

# REPPER

RESEAU D'ECHANGE DE PROJETS ET DE PROGRAMMES EN FAVEUR DES ENFANTS DE LA RUE

No 16

March 2003

*Most of the associations making up the network have found themselves faced with all sorts of situations linked to the question of street childrens' work. On reading their letters and reports, a number of questions have arisen from whence we have endeavoured to outline the problem. How have they reacted to certain problems? What experiences have they attempted? What were the results? Success, for how long? Thanks to whom or to what? Failure or dissatisfaction due to whom or what? Before, however, referring to various experiences (don't forget to let us have yours), basic positions on the work of children must be recalled in order to clarify the points of view. Martine BERGE*

## 1. VARIOUS POINTS OF VIEW:

The work of children is considered differently depending on the culture and traditions of different countries. In the West, it is thought that poverty is both the consequence and the cause of children working. A poor family does not have the means to send its children to school to obtain suitable training. Forced to work to survive, poverty keeps them in ignorance. At a stroke their future is compromised, it is a vicious circle. From the point of view of Western culture, the work of children is seen as a dramatic fatality. It should not be forgotten that the first international legislation requiring the abolition of child work is hardly more than twenty years old. It is very much influenced by the guilt of Western societies that employed thousands of children in mines or factories in the industrial boom of the 19th Century. Children who work are, in the West, subjects of compassion.

Nevertheless, in other, disadvantaged, parts of the world there is a quite different analysis of childrens' work. For example, a teenager interviewed in Cusco stated that: "Here, there is no work. That is why we work from childhood, to learn something, get some experience of life, learn order, learn to work, learn to judge ...". Moreover, most observers have noted that children and adolescents do not merely ensure their survival by working, but that they all seek, through work, to live with dignity and express their social usefulness.

The foregoing does not mean that there is no awareness of the risks or potential abuses of childrens' work: insupportable hours, too heavy burdens, inappropriate remuneration, risks to their health, etc. If, however, these risks are avoided, and they must be guarded against, getting a child employment can procure for him an added importance and economic responsibility in his family and entourage. It should not be concluded that childrens' work is the best means for their development, but that there may be a different way of analyzing that situation.

## 2. THE IMPORTANCE OF WORK FOR STREET CHILDREN

Work is important because:

- It ensures them a revenue allowing them to live without begging, stealing, going into prostitution or selling drugs.
- It rebuilds the child from inside, by giving him back his dignity.
- It adds value to the child who may, through his earnings, help his family and thereby often reintegrate it.
- It encourages his reinsertion into society of which he becomes an active participant instead of living like a parasite.

## 3. THE STAGES TO OVERCOME:

- **The first stage :**

They begin with odd jobs, temporary and fleeting, the "better than nothing" that allows them to survive as well as can be expected. These are, however, an improvement for the child who can get some money from them. It is also a step towards the child's adaptation to society, if only from the human relations level (there are always at least a boss and customers to satisfy).

- **The second stage :**

The second stage is that of choosing a more stable and regular employment, whether rural (market gardening, raising fowl, etc.), crafts (dressmaking, carpentry, etc.) or in the service sector (salesman, porter, rickshaw driver, etc.)

At this stage, the child must be helped:

To choose his work in accordance with his tastes, aptitudes, and the work market.

In his professional training, sometimes requiring apprenticeship.

In his professional insertion: finding an employer, helping him to start up on his own, buying tools, start up support.

In helping to safeguard his money (stolen by other children) and to manage it to protect him from exploitation by adults or older children.

Let us know what these questions bring to mind for you. Tell us the other problems arising on the ground. Exchanging experiences (good or otherwise) is the strength of the network, enabling one and all to lose less time, even to save time, thus economizing money and effort that can then be invested in other projects!



## EXTRACTS FROM "THEIR LIFE IN THE CITY: CHILDREN WHO WORK ON THE STREET"

*The QOSQO MAKI Association has been active on the streets of Cusco (Peru) for fifteen years. The observations and studies carried out throughout that period have given rise to a number of publications. Here are some extracts from one of those, written by Isabel Baufumé and published in 1998. The problem of child workers is described in its entirety, whether or not the children are street children.*

(...) After years spent with children and young people working on the streets, we have come to the conclusion that, even if the work conditions may in some cases be detrimental to the child's development, he may, in many other cases, acquire incontrovertible advantages. We must decode the message of the children who work.

### **How many child workers are there on the streets?**

(...) According to the census we have carried out, 3,127 children between 6 and 17 work on the streets of Cusco, a town with 300,000 inhabitants. 20% of them are under 12, the legal working age in Peru. (...) They cannot really choose their activity since it depends on the market and they demonstrate great flexibility in adapting their competence to the demand.

Girls represent only one third of the workers on the streets, where they are in fact much less numerous than boys, probably because of their domestic tasks. They are preponderant in the commercial sector, as are the little children,

whereas the older ones choose activity requiring physical strength.

### **What are their working hours?**

Work time on the streets has advantages even though precarious and the remuneration unforeseeable. In general, however, there is a marked flexibility adapted to the possibilities of each and all: less than 6 hours a day for those under 8, or only during the weekend for the 27% who sell on the markets. (...) Street work is less restricting than that of an employee and allows the children to take advantage of slack periods to amuse themselves. For example, shoeshine boys, present 12 hours a day, actually work only 2 or 3 hours.

### **Do the young workers go to school?**

Our study shows clearly that the supposed desertion of school by working children is a myth. Only 18% of the children stated that they do not study. (...) Among them, we found a large proportion of young people from the country, speaking Spanish badly (their mother tongue is Quechua), whose rural experience is useless in the city and their scholastic level lower than that of young townspeople who despise them. In addition, they earn too little to allow them to cover the cost of schooling.

### **What are the family situations of the young workers?**

88% of the young workers live in a family type structure, (...)

demonstrating that the Peruvian concept of childhood is quite different from that of the West. In Andian culture, work is an essential value. All children are thus given, from 5 years old onwards, specific tasks that change in accordance with their age and their sex. The fact of being responsible for part of the family production confers on the child the feeling of belonging to the community (...) and confirms his expertise and usefulness (...).

Emigration leads to an effort by the family to adapt to a new environment, that of the city. The children are thus given other revenue-earning tasks ensuring that they continue to play an active part in the community (...).

Among the 12 to 14 year olds, 9% stated that they live outside a family structure and may be considered to correspond to the group known as "street children". Their situation is less worrying than may appear at first glance. Most of them are shoeshine boys or porters and state that they live in a home or private

room. The case of Cusco is special, since there are two shelters for homeless children (...) which means they can escape from the vicious circle of marginality. They can therefore carry out their work independently, without being persecuted by the national or municipal police. (...).

To summarize, the question of the detrimental effects of work on the development of children cannot be evaluated unless it is compared with the positive aspect, in the logic of a balance between advantages and disadvantages, successes and failures. (...) It is not coercive measures that ensure development, but those measures offering a wider choice to the young people and taking into account their opinion, so that they are free to choose and to put their decisions into practice.

*For further information (since, unfortunately, for lack of space, we were obliged to make many cuts), apply to Isabel Baufumé Email: qosqomaki@telsa.com.pe*



During an interview, François Lefort, who worked for Médecins du Monde, indicated that: 'Many a time, in many different countries, in speaking to street children, I told them that: "You know, in France, children aren't allowed to work before they are 16." The reply was always the same: "Why are you lying?" "I am not lying, honestly, in France, children under 16 aren't allowed to work." The street children usually looked crestfallen and replied: "Oh, the poor things".'

If the street children were not allowed to work, many of them would die, many of them would thus lose their last hope of learning a trade, of inserting themselves into society. The great scandal is not that there are children who work but that there are children who have no other means of surviving, of having a future, but by work. The most urgent task is to give all children a home and a school, the rest will follow.



## THE FORCED RENUNCIATION OF A SUCCESS

NANBAN in Madurai (India) set up in 1996 a programme allowing young people who so wished to become conductor or conductress of a rickshaw and proprietor of the vehicle. The rickshaw is a kind of motorized taxi-bicycle. All this sprang from a young girl, doubtless less than inspired by the trades usually exercised by women, who expressed the wish to exercise that profession, until then exclusively masculine. NANBAN helped her obtain her driving licence, and bought her a vehicle, the cost of which she was to reimburse without interest, in 30 instalments. In addition, she was told that, in regard to the customers, certain rules of politeness, indeed, friendliness, were obligatory, as well as correct and decent dress. She was the first rickshaw conductress in Madurai, to the pride and joy of all, throughout India, informed by the media of this great first. She was able to pay off her debt for the vehicle well in advance of the time allotted and many of the youth of NANBAN emulated her: almost 50 young people followed her example. Moreover, since rickshaws sometimes break down, the young do-it-

yourselfers of NANBAN mended them, and little by little a real mechanical breakdown workshop was created and opened to the neighbouring public, giving work to a whole team of mechanics from NANBAN.

Sadly, we have learnt that the rickshaw conductor programme has had to be abandoned because of changes in the sector: the authorities have restricted the number of rickshaws in town and require from conductors a much higher level of qualification, etc. NANBAN has given up the programme and redirected the funds available to the workshop. Some conductors have given voice to their experiences: "*Being our own boss gave us a sense of responsibility. This job provided us with a stable and comfortable revenue. Being the owners of our vehicles, we took great care of them and kept them in good working order. Nanban opened up a new direction for womens' work. This job, which pays well, is much less tiring than carrying on the head heavy loads from building sites. The creation of a workshop was a great help for us girls*".  
Email: james@nanbanmadurai.org

## STREET CHILDRENS' WORK: WHY? HOW?

*Report from Aurélie Ferrari, in charge at Rekebisho in Nairobi (Kenya).*

### "WHY?"

Children and work are words which, generally, we do not like to associate. In the rights of the child, one of the principal rights is that of not working. In respect of the specific problem of street children, however, work can be a means of reinsertion that should not be overlooked, for two kinds of reasons.

Firstly, one of the difficulties some street children have in staying for good in a welcome centre is linked to the fact that they are used to earning money (by means, among others, of begging, stealing, odd jobs or prostitution) and managing it.

Secondly, on the street the child has learned to look after himself alone, he leads a kind of adult life and he does not usually want to be thrust back into the childhood he was forced out of. Whence, in some cases, the desire to work.

### HOW?

The first point to underline is that work for a street child under the control of an NGO should not be, for the child, an obligation but rather a choice among others (education, professional training, reinsertion into the family ...). This choice should be a true request by a child or youth who is already used to working and earning money on the street. In our NGO, Rekebisho, in Nairobi, we gather in street children of all ages. At present, we have 50 children. The main goal of our activity is to allow these young people to be independent and to live properly and honestly. We look after them, therefore, until they reach adulthood, have their own lodgings, job, and have stopped completely taking drugs or imbibing alcohol.

Among the other means of reinsertion we suggest to the children in our centre, we propose two kinds of work. One of these is to be trained and to work through our NGO. In fact, the young people have a short period of training in local crafts for the manufacture of goods we sell afterwards through our association, the young people being paid in accordance with the number of objects made. This work method has been in force since the beginning of our activity in 1999.

Finally, and recently, we propose another type of work corresponding to reality: some street children do not wish to live in a welcome centre and prefer to remain on the street. We have therefore decided to help them where they are, that is, on the street, by suggesting they start up minor, ambulant street trades so that they do not need to turn to illegal activities to meet their needs, and to reduce their intake of solvents and other drugs, for they need to have their wits about them for their trade to make them some money. This second sort of work is something new for us, since we have only been doing it for two months. Nevertheless, initial results are rather encouraging."

Email: [rekebish@hotmail.com](mailto:rekebish@hotmail.com)



## CHILD TRAFFICKING

*The Félix Deschamps Foundation in Yaoundé has sent us the following summary of a study it submitted to the Cameroun Ministry of Work:*

"Traffic in children is here among us in Cameroun. There are three kinds of traffickers: the promoters (those who find places for the children to work), the people movers, who are the intermediaries, and the users. Street children are victims of this traffic. Prostitutes also use children: their work consists of finding customers from 10 p.m. until dawn for a salary of 500 francs a day (...) Six children between 11 and 13 told us that they frequently had sexual relations with the prostitutes in lieu of pay. This has led us to set up the MST/AIDS prevention programme for street children. (...) Some children are "found a place" from their home country. We met six, aged from 9 to 12, used in petty trade. The takings are given to their user at the end of the day. The money which the children ought to be given is nothing more than their food and lodging." Email: ffelixdeschamps@yahoo.f



## THE NEXT REPPER MEETING

**will be on Saturday, 15 March 2003  
from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.  
12 rue de Martignac 75007 Paris  
Metro Assemblée Nationale**

### REPPER

110 Avenue du Roule, 92200 NEUILLY sur Seine, FRANCE.  
Telefax: 33 1 47 22 71 73.

Email: repper@enfants-des-rues.com

REPPER is edited by: CONSTRUIRE, 16 rue de la Glacière, 75013 Paris, TeleFax: 01 47 07 87 14.Email: christian.bompard@club-internet.fr