



Expert meeting on the promotion and protection of children living and/or working on the street

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Opening by Ibrahim Salama
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I am pleased to open this Expert meeting on the promotion and protection of the rights of children living and/or working on the street. This meeting offers the unique opportunity to continue the discussions initiated by the Human Rights Council last March. After years of silence at the international level, the Council adopted resolution 16/12 strongly condemning the violations of the rights of children living and/or working on the street, including discrimination and stigmatization, lack of basic services, as well as all forms of violence including exploitation, gender-based violence, trafficking, forced begging and hazardous work, forced recruitment by armed forces and armed groups, forced disappearances and extrajudicial killings. The Council urged States to ensure a holistic child rights and gender-based response to this phenomenon, within the context of comprehensive domestic child protection strategies, calling them to give priority attention to prevention by addressing its diverse causes through empowerment strategies in the economic, social and educational fields.

One thing was made clear at the Council: children living or working on the streets are to be found everywhere, both in the developing world and in wealthy economies. This reality flies, as the High Commissioner for Human Rights said, in the face of existing international standards for the promotion and protection of the rights of the child, particularly the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocols.

For some children, the street is their whole universe: home, school and community. No matter what terminology we use, as we will see during this expert meeting, be it “street children,” “children in street situations,” “street connected children,” or “children of the street,” the common factor is that for these children, the street plays a major role in their lives.

Many factors can push a child to live and work on the streets: poverty and economic hardships, family disintegration, exclusion, stigmatization, lack of education, domestic violence, urbanization and natural and man-made disasters, as well as social and cultural factors, including the persistence of certain harmful practices such as

early or forced marriage. No matter the cause, once on the street, children become more vulnerable to human rights violations, including sexual exploitation and abuse, violence and trafficking. They can be easily subjected to exploitative work, drugs and harsh punishment for small offences. They are also more prone to be recruited by gangs and by armed forces or armed groups.

While the State has the obligation to protect children under all circumstances, for many children in the streets, the State can become the main perpetrator of violence. This was recognized by the UN Study on Violence against children, whose main findings and recommendations remain valid today. The right of children to freedom from violence has also been reiterated by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in its recently adopted General Comment on article 19 of the Convention. International mechanisms, particularly the Committee on the Rights of the Child, give much attention in their review of State party reports to the situation of children in street situations and regularly recommend the development of proactive policies and programmes of prevention, support to families, and strengthening of assistance, including in education, health care, food, and shelter. The Committee has equally recommended that their presence in the streets for survival behavior acts, such as begging, not be used to treat them as delinquents or criminals, but instead that they be provided with preventive and rehabilitative services, such as for physical and sexual abuse, to which they are all too commonly vulnerable.

Children in street situations are right holders with a full potential to contribute to society and are agents for change. What to do in practical terms to help children in street situations is not so easy. Some children were forced on the street, some others run away from their homes voluntarily. Some found a way to cope; some others are victimized or traumatized by their harsh environment. This is why this expert meeting is a step on the right direction. The participation of all of you, with demonstrated experience in this area, including government representatives, UN agencies, non-governmental organizations, academia, the private sector, and former children in street situations will ensure that the discussions and recommendations coming from this meeting are focused and effective. Please rest assured that the dialogue and exchange you will have during these 2 days, will inform the report that the High Commissioner will present to the Human Rights Council in March 2012.

Many thanks.
