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# SOCIETY OWES ITS CHILDREN A DIGNIFIED LIFE

The conditions in which children are born, grow up and live reflect the degree of respect for the particular human rights of a group within society which has specific needs and which because of its vulnerability requires special protection.

To assert that children represent the future of a country may seem to be an obvious truth. However, when the lack of disposition on the part of governments to guarantee children's elemental rights and the almost nonexistent conscience on the part of society in general to defend and recognize these rights is observed, this assertion seems more like a fantasy.

Nothing expresses this contradiction more eloquently than the one hundred fifty thousand children who die every year before reaching five years of age<sup>1</sup> and the millions of abandoned children who have made the streets their home, where they develop and take refuge, and show signs of creativity and inventiveness. Apart from these two extreme situations, millions of children live, while not totally abandoned, without the possibility of going to school, on an insufficient diet, victims of social and political abuse, must work although it is prohibited by law and without any protection or regulation of working conditions,

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and some of whom are tortured or even killed by judicial authorities or by the United States border police. Many more suffer torture and abuse from the adults who should take care of them, are bought and sold in child trafficking, are exploited sexually or are induced to take drugs. Finally, there are children who have to reject the cultural values of their particular ethnic group because the dominant culture does not recognize it and has imposed other values on them. We must ask ourselves, what proportion of some forty million minors who live in Mexico, enjoy a decent life?

The relationship between the present situation of this under 18 age group and the future of the country is something which should be a topic of concern for governmental authorities and society at large. Closing our eyes to this reality could have incalculable consequences.

The International Convention on Children's Rights, approved in

November 1989, implies a qualitative change because for the first time children are considered as subjects instead of objects as far as their human rights are concerned. However, it took the international community ten years to arrive at a consensus on this topic, during which time 145 million children of the world died in the face of apparent indifference on the part of international society.<sup>2</sup>

The distance between the approval of a legal instrument and the actual observance of it is very great, and in the case of human rights we know the terrible contradictions between what is declared and what is actually done. Without a doubt, an enormous effort to raise society's consciousness about the urgent need for concrete action in defense of children's rights is needed. The Convention's success will depend to a great extent on this effort.

## **Constitutional Recognition**

In this country it was not until the beginning of the 1980's that a child's right to "the satisfaction of the necessities of mental and physical health" was included in the Constitution.<sup>3</sup> In many people's opinion, this statement is extremely simplistic and wrongly delegates this obligation exclusively to the parents, detracting from the importance of what should be the State's

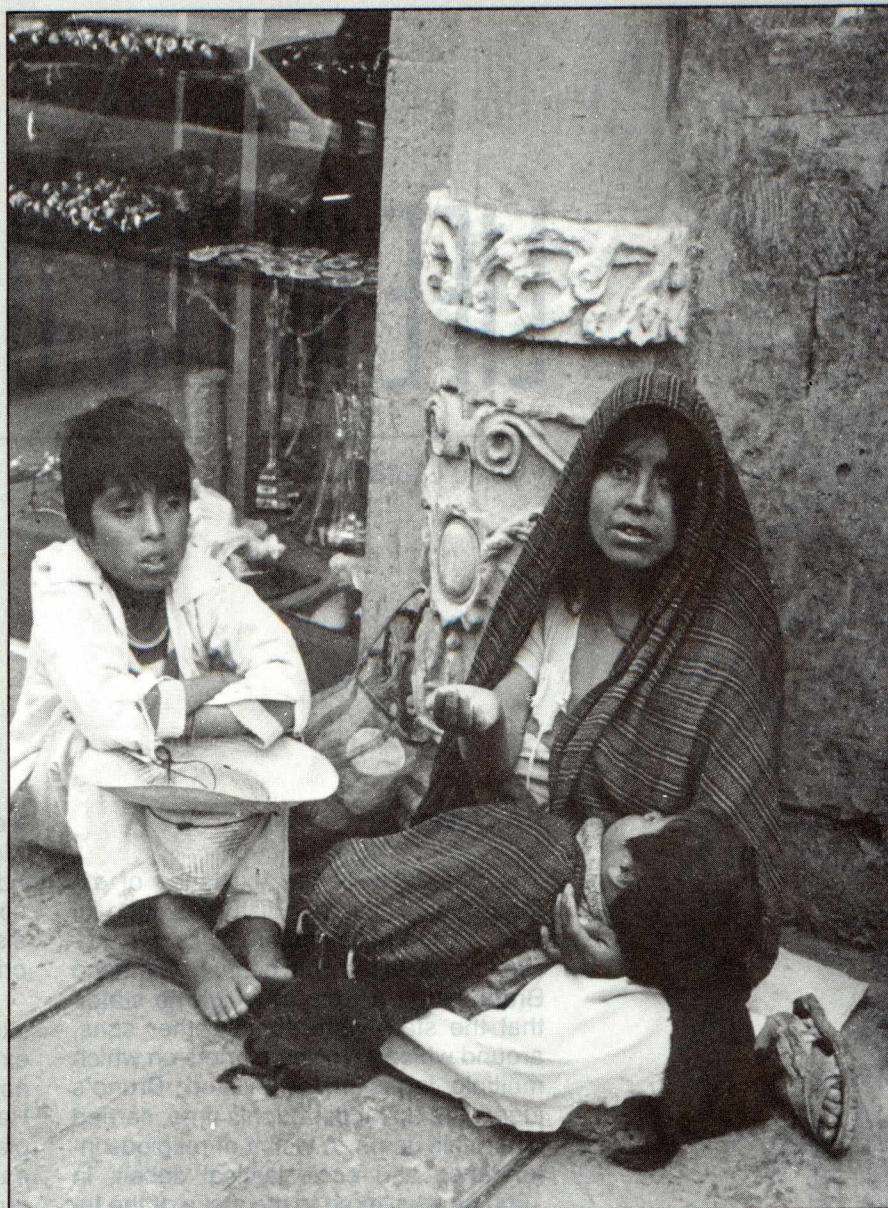
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responsibility for these needs and rights.

Scattered throughout the vast Mexican legislation there are fifty-some laws concerning children, but a considerable number of them, besides being out of date, refer to legal procedures related to parental relations and reduce the child to the status of a mere object. The lack of effectiveness of this legislation was brought to light in October of this year when a public forum about the situation and rights of children took place in Mexico City. This forum was proposed by the Assembly of Representatives of the Federal District and one proposition which received widespread support was the creation of a protective code for children which would include all laws referring to minors and eliminate contradictions that exist in the present legislation.

In another vein, the quality of life of the majority of the population has deteriorated as never before. Fundamentally, this has been the result of the application of a series of economic measures, most importantly the reduction of public spending, a fact which is recognized even in official circles. Added to this are the negative effects of these measures on employment and salaries. Putting aside the reasons which are used to justify these economic policies, no one can deny that children are the immediate victims of cuts in preventive medicine, maternal-infant care and education programs, and of poverty in general.

Recently, the Federal budget for 1990 was made public and in it an



And the rights of children? Photo from the Hermanos Mayo Archives.

increase in public spending is established. It is obvious that the levels of health and education programs will only be able to recuperate the levels reached a decade ago if this tendency continues. Meanwhile, nearly a whole generation of Mexicans, who were born fifteen years ago, have suffered the consequences of this situation.

The statistics are terrifying and speak for themselves, but until now they have only created sensationalism and seem to be quickly forgotten.

A society's development can be measured in many different ways. With current scientific and technological advances and the unfolding of democratic aspirations of many peoples, new indicators have emerged. But it cannot be denied that the proportion of

children who enjoy normal mental and physical development reflects both the degree of satisfaction of basic necessities for the population in general and the concern of its government and of society for the future of new generations. □

#### Bibliography

<sup>1</sup>*La situación de las madres y niños en México.* (The situation of mothers and children in Mexico). UNICEF-Mexico, 1987, (mimeographed copy).

<sup>2</sup>Calculated from the report entitled *Estado mundial de la infancia.* (The International Situation of Children). UNICEF. 1987.

<sup>3</sup>*Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos.* (Political Constitution of the United States of Mexico). Article 4.