

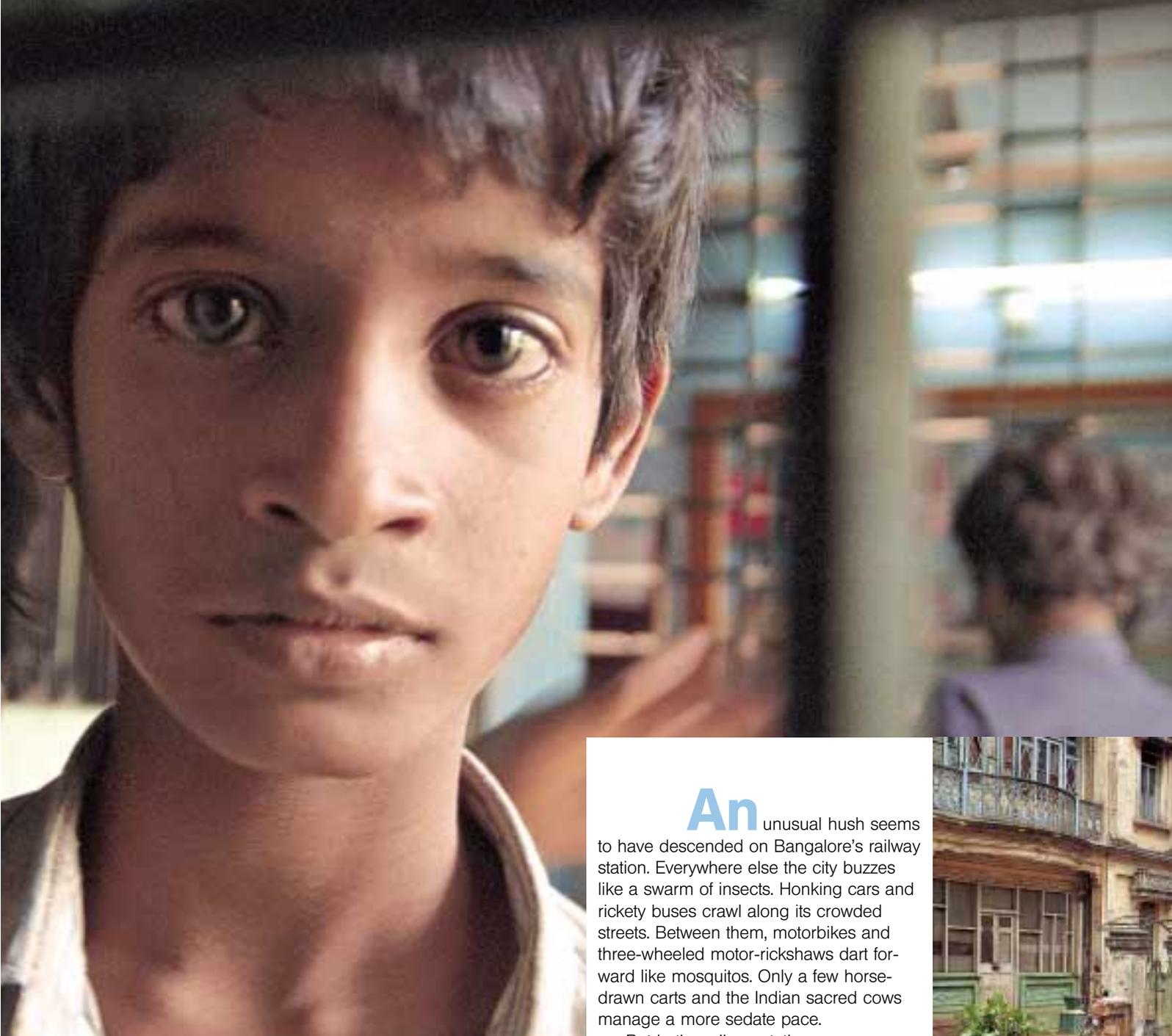
About 60,000 children live on the streets of Bangalore, the southern Indian metropolis. The centers run by the Don Bosco Salesians, a Christian order, provide them with a roof over their heads and offer them opportunities to reintegrate themselves into society. This project is supported by HelpAlliance, an initiative of Lufthansa Group employees.

## A future for Bangalore's street kids

Text: Gesine Kleinschmit  
Photos: Rolf Wenzel

### Photo feature





**An** unusual hush seems to have descended on Bangalore's railway station. Everywhere else the city buzzes like a swarm of insects. Honking cars and rickety buses crawl along its crowded streets. Between them, motorbikes and three-wheeled motor-rickshaws dart forward like mosquitos. Only a few horse-drawn carts and the Indian sacred cows manage a more sedate pace.

But in the railway station everyone seems to be having a siesta. Green shoots are emerging between the tracks. Trains are rare at this time of day. On platform 5, right next to the fruit seller's cart, there is a plain container. "BOSCO's Makkala Ashraya - Children's Shelter" says the sign above the door. Through the window a large dragon painted on the container's back wall can be glimpsed. "Made by street boys - Bosco" is painted above the multicolored monster spewing flames. Inside the shelter is Manoj. He's a 21-year-old theology student who belongs to the Roman Catholic order of the Don Bosco Salesians. Currently he is serving an internship at BOSCO, which has long worked to help Bangalore's street kids.





BOSCO was founded some 20 years ago by five Salesian theology students. Like many of their brothers around the world, they followed the example of Giovanni Bosco, the founder of their order. Bosco was a nineteenth-century Italian priest who dedicated his life to working with children and adolescents.

The small BOSCO shelter on platform 5 and a second one, at the nearby bus station, serve as initial contact points for “fresh children,” as the BOSCO staff call them. At the railway station shelters, Manoj estimates they take in up to 30 of them every day. These are children from the surrounding countryside who have run away from their families to try their luck in the big city, only to end up on the streets pretty fast. “We need to be faster than the others,” says Manoj. Faster than the so-called employment agents, for example, who offer the inexperienced new arrivals tough jobs like washing dishes in hotel kitchens for a pittance. And faster than the gangs of street boys, who are always on the look-out for new, compliant members.

The young Salesian walks around the station, searching for fresh children. An old, clanking locomotive approaches. The driver shouts a friendly greeting to the pedestrian and lets him pass. “Fresh children” are not often visible in the sweltering midday heat. But not far from the station buildings, in front of a dilapidated shed, Manoj meets a small group of street boys. They look skinny and are dressed in rags. One of them shows off two small monkeys, which he cradles in his arm like babies. Another boy hides a bag behind his back. Glue and gasoline are the drugs of choice here. They are easy to obtain and sniffing them helps to forget the tough reality of the streets for a while.

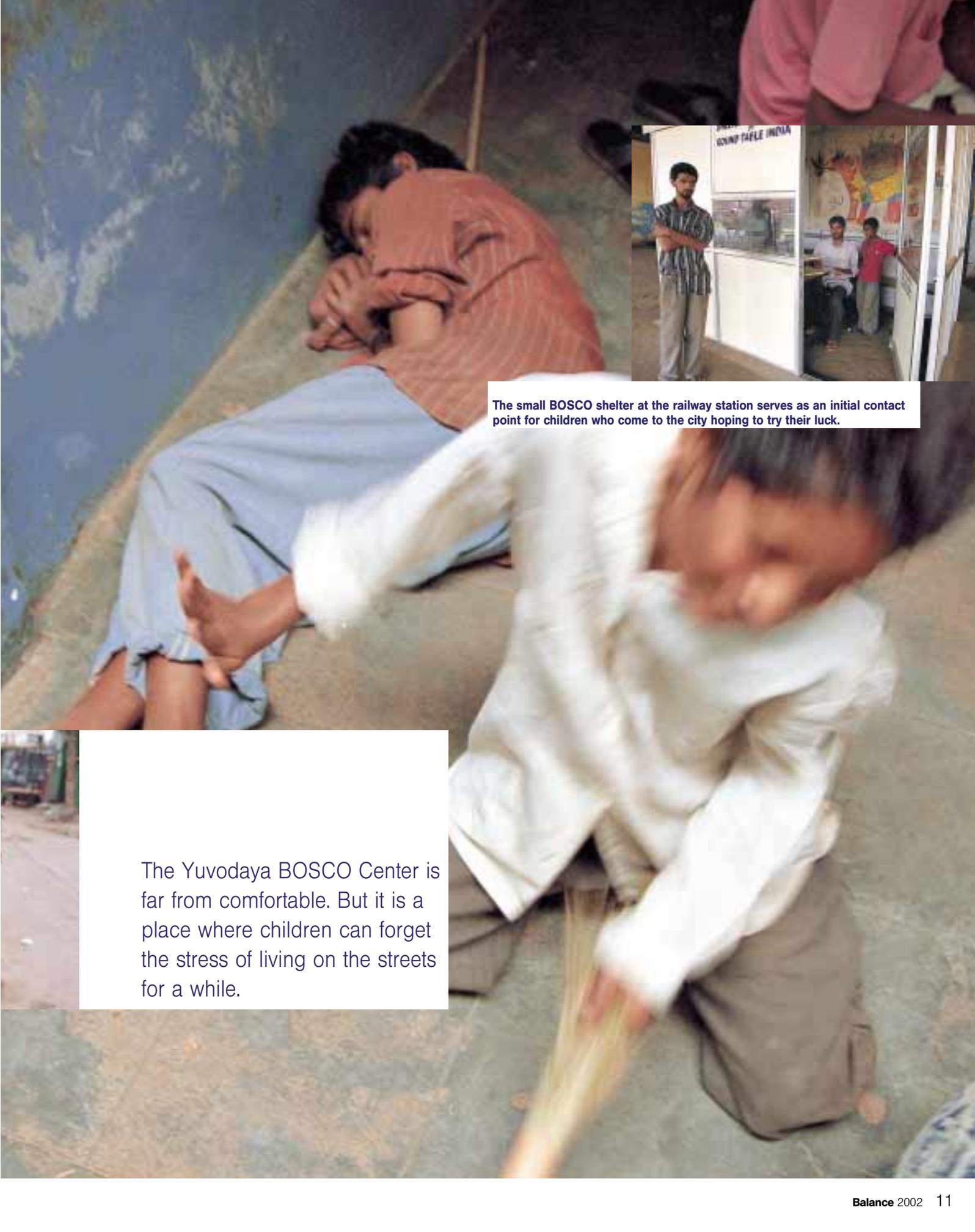
## Not comfortable, but welcoming

“Once the children have got used to living on the streets, it’s very difficult to guide them back to mainstream society,” explains Pater Varghese. In his mid-forties, with hands that carefully accentuate his words, he manages the three BOSCO centers in Bangalore. The services they offer are geared to boys. There are significantly fewer street girls in Bangalore, and they are looked after by other organizations, such as the Sisters of Don Bosco.

Two of the BOSCO centers are residential training hostels for former street boys. The third, called “Yuvodaya” (meaning “Youths’ Awakening”) serves as a central registration point for “fresh children.” In addition, this hostel is open around the clock for boys who continue to live and work on the streets. They may come to the Yuvodaya Center to rest and are free to leave whenever they want. They can also receive medical attention and legal help if they get into trouble with the police or if an employer refuses to pay their wages.

The center is located in an unassuming two-storey building in a narrow side-street not far from the railway station. Some boys sit chatting on the entrance steps. The center certainly does not offer the comforts of a hotel. On the upper floor, there is a bare room containing nothing but a television set. No tables, no chairs, just the bare walls and a smooth stone floor. Next door is an alcove with washing facilities. And yet, the mood is far from downcast. The television shows the sickly sweet colors of a typically Indian “Bollywood” film.





The small BOSCO shelter at the railway station serves as an initial contact point for children who come to the city hoping to try their luck.



The Yuvodaya BOSCO Center is far from comfortable. But it is a place where children can forget the stress of living on the streets for a while.



HelpAlliance is a private, non-political and interdenominational initiative of members of Lufthansa's staff, who are committed to social issues around the world. The association was founded in 1999, bringing together twelve independent initiatives and associations under its umbrella. It supports projects that help the poorest people in so-called Third World countries. The projects are organized locally by specialist partners from development aid organizations. HelpAlliance provides financial support, and donates materials and - if necessary - technical know-how.

The initiative is supported by the unpaid work of its members. Its patron is Sabine Weber, wife of the Chairman of Lufthansa's Executive Board. Working for an airline makes it easier for Lufthansa employees to keep in touch with projects around the world. Fund-raisers within the company support the work of HelpAlliance, as does the recently-started "Small change for big help" scheme: passengers flying home on Lufthansa - and now also on Condor - are offered the opportunity of donating the foreign currency small change left over from their trips to HelpAlliance. Since May 2001, almost 9 tons of foreign currency coins and banknotes have been collected by HelpAlliance - with collections being especially heavy during the transition phase to the euro.

**More information:**  
[www.help-alliance.com](http://www.help-alliance.com)

**Donations account:**  
 HelpAlliance e.V., Frankfurter Sparkasse,  
 account 200 029 223, BLZ 500 502 01  
 (German bank sorting code), SWIFT  
 address: FRASDEFF (key word: BREADS)



Finding their way back from the streets to an orderly daily routine is not easy. At the centers run by the Catholic order, children can attend school again and take training courses.



**At the metal workshop of the Mane Center, young people learn basic craft skills.**

There are about 15 boys in front of the TV set, sitting or lying down, chatting, some asleep. Many of them have worked all night.

“We see ourselves as the children’s partners,” Varghese emphasizes. “They should feel comfortable at our hostels and quite simply be allowed to be children.” While it is not possible to get all the children off the streets, the centers offer a home to those who want one. Later on, the young people can be helped to look for regular work and, eventually, somewhere to live.

## Building social bridges

Bangalore, a city of 6 million people and an important IT center, has about 60,000 children living on its streets. They have broken all contact with their families. They collect trash, stack fruit at market stands, wash cars or sell newspapers. Many are sick, malnourished, drug-dependent or have been sexually abused.

“Initiatives like those supported by the Don Bosco Salesians are the right place to start to help children in a desperate situation,” says Bernadett Scholand, HelpAlliance’s Chairwoman. The organization, which was founded by members of Lufthansa’s staff, encompasses other free-standing initiatives, such as the Human Help Network. HelpAlliance has been supporting the Salesians’ work in Bangalore since 1999. Scholand has gathered her own impressions of the street kid project in the city: “Right away you sense that the Salesians have gained the children’s trust.

Their offers of help are accepted and practical. For many young people, they are a bridge to an independent life, where they can look after themselves and others.” And it is important, Scholand continues, “that the members of the order provide unconditional help. All children are welcome - no matter if they are Hindu, Muslim or Christian.”

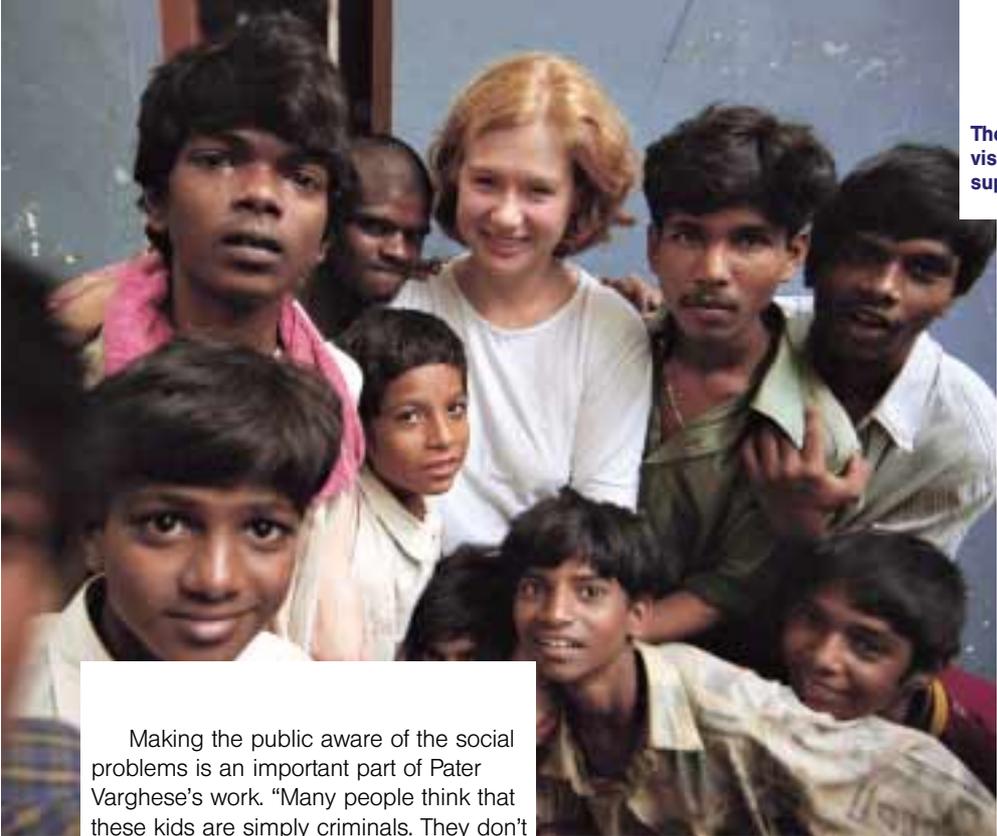
## A problem that concerns everybody

In most cases, BOSCO’s “street workers” make the initial contact with the boys. They know the boys’ habits, their meeting places and places of shelter. Many children come to trust the street workers and thus find their way to the BOSCO centers.

New arrivals at the Yuvodaya Center first have to register with Mary Triza. She is something like BOSCO’s secretary and receptionist. Meticulously, she enters the boys’ personal data in a ledger: name, age and origin. She also notes the reason why they ended up on the streets. Sometimes the responses she records sound quite naive: “I wanted to see the train,” one boy,

who came from far away, said. Another boy no longer wanted to go to school. Many did not feel cared for by their families. Divorced, alcoholic or violent parents are their reasons for running away. “Of course, poverty is an enormous problem. But an astonishing number of children come from middle-class families,” says Pater Varghese. To begin with, the centers try to get the runaways back to their parents. The BOSCO staff find out if this is possible and sensible in discussions with the child and his relatives. In cooperation with other organizations, they also offer long-term advice and support for families. This meant that about half of the almost 3,200 “fresh children” who came to BOSCO last year could be returned to their families.

Pater Varghese is proud of the “National Research and Documentation Center” housed at the Yuvodaya Center. “Over the years, we’ve recorded statistics concerning the street kids. This gives us important information which we can pass on to the political decision-makers.”



The Chairwoman of HelpAlliance, Bernadett Scholand, visited the street kid project in Bangalore, which is supported by members of Lufthansa's staff.

Making the public aware of the social problems is an important part of Pater Varghese's work. "Many people think that these kids are simply criminals. They don't see that all of society shares some of the responsibility for their plight."

### Lessons for a new life

The Mane Center, a few blocks south of Yuvodaya, is home to 70 boys up to the age of 14. The older boys live at the third center, Yuvakendra, in the west of the city. In the afternoons, the chatter of voices rises at Mane. The children who attend public schools are returning home. Outside, a few boys play volleyball in the palm-lined courtyard. On the doorstep, Nanda, the center's four-year-old "baby," romps around. Everybody looks after him and hugs him just like a little brother.

At the same time, training courses are taking place in the center's basement rooms. Among others, there are needlework, woodwork and bookbinding workshops. These courses teach basic craft skills and are designed for children whose irregular street life and interrupted school attendance mean they would have great difficulty in following ordinary training courses. Many of the older boys from the Yuvakendra Center also participate in these courses.

15-year-old Raja is among the future metal workers who are drilling holes in rods. He speaks softly and with some shyness. He came to BOSCO three years ago. He is pleased that he has the chance to learn a solid trade now. After completing

the one-year training course, he would like to return to his home village and work there.

### Plans for the future

BOSCO's latest and largest current project is a village for young people in Adjanahalli, on the edge of the city of Magadi, about 60 kilometers southwest of Bangalore. Construction of the spacious building that will soon be home to 250 children is in progress. The construction workers are likely to be busy until the middle of 2002. In cooperation with other private organizations, HelpAlliance secured financial support from Germany's Federal Ministry of Finance for this and two similar projects at other locations. HelpAlliance's contribution of over 50,000 euros is the largest private donation towards this million-euro project.

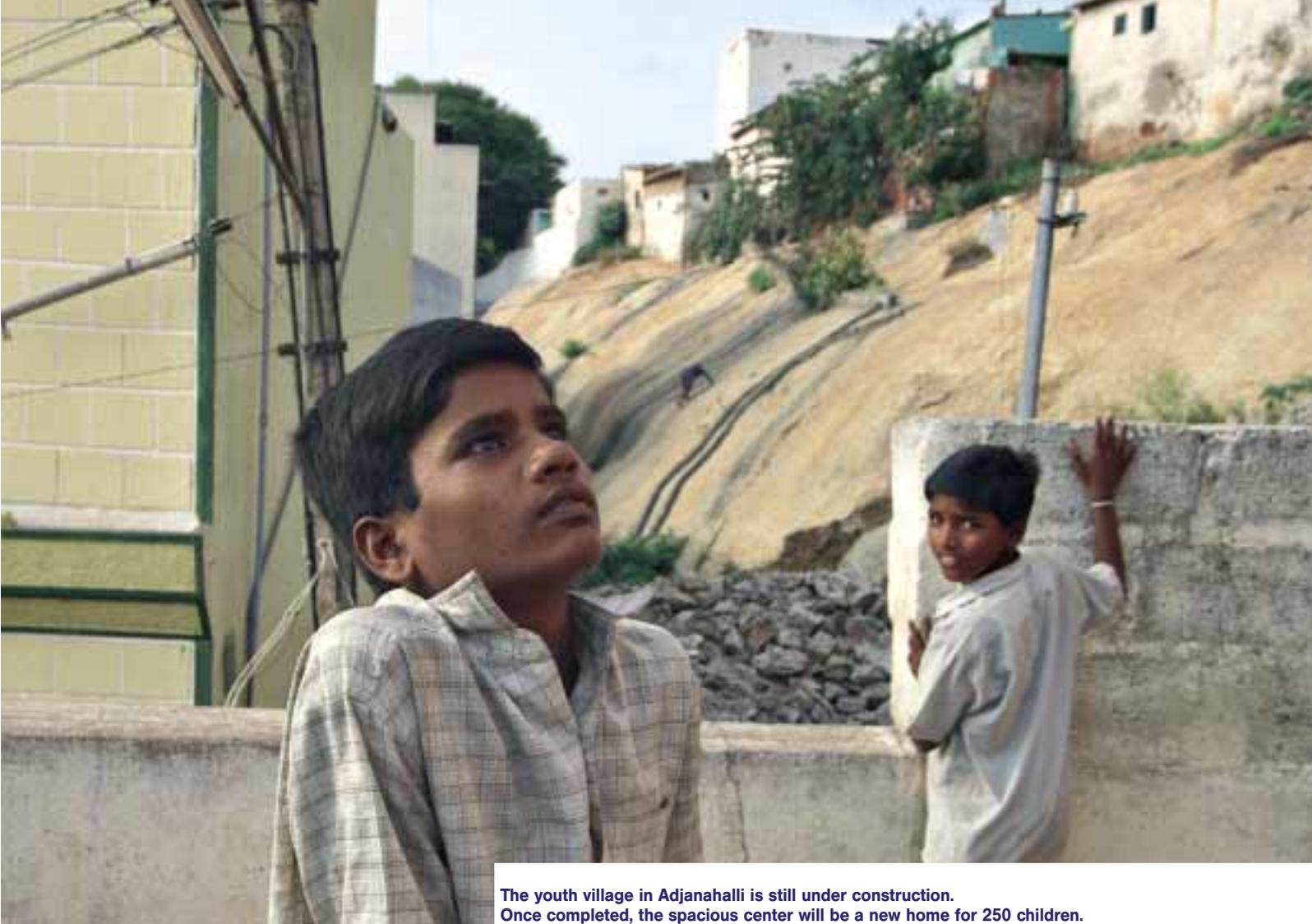
This is a rural area. Here and there are small villages. Deep green rice fields line the road, every now and then jagged rocks rise from the landscape. The building site in Adjanahalli lies far from the road in a large field. Shirts and pants are flapping in the wind on an endless clothesline. A makeshift building next to the future center's shell already houses more than 100 boys aged 7 to 14.

Most of them are street kids from Bangalore, who are in this rural setting to get used to living without drugs. Care programs for children infected with HIV and living with AIDS are being planned for Adjanahalli. Another group for which the center intends to offer care are former child workers. Children are easily exploited in the silk industry, which highly appreciates their swift small hands. For a number of years, the Indian government has cooperated with organizations such as Don Bosco in taking more effective action against this abuse. The youth center near Magadi is also set to offer the opportunity of attending school and receiving professional training to the young people from the surrounding villages - boys and girls alike. "This house is meant to be a self-help center for the entire area," explains Pater George Mathew, who coordinates the project. Courses for women from the villages have already started. They learn how to invest their money wisely and develop cooperative business models.

"We can't wait to see how the project develops once construction of the center has been completed," says Bernadett Scholand. Together with her fellow supporters at HelpAlliance she intends to follow closely the work of the Salesians, providing support wherever needed.

### The youth village in rural Adjanahalli is to develop into a self-help center for the entire area.

Ravi is among those who stand to benefit from such help. He is 14 years old and started work in a silk factory at the age of 6. He came to BOSCO a few months ago, suffering badly from tuberculosis. He is still very skinny. But his eyes have regained their sparkle. And he is full of big plans for the future.



**The youth village in Adjanahalli is still under construction. Once completed, the spacious center will be a new home for 250 children.**

### Supported projects

A selection of projects supported by HelpAlliance:

- a polio camp in Mumbai, India
- a school for slum children in Lusaka, Zambia
- a training and leisure project for the children of the “Smoky Mountain,” Manila’s garbage dump
- orphanages in Nigeria and Brazil
- an infrastructure and training project in Djougou, Benin
- street kid projects in Benin, Germany, India, Rwanda, Thailand, and the CIS states
- an emergency aid project in Tonga
- a project for the development of villages in the Tibetan refugee camp at Dhondenling, in southern India
- bush hospitals in Kaloleni, Kenya and Obizi, Nigeria

In emergencies, HelpAlliance does its utmost to ensure swift and nonbureaucratic help. It assisted local relief organizations after the devastating explosion of a munitions depot in Nigeria and the volcanic eruption of Mount Goma in eastern Congo. At the beginning of 2001, a large-scale operation brought aid to earthquake victims in northwestern India. Lufthansa Cargo provided logistical support for these operations, carrying 20 tons of supplies to northern India alone.

