



On the streets

There is a haunted look in 13-year-old Peter Kinyanjui's eyes. He has not eaten for two days. A meticulous search of the putrid garbage heaps that dot most city streets has yielded nothing and he's been surviving on banana and pineapple peels dumped near the city market by fruit dealers.

Peter took to the streets two years ago following the death of his mother. He is just one of many such children to do so,

driven out by poverty, lack of parental care, family break-ups, unwanted pregnancies, child abuse, AIDS, natural disasters, ethnic violence and rural-urban migration. In most urban and market centres, street children, derogatorily referred to as *chokora* — derived from the Swahili word *chakura* meaning to scour or scavenge — have become a common feature. Official statistics show that there are about 600,000 street children nationwide, and Nairobi, Kenya's capital city with a population of about 3 million, is in the lead with about 100,000.

The problem is not confined to Kenya. In neighbouring countries, figures are equally disturbing, and Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies throughout eastern Africa, the Horn and the Great Lakes are witnessing a rising tide of child homelessness. From the Comores to conflict-torn Rwanda and Burundi, from Sudan to Tanzania, from Uganda to Ethiopia, reports

reaching the Federation's Nairobi Regional Delegation are causing increasing concern. "We have a regional phenomenon that requires a regional approach," comments head of delegation Al Panico.

Over the borderline

As inflation increases and poverty extends its tentacles to all spheres of society, more and more Kenyans are crossing the borderline to join the "have-nots", their survival dependent on their ability to steal, the generosity of the "haves", and humanitarian action. It is estimated that 50 per cent of Kenyans live below the poverty line.

Mukami doesn't know how it feels to live in a house. She has spent all her life on the street. She and her mother survive on handouts from the public and left-overs she collects from dustbins in city restaurants. She moves from one shop to an-

other asking for money from traders and, at the age of six, she has perfected the art of begging. Without it she will starve to death, although the average ten shillings a day she gets is too little to buy food for both her and her mother.

Mukami is angry, hungry and worn out. "Many people don't want to give us money because they think we'll use it to buy glue. Some even beat us when we beg because they think we are a nuisance," she says.

Harassed and rejected

Deprivation has bred crime and earned Kenya's street children public resentment. They are harassed by police and heavily punished whenever they steal or snatch valuables from passers-by. For 14-year-old James Mwaura, life is a series of violations. He has been rejected, laughed at, spat on and beaten. He recalls an incident in which he snatched a purse from a woman and

Photos by
Eddy Posthuma de Boer

Every child has the right to a standard of living adequate for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.
— Article 27, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child



attempted to run away, but was caught and beaten by a dozen adults. "It was like I had wronged everybody. No one seemed to care and some even wanted me killed. I asked them to spare me but they would not listen."

Kenya's Daily Nation newspaper recently uncovered the case of a ten-year-old girl forced into prostitution by her destitute mother. She slept on the streets, where she was beaten and sexually abused by adults. She contracted AIDS and died. According to the Government's Principal Welfare Officer, Beatrice Wekesa, there is a high incidence of sexually transmitted disease among street children, which she attributes to prostitution and rape. Yet they do not have access to medical facilities. Cost sharing, introduced by the government as part of the fulfilment of International Monetary Fund conditions for aid, has made health care inaccessible for many Kenyans.

The Nairobi Branch of the Kenya Red Cross has in the past provided health care and feeding programmes for street children but, faced with meagre means and public disinterest, has now turned to addressing root causes. A network of community income-generating activities – bee- and

poultry-keeping, handicrafts, arrow-root growing – aim to alleviate poverty and empower parents to meet the needs of their children.

Robbed of care

In Limuru, a small industrial town in an agricultural area 40 km west of Nairobi, 15-year-old John Ngigi tells his story, as boys roll down his cheeks. He recalls the good things he had before his mother succumbed to mental illness four years ago, depriving him and his three brothers of parental care.

John is faced with a slew of problems: harassment and lack of food, shelter, clothing and money to pay his mother's medical bills. He is currently a handcart pusher at the local market, but he complains of police harassment, underpayment and exploitation by traders whose goods he transports.

An average 50 shillings a day is too little to sustain him. He does have something to smile about: he is at least assured of a meal every day, from the Limuru branch of the Kenya Red Cross. It feeds street children, washes and mends their clothes, and provides them with soap and water. With the help of the local community, it collects used clothes for the children.

Volunteers run classes

With a population of about 5,000, Limuru is faced with the gargantuan problem of social dislocation: rising poverty, unemployment, rural-urban migration and overpopulation. It has more than 200 destitute street children of which the Red Cross can feed only 30.

"It isn't enough to feed the children and send them back to the streets," says Mary Mwikamba, the branch coordinator. "They need to be trained to become self-reliant. The feeding programme is just a stopgap measure aimed at meeting their immediate needs and ensuring their survival. At the moment we are treating the symptoms but not the disease. Vocational training is crucial and their parents must be helped to provide for them. Children cannot stay at home if they are not clothed and fed."

Mwikamba argues for the establishment and strengthening of income-generating projects, but feels the gap between the enormity of the problem and the response points to a bleak future.

Urban disaster

The growing number of children who roam the streets, the dangers they face, the insecurity they engender, call for a compre-

hensive programme. As Kenya's population grows, and poverty and disease with it, vulnerability only increases.

Street children, says the Federation's Al Panico, are but one manifestation of Africa's growing urban problems. "Already our cities groan beneath the weight of poverty, and the growth of the urban poor is quickening. We have congestion, pollution, and crumbling infrastructure, sprawling slums and shanties. Today's urban problems are tomorrow's urban disasters."

The United Nations Centre for Human Settlements forecasts that by 2025 Africa's level of urbanization will be more than double that of 1975. Fifty-three per cent of the continent's people will then be living in cities. Should urban poverty continue on its present course, the consequences are unthinkable.

Says Al Panico: "We must look into the faces of the street children and ask ourselves a straight question. Out there in the concrete jungle of the 21st century, where will the Red Cross and Red Crescent be?"

Grace Chepkwony

Grace Chepkwony is a Kenyan journalist working as an information officer for the Federation's Nairobi Regional Delegation. She is a former reporter and sub-editor on the Daily Nation newspaper.

Every child has the right to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.

— Article 32, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

