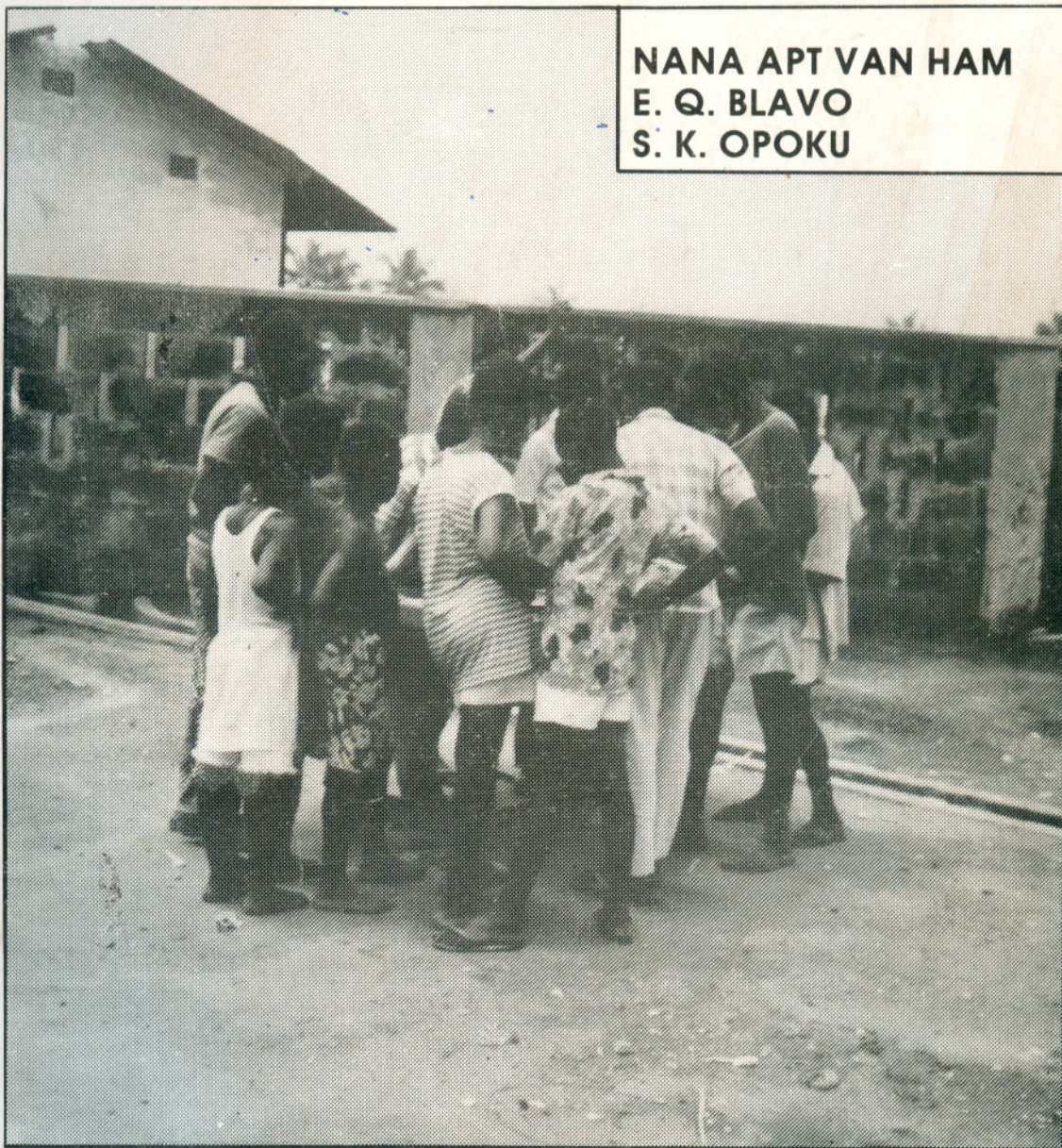


STREET CHILDREN IN ACCRA: *A Survey Report*

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PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS OF STREET CHILDREN

In the last four chapters, we have reviewed the life situation of street children in Accra in both quantitative and qualitative terms. This chapter will pull all the threads together and make some prognosis with regard to the future of these children. From data in hand, we shall review their life situation looking specifically at their family background, health, education employment perspectives and personal development.

The information so far collected and analysed point to the following facts:

Who Are The Street Children?

The following characteristics have emerged from the study: The children found in the streets of Accra range in ages between 4 and 15 years old. The majority are in the most impressionable ages of 7-15 years and they mostly work in the street for economic gains. A greater proportion of the children were born and bred in urban areas and a larger percentage still had lived almost all their lives in urban environment. In this study, only 18 percent of the children were born in rural areas both within and outside of Accra, and just about one fifth of the total children had lived extensively in rural areas. Many of their parents are also urban residents suggesting that urban-urban migration seems to be the likely trend of children roaming the streets of Accra.

Family Background

Contrary to public opinion, street children are not necessarily orphans or children whose parents have migrated out of the country. In this study, an insignificant number of parents were deceased and fewer still were out of the country. Thus these two factors cannot be said to be the major reason for children being in the street. The parents were not only very much alive but the majority lived in or around Accra. Many had history of broken marriages. This therefore is the crucial fact to be related to the situation of street children. Of even more interest to the large presence of parents in the study is the revelation that a great number of the children had very little living experience with their own parents. Those children who had the benefit of living with parents (mostly mothers), were boarded out to live with others in the early formative years. As a matter of fact, the single most important factor that characterises the history of street children in this study is that one parental figure if not both, was missing during the formative years.

One could well argue that by far the most of the children found in the street have experienced some form of emotional deprivation and might even lack basic trust. What is a proven fact nevertheless is their generally economic deprived backgrounds. Many came from large families, living at subsistence existence. Sooner or later, their labour was an expected and often a necessary input to the family budget.

Educational Background

The children were characterised by low educational levels. Whereas 23 percent of their number had never been to school, 35 percent had dropped out of school in the primary stage and 29 percent who were registered in school during the study, were likely to drop out sooner or later since a substantial number were found to be attending school irregularly. The data shows that the most potent outside of school factors influencing non attendance of school are, divorce of parents, non payment of school fees by parents or guardians and the encouragement of parents/guardians for the children to earn some income. This lack of schooling as manifested in the study has very serious developmental implications for this country both in social and economic terms.

Health

Health is difficult to maintain if children are eating unhygienic food, drinking from contaminated cups, having no proper rest and remaining in the sun for long hours of the day. Children may have to pay to visit a public place of convenience but as observed it is common for them to squat in the alleys or at the beach where they assemble to sleep or share experiences. When fighting flares up, it often ends in gang-fighting, casualties and police arrests. In times of illness, children do not readily go to the hospital or clinics: they use medicines suggested by peers on trial and error basis and they are taken to the hospital normally in a critical condition.

Health related factors in this study show some alarming incidents of protein deficient childhood for many of the children. Their perceived habitation in malaria infested and contaminated environment without any health protection and worst of all, their exposure to diseases, to epidemics, even the AIDS virus, deserve much attention. There is much evidence indicating that when the children are ill, self medication is the rule rather than the exception. This situation has dangerous consequences in the long run for health maintenance. It has been well established that street children by and large eat nutritious food but the environment within which food is consumed, the containers in which food and water is eaten and drunk give much cause for alarm in terms of health maintenance. There are some indications that some of the children are used by adults to push illicit drugs in the market. The children themselves stand the risk of being pushed into taking drugs. The hazards connected with drug use in terms of health are too obvious for further elaboration.

Employment

What hope is there for future work opportunities for these children in a society such as ours which is fast modernising if they are not given some training? The answer is obvious enough. Without some reasonable level of education, training is already a problem. The jobs they have now do not offer any opportunity for development of talents and skills. Even if they do, good earnings cause over-exuberance in the jobs they undertake and result in rapid frailty of mind and body when still very young. Some of the jobs they are engaged

in are hazardous in nature such as those needing extra physical effort and those which involve walking long hours under the blazing sun in heavy traffic

Personal Development

Without proper parental guidance and love, it appears that any problems these children face have to be solved by their peers. Friends mean a lot to these children. Friends protect them in times of trouble and comfort them when sick. Friends play together (44 percent responses), converse (19 percent responses), sing and dance together (7 percent responses) and watch video together (7 percent responses). Most importantly, they need friends to work together (24 percent responses). Friends can also lead them into trouble as clearly enunciated by Nii Arsu in the last chapter. He at least had the foresight to drop his friends who by his own admission were stealing. How many others stick to their bad friends because they are the only companions they know? Of these children in the study, about one third had spent already some time in a remand home or a borstal/industrial school.

Street children normally have at least one trusted friend. Although in this study 15 percent of the boys and 16 percent of the girls claimed they had no friends, the majority had about two to three close friends. Only 8 percent of the sample belonged to any youth club or religious organisation. These were children still in school.

To many of these children, the street is the only comfortable home they know. Only 34 percent planned to go home and in this respect, just over 21 percent had visited home "recently" at the time of the study. The majority in the sample formed the bulk of those who had never ever been home or "been there a long time ago" or "a few years ago". On the other hand, over 57 percent of the sample interviewed did not think that any relatives had been searching for them since they left home, thus confirming their detachment from home and their reliance on the street as a substitute home.

Many admit to facing a lot of problems on the street. These problems range from harassment from A.M.A. personnel to theft, false accusations, fighting and rape to name a few. The most frightening experiences encountered by the children in the street other than the problems mentioned above include violence when people are knocked down in fights, accidents on the road or at sea and being chased by people when someone steals. All the same, over 50 percent of the sample are of the opinion that "life outside is better than home", a further confirmation of their unhappy home experiences and complete detachment from the family. Interestingly enough, even with their very negative home experiences, 79 percent of the children hoped to marry someday and raise their own children, making one wonder what kind of parents they will themselves become in future.

Future Aspirations

Even though over half the sample of children preferred being in the street to going back home, when asked whether they would accept offer of care by someone else, almost 60 percent said they would. Reasons given were rather interesting in that they showed the children's basic need for love, care and security which no doubt they lacked from their own families. These children yearn for somebody who would treat them well and for some 9 percent of the respondents, the possibility of going back to school is an added attraction. Similarly,

when asked about job aspirations in the future, only a small percentage (11 percent) did not know yet what they wanted to be. The majority were quite specific putting high priorities on vocational jobs, trading and business.

Conclusion

Child neglect stands out as a crucial factor lending credence to a theory on street children in Ghana if Accra's situation is to be used as an example. Many of the children in the street of Accra can be said to have been neglected in one way or other physically or emotionally. There is need for social policy that emphasises the central importance of sound parenthood in the building of a sound nation. This is necessary to ensure through policy planning that the individual's right to pursue parenthood is upheld in such a way as to benefit not only the individual parents but also the children and the society on the whole.

Children face hazardous existence in the street. Social Welfare and other related government agencies as well as NGOs in Ghana need to forge a concerted action to assist these marginalised Children and to curtail the rising phenomena of children in the street.

Issues in Social Services Delivery:

WHAT CAN GOVERNMENT AND NON GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONS DO TO HELP?

Although social services have been recognised in this country as part of urban life, their importance are not supported by commitment of governments in the resource allocation. Valuable welfare services which aimed to strengthen family life cannot be any longer provided by the Department of Social Welfare due to shortage of logistical services.

The number of abandoned children, fathers who refuse to provide child care allowances, and juvenile delinquents are on the increase. The social and economic costs to society can be enormous if measures are not taken to arrest the trend from the very beginning which is to provide preventive welfare services. These include extending school welfare services to make it more beneficial to children, family planning, vocational training and youth services.

In the outcome of this survey on street children in Accra, the low income status of the average Ghanaian family has come to the limelight as a major factor to contend with. As a result of economic constraints, children have to work and earn money for their own upkeep and often to supplement family income. The two inter-dependent issues of low incomes of families and child labour are both major social problems facing the nation. Poverty renders a family vulnerable to physical and emotional stress and this is inconducive to the social well-being of children. A child living and working in the streets is also vulnerable to environmental and occupational hazards. More importantly, street children miss educational opportunities, a constructive way of developing talents and skills and meaningful ways of using leisure time and keeping out of trouble.

If families could be assisted through meaningful economic and social programmes to be able to meet some of their daily needs for survival and also meet their financial and social obligations to their children, children will not be working out in the streets. The number of children not actively engaged in any academic pursuits is inevitably increasing. Something has to be done to avert a situation where the nation will have to pay a price

for the frustration of today's children. There is the need to increase their skills for work rather than doing away with their means for livelihood.

An evaluation of what is being done to prepare young people for employment shows the unsatisfactory state of technical and vocational education in the country. The training programme of the vocational schools takes many years and this does not encourage trainees to stay on long enough to complete their studies. The end result is frustration because the students who graduate from these schools are not helped to find work. Firstly, there is no placement services and secondly, the curriculum in these schools is not always in line with the needs of the local industry.

These problems are hopefully being dealt with by the new educational reform giving accelerated courses with shortened curricula based on practice rather than theory, and a training system compatible with the requirements of local industry.

Encouraging Voluntary Organisations

Voluntary organisation both national and international, charitable societies, mutual aid societies, youth organisations and other social and economic organisations, should be encouraged to be involved in the provision of welfare services for family and children. Some of these organisations can be made to assist and co-operate with Government departments in providing general or specific welfare services for children.

Involving the Business Community

Business organisations, privately or collectively, have certain responsibilities to the community they are located in. As part of this responsibility and business promotion, they should be encouraged to provide assistance by sponsoring a welfare programme for families and or children.

Inter-agency Co-operation

Co-operation between social service agencies such as education, health, social welfare, community development, the police service etc., can save scarce resources which would have been spent on duplication of services such as family planning and literacy programmes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The basis for making recommendations are that:-

- (a) Working parents and guardians of street children need decent income to be able to maintain their families and keep their children out of the streets.
- (b) There is a great need for the intensification of family planning and family life education to reach the masses.
- (c) Younger age group of street children having dropped out of school or never been to school, need to be assisted to attend school or taught through special educational programmes.
- (d) Older age group of street children might not be interested in formal education but are willing to

improve on their skills if that would spur them on to better monetary gains.

(e) Preventive health services must be brought to the streets and health education must form an important part of literacy, adult education and other social development programme for the family.

Specific Recommendations:-

I. Since parental love is needed for a healthy growth of the child, foster care services should be intensified by the Department of Social welfare and broadened to include placement of needy and neglected children with families who can adequately provide loving care.

II. The country should develop a national policy which takes cognisance of the total needs of children in both urban and rural areas and to include those of school age who do not go to school. Such policy should aim at:-

Preparation for Living: Measures aimed at the reduction of child mortality and morbidity: the elimination of communicable diseases, poor sanitary conditions, malnutrition and illiteracy.

Protection: Measures aimed at the development of the child into a useful and constructive member of society. Here the need is for education, vocational guidance and training for good employment prospects.

III. General measures for the elimination of malnutrition in children should receive special attention in the preventive health care programmes of the Ministry of Health. There is the need to extend and expand parent education in food and nutrition.

IV. Community development programmes are in a strategic position to interpret the importance of children and their needs to parents and the community as a whole. If community development is to make its maximum contribution to the well-being of rural children, higher priority should be given to the social development element in their programmes.

V. The need for day care of children has become a matter of urgency since more and more parents need to work outside their homes. As such, industries which employ women should be encouraged to establish day care programmes for the care of children. Trade unions should request such facilities as one of the conditions of service where women are an important element in the work force.

- VI. Immunisation programmes should be expanded to realise the full potential of the means of preventing diseases in children: more attention should be directed by the Ministry of Health to preventive and follow up care through integration of community services with specific health programmes, as in the cases of malnutrition, gastro-enteritis and other conditions which represent a serious threat to the health and life of children.
- VII. Health programmes should be developed which are directly related to the needs of children in the street, such as special arrangements in clinical services to accommodate them and to enable them to be under continuing medical supervision.
- VIII. The needs of children cut across different ministries, hence several ministries are responsible for the administration of programmes which affect children. Continuing efforts should be made to achieve closer integration with regard to both planning and provision of services on a broad inter-disciplinary basis.
- IX. Governments should give consideration to the provision of adequate physical facilities for children, such as community centres suitable for day care services and playgrounds. However, in view of the country's restricted financial resources, voluntary agencies and private groups should be encouraged to be active in this field. Recognition and support should be given to the pioneering efforts of voluntary programmes on behalf of children. To meet the urgent need for services on behalf of children, NGOs should be encouraged to increase their involvement in co-operation with government which can be mutually supportive.
- X. Recognising the valuable contribution that can be made by research and statistics in revealing the causes of problems that affect children and the solutions to these problems, special quantitative and qualitative data have to be continuously collected and processed for the preparation and execution of programmes for children. Information now available about the needs and problems of children in the street must be widely disseminated to create public support for action to address some of the issues.
- XI. Services to supplement and support the family in meeting the needs of children require a wide range of trained personnel at several levels. The training of staff for the planning, organisation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes for children should be given serious attention.

XII. The training courses for social workers offered at the School of Social Welfare, Osu and the diploma A and degree courses in social work and administration offered at the University of Ghana, Legon, should be strengthened to increase intake of students.

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