

RESEARCH PRINCIPLES AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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KEY POINTS

- Research with 198 street children and young people aged 14–20 in three African countries over three years.
- Young people living and working on the street have been trained to be Research Assistants.
- The research uses the ‘capability approach’ as a framework to understand life growing up on the streets.
- The findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of life for young people and inform international policy and service planning.

INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH

This is the first of a series of briefing papers to report on the emerging findings and evidence gathered by the *Growing up on the Streets* research project. The research aims to highlight the complex lives and difficult choices experienced by young people living in poverty on the streets and informal settlements of African cities. The evidence, collected through this research, is intended to contribute to a better understanding of the conditions and consequences of growing up on the street to inform the design and delivery of policies and services targeted at street children and youth. The intention is to cultivate an international discussion involving policy makers, academics, practitioners working with street youth and most importantly the young people themselves on how we understand and respond to the needs of children and youth growing up in urban environments.

The research is taking place over three years with young people aged 14–20 in the cities of Accra, Ghana; Bukavu, Democratic Republic of Congo; and Harare, Zimbabwe. In each city six young people have been trained in basic ethnographic methods to be research investigators – reporting on their own lives and experiences on the street and engaging with a group of 10 young people within their social network. This cohort of 66 young people in each city provide a regular narrative on their lives and contribute to thematic discussions structured around a set of ten



‘capability’ indicators. To avoid disrupting existing social and support networks established in their communities, the research has been structured to be embedded in the lives of the participants.

Developed as a partnership with young people and with NGO practitioners working in African cities to be an ‘active, generative and self-defining practice’ (Appadurai, 2013) the research is hosted by NGO partners in Accra (Catholic Action for Street Children); Bukavu (PEDER); and Harare (Aids Counselling Trust) who provide an organisational and administrative base for the local project manager. Additionally, a group of six NGOs across Africa form a peer network of expert practitioners to review the research findings and contribute to and champion the project. The University of Dundee leads the data capture and analysis for the research and the University of Manchester is core partner to the project.

StreetInvest provides programme management support to the research partners and is the accountable body.

Adopting a primarily qualitative approach, ethnographic reporting by the young participants is supplemented by thematic focus groups and annual participant surveys collecting demographic and economic information (see our Methodology briefing paper). The methodology was constructed specifically to address the particular conditions and challenges of working with children and youth on the street, including overcoming problems of access to communities where young people are rightly wary of unfamiliar adults and adopting methods of data collection that reflect and utilise young people's skills. To survive in the hostile environment of the street, children and youth develop heightened observation skills to identify risks and changes to their surroundings but also rely on storytelling as a means of social engagement and participation.

STARTING POINTS

The research project was initiated by Fr. Patrick Shanahan in 2011 to understand what proportion of street children remain street connected as adults. This research question arises from the practitioners' view that neither the prevailing language used to describe street children, nor the policy priorities of service delivery agencies fully correspond with lived experience of children in African cities. The global approach to the 'problem' of street children ignores the significant proportion of children that never leave the street – the street being their home, society and source of income. As a research task this presented three challenges. Firstly, it was important to avoid valorising the street environment by ignoring the dangers and hardships associated with life for young people living and working on the street. To live on the street is both a consequence and self-perpetuating cause of abject poverty that shapes the futures and the wellbeing of street children and youth. Secondly, there is a lack of data enumerating the populations of street dwellers. While there is a wide range of estimates to be found in academic and policy papers, outside of headcounts produced in cities sponsored by local government or NGOs there are no reliable data to define populations of street children. Thirdly, the research had to respond to the heterogeneity of street connected populations and

complex needs of street children and youth. While often referred to as a coherent group, the experience of practitioners suggests a diversity of motivation, experience and need.

CONFRONTING THE LABELS

A significant challenge to designing research programmes with street children and youth is overcoming the powerful discourses of childhood that dominate public policy and programme design. The idea of children in the street as being 'out of place' (Ennew, 2003) and lacking agency because of their age severely constrains the range of potential service responses to the needs of young people to actions consistent with a child protection agenda (van Blerk 2014). While child safety should of course be a primary consideration, the lack of tailored responses to individual need is a major weakness in current provision.



The ideal of a nuclear family unit overwhelms service design driving delivery towards those young people that offer the possibility of being returned to family environments. While this can be a positive step where fractured family relationships can be repaired, anecdotal evidence from NGO practitioners involved in the research suggests that programmes that support family reunification are appropriate for only a small number of young people. In many cases, young people have run away from abuse, been orphaned or sent to the city due to poverty in the family household (Young, 2004). They may live part-time on the street, working or begging to supplement family income, or be part of extended families that live permanently on the streets or in informal settlements and are therefore in that sense already at 'home' (van Blerk, 2012).

The impact of complex family and social relationships on policy and service design is further increased by the discursive applications of 'street'. This is used both to describe the physical thoroughfare but also symbolically to denote an arena, and by extension a person, that is outside of society and without formal connection. The use of 'street' has particular importance for research into the lives of street children and youth as it underpins a simplistic binary where 'on' the street represents danger and a departure from normative social behaviours and 'off' the street is indicative of problems resolved and counted as a legitimate output from a service intervention. This approach emphasises the 'street' over the 'child' (Glauser, 1997).

The labels of childhood and street contribute to how street youth are conceptualised and frame the design of 'legitimate' actions eligible for public and donor funding. The research aims to confront how life on the street is conceived and to create an evidence base to inform debate and overcome the boundaries of what is considered to be an appropriate service intervention.

URBAN LENS

Children and youth on the street is a uniquely urban issue. This research has been constructed to see the urban context not just as a backcloth for the experience of young people but as an instrumental condition that shapes the ability of young people to create lives they have reason to value. Informality has become ubiquitous in cities of the global south and with international agencies forecasting continuing urbanisation driven by endogenous population growth and rural-urban migration (UN Habitat, 2012) cities will remain challenging environments for service delivery and an important focus for research.

The research provides an opportunity to document everyday life in the city at a level of detail that has not been undertaken previously with street children and youth in Africa. This allows an investigation of how far young people are integrated into the economic and social systems of urban life. This aspect of the research aims to challenge the appearance of transience associated with life on street to establish how far young people become rooted in urban areas by developing strong connections and social capital within informal communities and the significance of this for their lives as adults.

EMBEDDED RESEARCH

While there are examples of research projects utilising young people as 'street researchers' or undertaking 'peer-to-peer' data gathering (Bemak, 1996, Hampshire et al, 2012) this project sought to locate young people in the research process as the principal agents of data collection: providing training to a group of six young people in each city to be Research Assistants (RAs) for the three year study. Data collection takes place in carefully targeted areas where children and young people have strong social networks. The spatial configuration of the research reinforces the efficacy of the RAs who benefit from friend and peer support and gain confidence by being the expert on their local social and environmental dynamics. The experience of the RAs becomes the window into life growing up on the streets.

CAPABILITY APPROACH

The capability approach, adapted from the work of Sen and Nussbaum (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000), allows the research to see beyond the manifestations of poverty and life on the street to those aspects of life that the young people most have reason to value. Through a process of participation, ten capability statements were identified by young people as reflecting the aspects of life most important to them as they struggle to build adult lives (Shand, 2014). The statements provide both conceptual framework for understanding choices and constraints in everyday life experienced and a methodological structure to collect and organise the participants' narratives.

The capabilities are both causally and conditionally related. For example, preservation of health is affected by the availability of shelter; and access to food is dependent on economic activity.

While the importance of each capability differs between



individuals, when the RAs were asked to rank capabilities in priority order there was a high degree of consistency in their responses. In developing the capability set it was important to expose the complexity and ordinariness of life for young people on the street, living in extreme conditions of poverty and social exclusion.

Finally, young people have a key role to play to shape how their needs are understood. This research is intended to create a platform for young people to engage with policy makers and providers and ultimately to translate research evidence into policy and service design.

REFERENCES

TEN CAPABILITY STATEMENTS

- I frequently receive the support of friends.
- I am able to realise my plans for the future.
- I am resilient in the face of problems that affect me.
- I usually have enough to eat.
- I am able to behave in ways that protect my health and wellbeing.
- I am able to earn enough money to meet my basic needs.
- I have enough time to play.
- I have access to shelter.
- I am able to move freely and be safe in my local area.
- Through work I can build assets for the future.

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