

Perceptions, Persecution and Pity: The Limitations of Interventions for Homelessness in Developing Countries

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Abstract

Interventions for homelessness in developing countries are frequently negative and unhelpful. They tend to exist in an environment of hostility, suspicion and apathy towards homeless people. This environment is cultivated and enhanced by negative and derogatory language and images used by politicians, the public and the media in their portrayal of homeless people as unemployed, beggars, drunks and criminals. Findings from a recently completed study of homelessness in nine developing countries suggest that this perception is largely false. This article argues that, until the popular misconception of homeless people is corrected, even the most well-intentioned interventions will have little long-term effect.

Introduction

Language used to describe homeless people in the literature is broadly construed. It includes media images, sound bites and defamatory rhetoric, as well as policies and programmes that convey mainstream society's message of power, influence and authority. The messages that raise a number of dilemmas can become tools of manipulation. Homeless individuals may be silenced by such power relationships, control mechanisms and by messages contained in popular media. (Daly, 1996: 6).

It has been well argued that perceptions of homelessness affect attitudes to policy. A study by Pellegrini *et al.* (1997) in America found that self-identified Republicans had significantly greater perceptions than self-identified Democrats that homelessness is a result of internal factors rather than external influences. They also expressed significantly less favourable attitudes toward publicly funded programmes for homeless people than Democrats. The negative and exclusionary language used to describe and discuss homeless people helps to construct homeless people as 'other' and institutionalize their stigmatization, keeping them dissociated and disconnected from society (Olufemi, 2002). Homeless people can be confined to the periphery of public consciousness because the public perception of them is that they violate social norms and offend public sensibilities (Daly, 1996). In turn, this reduces the extent to which homeless people are included in mainstream policy or special solutions are found for their needs.

Negative labelling of homeless people has caused concern in some countries. For example, in the 1980s in Finland homelessness had become so closely associated with a growing alcohol problem that there was an active movement to 'delabel' homeless people in order to distance them from this negative stereotyping. The result is a coded language in which homeless people are referred to as those having 'certain individual needs and inclinations' (Glasser, 1994: 29).

The justification given for the negative perceptions of homeless people fall into four categories.

- **Competitiveness:** economic and business interests, with homeless people on the streets outside their premises, adopt unsympathetic language and attitudes towards them as they are seen to reduce competitiveness with businesses not so affected (Daly, 1996).
- **Worth:** governments and their agencies tend to use language indicative of worthiness for help, or whether they are deserving or undeserving of whatever assistance may be possible. There is an attempt to ration help in a pseudo-logical way by labelling some potential clients as less deserving of help and, therefore, rightly excluded (Neale, 1997).
- **Appearance:** the image of homeless people as scruffy, unkempt, dirty, and repulsive, is used to justify street-clearing operations and improvements in a city's image. It is wholly negative and unsympathetic.
- **Pity, charity and compassion:** religious and philanthropic institutions adopt more sympathetic and positive language in their acceptance and inclusion of homeless people. Nevertheless, these can undermine the potential of many homeless people, labelling them as victims, helpless and in need of charity.

These perceptions are self-reinforcing and serve to keep homeless people excluded, making legitimization, through being housed and employed, more difficult even where both housing and jobs are relatively plentiful. Ill-informed perceptions of homelessness and homeless people guide and form interventions to address homelessness which, most often, serve to reinforce the negative perceptions and stereotypes.

Here we present some of the perceptions, language and imagery used to describe homelessness in developing countries and counter this with what we have discovered about the true characteristics of homeless people. We then discuss how these perceptions condition responses to homelessness. We begin with a brief discussion of our DFID-sponsored study.¹

About the study

The study was undertaken in nine countries,² selected because they present various housing and homelessness situations, degrees of poverty, different cultural experiences and understanding of housing and homelessness, and a range of institutional situations and welfare regimes. In addition, for logistical purposes, they are all countries in which we have good connections and could employ country-based researchers with whose work we are familiar. Finally, they are all countries in which DFID has research interests.

In each country a researcher was commissioned to undertake a study of homelessness as it is understood in that country, using a detailed specification. This focused on several main areas of investigation.³ The work included conducting a local literature review,

1 'Homelessness in Developing Countries' (SSR Research No. ESA 343) is a UK Department for International Development (DFID) supported project. DFID supports policies, programmes and projects to promote international development. The country-specific data were collected by the following researchers: Bangladesh, Shayer Ghafur; China, Hou Li; Egypt, Tarek El-Sheikh; Ghana, staff of the Department of Housing and Planning Research, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi; India, Peu Banarjee Das and Trudy Brassell-Jones; Indonesia, Tjahjono Rahardjo; Peru, Liliana Miranda; South Africa, Olasola Olufemi; and Zimbabwe, Amin Kamete. We acknowledge their valuable work without which we would have been unable to carry out the research. The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors alone.

2 Peru, Ghana, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Egypt, India, Bangladesh, Indonesia and China.

3 The main areas of investigation were: housing theory; current housing supply characteristics; current definitions of homelessness; what the median household would regard as unacceptable shelter; appropriateness of western typologies; numbers of people involved in types of homelessness; systemic causes of homelessness, isolation or exclusion of homeless people; characteristics of homeless people; street children, typologies of street children; causes of street child phenomena; conditions of living; responses to homelessness; actors and agents.

trawling secondary sources for statistical data and undertaking interviews with homeless people and representatives of government and non-government organizations. Specific case studies of 'typical' homeless households were sought through interview and oral testimony. The researchers were also asked to identify, through interviews and media reviews, common perceptions of homeless people and language and terminology used in relation to homelessness. It is this latter part of the work which underpins this article.

The availability of data varied very widely between countries for a number of reasons. First, the number of interviews with homeless people each researcher conducted depended on the specific situation in that country. For example, the researcher in Zimbabwe experienced considerable difficulties and danger in interviewing homeless farm workers who had fled their homes when President Mugabe's 'War Veterans' reclaimed white-owned farmsteads. Second, availability of data is likely to be influenced by the 'service statistics paradox', in that those countries with a willingness to acknowledge homelessness, and to establish services for homeless people, are more likely to be able to locate and count them and, thus, will have more accurate (and higher) figures (FEANTSA, 1999). Third, many countries do not use definitions of homelessness. This is, in part, because of the politically sensitive nature of homelessness. Where housing is seen as a basic right of citizenship, to acknowledge homelessness is to acknowledge a failure of the government to support citizens or that the social system is failing (Jacobs *et al.*, 1999). The lack of 'official' definition was complicated further by cultural differences in relation to homelessness (Tipple and Speak, 2005). For example, the languages used in the study areas in Ghana do not even have a word for homelessness, as 'home', in its broadest sense, tends to be related to family and kinship. Therefore, only those people without any family anywhere, however remote, could be homeless.

Definitions of homelessness

The basic aim of the research was to attempt to establish a definition or, more likely, a range of definitions of homelessness that can be used in developing countries. Thus, we did not begin with a definition of our own. In the preliminary work from which this research resulted,⁴ Springer (2000: 479) concludes that:

there are as many classifications and definitions of homelessness as there are different points of views. A definition of homelessness might refer to a special housing situation, to a special minimum standard, to the duration and the frequency of a stay without shelter, to lifestyle questions, to the use of the welfare system and to the being part of a certain group of the population, to the risk of becoming houseless and to the possibility to move or not if desired.

We were drawn to a continuum approach through either a homelessness continuum or a home-to-homelessness continuum (Watson and Austerberry, 1986). At one end of the latter, more all-encompassing continuum lie satisfactory and secure forms of housing and at the other lies sleeping rough. Similarly, Neale (1997) sees homelessness as a highly ambiguous and intangible phenomenon which lies at one end of housing need/experience. She argues that, as homelessness is integral to the housing system and inseparable from other aspects of housing need, theories of homelessness and policies to tackle it cannot be separated from other aspects of 'housing'.

One of the obvious features of the people who might be included as homeless in many countries is that many of them do have shelter of some sort. Many households who are living in informal settlements, who have poor services, or whose tenure is not up to a standard regarded as appropriate by the government, may be included in the

4 This research arose out of the preparation of a UNCHS (Habitat) report on homelessness (UNCHS, 2000).

homeless category, particularly for census purposes. They would be at the top end of the homelessness continuum, where housing conditions just fall short of measures of adequacy. One of the main topics of interest in setting up the research was whether people who are inadequately housed (and, thus, have need for improvement in their tenure, physical shelter or servicing) could be easily separated from those whose housing circumstances are so acute that they can be regarded as having no shelter worthy of the name. This task is ongoing at present.

In all our countries, there is a link between homelessness and a basic lack of sufficient housing to accommodate everyone. However, the way in which homelessness manifests itself differs between countries. In India and Bangladesh, for example, there are large numbers of people, including family groups, sleeping on city streets and waste ground. Many of these people are minimizing their housing expenditure to maximize other benefits including sending money back to their original rural homes. In both countries people also live in disused buildings and stairwells. In Indonesia, families also live on the streets and in disused buildings but most homeless people live in the poorest squatter settlements, rather than on the street.

It was less common to find a large number of people, especially families, living on the streets in other countries. Indeed, in China, street sleepers would not be tolerated at all. The nearest thing to homelessness is the state of being 'blindly floating' (*mangliu*); having no registration in the place of residence. They tend to occupy areas of poor-quality private housing, often based around villages subsumed into the city (known as *chengzhongcun*) and subsequently developed by house-owners keen to make money from rooming accommodation (Zhang *et al.*, 2003).

In China, as in India and Indonesia, homelessness is also associated with the lack of a registration or ration card, and reflects disconnection from society and the loss of citizenship.

In our case studies, homeless people live in many common locations, especially on open public spaces and government land allocated for other uses. In Egypt, many people live in graveyards. There and in India and Bangladesh, building landings or roof tops are often occupied. In South Africa it is also common to find people squatting in disused buildings, such as warehouses and government buildings.

In Ghana, homelessness is a new phenomenon resulting partly from a recent decrease in the cohesion of extended family networks and partly from ethnic violence in the north. It is manifest mainly in young people living in public places. However, those renting space to sleep within the courtyard of a house are also considered by some to be homeless.

Large-scale squatting, in the form of informally built shelter on public or government land, is common in Peru, India, Bangladesh and South Africa, and to a lesser extent in Egypt. In Peru, those in squatter settlements who do not own a legal title to the land on which they live are officially classed as homeless, regardless of how good a dwelling they construct. However, as soon as legal title is granted they are no longer regarded as homeless, no matter how poor their dwelling. This emphasis on ownership is repeated in Zimbabwe, where anyone without ownership or tenancy of a formal sector dwelling is regarded as homeless (Kamete, 2001; Tipple and Speak, 2005)! In all cases, mass squatting is associated with extremely poor levels of security and services.

We are aware that including informally housed people in mass squatter settlements in the homeless category may be seen to deny the efforts they have made in housing themselves, which are now more generally applauded than condemned. We acknowledge also that to include them lessens the focus on those in the most desperate of circumstances, such as street sleepers in India and Bangladesh. However, as Cooper (1995) notes, definitions of homelessness reflect political priorities, determining our understanding of the issues and how we respond. Within efforts to attain target 11 in the Millennium Development Goals; to achieve 'by 2020 a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers'; we might instinctively want to concentrate on those in most need and least likely to be assisted. However, the arguments for such a focus can most effectively be made within a full understanding of what

countries currently regard as homelessness, whether it is in line with international thinking or not.

In this instance we are attempting to report the policy and practice reality, such as it is in the selected countries, rather than imposing the internationally received wisdom. If we excluded squatters, we would adopt a too sharply focused view of homelessness, much against the trends in industrialized countries where a broader grouping than only those sleeping rough has long been encouraged (Edgar *et al.*, 1999; FEANTSA, 1999). Moreover, many NGO interventions are focused specifically at those who fall through mainstream policy and practice nets. In this spirit, therefore, we include in our discussions occupants of informal settlements at the upper end of the local homelessness continuum. In this article, we identify people who sleep in public places as 'street homeless people'.

Language labelling

A range of negative and judgmental language and images are used to portray homeless people around the world. Sometimes they are light-hearted or jocular, such as the terms *Mukomana* (*musikana*) *wekuseri* meaning boy or girl from the back, used in South Africa, to describe adult lodgers who live in back-yard shacks.⁵ More often there is a broad range of terminology which labels homeless people as personally inadequate, belonging to an underclass. For example, in the Indonesian language the term '*tunawisma*', derived from old-Javanese, literally means 'no (*tuna*) house (*wisma*)'. Thus, unemployed people are called *tunakarya* ('no work'), blind persons are called *tunanetra* ('no eyes') and sex-workers are called *tunasusila* ('no morals'). The Suharto New Order government often used such labels during its three decades of rule.

In Bangladesh we also found labels which emphasize what the homeless person lacks and linking the lack of shelter to destitution. One term used in Bangladesh is *sharbohara*. Broadly meaning 'utterly destitute', it comes from *sharbo* meaning 'all' and *hara* meaning 'the state of not having'. Thus, the inference is that a homeless person has nothing, which is not necessarily the case. This labelling is particularly pertinent to Bengali society, where individual or group identities, based around home and family reputation, are hugely important in locating a person within a social hierarchy. Thus, a woman is the wife or a boy the son of a certain 'home'.

Sometimes terms used are serious and derogatory labels, which serve to condition and reinforce the public perception of homeless people as drunks, mentally ill, unemployed, thieves and beggars. In China, for example, the term '*Jiaohuazi*', meaning beggar, is often used to refer to homeless people.

Perceptions of homeless people differ according to the type of homelessness. For example, people made homeless by disasters are thought of as 'unfortunate' but those considered destitute are thought to be a 'burden on society' (Aashray Adhikar Abhiyan, 2001) and are often harassed and abused. Abusive behaviour is provoked by:

the fear of criminality — particularly of theft and of the consequences of addiction. It involves views on 'idleness' and lack of work, the stigmatisation of occupations as physically dirty, anti-social and illegal (drug [dealing]); and notions of ugliness and of destitution as a challenge to modernity (Harriss-White, 2002: 12).

Here we reflect on some of the more common examples we found in our study and compare the image they portray with the characteristics of homeless people our study highlighted.

- 5 These are free-standing ranges of rooms built in the plots of formal dwellings to provide rental accommodation or just extra space for large households. They may be rudimentary assemblies of recycled materials or masonry constructions. Households occupying them usually share services with the main dwelling.

The 'villain'

The perception of homeless people as criminals is common throughout the world. In Peru, street children are referred to as '*Piranitas*' — little piranhas, implying that they are dangerous. A similar child in Bangladesh is referred to as a thief, illegitimate, or son of a beggar. However, while children do commit petty crimes out of need to feed themselves, the degree to which they are incarcerated exaggerates the seriousness of their alleged offences (El Baz, 1996; Bartlett *et al.*, 1999).

Despite the conditions of Article 40 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), which affords children the same legal protection as adults (with the addition of protection from capital punishment and life imprisonment), there are, no doubt, hundreds of thousands of children incarcerated around the world. Many are held without legal representation or trial and sometimes in the most desperate of conditions. Accounts of torture and murder are commonplace (Bibars, 1998).

In some countries homeless people do not need to actively commit crimes in order to be 'criminals', as states construct various laws, such as the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act (1959) in India, which make vagrancy or begging illegal. Thus, simply being on the streets is cause for arrest. In a statement concerning *Olga Tellis v. Bombay Municipal Corporation* (1985), regarding the eviction of pavement dwellers in Mumbai, the Indian Supreme Court said:

The boys beg. Men folk without occupation, snatch [gold] chains with the connivance of the defenders of law and order, when caught, if at all, they say: who doesn't commit crime in this city? (Bannerjee Das, 2002: 69).

Our study highlights that homeless people are more likely to be victims than perpetrators of crime. In almost all countries, our researchers report that it is uncommon for adult street homeless people to commit crimes, especially violent crimes.

Street homeless people are, however, the victims of theft and abuse, both verbal and physical. Many struggle to keep their few belongings or meagre earnings safe. In both India and Bangladesh this was perceived to be a major problem. Assault and sexual abuse are common against women, young boys and girls. Moreover, they are frequently perpetrated by police or other authoritarian figures such as security guards.

The 'beggar'

One of the most common public perceptions of homeless people is that they are all beggars. The Joint Commissioner of Police (Traffic) in New Delhi has been quoted as saying, 'the city is plagued by the presence of beggars' (*Hindustan Times*, 2002).

However, in a study in Calcutta, it was found that only 8% of homeless people are involved in begging or marginal work such as rag picking (Jagannathan and Halder, 1988). The majority of homeless people in India are casual labourers who often travel long distances across the city every day to reach work, although in Delhi, only 44% of homeless people manage to find work daily (PUCL, 2000).

Similarly in Ghana, whilst popular imagery and perception again portray homeless people as beggars, our study found only around 3% actually engage in begging. The vast majority of homeless people undertake some form of work to earn their livelihoods. In the small sample interviewed for our study, about 53% of the males are head porters and 35% polish shoes for a living. Around 83% of the females are engaged in head portage while 7% sell oranges⁶ or sachets of water.

6 These oranges are sold as drinks. The seller pares away the zest leaving a white sphere from which the base is sliced to allow the buyer to squeeze out all the juice for a convenient drink.

The 'mentally ill'

In some countries, the common perception of people on the streets is of their being mentally ill or personally defective. For example, in Peru, those who live on the streets, in parks or in abandoned buildings, are officially referred to as 'mentally ill people on the streets'.

In Ghana, homelessness, as defined by charitable institutions and non-governmental organizations, refers to beggars, and destitute and mentally ill people who are not under the care of relatives or the extended family and do not have a home. An official at Oxfam's office in Tamale, interviewed for this study, described homeless people in Ghana as '*the mentally ill people whose movement cannot be easily controlled*'.

Not only is mental illness a contributory factor in some people's homelessness but also homelessness is a contributory factor in some people's mental illness. However, what we see here is a perception that homeless people, especially street homeless people, are likely to be mentally ill. Our study found no evidence to uphold this view; the vast majority of even the most destitute of street dwellers must be emotionally robust in order to construct the complex strategies by which they survive.

The 'immoral'

The negative labelling found in the Indonesian 'tuna' terms, especially '*tunasusila*' used for 'women having no morals' is repeated in Bangladesh, where a young homeless divorcee or widowed mother is publicly called a whore, especially if she is homeless, regardless of her sexual activity.

Despite a raft of international legislation meant to protect the rights of women to inherit land and property, homeless women in developing countries are frequently so because of abandonment or widowhood. Domestic violence, a strong factor in homelessness amongst women in the West, is also a major cause of homelessness for women in developing countries. In some parts of Latin America, for example, family violence is pervasive.

There is an arguably stronger international acceptance of the rights of the child to a safe home, through legal instruments such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989. Nevertheless, entrenched cultural attitudes to widows mean that they and their children are often turned out of their homes (Speak, 2005). The stigma of perceived immorality then attaches to the children. Discussing the plight of homeless women and children in Durban, Gray and Bernstein (1994) note that children left with relatives are less stigmatized while their mother is away than when she briefly returns to the village to check on them.

The stigma of immorality leads many homeless families to split up. In the strongly Islamic moral culture of Bangladesh, for example, it is uncommon to find women or girl children living on the streets. When a family becomes homeless, the women will most often be sent to live with relatives whilst the man sleeps rough on the streets. This produces a self-fulfilling prophecy, in which any women or girls who are living on the streets are perceived not to care, or be cared about, and are abused, even being raped.

The 'transient'

In the past, homeless people were often only manifest in the transient individuals seeking work in new places. In South Africa, the use of labels such as '*malunda*' (those who sleep away from home) originated from that time. One ex-homeless man interviewed there recounted:

In the olden days people used to tie their stuff on a stick and put it around their shoulders and they look like a bull hump and they trek from Eastern Cape to Johannesburg. Because they sleep in different places, they used to call them 'Umanlunda', or 'Malunda'.

This reference to homeless people as on the move, with no real location, is common in most countries. For example, a term often used in Indonesia to describe homelessness (though not in official documents) is '*gelandangan*', meaning 'tramp', which is derived from '*gelandang*' meaning to wander. In China, housing reforms introduced in 1988 to change housing from a form of welfare to a commodity, coupled with relaxation of the control over movement between cities, has led to greater choice for Chinese people but also to a growing number of homeless people (Chang, 1996). This group of homeless people is known as '*Mangliu*', which means the 'blindly floating population' (Ye, 1992). Another term, '*Liulanghan*', meaning 'people who are floating or vagrant', is also used to describe homeless people. These terms reinforce the perception of homeless people as being alone and without permanence. In reality, these people are relatively stable, living in '*chengzhongcun*'; villages which have been subsumed into the expanding cities, often as tenants in housing developed by local villagers on their communally owned land (Zhang *et al.*, 2003). Strict policing of Chinese cities means that transient, itinerant street sleepers or informal squatters would not be tolerated.

However, whilst homeless people do suffer extreme insecurity of place and are frequently moved on, the perception that they are all transient, constantly wandering, with their few possessions on their backs, is generally misleading. Even if we only consider pavement dwellers, we can see that they often live together in stable clusters, in some cases for a considerable time. Pavement dwellers in India, and others who squat in small numbers, often collect in small groups and form semi-permanent settlements on the edge of the road or on vacant land plots. Although their dwellings are poor and they do not have access to services, they build social networks and may become an accepted part of the local community, often employed or self employed, performing valuable tasks, such as garbage collection and recycling. Figure 1 shows one group of several households which has settled in a vacant plot at the side of a road in Bangalore. They work as roofing contractors to the booming development industry in the city. Although their living conditions are poor (having no roofs themselves), they have been in the same small and mutually supportive community for several years.

The 'loner'

Perhaps one of the most common stereotypes, perpetuated particularly by cartoons, is that of a homeless person being alone, indeed, generally a lone male. The Spanish term used to refer to homeless people is '*desamparado*' (without protection or comfort from other people), which implies loss of family (Juliá and Hartnett, 1999).



Figure 1 Roofer's huts in Bangalore

Glasser (1994) quotes a definition of homelessness as suggested by Caplow *et al.* (1968: 494):

Homelessness is a condition of detachment from society characterised by the absence or attenuation of the affiliative bonds that link settled persons to a network of interconnected social structures.

The nature and causes of homelessness in developing countries mean that this may not be the case for the majority of homeless people. Dupont (1998) noted, for example, that many of the handcart pullers in the Khari Baoli wholesale market in Delhi Old City group together at night, cook food collectively and sleep on their handcarts in the security of a group. Migrants from the same village, who follow brothers, cousins and friends on a well-travelled migration route to the city, also tend to stay in a group on the pavement.

Moreover, in many countries (in our study, India, Indonesia and China in particular), there has been a rapid increase in the number of households with children living on the street. In India, whilst the majority of homeless people are lone men, either unmarried or married with families residing in their villages, households also exist amongst the homeless population. However, they are more likely to be found in Calcutta, Mumbai and Chennai than in Delhi, where it is unusual for family units to reside on the pavements (Dupont, 1998; Singh and de Souza, 1980). In Calcutta, 37% of homeless people were found to be living with their families (Jagannathan and Halder, 1990). Moreover, the percentage of families among homeless people increased substantially between 1976 and 1987. This increase in homeless families is considered a good indication of their social stability.

In Peru, squatting on poor desert land under makeshift shelters of straw mats and without any form of services is commonplace and included in the definition of homelessness there. In terms of their dwellings, access to services and insecurity, many of these people can be considered as being homeless and likely to remain so for many years. However, like others in comparable circumstances in many countries, they often form tight and supportive social networks as they band together to gain secure title. In some cases, they form community groups to campaign and to improve their environment. If even a small percentage of the millions of people in informal settlements around the world in these circumstances are to be included in a definition of homelessness, the reference to a 'lack of affiliative bonds' presented by Caplow *et al.* (1968) would be inaccurate (Figure 2).



Figure 2 Squatter community groups planting 'community gardens' in Villa El Salvadore settlement in Lima, Peru – a clear demonstration of affiliative bonds

The 'helpless'

Some labelling is unhelpful although intended not to be so. Many advocacy or religious organizations portray homeless people as victims, emphasizing their helplessness. NGOs, for example, routinely use emotive pictures of homeless people to gain sympathy for their cause. Homeless people are also given labels such as 'unfortunate shelterless souls'. Such practices confuse vulnerability with helplessness and do a disservice to homeless client groups.

This is particularly the case for street children, whose visibility on the streets is an emotive issue. However, the act of leaving home and taking up a life on the streets, whilst it exposes the child to all manner of dangers, can also be a mark of control and strength for many children (Beazley, 2003). Indeed, it has been noted that some street children can provide for themselves better than their parents could. We should not confuse vulnerability with helplessness.

Moreover, we should not assume that homelessness is a last resort born of lack of choice. In some cases, a conscious decision is taken not to spend money on accommodation. In doing so people can save money for other important things or send more money back to a rural home (Speak, 2004). We do not suggest that it is acceptable for people to have to make that decision. However, homelessness can be an act of self help and control, rather than an act of helplessness.

The 'noncitizen'

Homeless people and squatters in many developing countries are perceived as 'non-citizens' and have no civic rights and generally no vote. Many countries include squatting as part of homelessness. Indeed, some of the most highly influential NGOs and networks of community organizations, e.g. Homeless International, equate people living in shacks and slums with homelessness.⁷ The residents of *permukiman liar* (illegal settlements) in Indonesia are not registered as citizens of the city (which must be verified with the possession of an identity card or *kartu tanda penduduk* (KTP) issued by the respective local authority). The KTP is the sole defining element for both inclusion and identity. Not having a KTP is a serious offence for which a person can go to prison and be expelled from the city. At a more personal level, even to obtain a marriage certificate one needs to have a KTP. Therefore, in *permukiman liar* it is commonplace to find couples who have been living together for many years who are not recognized as married couples and are not given the rights extended to married couples by the authorities. Consequently, their children are not issued birth certificates, which will be a problem when they are to enter school. Likewise in India, street homeless people do not have ration cards making them entitled to important nutritional supplements, the right to vote and access a range of services. A similar situation also exists in China where *mangliu* are virtually invisible to the authorities.

In many instances, people in some informal settlements have some rights. Moreover, they are often perceived as a political opportunity. For example, in India, local campaigns often focus on promises of settlement formalization and/or slum upgrading in order to secure the votes of the occupants. When an informal squatter settlement is given formal status as a slum, indicating it will be programmed for upgrading, the residents may receive voting rights. A strategic game is played, in which local leaders secure votes in forthcoming elections by placing slums on upgrading programmes. Nevertheless, the vast majority of homeless people can exert no pressure on politicians to improve their situation or to highlight their true characteristics. They are not perceived as equal citizens.

7 These definitional issues are argued in our recent article (Tipple and Speak, 2005).

The reinforcing role of interventions

Our research confirms the common perception of homeless people as 'others'. The cause of their homelessness is perceived to lie in their personal inadequacies (Neale, 1997). This view is perpetuated in the popular media, in articles and cartoons. When constructed upon these largely false perceptions, interventions to address homelessness are frequently unhelpful, even victimizing and harmful. The perception of homeless people as anti-social and unclean leads to clearance operations in every one of the countries we studied. They range from the nightly moving on of people sleeping in public and semi-public locations, such as shopping centres and bus stations, to more concentrated and organized evictions or 'cosmetic' clearances before civic events or to improve the value of land and property (Berner, 1997; 2000). For example, Agbola and Jinadu (1997) discuss the eviction of 300,000 residents of Maroko, Lagos from land they occupied close to a high-income area, where residents were concerned about crime and threats to property values.

Homeless people's efforts to maintain standards of health and hygiene can be thwarted by actions such as those in Joubert Park in Johannesburg, South Africa, where taps were sealed to deny homeless people access to water. This is dangerous as access to water for drinking is of major importance to people who have no facilities of their own. Probably of more importance in our current context is the way this is demoralizing, reducing the homeless people's chance to be clean and increasing the gulf between them and the housed population.

The perception of homeless people as criminals leads to many being arrested and imprisoned without trial. In most Indian cities, for example, the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act is used to clear the streets of homeless people, regardless of their criminality. Street children are particularly hampered by this perception of criminality; with many thousands of children arrested and imprisoned without trial for crimes they did not commit (El Baz, 1996). The behaviour patterns to which they are exposed in prison, and the stigma of being incarcerated, reinforce criminality.

The concept that homeless people do not work not only undermines their vital role in the informal economy but also leads to the development of interventions and initiatives which further hamper their livelihood strategies. For example, night shelters, whilst built in good faith, are generally positioned out of sight and seldom close to the city centre (Vanderschueren, 1998). This overlooks homeless people's need to be close to the city to support opportunistic lifestyles. Moreover, in Delhi, cycle rickshaw drivers and handcart pullers cannot use the Municipal Corporation of Delhi's (MCD) night shelters as they have no safe parking for their vehicles.

Indeed, there is so little storage at these shelters that they are clearly not intended to serve entrepreneurial homeless people who may have valuable stock or equipment. Nine of the Delhi shelters have been closed down in the last four years because of under-occupation, while thousands of people still sleep on the streets at night. Further night shelters have also been threatened with closure because the MCD say they are not being 'used optimally' (*The Times of India*, 2001).

The perception of homeless people as dirty and without personal standards conditions the quality of facilities built for them. In both India and South Africa, night shelters are felt to be both unsafe and dirty and so homeless people prefer not to use them. As one homeless Indian man points out 'the night shelter are too dirty for humans to live in' (*The Pioneer*, 2001).

We prefer sleeping on the pavement. The night shelters are full of bed bugs, the blankets are stinking and, worse, one has to pay for this filthy facility (Menon, 2001).

Interventions to address the growing phenomenon of street children tend to respond to them in one of three ways. Some see the children as villains or criminals, from whom society should be protected. In this context shelter is sometimes used as a mechanism for control (Karabanow and Rains, 1997). In extreme, but not infrequent, cases, many

find themselves in inappropriate institutions such as jail or mental institutions (Bibars, 1998). Despite the assertion of Article 40 of the UNCRC, that imprisonment of children is to be a last resort and for the shortest possible time, street children around the world are frequently arrested for minor misdemeanours and incarcerated for months. In India, street children are regularly arrested for begging and are locked in jail, to be tried later in the beggar's court. In Zimbabwe some street children's centres even collaborate with the police, who use dogs, teargas and truncheons on the children, usually in the dead of night. Arrested children are sent to institutions to be 'screened' and 'reformed' (MSPLSW, 1999). Alternatively street children are regarded as naughty runaways, who should be returned to the safety of their families. However, research shows that the majority of street children run away from home because of extreme poverty or abuse. To return them is, in many cases, to condemn them to a worse life than they can construct for themselves on the streets.

Finally, many interventions for street children see them as helpless and in need of safe custody, housing and morally corrective tuition. Yet it is often an overly authoritarian home which has led them to the streets (Lusk, 1992; Korboe, 1996). They tend to be fearful of adults and resentful of authority. In many cases they are resourceful and mutually supportive, able to find relatively secure accommodation for themselves, amongst their own kind, in the city at night. Indeed, it can be argued that the very act of leaving an abusive, neglectful or poor home is an indication of a degree of agency and control over the situation (Beazley, 2003). Interventions which aim to control and contain street children frequently serve to scare them away. Thus, the children do not even benefit from the education or medical care which such interventions provide (Karabanow and Rains, 1997).

The director of one very well resourced residential project for street children in Bangalore, India, which was visited for our study, commented on the difficulty he has in preventing children from running away and returning to the streets.

It's like a constant war, us against them, just trying to keep them here, they steal from us and run off to the streets, then, when they need more money, they come back, sometimes we have to say 'you can't come back again if you continue like that'.

Conversely, another project in the same city which can only provide education, health care and food, but leaves children to find their own accommodation at night, cannot handle the number of children who come and, more importantly, remain with the project for many years.

The training and development of street-based outreach workers, who work 'with' rather than 'for' street children, using participatory rather than authoritative methods, may be more effective than housing-focused projects. Such outreach has been active in Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico through 'Casa Alianza' outreach teams providing street youth with emergency medical care, HIV education, informal education, and counselling. In Benin, women from the NGO 'Enfants en Situation Difficile' work with girls who have been sold into domestic service, teaching them basic skills and trying to make sure that employers are treating them well (Stevens, 1999). Indeed, some of the best outreach workers have been street children themselves in the past (Copping, 1998).

A misunderstanding of cultural values is probably the cause of much wasted money, spent on well-intentioned but unnecessary projects. One project in Bolivia was established to house and feed the migrant workers, and their children, who visit the cities from the rural Andes every year to trade. Its aim was to provide safe daytime accommodation and education for the children, while their parents worked on the streets, and night shelter for them and their parents. Neither children nor parents chose to use the project, which had overlooked the fact that both saw working and playing on the streets of the city as more appropriate education in a society which values a child's ability to earn (Figure 3).



Figure 3 Bolivian boy learning to earn money in Cochabamba, Bolivia

However, there are examples of interventions which work well because they have not only recognized homeless people's needs but also because they are capable of collaboration and organization. For example, SPARC⁸ formed an alliance with the National Slum Dwellers Federation and Mahila Milan to support 60,000 low-income people in a voluntary move from their settlements beside the railway tracks of Mumbai to make way for improvements to the infrastructure. With the support of these organizations, the people helped to plan their new settlement and moved without forced eviction and without the further impoverishment which usually accompanies such moves (Patel *et al.*, 2002).

Another innovation in Mumbai acknowledges the dignity of street youths in a scheme to provide employment. The police have trained older street children in traffic control over a period of 6 months, given them uniforms and put them to work for the city. The scheme was so successful that it was extended after the first year.

Conclusions

While there is little consistency among countries, it is evident that both official and informal perceptions of homeless people are very poor in developing countries and are likely to be damaging to the way they are incorporated into policy. The lack of useful definitions of homelessness in most countries allows policymakers to forget about homeless people. This is especially acute in China, though recent changes in policy away from 'repatriating' *mangliu* are encouraging. Labels for homeless people may reinforce the 'individual pathology' approach to homelessness (Jacobs *et al.*, 1999), presenting the causes as inadequacies (mentally ill, evictees, refugees); or behaviour (immoral and criminal), but both are unhelpful.

8 Society for Promoting Areas Resource Centres.

The assumption that homeless people are criminals, prostitutes and beggars is unfounded and unhelpful, and laws based upon this should be repealed. The perception that homeless people are solitary and transient is largely inaccurate and not useful. There are increasing numbers who are living in groups and stay in the same place for many weeks or even years. Though they are regarded as beggars, they tend to be in work, albeit sometimes of a fairly marginal sort such as guarding parked cars.

The use of labelling intended to be helpful may also harm the cause of homeless people. Confusing vulnerability with helplessness, many philanthropic agencies use language to extract sympathy for homeless people rather than empowering them to improve their self-image and recognizing their contribution to society.

The perception of homeless people as undeserving of the benefits designed for poor people (rations, land allocations, etc.) through denying them identity cards is particularly cruel and unjust. We have seen that most homeless people work and, therefore, contribute positively to the economy. Through spending their incomes, they are also part of the tax base. Thus, exclusionary language implying non-citizenship is unjust and very damaging.

Underpinned by false perceptions and an apparent apathy to the plight of homeless people, many of the interventions to address homelessness in developing countries will fail to help homeless people. As social safety nets such as extended family support or more official welfare systems break down, there is an increasing risk of insecurity. In placing homeless people outside society and regarding them as 'others' we are in danger of disenfranchising an ever-growing population.

Widening the gap through language of 'otherness' allows the vicious circle of deprivation and exclusion. Thus, a change in attitudes towards homelessness is required. Actions to change attitudes might begin with increasing the understanding of the realities of life on the streets and in the worst housing in cities. If more is known about the causes of homelessness, the lifestyles of homeless people and the contributions they make towards the economy, there is likely to be a more positive attitude towards them. In the short term and at the individual level, advocacy is proving effective but is a constant battle against negative perceptions of homeless people.

Through self enumeration, people in very poor housing in Mumbai (including some on the streets) were able to present the authorities with correct information regarding their age, employment and livelihood activities and lifestyles. This had many positive effects on their lives, not least improved access to housing and loans. It demonstrates how exploding the myths could be very beneficial to homeless people. When municipalities are confronted with the truth about groups of homeless people, including their numbers, how many children are included in that number and what their economic contribution is, they are more likely to respond positively. It is a reversal of the 'service-statistics paradox': they learn the statistics and cannot avoid extending the services.

The activities of NGOs in lobbying to end arrests, imprisonment and abuse of street sleepers by the police (for example, the action taken by Aashray Adhikar Abhiyan, in New Delhi, and SPARC, in Mumbai, to improve the situation for street sleepers) are an important baseline for action. The repeal of hostile legislation could be pivotal for improving homeless people's lives and changing attitudes towards them. The Bombay Prevention of Begging Act (1959) is a case in point. Legalizing street sleeping must be a not-too-distant aim; but meanwhile homeless people should, at the very least, be afforded the rights of other citizens, especially in terms of identity cards and all to which their possession entitles the citizen. If homeless people can be released from their exclusionary labels, helpful interventions are more likely.

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Résumé

Les interventions en faveur des sans-abri réalisées dans les pays en développement sont fréquemment inefficaces et néfastes. Elles se déroulent généralement dans un contexte hostile, suspicieux et indifférent à l'égard de ces populations. Ce contexte est nourri et renforcé par le langage et les portraits négatifs et désobligeants qu'emploient les hommes politiques, le public et les médias lorsqu'ils décrivent les sans-abri comme des chômeurs, mendiants, ivrognes et criminels. Les résultats récents d'une étude sur les sans-abri menée dans neuf pays en développement suggèrent que cette perception est largement erronée. En conséquence, tant que les idées fausses qui courent sur la population sans-abri ne seront pas rectifiées, même les interventions les mieux intentionnées n'auront qu'un effet limité à long terme.