Consultations with children on their priorities for the post-MDG framework

BRAZIL

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May 2013

Cover photo: Brazilian children pictured were not part of these child consultations.
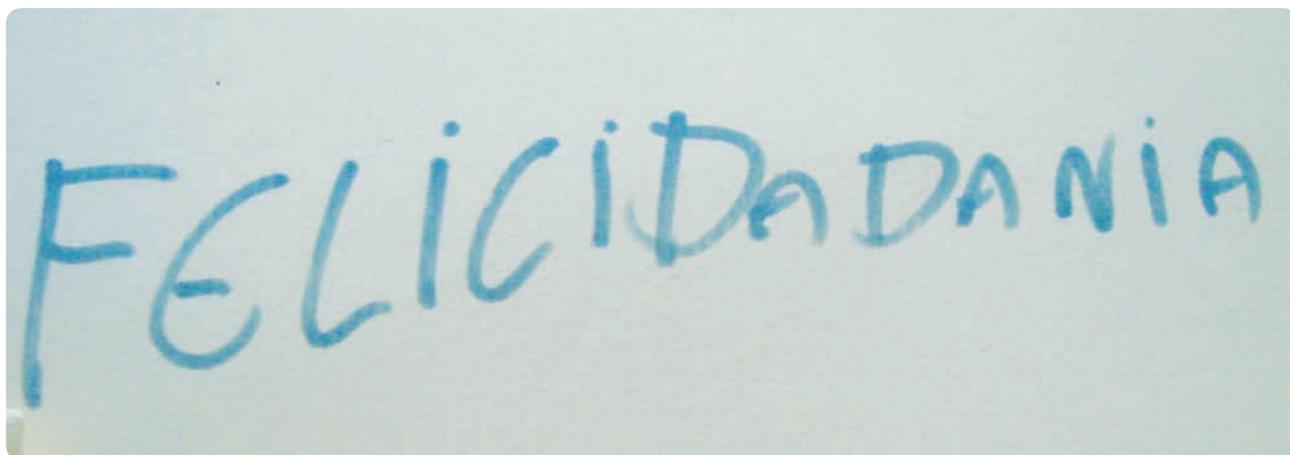
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Figure 1 A new word created in one of the groups by a boy of 14 to express what he considered important to improve the lives of children. In English this word would be a mixture of Happiness/Citizenship

Introduction

"Children are not really understood. Adults think children know nothing." (boy, 12)

This report presents the findings from research carried out in Brazil as part of a worldwide consultation involving seven countries with over 600 children. In Brazil, the research was carried out with nine focus groups of children and adolescents who currently live on the streets or are at high risk of losing parental care.

The purpose of this research is to give these children, whose current status is considered extremely precarious, a voice with a view to raising the bar on priorities for the post-Millennium Development Goals (MDG) agenda. The goals, which expire in 2015, were established by the United Nations (UN) in 2000, following an analysis of the major problems the world was facing. These are:

- eradicating extreme poverty and hunger
- achieving universal primary education
- promoting gender equality and empowering women
- reducing child mortality rates
- improving maternal health
- combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases
- ensuring environmental sustainability
- developing a global partnership for development.

Before the final deadline for the evaluation of the achievements of these goals, organisations throughout the world are undertaking consultations with a view to proposing new themes for the post-MDGs agenda.

In Brazil these consultations were carried out by the non-governmental organisations Associação Brasileira Terra dos Homens (ABTH)and Organização de Direitos Humanos Projeto Legal who have worked with their partners to bring children and adolescents together to participate in this research.

The research started on 29 November 2012, with a break due to the end of year holidays, and was completed in March 2013. Nine groups were formed in Brazil and a total of 71 children and adolescents took part.

Methodology

The consultations took place through focus groups with children aged between 8 and 17 from the following categories:

- children being cared for in extended families
- children living with one or both parents in violent communities
- children and adolescents living in foster families
- children and adolescents living in refuges
- children undergoing Youth Probation Programmes[1].

The methodology used for the consultations was devised by Family for Every Child and tested in India and Guyana. In October 2012 a webinar was run to brief and train the research staff involved. In Brazil the consultations were set up by ABTH and Organização de Direitos Humanos Projeto Legal, who used their network of partners to bring together the children and adolescents to participate.

The 71 children and adolescents we heard in the 9 focus groups are from general assistance or special programmes for children at risk. These are:

- temporary residential care for children and adolescents who have lost the family ties
- a Foster Care Program, which provides shelter to children and adolescents at personal or social risk, victims of violence and/or at risk of being abandoned, who live with foster families temporarily until they can be returned to their original family
- the Raízes Locais (Local Roots) programme developed by ABTH to help those children who have lost or are without parental care and who live in violent communities
- the Youth Probation Programme, for adolescents who have committed an offence.

In these groups the children were identified by category and age as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Children who took part in the consultations in Brazil by age and gender

Category	8 - 12 years		13 - 17 years		Total
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	
Children in the care of extended family	1	1	/	/	2
Children living in residential care	2	6	4	11	23
Children living with one or both parents in violent communities	3	11	/	/	14
Children living in foster families	7	4	/	/	11
Adolescents undergoing Youth Probation Programmes	/	/	19	2	21
Total	13	22	23	13	**71**
	35		36		

1 These Youth Probation programmes are used when adolescents commit an offence which goes against the Brazilian Penal Code. But whilst the law specific to children and adolescents states that children cannot be punished in a criminal sense, specific measures exist to afford a custodial sentence (either in semi-closed or semi-open institutions) or those which are not custodial (warnings, obligations to make good the damage, community or supervised probation).

Two different formats were used for these sessions, one for children aged 8-12 and another for adolescents aged 13-17, each lasting approximately two hours. The types of activities employed were designed to help us learn, in a playful and participative way, things that make children feel happy and secure and unhappy and insecure, and those things which they consider important to improve their own lives and the lives of children in their community and the world. We used techniques which helped to facilitate dialogue and a collective bringing together of priorities using pictures, words, collage etc.[2]

All the sessions were introduced with an explanation of the Millennium Development Goals. We told them that their opinions were of the utmost importance for both improvements in the lives of children throughout the world and in the context of political decisions which were to be taken. Once we have finished all the consultations we intend to pay a return visit to the children who participated, to share the results.

For one or two of the groups we had to adapt the methodology a bit in view of who actually attended the meetings. Even though we tried to arrange the meetings so they were single-gender, sometimes the groups were in fact mixed but with a majority of one sex or the other.

Also, in one of the two groups some of the participants were 18 years old. In both cases as the youngsters had been invited by their own projects and had agreed to participate, we decided to allow them to stay.

Likewise, in these same two groups, there was a higher number of participants than that proposed in the methodology, due to the fact that the partner projects had brought the groups together. In this case and knowing what a huge investment the youngsters had made to participate in the groups, we decided it would be interesting to allow all who came to take part.

In all the situations cited, the researcher did not consider this would affect the groups unfavourably and the results were considered to be satisfactory.

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2 For more details, please visit the Family for Every Child website: http://www.familyforeverychild.org/knowledge-centre/post-mdg-consultations-children-toolkit
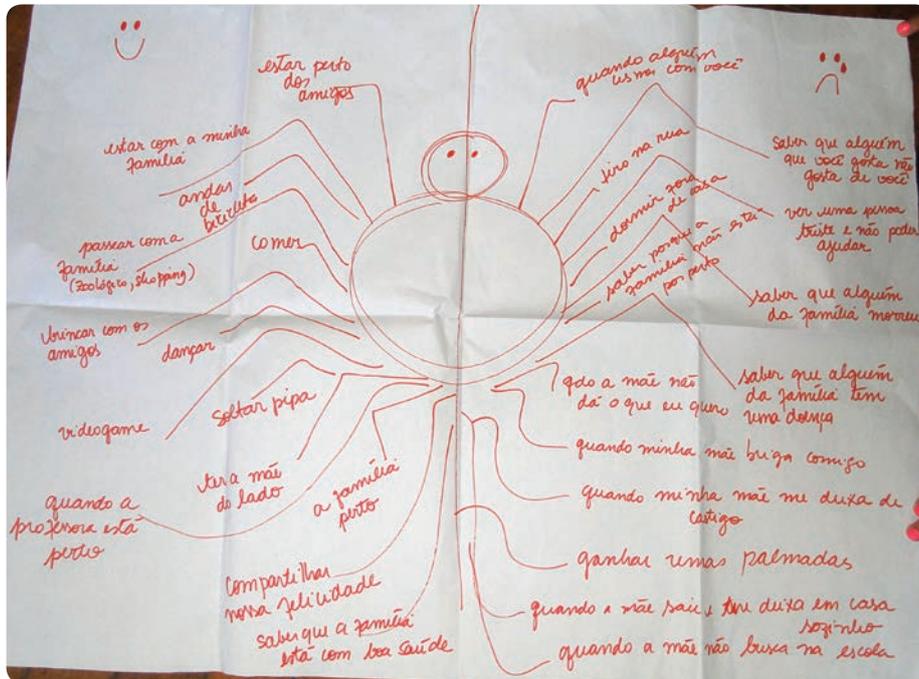
Figure 2: Poster created by the children living in extended families and children who live with one or both parents in violent communities showing the things which make them happy/secure and unhappy/insecure using a tool called a spider diagram used in the research

Figure 3: A group of adolescents who are undergoing a Youth Probation Programme in the midst of creating the posters showing the things which make them happy/secure and unhappy/insecure.

Results

The experience of listening to children in the hope of giving a platform to those who have rarely had a voice in the political arena was extremely important and the results offer great assistance with the building of a more just world where children can grow up in a healthy and secure environment.

The factors which make the children feel happy and safe

The method used to encourage debate around the things which are important in children's lives was to get them to think about what makes them feel happy and makes them feel safe. This trigger had a positive effect and worked well, in that it allowed the children and adolescents to talk about normal everyday subjects in a light and unconstrained manner. The key factors that make children feel happy are:

1. Living together in a family
The presence of family in the life of a child was understood to be a primordial instinct to promote happiness and security. In all the groups, closeness and living together as a family with parents, siblings, nieces and nephews, their children (in the case of adolescents) and even pets were mentioned. They showed a concern as to the health and well-being of the families and they consider that their own happiness is directly related to the happiness of that family.

> *"My security comes from having everyone I love at my side"* (girl, 15)

> *"What makes me feel safe is having my mother at my side"* (boy, 16)

> *"Money doesn't make you happy because it's not going to bring my family back"* (girl, 15)

2. Respect and protection of children's human rights
Respect and protection of children's human rights were noted as being one of the key factors which ensure that children feel safe and secure. The following were mentioned: love, affection, understanding and the ability to share good times. In general terms, all agreed that children need their rights to be protected to grow up happy and healthy. In this respect the right to good nutrition was also mentioned.

> *"Show love towards the children in residential care, more homes and food for the children"* (girl, 10)

> *"The mayors can give more shelter and food to the homeless children"* (boy, 12)

Amongst the responses which touched on this theme, two brothers aged 9 and 11, both in the foster care programme, together with a third brother who is a wheelchair user (and didn't participate in the group) said they felt happy when "I see someone showing respect to an older person" and "when those with mental or physical disabilities are shown respect".

Other values mentioned were the law, liberty, solidarity and compassion.

"If you can help, then help. If you can't, make an effort" (boy, 12)

3. Education

Education is seen as a priority in the lives of the children, not only in terms of the future but also the feelings of security which the presence of a teacher brings. Children spoke about the importance not only of attending school but also of paying attention in class ("becoming smart at school"), studying for exams and moving up a year.

"Every child needs to go to school, and know how to read and write. The adults also" (girl, 9)

However, failures in access to education were also noted, from lack of attendance at schools, a shortage of teachers and enough school places for all children, to difficulties often faced by parents in actually getting their children to schools and classes.

"Some of the children don't go to school because there's no one to take them" (girl,11)

The existence of violent situations were also mentioned as being one of the difficulties boys and girls were facing in terms of access to schools. Frequent shooting incidents on the streets resulting from police raids on drug traffickers were mentioned.

"Due to the police in the favela, mothers don't allow [the children] out to go to school" (girl, 9)

In this respect, the importance of the education received from parents in the home was also mentioned.

"The parents need to educate their children" (boy, 9)

One girl of 16 who was completing a youth probation programme told how she had ended up with proceedings against her due to a fight at school. She felt she had been wronged because the school couldn't deal with the problem themselves and instead sought external intervention.

"I had to leave my school, study at a state school, something which I have never done. I feel ashamed. I'm a girl and it's not the same as for a boy, this idea of a youth probation programme."

4. Relationships with friends

Friendships were mentioned in all the groups. Children understand that strengthening emotional bonds is good for improving happiness and the feelings of security. They believe that this is a route to the world being a better place.

"friendship + love = a happy world" (girl, 11)

"My friends make me very happy" (girl, 16)

For children in residential care, these bonds were considered to be of great importance to overcome the absence of family.

> *"When I am frightened at night I stay with my friends"* (boy, 9)

5. Culture, sports and leisure

One of the central themes coming out from what the children said was in relation to access to cultural, sporting and leisure activities. They mentioned activities such as the theatre, travel, celebrations and games like skipping, flying a kite, football, Capoiera[3], singing and dancing, "courting", playing video games, riding a bike and watching television.

6. Religion

One other aspect mentioned by the children was their religious beliefs, asserting that to believe in God is to know that God is with them and makes them feel safer.

7. Access to material goods

This aspect was mentioned mainly by the children in residential care and adolescents in trouble with the law, who highlighted the desire to have access to consumer goods like cars and Christmas presents.

This was pretty significant, especially in relation to the differences between the sexes as many of their responses were based on controversial statements about their love relationships.

> *"Women like money. You take a stroll through the favela and if you have any cash they love it. If you go to the shopping centre with a real stunner, the security guards follow you but show your money at the counter and everything changes and even the shop assistant gains"* (boy, 17)

It is important to emphasise here that many of the adolescents justify their turning to crime (or "vidalouca[4]") as a means of earning money in order to have access to consumer goods like mobiles, trainers and famous brand clothes.

> *"The adults say they deal (drugs) to work and earn money. And meanwhile the kids are on the street selling sweets[5]"* (boy, 11)

It's interesting to highlight that when asked what the difference was between the things that made them feel happy and secure and the things which make other kids who live in other situations feel happy, many argued that rich kids only feel happy when they get computers and pocket money.

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3 Capoeira is a Brazilian art form which combines fight, dance, rhythm and movement.
4 "Vidalouca" is a life lived outside of the law.
5 Translators note: Bala generally means sweets as in the way kids sell these to passing motorists etc in Rio but it can also mean Ecstasy tablets – from the context I think this to be too extreme.

Adolescents who are already in conflict with the law emphasised the use of firearms and clashes with the police in relation to issues of safety and security. For these adolescents as well as being a sign of power, being armed is felt to be the only way to protect themselves against confrontations with the police.

The factors which make the children feel unhappy and insecure

1. Violent environments
Violent incidents appear to be what make children feel most unhappy and unsafe, especially the 'everyday' incidents, like shootings on the streets and police operations, many times during the day and at times when the streets are busy with people and children.

> *"In many places more bad things than good things happen"* (boy, 10)

> *"There's loads of people who kill and think that's good. They are really bad people"* (boy, 10)

Other factors mentioned were drug dealing, fights, child beatings, rapes, murders, robberies, kidnapping of children and domestic violence.

> *"I feel insecure when my father uses drugs and becomes violent, but I didn't mean to talk about this in front of the girls"* (girl, 15)

> *"My heart can't take any more of this shame, it needs love, peace, equality, hope"* (girl, 16)

> *"There's only dealing because it's illegal. They have to legalise it and then all this will stop and it will be sold commercially. Imagine Alcântara where drugs are legal!"* (boy, 18)

In respect to drug dealing in their communities, it became apparent that almost all of them had been involved.

> *"A child using a firearm makes me so angry and insecure"* (boy, 9)

> *"It's not great a child seeing firearms where they live. We have to use them but it's not great the others seeing this"* (boy, 16)

One other point worthy of mention is in relation to the effect that the Police Pacification Unit[6] (UPP) has had on their communities and in other shanty towns in Rio de Janeiro:

> *"The UPP brought more arms over here. Now everyone has a rifle, no longer just a gun."* (boy, 17)

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6 The Police Pacification Unit is a public security policy of the Government of the State of Rio de Janeiro based on military actions deployed in poor areas of the city, more commonly favelas, controlled by drug dealers.

2. Inequalities and injustices

Another much mentioned matter which came up when the children and adolescents were questioned about the things which make them unhappy, was referred to by some as "bad things about the whole world". This seems to be situations in which they feel impotent in terms of social injustices and inequality.

> *"What makes me very sad is seeing people sleeping on the streets without anything to eat or anywhere to sleep"* (girl, 17)

Children also spoke of "seeing people in need", "seeing a sad person and not being able to help", misery, cowardice, lies, "doing bad things because we have been told to", "taking things which are not yours" and generally mocking others.

> *"A rich boy when he reaches 18 takes some qualifications, a poor one gets his social security number card"* (boy, 17)

3. Feelings of loss and abandonment

In all of the groups the fear of being abandoned was the recurring response when asked about what things leave them feeling insecure. Children spoke of "not being loved", "feeling exposed", "when your mother goes out and leaves you home alone", "when your mother doesn't come and pick you up from school", "when you love someone but they don't love you", "lack of attention", "when people won't talk to me", "knowing why your family are not close by", and "it's awful being left alone".

> *"I'm scared of ending up all alone, abandoned"* (girl, 15)

> *"I'm scared of ending up alone, without any affection, or love. Without friends, family, an adult to help me and teach me. To be alone is like you are invisible and with no one to look out for you or to chat with"* (girl, 12)

Added to this the idea of loss was frequently associated with unhappiness and insecurity, from losing people you love (family members, teacher, friends, God), to material losses such as toys, Facebook, television and even "losing school", "losing theatre and capoeira classes".

4. Penalties and punishments

In this respect it was interesting to try to understand the differences in responses between the two different age groups: whilst in the 8-12 year old groups the children stated that sometimes "they get punished" usually by their mothers and sometime with a "few slaps"; on the other hand the adolescents, already in trouble with the law, mentioned prison, privation and isolation.

> *"People should just think a bit and put themselves in our shoes"* (boy, 17)

Children's priorities for change

Table 2 was put together from the responses given by the children when asked to write on cards what is needed to improve their lives. The children were invited to put up a poster and then to place their cards on it, placing that which they thought most important in the middle, low priority at the edges and medium priority between the two. From these results we can see that different children placed some of the issues mentioned in dfifferent categories which is why they appear more than once on the table.

Most of the issues included in the table have already been discussed above, but what stands out are comments on the eradication of hunger and access to good nutrition. This theme crops up in two important categories (high and low) and some interesting remarks were made like poorer children should have a right to good nutrition and that no child should be allowed to go hungry on the streets. Many children consider that infant mortality is directly linked to lack of food.

Figure 4: Collage showing the priorities for adolescents living in residential care

Table 2: A summary of priorities for improvement in the lives of children as identified by the children who took part in the consultations

High Priority	Medium priority	Low priority
• To stay close to mother/family/ all children must have love and affection/to be happy/have more friends/more attention to be given to children and adolescents	• To have good friends/we need partners/friendship	• To love our neighbours/affection/ love/respect for others/peace/ honesty/purity/to have more hope
• To eradicate extreme poverty and hunger/no child should go hungry/food for homeless children/a ban on leaving hungry children on the streets	• More residential care/help those who are in need/shelter for children who deserve it and those who don't/mayors can provide more shelters for homeless children	• Willpower/help/confidence/unity
		• Peace/fraternity/liberty/solidarity/ charity/consideration/truth/ discipline
• To enjoy good health/have a health centre for the residents of the community/health	• To receive a good education/to be able to attend school	• To have a good diet/more food for the children in need
• To reduce infant mortality	• To study/public universities/be more intelligent	• To have a good sense of humour/to think
• The world of a child needs fun things like parks, cinema, zoos, games/leisure and sports activities	• To meet new people	• To promote gender equality
	• To have a united family/have mother at your side/parents must educate their children/parents must take more care of their children/parents to have a more important role in their children's lives	• To improve maternal health/ improve the maternities
		• To care for the planet
• To have an NGO like ABTH close to home	• To stop throwing litter on the ground/to improve the community/ to improve transport, tarmacked roads, sanitation, water	• Medicines/to improve the hospitals
• School/to improve studies/more school	• Family/home	• Dance/music/sports/leisure
• To stop the violence/ to stop the killings/to stop child exploitation/ to stop drug dealing	• Work/opportunities for employment/ money	• To have family close by/to have a house
• Tarmac in the community/ sewage treatment	• Equality/to stop prejudice/justice/ peace/less violence	• Tarmac the roads
	• Toys	
	• More love in life/to be more respectful of people/to respect parents/more attention/ happiness/ joy/patience	
	• To believe in God, nature	

Differences between the Groups

Even though gender equality appeared to be low priority, when the children were questioned on what were the important things to them to improve their lives, this was a theme which led to much discussion in the groups, especially during the initial presentation on the existing MDGs and also when questioned about whether their answers applied to both boys and girls. Generally all tended to agree that differences between men and women do exist, with many remarks from children suggesting prejudice against women.

We frequently heard from the boys that men are better and stronger than women.

> *"A man who hits a woman is a coward and the woman who gets hit is shameless"* (boy, 9)

> *"A woman is only good for food"* (boy, 11)

On the other hand, it was the girls who made remarks about aspects where women are still worse off in relation to men:

> *"There are many differences, a woman has to look after the house, a woman works hard and the man just stays out all the time"* (girl, 16)

> *"Sometimes women do the same work but earn less"* (girl, 15)

> *"Women have to get permission from their husbands to do anything"* (girl, 16)

> *"A woman is at the bottom of the pile"* (girl, 15)

> *"A man is not allowed to hit a woman, but they do"* (girl, 12)

What stands out here is that in terms of love and relationships, the most common discussion areas highlighted the existence of gender bias especially in the adolescent group. The girls said that if the boys go with lots of girls they are 'studs' whilst if the girls go with lots of boys they are 'sluts'.

Then the boys said that in the favelas[7], the girls are only interested in fame and money and that it's hard for them to find a girl who is interested in them as a person.

> *"The girls don't want to miss the fun and want us bank rolling them in the favela. Passion soon disappears, what they want is fame. Then they complain when we shave their hair off[8]. There are girls who won't even take our money, now they are great"* (boy, 17)

Another significant difference noted between the groups of children and adolescents is with respect to expectations for their care and protection in the future. The children made many references to the need for protection and family and are more optimistic in relation to the future, whilst the adolescents

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7 Favelas are typical Rio and elsewhere shanty towns but with infrastructure etc.
8 Reference to a form of punishment for girls who deal in drugs.

were more pessimistic, and have no hopes for a better life. They expressed both resentment and a sense of resignation about the violence and the hardships they experience.

> *"The problem we have here is that no one wants us at the school. Ex-offenders, trouble makers, ex-dealers. Teachers don't want to teach boys who have been in trouble with the police"* (boy, 16)

> *"I'm going to carry on with my life outside of the law, I tried to get a job but nothing"* (boy, 18)

> *"The future will be just like Iraq! Urban warfare! I'm scared of dying, being shot"* (boy, 16)

> *"The only opportunity we have is to be an assistant to the stone mason...to earn just that I'm not interested. It's better to be with my friends, selling cocaine.[9] I've already made a thousand reais just for one Saturday!"* (boy, 16)

> *"Our experiences make us different to other people. Only those who have lived it know what it's like. You see everything differently now. You already have a distrust of the whole world"* (boy, 17)

> *"In this life no one has a friend really, I had one but have no more"* (boy, 17)

Another difference between the two groups was in relation to the need for affection on the part of the children living in residential care or with foster families, compared to those who live with parents or extended families. The former spoke a lot about the need for love and affection towards children, they talk about the importance of there being love whilst in residential care and of their seeing some improvements.

> *"The mayors could set up more shelters and provide more food to those children who are homeless"* (girl, 9)

> *"The girls out there [not in residential care] think differently. Here, all we think about is running away, and using drugs and then we lose our schooling from fooling around"* (girl, 15)

> *"I'm scared of losing my sense of joy if I stay in residential care for too long"* (girl, 12)

Furthermore it was also observed that both the children and the adolescents who had been in residential care for a long time (up to eight years in some cases) displayed a certain distancing from the external realities, finding it difficult to understand the political agenda laid out in this study. Their statements and demands were centred on the more minute issues of individual liberties and what they are allowed to do within the limits of the child protection system. Most of them referred to leisure activities and access to consumer goods like toys and computers.

So in a sense, what featured strongly in children's responses to what makes them happy, is the fact that they value those activities which are permitted in residential care, like watching TV and playing

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9 Known as "Pó de quinze" a quantity of cocaine sold for R$15,00.

video games. Likewise, what makes them unhappy revolves around the punishments that deprive them of these activities. Even though we can understand these comments to be indicative of the need for the children to have access to these play activities, one can also identify obstacles/barriers to political awareness and sociability, imposed by the care system.

When questioned on the important things that would improve their lives and those of other children, the majority of children in residential care said they need more solidarity, fraternity, affection etc., reinforcing their sense of dependence which many show and which they believe to be irreversible, that is, that they will always rely on "the good will" of others to survive.

At the same time, despite complaining of the limitations like restricted timetables and very little liberty to go out, they also said that residential care is important in their lives in relation to the difficulties they have had to face, which showed how insecure and vulnerable they felt in the outside world.

> *"Here we have things other don't have. We have clothes, food. There are children out there [outside the refuge] who have nothing"* (girl, 15)

Conclusion

These consultations with children and adolescents on the subject of the post-MDG framework enabled us to give voice and visibility to children who are commonly excluded from policy debates, but for whom government policies in areas such as child protection can have a major impact on their lives. We heard some strong policy statements from these children which support a need for continued work on the themes included in the current MDGs, like ending hunger, giving access to health and education to all children, as well as other more material concerns, such as improvements in urban public transport and tarmacking the streets.

Children also raised a number of other non-material issues which are not included in the current MDGs and must be addressed when devising new goals for the post-2015 development framework. In particular, the children and adolescents we spoke to emphasised the importance of building emotional relationships in their childhood to maintain close family ties. Even when the children understand why they are kept away from their families (many of which involve violent settings) they want to return home to live with their families.

Another very important point is in relation to developing urgent policies for combating violence in areas where police raids and frequent exchange of gunfire with drug traffickers puts the lives of inhabitants, including children, at risk. These violent situations are generally in the context of extreme poverty and inequality, reinforcing the urgent need to develop social policies which distribute wealth. At the national level, we can conclude that the Brazilian children we spoke to are expecting those who govern to promote a more just and egalitarian world, where they can live in healthy and safe environments, with their families and with access to those rights guaranteed to them by the Brazilian Constitution.

At the global level, we urge the Government of Brazil to use their considerable influence at the United Nations to highlight the importance of children growing up safe and protected within families in the

debates around post-2015 development framework. In particular, we suggest the inclusion of a goal and targets on child protection in the post-2015 development framework. For example:

Goal:
All children live a life free from all forms of violence, are protected in conflicts and disasters, and thrive in a safe, caring family environment.

Targets
• End all forms of violence against all girls and boys
• End the unnecessary separation of children from families

Using learning from the Brazilian context, we feel that it is essential that any strategies designed to reduce violence against children address the root causes of this violence, such as the inequality and consumerism highlighted by the children who took part in these consultations. We note that the children we spoke to challenge policies which only address violence through violent means and do not address its root causes. We therefore also urge the Government of Brazil to highlight the importance of a holistic framework, which recognises the linkages between issues such as education and poverty and violence. We further call on the Government of Brazil to highlight the central importance of equity in the debates around the post-2015 development framework, and the value of consulting with and listening to children, including the most excluded groups.