

FROM STREET CHILDREN TO CHILDREN OF THE STREETS - CHANGING VIEWS OF OUR CHILDREN IN TANZANIA AND BEYOND

Jessica Essary, Fortidas Bakuza, James Hoot, Munisi Aunsu⁴

Zayed University, University at Buffalo, University at Buffalo, Ngarenaro Vocation Training Centre⁴

jnessary@sbcglobal.net, fbakuza@yahoo.com, jhoot@buffalo.edu, hansmunis@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Increasing numbers of children struggle to survive living in the streets of our world. Research can begin to help ameliorate countless lives of these children. However, research to date addresses the needs of street children in a fragmented manner, with each discipline exploring only one aspect of their plight (Thomas de Benitez, 2011). This article reflects a more systematic review of the related literature that examines Tanzanian policies and economic conditions as they relate to children of the streets from a variety of disciplines. Authors conclude with recommendations based on the current education systems' ability to provide greater opportunities for these children.

Keywords: street children, children of the streets, children in poverty, early childhood education

INTRODUCTION

As I sat in a grossly overcrowded public transport next to my Tanzanian friend, I gazed outside at a child in tattered clothes. The child appeared mesmerized by his crinkled plastic water bottle and the contents inside. He sat with his eyes focused on the broken stick he used to swirl the glue around. My friend explained, see him... he is one of the street children. He is addicted to that glue and makes money to support his addiction cleaning windshields. Immediately my mind was flooded with questions. Where does he sleep, I asked? His reply, He sleeps on the streets. Where does he find food? On the streets. Who keeps him company? The other street children. How do they find happiness in life? They use the glue to get high. They say it keeps them from feeling hunger, cold, and other pain, but they start to lose their minds. My final question I kept to myself- What can we do to change this situation?



Picture 1: Street Child Sniffing Glue

Like many developing nations, Tanzania is currently in a transitional period socially, economically, and politically. The shift from socialism and self reliance to a more liberal market economy following independence in 1961 has greatly impacted the lives of the common people. Immediately following independence from Britain, the government of Tanzania was the main provider of social services (e.g., education, health care, water, and sanitation). Although there were often constraints in receiving these services, public services were free for all people in both urban and rural areas. The government at that time made a commitment to fight ignorance, diseases, and poverty which were identified as the three main enemies of successful development. The government was also committed to ensuring that every citizen was able to access social services. *Ujamaa na Kujitegemea* (socialism and self reliance) became the national policy dedicated to transforming the national economy to improve the lives of all its citizens. The key to reaching this goal was seen as education which became compulsory for children from ages 7-14 in 2002.

With the demise of socialism in the mid 1980s and the population increasing by an estimated 1.96% annually, poverty has become rampant throughout the country. Tanzania now ranks as the 55th poorest country in the world. (CIA, 2011). Many traditionally large families are now no longer able to sustain themselves in the absence of social services. The government is supposed to intervene to support families with social safety net programs during this time of transition. However, this task is daunting, at best, for a struggling nation. Consider that in 2002 Tanzania's population had 20,192,608 children and 19,253,453 adults (Tanzania's Children and Development Policy 2nd edition, 2008). It is clear that current challenges for Tanzania have been greatly magnified in recent years, especially for the most vulnerable citizens of this nation-- the children.

In Tanzania, as in most African nations, children belong to the extended family. However, recent changes have greatly impacted traditional social ties. Families are now faced with many

more challenges in raising their children. These include poverty and limited access to basic social and health services. Perhaps one the most challenging of all is the lack of education which holds the most promise for a better life for street children. This is especially the case given the limited number of pre-primary schools. Further, those that are provided require fees which relatively few can afford (Bakuza, 2010). Poverty is so rampant that even the cost of a uniform can keep a child from an education.

The great majority of Tanzania's population (around 80%) reside in rural areas. Rural areas are also most affected by emerging challenges identified above. Increasing numbers of children from these areas leave home at very early ages in search of a better life. Their search, however, often brings them to crowded urban areas where children earn a meager livelihood through whatever means available (e.g. begging, domestic service, prostitution). It is children like these who too often end up as street children. In response to challenges far beyond their mental and physical readiness, these children develop survival strategies which often result in addictions that further diminish their potential for surviving and contributing to society.

The existing literature focusing on this subject often addresses the complex needs of street children in a fragmented manner (Thomas de Benitez, 2011). This article explores the plight of Tanzanian street children in a more comprehensive manner which includes both national policies and socio-economic conditions. Also included are recommendations from research on children of the streets from other disciplines and locations around the world.

Who Are Street Children?

The propensity to become a child of the streets all too often begins at very early ages. Eighty percent of children in Lugalla & Mbwambo's 1999 study of 200 Tanzanian street children, for example, reported that they became street children when they were between 8 and 10 years old. Moreover, 95% of this sample indicated that they had no reading and writing skills because they had never been to school. In many urban centers it has become normal to see street children at bus stops struggling to sell their wares to passengers rather than attending school. These children have often lost contact with their parents and as such have no parental (or extended family) protection, love, or health care (Lugalla & Mbwambo, 1999).

Part-Time vs. Full-Time

Street children are categorized in research as part-time or full-time. It is difficult to determine reasonable estimates of children in Tanzania who fit into either of these categories. Perhaps part of the difficulty in assessing the extent of this problem resides in defining street children- i.e. those who are full-time or part-time. Lugalla and Mbwambo (1999) characterize street children as those who live on the street both day and night. Children who regularly work on the streets and return home at night with badly needed money, are referred to as part-time street children. Children who

both work on the streets and use them their primary domiciles are referred to as full-time children of the streets or simply street children (Aptekar & Heinonen, 2003).

Street Children-How Many?

The number of street children in our world is clearly difficult to assess. In 2002 UNICEF suggested there were more than 100 million street children globally (UNICEF, 2002). In 2005, UNICEF proposed that this number exceeded 20 million (UNICEF, 2005). Likewise, the nebulous nature of the extent of the problem is perpetuated by general estimates such as those by a US Embassy report indicating there are significant numbers (emphasis added) of street children in Dar es Salaam, Mwanza, and Arusha-Country Report on Human Rights Practices: Tanzania- 2010, pg.38). Connolly and Ennew (1996) suggest that such random, vague, incalculable figures seriously underestimate the extent of this problem. The great variation in estimates is partially accounted for by the mobile nature of children living on the streets as well as the high rate of undocumented children living in our world. While exact numbers are unclear, it is certain that any estimate offers little consolation to children living on the streets each day and night.

Societal Perspectives On Street Children

Support for street children varies widely depending on the public view of street children. Street children in Tanzania have described themselves as very strong and carefree people (Lugalla & Mbwambo, 1999). Yet, public stereotypes of street children around the world range from vulnerable victims to dangerous delinquents (Thomas de Benitez and Jones, 2008).

In Tanzania the nickname for street children is Born-Town children, This metaphor suggests that these children were born from the consequences of urban development. To those that use this term, it means that they view these children as a product of a failed social system.

Street children's perspectives are rarely considered in researching their identities or experiences on the streets. For example, pictures drawn by children of the streets- solicited by researchers to reflect their lives are commonly interpreted by adults. Ennew (2003) argues for a child-centered approach to research by suggesting that children should provide the narratives for their drawings. For researchers, this may become difficult to accomplish because of ethical regulations for research with vulnerable populations. Nevertheless, the gap within the research suggests there is a need to find ethical methods of data collection to better represent the perspectives of children under investigation.

Why Children Become Street Children?

There are many factors which can lead a young person to become a street child. Variables include cultural expectations, death or illness in the family, and even domestic violence (Lugalla & Mbwambo, 1999).

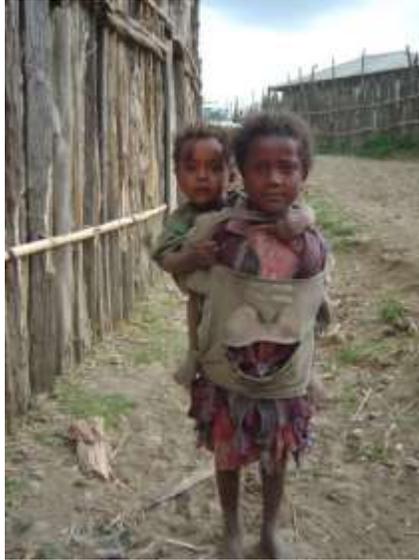
Cultural Expectations

There are a number of cultural issues that encourage a life on the streets. One such example is the cultural expectations for boys to search for work. Oftentimes, males are expected to search for work as soon as they are physically capable. This reflects the common belief in Tanzania that it is the man's role to financially support the family (Mkombozi, 2004).

Severe Poverty

Severe poverty caused by one or more factors often results in the family's dependence on a child to provide financial support. One increasingly common factor that leads to life on the streets is a death in the family. This factor is exacerbated by Tanzania declining life expectancy. Between 2006 and 2008, for example, the life expectancy declined from 52 to 50 years (UNICEF, 2008). This reality hinders even further elder's ability to care for younger children.

Tanzania has also been affected by HIV/AIDS which continues to claim the lives of the parents and guardians leaving far too many children to fend for themselves with no financial/social/emotional support. Data from Tanzania HIV/AIDS and Malaria Indicator Survey (THMIS) 2007-2008 indicated that the prevalence of HIV/AIDS infections among the sexually active population (between 15 and 49 years of age) was reported to be 5.7%. This data also indicated that women were more affected (6.6%) than men (4.6%). Poverty resulting from the death of one parent or both parents due to HIV/AIDS is a major contributor to a life on the streets.



Picture 2: AIDS orphan must care for both herself and her infant brother

Family Violence

An increasing cause of children living on the streets today is due to many sons and daughters running away from severe family violence. The National Study on Violence against Children found that sexual, physical, and emotional violence are common for children growing up in Tanzania, and the perpetrators of this violence are often near and well-known to the children (United Republic of Tanzania, 2011, pg. 5). As a result, one might assume, many of these children are also suffering from depression. Depression often makes children susceptible to participating in more risky behaviors such as sexual promiscuity and drug use. There are a multitude of reasons that children run to the streets, and once they arrive the problems they face often multiply.

PROBLEMS STREET CHILDREN ENCOUNTER

The problems street children face are numerous and intertwined. For example, malnutrition often complicates health issues, while a lack of education decreases a child's chance of escaping chronic poverty. The plethora of issues become highly confounded and multifaceted. These children lose their childhood by assuming adult roles and taking care themselves without protection, guidance and support.

Illness

Waste management facilities in many urban areas of Tanzania are overused or nonexistent (UNHSP, 2009). Without basic hygiene facilities, street children are much more prone to illness. In Dar es Salaam, for example, all 200 full-time street children participating in an interview study reported that they do not bathe more than twice a week. Since most of these children struggle to

afford food, hygiene often becomes a luxury. In addition, the entire sample reported having regular episodes of malaria, diarrhea, and/or respiratory and stomach-related illnesses (Lugalla & Mbwambo, 1999).

Street children often collect trash left by widespread public littering in order to create fires to stay warm at night. It is ironic, indeed, that these children, who are often considered a threat to society, are the ones who provide a public service by removing litter from the streets. However, the constant exposure to trash seriously compromises the health of these children.



Picture 3: Street Children Preparing Their Fire For The Night

Many children also suffer from *mdudus* (directly translated to mean bugs- better known in the medical field as worms or parasites) in their stomach. As a result, their hunger cravings frequently spike in order to feed these internal organisms. Hospitals are often severely overcrowded and street children may not be able to take time away from working on the streets in order to survive.

Hunger

In 2005, a three-stage cluster sample survey and interview study of 3,739 children ages 13 to 24 from Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar was conducted in order to better understand the basic needs of street children (URT, 2005). Children were asked to reflect and share their childhood experience on the Global School-Based Student Health Survey (GSHS). Of these 3,739 children, 62.7% of boys and 46.2% of girls reported that they occasionally to often have difficulty accessing food (United Republic of Tanzania, 2011, pg. 44). Since the majority of Tanzania's population are farmers, food access is normally not a critical issue in Tanzania, but affording it and maintaining a healthy diet can be (URT, 2005).

Drug Addictions

Complicating assaults on a child's health caused by improper sanitation and nutrition often involves turning to mind-altering drugs to take their thoughts away from hunger and illness. Comprosky (2002) suggests that these children turn to sniffing glue for a plethora of reasons such as to suppress feelings of hunger, stress, anxiety, isolation, rejection, cold, and pain that comes from living on the streets (Comprosky, 2002, 603). Such glues often contain brain damaging and often fatal toxins such as toluene and cyclohexane. While sniffing glue is a cheap departure from immediate problems, this increasingly common practice further threatens the human potential of these children.

Child activists have asked glue manufactures to take responsibility for the misuse of glue by replacing the addictive ingredients with other less toxic ingredients (Comprosky, 2001). Yet, little evidence exists to suggest progress is being made in this regard. Thus, despite serious threats to the health of Tanzania street children, the availability and affordability of such toxic glues remain and continues to grow daily.

In addition, other drugs, such as cough mixtures, antidepressants, hashish, marijuana, and cigarettes are becoming commonplace. Alcohol abuse among Tanzanian street children, however, is less common than other drug use. This is because it is considerably more expensive than the alternative drugs the children are able to find.

Labor

The majority of street children make a meager livelihood by begging, washing windshields, fishing, working in fish-processing factories, quarrying, selling magazines, groundnuts, and plastic bags (also known as hawking), loading bags, car-parking attendants, car washers, barmaids, shoe shiners, car-pushers, mechanic helpers, vehicle security guards, and participating in prostitution. Despite long hours, these activities allow them to earn only enough money for basic survival needs (Lugalla & Mbwambo, 1999).

In some cases children work with no pay and become victims to false promises. One street child, for example, reported to an author of this article that his friends agreed to board a bus to help mine minerals. Only one, however, returned in a badly undernourished state. These children had originally left with a man who promised riches for mining. Upon arrival at the mine, the man guaranteed that the minerals were there and once the minerals were found they would be receiving a large payment. When the children threatened to leave when they did not receive payment, the man again reassured the children that they would be extremely wealthy. After nearly a month of difficult manual labor and very little food, the children realized the area was barren and they were alone to fend for themselves. The child labor recruiter had fled the scene. Such examples portray the harsh reality experienced in one of the numerous occupations street children assume.

The Tanzanian government's National Children Development Policy of 1996 was revised in 2008 to address the growing problem of children of the streets. In addition, in 2009, Tanzania enacted a special Act The Law of Child Act. This law provides four key principles for all children, including the right to: best interest, freedom from discrimination, safety and security, and participation. The law does not allow children to work in a way that prohibits them from attending school between 6 in the morning and 8 in the evening. It further requires that children 14 years of age or older must be paid for the value of their work. According to the law, any work that poses a threat to the safety, health, or morals of a child, such as selling cigarettes, drugs, alcohol or any intoxicating substance- is unlawful and the penalty is Tsh 1 million to 500 million (about \$624-\$312 USD) or imprisonment from 1 to 20 years. While on the books, however, few Tanzanians have even heard of this new law and, for certain, enforcement is a challenge at best. According to reports, awareness of new child labor laws will be integrated into the teacher training curriculum in order to improve community awareness (Embassy of the United States Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 2009).

Violence

Violence on the streets can come from a variety of sources. A position paper by the Mkombozi Centre for Street Children presented to the Arusha Caucus for Children's Rights, for example, suggests that street children in Arusha have experienced violence and even imprisonment from even law enforcement in attempts to clean the streets before high profile guests come to visit Tanzania (Mkombozi Centre for Street Children, 2004).

Four-fifths of children in Lugalla and Mbwambo's interviews reported that they depend on their peer groups for security as well as for companionship (Lugalla & Mbwambo, 1999). Heinonen's (2000) interviews of street children in neighboring Ethiopia revealed that many groups fulfill a child's desire to be social, yet are a bit counterproductive to a street child's desire for autonomy. Moreover, these groups can provide protection from petty thieves and also provide emotional support. At the same time, however, these groups often experience between and within group violence. In addition an increase in sexual activity among groups of children makes them even more at-risk for contracting sexually transmitted diseases.

Lack Of Education

The legal and political environment in Tanzania is becoming child sensitive in theory. However, practical efforts to support families and children are still constrained. The World Bank recently recognized Tanzania as a country lacking the economic, human, and material resources it needs to reach Universal Primary Education by 2015 (World Bank, 2002). Basic provisions keep many children out of school. Street children often experience very limited access to schooling because they lack a fixed address as well as money to purchase even school uniforms or books (Embassy of the United States Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 2011).

Currently, the Education and Training Policy of 1995 under the Ministry of Education and Vocational Training mandates that families enroll their children in pre-primary classes at age five and six years. Yet, many children live on the streets without adult care and do not attend school. Children of the streets often express a desire for an education that will train them in productive economic skills (Lugalla & Mbwambo, 1999). The Tanzanian government is currently in the process of finalizing the Integrated Early Childhood Development Policy. The creation of this policy involves the Department of Children and the Department of Family in the Ministry of Community Development Gender and Children, the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare, and the ministry of Education and Vocational Training. Civil society organizations and Development Partners are also involved directly or through their technical support in the development of the policy. If education begins early on, children may better understand their social capital and turn to others for help before they go to the streets. Once school age children are enrolled and efforts are made to keep them in schools, the problem of children coming to live on the streets will be minimized.

CONCLUSION

In order to improve the lives of full time street children, many organizations must work together to create sustainable solutions. Children living on the streets need social, psychological, educational, judicial, and health support. For example, providing information on clinics, free food available from local non-profits and potential housing sponsors would provide opportunities for assistance in a less forceful way. In designing interventions, researchers, government leaders, and non-profits would be wise to become familiar with the work of one-another. In addition to being aware of each other's work, providing children with a milieu of alternative resources might also be helpful with assisting them fully. A complete recovery from chronic street life cannot be achieved without consistent collaborative support for their financial, emotional, social, cognitive, and physical needs. Also all levels of government and non-profit agencies should devise the mechanisms for working with families and communities to find long-term solutions which are more comprehensive and sustainable.

In addition, educational support for street children may be most productive when children are not only financially able to attend, but also more motivated to attend school. When working with homeless populations, research suggests that self-initiatives can reverse the feelings of disempowerment many homeless individuals experience (Fisher, 2008). Unfortunately, very few street children view an education as a way out of their dilemma. When told to attend school, street children often complain that education was not designed with their needs in mind. For example, Tanzania has a traditional education system that is teacher-directed rather than learner-centered. In addition individual needs are seldom met with up to 100 children in one classroom with a minimally educated teacher. Learning often involves rote memorization and rarely addresses the basic needs of street children such as skills that are applicable to their real life struggle to survive.

With increasing numbers of children turning to the streets at such young ages, greatly increased early childhood education programs could become the a safety net that assists children in better understanding their rights, resources, and opportunities. Considering the constraints developing countries encounter, however, it may be suggested that supplying financial, material, and human resources for quality early childhood education is an emergency requiring widespread-international support.

Finally, the literature dealing with street children has recently begun referring to these victims as children of the streets as a more appropriate reference than street children. While both terms are frequently used, an increasing effort is beginning to be made to employ vocabulary that will focus greater attention on the needs of these masses rather than a term that creates only stigma. Mrombozi (2012) perhaps best described this changing view in stating: The streets do not bear children. People do. Children on the streets are yours and mine (Mkombozi, 2012).

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