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FRIENDSHIP ON THE STREETS

Street Children and Youth in Three African Cities

Briefing Paper 13 · August 2018

KEY POINTS

- The absence of family and other stable adult relationships increases the importance of friendships as a way to cope with the difficulties of life on the street.
- Friends are a source of protection, knowledge, comfort and practical support, which enable children and youth to meet their basic needs and to respond to the problems they experience.
- Friendships can falter or become exploitative where young people are competing for money, food or sexual relationships.
- Relationships change as young people get older and they take on other responsibilities, such as caring for children.

INTRODUCTION

Children and youth living and working on the streets, rely on friends and their wider social networks for survival. The lack of stable family relationships, combined with poverty and social marginalisation, mean that friendships are vitally important as sources of protection, practical help and emotional support. However, harsh conditions on the street also create competition between young people that leads to friendships being fragile and conditional upon the availability of resources. This briefing paper examines the meaning and function of friendships for street children and youth. It analyses findings from 18 focus groups on the topic of friends with over 200 young people in Accra (Ghana) and Harare (Zimbabwe) in July 2014, and in Bukavu (DRC) April 2015.

BUILDING FRIENDSHIP

Having a network of friends is essential to survival as a means of building social capital, bonds of trust and reciprocal support. "It is never possible that you will stay without having a friend on the street [...] when you get into any trouble, it is your friends that you can discuss it with to help you solve the problem" (Accra group 5). Without friends young people feel isolated and unable to cope with the challenges that they experience: "you must feel bad when you have no friend of yours you can talk to" (Bukavu group 2).

Friendship is built upon bonds of reciprocity, where young people rely on their friends to offer support when it is needed: "some friends are like brothers or sisters –



Two friends at a drop in centre in Bukavu, DRC.

when you go to him he will help you so that when he also falls in need you can help him" (Accra group 2). These bonds of trust and mutual reliance are particularly important in contexts where children and youth are constantly victimised. "Friendship among the street children means to sit, walk, work together and assist or defend one another when there is a problem. For example, if my friend is being beaten, I must defend him for his protection" (Bukavu group 5). Bonds of friendship are formed around the 'base' or spaces where young people stay. These locations help define the friendship unit and the terms of support:

“our protection for each other is such that a person from [another base] cannot come and beat up a person from our base while we are there” (Harare group 1). Young people new to the streets may try out groups or bases to find those with similar values to their own. In Harare a participant comments: “possibly the first base you may go to may not have people of your age group or they may be there, but their behaviour may be different to how you behave. Maybe they steal while you are not a thief, so you cannot be with such a person. In the end, you will have to look for different base as you will be alone there” (group 4). Newcomers may also take on the values and survival strategies of their new group, which may frame their future behaviour: “the person who comes to Accra doesn’t have any sleeping place, no money for food and others; so the person he/she meets the first day; what the person does, is what he will also do” (Accra group 4).

Friendships can extend beyond peer groups to include adults and older youth on the streets. Participants identify older people as important sources of guidance, as they have more experience or maturity compared to peers, greater social authority and access to resources. “Older people have the potential to change my life [...] I have been working with them in their trade and now am getting better and experienced at it” (Harare group 2). “An age mate can’t offer you help when you need it, so it is better to pick an adult as friend” (Accra group 7). The focus group discussions highlight a number of perceived differences between boys and girls in the formation and nature of friendships. A female participant in Harare comments: “Boys’ friendship may be based on the fact that they steal or make money together... Girls’ friendship may be based on the fact that they stay together in a same room or play together” (group 1). Similarly in Accra: “there is difference because when a girl is in need, a fellow friend (girl) will be willing to support her, but the boys don’t do that to their fellow boys. He will expect you to go and work for yourself; he will not offer you any help, so we the girls have chance of getting help from others compared to boys” (group 8). Friendship across genders can occur, but may be based on lucrative or exploitative relationships. “The friendship between a boy and a girl is better than the one between two boys. A girl can help you earn a lot of money. For example, thanks to a girl you can plot and succeed to catch and seize money



Boys at a ‘base’ in an alleyway in Harare where they share both food and sleeping space.

from a man who loves her” (Bukavu group 3).

While friendship is important, vulnerability can make it difficult to establish strong bonds of trust among young people or within the community. A participant in Bukavu comments: “it is difficult for a street child to trust in somebody for fear of getting a problem [...] that is why we do not trust in anybody on the street. We doubt all the people we see and we do not know well” (group 3). Similarly, in Harare: “I have learnt not to completely trust anyone as a friend because they can change their mind” (group 1). Friendships are sustained through acts of mutual support: “that’s why, if I get my things, I cannot share with you if you don’t share with me” (Bukavu group 2). They are also conditioned by the harsh realities of poverty and life on the streets. A participant in Accra summarises: “there are some people when they come here for the first time they think you will give them everything they need. But the situation is not like that here. This place is for hustlers” (group 3).

FORMS OF SUPPORT

Within social networks, friends provide different forms of support to each other, with children and youth managing their social capital in ways that maximise access to resources and assistance. The scope for practical support may be limited among friends who all live in similar conditions of poverty: “when you are in need and you go to a friend he or she will tell you she is also in serious trouble. So it is not everyone who can be of assistance to you” (Accra group 5). However, friends are important sources of advice and comfort: “when I don’t have money I can go to my friend and he can help

or even say something that will comfort me" (Accra, group 2). The difficulties of life on the street mean that emotional support is vital to enable children and youth to cope with feelings of isolation: "let's say you have your radio on, but you will not be happy because you will be alone. You see? When you have your friends with you, you will talk together and you will be happy. So I think it is good to have friends" (Accra group 5). Boys and girls share sleeping spaces together as a means of protection at night. As a girl in Bukavu explains: "I have got my friend I grew up with. I came to the street and after some days I also saw her on the street. I asked her why she was on the street, she answered that she had been chased from her home. So, I took her to the place where I sleep so that we can be sleeping together. Up to now, our friendship continues. She helps me and I help her" (group 6). Girls may be vulnerable to sexual assault at night even when share sleeping places with their friends. In Accra, "girls wear two or three [pairs of] shorts before sleeping" (group 4), as additional protection from sexual assault at night. On a practical level, friends provide a safety net for times where children and youth are unable to earn money or obtain food. "Some friendships start through eating, a person may consistently share his food with you and after some time, you will end up being friends. If a friend gives you food today... in the future the situation may be reversed and I would help my friend in return" (Harare group 3). "There are some friends they will give you money for food if you approach them and tell them you need money for food" (Accra group 7). For others strong bonds mean that "there are friends of mine with whom I must share everything. I can't 'eat' without sharing [with] him" (Bukavu, group 2). Because of their age and low social status, children and youth living on the street come into frequent conflict with adults and the authorities. Young people intercede for their friends when they get into trouble in the community. When his friends were caught stealing, a young man in Accra "begged the woman [and] because we know each other they let the boys free" (group 2). Friendships are a coping mechanism and an aid to survival in times of crisis. "I once had a fight on the streets and got arrested by police, then I was taken to court where they asked me to pay a fine. I called a friend of mine to lend me the bail money, and my friend was able to pay the bail for me – about \$50" (Harare group

1). In Bukavu, when arrested by the police, it is friends who pay for their release or provide food when they are in detention: "I have only one friend with whom I share everything. If he is imprisoned, it is I who must assist him" (group 3).

Friends provide a source of skills and knowledge, important for surviving on the street. "I didn't know how to sell, but when I came here someone taught me how. I also taught my friends how to sell" (Accra group 2). Through friendships young people learn both legal and illegal forms of work and the skills to meet their basic needs. "Thanks to my friends I knew how to look for or make money on the street. I could not earn money when I was at home, but now I know all the ways to earn money for my life" (Bukavu group 5). "I have learnt that, when I get hungry and I do not have money, there are some bases and bins I go to 'siketa' [search for] food and eat" (Harare group 6).

Friends are also vitally important when children and youth have health problems and are unable to access medical assistance. "I remember when I was about to deliver, there was nobody home... It was my friend who assisted me to the hospital and brought me back. She was the one who cooked and washed my baby's dresses for me" (Accra group 7). Young people rely on assistance when they are unwell, "if I see that my friend is ill, I must take care of him and work as one family" (Harare group 3). With street children and youth vulnerable to illness and injury, reciprocity among friends is important for survival: "if you meet him sick, without even 200francs (9 pence), or hungry without even 50francs, the best way is to help him...That's my street friendship" (Bukavu group 1).



Street youth in Accra, Ghana took this picture of a group of friends meeting on the street, for their [story map](#) (Support of Friends).



Girls attributed their friendship to sharing accommodation or playing together.

LIMITATIONS OF FRIENDSHIP

In contrast to the important benefits of friendship among street children and youth, relationships can be fragile and a source of exploitation. As a participant in Accra commented: "sometimes it is good to have friends at other times it is bad" (group 5). In the context of extreme poverty and limited access to basic necessities, friendship is conditional: "we do protect each other on the streets, but it is not a hundred percent" (Harare group 5). Young people are often in a position where they have to prioritise their own needs and wellbeing over their commitment to friends. "How and why can I help somebody with money while I am unable to support myself? It is impossible to act like that on the street" (Bukavu group 3).

More insidious is the use of friendships to exploit, where 'friends' are encouraged to steal or engage in sexual activity to serve the interests of another. "Your friend will not encourage you to work, instead she will motivate you to go to town for commercial [sex] work" (Accra group 4). Due to the dependency some younger children have on their peers, they may be under severe pressure to agree to otherwise unacceptable activity, in order to sustain 'friendships'. This form of bullying is illustrated in Harare: "there's a boy, he calls himself a

giant...he sent me to fetch water and I refused. Then he tried to hit me with a brick. Then he asked again for me to go fetch him water, I accepted because I wanted to please him" (Harare group 3).

Friendships can also fracture where there is a change in circumstances. When young women have children their priorities shift and they are forced to reassess their friendships: "when he gets money he will go and chill or enjoy with it, but I will have to feed someone so I had to separate myself from him" (Accra group 4). Young people mature and take more control over their relationships: "friendships change as you grow up because as you grow, you would reason better and you will know better. My other friends may badly influence me and such friendships are not good" (Harare group 5). Friendships also break down when friends move away and "you are no longer able to see them every day" (Harare group 1), but also jealousy when individuals are able to 'leave' the street. Participants in Accra comment that tensions emerge with friends no longer on the streets: "those who have rented rooms sometimes want to challenge those of us who sleep on the streets. When they come to the street they tell you: 'you are not his/her class' meaning he has been able to leave the streets and rented a place for himself. When you challenge him, it might end up you fighting one another" (group 4). Lives lived on the street also mean that it is difficult to maintain friendships at home: "I had a friend in the former time when I was home. Nowadays, she no longer talks to me since I have become a sex worker" (Bukavu group 6).

CONCLUSION

Friendships are vital for children and youth on the streets, but these can be conditioned by poverty and challenged by competition for limited resources or jealousy. In the absence of parental and state support, street children and youth's built social networks form an important part of their efforts to meet their basic needs and to grow up on the streets.



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

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