Reactive, Protective and Rights-Based Approaches in Work with Homeless Street Youth

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Abstract

Homeless children on the streets are one of the most disadvantaged sectors of urban youth. Their circumstances leave them without access to many of their human rights and excluded from mainstream society. Policies that affect these young people can range from broad-based to targeted initiatives—each brings advantages and disadvantages. This paper distinguishes three basic approaches that cut across this typology and describes how governments view and treat homeless street children. There are three main governmental approaches: reactive, protective and rights-based. The distinguishable impacts of each type of policy on the lives of homeless children who live in the streets are drawn out in this paper. Broad-based initiatives within a rights-based governmental approach, into which targeted initiatives by civil society can be integrated, seem a potentially effective combination for including homeless street children as participants in the wider society.

Keywords: street children; government policy; paradigms of childhood

Homeless Street Children

There is no universal definition of “street children” and several interpretations are in common use, some covering smaller populations of children who live in the streets, others including the much larger sector of children who work on the streets (Thomas de Benitez 2003, 5). For the purposes of this paper, I will look at homeless street children—also known as street-living children—on the grounds that a narrower focus allows for clearer discussion, and that the arguments in this paper can be developed to apply to street-working children and other children in urban street situations.

Street-living children can be taken to mean those who sleep on the street the majority of the time and retain limited or no contact with their family of origin. Children who live on the streets without any parental support are a fraction of the total population of street-involved children. The majority are “abandoning” rather
than “abandoned” children, who have generally left home for the street as a result of family breakdown and violence almost invariably linked to the stresses of extreme poverty. In certain parts of the world, a large proportion of street-living children are AIDS orphans, or have been displaced by war (Consortium for Street Children 2002).

Before addressing the particular circumstances of homeless street children, it is important to recognize that the use of “street children” as a reference term is, in itself, highly problematic. According to Panter-Brick (2002, 148) there are five powerful criticisms of the term:

‘Street children’ is a generic term which obscures the many differences in individual children’s circumstances.
It does not adequately represent how children see themselves.
It is a stigmatizing label.
It draws attention away from other children in poverty and social exclusion.
It reflects social and political agendas more than children’s reality.’

Unfortunately, however, there is no wide-spread agreement on an alternative phrase for “street children:” “No term has yet been coined to capture both the peculiar nature of street life and its interconnection with other aspects of vulnerability” (Volpi 2002, 3). This interrelationship between street life and other areas of vulnerability as well as difficulties in gaining consensus over definitions indicate that this is a group of children who can easily fall through the cracks of policy initiatives.

“Being poor is itself a health hazard; worse, however, is being urban and poor. Much worse is being poor, urban and a child. But worst of all is being a street child in an urban environment” (De la Barra 1998, 46). While the particular circumstances of homeless street children vary from country to country, city to city, and child to child, there seem to be at least six types of barriers which interact to a greater or lesser degree to keep homeless street children in extreme poverty and excluded from mainstream society:

First, homeless street children “share the common condition of being ‘out of place’ in street environments, spending their lives largely outside the spheres typically considered appropriate for children, such as home, school and recreational settings” (Raffaelli and Larson 1999, 1). This “out of place” condition sets street-living children outside the usual rules and protective norms of society.

Second, street children are “particularly vulnerable to abuses in juvenile justice systems; they are more likely to come into (actual or perceived) conflict with the law, and they are less able to defend themselves from abuse once within the system” (Consortium for Street Children 2002, 1).

Third, while street children are often found in cities where education “is already close to universal primary schooling” (Coombs 1981, 55; cited in Boyd 1991, 101) and teaching is generally of higher quality than in the rural areas (Watkins
2000, 73), they have lower probabilities than most children of being able to access formal education—not least because of their mobility, lack of birth certificates or home addresses, and no adults to enroll them in schools.

Fourth, homeless street children are particularly exposed to certain health risks, yet have less access than most urban poor children to health services. While there is little statistical evidence to show that street children are at greater risk than other poor urban children of malnutrition or poor mental health (Panter-Brick 2002, 161), they are at greater risk of street accidents, exposure to high levels of environmental pollution, chronic skin infections, exposure to AIDS, STDs, abusive sexual relationships, risk of young pregnancy and solvent abuse (Curtin, Hossain and Verghese-Choudhury 1997, 70; Raffaelli 1999, 20). And street children risk death from violent trauma, accidents, suicide and murder, although few survival statistics have been published (Raffaelli 1999, 18).

Fifth, homeless street children need to earn money or food to survive. Their work is usually sporadic, marginal, sometimes criminal and always in the informal sector. Their marginal activities put them outside the scope of any protection services geared to ensuring child labor is not exploitative or hazardous.

Sixth, as sporadic workers and non-adults, street children are usually unable to rent housing and are excluded from assisted housing schemes.

These circumstances can work together, forming multiple barriers which confront homeless street children as they try to move out of social exclusion, vulnerability and extreme poverty. Marginalization can be exacerbated by the development or deepening of behavioral patterns which may help children meet their immediate survival needs but which can become a source of further alienation from society: lack of attention to hygiene, aggressive behavior and drug use are just a few examples of conduct that can work against children attempting to get back into school, into regular work or rejoin their families.

These barriers can carry serious exclusionary implications for the children themselves in later life and also for wider society. This is not to say that all homeless children in the street will become socially excluded adults, but rather that they seem likely to confront complex combinations of pressures which work towards their exclusion as adults.

**Broad-Based and Targeted Policies**

Before turning to the different sorts of approaches behind policies towards homeless street children, it is useful to review the ways in which broad-based and targeted policies can differ, irrespective of the type of approach adopted.

**Broad-Based Initiatives**

Broad-based initiatives are frequently aimed at poverty reduction, urban children at risk, social inclusion or guaranteeing human rights to all children. They can be
international, national or local initiatives, which set out to address specific themes of importance to a wide range of disadvantaged children.

At the international level, UNICEF, for example, has focused on five broad, cross-cutting priorities for children during 2002-2005: enabling children to complete a primary school education of reasonable quality, promoting integrated early childhood development, safeguarding against disease and disability, stopping the spread of HIV/AIDS, and helping children to grow up free from violence, exploitation, abuse and discrimination- on the basis that “this is the framework that will allow us to have the biggest impact on the lives of children and young people” (UNICEF 2002, 1). Large international NGOs like Save the Children, Oxfam and Plan International have similarly adopted themes with humanitarian aid and development that allow them to operate coherently around the world. At the national level, many countries have broad-based policies aimed at improving the lives of poorer children: improved access to health clinics, drives to improve primary school enrolment, and legislation to protect children from exploitative labor are three common areas of policy reform. Local authority initiatives often work in tandem with these, for instance by equipping schools in poor urban communities, staffing health centers, providing vocational training schemes.

These are vital services for the urban poor and will no doubt improve many children’s living conditions and future prospects. Further, it is possible that such broad-based policy initiatives gain homeless street children at least intermittent access to new services such as immunization campaigns- if they are blanket campaigns aimed at covering all children. Effective campaigns to reduce the incidence of STDs or slow the spread of HIV/AIDS will affect street children directly or as part of a domino effect of reducing the overall probability of infection. Broad-based initiatives can address and reform whole social networks, and therefore can allow more scope for preventive action. Effective programs to reduce domestic violence may prevent some children from taking to the streets, while vocational training opportunities in high youth-unemployment areas may keep other children out of street gangs and thereby prevent some of these taking to street life.

However, broad-based initiatives run the very real risk of including street children at the levels of planning and discourse but excluding them in the practice. This is in essence because services for urban poor children or children in extreme poverty are, like most services, limited by explicit resource constraints and performance targets. A typical localized example could be that of a vocational training workshop for children from low-income urban families, which may be designed with 50 places, of whom 20 “graduates” might be expected at the end of the first year. The combination of place restrictions and performance criteria will create competition among the eligible children from low-income urban families. Homeless street children- who are more mobile, have had less schooling, may be dirty and possibly aggressive- may well be perceived as less inclined to arrive on time or carry out routine tasks, are often less informed about such opportunities, and may feel less able or less willing to compete for the places than children who have family support, a fixed place to sleep and more regular schooling habits. Even if street-living children are offered and accept a place, they are likely to face more obstacles to
staying in the program, having to make more changes to behavioral patterns, and more likely to face stigmatization, than other children in poverty.

A broad-based initiative, designed to address a specific problem faced by large numbers of poor children, is likely to be most successful for those children who have most support and fewest “anti-social” characteristics. They seem likely to be least successful for homeless street children who have very few sources of support, engaging in precarious day-to-day survival with a range of interacting barriers impeding different areas of their lives.

Sometimes, several domains of national social policies are cited as including street children- such as employment (vocational training) health (community health centers), and justice/welfare (orphanages and shelter homes). But within these, even in high-income countries like Belgium, “no particular attention is given to street children nor are specific methods applied to them” (Council of Europe 1994, 46). In practice therefore, homeless children are more likely to be excluded from broad-based initiatives for children, regardless of the type of underlying approach.

**Targeted Initiatives**

The largest and most important targeted international initiative level for street children so far has been UNICEF’s regional program in Latin America and the Caribbean launched in 1988 for children in especially difficult circumstances, in which street children were given priority (Boyden and Holden 1991, 75). A few UNICEF offices still run targeted programs, often together with NGOs (such as UNICEF Albania and UNICEF Vietnam). UNESCO and the World Bank have also targeted street children through different policy initiatives. For example, through its Global Basic Education for All Program, UNESCO funded several NGO initiatives for street children and disseminated examples of good practice during the 1990s (UNESCO, 1995). The World Bank has also funded projects for street children through local authorities and NGOs (for example a pilot program in Ceara, Brazil), launched its Street Children Initiative in 1998 as part of the Urban cluster, hosted an international conference on street children in 2000 and published a report on approaches and practices for street children in 2002 (Volpi 2002).

While their global presence and wide-ranging responsibilities provide international agencies and international NGOs with a platform for advocating for policies and disseminating good practice, they do not have the comparative advantages of specialization, innovation and personalization needed to implement and sustain policies targeting particular groups of disadvantaged children (Thomas de Benitez 2003, 34). It is more often local authorities and sometimes national governments that develop targeted policies, often in conjunction with NGOs, and usually in reaction to growing numbers or persistent populations of working or homeless children visible on their cities’ streets. Mexico and Kenya are examples of national authorities which currently implement targeted initiatives to address street children in their major cities. And local authorities in many cities across the world have started their own initiatives in response to local concerns and anxieties about homeless children on their city streets.
Targeted initiatives recognize homeless street children as a unique group of disadvantaged children who survive in particularly precarious, but often highly visible, conditions. Targeted initiatives can work to help street-living children gain access to services that address specific, identified needs in health, welfare, housing or employment. Drop-in centers, medical and dental treatment, psychological and family counseling, access to schooling and job opportunities can all be directed at resolving homeless street children’s needs. Initiatives targeted at homeless street children can help to plug “gaps in the social networks through which children, and street children in particular, can fall” (Council of Europe 1994, 47). Several hundred small, often local, NGOs around the world help plug these gaps, either in collaboration or conflict with local authorities. However, targeted initiatives are essentially reactions to perceived, existing problems, and are limited in their capacity to prevent those situations. Also, although a targeted initiative seems more likely to have immediate impacts for homeless street children than a broad-based initiative, this does not mean that impacts are necessarily positive or lasting for a child’s inclusion in society. The nature and strength of impact for each child will depend, at least in part, on the type of approach adopted by governments.

Approaches to Homeless Street Children
Perspectives on street children have undergone a sea-change at the turn of the 21st century (Panter-Brick 2002, 148). A driving force behind this change has been the almost universal ratification of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the most widely and rapidly accepted human rights treaty in history. Children are moving from the margins of discussions about poverty toward center stage, as UNICEF’s *Poverty Reduction Begins with Children* publication suggests (UNICEF 2000). Street children and other youth in difficult circumstances have become “no longer a matter of humanitarian and charitable concern, but a legal responsibility at local, national and international levels” (Panter-Brick 2002, 8).

While only one approach, the rights-based approach, responds adequately to the legal responsibilities towards street children assumed by all governments upon ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), two other approaches are also evident in practice in many countries; they can be described as “reactive” and “protective” approaches.

Reactive Approach to Homeless Street Children
This approach sees street children primarily as a threat or potential threat to public order and safety. A key policy manifestation is the use of the juvenile justice system as a way to clear the streets and punish offenders against the common good. A “central characteristic of the Law and Order approach is that the phenomenon is individualized and is viewed only in terms of its possible consequences for public order” (Council of Europe 1994, 17).

Children in some countries can be arrested simply for living on the street, or for committing offences connected with their homeless status, as in the Philippines (Consortium for Street Children 2002, 1). “Homeless youngsters are often defined as ‘vagrants’ and in many countries vagrancy is a criminal offence. Homelessness is often confused with delinquency and provides automatic grounds for arrest”
(Boyden and Holden 1991, 71). In Kenya and Cote d’Ivoire for example, children have been routinely arrested for homelessness or vagrancy (Satterthwaite 1999, 227). Sometimes drop-in centers are moved by the authorities to the periphery of cities in an attempt to get children off the streets (Bartlett et al., 1999, 217).

Sentencing policies can range from those which place children in custodial institutions to alternatives such as community service. Custodial options are still in place for children in many low- and middle-income countries, such as Namibia, Pakistan and Ecuador. Street children can be particularly vulnerable because they rarely receive family support in their journey through the court system. Where a child rights agenda is not yet in place, or where it is only nominally in place, policies can be highly repressive towards children at any stage of the legal process.

Policies of rounding up children to frighten them away from the streets and imprisoning “vagrants” may be symptoms of “authoritarian populism” in countries living through political chaos or economic decline, when governments draw on particular prejudices and discontents to attract support and legitimacy (Stuart Hall 1982). Underpinning such treatment is the concept of street children as delinquents. “The problem of street children is therefore often perceived solely as a criminal problem” (Council of Europe 1994, 48).

Under a reactive approach, homeless street children are likely to receive from the authorities those welfare and educational provisions available in custodial institutions under punitive policies. Since a policy goal is to remove delinquents from the streets, there may be attempts at rehabilitation or at instilling fear, so that on release children do not return to the streets. However, there is considerable evidence that after custodial sentences homeless children return to the streets, since the problems that led to their homelessness have not been addressed (Consortium for Street Children 2002, 1).

A broad-based initiative for children under a reactive approach is likely to help those children regarded by the authorities as “deserving” and “needy,” rather than “delinquent,” so homeless street children are unlikely to be affected directly. A targeted initiative under a reactive approach is likely to be repressive. Impacts may include: presence of street children in custodial institutions, unchecked abuses of children’s rights, homeless children being periodically less visible as they avoid police, and homeless children becoming increasingly alienated from society.

Another manifestation of a reactive approach can be civil society organizations, particularly NGOs, in open conflict with the State. Casa Alianza is currently challenging the government of Honduras to protect children from street killings, which have escalated alarmingly within a climate of perceived lawlessness (Casa Alianza 2003). Of course, in countries where government repression includes heavy media censorship, NGOs might be less visible in their attempts to defend street children’s rights. To stress the earlier point, any government, whether national or local, which adopts a reactive approach toward street children does so in contravention of its obligations assumed under the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
Protective Approach to Homeless Street Children
This approach perceives children to be both “incomplete” and “our future,” thus needing different treatment than adults; protecting them from potential social evils is seen as imperative. A key policy within this approach is the focus on specific “problems,” including integrating children into formal education and withdrawing them from work. A central characteristic is that street children are perceived as individuals in need of extra attention to reintroduce them to traditional socializing systems of school and home (Council of Europe 1994, 16).

Under this approach, legal sanctions against homeless children are not a preferred option, since they would not be effective in helping children integrate into mainstream society. National and local welfare policies may include offering temporary shelter or longer term residential accommodation in state orphanages or children’s homes, and often there are attempts to trace families and return children to their original home environments. Shelter and protection services may be provided by NGOs, sometimes loosely coordinated by local welfare departments. Under a protective approach, children’s housing by the state is usually conceptualized as a residual welfare measure, often, although not necessarily, using inappropriate buildings which are usually poorly equipped and understaffed.

Health care will be considered a necessity under a protective approach, although the priorities that are identified may be those of the authorities or NGOs rather than those felt by the children themselves. There may therefore be more focus on curative than preventive health, and more emphasis on physical than mental health. Under a protective approach, homeless street children may be conceptualized as a residual category in health policies too, and more expensive health needs, particularly if they are not life-threatening, may not be met.

Of prime importance will be overcoming legal and educational barriers to enable children to rejoin school, sometimes irrespective of the quality of the education available and its appropriateness to homeless children. Reintegration policies under this approach may include counseling, therapy and vocational training as support mechanisms to enable children to re-enter formal education or the job market, although child work will be discouraged.

The focus of the protective approach is on outcomes, rather than process; on immediate causes of problems rather than on their structural causes. It may be charity-driven, and seeks to achieve specific goals recognized as helpful to most children in society, over improving participation or otherwise empowering homeless street children (Canadian International Development Agency 2001).

A broad-based initiative for children under a protective approach is likely to include homeless street children, at least at the planning and discourse stages. Some may indeed reach them directly, such as blanket immunization campaigns. But unless designed to have 100 percent coverage, most initiatives such as community clinics, more schools, and better housing for the poor are in practice likely to have no direct impact on homeless street children.
A targeted initiative for street-living children under a protective approach is likely to respond to identified needs- identified either by the authorities or NGOs, or sometimes by children themselves- for health, education, vocational training and welfare provision. It will be aimed at reinserting children into mainstream society through using established social structures. Impacts are likely to include: presence of street children in state and NGO residential and day programs, fewer homeless street children visible on the streets, more homeless children with access to schooling and health care, and public education campaigns encouraging support for off-street programs for homeless children.

The ideologies behind many democratic regimes, from neo-liberal to social conservative, are likely to produce a protective approach largely because their priorities are elsewhere- primarily within the economy, on the workers and producers, rather than on children in poverty. Their priorities for children are to create adults who will contribute to the economy and nation state. Using a protective approach, governments are likely to encourage civil society organizations to develop and work independently, under loose supervision by state social services. This reflects both state budget constraints and governmental commitment to ensuring that homeless children are adequately protected. Government and NGO relations are likely to be superficially collaborative but in constant tension, as independently-funded NGOs chafe under government requirements to ensure that homeless children are “adequately” protected.

**Rights-Based Approach to Homeless Street Children**

A rights-based approach sees street children as human beings whose fundamental rights have been violated. A key policy within this approach is to ensure the legal protection of children’s rights, promoting the well-being of children through a range of social, economic, cultural and educational measures which allow street children to take control over their own lives. A central characteristic of this approach is that street children are human beings who have been pushed into a weaker position with few, if any, human rights, and have to cope with a number of additional problems specific to their situation (Council of Europe 1994, 16).

Under a rights-based approach, policies are geared to outcome and process goals which emphasize the realization of rights for all children. This approach recognizes that rights always imply obligations of the state, and can only be realized with empowerment. Structural problems are addressed alongside the immediate causes of problems, and programs are more likely to be inter-sectoral and holistic. This approach is highly policy-oriented and looks at social, economic, cultural, civil and political contexts (Canadian International Development Agency 2001).

Under a rights-based approach, homeless children in breach of the law should have their special circumstances taken into account. For example, some Brazilian cities have set up screening and referral centers offering alternative options to juvenile prisons, while some high-income countries have schemes to mediate settlements between offenders and victims (Bartlett et al.,1999, 230). In some countries, state social workers or NGOs accompany homeless children all the way through the legal
process, in recognition of their particular lack of other support systems (Council of Europe 1994, 18).

In juvenile justice, the human rights perspective is currently driving most reform throughout the world. “One of the most important aspects of the Convention on the Rights of the Child is the guidance it gives for youth justice systems; to make these systems compatible with this Convention usually means that significant changes are needed in laws, procedures and the make-up and attitude of authorities and institutions with responsibility for managing children in conflict with the law” (Satterthwaite 2002, 6).

Sustained access to basic health services, education and housing are all recognized as entitlements of homeless children within a rights-based approach. “Certain governments and some local authorities have made low-cost lodgings, vouchers for hostel accommodation and advice on housing available to young people” (Boyden and Holden 1991, 71). The Convention on the Rights of the Child requires that all state actions reflect the best interests of the child, couched within a framework that entitles children to participate, express their opinions and have these opinions taken into account in policies, programs and decisions which affect them. In this context, children may have the right to: work under certain circumstances; choose whether to return to the family home or to take alternative shelter options; participate in formal or non-formal schooling; and receive health care at preventive and curative levels according to their own perception of their needs.

A broad-based initiative within a human rights approach is likely to include children at planning, piloting, implementation and feedback stages. Homeless street children will not be consulted as a particular group, but children with particularly weak access to their rights are likely to participate. Broad-based initiatives are likely to include structural reforms in educational, health or welfare service provision- with homeless street children along with other children being encouraged to participate in order to identify processes appropriate to achieving desirable outcomes for all. However, since such initiatives require fundamental changes in the way state services are resourced and delivered, change will take time, and homeless street children may perceive impact more as participants in planning than as receivers of services, at least in the short term. Participatory methods have been developed from the empirically-derived participatory rural appraisal (Chambers 1997) to help empower marginal populations such as street children. But if resources are constrained and numbers of children in need are large, even widespread uses of participatory techniques are unlikely to enable homeless street children to access their rights to protection and service provision.

A targeted initiative for street-living children under a rights-based approach is similarly likely to involve homeless street children primarily as participants in finding ways to gain access to their human rights. The main emphasis is likely to be on empowerment outcomes, using participatory strategies. Rather than aiming to reinsert children into mainstream society, a rights-based approach may seek to change the way society operates for children. NGOs may work in this context to foster social movements and forums to enable street children to voice their
concerns and needs (as in Brazil, India and Peru). Impacts are likely to include: high profile presence of street children in public events covered by the media; increased variety of options for street children to be able to access state services through child-lines, temporary hostels and wide-ranging referral systems; and public campaigns to change perceptions of homeless children from delinquents or victims to individuals in difficult circumstances in need of empowerment.

Social democratic governments, with their underlying ideological tenets of inclusion and equality, seem at first sight most likely to produce this approach, under which governments may encourage civil society organizations to contribute to policy-making, use participatory methods and share their innovations in service delivery. Governments and NGO relations are likely to be collaborative in these spheres. Governments are also likely to contribute significantly to NGO service delivery costs for homeless street children. However, this is as yet rarely practiced even within high-income countries, where numbers of homeless children are relatively small and social services, education and health care are significantly better resourced in financial and human terms than in low- and middle-income countries.

In addition, the inconsistencies inherent in participatory methods (Kapoor 2002) mean that the quality of support received by homeless street children in empowering themselves can be very uneven and may be very superficial.

Since a child rights perspective is being actively pursued by leading intergovernmental organizations such as UNICEF (UNICEF 2002), and by key donor governments including the UK and the European Commission (DfID 2002; European Union 2000), national and local governments are finding support from the international community, and this joint action is accelerating the introduction of human rights-focused provisions for children across the world.

Initial Recommendations
A rights-based approach has been widely accepted by the international community and national governments, as well as by many organizations within civil society, as the most appropriate legal framework for healthy child development. The paragraphs above concur with this assessment, pointing to the incompatibility of a reactive approach with reducing poverty or with enabling homeless street children to engage with wider society; and to the partial nature of a protective approach which is unable to address adequately the complexity of homeless children’s situations. But though a rights-based approach is a more complete and appropriate conceptual framework, it has not yet been adequately operationalized to support homeless street children. This section recommends potentially helpful features of broad-based initiatives and targeted initiatives, and suggests how they might be integrated.

First, broad-based initiatives can be useful preventive strategies which may limit the numbers of children becoming homeless on to the streets if they address poverty and social exclusion in early childhood. Possibly the most important aspect of poverty prevention and social inclusion is guaranteeing basic education and employment opportunities for girls, so that they are better enabled as mothers to
make their own choices, gain access to social services and provide a supportive family environment. In addition, Townsend and Gordon (2002) recommend as “the single most important step to reduce child poverty” the introduction of the legal right to child benefit- as per Articles 25 and 27 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (425). Improved housing for inhabitants of slum areas may also be a contribution in preventing children leaving home for the streets, although “identifying where poor households are in a city is not the same as identifying children in need” (Satterthwaite 2002, 9). There are examples of good national and local authority low-income housing projects in many countries (Satterthwaite 2002, 14), although their effects on reducing the numbers of homeless children on the streets has not been proven.

Second, broad-based initiatives for children should be carefully planned and monitored to ensure that homeless street children are not excluded from programs guaranteeing free access to basic healthcare, education or welfare. At the local level, this may mean dismantling barriers such as requirements for birth certificates, school records and parental signatures which exclude homeless street children. It also may include reviewing school curricula and school policies toward children to make schools more welcoming places of learning for disadvantaged children such as the homeless (Volpi 2002, 24), and ensuring that campaigns to promote sexual health are appropriate and available to high-risk groups like street-living children. This type of broad-based initiative should improve children’s opportunities for participation in wider society.

Third, broad-based initiatives are likely to be insufficient on their own to enable homeless street children to engage with society on their own terms. As listed above, there seem to be at least six interacting barriers which work to keep homeless street children in extreme poverty and excluded from mainstream society. Their resulting marginalization is compounded by the development or deepening of behavioral patterns which help them meet their immediate survival needs but may further alienate them from society, including strengthened feelings of independence, lack of attention to hygiene and aggressive behavior. While a rights-based approach emphasizes improving children’s participation, this is only realistic in a context in which children are also afforded sufficient protection and service provision to enable them to overcome structural and experiential barriers. A targeted initiative should involve homeless children as full participants in finding ways to guarantee their needs for adequate protection and healthy development.

Targeted initiatives can enable homeless street children to resolve basic welfare concerns, and develop some emotional and cognitive competencies, so that they are empowered to access wider services and opportunities for which they are eligible in mainstream society. Targeted initiatives may also prove effective in prevention: Lane (1998,18) describes how working with siblings of street children can be successful as part of a preventive approach, making the distinction that “those that are at greatest risk of taking to street life and those who live in poverty are central to effective prevention strategies.” Not all disadvantaged children take to the streets, and those who do are most likely to slip though the nets of “broad-based” community interventions (cited in Panter-Brick 2002).
Fourth, NGOs have provided the bulk of targeted services for street-living children in many countries, and may often be best placed to design and deliver appropriate services, within a context of full local authority support and coordination (Thomas de Benitez 2003, 34). NGOs are often better suited to innovate, experiment and provide personalized services, while local authorities are better suited to coordinate, carry out public education and implement broad-based policy initiatives. For effective and efficient practice, rational partnerships between local authorities and NGOs should be encouraged. These partnerships should be linked to compatible national broad-based initiatives to enhance benefits for homeless street children, with governments assuming their responsibilities for service delivery costs, encouraging feedback to inform policy-making and fostering the spread of local partnership innovations.

Finally, the impacts of broad-based and targeted initiatives on street-living children should be assessed within these collaborative government-civil society partnerships, in reviews which are accountable to homeless street children themselves as well as to the wider community. While broad-based initiatives can miss homeless street children altogether, targeted initiatives are also unlikely to enable homeless children to gain access to their rights unless participating children are fully involved at the planning, implementation and evaluation stages. Imposed resource constraints can lead to initiatives which, in their planning and discourse, seem to support street children, but do not help them in practice. To avoid the implicit risks of children or service providers being blamed for perceived “failures” in these cases, budgets and financial reports should be detailed and available for review at planning and assessment stages. Further, to ensure that services reach children they are intended to reach, periodic assessment in terms of changes in access by homeless street children to their rights should be built into initiatives at local levels as well as into broader-based policy reforms at national levels.

**Conclusion and Research Recommendations**

This paper is a small and tentative step—taken as a practitioner and a postgraduate student, not an academic—towards a wider framework for exploring the effects of government approaches towards homeless children living in the streets. It aims to be neither authoritative nor in any way complete, but rather to highlight some potential similarities and differences in government reactions towards homeless street children. The five recommendations offered above are in the same spirit— as preliminary suggestions to encourage more rigorous attention to the ways in which governments respond to street children. At least two lines of further research would seem to be indicated: the first into how homeless street children themselves perceive, live with and react to structural barriers to participation; the second into how political environments constrain and foster governmental approaches towards homeless children in the streets. Research in these areas may lead to a clearer understanding of children’s preferences and institutional constraints, so as to better inform strategies to support homeless street children.
Endnote
1. This paper was originally presented at the conference on "Youth Explosion in Developing World Cities: Approaches to Reducing Poverty and Conflict in an Urban Age," held on February 10, 2003 at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC.

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