The lives of children working on the street in Brazil

Children working and living on the street in Brazil became iconic symbols of dispossession and vulnerability in the 1980s. Today, it is estimated that up to a third of all children aged between 7 and 17 work. Current policies mainly focus on poor children, rather than street working children, and such policies rely largely on incentives for parents to encourage their children to attend school, such as cash transfer programmes. However, the first large scale survey of street children working in Minas Gerais, Brazil, suggests that although these measures have been successful in reducing headcount poverty, they do not capture the complex dynamics of street work for children. The research therefore points to the need for a more creative approach to policy making for children who work on the streets.

KEY FINDINGS

- Urban street work is a very specific sub-set of child labour. It is not driven by market demand but by the need of the workers themselves to earn income.
- The majority of street workers are boys; only 17 per cent of the 3,000 children surveyed were girls.
- 80% of the children said that they slept in their parents’ house or with close family; almost 20% said that they were without significant family ties.
- Only a small number of children and young people were working directly because their parents made them, and only a third of the children claimed that they gave all the money directly to their families.
- Many children reported enjoying aspects of working on the street.
- The vast majority of the street workers were attending school.
- Often, the decision to work on the streets was taken by children themselves, not by their parents.
- Street work sometimes allowed the children to exercise a degree of agency that they perceived as valuable.
- Despite the vulnerabilities associated with it, street work was not only remunerative but sometimes also played a positive, as well as negative, role in the day to day wellbeing of the children. Some children reported achieving a sense of worth from it.

BACKGROUND

State responses to vulnerable children in Latin America have changed considerably over the last twenty years as a consequence of greater awareness of children’s rights, human rights more generally, and democratisation. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
(UNCRC) is ratified across Latin America, but although governments are generally sincere in their ratification, they are often unclear as to what they should do to promote children’s rights. Policies are frequently underpinned by a view that the lives of poor and working children should be ‘normalised’. However, this fails to take into account the real life situations and dilemmas that these children face, and the complex dynamics of street work for children. As a result, policies that are intended to protect poor children can sometimes be ineffective or have unintended consequences for street working children.

This briefing is based on data from a survey of over 3,000 children; the first large scale survey of children living and working in Minas Gerais, one of Brazil’s 26 states. The survey was conducted in response to the 2006 national household survey which revealed an increase of 5.6% in the numbers of working children in the state, despite the fact that child labour figures were steadily declining nationally. The survey included all children found working on the streets across all the 21 cities of the state who appeared to be under 18 years old (those who said they were older were excluded), and who agreed to participate. It was carried out by social workers experienced in working with vulnerable children who had been trained in survey research techniques.

**URBAN STREET WORK IN MINAS GERAIS**

Some of the perceptions of policy makers about child labour on the streets were corroborated by evidence from the survey. Urban street workers are certainly vulnerable to exploitation and they share a view that they are socially marginalised. Many have issues with drugs and alcohol. However, this is not the whole story. The children in the survey were able to exercise choice, especially in terms of their decision to enter the street labour market and in relation to how they spent their money.

This challenges some of the assumptions of child labour policies, namely that parents make the decisions as to whether and when children enter the labour market and that children work in poor families primarily to contribute to family income (Becker 1982). In
fact, many of the children in Minas Gerais were not using the money they earned to support their families, or at least they were not using it directly or exclusively to do so. Only a third of children claimed they gave all the money directly to their families, and more than 30% said that they spent most of the money they earned on themselves.

This may be one of the reasons why many children reported enjoying aspects of working on the ‘street’. Many reported that earning money gave them a sense of independence and that ‘buying things’ made them feel good. However, the children also expressed pleasure and gratitude in aspects of their work that went beyond getting and spending money.

70% of the children aged between 10 and 14 said that they ‘liked’ or ‘liked a lot’ their work. In fact, it is only after 16 that this sense of pleasure seemed to tail off. Still, even at 17, more than 50 per cent of children enjoyed aspects of street work. For many of the children, being away from home was a key factor in their enjoyment of being on the streets. Lots of the children said that they felt that they were escaping from (unpaid) work or even violence there.

In addition, almost 20% of the children said that they were without significant family ties, which raises questions about the underlying assumptions of Brazil’s social welfare programmes which are based on supporting families to keep children in the home and in school.

Perhaps surprisingly, the survey results showed very clearly that the vast majority of child street workers were attending school. Over 90 per cent of 10 year olds said that they went to school full time, and it was only once the children passed the age of 12 that school attendance fell. The children understood the importance of going to school, but did not see school attendance as carrying with it an obligation not to work.

**RECCOMENDATIONS**

- Policies need to take into account that school can be a complement, not a direct alternative, to work for many street working children.
- In the world of policy, insufficient attention has been paid to the significance of children’s agency with regard to street work. However, it is important to understand that street work may sometimes allow children to exercise a degree of agency that they perceive as valuable.
- Policies for street working children, if they are to be rights-based, cannot simply consist of interventions that eliminate their principal sources of income – unless that takes place alongside a radical transformation of the structures of inequality that underpin child labour.
- Policies emphasise the provision of financial subsidies to poor households as a way of tackling both child poverty and child labour. Whilst these policies have
undoubtedly been successful in reducing poverty, they do not address sufficiently
the labour aspects of these children’s lives, and interventions that are aimed
primarily at preventing children from working on the streets are unlikely to succeed
if they leave other factors untouched.

- In addition, almost 20% of child street workers are not living with their families and
  are, by implication, outside the reach of these programmes, although they may
  well be the group of children most in need of them.
- The findings of this study challenge some of the assumptions of child labour policies,
  and the study therefore highlights the need for a more creative approach to policy
  making for children who work on the streets.
- This needs to be supported by more detailed research about the relationship
  between school, street work, cash transfer programmes and the wellbeing and
  trajectories of children who are engaged in both street labour and education.

FURTHER READING

  street situations in Rio de Janeiro’ Childhoods Today, 3(2).
- Hecht, T. (1998) At Home in the Street: Street Children of Northeast Brazil,
  Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
  Developmental Supports: Strengthening Family and Community Supports for
  Children and Youth in Rio de Janeiro, EDUSU/CESPI/USU Instituto Promundo.

CREDITS

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see Grugel, J and Poley, F. (2012) ‘Street Working Children, Children’s Agency and
Challenge of Children’s Rights: Evidence from Minas Gerais, Brazil’, Journal of International
Development (available on line DOI: 10.1002/jid 2012)

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