Lost in translation: children in street situations

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Editorial, by Daniel Stoecklin, 23 February 2018

General Comment No. 21 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) addresses "children in street situations". The English version of the General Comment on Children in Street Situations was, as usual, the first adopted, and then translated into the other official languages of the United Nations (French, Spanish, Chinese, Arabic). Unfortunately, these included some translation errors. The French version has "Observation générale sur les enfants des rues" (General Comment on Street Children).

The Spanish version also uses the term "street children" (niños de la calle). The Chinese expression 街头流浪儿童 (jietou liulang ertong) is also not a faithful translation of "children in street situations" because it describes them as "children wandering the streets".

These translations are plain wrong and many (including the undersigned) have asked questions of the Committee, which claims to have "found this anomaly but without being able to identify any justifications" (in a personal communication), and pledged to issue a "corrigendum". This will restore consistency with the official terminology of the CRC, which, since 2009, has adopted the term "children in street situations", with notable encouragement from Jean Zermatten, the then president (Stoecklin, 2017). The call for input on this comment was therefore made under the heading "children in street situations".

One of those active in the field, Edwin Boevé, Director of Dynamo International, noted in his email of 24 January to the CRC that "In fact, the term 'children in street situations' illustrates well what the general comment demonstrates, namely the fact that these are children ... who have developed close links with public places and for whom the street is an essential element of their identity and their daily life. Children who find themselves, for a short medium or long period, in the street and for many and varied reasons. Every child's situation is in this sense unique and singular. The term "street situation" encompasses the fact that it is indeed a passage, a dynamic situation, and that it is not fixed."

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The emphasis on the dynamics of the street situation, and therefore on causes that cannot be reduced to the responsibility of either the child or its parents, avoids the stigma attached to the expression "street child" (or "child of the streets"). To understand the fundamental difference between these two ways of expression, take a more concrete case and replace the word "child" with any first name. There is a world of difference between "Peter of the streets" and "Peter in a street situation": the first is a stigmatizing diminution, implying that Peter is a ragamuffin who has all the traits of a street child. Whilst the second illustrates the situation, as experienced by Peter, looking for a temporary solution to his problems. The consequences are important: repression or conscience-stricken victimization on the one hand, support for a child exercising his or her rights on the other. Beyond the literal translation error, the question is not just rhetorical: it threatens the very spirit of general comment by conveying regressive concepts and approaches. That the Committee is quickly correcting this error is to be welcomed.


NB: The editorial does not necessarily reflect the opinion of IDE board and team.

Any comment you may have would be welcome: webmaster@childsrights.org