

IV. Background

Children living and working on the streets, outside of the care and protection of their parents, are a relatively new phenomenon in the DRC, as in many countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Congolese child protection activists, jurists, and academics familiar with issues involving street children, told us in interviews that prior to the 1970s there were few, if any, permanent street children in the DRC. Up until that time, vagrant children were promptly brought before a judge, and either reunited with their families or placed in private or government institutions for children known as Etablissement de Garde et d'Education de l'Etat (EGEE). According to Floribert Kingeshi in the office of child delinquency in the Ministry of Justice, the state response to vulnerable children in need changed in the 1970s and 1980s, with diminished resources available to pay police, judicial personnel and to support government institutions. Police no longer systematically arrested children for vagrancy, and government institutions to care for them fell into disrepair and disuse.² Around the same time, a declining Congolese economy coupled with a rise in unemployment made schooling unaffordable to many poor Congolese parents. Some children, often pushed by their families, began looking for work in the streets or begging in markets, bus stops, or other public places. For the first time, small groups of children began spending the majority of their time living and working on the streets.

Street children also began loitering around universities, begging for food or money in exchange for domestic labor. An official in the Division of Social Affairs in Lubumbashi told us that because many university students were provided with meals and government scholarships, children would beg them for their leftovers. They would offer to wash students' clothes or clean their rooms in exchange for small amounts of money or food.³ Groups of children living on the streets, hanging around schools, and doing piecemeal work became collectively known as "moineax" or "balados,"⁴ derogatory names which referred to their daily activities, or "phaseur" in reference to their habits of napping during the day.⁵

² Human Rights Watch interview, Ministry of Justice, Kinshasa, October 3, 2005.

³ Human Rights Watch interview with Mme. Kabera Mujijima Bora, Division of Social Affairs, Lubumbashi, September 16, 2005.

⁴ "Moineax" meaning sparrows or "balados" meaning one who walks around.

⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Mme. Germaine Akonga, Division of Social Affairs, Kinshasa, September 29, 2005.



Many street children spend time in the markets selling goods, transporting loads and playing with their friends. © 2005 Marcus Bleasdale

In the last fifteen years, numerous interrelated and complex socio-economic factors have led to the explosion in the number of children on the streets in DRC including, but not limited, to: the civil war, resulting in countless children orphaned or abandoned, huge numbers of people displaced, a sharp deterioration in essential state services, and a related increase in poverty and unemployment; rapid urbanization and the breakdown of traditional support structures of the African extended family; the difficulty that some women and older children face as heads of single- or child-headed households; the impact of HIV/AIDS on society; and, the inability of parents or guardians to pay for school fees and other related costs of public education. Although their exact numbers are unknown, an estimated 30,000 children live on the streets in Kinshasa, and tens of thousands more in other urban areas.

The large number of street children and adults in cities throughout the country comprise a growing urban subclass, with their own adult leaders who tightly control large and sometimes competing groups of street people, and their own language, with terms and vocabulary used uniquely among them.⁶ Since at least the mid-1990s, street children in

⁶ For further analysis on the history of street children and their societal impact, see: Gilbert Malemba-M. N'Sakila, *Enfants Dans La Rue, Le Sans et le Hors Famille*, (Lubumbashi: Presses Universitaires de Lubumbashi, 2003); Division of Social Affairs, "Enquete sur les Enfants Victimes du Secteur Minier du Kasai Oriental Vivant Dans les Rues, et Grands Places de Mbuji-Mayi et Ses Environs," Rapport Final, January 2000;

the DRC have been known as “shegue”, a term that was popularized by Congolese musician Papa Wemba in his song, “Kokokorobo”, and has largely replaced previous names used to refer to street children. “Shegue” was described to researchers as an abbreviation of the name Che Guevara, in reference to the independent spirit and toughness of street youth. Other names for street children are “mayibob” or “tshell”, often used in reference to girls who engage in prostitution. An older street boy or adult can be called a “yankee”, a term of respect used only among younger street children to address older street boys or men who command obedience from them.⁷ Some street men and women, having grown up on the streets, are having children of their own, raising a second, and in Kinshasa sometimes a third, generation of children who know nothing of life but the streets.

and Marie Louis Bawala et. al, “Rapport de Recherche sur les Enfants Séparés des Familles Mbuji-Mayi,” November 2003.

⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with staff of the Association des Jeunes de la Rue pour le Développement (AJRD), Kinshasa, September 30, 2005.