# Streets versus Elites: Tensions, Trade-offs, and Treaties with Street Children in Accra, Ghana

**Fr Patrick Shanahan**
Centre of African Studies
University of Edinburgh

The methodology in my paper is very simple. I propose to follow each of the main words as I present the situation of street children in Accra, Ghana, today. I do not apologize for any of the words and I am fully aware that they give a picture of the possibility at least of some sort of conflict as opposed to the consensual world that many of us prefer to live in.

I have to say from the beginning that I am not an academic. I am a practitioner, a social planner. I have spent all my working life in Africa, and the last fifteen years in the downtown areas of Accra and other capital cities in Africa. I am delighted to be able to share platforms with academics. At least the academic world is beginning to admit it needs the practitioner's world- the operational world- for support of its theories. In turn, as practitioners, we are very happy to be shown new ways, new ideas, new methods of thinking by the academic world. What we find hardest of all is to be by-passed by policy makers who speak to academics, create a cozy huddle, and set principles of action in stone and tell us to get on with things.

I think we must make certain things very clear from the beginning. My thinking about street children, and the thinking of many colleagues on the streets of Africa's cities, has its roots in two principles. First, I say that a street child has the right to be a street child. I say that we must validate the position of the street child. Secondly, I challenge our partners- and anyone else who works with street children in Africa- to be bold enough to recognize that street children are becoming a critical mass. I challenge people and organizations not to hide behind the occasional intervention or charitable gesture but to say, in any town in Africa: "We want to be the friends of every street child in this place."

## Streets

This first section is the sine qua non of my own practice as a social planner trying to relate to street children. It is from this section that my conclusion will have its true validation.

There are some experienced commentators, like Fabio Dallape, who have, in my opinion, failed to take on board the fact that the street is a living entity in the life of a street child. He says: "The term 'street children' is inappropriate, offensive and gives a distorted message" (Dallape 1996). I have great respect for Dallape. We were both taught our practice with street children by one of the pioneers in work with street children in Africa, Fr Arnold Grohl. I wonder, though, if Dallape is not falling into the trap of seeing everything to do with the street as bad. Let's return to reality. Let me tell you about the worst insult in Accra for male street children. It is not to be called "street children." The word in Ga, the language of the ruling people of Accra, for "carrier" is kaya. In colonial times, rubbish, waste- human and animal- and all other detritus was collected by the poorest worker and taken to an incinerator. Pidgin English picked up the word "boiler" as an alternative to "incinerator." The poor laborers who carried the waste and the rubbish became known as "kaya boila." This insulting term meant that you were one step up from the waste you were carrying, that all you could do was a job carrying rubbish. Today in Accra, if you want to insult a young street boy or a young street teenager who is a kaya boila, taunt him by saying: "You, my friend, you no fit do nothing but be kaya boila." Some of the worst fights I have ever seen between street children, sometimes with knives or sharpened chisels, have come about because one small boy has told another small boy that all he's fit for is to be a carrier of rubbish and waste. It is not the street which worries the small boy; it is the fact that he knows that the most menial and degrading job in the whole city is to carry waste on your head.

Authors are very quick today to toss out such alternative expressions as "streetism," which is as inaccurate as it is ugly sounding. We even had the Junior Mayor of Bloemfontein saying in 1997 that he didn't like the name "street children" and that we should call them "community kids." Serious academic commentators are worried by the word "street." Christina Szanton Blanc says "They are trapped by labeling, stigmatization, and victimization" (Dallape 1996).

The street plays a major role in the life of a street child. For us from the western world, and for African leaders and social workers, our duty is to suspend concepts we have of the street being bad. I have no wish to glorify the street. I think living and sleeping with the rats is grim. But, I cannot deny the actuality. I cannot say: "I wish you were not here so that I can call you any name other than street child." The street is as much part of the solution as it is part of the problem. Let me go one step further. If we fail to understand the position of the street in the life of the children we will always be looking for the quick fix to the problem. We will always regard street children as problem children, rather than children in the first place whose first habitat is the street. If you remove the word "street" then you remove the proper concept of "street worker." If you

remove the essence of the street worker, you end up with no relationship with the child and a method of working with street children that is at best an attempt simply to lure them away, or at worst a product of the "round them up, lock them up, beat them up, send them home" philosophy. I give equal weight to both words: "street" and "child."

I am not going to get dragged into the argument about official definitions of street children. Glauser (1997) has argued that the terms and concepts about street children are both imprecise and lack operational value. His experience is in Asuncion, and he argues that many children simply don't fit into the categories of "in" and "of" the street. He is one of the few academic commentators who argue, for example, that those who have kept contact with their families share much of the life of the children "of" the streets. I say that because it is extremely difficult to get a hearing seriously to discuss this very basic starting point. If a child works all day on the street in one occupation or another and goes home to a guardian, or a parent, or a relative, or a very good friend, to sleep in the same place, he does not bring that sleeping place to the street; he brings the street back to the sleeping place. He is a street child.

When I began to work in the slums of Accra I very soon started talking about a sub-culture. I suppose I was resisting the step into an unknown world where the anthropological principles I had been using all my working life up until then were being challenged. After six or seven years I started to call street life an "ethnicity." A few years ago I dismissed that as well, and I now call street life, and in this case the children in that street life, a "new culture." I know the difficulties of trying to make a theoretical justification for such a statement, but I think that some anthropologists can be of help and their position can be adapted to this particular subject.

First, there is the notion of "knowledge is power." "The criteria of what constitutes knowledge, what is to be excluded and who is designated as qualified to know involves acts of power." (Foucault 1971, quoted in Hobart (ed.) 1993). It has been argued that indigenous knowledge has often been ignored or labeled as "primitive," so "street knowledge" has not received the attention it deserves. A new young scholar/practitioner, Savina Geerinckx says: "By having labeled street children and continuously tried to impose our values on them, we have denied them any form of agency. Validating the street child would mean questioning the established power relations" (Geerinckx 1999). I think we have to go beyond the current mantra of "participation," which has too often become mere tokenism, and accept that the street child could finally become an active subject, just as we accept that anybody from a given culture is an active subject.

Secondly, in order to push this new part of the development discourse a little further, I would go as far as talking about an "epistemology" of the

street child. Street children have their own pre-suppositions. It appears more natural for many of us to accept that indigenous people have formed their own pre-suppositions over a long period of time. It seems harder for us to accept that teenagers and small children living in difficult urban contexts have relationships with their environment that differ fundamentally from ours. If we declare the need to search this new knowledge, this new metaphysic, then we are going beyond any form of tokenism and treating their culture in a more honest way.

To return to the street, the first lesson a street worker has to learn is to map that street or group of streets where he or she works. Street mapping has been re-defined by me and others along the lines of social mapping, but searching for two principles about the dynamics of the street or section of streets:

(1) to try and determine the rich and the poor of the street;
(2) to try and determine who are the real power brokers on the street.

It is crucial to understand the place and places where so many children live, work, socialize, suffer, and are happy. We make workers map the streets, on their own or together, and then we ask them to make a map with a street child from that neighborhood or street. The two maps are never the same. The trained social worker comes from straight lines, targets, statistics, befores and afters. The street child moves in circles, watching his back, looking up, looking down. It all seems so obvious and so simple and yet, in this whole search for the best way to work alongside these children and with them, these differences in street maps are cast aside in a cavalier fashion.

To show you how complex the issue is, and how it is too easy it is to dismiss the street, let me quote from UNESCO. "Street life is in fact made up of latent or open violence, of selfishness and solitude. The child will want to escape and has to be helped to do so." And: "It is obvious that the street cannot be an environment where, in the long run, the child can develop in a positive way." (UNESCO 1995, 97).

Let me conclude this most crucial section with a salutary story of the next generation of street child. Behind the headquarters of the Motor Traffic Unit of the Ghana Police in Accra there is a piece of street used by around 100 people, mostly youngsters and children, as a place to sleep. There is a young girl of 15 there who has a baby of about 10 months old. I often use her story to trap politicians. I tell them that I am at a loss to know what to do for the young baby who has to sleep with her very young mother behind the police station. The immediate reply is: "Send the mother and child back to her village. Resettle them." I can't. You see, the baby who was born on the street has a mother who was born on the same street. The street is their "village;" they are "settled." I find such an experience very challenging to my own thinking.

**Versus Elites: Tensions and Trade-Offs**

Hero, villain or victim: in practice street children are all of these things. The stereotypes say more about the adults involved than the lives of the children (Green 1998).

We are the "Elites." We have power and privilege, and many of us are citizens of rich and powerful nations. The quotes that follow are to provoke discussion and debate and to show that the "Tensions" and "Trade-Offs" are created by us. In the documents that are quoted below it is only in The Exodus that the possible existence of a street child's perception of the world is acknowledged. The latest and most powerful player in the lives of street children is the World Bank. Its work continues to regard street children as a problem. Nowhere in its documents, either operational or theoretical, does it validate the street child.

The head of Africa Foundation [Ugandan NGO] eventually realized that these children are difficult to handle because what seems essential for a 'normal' human being is not necessarily so in their eyes. Give them a mattress and a blanket today and tomorrow they'll have sold them (Velis 1995, 123).

Catherine Caufield, in her book Masters of Illusion: The World Bank and the Poverty of Nations (1996), has no report to make on any relationship whatsoever between the World Bank and street children. In fact, she has no section at all on the World Bank and poor urban children. Why?

In September 1997, the World Bank introduced its Poverty Reduction Project into Ghana and, after many hours of argument and discussion, stated that it was not interested in the position of street children as an important sector for such a project. I have no documentary evidence of this; I was the one who argued with the World Bank team. Street children, we were told, would be taken care of under "Education."

In November 1998 the Technical Committee on Poverty for the Government of Ghana produced a document called "Street Children in Ghana: A Literature Review." No attempt was made to present the street child's case.

In 1999 the Technical Committee on Poverty for the Government of Ghana made a draft proposal for street children in Ghana, as requested by both the Government and the World Bank. The documents of this Committee and the preparatory work of other committees really deserve a paper all of their own. There is no discussion about the real position of the street child. There is no discussion about the reality of proper street work. There is the presentation of an enormous budget, presumably for interventions into the lives of street children in Ghana.

In April 1999, as part of the World Bank's "new approach to country-owned Poverty Reduction Strategies," the Bank in Ghana produced a Project Appraisal Document for its Poverty Reduction Project. This time street children, it would seem, had actually made it. The document has a small paragraph called "Assistance to Street Children." It says: "The LIL (Learning and Innovation Loan) will support the Government in the development of a national policy on street children, deepen public awareness of the problem and assess the cost-effectiveness of street children interventions." Again there is no attempt to present the street child's case.

From December 1998 to March 1999, a piece of research called The Exodus was carried out by Catholic Action for Street Children (CAS), in Accra, Ghana, funded by UNICEF Ghana. It explores the reasons why children from the rural areas are migrating to Ghana's urban centers. It has been presented to the World Bank in Accra. There has been no comment.

In April 2000, the World Bank declared its "Street Children Initiative." Interestingly enough, it aimed to identify promising policies and techniques which were being developed by NGOs in ten countries in East and Central Europe. It also commissioned comparative studies in Colombia and Brazil, and threw in Russia and the Ukraine for good measure. Those of us from Africa and Asia present at the Conference wondered what we had to do to be part of the Initiative. The Consortium for Street Children UK asked that the post of an Operations Director be set up in the Bank exclusively to care for street children. This is a necessary Bank operations instrument. Without it there is absolutely no chance of getting the full power of the Bank on your side. This request was rejected.

**Treaties**

I think that treaties with street children must be made on the streets with street workers because these agreements require proper brokerage. Below, I present a diagram (Figure 1) which shows the nature of the relationship and I then outline the characteristics of those who will broker the relationship. Because I want to engage with children in the streets, I use the concept of triangular relationships. We have three very different partners to bring together if we are to make genuine treaties with street children.
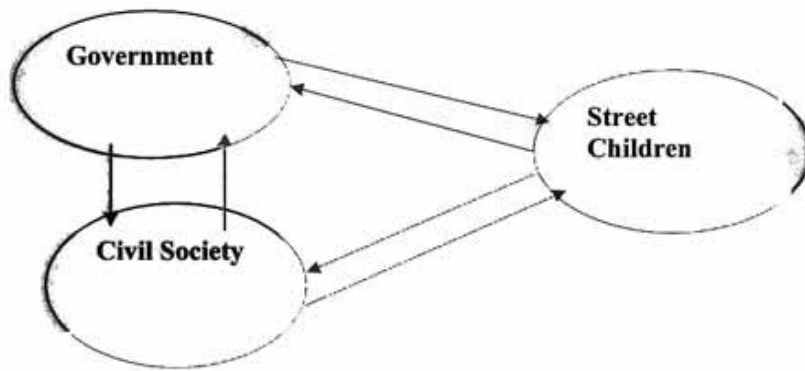
**Figure 1.** Brokerage Relationships

Let us look at the epistemology. Enshrined at the heart of this approach to making treaties with street children is not just the promise of equality but the need for it. The minute that there are exits and entrances to all three of the "eggs" above, there can no longer be deals that are merely dyadic by nature. Straightaway we are in trouble, for example, with the World Bank. For the Bank, every deal is dyadic; it is Bank-to-Government. The Bank in Accra does not have the mechanism for discussing anything with the third part of the triangle - the street child. We have to ask: is there even recognition of the third side of the triangle?

I realize that for some scholars and practitioners it may seem offensive not to have placed street children in the Civil Society "egg." I am not wishing to be offensive, but I must say that as far as my experience goes they are so excluded as to be refused entrance into civil society. Civil society, it seems, knows everything about them and will talk for them. If that is so, why is civil society so reluctant to discuss its components and define its true realities? I must therefore look for the broker to ensure that street children are given this equality and equity without which they will not survive.

The genuine broker is the street worker. I need to make a distinction between street worker and outreach worker. It is not a nice distinction, or a semantic one, but rather has a very strong foundation in reality. Some of the following text is taken from different notes produced by an organization in Australia called Open Family. I find it remarkable, as a practitioner whose working life has been in Africa, hat I should find a complete similarity of approach from an NGO working with street children in Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra.

When I talk of a street worker I am not talking about the traditional outreach worker with a bit of a difference.[2] Street work is about reciprocity on the part of both the street worker and the street child. In other words, children have the right to decide if the street worker is

significant, and have the option to walk away if they so choose. The characteristic is an inherent equality. Outreach work usually involves taking offers of services into the child's environment. It is characterized by an inherent inequality between helper and the child.

Further, street work is geared towards the building of a relationship with children by addressing their innate need for a significant other. It is a relationship that bases itself on finding out in a generative way what the best story of the child and the worker will be. It meets the child's need for connectedness and for belonging. Involving the child in a web of services is secondary. Traditional outreach work, in contrast, is usually backed by a center-based service and is driven by the objective of engaging the child in the pre-determined service in the long run.

If the family is taken to be the basic to social life, then children outside families are particularly anomalous and none more so than street children who demonstrate their independence from adults living outside respectable society… They are an affront to our idea of childhood and thus lend themselves to scandalmongering treatment, which occasionally hinders programs aimed to help them (Ennew 1989, 55).

If we look at our triangle again, we can see that it only works if all three sides are connected to each other. I maintain that the street worker is the one person who can keep this brokerage alive. It would be wrong of me, of course, to denigrate a lot of wonderful work that has gone on, and still goes on, in the streets of African slums through the traditional outreach approach. What I am now asking is that the street worker and the street child are allowed the time and the space to build relationships on trust and mutual respect over months and years, and so determine between them which ways the development of the street children will go. I think that traditional outreach methods take away the alertness and timing and responsiveness to street children.

Woolly liberal? Too messy? Too time-consuming? Too expensive?

A street worker engages 24/7. Street workers might be liberal, or might not, but they are definitely not woolly. A street worker is committed to validating children and working inside their milieu, which is the street. The job is definitely messy. All street children will protect their stories until mutual trust is formed, which can quite often never fully happen. Further, this approach is time-consuming in that it is very hard to explain to government and to civil society that the end term is open.

Too expensive? Allow me the pleasure of a little joke for the cost-effective analysts- whether they be in the World Bank or large donors or the EU or the British Government. Using current salary costs and building costs in Accra, Ghana, I have calculated that it will be cheaper to fund 200 trained street workers for each of Africa's 53 capital cities for three years than it

will be to build ten primary schools in each of the 53 capital cities in the slum areas before you even put staff and equipment in them. After three years, I maintain, there would emerge a pattern of development thinking between street child and street worker that would enable us to offer a completely different form of service which would meet children with equality. On the other hand, I maintain that without it the primary schools built would not find many street children in them. I do not offer this as yet another attempt to find the magic formula. I offer it as an example of the need we all have to validate the street children of Africa and listen with humility and respect to their stories.


**Endnotes**
1. This paper was given in May 2001 to the Annual International Conference on Africa run by the Centre of African Studies at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. The theme of the conference was "Africa's Young Majority: Meanings, Victims, Actors." It was one of two papers dealing with street children and was published by the Centre of African Studies in 2002 as one of the chapters in the book that accompanied the conference (Trudell et al., 2002).
2. Street workers follow six basic principles: reciprocity; relationship-focused; unbounded by time; alertness; holistic view of helping resources; building the sustainability and resilience of local communities.


**Fr Patrick Shanahan** is a London-born Catholic priest, who has lived and worked in Africa for the past 34 years. He has worked on the streets of urban Africa since 1985. He co-founded Catholic Action for Street Children (1993), Street Girls Aid (1994), Urbanaid (1987) in Accra, Ghana, and. Street Child Africa (1998). Fr Shanahan has developed and practised new methods for training street workers in Africa, and regards these young Africans as the most important people in the lives of Africa's street children.

**References**

**Africa Insight** (1996). Special Issue on Street Children in Africa. 26(3).

**Beauchemin, E, P. Aveyor and C. Baffoe** (December 1998-March 1999). The Exodus: The Growing Migration of Children from Ghana's Rural Areas to the Urban Centers. Accra, Ghana: Catholic Action for Street Children (CAS)/ UNICEF.

**Blanc, Christina Szanton** (1996). Childhood 3(2).

**Caufield, Catherine** (1996). Masters of Illusion: The World Bank and Poverty of Nations: MacMillan.

**Childhood** (1996). Special Issue on Working and Street Children. 3(2).

**Dallape, F.** (1996). "Urban Children: A Challenge and an Opportunity." Childhood 3(2).

**Ennew, J.** (1989). The Next Generation: Lives of Third World Children. London: Zed Books.

**Geerinckx, S.** (1999). Validating the Street Child? Master of Arts Dissertation. Social Anthropology. University of London, London.

**Glauser, B.** (1997). "Street Children: Deconstructing a Construct." In James and Prout, eds. Constructing and Reconstructing a Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood: The Falmer Press, 145-164.

**Street Child Africa** (2000). Street Child Africa (Brochure).

**Technical Committee on Poverty** (1998). Street Children in Ghana: A Literature Review. Technical Committee on Poverty/ Street Child Africa. November.

**Technical Committee on Poverty** (1999). Draft Proposal: Street Children in Ghana. Technical Committee on Poverty/ Street Child Africa.

**Technical Committee on Poverty** (1999). Project Appraisal Document of World Bank for Ghana. Technical Committee on Poverty/ Street Child Africa. April.

**Trudell, Barbara, et al.** (2002). Africa's Young Majority: Meanings, Victims, Actors. Centre of African Studies, University of Edinburgh.

**UNESCO/ International Catholic Child Bureau** (1995). "Working with Street Children: Selected Case Studies from Africa, Asia and Latin America." UNESCO Publishing/ International Catholic Child Bureau.

**Veils, J-P.** (1995). Blossoms in the Dust: Street Children in Africa. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.