



Saving the Next Generation: A Needs Assessment of Street
Children in Freetown, Sierra Leone



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This report is dedicated to them.

Introduction

Goal

To assess the needs of street children¹ within the area of Freetown, Sierra Leone and provide some clarity of the need for the International Community, Government of Sierra Leone and Civil society organizations to help this vulnerable group within a society that is recovering from ten years of brutal civil war.

Objectives

1. To assess the needs of street children within the area of Freetown, Sierra Leone.
2. To contribute to the development and/or improvement of policies and programs orientated towards the rehabilitation of street children within Sierra Leone.

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¹ For the purpose of this research the term ‘street children’ shall be used in reference to a child under the age of eighteen who lives and/or works on the streets and may fluctuate from living with relatives to living on the streets.

Chapter One

Background to the Study

A street child is any child that works and/or lives on the streets. Street children often alternate between living with their families and relatives to living on the streets. Street children are a key feature in many cities around the world and one manifestation of this is the situation in Freetown, Sierra Leone's capital city. As a result of ten years of civil war that occurred in Sierra Leone, the humanitarian situation greatly exasperated the phenomenon of street children throughout the country and particularly within the area of Freetown. The war has consequently resulted in an indefinite number of street children currently living on the streets of Freetown and throughout Sierra Leone.

The civil war which took place in Sierra Leone devastated the entirety of the country and as a result many children found themselves abandoned on the streets. Although the civil war ended some seven years ago, the graffiti are still visible and the country is still riddled with poverty, having been classed for two years as the poorest country on the planet and one year the second poorest country.² Consequently, children as young as ten are seeking jobs on the street with either the express permission of their parents or guardians or the latter's carelessness about how the children survive, since families are incapable of providing for them. These street children are particularly vulnerable to illicit activities such as drugs, prostitution and child trafficking. Those which are lucky may live in a shelter with up to fifteen other street children whilst many other children are forced to

² United Nations Human Development Index 2005, 06 and 07.

live, eat and sleep on slabs in markets places or shop steps in the city without any shelter or protection and are left vulnerable to all sorts of dangers. Many children encounter violence and torture by rival gangs and even the police and almost all street children are likely to experience hunger, thirst and sickness.

Project Design and Methodology

Alongside an analysis of recent reports and publications on the rehabilitation of Street children, the majority of the research findings have been generated from one-to-one interviews with street children themselves in the form of questionnaires. It was necessary to use a qualitative approach to disclose the harsh realities that street children encounter. The qualitative approach generates knowledge and insight that will allow for the development and improvement of programs aimed towards assisting street children.

Research Sample

To gather information on street children it was deemed necessary to talk directly to the children themselves within their environment. A questionnaire was designed to assess the needs of street children and was administered in twelve different areas within the capital: P Z, Eastern Police Station, Lumley, Gray Bush, Susan's Bay, Victoria Park, Kroo Bay, Gold, Lumley Street, Freetown bus station, Government Wharf and Waterloo. In total, 94 questionnaires were completed and analyzed to constitute this report. The child respondents, all of whom were under the age of eighteen years were identified randomly in the eleven different areas throughout Freetown.

It should be noted that the recruitment of study participants was at times challenging. Many street children initially refused to participate in the research due to fear and uncertainty of its purpose. However, once the Research Team explained to them the objectives and anonymity of the project and clearly laid out issues of informed consent and confidentiality, their fears were greatly allayed and they agreed to participate. Despite these challenges, the research was able to take place successfully due to the willingness of the community to address the issue of street children.

Ethical Considerations

The safety and protection of all participants was essential due to the vulnerability of the target age group—under eighteen years. Prior to involvement in the study, all potential participants were given a summary of the research goals and expectations from them. No questionnaire was completed without obtaining the full and informed consent of participants. Although the children who partook in the questionnaires were under the age of eighteen and usually paternal or guardian consent is required in such cases, due to the impossibility of obtaining consent from any parents, this principle was compromised for legitimate considerations. The children were also advised of their rights to refuse answering any questions posed by the Research Team.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the questionnaires was essentially a meticulous process that involved careful reading and annotation of the collated information so as to determine its implications.

There was also a necessity to assess the general needs of the children and actions or programs necessary from stakeholders in the amelioration of the plights of these children.

Chapter Two

RESEARCH FINDINGS

1) Reasons for living on the street

The vast majority of children had previously lived with their family or relatives, however, due to financial constraints they have been forced to live on the streets and seek employment. There is evidence that some children chose to leave their homes on their own accord as their families were unable to provide for them.

Although the vast majority of children had previously lived with their family or relatives, some are orphans and were unable to locate any relatives, consequently being faced with the harsh street life.

'I was unable to locate any relative and then I was notified that my parents and immediate family were all dead.'

- Boy aged seven living at the Government Wharf

Whether these children were forced or voluntarily left their homes is unclear, but it is apparent that many children have traveled great distances to the capital Freetown in the hope of finding some form of employment. Some children, especially those living at

Susan's Bay had traveled as far as from Makeni and Bo.

Another reason for some of these children leaving their homes is the number of members within a family and the provision available for all of them. Although large families are inherent to African culture, what emerged as factual is that families with more than five children were unlikely to provide sufficiently for their children. The civil war left Sierra Leone poverty stricken and many families are unable to provide basic amenities such as food and water to their children, resulting in the mass number of street children throughout Sierra Leone.

Small families of five are still able to provide for their members. It is therefore advantageous to hail from smaller families since one member could become the social security beneficiary³ and take care of the rest.

*'There are four children in my family including me and we are looked after by our grandmother.'*⁴

Conversely, larger families of more than five children tended to be left to fend for themselves as the family is financially constrained.

2) Form of employment on the streets

³ The Africa Social Security Scheme is for a family to invest in one member to gain education and in-turn this member takes care of the rest. This is one reason why corruption is rampant in most Africa states.

⁴ Fifteen year old boy living at Susan's Bay.

The vast majority of children living on the streets had some form of basic employment. They perform some or all of the following jobs: collecting rubbish such as aluminum cans and wire which could later be sold for a small price; sweeping rubbish in market places, shops et al; street trading, mainly in plastic bags or sweet; carrying heavy load, mints or bubble gum; becoming apprentices on public transports, push-chart or porters; or worse, engaging in petty thievery like pick pocketing or recognizance for hardened criminals. Children living in the same community or area tended to hold similar employment. For example, children in Lumley tended to be drivers or conductors on Poda Podas, whilst the street children located in Victoria Park tended to sweep the floors or assist people with carrying loads.

There are some children who had no form of employment. About thirteen percent of children who participated in the research had no form of employment on the streets due to scarcity of jobs even for them. This is manifested in a reply from one of our participants who stated that:

'I am not working as there is nothing to do.'

Many of the street children who claimed to have employment are willing to work if jobs are available but unemployment is not akin to them as most Sierra Leoneans are mainly unemployed. Due to the inconsistency, uncertainty and availability of employment on the streets many street children are faced with hunger, violence and sickness, sometimes resulting in a premature death.

As a result of the scarcity of employment many engage in illicit activities such as prostitution and drug selling as a means of survival. Although this study only manages to locate one female street child whose employment was to assist a tailor, there is notably a vast amount of female street children who engage in prostitution as a form of employment. Many participants within the PZ area openly admitted to selling marijuana as a form of employment.

3) The Level of Education

The study made evident that the level of education of street children was very low, well if they had education there was been no need to be on the street. About seventy percent of research participants had received only partial primary education; thirteen percent went as far as starting secondary education; and twelve percent have never received any form of education. These figures are shocking and reveal that, if this sample group is a true representation of street children within the area of Freetown in Sierra Leone, then there is a vast majority who have only received a basic form of education. These figures would also support the high levels of illiteracy within Sierra Leone. With zero percent tertiary education attainment in the questionnaire, this calls for urgent action.

What is interesting however is the willingness of fifty-five percent of participants to return to school or any form of education that will take them of the street. Some preferred skill training like tailoring and constructions work, whilst the majority wanted to become drives as a form of quick money. These results illustrate the importance placed on education and correlate with the results of the level of education attainment. Participants

who were under the age of fifteen tended to view education as more relevant than those above the age of fifteen. Reasons for this may be that education is not always necessary for employment and therefore learning a skill may increase the likelihood of gaining employment.

4) Living under Harsh Conditions

This study documents the harsh and brutal reality of street life for many children living within Freetown. As the questionnaires took place in either the street child's living quarters or working environment they revealed the poor standard of living these children encounter daily. When asked about the conditions or experiences they had been subjected to many confessed that they were often treated badly and tortured or beaten up by rivaling street children, police or older boys and many experienced sickness. These conditions are inherent to street life and children are particularly vulnerable to dangers.

Some become emotional and reserved as they recount their life experiences and conditions on the street. Many have visible signs of abuse such as scars, burns and signs of malnutrition. Some are underdeveloped and this correlated to the lack of food that is available to them. Majority of them get to live on a single meal per day ratio, some only when it is available (meaning they can go without any food at all). Good conditions can become available as some get two meals a day and only few gets square meals – all depending on the availability of work and one meal a day for the majority of street children is hazardous and shocking when considering the workload that they undertake.

It has already been identified that there was a variety of jobs undertaken by the street children. However, one commonality was that the majority of children worked from morning until night. As work is not readily available, street children usually work whenever work is available or they seek jobs like vultures looking for prey. When asked, one fourteen year old boy said:

'I work continually throughout the day from morning to night when work is available otherwise I'm looking for a job all the time

5) How To Save the Next Generation?

This question provoked two responses: either education or shelter. The reoccurrence of these issues illustrated the importance of both these necessities. Education was viewed as fundamental for progress especially for the participants under the age of fifteen years. Shelter was also viewed as greatly important, especially for those street children who had no form of shelter and were actually living on the streets.

Many participants in the study tended to steer away from political discussion. This might be a reflection of their age and perhaps ignorance of the current political landscape of the country or of the relationship between politics and their plights. As this study took place in the run up to the 2007 elections it would be expected that more emphasis would be placed on the election for political parties to pledge commitments to help children. One of the participants, a fourteen year old, stated:

'I would like education and shelter. I think the government has a responsibility to help those on the streets.'

What is apparent here is the need for all hand to come on deck and assess the situation. International Organizations and civil society organizations should remind the government of its responsibilities under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Chapter Three

Recommendations

This small scale study has provided insight into the harsh reality of street life for many children throughout Sierra Leone. Although this study solely focused on Freetown, one can make the assumption that the handful of street children that participated in this study may represent the rest of Sierra Leone.

- The sole purpose of this study was to identify the key needs of street children so that both governments and civil society organizations can ensure that their needs are met adequately. This study has identified the key areas which need to be addressed both by Government and Civil Society Organizations as being education, food, shelter and security. All these factors are collectively important and it is essential that they are addressed simultaneously to ensure effective results and the rehabilitation of street children and their integration into the community.

- There should be a joint Task Force of various stake holders, donor agencies dealing with children, government and civil society organizations that will draw up a program based on the following:
 - Quantify the number of children on the street in the country
 - Develop a home program like the Don Boscoe program
 - Provide education in formal or informal ways

- Another way to discourage children from ending on the street is to enforce the Anti-Human Trafficking and Child Labor Laws in the Country. Though some alternatives to street life for street children should be considered before proscribing it, it is necessary implement the good will of these two laws.
- The Child Rights Act 2006 has splendid innovations that cater to street children and with its full implementation most of the problems faced by children will be minimized, if not eradicated.
- There should be more education on birth control- families with many children tend to be unable to provide for them. The government should institute a policy on birth control and civil society should mount continuous education among the mass illiterate masses of the country, especially in the province.
- Government compulsory and free primary school education should be rigorously pursued to provide a sense of purpose for these children at a tender age.
- Employment and livelihood standards should be improved in the country for parents and guardians to take full and proud responsibilities of their children and wards.

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Appendix 1

QUESTIONNAIRE- to assess the needs of street children

1. Name (Optional)
2. Former Address (Optional)
3. How old are you?
4. Are you currently living with your family or relatives or did you previously?
5. Where are your parents and what do they do for their living?
6. How many of you are in the family and who takes care of all of you?
7. What do you do on the streets (I.e. form of employment if any)?
8. Have you received any form of education (I.e. primary/secondary/tertiary)
9. If money was available would you like to receive an education or learn a skill such as tailoring or construction?
10. Describe the conditions or experiences you have encountered whilst working on the

streets.

11. How many meals do you have everyday?

12. How many hours do you work everyday?

13. How would you like government or civil society organizations to respond to your needs?