

“STREET CHILDREN” IN BRAZIL

Karin Schmitt

Brazil – land of contrasts

In developmental terms, Brazil is defined as an emerging economy: it ranks at the upper end of the middle-income category. The scale of the Brazilian economy, the country’s abundance of natural resources and land, its diversified manufacturing structure, and its high degree of industrialization all point to a successful development path. Yet these factors obscure the pronounced contrasts that divide the country. Some of these contrasts are geographic or climatic in nature; others are ethnic: Brazil’s population draws on Native American, African, and European roots, and successive waves of immigrants, mainly from Asia and Europe, have added to the mix. Such a combination of races and cultures, spread over more than 8 million square kilometers, makes for an interesting diversity.

Yet other contrasts are social in nature and less desirable. Living conditions for Brazil’s 191.3 million people (2007)¹ vary dramatically, both across the country’s regions and states and within them. Spatial variations can be marked.

Life expectancy at birth ranges from 63.2 years in Alagoas to 71.6 years in Rio Grande do Sul. Adult literacy ranges from under 70% in Alagoas and Piauí to almost 95% in the Federal District. Poverty incidence rates range from 3.1% in metropolitan São Paulo to more than 50% in the rural northeast.² Income disparities in Brazil are significant not only across regions but also between metropolitan areas, non-metropolitan urban centers, and rural areas. Moreover, inequality across gender and ethnic groups is also important.

Despite Brazil’s progresses in reducing infant mortality rates, increasing school enrollment rates and improving access to better water sources,³ the poorest one-fifth of Brazil’s population account for only a 2.4% share of the national income. Brazil is second only to South Africa in a world ranking of income inequality. About one-fifth of the population lives on less than USD 2 a day and 8% live on less than USD 1 a day.⁴ Brazil’s Northeast contains the single largest concentration of rural poverty in Latin America.⁵ The situation of these people is not

much different from the circumstances in which the poorest of the poor live in other parts of the world. In 2005, the annual number of children dying before their 5th year of age was 123,000.

There are an estimated 3.7 million orphans (2005) who have lost their parents to varying death causes, also to AIDS.⁶ Health care, sanitary facilities and food resources are inadequate for most of the poor population, while education is the privilege of a select few. Although Brazil is one of the world's largest industrial nations, it ranks 69th on the UNDP's 2006 Human Development Index (HDI).⁷

Great numbers of Brazil's most destitute people live in the slums of the big cities, the so-called favelas, where the infrastructure, especially the drinking water and drainage systems, is deficient. Slum dwellers squat on land to which they have no legal title. But since this is mostly unused and unusable public land – hillsides, swamps, lagoons, rubbish dumps, and so on – they are not likely to be evicted.

Where these impoverished people live within sight of the pleasant living conditions enjoyed by a privileged elite, social tensions and the potential for conflict grow. The streets of large cities such as Rio de Janeiro are increasingly the scene of confrontations between rich and poor, including street crime. Those who are unable to make a living as vendors of newspapers or lottery tickets, shoeshine boys, guards for parked cars or the like, are often forced to earn a living illegally. Even within the slums there is virtually no place for solidarity: When someone else's existence is a threat to one's own, self-interest comes first.

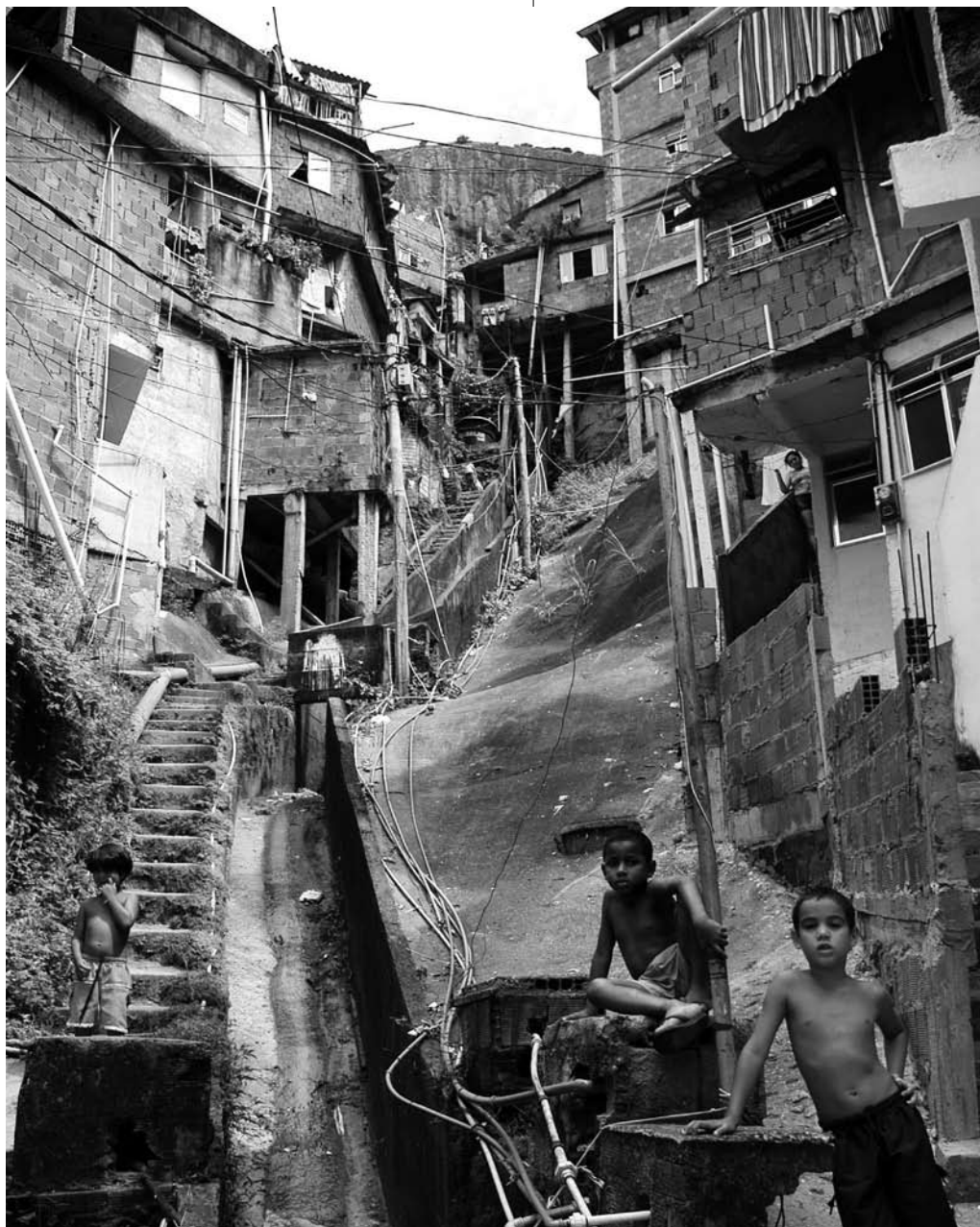
Extreme population density and crowded living conditions in the slums, combined with the struggle to survive, generally lead not only to social disintegration but also to violence

within the family and to broken homes. This makes the situation even more difficult for children and young people, and at least partly accounts for their increasing presence on the streets. Along with suffering hunger, being undernourished, and being exposed to disease, probably nothing contributes more to the loss of human development potential than a childhood and youth spent outside the institutional framework of family and school in the usually hostile environment of the street. The growing number of children who work on the streets, or even live there permanently, is one of the most pressing development problems world-wide. A future in dignity with a reasonable livelihood is at stake for a whole generation of urban youth. But of Latin American countries known to have "street children," first and foremost is Brazil, where their numbers are estimated to have reached between 12–17 million. Millions of children roam the streets of the Rio slums daily, addicted to drugs, forced into prostitution, in fear of death and of each other. Brazil is not a legally backwards country with no legislation for the protection of its children; as a matter of fact they have one of the best movements for the rights of street children. But there are indications that the situation has not much improved over the past 15 years: In 1993⁸ there was an estimated 4–5 children murdered each day on the streets, and few children of the streets can expect to live past their 18th birthdays.⁹



01

01 Child getting home after playing football. Favela Rocinha, 2005.



02

02 Children in Favela Rocinha, 2005.

“Street Children” in Brazil

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- 1 UNFPA: World Population Report 2007, New York, N.Y. 2007.
- 2 The World Bank: Inequality and Economic Development in Brazil. A World Bank Country Study, Washington, D.C. 2004.
- 3 Brazil has achieved dramatic results in improving living conditions: Infant mortality declined from around 50 per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 32 per 1,000 in 2004. Net enrollment in basic educa-

tion rose from 85% in 1990 to 97% in 2004. Brazilians with access to an improved water source rose from 83% of the population in 1990 to 89% in 2003. See World Bank: World Development Indicators 2007, Washington, D.C. 2007.

- 4 See also UNICEF: The State of the World’s Children 2007, New York, NY 2007.
- 5 World Bank: World Development Indicators 2007, Washington, D.C. 2007.
- 6 UNICEF: The State of the World’s Children 2007, New York, NY 2007.
- 7 <http://hdr.undp.org/hdr2006/statistics/>
- 8 For any further information consider <http://www.mindfully.org/Reform/2004/Brazil-Homicide-1980-02-5mar04.htm>
- 9 See the Economist (US) dated July 31, 1993.
- 10 See also Lusk, Mark and Derek T. Mason: Fieldwork with Rio’s Street Children. In: Rizzini, Irene (Ed.): Children in Brazil Today – A Challenge for the Third Millennium. Editora Universitaria Santa Ursula, Rio de Janeiro, 1994.

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in Africa and South East Asia. Her past work in the Foundation included building up community organizations in Brazil to

approach the root causes of street childhood and child destitution for more than ten years. She was involved in the development of agricultural extension services in Laos for about five years and income generation programs in Bangladesh.

At present, Karin's programs are concerned with the development and dissemination of best practices in the psychosocial care and support of children affected by HIV-AIDS, poverty and violence in Africa (a regional program covering 13 countries in sub-Saharan Africa) and community health programs in Sri Lanka. Karin's involvement in her programs is on multiple levels, starting from organizational capacity building, human resources development, strategic orientation to organizational self-reliance and the application of the latest state-of-the-art knowledge and practices in the subjects addressed by her programs. Besides her extensive contributions to the Foundation's articles of interest, Karin M. Schmitt has co-authored many publications together with Klaus M. Leisinger. See www.novartisfoundation.org.