

disadvantaged youth in geneva

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRIVATE DONORS AND FOUNDATIONS

The situation in Switzerland and Geneva

Switzerland has a relatively high standard of living as compared to world averages. This has, however, to be qualified by two elements: on the one hand, the disparities between the fortunate and less fortunate are increasing and, on the other hand, a number of studies have shown a marked increase in the precarious situation of one section of the population. More than 1 million people in Switzerland today are affected by poverty which represents more than 10% of the total population of the country. Although this is "relative" poverty which is not comparable with the "absolute" poverty of countries in the South, the great disparities and situations of personal distress are the sign of real emerging needs. The State has recognised this and is putting a number of programmes into place to improve the situation. What the State does is, however, no longer sufficient today to cover the demand, the expectations and the needs.



Young people and children are among the sections of the population most affected by these new problems, whether it be directly with the decrease in the number of professional opportunities, the increase in the consumption of substances leading to dependence or violence, or indirectly with the impoverishment of their families or the personal problems of their parents (dependence, violence). Geneva, an international city at the crossroads of Europe, is one of the cities most affected in Switzerland by violence and unemployment which affects 5.6% of the population, as compared to the national average of 2.5% (November 2008).

Disadvantaged youth

Children and young people are a highly sensitive part of society, they represent its future and yet are one of its most vulnerable parts at the same time. A large number of children and young people in Geneva today are in an unfavourable situation: more than 1500 young people (8%) are out of work or have dropped out of school. They have finished compulsory schooling, but have no access to any training or professional activity. One of the local newspapers, the Tribune de Genève (Adélita Genoud, 11 July 2008), talks of "These 1500 young people who are playing truant from life". With no prospects, there is the risk they will develop anti-social behaviour (marginalisation, debt, violence, depression, loss of identity). The number of young perpetrators or victims of violence, in a situation of distress (depression, suicide) and dependent is increasing steadily. 15% of young people under 25 years of age today are receiving social assistance, they are financially dependent on society and often have many difficulties, which have to be attended to by social organisations.

The issues related to children and young people are often on two levels: (1) "upstream" factors which put them under pressure before the emergence of personal problems which place them in a difficult situation from the outset, such as the family context or health problems, or (2) "downstream" issues which are often the consequence of a difficult initial situation, such as failure at school or depression.

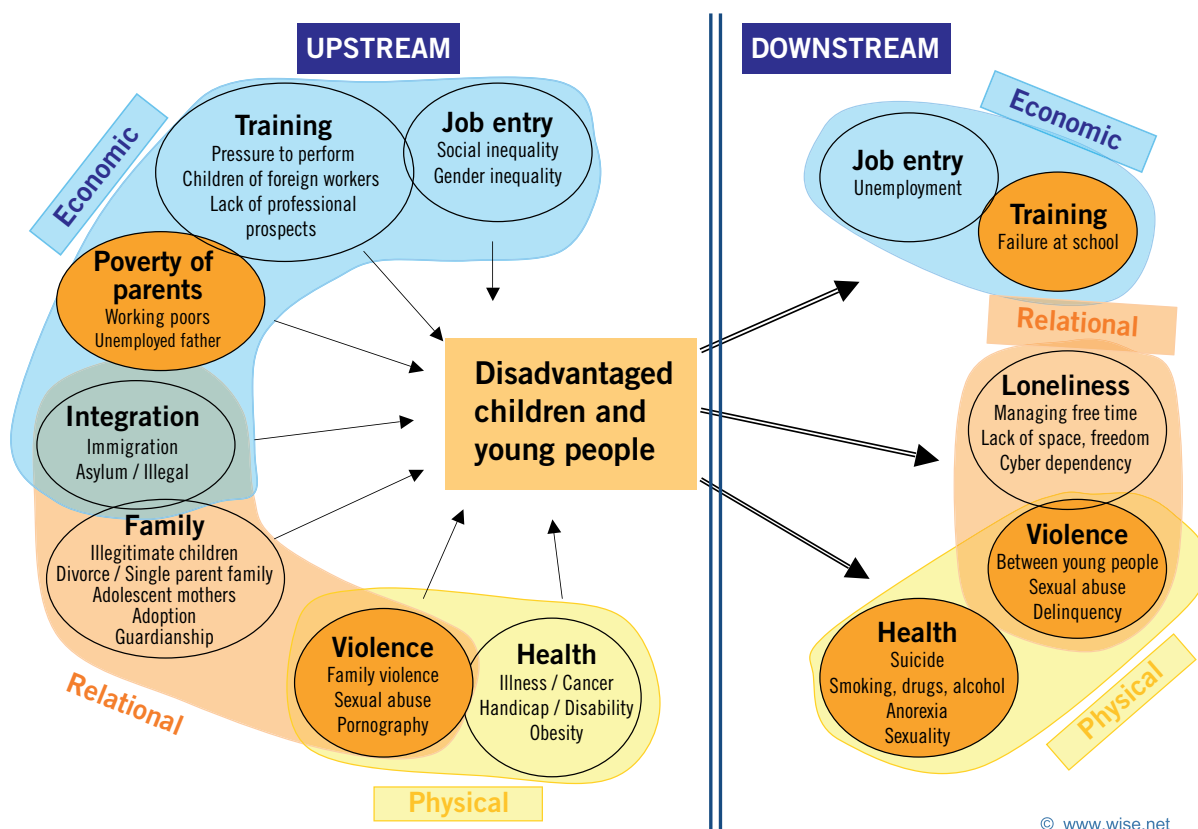
“In Geneva, more than 1500 young people are out of work or have dropped out of school”

Existing educational programs

Taking action with regard to the upstream factors makes it possible to prevent the appearance of downstream factors of difficulty. It is more a case of "prevention" for upstream factors and "redress" for downstream factors. As a general rule, there are more support programmes for downstream factors, as the results are more visible. It is, however, very important to take action upstream for a more long term impact.

In Switzerland, the State makes provision for a large number of social issues. It already gives wide support, for example, to the handicapped persons in the different stages of their development and different aspects of their lives. But the overall resources of the State have diminished while demand has increased. A process of re-evaluation and the putting into place of new rules and structures make it possible to reallocate resources. But there are still many sectors which receive little or no support.

The role of the State is limited by the resources available and the nature of certain situations. For example, the State invests considerable resources in issues related to young people who have no professional training. But these young people often reject the public organisations which make them bear the heavy responsibility for their failure without taking into account their often fragile personal situations. They need other kinds of support and it is the private organisations which are offering the solutions. The State acknowledges its limitations and backs the development of alternative private solutions to complement the services provided by the State. It only partly funds these initiatives and the private organisations are looking for new sources of mainly private funding.

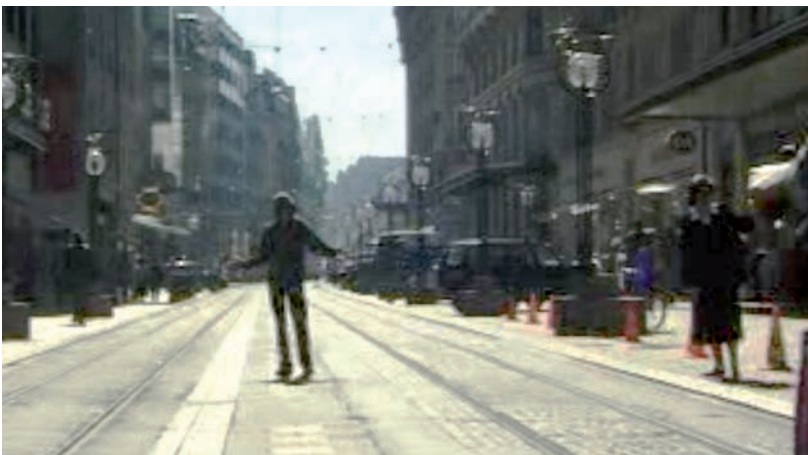


New evolving situation

The public and private sector professionals who work with young people in difficult situations note that the situation has evolved in the past 5 years. They question whether the solutions on offer today, such as homes for young people, the supervision of suicidal young people, the leisure activities on offer, for example, are still appropriate. They believe that it is necessary to offer new kinds of solutions. It is mainly the private organisations which are taking the initiative to launch new models with a more in-depth response to the issues and which make it possible to renew the dialogue with the young dropouts. This is an opportunity for you to back a project which will make a difference.

Increasing needs

Most of the young people who have dropped out of school or professional training have other problems. Upstream, a favourable family environment is decisive for the development of children. In Geneva, disadvantaged young people come mainly from 3 specific contexts: migrant families (living in a very precarious situation), single parent families (insufficient resources) and "families at risk" (parents dependent on games, alcohol, drugs). In Geneva today, the following problems are considered to be acute by professionals and to be lacking financial resources:



- **Grey area between school and profession**

- Phenomenon of inactivity among young people: they have not finished their schooling and they remain without an occupation for years. These obstacles to entry into the job market lead them into progressive marginalisation and to a precarious situation

- **Precarious economic situation**

- Precarious context for children on the increase (poverty of parents, disadvantaged families).

- "Subscription to poverty": half of the young people who have received state benefits at any time do not succeed in regaining their independence and embark on a path of long term social dependence.

- Phenomenon of excessive debt: this is gaining ground and is crippling young people and young adults, who are tempted all too easily by various consumer goods (mobile phone, games, alcohol). Their accumulated debts make it difficult to obtain a job or accommodation, so they enter a vicious circle from which it is difficult to escape.

- **Violence**

- Violence among young people (sexual abuse, violence acts between young people, delinquency)
- Sexual abuse of children

- **Relational vulnerability**

- Increase in the consumption of drugs and alcohol, in particular amongst school children
- High suicide rate among young people
- Weakening of parent-child bond (loss of authority, loss of points of reference, loss of control)
- Lack of "low threshold" meeting places: premises open to anyone, with no conditions, for children (under 11 years of age) whose parents work, families and vulnerable people (those with mental health problems, for example), as a place to meet, share and be part of a group.

Where action is required

1. **Upstream:** To try and influence public policies, supporting information campaigns to increase public awareness or to promote support for preventive projects. There are no specific projects for this at the present time to the best of our knowledge.
2. **Downstream:** To alleviate the difficulties of children affected by a specific problem by means of "clinical" care in the case of violence, trauma, or dependence etc. To motivate and support young people to train and enter into professional life. These projects are of very great value for the beneficiaries targeted. The results can generally be measured.

For example, "bridging" class projects are offering young people real opportunities to reintegrate into a career path.

3. **In between the two:** To support projects which marry prevention and care at the same time for wider, more long term impact. The proportions of prevention/care can vary greatly.

For example, a project to fight adolescent suicide has put into place a preventive structure (telephone helpline, consultations). This is "direct" prevention, as it is difficult in reality to prevent suicide once the adolescent has made his or her decision. The project does not include more upstream causes of malaise in young people, such as abuse, failure, loneliness. An example of an upstream prevention is a project that provides a psychological framework for the victims of sexual abuse and their families. It places particular emphasis on prevention. In addition to wide scale public awareness campaigns and training for professionals concerned by this issue, CTAS has also been involved in putting specific programmes into place for adolescent perpetrators of sexual abuse, with a view to preventing recurring sexual abuse (very frequent). This is therefore a type of up-stream prevention.



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Sources

1) Interviews (Geneva and Berne)

Pierre Maudet, Marion Nolde and Claudio Deuel (*Director, Secretary, Representative in Geneva, Federal Commission for Childhood and Youth*), Laurence Roth (*Agency for Protection of Minors*), Julie Schaller (*Director, Paidos*), Alexandra Rosetti (*UNICEF*), Jean Zermatten (*Director, International Institute of the Rights of the Child*), Franz Schultheis (*Director, Sociology Department Geneva University, Member of the PNR52 Committee*), Vito Angelillo (*Director, Geneva Social Work Department*), Alain Kolly (*Social Work Director, General Hospice*), Karin Gestin (*former member of staff, FSG social impact advisor*), Sandra Jean (*Realise*), Marianne Ricard (*Deputy Director, Caritas*)

2) Documents

Documents published in electronic form or on paper (more than 550 pages), books, reports, articles, statistics