

## Growing up poor

### emerging strategies for community and family supports for children in urban areas

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This article focuses on children and youth who are growing up in contexts of poverty and marginalization (1), looking at means of preventing them to end up on the streets or in institutions. I will be discussing some emerging strategies for community and family supports for children based on the empirical work done in Brazil and on research and lessons learned through ongoing dialogue with partners in several countries.

Despite the economic growth and technological progress achieved during the twentieth century, a large proportion of the world's population has been excluded from the benefits of prosperity. According to Amin, pauperization is the best term to describe the trend of growing impoverishment during the second half of the twentieth century. I agree with the author when he argues that "pauperization is a modern phenomenon which is not at all reducible to a lack of sufficient income for survival. It is really the modernization of poverty and has devastating effects in all dimensions of social life" (Amin, 2003:7).

While the concern today's global economy has created significant inequalities seems to get more evidence over time, it is a fact that this trend affects women and children more dramatically (Kaufman & Rizzini, 2002). In this paper, I will focus specifically on

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those children and youth who are in many ways victims of the social and economic injustice that maintains the segregated lives of the wealthy and the poor worlds apart.

### **Assumptions, goals and contribution**

(A) Despite the adoption of the framework of rights globally that made our countries more aware of the importance of respecting children's needs and perspectives, the fact is that our countries – poor or rich – have not stopped institutionalizing children. That is the case despite the fact that our laws state that placing children out of their family and community settings should be the last alternative.

(B) It is also a fact that for all our societies there are children who cannot be raised by their own families. We all believe that our systems should be capable of providing adequate substitute care for them, including institutional care when needed. However, that has not been the case in most countries.

Our goals as societies is how to provide children with appropriate care, meaning that they should grow up in a nurturing environment that would allow them to fully develop their capacities and potentials. In the realm of caring for children, one of our current challenges is to understand the main complexities in providing such care, considering local, national and international spheres. Some important questions for us to ask as we face the challenges are: what is it that we – as individuals and societies - want for the children - and what can make a real difference in their lives? These issues should not be disconnected of the political will to include them as priorities in our countries' political agendas and transform them into real practices.

One way of addressing the issue of children growing up in the margins of society is to focus on kids who cycle downwards in child welfare and correctional systems looking at their life trajectories.

The CIESPI team has been conducting a series of studies that focus on the life trajectories of children who are born in the low-income communities of Rio de Janeiro – from their lives in their homes, communities, schools, to their passage to the streets and

through several types of residential facilities (2). These institutions are supposed to protect them against the surrounding violence and several forms of abuse that affect them, but in practice have not been able to. One of the problems we face these days is the easy access these children have to guns and drugs: this is an international phenomenon and cannot be understood and dealt with only locally. The involvement of children in the drug trade in many of our countries is a reality. They do attract many children and adolescents and the truth is that so far no one knows how to deal with it.

### **Children moving from the home to the streets and institutions**

In the last two decades, the practice of placing children in institutions became progressively less used in most countries particularly as the framework of human rights and children's rights gained more visibility. In Brazil, the issue stopped being discussed as if the problem had been solved. However, that was not the case. The problem seems more present than ever and much concern has emerged in the first years on the twenty first century both in Brazil and in several other countries. Documents reporting bad services and episodes of violence that took place children's institutions continue to show the poor state of institutional care in the world these days.

In the past few years, institutional care became the target of growing concern in Brazil. The media started to focus on the problems institutions experienced protecting and taking adequate care of children and adolescents. There were also several examples of judicial interventions in various establishments after they had been inspected. One way of explaining this is the failure in reducing poverty and providing public policies and services capable of allowing families to meet the basic needs of their children (3). Families in low income communities face many difficulties and find little support to raise their children. This proves to be true in many other countries as well, particularly those undergoing rapid political and economic transformations.

One of the main consequences we will be focusing in this paper is that early children find out they cannot depend on their own families and feel responsible to contribute to the family income. As we will show, these children, often start detaching from their family and community references to look for sources of income elsewhere. Many end

up slowly migrating to the streets where they find other groups in the same situation and also other forms of support. They claim to enjoy the freedom they find on the streets; however they soon realize this freedom is an illusion. Soon they realize there are many other pressures and forms of control that lead them to keep moving from place to place to try to protect themselves and remain alive. After listening to many kids both on the streets and inside institutions I came to conclude that they feel there is no place for them in the world.

To illustrate my points I have chosen the story of a young boy of 15 who, like many others, have passed through 14 institutions in the city of Rio de Janeiro. The text below is a summary of Rai's life history as he kindly volunteered to us knowing that we would be using it to argument in favor of enhancing opportunities for children and youth in their own family and community settings (4).

### **The story of Rai**

*"Ah, my life was...was bad"*. This is how Rai, only 15 years old, sums it up.

In his trajectory one sees many broken ties. The first one happens when he is two years old. Rai's mother and father argued a lot; the mother being constantly abused. During one of the fights, after having been once more beaten up, she leaves the house and abandons the children in a "woman's" house, as Rai recalls. These children were Rai, his four year old sister and a brother over seven. This attitude provokes an enormous resentment in the boy. His words are harsh: "My father beat her, and my sister and I got the blame. She abandoned me. Left me in that woman's house and never came back until today. I know where she is but I have no contact with her, because I don't like her. I hate her. Nothing will change what I feel for my mother. All I want is that she lives her life on one side and I on the other".

Rai declares to have suffered physical violence with his brother and sister in the house where they were left. The elder brother manages to run away. Rai and his sister also try to run away. They look for a paternal aunt, who, however, hands them back. They try again. On the second time they look for the same aunt, that then takes them to an orphanage. "It was the orphanage that raised me", says Rai. This aunt goes back to fetch them when Rai is already 10 years old. He did not want to leave the orphanage, where he seemed to be happy. He says that they were taken to many places, to waterfalls, beaches and so forth. He cried a lot, asked to stay, but it was of no use. He was then taken to the paternal grandmother's house. The sister is taken to live with his mother, where she remains until today, "only because she has no where else to go to", says Rai. He tries to keep in touch with his sister by the telephone.

Rai is not able to adapt himself to his grandparents' house. He felt imprisoned. He says he was obliged to go to church, to school, and almost could not play. Even though he

loved his grandmother, he stayed with her little over a month. He presently visits her, but only on Saturdays and Sundays, “to go for a walk in the afternoon”, as he puts it.

During the time he lived with his grandparents, something very important happened. After spending seven years in prison, Raí’s father decides to look for him. “He arrived at night, I was fast asleep. My grandma woke me up to say that my father was there. I didn’t believe it was my father because I didn’t even know him properly. Then my grandma explained to me that he had been in prison. In my mind my father had already died. It was when I got to know him”. It was Christmas time and they spent it together. His happiness, however, was short. Before New Year, Raí’s father was murdered by the police, in a gunfight with the community’s drug dealers. Raí says this was the worst thing that happened in his life. In his world, the father is still the most important person.

When he was alive, Raí’s father took him to meet his friends in the drug traffic gang he belonged to. Raí starts meeting them daily, until he becomes part of it. “I already knew how it was, because I had seen many people doing it, then I learned. All I had to do was to pass the drug in the ‘favela’ and pass the money to the boss. I earned R\$ 150,00 (one hundred and fifty reais) a week, sometimes” (5) . Half was his, half was for the boss. He sold marijuana and cocaine.

His elder brother works with drugs until today. This was his trajectory after he ran away from the house where his mother abandoned him. He lives with his wife in a house Raí says was bought by his father. Raí lived with them, but could not stay there because he did not have a good relationship with his sister-in-law.

Anyhow, today Raí has been banned from his community. In the drug business he already had a gun and had exchanged fire with policemen. He was hurt once with a bullet in his thigh. He was 11 years old. Now he owes R\$1.000,00 (one thousand reais) to the drug dealers, and can only come back with the money in his hands: he was caught by the police with a bag of marijuana and a pistol.

The judge sentenced him to a year and three months to be spent in detention facility for youth. “The worst prison I’ve ever been to”, says Raí. This is how he calls all the institutions of the so called Brazilian socioeducational system: “prisons”. Carried out the sentence, Raí went back to the streets to try to make money to pay the drug dealers. From then on, his life has been a constant coming and going between streets, the “prisons” and several establishments that shelter children and young people. Once he looked for a judge to complain his right of remaining at a shelter which did not want to accept him (because of his previous history): “The shelters were made to accept minors”. He turns to them when the streets become unbearable: “When things are very bad on the street, when it’s impossible to stay, then I go”.

Raí finds out that the streets are not like he had imagined. “One suffers a lot on the streets, life is much worse”, he declares. Instead of being neat, of being able to get everything easily, as he had thought, he got to know hunger, violence from the police and the other boys, scorn and all kinds of aggression: “Some people went by and swore at us, told us to get some work. How? If even for those that have studied it’s hard to get work!” Raí studied until the 6<sup>th</sup> grade (14 years old), a bit in each institution he went by, but has difficulty to write simple sentences. His conclusion is that the only way out is to steal, despite the consequences. Raí was already “imprisoned” nine times. Altogether, he figures he already has spent three of his 15 years of age in “prisons”. With the money he manages to steal, he buys glue and marijuana. He began to use marijuana when still in the community. The glue he learned to use on the streets. He says he drugs himself to forget

about things that had happened to him, to try to forget his father's death, whom he loved very much, and remembers about a lot.

He also does not forget the episodes of violence done by the police. He said he had been placed in the institution where we interviewed him because he had been sworn to death a few days back on the streets. He had thrown some stones against policemen that had taken his glue and was threatened – the policemen said if they caught him on the streets again, that they would kill him.

A year before, Rai had been “caught”, together with two other boys, by municipal policemen. After they were beaten up, they were “left” near a hospital. Rai's greatest fear is to be killed by the police at night, during his sleep.

But the danger is not only on the streets. Rai also fears the invasions from the drug gangs inside the institutions; he says that if the facility is located in an area that belongs to a certain “comando”, and most of the boys come from areas of rival “comando”, then the shelter may be invaded. They will be beaten and also may get killed.

Rai asks God the courage to change his life. He declares not to have much courage to get a job, to ask, to inquire. The only time he worked, he managed to stay during four or five months. He enjoyed the work. “Raising a family” also seems to be something very important for Rai. The best memory Rai keeps is of a photo, which his aunt framed. In it, Rai, still very young, is surrounded by his mother and father.

Rai does not have many certainties about the future. He says he wants to be a parachutist, but soon remembers the several “prisons”, and then regrets he cannot enlist in the army. He then says he would like to be a football player. He, then concludes, he believes it depends mostly on him: “I'm the only one that can help myself. It's only me to really change my life.”

Rai's institutional life is long. He named 14 establishments he had been to. The exact time sequence is impossible to be precisely defined. The order of events is confused. Each memory is charged with emotions. Many places are mentioned more than once. To each of these Rai raises pros and cons, what is good and what is bad. But he is not able to remain anywhere, he confesses. In his testimony, he makes it clear that he misses affection, attention, being heard. He asks us to talk to him. He tenderly recalls two educators that treated him with love. One of these he considers as a mother, though they no longer are in touch. It seems that the few bonds he managed to develop during his life – the two educators, the sister, and the grandmother of whom he speaks tenderly – are not enough to make him interrupt this process of constant escaping. Rai says all the time that he does not like to stay in the same place for a long time. Everything becomes tedious and he must go away. This difficulty to adapt wherever he is, gives us the impression that he feels, in fact, without a place in the world.

Rai's life story makes us reflect upon the fate of many other kids in the world, who pay a high price for having been born poor. Most of these kids are born healthy, however they cannot fully develop and their potentials are lost.

When considering the tragedy of the trajectories of low income children who like Rai end up in state systems for the neglected, abused, abandoned or delinquent, it is

tempting to concentrate on improving those systems. That is not enough. An alternative is also to consider the conditions and circumstances that are responsible for those trajectories. The problem, however, with this latter approach is that it takes enormous resources and reform efforts to change things enough to affect the most vulnerable children. On the other hand, once children are headed for a state welfare or criminal justice system, it might be impossible to divert many of them from that path even with the most intensive services. Research into the effects of family preservation efforts suggest this sad conclusion. At some point the children's and their families' condition may be irredeemable at least in the sense of keeping them out of public systems for needy children.

We will be focusing now on some emerging alternatives that try to tackle the roots of the problem by prioritizing preventive measures and, beyond that, the promotion of development of children and youth who live in adverse circumstances.

### **Emerging alternatives for family and community supports**

In this session I will summarize lessons learned about emerging strategies for community and family supports for children based on research done in the Brazilian context in the past 3 years (6).

The results are based on a project carried out in Rio de Janeiro in 3 very diverse low income communities with the following questions in mind:

- (a) How are children and adolescents growing up in their families and communities?
- (b) what kind of support parents and other caregivers get to raise the children? (we call these *developmental supports* or *bases de apoio – bases of support*) (7);
- (c) how to strengthen existing family and community supports or to create other forms of support?
- (d) how to engage families and communities in this process?

The project has been mapping family and community based developmental supports in a few low-income communities in Rio de Janeiro to illustrate both their existence and potential for meeting the developmental needs of all of their children and youth.

This research resulted in the following four key conclusions:

1. A number of formal services do exist in each community with staff that are driven and committed, yet these services receive very little technical or financial support from outside the community;
2. The formal support services that exist in these communities reach a limited number of participants, have low awareness rates among youth and do not meet the extensive needs of youth and children;
3. Informal supports reach a much greater number of children and youth, but there is little structured public assistance for these supports;
4. Existing support services do not collaborate together, nor engage family members or their other informal supports in developing their services.

We should keep these conclusions in mind as we analyze a few issues that might give us some important clues as to what questions make sense to ask when thinking of informing policies and practices that aim at preventing children to grow up out of their family and community environment. One of the key questions is: what broad concerns should guide our attempts to improve the life conditions and life chances of children in low-income communities? Several questions may be similar for many countries but the emphases and the opportunities will be different in different places. The list below was developed based on the conditions in the low-income communities of Rio de Janeiro (8).

- What are some of the effects of poverty on the chances of causing stress on families and children?
  - Parents not able to spend much time in the home;
  - Lack of schools that are good enough to capture children's interest and prepare them for a decent job;
  - Inability of parents to afford a safe neighborhood;
  - Lack of a knowledge of or sense of the possibility of any legitimate opportunity;
  - Poor health and education status;



- May cause instability in parents' marriage/primary relationships.
- What are the effects of social isolation in resource to poor communities?
  - Communities become no-go zones for policing;
  - Children have no access to decent quality schools, recreation, safe areas;
  - Parents have access to very limited range of shops often with poor quality and expensive basic necessities;
  - Parents have no convenient access to legitimate job markets;
  - There are few role models for successfully engaging schools and the job market;
  - Parents lack access to surrogate caregivers e.g. crèches, schools, youth clubs;
  - Basic infrastructure like water, electricity, sewage are not reliable or safe threatening health;
  - Parents and children get labeled in ways that reduce their opportunities
- What are some viable ways to reduce the number of children growing up in poverty?
  - Better pathways to better jobs (training, education, etc);
  - Public jobs programs in the private and public sectors;
  - Tax system that propels more workers into formal employment.

- What are the effects of a failure to confront violence?

Using the example of gangs:

- Gangs increase chances of drug involvement;
- Gangs reduce legitimate business activity and social activity;
- Gang activity is health and life threatening;
- It is the most negative role model for entering the mainstream;
- It de-legitimizes activities like school that could lead to a different life.
- What are some of the failures of public institutions?
  - Corruption is pervasively damaging to the poor in e.g. the administration of health and social welfare programs; crime control and the judicial system especially the toleration of gangs and the drug trade;

- Lack of accountability for the expenditure of public funds ranging from incompetence (poorly trained and poorly paid teachers) to corruption.
- What are the effects on poor families of globalization and the behavior of major corporations and the advanced economies? (9)
  - In some parts of some developing countries, foreign investments have raised standards of living. But during the 1990s there were 100 million more people in poverty while global income was increasing 2.5% per annum.
  - Trade liberalization can devastate local agriculture and industry in a developing country and the effect is even worse if no safety nets like unemployment insurance are in place.
  - US and European communities' subsidies of their agricultural sectors directly and massively injure developing countries' export markets.
  - The IMF's overarching concern with debt repayment has forced countries into the most devastating cutbacks in government spending on such key long term investments as health care and education.

## **Concluding**

I would like to conclude focusing back on one of the challenges mentioned in the first pages of this paper: to understand the main complexities and identify what can make a difference in the lives of children, and point out a few directions that could help us impact policies and practices so that they meet children's needs.

In this paper I have discussed a few emerging that can be useful for this debate. Based on empirical data from research done in low income communities in Rio de Janeiro, as well as the work of many others in several countries, I have pointed out the importance

of strengthening what we called “bases of support” for children in their own life contexts, involving members of the family, community and school spheres.

In the political there are other important challenges. For instance, how to establish national and international agendas that will prioritize directions that favor local participation? It is not an easy task. Different political groups will have an appetite for different agendas. Policy prescriptions must take into account the willingness of different political groups to work on an issue at any point in time. In Brazil, the rule of the generals through centuries of dictatorships left the country with little experience of policy and social change advocacy so that void is a major challenge.

Finally, it must be said that there will never be a single answer to reducing the number of children who suffer the dislocations of Rai. But we may be more effective if we choose where we are going to put our individual and collective efforts having honestly looked at all the factors that go into his dehumanizing experience and then carefully choose where we think we can make the most difference

## Notes

- (1) The term marginalization is used here to describe people who live in the margins of society. That does not mean that they are not part of the system. As Samir Amin states, “Some are indeed excluded from the benefits of prosperity. The excluded are very much part of the system and are marginalized in the sense of not being integrated – functionally – into the system” (2003:7).
- (2) Rio de Janeiro is one of Brazil’s main cities. A few figures should help the reader to understand the lives of children such as the one described below. Brazil has a population of 170 million people; 50% of the population is under 25 years of age and 41 % is 19 or under. There are 70 million children and adolescents. As to income distribution, Brazil is situated between the world’s 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> largest economy. Nevertheless, 66% of families earn 2 minimum wages or less i.e. US \$140 or less a month. It is a fantastic example of inequality, revealing a huge gap between the rich and the poor.
- (3) Let me quote Amartya Sen to make another point about poverty. While poverty is at the heart of these problems, Sen points out in his book “Development as freedom” that changes in per capita income won't in itself achieve the freedoms he suggests are the end goals of development efforts. So those goals deserve to be tackled beyond the tool of poverty reduction.
- (4) For further information about Rai and other kids’ life trajectories from home to the streets and institutions, see Rizzini (Ed). “Life on the streets: children and adolescents on the street: inevitable trajectories?” (2003).
- (5) What corresponded to about a minimum wage (per month) at the time.
- (6) This session is based on the BASES Project, carried out by CIESPI (The International Center for Research and Policy) in partnership with the Instituto PROMUNDO, in Rio de Janeiro. For further information, see: [www.ciespi.org.br](http://www.ciespi.org.br); [www.institutopromundo.org.br](http://www.institutopromundo.org.br) (projeto bases de apoio).
- (7) The term ‘developmental supports’ refers to community resources that offer young people safety; caring relationships; opportunities to develop skills, friendship and self-confidence; and activities and services that contribute to the cognitive, social, creative, cultural, vocational and emotional development of children and youth. While some of these supports may be provided in the formal education and health sectors, developmental supports generally refer to community supports and resources available outside the public school and public health systems (Rizzini, Barker, Cassaniga, 2002).
- (8) This list should be seen as an analytical exercise. Much of it is a listing of problems. Eventually we should chart the best strategies for solving the problems we want to focus on.
- (9) Based on Stiglitz (YEAR) XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX



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