



# General Assembly

Distr.: General  
20 February 2012

English only

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## Human Rights Council

### Nineteenth session

Agenda item 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

### **Written statement\* submitted by the International Educational Development, Inc., a non-governmental organization on the roster**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[13 February 2012]

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\* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

## **Continuing the discussion of children living or working in the street\*\***

International Educational Development, Inc. (IED) and the Association of Humanitarian Lawyers (AHL) think that there are aspects of the issue of street children that were not fully addressed at the annual session on the rights of the child at the Council's 16th session.<sup>1</sup> In particular we think attention to the situation on Mexico can be instructive in drawing attention to these and in fashioning remedies that can be applied everywhere.

The two main reasons children escape to the streets are poverty or abuse and neglect within a broken family environment. In Mexico, despite the fact that children rely on the streets for a means of support, the majority does not initially live on the streets. There is a distinction between those who live "on" the street and those who live "in" the street. Children who live "in" the street are known as "market children" and are forced to sell trinkets, food, and gum, in order to generate additional income for the family household. Seventy percent of the Mexican street child population belongs to this group. They are usually on good terms with their family, attend school, and have a home to return to. In contrast, children who live "on" the street have severed all ties with their family, do not attend school, and many have been living on the streets for a long period of time. Street children "on" the street work grueling hours; are the victims of sexual and/or physical abuse; and, partake in high-risk activities such as involvement in gangs, unprotected sex, and drugs. These increase exponentially each year a child remains homeless.

In addition to experiencing the hostility of street life, children are also victims of state and government sponsored violence. Rather than viewing the plight of street children as a symptom of economic and societal issues, or the effect from lack of opportunities and services, street children are viewed as a "problem" that requires remedy through use of force, violence, and in some cases, murder. To begin addressing the issue of street children, there needs to be recognition by the State of its obligation and duty to ensure an adequate standard of living, coupled with access to basic services for all children; of a need for complete restructuring in social attitudes and state-sponsored or non-governmental sponsored programs; and, a financial and policy commitment to support and strengthen the family-school-community partnership. Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children are guaranteed an adequate standard of living, access to education and other public services, and opportunities that will promote reaching their highest potential. A change in social attitude is fundamental to the understanding that street children are the result of social and economic problems. On the local level, a positive relationship between the family, school, and community will encourage children to remain in both their school and homes.

In Mexico, the prevailing view among citizens is that street children are delinquents. This distorted view makes it difficult for people to sympathize and empathize with street children. Also, because there are very few public citizens who speak for the rights of these children, it is easier for police and government-sponsored death squads to eliminate street children through violent, and often deadly, measures. Mexico is not unique in this regard. In any place where there are strong negative attitudes towards street children, there needs to be a widespread effort by the media, non-governmental organizations, and government

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<sup>\*\*</sup> The Association of Humanitarian Lawyers, an NGO without consultative status, also shares the views expressed in this statement.

<sup>1</sup> Association of Humanitarian Lawyers researcher Kiana Bayron assisted in the preparation of this document.

institutions, to educate the public on the reasons children end up on the streets and endure life threatening circumstances: the public needs to be engaged in positive change. This can be done through television commercials, radio announcements, free workshops, and community-themed events that bring street children and the public together in a constructive and productive setting. A goodwill campaign on behalf of these children dignifies their plight and hopefully, fosters understanding and cooperation with the public. In Veracruz, a campaign such as the one loosely described above has been proposed by a non-profit organization and seeks to inform the public about the plight of street children and bring these two populations together in order to find a solution to child homelessness and labor.

On the state level, a restructuring in current governmental programs and agencies is necessary in order to increase efficiency and promote long-term sustainability. Mexico's current anti-poverty program, known as "Oportunidades," reduces the income gap between poor and rich families, but falls short in affecting headcount ratio, establishing long-term values of education and nutrition and providing incentives that keep adolescent males in school.<sup>2</sup> In the short-term, "Oportunidades" succeeds in providing supplemental income to families living in moderate- to extreme-poverty. However, it has not been shown whether "Oportunidades" lowers the percentage of the population living in poverty. One way in which headcount ratio can be positively affected in the long-term is by promoting the importance of education and nutrition so that future generations can break the chain of intergenerational poverty. In Brazil's Bolsa program, for example, the supplemental funds go primarily to women, the families participate in special programs, and the funds are only available if the child is regularly in school. In addition to the fundamental and structural changes that need to occur in the "Oportunidades" program, governmental agencies such as Desarrollo Integral de la Familia (DIF), responsible for integrating and maintaining cohesion within families, could do more. DIF is integral to the fight against child labor and homelessness in that it addresses one of the main reasons children take to the streets, a broken family environment and incidences of abuse or neglect. What is most important is to find ways to keep even homeless youth sufficiently supported so that they attend school and receive some care.

On a local level in any country, national governments should work with municipal governments to establish a relationship between the school, community, and home, perhaps in collaboration with local non-governmental organizations. One way to build a relationship between the community, school, and home, is through focused efforts in afterschool programs. These efforts would require parent engagement and participation, and concurrently, educate and enhance parenting skills through workshops and seminars. After-school programs provide a safe place to stay after school hours, build closer relationships between school faculty and families, and encourage parent involvement. For children who live "on" the street, informal street schools should be established to provide children with basic education and a supportive environment in which they can interact positively with adults and other children. Many children who live "on" the street will not attend a school with children who have homes as homeless children are frequently mistreated by classmates.

IED and HLP encourage the Council to continue its focus on children through its annual full day meeting. However, we propose that at least one hour of this session be devoted to some form of follow-up from previous meetings and topics to allow outcome evaluation and to address issues not fully addressed.

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<sup>2</sup> Oportunidades is modeled after Brazil's Bolsa Familia, but the Bolsa Familia has been more successful in moving people out of extreme poverty. Peru has also started a similar "bolsa" program called "Juntos" that also appears to be heading toward success.