Mitaani hadi shuleni: from street into school

Child centred research to understand the lives of street-connected girls in Nairobi

This paper addresses question 4: developing rights based holistic strategies for street-connected children.

The research and evidence

This submission is based on detailed qualitative research with over 200 street-connected girls including 48 in-depth case studies of girls and their families living in informal settlements across Nairobi in Kenya. The girls who participated in the research were selected so that one-third were living and working on the streets without intervention, one-third had completed a rehabilitation programme with Pendekezo Letu, a local organisation working to improve the lives of street-connected girls in Nairobi, and the remaining one-third of girls had dropped out of Pendekezo Letu's programme and returned to the street.

The research, funded by the United Nations Girls Education Initiative, was co-constructed between the University of Brighton, ChildHope UK, Pendekezo Letu, and the Overseas Development Institute. A team of 10 young Kenyan researchers and 6 social workers were trained to carry out participatory and qualitative research to gain a deeper understanding of the complex everyday lives of street-connected girls, their peers and families, and of how interventions had worked (or had not worked) to improve their educational opportunities and wellbeing. Methods such as roads and rivers of life, life histories, safety mapping, network diagrams, happy/sad matrices, photo narratives and interviews were used with focus groups and individuals in case studies. Key representatives from government departments and national and international non-governmental organisations participated in a reference group that analysed key aspects of policy and legislation that needed to be addressed to support local interventions.

Examples of case studies and context:

Story from street-connected girl: Diamond aged 15

Diamond's mother suffered from mental health problems and couldn't look after her eight children. Diamond was bullied on the streets, sexually harassed by older street-connected boys, and many of her friends started to take drugs. She went to live with her grandmother, who was living with HIV & AIDS. Although some community members helped out with food and clothes, all of the children had to go out to work. Pendekezo Letu worked with Diamond in the rehabilitation centre and helped her and her siblings to find places to stay. They also helped her grandmother by providing food, medicine and counselling so that she was able to participate in a group of women living positively with HIV. Her uncle now also helps Diamond with accommodation and comes to talk to the teachers at school.

Story from street-connected girl: Angel aged 17

Angel ran away from home as her mother used to beat her. Although she attended the rehabilitation centre and, following this, entered formal education, she got raped on her way home from school one day and didn't know who to tell. She became pregnant and was diagnosed with HIV. The person responsible walked away from her, she also lost the baby and was totally devastated by this series of events. Angel had been abused and lacked any family support and so was introduced to prostitution by a friend. With this complex set of risk factors facing Angel, there would need to be additional intervention to engage further with her and she may need to be signposted to other services.

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A new theory of change for working with street-connected children and their families.

All street-connected children may be considered marginal due to the places and spaces which they and their families inhabit and work in. Their level of vulnerability will vary, however, depending on the particular risks that they face in their complex everyday lives and the type of support (or lack of support) they have from their street-connected families or peers.

These risks and vulnerabilities are best understood through narrative and participatory visual research with children to understand their journeys to the street and the different cultural and political factors that affect them.

From detailed analysis of the data collected, the research team developed a vulnerability spectrum to assist non-government and government organisations to assess the type of intervention that may be required to realise the rights of street-connected children and to therefore improve their lives.

Lower vulnerability

The research shows that **Community-based initiatives** can be effective in supporting street-connected children that have some form of support network. Child protection committees (CPC's) made up of community members who are trained in child protection and child rights can provide a good safety net for vulnerable girls and their siblings connected to the street. Schools are also key partners, and teachers can benefit from training to improve

understanding and attitudes towards street-connected children, participatory skills, child rights and positive discipline. Child rights clubs in schools can also be effective in promoting peer-to-peer support.

Increasing vulnerability

In these situations more vulnerable children can benefit from having **a safe and separate space for rehabilitation** in parallel to **family members being assisted** to improve their health and wellbeing so that they can better support their children. Findings showed that one-to-one psychosocial support, counselling and life skills training can significantly improve education and protection outcomes for girls with complex needs.

Girls who can then enroll in school can benefit from income generated by their parents. While parents are supported with income earning activities through skills training and loan programmes, they can also benefit from discussions with their children and social workers about child rights and responsibilities, and how to provide positive family environments.

High vulnerability and multiple risks

The research found that in these situations more work needs to be done to **ensure legal representation** of street-connected children in the criminal justice system. The research also highlighted the additional work that needs to be provided in particularly dysfunctional families to

(e.g. if parental alcohol addiction is not addressed). Where children have faced multiple risks within dysfunctional families, their strategies can be supported and they may be integrated into alternative family or peer groupings in which they feel protected and can effectively realise their rights.

- Rights-based strategies that are holistic include consideration of the right to special care and protection for the most vulnerable (article 20), and the right to assistance to children and their street-connected families to adequate standard of living (article 27). Partnership is also important, for example involving community representatives (CPC members, local elders, chiefs etc), district authorities, schools and other child focused organisations working in the area.