

Lothar Krappmann, UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

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

For many years I was a researcher in child development and was always particularly interested in the stimulation of children's social development by their friendships and peer groups. Within these friendships and groups children learn how to cooperate, how to help each other or deny help, if they feel it is not their duty to assist. They also learn how to solve a conflict or in which way to deny an agreement contrary to their own views. They also find out in which situation it is better not to oppose or how one should prefer some kind of compromise in order to avoid detrimental consequences.

Street children's groups are an extreme context for such processes because these children are further away from adults, who could support children in hardship and difficulties, than other children are. I myself did no research on the lives of these children, but read a lot of reports and studies and once edited a newsletter issue of an international learned society to make developmental researchers more aware of the many children living with other children in the streets and mostly independent of their families.

Does the work of the UN Committee of which you are a member encompass protection of such children?)

Yes, the Committee is very much aware of these children and their life situations – many children living in very different situations across the regions of the world. These children are entitled to the full implementation of the rights, which are incorporated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Committee addresses this issue in many dialogues with State parties, when the reports of the governments on the situation of children are discussed, and the Committee also often includes recommendations referring to these children in its Concluding Observations, which it adopts after intense exchange of views with the government.

The first concern of the Committee is that these children are protected against maltreatment and brutalities, and then that they have access to the most important services which these children need: nutrition, shelter, medical services, education and occupations where they are not exploited. The Committee demands from the governments to find ways to reunite them with their families if this is possible, and to assist these families, so that they can adequately care for their children.

What would be your message to UN agencies in favour of children in street situations?

In order to effectively help these children in the streets, it is important to respect these children as human beings, who have their own views and interests. For this reason all decisions about their protection, support and future development have to be discussed with these children. Quite a number of them may have good reasons not to return to their families, and many of them may also have good reason not to be accommodated in a home. There are more alternatives: protected shelter for groups of children who want to stay together, or self-organized, but supervised apartments, and also a variety of community projects. One has to find out together with these children, what is appropriate for the individual child and which kind of help children themselves want to have, often depending on age and their personal life history. It is possible that children who cannot imagine to go back to their families, change their minds after some time. Overall, the reintegration into the social lives of families and communities needs the establishment of mutual trust and may be a long way.

And a message to governments?"

Governments have to pay attention to the fact that these children are victims also when they apparently are offenders of laws and accepted behavioural standards. When they are involved in deviant behaviours, petty crime, drug consumption and trafficking and the like, this is a reaction to the conditions in which they live. They have not created these conditions of life with which they struggle. Their behaviours reflect that adults and their institutions have failed to prepare them and to open for them an agreeable position and role in family, school, occupational system and society. Thus, they dropped out, or even more precisely: Very often they were pushed out and were excluded. If destructive behaviours, which they may exercise, have to be terminated, this must be done by educational and rehabilitative means and not by punishment, which once more humiliates them. There are enough studies of these children, which demonstrate that these children have capacities and potentials providing a base for development and life prospects. Most of them, if not all these children wish nothing more than a secure, non-violent life under fair social and economic conditions and are willing to contribute their share.