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THE PLIGHT OF STREET CHILDREN IN SOUTH AFRICA

PART OF A PAPER TO BE DELIVERED AT THE MALIBONGWE CONFERENCE

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The Phenomenon of homeless or street children is one found in most Societies in the world. The causes of homelessness can be given in terms of imbalance of the distributions of wealth both between countries and within the societies, with the consequent poverty and marginalising of large sectors of the population.

In many societies, as witnessed in South Africa, Housing, Welfare health and Education are geared for the benefit of a minority and the majority of the population have no or very limited access to resources. for personal, family and community needs. In South Africa the situation is exacerbated by the official policy of apartheid which concedes rights and opportunities and access to services on the basis of skin colour. The policy of the "Homeland" the uprooting of whole communities into areas of inadequate development and no facilities for decent housing, schools and employment lead to the discription family life and community cohesion, and the children usually suffer.

In this part of the paper I will attempt to look at causes or problems from which homelessness arise as well as the effect of being a street child.

HOMELAND SYSTEM - UNFAIR DISTRIBUTION OF WEALTH IN THE COUNTRY

There is enormous lack of resources and bare necessities in the so called homelands which result in large numbers of people flocking to the cities to look for employment or in search of a better living. These people end up squatting in backyards tunnels and whatever place they can find to rest.

Those who manage to get employment stay either in hostels or servants rooms where they are not allowed to stay with the children. This result in children having to stay far away from their families or parents with strangers. Lack of control over these children or neglect will drive them to the streets. They will feel unloved and uncared for.

Migrant working is one of the major causes of family disorganisation. Families where the bread winner has to go out and look for employment in the cities. Because of the dehumanising effect hostel life has on the Social development of these people they end up engaging in extra marital affairs from which children usually result. The outcome is a man two family units or households, or with women having to sit with fatherless children because the man cannot afford to maintain two families from his meagre wages.

These children who are products of economic disability and social disregard tend to have a very problematic upbringing; the single parent mother cannot afford economically and socially because she has a life of her own to live. In the event of the mother establishing a new relationship a problem of acceptance arises from both the child and the new boyfriend.

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UNEMPLOYMENT

Because of the economic crisis that SA is in is one factor which contributes to homelessness. People who are dismissed, retrenched and generally unemployed cannot afford the exorbitant rentals thus get evicted from their homes resulting in people roaming the streets and children staying with friends and relatives.

Lack of income into the home makes children to go out and fend for themselves.

PRIVATISATION

Privatisation of housing has created a shift from government responsibility to provide houses for the citizens. These company owned houses are too expensive and thus people who cannot the escalating bond rates get their houses repossessed. Housing remain a commodity for the reach and wealthy only. This also results in homelessness or squatting in shacks.

INADEQUATE HOUSING UNITS

The houses provided are usually not adequate because there are situations where a family of five or more stay in a one roomed or two roomed households with no privacy. This creates conflict in the family and result in family disorganisation and others running away from home.

BAD PLANNING OF TOWNS

There are areas that are troubled consistently by natural disasters leave people homeless and without any means of survival. An example of these natural disasters are the Natal floods which occur every year during the months of September and October. These problems arise from time to time with no form of relief or intervention from the state by either moving the residents to a safer and disaster free area.

FORCED REMOVALS AND INCORPORATIONS INTO BANTUSTANS

Forced removals to inadequate developed and unserviced areas is also one cause of homelessness and family disorganisation. People who resist these removals get their houses demolished in order to force them out.

Incorporation into homelands also contribute to people being left homeless and those who resist incorporation are driven out to unknown areas where they end up squatting as refugees

REPRESSION

The era of the 1985-87 and the subsequent declaration of the State of Emergency left many children homeless because they had to evade detention and thus become what we term internal refugees.

Internal refugees also resulted from the conflict in Natal because the youth had to seek protection and hiding in other areas to avoid detentions and being killed.

Refugees from other countries eg Mozambique also contribute to the number of homeless children who have to be integrated into the South African cultural heritage.

Harrassment of parents and family members by the police and subsequent detentions left many children without proper care and this also sent them out to the streets.

TEENAGE PREGNANCY

Teenage pregnancy also contributes to the high rate of street children because most of the teenagers who fell pregnant are not ready economically, emotionally and socially to cater for their children and this usually result in them dumping the children at any age and these children grow up in the streets with others living in tunnels and alleys.

This is evident in the number of children under the age of two moving around with others of about four to five years. What future does these children have?

All the above factors have drastic negative effects on these children. What follows are common effects that streets children have.

BREAKDOWN OF FAMILY UNIT

Homelessness leads to total disorganisation of family unit. Lack of family ties makes children to be unable to establish good and general family relations and even social relationships.

Children from poor family relationships or total no family ties does not know what having a family means thus have no reason to establish one himself or herself.

These children because they had a breakdown in family relations does not know or cannot trace their next of kin and thus do not know their origin.

SOCIAL MISFITS

Street children are a nuisance to society and thus a hated lot. They tend to indulge into malappropriate social activities like drug abuse, being abused for sexual practices; gangsterism; robbery; glue sniffing, etc and general loitering which usually result in them having a brush with the cops at an early age.²-

EDUCATION

The children who are without proper housing or are homeless and thus becoming street children do not get a chance to receive basic education.

Children who have spent time on the streets can lose basic educational skills acquired earlier and also suffer from cognitive and perceptual dysfunction.

HEALTH

Street children because of lack of proper shelter, food and clothing are prone to all sorts of diseases.

They eat from dustbins, sleep in tunnels and alleys and have no immunisation done. (This can be traced from an example of a two year old child who is being cared for by her seven years old brother. They are staying in the Streets of Hillbrow. No shelter even at night and scavenge for food from the restaurant dustbins.

None of them knows symptoms of any sickness and in the event of one getting sick there is no urgency to get him or her to the hospital or clinic for treatment. The older one does not even know whether the younger one has been immunised or not. They just live to see the next day.

Street children are the victims of child abuse because they run the risk of being abused sexually by the older people who are rejected in life by their own peers.

CULTURAL VALUES

Children brought up in a close knit family background learn their folklores, traditional norms and values as well as their standards and artifacts and are able to integrate this into their modern ways of development.

Street children are the direct opposite of the above category of children because they do not even know their origin or next of kin they will not

know their history and thus have lost total track of who they are and with whom they relate. They do not have anybody who can relate their history to them. What they learn is street language and street culture.

They themselves will not be in a position to tell their children where they come from.

ALL THE ABOVE EFFECTS HAVE A VERY NEGATIVE BEARING ON THE PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING OF THIS STREET CHILD.

STATE REACTION TO STREET CHILDREN

STREET CHILDREN live on the fringes of society and have no recourse to protection from the law. In fact the response to these children often is to arrest them for loitering or vagrancy. Sometimes they are picked up for being " dirty ", the police recognise or assume that they are street children, put them in a van and transport them to places like Kinross or Van Rijn. These are but two of about eight places called " places of safety ".

Often the response of the state has been to put youngsters in jail for a while until they are removed to these so-called " places of Safety ". These places are like hostels which dehumanises the children because they are removed

from the community and placed in such conditions which have little or if any opportunity for socialisation and thus does not develop a sense of belonging in the community.

It seems more a policy of put them out of sight and they will be out of the mind of society.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT IN THE PLIGHT OF STREET CHILDREN

A lot has been done and said by some groupings in the communities to help alleviate the problem of these children but nothing seem to help.

Some of these children are cared for in shelters like PROSCCESS, Twilight, and Streetwise which have recently began to house boys in Pretoria and Durban. Many of these youngsters through the help of Social Workers maintain contact with their families although some prefer to stay at these shelters because of the strained family relations.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE

Besides protection and shelter many children need expert psychological help to adjust to their "new life" after the trauma and brutalisation they have experienced at home and subsequently on the streets.

Sharing of resources and more coordinated planning between the groups working with street children is essential.

More focus must be given to the economic, socio-political climate that helps to create suffering, poverty and denial of greater human development of the citizens of the state, and street children are only one group of this population.

Attention must be given to restore family life, community development and a place for all to be given full rights and full citizenship of their country.

South Africa does not respect the UN Declaration of Children's rights as well as her own act called "The children's act No 33 of 1960 as amended in 1985.

That is why there is no legislation that caters for the welfare of street children.

AS they are not protected by any law the only people who can care for them are their own people because we are all victims of this evil apartheid

system whether you find yourself in a house or not because today you have a shelter tomorrow you are without one through vigilante attacks or open state terrorism.

If my child cannot fend for herself at the age of seven, how to I expect my fellow country men's children to care for herself at that age. Street childhood is a diseases which needs to be healed gradually like all other diseases for which prescriptions are available.

EVERY CHILD IS MY CHILD !!!

THANK YOU.