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LIVING ON THE STREETS, MAKING PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

Street Children and Youth in Three African Cities

Briefing Paper 15 · May 2022

KEY POINTS

- Like other young people, street children and youth have hopes, dreams and aspirations, but perceive their future as more immediate due to the daily search for shelter and food.
- Street children and youth hope to attain material and symbolic signs of adult status, including starting their own family, and the respect and esteem of the wider community.
- Their route to the future they aspire to is often unclear, hindered by a lack of shelter, identity documents, discrimination, and gender norms.
- While acknowledging limited power, street children and youth were simultaneously optimistic and realistic about what their future may hold.

INTRODUCTION

For young people globally, there is an expectation that as they transition into adulthood, they will attain key markers of growing up. These milestones include completing education, finding work or employment, and having a long-term relationship (Bowen, et al., 2020; Ungruhe, and Esson, 2017; Langevang, 2008; van Blerk, 2007). For street children and youth, who sleep, for example, in marketplaces, alleyways, and kiosks, and the majority of whom are not in formal education or family settings, expectations of attainment, or aspirations for the future vary due to their context.

Focus group discussions about plans for the future took place in the three Growing up on the Streets project cities (Accra, Ghana and Harare, Zimbabwe in November 2014, and in Bukavu, DRC, in May 2016) and involved 193 street children and youth participants (148 young men and 45 young women in 18 groups).



Participants taking part in follow-up discussions of the original future plans focus group data. Accra, March 2022.

These were the final of ten quarterly groups taking place over three years, where street children and youth discussed self-defined capabilities (see below for access to other Briefing Papers).

Participants explored what the future meant to them, including when it would begin, how they planned for it, their hopes and dreams; plans made in the past and challenges or successes; their sense of control over their own destinies and who helps, or hinders them to achieve their future goals.

WHEN IS THE FUTURE?

There was debate about where the future lies, in relation to the present. For Dumor, a street youth in Accra, “the future is seconds, minutes and hours” (group 5), for others “as the days and months pass by; that is the future” (Accra group 4).

In Harare, a young man in group 2 made plans “for one day only”, while another had a “plan for my whole life.” Others plan for the next few hours: “my plan is to only get a dollar to buy cigarettes, so that I can smoke and go to sleep” (group 4). The future can be a distant moment when dreams will be attained: “five years from now, I will have my future; I will not be on the streets anymore” (Accra group 3). For others, the future is constantly under construction: “when you are alive each day and you are able to walk and work; that is your future.” (Accra group 5). A friend in the same group agrees: “that would be my future; because you must always work hard to save money so that you can use it for something beneficial.”

In Bukavu, the future for members of group 3 began in periods ranging from one hour to seven years. For a young woman the future begins “at 20 because you can start thinking about your life” (group 6), while a boy in group 2 felt that “though I am a child of 15 years old, I can plan and prepare my life” (group 2). A young woman in Harare, explained how future plans fluctuate: “I plan for my whole life, but when things are difficult, I live in the moment” (group 6). While street children and youth may aspire to a successful adulthood, these hopes conflict with their present, immediate, needs.

FUTURE PLANS, OR DREAMS?

In all three cities, there was consensus that “none of us can dream to keep on living on the street” (Bukavu group 3). Young people often move to the streets seeking opportunity, but with little monetary and social resources young people may have “the desire to do good things but we do not know how to start” (Harare group 4). A young woman reflected on her inability to achieve what she had hoped would be her future, explaining that she has “not been able to achieve many things” because of “living on the street”, but she is “trying my best that God will help me get there” (Accra group 2). A young man in Bukavu describes how they “think of buying clothes or shoes or something important. But when we have got money, we change; we forget or neglect what we planned” (group 2).

A FUTURE PLAN ACHIEVED: MELISSA'S HAIRDRESSING BUSINESS

In November 2014, Melissa (Accra group 5) explained how she would set up her own hair braiding business within a year, stating:

“From here, I am going to gather my things; I will be going to my mother’s place; I will give birth then come back to Accra. I will come and continue my work with the woman I work with; by a year’s time, I will be my own boss.”

In May 2017, Melissa features in a video recorded by street youth for the Accra story map, in the section on Building Assets, working on her hair braiding stall with two trainees. The caption explains that Melissa received training at a local NGO and has a kiosk to keep the tools of her trade safe. In 2022, we know that her business continues to be successful. She has moved out of the marketplace and has a rented kiosk nearby where she lives with her long-term partner and father of their two children.



Melissa on her stall in 2017 (taken by street youth for the Accra story map).

As this participant indicates, the route to their future is unmapped: “we have an idea of our future; but how to get there is the problem” (Accra group 8). In work with homeless youth, Bowen (2020) distinguishes future plans as “striving and dreaming”. For example, a young man states that, “I do have plans, though I do not have an identity card, but I plan to play soccer” (Harare group 2). With few resources, this young man’s “plans” are in fact his dream. In Melissa’s case (see box), she sets out a plan to achieve her dream.

SEEKING RECOGNITION AND RESPECT

A young man in Accra is hopeful that “10 years from now; you will see me and not recognize me.” Recognition and respect within their communities was important for street youth.

According to participants in Bukavu, due to poverty, young people “are not respected; we are not considered as human beings” (group 1). Another states that “what I need is to be free, and my dignity to be respected” (group 2). Another anticipated becoming “respected and greeted” and that people “couldn’t imagine me becoming such a good guy” (group 5). A young woman there asks God for help, “so that I can change, and people would be surprised to see me and that they would stop looking down on me on the streets. That’s what I think about. I still hope to have a good future life” (group 6).

Meanwhile in Accra, many dreamed of a future in other countries including Nigeria, UK, Canada and USA, where “there are more job opportunities in those places. I can’t work and be successful here; I want to travel [...] so that people will not see me as a useless person” (Accra group 7).



Henzo in his sleeping place, Harare, 2020 (taken by street youth for the Harare story map).

FAMILY AND PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS

Young men in the three cities shared a dream of having a family of their own and a home in the future, if they could find income to support it. As Yakubu in Accra stated, “my dreams for the future are to get money and build a house and take care of my family so that they will not go through the hardship I am going through” (group 7). In Harare, having a family is symbolic of a community status: “one day I would want to have my children and family, and to have respect” (group 1). When you have money, you “can do something important” such as “get married, buy a house and feed and school the children,” while also becoming “useful to his life and to the community” (Bukavu group 3).

For young women, caring for children, partners, and even parents, is a present rather than future event. A young woman explains that “I am in my future, because I have two children that I have to take care of” (Accra group 7). Young women may perceive themselves as having achieved adult status; caring for children who represent their future, while also defining and limiting it. In Bukavu, a young woman says that when she gets money, she will “save some and eat some” as “this money will help me tomorrow for my child and myself” (group 6). In Harare a young woman “may get a dollar to buy my children some food [...] but I myself

am not important” (group 6). In Accra a young woman complained that as well as caring for children, “there are some girls who take care of the men; so, most men don’t plan their life. I will never plan for a man, rather for my children” (group 8). While the emotional burden is often carried by women, the support of family or a partner may contribute to young people achieving their dreams, as seen in the case of Melissa (see box).

FRIENDSHIP AND ‘PEER PRESSURE’

Friendship was talked of as a source of support on the streets, but young people also recognised that “peer pressure” means that “when I meet with my friends, they can influence me to spend the money for other things” (Bukavu, group 1). A young man in Harare spoke of “peer pressure” as a “factor that affects our plans, as we copy what other people are doing” (group 5). Participants spoke of having a “true friend [that] can help me succeed in my life” (Bukavu group 2), having role models, and being able to “discuss with my friend about our life and help each other” (Harare group 2), but there were few tangible examples of sustained support, as friends help each other with day-to-day needs rather than long term plans; “Baba can assist me with food only, but he cannot help me prepare my future life” (Bukavu group 4).

SHELTER AND LIVELIHOODS

For participants in group 3 in Accra, immediate plans are for a secure shelter, because in terms of daily challenges, “the most important priority I have is to get a sleeping place”. Interwoven with the desire for shelter is the need for better livelihoods: “when I have better work, getting a sleeping place will be no problem.” A young woman who sleeps in the marketplace at night, anticipates a future where she avoids humiliation and discomfort when “the market women will pour water where we sleep [...] By next year, I will have better work”.

In Accra there are alternative livelihood strategies for young women rather than sex work, but the young women in Bukavu have fewer options. Those in group 6 expressed hope that they would move on from sex work in bars, with one 18-year-old saying: “in ten years, I will have become very old. Now I am planning my street life in the three years I still have in the streets.” In Harare, young men dreamt of making “a lot of money” and having “many trading shops so that I can help other people that are suffering like me” (group 1). A key stumbling block for young people there is the requirement of a national identity card for work: “there is no way you can fix cars when you do not have a national identity” (group 4).

PARTICIPANT ANALYSIS OF FUTURE PLANS DATA, MARCH 2022

In March 2022, we had the opportunity for further analysis of the Future Plans focus group data with 30 young people in Accra, 11 of whom were original participants. Three groups discussed over-arching themes emerging from qualitative analysis: building assets, income, and relationships. Participants recounted the impact on future plans of pregnancy, the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns; the positive and negative impacts of friendships, family, and intimate partner relationships on future plans, including helping young people to move off the streets; the importance of friends for advice and leadership, as well as livelihoods, savings, sources of profit and investment. Assisted by experienced youth researchers, participants recounted discussions to the whole group; for some young people it was the first time they had presented in this way.



Participants discussing the roles of income (top) and building assets in their future plans. Accra, March 2022.

Young men in group 2 in Bukavu stressed the importance of a change of livelihood, being “a mechanic or a driver” or another “well-paid job” in order to achieve their dreams, again “to buy a house and to get married”. Ultimately, though, “everything is waiting for money” (Harare group 4). As a young man explains, “when I look at the money I earn, it is not enough to meet my primary needs. How can I save money to prepare my future life?” (Bukavu group 1).

CONCLUSION

For street children and youth, future plans, including their hopes and dreams, may be short term and relatively achievable, or longer term and perhaps never attained.

All participants aspired to see change in their future lives, including material success and intangible milestones of having achieved the status of adulthood. They hoped for secure shelter, families of their own, and sustainable livelihoods, but also the respect and esteem of their wider communities. While they acknowledged there were aspects of life over which they had little or no power, they were optimistic and realistic about what their future may hold.

FURTHER READING

Growing up on the Streets Briefing papers, and links to story maps: <https://bit.ly/3huTE8J>.

Bowen, E., et al. (2020). Striving and dreaming: a grounded theory of the transition to adulthood for cross-systems youth. *Youth & Society* 52(6): 1006-1032. doi:10.1177/0044118X18791869

Ungruhe, C. and J. Esson (2017). A social negotiation of hope: male West African youth, ‘waithood’ and the pursuit of social becoming through football. *Boyhood Studies* 10 (1): 22-43.

Langevang, T. (2008). ‘We are managing!’ Uncertain paths to respectable adulthoods in Accra, Ghana. *Geoforum* 39 (6): 2039-2047.

van Blerk, L. (2008). Poverty, migration and sex work: youth transitions in Ethiopia. *Area* 40(2): 245-253.

Please note all participant names are pseudonyms.



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Growing up on the Streets Briefing papers, and links to story maps at the University of Dundee: <https://bit.ly/3huTE8J>.

Or: <https://www.streetinvest.org/resources/growing-streets> · E: quots@dundee.ac.uk

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