Garbage People/Children of the Street

Mexico City

Martin Trejo, 22, typically makes 20 peso a day, and on a good day, he can make up to 50 working in the landfill sorting glass from wood, and paper from plastic. Though he's up to his knees in other people's waste, surrounded by skinny, sick dogs, aggressive flies and flying garbage on a windy day, he's happy with the job. He believes it is the only alternative is unemployment.

The pepenadores (the garbage people) represent a growing part of Mexico City's population that is living in extreme poverty. Trejo, like thousands of others, not only works in the landfill. He also lives there and has built a small house out of garbage. His closet is in an old cooler, his sofa consists of two orange old bus seats of plastic, and his calendar sporting pictures of naked women is, of course, from last year. Trejo has no electricity, no water, no formal address in the Neza landfill, one of Mexico City's seven landfills.

As a consequence of the currency devaluation in 1994, the GDP per capita dropped over 30 percent to $2,800 in 1995, the severe inequities in income distribution became even more severe, and the number of people living in extreme poverty rose.

"There is not only more inequality," wrote professor of political science Jorge Castanada in his recent book, "The Mexican Shock."

"There is a new inequality--and a new poverty--in the hemisphere. It is produced by the conjunction of the rush to the cities and the disappearance of the high economic growth rates in Latin America between 1949-1980. The large majority of the poor and excluded are now in the cities."

Arturo Buenrostro is a garbage specialist and has his own NGO, called "BIO," which fights to make the lives of the pepenadores more livable. "The average age is 50. They cook and eat out there and have all kinds of stomach diseases. Some children die before they are 10. We are fighting for them first, then for the environment," said Buenrostro who has been garbage-stoned out of the landfills. "They don't like us, because they think we'll take away their jobs. But they can't read or write, and they don't understand what we are trying to do."

According to Buenrostro, the solution is to privatize the whole garbage industry, so the some 25 million inhabitants pay what it cost to get rid off their 20,000 tons garbage a day. Today, the industry is run by a mafia, and the government does nothing about it, because it does not want a political uproar, said Buenrostro. "By charging people what it cost to get rid of the garbage, we would force them to think of their consumption. They'd start buying food without so much packaging, and they'd have to sort their garbage from their home."

Yet, his visions are not visible on the Mexican horizon. With an unofficial unemployment rate in the 50 percent range, the low value of the peso for the Mexicans, and a fight for food and other basics to stay alive, there is not space for environmental considerations. So, Martin continues his job in The Lost City (another name for the landfills).

Three times a week he does get out of the garbage. Next to the landfill, CPJ Neza Ac. has a playground. Here, Martin plays football twice a week with the other pepenadores and the kids in the neighborhood, and then, once a week, there's even a rock concert, he can attend.

Neza Ac. is a part of the coalition "Axis-Urban Courage," that will be present at the Habitat Conference in Istanbul this June. The NGO has been labeled as one of Habitat II's Best Practices projects. It works for young people's rights and their well-being. CPJ Neza has playground for football and rock concerts, a workshop to produce furniture and t-shirts and a kitchen to give out free meals once a day. Here young people not only get their basic needs catered to, they get politically sensitized, and some of them are even led to a new path in life.

Mexico City's Children of the Street

Marceo Antonio, 18, gave his puppy another hug and smiled. He had just come up from his home, a hole in the ground in the center strip of Insurgentes, one of Mexico City' many noisy, smoggy highways. The dirt in his nostrils made him sneeze, and he coughed because of the turpentine he was sniffing. Marceo's smile was not a happy one. He was just shy and high. "If I could chose," he stammered, "I'd leave the street and get a job. But I don't think it is possible."

Marceo does not believe he has a chance to get a better life, ever, he said. He has no hopes for his future and he is not alone. In the overpopulated city, the number of street children is on the rise. Children, who live and work in the streets, do whatever they can to scrape by. Some dress up as clowns to make people pay for a laugh, other wash car windows, sell gadgets or simply beg. According to a recent survey from La Comision Economica para America Latina y el Caribe 17 percent of the youth population in the city work in the streets. That amounts to two million.

Casa Alianza, a Latin-American NGO for street kids, has reached the same conclusion. But far fewer kids actually live in the streets like Marceo. According to the latest UNICEF survey, there are 14,000 kids living in the streets. "But that number is definitely higher. Our own government has estimated that it is more like 25-30,000, and that's the minimum," said Jose Capellin Corrada, National Director of Casa Alianza. "We, alone, approach 1,300 new kids every year."

Marceo's home at the end of the hole in the ground is crammed as a cell and furnished with a couple of blankets, one pillow, and brown dust. He shares it with 10 to 12 other street kids. There's another hole close by, and in total the group amounts to 30. Carlos, 12, lives in the same hole as Marceo. "There are not only more street kinds, because of the crisis, but they also get younger and younger. Today we get them down to eight years old," said Omar Santiago, Casa Alianza Street Team Coordinator. "Their parents ask them to go out and find jobs, but in the streets they get trapped in gangs, start sniffing pvc or glue, or even smoke marihuana or crack, which we did not see a couple of years ago."

All around the group's "territory," empty, yellow cans lie around. The turpentine-like fluid costs 5 pesos (less than a dollar) a piece.

Casa Alianza tries to convince the children to leave the streets for shelters in order to start a rehabilitation process (first shelter, then a transition house, and then a girls' house or a

boys' house where they attend school), and finally, they can either go back to their parents, if they have any, or start living a 'normal' independent life.

Casa Alianza did not succeed in convincing Marceo, and now he's 18 and too old. They did succeed with Fanny, 16 and mother of four-month-old Asucena. Fanny, pregnant after a one-night-stand with a security officer twice her age who picked her up at the bus station, has changed her mind after coming to Casa Alianza. But it is primarily because of Asucena, she said. "She gives me a meaning in life, she makes me strong, and I'll fight for her."

"Each year 100 of our children go back to their families," Corrada said, responding to questions on success rates. "15 percent come back or end up in the street. Each night 150 boys and girls sleep in our houses, and they typically stay for a year, unless they have no other options."

Carlos, 12, has been on the street for two years and is likely to soon move to a shelter. Others are just not motivated, like Alberto, 13. He's the groups most active car window washer and can make up to 50 peso a day (almost $7). He's got dreams, and he knows what he would do, if he won the "life" lottery. "I'll go to California," he said. But he did not mean the US State of California, he meant the fast-food restaurant by the same name on the other site of Insurgentes.

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Compiled by: Glenn Welker
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