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WORK AND EARNINGS OF STREET CHILDREN AND YOUTH

Briefing Paper 5 · August 2015

KEY POINTS

- Street children and youth engage in a diverse range of work activities.
- Working on the fringes of the formal and informal economy, they undertake both legal and illegal work, much of which makes them vulnerable to exploitation and harm and brings them into conflict with city authorities.
- Earnings are low and unstable and are frequently insufficient to meet their basic needs.

INTRODUCTION

In street environments, markets and informal settlements, street children and youth work on the fringes of formal and informal urban economy. Living on a subsistence basis, they are typically unable to build the material or financial assets to stabilise their position and escape negative cycles of extreme poverty. Continually resourceful in their responses to social and economic marginalisation, they attempt to generate income to meet their basic daily needs, while frequently exposed to risk and harm. This briefing paper is based upon research undertaken with street children and youth aged 14-20 in three African cities: Accra (Ghana), Bukavu (Democratic Republic of Congo) and Harare (Zimbabwe); drawing from 18 focus groups on work and earnings which took place in October 2013 and June 2014 involving around 200 young people.

THE INFORMAL URBAN ECONOMY

“Work” is any economic practice in which street youth engage to earn money. This includes casual employment with formal businesses, petty trading, waste-picking, cleaning, cart pulling, collecting and selling recyclable materials, through to illegal acts of theft, sex work and begging, as shown in the table (p.3). Most types of work are transient, unsalaried, unregulated and lacking security. As earnings are typically very low, young people are driven to under-take work that is age inappropriate and hazardous to wellbeing and safety, involving exploitation of their labour or person. Limited



opportunities restrict choice to the least-worst options, shaped both by the prevailing economic conditions within the city and the young person's age, gender, personality and abilities. Street children and youth recognise that living in contexts with limited options and little economic or social influence, their economic activity is a daily balance of meeting basic needs while attempting to mitigate their vulnerabilities on the street. The types of work undertaken across the three cities in this study are similar. However, there are notable differences, with sex work, theft and recycling being more significant in Bukavu and Harare than in Accra, where the city's dense informal development and market areas create greater opportunities for young people to access transient employment, such as sweeping or vending. In Accra, street children and youth engage in the trade of any goods that can be carried and hawked on the streets, such as toffees, eggs, sachet water,

clothing and cleaning materials; purchasing packets of goods, such as cigarettes and selling them individually to make a small profit, selling goods on behalf of a trader or earning a fee or sharing profit on the goods they have sold.

While young people in both Harare and Bukavu also work around markets, these cities have less buoyant formal and informal economies and tighter regulation by the authorities mean that young people become more reliant on theft and sex work to generate an income; increasing the risks of violence, ill-health, injury and arrest. Opportunistic and organised theft takes place in all cities, and is identified as a primary type of “work” in Bukavu, where there are few alternative sources of income; as one participant stated: “I have no other job apart from stealing” (Group 2). Young people report that they are constantly looking for potential victims who have money, mobile phones or small bags that can be stolen or “shocked”. In Harare young people do “rounds”, moving at night “to steal from others; cutting pockets” because “that is all there is. You have no choice” (Group 4). Stealing during the day is more risky, as one young person in Harare suggested: “you have to first look at the face and consider if the person will not kill you once he catches you, because there are other people that can beat you bad once they catch you” (Group 4). In Bukavu, girls use their contact with men to steal money and other valuables, which they can use to meet their needs. “Once you have no lover interested in you, you may go around the bar looking for old aged men or very drunken men, pull him to the dance floor, check his pockets while dancing. What you find will be your booty” (Group 6). Lack of income also drives street youth towards theft in Accra: “if you have a girlfriend with a child, 5 Cedis [75 pence] will not be enough, so you will be forced to get [additional] work. When you don’t do that then that is what will make you steal” (Group 5).

EARNING TO MEET BASIC NEEDS

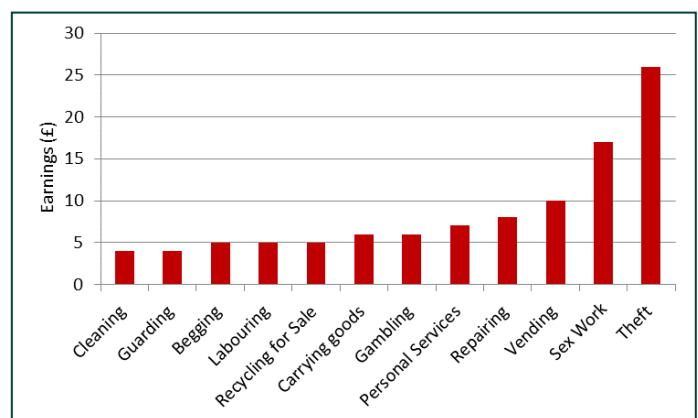
“When you go to bathe or toilet you will pay; when you need water to drink, you will pay. Everything is money” (Accra Group 3).

Daily needs include food and water, clothing, shelter, nappies (for those with babies), toilets and bathing, but if individuals have sufficient funds they may also include nursery fees, bribes for authorities, and money to save or

to send home. For example, one participant in Accra stated: “When I receive my pay I go to save some and the rest, I use some to buy dress, toothpaste, I pay for bathing, and I also send money to the village” (Group 4). Similarly in Bukavu: “I always get money at the end of each week. I already plan how the amount will be used: 5,000 francs [£3.50] for my mother, shoes and clothes, 1,500 for the 10 small balls of hemp, and a 1,000 for food” (Group 1).

Earnings vary considerably by task and by city, with young people often accepting whatever is offered to ensure some form of payment. The Figure provides an indication of earnings by work task, showing that illegal and high risk theft and sex work generate the greatest earnings. Across the three cities young people can expect to earn between £1-4 per day washing cars; £3 for collecting 300 plastic bottles for recycling in Harare; and £2 for repairing fishing nets in Bukavu.

Figure. Indicative Earnings by Work Type.



Source: Focus Groups—October 2013 (Accra and Harare) and June 2014 (Bukavu).

BUILDING TRUST

Young people learn from their peers and from adults, developing a range of practical contextualised skills allowing them access to both work and social networks on the street. For example, in Bukavu a participant describes how as a new arrival in the city sleeping on the shore of Lake Kivu, he saw fishermen bringing in their nets: “when I was first chased from home [...] I started not knowing how to take a fish out of the net [...] I am now an expert” (Group 4). Another in the same group describes how he “befriended the old cart pushers, helping them and progressively became accustomed to cart pushing up to now”. In Harare, street children and youth living and working in market areas become known in local areas through asking for work such as carrying

goods or clearing waste. Building networks and trust can be difficult however, as a participant in Accra highlights when seeking work in a local market as a newcomer, “it will be very hard for you to get one load to carry because the person can think you will run away with it” (Group 3).

AGE AND CHANGES IN OPPORTUNITIES

Young people report that age is an important factor determining the types of work they can access. For example, younger children, those with disabilities, girls and young women with babies are more successful in eliciting money when begging, as one female participant in Harare describes: “you may sometime not have anything to do and the children are hungry and crying for you so I will decide to go and beg with the children.” Male participants in the same group said that in that situation “people will feel pity for you”, but for older boys, “nowadays begging does not pay” (Group 6). Young people may grow out of types of work they have found lucrative and have difficulty finding replacement sources of income. One participant in Accra who guides “the blind people begging for alms” among cars queuing in traffic, reports that he is now perceived by others as



too old for this type of work: “grown up people like you, you will not go and look for work to do!” He explains: “I am doing the ‘blind work’ to get money; the kind of work that I want to do is engineering” (Group 2). Another is too young: “they will ask your age before they will offer you the work; if you are about 12 or 13 years, you will not be given the job” (Group 5). Finding age-appropriate work can be difficult, a Bukavu participant commented: “I never carry loads because I once carried a sack of cement, but I was unable to lift it and make a single step forward. Both the sack and I collapsed to the ground! I am too young to carry heavy loads” (Group 5).

Work type	Types of Work and Earnings	A	B	H
Begging	Street begging	●	●	●
	Guides blind people to beg	●		
	Supermarkets / churches			●
Carrying goods / transportation	Bailing/carrying clothes, loads	●	●	●
	Driver's mate	●		●
	Offloading ships/trucks		●	●
Cleaning	Cars, buses, car windscreens, chop (food) bars, sweeping	●	●	●
	Laundry	●		●
	Collecting waste		●	●
	Shoe shine	●		
	Arranging nets, cleaning canoes		●	
Gambling	Betting, cards and dice	●	●	●
Guarding	Cars		●	●
	Security guard	●		
Labouring	Assisting fishermen, cooking, cart pushing	●	●	
	Unlicensed taxi driver	●		
	Charcoal collecting		●	
	Melting plastics to make floor polish, make lampshades			●
Personal services / relationships	Pocket money from boyfriend, babysitter for sex workers, downloads music on phones, hair braiding, barbering	●		
Recycling for sale	Plastic bottles, cans, scrap metals	●	●	●
	Copper cables, clothes			●
Repairing	Gas cookers, mobile phones	●		
	Fishing nets		●	
	Shoes, roads			●
Vending	Airtime for mobile phones, alcohol, marijuana, eggs, fruit, sweets and biscuits	●		●
	Renting chairs, bicycles	●	●	
	Coconut, sachet water, games centre	●		
	Disinfectant, stones		●	
	CDs/DVDs, cigarettes, soap, reselling waste food from bins			●
Sex work	Street prostitution, sugar mama/ daddy	●		●
	At bars		●	
Theft	Pickpocketing, sale of stolen goods, snatching phones	●	●	●
	Stealing metal	●		
	From sex work clients		●	

Source: Focus Groups—October 2013 (Accra and Harare) and June 2014 (Bukavu).

GENDER DIFFERENCES

While common in Accra, sex work is the predominant form of income generation for girls in Bukavu and Harare. In Harare, girls face pressure from boys to engage in sex, especially when new to the streets, as they are less likely to have sexually transmitted diseases. For girls, being drawn into sex work appears inevitable. A participant in Harare commented on her experience when first coming to the city: "if you meet other girls when you come on to the street they will tell you to go with them to go look for money, of which as a girl there is no other way of making money except prostituting. At first you will be shy and in the end you will be used to it" (Group 5).

THE ABAAYEE

In Accra, young people trading on the street come into conflict with city authority market wardens. These officials are called, in the Ga language, the *Abaayee*, "they are coming". The *Abaayee* confiscate and destroy goods, as one Accra participant describes: "they even came this morning to destroy things. They came to sack everyone there – they said that they will not allow anyone to sell there" (Group 5). The confiscation and destruction of goods is a financial blow for young people who have invested money in buying stock and exposes them to debt or risk of physical punishment when selling on behalf of another trader.

When a male participant in Harare recounted his means of earning is to "carry luggage for people and beg", a female participant responded: "I am too shy to beg, I do not have money to horde and sell. If I do not have money I will go to prostitute looking for money" (Group 3). Similarly in Bukavu, one female participant asked, "how do you wish us to live? I cannot carry loads at [the] market for example!" Another added, "we have only two types of jobs: sex and stealing". Sex work is the only way to avoid "poverty and hunger; when you are hungry, you cannot think twice. Even for 500 francs [35 pence] you can have sex provided that you get some food". Girls base themselves in bars, as they are marginally safer than working from the street, where they describe frequent experiences of gang rape and violent assault. "Most of us have been raped! You cannot imagine! [...] You cannot cry at night lest you could be killed" (Group 6).

RELATIONS WITH AUTHORITIES

Working in contested public spaces, street youth are visible transgressors of by-laws on trading; sleeping and working in areas of the city that are designated for other uses. For example, at the time when these focus groups were conducted, washing cars was an important source of income for young boys and men in Bukavu. More recently, interviewees identify how city authorities stop car washing; arresting both street children and car owners. Similarly in Harare "we no longer guard cars because if the council police comes they will clap (clamp) the car" (Group 4). In Harare, three participants describe city council and police interventions for unlicensed street trading, prostitution, selling drugs and touting for taxis: "I can be caught by council and they will take my money [...] if I prostitute I will be caught by police and be taken to jail [...] if they catch me I will be taken to the drug section police they will beat me up on the bones" (Group 3). Living and working with no official status prevents young people accessing work legally: "I offload the lorry but the problem I have is I do not have an ID; I told the owner that I stay on the street and he told me to get an ID" (Group 6).

CONCLUSIONS

While contexts differ across the three cities in this study, the experiences and activity of young people to generate an income are remarkably similar. Street children and youth require money to live and rarely have means of support other than by their own efforts. Lack of social status and tenure concentrate work activity into marginal areas of the formal and informal economy where they undertake a range of high risk and laborious tasks in order to earn a meagre income. Working in these spaces adds to the vulnerability and instability of street children and youth.



BackstageTrust

For further information on the research plus Briefing Papers using the words of street children and youth themselves:
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