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Building sustained relationships of trust is often a difficult task as children have no stable domicile but move in response to shifting opportunities. Furthermore, often they struggle with sustaining concentration and for some the temporary denial of toxic substances is hard to bear. Conventional and formal forms of educational interactions must be replaced by highly participatory ways that utilise visualisation and physical actions, as our interventions showed. Working for more frequent short periods rather than long ones that require sustained listening is another way of facilitating ongoing interest and engagement. Most importantly, people working with and supporting street children need to suspend assumptions and prejudices, learn to ask the right questions and listen actively. In this way we can learn from them and assist in processes of defining necessities and responsibilities. Thus, we suggest the first priority is to approach street children in the same way as we approach poor women and men: with an emphasis on their dignity and a recognition of their right to decide on their lives, in consultation with us whose role may be to counsel, to give information necessary to make informed decisions – but not to prescribe against their will.

### **Spaces and places in the city**

Based on the information gathered with participating groups, we suggest that ways of assisting children to remain safe while on the streets must be developed. For a start, this is deemed to be a more workable option, given the large and increasing numbers of children, but such an approach is also in line with the rights of children. Hence, we concur with the Alliance, which suggests that programmes which aim to work with street children should start

working with them where they are and not trying to force them to leave the streets. In some places, authorities have introduced activities which are focused strongly on children and young people leaving the street. These are usually motivated by factors other than the best interest of the child, such as civic/political pressure to “clean up” the streets (International HIV/AIDS Alliance, n.d.).

In addition, the suggestion that children should be reunited with their families or an alternative stable family setting flies in the face of a reality in which they themselves have created family substitutes, as well as relations of care and caring. Many of the children form fairly stable relationships that are similar to extended families or households. The majority of drawings produced by the children show images of closeness: friends embracing, kissing, holding hands. Many of the narratives include references to the fact that they do not wish to live in shelters where they are not allowed to have their boy- or girlfriend with them. The experience of being loved and protected – even if this may be transitory – is also important for a child’s sense of self. While not all who share a sleeping space may contribute to and eat out “of the same pot” (a definition of traditional households), members of a sleeping group establish a working relationship that is often very close, resembling the emotional ties of kinship and family. Although there is evidence that within a group there may be exploitation – particularly of young boys at the hand of older ones, and of girls in the form of sexual harassment and rape – this is incidental. Compared with what the children described as the constant emotional and

physical abuse suffered at the hands of law-enforcement officers or people they have sought to escape from by leaving home, ill-treatment by peers was regarded as insignificant.

The city belongs to all who live in it and therefore we argue strongly for the creation of child-friendly spaces. The city should be an environment where children can experience a sense of safety, recreation, beauty and care, *and* enjoy the services they are entitled to. Le Roux (2001:109) has observed that “life on the streets is often characterised by insecurity, violence and abuse – invariably at the hands of the very adults whom they should look up to.” The whole city should be a place where children do not have to fear assault, abuse or arrest, yet instead of guaranteeing this basic right by making the city safe we, as adults, remove the children from it! What makes their fear particularly vicious is that the children seem to feel that no-one is ready to listen to them, and hence they do not trust welfare organisations and street workers to represent their interests.

Within the city the children (and in particular those who live on the street) need centrally located multipurpose drop-in centres where they can access services such as nutritious food (and nutrition education!), bathing facilities, health screening, and counselling, where they have access to information on various formal and non-formal education opportunities, living options and voluntary referral to shelters. Such drop-in centres would have to guarantee “free passage”, that is, children would not run the threat of being arrested or detained. Instead, they would have to feel free to come and go, confide and be cared for, without worrying about coercion. Recognising the different interests and needs of young and older children, girls and boys, centres should have designated spaces for different age groups. Children can develop a sense of belonging and pride, if they are encouraged to participate in the design and decoration of the spaces. Such processes also offer unique opportunities for non-formal education.

Often the staff employed or working in drop-in centres consists of former street children; however, while they may draw on their experience for insight and empathy, they may also be steeped in the top-down habits so typical of adult-child relations. Child-friendly spaces need staff trained to work with children – and whose work is informed by a deep sense of social justice and the knowledge of and belief in rights – as much as in counselling and communication skills. Importantly, drop-in centres must offer opportunities for children to report misconduct, abuse and exploitation without fear of recrimination. Perpetrators from the public – ranging from men buying under-age sex, to shopkeepers selling dangerous glue, to citizens refusing to pay tips for car-guarding services – are rarely accused of complicity. However, if we want children to regain respect for adults, their rights must be seen to be respected and defended.

Drop-in centres could also be the sites where children can be given access to individually “owned” storage facilities and post-boxes. Research indicates that theft means children losing the little bit they do have, including their identity documents and cash. What if the little property they do own could be kept secure in a safe place to which only they have access? This would also allow them greater mobility to pursue livelihood activities as they could leave the sleeping place without worrying about theft. The post-boxes would further function as a means of communication between children and others, and create small spaces which they can control as “my space”.

Increased and improved access to nutritious food, hygiene and sanitation would allow children to remain healthier and avert a range of skin infections and diseases; it would also allow them to clean their clothes and work on their appearance – which, in turn, would make certain casual

work more accessible.<sup>5</sup> Drop-in centres should offer private washing, showering and toilet facilities: this right to privacy is particularly important, considering that the children have no space they can retreat to. Regular health screening and treatment opportunities “with no strings attached” would allow children to take charge of health and infections before they become serious.

Many of the children’s stories demonstrated that access to birth certificates and identity documents is recognised as crucial. Endless promises made by endless streams of researchers (as evidenced by the children) have yet to materialise such as real help with applications for identity documents. Again, drop-in centres could function as the space in which access to the Department of Home Affairs and assistance with applications is possible. This would have the additional advantage of making such centres not just safe and desirable spaces, but also useful places.

Finally, there is clear evidence that regular, formal school education suits only a minority of the children. What if the education was not based on authoritarian forms of delivery, thus conjuring memories of failure, but based on the resourcefulness and experience of the children, building on what they know rather than what they lack? What if it made them enjoy learning – as much as the participants in the PAR exercises of this research enjoyed participating and in this way found learning to be fun? In Brazil education is combined with the provision of food, and this has worked well (Swift, 1997). Similarly, if the education offered included basic skills training, thus creating potential access to income-generating activities, it might be more desirable. If drop-in centres had a truly multipurpose orientation, any of the encounters and activities would offer education and learning possibilities without having the connotations of previous school failures, shunning and the like.

### **The right to work and make a living**

Thomas de Benitez (2003:3) has noted that:

homeless street children need to earn money or food to survive. Their work is usually sporadic, marginal, sometimes criminal and always in the informal sector. Their marginal activities put them outside the scope of any protection services geared to ensuring child labour is not exploitative or hazardous.

Although the local authorities do not support the income-generating activities of street children, the view of local NGOs and service providers is often different. In Chetty’s (1997:169) study of street children in Durban, she found that 78,9% of service providers stated that street children should be provided with job opportunities and 52,1% felt that the law should allow disadvantaged minors to work.

Money earned gives children not just a sense of independence, power and dignity, but also allows them to make choices. What if children of the street were to be given job opportunities that are appropriate to their age? If there were regular income-earning activities (such as distributing pamphlets) with a fixed minimum wage on offer and advertised by word-of-mouth, through personal post-boxes and on notice boards at drop-in centres, children would have to spend far less effort and energy looking for odd jobs and could begin to plan their livelihood activities. Viewed from the other side, the exposure might trigger a shift in employers’ attitudes as they come to recognise and respect the resourcefulness of children. A regular reliable

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<sup>5</sup> This is not to suggest that all children lack personal hygiene - the raggedy and dirty appearance associated with beggars is often part of the “professional outfit” that makes the appeal more compelling.

income would also mean that sex work was no longer the main/only livelihood activity for girls.

If children of the street were to be regarded like (other) child-headed households, this would give them a status beyond the stigmatised and criminalised status of “street children” and make them eligible for particular rights and entitlements. The Children’s Bill (B70 of 2003) recognises children from the street as “children in difficult circumstances” and suggests that services to children on the street be considered in the same light as services offered to other children in need of care. If groups of street children were to be treated like other child-headed households, the state could be held accountable to ensure the provision of basic resources necessary for survival and development. This includes material support such as access to social grants, food parcels, payment of school fees, etc. Similarly, if children were to be treated like other poor households, they could expect to benefit from government responses to food insecurity that include the child support grant, food parcel campaigns and provision of maize at subsidised prices. None of these is available to street children on a reliable basis, but we would suggest rather that social development efforts would be better spent focusing on ways to construct households composed of, or including, street children. Access to child-support grant monies would free children to spend more time learning and playing, as well as participating in committees and meetings formed to deliberate and decide on their future.

## CONCLUSION

While emphasising the importance of children’s participation in joint efforts to constructing a better future, we also acknowledge that enlisting their sustained engagement may not be easy. Once children’s experiences have led them not to trust adults and their capacity to care for them, it will take holistic, coherent and consistent efforts to re-establish this trust. Their reluctance to come forward and engage must be met with respectful communicative efforts and patience. The intoxication and hence inability of some children to function is a further limitation to participation. Reducing the dangers and hazards associated with glue sniffing is a complex issue and does not just simply involve a period of rehabilitation. If glue sniffing is used primarily as a means of staving off hunger, pain, fear and the discomfort of adverse weather, these are the causes that need to be addressed directly through the supply of food, emotional care and shelter. Drugs and glue are highly toxic and addictive escape mechanisms and the accessibility of glue makes such escape easy. Mobility maps showed where children in the two groups purchase glue (and alcohol); while there is no doubt that shopkeepers know the purpose for which a child purchases strong cobbler’s glue, they sell it to them thus contributing to their habit. What if the sale of glue to children was made illegal and shopkeepers faced shame and punishment for putting greed above consideration for the health of children? Our experience suggests that fun education processes and dignified income-earning opportunities can provide enough satisfaction so that intoxication will no longer be quite as necessary.

Finally, we want to submit that measuring the success (or not) of rights-based interventions with street children would require different tools and indicators than counting the numbers of children “disappeared” from the streets. Such indicators would include, firstly, children’s freedom from violence and adults’ responsible participation in the daily running of street children’s lives. Secondly, it would require the ability to weigh up choices and make informed decisions based on information and an understanding of their rights and a range of viable options. Thirdly, what is needed is a clear voice and say in policies formulated in consultation with those whom they are meant to serve. Fourthly, there needs to be support from community forums established to respond to the articulated needs of increasing numbers of destitute and

homeless children. Fifthly, appropriate work opportunities and enacted regulations that protect them from exploitation or abuse are required. Sixthly, they need contact with sympathetic and open reference people and counsellors to whom they can turn in order to report attacks, and there should be clear mechanisms to redress injustices. And finally, access to small loans and banking facilities that support their efforts to create and sustain business opportunities should be made available.

Such interventions are certainly hard to establish and measure: you have to be in for “the long haul” as they require the active participation of children in their implementation. As adults we have failed our children and their insecurities are an indictment. We could respond by lending some dignity to their attempts to make a living; this research has led us to propose that this entails a more sustained way of responding to the crisis that we all have created and continue to maintain. Finally, the poignant words from Dickens’s *Great Expectations* are a timeless reminder of how society’s actions impact on children of the street: “In their little worlds in which children have their existence...there is nothing so finely perceived and so finely felt, as injustice”.

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