular, emphasized the “right of the child to be educated in his or her own family” and offered space and resources for programmes offering educational and psychological support for problem families. Institutionalization, in the eyes of the law, had become a last resort, applied only in cases where there was no alternative.

This law (under Article Four) also for the first time recognized the child as a subject at law: it affirmed the right of the child (over 12, and, where “opportune”, of all ages) to express his or her opinions before judges in cases regarding adoption or foster care. This was a significant step forward.

Changes in administration and official policy

The 1970s in Italy, as in most Western nations, were marked by cultural and political ferment which had considerable effect on legislation and, more gradually, on the administrative structure of the nation.

A fundamental administrative transformation was laid down by the 1970 law which instituted 20 regions. Until that time, public policy and administration were almost totally centralized. Local municipalities and provinces were mandated merely to administer laws, budgets and programmes decided upon in Rome. Child-related policy was no exception. The great number of publicly financed institutions which provided child services – orphanages, foundling homes, reformatories, summer camps – were all nationally administered. In 1971, a Presidential Decree (No. 9) transferred the administration of these bodies – many of which

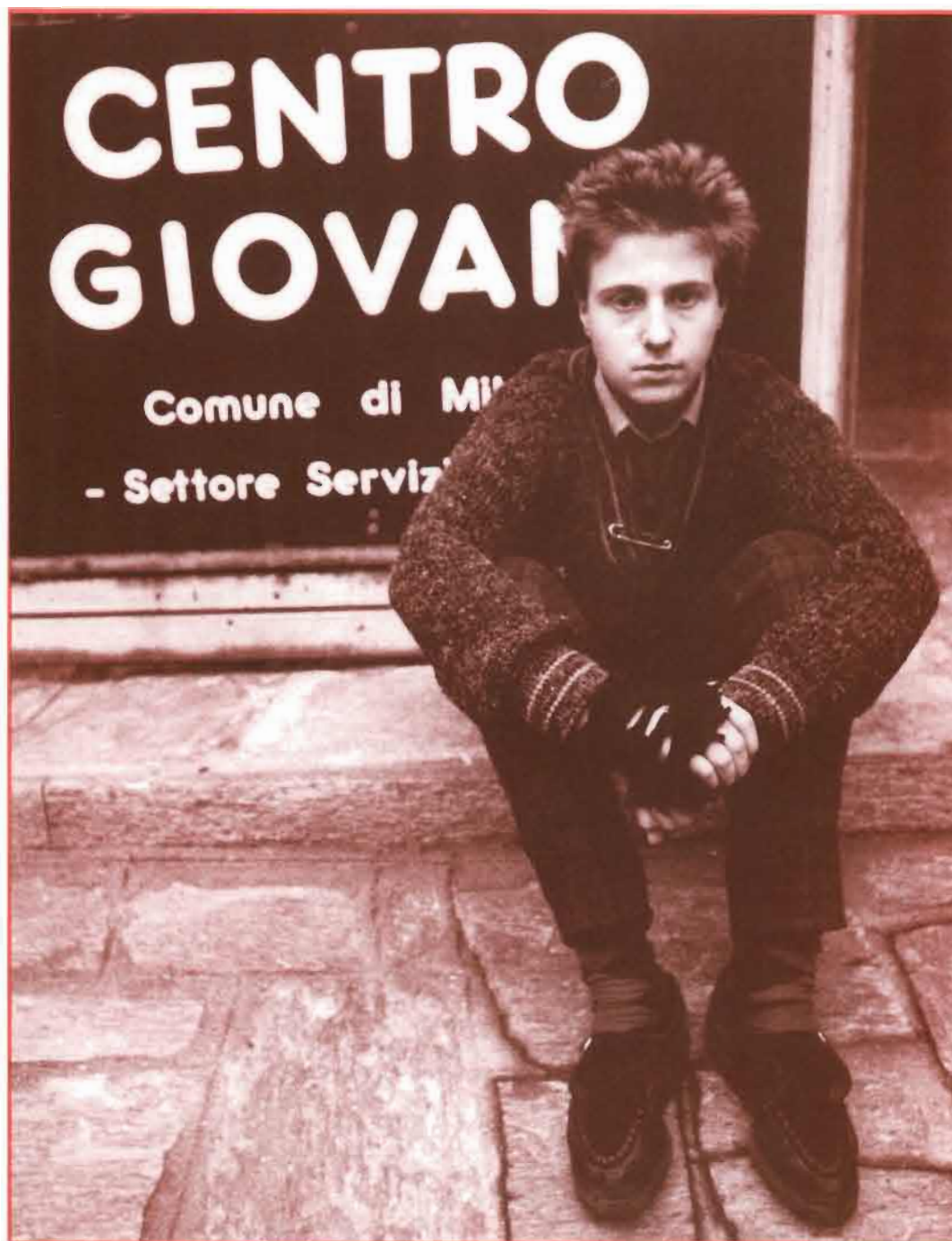
employed redundant personnel and enjoyed inflated budgets – to the new regional governments. This innovation involved the new institutions in a cumbersome task which in some instances (especially in the less organized southern regions) is still not complete.

At the same time, the cultural atmosphere – influenced, in part, by research and policy experiences in other European nations and the US – and the new child-related legislation it inspired, were characterized by a shift towards deinstitutionalized, preventive, locally administered programmes. In this context, important landmark laws include: the 1971 law mandating regions to establish a network of public, municipally administered nurseries; the 1975 law mandating the creation of a network of ‘family planning centres’ (*Consultori*); the 1977 law which attributed the responsibility for all youth policy (normatively redefined as preventive and community-based) to municipalities under the direction of the regional legislatures.

The total body of this new legislation in theory created the possibility for innovative, effective programming for all children, in particular, for urban children in difficult circumstances. However, in practice, as is evidenced by the joint Istituto degli Innocenti/UNICEF study, in those city environments where problems are rife, these laws have not yet been translated into programmes, centres, and qualified personnel dedicated to improving children’s lives.

As described earlier, fewer than one per cent of eligible children in Palermo and Naples are served by public nurseries. The total of ‘family consultation centres’ in both cities can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Contrarily, in Milan and in other major cities in north-central Italy (Emilia Romagna and Tuscany in particular) these services are numerous and effective. In Palermo, in Naples, in Rome, parish halls and community centres run by voluntary – lay and religious – bodies still represent the only alternative to the street for the majority of these cities’ children. The most marginal – the children of foreign immigrants and gypsies – are even less well served. In Rome, the municipal government depends on Caritas, a Catholic organization, to provide both services and information on the city’s immigrant and nomad children. In many cities, especially in the South, a similar situation pertains.

Laws have been passed and funds allocated; but in most cases, much too little has been provided. After the original investment of L20 billion (around \$29 million at 1971 exchange rates) for setting up public nurseries to serve an initial five per cent of the population, no further national funds have been committed. The result is that permanent, effective programmes and structures for children are still lacking in many Italian cities.



Translating policy into action

The most recent Italian legislation (1991) regarding children – Law 216 – is entitled: “First Interventions in Favour of Children Risking Involvement in Criminal Activities”. This is the first national law to focus specifically on children themselves rather than on programmes or institutions affecting children. Carlo Pagliarini, the president of the national

youth association, *Arciragazzi*, observes: “On the surface, this law seems very progressive and potentially effective for children in difficult circumstances. Italian laws have this characteristic. They are professionally prepared, in terms which have been well-studied from a legislative and scientific perspective. In theory, Italian legislation on educational and social services is among the most progressive in Europe in terms of deinstitutional-

ization, participation, etc. But on the level of application, the laws are always lacking. The contexts in which they are to be applied, the instruments and financing necessary to ensure their success, are never adequately considered.

“This law cannot be applied efficiently for three reasons. First, the local governments which are called upon to apply the law, especially in the Naples and Palermo areas, have no practical experience of effective educational-social services; second, the law reconfirms an essentially welfarist approach to the problem; and, last, the budget allocated by this law is inadequate: only L15 billion (\$12 million) nationwide.”

The recommendations made by the researchers in the joint Istituto degli Innocenti/UNICEF Urban Child Study re-echo this statement. By considering in detail each of these obstacles to the implementation of sound policies – together with examples of cases where they have been avoided – it is possible to begin to develop strategies to close the gap between what is essentially good legislation, and the current absence of effective programmes for children and young people.

The political environment

The disparity between cities and regions in the quantity and quality of public social services and programmes available to children is, in part, a reflection of the political environment. Many city administrations, especially in the South, have been incapable of utilizing systematically the opportunities offered by national legislation. In these areas, the political situation is extremely unstable. This instability is the product of an intricate and precar-

*Under conditions of instability,
administrations often fall
before they can
implement programmes they
have proposed*

ious network of agreements between political parties at local and national level. Under these conditions, administrations often fall before they can implement programmes which they have proposed, or complete programmes which have been initiated. The national government is also hesitant to finance proposed programmes in periods of political uncertainty.

Programmes already underway are directly affected by this instability. Many youth workers describe how uncertainty over the prospects of continuing employment seriously hinders their work with children. “Given the precarious state of

our project we were only able to intervene in emergency cases. At a certain point, we had to decide to refuse long-term cases. How could we tell a family to come to one or two therapeutic sessions, and then tell them to ‘go away’ because we’re no longer here?” queried a young psychologist in a drug prevention programme in Palermo.

An unstable political situation can also be a breeding ground for currying political favour. In this climate, organizations are often selected for financing not on the basis of demonstrated or verifiable capabilities, but rather to satisfy political factions. In fact, until recently, it was rare – almost impossible – in Italy to find examples of careful, systematic documentation and evaluation of social programmes. Evaluation, especially in southern cities, is often based on political considerations. Recently, the National Youth Council (a non-governmental consultative body established by the Ministry of the Interior in 1985 to monitor the situation of children and youth in Italy) proposed to the Ministry that a limited number of pilot projects (under Law No. 216) be carefully selected, documented and evaluated. The proposal was turned down by the politicians. It appears that funds will continue to be allocated through political channels, in a dispersive, uncoordinated manner.

Another characteristic of public spending in southern Italian cities is the tendency to concentrate efforts on emergency situations. This detracts from efforts to create effective permanent educational and social services for children. The need to respond to economic crisis, to the increased involvement of youth in organized crime, and to natural calamities such as the devastating 1980 earthquake, is bound to exert an influence over spending. However, it is also unfortunately the case that the large sums of money made available for rehabilitation programmes may end up favouring unintended beneficiaries in an unstable (and at times, corrupt) political environment. Such was the fate of many billions of dollars for post-earthquake reconstruction in Naples, some of which contributed to the expansion of organized crime and drug trafficking as described above.

The mass media also contributes greatly to this emergency-driven, fire-brigade approach to social policy planning and spending. The death of Palermo’s “little Maricò” at the hands of her parents, for example, led to a public outcry and media campaign which brought about immediate public investment in special programmes for Palermo’s children. However, with the passing of time, this ‘emergency’ has been forgotten (by politicians and by journalists, not by the thousands of Palermo children living in difficult circumstances) and public support for these programmes has been significantly reduced (see *Project Childhood: Palermo*, in the next chapter).

The story of Maurizio Palermo

Maurizio is 11 years old. He dropped out of school last year in the middle of the fourth grade, and is now occupied selling used clothes from a vendor's cart. His boss gives him about L50,000 (\$40) a week – high pay for this occupation. He gives over half to his mother and keeps the rest for himself, "to buy a motorscooter when I have enough".

For the past two months, Maurizio has been watching the activities taking place in the abandoned lot across the street from his 'corner'. Until these activities began, the lot had been like most of the other rubble-filled areas in his neighbourhood, a typical no man's land with stray dogs and a few broken benches, called an 'Equipped Urban Green Space' by the planners.

Two months ago, about 50 neighbourhood children together with five young adults started using the area. They came with large plastic bags, brooms and pitch forks, and started to clean up all the rubbish. That phase took several days. Maurizio found out that the five adult 'animators' belonged to *Arciragazzi*, a nationwide association of volunteers which works with young people.

Maurizio knew most of the children. Quite a few were 'employed', just like him. The oldest boy, Salvatore, 12 years old and still in the third grade, was a fruit-seller. Gaetano, seven years old, helped his father in the fish market. And Giovanni, eight, was thinking of dropping out of school to take up his father's trade – bricklaying.

After the children had cleaned up the lot, they began a series of activities which intrigued Maurizio. One day they all dressed up in the craziest of costumes, painted their faces and had a parade. For weeks they built sculptures and

imaginary animals from materials they had found. Sometimes they played soccer – with an invisible ball. He noticed that quite a few girls were joining the group. They were even playing soccer instead of staying at home and helping with chores.

One day a group of mothers – some with very young children – even came down to play. Sometimes teachers from the nearby school would come by and talk to the children and animators.

All this was too much for Maurizio and he decided to ask his boss if he could join the group "when business was slow". The boss, whose nephew was a member, agreed. Maurizio joined the group the day they decided to build a playground on the site. They began by drawing the most incredible games and structures they could imagine. They even made a map of the site. Maurizio helped to take the measurements – he is really good with figures.

One day the animators arrived at the site with long faces. They explained that their agreement with the City Administration had expired. In fact, for the last month, the group had been working without any support from the City. A City which paid for policemen, teachers, and office workers could not pay for a small project like this one. Many neighbourhood people knew too well what happened to public money in Palermo.

Some of the animators still come around and talk to Maurizio on his corner, and with Gaetano at the fishmarket. They say that another project may begin in a few months, if the City Council – which is in crisis – is reformed. But in the meantime, Maurizio and his friends and fellow workers have no place to play.

Collaborative efforts

Historically, public administration in Italy has been characterized by inefficient bureaucracy and a highly sectorialized structure. Traditionally, departments responsible for specific areas of children's lives – such as education, social services, health, and recreation – have rarely communicated with each other. The new legislative and cultural atmosphere in which the child is recognized as an individual in his and her own right, developing in an environment of great sociological complexity, calls for systematic interdepartmental collaboration. However, especially in southern cities, efforts to reorganize departments and services have been, for the most part, unsuccessful.

The reasons for this lack of success are both technical and political. In the first place, public employees and administrators are not accustomed to working in an interdisciplinary manner. Channels of communication between departments are often inefficient or non-existent. Officials, for rea-

sons of political affiliation already described, sometimes practise what in Italy is known as "cultivating one's own garden". The compartmentalized nature of services means that programmes tend to be high in cost and low in quality. Local administrations in large northern cities have been more successful in developing the practice of interdepartmental collaboration, as illustrated by Milan's *Domestic Aid for Children Project* (see next chapter).

Poor as the public sector has been at developing successful social services for children, there are numerous examples in southern cities of innovative, effective projects for children at a grass-roots level. These programmes do at times receive municipal funding, but their relationships with local administrations tend to be precarious and intermittent. Some religious and lay voluntary organizations have behind them decades of dedicated effort towards children in these cities, as does the *Spanish Quarter Association*, see next chapter.

Those involved in these groups, many of whom



are highly qualified and practise effective methodologies, represent human resources of which public administrations could take advantage. They possess knowledge of the life situations of children which is often more complete than the data accessible to city administrations, both in qualitative and quantitative terms. City administrations have a reputation for being either uninformed or uninterested in these resources.

Some cities have recently begun gathering data concerning these initiatives in order to build on

Experiments in collaboration between voluntary associations, youth cooperatives, and public agencies have been tried in northern cities

their effectiveness. In Naples, a 'Clearing House on Children's Programmes' is being developed by the Social Services Department. In Milan, and in many other cities in northern and central Italy, official registers of qualified persons and groups who work with children have been established. These are positive signs of changing attitudes. However, especially in the South, the decisions regarding which of these initiatives or persons are to be financed continue, at times, to be interwoven with political considerations.

This situation must be changed through careful monitoring and evaluation of social programmes and policies for children by bodies such as the National Youth Council and similar initiatives at a regional and municipal level. Experiments in collaboration between the so-called 'private social sector' (voluntary associations, youth cooperatives) and public agencies have been tried in northern cities (see *The ADM Project, Milan*, next chapter). The success of such integrated approaches may represent progress towards better programmes for children and young people.

Given the size of the child populations in need, large cities such as Naples, Palermo or Milan cannot count exclusively on the limited number of youth workers self-trained during their experience of voluntary or quasi-voluntary activities. There is a significant unanswered problem regarding the formal and specialized training of these new professional figures.

The 1978 law on Professional Formation passed responsibility for post-diploma training and follow-up courses to the regional administrations. Public financing was made available to prepare new personnel and retrain existing social workers and educational psychologists so that the new orientations in child services – focus on the child, interdisciplinary and integrated approaches, avoidance of institutionalization – could be taken on board. The results in cities such as Milan, where a pool of qualified youth workers has been created, are reassuring; in southern cities, there is no corre-

sponding development. In those rare cases where funding is allocated and programmes have been developed, the adoption of a welfare approach has compromised effectiveness.

From welfare to cost-effective social development

A welfare approach to social policy is problematic from two perspectives. First, it is ineffective in stimulating personal developmental change; second, the costs are high and provide no return on investment. The faulty hypothesis on which such an approach is based is that the simple act of allocating funds to fulfill material needs will resolve problems of children and their families. In this perspective, children and families are passive recipients of help rather than active participants in a developmental process. While accepting that, in a number of cases, economic assistance to families of children in need is necessary, experience has shown that on its own, material assistance is insufficient and often not the best alternative.

The most obvious example of the welfare approach is that which prescribes that problem children should be admitted to a correctional institution. Although nowadays recognized as a last resort in dealing with child problem cases, there will unfortunately always be children for whom this last resort is called upon. Some juvenile detention centres have been at the forefront in devising developmental, non-welfare type programmes for children in difficult circumstances, ahead of the other non-punitive institutions for children such as boarding schools and orphanages, where the damage of welfarism to their charges is perhaps less self-evident.

Between the late 1970s and mid-1980s, the Filangieri Juvenile Detention Centre in Naples, under the direction of Luciano Sommella, reformulated its activities according to the recent advances in social legislation and judicial procedures regarding youth. Sommella and his staff took advantage of available government funding and utilized the rich cultural terrain of Naples' grass-roots programmes for youth to develop new educational initiatives for youngsters detained at Filangieri. These children took part in theatrical and musical projects and acquired interests and skills which have proved useful to many upon their return to society. Collaborative efforts with city artisans allowed some detainees and probationers to take advantage of periods of apprenticeship and train for professions inaccessible during their limited scholastic careers.

Sommella insists that society's answers for problem youth: "must surpass welfare. We must recognize these children not as problems, but as capable individuals, as human resources. We must

create opportunities for them to reassume dignity and develop skills." The comments of Ciro, one of the boy apprentices, illustrates its success. "I'm happy to work outside. I'm learning a trade in a pastry shop which will be useful, I hope, when I get out. My boss and colleagues are nice, they treat me like a person, not a criminal. The only problem is, with all those pastries, I've come to hate sweets!"

Despite the new guidelines in Italian legislation, thousands of children continue to be institutionalized in Italy. In the South, government subsidies to private boarding schools or day institutions run by religious and lay charitable organizations for needy or problem children consume the largest share of social spending for children in many cities. In addition to the demonstrated ineffectiveness of many such institutions at reintegrating children into society, this welfare approach is extremely costly. In Palermo, for example, the municipal government has allocated, on average, around \$15 million a year during the last five years to these institutions. These expenditures cover living costs for around 400 full-time and 3,000 day-time boarders. In Naples, children in institutions presently exceed 8,000 and their numbers and share of public expenditure are growing.

A recent national survey in medium-sized cities placed the average cost per client of institutionalization (adults included) at over \$6,000 per year. The same survey calculated the cost per child for foster care at less than \$2,000, and for day-time care at less than \$800. Neighbourhood-based social centres cost approximately \$300 per client. Thus, public community centres and family support programmes could, with the same expenditure, serve nearly twenty times the number of children served by institutions. These kinds of considerations should be taken seriously by public admin-

Community centres and family support could, at the same cost, serve twenty times the number of children served by institutions

istrations, especially at times – as at present – of cutbacks in social expenditures.

Another kind of welfare attitude is unfortunately observable in large southern cities, not only in institutional programmes but in the public sector in general. The recipients of this 'welfare', however, are not the clients, but the suppliers of services. A recent newspaper article described how the only public nursery in Ercolano, a small city in the Naples metropolitan area, was forced to close because rates per family had exceeded \$1,000 per

child per month. This exorbitant figure was explained by the fact that over 30 salaried employees served a maximum user population of 55 children. While this is an extreme case, administrative departments in southern Italy are typically over-staffed. A large percentage of public funds support office workers performing purely bureaucratic functions for the limited number of people actually employed in services.

A social worker in Palermo explained how the 1971 law, which passed responsibility for management of publicly financed, privately operated nurseries to the newly formed regional administrations, was managed in Palermo. The region wished to respect the rights of hundreds of workers formerly employed in these nurseries to maintain their jobs. These workers were transferred into numerous clerical and supportive positions within the new bureaucracy. The rights of the children and families of Palermo to an adequate nursery service were not respected. Many of the nurseries were closed permanently. Not until 1989 were civil service examinations offered to fill the 350 vacant positions in the 38 nurseries built since 1979 and never opened. Meanwhile, many had been so seriously vandalized that they were no longer usable.

As of today, only 17 of these nurseries are functioning part-time and many of the new teachers and teachers' aides have been transferred for the time being into clerical or administrative positions. The approach which places emphasis on the 'welfare' of employees has high economic costs for public budgets and high human costs for the children and families of Palermo, Ercolano and many other cities when public servants are more concerned with their own survival than with the well-being of the public they serve.

Large northern cities such as Milan and, even more so, medium-sized cities such as Bologna,

children in their territories, but have rather encouraged and developed relationships between the public and private sectors. This approach has been very useful in the present period of fiscal cutbacks.

Voluntary organizations and children

In its most recent annual report, the National Youth Council identified rapidly expanding membership of youth associations and the growth of voluntary organizations as potent forces in the improvement of services and programmes for children and young people, and as important factors in their personal development. The statistics speak for themselves. The estimated number of Italians who are members of associations is approximately 10 million. A 1984 survey found that nearly 3.3 million people dedicated part of their free time (an average of seven hours per week) to voluntary work in the community. Today's tally is thought to be much higher. Both these complementary and overlapping features of contemporary society – membership of associations and commitment to voluntary work – play a potentially useful role in the lives of children in difficult circumstances.

The number of children involved in associations in Italy is not high (between 500,000 and 700,000) when compared with other European nations, but the numbers are increasing. While the great majority are members of sports associations, surveys have demonstrated that motivations for joining go beyond a simple interest in athletics. Nearly 40 per cent indicate as their prime motivation the "possibility to mature and grow personally", while over 30 per cent join to "make friends" or to "be together with others".

Membership in the major national socio-recreational associations such as *ACLI* (the Italian Catholic Workers Association) and *ARCI* (the Italian Cultural Recreational Association) dropped off slightly in the 1980s (although *Arciragazzi*, the latter's youth wing, is growing). This slump, however, has been more than compensated by an enormous increase in scouting and naturalist-environmental associations. The children's sector of the Italian World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the Panda Clubs, have nearly doubled in numbers in each of the last four years to almost 100,000 members. While members of youth associations tend to come, primarily, from middle and upper classes, both *Arciragazzi* and WWF report significant increases in their memberships in poorer southern regions such as Sicily, Campania and Calabria. *Arciragazzi*, in particular, has begun to focus organizational activities on urban children in difficult circumstances.

Associations offer children and young people places to socialize and, in some cases, take part in non-academic educational experiences which aim

An approach which emphasizes the 'welfare' of employees has high economic costs for budgets, and high human costs for children

Florence, and Reggio Emilia in the north-central region, are characterized by efficient administration and effective social programming. These cities were able to use national legislation and available national and local financing to create an extensive, high quality infrastructure of social services for children and their families during the 1970s and 1980s. They have also not ignored the capable non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working with

to give them useful interests and skills. In addition, some organizations (*ARCI*, Scouts, WWF, for example) offer opportunities to visit different environments, to meet different people and to develop values of solidarity and respect for different cultures and species.

Voluntary action is described by the National Youth Council as society's alternative to the "ever-increasing phenomena of rampant individualism and stifling bureaucracy". The 1980s in Italy saw an unprecedented expansion of voluntary initiatives by individuals, small groups, and organizations. In the city of Milan, considered the 'capital of voluntarism', for example, researchers have estimated a ratio of one volunteer for 89 inhabitants. In Milan, in particular, a growing percentage of voluntary organizations dedicate all or part of their time to children and youth. These organizations have the capacity to intervene rapidly in chronic situations among marginal groups.

The experiences of voluntary organizations with immigrant and nomadic children, drug addicts, or AIDS victims, for example, have often opened up a path which can later be taken by the slower-moving public bodies. NGO skills and knowledge in newly emerging problem areas represent valuable resources for public administrations, which are gradually taking steps to collaborate with these organizations. In Milan, a 1986 regional law was passed which officially recognized voluntary action as an "instrument of support and integration of existing public services and as an important beacon of new, unsatisfied needs".

The law also stipulates that voluntary activities be coordinated and evaluated by the public administration. Organizations and associations with the necessary attributes (including professional training, for which courses are offered) can be placed on a regional register. They then become eligible to negotiate contracts with and receive funding from public departments. The quality and quantity of projects and programmes for children in Milan have benefited greatly from the public-private co-operation made possible by this law.

Recently, a national law (No. 266/1991) has been passed which proposes to extend similar principles and fiscal benefits to voluntary organizations and associations throughout Italy. In the South, the benefits of this law (and its influence on regional legislation) have yet to be significantly felt. Meanwhile, in Naples and Palermo, a number of voluntary organizations – primarily of religious inspiration – continue to serve children and families in the



most disadvantaged neighbourhoods with little or no help from public funds.

Numerous voluntary groups and associations have recently adopted what can be termed a 'participatory strategy'. This is an important contribution to the evolution of effective programmes for the social development of children. (See the account of the Spanish Quarter Association in Naples in the next chapter.) National projects by *Arci-ragazzi* – 'The City in My Pocket' – and the WWF – 'Let's Imagine the Future' – are involving thousands of children as active participants.

In these socio-educational programmes, children and neighbourhood residents, together with professional advisors, have developed planning criteria and are designing projects to transform their urban environment. A group of middle-school children from a disadvantaged Palermo neighbourhood recently won a National School Design Competition on the future of neighbourhoods, sponsored by the WWF. Children from disadvantaged areas are often the best experts concerning the difficult circumstances they encounter in daily life. They are also able to design beautiful images of a better future. Community participation, adequate financing, and the collaboration of qualified professionals from the public and private sectors are needed to help transform these images into reality.

WORKING WITH INSTEAD OF FOR CHILDREN

REGARDLESS of the great advances made in the last two decades, public social services for children and their families continue to be distributed unevenly throughout Italy. In the poorer southern cities, overburdened administrations are particularly stressed. Yet in Naples in particular, special initiatives have provided opportunities for at least some children to play, learn and grow. Given the size and complex nature of the problems afflicting children in these cities, the public sector may be able to learn from these experiences.

In a few cases, and usually for short periods only, there have been, even in the South, effective examples of collaboration between local administrative departments and competent NGOs. Some initiatives continue to function while others have folded. By examining two such programmes, one in Naples, the other in Palermo, it is possible to decipher their merits and shortcomings from methodological and administrative perspectives.

The Spanish Quarter Association (Naples)

Giovanni Laino is to be found in the Youth Centre which the Spanish Quarter Association has recently opened with help from the city administration and private benefactors. Laino, the director, is always ready to help his young charges, who interrupt him with all kinds of requests such as boards for playing checkers or the keys to the

"In order to understand a neighbourhood and develop useful services, we felt you must live in it and talk continually to its residents"

darkroom. There is a general uproar of young people at the snack bar in the next room.

Above the noise, Laino explains: "We began working in the Quarter in 1978 out of a small *basso*, known as 'Anna's House'. Our original motivations were religious and political. The core group was made up of lay Franciscans dedicated to the idea of offering solidarity to the most oppressed and disadvantaged members of society."

The association was not convinced by the prevailing sociological wisdom which held that offering standardized services in a neighbourhood would resolve everyone's problems. "In order really to understand a neighbourhood and develop useful services, we felt you must live in it and talk continually to its residents. 'Anna's House' was, and continues to be, a place where people can drop in at any time, have a cup of coffee, and find a friend to talk with."

Following an approach which Laino calls "attentive, observing participation", he and his colleagues have acquired over the years an acute knowledge of community problems and resources. In the last decade they have managed to carry out a number of projects, relying on limited resources from the public administration and private donors, plus considerable voluntary effort. While these projects are not exclusively aimed at children and young people, most of them contribute directly and indirectly to children's well-being.

The association's main concern is people's development, and the development of resources already available in the quarter. For example, from 1984-90 the group, together with two young leather craftsmen whom Laino calls "social agents", ran a successful community handbag factory: *Fabbrica 081*. This provided legal, well-paid work for 15 local teenagers, mainly girls, who had been previously employed in the exploitative and illegal labour market (*lavoro nero*). Several of the participants in the *081* were juvenile offenders and drug-users. Through this experience, these youngsters acquired confidence and skills which contributed to their reintegration into the community.

Although this initiative – whose turnover reached \$200,000 a year – was forced to close through "some organizational errors and outside pressures" (competing illegal workshops), the project was favourably reviewed by the EC which is presently considering funding a revised and enlarged project from its Economic Development Programme for southern Italy. If a recent proposal is approved, 300 local young people will be trained in the large, abandoned shoe factory in the quarter which the association has identified for rehabilitation.

The association has been able to utilize available state funding (Article 23) to train 162 unemployed youth in "community research and data

processing". Laino points out: "This Article is almost exclusively implemented as welfare, but by providing a guaranteed income for a limited period to unemployed youth, we developed a training programme which was useful to the community." The project, entitled 'Butterfly City', involved the youngsters in the collection of neighbourhood data (population, economic activities, housing, services, etc.) and the creation of an interactive database which can be used in various combinations on neighbourhood maps.

The experience was "personally productive for many of the youth, but as important, its products represent a resource which will greatly assist our future work or that of anyone (including public agencies which do not possess such instruments) wishing to use them."

The association is a member of a city-wide coordinating group comprised of other associations involved with children and youth, drug prevention, and social animation. This group's objectives are to exchange experiences and strategies, elaborate inter-zonal projects, develop awareness, and activate public funding and collaboration.

Laino believes that associations like his can represent important resources for local authorities. "We've proposed many ideas to the city administration which represent a turn-around in the welfare mentality which pervades public offices. For example, there are more than 100 young workers who were originally taken on by the city as 'community animators', around 80 of whom are presently employed in clerical positions. The remaining 20 who are working as animators at the Santa Sofia Centre don't even have enough financing from the city to buy crayons or paper. We've proposed that they come here to the Centre and work with us. We have projects and we have children!

"There's a law which permits public employees to be temporarily transferred from their offices to

"We've proposed ideas to the administration which represent a turn-around in the welfare mentality which pervades public offices"

work in useful social services. The municipal offices of Naples are full of redundant workers who are literally doing nothing! Unfortunately, they don't want to leave their jobs, it's easier for them to hide in the gigantic 'company town' which is the public administration."

The association's most recent achievement is the youth centre. Laino estimates that hundreds of children and teens use the centre each day. Yet he,



like many of the community centre coordinators, is concerned that a significant proportion of the neighbourhood's youth are not using it. "The kids you see here are what we might call 'street kids' – difficult children from unstable families, but who are able to move around the neighbourhood. There is a whole other segment which worries me: the 'homeboys'. These children come from equally poor but stable families which exercise more control over them. It's important for these two groups of children to meet. Our 'data bank' has been useful in this regard. We send letters to all the local families about the programmes we offer."

The photography course which the centre organized several months earlier in collaboration with the District School Board and UNICEF-Campania, and financed by the Regional administration, was attended by over 30 boys and girls. This course, in line with the association's philosophy, aimed at offering children an opportunity to "acquire confidence and skills, to enjoy themselves, to work together with other children and caring adults". Many of these children continue to use the darkroom and cultivate their hobbies. An advanced course will be offered in the near future.

Laino concludes: "Motivation is the key. Some

social theorists insist that if you offer a service people will push down your door, but that's just not true. People have to understand why a programme or project is being offered and what role they have in it. I've modified my views over the last 15 years. You can't save anyone. People have to decide on their own that they want to change, both themselves and reality. But even I realize this is a difficult proposition."

Project Childhood (Palermo)

Palermo's Project Childhood grew from a series of initiatives undertaken by the City Council, the city's women's movement, and numerous voluntary associations. It was inspired by the tragic death of four-year-old Maricò Mazzola in 1987.

This multi-faceted project, implemented between 1987 and 1990, managed to achieve several significant results in a city whose administration, until that time, exemplified most clearly society's disregard for children. Among its many activities, the project set up a shelter for abused children and mothers, established with the inter-departmental collaboration of the social services and health departments; a child abuse hot-line; public information programmes; and the rehabilitation and staffing of several public nurseries.

The project also set up the 'Territorial Service for Disadvantaged and Abused Children' by hiring additional public social workers and psychologists, involving other voluntary associations and coordinating existing services. A children's workshop was opened in the children's shelter, offering pre-adolescents the opportunity to take part in creative activities on a regular basis.

A drug-prevention programme for the city's youth and their families was also set up. This project, directed by one of Italy's leading experts in the field, Luigi Cancrini, coordinates an interdisci-

plinary city-wide network of 50 social workers, 30 psychologists, five paediatricians and five psychiatrists. The project approach is based on family therapy, and efforts are made to operate in an integrated fashion with existing public and private services for youth, including social services, health, the juvenile court, and appropriate NGOs.

limited their efforts for problem children to institutionalization. Therefore, the project represented an effort to create an integrated system of social services within an existing vacuum. Personnel capable of implementing preventive, educational programmes had to be trained, and permanent, functioning centres had to be created from scratch. The nation's worst living conditions can be found in the city of Palermo. The indicators of economic hardship and the levels of truancy, drug use, juvenile crime, and child abuse are among the country's highest. In addition, the city's administration was characterized by inefficiency and political corruption. There existed a real gap between the city government and the people.

The period between 1987 and 1990 in Palermo was marked by a concerted effort towards political reform in all sectors. This atmosphere, while it lasted, contributed to the creation of an open dialogue between the public and private spheres, which brought the issue of disadvantaged children and their families into the political arena and opened up channels of public financing for child services for the first time.

Unfortunately, the obstacles to delivering on such good intentions were overwhelming. The inefficiencies of the bureaucratic and political structure made it a long and painstaking task to get the project's activities off the ground. There were insufficient municipal social workers to handle the cases referred to them. Institutions accustomed to offering exclusively custodial services to children had difficulty adapting to the new participatory preventive approach. In the long term, this was destined to change the nature of their services and bring about a budgetary reduction for them. The reaction of conservative elements in the city administration to the new preventive and developmental philosophy contributed to the downfall of the progressive administration. The so-called 'Palermo springtime' came to an end.

Some of the initiatives, like the Cancrini Project, manage – just – to survive. The project's personnel has been drastically reduced and those remaining worry, on an almost daily basis, about the possibility of the programme being discontinued. Some of the support services on which the project counts are equally precarious and have had difficulty adapting to the new requirement for interdepartmental collaboration.

The limited, but significant, results which the project has achieved at the level of individual children and their families are at risk. Nevertheless, dedicated child workers in the drug rehabilitation programme, in the foster-care network, and in child-care centres continue their efforts. The dialogue between officialdom and the activist caring community continues, despite the reduction in public support. The experiences of these short years

This dialogue brought disadvantaged children into the political arena, and opened up channels of public financing for child services

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Project Childhood has had to struggle to keep going. Previously, Palermo's public authorities had

The story of Fabrizio *Palermo*

Fabrizio (13) and several of his friends hang out in one of Palermo's chaotic *piazzas*. They make money as tour guides for Japanese and American visitors to Palermo.

The boys still remember the time they took part two years ago in the children's workshop.

"Yeah, I remember the first day I came to the centre. You all got angry because I threw papers on the floor and knocked over all the chairs. But then, after a while, I calmed down when I realized that you weren't like my teachers."

Fabrizio's hard time at school is legendary among his friends. His teachers, he says, always picked on him. These days, he barely attends the fifth grade, preferring to stick to the visitors. He brightened up when he remembered how the tourists compliment him on his knowledge of Palermo or clap their hands when he sings a Sicilian folk song.

Fabrizio probably doesn't know anything about the remaining activities of Project Childhood. What Fabrizio does know is that "once upon a time", for about one year, he had found a place where he could go to meet friends and find company with adults who were interested in him. He had found the time to be a child and also to be a 'teacher' for the little ones at the centre. For a while he had felt useful, and maybe found some sense of direction in a confused life.

"But that was a long time ago", he says.

have made an impact on Palermo's 'culture of childhood', and those involved agree that this change offers great hope for the future.

Domestic Aid for Children (Milan)

In the city of Milan, an abundance of black and white signs, strategically placed by the local authorities, indicate the location of the numerous social services. The signs reading 'Family Planning Centre', 'Infant School', 'Community Health Centre', 'Time for Childhood Centre', are geographical pointers to the complex and decentralised system of services for children and families which the municipal authority – together with its citizens – has established in the past decade.

The Domestic Aid for Children Project (ADM) is one such project, which came into being in 1985. This project formally involved the private social sector in the public administration's overall programme for Children and Families at Risk. This programme aimed to offer the kind of support – in terms of both assistance and education – which some families needed to avoid the institutionalization of their children. Its approach reflected the contemporary legislative and cultural atmosphere (the right of children to be educated within their own families), as well as representing cost-effectiveness at a time of budget cutbacks.

ADM grew out of the previous experiences of voluntary community educators (specifically, the 'Comin' cooperative in Zone 10) who had successfully carried out experimental projects on a limited scale. The approach focused primarily on the life space of children and their families, and applied an adaptive strategy in which the specific needs, resources and willingness of each 'client' were deployed. The ADM project formalized the relationship between educators, families and the local

social services and disseminated the approach city-wide. In 1985, less than 10 children in only one zone were involved in the project. By 1991, 424 children in 279 families, in 14 of the city's 20 zones, were taking part.

The central figures in the ADM project are the educators, or 'grown-up friends' as many of the children refer to them. (The story of Marco, in the first chapter, illustrates this relationship.) Also involved are the neighbourhood social worker and the ADM coordinator within each cooperative. Depending on the requirements of each case, others such as the community psychologist, the child's teachers, or the parish priest, and services such as health clinics or community centres, are brought in. The educators are qualified professionals with a regional diploma in education or its equivalent, and at least two years experience in youth work. They are members of Social Service Cooperatives which are responsible for further training and the coordi-

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nation of the ADM project in their zone. The ADM coordinator in each cooperative meets regularly with all educators in the zone to exchange experiences, to evaluate and modify interventions where necessary, and to prevent individual educators becoming isolated.

The public social worker for the neighbourhood, who is officially responsible for each project, identifies children and families from his or her case

work as suitable for the ADM type of intervention. These children come primarily from Milan's public housing projects, are often from families suffering recent eviction, and for the most part are not native to Milan. The children are often behind in school and have difficulties relating to their peers, their teachers, and their families. Typically, these children have little or no space to play, to study, or to have privacy. Francesco, for example, was iden-

*The family makes a 'contract'
with the project based on an
informed understanding of its
implications*

tified by the school psychologist as developmentally retarded because he was "always on the floor". His ADM educator subsequently discovered that Francesco was only comfortable on the floor since the only table in his home was never available to him for homework or other projects.

The social worker together with the cooperative (which selects a single educator to follow the case) develop a general plan based on their analysis of the situation. This is then presented to the child's family for their approval. The key moment, however, is the meeting between the educator and the family. The important – and innovative – aspect of this encounter is that the family makes a 'contract' with the project based on an informed understanding of its implications. This is significant because it is based on the family and child's acceptance of the objectives (which have been jointly developed) and of the activities prescribed.

Certainly, a family must be motivated to welcome an outsider into its space and time for around 10 hours per week, and for a period which can extend to more than a year. It is true that the educator is a helper who often lends a hand in daily routines – assisting children with their homework,

accompanying them to the community centre, contributing to daily chores when necessary, substituting the parent temporarily at times. This is easy for the family to accept. What is more difficult is for the family to accept part of the responsibility for their problems and agree to try to change. In this context, the educator is more than a helper, but someone who serves as a role model, who introduces new ways to be together and to value the importance of each member of the family.

Families are often frightened to take on the challenge offered by the new 'family ecology' created by ADM. Andrea's family was frightened that the Mental Health Service might declare their child "crazy", or that the educator or social worker might succeed where they had "failed". The family was unquestionably poor: Andrea's mother was physically unable to work and his father had no stable employment; but it became clear that another form of poverty – the lack of caring relationships and communication within the family – was their principal problem.

Like so many other families, isolated in the urban environment and struggling just to make ends meet, Andrea's family had little time to enjoy the 'little things' which make up a happy family environment. The entry into their lives of these supportive figures helped this family to find the time and to discover the pleasure of talking and doing things together.

After months of 'working together', when they sit down to dinner Andrea's parents no longer look at the educator to see what they should do. They are more confident and have made the time to think about their own and Andrea's future. Perhaps this new-found security has contributed to Andrea's father acquiring a permanent job, which will help the family financially. Certainly, ADM has helped this family to find the strength to overcome the 'other poverty' – of isolation, loneliness and helplessness – in which so many families and children find themselves.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

IN the contrasting and contradictory landscape of childhood in Italy today, the reality of some children's lives represents utopia to many others. If children from Palermo's Borgo Nuovo quarter or from Naples' Spanish Quarter, or gypsy children from the outskirts of Florence, or Senegalese children living in an abandoned factory on the edge of Rome, could experience the 'Time for Childhood Centre' in Milan, or one of many child care centres in Bologna, they would probably be amazed. Yet, this situation can be changed.

The resources necessary to guarantee time and space for happy and healthy childhoods for all Italian children exist, although at present they are unevenly distributed, uncoordinated, and effective approaches are poorly understood. The development and application of these resources represent a

major contemporary challenge for policy-makers.

At the national level, policy-makers are finally beginning to recognize the serious nature of the circumstances endured by many children – at home, in school, in the streets – throughout Italy and especially in the pockets of the country where traditional poverty persists. Legislators, as indicated by the recent passage of Law No. 216/1991, have begun to allocate larger amounts of public funds to those regions most afflicted by juvenile crime and violence, child labour and drug abuse. But it is important to ensure that these funds are distributed in a coordinated and planned manner.

A careful analysis of the environments in which programmes are to be implemented will facilitate the deployment of human resources already present in these areas. Existing public programmes, volun-

A Time and a Place for Childhood *Milan*

Stascia Grella is the director of the 'Time for Childhood Centre' in Milan's zone 10. The centre has an unusual history. Together with others who, like her, had fostered children, Grella formed an association in 1984. "Our previous experiences had convinced us that a new form of service was necessary for children sent for fostering and their families. We had reached the conclusion that inserting a child into a second family when that child was having problems with his or her own family was often not the best solution."

Grella and her colleagues had observed that often the original families, who were already overburdened trying to resolve multiple problems, felt frustrated and 'bad' at the prospect of having to share their child with a 'good' family. "Many children also had difficulty in resolving the psychological dilemma of having two families – one of which continued to suffer great problems. Yet, it was obvious that these children required a place outside their home and other adult figures which could offer them 'time for childhood'".

Their decision was to create the Time for Childhood Centre, a place which was easily distinguishable in the child's mind from the family environment, but which offered things a family normally provides: love, individual care, opportunities to develop the child's own personality. "It was to be something in addition to the family which all children have the right to enjoy."

The centre is open six full days a week, but since some of Grella's associates live there, the children can stay over or sleep there whenever they need to. The centre offers a place to eat together, to take a bath, to play, to study, to take up arts and crafts. Children can take part in formal courses (dance or music) if they wish. They can invite their friends from school or the neighbourhood to the centre, casually or on special occasions, such as birthdays.

The centre provides a variety of services, some for children, others for their families. "We often organize excursions around Milan to enable the children to know and feel at home in their city. We also offer special assistance to the families in times of need. We meet with the children's teachers, and if their parents are unable to, we sometimes accompany them to school. At times, we help out in the family, for example if the child or a parent is ill."

"Our numbers have grown, and we are at present serving 25 children and their families. Our activities are financed under agreements negotiated with the Social Services Department for each child we serve, and by grants we occasionally manage to acquire."

Two of the children in the centre are Margarita and her friend, Carlo. Margarita is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. L., a migrant family from the South, whose difficulties in adapting to their new

► environment in Milan were described in chapter two. Two years ago, Mr. L. abandoned the family and emigrated to Venezuela. At that point, with the support of the zone's social worker, Mrs. L. decided to reunite the family in the public housing apartment they had been granted on the opposite side of the city, replacing the small, damp basement unit they had previously lived in. Its inadequacy, together with her husband's often aggressive behaviour towards Margarita's older sister, had prompted Mrs. L. to place the children in boarding institutions.

Margarita is small for her 12 years and her light brown eyes reveal sadness even when she smiles. She and her family participated in the ADM project – which helped greatly in reintegrating the family – until several months ago. The unmanageable hours of Mrs. L.'s job as a cleaner did not allow her time to meet all her children's needs. Now, thanks to Francesco their 'home educator', her two sons have successfully finished junior high school and Margarita's older sister has found a job. Margarita began attending the Time for Children Centre several months ago. Since the conclusion of their involvement in the ADM, the centre has been an important resource for Margarita and her mother.

Margarita and Carlo brighten up as they talk about the centre. Carlo preferred the 'old centre' – the original building in which the centre had been housed. When the city administration demolished the building (which was illegally occupied by several community groups), Stascia Grella had refused to leave. "The building was knocked down with her inside, but luckily she didn't get hurt," says Carlo. Grella's courage, together with the assistance of the neighbourhood social worker, convinced the city administration to grant the centre a new home in the record time of only two months.

The children are deeply attached to the place and believe that the people who work there "are interested in our well-being and respect us as capable persons". Their words reflect their active role in the centre's management. At present, they are running a sports and games tournament.

Margarita and Carlo especially like the fact that the centre allows the children to "sleep over" on special occasions – for example, on a child's birthday or as a reward for doing well in school. Children must have their parents' approval, and take responsibility for their sleeping quarters, and prepare breakfast. The centre also offers hospitality to children in emergency situations. Grella explains what such a crisis might consist of: "when, for example, a family blow-up requires a period of cooling down and negotiations between parents and children".

What would the children want to change about their home lives? They joke, half seriously: "change my mother, get rid of my brother"; more seriously, they "want to be rich". Why? "To have larger, more beautiful homes" where they could have their own rooms, plus a study where they could keep "books, a computer, and personal projects". It is clear that the centre not only offers children time to **be** children – to play, create, have fun with friends – but space, too, which they can modify and control. Space such as this where they can study, think and organize themselves is unknown in the crowded apartments, basements and encampments inhabited by so many children in difficult circumstances.

Two small boys burst into the room. Gianni and Simone want the children to go outside into the garden to see the "city" they are building with sand, water and wood. Gianni explains that he is "building a city in which everyone can be happy and have fun, not like today, because everybody is sad with all this fog and rain." He and Simone describe the "special systems" they have designed to bring water "from the trees to the people".

In their city, there will be no war or violence. What else are they planning to put in their city? "Houses, lots of houses which are full of happiness." Gianni wants "some ropes and lots of lights so everybody can really see this place and exclaim: 'How beautiful!' I could use some help, lots of other kids to help me. So we could show that people can help each other!"

tary associations, capable professional figures must be identified, and their knowledge and expertise fully exploited. This suggestion requires an evolution in the attitudinal culture of public services – from the delivery of welfare to the nurturing of human development. In order to promote such progress, administrators need to recognize the importance of research and programme evaluation.

Innovative projects, such as the ADM programme in Milan, could be studied attentively and their models carefully modified to fit the different socio-economic, cultural and environmental contexts of large southern cities. At the same time, it is probable that many innovative grassroots programmes and capable social animators in the turbulent southern centres could assist northern pro-

grammes, especially in terms of the methodological skills and spirit which they possess. These exchanges can be fostered through the creation of consultative bodies – like the National Youth Council – at municipal and regional levels. Observation reveals that steps in this direction are slowly being taken throughout Italy.

It must be emphasized that these recommendations do not require massive public financing. Such a requirement would be unrealistic in the present period of fiscal austerity. Policy-makers need instead to guarantee cost-effective social programming. The integration of certain socially active voluntary organizations and associations (such as the youth cooperatives implementing the ADM programme in Milan) into publicly coordinated

initiatives on a permanent basis is one possible strategy. The growing number of all types of NGOs should be seen as a potentially useful resource. This does not mean that the public sector must abdicate its social responsibility to non-governmental bodies. Rather it implies the development of new forms of collaboration.

Another of the major obstacles to effective social policy in Italy, especially in the South, is the complicated, segmentalized, slow-moving bureaucratic apparatus. While suggestions for changes in this context are beyond the scope of this publication, it is important to note that there are signs that significant changes are occurring. A widespread debate has developed around the recent national law (No. 142/1990) which compels local administrations to reform their city charters and, in time, their administrative infrastructures to serve their populations better. Transparency, participation, and social responsibility are the key concepts of this reform. As would be expected, southern cities have been slowest in responding to this law. Again, careful analysis and dissemination of the administrative innovations proposed by some medium-sized cities could contribute to the reorganization of large municipal governments, if there is sufficient political will.

Finally, at a cultural level, the nation's media is starting to abandon exposés of dramatic individual stories and scandals in favour of an intelligent discussion about the deep-rooted socio-economic origins of children's problems. Informed debate concerning strategies and policies necessary to reduce these problems is spreading in public administrations, in universities, and in the community at large. This debate is contributing to the diffusion of a new 'culture of childhood'. It is the intention of the joint Istituto degli Innocenti/UNICEF research project 'Children in Difficult Circumstances' to contribute to this debate, and help to catalyze the urgently needed political, administrative, technical and attitudinal transformations.

In this new cultural perspective, children will be increasingly recognized as a social category in their own right, as active subjects, and as citizens, not only during their future adulthood, but today. When this step is finally taken, when children and communities are seen as resources rather than problems, when their voices are heard in the debate, when "people can work together" – meaning all people, children included – then the challenge to create time and space for childhood will be on its way to being met.



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