



**Social Development Division
Social Policy Section
ESCWA**

Policy Brief

**Looking the Other Way:
Street Children in Egypt**

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Executive summary

Poverty, contrary to general belief, is not solely responsible for boys and girls living on the street. Exclusion from policies, programmes and projects combined with violence encountered at home, at school or at work, with no protection from their families or the state, drive children to seek an alternative life elsewhere. Government policies are often confined to a legal approach rather than one based on addressing the root causes of the problems these children face in a manner that recognises their rights as citizens. Based on this analysis, the present Policy Brief comes up with the following seven recommendations: to understand better the situation of street children through research; to shift the approach to street children from legal actions to preventive, protective and rehabilitative interventions; to enforce and monitor all international and national commitments to children; to establish clear mandates and lines of institutional responsibility for street children; to devise a comprehensive child protection system that addresses the issues of all categories of vulnerable girls and boys in all their diversity of age, class, religion as well as family and regional background; to devise a National Strategy, programmes and projects specifically for street children; and to strengthen the advocacy role of civil society organisations working with street children.

1. Introduction

A “street child” is defined as “... any boy or girl for whom the street in the widest sense of the word has become his or her habitual abode and/or source of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised, or directed by responsible adults”¹.

The situation of street children in Egypt demands urgent solutions. The prevalence of street children is very high, whether the lowest estimate of 200,000 or highest estimate of two million is accepted. The plight of these children and the conditions under which they live and try to survive is overwhelming. There is no doubt that both the state and the general public would want to find a solution to this issue. Why is it then that, in the majority of cases, they tend to ‘look the other way’?

Is it indifference? Is it lack of commitment to a group that has no voice or power? Is it a feeling of guilt because of their inability to do anything to alleviate the hardships from which these children obviously suffer? Or is it that these children symbolise, in a very visible way, a society’s inability or unwillingness to care for all its citizens, resulting in their exclusion from the mainstream?

A general lack of understanding - or a general reluctance to understand - the root causes for the widespread phenomena of street children, is an important element for a general inability to address this issue. Despite efforts which conceptualise street children as “vulnerable” or “children at risk in need of protection”, the prevailing view is that they are really “delinquents” who come from very poor backgrounds and uncaring parents. Given this, government policies are often confined to a legal approach and tend to ignore the root causes of the problem.

International commitments like the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are also an example of where development efforts might have failed street children. MDG targets and indicators do not measure changes in the status of socially excluded, vulnerable or minority groups. By not capturing inequities and disparities among different social groups, it denies the rights of those it leaves behind, exacerbates structural problems and has a negative bearing on the sustainability of national development².

At the national level, street children can be regarded as a symptom of weakness of economic and social processes and policies, the justice system and social protection. “Children are considered excluded if they are deemed at risk of missing out on an environment that protects them from violence, abuse, and exploitation or if they are unable to access essential services and goods in a way that threatens their ability to participate fully in society in the future.”³

Despite what seems to be a bleak situation, there are increasingly positive examples of both government and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) interventions that are striving to meet the needs of street children and to work towards advancing their rights as citizens.

The present policy brief will use examples of such interventions to illustrate where a more just and effective approach could be pursued to address this very important issue.

2. Context and Importance of the situation of street children in Egypt

“It is very painful to see people treat you as ‘Me’afen wa Zibala’ (rotten and rubbish)”⁴.

The number of street children in Egypt is unknown. In the absence of official statistics, different studies mention different numbers: Some assessments hover around 200,000 to one million boys and girls living on the streets; some others give numbers close to two million⁵. It is estimated that 25 per cent of street children are less than 12 years old and 66 per cent are between 13 and 16 years old⁶. Most observers agree that the incidence of street children is increasing and that the average age of street children is going down.

2.1 Poverty alone is not the cause for children living on the street

Poverty is generally cited as the main cause that pushes children onto the streets. In the absence of reliable statistics on poverty in Egypt, it is found that the percentage of those living on less than \$1 a day is 3.4 per cent while the percentage of those living on less than \$2 a day is 42.8 per cent⁷. One of the problems of using the poverty line as a measurement of poverty is that it tends to underestimate poverty; moreover, the poverty line hardly reflects aspects of inequality⁸.

Some Egyptian families who face severe economic and social marginalization have become seriously dysfunctional. This has contributed to placing their children in circumstances that have resulted in these young girls and boys leaving home and trying to survive in an often unprotected and hazardous street milieu⁹.

While in most cases street children do come from an impoverished background, poverty is not the only cause that drives children to live on the streets. An in-depth study carried out in Indonesia clearly demonstrates that although financial hardship is an important contributing factor, family circumstances and dynamics leading to neglect, abandonment, abuse and violence, constitute another set of factors that force children to leave home¹⁰. In the words of a street boy in Egypt, “the recurrence of violence and the constant anticipation of more abuse and violence made the environment at home more dangerous and oppressive than the street”¹¹.

Another contributing factor is the fact that, increasingly, children are working at an early age. The number of working children between the ages of 6 and 14 is 2,768,000; this represents 20.5 per cent of Egyptian children of the same age group¹². While working at such an early age is an abuse of children’s rights, it does not necessarily lead children to leave home for the streets. However, another reason why some children may run away is violence coupled with exploitative and abusive relations with employers, with no possibility of recourse to justice.

Deprivation of the right to education is another reason why the incidence of street children has increased over the last few years. Based on the Egyptian 2006 census, the percentage of children between 6 and 18 years who never enrolled or who have dropped out of basic education was 14.7 per cent, amounting to around three million children. The gross enrolment rate of children in basic, secondary and tertiary levels was 76.4 per cent¹³. A small-scale study showed that 70 per cent of street children dropped out of school during their primary education and 30 per cent have never been to school¹⁴. Education and child protection experts agree that there are many factors that lead to being excluded from education, besides the increased expenses associated with education. These factors include overcrowding, poor quality of teaching and violence at school.

Studies have shown that children who most desperately seek to establish a life elsewhere are the ones who had experienced violence at home, school or work and found no protection from their families or the state. In such cases, taking the decision to live on the street can be seen as a proactive move to change their lives. When children lose all hope to change people around them, they change their circumstances by changing their environment. The fact that the circumstances that pushed them out onto the streets are preventable and can be changed through early detection and protection, opens the possibility for early intervention to the state and governmental institutions.

2.2 The lives of children on the street

Once on the streets, children sleep under a bridge, a doorway or on a grass verge in the middle of cities. They sell menial items in the street; they beg; they shine shoes; they take on casual work; and some may engage in petty theft to survive. The girls and boys are often hungry and cold. They suffer from malnutrition and ill health. Their health problems are often severe, ranging from cholera to tuberculosis, anaemia and skin diseases. Some suffer from psychological problems. Many feel they have been let down by everyone and have a grievance against the world. They are often, and with good reason, suspicious of people and expect the worst all the time. Some of them resort to drugs such as the sniffing glue and solvents.

Street children predominantly live with a constant feeling of insecurity. Yet again, violence is part of their daily existence, this time on the street. Around 80 per cent of them are exposed to a real and constant threat of violence from employers, hostile and abusive community members, their peers¹⁵ as well as the police¹⁶. Employers could be older street children or racketeers using children for selling petty merchandise on the streets. The surrounding communities are also a source of multiple forms of violence: consequently, children have a sense rejection and alienation from the communities in which they live. As one of the studies reports, street children speak of the humiliating pain and sense of marginalization they feel when store owners and neighbours give them looks, call them names, and deny them access to their stores or to the streets, and in some cases report them to the police. The worst kind of violence children face is sexual assaults (kidnap and rape) by adult men living or working in the neighbourhood that the children frequent to secure food, money or use for sleeping areas. When interviewed, members of the communities referred to the children as “disease”, “pollutants” and “tomorrow’s thieves”¹⁷.

This is also a view shared by the police who perceive and treat street children as if they were sub-human. Police beatings are common and police officers give no reason for them. According to Human Rights Watch, police beatings are purely punitive or “correctional” in approach: in other words, they are used to “teach the children a lesson”. Extremely offensive language is also routinely used by police officers dealing with street children: degrading and humiliating language is part of the whole process of violence, extortion and sexual abuse of children¹⁸. Studies showed that sexual abuse of boys, but mostly girls, is widely practiced by the police: in fact, all girls interviewed reported sexual harassment and abuse while they were in police custody¹⁹.

Violence may also occur among the street children themselves. This is mostly related to gang formation, territoriality and the exercise of power and control by older boys over younger boys and girls. Physical violence that often ends in injuries is the most common; sexual violence against both boys and girls is prevalent. In the latter case, this leads to unwanted pregnancies with extremely serious consequences for the mothers and their children²⁰. Unwanted pregnancies may also occur when the girls are kidnapped and raped by other men.

2.3 Street children and questions of autonomy

While life on the street is obviously very tough and full of dangers, street children in Egypt as elsewhere in the world have “... various forms of emotional, psychological, and physical tactics which street children have developed as a distinctive way of life, and which are embodied in their lived out daily practices and attitudes. This includes their ideas of individuality, freedom, and solidarity; how they shape their norms, rules and values; their social organization, conflicts and pressures; and their relationships with other people on the street”²¹. They may develop strategies including “...the appropriation of urban niches in the city in which they are able to earn money, feel safe and find employment”²².

This means that street children do not lack agency as they take responsibility for their own actions and attempt to exercise some control over their lives. The creation of a “street kid” identity and the maintenance of their own subcultures can be understood not as a problem, but as a response to their stigmatization and a solution to the variety of problems they face in a world which is hostile to their existence²³. Brake, for example, states that subcultures are often an attempt to resolve collectively experienced problems arising from contradictions in the social structure, alienation in society, and harassment by the law²⁴. He adds that subcultures appeal to those who feel that they have been rejected and provide an alternative social reality and status system which offer “rallying points” and “symbols of solidarity”²⁵. Every subculture “represents a ‘solution’ to the particular problems and contradictions”²⁶.

It is often this agency and the creation of a subculture that might make street children inaccessible to interventions. At the same time, this may represent an opportunity for change. If approached with the knowledge of the causes that brought these children on the street and the way they live there, instead of finding solutions “for them”, it might be possible to find solutions “with them” as citizens with full rights.

3. Problems and opportunities for change

3.1 What is the dominant understanding and approach to street children?

Over the past two decades, Egypt has gradually moved towards a market-oriented economy, with some measures to reduce the “side effects” of that policy on the poor. These measures are mostly characterised by welfare and charity approaches and do not address the root causes of poverty in Egypt. By not recognising other root causes of the problem, such as violence, exclusion from education and the conditions of working children, current approaches to deal with street children have tended to neglect their basic rights of children as citizens and contributed directly to their exclusion.

Some government officials tend to put the blame on the parents of street children and on the children themselves for the predicament they are in. The phenomenon of street children is seen by many to be the result of “ignorant”, “uncaring” and “unscrupulous” parents who produce too many children and abandon them onto the street. The children are also perceived as having been socialised in a way that will inevitably lead them to misbehave and become delinquents²⁷.

3.1.1 Street children as “delinquents”, “victims” or “citizens with rights”

By conceptualising the street children phenomenon as above, the current approach is more punitive than “preventive” or “curative” in character. Given that most state institutions are unable or unwilling to deal with the parents, all their interventions thus target the street children. Consequently, all punishment is directed to children who are more visible. Under Egyptian law, street children can be locked up as potential delinquents²⁸. This has led to mass arrest campaigns of street children whose “crime” is that they are in need of protection²⁹.

In rejecting the criminalisation of street children, some CSOs and sympathetic sections of the media, portray street children as “victims”. However, such an approach, while understandable, may solicit a “charity” perspective that might have its limitations. The latter approach focuses on interventions that deal only with the symptoms rather than the root causes of the problem: therefore, it ends up with short-term and ineffective solutions.

Other CSOs interested in street children in Egypt have been working on establishing an understanding and re-conceptualisation of street children as “citizens with rights” who are excluded from mainstream society and appropriate state interventions. Equipped with this approach, some CSOs have been able to lobby for the rights of street children. However, in the majority of cases, CSOs have little expertise in the area of advocacy and the majority focus their interventions largely on rehabilitation services.

The National Council for Childhood and Motherhood (NCCM) seems to be the only institution that is attempting to challenge the orthodox approach. According to the Secretary General of the NCCM, “the real significance of the Strategy [on the Protection of

Children] is that it adopts a rights-based approach. These children are not criminals but victims who have been deprived of their rights – the right to education, health and social care, and especially the right to family care. The Strategy is based on changing the way in which society views these children.”³⁰

There is a general debate about the tendency to represent street children either as delinquents or as victims. “The definition of the street child only in terms of “victimization” or of delinquency leads to a reduced conception of a reality which is in fact far more complex. This dichotomy generates the stigmatization of the child”³¹. The main argument here is that street children should not be perceived within such rigid stereotypes. Instead, it is important to focus on the agency of street children. It is therefore essential to view their actions and motivations as complex and diverse, depending on the situation they find themselves in and the people with whom they interact³². They tend to “...actively reject their “victim” or “deviant” label. They establish their own new identity as a group, and this is a means through which street children can voice their collective indignation at the way they are treated by mainstream society”³³.

It is crucial to recognise that the way they are understood and dealt with by mainstream society puts street children at risk. Studies point to a strong link between the deprivation of children of their basic rights and their exposure to risk. Confronting this deprivation requires measures that protect and guarantee the rights of children. The State and other institutions working with street children can establish channels of communication and ways of giving them voice, which can be a real opportunity for change.

3.2 Is the data needed for evidence-based policy and practice available?

The discussion above highlights the complexity of the issue at hand and demonstrates that if there is any hope for the situation of street children to change, there is a drastic need for a change of approach. The first step towards this is to reach an understanding of the root causes for why children end up on the streets as well as how they live on the streets. Is the kind of research needed for this available?

3.2.1 Quantitative research

Street children, by the very nature of the way they live and survive, are a difficult group to count and research. Indeed, this is clearly exemplified by the wide disparity in estimating their number: some studies say there are around 17,000³⁴ street children while other studies estimate the number to be close to two million³⁵. However, in term of quantifying street children, there are available methodologies that could be used to arrive at more reliable estimates. There is also lack of data about the demographic profile of the children in terms of sex, age, background and other characteristics.

Such statistics, however, are critical for tracking change in social groups in all their diversity. There is a need for baseline statistics on the economic situation of street girls and boys along with all other group, and it is also important to include other measures, such as the reasons why girls and boys do not enrol in school and why they drop out. This will

enable an examination of the root causes rather than just the symptoms of exclusion of this group from education.

3.2.2 Qualitative research

While statistics and quantitative indicators are extremely important in terms of informing policy-makers and planners, in-depth qualitative research is equally crucial. There are a number of studies that were carried out using methodologies, such as content analysis of the juvenile court records and rapid situation assessment. Most CSOs carry out their initial research on the issue: indeed, some have their own research units carrying out small-scale studies. There are significant gaps in the data on a number of issues such as the lives and profiles of the families of street children, the attitudes of society towards them and their sexual abuse and exploitation. A gendered understanding of street children is another very important dimension missing in research.

Another gap is the absence of policy research examining the institutional, policy, planning and budgeting processes and impact at the level of multilateral and bilateral agencies, the State and CSOs. This includes a deeper analysis of values, attitudes and political commitment to street children, and more generally children at risk and in need for protection.

3.3 Are national and international commitments translated into effective policies and legislation?

3.3.1 International Conventions

Egypt has ratified the majority of human rights, women rights and children rights conventions. Key conventions that relate to the situation of street children include the “Convention on the Rights of the Child” (ratified in 1990); the optional Protocol to the “Convention on the Right of the Child” on the “Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography” (ratified in 2002); the African Charter on the “Rights and Welfare of the Child” (ratified in 2001); the “Convention on the Minimum Age for Admission to Employment” (ILO 138- ratified in 1999); the “Convention concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour” (ILO 182- ratified in 2002). While ratifying these conventions is important, real political commitment to these issues is in their translation into policies, legislation and procedures as well as implementing them in programmes and projects with dedicated resources.

3.3.2 Legislation

In terms of legislation, the most important initiative in this regard was the amendment by the Parliament of the Child Law 12/1996 to the new Child Law 126/2008. The new amendment was intended to address the deficits in Child Law, especially in Chapter 8 concerning the criminal treatment of children. Article 96 changes the expression from “Children liable to deviancy” to “Children at risk”. Article 96 of the by-laws lists 14 cases of children at risk, including the following: “if his safety, morals, health, or life is endangered”; if the circumstances within his environment put him at risk; if he is abandoned by the

person responsible for his maintenance; begging or selling menial items in the street; collecting cigarette ends or any other wastes; having no fixed place of residence, and spending nights on the street”³⁶.

The new Law includes a number of items, and the most pertinent to street children are: to raise the minimum age for criminal responsibility from 7 to 12 years of age; to separate children from adults in detention centres; to add a new section on social and psychological measures for the protection of children at risk and their families and to establish a mechanism to monitor and follow up on children at risk; to strengthen the penalties on parents who abandon their children or relinquish their responsibilities; and to prohibit all forms of violence against children, end impunity and strengthen measures of prevention and protection³⁷.

While the new Law is an improvement on the 1996 law, there are still aspects which undermine its effectiveness. For example, under Article 94 on the age of criminality, there is a paragraph that states that children from 7 to 12 years will go through all procedures of the judiciary system from detention, custody to court. The only exception is that these children can be sentenced to four out of eight rulings while the children from 12 to 15 years are subject to the whole eight ruling, exempting them from rulings to do with duties and work.

Despite its shortcomings, the new Law still represents an opportunity to address the legal treatment of street children. However, the new amendment does not solve the problem of legal representation of children, especially those children who have no legal guardians. CSOs do not have the right to act as their guardians or represent them in case they go to court.

The new Law was amended as result of the work of The National Council for Childhood and Motherhood (NCCM) who drafted it and lobbied for it. CSOs working with street children joined by a number of UN agencies came on board to support the amendment. This level of collaboration, however, did not fully include key governmental institutions which may prove to become an obstacle in the implementation of the Law.

3.3.3 Policy and planning

At the level of policy and planning, while street children may be covered by policies and strategies related to children in general or children at risk in particular, this is often done as a separate paragraph or chapter with very little resource allocation (more of this will be discussed in the following sections). The main strategy that was designed for street children is the “National Strategy for the Protection, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Street Children” launched by the NCCM in 2003. The Strategy adopted five goals: changing attitudes of the society towards street children; collecting and analysing comprehensive data on street children; providing qualified and specialized cadres able to deal with street children's problems with new positive attitudes; mobilizing national resources for funding the programs for the protection and rehabilitation of street children; and attracting children away from the street through the elimination of the circumstances pushing them there and building their capacity for reintegration within society. The Council tried to establish a

network after the launch of the Strategy in order to get a more multi-sectoral approach to its implementation and follow-up, but this did not work out.

A number of questions could be asked about this strategy. Given that the NCCM is not an implementing agency, which organisations have taken on delivery? How sincere was their commitment? Did they have sufficient resources? The Parliament held three hearings and the Prime Minister chaired a ministerial meeting where the government decided, in 2007, to allocate resources for the implementation of the Street Children Strategy, with the Ministry of Social Solidarity as the implementing body³⁸. This is clearly a positive development that needs to be monitored.

3.4 Who is responsible for street children at the level of the state?

Institutionally, street children ought to fall under the responsibility of a range of ministries dealing with the economy, employment, education, health and other social services. By its very nature, the situation of street children needs to be addressed as a cross-cutting issue to be mainstreamed across sectors.

As with the experience of other cross-cutting issues, national mechanisms are often put in place with the mandate to lobby, strategise and monitor the implementation of legislation, policy, programmes and projects across the different sectors. Where this catalytic role has been maintained, cross-cutting issues have been institutionalised in different sectors, with responsibility assumed by all.

Such responsibility was taken over by the National Council of Childhood and Motherhood (NCCM). However, the Council has many wider responsibilities than those towards street children. The Council was established in 1988 and is under the Prime Minister. Its mandate includes: proposing general policy and a national plan on childhood and motherhood; following up and evaluating implementation in light of reports submitted by ministries, institutions and agencies and removing any obstacles encountered; and collecting information and statistics on childhood and motherhood. Under its mandate and powers, the Council also works as a coordinating mechanism through a Technical Consultative Committee comprising representatives from different ministries as well as civil society. The coordinating role of the Committee is seen as weak. This has implications on its effectiveness in synchronizing the work of the different ministries as regards street children. On the other hand, the Council took very good steps in advocating the rights of street children: as mentioned above, it played a central role in amending the law and putting together the Street Children Strategy.

Recently, the NCCM was merged with the National Council for Population and Anti-Addiction Fund under a new ministry entitled the Ministry for Family and Population. The question now is how this new institutional arrangement will affect the work with street children.

Also, a more cross-sectoral approach has been initiated through the amended Law 126/2008, creating a new mechanism to deal with cases of “children at risk”. The “Child Protection Committees” and sub-committees were formed in each Governorate headed by

the Governor with local directors of police, education, health, social affairs and civil society representatives. The role of the sub-committees is to detect cases of children at risk and carry out preventive rehabilitation interventions and follow-up.

While this represents a good opportunity for addressing the situation of children in need of protection, the question remains whether street children are really treated and seen as “children at risk”. The other problem relates to the effectiveness of such a Committee when it has no budget allocation, no training for the committee members and no clear procedures for the enforcement and follow-up of the committee’s recommendations. Mechanisms in child protection systems include detecting, reporting, investigating, designing interventions, and monitoring them. This needs a well-organized and highly coordinated process. It also constitutes a full-time job: the committee members are allocated this responsibility in addition to their regular job. Despite what may seem to be an uncertain start, there is still a real potential for the important role that the Committee could play in the future.

3.5 How effective are the services provided to street children?

In addition to institutional mechanisms that are meant to work in a cross-sectoral way, there are also government institutions as well as CSOs that provide services targeting street children directly or indirectly.

3.5.1 The National Council for Childhood and Motherhood (NCCM)

In addition to its advocacy and policy work mentioned above, the NCCM also implements some projects related to street children. In fact, this is not part of its mandate but, as in the case of other coordinating/catalyst bodies, it uses its resources to try to fill a gap instead of pushing for other institutions to take on the responsibility of delivering much needed programmes and projects. One such project is a free 24/7 national hotline service, which was launched in 2005, putting children, relatives or witnesses to violence in contact with child protection workers. "Ever since our launch, we have received over 200,000 phone calls."³⁹

3.5.2 Sectoral Ministries

The General Social Defence Department in the Ministry of Social Solidarity, delivers a number of services mostly to children without families. This includes around 174 Residential Care Institutions providing educational, medical, vocational and recreational services to 6,000 children. Foster families, a system that was introduced in 1959, provide services to approximately 2,500 children annually⁴⁰.

The focus of the General Social Defence Department is to provide care to juvenile delinquents and children exposed to delinquency; prevent substance and drug abuse; work with victims of sexual exploitation; and deal with released prisoners and their families. It runs “Houses of Observation” which are social institutions where the children are fostered before being presented to the juvenile court, as well as hostels that provide residential care to children whose family situations are dangerous to their existence. They also have “Social

Surveillance and Follow-Up Bureaus” responsible for writing reports on the situation of the child and his/her family and the reasons for his/her exposure to delinquency which are submitted to the juvenile court before deciding on the child’s case⁴¹.

Though small in impact, these services do seem to benefit some street children and above all show some commitment by some state institutions to the issue. However, when it comes to other sectoral ministries, more efforts could be made to prevent children from being pushed to resort to life on the street. Once on the street, children are then denied any access to these sectoral programmes and projects.

The Ministry of Education, in its capacity to provide education for all children, has the responsibility to ensure that all girls and boys are enrolled and continue their basic education. Among the population aged 6 to 18 years, 10 per cent (or 2.1 millions) have never attended school⁴². The official statistic for school dropout rates ranges from 1.2 per cent to 6.8 per cent according to different regions⁴³. These figures are contested as being too low by many who work in the field of education in Egypt.

The Ministry of Health provides very little, for street children. For example, since health insurance is linked to being registered in school, by leaving school, street children are excluded from this very badly needed service. Medical institutions also do not detect and follow up on signs of malnutrition, neglect or physical and sexual violence.

Part of the mandates of the Ministries of Labour and of Agriculture is to monitor the implementation of ILO conventions such as the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour. The significant number of working children and the conditions under which they work is testimony that these ministries could make greater effort to implement those conventions. This does not take the onus away from the economic sector that has failed to create sufficient job opportunities for adults and an economic climate conducive to decent livelihood, making it impossible for some families to survive without the contribution of all its members including children.

3.5.3 Law enforcement institutions

When it comes to state institutions and despite some of the services available for street children, it seems that the one institution with whom street children have the most contact, are the police.

International organizations paint a bleak picture. "The sheer fact that the children are being handled by police is an abusive act"⁴⁴. "The government says it arrests children to protect them. The reality is that most of these children are back on the street within a week, in even worse shape than before"⁴⁵. Human Rights Watch found that police in Cairo routinely beat children with batons, whips, rubber hoses and belts; the children are transported in dangerous vehicles, often with adult detainees; and they are exposed to sexual abuse⁴⁶.

The question is how much longer can the police be allowed to perpetrate harmful acts on defenceless children? Why does the general public and institutions that represent them, let alone other state institutions, look the other way? In the light of the new Law, is there an opportunity for real change?

3.5.4 Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)

The most direct and dedicated work done for street children is carried out by Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). Some CSOs have worked on this issue for many years such as Hope Village (Al-Amal) who started its work with street children in 1990. Other CSOs have started working with street children since 2003 only.

Hope Village services include temporary and permanent shelters and drop-in centres. The Village also offers rehabilitation programs for children, including amongst others: literacy; education; vocational training; job placements; counselling; group therapy; health; and emergency services⁴⁷. In collaboration with UNICEF⁴⁸, the village runs the 'Street Children Health Risks Project', a preventive education program designed to help children living on the streets of Cairo, Alexandria and Qena in dealing with the daily risks they face.

CARITAS is another development CSO that has been working on issues regarding child protection for many years. By 2004, other CSOs such as Al Ma'wa (the sanctuary), the General Egyptian Association for Child Protection and Toufulti (my childhood) also started to work with street children. While perhaps with a slightly different focus and at different scales, these CSOs still offer similar services as those offered by Hope Village. The drop-in centres seem to be the most successful. By 2007, there were 24,000 visits to the half-day centres run by the five non-governmental organizations with which UNICEF works, including repeat visits⁴⁹.

Given the large number of street children and their multiple needs, the fact that most CSOs in Egypt provide more or less the same services should not be seen as duplication. However, with more coordination and the acquirement of new skills, it might be possible for NGOs to diversify more. Another more problematic issue that is often raised concerning the work of CSOs working with street children is the fact that they are mostly concentrated in Cairo and Alexandria leaving the rest of Egypt without services. Furthermore, many CSOs seem to be suffering from lack of professional expertise in the area of rehabilitation. CSO staff themselves admit that they lack capacity to deal with issues like drug abuse or counselling children who suffer from psychological problems as a result of living in constant fear. CSOs working in this field are also criticised by some experts for focusing on short rather than long-term care and solutions.

While a growing number of CSOs put advocacy as part of their mission and/or as a goal/objective for specific projects, few have expertise in this area. CSOs suffer lack of qualified staff to present evidence-based arguments or alternative visions and approaches. The meetings with policy-makers become complaints sessions or shopping/wish list, in most cases. There are also no systematic mechanisms to approach policy-makers or influence the decision-making process such as, for example, hearing sessions in the Parliament or communications channels at the ministerial level.

Despite their limitations, CSOs are providing extremely valuable services to street children and could do more with the support of the government. For example, in 2005, Hope Village opened a residential centre for young street mothers who have become pregnant as a result of rape. Its aim was to provide these mothers and their babies with the secure surroundings they need as well as help them to work out problems with the authorities. Obtaining birth certificates for their children is one such task. The young women are expected to leave the centre by the time they reach the age of 21 years. By then, having attended literacy and child-rearing classes, and some vocational training sessions, they would hopefully be able to face the future with confidence⁵⁰.

Whether it is about services provided by the state or by CSOs, monitoring and evaluation systems within and across the institutions to assess the effectiveness of actions addressing the needs of street children are weak. The same applies to the impact assessment of all the other interventions including legislation, strategies and policies.

4. Recommendations for Change

The prevalence and increasing numbers of street children is one of the most visible indicators of economic and social trends and policy failure to reach all its citizens. It calls into question whether economic growth has 'trickled down' to the poor in Egypt. It also questions the effectiveness of the current welfare approach as opposed to a redistributive one to address the rising inequalities in Egyptian society. While these issues are beyond the scope of this policy brief, they do have an impact on the situation of street children. The following recommendations will focus on the street children directly while touching also on these wider issues where appropriate.

1. To understand better the situation of street children through research in the following areas:

- 1.1 Quantitative data at national level to assess the magnitude of the problem. The statistics need to be disaggregated by sex and age.
- 1.2 Qualitative and quantitative research to examine the root causes that put girls and boys at risk, among them street children. This research will need to examine the link between poverty, inequality, exploitation, violence and exclusion.
- 1.3 Qualitative research to examine the everyday lives of the street girls and boys and the attitudes of society and the government towards them.
- 1.4 Policy level research examining the effectiveness of existing policies, planning and legislation and institutional arrangements and budgetary allocation targeting street children.

2. To shift the approach to street children from legalistic to preventive, protective and rehabilitative interventions, through a focus on:

- 2.1 Root causes and not only on symptoms
- 2.2 The economic and not only the social sector
- 2.3 Mainstreaming as well as specific institutions and actions for street children
- 2.4 The rights of street children as citizens and not as charity cases or delinquents

2.5 Street children not only as victims but also as citizens with the agency to participate in decisions which target them.

3. To enforce and monitor all international and national commitment to children

3.1 To review that all items of international conventions such as those pertaining to children's rights and elimination of child labour are translated into legislation and other procedures.

3.2 To review that all enforcement procedures are in place and are implemented.

3.3 To strengthen all monitoring and reporting systems relating to relevant international conventions.

3.4 To review and further amend the 'Child Law' 126/2008 by removing all clauses that undermine its effectiveness and to put in place all the necessary procedures and monitoring mechanisms.

3.5 To review and amend articles pertaining to corporal punishment in a way that prohibits all physical violence whether at home, school, work or any other institution.

4. To establish clear mandates and lines of institutional responsibility for street children

4.1 Strengthen cross-cutting entities

4.1.1 To strengthen the establishment of a unit or department in the new Ministry for Family and Population with a clear mandate for responsibility for street children. This entity would be a catalyst advocating, legislating and monitoring the situation of street children.

4.1.2 To review and strengthen the role of what was previously the NCCM 'Technical Consultative Committee'.

4.1.3 To strengthen the 'Child Protection Committee' according to the amended 'Child Law' through appropriate budget allocation, establishment of clear guidelines and protocols and awareness-raising and training for the committee members.

4.1.4 To establish a surveillance system such as a children's Ombudsman

4.2 Establish responsibility of line ministries

4.2.1 To strengthen the role of economic sector ministries in addressing poverty, such as the creation of jobs for poor women and men.

4.2.2 To strengthen the monitoring systems of the Ministry of Labour in the area of child labour.

4.2.3 To lift all exclusionary conditions from access to education such as the rising cost of education, forced private tuitions by teachers, mistreatment of poor children in schools, corporal punishment and gender discrimination.

4.2.4 To establish effective internal and external mechanisms and multi-sectoral interventions to identify children at risk and design suitable and sustainable interventions to reduce and eventually eliminate the risk factors.

4.2.5 To formulate a new Social Protection Strategy with the full collaboration of all relevant state institutions and NGOs that focus on the rights of the

child, with a dedicated budget and clear roles and responsibilities for its implementation and monitoring.

5. To devise a comprehensive child protection system that addresses the issues of all categories of vulnerable girls and boys in all their diversity of age, class, religion as well as family and regional background

- 5.1 To devise a Social Protection policy for vulnerable girls and boys.
- 5.2 To devise a Social Protection strategy translated into cross-cutting and sectoral programmes and projects and procedures.
- 5.3 To create realistic budget lines for the implementation of the various components of the Social Protection system.
- 5.4 To create clear institutional responsibility for monitoring and evaluation of the implementation of the strategy.

6. To devise a National Strategy, programmes and projects specifically for street children

- 6.1 To evaluate the implementation of the “National Strategy for the Protection, Rehabilitation and Reintegration of Street Children” of 2003, as well as all programmes and projects directly targeting street children.
- 6.2 To build on lessons learned and design a new Strategy in collaboration with key state institutions and NGOs.
- 6.3 To design innovative and participative programmes and projects that address the conditions and circumstances of children already living on the street taking into account that:
 - 6.3.1 There is more chance of succeeding by helping children get off the streets through early intervention, before they establish their new “street kid” identity.
 - 6.3.2 For those who have been a long time on the streets, it is possible to use participative methods and consult them in the design of the most effective activities.
- 6.4 To strengthen all programmes and projects that help the re-integration of street children into mainstream society.
- 6.5 To put in place actions that address negative attitudes of both the general public and state employees towards street children.
- 6.6 To work directly with the police to address the way they perceive and treat street children
- 6.7 To solicit more resource allocation for items listed in recommendation 5 above from government and from bilateral and multilateral organisations.

7. To strengthen the advocacy role of civil society organisations working with street children

- 7.1 To strengthen CSOs ability to establish channels of communications with street children and to help make their voices heard.
- 7.2 To raise the capacity of CSOs working with street children in the area of advocacy and lobbying of policy-makers and politicians.
- 7.3 To support civil society networks and strengthen their roles as advocates of the rights and needs of street children.

NOTES

- ¹ Lusk, M. et al. 1989. Street Children of Juarez: A Field Study. *International Social Work*. 32 (3): 289-302. Also found on: <http://iilt.ilstu.edu/psanders/litsearch/streetchildren.htm>.
- ² Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). March 2006. "Interregional Cooperation to Strengthen Social Inclusion, Gender Equality and Health Promotion in the MDGs". Project Document: Bangkok, Thailand.
- ³ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). 2006. The State of the World's Children. "Excluded and Invisible".
- ⁴ A young boy living on the streets of Cairo. Interview by Essam Ali in 2009.
- ⁵ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). 2002. Drug Consumption among Egypt's Street Children.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Expenditure and Consumption Survey 2004/05 (HIECS). Found in: Ministry of Economic Development. 2008. "Egypt: Achieving the Millennium Development Goals - A Midpoint Assessment 2008". <http://www.undp.org/Portals/0/MDG%20Links/Egypt%20MDG%20Mid%20Term%20Assessment%20Report%202008.pdf>.
- ⁸ Most governments and international agencies set a single poverty line determined primarily by the cost of food: this underestimates the scale and depth of poverty in places where costs of non-food necessities are high. The fact that large sections of the poor have to pay high prices for housing, water, sanitation, transport and health care among other living expenditures is rarely considered in setting poverty lines. See Satterthwaite, D. "The Millennium Development Goals and Poverty Reduction" at <http://www.iied.org/pubs/pdfs/G00446.pdf>. See also: Satterthwaite, D. 2003. "The Millennium Development Goals and urban poverty reduction: great expectations and nonsense statistics". *Environment and Urbanization*. 15 (2): 179-190. The poverty line does not measure poverty in the context of wealth leaving out income disparities and inequalities. When measured at the level of the household, it also does not allow measuring possible inequalities among different household members.
- ⁹ United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention (ODCCP). 2001. "Rapid Situation Assessment (RSA) of Street Children in Cairo and Alexandria", p. 5.
- ¹⁰ Beazley, H. Spring 2003. "The Construction and Protection of Individual and Collective Identities by Street Children and Youth in Indonesia". *Children, Youth and Environments*. 13(1).
- ¹¹ Mehanna, S., Al-Shermani, M. 2005. "Participatory Assessment Research on Violence against Street Children", Social Research Centre, American University in Cairo, Egypt.
- ¹² National Council for Childhood and Motherhood (NCCM), "National Survey on Child Labour", CAPMAS, Cairo 2004.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ ODCCP, op. cit., p.16.
- ¹⁵ ODCCP, op. cit., p.5.
- ¹⁶ American University in Cairo, Violence against Street Children, 2005.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Human Rights Watch, 2003, p. 25.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ For example, the dangers associated with giving birth on the street, the difficulty in obtaining a birth certificate, etc...
- ²¹ Hall, S. and Jefferson, T. eds. 1976. "Resistance through Rituals: *Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*", London: Routledge. See: Beazley, H., op. cit., p. 2.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Hebdige, D. 1979. "Subculture: The Meaning of Style". London: Methuen & Co., Ltd. See: Beazley, H., op. cit., p. 3.
- ²⁴ Brake, M. 1980. "Sociology of Youth Culture and Youth Subcultures: Sex and drugs and rock". London: Routledge, p. 175. See: Beazley, H., op. cit., p. 3.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ ODCCP, op. cit., p. 29.
- ²⁸ Carroll, J. 2008. "The Egyptian government and non-profit groups are stepping up efforts to help street children". *The Christian Science Monitor*, p. 7.
- ²⁹ Op. cit., <http://hrw.org/reports/2003/egypt0203/>

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- ³⁰ Moushira Khatab, Secretary General of the National Council for Childhood and Motherhood (NCCM), Re-election Pamphlet.
- ³¹ Lucchini, R. 1993. "Street-Child and Drug Consumption in Brazil: Thoughts about Addiction". Working Paper Number 231, p. 16. See: Beazley, H., op. cit., p. 3.
- ³² Beazley, H. 2000. "Street Boys in Yogyakarta: Social and Spatial Exclusion in the Public Spaces of the City." In Watson, S. and G. Bridges, eds. Companion to the City. London: Blackwell, pp. 472-488, p. 3.
- ³³ Beazley, H. Op. cit., 2003. p. 1.
- ³⁴ The Social Solidarity Ministry conducted a recent survey in all governorates in the same 24 hours and concluded that the number of street children is 17,000.
- ³⁵ UNODC, op. cit.
- ³⁶ Article 96, Law 126/2008.
- ³⁷ See Khattab, op.cit.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ IRIN, 19 Nov 2006. "Egypt: Street Children Worst Hit by Violence".
- ⁴⁰ ODCCP, op. cit., p. 30.
- ⁴¹ Ibid, p. 32.
- ⁴² Ministry of Economic Development, 2008, op.cit., p.15
- ⁴³ Ibid, p. 17
- ⁴⁴ Interview with Nadra Zaki, UNICEF Programme Officer in op.cit., IRIN
- ⁴⁵ Clarisa Bencomo, researcher in Human Rights Watch's Children's Rights Division
<http://hrw.org/reports/2003/egypt0203/>
- ⁴⁶ Ibid
- ⁴⁷ ODCCP, p. 38, op.cit.
- ⁴⁸ Started working with UNICEF since 2003
- ⁴⁹ Interview with Nadra Zaki, op.cit.
- ⁵⁰ http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/5036382.stm BBC news Channel: Thursday, 1 June 2006, 11:04 GMT 12:04 UK.