

Ahmed Ishtiaque, Bangladesh

Children in street situations is an interdisciplinary issue : what is your personal and professional approach ? What has led you to advocate for children in street situations?

I am the head of Apareyo Bangladesh, an NGO that has set up programmes for street children in Dhaka. We run long-term and progressive intervention for street children, interact with them, give them knowledge, life skills and skills for development, so that either they want to go back to the family, or they will be active in society as proactive adults. That is our main mandate of work. Our work therefore belongs to social work.

What are the particularities of the phenomenon in Bangladesh?

There are two or three things to consider : why are children on the streets? Why are their numbers so high? First, poverty leads people (not only children) to migrate from the villages to the urban sectors of the cities to find jobs. Hoping for better times. But it never happens, except for a few.

The second factor is the massive unplanned urbanization in Bangladesh. The job market is in the capital city or other provincial towns. Children, because of no food at home, either run away, or are pushed by the family to work to subsidize family income.

These are the main reasons that we have found why children are on the streets.

When children are in a street situation, generally, like in any other country, they become vulnerable, to their survival.

I started work with my organization a long time ago, in 1989 : right from the beginning, we wanted the government of Bangladesh to recognize the existence of children in street situations in the country. It took more than 10 years to recognize it. In year 2000, the government recognized the existence of them and came up with a project : basically it asked Apareyo Bangladesh, where I am working, to see how we were approaching street children and then replicated our knowledge across the country. The government is now working in the six divisions other than the capital. Since the project was developed and we were also part of it, in terms of capacity building, consultation, and also doing a small job with the government in addition to our regular job, pushed the government to consider a national policy on street children. This took another seven years. Now the government, UNICEF and NGOs (including my NGO), have draft a first version of a national policy.

Would you have a message to pass through to UN agencies about children in street situations?

I am thinking about UNICEF : even last year, we were wondering as an NGO why UNICEF was not talking about children in street situations as part of their mandate in Bangladesh. We never found it. What was important, was that when Bangladesh government started their project, it was funded by UNDP (UN system also). As far as UNICEF is concerned, they should talk about the children. First. That is what we feel and we believe in. UNCRC is the guiding principle to work with the children. To the UN my message is very clear : (...) the number of street children estimated by the government in Bangladesh is more than half a million in the country. If the problem we consider is poverty, than the government and the UN

agencies should come up with a prevention programme, because if you address the problem when the child is already on the street, then it is like when the patient got sick, then you go after care. In coming years, if the influx of this children population to the streets is like before, it will become unmanageable. So, I think nothing works unless there is massive action, not only a couple of NGOs : numbers are very high. NGOs can create a small model, things like that, but they cannot address a whole nation and eradicate the problem of children being on the street. The situation is getting better because the government has started working with NGOs this year, and hopefully it will improve.

What would be your message and advice to any government in the world?

Countries like ours have to work with other countries for their economy, for their growth of GDP. Bangladesh is developing economically, and definitely not independent. It is interdependent, we export things and then the money comes. The population of Bangladesh is 140 million, for a tiny little country. So, what I would say to international bodies, what I would request is that although Bangladesh is suffering poverty, it is a champion of the microfinance system and gradually improving. But the way it is improving, this is not much care. The political system of our country is not very effective, and that is why day by day the population suffers. Adults, but particularly women and children are vulnerable. My appeal is therefore that if we can work in collaboration, the suffering of the people of Bangladesh would be lessened, and the very high number of children living in the streets (500'000) would be reduced. We must have a government where the social system is integrated.

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