KENYA:
Child newcomers in the urban jungle
by Dorothy Munyakho
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 exchange of experience; and to advocate and disseminate ideas and policies towards achieving the goals of child survival, protection and development. On a very selective basis, in areas of programme relevance, the Centre also provides training and capacity strengthening opportunities for UNICEF staff, concerned government officials, and the staff of other institutions with which UNICEF cooperates. The Centre is housed within the Spedale degli Innocenti, a foundling hospital that has been serving abandoned or needy children since 1445. Designed by Filippo Brunelleschi, the Spedale is one of the outstanding architectural works of the early European Renaissance.

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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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THE URBAN CHILD
in difficult circumstances

KENYA:
Child newcomers
in the urban jungle

by Dorothy Munyakho

Innocenti Studies

Dorothy Munyakho is a senior Kenyan journalist whose work has appeared in many national and international outlets, including Panos Publications. This report was written in collaboration with Debbie Taylor, a previous Editor of New Internationalist magazine and a writer on women and development. The views expressed in this publication are their own, and do not necessarily reflect the policies or views of UNICEF.
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**Preface**

This publication represents the fifth report, tailored to a non-specialist audience, resulting from an extensive case study on Kenya, one of the five countries selected as the first project of the Urban Child Programme of the UNICEF International Child Development Centre (ICDC). Dorothy Munyakho and I travelled through Kenya in March 1992, together with Stefano Bertozzi and an Assistant Programme Officer. The team visited urban basic services programmes and projects for children in especially difficult circumstances in sites in Nairobi, Mombasa and Kisumu. Ms. Munyakho met municipal authorities, interviewed representatives of government and non-governmental organizations, talked with urban children and their families, observed them in their daily activities, visited slum areas, met researchers, and acquainted herself with material already prepared by the Kenyan urban child case study team. A subsequent analytical publication, designed for the professional and expert community, will report more extensively on the results of the project in Kenya.

Responding to needs expressed by UNICEF Country Offices 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 Italy. The first three countries were chosen for their innovative programmes on urban children and communities. India in particular was selected because of its impressive achievements in the areas of community participation and the success of its urban planners in convincing the Indian government to adopt the UBS model for the country as a whole. Kenya exemplifies the growing problem of children living in the proliferating urban slums of Africa. Italy represents the project's 'coscienza', by reminding us that economic growth alone provides no assured safeguard for children. Children need to become much more central in the concerns of policymakers before real progress can be made even in high-income settings.

Each technical country case study in the Urban Child Project has selected a particular focus, which is only partially reflected in these reports for non-specialist audiences. The Philippine and Brazil studies, focus explicitly on street children and how they relate to the community. Studies in India, Kenya and Italy focus more on disadvantaged children in the community and their relationship to work, education and the street. All discuss the problems of institutionalization, and include a concern for problems faced by young girls, highlighting differences from those faced by boys.

The first aim of the project is to develop a fuller understanding of the current problems facing children from birth to age 18, by analysing various levels of causes for their abuse, abandonment, mistreatment and neglect. This objective required going back to the children's families and family histories to trace paths of deterioration that led to their present situation at home, in the streets or in institutions. It also required developing an understanding of what led people within such families to move apart, lose family connections and become socially isolated. Which factors led to loss of self-esteem by parents and children to the downward spiral of severe distress? Which combination of factors seemed to lead certain families or certain children in those families along this path?

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

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

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

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

Kenya exemplifies many of the trends that currently characterize Sub-Saharan Africa. With rapidly growing urban areas and a sprawling prime city likely to grow by six times in size between 1980 and 2030, and to reach almost 10 million people, Kenya is facing the relatively new problem of urbanization at a time of severe economic deprivation. The 1980s have witnessed falling GDPs, declining agricultural outputs, and severe pressures for structural adjustment all over the region. Widespread poverty, malnutrition, and marginalization from services have become more evident in both rural and urban areas, despite the efforts of the government to limit budgetary cuts. Urban children are faced with growing problems and declining social support. The mobilization of Kenyan cities for the improved welfare of their disadvantaged children, families and communities described in this study thus represents an important step. A view of such children and families as citizens who contribute constructively to the betterment of their cities, with the support of government and NGOs, is a key element of that effort.

Each of the other studies emphasizes different and innovative approaches. The Philippines shows how a participatory approach can offer preventive solutions by specifically involving children and families living in difficult circumstances in the monitoring of their own problems. Another preventive approach, illustrated by the Brazil case, is to identify the strategy that will facilitate a shift in the existing vision of the role of children in cities and in the nation. Both Brazil and the Philippines illustrate the creative interaction that can be established among children, families, communities and policy-makers - but which needs to be closely supported to avoid tokenism or misutilization. The Brazil case shows how the public image of children can be significantly transformed and how this can be subsequently translated into technical support and into long-term municipal and state-level monitoring of children's problems.

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

We hope this series of popular publications helps to illustrate the everyday lives of urban children and their families, showing not only the 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 confronting the dramatic demands of the cities of the future.

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September 1992
CHILD NEWCOMERS IN THE URBAN JUNGLE

Kenyà's cities are growing rapidly. The urban population grew at an explosive 199% per cent between 1980 and 1990. Most of the growth was concentrated in Nairobi, the capital, and Mombasa, the second largest city. A significant proportion of this dramatic increase consists of migrants from the countryside; poor families driven from their rural homes by landlessness, drought, and unemployment.

In 1965 the great sprawling Mathare Valley slum area on the outskirts of Nairobi - now almost a city in itself - was little more than a village of 5,000 people. By 1970 it had grown almost twenty fold to 90,000. Today, Mathare's population is estimated at nearly a quarter of a million. Together with the other slum settlements of Huruma, Dandora and Karagumoi, all in the suburban sprawl known as the Eastlands stretching out from downtown Nairobi, Mathare Valley is among the poorest and most difficult places to live in Kenya. The average monthly salary of a Mathare resident is only KSh 907 (US$12.80), according to the Kenya Consumers' Organization.

One of the most conspicuous symbols of the slum dwellers' poverty is the growing presence of children on the streets: children making a living - scavenging, begging, hawking, soliciting - while their peers are in school. Some of these are children who are working members of their families, helping to make ends meet. A minority are children who have run away from violent homes or been abandoned by absconding parents, children who roam the streets in gangs and sleep in huddles in shelters made of plastic and cardboard. These are the 'street children', that category of young humanity which has become a feature of urban life all over the developing world.

Four years ago the number of street children in Nairobi was estimated to be around 3,600, while the national figure was around 16,300. The Undugu Society of Kenya - which has pioneered a series of innovative programmes for such children - believes that the numbers are growing at a rate of around 10 per cent every year. That puts the current estimate of street children in the country at around 25,000.

Street children constitute just the most visible 10 per cent of a much larger number of urban children living in what is known as 'extremely difficult circumstances': children who live in one-room shacks, with no access to a toilet or a playground, who live under the constant threat of the men with bulldozers who could come any day and raze their flimsy homes to the ground; children with no change of clothes and no beds of their own, who never taste meat, and whose parents are too poor to afford their school fees; children whose families are so stressed that they daily confront the possibility of a beating or sexual assault.

It is now believed that as many as a quarter of a million of Kenya's urban children are living in conditions which are seriously affecting their chances of a fulfilled childhood and sound preparation for adult life. This report, which is based on a research study undertaken by a team commissioned by UNICEF's International Child Development Centre in Florence, is about some of those children: about how they have been failed by the society that is charged with their care and safety and about some approaches at dealing with their problems.

Born to the streets

"I have been in the streets since I was 11," says Beatrice Wangiki, now 16. "I had to drop out of school when I was in Standard Six, because there was no money for school fees and I had to look after all my younger brothers and sisters when my mother went out to work. I couldn't stand it. So I left to come to this place."

"This place" is chaum Kadide, a big patchwork tent of plastic in one of the shadier alleys of the city of Nairobi. This chaum, to the street fami-
Away from the discipline of their parents, they fight and snatch things from each other. For many, this jungle discipline is preferable to the harshness of the homes they come from.

Before she left home, Beatrice lived with her mother, Esther Wangui, and five younger siblings in a one-roomed shack in Mathare Valley. Her three older sisters had already left home already, leaving Beatrice in charge of her younger siblings while her mother went out to work. Esther worked as a housemaid in the neighbouring Juja Road Estate, leaving the house before dawn every day and returning after dark in the evening after she had cooked and cleaned up the evening meal for her other 'family'. "We almost never saw our mother in daylight," says Beatrice.

When Beatrice's youngest brother, Anthony Nding'ii, was born, Esther Wangui found it impossible to earn enough money to feed and clothe the rest of the children - let alone pay the fees necessary to keep them in school. Beatrice had little choice but to drop out of school. Her three older
sisters had already left home. Two are married, living in the industrial town of Thika, 40 kilometres north of Nairobi. One is a casual worker at the Del-Monte pineapple canning factory, the second is a housewife. The third sister, Florence Nduka, also made an attempt at marriage but has since left her husband, and now lives in Mathare Valley and works as a barmaid.

The going was tough for an 11-year-old expected to care for five younger siblings. And she never seemed to be enough money. “Even food and clothes were a problem,” says Beatrice. In the end, the weight of carrying so much responsibility wore her out. A friend of hers, Njoki, said there was easy money to be had on the streets. It didn’t take much to lure Beatrice away from home.

With Njoki for a tutor, Beatrice quickly learned the tricks of the oldest trade in the world. She fell into a pattern of selling sexual services to older men during the day, then returning to the chum at night for the company of street boys in their mid-20s and early 30s. She soon fitted into the alternative society of the chum, where she discovered that there is a pairing among the boys and girls who consider each other ‘husbands’ and ‘wives’.

The returns from prostitution are usually poor: sometimes as little as KSh 5 (US$ 0.16). Sometimes the only payment she receives is a packet of potato chips. Beatrice has contracted gonorrhea, for which she receives treatment at a clinic. If she had quit home hoping for a better life, Beatrice found cold comfort in the streets.

But there is camaraderie in chum Kadude too: the children form small groups to share what they have and sleep together in their own alternative ‘families’. Resenting interference from outsiders, they have become, literally, a law unto themselves. When the police try to arrest them — for loitering, begging, glue-sniffing, stealing — the children drive them away by hurling faeces at them, or showering them with the foul-smelling stuff. It repels the police, but it does not seem to disturb them. “We can just go and bathe”, says one child cheekily, although a proper bath is all but impossible for someone living in this kind of accommodation.

Perhaps being high on drugs dulls their senses and enables them to put up with the stench. Perhaps the stench is why being high on drugs seems essential to these children. Beatrice herself owns up to sniffing glue “sometimes”. She used to smoke bhang (marijuana), but claims she has given it up. Drinking alcohol, inhaling petrol and glue, smoking bhang and chewing miraa (an intoxicating leaf) are all part of these children’s culture.

Four years after she began this life, in June 1991, Beatrice discovered she was pregnant. “I decided to go back to my mother”, she says. And though Esther was not pleased at the prospect of her 15-year-old daughter bringing home an illegitimate child, she nonetheless cautioned the girl “not to throw away the baby.” Paradoxically, in spite of the growing association between child-bearing and the ever deeper plunge into poverty, the high value traditionally accorded to children still holds sway and babies are generally accepted even in the harshest economic conditions.

Back at home, Beatrice found that not much had changed. If anything, things seemed to have deteriorated. Her younger sister, Monica Wairimu,

The returns from prostitution are poor. Sometimes the only payment Beatrice receives is a packet of potato chips aged seven when Beatrice left home, was experiencing the same problems which had driven her onto the streets. Now aged 12, Monica was already dividing her day between school in the mornings and searching the neighbourhood for scrap metal and waste paper in the afternoons to earn the family supper. Two of the younger children — Joseph Karuki, 10, and Joyce Muthoni, nine — have found places at a local informal school which allows them to work on the streets in the afternoons.

Though food was less plentiful at home than it was in the chum, Beatrice decided she needed the security of a familiar roof over her head during the last months of her pregnancy. But she became more and more convinced of the difficulty of survival in the slums. Despite the advanced state of her pregnancy and the awkwardness of her protruding stomach, she had to go out scavenging with her younger brothers and sisters at the Wakalima Market, picking up food tipped on the street when the wholesalers unloaded their wares from their trucks onto the retailers’ stalls.

On 2 November 1991 Beatrice went into Kenya’s oldest and busiest maternity hospital to give birth to Francis Njogu, a bouncing baby boy. Three months later she was back in Chum Kadude with the baby, joining the ranks of an emerging Kenyan reality: the street family. She sometimes talks optimistically about quitting the street life and finding sponsorship to be trained as a tailor. “I want to help myself and my mother,” she says.

For four years, Beatrice was a child of the streets. Now she is a young mother of the streets, with a child of her own. Her younger brothers and sisters are in an intermediate situation: they live at home, but make a living on the streets during the day, coming back to a dark, empty house in the evenings. The reason they are all living so close to the edge is Esther Wangu’s inability to earn enough to supply their basic needs.

Esther works hard, no one could doubt that.
She often works over 14 hours a day. And she is
lucky to have a job: research undertaken as part of
the ICDC study found that only 22 per cent of the
mothers of slum children were in regular salaried
employment. Esther Wangui's problem is that she
is the only adult bringing money into the family.
Her husband, who had not been a stable presence in
the house for years, and who never contributed any
regular money to the family, left for good soon
after the birth of her last baby, Anthony Ndung'u.

This makes Esther's one of the growing number
And it is her situation, and the situation of millions
of women like her, that is at the root of the problem
of children on the streets, kept out of school to work
or help the household survive, sometimes dropping
out of the household altogether. Very often it is the
'especial difficult circumstances' of Kenya's
women that create the 'especial difficult circum-
stances' of their children. It is for this reason that so
much of this exploration of the plight of Kenya's
urban children is focussed on the factors affecting
women's lives: those factors are an integral part of
the influences shaping the lives of their children.

Only when the full picture of women's and
children's interwoven predicaments are under-
stood, and responses developed both for women
and for children and for women and their children
together, is it possible to do something longlasting
to relieve the plight of children. Some of the pro-
gramme approaches described in this publication
are for children, but equally, many are for women.
They have been designed to help mothers such as
Esther Wangui overcome the economic difficulties
facing them, to make possible a life of reduced
drudgery, increased income, and better child-bear-
ing and child-rearing prospects. Without targeting
the women of the slums, their growing children
will face no other option than resort to the streets
along paths similar to that pursued by Beatrice
Wanjiku. It is in the hope that strategies may be
developed to reduce the swelling throng of dam-
aged child lives inhabiting Kenya's urban hinter-
land that this publication has been prepared.
THE ICDC research study into the situation of urban children of Kenya focussed on the country’s three main cities: Nairobi, the capital (population 2,145,000), Kisumu on Lake Victoria, the main city of Western Kenya (population 398,000), and Mombasa, one of the most important and ancient ports on the East African coast (population 658,000). Separate studies were undertaken, and although the situation of children in difficult circumstances has many similarities in the different environments, there are also contrasts.

Nairobi, the capital

Although the various slum areas in and around Nairobi differ in terms of their history and ethnic mix – just as they do in Kisumu and Mombasa – three particular settlements were described in the Nairobi study as being typical of the conditions faced by children in especially difficult circumstances. These three settlements were Kitui, Ngomongo and Mathare Valley.

Kitui – four kilometres from the centre of Nairobi – is often known as the ‘igloo village’ because many of the dwellings are made of plastic and sticks in the shape of an Eskimo igloo. Women heads of household form a dominant group in the area and the population of children in the area is very large. It is not uncommon to find households where both an unmarried mother and her teenage daughter both have infants at their breasts. There are no latrines: children simply defecate on the paths between the igloos and refuse is piled up in heaps on the edge of the village.

Ngomongo is about ten kilometres from the city centre and is inhabited by shanty-dwellers whose homes were destroyed when they were evicted from the old Grogan Road squatter settlement 13 years ago. It is the fastest growing slum area in Nairobi and, as in Kitui, children form the bulk of the population with 33 per cent of the population under ten years of age. The drainage is poor so the area becomes a muddy swamp during the rainy season.

Mathare Valley, Kenya’s most notorious slum area, currently consists of about 200,000 people, the majority migrants from the rural areas: a recent survey of women aged over 15 revealed that 91 per cent were born outside Nairobi. As with the other slum areas, the population of children and female-headed households is overwhelmingly large, but 61 per cent of all adult women in the area earn less than KSh 650 (US$21) a month.

There have been considerable efforts to improve the conditions of the inhabitants with provision of clean water, latrines and street lighting in some areas. Forty-eight per cent of Mathare Valley dwellers are illiterate and only 20 per cent are in formal wage employment. Fifteen per cent of the population in Mathare consists of children below the age of five.

Children – mainly boys – making out on the streets of downtown Nairobi have been a familiar sight for many years. The generic term applied to them is ‘parking boys’, deriving from one of their more visible activities: directing motorists, for a coin or two, to empty parking spaces along the congested streets of the city. Nairobi’s street children are found in three major geographical areas: the central market of Waiulimba, the central dumping site of Mukuru in Dandora and in Kariua Village, a back street in the Parklands area.

Conditions in Kariua Village are particularly degraded. There is only one toilet for 53 households. None of the adults who live there are employed and none of the children go to school, though a large polythene tent has recently been erected for informal lessons in the afternoons. The rest of the time the children, especially the girls, beg with their mothers outside the local hotel, the cinema and the masups.

Kisumu, Western Kenya

Kisumu was chosen to be part of the ICDC study because it is one of several medium-sized cities in Kenya which are undergoing a process of rapid expansion. Though there are many children in especially difficult circumstances in the city, there are as yet relatively few actual street children. In this sense Kisumu may be a ‘Nairobi in the making’ as far as children are concerned.

Two areas of Kisumu were studied by the research team. The first of these – Kaloleni Community – was originally used as a graveyard, surrounded by scrubland. It was occupied mainly by
grave-diggers and caretakers of Arabic coastal descent, who intermarried with the local people. During the 1980s the whole area was notorious as a hideout for all sorts of crooks - car thieves, petty criminals, drug-peddlers, prison escapees. But more recently the Municipal Council has been trying to upgrade the district, dividing it into plots and leasing them to latter-day migrants from the Coast, the only people prepared to live there.

The lease-holders have typically built large houses on their plots for their own use. The area therefore consists of a few reasonably constructed houses with a plethora of dilapidated mud-and-tin houses in between. The people who live there are predominantly Muslim - 80 per cent - with many of the social customs that implies.

Polygyny is common, since Islam permits men to marry up to four wives. Divorce is common too, since this is easily procured within the Moslem faith, but although a man may easily rid himself of his wife, she is not permitted to divorce him. In fact women in this society are regarded as subservient beings, who must obey their husbands without question and whose primary role is within the home as mothers and housekeepers. In the Moslem tradition a girl may be betrothed at birth, often to an older man, and may be handed over to her husband - with or without her consent - as soon as she reaches puberty.

Many of the men are absent working as migrant workers elsewhere; but those who are present, and who have jobs, work at the local garment factory. Because women are not expected to work outside the home, very little value is placed on educating girls and large numbers drop out at an early age. This means that when they do grow up and get married, and if they subsequently are divorced by their husbands, they have no training or skills to prepare them for a life of independence.

Indeed Moslem families do not take formal education very seriously for their sons either, often turning a blind eye when they skip classes or drop out of school. On the other hand they set great store

“They have survived well without going to school. They can’t see what all the fuss is about”

in making sure their sons receive Koranic teaching in their own madarassas (mosque) schools.

The other area is the Obungu/Kandani estate district which borders the main industrial area of the city. In contrast to the Kaloleni Community, the people living here are mainly Luo from the countryside surrounding Kisumu, who migrated into the city looking for work in the cotton mills and in the recently opened Kenya Breweries factory. There are some one- and two-roomed concrete houses, built by plot owners and rented out, as well as clusters of mud-and-tin or mud-and-thatch houses. Few have electricity, and in both this area and in Kaloleni, water must be purchased from kiosks.

The numbers of female-headed households are increasing. Many women who are not formally married have up to seven offspring from the same number of different fathers. To all intents and purposes, these women are ‘single’, in the sense that they carry the long-term weight of economic responsibility for the household. Children from families like these are likely to drop out of school to help support the family doing charcoal picking, paper collecting and scrap-metal dealing.

Mombasa, on the coast

Mombasa is Kenya’s main port and has been subject to a great deal of in-migration. The city is densely populated and Swahili people - who are of African-Arab descent - constitute a 75 per cent majority. The predominantly Christian communities of Magongo and Kongowea consist mainly of migrants from surrounding rural areas seeking work in the port and cement factories.

The fact that the Swahili are predominantly Muslim gives the area a distinctive atmosphere and produces similar social conditions to those in the small Moslem community in Kitumu.

In recent years population increase has made living off the land more problematic. At the same time, the community’s traditional monopoly on trading has also been encroached upon by other communities, notably local Asians. It seems that members of the old Swahili community have been slow to develop alternatives to their traditional sources of income.

Unlike other Kenyans, the coastal people have not stressed education as a passport to upward mobility. This is partly because of their Islamic beliefs: the historical association of education with Christianity may have coloured the perceptions of Mombasa parents (or guardians) towards the value of education. "Most of them don't take education seriously," says Bakari Chambo who runs a primary school in the city’s largest slum area. "They say they have survived well without going to school. They can't see what all the fuss is about."

Though there are few exceptions, most of the Swahili are poor, their activities being confined to petty trade and unskilled artisanry. A walk through the narrow lanes of the squatter settlement of Majengo brings one face to face with school-age children selling mabuteri (donuts), whose mothers make for a living. A survey of children in difficult circumstances carried out in the city found that most of these children’s mothers were single
either because they were widows or divorcees.

Because of the high rates of divorce and remarriage among both Swahili and the polygamous Christian people, many families are made up of step-parents and step-children. This results in large numbers of children being neglected or ill-treated because they are not living with adults who feel responsible for their well-being.

In a familiar pattern, mothers are often unable to provide enough food for their children and can seldom afford school fees as well. Mothers often leave home at dawn for casual work at Kilindini Harbour’s various go-downs, leaving children without food. Such children have been forced to adopt various survival strategies, often injurious to their well-being.

Although there are no visible street children in Mombasa, there are beach children instead, though very few actually sleep in the open. They are found in markets along the coast, and in beach hotels where they are employed selling ice-cream - *bunafu* - and snacks such as *samosas* for a small salary, food and accommodation.

**Women: the new urban migrants**

The majority of people living in the slums and squatter encampments of Nairobi, Kinuru, and Mombasa have their origins in the rural areas. The forces contributing to rural-urban migration are both historical and economic. Mass migration into Kenya’s urban centres is essentially a post-independence phenomenon, particularly as it concerns women and children.

In the days when Kenya was a British colony, the administrators only allowed migration into the city of able-bodied, unattached young men. The few women who found their way into the towns came in as domestic workers for Europeans and Asians, or as wives of white-collar men working in public services or in the factories.

But although women were not permitted to come to the cities at that time, their rural environments were becoming increasingly hostile. The official registration of land that began during the colonial era meant that farms were almost always registered in the name of individuals, invariably men. This put an end to the group ownership systems that used to pertain, where a village might own land communally and plots were then allocated to families according to their need. Land registration also undermined women’s independence as farmers by interfering with their traditional usufruct rights to land.

For women whose husbands had migrated to the cities this was a double blow. Forbidden to accompany their husbands to the towns, they then found their access to land was forfeit because their husbands were not there to register for land in their names. Not surprisingly, women who found themselves in this predicament were among the first women to take advantage of relaxed access to urban centres after Independence.

Today, the reasons prompting people to mi-
The phenomenon of single mothers

The majority of more recent migrants are young women from poor families. Kenya is by no means unique in this. Demographic studies from all over Africa have shown that people who migrate into the cities from rural areas tend to be the poorest and least-skilled people in their villages.

Many of them are mothers without a regular spouse shouldering responsibility for the household. And it is this, more than any other factor, that appears to be closely linked to the problem of urban children in difficult circumstances in Kenya. Indeed, UNICEF's 1992 "Situation Analysis of Children and Women in Kenya" argues that female headship of a family is one of the factors most closely associated with poverty.

Nearly one-third of Kenyan households - 29 per cent - are headed by women. This gives Kenya one of the highest proportions of women in difficult circumstances in Africa. And this is the figure for the population of the whole country. In low-income areas the proportion is much higher. In
Mathare, for instance, it has been estimated that between 60 and 80 per cent of all households are headed by women. Considering that the majority of such women will be among the poorest of Kenya's poor, the implications for the children living in these areas are bleak.

Why are so many women migrants mothers of several children but without a spouse? The single-parent phenomenon, like other phenomena underlying the problems of urban children in Kenya, is multi-faceted. It is the result of a combination of social and economic factors, including the increasing employment of women outside the home, connected to the impact of rapid urbanization and the unfamiliar city lifestyle on family ties and conjugal life. These have led to high rates of divorce and separation, lack of incentive to marry early, abandonment of women, widowhood without traditional family support from the husband’s relations, sexual promiscuity, and illegitimacy.

A special analysis of the impact of changing family structures on the problems faced by Kenya’s urban children singles out children from female-headed households as being particularly disadvantaged. Such children often lack the food, shelter, clothing and education, not to mention parental care and protection, that many children in stable families take for granted (see Case 0).

A striking feature of the extended family structure is the high proportion of members who are dependent on their more affluent relatives. Urban migration, which is an almost inevitable consequence of industrialization and development, tends to result in what has been called the ‘nuclearization’ of the family. This contrasts with the old polygamous family structures, which provided a framework for relations between providers and dependents and for family obligations.

Polygamy has always been condoned in Kenya as one way for a man to ensure he had enough offspring to work on the family land, and at least one son to inherit. According to village tradition, the first wife was always consulted about the choice of her co-wife, thus avoiding conflicts and jealousy. Indeed the first wife often welcomed another pair of hands to help with the domestic work and labour in the fields during the growing season.

However, polygamy is less tenable for women living in a modern monetary economy. Away from the traditions of rural life, a first wife’s sense of seniority is easily undermined by the arrival of a younger second wife. Nowadays, menfolk in urban areas often do not trouble to consult their first wives on the choice of their co-wives, and this results, almost inevitably, in relationships which are strained and conflictual. The wives compete for their husband’s attention – and for a share of whatever money he manages to earn – and may suffer considerable emotional stress and psychological insecurity as a result. The atmosphere in some polygamous households, particularly those in the urban areas, is distinctly hostile. This, in turn, is often reflected in gossip, malice, accusations and counter-accusations of witchcraft. Helen Atieno (See

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### Case I: “They threw me off my husband’s land”

Loretta is a 27-year-old widow and mother of five children aged between three months and 11 years of age. She dropped out of Standard Four when she was 15 in order to get married. But when her husband died, his family threw her off his land because none of the three children she had at that time were boys.

With nowhere else to go, she packed up her belongings and travelled to Kangemi, a slum neighbourhood on the outskirts of Nairobi. She chose Kangemi because some people she knew from the village had come here themselves some years earlier and she thought they might be able to help her.

They were able to find her a job as a house-girl, and things began to look up. She began an affair with a married man and he gave her some money now and then to buy food, and helped out with the rent. But he refused to contribute towards school fees of the older children, arguing that they were not his responsibility. She bore two more children as a result of her liaison with him, but the relationship broke up shortly before the birth of her fifth child.

Her main source of income now is from the sale of fresh produce which she buys at the central Kangemi market on market days and then sells at nearby Uhuru. In a good month, she manages to make KSh 900 (US$31), but this is not enough to keep her school-age children in school. She worries about her children’s health, saying that they are often sick with malaria and pains in their chest.

She thinks she would like to start trading in old clothes: she knows of people who have done quite well in this business. But she doesn’t know where she will ever get the money to open a kiosk. She feels there is no-one she can turn to in her extended family – she left her own home at 15 when she got married and her in-laws have disowned her. Anyway, she could never afford the bus-fare to take her back home.
Case II believes that her mother died as a result of being bewitched by her stepmother, a suspicion which makes her very frightened for her own safety. A combination of low self-esteem and resentment, coupled with a husband’s preferential treatment of the younger wife, often leads to divorce and separation. The first wife’s children suffer whatever happens. Either mother and children continue to live in a household seething with rivalry and hostility, or she leaves with them, and they all move to a slum or squatting shack to live in poverty, or she leaves without them, condemning them to the dubious parenting of a stepmother who may well be resentful and neglectful.

In the case of children such as Helen Atieno, the extended family network has still proved strong enough to support them when their nuclear family fails them. Many others are less fortunate. With the safety-net of the extended family broken in so many places, the children of poorer relatives often find themselves falling through.

Inflation is beginning to make families regard children more as liabilities than assets, especially in urban areas where people must buy their food rather than grow it on their own shambas (farming plots). According to the 1989 Kenya Demographic and Health Survey, the total fertility rate has fallen from eight children in 1977 to 6.7 in 1989. Faced with difficulties in providing for their own children, families are less willing than in the past to assume the added burden of caring for less fortunate relatives. Children who used to belong to everyone in the extended family now find themselves belonging to nobody at all.

Illegitimacy and poverty: a modern problem

Illegitimacy was almost unknown under customary law, since children were considered to be the responsibility of the whole community rather than of individual parents. When a young man made a

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Case II: “My step-mother is a witch”

Thirteen-year-old Helen Atieno’s mother died early last year. But she has been separated from her for much longer than that. Her mother abandoned her soon after her husband married a second wife and brought this new woman home to live with the family.

“T was because she was infertile,” Helen Atieno explains. “I was born after many years of marriage, then there was another long wait before my little brother was born.” It was soon after the second child was born that her father married again.

At this time the family were living in the chaotic, crowded streets of Kilele, a slum settlement on the outskirts of Kisumu far away from their original rural homeland. This seems to have made Helen’s father less sensitive to both his wife’s feelings and to customary dictates. He did not seek his first wife’s permission to marry again, let alone sought her advice in the selection. Meanwhile, the home into which he brought his new wife was not the loosely clustered group of dwellings that make up a typical rural homestead in which each wife may have her hearth and dignify be preserved; but the cramped dwelling of an urban slum.

Helen Atieno blames the second wife for her parents’ marriage breakdown. “That woman is very kimbelembele,” she says, referring to her stepmother’s habit of pushing herself forward and flattering her father. Whatever the reason, her mother soon divorced her could not live in the same house as her rival. She left without warning and was not seen again until recently last year, when she turned up at her matrimonial home in Ulumbi Village in the East Gem Location. By then she had become very ill – Helen Atieno doesn’t know what with – and she died soon after.

The relationship between Helen Atieno and her stepmother, which had never been cordial, reached its lowest ebb after her mother’s death. “That woman is very quarrelsome. She can quarrel continuously for two days on end,” she complains. “She never beat me up, but she was always making me do all sorts of jobs. If I failed in any one of her assignments, like gathering firewood or going to the well for water, then she would start quarrelling.” She says her stepmother gives her own two children preferential treatment. “It makes me very unhappy,” she says.

The pressures at home and her grief over her mother’s death affected Helen Atieno’s school-work. She soon started skipping classes and eventually dropped out of school altogether. Her father was worried about her academic failure, but having recently retired from his job as a security guard, and with three other children to support, it was impossible for him to do anything to help her.

Fortunately, one of her mother’s relatives, Phedella, has been keeping an eye on her and paid for her enrolment in evening classes. “She has had so many difficulties,” says Phedella, who works as a hospital in Kisumu. “We thought we should try to give her a second chance.”
girl pregnant, he was compelled to marry her: not just to protect the reputation of the girl's family, but also to ensure that the child was born within the security of an extended kinship network.

The Luo and Luyia people of Western Kenya are particularly strict in this regard. In their communities, if the father-to-be refused to marry the pregnant woman - for whatever reason - he was still required to take care of the child, give it his name and bring it up among his other children. Indeed, until 1969, a man's responsibility to provide for all his children was enshrined in Kenyan law. Children born out of wedlock were protected by the Affiliation Act, which required biological fathers to maintain their offspring.

The repeal of the Affiliation Act in 1969 shifted the burden of caring for these children onto the mothers. The repeal was accompanied by one of the hottest debates in Kenya's parliamentary history. It was argued that the Act had been abused by women. The almost exclusively male parliament argued that women with children born of fathers to whom they were not married used the provisions of the Act to claim maintenance from more than one man, telling each that he was the biological father.

Whether this was true or not, the result of the repeal of the Act has been great hardship for women with what is, for the first time in Kenya's social experience, are 'illegitimate' children: children not recognized or provided for under the law. Without any means of support for their children, such women find themselves in urgent need of employment in the formal or informal sector. In rural areas, mothers who need to work tend to leave their children - by the day, or for long periods if necessary - with their own mothers. But in the city, they often have no one to turn to. Mothers with no time to spare for rearing and nurture from the economic problems with which familyhood has presented them, are often the mothers who are forced to deploy their children's labour as aids to household support; and who may find themselves watching helplessly as their children drift into the streets.

For the first time in Kenya's social experience, there are 'illegitimate' children, not recognized under the law.

The ultimate cause of the repeal of the Affiliation Act was that the number of children being born about whom there could be dispute as to fatherhood - and therefore, over whom there could be conflicts as to responsibility - had grown very considerably. Such a situation was almost impossible in the traditional rural society, where people knew about each other's comings and goings and sanctions would be harsh against sexual or marital non-conformist behaviour. Leaving aside male-female questions of responsibility, the new phenomenon of children born out-of-wedlock or 'illegitimately' itself points to the breakdown of another element of the traditional family structure.

Industrialization and urbanization have eroded cultural inhibitions to premarital sex. Young couples increasingly cohabitate before - or instead of - getting married. The traditional family structure gave parents and other members of the family an important say in the choice of marriage partner for their children. Even when young lovers floated parental disapproval and eloped, the groom's family hurried to contact the bride's parents in order to formalize the relationship through negotiations and exchange of bride wealth. Not so any longer.

There is a growing trend towards cohabitation, particularly in urban areas. While cohabitation is usually excused on the grounds that the couple want to test compatibility before taking the plunge, children are often the result of this experiment. And although the man and woman usually function as husband and wife while they remain living together, complications regarding the custody of children and the inheritance of property often arise when the relationship breaks up.

The new instability of marriages

Cohabitation is an inherently unstable arrangement. But the rising divorce and separation rates imply that formal marriages also appear to be much...
less stable than they used to be. This instability can be attributed to the loss of the social, moral and economic support that couples used to receive from their extended families. In traditional communities, marriages were held together at all costs.

Traditionally, a son relied on his father to pay his bride price - the compensation paid to the bride’s family for the loss of their daughter. This gave the father considerable say in the choice of his future daughter-in-law - and an incentive to ensure that the marriage worked. If the couple fought, both families would intervene as peace-makers to maintain the link between their two kinship networks.

But with more young unmarried people living and working in towns, marriage is fast becoming a two-person affair rather than a union of two families. The education and financial independence of many young people in urban areas has reduced parents’ control over whom their children marry. And without the restraints and sanctions that are applied in closely-knit traditional communities, extra-marital affairs and domestic violence have become more common. Also on the rise are rates of infection by sexually-transmitted disease, which can lead in turn to infertility and the separation of partners or to the man taking a second wife, as in the case of Helen Atieno’s father.

One of the ways in which male aggression and female oppression are expressed is through wife-beating, which has become a widespread and very serious problem in many urban families across ethnic groups. Often the violence spills over onto the children. Eighty-five per cent of children interviewed as part of the Nairobi research commissioned by ICDC reported being physically abused by their parents.

The threat of the bulldozer

The overcrowdedness of slum life is not the only potential cause of family tension. Insecurity of tenure is another important factor. It means, moreover, that few people have the heart to improve their dwellings and their living environment, even if they can afford to. Over 85 per cent of Nairobi’s slum population live either in rented rooms or in illegal ‘squatter’ settlements.

There is a plethora of policies aimed at maintaining Kenyan cities at the highest standards of hygiene; these almost invariably worsen the plight of already marginalized people. Urban planning restrictions forbid the development of squatter settlements in urban areas and punish squatters with eviction, usually accompanied by demolition of their homes. When so many slum families are held together by the most precarious of threads, a series of evictions is almost guaranteed to cause further breaks in the fragile family structure, encouraging children onto the streets.

The Nairobi City authorities have been involved in several evictions in recent years. The most dramatic of these was in May 1990, when squatters were evicted from Muoroito, a slum village on the fringes of the city centre. The justification for this action was both to “keep the city clean” and to return the land to its legal owners, the Nairobi City Commission Cooperative Society. The residents claim they were given no warning: the demolition squad simply moved in at dawn and started pulling down their homes, bulldozing them and their belongings to the ground. The terrified residents retaliated and the whole area was the scene of a pitched battle which left some 40 people injured.

The evictions unleashed an unprecedented uproar and one of the most vocal critics was the local Member of Parliament - then a cabinet minister - who was out of the country at the time. His public sympathy with the squatters cost him his cabinet post. He was even accused of having incited squatters to defy eviction.

Although the residents of Muoroito were subsequently allowed to rebuild their houses, they were evicted again just six months later. On this occasion 34 elderly people were given alternative accommodation. The rest were simply told to wait until they were allocated an alternative site in an area far from the centre of the city.

At around the same time, the 30,000 residents of Kibagare, another slum village, were given a ten-minute warning that their homes were about to be demolished. The demolition, which took just four days to complete, was carried out by the youth wing of the ruling party, the Kenya African National Union (KANU).

Enforcing housing standards has particular implications for households headed by women - which are the type of families that predominate in the illegal settlements. Classifying certain areas as illegal can mean that even minimal services are denied: water supplies, covered market places, health clinics, electricity, paved pathways or streets, toilet facilities, police vigilance - which has its positive as well as negative sides as far as the inhabitants are concerned.

As with settlement, so with occupations. The majority of slum inhabitants are obliged to work in the casual workforce or informal sector since they are unskilled and ill-equipped for permanent salaried employment. One study among urban children in Nairobi revealed that 49 per cent of their fathers
and 54 per cent of their mothers were either self-employed, casually employed, or unemployed. Such families often eke out a living by trading, vending or running a small kiosk. But the already meagre livelihood to which they are reduced is further exacerbated by restrictive regulations which control their income-earning activities.

Laws forbid hawking on the very streets which are likely to offer the best income. Hawkers are driven away from the more affluent areas, regularly suffering confiscation of their goods and arrest by the police. They face up to six months' imprisonment, leaving their children unsupported at home in the slums. A recent tactic has been to confine them to areas where the authorities know there will be too few customers to make their business viable.

In 1991 there was what appeared to be a concerted effort to deal with the perceived 'nuisance' of kiosks and hawkers. Although the city administration's intention to demolish 7,000 kiosks was averted by political objection, the harassment of both hawkers and kiosk owners was stepped up. A market was established to accommodate the hawkers - mostly women - who were evicted from the city centre. But it was situated in a suburb, miles away from the busy streets where their best customers walk.

An unhealthy environment

Classifying certain areas as illegal can also mean that even minimal services are denied. And though...

Arrested hawkers face up to six months in prison, leaving their children unsupported at home in the slums

a communal water supply like a standpipe would serve slum women well. Urban planning laws often insist on individual connections so that there is someone to send the bill to. Many women are therefore forced to walk long distances for water, or pay an exorbitant price to a better-off neighbour who has set up a commercial water kiosk.

A recent survey found that 95.4% of Nairobi's
slum population could be said to be effectively without sanitation. Carried out by the Kenya Consumers' Organization (KCO) early in 1992, the survey discovered that, although as many as 29 per cent of slum dwellers had access to communal flush toilets, these were non-functional most of the time because of the unavailability of water. This means people either using the paths between the houses or the rivers and streams running through the neighbourhood. "People just keep a polythene bag in the corner of their rooms and go in that," says Alice Gitahie who runs a nursing home in the Mathare Valley slum area. "Then when it's full they just dump it on the path outside. They wash inside their houses and throw the dirty water where everyone is walking."

The researchers were also concerned about the shortage of bathing facilities. While 57 per cent of slums surveyed by KCO use communal baths, 38 per cent have no such facilities. In Mathare Valley the figure is even higher, with 82 per cent of households having to collect water and wash in basins at night in their houses, or outside in the latrine – or even in the filthy, polluted rivers.

Alice Gitahie says her patients often complain of dysentery and food poisoning. And acute respiratory infections are common among children. This is partly because the single room each family inhabits is cramped and stuffy and often full of smoke, having to serve as kitchen, living room and bedroom all at the same time. In an attempt to maintain some semblance of privacy, the single small window is hardly ever opened. Even when it is, the prevailing stench of decaying garbage and human excreta could hardly be said to improve the atmosphere inside.

This dismal situation is further frustrated by official interference in efforts by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to uplift the sanitation standards of the slum communities. Such is the case in Kibera, where the fate of an NGO pit latrine emptying initiative started in June 1990, currently hangs in the balance.

The NGO concerned is the Kenya Water for Health Organization (KWAHO), which started off in 1976 as the UNICEF/NGO Water for Health Project. Its purpose was to enable disadvantaged groups to achieve better access to clean and sufficient water supplies, and to improve sanitation through the construction of ventilated improved pit latrines (VIPs). KWAHO worked with 14 women's groups in Kibera's nine villages, helping install water tanks which provided water at a considerably lower price than that charged in the private water kiosks: K. Sh. 30, compared to K. Sh. 50.

KWAHO also built demonstration pit latrines, each serving 50 to 100 people. With almost 30 per cent of the residents lacking bathing facilities, and therefore using the latrines as bathrooms, their filling rate is obviously high. The need for a service to empty the latrines soon became evident.

Kibera's informal status means that it does not qualify for city sanitation services. Besides, the city's public health by-laws disapprove of pit latrines on the grounds that they could contaminate water sources. But the reality of the situation is that residents of squatter settlements need sanitation facilities, and provide themselves with them in spite of the by-laws.

In response to this problem and to the lack of space to dig new pits KWAHO was inspired to introduce a pit latrine emptying service. They managed to obtain a special vehicle costing US$44,163 with funding from NORAD. The service has become popular, serving an average of six five-paying clients in a day, at K. Sh. 150 per load. Between 30 and 60 requests are pending at any one time.

However, local bosses have tried to insist that the management of the project be handed over to the community without taking into account the latter's lack of capacity to maintain the vehicle in a good state of repair. It seems likely that the service...
would soon collapse if the officials get their way. This is one example of a lack of sympathetic understanding by authorities — in this case local provincial officials, not those of the municipality — in the difficulties of hygienic living in the slums, and the need to facilitate other approaches than those envisaged for relatively better-off suburban areas.

The lack of running water in the slums and squatter settlements has another negative aspect: it increases already dangerous levels of fire risk. Shanty fires are a regular hazard in the closely-built little wooden-walled houses, especially in the dry season. The use of kerosene stoves inside are a major contributing factor, with dry winds and scattered litter carrying the flames quickly from house to house. Tragic stories abound, of children burnt to death in wooden shacks where they have been locked 'for safety' while their mothers go out to work or to drink.

**Children under nutritional stress**

One of the measures commonly used to determine the extent of children's condition is their nutritional status. At the end of the 1970s, it was estimated that about one-third of all Kenyans were either malnourished or under-nourished. The urban poor, together with pastoralists, smallholders, landless rural workers and disabled people were identified at that time as being the most likely to be nutritionally disadvantaged.

There is a close association between nutrition, intelligence, health and economic development. Malnutrition causes mental and physical deficiencies, which lead in turn to malnutrition-related illnesses. And these are a major cause of absenteeism from class among poor children, eventually causing them to fall behind so far with their schooling that they are almost bound to drop out. Children who drop out of school are more likely to be unemployed or able to make a living only in menial occupations, and so will be less able in due course to provide food and care for their own children.

Unless this circle is broken through special programmes aimed at the nutritionally disadvantaged, economic growth is likely to widen both nutritional and income inequities and thereby hamper the process of economic development in the country, according to economists. Such programmes may prove all the harder to bring about given that Kenya is in the throes of implementing structural adjustment programmes to satisfy international Monetary Fund and World Bank conditions for loans to support the balance of payments. This has meant devaluation of the Kenyan shilling, cuts in government spending, higher taxes on mass consumption goods, and the removal of price controls. The Government has also cut its salary bill by laying off large numbers of civil servants. These have mostly belonged to the less-skilled grades, those least likely to find alternative employment.

**Removing controls on food prices has hit poor people hard. The price of maize meal has more than doubled**

Removing the controls on food prices has hit poor people especially hard. In recent months the controlled price of maize meal, Kenya's main staple, has more than doubled. One of the biggest blows suffered by the urban poor is the erosion of the value of the Kenyan shilling in recent years. In 1979, a Nairobi household of five people would have needed to spend just K. Sh 620 (US$20) on food in order to meet the daily intake recommended by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO). By 1984, that same household would have needed to spend K. Sh 3,000 — nearly twice as much — to buy the same amount of food. But the minimum wage was just K. Sh 480 (US$15.50) a month at that time, meaning that such households would have needed to earn more than twice the minimum wage to buy food alone.

More recent figures come from the Kenya Consumers' Organization's baseline survey of the basic needs of the urban poor. Based on calculations on the current minimum wage of K. Sh 964 (US$31), KCO notes that families were only able to spend K. Sh 604 per month on food. This is because food is not the only call on the family's income — there is rent, for example, as well as fuel, water, travel fares, clothes, soap powder, school fees, and other basics. In fact it is estimated that poor people in urban areas are only able to spend 30 to 50 per cent of their incomes on food. The result is chronic hunger and malnutrition — and the ill-health, particularly among young children, this inevitably brings in its wake.
How do slum children cope?

A boy emerges from an alley adjacent to Tom Mboya Street in Nairobi. He is carrying a bundle of waste paper collected from dustbins and hurrying to a middle-man who will buy the paper from him and sell it to a recycling plant. The boy’s name is Chesire Barasa Thomas. He looks no more than 13 – he doesn’t know his exact age. He dropped out of school when he was too young to remember such details, because his father who was a lab overseer on a coffee farm, couldn’t afford the fees. He has been collecting waste paper because he needs the money to buy sugar and soap for his mother, younger brother and sister.

Chesire is a ‘parking boy’, the term applied to all boys who work on the streets of Nairobi. Other boys work in the market repackaging potatoes for stall-holders in return for food, or picking up spilled food, or stealing it, and repackaging it for sale.

Some children work as porters for public transport, or collect the fares on the matatu, communal taxis, one of the means people use to move around within Nairobi or from Nairobi to other towns and cities. Many work in food kiosks and small restaurants, washing dishes and peeling potatoes, often with only food as payment. They either live in the area where they work, or come in daily from outlying slums where they live with their families. A few sleep on the streets near the markets.

Children in these various occupations in the informal sector are usually earning money to help out at home. In some cases, they keep most of what they earn, or have left home and are living independently. Some become caught up in semi-legal and illegal occupations. They may sell bhang, operating as a human shield for adult drug dealers.

The children who work on Nairobi’s Dandora dump – boys and girls with an average age of about 14 – come from the surrounding slum areas to which they return at night. They sort through the waste thrown into the pit, dividing it into categories – papers, scrap metal, medicine bottles, clothing materials, batteries – which they sell to dealers. The boys in particular seem to be high on drugs or glue fumes most of the time and many of the children have infected wounds from broken glass and dirty toys. They are regularly sick from eating contaminated waste food. The children, as a group, are feared by local residents.

There are ‘parking girls’ to be found on the streets of Nairobi too, but they are far less visible than the boys. Most are hidden away, working as house-girls or prostitutes, or in the kitchens of restaurants, or scavenging for salable items on the rubbish dumps.

In Kisumu, many young out-of-school boys are found round the Municipal Market and bus park where they work and, in some cases, sleep. They work mainly as basket boys, carrying goods around the market and to and from the buses. Some work as porters and ice cream vendors, besides selling peanuts, which has earned Kisumu’s street children the nickname of njaga (peanut) boys. Yet other children collect paper for sale to dealers, or collect charcoal. A favourite pastime for those for whom the street has become a way of life is glue-smuggling or smoking near the Kisumu Social Hall. They may also play, and sleep, in the parks nearby.

Downtown Kisumu, by the lake, is the place for the more experienced boys. There are many hotels by the lake where the boys earn a small amount of money for washing the client’s cars. Others are paid a tin of porridge for sleeping on top of piles of waste-paper and ‘guarding’ them.

Though no children live permanently on the streets of Kisumu as yet, many – especially those who are the children of young women – are often seen helping their mothers selling vegetables, cassava chips, mahamri, bhajias and fish. Some chew mitaa and smoke tobacco and bhang.

In Mombasa, where similarly there are at least so clearly identifiable street children, the ‘beach boys’ are close to a condition of independence from their home settings. They are, in fact, male prostitutes, touting for trade or peddling drugs to the tourists. Some children are employed as house-girls or house-boys in the few non-Muslim households where the wives are out at work. Girls are
also involved in prostitution and drugs, but to a lesser extent than the boys. Boys and girls also sell trinkets and beg. In the Moslem areas there are also what are known as 'maskani boys': youths who gather in shed-like structures in open places where they pass the time talking, story-telling, playing draughts, taking and selling drugs.

Talking to Mombasa people about such children, the word malezi recurs again and again. Malezi is Ki-Swahili for upbringing. When a child drops out of school or is arrested, 'malezi maovu' – or bad upbringing – is always blamed. At the same time, several different researchers mention the lack of discipline in Moslem households. Parents seem very fond of their children and tolerant of their behaviour – at least in the boys' case. One reason suggested to account for this is the fact that most children in Mombasa are not raised by their biological parents: they are assigned to guardians from their birth, who are responsible for all their needs and who even leave them their property when they die. Drug abuse is a serious problem among children and teenagers of Mombasa's urban poor. Often the habit starts with glue-sniffing while the children are at school. They buy the stuff from class-mates who use the money to purchase things they want: their parents cannot afford more than the barest necessities for their children.

All these children, in Nairobi, Kisumu and Mombasa, are children in difficult circumstances. Whether they are still closely connected with their families, or have drifted away into a life of independent survival, their lives are characterized by early arrival into the state of adulthood. They are short of nurture, short of protection, short of educational preparation for adult life, and they have entered the world of work and earning long before maturity. Social and economic stresses within their family background have led – usually through no fault of their own – to a partial or total abandonment of childhood in favour of a life-style which is always difficult and sometimes dangerous.

**Children's lack of education**

One of the reasons that children who should be in school are not in school is that primary schooling is not free in Kenya, although there are no formal fees. However, parents are required to pay subsidies each term and contribute to building and other amenity funds, as well as buy school uniforms, books and stationery for their children. These requirements put even basic education beyond the reach of many poor urban families. Shortage of school places, particularly in poorer areas, is another contributing factor. Between 40 and 60 per cent of children living in the poor slum areas of Nairobi, Kisumu and Mombasa do not go to primary school. This contrasts with average primary school enrolment rates of between 76 and 80 per cent in the urban popula-
tion as a whole. Many attend school sporadically, going to classes for a few years, or even a few terms, when there is money available and dropping out when their circumstances change.

Two-thirds of the children interviewed in a study carried out in Nairobi had spent some time in school, but most had attended classes for fewer years than they should have and had fallen behind. Not surprisingly, a third of the children said they were illiterate. A survey of Kenyan slums estimated that only between 50 and 70 per cent of the population can read and write. Various factors contribute to these low rates. Girls, in particular, tend to drop out because they are pregnant or needed to look after younger siblings at home when their mothers are out at work; or because they are sent out to work themselves. (See Case III.)

The Nairobi researchers found that the majority of children who had dropped out of formal schools came from single-parent households, most of them headed by women, 75 per cent of whom were unemployed – comparable with a 25 per cent unemployment rate among the mothers of a comparison sample of children at formal school.

In many areas where poverty is rife and illiteracy rates high, the comparative level of female literacy is lower than that of men, and the enrolment rate of girls tends to be low across the whole educational spectrum. In one district, the rate of primary school enrolment for girls is 42 per cent. Yet, as social analysts are all agreed, education is the vital tool for an improved status of women.

Where girls are not given educational chances, they will tend to repeat the fate of their mothers

Education gives a girl the possibility of a better standard of living and a know-how and confidence to equip herself for adult survival strategies. Where girls are not given educational chances, they will tend to repeat the deplorable prospects and menial occupations of their mothers.

**Case III: "I wish I could play with the other children"**

Margaret is up by 5.00 am, while everyone else in the house is still asleep. She lights the charcoal stove to warm the bathroom and begins to prepare breakfast on the gas cooker. Then she washes the utensils of the one-year-old baby in the bathroom and wakes up the other four children for school. The eldest of the children she looks after is 15 years of age. Margaret is only 12.

Margaret has been a domestic servant since she was eight. Why isn't she in school? "My mother is poor," she explains. "We are seven in the family, and after my father died, we never had enough food. We don't have any clothes, so when a woman from town came to look for a maid my mother said I should work so that I would be able to buy my own clothes."

Though she was sad to leave home, Margaret consented herself with the thought that she earned enough money she would be able to go back again. She had been doing well at school and enjoyed her lessons. But as things turned out, she never did any of the money she earned or even know how much she was owed. "The family had two very young children and I had to do everything for them as well as clean the house all by myself."

On the first day of school she ran away and made her way back home. But her mother insisted she had to go out to work. "When I begged to go to school she threatened to beat me," she recalls with tears in her eyes.

Weeks later Margaret was back in Kiambu city again, working for another family, this time with four children. She had to look after the two younger children when the older ones were at school as well as wash all their clothes, go to the market for vegetables and clean the house.

When the eldest one came back from school, Margaret would sit beside her as she did her homework, hoping to learn something by watching over her shoulder. "One day the girl's mother found me reading her books and really beat me," she says. "I gave up trying to read after that."

But the worst was yet to come. A brother of the man who was staying with the family started harassing Margaret. "Every time I was alone with the children he would make funny gestures and pull me into his bedroom," she explains. "I was too scared to tell anyone, but all the same I tried to resist." Then one weekend when her employers were away he stormed into my room and forced me into things I didn't know. I hate him -- I hate all of them! I hate men!" cries Margaret.

When she ran away this time she knew there was no point going home. So she decided to look for another job. "I suffer the hard work here because I do not have much choice and because I feel safer here than in that other place. Sometimes I wish I could play with the other children when they come back from school but there is always too much housework to do."

Margaret has not seen her family for a year now. "My mother doesn't know where I am. I miss her and my brother and sisters and sometimes I feel like running away. I would still like to go to school," she adds wistfully.
In situations where families preserve educational opportunities for boys, informal schools provide girls with access to some education, providing an alternative set of horizons on a better chance in life. Such schools also operate as a safety net for formal school drop-outs and are therefore an important way of preventing the otherwise inevitable flood of young children onto the streets. These schools are a relatively new feature of slum life in Nairobi, and are described later in more detail.

Child labour: the price of school fees

Some children who drop out of school do so not only because the fees are too heavy a burden for their parents, but because their parents need the income they can produce. Others - those who have begun to lose contact with their families - earn to support themselves.

Whoever receives the financial product of their labour, such children are introduced into the world of work at very young ages, often in contravention of international laws relating to child labour. Like the laws which fine and imprison parents who are too poor to be able to provide for their children, the laws against child labour are blind to the economic issues that force children to work for a living.

Those who look to the law for regulation in this area have been forced to recognize that child labour can never be abolished by legislation because its roots lie in abject poverty. Any society which admires can only be practically applied in the formal labour sector – in factories, offices and workshops which are stable and prominent and amenable to being policed.

But the vast majority of Kenya’s child workers are in the informal sector. They are the parking boys and girls of Nairobi, the baarafa boys of Mombasa, the njagw boys of Kisumu; the house-boys and house-girls of all major towns and cities.

It is well-nigh impossible to apply legal standards of safety in the streets and many children are exposed to hazardous working conditions or are exploited in terms of salary and working hours. Research with children working in domestic set-
tings has revealed that many are ill-treated physically and sexually. Many of the girls in prostitution in and approved schools have previously worked as house-girls.

Children engaged in the business of collecting scrap metal, paper, bottles, plastic containers and bones from dustbins and garbage dumps are doubly abused, first by the dangerous and unhygienic filth in which they work, and second, by the middle men who buy their gleanings for a pittance and sell at a profit to the recycling factories. Little house-girls, children in food service outlets work for long hours for little or no pay. In many cases all they earn is the food their employer gives them. Similar exploitative arrangements are prevalent in so-called 'boarding houses'. A Committee on Working Minors found that child prostitutes are seldom paid directly for their work. When they are paid at all, the proprietors often handed the money straight over to the girls' older relatives.

It is a legal requirement to seek approval from an authorized officer before employing a child. But when a child's earnings supplement a family's income, there is no incentive for parents to insist the employer seeks official permission for the child to work. And yet official approval is essential to ensure that children are not engaged in work that is hazardous to their life, health or morals.

The problem of child labour will not be resolved until primary schooling becomes mandatory - as it is in many other developing countries. Even in this case, such a law would prove ineffective if parents are still required to pay fees to keep their children in school, and continue themselves to be so under-paid that they are dependent on their children to augment their meagre livelihood.

A particular occupational hazard

For some years now, the work of the Undugu Society of Kenya has included weekly rounding up of street girls for treatment of sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs) at the Sisters of Mercy Dispensary in the Eastlands location of Makadara in Nairobi.

Stella Oduor, who is in charge of the health programme at Undugu, says that the older street 'boys' - men aged between 25 and 30 - usually try to avoid girls who they suspect of being infected. And because their street earnings tend to be more than the girls', they are often able to buy some kind of treatment. But because they are seldom able to afford the full dose needed for a proper cure, they often re-infect the girls.

According to Stella Oduor, street girls are ashamed of admitting that they are infected. She says they often complain of a headache or stomach-ache in the hope of being given a drug that will incidentally also cure their STD. But often they are in so much discomfort - from the pain of internal pelvic inflammation or the irritation of trichomonas - that the way they walk gives them away.

Fourteen-year old Anna Wanjiru has syphilis. Her condition was discovered when the girls at Undugu's workshop were examined. "I would never have guessed I had the disease," she confessed. Tall for her age and strikingly beautiful, Anna says that her mother died last year and she now lives with her grandmother in Nairobi's south-

Anna now knows that AIDS is transmitted by "going about with men" sharing razors and used needles

en slum area of Kwanjania. She shares the single room her grandmother rents with three aunts and uncles. She dropped out of school when she was eight; now she remembers how to write her name, but hardly anything else.

Anna moved into the street to "look for money". She needs the money because "when granny has no money, we go without food", she says. As a chang' a'ap (illegal spirits) distiller, the old woman's income is uncertain. She has to be constantly alert to avoid arrest by police.

Recently, the grave risks that these girls face prompted Undugu to organize a two-day workshop on AIDS for 22 street girls and 11 boys. As a result, Anna now knows that AIDS is transmitted by "going about loosely with men", sharing razors, used needles and toothbrushes. The impact of AIDS in Kenya is now beginning to be felt among children, particularly among the 11,300 children who have lost either one or both parents to the disease. These children, too, are beginning to swell the ranks of those in 'especially difficult circumstances' (see Case IV).

When the girls at the AIDS workshop were medically examined, it was found that they all had worms, lice and scabies as well as STDs. A Ford Foundation study carried out by the African Network for the Prevention and Protection Against Child Abuse and Neglect lists bronchitis and respiratory infections, skin diseases, malaria and abdominal problems as some of the ailments that affect street children.

Children's description of their lives

The ICDC study produced some interesting revelations on the way in which children 'in difficult circumstances' perceive their predicaments. In Kisumu and Mombasa, the children interviewed were still very attached to their parents, and were also very capable of analyzing why their lifestyle had come about. They were deeply concerned about
Case IV: "I don't want my children to grow up as orphans"

Jonathan is a 16-year-old teenager living in Nairobi and faced with the responsibilities of an adult twice his age. His parents died of AIDS, turning him into the breadwinner of the entire family. When they fell ill he didn't realize they had the disease. "I thought they had been bewitched," he says.

"Their deaths left us all desperate, helpless and confused," he says. But there was little time to mourn – at least not for Jonathan. With two sisters and four brothers all relying on him, he knew he had to be strong. "I was enrolled on a technical course, learning to become a mason," he explains. "But all that had to stop because there was no money for it and I had to earn something so that the little ones could eat."

Now every morning Jonathan goes to the wholesale market to buy fruit for sale. Then at night he is home early to help his brothers and sisters with their school work and comfort them if they need it. "They are still very shocked by our parents dying," he says. "But they are getting better and I encourage them."

Although Jonathan had heard of AIDS, it was not until he took his sickly brother to the doctor that he learned the true cause of his parents' death. Now the disease has stigmatized the family to such an extent that his uncle tried to sell their house in the Kibera slum area and would have cheated them away if the area chief had not intervened to protect them.

"My uncle tried to make us go to live with my grandmother in the village. But she didn't want us because she thought we might have the disease too. Our other relatives felt the same when they found out what my parents had died of."

But what lies ahead? A sympathetic neighbour has lent Jonathan money and a local NGO contributes towards the children's school uniforms and fees. But Jonathan is worried: "Every time we don't get enough to eat I imagine my brothers and sisters lured by other slum children into the streets, and even into drugs. Life has changed because no relation of ours cares about us any more."

And the threat of AIDS is always there. Jonathan is afraid the children might have contracted the disease from their parents, especially the youngest brother who always seems to be falling ill.

Some of Jonathan's friends have been advising him to get married so that he would have someone to help him bring up the children. "But how do I know I will live long, or if the woman herself isn't suffering from AIDS?" he asks. "I don't want to leave orphans behind the way my parents did."

the violence and dangers surrounding them, and much more aware than their parents of environmental degradation and pollution.

A study in Nairobi looked in detail at the lives of 412 children in slums and squatter settlements who attended approved or informal schools. The researchers also interviewed children at one institutional home for children. An informal school is a community-run school for slum children who cannot afford regular schooling.

The children interviewed were between six and 20 years of age, of which most were below the age of 15, and nearly one-third below the age of ten. Their families tended to be large, containing an average of eight children, and although half were born in Nairobi, most of their parents had been born outside the city. Many had come into the city from surrounding rural areas where there is an acute shortage of land for agriculture, illustrating how common is the novelty of life in the city for families in difficult circumstances.

Though the parents of most of the children were both alive, in only one-third of cases were their father and mother living in the same house; another third were living with just their mothers. Altogether, in nearly two-thirds of cases, the household in question were headed by women.

Just over half of the children's fathers were in permanent employment or worked as casual labourers; but only one-fifth of the mothers were in a similar situation. Given that only a minority were living with their fathers, this confirms the economic hardship faced by many children from woman-headed households.

Over one-quarter of the children named "lack of money" as being the worst problem facing them; another quarter named "lack of food"; another quarter, "lack of clothing". Many must have felt hungry for a significant portion of most days since a minority of those in the informal schools went home for lunch. The vast majority of the others just went without lunch altogether during the week. In fact it turned out that by far the majority of the children managed on only one meal a day, and this usually consisted just of starch – maize porridge (ugali), rice or bread – with a vegetable relish of some kind. Only 11 per cent of the children ate meat regularly and a third never had meat at all.

Poverty was the main reason for the children's poor and monotonous diet. But their dependence on one meal a day was mainly due to the absence of parents from home for long periods each day,
which in one-fifth of cases ran to over 12 hours at a stretch.

The children were asked whether they would like to stay living where they were or move to another place. Most wanted to move somewhere else and of those who wanted to stay where they were, a significant number were orphans living in the children's home, or children at the approved schools who said the environment they had lived in before was much more hostile than the institutions they were staying in.

Over one-third of the children in institutional care described their homes as unhappy and disturbed; 65 per cent reported having been beaten. Quite a few children had wounds which they said had been inflicted by their parents. More than half said that family bonds were fragile and did not find that the home atmosphere was supportive; nearly three-quarters felt it was unstable and unreliable. This environment can easily come about as a result of the pressures of urban life, especially in households which have only recently faced the trauma of adaptation from the countryside to the cramped quarters of a slum or squatter settlement.

Despite their problems, most of the children expressed love of their parents and clearly valued their emotional support - where the parents were able to provide enough of it, given their many economic obligations. However, one-quarter of the children knew someone who was being sexually assaulted, and three per cent admitted that they had been sexually assaulted themselves.

Given these difficult conditions at home, it was perhaps somewhat surprising that only one per cent admitted to sleeping in the streets. One explanation could be that the majority of the children experi-

Children at the approved schools said the environment they had lived in before was much more hostile.
occasionally, and watching television, almost invariably at someone else’s house. Few admitted to
taking drugs, but around a fifth of the children said
their friends drank alcohol, sniffed glue and petrol,
smoked bhang, or chewed miraa. The researchers
concluded that at least 20 per cent of children in
difficult circumstances take intoxicating drugs of
some kind. When asked why they abused these
substances, they said it was to make them feel
good, or to send them to sleep, or because all their
friends were doing it.

Only a third of the children lived in permanent
houses. Of the rest, half lived in mid-and-paper
houses, and half were in semi-permanent struc-
tures. Furnishings were very basic indeed. Though
most had a table, a cupboard, and a stool or chair to
sit on, very few had a cooker or wardrobe. Most
homes were without running water, electricity, or
toilets. The nearest tap was about one kilometre
from the house and water had to be fetched several
times a day at a cost of K.Sh.0.50 a bucket. But
what bothered the children was the overcrowding
in their tiny one- and two-roomed shacks, rather
than their lack of facilities. Two-thirds reported
sharing a bed with their siblings and ten per cent
shared a bed with their parents.

The researchers identified a subgroup of 30
children whom they judged to be particularly dis-
advantaged. Most of these children had spent some
period of time in child-care or disciplinary institu-
tions. The intention was to discover which charac-
teristics of the children’s home lives were associ-
ated with their difficulties. The children they inter-
viewed were either involved in drugs, or had been
arrested, sexually abused, or were working as street
children.

They discovered that the vast majority of these
children were living with a single parent – almost
invariably the mother. Almost all described their
homes as unstable, unreliable, violent and unsup-
supportive. Children arrested for stealing, and those
who were engaged in labour, came from unusually
poor or deprived parents.

The results also implied a relationship between
drug-taking and child labour, indicating that chil-
dren with their own source of income will tend to
spend at least some of it on dangerous substances.
This finding was confirmed by research with street
children in Nairobi. The analysis also revealed a
significant association between drug-taking and
sexual abuse.
THE PREVENTION AND CURE OF CHILD DISTRESS

DELINEQUENCY, child labour, children working and living on the streets are symptoms of an underlying social and economic disease. Treating the symptoms will not cure the disease or prevent the symptoms recurring.

Evicting squatters will not prevent people from migrating into urban areas from a countryside that is no longer able to support them. Harassing and arresting hawkers or the brewers of illegal chang`aa will not prevent semi-literate and unemployed people making and selling whatever they can in order to feed and clothe their children. Rounding up child prostitutes and treating their STDs will not prevent them going back out to solicit on the streets because of their need to make a living, and thereby becoming reinfected. Arresting street children for begging, scavenging or stealing and placing them in approved schools will not alter the circumstances that sent them out onto the streets in the first place.

However, it is not possible to ignore the symptoms until the underlying cure for all the ills, including poverty, precipitating the distress of urban children and mothers has been provided. There are ways to address the plight of both children and mothers in difficult circumstances which have been pioneered in Kenya, by members of the non-governmental community, and by Government projects too.

The urban child Task Forces

In 1988, special Task Forces were set up in Nairobi, Mombasa, and Kisumu to examine the situation of urban children 'in especially difficult circumstances' (CEDC). These Task Forces were composed of government officials, including representatives from Children's Departments, the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Department of Social Services and Housing, the Prisons Department, and non-governmental representatives from such bodies as the Undugu Society of Kenya, various children's homes, as well as the Civil Law Commission and the police. The Task Forces are chaired by the Provincial Children's Officers, and maintain links with the Task Forces for Child Survival and Development which form part of Kenya's Urban Basic Services programme, carried out in co-operation with UNICEF.

The work of the Task Forces has been to assess the situation of children, define the main problems, and establish long-term policy goals and immediate priorities. The ICDC study has been able to feed its own research into the Task Force activities, in order to improve understanding of the situation of children as well as identify the most important and effective programmes for both prevention and cure. Lessons also need to be learned from approaches which have been tried and found wanting.

In Nairobi, the Task Force has examined the whole question of the institutionalization of children (see below), and has set in motion a systematic policy of contacting the families of abandoned children and facilitating the children's return to their families where practicable. They have encouraged community-based work in the slums as an alternative, preventive approach. They have also tackled the issue of the imprisonment of women hawkers and street traders who may be arrested and imprisoned without regard for the fate of their children, proposing community service as an alternative sentence. The fate of children imprisoned with their mothers is also being given attention, and support has been provided to informal schools. Many of these approaches are discussed in more detail below. The work of the Nairobi Task Force in collaboration and co-ordination is important and valuable.

In Kisumu, the Task Force for CEDC is a Subcommittee of the Child Survival and Development

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The fate of children imprisoned along with their mothers is also being given attention

and Urban Basic Services Programme, whose director is the Medical Health Officer of the Municipality. The Programme as a whole works not only with a number of municipal departments, but with community-based work run by NGOs in such areas as income-generation and non-formal schooling, as well as with Kisumu's new street children project, Pudigari.
In Mombasa, the Municipality is responsible for child survival and urban basic services (UBS) programmes, and works with community groups. So far, the CEDC Task Force is working independently of the UBS programme, and focuses mainly on education and social work cases.

The need to coordinate programmes which aim to improve the delivery of urban basic services, especially those specifically geared to help women and children, with programmes and projects addressing the needs of children in especially difficult circumstances is beginning to be well-understood by the many types of policy-makers involved.

Institutions: the constraint of children

Kenyan law provides for the protection and discipline of children, juveniles and young persons. It also regards as 'punishable' parents and guardians who fail to care adequately for their children. Failure to provide food, clothing, medical aid and shelter for a child — whatever the social and economic forces operating on the parents or lone mother — carries a penalty of Ksh 5,000 (US$161), or a prison sentence of up to six months. In some cases the magistrate may choose to impose both a fine and imprisonment. Yet it is clear that legal constraint by fine or imprisonment of a parent cannot, in the vast majority of cases, do anything but further damage the child's situation in life.

The current official policy is equally tough on street children. Many are rounded up and handed back to their parents. If the parents are unable to provide the protection or discipline deemed appropriate, the children may be given into the custody of an institution such as an approved school. This approach dates back to the colonial period and is well backed by laws relating to the care, custody, and control of children and youth.

However, as more and more children flood onto the streets impelled by the adverse economic climate, institutional responses to the problems of Kenya's unaccredited and neglected children have begun to appear futile. At best, they offer temporary solutions to the needlest of cases. At worst, they are unsustainable solutions to a problem whose magnitude defies stop-gap measures. There are simply too few institutions to contain the number of children who are eligible for places. "It is like trying to mop the water while the tap is still running", said the manager of a street children's programme in Kisumu.

The ICDC researchers discovered that many street children, remanded from Juvenile Court in Nairobi for protection and discipline, had been released back into the streets because there was no room in the appropriate institutions. Often the institution may itself be inappropriate to the children's needs. The problem is acute for girls juveniles, because there is only one institution for girls in the whole of Kenya, Kirigiti Approved School.

Located amidst the lush coffee plantations of Kiamuu district outside Nairobi, Kirigiti was set up originally as a reception centre for girls too young to go to prison or detention camp. It was converted into an approved school in 1964 shortly after Independence. The problem is that some of the girls sent there are in no sense criminals, or even 'difficult cases'; there is just nowhere else to

Case V: “I am afraid to go home to my father”

Nancy Nyakairu is 18 and she is frightened. She is old enough to leave Kenya’s only approved school for girls, but she doesn’t have anywhere to go when she does. “I don’t know where my mother is, and my father is not very good — I am afraid to go home to him,” she says timidly. In fact her father raped her when she was 15, which is how she came to Kirigiti in the first place.

Nancy and her younger sister, then aged 11, were placed in Kirigiti in 1989. The trauma of the rape and the trial that followed tore the family apart. Her father was tried and put into jail. Her two youngest brothers were taken to Nairobi Children’s Home — the only government-run children’s home in the country — and the two oldest boys to Dagoreti Approved School to the south-west of the city. Their mother is beside herself with grief and anger. “It drove her crazy,” Nancy says, tears welling up in her eyes.

Not surprisingly Nancy’s education has been quite severely disrupted by the events of the last few years. She performed poorly on her Kenya Certificate examinations last year, "because I had so many worries," she explains. Her marks were so low that the school thought there was no point allowing her to rest the exams. She is now learning tailoring in some attempt to prepare for an independent life outside the approved school. But Nancy has no confidence in her chances of success and doesn’t feel ready to try: “I am not yet proficient,” she says.
send them when a family descends into crisis and
no kin comes to their aid (see Case V.)

The case of Nancy Nyawira demonstrates both
the good and bad aspects of institutional solutions. The
vocational training she is receiving may prove to
be an important source of income for herself and
her younger brothers and sisters when she is re-
leased. On the other hand, she and her younger
brother have spent three impressive years among
girls with criminal records, being exposed to any
number of harmful influences.

Florence Ombo, the school's manager, says
that the main purpose of an approved school is to
rehabilitate children who break the law. There was
one young girl there who had been admitted re-
cently and was going though serious withdrawal
symptoms resulting from her alcoholism. She drank
heavily because her mother earned a living by the
illegal brewing of chang'aa.

Kirigi is severely overcrowded. Built to house
160, it currently holds 212 girls. Florence Ombo
remembered times when they had to cope with 270.
But a significant proportion of inmates are simply
normal children, like Nancy and her sister, who
have been placed in the school because there is
nowhere else for them to go. "Girls like Nancy are
here by mistake," she says. Orphans also end up at
Kirigi mix with children who have been ar-
rested for stealing, fighting, soliciting as prostitu-
tutes, or selling drugs.

Even where girls have been engaged in activi-
ties which place them on the wrong side of the law,
it is unfair to treat them as 'criminals'. Child pros-
titutes, like children who trade, or run errands, or
park cars, or shine shoes, are primarily victims of a
harsh economic environment. They need economic
solutions to their problems rather than incarcer-
tion in the approved school. Indeed, the approved
school's reputation for being little more than a
prison means it is difficult for the inmates to find
employment when they are released.

Partly as a result of initiatives undertaken by
the Nairobi Task Force on CEDC, which has en-
couraged a re-assessment of institutionalization of
children, approved schools do try nowadays to
help children fit back into their families once they
have served their sentence or reached the upper age
limit of 18. One way of promoting this eventual
reintegration is to encourage the children to spend
school holidays with their families. Unfortunately,

Some girls are only in the
approved school because their
families are too poor to
support them

in some cases this is impracticable. Some girls are
only in the school because their families are too
poor to support them, and they therefore cannot
afford to do so 'in the holidays'. In other cases, the
household is violent or fragmented, or they have no
permanent home to go to. Last December, 99 chil-
dren stayed behind at the school when the rest of
the children went home for Christmas.
Keeping such children at the school in the holidays is expensive for an institution that can ill afford any additional expense. Kirigiti's annual budget is K.Sh 1.5 million (US$48,390). Nine months into the 1991/92 financial year, Florence Ombozo had received only half of the year's money from the Government and was worried about when -- and if -- she would receive the rest. International donors suspended aid to Kenya in November 1991.

There is an increasing trend towards interventions in which the community takes the lead...

Pending political reforms, and the Government has cut back on social spending to low levels.

Margaret Nyaga, the Government's Director of Children's Services -- with responsibility for all children's homes -- believes that such institutions are not sustainable at their current level of funding. For one thing, the demands for institutional places far exceed the supply. On top of this, the approved school age limit of 18 does not always coincide with children's ability to stand on their own two feet. "They need time to adjust and fit back into the community," says Nyaga. But giving them this time means there are even fewer places available for younger children coming into the system.

Policy-makers in Kenya are beginning to realize that institutional intervention in Kenya falls on two counts: first, it fails to get to the roots of the causes of the children's plight; second, there are far too few places available to cope with the extent of the problem.

There will probably always be a need for institutional care of some difficult, disturbed or destitute children. But not every wandering child is in need of this kind of help. Some children in especially difficult circumstances need intensive help; their situation is already so bad that they need special care, attention, and rehabilitation. But there is an increasing trend towards interventions in which the community takes the lead, and which, unlike the traditional institutions, offer the promise of sustainability.

"We would prefer to emphasize preventive approaches," says Margaret Nyaga. She is very much in favour of the community-based alternatives which are at the forefront of a new style of thinking about abandoned or delinquent children.

Aiming for a 'home away from home'

The overcrowding at Kirigiti is no isolated phenomenon. In the Nairobi Juvenile Remand Home, for instance -- where children who have been arrested are placed before their cases come to court -- 180 children were living in a space meant for 100. In such conditions, public health can be a problem, specially as the children have few clothes and many of their garments are torn and in a sorry state. Many suffer from the skin diseases that are associated with lack of hygiene. Indeed, conditions at the remand home were not unlike those which had driven the children onto the streets in the first place.

Most children's homes in Nairobi are so run down as to defeat their purpose. Their very existence operates as a challenge to those who argue that more children's homes are needed. Indeed it has been argued that some homes are being set up for the purpose of attracting funds for their managers -- and that benefiting the children is just a means to an end. Not surprisingly, the managers of this kind of institution do not look favourably on the trend towards community-based solutions to children's problems which aim to maintain children in their own homes.

Frank Boomers -- a Dutch missionary -- suspects that the amount of funding that has become available for street children's programmes may be contributing to the proliferation of children's homes in the country. Caring for street children has become a fashionable cause and he is worried that it might be developing into a crusade to institutionalize all of Kenya's street children.

Boomers runs the Pandipieri Catholic Centre, which has spearheaded Kisumu's first street child initiative. "Our primary responsibility should be to try and repair broken relations at home," he says. "I believe that 90 per cent of the children's problems are based in their homes." He is particularly worried about the practice of rounding up children and taking them to institutions by force. Boomers believes that the institutions should be pleasant enough to attract the children in off the streets.

The Pandipieri Centre has begun a networking initiative to put all of Western Kenya's child-based institutions in touch with each other. One purpose of this is to disavow newcomers from undermining the efforts of more established street children's programmes. The idea is to learn from one another's experiences so that each institution can avoid the pitfalls others have fallen into. "It's such a waste of energy for us all to keep reinventing the wheel," he says.

Boomers believes that institutions should work with children's parents. "If we can get children back to their homes within a month, we can still follow them up from there," he says. Recently, Pandipieri has begun working with the Undugu Society of Kenya (whose activities are described later) to see whether some of its community-based programmes in Kisumu can be replicated in Kisumu, where the problem of street children is not yet as pronounced.
The main thrust of Pandipieri is towards community development. Out of 20 programmes, only one is directly aimed at children themselves. The Pandipieri philosophy is that the community knows best what is good for its children.

New directions: the informal school

Informal schools are the brain-child of Nairobi's city education authorities who now realize that the population of school-age children can no longer be absorbed by the normal schools. A crucial characteristic of informal schools is that they have done away with many of the requirements that make formal schooling so expensive for slum-dwellers. There is no school uniform, for instance, and it is possible to pay the small school fees in monthly instalments, which is a considerable help to people who are unable to amass the terribly lump-sum demanded by an ordinary school. In a sense they operate as a safety-net for formal school drop-outs, and are therefore an important way of stemming the rising flood of young children onto the streets.

The City of Nairobi has four informal schools to its credit. But the idea has snowballed and there are now a further 26 similar schools, catering for 6,000 children altogether, run by non-governmental organizations and slum community groups. The Nairobi Task Force for children 'in especially difficult circumstances' has been active in promoting the informal schools network.

The majority of children at Nairobi's informal schools are from single-parent households, most of them headed by women. Their mothers tended to be unemployed or temporarily employed. The mothers of three-quarters of children in informal schools are unemployed compared to only one-quarter of those in the regular school system.

Another important aspect of the informal school is that it has no age limit for admission into Standard One — the first grade. Formal schools do not admit children over the age of seven, which means that many children miss the education boat altogether if their lives are disrupted at a crucial time by illness, migration or some other kind of family crisis. Formal schools also insist on a birth certificate as a criterion for admission, which is often a problem for children from unstable home backgrounds. Informal schools, as their name implies, are much more flexible. This flexibility is in line with other survival strategies practised by the urban poor. Most hawkers, for instance, are unable to pay their annual
business licences, but might be able to cope with a monthly payment scheme if one were available. This would, in turn, free them from the harassment and insecurity attendant on illegal hawking.

Schools run by the community

Kangemi Informal School is one of the four informal schools run by the City Education Department of Nairobi. Located some 10 kilometres west of the city centre, the school started life in 1977 as a Youth Centre in the community hall. But the school soon outgrew the hall and was moved to some buildings erected by the local community on a plot originally set aside for the expansion of a health centre. The community subsequently formed a management committee which took over the running of the school from the Education Department in 1980.

Unlike the Undugu schools described below – which make no attempt to qualify pupils for national examinations – Kangemi has been following the official syllabus and enrolling children for examinations since 1981. Unfortunately, the informal schools are not yet fully integrated into the formal school system. They are not issued with the official forms children need to fill in to be assured of a place in secondary school. This means that children who do manage to pass their exams then have to compete for whatever places are left when the examination results are posted.

Despite the low monthly fee of K.Sh 100 (US$1.30), 30 pupils at Kangemi have fallen behind with their fees. “If their parents cannot afford to pay their fees, the chances are they are also unable to buy their food,” comments Andrew Onyango, the school’s head-master for the last 12 years. He says that the majority of his pupils are from households headed by single women and he is well aware of the struggle such women have to provide for their children.

But waiving some children’s fees has one very unfortunate consequence – because the salaries of teachers working in informal schools are paid for out of the fees. Onyango says that his teachers’ salaries are between K.Sh 1,400 and 2,300 per month (between US$45 and US$74), which puts them in the country’s lowest income bracket. This means that the teachers at Kangemi, like their counterparts in other informal schools, may often be as poor as the parents of the pupils they teach. This has important implications for the quality of education that informal schools are able to offer because it reduces their ability to attract and keep good teachers. Only Onyango is a fully-trained Teachers Service Commission grade level teacher. The others are untrained.

Teachers’ salaries are even lower at Thayu
Case VI: “The desks were made for smaller children”

It is 5.30 pm at Arina Primary School in Kisumu. The normal school day is over. But for Lynette Atua, aged 13, classes are just beginning. Lynette lives in as the house-girl of a business woman at Kondele along the main Kisumu-Kakamega highway. Like many of the other girls in her class, Lynette’s day is spent doing household chores.

“I wash the dishes, clean the house and look after the three little children while the mistress is at work,” she says. So by the time she comes to school she is already tired.

Like all formal schools in Kisumu Municipality, Arina Primary School is built on spacious grounds with ample playgrounds for the day-time pupils. But Lynette and the 31 other girls attending the school in the evenings have no time to play. They are simply grateful for the chance to sit at the little wooden desks — their tops etched with the names of their young day-time occupants — which becomes theirs every evening.

“The desks were made for smaller children,” she says. The classrooms show other signs of their day-time use. The floors are still coated with the day’s dust, they will not be mopped until tomorrow morning before the classes begin. The walls are scribbled on with pencil and biro, but not up to the level Lynette and her friends can reach.

Lynette has set her heart on a teaching career, and she knows that there is no short cut to it except through school. But the going is tough. Lynette is studying a syllabus designed to fill a full eight-hour teaching day in just a quarter of that time. While many children at normal school have ample free time in which to do their homework — and parents and older siblings to help them with it — she has to go back to domestic chores in a family not her own when her classes are finished. With difficulties like these, perhaps it is not surprising that only one girl passed her examinations last year — and she has yet to find a sponsor to pay for her to go on to secondary school.

Informal School, situated in the sprawling Mathare slum district. The best-paid teacher there earns just K.Sh 950 a month (US$30.60), the lowest paid getting only K.Sh 650 (US$21). This is not surprising; average monthly income for Mathare residents is just K.Sh 397 (US$12.80), according to the Kenya Consumers’ Organization. So Thaya pupils’ parents are even less able to pay the small monthly amounts than parents of Kangemi children. As at Kangemi, Thaya teachers are all untrained, although the head-teacher has had an in-service training course.

There are 300 children at Thaya Youth Centre and Nursery School. Without proper partitioning, several classes go on simultaneously in one room. One of the teachers, Elizabeth Nyawira, says the school caters mainly for children who drop out of formal schools because their parents are unable to afford school fees.

Nyawira thinks that hunger is one of the most serious problems that Thaya children face. But the fact that the children are prepared to endure their hunger in order to stay on at school is an important argument for those schools’ existence. “The children realize that education is more important than food,” Nyawira says. Large numbers of slum children do not go home for lunch because there is no one at home to prepare it for them.

The ICDC researchers found that a third of the children they interviewed from informal schools wanted to continue their education beyond the primary level. Some had quite lofty ambitions, given their reality. Thirteen per cent said they would like to go into medicine as a career; nine per cent wanted to become teachers. But another nine per cent just wanted to get a job — any job.

UNICEF pays for books, desks and partitioning in some of the informal schools. Despite their drawbacks and problems, project officer Monica Mutuku remains convinced of their value. “We still haven’t found a better way of improving these children’s lives,” she says.

Schools for working girls

Informal schools have become a feature of Nairobi slum life. In Kisumu, the focus is more on evening continuation classes to give formal school drop-outs another chance. Here the students are largely composed of house-girls, who have their own stamina as well as their employers understanding — to thank for enabling them to endure classes after a full day’s domestic labour.

At least 108 girls are attending evening continuation classes at four centres within the Kisumu Municipality. The classes last from 3 pm to 6.30 pm every evening during the week. This timing is intentional — firstly because the girls are not free to leave the house until their employers come home from work; secondly because the classes are held
in the classrooms of ordinary schools which are occupied during the day.

Though the classes aim to prepare the young girls for the Kenya Certificate examinations, only one girl passed in 1991. "I don’t blame them," says the project’s co-ordinator, Charles Anyang. "These girls get up as early as four in the morning and work right up to 5 pm when their employers come home. The classes last for an hour and a half, then they go back to work, sometimes until midnight." (See Case VI.)

The syllabus the girls have to study - the same one that ordinary pupils cover in a full school day - has 10 subjects, and is much too broad to be completed within the seven and a half hours a week available to the girls. But the girls seem undeterred. "For women, education is definitely a tool for empowerment," says UNICEF’s Monica Mutuku. UNICEF has been a sponsor of Kisumu Municipality’s evening class programme for girls who failed to complete their primary school education because they had to go out to work for a living. The programme’s co-ordinator, Charles Anyang, says that Ksh 227,800 (US$7,120) was spent in the last financial year on the programme. Because the premises are already in place, most of this money was available to pay the salaries of the 10 teachers attached to the four centres.

A ‘parent in disguise’ for maskani boys

Situated at the centre of Mombasa Island, Majengo is one of the oldest settlements along this Indian Ocean coast. It is a crowded village, with palm-thatched houses clustered together, separated by narrow footpaths. Each tiny house is occupied by a family and there are often as many as nine people occupying one to two rooms.

To maintain their privacy - and sanity - the older boys often leave home for hours on end, retiring to the roofs, verandas and corridors for the night, with palm-mats as bedding, to avoid the ‘shame’ of sleeping with their parents. In such a situation, studying is impossible. (See Case VII.)

For the Moslem girls, escape is not an option. Even the poorest family tries to insist on their daughters staying off the streets. The boys are a different matter. They run off whenever they get a chance, invariably to the maskani gardens. Custom restricts the use of the maskani: youngsters are not supposed to be there at the same time as the older men. But in practice it has proved impossible to shield the younger boys from witnessing and imitating the activities of their elders.

The maskani gardens are places of idleness, where the older boys take and sell drugs and the younger boys watch and learn and eventually imitate them. It is hard to blame them: amidst the

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**Case VII: “We discussed what to do with our lives”**

Yasser Swaleh is what Mombasa people call a ‘bad boy’. Though from a well-off family - his father runs a successful shop - Yasser's drift into theft and drug-trafficking is a familiar story.

He started skipping classes four years ago to “pursue worldly pleasures”. The head-teacher of the school, Tom Mboya Primary School, went to see his father to report his frequent absences and to tell him that the boy had been caught stealing from his classmates.

“I just refused to believe it,” says his father. Mzee Swaleh, bitterly. “Money wasn’t a problem. I tried to do a bit for that boy. But when he was finally expelled from Standard Seven - well, I had to believe it then.”

In an attempt to separate his son from the bad influences of the other maskani boys, Mzee Swaleh sent his son to the prestigious Mos choke Academy far away in Nyanza Province. And, to begin with, Yasser seems to have made an attempt to reform. But by the second year he was at it again. He was caught stealing, and this time wound up in an approved school.

When he discovered the sorts of conditions Yasser was living in at the approved school, his father took pity on him and arranged for him to be released. But when the boy started running off to the maskani gardens and stealing money to buy drugs, his father decided to wash his hands of his son and threw him out of the house.

Fortunately for Yasser, there were other people willing to put their faith in his ability to change. His older brother took him in and last year the boy was invited to take part in a workshop for maskani boys at the Kanamal Holiday and Conference Centre, convened by the Mombasa Municipality. Though only ten boys were invited, 15 turned up and 12 stayed right to the end of the sessions.

“We discussed what we wanted to do with our lives," says Yasser. "There was not just one solution - we came up with lots of ideas." Yasser chose motor vehicle mechanics as his line of trade: he has just enrolled on a two-year course. Other boys chose mechanics, carpentry, and tailoring.
general poverty of the Majengo area, dealing in drugs is one of the few sources of income for an illiterate primary school drop-out.

Why do so many children drop out in Mombasa? A major problem identified by researchers is parents’ lack of interest in the education of their children. “Most of them don’t take education seriously,” observes Bakari Chambiri, head teacher of Majengo Primary School. “They say they have survived well without going to school. They can’t see what all the fuss is about.”

Aswini Jeza, the Vice-Chairman of the Mombasa Education and Welfare Association (MEWA) agrees that behind the problems of unguided childhood, sometimes leading to delinquency, in Mombasa is their own parents’ lack of schooling. This is why the Association has taken on the role of ‘parent in disguise’.

Drug abuse, a serious problem among children and teenagers in Mombasa, deeply concerns Jeza. Too many children, he believes, do not have the parental protection and guidance they need because their parents are simply unable to afford the time to give it. “Without supervision by their parents it is easy for children to become addicted to drugs,” he says. MEWA is particularly concerned about the children who are so deeply addicted that they need professional counselling to wean them off the drugs. The Association recently sent two of its members to the US to attend a five-week course on combating drug abuse and trafficking.

Formed in 1985, MEWA has established seven centres in the island of Mombasa, at which it offers tuition for poor children from nursery level upwards. The classes take place daily, in the evenings, and during the week-ends. Last year one of its pupils, Bakresa Said Abubakar, had the best Kenya Certificate results in the entire Coast Province. Bakresa has now gone on to attend the Alliance High School, which is Kenya’s top secondary school.

Running classes at these unusual hours means the Association can keep children occupied during the times when they might otherwise be roaming the streets and getting into trouble. MEWA also helps older boys who want to start their own small businesses as an alternative to drug trafficking.

UNICEF has provided the tools for the various trades that the boys are engaged in and at least 100 boys in Majengo have become involved in the project. To occupy the hours after their day-time training, and help them resist the lure of the maskanti, the programme has also developed small-scale money-making ventures — like selling kebabs and freshly-squeezed fruit juice — to keep them out of the gardens in the evenings.

Ahuwani Goli is Chairman of the committee run by parents of the maskanti boys in the programme. He admits that his own son, Juma, was both unemployed and unemployable before he enrolled. “Now if each of them has a trade, they won’t need to go back to their bad ways.”

Undugu: a curriculum for survival

The Undugu Society of Kenya (undugu means ‘brotherhood’ in Ki-Swahili) was set up specifically to address the problems of street children. It dates back to 1972, when a Dutch missionary, Father Arnold Grof, was posted to Nairobi. The priest noticed that there were large numbers of young boys roaming the city streets, smoking bhanga, sniffing petrol and glue, working in many informal occupations that are included under the nickname of ‘parking boy’ in Nairobi. Father Grof not only noticed the boys; he became determined to do something. Grof was a true pioneer.

When Grof founded Undugu, his first idea was to organize recreation for the boys to “keep them off the streets”. Assuming that they were idle and
needed something to occupy them, he involved the boys in activities like football, boxing, music and drama. In fact the successful Nairobi jazz band, Undugu Beat '75, is a product of these early activities. By engaging in these activities, many boys began to find their own role in the community, instead of being marginalized and isolated in their street culture.

Regular get-togethers also gave the boys the opportunity to discuss their problems - which turned out to be survival rather than mere idleness. Grod responded by collecting clothing donated by well-wishers. But this still did not address the children's basic problems. On the contrary, Undugu now believes that hand-outs of this kind actually undermine the tough combative spirit the boys need for their survival. (See Case 716).

The challenge for Undugu, then, was to help offers literacy and numeracy skills to over 700 street children in four slum schools.

Unlike the eight-year primary course offered in ordinary schools, the Undugu curriculum runs over three years. The fourth year is devoted to familiarizing the children to a variety of practical skills such as carpentry, tailoring, and sheet-metal working which can equip them for work when they graduate. This somewhat unorthodox primary curriculum has been approved by the Kenyan Government. This can be regarded as a major triumph.

Recently, the Undugu Society has been concentrating on yet another informal education approach: part-time schools for 'part-time children'. Machuma schools are special schools tailored to the needs of the many children involved in collection of waste material for sale. Flexibility is the key. During the morning the children are taught the basic numeracy skills that will help them to organize such vital matters as counting their sales money and thus avoid being exploited by middlemen. In the afternoon, they are free to go back out to the garbage dumps to ply their trade. Undugu currently runs five Machuma schools, with an enrollment of around 145 children.

Undugu also helps needy children by providing scholarships to prevent them from dropping out of their formal school in the first place. In 1991, Undugu sponsored 999 children from four slums: Mathare, Kibera, Kitui and Mutuwa, to continue their primary or secondary education, or enrol in technical and informal courses.

Initially, parents approach Undugu for these scholarships. A social worker is dispatched to their

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The children see themselves as having a role in society instead of being relegated to its margins.

the children without compromising their ability to help themselves, and to allow them to see themselves as having a role in society instead of being relegated to its margins. Providing basic education and skills training are the main means chosen to bring about this 'empowerment'. Undugu believes that education is a basic right for every child. Through its Basic Education Programme, Undugu
home to assess the extent to which this kind of help is required. Then an agreement is struck, whereby the parents contribute an agreed sum towards the scholarship. Cost-sharing arrangements like these have been instituted to avoid the confidence sapping “dependency syndrome,” which Undugu finds all too prevalent in the slums.

Undugu today also works within slum communities, trying to address the problems of children pre-emptively, where they begin, in low income and family distress. Although it is the most well-established and largest NGO addressing the problems of street children and children in difficult circumstances, its efforts can only scratch the surface. If, as they estimate, there are 130,000 such children in Nairobi alone, Undugu is currently helping less than one per cent of them.

Listen to the children

Undugu has come a long way from rounding up parking boys and encouraging them to play football. And much of the organization’s success has come from listening to the children they seek to help and tailoring their services to meet those children’s needs. Unfortunately this approach is all too rare in people who design services for children in difficult circumstances.

One of the most serious drawbacks to conventional services for children in Kenya is the tendency for them to be organized hierarchically. The hierarchy puts a gulf between both service design-

Parents contribute an agreed sum towards the scholarship, avoiding a ‘dependency syndrome’

ers and service implementers, and between service implementers and the children themselves. Some commentaries observe that decisions about the kinds of services that children will be given, and why and how, are made by top-level administrators in governmental and non-governmental organiza-

Case VIII: “I used to pounce on women and snatch their money”

George Muhoro, has been with Undugu since he was 13. He left school when his mother died. A brief stay with his grandmother convinced him that she was in no position to meet his needs. He then moved into the streets where he got caught up in the ‘parking boy’ syndrome.

“I gathered scattered potatoes at the market (market) and sold them. I unscrewed the lamp on people’s cars and sold them. I pounced on women at night and snatched their money and anything else they had,” he said.

Almost inevitably Muhoro was arrested. He was convicted and jailed for two months. Upon his release, he went back to the market where Father Groi, founder of Undugu, discovered him hanging about looking for something to eat. The priest took him to a village in the Murang’a area, an hour’s drive from Nairobi, in the hope that the boy would settle and become involved in productive work there. But instead, Muhoro ran away, back to the city. This time when Groi found him, he took the boy to a reception centre. But a month later he ran away yet again, choosing to live on the streets once more.

Then one morning Muhoro woke up in his usual bed of old paper and thought: “If I continue like this I’ll end up a very sad person.” This time he returned to the reception centre of his own accord. After living there for two years he went on to Undugu’s home in Eastleigh, where he enrolled at one of the Undugu schools. He has now completed three years of basic education, and is a carpenter’s apprentice.

“Now I can make three-piece suits — you know, sofas and armchairs — and stools and tables, beds, doors, windows, all by myself,” he says proudly.

Muhoro earns K.Sh 600 a month (US$18) as an apprentice and Undugu gives him another K Sh 350 to help meet the costs of his food and accommodation. He considers these sums to be “a lot of money” — presumably because they are the largest amounts he has ever handled. “I can now stand on my own two feet and cope with financial problems,” he says.

He has also been inspired by some of the older boys with whom he received his training. “Many of them are now big men — big people,” he says. “They have property and have saved up a lot of money.” His ambition is to become a successful carpenter and he hopes that once he has saved enough to buy his own tools, Undugu will help him get a loan from the bank to start his own business.

He is well aware of the contrast between his life now and that of his friends who have stayed on the streets. “They will just continue to steal and risk being locked up in jail. At best they are scavengers,” he says. “In the streets there is no discipline. You think you can do what you like, but you can’t really. The police always catch you in the end. Here you have to control yourself. You have to learn some self-discipline. It’s worth it if it means you can lead your own life eventually.”

This profile is abridged from ‘The Parking Boys of Nairobi: In Against All Odds, published by Parnas, 1999.”
tions alike; while social workers and other field staff are expected merely to carry the decisions out.

The social workers, in turn, have the same expectations regarding their relationship with the children and their families. "They expect unquestioning compliance and acquiescence. The assumption is that whatever is being done or offered is for the parents' and children's own good," they say.

Unfortunately, this assumption is not always shared by the children and their families. Although they need help, they often dislike the authoritarian attitude of the people offering it - and they express this dissatisfaction by refusing to co-operate or trying to manipulate the service providers.

In Mombasa, for example, the problem of teenage pregnancy is habitually swept under the carpet. But children appear to be very concerned about adolescent fertility. On the one hand they realize that *malezi maua* - bad upbringing - may be to blame; on the other, that boys or men may mislead girls, telling them that they are ready to marry them when they make love to them. Parents are blamed as well as the girls themselves, for failing to instruct their daughters to avoid bad company.

In Kisumu, a children's workshop held in 1990 produced an extraordinary request: they stated that they wanted a foot bridge to be built across a river separating two marginalized communities. Such a major capital project did not seem to have any real bearing on the problems of children in difficult circumstances. However, when the issue was closely examined, the request turned out to have genuine purpose.

Wilson Oduor Odien, aged 15, was one of the workshop participants. He lives with his uncle in the impoverished Obunga estate - one of the communities in question. "When it rains, Obunga is no good," he said. The River Awaya separating Obunga from neighbouring Bandani floods, making it impossible for children from Obunga to cross over to Bandani, where their primary school is situated. Therefore, the flooding of the river is the cause of a high rate of absenteeism at the school.

A bridge across the River Awaya would also
help the Bandani people: the only market in the area is situated in Obunga. Without access to the market, Bandani women are frustrated both in their trading activities, and in their marketing for family needs. The bridge would also reduce the number of wounds received by children from the broken bottles and metal objects which litter the bed of the Awaya. “The bridge is desperately needed,” was the plea of the children from these slum communities. It seems that they might actually be right.

**Helping mothers to help children**

A vital theme to emerge from the ICDC studies is that among the best ways of helping children in especially difficult circumstances is to provide help to their mothers.

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**Case IX: “Half a million is not a small amount”**

The Baba Twende Women’s Group is trying to save half a million shillings. They need the money to buy a 40-hectare plot of land. Such an ambition would have seemed like a wild dream 13 years ago when the group first started. But now — slowly, slowly — it is beginning to become a reality.

The group lives in Kitisuru Village, one of the oldest squatter settlements in Nairobi. “There were 32 of us when we started,” Mwanasisha Shabaan recalls. “We began by knitting school cardigans, but so many others were doing the same thing that the market was soon flooded.” So they tried to come up with some other way to make money.

They looked around them and soon realized that selling water might be the answer. They all had to buy water from the water kiosks dotted around the slum location. They felt sure they would be able to provide it more cheaply than the kiosk owners.

With a loan from Undugu, they installed their own water kiosk five years ago. Today water sales earn the group as much as KSh 10,000 (US$322.60) a month in the dry season. “We don’t make much money during the rains,” says Mwanasisha. “People try to cut down on that expense by collecting from their roofs and going to the rivers, even though the water is very unhygienic.”

The next business they went into was renting. They constructed a building with their own hands, which is now let out to small local businesses at a combined rent of KSh 6,800 (US$219) a month.

Now Mwanasisha is sitting on the cement floor of a small room that houses the group’s latest enterprise: a kerosene tank. It is her turn to run the vending machine and make sure sales are properly recorded and the money safely kept. She exudes the confidence of a woman who has made it.

It was Undugu who lent the group the KSh 6,000 (US$256) they needed to get the kerosene tank installed. Although normally costs twenty times as much to install such a tank, the women have come to an arrangement with Kobil Oil, the supplier. They provided an initial down payment, plus instalments of KSh 2,000 (US$64.50) per month.

The size of the tank — it has a capacity of 10,000 litres — is an indication of the strength of the women’s optimism. At the moment they can only afford to keep it a quarter full. “It would cost us KSh 75,000 (US$2,420) to fill it to the top, but we will fill it one day,” says Mwanasisha.

The group makes KSh 3,600 (US$112.50) a month from sales of kerosene; this is the fuel people use in their stoves (cooking and heating in the cold season) and to fill the little smoky lamps they use for light in the evenings. After the group’s KSh 2,000 installation is deducted and after paying KSh 1,600 to the pump attendant, they are just about breaking even. Next month, though, they will have finished paying for the tank and they will have KSh 2,000 a month extra to share out between them — or put aside for investing in their dream.

The dream is a 40-hectare farm some 25 kilometres east of Nairobi. So far they have managed to save two-sevenths of the KSh 200,000 (US$62,580) they need to make it their own. What with the kerosene sales, plus the income from their water kiosk, and the rent from the building, the group manages to put around KSh 15,000 (US$484) a month towards the purchase price of the land.

The women know that the remaining half a million shillings “is not a small amount”. But they are determined. Owning their own piece of land will give many their first real taste of security. Many came to Nairobi because they were divorced or widowed by their husbands and so lost their right to farm his land. Now the threat of eviction is hopefully set to become a memory — the bad dream of the past.
cially difficult circumstances was also the motive behind a UNICEF-sponsored initiative in association with the Municipality of Mombasa. The Municipality, too, has seen the potential of mobilizing women in groups so that they can more easily be involved with programmes to help ameliorate their financial problems.

The Child Survival and Development programme has been working with selected Mombasa-based women’s groups in various income-generating activities since 1988. The project entered a new phase in 1991, when UNICEF contracted a local NGO - Tototo Home Industries - to conduct business training for the women. This was because they realized that, though there were more than 1,000 women’s groups within Mombasa Municipality, the women’s income still hovered around or below subsistence level.

The main handicap women’s groups in general face is lack of business management skills. The Mombasa groups were no exception. Other difficulties limiting their success are their lack of access to credit facilities, their unfamiliarity with bank savings accounts, and their lack of knowledge of the way the system of collateral operates.

Formed in 1963, Tototo's aim is to train women in leadership skills so that they can solve these problems together as a group. It also teaches them the criteria for selecting viable business activities, and ways of maximizing their profit.

It has been estimated that as many as 90 per cent of women working in Mombasa’s informal sector operate their own individual businesses. But Tototo has learned that unless a business is big enough, it will offer only minimal benefits to the people who run it. This is why they encourage women to get together and pool their resources wherever possible. But they also help individual women to expand their activities, through offering loan facilities and advising women on amassing a lump-sum of collateral that can be used as security for a loan.

Priscilla Tsuna, one of Tototo’s supervisors, considers that savings are one of the most important aspects of the training. In fact the use of savings is the first part of Tototo’s three-part training programme, whose other two components are leadership and business skills.

The UNICEF-Mombasa Municipality-Tototo initiative started with six groups and a budget of Ksh 300,000 (US$4,680). This was divided out among the six groups’ members and used to supplement the savings in their own merry-go-round funds. The number of groups involved in the programme has now grown to 12.

The Omena Women’s Group is hoping to get a loan to build a store for the dry fish they sell. At present the 30-person group buys its supplies in small amounts from Kisumu. With their new store they will be able to buy a larger amount of fish at a discount and so increase their profits. Another group wants a loan to build a shop. When it was broken into last year, they have not dared to store food so they have not been able to take advantage of buying in bulk.

Elvina Mutua, Tototo’s Managing Director, sees all this eventually affecting the welfare of children. “The mother is the person to relieve the problems of the child. Given a chance to generate income, it all goes towards benefiting the child. Income-generation activities are the most powerful tool of alleviating problems of children,” she says.

One of the groups which has benefited from Tototo’s assistance is the Yetu ni Sawa (in Ki-Swahili, “Everyday is Fine”) Women’s Group, formed in April 1990. When the women first came together, they had no clear idea of what they wanted to do. Each had ideas of what to do to improve their lives, but they just did not seem to have the finances to get their ideas off the ground.

“Whatever we had in mind called for cash, which we did not have,” recalls Rakia Ahamandi, the group chairman. The only option they seemed to have was the ‘merry-go-round’, one of the oldest forms of savings among women’s groups. The merry-go-round involves each member contributing money towards a lump sum which is given out to members on a rota.

“Life is very difficult,” says Rakia. “Money from a husband is not always enough. At the beginning of the year, we had many children sent home from school for lack of cash for fees”. She says educating their children is the thing that worries them the most. Today, a child must go to school,” she says. “But the cost of uniforms, building and activity funds and stationery all have to be met. You may only be able to buy a few books, and then your child suffers.”

Another group member, Makau Juma comments: “Everybody has their own problems. Previously, we did not know what to do. Now we can put our savings together and help each other.” But, although the merry-go-round fund had helped them to meet certain basic needs, they were not using it to its full potential - to expand their business activities.

Then Tototo Home Industries came on the scene early this year and gave them a two-day training course. Barely two months after being introduced to the secrets of business management,
the women of Yote ni Sawa are bubbling with enthusiasm as they talk of all the different projects they have in mind. They have already saved K.Sh 5,825 (US$188) to put towards a down payment on a loan to help them achieve their new goals. Previously, every member kept her money at home. But now the group has opened a bank account, where weekly savings are deposited.

They are now thinking of advancing their business activities using their savings. The group has begun selling water recently in response to the chronic water shortage in the Mombasa area in recent years. They are planning to buy handcarts so they can deliver quantities of water to different areas and so increase their business. The individual members have ideas for their own businesses too. Rukia Athumani, for instance, wants to borrow upwards of K.Sh 10,000 (US$323) to upgrade her business from ordinary tailoring to teaching the craft to tailoring students. For this, she needs to put up a kiosk. Another member wants to borrow K.Sh 5,000 (US$161) to expand her curry powder trade, and another a similar amount to boost her cassava crisps business.

Farming in the city

The Nairobi-based Mazingira Institute has investigated how very poor urban families managed to obtain and cook enough food for themselves given what was known about their extremely low levels of income. It discovered that food-growing was a major economic strategy of people living in Mombasa, and was even more important for the very low-income groups than others.

One of the major findings of Mazingira’s study is that in one season in 1985, urban farmers in Kenya’s towns and cities produced around 25 million kilos of food worth about K.Sh 60.9 million (US$4 million at 1985 exchange rates). They discovered that urban agriculture - as a subsistence activity - was carried out predominantly by women. “Mostly harassed or ignored by the municipal authorities, the African urban farmer has rarely been considered by researchers, planners and policymakers,” says the report. Yet, despite the obvious potential of urban farming, few organizations have taken up the challenge of promoting it.

Indeed the very opposite appears to have been the case, with urban agricultural activities having been actually hampered by by-laws enacted during the colonial period. These by-laws ban crop production in urban areas on the grounds that it constitutes an eyesore, and encourages the breeding of
mosquitoes. Although slum-based NGOs, like Undugu, are beginning to force the authorities to recognize that urban farming is a legitimate survival strategy adopted by the poor, it is not uncommon to see their crops destroyed in urban clean-up campaigns. It seems that double standards are in operation: the food crops grown by people who need these supplies for their survival lands are cut down with impunity while the rich are still permitted to water their flower gardens.

The Kwasheshe Women’s Group based in Mombasa expanded its activities into urban farming after eight of its members went on a Tatoto training course. The 33-member group began life in 1983 selling kerosene and kanzas – the multi-purpose Swahili length of cloth used as a wrap-around skirt. Last year they embarked on what is known as ‘zero-grazing’ of dairy cattle.

Zero-grazing involves keeping the animals tethered, or confined in a small field, and collecting fodder for them – as opposed to herding them from place to place in search of grazing. Provided there are sources of fodder available, this makes cattle-rearing viable in a city setting. The women have been allocated a 2.5 hectare field in a northern suburb of Mombasa, which they secured with the Municipality’s assistance.

Although drought had taken its toll on the vegetation on and around the field, the women took turns searching further and further afield, to ensure that their two cross-bred cows were fed and milked. Unfortunately, a third cow died while calving early this year, but the remaining two produce at least 10 litres of milk a day, which is sold to members at KSh 12 a litre (US$0.38), a much cheaper price than milk from a shop. This milk helps mothers to improve their children’s nutrition.

At the moment, all the money from milk sales have been used to pay veterinary fees, and the two cows do not really produce enough milk for all the group members’ needs. But this experiment into urban farming gives some indication of what may be possible in the apparently unpromising setting of an urban area.

Another programme which has brought far-reaching benefits to slum residents in Nairobi is a farming project along the Nairobi River. Growing crops on this land used to be a risky and haphazard affair: the river would often flood during the rainy season and wash the plants away; and the farmers felt insecure about their right to use the land. But farming along the river has been put on a gradually more secure footing since 1988 when Undugu daringly organized the allocation of strips of unused public land, each three metres by 55 metres, to members of Kinyayo Bidii Group.

"Most of us previously came from rural areas, where there were big slumboles. Farming was nothing new to us," says Mutokaa, who chairs the group. Seventy-five of the members of Kinyayo Bidii Group are single women and heads of household and they all live in the adjacent slum settlements of Kinui and Kinyayo.

In the first season the group produced enough vegetables to supply neighbouring villages. They grew the popular sukuma wiki (greens; literally meaning ‘to push out the week’), sweet potatoes, bananas, and sugar cane. Says Peter Njenga, Undugu’s Urban Agriculture Coordinator: “We encouraged them to plant sugar cane to check the destructive impact of the floods of Nairobi River.”

Group secretary, Mary Lucy Wairimu, who has lived in Kinyayo all her life, now manages to sell KSh 400 (US$12.90) worth of vegetables per month, and has recently sold two green banana bunches for KSh 110 each. Now the members of Kinyayo Bidii Group no longer have to buy greens at all. “We have vegetables even during the dry season,” Mutokaa says. Selling what they grow has also helped members to send their children to school again. It is a far cry from the time when “we used to be drunks and had no hope for tomorrow”.

Food crops grown by people who need these supplies for survival are cut down with impunity.
The biggest challenge now facing the group is raising funds to install a water pump. Although it is easy to reach the water table to irrigate the shambas, in an especially dry season the crops suffer.

**Rehabilitation, not punishment**

Lack of official recognition for urban farming activities is just one way in which the survival strategies of the urban poor are undermined. This forces them — the majority of whom are single women— into illegal activities such as prostitution and beer brewing. In fact, beer brewing is one of the commonest causes of women being arrested and thrown in prison. But imprisoning women is not only futile as far as the women are concerned, it also means that their children are often left alone in the slums with no-one to look after them. And this lack of parental supervision is clearly a major cause of delinquency among Kenyan children, as among children anywhere.

Concerned about this situation, two Maryknoll sisters based in Nairobi founded a programme in 1987 called Riziki. The aim of the programme was to help women ex-prisoners acquire skills that would prevent them returning to the illegal activities that caused their arrest. (See Case X.) A related aim was to foster self-reliance in the women and help them rediscover their self-respect. During their stint at Riziki, the women also learned about the law so they know exactly which activities to avoid once they leave.

Riziki operates from a centre in the southwestern suburbs of Nairobi. The women attend the centre for up to two years, until they are ready to stand on their own feet. The mothers are accommodated by the programme in Kibera, where the organization has also built a day-care centre to keep an eye on children left behind while their mothers are away at their classes. The child-care centre is operated by the mothers themselves on a rotational basis. The women get allowances — ranging between K.Sh 800 and 1,600 (US$26-52) a month — to help them maintain their children for the duration of their stay.

A major specialization of the organization is making soft toys. Some dressmaking and machine-knitting is also offered, but concern has been raised recently over the fact that there are so many women’s groups making clothes that the market has become saturated. Finding marketable skills for the women keeps the current administrators on their toes.

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**Case X: “I never want to go back to that place”**

Susan Kairuthi has been jailed twice in her 25 years — and so has been her three-year-old daughter, Margaret. Susan, 25, has two other children, blames a former boy-friend for her imprisonment.

When Susan first came to Nairobi, she lived with an aunt. But she left when her uncle started making sexual advances towards her. She settled in Dandora, one of Nairobi’s upmarket squatter settlements.

With three children to look after — “I drooped out of school when I was in Standard Six because I was pregnant” — she had to find some way of earning a living. She found a job as a barmaid to begin with, then started distilling chang’aa, the illegal alcoholic brew whose sales sustain many a slum woman.

As she was now earning a small income, she attracted the attention of a boy-friend who moved in with her. She hoped he would help her to make ends meet, but the opposite soon turned out to be the case. “He used to demand money from me, which I refused to give him because I had my children to look after,” she says. What made things worse was his dislike of the custodians who came to buy her chang’aa.

He finally informed her to the police and she was arrested and jailed in January 1980 for two months. “When I came out of jail, he’d gone and taken all my things with him,” says Susan angrily. “I managed to trace him and get them back, but then he called the police again.” This time she was charged with theft and put in prison again.

“Life in jail is hard,” says Susan. “I had Margaret with me, but I missed my other children. She also resented the beatings when anyone refused to call the prison warder ‘Madam,’ or braided her hair. ‘I never ever want to go back to that place,’ she says vehemently. “I pray to God a lot so He’ll help me — so that if anybody upsets me, I’ll manage to run away rather than fight and get arrested.”

Susan is currently on Riziki’s two-year rehabilitation programme for ex-convicted women. She is learning new skills in the hope that this will keep her away from illegal activities when she leaves. “When I finish, I would like to go into business, like making clothes or selling food,” she says.

She gets an allowance of K.Sh 700 (US$22.50) a month for herself and baby Margaret. Her two older children went to live with her grandparents when she was first convicted. Little Margaret is now going to nursery school at the Riziki Day Care Centre. Susan would like her to go on to primary school. “If I had completed school, I’d not have been jailed,” she believes.
their toes – Riziki was taken over by the African Network for the Prevention and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect in 1989. Recently, they have discovered that there is a market for fresh fruit juices, such as orange and passion fruit, and they are working out how they can exploit it. They are also looking into the possibility of producing jam and tomato sauce.

Women with O-level education are given scholarships to enable them to attend nursery school teaching courses. Though Riziki will not be able to employ all of them in its own child-care programme, they should be able to use their new skills to work at the numerous nursery schools in the city.

The organizers are concerned about the limited impact of the programme when compared to the large numbers of women who need their help. But its positive effect on the few women who have benefited from it cannot be denied.

**Certain regulations hamper or undermine poor people’s very real attempts to improve their lives**

Needed: a flexible and holistic approach

The ICDC study has helped to draw policy-makers’ attention to the wider problems of which the phenomenon of children ‘in especially difficult circumstances’ is a symptom, as well as an outcome. It is vital to recognize that the survival strategies deployed by Kenya’s young newcomers in the urban jungle – even where they are anti-social or illegal – are inseparable from the real and genuine problems faced by their mothers, their families, and the community at large. It has also become clear that these problems cannot be understood, let alone addressed, unless children and their parents are invited to express their views about them and identify what they see as solutions.

Also emerging again and again from this study is the way certain regulations hamper or undermine poor people’s very real attempts to improve their lives. In housing, for instance, planning by-laws uphold standards which result in houses being built which are far too expensive for the urban poor to afford. They are therefore forced to occupy hovels on unhygienic sites, which are a health and fire hazard for everyone in the neighbourhood.

In provision of water, there are the by-laws which pay no attention to the inability of the poor to meet the exorbitant basic installation fees, thereby condemning them to pay for water from a kiosk at rates far more expensive than those paid by better-off members of society. In sanitation, there are by-laws which outlaw the use of pit latrines, even when a waterborne sewage system is not available for the safe disposal of human waste.

In meeting the nutritional needs of the family, there are by-laws forbidding the cultivation of food
crops, even when the spiralling cost of living has cut the purchasing power of the urban poor to shreds, making it impossible for them to buy the food they need.

And in the all-important area of education – which is the means whereby both children and women can be empowered to run their lives more effectively in the future – there are policies that fail to recognize the role of informal schools and their contribution to the eradication of illiteracy among the poor.

It is instructive that most of the programmes that have made a positive impact on the lives of poor urban families and their children are ones which have found ways of side-stepping these constraints, and which have integrated the problems of children with those of families – particularly women breadwinners – and tackled these problems from many directions simultaneously.

These are the programmes which recognize that shelter does not have to conform to the standard norms laid down by urban by-laws, and that housing for the poor has to be tailored to their needs and their pockets. They are the kinds of programmes which recognize that individually, the poor have no means of access to safe drinking water, but that as a group, they can install and sustain water tanks and kiosks for the common good. They are the programmes which recognize that a pit latrine may be illegal, but it is far better than the open dumping of human waste. They are also the programmes which side-step restrictions to urban food production, which has shown such immense potential in alleviating hunger.

These approaches point to a move away from institutions as a way of solving children’s problems, towards the community-based, or slum-based approach, drawing on the creativity of families and children who in their own way have managed to develop survival strategies. These strategies deserve recognition, support and enhancement. What is needed are programmatic and service solutions in which meeting the needs of the poor – for the sake of the entire family’s well-being – must be the sole criterion of success; meeting the desires of urban planners for fine buildings and installations must come second.

This report has described some programmes which meet this criterion successfully. There are many more good programmes going on quietly in slum communities in all of Kenya’s big cities. On their multiplication and expansion, the future of this generation and coming generations of Kenya’s poor urban children will ultimately depend.
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