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## **Resilience on the Streets**

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## RESILIENCE ON THE STREETS:

Street Children and Youth in Three African Cities

Briefing Paper 11 · November 2017

### KEY POINTS

- Street children and youth are creative and adaptable in response to the very difficult conditions of extreme poverty and violence that characterise life on the streets.
- Resilience is a useful concept in considering the complex responses of street children and youth to everyday situations of risk and harm. Resilience encompasses how young people employ capabilities as well as the many negative forms of coping, for survival.
- Street children and youth use local knowledge of the city, their social relationships on the streets and support from NGOs, churches and charities to manage everyday problems.
- Being resilient and tolerating harm is also indicative of the vulnerability of street children and youth and their powerlessness to avoid dangerous and harmful situations growing up on the streets.

### INTRODUCTION

Children and youth growing up on the streets live in conditions of chronic poverty and social exclusion, with difficulties often compounded by a lack of support and protection from city authorities and the police. Young people rely on their own resources and initiative to survive and meet basic needs for food, shelter and safety. 'Resilience', as the ability to survive (and thrive) during periods of adversity, is a useful concept in the context of street life as it demonstrates the ways in which young people use capabilities to manage everyday challenges to their wellbeing. However, resilience is a complex term which also encompasses extremely negative forms of coping, where young people accept violence and abuse as part of the cost of survival on the streets. This briefing paper reflects the complex meanings of 'resilience' for street children and youth. It reports findings from 18 focus groups undertaken with over 200 young people in Accra (Ghana) and Harare (Zimbabwe) in April 2014 and in Bukavu (DRC) in February 2015 on the topic of resilience.

### DEFINING RESILIENCE

In Bukavu young men define resilience as *'kaza roho'*, to 'tighten the heart', a way of survival through difficult circumstances: "to take courage and harden the heart to endure whatever will happen to you" (Bukavu Group 4).



Floods in June 2016 in Accra, Ghana had a devastating impact on some street children and youth who lost possessions, livelihoods and in some cases family members and friends.

In environments where young people experience daily challenges to their safety and wellbeing, resilience can represent the practical response to threats: "when I get into trouble I can't sleep so I will go to my video centre and play some games and I will forget my problems" (Accra Group 4); but also behaviours that illustrate the powerlessness of street children and youth to deal with violence and marginalisation. In all three cities, resilience can include behaviours that ultimately have a negative effect on wellbeing, such as drug-taking or tolerating exploitation, which may appear acceptable in situations where young people have few choices available: "if I have too many problems I will smoke drugs and sleep not think about the problems. Tomorrow, when I get sober, I will start again" (Harare Group 6).

The challenges of street life in the three cities share similarities, such as the need to find shelter and food, but the ways young people meet these needs can differ. For one group in Harare, there are “skills of surviving”, with “the first skill I know of is knowing where to get your food to eat”. Another is when “I am selling my discs and the piracy-police will come, catch me, take my stuff, and leave me with a few items. [...] I am persevering such that I will continue to sell and not beg.” For these young men resilience means to keep going: “you cannot persevere in any easy situation. When things are difficult, that is when you persevere” (all Harare Group 1).

In Accra, street children and youth describe the challenge of losing their possessions due to fires, flood or demolition: “I tried my best to be able to rent a kiosk so that I can buy things for myself and keep it there. When I built the kiosk less than one month later it was demolished because the land belonged to the government. [...] in all those situations I still didn’t give up” (Group 4). Resilience in this context is a determination to remain in the city, even given difficulties: “I don’t think I will ever regret; whatever will come my way, I will have to face it” (Group 4).

Resilience is also understanding the reality of difficult situations and adapting to risk. In Bukavu, a male participant discusses his experience of being robbed: “I came across older boys who were stronger than me and who ate my 4,500 Francs [£2.20]. [...] I decided not to trouble them because they were stronger than me and I could struggle to get some other 4,500 Francs through my sweat” (Group 2).

Across the three cities, girls face the challenge of pregnancy and are often raising children on their own. One female participant describes resilience in this context: “As for me, I got pregnant and I didn’t have a father for my baby. So, I had to struggle all alone to take care of myself and the baby. I bought everything I

needed on my own until I had some money to go back to my hometown [...] It has given me the courage that I can do everything on my own” (Accra Group 7).

## SOCIAL RELATIONS

With few sources of support from the authorities or from families, street children and youth rely heavily on relationships with peers to cope with difficult situations. In Accra, a participant notes, “when I get into trouble or get into hardship, my friends do advise me what I should do to help myself” (Group 7). Young people sharing similar experiences provide a source of solace and practical assistance. In Bukavu, strong social networks are important for street children and youth when imprisoned or detained in police cells: “if you were in good terms with your friends, they are the ones who can bring you an avocado with a slice of bread, or bring you cigarette if you do smoke” (Group 1).

Reliance on friendships can be important to learn about how to survive on the street, but may also lead to the reproduction of negative and harmful forms of behaviour. In Harare, experienced street children share knowledge about the city and give advice to new arrivals on survival skills: “I teach him the place where he can bath and also be able to get into a bin and pick food because some may be shy to pick food” (Group 4). In Bukavu a girl comments: “There are some that started the street life before me. I just used to follow them and saw how they were treated and I followed all what they were doing. If it’s rape, I must endure it” (Group 6).

The research shows that social relations can also be unstable. When competing for very limited resources, street children and youth may opportunistically steal from each other, where this gives them some advantage. In Accra where young people identify a peer who has earned some money, they may arrange a robbery: “when he falls asleep then we will come back. We sometimes use a blade to cut his pocket, take the money and run away with it” (Group 4). Similarly, in Harare, more experienced street children and youth may exploit new arrivals to the street: “if I see that he has money I will ask him to buy me sadza and if the child is not very clever, I will steal his money” (Group 3).

Learning from peers, as well as through direct experience, frames ideas of ‘normal’ that shape adaptation to the challenges of life on the streets. A participant comments: “problems are part of my life. I



Girls often have sole responsibility for raising children.

always face problems everyday" (Bukavu Group 2). Being resilient in the context of constant risk and threat requires street children and youth to adopt new behaviours or strategies that help them to cope: "the problems add to our experience as a street kid, every time the police attack us we become better street kids" (Harare Group 5).

Networks also extend to relationships with churches and NGOs in the city as sources of support. These groups are important in both filling gaps in meeting everyday needs, such as food and clothing, and offer places of safety when street children are unable to cope with difficult situations. For girls in Bukavu, this includes when they have been the victim of sexual violence; serious sexual crime is a common experience. Here a participant describes being raped and her reaction to it in a rather matter of fact way, which may be symptomatic of dealing with extremely difficult aspects of survival: "I sometimes go out for sex work, where I am by bad luck, raped. But I come to PEDER [NGO and project partner] where I can wash my body, wash my clothes [...] be given food and then go on my way" (Bukavu Group 6). NGOs are particularly important as a means to access medical attention. In Accra, Street Girls Aid (an NGO and project partner) assists pregnant girls by taking them to maternity care and covering the costs; NGOs can act as the responsible adults that may be absent from the lives of young people. "When things became hard, when I was pregnant of my first son and [the father] denied responsibility, [NGO worker] took me to the hospital and took care of all my bills. If not for them! When I went to my father he told me that I can't come there to give birth" (Accra Group 2).

In Harare, churches offer conditional support to street children and youth and are an important source of food and income on Sundays when young people have limited opportunity to find work or to earn money through begging. Often support is contingent on attending services or joining church activity: "we first attend bible study and then they would buy us lunch" (Group 2).

These types of organisations form part of a tapestry of support that street children and youth identify and use as part of their survival strategies. Street children and youth acquire and build local knowledge and networks in order to meet their basic needs and to some degree



NGOs can be an important source of support and increase the resilience of street children and youth. For example this joinery workshop run by an NGO in Bukavu, DRC.

protect themselves; this underpins their ability to be resilient and maintain their wellbeing in highly adverse circumstances. In Accra, a participant emphasises the precariousness of networks: "I don't get assistance from anywhere, it's only my friends that can come to assist me" (Accra Group 8).

## ADAPTING BEHAVIOUR

Being resilient on the streets relies on the ability of individuals to read mutable situations and to form appropriate responses which minimise risk and maximise opportunity. This includes behaviour that facilitates the membership of groups. In Bukavu, when a street child approaches a group, he or she would learn to "take the mood [...] if they are laughing you must laugh with them and if they are angry, you must show that you are angry too. If you meet them angry and then you start laughing, you must be beaten" (Bukavu Group 1).

Street children and youth adopt performances that enable them to cope in complex situations of risk. In Harare, a participant notes, "if you do not want to be regularly beaten up by older people, you will just dress like a mad person and they will be afraid of you as you walk by" (Harare Group 4). Focus group participants note the need to use or at least give the impression that they will use violence: "being a street kid requires one to be hardy (tough). Even if you beat me, I must be able to hit you back with a brick" (Harare Group 3).

Performance is more subtly expressed by girls in Bukavu who engage in sex work as it provides some protection from being on the street. They may try, for example, to subvert power relationships by stealing from drunken clients. In Bukavu a young woman states "I may use my own intelligence: when they are all asleep I can steal from them and get additional money" (Bukavu Group 6).

## TOLERATING HARM

Resilience clearly includes behaviours that demonstrate the powerlessness and narrow range of options available to children on the streets. Across all three cities, young people tolerate abuse and exploitation as part of the pattern of everyday life and as a necessary condition of survival. In Bukavu, a male participant comments, "I bear sufferings imposed on me by mates. I can accept to be beaten, if only I get money for my life, because one day's flogs cannot kill a person" (Group 4). For street children and youth in Harare regular violence and theft of their possessions is a mundane aspect of life, with young people adapting their behaviours in order to manage sources of risk: "if the police beat you up for the first time the next time you will be friends with that police officer" (Group 4). The regularity of these conditions induce a sense of acceptance and 'normality' of what would be otherwise be unbearable situations.

While the research reveals that both boys and girls tolerate harm as part of their survival strategies, girls in particular suffer sexual exploitation in their efforts to mitigate risks of violence and to meet their basic needs. The lack of adequate shelter means that young women tolerate physical abuse in order to reduce vulnerability of being on the streets at night: "because you don't have any sleeping place, even when he beats you, you still go back to sleep with him" (Accra Group 3). In Bukavu a girl explains, "when I come across the *omboyis* (thugs) they ask for *fiabe* (sex). If you dare refuse, they will rape you and then beat you afterwards [...] you must only let them have sex and then you can be free" (Group 6). Girls are also driven to accept sexual exploitation in exchange for money or food. In Harare a young man comments: "most of the girls are forced to do what they do not want to do because they will be hungry" (Group 1). Girls have few options available to survive and meet their needs other than use of their bodies.

In all three cities, for both boys and girls, taking drugs and alcohol forms a key part of coping with the difficulties of life on the street. In Accra a young person comments: "for me when I don't have solutions to my



Makeshift shelter constructed by street children in Harare.

problems, I resort to smoking [drugs] and when I smoke I will forget all my thinking" (Group 4). In Harare a young man says: "for problems these days I just drink a bottle of Bron-Clear (cough syrup) and two ticks of mbanje (marijuana) and a bottle of water to avoid a dry mouth, after that I will be like I am in America, but if I become sober again the problems will come back" (Group 1). The use of drugs and alcohol numbs perceptions, allowing children and youth to survive in very difficult conditions and to engage in behaviours that they recognise are harmful to their wellbeing.

## CONCLUSION

For children and youth on the streets, resilience has multiple meanings exercised through responses to everyday situations of risk and harm. In order to preserve their wellbeing, young people find ways to cope with challenges by recognising and avoiding dangers, through relying on friends, family and other available forms of support and by more negative adaptations, where they come to tolerate violence and abuse as part of the conditions of everyday life. Resilience offers insight into the creative ways that street children and youth cope with poverty and exclusion and the negative impacts of powerlessness and limited choice on young lives.



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

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