Street Children in Mozambique

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of street children is common in many cities around the world and is frequently related to rapid urbanization and industrialization or profound socio-economic crises. While both these factors should be considered in the case of Mozambique, the reasons for the appearance of and rise in numbers of street children are of a rather different nature. The majority of the children whom we find in the street are, first and foremost, a consequence of the war being waged against this country and the accompanying political, military, economic and social destabilization.

The war, which has destroyed the vast majority of Mozambique’s economic and social infrastructure, has forced numerous families (some of which are already separated or fragmented) to abandon their villages and seek refuge in the cities in search of safety and better living conditions. They leave their areas of cultivation which, under normal circumstances, guarantee a degree of nutritional security, and travel to the urban centers where the socio-economic situation is constantly changing and where the network of services (health, education, and food supply) is long since saturated and cannot support anymore users. One consequence is numerous children in the streets, some of whom are sent out by their parents looking for means to sustain themselves or means to make money to contribute to the meager family budget.

Although conjugal instability, child abuse, truancy, and a certain crisis of values in our society contribute to the phenomenon of street children, the war is the most fundamental cause. The war has provoked the profound socio-economic crisis of famine and the destruction and disintegration of families and communities.

The present study is based on material collected during an investigation of street children in Mozambique. Research previously conducted by the
National Directorate for Social Action (Ministry of Health) described many of the major problems confronting street children, however, the causes of the problems and the very phenomenon of street children were not clear. For this reason, further studies were undertaken in other cities around the country in order to better understand the causes and the extent to which children are abandoned or become dependent on street life. The present study had the following objectives: (1) to collect information on the causes of the phenomenon of street children, their living and working conditions, their problems and aspirations; (2) to develop base-line information for the compilation of a profile of Mozambican street children; and (3) to identify national policy alternatives which can serve as the basis for new and renewed activities and programs on behalf of these children. This investigation took place in seven provincial capitals: Maputo, Xai-Xai, Inhambane, Beira, Quelimane, Nampula and Pemba, and consisted of interviews with street children and their families as well as a public opinion questionnaire.

This paper will present the results of this study which found, in short, that the growing phenomenon of street children in Mozambique is the result of a combination of economic, social, political and cultural factors. First, we will describe the components of the problem and then present a number of proposals for actions to address the needs of children.

2. Methodology

This study, undertaken in various provincial capitals, was executed by a team of three investigators under the supervision of the author. The team spent 12-15 days in each of the locations. Various methods of data collection were employed, such as structured and lengthy interviews with children (approximately 20 interviews were conducted in each location), and standard use of questionnaires (see appendices). The following numbers of questionnaires were filled out: 138 in the city of Maputo, 50 in the city of Xai Xai, 45 in Inhambane, 85 in Beira, 45 in Quelimane, 55 in Nampula, and 75 in Pemba, for a total of 493.

The questionnaire was designed to obtain information such as the ages of the children, their place of origin, their educational situations, causes of their marginality, activities in which they are presently involved, structure and organization of their survival systems, and level of contact with their families. The team also recorded their observations of activities being undertaken by the children in the streets and in temporary shelters where they may be living. In addition to the questionnaire administered to the children, public opinion polls were conducted to get an idea of general attitudes towards street children. This questionnaire was distributed to teachers, educators, employers, heads of residences housing street children, police and religious authorities.

Finally, the majority of street children have at least one family member living in the same city and the team attempted to conduct interviews with those