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PLAY ON THE STREETS:

Street Children and Youth in Three African Cities

Briefing Paper 10 · August 2017

KEY POINTS

- Street children and youth engage in a rich variety of play activities, which change as they grow into young adulthood.
- Youth in the three cities shared some common play experiences, with differences around how girls and boys play and the range of activities they engage in.
- Play is a key coping strategy, essential for emotional wellbeing and in building social relations with friends and the wider community.
- Challenges include finding time for play while also meeting daily needs, finding space for play in dense city environments, and aggressive policing from security officials and local leaders who discourage the visible presence of street children and youth.

INTRODUCTION

Play is an essential aspect of life for young people growing up on the streets. Focus groups held in Accra and Harare (January 2014) and in Bukavu (December 2014) over 200 street children and youth discussed play. A broad definition of play was adopted as any physical or mental activity that provides amusement, recreation, leisure, escape, and interaction with others. For street children and youth play also is a means of learning new practical and social skills, from using technology (betting shops, mobile phones, games' centres), to sports skills (football) and numeracy (Ludo, draughts). In addition, play is also a livelihood strategy, with forms of competitive play adapted to gambling or betting. The three cities share many common activities and challenges; alongside cultural, spatial, gender and age-related factors that affect the types of play engaged in. In March and July 2017, workshops were held in Accra and Harare, where participants discussed the emerging findings from the focus group data and contributed their analysis to the production of this briefing paper.

PLAY AS A SOCIAL MARKER OF ADULTHOOD

During the recent analysis workshops, participants' ranking of play activities highlighted the issue of age. Now young adults (aged 22 or 23; participants were 17-19 when they took part in focus groups), the most important activities are music, gambling, alcohol, drugs, and socialising (chatting in person and via social media).



Boys watch a football match in Bukavu; one holds a street football made from plastic bags and string.

Focus group data also shows a division between activities seen as adult and those for children, with skipping, ampé, video and board games typically for those in younger age groups, whereas social media use, gambling, drinking and sex seen as adult activities. (See Table overleaf for the top 20 activities). In Accra, adults and street youth will challenge children engaging in activities inappropriate to their age.

Games are played by different age groups at different times; video games, for example, being the preserve of younger boys during the day, but used by young adults at night, with the added excitement of gambling on the outcome of matches.

GENDER AND PLAY

In Bukavu there appears to be some gender parity when it comes to games, and according to one group of boys, this may reflect a societal shift: “these days, all the games are played by both girls and boys together. You may see a boy playing ‘kangé’ or skipping a cord with girls. [...] In former times there was a difference, these days you can see a girl wearing her father’s trousers.” When asked how it feels to play football with girls, the young person said “I feel as if I were playing with boys” (Group 1). Members of another group agree, “there is no game that a girl doesn’t know. If they see us playing football, they ask for a place in the team. If they meet us playing cards, they ask for a pass. They know all the games’ rules and take part in them” (Group 4).

In Accra, there are “different types of play; some for the girls and others for boys,” the exception being dancing (Group 5). A male participant explains: “boys like to play football and the girls like to play ampé [...] boys play TV games but girls can’t play it”. To which a female member of the group instantly responds: “there are some girls who are better than boys. What some boys can’t do, some girls can do it perfectly” (Group 8). According to a boy in the same group, girls do sometimes play football: “there is a girl around our place, we go for training with her, she is a lady but she enjoys football [...] our coach likes her because she makes the effort – even though she is a girl” (Group 8). In Harare, “the girls do their thing and we wake up and do our own thing. Girls may play cards, and ‘nhodo’ (a game with stones). Boys play casino, soccer and draughts; that is how we play” (Group 5). In contrast to Bukavu, where boys recognised that “girls have also the right to relax and play,” (Group 3), in Accra girls complained that boyfriends restrict their opportunities to play; “we may be chatting and it would turn into laughter. They would not allow us to chat among ourselves; so by this they sit on our freedom” (Group 4). Domestic duties also mean that girls “don’t get the chance” to play, because boyfriends “keep us in the nets as if we were at home” where girls “wash or cook for him, so she will not have time to go and sit behind the game, so it is the boys who play it. The girls don’t take part” (Group 3).

TIME TO PLAY

Street children and youth “mostly relax in the afternoons or evenings” (Bukavu Group 1), with time for play

#	Top 20 Games and Play Activities	A	B	H
1	Football/Soccer	++	+++	+
2	Gambling with cards (or dice in Harare) (boys)	++	+++	++
3=	Music and dance (in public spaces)	+++	+++	+
3=	Alcohol and drugs	+++	++	++
4	Games centre – video games (boys)	+++		+
5=	Ludo (girls)	+++		
5=	Gambling on ‘TV game’ (boys)	+++		
6=	Ampé (jumping game played by girls)	+++		
6=	Betting on outcome of football matches (boys)	+++	++	
7	Chatting, sharing ideas	+++	++	+
8	Joking or being the comedian with friends	+++	+	+
9	Gate crashing music concerts	+		+++
10	Playing or swimming at the beach, lake or river	++	+	+
11	Listening to music	+++		
12=	Watching TV (boys: football; girls: soap operas)	+	+	+
12=	Skipping (girls)	+	++	
12=	Draughts	+	+	+
13	Bicycle or motorbike riding	+	+	
14=	Having sex (for fun)	+	+	+
14=	Watching films	++	+	

Table. Top 20 games played by street children and youth (by both girls and boys unless stated) across the three cities as discussed by focus group participants.

Comparative to the other cities, those in Harare (H) engaged in fewer types of play and less often, but shared primary play activities with Accra (A) and Bukavu (B). + = Evident; ++ = Prominent; +++ = Very prominent.

While street children and youth in Harare share play activities with Accra and Bukavu (see Table), play is reminiscent of the past. Looking at an illustration of children playing football, it reminds a male participant of “when I was at school playing soccer with others” and a female participant of a time “before I got into the streets, when I had a childish mind” (Group 3).

Both boys and young adults in Bukavu play football, and age is not significant in choosing with whom they play; what matters is other player’s willingness or skill: “there is no difference in playing. Be him older or younger we must play together” (Group 3). For girls in Bukavu, growing older (into their teens) means they have left games behind: “ ‘jeux de fée [piggy-in-the-middle], ‘kaloké’ (ball bouncing), ‘loko’ (hopscotch) are games we played when we were still small children [...] Nowadays we can play football, ride a bicycle or motorbike, or dance to music” (Group 6).

dictated by when shared public spaces become available. In Accra's Kantamanto Market, once the stallholders depart on Saturday night, the space 'belongs' to the street children and youth who live there. They can listen to music and dance, hold funeral parties or play football: "the market people don't come to work on Sundays, so that is the day that we, the boys, use to play football; we can play it in the morning and in the evening" (Group 4). In all three cities, street children and youth adopt a "work first, play after" approach (Bukavu Group 5), because "you cannot live on playing" (Bukavu Group 3). Days are spent "walking around and looking for some work to do" (Accra Group 2), or "play" is simply "working, we work by begging" (Harare Group 1). Another Harare participant "always" has "time to play, after getting money from the little jobs I do" (Group 2).

PLAY IN SOCIAL RELATIONS

Play has a role in building social capital with the wider community. Street children and youth in Bukavu described playing with "normal children" with whom they "become friends, because you have shared a moment together playing" (Group 1). They also "play with the restaurant workers, or those who do car washing, or again those who hire out bicycles and motorbikes" (Group 5). In Harare, a male participant defines play as mixing "with all people at all places: 'gooseberry' (my friends); 'mhene' (my clients); the 'D-dhubha' (taxi drivers); guards, and caretakers; and bicycle police; and children from the flats; and soldiers..." However, when asked how they play together: "they would want money from us that is how we play. We play asking each other for drugs" (Group 1). One Harare participant manages to combine friendships on and off the street: "I will be happy with my mafia (group) during the week, and on Sunday I go to amateur soccer where I will meet different people. We have a team" (Group 5). Playing with other street children enhances group identity, provides protection, including from emotional hurt: "if I don't play with my fellow street children, I have nobody else to play with. If I try to call the other 'normal' children, they can jeer at me saying I am a street child and they cannot play with me" (Bukavu Group 4).

PLAY AND EMOTIONAL WELLBEING

Participating in games and group activities raises self-esteem and helps in the avoidance and management of conflict: "play is any game that brings you together so



Boys gambling over a game of cards, Harare.

there will not be any confusion among you and your friends. It brings unity and development to people" (Accra Group 5). In Accra, the daily ritual of washing at the public shower provides opportunities to "meet with my friends, we are chatting and sharing ideas, then we all become happy" (Group 2). Sharing ideas and experiences is also important in Bukavu: "we meet other street boys and know their names, origins and history. When we are all together, we share even the encountered difficulties: 'I was arrested', 'I was beaten...' and each of us will know the other's difficulty" (Group 3). In both cities, it is important to share laughter: "if my fellow here tells me about a good event he has experienced, I can also be happy with him and we will start laughing together. If he was angry, I will manage to make him laugh, so that we can be both relaxed" (Bukavu Group 5).

Participants at the Accra and Harare workshop in March and July 2017 confirmed that different forms of 'play' (including drugs, alcohol, sex, dancing and music) are used as coping strategies, through which young people deal with emotional challenges of living on the street. From the focus groups, both girls and boys recognised that exercise has physical and emotional benefits: "playing strengthens the body. I came here somehow weak and lazy, but now I am feeling strong because I have played football with my fellow boys" (Bukavu Group 6). "I have lost my mother and I am seated quietly, my friends can come to me, and ask me to go and play football. When we go out, in the course of the exercise I might forget my mother's death" (Accra Group 4). Play provides a temporary distraction from worries, such as hunger, loss, violence, or the police:

"When playing I forget about the difficulties encountered at night. When I am following a film for example, I completely forget about everything I lived in - slaps [violence] , sleeping space - but after the film, those difficulties will once more come back to my mind. I start wondering how I will get food, where I will sleep, how I will be beaten" (Bukavu Group 4). In Harare, play helps one participant "to be very happy; I will get sad later [...] you may have stress being from home but you will not think of it when you play." Another adds: "I may have bad luck, like being beaten up, but when I play soccer it will be better" (Group 3).

PLAY IN CONTESTED URBAN SPACE

Particular spaces constrain or create the opportunity for play. In Accra, the beach area (where anyone can play regardless of their social status), games or video centres, and the market place, when closed, can be used for play. Sundays are the only day when it is safe to play on the streets. To play football in Bukavu, street youth go to an area on the outskirts of the city, as elsewhere they are charged a fee, or chased by the local leaders, who "if we are playing football, they take our balls. We are not free to play there. We may wish to play marbles in the market place but they always chase us" (Group 4). Spaces for play also double up as places of shelter, such as the films-hall in Harare, bars in Bukavu, and games centres in Accra.

CONSTRAINTS TO PLAY

As well as lacking the time and space to play, participants at the recent Accra workshop reported that the cost of play activities can be prohibitive (drinking, gambling, music concerts; airtime for chatting and using social media are expensive). This can include the cost of equipment, such as board games (pieces are easy to lose and costly to replace), shoes for playing football, "when you are playing without any boot, you can hurt yourself" (Accra Group 7), and even a ball: "I feel really good at playing football. Were there a ball, we could be playing every day and even become famous players in the city" (Bukavu Group 4). In Harare, two participants described finding ways around a lack of equipment:



Boys play 'kassei', table football, at a centre for street children in Bukavu.

"I go to shops with TVs and watch while I stand outside the shop. [...] If I lose at gambling I will make a plastic paper ball and play" (Group 3).

In all three cities, the most a serious inhibitor to play however were interactions with, or fear of, the police. "When I gather with my friends playing cards together, police can come to arrest us, so when I have those thoughts, I sometimes leave them and go away because if a police man should arrest me, it will be a bad luck for me" (Accra Group 5). In Bukavu "if they come to the place we are playing, we must flee at their sight. We climb up the roofs, some cross the roads because if you remain there you will be caught, jailed and beaten seriously" (Group 3). In Harare boys "used to play soccer at the shops at night after the shops closed; but now we do not do that anymore because if we start to play the police will come and beat us up" (Group 1).

CONCLUSION

While play may appear to be relatively unimportant when compared to other issues affecting street children and youth, such as accessing shelter or earnings, it makes a vital contribution to their wellbeing. Play, in its many different forms, is essential to coping with the physical and emotional stress of life on the street. It also enables street children and youth to manage social relationships by making new contacts, strengthening bonds of trust and mutual reliance with friends and resolving conflict.



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[Growing up on the Streets: A Story Map by Accra's Street Youth](#)

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