

# Children and Youth: A Sacrificed Generation?

**During school hours in the teeming cities of the developing world, they can be seen, shining shoes, washing cars, pushing trolleys or collecting refuse. And those are the lucky ones.**



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*A young girl carries bricks in Butawal, Nepal, where an estimated 60 per cent of children work to help their families survive. She earns 10 rupees (US 25 cents) for every one hundred trips.*

Without basic education or proper training, street children are easy prey for drug dealers and pimps. Many slide into a life of crime or prostitution and often contract HIV/AIDS from unprotected sex or drug abuse. They get arrested, beaten, even murdered by "death squads" if they live in the shantytowns of Rio de Janeiro.

Whether they are out-of-school girls, orphans or abandoned children, displaced or refugee children, children with disabilities, child labourers, or among the estimated 300,000 children under 18 involved in armed conflicts, all children in need have one thing in common: they are at the bottom of the economic heap. A matter-of-fact remark by a parent in Udon Thani, Thailand – where the poorest children are forced into prostitution or begging in the streets – says it all: "The day we stop being poor is the day we stop selling our children."

Poverty denies schooling, but exclusion from education in turn perpetuates the cycle of poverty. Education is the best, and often only means by which a child can break the downward spiral of deprivation. Anjimile Doka of the United Nations Development Programme believes that "the inequality between children today is completely unacceptable and the only way to fight it is to give them a chance for education."

Today, 113 million children, most of them girls, are excluded from education. 100 million of them live in developing nations. An excluded child might be a boy from a South American hill tribe recruited into a militia, or a girl who is a sex worker in an Asian slum. But these, like street children, are at the extreme end of the scale. In other cases the reasons for exclusion may be more mundane but the effect is just as pernicious, such as an African child, usually a girl, kept at home

to tend crops, fetch water or look after younger siblings.

A tangled web of socio-cultural, economic and physical factors excludes children from education. Schools exclude when they do not welcome families as partners; the education bureaucracy excludes by failing to adequately support teachers; and governments exclude by failing to pursue pro-child policies. As governments have been slow to embrace non-formal education, non-governmental organizations provide most of the schooling to children in need. But for real advances to be made, more effective partnerships between non-governmental organizations and governments must be built.

"Reaching children on the margins of society is a difficult and costly task," remarks Svein Osttveit, Executive Secretary of the Education for All Forum. "Providing them with learning opportunities is, and will be, an enormous challenge which needs to be tackled with imagination."

**"Unless we take down the walls of gender, poverty, ethnicity, disability and distance that leave these young millions excluded in the first place, education for all will remain a bitterly unfulfilled dream".**

**Carol Bellamy,**  
Executive Director of UNICEF.



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Partnerships with communities and child-centred learning activities are at the heart of projects such as ACCESS in Ethiopia, which have pioneered flexible, community-owned schooling on a large scale. The alternative basic education programme for children in Mexico operates in the camps of seasonal migrant workers, tailoring its schedule to harvest dates and allowing pupils to rejoin the formal system later. Save the Children are working with the Lesotho government to integrate children with disabilities into mainstream schools.

Today's excluded children become tomorrow's marginalized youth. Many unreached children enter adolescence unequipped with the basic skills necessary to fully join society. At over one billion, there are more young people aged between 15 and 24 in the world than there have ever been – and the numbers are growing. However, little research exists on marginalized youth. "Real statistics are lacking, or else being hidden," explains Marc Gilmer of UNESCO. "All we see are fragments of a pattern, with Ministers of Education, Employment, Social Affairs and Justice each dealing with one particular group of young people."

Marginalization is not confined to youth in developing countries: The International Labour Organization (ILO) warns that youth unemployment and other forms of social exclusion have reached "intolerably high levels" in the world's major industrialized countries. In France, where the young have been called "la génération salle d'attente", or the waiting-room generation, one youth in four is unemployed.



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*"What are you looking at?" A Brazilian boy strikes a defensive pose. Alienated youth have been described as a social bomb waiting to explode.*

Over the past decade, new solutions to fight youth exclusion have emerged. In the United Kingdom, a project by Voluntary Services Overseas, a non-governmental organization, involves marginalized young people in development work. After receiving training in topics such as HIV awareness, sports development and global education, they spend six months living and working in developing countries. The results are more skills, more life experience and a greater sense of self-worth.

Other strategies to fight youth exclusion include community and night schools, the use of radio in distance education programmes and helping poor populations develop income-generating skills. Learning for Life in Mongolia uses radio to teach income-generating skills to 3,000 geographically isolated young people, among others. And the European Commission is piloting "second-chance schools" in twelve countries.

In a project run by the Association for the Protection of the Environment (APE) and UNESCO in the "garbage village" of Mokattam, in Cairo's suburbs, thousands of young garbage collectors have learned to operate plastic-crushing machines, paper and cardboard compactors and cloth grinders. They acquire literacy, basic accounting and management skills on the job. "Market mechanisms produce learning which is just as valid and effective as education in classrooms," says Laila Isdandar Kamel, one of APE's founders.

"It is young people's hope and energy, their enthusiasm and willingness to experiment, that make society move forward," says Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations. Conversely, alienated youth are a recipe for social unrest. Well-targeted projects can bring them into the mainstream, but, if yet another generation is not to be sacrificed, swift action on a massive scale is needed. As Mr Annan warns, "A society that cuts itself off from its youth severs its lifeline; it is condemned to bleed to death." ■

