



University of Dundee

Accessing Food on the Street in Three African Cities

Shand, Wayne; van Blerk, Lorraine; Hunter, Janine

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ACCESSING FOOD ON THE STREETS

Briefing Paper 4 · March 2015

KEY POINTS

- Strategies used by street children and youth to access food include informal work, prostitution, trading sex for food, begging, theft, picking from bins, sharing, building relationships with trusted adults, NGOs, churches.
- Lacking a safe space to store utensils and prepare food themselves, street children and youth often rely on poor quality food bought on the streets.
- Risks in accessing food include malnutrition, food poisoning, exploitation, and police detention, as well as low self-esteem, ridicule and humiliation.
- Young people use drugs to give them courage to pick from bins, steal, or cope with hunger.

INTRODUCTION

For street children and youth living in Accra (Ghana), Bukavu (DRC) and Harare (Zimbabwe), accessing food is a daily challenge. Inadequate shelter and few opportunities to earn money impact on their ability to store and cook food; creating reliance upon begging, theft, eating cheap food and scavenging waste food from bins for basic sustenance. This Briefing Paper explores these issues, drawing on the discussions of 198 street children and youth who participated in 18 focus groups held in Accra and Harare in October 2012 and Bukavu in April 2013.

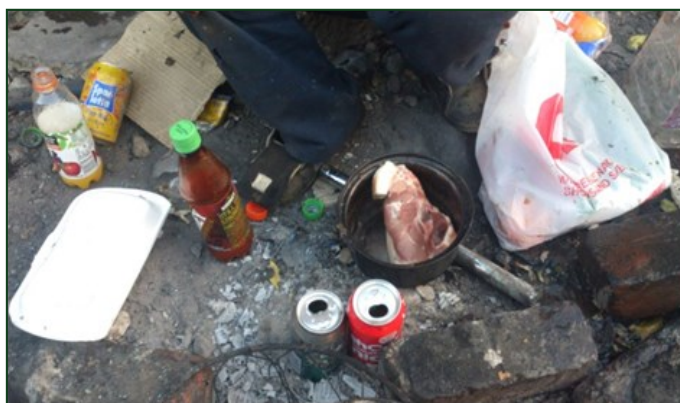
FOOD IN THREE URBAN CONTEXTS

While the urban environments for young people living in the three cities differ, they share the need to find food. Common sources include markets, restaurants, fast food outlets, supermarkets, residential blocks and hotels, where waste food can be found (see box 1). Street vendors are a source of cheap but poor quality food. 'Chop houses' (kiosks selling food) are present in Accra and Bukavu; in Harare, food is sometimes provided by NGOs, churches and individuals. Young people beg for and steal food and money in order to eat; theft of food or money to buy it is only used when they feel they have no other choice.

The staple dish in each city is rice, fufu or banku (boiled and pounded starchy food such as cassava, yams or plantains) or sadza (a thick porridge of ground maize), ideally accompanied by vegetables, meat or fish; rarely afforded by those living on the street.

"You don't have enough money, you are having GHc2 [40 pence]. You go to buy banku 1 cedis and fish 1 cedis; in that case what will you eat in the evening? You won't have it. So you instead buy rice 50 pesewas [10 pence] for morning, afternoon, evening."

(Accra Group 1).



A group of young people in Harare prepare a meal on an open fire in an alleyway: meat is an unusual treat.

PICKING FROM BINS IN HARARE

When they have no money to purchase food, street children and youth scavenge for edible waste in bins, preparing stews of meat, vegetables and rice or sadza, reheated over open fires in the street. "Everything is thrown into a bin [...] some pampers would have burst and there will be sadza next to it; and you will be hungry so you just take and go wash it" (Group 2). In sourcing food in this way, street children and youth risk food poisoning and attack from owners, security guards or others who claim ownership. Waste food has been intentionally spoiled to prevent consumption: "It is cruelty, you are also human and you breathe like me; then you pour [Vim] on food that I want to pick from bins; I have not stolen from anyone or snatched from anyone" (Group 5).

STRATEGIES FOR ACCESSING FOOD

In all three cities, work is seen as essential in order to get money for food: 'it all depends on work. If you are not working, you will not have money [...] if you don't have the money, you will not get food from anywhere' (Accra Group 1).

Street children and youth earn money in whatever way they can, typically carrying goods and cleaning cars; sweeping markets or helping vendors, picking and selling plastics, and for younger children, begging. In Bukavu, Lake Kivu provides opportunities for work as well as stealing and selling fish: 'if I have not removed fish from the nets, I cannot find money' (Group 4).

Informal (often unlicensed) work such as head loading, or hawking low value items pays very little, usually only enough to buy food for that day; "we carry people's luggage and get money [...] then we buy food" (Harare Group 2); and is frequently thwarted by the police, council officials, and soldiers.

"I would toil before I can get money to buy food. When you go and sell the water, you will earn 1 cedis [about twenty pence per sachet]. If you are not able to sell more, the following day you will bathe from it and eat from it [...] When you are not lucky the next day, you will not have money to eat" (Accra Group 1).

In all three cities, girls (and some boys) engage in sex work for money or food. As one girl explained, "we have the disadvantage that we cannot go to a person and ask

to carry their luggage"; the choice is "we go sell ourselves" or "I spend the day with my hunger" (Harare Group 2). Where work is unavailable, street children and youth steal, beg, and use deception to gain access to food in the three sites (see box 2).

In Accra theft is typically amongst each other: "when they are hungry, they can pick items that belong to their friends and sell [...] because to go hungry is very difficult" (Accra Group 6). Theft can result in police detention: "someone was jailed for five days after stealing a loaf of bread" (Harare Group 1).

Hunger is the norm and exacerbated by the rainy season and Sundays when there is less work and fewer commercial activities. On any day of the week street children and youth eat in the morning in the hope of earning enough during the day to eat again in the evening, but hunger is a constant risk; "when I have no money, I go even two days without eating" (Bukavu Group 4). They use various coping strategies to escape hunger, including sleep: "I 'dodge time'; I will sleep till one o'clock, [...] eat, then I and my friends will play around; when it is six, then I will go back to bed" (Accra Group 6). Others use and become dependent upon drugs and alcohol to escape the pains of hunger, the stigma associated with picking from bins, or the daily challenges of finding food: "we are often assaulted when we prepare food outside and our food is taken by other street children; that discourages us a lot and pushes us to take drugs" (Bukavu Group 4). Drugs, which in the first instance are used to cope with hunger, create dependency, meaning that some prioritise buying drugs rather than food.

THEFT IN BUKAVU

In Bukavu, theft is more often a daily strategy for survival. For one group, hunger makes them "so desperate that we even think about stealing" (Group 1); for another, theft was essential: "when I have not stolen, I cannot have anything to eat" (Group 4). Typical thefts are stealing baskets of fish to re-sell; other strategies include ordering a meal, then "once I've eaten, I say I don't have any money and I flee" (Group 3), or stealing "the handles from the plastic buckets that the mother merchants use. I resold them for 1200fc [about 84 pence] each and I bought some food!" (Group 4).

Street children and youth's transient mode of living and precarious access to shelter determines their access to food, as they rarely have a safe space to store and prepare uncooked food ingredients: "We may look for our tins and we cook for today but tomorrow when we want to cook again they will be stolen; there will be other people using them" (Harare Group 3). As a result there is a reliance on street vendors and fast food. Boys in Bukavu complained: "When you contribute 500fc [about 35 pence] and cook yourself, you will feel satisfied, whereas 500fc at a restaurant won't fill you up [...] It's much cheaper to cook food ourselves" (Group 2). For girls and young women who are raising children on the street, providing sufficient healthy food for themselves when breast feeding and for their children is difficult. One young mother in Accra describes how she prioritizes feeding her child while her stomach will "stay empty"; "I am old enough but he is a child, and he is also more important than I; the child has a future" (Group 4).

EATING 'BOKA'

Buying cooked food does not guarantee its quality. Participants in Accra reported that food for sale on the street was prepared beside gutters using dirty water and reheated waste food. This cheap food is named 'boka'; "leftover food that has been taken round to be sold, but was not sold" (Accra Group 3). Most groups stated that street-purchased food "causes stomach pains" (Harare Group 5) and as a result "you will have your stomach running the whole day" (Accra Group 2).

SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF FOOD

Food, beyond its material and nutritional importance, carries social significance reflected in the practices of consumption. How street children and youth obtain and consume food has three impacts: the negative perceptions of wider society; the implications of these perceptions on their psychological wellbeing and identity; and social relationships, sharing and competing for limited food resources.

Accessing food is frequently a source of shame and embarrassment for street children and youth, not only in picking from bins, but in buying cheap food, which in Accra exposes them to the derision of their community: "Some of them will call their friends, clap their hands at you and laugh at you [for eating 'boka'...], you feel very



sad" (Group 1); or disdain: "people don't regard us" (Group 4). This is a common experience in all three sites, "they laugh at us and insult us by saying nasty things" (Bukavu Group 2), and when seen picking from bins, "they just stare at us" (Harare Group 3). Participants in all cities were shouted at, using the local labels for street children: "kobolo" in Accra, "maibobo" in Bukavu, "magunduru" in Harare.

This awareness of how they are perceived by others impacts on the self-esteem and identity of street children and youth. "They think we are useless" (Accra Group 4) and "not part of the human race" (Accra Group 5); "we are despised" (Bukavu Group 3) and people are "nauseated by us" (Harare Group 3). As a result, "we are traumatized, pained; we also want to live at a clean place to eat good food, we are also people [...] the spirit they suspect us of is not good; and it causes us to lose hope" (Harare Group 2). Food and respect (for oneself and from others) are closely linked; in contrast, when imagining a time when they would have access to plentiful healthy food, participants felt that: "people will respect you; you will feel that you are now OK" (Accra Group 2).

While cruelty and disrespect are commonplace, street children and youth often also experience kindness and generosity from individuals in their communities: "people have different hearts; some people have a good heart and give" (Bukavu Group 1).

Gathering, preparing and sharing food collectively is also an opportunity to build solidarity and group identity among themselves; an expression of "one love", meaning "when I get food alone, I share it with my friend" (Harare Group 1): "we club together and we cook in the morning before we do anything else [...] We have makeshift pans;

large Nido milk tins work well, so that's what we tend to use as cooking pots [...] We use old tyres or used shoes [for fuel]" (Bukavu Group 2).



Sharing food together is an ideal to which young people aspire

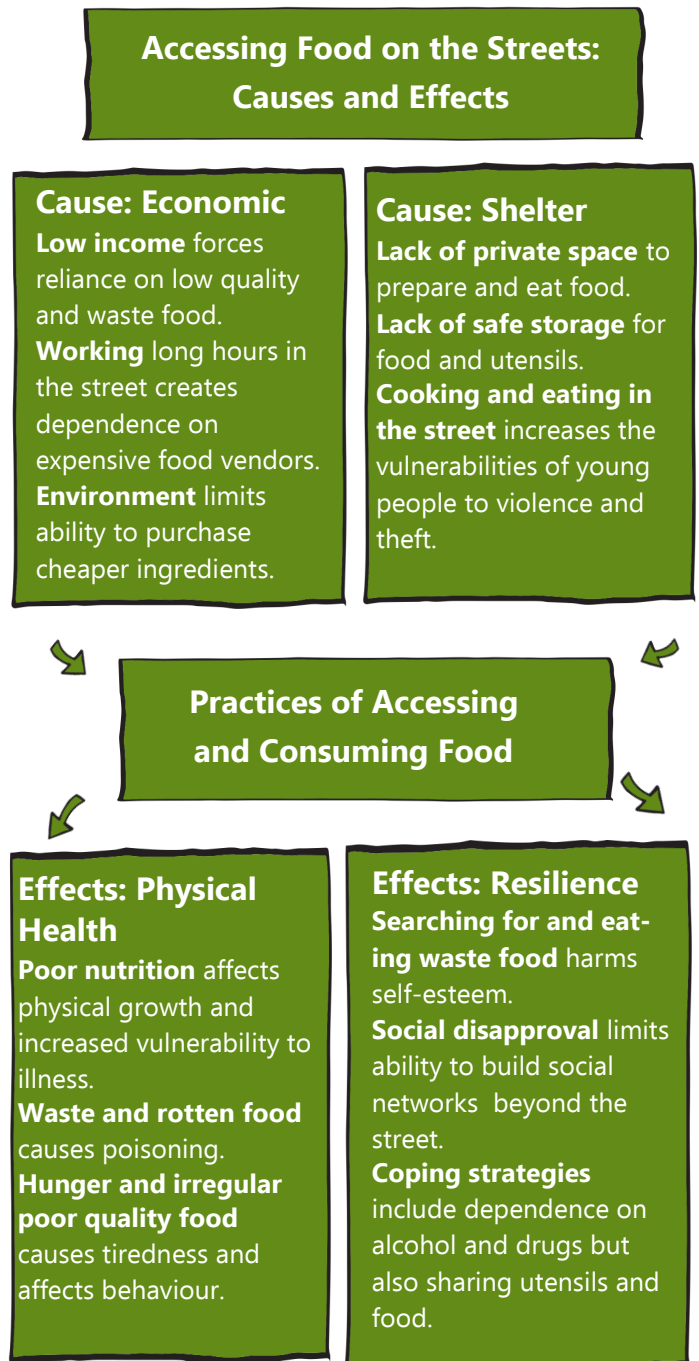
Across Africa, cooking and eating "from one pot" is symbolic of "family" and "home" and an important shared experience (Ansell & van Blerk, 2004: 676). Sharing food is an opportunity to build social capital, because "if someone hasn't found anything [to eat...] I would give them something; maybe one day they could help me" (Bukavu Group 1). While street children and youth rely on each other for moral and practical support, the search for food places pressure on the relationships. Food is often consumed as soon it is found, due to fear of theft and because "it is not sufficient for you to share" (Accra Group 3).

CONCLUSIONS

Accessing food on the street is a daily time- and energy-consuming challenge for street children and youth. Earning to buy food, scavenging and cooking on the street all contribute to their vulnerability to theft, harassment and violence. Poor quality food and social condemnation contribute to illness, feelings of diminished self-esteem and negative behaviour, including dependence upon alcohol and drugs. There is a clear association between, as shown below, the conditions that affect the ability of street children and youth to access food and the strategies that they develop to obtain basic sustenance. Despite these challenges in finding food, street children and youth in all three cities were resilient and willing, where possible, to share. They had hopes and plans for the future, and "the dream that things will change" (Accra Group 6).

REFERENCE

Ansell N and van Blerk L. 2004. Children's Migration as a Household/Family Strategy: Coping with AIDS in Lesotho and Malawi. *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30: 3: 674-690.



BackstageTrust

For further information on the research plus Briefing Papers using the words of street children and youth themselves:
www.streetinvest.org/guots · guots@dundee.ac.uk · guots@streetinvest.org

Research Directors: Professor Lorraine van Blerk, Dr Wayne Shand, Patrick Shanahan

Researcher: Janine Hunter