



NO EXISTE

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STREET CHILDREN

A FOCUS ON DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

THE ABUSE OF CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

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Their rights are not being denied because they are street children, they are street children because their rights have been denied.

OVERVIEW

No Existe is Spanish for doesn't exist, which refers to the reality of street children in society today. Although children are the most vulnerable population in society, street children are, more often than not, ignored and resigned to fate. Our group's resolve to thoroughly understand the issue of street children in the Dominican Republic is consummated by profound personal experiences that are intricately intertwined in this problem. The Dominican Republic holds a very special place in our heart, having lived and had many life-changing experiences in this country. Through our research, we aim to bring acknowledgment to these children and shine a light on this problem and its effects on society.

INTRODUCTION

Over 150 million children are living in the streets across the world today (UNICEF, 2006). The Dominican Republic which is case in point is one of the many countries where children's rights are not being protected, and the public welfare of children is not a priority, particularly in the case of street children, thereby increasing

children's encounter with challenges and exposure to risks. The lack of sufficient data creates a conundrum reflecting how bad this situation currently is, but growing concerns have proven how detrimental the challenge is to both children and the future of the country. Despite these alarming global statistics and deteriorating situations, this problem is still a fairly uncharted territory; this challenge leaves policymakers, governance systems, and communities both responsible and at risk as street children are as vulnerable as they are a threat.

This study attempts to assess the current challenges associated with street children in the Dominican Republic, the working plans that are already addressing this challenge, and the areas needed for intervention.

WHO IS A STREET CHILD?

"A street child is any girl or boy who has not reached adulthood, for whom the street (in the broadest sense of the word, including unoccupied dwellings, wasteland, etc.) has become her or his habitual abode and/or sources of livelihood, and who is inadequately protected, supervised or directed by responsible adults" (Inter-NGO, 1985).



BACKGROUND

In 1989, World leaders determined that children should have a special convention as a necessity because unlike adults, children under the age of 18 are in need of special protection and care. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was birthed as a result of the decision to have the world recognize and defend the rights of children. The CRC has been ratified by more nations than belong to the United Nations or ascribe to the Geneva convention being signed by a record 193 nations of the world.

After the CRC was conceptualized in 1989, the Dominican Republic was one of the first countries to sign to the Convention in 1991; however, until the Child Protection Act was enacted in 2003, there was no all-encompassing legislative provision under domestic Dominican Laws to account for all the articles listed in the Convention of children's rights in the Dominican Republic.

Despite being the fastest growing economy in the Caribbean, It is estimated that between 30% to 40% of the 10.77 million Dominican population are living below the poverty line. While poverty may be a significant influence on children being denied the necessities and opportunities to live better than living on the streets, cultural factors and poor parenting are the primary factors that enforce the abuse of children. Culture is a catalyst that could reinforce many ails of society because of its tendency to legitimize a problem within a system. The effect of this accepted standard causes the minority or vulnerable groups, in this case, Street Children, to suffer as they become invisible.

PROBLEM LANDSCAPE

This study gathers that there are two groups of children who can be found in the streets:

Children On the Streets

a) These are children who go out to work on the street in order to earn a living and return home to aid their families.

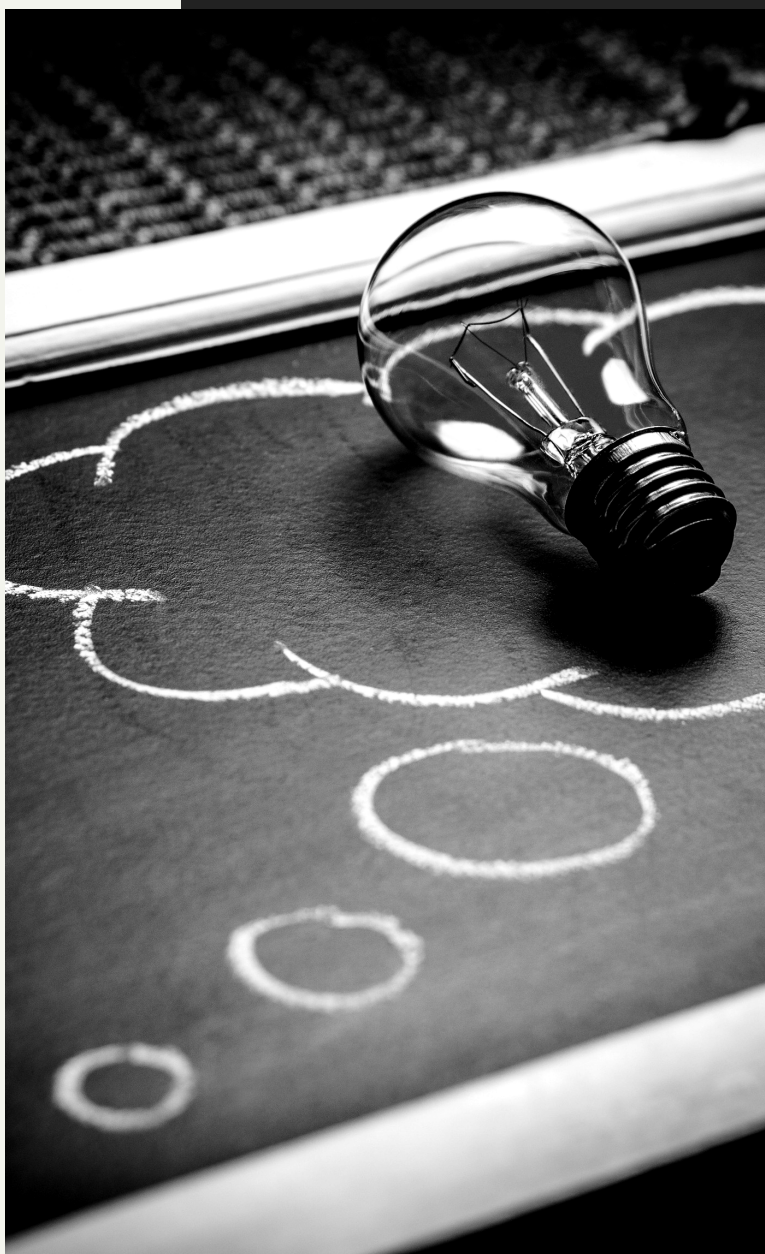
As the Dominican Republic suffers an alarming poverty rate, many families are economically stagnated, and the result is an ineffective and dysfunctional upbringing of most children below the poverty line.

Relatedly, more than 13% of all Dominican children between the ages of 10 to 14 experience child labor by working to help support their families (International Justice Mission, 2013), a practice contrary to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Children on the streets are often left out in the larger discussion of street children but more often than not the transition from of the streets are very fast and the lines are often blurred.

Children of the Streets

b) These are children who perpetually live and survive on the streets.

The system that causes this problem to stay in its place can be explained by looking at the key factors and structures within the Dominican society.



PROBLEM LANDSCAPE

Family Dynamic and Parenting

67% of households use physical and psychological punishment to discipline their children. The metamorphoses from discipline to abuse is unpredictable and very often the two coexist. The family dynamic is a major contributing factor to the problem. Beyond the overall economic challenges that are associated with the increasing number of children in the streets, poor parenting fuels this problem mainly. Ninos Del Camino, a local organization that provides shelter, food, and educational services to street children, reported that about 77% of the children they serve had experienced some form of domestic violence before leaving their homes to live on the streets.

History of commercial sexual exploitation

Known today for its alluring reef-protected lagoon of serene crystal blue waters and powder-white sand, Boca Chica beach is the most crowded Dominican beach perfect for families with children as it is only waist deep even up to a mile from the shore and hardly ever experiences waves. Boca Chica municipality is also the commercial capital of Santo Domingo, as well as commercial sexual exploitation of minors. However, this has not always been the case. In 1980 the government implemented policies to change its focus from sugarcane farming to tourism, which was the economy of the area at the time. This drastic change affected the financial stability of many locals that gave birth to economic desperation. A combination of this desperation and the absence of child rights laws at the time gave birth to the widespread sexual exploitation of minors commercially in meeting the demand of tourists who could live out their darkest fantasies on the Island.

Culture of Commercial Sexual Exploitation

Young male and female children alike are sexually exploited commercially in the Dominican Republic. This culture thrives on the massive influx of tourists to the country. Tourism is a strong pillar of the Dominican Republic's economy. The country's landscape, beaches, and beautiful scenery attracts about six million tourists annually (Global Affairs Canada, 2018). **Despite their contribution to the country's economy, the International Labor Organization (ILO) reported through its International Program for the Elimination of Child Labor that 88% of commercial sex clients are foreigners and about 60% of prostitutes entered the industry as minors (International Justice Mission, 2014). A 2006 study by the ILO showed that 7% of Dominican citizens believe paying underage children for sex should not be considered a crime.**



CONTRIBUTING FACTORS

After a child falls through the cracks of the existing system, other factors further perpetuate this problem and make it so that children are stuck in this cycle.

Widespread Ignorance and Stigma

In the Dominican Republic, many factors contribute to the violation of children's rights and the increased number of street children. These factors, nursed by economic, social and cultural conditions surrounding the situation, create an increased de-sensitization to the rights of children on the streets. One in every ten individuals in commercial sexual exploitation in the Dominican Republic is under the age of 18. In 90% of towns surveyed, local third parties affirmed their ability to locate and deliver a minor for sexual exploitation (International Justice Mission, 2013). Street children are given limited to no access to educational opportunities and public services. They are seen as problems rather than symptoms of a complex societal issue.

Cycle of Violence

To continue surviving and avoiding the violence they encounter, street children share solidarity and form alliances on the streets. These alliances support the youth and protect them from violence to an extent. Over time, street children grow from being victims to perpetrators. They find comfort and strength in marijuana, glue addiction, and drug abuse become an accepted routine. The influence of drugs and other harmful practices redefine some of the kids and transform these alliances into small gangs that eventually become a threat to the community. This cycle is created from their natural tendency to be defensive about harming and fighting for survival.

SOLUTION LANDSCAPE

Government Efforts

The National Council for Children and Adolescent (CONANI) is the government parastatal that is responsible for all child welfare issues in the Dominican Republic. CONANI is an umbrella government effort through various metrics like facilitating adoptions, accrediting NGO which deals with children, safe homes for children who suffer from traumatic emotional-physical abuse in the home. CONANI is however poorly staffed and lack the human resources to properly facilitate it's work hence it takes several months to complete basic adoptions.

Local Solutions Model

Several organizations and programs have been working to address the challenge of street children in the Dominican Republic for many years. These interventions fall under three important models of approach to addressing the problem of street children: preventative, rehabilitative/ outreach, and correctional.

Preventative

The preventative approach targets potential street children and seeks to address the causes that influence children living on the streets. This approach also tries to deal with the foundational problems that fuel the issues of street children. Many factors, including unemployment of parents, poor housing conditions, and abuse are the issues that this approach assesses.

Mercy Red Foundation

This Christian Safehouse is a not-for-profit organization that is focused on the areas of intervention to redirect children's path from living on the street and combating stigmas surrounding orphan children. This safe house serves as a safety net for abused & neglected children to prevent them from ending up on the streets and in many cases to allow legal intervention. However due to capacity and the poor execution of the rule of law only so many kids are attended to whilst much more slip through the tracks.

SOLUTION LANDSCAPE

Caminante

This trailblazing organization in Boca Chica is actively combating the normalized culture of child sexual exploitation. Caminante organization has impacted the lives of over 12,900 youth affected by sex tourism. Despite an incredible success record, Caminante's Impact is limited by the flow of financial resources and its geographical location, this organization also has most of its resources directed towards the affected individuals.

Rehabilitative & Outreach

The goal of this approach is to work with children through the challenges they face living on the street and help reinterpreted them back into society. This approach looks to equip street children with education skills and empower them to become reintegrated into society and pursue a better future.

Niños del Camino

This is an organization that was groundbreaking in its efforts to carve out a space that implemented socio-

educational and cultural processes that promote a healthy quality of life for street children in Santo Domingo and greater province area. Niños del Camino created a safe space that provided vocational educational programs and reduction assistance for youth who abuse psychoactive drugs. As influential as this organization has been in the life of street youth in the Santo Domingo area it has since shut its doors permanently due to financial instability. Dominican government used to provide \$10,000 pesos or about \$270 a month to Niños del Camino however that stipend stopped being received (Walter Cronkite School of Journalism).

Accion Callejera

Is a non-profit institution that, since 1989, This institution has several programs that are specialized to meet the mental and emotional needs of street children. They are not round the clock services and are accessible to children at only certain times.

SOLUTION LANDSCAPE

Correctional

This model is used in the protection of the public against street children who are seen as a threat. Actions taken against the children include beating, raiding, or robbery by the police. This model also includes youth incarcerations “Detention Centers” or “Youth Center” which is oftentimes an adult correctional model solely labeled more child-friendly.

WHAT IS WORKING ELSEWHERE

Brazil

In Brazil, there has been a long violent history with street children and the denial of street children's basic human and civil rights. An autonomous non-governmental entity is striving to ensure that the rights of street children are being protected, The Movimento Nacional de Meninos e Meninas de Rua, or MNMMR.MNMMR which was founded in 1985, is an alliance between street children and teachers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Brazil, gives a voice to the voiceless in terms of tailoring an educational system that is specific for Street Children. This movement to protect the rights of children in Brazil has produced results in the legislative sphere, in June 2014 Brazil became the 38th country to ban corporal punishment, now striving to ensure violence on youth is eradicated (Jungmann, 2014).

Sweden

Sweden was the first country to outlaw corporal punishment of children in 1979, deeming that any act of physical or humiliating forms of discipline was illegal (Fredén, 2019). This step towards non-abusive parenting aids to change the social perception of this issue as a whole. Without the ban on corporal punishment, parents' boundaries would be much vaguer and violence more common (Fredén, 2019). This was a drastic decision at the time but since then, many more countries have implemented laws against corporal punishment of children.

GAPS AND LEVERS OF CHANGE

The challenge of addressing the issues associated with street children requires a collaborative effort from four primary stakeholders in the Dominican society: Institutions, organizations, government, public school system and local businesses. One without the others, or vice versa, will not be able to respond to this problem adequately. There is a need for alignment in the roles of these stakeholders. Critical to any solution that seeks to address this problem is it being holistic and sustainable.





GAP

Institutions: Lack of capacity and education about proper parenting.

LEVER OF CHANGE

Institutions: Institutionalized programs that educate parents about proper parenting and child welfare.

Families have grown over time to be accustomed to the culture of child abuse, exploitation, and disregard for children's rights. The Center for Integral Attention to Children and Families (CAFI) was birthed in 2015 to meet this need but currently runs only a one time program for families with children aged 0 - 5, bridging this gap could be done by the Implementation of more comprehensive programs in hospitals, schools, and tertiary institutions that could educate families about proper parenting skills and children on when to ask for help during an abusive situation. There is a dire need for widespread sensitization and parenting education though may come at the cost of a huge budget. However, funding for such programs would be reduced to its barest minimum through partnerships with already existing learning institutions.



GAP

Government: Lack of capacity, ineffective policy implementation and the absence of data that showed the number of children living on the streets of the Dominican Republic.

LEVER OF CHANGE

Government: Integrate street children issues in policy decisions and allocate resources to implement policies that address the challenges associated with child abuse.

Policy makers need to ensure that children living on the streets should be an important issue on the political agenda and policy engagements. Government policies need to holistically address child abuse issues and provide greater protection and opportunity for them to prevent the victim to perpetrator cycle that only creates more threat to the peace of communities and the growth of the economy. Additionally, the lack of sufficient data on street children and the issues of children, in general, does not adequately reflect the impact of this issue in our society.



GAP

Dominican Public School system; being ranked the lowest amongst Spanish-Speaking countries, children are deprived of having a valuable education.

LEVER OF CHANGE

Dominican Public School system; Adopting educational practices from neighboring countries/areas that are doing better academically. Also, taking steps towards protecting the rights of Children within the school system.

The school experience transcends the content of what is being taught in the classrooms, this involves everything from teacher-student interactions to the quality of the facility and learning materials. Furthermore, the rights of children must not be overlooked within the school system as many children are also abused within the four walls of the classrooms.



GAP

Businesses: Limited opportunities for locals to earn money legitimately.

LEVER OF CHANGE

Businesses: Increased opportunities for locals to provide services and earn income.

A cultural change to the commercial sexual exploitation of children can be incentivized by tapping into the already existing tourism industry, via creating more channels for services to be offered by locals.

ECONOMIC IMPACT

A validated challenge that discourages the government from placing this problem on a high pedestal on government agenda is the effect such a narrative could possibly have on this tourism-based economy. However, current figures speak differently in relation to the effect a permanent solution could contribute to the long term prosperity of this nation.

If all street children were potentially educated and gainfully employed in the Dominican Republic this is what it would mean for the country in the nearest foreseeable future; An annual average addition of 1,127,449,125 Billion Pesos contributed to the economy through personal income taxes alone. We came to this conclusion using following as a sample; The average salary in the Dominican Republic is 7000 pesos and annually stands at 84,000 pesos, given the current personal income tax margin at 25%, the average person would have to pay 21000 pesos annually. It is fair enough make an argument for the estimated 54000 children who are deprived of their childhood and proper development through child labor that given the opportunity they could contribute over a billion Dominican pesos to the economy on the average.

CONCLUSION

There is an urgent need to create more policies and programs that will uplift children from the challenge of living on the streets. Street children are presented with many risks that pose threats to their survival and growth. From poor parenting to lack of community involvement and inadequacy of government intervention, children are losing out on the opportunities to grow into resourceful and productive citizens. This challenge does not only create a bleak future for children but also affects the nation's long term economic prosperity as the long-term economic growth of a country is a function of the quality of the current citizens — workforce. And if children can be nurtured and given the resources and tools to grow into productive citizens, the many challenges associated with economic growth and the environment would have a more significant and positive outlook to be addressed. The rights of children in the Dominican Republic can be upheld according to the convention of child rights, so the future of all Dominican children are protected.