

A State of Emergency for Children

Excerpts from Father Joseph Wresinski's speech at the press conference organised by the UNICEF French Committee in Paris on 9 December 1987, on the occasion of the presentation of the report on the situation of the world's children, in 1988.

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN EXTREME POVERTY

I would like to share a few thoughts with you, without distinguishing between families in developing countries and those living in industrialised countries. Indeed, the families in New York or Chicago who take refuge in the streets of their cities, the families who in France are holed up in discarded trucks between a rubbish dump, a motorway and a cemetery, send us the same message as those who cling to the slopes of a hill, to the steep sides of a ravine or to the marshy land on the shores of a bay in developing countries.

All these families are not only repeatedly turned away from decent residential areas. Worse, they do not even find their place in low-cost housing communities, slums or shanty towns. In fact, they are pushed out beyond these zones of poverty, exiled into a life of human misery because of their extreme situation of poverty. This is why no town knows exactly how many of them there are. Worse still, in most cases they appear neither in the local authorities' registers, nor in national statistics. They have no place in the political leaders' priorities. In short, they exist for no one. Consequently, with no recognised existence in industrialised and developing countries alike, the children of the poorest families have one thing in common: they are all denied a future.

The child who sells in the streets or begs in the subways of our capital cities, the child who earns bread for his or her family in the developing world, the child who sleeps rough alongside the slaughterhouse, the railway station or the market, and who at dawn scavenges in the city's rubbish dumps, tells us how far we have to broaden the boundaries of our policies and programmes. And to do this, how much further we must expand the limits of our vision, of our understanding.

THE POOREST PEOPLE ESCAPE THE ATTENTION OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

We have to admit that even today, entire population groups are still alone in trying to survive and keep their hopes alive against all the odds. Forced to survive through their own efforts, sometimes with the support of small, local NGOs, they largely escape the scrutiny and analysis of the international community.

So, what do we really know about the so-called "landless" children and families, often rootless, condemned to wander the lanes and roads, fleeing hunger, in search of work?

What do we know about these children, these families, who, without means, without belongings, reach the cities, hoping to find if not a welcome at least some money begged here and there?

What do we know about these jobless families, without shelter or resources, who remain on the outskirts of the cities, a shifting population, poorly identified, staying in areas where the bulldozer will chase them away again as urbanisation spreads?

What do we know, too, of the homeless families straying across Western Europe and North America? Broken, dislocated families whose mothers and children are taken into shelters while their fathers end up in single men's hostels?

It is from these broken, blighted, hungry families that we get the children we call "street children", a label we should reject. Is it possible that these children, who like all children are the rightful offspring of a family, an ethnic group, a city and a nation, should be labelled in this way, whether they are from Amsterdam or Bogota, from the Far East or southern Sahara? Do we know what happens to them once they are adults and therefore able to start families themselves?

I know from experience that UNICEF has never accepted to abandon these children. It has never ceased to remind us of their existence.

But in the name of these children's families, the International Movement ATD Fourth World has to forever remind the entire international community the burning obligation to genuinely really seek them out, encounter them and accompany them.

This is where the great Alliance that Mr. James Grant, UNICEF Director General has proposed makes perfect sense. It is urgent that you and I commit ourselves to this Alliance, here and now. You and I must ensure that this Alliance gain credibility, so that thanks to it, we can give priority in UNICEF programmes to these very children and their families who, have never been reached before. Human rights are at stake. Poverty is a violation of all children's rights. It is high time we declared a state of emergency against extreme poverty, a state of emergency for children.

WHAT SHOULD WE DO FOR THIS ALLIANCE TO WIN THE WORLD

If UNICEF does everything possible to ensure that it gains ground, this Alliance can win the world over. It can energise great numbers of people and organisations, especially if we all support UNICEF in ensuring this Alliance takes off for the benefit of the very poorest.

If it does not, as we know, the Alliance will contribute to increase the percentage of children vaccinated, up to 80%. It will help save more children from dehydration. It will ensure better nutrition for tens of millions of children. Yet without everyone's efforts, what will happen to the remaining 20%? The fear is that it will always be the most resilient families, those most able to grasp things quickly because they are well enough integrated into the communities, who will be reached. This is the normal course of events. In the face of suffering, hunger and disease, we go where we can best respond to the most urgent needs.

This is not at all dishonourable, on the contrary, but it inevitably condemns the poorest 20% of the world to further abandonment.

The Alliance's pride will be to break this fatality of extreme poverty that isolates and kills and that renders human rights and the rights of the child null and void.

Joseph Wresinski