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Street children in Vietnam

An inquiry into the roots of poverty
and survival livelihood strategies

Andrea Gallina and Pietro Masina

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List of abbreviations

ABE	Alternative Basic Education
BSS	Basic Social Services
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women
CEMMA	Committee for Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas
CPCC	Committee for the Protection and Care of Children
CRC	Convention on the Rights of the Children
CSW	Commercial Sex Workers
DC	Dynamic Classes
FVWI	Social Guarantee Fund for Veterans and War Invalids
FRR	Social Guarantee Fund for Regular Relief
HEPR	Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction Programme
PHSDR	Contingency Fund for Pre-Harvest Starvation and Disaster Relief
KG	Kindergarten
MOET	Ministry of Education and Training
MOLISA	Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs
ODA	Official Development Assistance
STD	Sexually Transmitted Diseases
USD	United States Dollar
VND or d	Vietnamese Dong

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Note for the reader

The report is divided in two main parts. The first provides an extensive review of the literature on disadvantaged children in Vietnam, emphasising the main causes at the root of the street children conditions and the institutions, local and international, approach to improve it. Likewise, on the basis of the studies that have been carried out by international agencies and non-governmental organisations, and supported by the findings from the interviews carried out in Hanoi for the pilot study, the report presents a new conceptualisation of street children. These categories have applied for the field-research in both Hanoi and the countryside, which constitutes the second part of the report.

The report is divided in five chapters. Readers that are familiar with Vietnam's recent socio-economic development can skip chapter one. In chapter two a thorough review of the literature on disadvantaged children in Vietnam is carried-out. This chapter is important for those readers that want to acquire a background information on the conditions of disadvantaged children and in particular of street children. Particularly, it part provides the reader with a clear definition of street children and warns about the inconsistency of statistics available on this issue. The following chapter highlights the Government and international organizations' policy and approach to solve the problem of poverty and improve the livelihood conditions of disadvantaged children. Those readers that are interested in the psychological dimension of street children living in the street or living in institutions can move directly to chapter four. This chapter provides, as background to the psychological problems of the children, useful insights into the change of Vietnamese family structures following the political and economic reforms. Researchers and policy makers that are aware and familiar with street children and the problems affecting Vietnamese households can instead jump directly to chapter five, in which the methodological approach used for field research is explained and the results of the interviews analysed. In this chapter the findings from the in-depth interviews are analysed. This chapter provides insights for both future research and policy implications. Comments on any chapter of this report are welcome and can be addressed to the authors' correspondence address.

Introduction¹

This study has been prepared with the aim to provide researchers and policy makers at the local and national levels committed to solve the problem of poverty (and in particular affecting children) with new insights, experiences and methodological tools. Especially for those that are fighting and researching poverty in so-called developing countries this report can provide useful insights and cases from which draw experience, as well as a method for future research.

The report focuses primarily on Hanoi, as this study was conceived as a support for the activities of an Asia Urbs project working with street children and disadvantaged youth in the Hoan Kiem District of Hanoi. Some of the mechanisms that bring the children to move to town may largely be the same as in the Centre and the South of Vietnam. However, the living conditions of street children in Ho Chi Minh City appear to be much more vulnerable and risky. Ho Chi Minh City has a vibrant and fast growing economy and attracts resources and migrants from all the country. Children are also attracted by the hope to find fortune there. Including children coming from the North of the country. However, it appears that street children are exposed to violence, abuses, drug, sexual exploitation, and organised crime in a way that does fortunately not exist in Hanoi. In the last ten years the conditions in Hanoi have not deteriorated, and in some cases (such as for housing opportunities in rented rooms) even improved. The number of 'street children' seems to have declined for a variety of reasons, while the number of young migrants may have increased.

There is agreement that the reforms undertaken in the last decade by the Vietnamese Government are causing stress to traditional safety nets and that new forms of poverty, as well as social evils are spreading in the country. Within the country and among international scholars this process has given rise to a very lively debate. Some believes that this is a natural consequence of the process of modernisation implicit in the shift from a planned economy to a market and differentiated sectors' economy: left free to operate market forces will adjust the redistribution of welfare and a process of convergence in households' wealth will take place. Others are less incline to accept the "neutral" nature of these processes and advocate for a stronger intervention of the state, and better coordination of donors' assistance, in order to avoid or at least limit the negative effects produced by the capitalist system. In both points of view, despite the different emphasis and priority given to poverty and poor people in the policy-making, there is a striking element that is common, i.e. the fact that poor people

¹ The study has been presented during the Asia Urbs second conference held in Hanoi during 2-5 December 2002. The authors wish to express their gratitude for the useful comments and remarks on the draft made by the participants to working group on urban poverty and street children.

are considered usually passive and not actors of their own life. This perception has led to the stratification of a way of thinking and addressing poor people and vulnerable groups exclusively from the 'top'. Policies for poor people were designed with the aim to eradicate poverty but without an understanding of poverty trajectories and of poor people's livelihood strategies.

Another common problem in both views is the lack of a clear distinction between "poverty" and its extreme form, which we can refer to as "misery". This problem is reflected in the tendency to consider poverty as a static condition. In fact, as long as there are different types of poor and vulnerable groups of people, there are as many as different types of measures and interventions. This means that the understanding of poverty cannot be separated from the understanding of the coping mechanisms that enables the poor to survive. In situations of misery the range of possibilities is even more limited and a minimum shock can eliminate any chance of survival.

The incidence of poverty has declined substantially in recent years. From 1993 to 1998 – the dates of the two Living Standard Surveys – the number of people below the poverty line has declined from 57 to 35 percent². However, any statistical measure of poverty can only describe part of the problem. Poverty is neither a homogenous nor a static phenomenon: poverty conditions may be characterised by different factors and change over time. A key element in understanding poverty dynamics is to look at the vulnerability or the resilience in front of adverse events (poor health, death of a family members, etc.). This means that the understanding of poverty cannot be separated from the understanding of the coping mechanisms that enables the poor to survive. A condition of high vulnerability means that the range of possibilities is very limited and a minimum shock can eliminate any chance of survival, although before the shock that person or household might have been able to deal with everyday life and was not necessarily poor. The study presented in the following pages will give a particular emphasis to the poverty trajectories, by looking at the vulnerability contexts in which households – and children in particular – live. Also, an important aspect of this study is that the poor and the vulnerable are not considered as passive object of studies or development policies. The poor often survive in difficult conditions because they have developed coping mechanisms and adaptive strategies, which in some cases even allow them to get out from poverty traps. This study is based on a participatory approach, which puts the views of the poor and the vulnerable about their own conditions as the very

2. The poverty line was calculated as 1,790,000 dong/year in 1998 (roughly US\$ 128). Although this measure is obviously arbitrary – and many people live slightly below or above this conventional poverty line – there is a general consensus among researchers that poverty levels have indeed declined. See World Bank Report *Attacking Poverty 2000*.

central factor in the analysis. The empirical part of this report has been conducted by using a variety of methodological tools (focus groups, household interviews, participatory social mapping, drawing with children) in order to make the poor themselves expressing their views about their conditions, the trajectories that they have followed, and their survival strategies for coping with the situation. The aim of the study is to contribute to revert a still dominant view of the poor and vulnerable as passive objects of top-down policies. Our study, instead, reveal the ingenuity that poor people, and vulnerable groups in general, have developed in order to survive notwithstanding adverse conditions. Often these coping mechanisms involve many persons at the same time, and in particular in Vietnam the role of the extended family is still important. The sudden change in one of the sources of the single person or the households' income can create unrecoverable situations and push them into 'misery'. At the opposite an intervention aiming at improving the conditions for acting and coping with poverty can create a favourable condition leading to a general welfare improvement, and eventually the eradication of the condition of poverty. However, central in this discussion is the fact that any measure addressing poverty – though having a bottom-up perspective – has limited impact if the changes at the macroeconomic level are roaming in the opposite direction.

Poor children live in conditions of particular vulnerability. Their future life is often compromised by shocks and stresses that hit their households when they are in young age. Lack of adequate nutrition in early years may impair physical and mental development for the rest of their life. A low level of school education – withdrawing children from school is a typical (unsustainable) coping mechanism – has sever consequences for future employment opportunities in a rapidly changing labour market like the Vietnamese one.

The analysis of the living conditions of poor children – and in particular of young migrant and street children – is the specific object of this study. This report discusses the causes that bring a large number of Vietnamese children to leave their homes and seek a job or a new life on the streets of a big town. Behind each of these children there is a story to be understood – often of extreme poverty and despair, sometimes the attempt to escape a life as a poor farmer. Most of these children retain strong links with their rural families, and their livelihoods perspective must be understood as part of their households needs and projects. For this reason, the empirical part of this study is based also on fieldwork in two rural communities of the Red River delta, home of a large number of street children and young migrant working in Hanoi.

Once the children have moved to a big town, however, they are basically alone. Here, however, there are fundamental differences among the different groups of children who live and work on the street. Many children working in the informal sector – shoes shining, selling fruit, selling newspaper – are in fact young

migrant. They move to town in groups from a same village and may benefit from some kind of social protection within their migrant community. Other children are left alone, without any family to go back to and without any stable link to any community if not a group of street children like them. In a town like Hanoi most of these kids are over 12 or 13, although a number of younger street kids do exist. There is another group of children who live and work on the street that has typically a much younger age: the children of poor migrants. In many cases these children have come to town together with the mother or the father, because nobody in the village is able to take care of them while the parents are working in Hanoi. In other cases, the children are born in Hanoi, although they are officially resident in the original village where their parents come from (and thus, they are ineligible for the normal public services such as school and health care). Children of migrant parents are often participating in the work of their parents such as scavenging waste for recycling although they may spend the entire day on their own or with other children in the same job.

Small children of poor migrant, street children and even young migrant they all share conditions of vulnerability, although in different ways. In some cases the borders between these theoretical categories are even blurred. Social ties among young migrant from a same village can even become a handicap when somebody in the group undertake some criminal activities or become addicted to drug: other kids in the group may be taken on the same road.

The living conditions of these groups of particularly vulnerable children are discussed in this report also on the basis of a large number of interviews and focus groups with these children, and observation of the places where these kids live and work.

The objective of this report is to contribute to the discussion upon poverty and poverty reduction strategy, and especially on those regarding the immense problem of street children. Therefore, our main concern was circumscribed to find out, through the information obtained with the street children and of those working with them, if and how the coping mechanism exist and were implemented by the kids themselves, and if and how traditional forms of solidarity among them are being eroded by the process of modernisation. The plight of street children in Vietnam is at an early stage compared to other countries in the region such as for example Thailand. Street children in Thailand have to use power and violence to survive, while in Vietnam street children are still looked upon from a paternalistic perspective and produces a feeling of pity for their unlucky situation. The characteristics of the street children phenomenon in Vietnam are therefore quite specific and so should be the responses to it, before it develops in a "dark culture" of violence, harm, abuse and exploitation. Inspired by these reflections we decided to undertake this study by having the street children as the main actors of the process, i.e. putting the

focus directly upon the kids. The level of participation that can be obtained with the use of "focus groups" methodology is very high.

The report is organised in five different chapters. In the first chapter the recent development in Vietnam's economic and social sectors are presented. Particular emphasis is put on the effects of the "open door" reform policy on the vulnerable groups of Vietnamese society. The second chapter deals instead with a particular group of vulnerable people, i.e. disadvantaged children. This chapter is a review on the existing literature on disadvantaged children in Vietnam. The review of both qualitative and quantitative studies on disadvantaged children, and in particular on street children, has shown the lack of a clear-cut definition of street children and therefore a difficulty in comparing the results obtained by the different sources. The report tries to overtake this limit by adapting one of the most comprehensive among the definitions found in the literature. The need to distinguish between different "types" of street children was not only due for the sake of methodological rigour. Also, because street children typology is very large, and particularly when addressing the issue of child labour this need is even more important. The limit that this chapter presents is the impossibility to include in the survey the studies published in Vietnamese. However, this problem is not so serious as it can be, since the Vietnamese researchers and scholars have increasingly contributed to reports and books published in English in the last years. Street children are not only children that run away from home because of poverty or violence, but also children with a family, migrant or locally resident, who go to work in the street after school. In this perspective, chapter two has highlighted some of the features of child labour in Vietnam and its perception in the local "culture". The following chapter tries to underline the role of the Government, international organizations and Vietnamese civil society in addressing the problem of poverty and child care, included the role of education and schooling. The focus on the children psychology is instead addressed in chapter four. This chapter has the main purposes firstly, to describe and analyse the change in the Vietnamese family structure and households, and secondly, to present some of the psychological aspects of street children leaving in the street or in institutions. Chapter five presents the findings of an empirical investigation conducted by the team in Hanoi and in rural communities of the Red River Delta (Hung Yen province).

CHAPTER 1

Economic and Social Indicators in Vietnam

Vietnam opening to the world economy has induced a process of modernisation of social and economic structures and at the same time increased the vulnerability of the country to external shocks. Although it is too early to assess the long-term impact of the Doi Moi (Open Door) reform policy, it can be stated from the outset that these processes are not neutral and they affect social groups in different ways. Doi Moi has benefited the rich more than the poor and urban populations more than rural populations (respectively 23 and 77 per cent of the total, 1999 Census)³. In a traditional society such as the Vietnamese, gender differences are very important as well. Different groups, and within them men and women, therefore respond to the transformations in different ways, with different coping mechanisms and strategies. Before understanding these mechanisms it is necessary to understand the conditions that affect the vulnerable groups.

The aim of this chapter is to give an overview of the main transformation of Vietnamese economy and society in order to provide a comprehensive background to the study of the vulnerable groups. Particular emphasis is given to the changing role of the family and especially the role of women in Vietnamese society, since these affect directly the care of children.

The transition in the economy has meant a shift from a national self-supplies and subsidy-based economy into a multi-sector commodity production under the management and control of the State. This makes products of labour and labour power itself into a commodity admitted, exchanged and traded drastically in the market⁴. The demand for labour has increased substantially, and voluntary internal migrations are larger than before. Children's labour, being readily available and cheap, it is obviously the main source used to meet a significant part of this demand⁵.

As well, the shifting from a collective economic system (based on cooperatives of producers) into a household economy, with the following reallocation of land per households and its scarcity for rice cultivation, are the causes of increasing underemployment and rural-urban migration. The differences in the living standard between urban and rural areas represent instead

3. Unicef-Hanoi 1999a, p. 13. The Government as well has expressed concern on this situation since the unbalanced pattern of economic growth has favoured urban over rural development, and capital rather than labour intensive growth, which does not generate enough jobs.

4. Ha Thi Phuong Tien and Ha Quang Ngoc, 2001, p. 26.

5. Theis and Huyen, 1997, p. 35.

the pull factor that is inducing people to migrate towards the cities⁶. Migration, changing family structures and need for differentiated sources of income, together with the de-collectivisation and reduction of social services, are creating new groups of poor, such as for example street children, and pushing some households towards extreme forms of poverty and misery. It has emerged from the analysis of Vietnamese and foreign sources that poor people have not fully benefited from the reforms, on the contrary they are worse off than before.

Socio-economic Indicators

In 1997-98, more than a third of all families remain poor, although the same figure was 58 per cent in 1992-93. According to the Unicef study on women and children, reforms may actually have worsened the situation of the most vulnerable and marginalised households and groups⁷. Similarly, the increased vulnerability of women and girls to cross-border sexual trafficking is connected to the open door policy.

Primary school net enrolment rate increased from 91 per cent in 1993-94 to 97 per cent in 1997-98 and has been rising steadily at the rate of about 2.1 per cent per annum since 1985⁸. Primary school completion rates are currently at 63 per cent⁹.

Maternal mortality rate is estimated at 130 per 100,000 live births according to current official estimates (however the World Health Organisation puts this figures at 160 per 100,000 live births), while mortality rates among children under age 5 declined from 55 to 48 per 1000 live births between 1990-1999. These figures improved significantly in the 1980s although regional disparities remain high. Some provinces in the Central Highlands, Northern Uplands and North Central Coast register maternal mortality rates from three to two times the national average.

Life expectancy at birth has increased as well to 66 years and adult literacy has been maintained at over 90 per cent. Of the 1.8 million young adults estimated to be illiterate (as 1993) 70 per cent were women. This figure has important implication due to the positive relation that exists between women's literacy and positive outcome for families and children, including increased productivity and income, improved health and nutritional status of children.

Women represent 52 per cent of labour force and 71 per cent of women

6. The annual income of a city dweller of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City is 5-7 times higher than that of rural workers.

7. Unicef 1999a, p. 10.

8. Unicef 1999a, p. 12.

9. Unicef 2000, p. 7.

between 13 and 55 years are economically active, although they are over represented in the lower level of occupations and the informal sector. Gender inequalities are even more evident in ethnic minorities. Women are also subject to discrimination in income, averaging only 70 per cent of that of men, and as stated by the World Bank in 1999, households headed by women, which represent about a third of all households, are more likely to be poor than those headed by a man¹⁰.

Even though land reform has provided rural families with much greater choice in the use and management of agricultural land, women do not hold title to land, do not benefit equally from training or extension programmes, and play a minor role in decision-making on rural development. Furthermore, the efforts to increase agricultural productivity (due to the need to fill the gap created by cutbacks in social services) fall largely to women and older children, which can work at an average of 15-16 hours a day¹¹. This situation coupled with the lack of men's involvement in child care produce a double burden on women, which is likely to reduce the quantity and quality of care given to children and diminish their opportunities for rest, socialising and learning new skills.

Children as well are affected by market liberalisation. Earning opportunities are correlated with increased drop out at school and decreased enrolment rate in rural areas. Child labour has become a cheap commodity and a gateway to abuses. The process of modernisation pushes children into the labour force at a very early stage¹². Many children enter child labour also because school is unavailable or too expensive¹³. The agricultural sector is the largest employer of children, but child labour in urban areas is increasing and is more subject to ruthless forms of exploitation and hazards. Child labour remains a sensitive issue on which it is difficult to generalise. For example, in Vietnam there are widely held views that work can be positive for children and it is considered part of a family's income generation option. This aspect will be discussed further in the section on disadvantaged children.

Taking into account that the fertility and mortality rates in Vietnam are

declining¹⁴, there will be fewer children in school age and a much higher number of adolescents. This means on the one hand the possibility to devote more resources to the improvement of primary schools, and on the other, the need to expand education and training opportunities at the secondary level. The latter group should be objective of high social policies and investments.

Similarly, it is expected that the percentage of children under 15 will decline by about one third by the year 2014, while the age group 15-19 will continue to grow. The total number of person aged 15-24 is expected to increase by 3 million between 1999 and 2004. This trend will put more pressure on secondary and non-formal education and will increase enormously the competition for jobs.

These problems are strongly connected with the high rural exodus. For example, 40 per cent of urban growth in Hanoi is attributed to internal migration and it is estimated that between 70 and 100 thousands persons migrate to Ho Chi Minh City each year. Of this it is estimated that over two-thirds are between the ages of 15 and 29¹⁵. This flow of people puts dramatic pressures on urban infrastructures and services and if urban employment does not keep the pace with migration the development of slum areas is expected to increase. Migration is caused more by the push of poverty in the rural areas than by pull factors such as better opportunities in urban centres. From the extensive research made by Ha Thi Phuong Tien and Ha Quang Ngoc on female labour migration showed that people migrate because situation of underemployment due to lack or smallness of land.¹⁶

The widening of the gap between richer and poorer is confirmed as well from several studies. It has been estimated that if in 1996 the income of the richest households was 7.3 times that of the poorest, this ratio in 1998 was 11.2 times¹⁷. As well, there is a ratio 5-7 to 1 between the income of households living in big cities and those in rural areas. Furthermore, the income of the rural population is strongly linked to the variation in the climate. In the rice fields a rural agricultural working month is approximately 300.000 VND (ca. 20 USD).

10. ZWorld Bank, 1999.

11. The reforms in the social sector implied the institution of user fees for education, health care, child care and other services that constituted the traditional safety nets.

12. Vietnamese law generally prohibits the employment of children under age 15, but regulation and enforcement are very weak.

13. It must be stressed from the outset that there is a big difference between child labour and child working, referring the former to forms of exploitation or bond labour or work in unacceptable conditions, though the terms unacceptable remains subjective, while the latter referring to works in the household or in household business or in other occupations that do are not harmful to the children.

14. The decline in fertility rate is masked by the delayed marriage and changing households living arrangements.

15. Unicef 1999a, p. 15.

16. Ha Thi Phuong Tien and Ha Quang Ngoc, 2001, p. 39. Rice fields are being reduced by urbanisation and expansion of industrial zones, especially in the outskirts of big cities. The amount of land distributed to people varies according to the characteristics (demographic and territory) of the districts in each province. In Chau Giang district-Hai Hung there were 1.3 Sao (1 Sao = 360 sqm) per person; in Cam Binh-Hai Duong 1.1 per person on average; in Duy Xuyen-Quang Nam 0.5 per person, or 5 Saos for a household of five people in Phu Loc-Thua Thien Hue. Ha Thi Phuong Tien and Ha Quang Ngoc, 2001, p. 41-42.

17. Ha Thi Phuong Tien and Ha Quang Ngoc, 2001, p. 31.

Deducting of the expenses for buying production inputs, tax, household-fee and other contributions to the commune, a third of the total paddy yield is left to the farmer household (about 500 kg paddy), which means a real income of 75.000 VND per month (ca. 6.3 USD at the time of the survey).

Geographically, the regions that are lagging behind are the North Central region and Northern Highlands region. Together, they account for 40 per cent of the poor in Vietnam and 29 per cent of the total population. According to the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) the provinces with the highest incidence of poverty are Ha Giang, Lai Chau, Cao Bang, Than Hoa, Kon Tum, and Quang Hai.¹⁸

18. Unicef 1999a, p. 14.

CHAPTER 2

The situation of disadvantaged children

Poor households' children are one of the most vulnerable groups of Vietnamese society. They are easily subject to social marginalisation and exploitation. Despite child labour has decreased, between the two Vietnamese Living Standard Surveys the estimates fell from 4 million of full time employed children in 1992-93 to 1.6 million in 1997-98, the number of children in migrant households and street children is estimated to be still at about 1.5 million¹⁹. This situation poses a dramatic challenge to the Vietnamese Government and therefore a more thorough understanding of the situation of disadvantaged children is needed, and especially of their survival livelihood strategies. The categories of disadvantaged children reviewed in this section are: commercial sex workers; disabled children; orphans and abandoned children; children from ethnic minorities; street children and working children²⁰. The aim of this section is to give an overview over the conditions that affect this particular group of society. The main focus of this work remains centred on the sub-group of disadvantaged children represented by "street children". But since this subgroup is transversal to the other groups this general overview will serve the scope to provide as much information as possible on the conditions affecting street children before and during their life in the street.

Commercial Sex Workers

Qualitative studies carried out by Vietnamese and foreign researchers have shown that among the children in this group illiteracy is very high, only half of them still go to school while nearly a fifth had never been to school. It remains that in this area statistics are very inconsistent. The General Statistics Office reported in 1993 that there were in Vietnam 72,293 sex workers, in 1994 the number was 15,115 and the year after 12,004. MOLISA estimates commercial sex workers (CSW) under 18 years old to be about 20,000 in the country, while the CPCC estimates that there are "only" 7000 CSWs in Vietnam, of which 1000 under age 16²¹. The figures quoted by the studies of the Women's Union, UNICEF, The Ministry of Interior, MOLISA and CPCC estimate that the children in the sex industry represent between 10 and 15 per cent of the total

19. Unicef 1999a, p. 53.

20. According to the Vietnamese Government a child is a person under 18 years old.

21. CPCC 1999, in Unicef 1999a, p. 61.

CSW. In the provinces of Hanoi, Hai Phong, Ha Tay, and Thanh Hoa this figure rises to over 50 per cent if are included young people up to 24 years old, of these over 70 per cent come from the countryside. In some cases they entered the commercial sex industry out of economic desperation, while in other they were sold by sexual trafficking rings ²².

In regards to the problem of trafficking, according to Unicef sources children are usually brought from rural areas to urban areas of neighbouring countries, especially China and Cambodia. Between 1990 and 1995 about 5,000 women and young girls were sold across the Vietnam borders with Cambodia or China. The trafficking towards China has the purpose of marriage, labour and household work. The trafficking from southern provinces to Cambodia, with some going to Thailand, is instead mainly for prostitution. In their report Ngo Kim Cuc and Flamm, describing the small village of Svay Pak, north of Phnom Penh, which is entirely devoted to the sex trade, reported that of an estimate of 800 Vietnamese girls the majority were less than 18 years old and unaware that they would be working in a brothel. Most of them came from Long An, An Giang, Song Be, Kien Giang, Dong Thap, Can Tho and Ho Chi Minh City. This situation, together with the spreading of drugs use, has increased the risk of HIV/AIDS infection. According to UNDP, in Vietnam some 2500 children under 14 are HIV infected. Between 1999 and 2001 according to Ministry of Health, the figure on HIV cases doubled reaching 37,000, and is expected to reach 200,000 by the end of 2005. ²³

The vicious spiral of exploitation begins upon their arrival in the club. They are deprived of their identity papers, denied earnings, abused with violence and their movements restricted. Even if they escape this situation, it is unlikely that they return home due to lack of financial resources, travel documents or to fear of stigmatisation on their return. ²⁴

The main reason given by children and young people for entering prostitution is poverty. In many cases they were weary with life or persuaded by friends, or they were just drifted into it, as it is more lucrative than other jobs for young girls ²⁵. This indicates that there is little evidence to support that the sale of girls to pimps and brothels is widespread. In another research the prominent reasons were a debt contracted by the family, destitution, coercion by parents or for running after desires. ²⁶

Compare to other jobs, such as domestic work or serving in a café, prostitution is much more lucrative, a daily earning amounting on average to 3-6

22. Unicef 1999a, p. 58.

23. Neefjes, 2002, p. 37.

24. Unicef 2000, p. 72.

25. Bond and Hayter, 1998, p. 39.

26. Luu Phuong Thao (year unknown), in Bond and Hayter, 1998, p. 39.

USD. The selling of virginity, usually but not exclusively to foreigners, is a business of 200-300 USD. This not necessarily leads a girl to fall into long-term prostitution, though it is likely that many do it because they have resigned or committed themselves to continuing in the trade ²⁷. The number of boy sex workers is still small but presumably growing, especially in cities and tourist areas. In Nha Trang one session with a foreign customer can bring in between 4 and 22 USD ²⁸.

Disabled Children

Disabled children are 1.2 million according to National Institute of Educational Sciences (NIES) data ²⁹. This figure represents 1.4 of the total population and 3.5 per cent of all children. Another study says that about 5 million people, or 7.5 per cent of Vietnamese population, are disabled most of which children ³⁰. Disability is defined according to the international classification of diseases but includes a consideration of social context. For example, an injury can lead to weak leg muscles and therefore a difficulty in walking. However, this not necessarily is a handicap. A handicap, i.e. the impossibility to perform an action such for example going to school, is created by the social context that does not allow overcoming the situation. More than half of disabilities are congenital and 6.3 per cent of all congenital disabilities are related to the residues from the Agent Orange.

Geographically, higher numbers of disables can be found in the Central Coastal and Central Mountains regions, quite understandably due to the fact that these are the areas that have been affected by defoliants or still have not been cleared from unexploded ordnance. The Government's integrated education program has helped some of the children with disabilities. Today, 42 provinces are enforcing inclusive education attended by at least 42,000 disabled pupils ³¹. International organizations as well are helping in training teachers and teacher assistants and develop material for Inclusive Education projects. According to Unicef over a third of disabled children in Vietnam never attended school, half of all between 6 and 17 years of age are illiterate, and only a very small number as ever received vocational training ³². No statistics are available on access to secondary school among disabled children. Access to treatments or aids such as

27. Bond and Hayter, 1998, p. 40.

28. Bond and Hayter, 1998, p. 41.

29. Unicef 1999, p. 53.

30. Van Oudenhoven *et al.*, 1999, p. 21.

31. Neefjes, 2002, p. 34.

32. Neefjes, 2002, p. 34.

wheelchairs, prosthetics or hearing aids are very limited and only 5 per cent of disabled children in urban areas and 10 per cent in rural areas receive financial support from the State, such as pensions, subsidised education or free health treatment.³³

Orphans and abandoned children

According to Unicef in 1999 there were 155,757 orphaned or abandoned children in Vietnam³⁴. Due to limited resources the services available for these children are adoption, residential care, foster care, and legal guardianship. International adoptions of Asian children are on the rise among Western couples and this has created a system of intermediaries with no scrupulousness. Measures for strengthening adoption regulations and monitoring systems have been put in place, but still more tighten measures are needed. In 2001 the Vietnamese authorities uncovered in the province of An Giang and Ninh Binh two cases of child trafficking rings that provided infants to foreign couples³⁵. Orphaned children are hosted in temporary child-care facilities operated by different organisations, including ten SOS villages.

Children from ethnic minorities

The largest group of disadvantaged children is the ethnic minority children. There are about 4 million children belonging to one of the 53 ethnic minorities groups in Vietnam³⁶. The status of ethnic minorities children against various indicators lags far behind national and *Kinh* averages, the dominant ethnic group of Vietnam. Infant mortality rate for H'Mong children is almost three times that of *Kinh* children. Also, the prevalence of respiratory infections and malaria among minorities' children are much higher.

School enrolment rates and literacy are low due to both physical distance to schools and lack of access to bilingual education³⁷. The Swedish Save the Children and *Enfants et Développement* are supporting the development of district Accelerated Teacher Training Centres for young students enrolled at primary school level (5 years) plus three more years of education. The

33. Neeffjes, 2002, p.34-35.

34. Unicef 2000, p. 74.

35. Neeffjes, 2002, p. 41.

36. Unicef 2000, p. 74.

37. In many remote mountainous areas, the walking distance to the district town is up to 20 km; to school it is up to 8 km; to the farming fields it is up to 16 km and to the nearest water source it is up to 6 km. Unicef 2000, p. 62 and p. 75.

Government has provided a number of boarding schools to facilitate access to education. In this case children are selected from ethnic minority families on the basis of their ability. Universal Education classes are given to other children for a minimum of 120 weeks of education³⁸. Among these children, girls are those with lower literacy rates and higher working loads. Furthermore, 90 per cent of ethnic minority girls are married before their twentieth birthday.

Street children: in search of definition

A general problem encountered in the studies on street children in Vietnam, but that can be likely found elsewhere, is the lack of a precise definition, which is also connected to the fact that estimates vary widely and statistics are inconsistent. It must be stressed from the outset that put in a perspective available figures on street children in Vietnam are quite modest in comparison to other South and Southeast Asian countries. This is also due to the humane attitude of the Vietnamese people and of the government's policies and institutions towards street children. In countries with more severe measures towards the "problem" of street children, the children feel persecuted and react organising gangs or abusing drugs, therefore creating an upwards spiral of confrontation and violence.

MOLISA indicates that there are "only" 19,000 street children in Vietnam while organisations working with street children believe that the number is much higher³⁹. Other sources give this figure at 50,000 in 1995 or 200,000 in 1997⁴⁰. In its 1997 report on social indicators in Vietnam, the General Statistical Office in Hanoi indicated as 2,345 the total number of street children in the country⁴¹, which coincides exactly with the number of children that participated to the survey by MOLISA on street children in 1995.

Most street children are found in urban areas, especially Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. According to a recent survey by Nguyễn Thị Huyền Thanh and her colleagues in July 1999 there were in Hanoi 4,600 children living in the streets. Of them, about 80 per cent dropped school, 12 per cent were still attending school and 8 per cent were going to the schools of the non-formal educational system⁴². In another article is stated that while in 1985 there were

38. This primary education program is for 5 years. Normal primary education requires 180 weeks to complete grade 1 to 5. Pupils completed 120-weeks course cannot continue on to grade 6 as they do not fulfill the requirements to enter normal state school. International Save the Children Alliance, 1997, p. 37.

39. Unicef 2000, p. 73.

40. Neeffjes, 2002, p. 35.

41. GSO, 1997, p. 157.

42. Duc, 2000, p. 26.

14,000 street children under age 16, ten years later the figure increased tenfold⁴³. According to another source quoted in one of the major Vietnamese magazines in Ho Chi Minh City there are 7,160 street children from 55 cities and provinces, in Hanoi there are 2,700 street children from 20 cities and provinces, Binh Dinh has 2,542 street children, Thanh Hoa 1,122 and Tien Giang 780⁴⁴. Boys account for 65.4 per cent of street children. A third of them work do shoe polishing, a fifth sell goods in the streets, another fifth work for somebody else, and the rest live collecting garbage, peddling, selling newspapers, selling lottery tickets, or as beggars.

This problem of inconsistency of the statistical figures is mainly due to two reasons: Firstly, the lack of a common definition of street children, and secondly to the fact that although most reports on the issue identify different categories of street children their data are not disaggregated category per category, making therefore difficult to understand the characteristics of each of these very different group of children⁴⁵.

Therefore the need of a definition that can include the different realities of street children and that can help to systematize the problematic that affect them and their ways to react become very stringent. For the purpose of this study the following definition, adapted from Bond and Hayter (1998), and the relative division in categories of street children is adopted:

"Street children are defined as being under 18 years of age, earning money through street based activities and belonging to one of the three following categories:

- A. Children that run away from their family or have no family, and earn a living for themselves alone;
- B. Children who live with their migrant families;
- C. Migrant Children who leave home for reasons of poverty caused by different reasons, and earn money in order to help their family.

Each of these three categories comprehends children sleeping on and off the street".⁴⁶

It should be stressed that this classification considers children having a

43. Dung Vu, 2000, p. 61.

44. Vietnam Cultural Window, 1999, p. 3.

45. Bond and Hayter, 1998, p. 24.

46. Bond and Hayter, 1998, p. 26.

stable employment not as street children but as working children. Furthermore, this classification excludes those "street children" who live at home and whose families are legal residents of the city in which they live. This choice was based on the ground that in Vietnam thousands of children supply family's income earning money in the streets after school time. In the particular case of Category B, it is important to stress that although children live with their families and can have a relatively normal life (and therefore should not be included in this classification), this group of families is one of the most vulnerable and insecure groups especially for the lack of legal resident document, which prohibit them to have access to any type of social service.⁴⁷

Three Street children categories

Children in *Category A*, "runaway children", are not particularly interested in work, except to earn the necessary to fill their stomach. This category represents probably the smallest number of street children. In Ho Chi Minh City it is estimated that there are about 2,000 of these children (corresponding statistics in other cities are not available). A survey on 100 children of this category in Ho Chi Minh City showed that 33 came from the central provinces, 24 from Ho Chi Minh City surroundings districts, 17 from the Mekong Delta, 12 from the North and 1 from Cambodia⁴⁸. These children lack emotional security and sense of identity that if coupled with feelings of marginalisation and rejection can lead to anti-social or delinquent behaviours. In this category is found the lowest number of girls, due to the fact that is much more risky and so less common for a girl to run away from home, unless they already have a place to stay. The main occupations in this category are scavenging, shoe shining, begging, selling lottery tickets or newspapers and petty theft⁴⁹. Most of them do not go to school and only half are literate. If they end in a drop-in centre or open house can likely start to study again.

In *Category B*, "children living with their migrant families", the risks of exclusion and marginalisation are very high. Very little is known on these

47. In all localities of the country, the freedom to reside, look for another job and control the income generated through legal activities is for everybody. Despite this, due to the massive flows from the country side, some cities have imposed regulations that do not allow new migrants to have resident registration and access to education for their children. Temporary permits, for 3 months but renewable paying a small fee, can be given to migrant workers.

48. Bond and Hayter, 1998, p. 27.

49. Le Thi, 1999, p. 118.

migrant families and on this particular group of children. The fact that they are not legally permitted to be resident in the city prohibits them to have the same rights and opportunities as the other citizens. Attempts to move them in new economic zones or camps have generally failed due to the harshness of the living and working conditions in those places, which have pushed them to escape and return to the city again⁵⁰. This sharing of discomfort and insecurity among family members creates a strong feeling of unity and solidarity, although the impossibility to exert control over the children has modified the children-parents relationship. Children are more independent but their awareness that the family relies upon their earning as well has the effect to strengthen their attachment to the family. Both in Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi these children are occupied in the same activities as the ones in the previous category. A distinctive group in this category that is found in Ho Chi Minh City only, is the group of street families from Cambodia. Generally, they are only mother and children and their only income generating activity is begging. Very unclear remains the government policy towards this special group.

In *Category C*, "children that leave home for poverty reasons and earn money to help their family", children migrate mainly for alleviating an overcrowded household and for finding a job in order to supply the family income. The number of this group is increasing nation-wide. In Hanoi, most of them are living in rented rooms in the cheap labouring quarters of Cau Dat, Vat Chuong, Hoang Cau Village, Train Nhan, etc., usually in groups of twenty or with adult relatives. They have come to the city to search for an income and not for adventure and freedom; therefore they generally try to avoid getting too many attentions. There are migratory routes and people coming from the same village often stay in the same places and do the same work. For example, half of the children coming from Hai Hung leaving in Hanoi are selling sundry goods and peddling, most of the children from Ha Nam are scavengers, and most from Than Hoa sell newspapers⁵¹. In Ho Chi Minh City, migrant working children come mainly from Quang Ngai and Than Hoa provinces. The ones from Quang Ngai concentrate especially in the Tan Binh district, where mostly work selling noodles in the street, keeping up with the 20 years old tradition of migrant from Quang Ngai. Usually, the families of these children receive an amount of money at the beginning and the employer provides food and accommodation for free for one year. If the child leaves before the agreed time than the family has to reimburse part of the money to the employer.⁵²

Usually very few leave before the agreed time, since they know that they have to earn the money that have been given to the family, and the ones that give

50. Bond and Hayter, 1998, p. 31.

51. Institute of Sociology & Hanoi CPCC, 1993, in Bond and Hayter, 1998, p. 33.

52. Bond and Hayter, 1998, p. 16.

up rather take to the street instead of facing the reaction of the parents. When children in this category leave their job due to the hard working conditions they are likely to end in *Category A* street children, since they are afraid to return home and face the family who had to return all or part of the money received in advance from the employer of the child.

The schooling situation of these children is similar to that of the other two categories. However, almost three quarters of them went to school before they left the village and the family. In this category, children of the poorest families and especially girls are the most vulnerable groups. They are subject to extreme forms of exploitation and abuse.

Working Children living conditions

According to a report from MOLISA, child labour is not necessarily a consequence of poverty. For example, in rural areas, a household with two parents and three teenage children relies for 30-40 per cent of labour on the children⁵³. Other reasons as well, such as the change from collective to individual forms of income generation and material possession contribute to push children into the labour market.

Child labour is a complex issue and to try to regulate it in countries where work done by children is a necessary and accepted function for the household can yield the opposite results. In Bangladesh for example, many girls that lost their jobs in garment factories exploiting them are now on the street, either begging or working as prostitutes⁵⁴. In particular in Vietnam,

"[...] children's work is widely accepted as normal and necessary. A common viewpoint maintains that child labour is good for the family and community, as well as for the child's own development"⁵⁵. And that "[...] it is largely through work, usually in a family context, that children are socialized into many adult skills and responsibilities. In the best of circumstances, the work of children is an integral part of a healthy family and community life, and a powerful vehicle for their intellectual, emotional and social development"⁵⁷.

53. Nguyen Kim Lien, 1997 in Bond and Hayter, 1998, p. 17.

54. Theis and Huyen, 1997, p. 28.

55. Bond and Hayter, 1998, p. 1.

56. Theis and Hoang Thi Huyen, 1997, p. 1.

57. Vu Ngoc Binh, 1997 in Bond and Hayter 1998, p. 17.

Overall children workload has increased as a result of market reforms. People's material life has improved, though households do not benefit equally from market reforms, children realize this and most are ready to work as long as they see an adequate reward⁵⁸. Still, Vietnam experienced a decline in child labour during the 1990s. Decreases in child participation to labour have been largest in provincial towns, minor cities, the southeast, and the Mekong river delta, while has been smallest in urban areas, the south central coast, and the very poor Central Highlands⁵⁹. It is necessary to take with certain caution the figures reported in the surveys since for example working conditions of child labour are not analysed, and illegal labour such as prostitution is often hidden, trafficked children, unregistered migrants and those street children that are not part of households are omitted as well. Some interesting patterns emerge anyhow and are worth to be considered in discussing the role of children in Vietnamese economy. For example, a particularly interesting element that emerges from these studies is that children in households with a household business work less than children in households without a business. This is probably due to the fact that households with a business are better off and live in better off areas. At the same time, children in households with a business perform more household work than children in households without a business. It remains that in general girls are more likely to work than boys (and this results in greater inequalities in access to education)⁶⁰, children from rural areas are more likely to work than urban children, and ethnic minority children are more likely to work than non-minority children.

Another survey conducted in July 1997 by the Institute of Labour Science and Social Affairs on 269 children has shown that most of the children work because their families are particularly poor or the household is overcrowded, while a small number regards the divorce or separation of their parents as the most important reason that pushed in the labour market⁶¹. Children wage is lower than that of an adult worker, though they work the same amount of hours, on average 8 hours per day and in some cases up to 10 hours, according also to the type of occupation. The working day is particularly long for housemaids, servants, and for those employed in places such as restaurants and hotels.

Higher salaries are found in the garment and embroidery sectors and in restaurants, while the lowest rates are in employments such as servants and housemaids and in the handicraft sector. In the survey on female labour, young

servants in restaurants and houses are reported to earn between 6.5 to 15 USD per month, depending very much upon the relationship that is established with the landlord⁶². Incomes vary also according to geography: In Ho Chi Minh City wages are double than in Hanoi and three times those of children working in Hatay. To this corresponds a lower cost of living in Hanoi and Hatay compare to Ho Chi Minh City. A particularly difficult situation is that faced by children working in the goldmines of Bac Thi and Lang Son. Here, after being recruited with the pretence that they are going to work on a road construction for example and for few months only, they found themselves in trapped in the goldmines, without salary and contract. The agreement is that they are going to be paid at the end of the contract but this is unilaterally extended by the employers that keep them in a state of bonded labour. If the children leave they loose their right to claim the unpaid salary and risk to be punished severely.⁶³

Despite the children feel very tired at the end of the day, most of them are satisfied with their work, especially those working in handicraft workshops. On the contrary, children working in food processing factories are less happy with their job, especially due to a bad and polluted working environment.

Street children represent a minority of the migrant children employed in the formal or informal sector in cities.

58. Theis and Huyen, 1997, p. 35.

59. Edmonds and Turk, 2002, p.3. The large declines in child labour in the rural Mekong may stem in part from Vietnam's integration into world rice markets. Edmonds and Pavcnik, 2001 in Edmonds and Turk, 2002, p. 30.

60. Duong Van Than, 1997 in Unicef 1999a, p. 26.

61. Do Minh Cuonong *et al.*, 1996, p. 4.

62. Ha Thi Phuong Tien and Ha Quang Ngoc, 2001, p. 73-90.

63. Theis J. and Hoang Thi Huyen, 1997.

CHAPTER 3

Government and international organisations' strategies for poverty reduction, alleviation and children care

Government social services and poverty reduction strategies

Despite years of conflict and limited access to official development assistance (ODA), Vietnam registers high literacy rates, low infant and maternal mortality rates, and longer life expectancy than in many other wealthier nations. According to the Unicef, total Government spending on basic social services (BSS) increased from 13 to 17 per cent between 1990 and 1997. This trend contrasts with the pattern of donor spending in BSS that, after a sharp rise between 1990 and 1993, declined to 10 per cent in 1997. Still, the objective set by the 20/20 Initiative (the proportion of Government and ODA spending allocated for social services should be 20 per cent of the total spending), is far from being achieved⁶⁴. In some sectors there is a lack of spending capability despite the resources allocated, while others such as education successfully utilised a greater proportion of budgeted resources.

Concerning public social assistance, there are four major funds addressing different groups.⁶⁵

- Social Guarantee Fund for Veterans and War Invalids (FVWI). The Fund provides pensions, free health insurance, monthly allowances, housing and assistance for children's schooling to about 1.4 million persons. Entitlement is based on family's contributions to the Vietnamese Revolution rather than need.
- Social Guarantee Fund for Regular Relief (FRR). The Fund provides food, payments and institutional care to selected vulnerable groups who are incapable of self-support and lack family care. Beneficiaries include: 40,000 elderly; 665,000 disabled, including 101,000 mentally afflicted persons; 155,000 orphans; and 19,000 street children.⁶⁶
- Contingency Fund for Pre-Harvest Starvation and Disaster Relief

64. According to the UN definition of "basic services" Vietnam and Donors are half-way towards achieving the 20/20 initiative goal. Unicef 2000, p. 7 and p. 88.

65. Unicef 2000, p. 36, Molisa in UNDP 1998.

66. Unicef 2000, p. 37.

(PHSDR). This Fund provides temporary relief only in case of emergency situations.

- Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction Programme (HEPR). This Fund addresses the poor at the households level through micro credit schemes, free health insurance, technology transfer and employment generation, and reallocation of land. Within this Fund, recently the Government has launched the Socio-economic Development Programme for Far and Remote Mountainous and Under-privileged Communes, also known as "1000 Poorest Communes Programme" initiative, with the aim to improve infrastructures.

Voluntary health insurance is available through the purchase of Government issued health insurance cards. In this way members pay 20 per cent of the total cost of medical treatments. Persons below the poverty line, around 12.5 million people according to Government estimates, are entitled to free health facilities⁶⁷. Privatisation of medical practice is not only posing a serious risk on the quality of the service provided, partly because is not effectively regulated, but is also deepening inequality in access to health care and rendering the poor and near-poor more vulnerable.⁶⁸

Government strategy for Children Care

In a recent document of the Unicef it has been clearly stressed that the road towards a full implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Children (CRC) is still long, but remarkable steps have been made by the Vietnamese government.⁶⁹ As well, a more integrated approach with other conventions, such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of

67. Though, many of them do not utilise the existing facilities assuming that providers are unwilling to provide care without payment. Unicef 1999a, p. 29.

68. *Ib.*, 30.

69. Vietnam ratified CEDAW in 1982 and the CRC in 1990. In 1991, a CPCC (Committee for the Protection and Care of the Children) was established with branches at district and commune levels. In the same year, the Vietnamese Government enacted the Law on the Protection, Care and Education of Children, and adopted a National Programme for the Survival, Protection and Development of Children (NPA). In November 2000 the Government of Vietnam ratified the ILO Convention no. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour. According to MOLISA, child under 15 is not permitted to work more than 4 hours per day or 24 hours per week and may only work with the written consent of their parents

Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) has been proposed in the new Country Programme.⁷⁰ In line with this new approach, other mechanisms of monitoring and mainstreaming at national and sub-national levels have been introduced in order to ensure appropriate and effective Child Protection measures.

The proposed strategy in the new Country Programme has the overall aim to create layers of protection for children at different levels, i.e. family empowerment and community participation. This strategy is going to be applied at district and province levels through capacity building in planning and coordination of the selected Areas and Sectors of intervention. At the national level the layer of protection will be created supporting the formulation of policies and legal measures and through capacity building of government actors. Still, children rights cannot be met unless families and communities have access to essential supplies and commodities. This is especially stringent in case of the poorest segment of society and culturally and physically isolated communities and families.

A central organization in the Government strategy for children is the Committee for the Protection and Care of Children (CPCC), established in the wake of Vietnamese signing of the CRC in 1991. The importance given to this organization is reflected by the fact that the president of CPCC is a member of the Cabinet. The CPCC is represented at the province, district and commune level. It is not an implementing agency but works mainly as information and advisory task with the role of inform, coordinate and monitor the implementation of policies for children. It works closely with the Ministry of Health for example in three initiatives for disabled children through the Fund for Vietnamese Children, and for the promotion of children's play in twenty remote and poor areas and for parental education, especially for mothers. The staffs of CPCC is strongly integrated in the relevant ministries and mass organisations. A particular figure working for the CPCC is the family collaborator, corresponding to the "home visitor" of the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). Both are community-based workers, usually kindergarten teachers, who visits family and discuss issues related to children. Their role is believed to be very important

or sponsors. The employer is obliged to ensure child's schooling. A child between 15-18 years old can not work more than 42 hours per week, or under dangerous conditions defined by MOLISA and being forced to work or being involved in abusive or exploitative work. In 1999 all provinces, 70 per cent of districts and 30 per cent of communes have developed their Programme for Action for Children.

70. The implementation of CRC is mutually reinforcing and dependent upon CEDAW. This is due particularly to the fact that the influence of Confucianism in Vietnamese culture is very strong and women remain in a subordinated position in family and society.

in providing the linkages between the different early childhoods care activities at community level.⁷¹

Schooling

According to Unesco Vietnam has a literacy rate of 94 per cent, very high in comparison with 57 in Laos, 81 in China or 83 in Myanmar. Most of the illiterates live in remote areas and have an ethnic minority background. Less than 1 in 5 children among ethnic minorities and other disadvantaged Kinh groups complete primary school⁷². In rural areas gender discrimination is higher (primary education completion rates are 47 per cent for boys and 40 per cent for girls, as compared with 64 per cent and 55 per cent respectively in urban areas). At secondary level as well, female enrolment is still behind male enrolment rates and especially in rural areas.

The formal Vietnamese school systems is organised in pre-school education (3-6 years old e 5-6 years old), primary education (6-11 years of age) and secondary education (11-18 years of age)⁷³. With the new Education Law, which came into effect in 1999, the Early Childhood Education became part of the formal national system of education. This is organised in Kindergarten (KG) and day care centres (DCCs). The Unicef projects are particularly concentrated in the education for 5 years old children and on the integrated care for children from 0-3 years. The latest available data (1997-98) for enrolment in structured pre-school education is 39 per cent for children between 3 and 6 years of age and 79 per cent for children 5-6 years of age⁷⁴. One of the most striking figures is that about 1.2 million primary school aged children are not in school and receive Alternative Basic Education.⁷⁵

Besides the Government and Unicef, other agencies, such as Plan International, Oxfam UK and Save the Children France, are engaged in supporting out-of-school children. This system reflects the Government commitment to provide basic education to all. However, there are shortcomings and problems such as for example the fact that this curriculum represents one of shortest primary school curriculum in the world. With only a 100 week truncated curriculum, compare to the normal 180 weeks introduced by the Ministry of

71. Van Oudenhoven *et al.*, 1999, p. 37.

72. Unicef 2000, p. 62.

73. After this there is tertiary education which lasts six years at university and only three years at college. University students can continue at doctoral training for three years or master training for two years.

74. Unicef 1999a, p. 48.

75. Unicef 2000, p. 63.

Education and Training (MOET) in the early 1990s, it remains very difficult to integrate the ABE graduates into the formal system.

The reform of the state has caused that even though primary education is free for all, it requires financial contribution from the family. In fact, parents should pay for the school premises, textbooks, notebooks, uniforms and insurance of their child. Their contribution is as high as half the cost of the primary education system⁷⁶. For many families, particularly in the countryside, these contributions exceed their regular income⁷⁷. Government's subsidies benefit well-off families since they are particularly directed to support secondary and tertiary education, which very seldom is reached by the poor families' children. Furthermore, charges levied at primary school level are flat and hence inequitable and regressive, as they represent a proportionally greater burden per child for the poor families than for the rich ones⁷⁸. Today, in urban areas to send a child to primary school costs per year almost 20 USD, to lower secondary about 35 USD and to upper secondary about 55 USD⁷⁹. For rural areas the figures are a bit less than 50 per than those for urban areas⁸⁰. In the rural areas families have to pay also some contributions for the school infrastructures. In the places where the uniform is compulsory the burden is even higher. Therefore in a family with more than one child the cost to send all of them to school becomes prohibitive. A decrease of government subsidies has resulted in increased child labour.

In recent years, as supplement of the formal educational system and with the particular aim to address children in difficult circumstances, dynamic classes (DC) have been organized in Hanoi and other cities. This free non-formal education is for children that cannot go to school because they have to earn their living (usually as street vendors, toothpicks, shining shoes, dump-collecting, or even begging). At the dynamic classes is taught only literature and mathematics, other subjects such as natural and social sciences are electives for the pupils having already attained higher levels. Besides these subjects, the teachers teach them social conventions and traditional morality, and the necessary skills to avoid to find themselves in dangerous situations. After the primary education, these schools offer a variety of vocational training to equip the children with the skills for finding a better job. Another objective of these classes is to encourage and convince these children to go home in the countryside⁸¹. These schools are

76. Evans, 1998, p. 9.

77. D'c, 2000, p. 25.

78. Evans, 1998, p. 3.

79. Vietnam Social Sector Survey 1996, in International Save the Children Alliance, 1997, p. 43.

80. Bond and Hayter, 1998, p. 2.

81. D'c, 2000, p. 26.

organised in various places close to the street children jobs and activities. For example, at Thu Lê Temple the "street consultants" have organised classes for the children that find shelter in the temple and beg in the surrounding area. They teach them from 8 to 10 a.m. because these are the hours during which the food stalls and restaurants are not yet crowded, and also because the owner of the restaurants do not give money beggars early in the morning for fear to be unlucky for the whole day. The timetable of the classes, generally two hours per day, is flexible according to the children work. Rag-pickers, beggars and children selling candies around Hoàn Kiếm Lake are usually busy from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. Shoe-shine children, paper-boys and paper-girls can earn best between 10.30 and 12 a.m. and between 2 to 3 p.m.⁸². One of the main difficulty of the DC schools is the organisation of a regular timetable because those children living with their vagrant family have also to take care of the younger siblings, shop and cook meals and therefore it is more difficult to plan the classes' timetable. Another difficulty of these classes is the difference in age and the level of knowledge among the students attending. Age limits for registration at the DC are not fixed. The same class should cover different levels of education and a wide diversity of subjects.

The learning of this type of non-formal education depends very much on the personal efforts of the children and help of their families. It is a great pain for these children to learn while lacking the support of their families. Currently there is a lack of criteria for monitoring and evaluating the impact of such teaching methods on the children. The teachers in the existing DCs in Hanoi are graduated from the Teachers Universities or Colleges and provided with competent knowledge of pedagogy, but still lacking the skill to work with street children.

Vietnamese Civil Society

Similar to Western countries, the reduction of the state role in the service sector has given impetus to the formation of voluntary civil society organisations, such as charitable organisations, saving and credits circles, medical volunteer groups, etc. Vietnamese civil society is mainly organised in mass organisations where political mobilisation and voluntary work are the basic elements. Small associations and funds are still limited in their spread. Although under the reform the government has reduced the financial support to the mass organisations, they still have an outstanding outreach thanks also to the support of donors. The problems they face are mainly related to the low level of technical skills to handle the problem they address and to a lack of institutional management to handle the project. On this it must be added the lack of

82. Duc, 2000, p. 28.

coordination among donors and the tendency of donor-supported project to create other vertical structures within the organisations.

Vietnamese mass organisations are under the umbrella organisation "Fatherland Front". They are organised according to their mission. The Vietnamese Women's Union, the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union, the Farmer's Association and the Vietnam Gardener's Association in the last ten years have devoted large attention to the problems of children, women and families.

Despite their outreach, remote areas and ethnic minorities areas where poverty is greatest remain marginalised by these activities. In these areas a crucial role is played by the Committee for Ethnic Minorities and Mountainous Areas (CEMMA). This committee has the main goal to promote the economic and social development of the ethnic minorities. It plays a coordinating role for the implementation of these policies together with the Ministry of Education and Training and the Ministry of Health. CEMMA is involved in the Northern province in a pilot project with Unicef providing health, nutrition, education and administration in the mountainous areas but it still lacks a proper policy addressed to children only.⁸³

*UNICEF Position and Approach*⁸⁴

The Unicef assisted programme focuses primarily on the family, particularly those in high risk and vulnerable areas, through a participatory approach. The focus is mainly directed towards the protection of children from neglect, abuse and exploitation. Rehabilitation programmes are supported as well for those already victimised. Also, social work with family at risk as preventive measures is planned to be strengthened.

The promotion of the participation of children and women in the monitoring and programming processes will assure a participatory approach in any Unicef assisted project and programme areas. Indicatively, for the next five years country programme (2001-2004) Unicef has allocated about 51.8 millions USD, of which 48 millions to be raised through supplementary funds developing partnerships with donors and agencies interested in the same sector or field of work.

83. Van Oudenhoven et al., 1999, p. 47.

84. The following information are taken from Unicef, 1999b, "Draft for Discussion. A Country Programme Strategy. Government of Vietnam Unicef cooperation for 2001-2005", unpublished paper.

The Unicef programme consists of 2 projects:

1. Child Right Monitoring and Mainstreaming, which includes:

- monitoring and surveillance systems;
- participation and mainstreaming;
- harmonisation of laws and policies with CRC/CEDAW

2. Child Protection.

The Areas included in this programme are street children, child labour, sexual exploitation, juvenile justice, and children with disabilities.

The new approach envisaged in this framework will take into account the importance of integrating other priorities and programmes that crosscut with the child right and protection issue. In particular, projects concerning issues such as Early Childhood Care for Survival, Growth and Development (ECC-SGD), Nutrition, Health, HIV/AIDS are objective of close cooperation. Early childhood, 0-5 years, is a priority focus for the 2001-2005 Country Programme of Cooperation. These are the years where vulnerability and learning opportunities are greatest and therefore particular attention should be prompted.

The ECC-SGD Programme focuses on mobilising resources and political commitment to invest in infancy and early childhood as national priority; a more integrated childcare promoting health, nutrition, environment, sanitation and stimulation for rural children under three years; a better involvement of communities and better services such as daily education fostering the physical, intellectual, psychological, psychomotor and language development of children from 3 to 5 years; and then strengthen the convergence of services at family and community levels to ensure a consistent complementarity of inputs.

The issue of HIV/AIDS/STD is also addressed in an integrated way by the country programme. The goal is both to reduce HIV/STD transmission and provide care and support for those affected, with particular emphasis on children and youth.

Four major components have been identified by the Unicef, and a task force under the direct supervision of the country representative will coordinate their implementation:

- a) Behaviour development and change, implemented by the Education section;
- b) Care and support through voluntary counselling and home care,

implemented as well by the Education section;

- c) Strengthening of reproductive/material health services, implemented as part of the maternal health component of the community based wealth and nutrition care project in the child survival sector;
- d) Advocacy through increasing the participation of people living with AIDS, implemented by the Advocacy, Social Mobilisation and Communication section.

Another concern and cross component of the Unicef strategy is the gender dimension. In this respect the strategies to be applied and concerned with both the knowledge about gender issues in Vietnam and their incorporation in all project and programme cycles. In the Unicef strategy this component should be added to the issue of improving the quality and efficiency of government coordination for planning, managing, monitoring and evaluation of child survival, care and protection. In turn, this component should strengthen the inter-sectoral monitoring of poverty alleviation in the five "observation" districts.

CHAPTER 4

Psycho-social conditions of street children

Households and community socio-cultural settings affecting child survival and development

Children are highly valued in Vietnamese society and education is accepted as an avenue to a better future. While parents and communities are well aware of the importance of good nutrition, health, environment, and psychosocial stimulation, little attention is paid to the importance of play in promoting the cognitive, emotional and social development of children. It happens very seldom to see children in an organised play in rural villages, as are games, toys and playgrounds. Games and toys are very rare sight in Vietnamese households and villages, playgrounds are even rarer, and girls play even less than boys.

At the community level there are many different actors involved directly or indirectly with childcare in rural areas. Commune health workers provide primary health care services for children. They are present in virtually every community. The Vietnam Women's Union (VWU) operates as well at the village level providing parental education and care and protection of children. The VWU works closely with the CPCC, which is also present at the grass roots level through "family collaborators" that give advice to families. It is believed that the providers of these services are generally underpaid, under-trained, isolated from social and professional networks, and lack career prospects and as well the tools and equipment necessary to perform their work. Communities' role and initiatives are instead very poor and families and communities rely heavily on the state initiative and support. Especially cultural activities, such as sports, play, music, singing or storytelling, are neglected.

In a survey by the Youth Research Institute on 20 households in Van Phuc commune in the province of Hai Hung, economic factors are listed as the first reason for children to decide to leave family. Hardship and poverty are due to the fact that natural conditions in this area are not very favourable, flooding and regular crop-loss is common, and to the fact that households are overcrowded. Rice is the only crop cultivated. The community life is also destabilized by the fact that during the periods when there are not farms' activities 80-90 per cent of the young men go to work in other places, such as gold mining (Bac Thi and Lang Son), coal production (Quang Ninh) and planting coffee (Tay Nguyen). It is worth noting that despite these difficulties, households still find ways to build or renovate their houses, even though they are aware that this can create economic

difficulties afterwards.

However, the survey has highlighted that there are also family and community factors that are responsible of the migration of children. Particularly, the divorce of the parents or the death of one of the parents represented a main cause of separation of the children from the family. As well, the ill treatment of the children by one of the parents or both was a good reason for the children to leave home. Still, the community influences strongly the decision for leaving: "leaving is the result of the bitter struggle between action with purpose and action with suitable value". To these "push" factors need to be added the "pull" factors coming from the idea that city life is bright and comfortable. It is also important to stress that many families of the survey in Van Phuc claim that the money sent by the children are so necessary for the households that they should not return until the family economy improves.

Changing Family structures

In order to understand the present Vietnamese family and its influence over the children psychological and cognitive development it is important to recall briefly the main cultural factors influencing families' reaction to change. Vietnamese families are impacted contemporaneously by the *Oriental culture* and regional cultures of South East Asia with many ancient religions such as Buddhism, Catholicism, Confucianism, Taoism, Islam, etc. Obviously, although the Vietnamese family has some common features to those in other countries, maintains its peculiarities. Vietnamese society is a rice-growing based civilization, with a sedentary way of life, with the family as its basic units. This implies that the family is not separated from the village and the family clan. This link between family-village-country has manifested during the whole development of Vietnamese nation. Still today the village is organized according to the pattern of rural communities: each village has a number of clans and each clan includes many families, which means that co-villagers are often in kinship. This structure has resisted the various political changes undergone by the country. As well, the influence of the great religions has coexisted and mixed with Eastern, Western and Marxist cultures, creating a peculiar blending of autonomy and a-typical feudal hierarchy.

As vividly expressed by a leading Vietnamese sociologist:

Despite all [...] "the infiltration from foreign cultures, Vietnamese family remains based on the *indigenous culture* characterised by Vietnamese

humanism whose contents include humanity, justice and compassion. Those who are ungrateful, selfish, and maltreat their congeners, first of all their relatives, are never pardoned by society. Those people certainly do not respect the community's interest, and do not have compassion and sympathy for other individuals. Therefore, the formation of a new family culture cannot be disconnected with traditional culture or the values of modern culture such as respect for human rights, individual interests, equality and democracy in interpersonal relationships. On the contrary, it requires the sound and harmonious combination of these two sources".

Contrary to Western societies, educational patterns were directed to the strengthening of the *community*, the family, the village, and the State, and not the individual with independent personality. The family, or in the wider sense the *households*, remains therefore the most popular form of economic structure in Vietnam at the present: 11 million households in rural areas, and dozen of thousands of households in urban areas are doing business in the form of family enterprises or shops. The growth pace of households has exceeded that of the population. The division of large families and the formation of nuclear ones has become common practice in the present history of Vietnam. But old parents rarely are left alone and usually they live with the eldest or the youngest child.

Nuclear (two-generation) family is becoming widespread in Vietnam. In urban areas this type of family represents 78 per cent of the total families, while in the countryside the figure descends to 75 per cent. Besides this the three-generation family (grand parents-children and grand children) is still found, and in Vietnam this type of family it is likely to be maintained. Usually this type of extended family can include close relatives as well. The average family size in 1992 was 4.82 people in urban areas, and 4.81 people in rural areas.

The living conditions of these families have been improved over the recent years, with more money available for house building and repair, domestic appliances, health care for the children. However the living standard of Vietnamese population remains generally low. For example, a survey conducted by the GSO in 1993 showed that although half of the families had a better standard compare with few years before, more than half of the population live under the poverty line (2000 calories per day), the majority of which in rural areas. Despite a relative improvement of a part of the population, the worry lies in the increasing gap between rich and poor households. Differences are found both between rural and urban areas and within urban areas as well. Given the

increasing number of people coming from the countryside and without permanent residence, housing conditions become a serious problem. There are more households than houses, and according to the official estimates there are more than half million households officially without accommodation. Many houses are therefore overcrowded, and with poor hygienic facilities.

As pointed out by the UNDP 1998 report, traditional social and family values are challenged by the reform process. Family break-ups and homeless or abandoned children seem to increase. As well, alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence, street crime, begging and prostitution are expanding. Even Confucian ideas, such as parental authority and filial obedience, can be challenged by market reforms. The greater time devoted to work at the expense of childcare can imply less influence on children. Parents spend lesser time supervising and caring for their children. The migration towards urban centres undermines as well the control that the parents can exercise over the children. The change in the relationship between parents and children is also due to children's lack of faith in their parent's ability to "guide" and "provide".

In a survey on 110 street children in Hanoi, 58 per cent have parents being alcoholics, 15 per cent have parents with criminal records, and 7 per cent have brothers or sisters in jail. In Ho Chi Minh City, the surveys on street children show that 23 per cent have either divorced or separate parents, 39 have the father or the mother, or both, who have died, 6 per cent do not know who are their parents, 36 have step-fathers or step mothers.

Increased workloads to women and unequal division of labour in families have also a direct effect on child care quality and quantity. Women provide 77 per cent of child care compare to 19 per cent for men, while the rest 4 per cent is provided by grandparents and older children, which are also the main source of assistance to women households chores. In this respect, some studies have demonstrated that the engagement of the husbands in domestic work and child care is not only depending on their relationship with the wives but also on the influence that other men and community members can have upon them. It remains that husbands have a decisive role in issues such as reproductive matters and selling family products, although the wives participated significantly in the creation of those products.

According to the studies from the World Bank extended family networks, and especially among the poorest, play a very important role in providing mutual assistance in child and elderly relatives care and also informal loans. Informal loans and mutual assistance provide a multipurpose safety net but also lead to stress and greater vulnerability, as families take on commitments that they find difficult to meet. As pointed out by the UNDP the government is generally less efficient than extended family networks in directing social assistance to the poor. Furthermore, social programmes focus primarily on civil servants or families

who made significant contributions to the Vietnamese Revolution, and as a result almost two-thirds of all the public assistance benefits reaches the richest two quintiles while only 8 per cent of such assistance reaches the lowest quintile of the population.

Economic and social transformations have thus empowered the family by broadening available options. However, at the same time has created pressures on welfare decision-making and on childcare. Nowadays young Vietnamese parents have little time to dedicate to their children and this results in a weak learning environment in the household. To this, if we add the reduction of support from the social system and institutions, it can be said that children learning processes are definitively at stake.

Street children psychology

The family's psychological environment is a central element in the formation of the children's individuality, ability, mentality and their integration into the community and society. Many street children are orphans or abandoned while some are sent to the city by parents that are not always aware of the dangers their children are going to face. Life in the street easily led children into criminal activities and substance abuse. It is estimated that 8,500 children are currently in conflict with the law. Some of them have escaped generally broken families or domestic violence while others end in the street in search of a supplementary income for the family or a temporary solution to overcrowded conditions at home. Due to these conditions the Government's attempt to reunite street children with their family had mixed results. The role of family is central and its collapse has consequences that are difficult to cure.

Street life is very hazardous and because incomes earned on the activities in the street are very low children face psychological distress linked to the personal situation and to the impossibility to sustain their family. This implies as well that they have little time for school. Most of the time, even though they would like to go to school they cannot due to the fact that their parents have no residence permit, or the children themselves have no birth certificate. Regarding their cultural standards, the majority of them can write and read, a very thin percentage goes to school and the rest are illiterate. Their skills are learned through experience rather than taught. Usually they can struggle with the difficulties of life and seem more mature compare to their peers but cannot distinguish between long-term goals from immediate gains.

To fill in the sentimental gaps caused by the absence of care and affection from their parents and relatives, children have the habit to eat many snacks between meals squandering their earnings. This is a consequence of the fact that

they lived by themselves for a long time and used to independent choices.

To survive on the street the child has to find a way to deal with a constant moral pressure. That is why they have often a provocative attitude. Soon they will arrive at a point where does not care anymore of what people think about them. This constant fight against public censure leads the children to seek for survival strategies to "resist" the psychological and physical violence to which are exposed. The strategies that can be applied vary according to gender, age and children background (for example if they come from the urban or rural areas). In general by forming groups and working together give them a feeling of security, and a substitute to the family. On the other hand, they can apply the strategy of avoidance, which means passivity. If they are asked something do not respond or lie in order to avoid punishment or unpleasant task. An extreme form of avoidance is to run away. The most "active" of this strategy is to fight back the aggressor, although this is less realistic for small children and girls.

A study on this category of street children has shown that many need and want help and that would like to study but do not have the necessary support. Some would like to go back home but have fear, shame or pride. Some are aware of their condition but do not know how to escape it. Some are lonely, frightened or unhappy, all a vulnerable to persecution. They are much easier to arrest than to help.

When children are picked up by the police for vagrancy they are generally taken to temporary centres where the authorities decide whether to send them further to other re-education and training or reform centres. The main problem is that some of these centres function as receptacles for both street children accused only of vagrancy and those who are in conflict with the law for other reasons. This situation has dramatic psychological consequences for street children since, as reported in interviews to them, they are beaten up by the older boys. They report as well that the police mistreat them and that is aware of what is going on in the rooms they share with older boys but does not take any action.

In general, street children are attached to the freedom, flexibility, change, fast movement, risk, fun, survival and fighting that is offered by the independent life in the street. Still, while children that fled home because of poverty suffer from nostalgia for their family and relatives, runaway children tend to remove past experiences and integrate in street life more rapidly. Despite this, both categories of children think that the possibility offered by street life are good, especially from an economic point of view. When asked, many of them would like to change their situation, especially in regard to the possibility to have a more regular income, but to attain their objectives would be possible only through their own effort. The cultural mismatch between an institutionalised life and a life in the street is the main reason for them to believe that although help is needed to escape the vicious circle in which they are trapped institutions are not a

solution to their problems. For street children of migrant families the street option is imposed by the tight relationship with the family. They feel responsible to provide supplementary income to the family and do not feel to abandon the family by moving into an institution.

Street children in organisations

Street children integration process into humanitarian organisations is not an easy one. There are both cognitive and affective aspects and behavioural aspects to take into account. Cognitive and affective difficulties are connected to the fact that street children are always in the alert, and that they feel they live in distrust and tension. According to a study on two humanitarian organizations (SOS village in Cầu Giấy Hanoi and the "Xa Me" House Lê Văn Sĩ' Street in Hanoi) children are afraid of being sold or killed. For the authors of the survey this psychological state stems from incomplete development in the field of cognition, from the moral tonus and the lack of experience in life, from being raised in a rural environment which is less complex than the urban one, from the lack of protection from the parents and relatives. Life in institutions is also full with rules and regulations to which for them is difficult to comply after a roaming life in the street. In addition to doubt and fear they have feeling of isolation, despair, humiliation fear of being abandoned again. This despair can leave to commit suicide. As well, they are afraid of being exploited by older children in the House or extorted money. There is also a non-confident attitude towards the staff in the House, which makes even more difficult to adapt to this kind of collective life and respect the regulations. The loss of freedom is one of the major concerns of the children sent to an institution. They often reject any project that can curb their freedom away. Also, the low ratio staff/children in these institutions makes difficult to treat children on an individual base and to solve their individual problems. Some discipline and same activities cannot be beneficial to children that have very difficult background.

CHAPTER 5

Field study report: Hanoi and Hung Yen province

The second part of this report presents the findings of an empirical investigation conducted by the research team in Hanoi and in two communes of Hung Yen province (Red River Delta) in July and August 2002.

The field study in Hung Yen province was conducted with the aim to clarify the causes that lead many rural young people to move to major towns and often to become 'street children'. The field study in Hanoi, apart from further investigating the motivations that bring children on the street, also focussed on the living conditions and livelihoods strategies of street children in the Vietnamese capital.

Both field studies were based on participatory methodologies and included focus groups, households and individual interviews. The investigation was also based on existing statistical data, reports by local authorities and interviews with key informants (officers, teachers, personnel of shelter homes, nurses, etc.).

Objectives of the investigation

As indicated above in this report, there is little consensus on the data regarding the numbers of Vietnamese children living and working on the street. The problem in finding consistent data is not due only to the limited resources available to Vietnam for monitoring the conditions of children. There are at least other two important factors that complicate a precise calculation of numbers. First, it is very arduous to find a definitions of 'street child' that is at the same time rigorous and meaningful. Second, for many children life on the street is not a static or permanent condition: for example, a child from a poor urban family may work on the street in the afternoon after attending school in the morning; or a poor child from a rural area may work in town during the summer but return to the village when the school starts again. In both cases, these children may be exposed to a condition of vulnerability in certain periods of the day/year although they may have caring families that protect them in other periods.

There is an increasing effort by national and local authorities, together with international agencies (like UNICEF) and NGOs, to work out more precise definitions and to collect more accurate data on the conditions of 'street children', including more reliable statistics. There is also an increasing attention to the issue in terms of policies in support of children, although the problem of 'street children' cannot be solved until the country will not have successfully further

reduced poverty.

The objective of this report is to concur to the wider effort of improving the understanding of, on the one hand, the causes that leads many children to work or live on the street and of, on the other hand, the livelihoods strategies adopted to cope with hardships of a 'street child' condition.

The contribution that this study can give is not providing numbers and figures, a work for which the local and national authorities are better equipped but to provide an in-depth analysis of concrete cases which may shed lights for a better understanding of existing quantitative data. For these purposes, a qualitative methodology is adopted. Through reconstructing the life-history of many children and households, and by analysing these stories against the background of their communities, we try to explore what are the factors and conditions that push many children to move to towns in search for a new life, or economic opportunities, or simply to escape from unbearable conditions.

Vietnam is in the midst of a rapid process of economic transformation, which also implies macroscopic changes in the social structures and social relations. The movement of children from rural areas to cities cannot be understood without considering the large flow of temporary, seasonal or permanent adult migrants. And rural life, including the resilience of traditional safety nets, is also changing, exposing children to new forms of vulnerability but also new opportunities.

The evolving socio-economic context plays a major role in determining the conditions of street children both in their migration to towns or in their life in cities and requires a constant review of analytical tools and policy measures. The aim of this investigation is to support a more multi-faceted understanding of 'street children' livelihoods in North Vietnam in the early 2000s, in order to contribute to more effective policies.

Methodology

The investigation was based on participatory methodologies and inspired by a 'sustainable livelihoods' approach (see the website www.livelihoods.org for an informative introduction to the concepts and tools of 'sustainable livelihoods' analysis). The methodology adopted relied on a wide international experience in the use of participatory methodology and on the direct practice of the team in the use of these techniques for research in Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries.

The investigation was based on two distinct exercises: fieldwork in two communes of Hung Yen Province (Red River Delta) for studying the causes that lead rural children to move to Hanoi; research in Hanoi with a panel of street

children and former street children. In both cases, participatory tools were accompanied by collection of available quantitative data and interviews with local authorities and other institutional key informants. For the research in Hanoi, the team benefited from the advice and support of the officers of Hoan Kiem District, which are also partners in the Asia Urbs project for which this report is prepared. In Hung Yen province, the team could operate thanks to the full cooperation of the district and communal authorities.

Fieldwork in Hung Yen province

The fieldwork in Hung Yen province was based on a methodology developed by the team in cooperation with other partners and tested in related fieldwork activities in several locations of Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. This methodology is associated with Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA) techniques, but puts particular emphasis on the evolution of traditional safety nets and coping mechanisms (see methodology in the annex).

The fieldwork in the two communities was conducted by a team of 8 researchers coordinated by Roskilde University and the National Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities (Centre for European Studies). The team operated in three distinct units: two units worked on the general setting of the community, while the third unit focussed in particular on the condition of children for the purposes of this report.

According to the methodology, the team spent 7 days in each location. The first day was dedicated to a 'group discussion' with local authorities and institutional key informants, followed by a Rapid Community Appraisal (transect walk, participatory mapping, etc.). During the second and third days were conducted focus groups and interviews with key informants (teachers, health care and security officers, women union, farmers union, etc.) and a few homogeneous focus groups (i.e., interviews with groups of people sharing a common feature). From the third to the fifth day a number of focus groups, households and personal in-depth interviews were conducted. In each of the two communities, the unit focussing on street children interviewed in focus groups or individually about 100 persons including: children who have a recurrent experience of work in Hanoi, young people who have been street children but have since returned to live in the community, parents of street children, plus a panel of children in the age in which other children have moved to Hanoi but have not or not yet decided to leave the village.

Findings and results of this unit were compared and contrasted with the other two units in order to better understand the general make-up of the community and to analyse the conditions of children on the bases of a more

complete frame.

The sixth day the entire team held a brainstorm meeting in Hanoi and prepared a draft report. This draft report, containing major findings, was eventually discussed with the local authorities the seventh day in order to fill existing gaps of knowledge and to validate results. The two reports presented to the Communal authorities of Ham Tu and Nghia Dan are included in the annexes.

Fieldwork in Hanoi

The investigation conducted in Hanoi involved about hundred children and young people either in focus groups or in personal interviews. Some of the interviews were made with children still living on the street, while other were made with children who are now living in shelter homes or with young people who have been street children in the recent past. The choice to include former street children in the panel was due to the intention to focus on the longitudinal dimension: i.e., to analyse how the conditions have changed over the last ten years.

Interviews were made in a variety of locations, including Gia Lam (bus and train station), Dong Xuan and Long Bien markets, Hoan Kiem lake, the shelter home Xa Me, the children house managed by the Hoan Kiem District in Phu Tan and the Children House of the NGO 'Re-orient'.

This work was made possible by already existing linkages not only with organizations working with street children but also with many former street children that helped greatly our research.

The investigation in Hanoi focused on the three typologies of 'street children', who revealed a quite distinct set of issues.

- 1) Young migrants, in the age from 14 to 18, who work in Hanoi to support families living in rural areas;
- 2) Runaway children (in some cases so young as 6 or 8) who escaped not only from poverty, but also from problematic family backgrounds;
- 3) Children of poor migrant parents. These children work on the street, alone or in small 'squads', collecting waste for recycling or in other informal activities.

Site selection

The fieldwork in Hanoi was conducted for the main part in the area of

Hoan Kiem district, both because this investigation was undertaken in the frame of an Asia-Urbs project operating in that district and because this district (corresponding to the centre of town) attracts a very large number of street children. Interviews were also realised in Gia Lam, whose train and bus stations are often the point of arrival and the first working and living place for many children (and in general, for many informal migrants). Focus groups and interviews were conducted at a number of institutions and shelter homes (and we gratefully acknowledge the cooperation from the personnel operating in those centres).

Part of the work was conducted on the street; interviewing children in the places where they live their life. These interviews would not have been possible without the support of two very special assistants. One was a former street child, who made to become a university student. He acted as research assistant during all the investigation (including in Hung Yen province) and his direct knowledge of life on the street made possible for us to reach much further than would have been possible otherwise. The second assistant allowed us to enter in touch with the small children collecting waste for recycling in the two markets of Dong Xuan and Long Bien. She is an 8 years old girl, who now lives in the shelter home Xa Me. Until six months before our investigation she had been working in the market with her little friends, and her mother and sister still work there. These two key informants were of invaluable help in guiding the team to the right place in the right moment.

The second part of the field study was conducted in two districts of Hung Yen province, in the Red River, at about 80 kilometres from Hanoi. This province was chosen because it is one of the provinces with a high level of migration to Hanoi, including migration of children. Hung Yen is not a special case like for instance Thanh Hoa, whose recent massive out-migration was due to specific conditions and it actually ranks high among the provinces with medium-level GDP per capita and Human Development Index (calculated by the UNDP). Being a 'normal' province Hung Yen was chosen as an interesting case study, able to provide results that may apply also to many other regional contexts.

In Hung Yen province two communes were selected: Ham Tu, in Khoai Chau district and Nghia Dan, in Kim Dong district. The two communes were identified with the support of the province authorities on the ground that both of them had an above average number of migrant children. The criteria negotiated with the province authorities were also meant to provide some variety of economic conditions, as eventually confirmed by the investigation. Ham Tu was poorer, with agricultural diversification but minimal livestock and almost no off-farming activities. Nghia Dan was better off, in proximity of a provincial main road, with agriculture concentrated on two rice crops (of which one of high

quality) but with significant livestock (pigs and chicken) and increasing off-farming activities. In both communities migration was compelled by land scarcity the Red River delta has the lowest ratio of land to farmers in the world but while in the case of Ham Tu it was a survivalist coping mechanisms, in the case of Nghia Dan migration (including children migration) was also connected to capital accumulation for starting new economic activities.

Street children: in search of a definition

A major result of this investigation was to provide a clarification of the diversity of conditions existing behind the expression 'street children'. The research revealed that there are at least three major groups of 'street children' which differ from one another in regards to the reasons that bring them on the street, to the conditions in which they live in Hanoi and to the policies that could be undertaken to reduce the state of vulnerability that they face. Any attempt to make clear-cut distinctions, however, cannot be entirely satisfactory, and the team is aware that there is a continuum of conditions between these different categories of children.

Young migrants

The investigation indicated that the largest number of children moving from Hung Yen villages to Hanoi was 14 years or older. They moved to Hanoi for economic reasons and normally retained strong binds with their family and their village. The team was fortunate to meet several of these young migrants in the village, where they had returned to participate in harvesting activities. One of the interviewed (a 16 years-old boy) had returned to the village because he was ill, indicating that the family still remained his safety net in case of need. With only one exception in Nghia Dan commune, none of the kids had found a wage occupation in town. The lack of a stable job made these kids perceiving themselves as temporary migrants, even if some of the adults interviewed reported to have spent more than ten years working in Hanoi. Kids could only find jobs in the informal sector petty trade, domestic care, service in small restaurants, etc. that compelled low social status. Polishing shoes was actually reported to be more remunerative than other jobs, but suitable only until 18 years or so, because it was considered particularly low in status. Both boys and girls felt that they were still regarded as poor peasants by Hanoians and had no chance

to find a wife or a husband in town. They all expected to return to the village for finding a spouse, although they may need to come back to work in town after the wedding. In other words, work in town was needed to support life in the village and the roots in the village were not lost even after many years of absence. The two villages were, however, close enough to Hanoi to allow migrants to return home often.

Most of the kids (and adults) reported to maintain close links with other villagers working in Hanoi and migration was often undertaken in small groups or through channels previously established by other villagers. For example, we found that a typical work specialisation for Dao Xa (Nghia Dan commune) migrants was to sell tea – a livelihood strategy 'invented' by one of the villagers about ten years earlier.

In some cases, the young migrants alternated work in town with work (or school) in the village. The lack of jobs in the formal sector and the consequent condition of marginality and exclusion faced in Hanoi would not allow them to develop a city-dweller identity.

There was a remarkable difference in the pattern of migration in the two communities taken into exam. In Ham Tu, young (and adult) migrants remittances were supporting the primary consumptions of their rural family. In Ham Tu poor families reported food insecurity stretching for up to 4-6 months per year, which could only be mitigated with money sent home by members of the family working in town. The reported high level of per capita rice consumption (about 1 kg on average) indicates that this community has a very low level of dietary diversification and lives only slightly above to the food poverty line.

In the case of Nghia Dan, migration – including migration of kids as young as 14 – may be related to the expectation to save capitals for investments at home, in order to create new source of income for the future life of the household or for the young migrant himself. Migration was therefore motivated by opportunities created by improved living conditions in Hanoi which generates new jobs in the informal sector; and opportunities at home, were investments in off-farming activities may meet a growing internal demand of services. The change in the use of remittances from Hanoi came after 1995-1997: until then, any source of income would be used for consumption (food); now much is used for investment.

In both communities there is the perception that young migrants may compromise their future by attending only primary education or even not completing it. In Nghia Dan the proximity to a major road has increased the expectation than some factories may be opened in the area. However, even in labour-intensive factories it is normally required that labour force has completed at least lower secondary education (9 years of school).

In both communities there is the awareness that life in town is confronted with risks but it is also a source of new ideas and skills. Young people who have an experience of migration – even in menial occupation such as shoes shining – may acquire more self-confidence in regards of their peasants' fellow villagers and more ability in seizing new opportunities. Children returning to the village after some years of work in Hanoi 'know more' than their low educated peasant parents, as it was suggested by a teacher in Ham Tu.

Life in town is perceived as difficult and even dangerous. Migration of teenagers was also considered as a cause of increased criminality in the villages (upon return of these migrants). In both communes the local authorities have been active in trying to limit the migration of children in school age, and these efforts are reported to have been partially successful. In both cases, authorities and villagers have been motivated to take actions after the media had reported that some of their kids were street children in Hanoi. Having children working on the street is still considered as a negative – and even shameful – reality for the village.

Many children indicated that their choice to migrate was a decision dictated not only by economic reasons but also from the monotony of life in the village. Children and adults reported that migration was often undertaken emulating others who had already left to Hanoi. The experience of migration is so familiar in these communities – each household has or had at least one member in Hanoi – that a period of work in town could be understood as a sort of initiation to the adult life.

As we will indicate in the following, children life in Hanoi may be dangerous. In particular, in the two communities it was reported that migrant children might end up by using drugs or being manipulated by criminal gangs. More than crime, however, adults reported a negative change in behaviour in children who have been working in town. Some children were considered to have assumed consumerist tendencies or to have become less obedient to family and community norms. The Vietnamese members of the team, however, did not identify significant hints of a deterioration of social behaviours in youngsters who had been working in Hanoi as street children (the way of speaking and behaving towards the team or the other members of the community seemed to be the typical one of respectful peasant kids).

Runaway children or children with family problems

The research team identified a second group of street children both in Hanoi and in Hung Yen villages. These are kids for which life in the street of Hanoi is the result of something more than mere economic problems. These

children have either lost their parents or have problematic families. The border between economic and social problems is often blurred, because families living in miserable conditions tend also to face social problems. And vice versa, families with social problems are often also very poor. However, some distinction can be made among different types of conditions. Children who migrate for mainly economic reason may return to their families in case of need, and anyway the bond with even distant families gives them some psychological support. Children without a family are more vulnerable because they have no families to return to, and often are psychologically more fragile. Runaway children living as street children may also be much younger than economic migrants even 8 or 10, and in some case even younger than that. The weakness of formal safety nets and the irregular coverage provided by traditional safety nets (see in the following) may force orphan children on the street.

The team found a high number of children either living on the street of Hanoi or living in very poor economic conditions in the villages even when they had lost only one of the parents. Several cases were discovered in which the mother had run away with another man after the husband had died, leaving her children behind. These mothers had apparently to choose between a life as poor widow or moving to live with a new husband that would not accept to provide for kids born from another wedlock. As long as grandparents or other relatives can take care of them, the kids can remain in the village. If the grandparents die, these children may have no alternative than moving to town.

The death of the mother can also force children on the street. The tradition wants that a man should marry soon again, especially if he has little children, after the death of his wife. The first son is consuetudinary the one that will inherit the family house (where the ancestors shrine is), although by law all the siblings should receive an equal share of the heritage. A woman that marries a man who has already children from a previous marriage may see her own offspring excluded from the inheritance something that will also compromise her livelihood in her late days if she becomes a widow. The oldest son from a previous wedlock may not feel so obliged to provide for his father's second wife, as he would have done for his own mother. As a consequence, several interviews revealed that children were forced on the street when their mother died: apparently in some cases new wives succeeded in convincing their husbands that these kids were 'bad' children and had them expelled from the family.

The two patterns described above have been verified in several cases both in Hung Yen and among the street children in Hanoi, but obviously this does not respond to a regular pattern: desertion of children is an exceptional condition and not the ordinary behaviour of widow parents.

Other kinds of family problems, like violence, are the reasons that forced many children to escape from home. Abusive fathers, especially in connection

with alcohol consumption, are widely reported.

It should be underlined that social problems are often the results of, or are enhanced by, conditions of severe poverty. Mothers that desert their children after the death of their husbands may take this extreme decision in order to escape a life of dire poverty, which in rural areas is often associated with being widow. In communities where households can barely cover their basic needs (including food), extended families may not be able to step in if children are mistreated or abandoned by their parents.

Children of poor migrant parents

Temporary migration is a normal coping mechanism in the Hung Yen villages visited by the research team as well as in many other rural areas. In most cases, temporary migrants leave their children in the village with other family members. Remittance from these migrant parents allows the children to remain in the village. Some migrants, however, do not have adult family members that can take care of their children or have severed their connections with the village (for example, in case of divorce).

In the markets of Dong Xuan and Long Bien the team met many small children who lived on the street with their mother (or, in a few cases, with the father and sometimes even with both parents). The mothers (or the fathers) of these kids work on the street from early in the morning to late in the evening, typically collecting waste for recycling in the market or in a variety of other informal jobs. Their children are left alone most of the day and normally also engage in the same working activities. Thanks to our 8-year old special assistant we were introduced to a little gang of about ten kids that work together in collecting plastic and paper. These kids are out of sight from their mothers until late in the evening and must provide for themselves. They are much younger than 'normal' street children: from 6 or 8 years old, with even younger kids left to the custody of their siblings.

These little children are particularly vulnerable due to their young age and to the precarious conditions in which even their migrant parents live. Food security is far from guaranteed to them: when the team took the ten-kids squad to dinner at a small restaurant, each of them ate only half of the food and brought the rest to their mothers.

This group of children of poor migrant should be distinguished from the children of more 'settled' migrants. Migrant children always face difficulties, because the lack of official documents excludes them from public services like school and health care (although the authorities of Hoan Kiem district reported that they try to support these kids even in absence of documents). A Participatory Poverty Assessment conducted in Ho Chi Minh City and published as *Voices of*

the Poor in 1999 indicated that migrant children are among the most poor and vulnerable in the country, because they are generally excluded by both formal and informal safety nets and their parents are easily trapped into poverty and debts.

The group of kids met in Dong Xuan market was, however, even in more tragic conditions than children of migrant families who have permanently moved to live in Hanoi. These children of 'temporary' migrant live in a context of extreme poverty and vulnerability, and often the migration of their parents to Hanoi was motivated by already existing problems apart from poverty. Many of the children in Dong Xuan market do not have a father, and some have fathers who drink or are engaged in criminal activities. Their life is full of uncertainty and some have older brothers and sisters who have simply disappeared.

While some settled migrant children find their way into the school, these kids not only are excluded because of their marginality but also are so used to the free life on the street to be able to sit down quietly for more than a few minutes. Both the district authorities and the shelter home Xa Me have some teaching activities directed to these kids, but involving the children into real educational programmes would require a difficult work of reintegration and re-socialisation.

For many of these children illegal activities, drug or prostitution can be one of the few ways out from a life as waste collectors.

Rural safety nets

Vietnam is a poor country and formal safety nets are still underdeveloped. The government is trying to provide health insurance to the poorest and other forms of financial support. Poor children are exempted from school fees, although local authorities, especially in rural areas, may charge local fees for constructions or maintenance of buildings. Once or twice per year poor children receive some small gifts (some rice, a t-shirt, etc.) from local authorities or mass organizations (Women Union, Farmers Union, etc.). For example, in Ham Tu an Education Promotion Fund donates pens and books to the school children in greatest need. Last year, in the children day, the local authorities collected 4,000,000 through a subscription and donated an equivalent of 30 Kg of rice to 20 children.

The district offices of MOLISA provide some economic support to orphans. In general, however, the extension of formal safety nets is very limited. The functioning of traditional safety nets is particularly complex to assess. Rural Vietnam is in the process of rapid transformation. Starting from very poor conditions, local communities are struggling in order to seize the opportunities provided by the economic reform. The resilience of traditional safety nets is

challenged by a change in needs and people's expectations. The local communities are still too poor to provide support to their most disadvantaged members through formal redistribution channels managed by the local authorities and mass organizations. At the same time, traditional solidarity seems to be undermined by increasing economic differentiation. Local communities are however different from one another, and some are more able to shelter the poor than other, without any automatic correlation between the level of economic development and the functioning of traditional safety nets.

A positive finding in both communities was the improving condition regarding debts. Although many households have large debts it appears that the spread of loans from moneylenders is decreasing and poor can borrow at better interest rates either directly from the Women Union or from banks via the intermediation of mass organization.

Street children in Hanoi: Working in town

Only a minimal number of young migrants find a job in the urban formal sector. Most of them work in the informal sector, but only some of them become street children. Many young migrants work in small restaurants or shops (cleaning, washing dishes, night guards, etc.), or in family care of babies or elderly people, or as carriers in the markets. Others work in petty-trade activities, like itinerant fruit sellers or tea sellers on the street. Some have occupation more typical of street children like selling postcards or newspapers or shoes shining. Those who have regular jobs, although in the informal sector, and receive food and housing through their job should not be regarded as 'street children', although their young age and distance from home may expose them to new risks like drug consumption. Peasant teenagers who have previously lived in a very protective rural world may have problems in coping with the new freedom and temptations offered by life in a big town.

Smaller children seldom have regular jobs in shops or petty trade. They are predominantly employed in activities such as selling newspapers and shoes shining. Bagging and petty crime also exists. Other children, like those met in Dong Xuan market, collect waste for recycling.

Children working in Hanoi, even in menial jobs, earn more than what they would in rural areas. They can normally save something after paying for the daily costs. Many send money to their families. Children who have no families are seldom able to save for the future, and normally spend everything.

Activities like shoes shining or selling newspapers do not create opportunities for the future. Children that don't go to school will be less able to find a good job when they are older, especially in a labour market with huge

unemployment and tough competition. However, street children also learn from the street and they become smart and active. Many of the kids interviewed wish to study more or to get some vocational training, but lack of money deprive them from these options.

Living in town

Hanoi is reportedly less dangerous for street children than Ho Chi Minh City. Interviews with local authorities, social workers and street children confirmed that there are no organised criminal organisations exploiting children for begging or committing crime. Sexual exploitation or harassment of street children barely emerged in the investigation, although there is evidence from other sources that some teenagers (mostly girls) are induced into prostitution.

Hanoi has actually become an easier place to live for street children compared to ten years ago. Migrants and street children can rent a bed in a room from private families for 2,000 dong per night. In the past they had to sleep on the street or in bus stations. A child can spend about 2-3,000 dong for a small meal and 3-4,000 dong for a larger meal. Thus, 10,000-12,000 dong are enough to cover daily expenditures for food and sleeping. This is within the reach of most street children with occasional jobs in town. However, life on the street is presented with risks and problems, which can make the child not even able to cover his food consumption needs. Poor health or bad weather may prevent a child from working for a few days. And even nice weather can be a hitch for a shoes shiner, because more people wear sandals in warm days. Street children are normally connected to other kids, which may be their only safety net in case of problems (for example, lending money to each other in case of need).

Young street children are often very ingenious in coping with a hard life. They wear two t-shirts one over the other, so that they can wash one while wearing the second. Since they have no home, they must carry with them all their belongings, which are normally contained in a very small bag. Bread is a good substitute to rice, because it is easy to bring along.

Children report that there are not so many public toilets, but more than some years ago. To wash themselves, they can shower on the street with their cloths on.

Street children normally use narrow roads to move from place to place, because in larger roads it is easier to meet police. Police may take them to a camp out of town, where they may be forced to stay for six months. Children are afraid to be taken away by police or sent to orphanages. But there is no hint of violence or abuse from police as it is typical for example in many countries of Latin America. In general, street children live a marginal life, but they are much less

embedded into spirals of violence and crime than in other countries.

Being 'cheated' by older street children is also reported as a main concern. In some cases, older kids or gangs may threaten and bully younger kids and steal money from them.

Drug is an increasing problem in Vietnam in general and also in Hanoi. More heroin is circulating in the country, probably also due to tougher actions by Thai authorities against smuggling from Burma. Many street children may be taken into drug consumption, or drinking, or gambling. Drug consumption and unprotected sex for children involved in prostitution may also lead to Hiv/AIDS infections and other serious disease like Hepatitis B.

Conclusion

This investigation indicates that behind the definition of street children there are a variety of conditions, both for what concerns the motivation that brings young people to work on the street of Hanoi and the kind of life they face in town.

The team identified that a large number of teenagers working in Hanoi should be regarded as young migrants rather than 'street children', although they may face some of the same risks and condition of vulnerability of the real street children.

Young migrants who work in Hanoi to support their family, often in poor rural areas, are normally able to cope with everyday needs, although they normally have a rather hard life. Some of them revealed to the interviewers the desire to find some more opportunities for further education or vocational training at least part-time either in town or at their village. Vocational training emerged as strong need for many of these kids, and apparently many families would be ready to temporarily renounce to the remittance from these kids if there were realistic expectations that they could acquire knowledge and experience for a good job. Existing vocational training in the country does not seem to be adequate enough to support the diffusion of off-farming activities in rural areas, which in turn would reduce the needs for young (and less young) people to move to town in search for a job.

The 'real' street children are normally on the street for a combination of reasons and not simply poverty. They are either orphans or have broken families, violent families, etc. Some of these kids may be returned to the care of their extended family if they have one but this requires the support and supervision of local authorities in their villages. The investigation indicates that local authorities (including key mass organizations such as the Women Union) are well aware of the critical cases in their community but often lack of the financial

resources to intervene adequately. And while formal safety nets are still faltering, the coverage of informal safety nets seems often unable to offer complete protection to kids in front of dramatic events (like death of parents) although help from neighbours and relatives may often provide important support to families in need.

From the data collected during this research it emerges that trying to return young children to their villages and families is important, although these interventions are not due to reach the expected results without a constant and adequate support to the children in the village.

The fear of street children that police may force them to return to the families from which they have escaped (or which they left for economic problems) or lock them into detention centres is an obstacle to the work of social workers and often keeps children away from the services provided by the local authorities.

Children living with poor migrant parents on the street are a particularly dramatic phenomenon. The condition of marginality, and generally of embedding into a variety of social problems, of their parents is reflected on these children. A specific work for reintegration of these young children into schools and in general into society is desirable although very complex. A real solution of the problem can only come by tackling the motivations that make their parents living in such marginal conditions. Services such as shelter homes for mothers who are alone in town with small children may be a first attempt to offer the kids an alternative to very vulnerable life on the street.

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