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AND YOUTH IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN SOCIAL SERVICE PROGRAMMES

presented by  
the Social Affairs Division of the  
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ADDITIONAL



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The general assessment of "Social Service in Latin America",<sup>1/</sup> undertaken by the Social Affairs Division of the Economic Commission for Latin America and presented as a background document to the Latin American Conference on Children and Youth in National Development, contains a number of conclusions and recommendations concerning the orientation of social service programmes for children and youth. The present introductory note singles out the questions of most direct interest to the Conference.

A very high proportion of social service programmes at present are directed to the dependent child, the deviant, and the handicapped, through institutions for custodial care, total or partial. Services for the normal but economically needy child, in such forms as food supplements, recreational activities, and facilities for cultural advancement are more recent and limited, usually appearing within broader programmes for direct food grants to families, the creation of community centres and playgrounds, etc. Social service activities for children within individual countries often consist of a number of separate programmes or agregations of programmes grouped for administrative purposes, each independent of the others in origin, purposes, criteria for performance, and logic of development. The nature of child welfare services remains largely remedial or protective; while "preventive" approaches are beginning to receive attention, programmes of the latter type are not yet sufficiently integrated or informed by understanding of the sources of the evils to be "prevented".

Programmes for youth within social service are fewer and of much more limited coverage. Existing public programmes centre around the juvenile delinquent, the physically handicapped and, of course, dependent youth who have grown from childhood to adolescence within closed institutions. Programmes offering recreational, "use-of-spare-time" and "social contact" activities are mainly under voluntary auspices and are confined to large cities. The few such programmes conducted by public institutions consist of juvenile clubs, sports clubs, and youth camps organized in marginal housing settlements. These reach only a small proportion of the youth in need of such services and are spotty in their coverage of the needs of the youth they do reach. What was said above concerning the organization and structure of services for children applies also to services for youth.

Any analysis of the problems affecting children and youth that fall within the competence of social service will reveal that most of these problems derive directly from the inability of the family to fulfill its roles as the natural environment of the child: the provision of material support and the provision of guidance during the period of transition from

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<sup>1/</sup> "Social Service in Latin America: Functions and Relationships to Development", prepared by Virginia A. Paraiso, Social Affairs Division, Economic Commission for Latin America (E/CN.12/L.9).

dependent status to full participation in society as citizen and producer. Families with many children, with incomes both low and undependable, and with breadwinners seriously handicapped in any effort to take advantage of the changing job opportunities of the modern urban environment, cannot offer the child and youth adequate material support or models for growing up. It is well known that the combination of rapid population growth and urbanization with lagging economic growth in much of Latin America has resulted in alarming increases in the numbers of families in the position now labelled "marginal", and changes in the rural areas are simultaneously depriving an increasing proportion of rural families of their traditional sources of security, limited as these were. Under such conditions, the unaided efforts of the family to cope with its unmanageable burden of child support can do no better than perpetuate the condition of marginality among the children, while many families disintegrate partially or altogether under the strain, with well-known consequences of abandoned and vagrant children.

Meanwhile, the traditional local communities or neighborhoods that have in the past supplemented the family's resources and helped in the youth's introduction to a given social order are disintegrating under the impact of the high geographical and occupational mobility that characterize much of the regional population. New forms of local social organization are undoubtedly appearing, even in the urban slums, but these defensive reactions to the situation or marginality can hardly contribute to the introduction of the younger generation to the wider society.

In principle, the responsibility for meeting the deficiencies in care for children and youth that derive from family and community weakness and disintegration fall upon the State. Almost all countries of the region have moved to meet this responsibility through enactment of a formidable body of laws for protection of the child. Many of these laws call for the creation of social service programmes to help children who are victims of social and economic change, who are deprived of normal family life, or who suffer from special difficulties affecting their physical and psychological development. In practice, the public resources available for the support of such programmes usually suffice only for action on a token scale, or, as indicated above, for institutional care of some of the children and youth entirely deprived of family life or coming to the attention of the authorities through delinquent behaviour.

Even if the resources and administrative capabilities of the State were a great deal larger than they are ever likely to be, it would be neither practicable nor desirable for the State to assume directly the burden for support of children traditionally borne by the family and the local community. In fact, the State can meet its legitimate responsibilities for supportive action, and in particular for the development of adequate educational and health services for children and youth, only if the great majority of families have the resources and the will to provide care and normal up-bringing.

The assertion implies, among other things, the expansion of productive employment bringing more adequate incomes for the families now struggling to support large numbers of children. The attainment of these objectives of

/development policy

development policy, however, will not automatically insure that families will then meet more adequately their responsibilities to children and youth. The experience of more affluent societies indicates that problems of family disabilities in relation to child care and the guidance of youth toward social participation will continue to be serious, although their forms will change. The study of "Social Services in Latin America" raises the question whether social service programmes and legislation in Latin America should not concentrate more on techniques of strengthening the family and local community than on programmes to remedy the consequences of the present weakness of these institutions.

In the present situation of Latin America, two forms of action are particularly important as means of helping low-income families meet their responsibilities toward their children: (1) Assistance through family planning programmes in making more manageable the burden represented by present extremely high rates of fertility; (2) direct social service designed to strengthen the family. The first form of action is discussed in another document before the Conference; the need and demand for such action is indicated by widening evidence of the social objectionable expedients now used by low-income families to limit family size or escape the burden of child support. The second is one of the most neglected of the important areas of social policy at present, as can be seen from the token scale of the few existing social service programmes that focus on the family unit.

Social service programmes for the family should include "educative" activities helping the family make better use of the material and monetary resources already at its command, and also helping it to take fuller advantage of the public services, legal rights, etc., from which low-income families are commonly barred by ignorance and inability to cope with administrative procedures. At the same time, such programmes should influence the re-orientation of existing health, educational and other resources to make them more accessible and better adapted to family needs. Programmes helping families in the material support of children already born require serious consideration. At present, family allowance provisions are found here and there but the grants are too small to be effective and the countries cannot afford to increase the grants or broaden their coverage on a scale meeting the real needs. At the same time, it is obvious that the unit cost of keeping a child in an institution is much higher than the cost of supplementing family resources for support, and the probable benefit to the child smaller. Promotion of self-help and mutual aid activities among families are also essential lines of action, and these presuppose the building of community solidarity. Effective programmes for strengthening of the family cannot deal with the family in isolation from its neighbors.

The families at which the programmes in question should be aimed are families still intact but suffering the strain of adverse conditions. In their cases, prevention of breakdown is obviously better than attempted cure of its consequences. The programmes can be envisaged as strategies to promote the welfare of the child and the youth through the welfare of the basic natural groups, family and community. Ideally they should bring together social service, employment, education, health and housing policies not as separate "social sectors" or as competitors for resources but as complementary aspects of a process of strengthening of the family.

