



Streetism Onsets, Challenges and Roles Played by Stakeholders to Care the Street Children: A Case Study of Street Children in Mekelle City

Abrha Kiros Kefey^{a*}

Addis Ababa University, Addis Ababa, P O Box: 10298, Ethiopia

Email: Abrha_kiros@yahoo.com

Abstract

The study aimed to explore onsets and challenges of streetism and to describe the roles played by the stakeholders to protect the street children in Mekelle city. Using a purposive sampling, focus group discussions were conducted with two groups of informants: one group included four representatives of the community leaders, and other a combined group of four governmental and six nongovernmental representatives. Additionally, two key informants were interviewed on one-on-one basis. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Based on the participants' responses, It was found that poverty, parental pressures and step-parents' abuse, pedagogic problems, lack of public awareness, and low legal enforcements to protect the rights of children and absence of responsible bodies who may be accountable in the matter. In the streets, children had faced physical and psychological harassments, societal marginalization and neglect of their rights to get the necessary services. These findings, therefore, call for all policy makers, the public, and researchers to address the current difficulties of the street children.

Key words: Street children; streetism; harassments .

* Corresponding author.

1. Introduction

'Streetism' is a term that refers to the life situations of street children who usually live in difficult circumstances. It especially refers to those children who live in the streets and engage in menial income [4]. Streetism is a severe societal, social and individual problem that is a rapidly growing aspect of the developing countries due to some specific complicated social and family related problems such as poverty, domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse, and HIV/AIDS [17]. As a result of such complicated reasons, street children in developing countries live in difficult situations that are contradictory to those child right conventions that expect the societies to establish the minimum conditions to secure for favorable child development. The present street children conditions is also contradictory to the child developmental theories, which describe and explain the conditions and processes where favourable development may occur [10, 14].

Studies [10, 14] show that in order to secure safe and happy childhood development, it necessitates to shape the physical, emotional, social and cognitive aspects of a child to actualize his/her overall healthy and normal progresses.

Other several studies [13, 20] have showed that childhood is the most formative period of human growth, which requires all necessary support to actualize the holistic development of a child. Any developmental failure during this period adversely affects the progressive development of a child. Understanding the valuable nature of childhood, several developmental theorists have described the preconditions for good, safe and successful development of children. They have also indicated the possible consequences of maltreatment to cultivate and raise children [15, 16].

In spite of the valuable nature of children's care and development, however, research [2] shows that significant portion of street children are consistently mistreated by adults. The children are badly treated, tormented, and even killed. Street children are frequently misperceived as antisocial, robbers, and crime makers, in which all of such maltreatment acts may put a long lasting effect in the normal development of the children and many of them may turn out to be street survivors to escape from such adult harassments.

In Ethiopia, there is no commonly agreed data about the number of street children. However, based on existing studies [11, 9], it can be estimated that there are 100,000 to 600,000 street children in Ethiopia, out of which 150,000 live in Addis Ababa alone. Studies in Ethiopia [9, 19] have shown that children are driven into the streets due to several compounding forces related to economic problems, family discord, parental death and displacement, parental neglect and violence as well as urban life attractions.

Notwithstanding these observations of streetism in Ethiopia, little is known about the street children's day-to-day lives, and their inherent problems are not yet identified through research. The present study has, therefore attempted to shade light on the roles' of the government, the community members and nongovernmental institutions to care and protect the street children as envisaged in the national and international declarations of child's rights [18, 7].

In order to create a comprehensive perspective to the social support of street children, the Bronfenbrenner's [3]

ecological model of child development has been used as a frame to describe the roles and actions of the social support systems in the city Mekelle found in the Northern Ethiopia.

2. Method

Qualitative research design was used to conduct the study. Qualitative research approach enables to understand the roles' of the governmental and nongovernmental stakeholders to care and support the street children [12]. To collect the data, both semi-structured interview and focus group discussion (FGD) were employed. Two Key informants of the study were interviewed on one-on-one basis, and two groups of stakeholders had participated in the FGD.

2.1 *Setting and Participants*

The research was made in Mekelle city that found in the Regional State of Tigray. The city Mekelle is located in the northern part of Ethiopia about 777 km far away from Addis Ababa, the capital city of Ethiopia. The city has seven sub-city administrative zones with an estimated population of 272,219 (male= 48.6%; female= 51.4%) in 2012. Among the seven sub-city administrative zones, Kedamay Weyane was selected for its suitability to include the participant street children. This zone is the center of the bus station where the majority of the city's street children are found to wander here and there.

With regards to the participant selection, for the FGD purpose, a total of ten participants were selected from both governmental and nongovernmental organizations, and a total of four participants were selected purposefully from the local community (one each from four local administrative zones or Ketenas) to give their experience of street children. Moreover, one key informant from the Social Affairs bureau found in Mekelle and a charitable person with pseudo name Mama who voluntarily provided a special care to the babies of the street children were selected purposefully. Consents of participants were taken and pseudo names were used to name the key informants in order to maintain anonymity.

2.2 *Data analysis*

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze and interpret the data. The data were transcribed and translated from Tigrigna language into English. To become familiar with the details of the entire data, first, the researcher read and re-read the transcribed texts. Next, the researcher generated the initial codes giving especial emphasis on the frequently occurring patterns. This process continued collapsing the data into several labels by transporting each code into their related categories. Finally, three major themes including the forces driving children to the street, the challenges of the street children, the roles of the stakeholders in caring and supporting the street children were created and made an analysis on those emerged themes [5, 6].

3. Results

The results were classified into three major categories: Experienced driving forces towards the streets, challenges to battle against the streetism, and roles played by the respective stakeholders to prevent streetism

and to care and support the street children.

3.1 Why children drift into the streets?

The participants responded their observations about the causal forces of children's street entry. According to the participants, the triggering forces of streetism include poverty at home accompanied with parental pressure, step-parents' abuse, displacement from Eritrea, academic failure to pass into the subsequent grades and lack of child right protection.

Considering poverty as one cause of the several streetism forces, one participant shared his prior experience that a mother had denied to welcome her son back from the street because she was extremely poor. He said, "Imagine how extreme poverty forced a mother to reject her son" (FGD 13). According to this FGD participant, the mother had no capacity to raise her five children alone because she has lost her husband who could help to take care the children, and as a result, she forced her eldest son to go to the street to feed himself in any possible way.

Four study participants did attach the problem of streetism to the children's family neglect, and lack of family planning. They said:

There are parents who denied their children cruelly (FGD 3).

We asked relatives of a certain street child to rejoin her back. However, they declined to accept their child. They are useless! (Mama).

The society knows nothing about the consequences of having a large size family. They simply give birth to many children. Parents should get awareness about family planning and guidance. Family should love their children (FGD 10).

Children go to the streets and sleep there because no one gives them care (FGD 4).

One FGD participant (FGD7) stressed that children go to the street because of their step-parents' cruel treatment. For example, he explained his experience about a certain psycho-socially traumatic street child that, "I came across to know a certain girl's case who was forced to have sex with her stepfather. Consequently, she later became traumatic and guilty, and thus went out to the street to escape from her step-father's abusive acts" (FGD 7).

One key informant (interviewee 15) claimed that failure in academics force children to enter into the street. For example, the key informant noted that "a number of children consistently dropped out from schools and entered into the streets. We always negotiate with the school directors and teachers to readmit the children back to their schools". Stressing on the impact of civil war to break families, one key informant (interviewee 15) witnessed that children who are residing around the borders of Ethio-Eritrea had drifted into the streets because of war and lack of social stability.

Based on the participants' responses, it can be concluded that children are driven to the streets for a range of reasons associated with parental problems, extreme poverty, school related problems and civil conflicts. The forces that drive children to the street include problems ranging from the innermost micro levels of the family to the outermost macro level societal systems.

3.2 Challenges of the street children

According to the participants, the existing situation seems to be unsafe and difficult for the children to live in the streets since the street children have consistently experienced several challenges during their course of street survival. For example, they are neglected their basic necessities, and faced physical torture, exploitation, sexual abuse, and societal marginalization.

Explaining the various challenges of the street children in Mekelle city, one participant has the following to say:

Police have harassed the street children. They usually beat and consistently offend them. At times, they forced them to go round the city for public display. Such cruel acts may make them more offensive in their behavior (FGD 1).

Other participant added that the gangs who found in the street of Mekelle have cruelly beaten and unduly forced the younger street children to engage in risky tasks. For example, one participant said:

I have seen many problems that the street children faced several challenges. One of my experiences was that a certain street gang beat a little street child bitterly for failing to serve these gangs. The street gangs cruelly burn a child and forcibly took him to sewer. I tried to intervene in the matter. But, one of the street gangs attempted to fight with me replying violently as 'what do you care about this child'? We are here living together'. You are nothing to them' (FGD 2).

Concerning the harassment of street children made by adults, one FGD participant said, "Irresponsible persons splash street children with their urine (FGD 13).

In conclusion, the participants witnessed that the street children have experienced a number of challenges that could exacerbate their street life situations. For example, many street children are being harassed by police, street gangs and other irresponsible individuals because the street children are considered as robbers and criminals. The marginalization of street children to the lowest category of human beings shows that the background problems and current challenges of streetism are not well understood and touched by society.

3.3 Roles of the stakeholders in caring and supporting the street children

Regarding the present life of the street children, the study participants responded that the majority of street children live without getting any societal care and support. They are abandoned to get the social services as stipulated in the international and national legislatives.

One participant said:

If a child has already entered to the streets, it is difficult to support him. It is difficult to provide the street children with the necessary services because they do not have any known residence. We do not know where they come from. Therefore, they are not trusted and supported (Interviewee 15).

Participants of the focus group discussion accused one another in assigning the responsibilities of caring the street children. Two participants claimed the role to be that of the parents and the society, whilst four others pointed their fingers at the governmental and the nongovernmental bodies:

3.4 Role of government to take care of the street children

According to the FGD participants, the mandated social affairs bureau in Mekelle has several limitations to address the problems of the street children. As reported by the participants, the bureau has failed to have a sense of accountability and to hold the necessary capacities to exercise its mandate and to enforce the legislative rights of children stipulated for example in the Ethiopian constitution. Two participants saw the role of the society as follows:

No system was there to make mothers accountable. Nobody accuses them when they send their children out to the street. The government has played little roles to protect the children's rights (FGD 11).

There is no child court that could advocate and protect children rights. No counselor and child advocacy service to help the children in both the court and the corrective centers. Children are not exercising their rights (FGD 7).

Concerning the limitations of the mandated governmental sector, participants stressed that there is no data existed that could explain about the number and situation of the street child in the city. Participants also noted that there is no known strategic plan and budget to facilitate the cases of street children. This implicates that the bodies of the city administration, especially bodies of social affairs, health and school sectors do not see and comprehend the severity of the problem and thus do not put any emphasis and efforts to correct the situation regarding the street children.

With this regard, the participants stated:

As governmental body, we have to admit our failure that the issue of street children is not yet addressed (FGD 6).

We have limited and incomplete data about the total number of street children. We have not made a baseline study yet. We only have some fragmented and crude data sent from the Weredas (Interviewee 15).

It is not possible to solve the problem without having proper coordination. It should be done in systematic way rather than trying to resolve the issue sporadically. We all feel uncomfortable about it. We have to discuss on the matter seriously (FGD 9).

Two governmental functionaries showed some signs of regrets in failing to coordinate the task of caring the street children. The participant who represented the social affairs bureau complains for having several roles at the same time including the caring of persons with disabilities, and the elderly's and the children's issues. The participant responded that "We do not have sufficiently skilled work force and extra budgets to hire the necessary human resources that could handle the problems of street children. Our existing organizational set up is not even motivating in anyway".

According to the study participants, it seems that the inherent problem to care the street children mainly resides in this mandated sector itself. For example, the social affairs bureau has various problems to properly coordinate the issues of street children, faced little staff motivation, has lack of clear and detailed strategies and budgets, and has absence of systems to enforce the legislative rights of children in general and street children in particular.

3.5 Role of nongovernmental organizations to take care of street children

The study participants did not value the role of the nongovernmental organizations (NGO) to assist the street children as they did concerning the role of the government. In this regard, one participant, said, "there are several NGOs working in the realms of the adoption and sponsorship activities. Nevertheless, none of them supports the street children. It is simply paying a lip service" (FGD 6). Another participant added, "I have no information that NGOs in Tigray have involved in supporting the street children" (FGD 9). In connection to the participants' reflection, one participant said that some NGOs are trying to provide food, whilst many do not actually involve in the prevention and reintegration programs that may have a long lasting effect on the life of the children (FGD 10).

However, two participants saw that the primary role of caring street children lays on the government. For example, two participants said:

The change must come from the government itself. It is not good to ambitiously wait for others to solve our problem. The bureau of social affairs should be strengthened by the necessary human resources and logistics (FGD 11).

It is useless to wait for NGOs support (FGD 14).

Based on the participants' responses, the nongovernmental organizations have played a little role to help the street children although the NGO participant themselves have retrospectively blamed the governmental sector/s for its failure to care the street children.

3. 6 Societal roles in caring the street children

All participants reported that street children lack societal attention and care. For example, one focus group discussion participant said the following:

Each Tabia has held several meetings to discuss issues related to the society. But, nothing was mentioned about the cases of street children. I was feeling shocked to see the children living in the streets without any dresses. They were exposed in the streets to the rain and cold. The society did not try to protect them, but dogs showed their best to safeguard the children. They sleep with them and warm their body (FGD 3).

Further, other participant stated how society accuses the street children blindly: "We people simply shout at them saying uuu...yes that is it. We do not try to investigate why and where they come to the street" (FGD 2). The society put the blame on the children without understanding the roots of these children's' problems driving them into street.

The FGD participants also complained the failure of the society to understand and support street children:

The society may not know why their children come out to the streets. Street children did not get societal attention. Society saw them negatively although many of the street children are ready to be changed for the better (FGD 6).

Both legally and socially, the problems are that of the society and the solution should come from the same society to which they belong (FGD 7).

In conclusion, the participants indicated that society has not yet fully taken the necessary measures to care the street children. The source of the problem lays in the individuals' ignorance to understand about the child right issues, which may gradually inflict danger to the society itself. For this reason, one participant warned:

The street children lacked societal love. They are hungry and living out there in the cold. If we do not care for them, they may turn out to be enemies in the future (FGD 13).

Placing more value on the children, another participant stressed, "Implementing the rights of children is not solely a humanitarian task, but it is the prime duty of all stakeholders". This participant further argued that the traditional parenting practices are not applicable in this 21st century. The assumption that let 'a child grows by his/her luck' should be reversed. The participant further advised parents to care for having a better and realistic future (FGD 7).

4. Conclusions and Discussion

Street children in Mekelle have faced multi-faceted problems to meet their basic necessities and to get the social services important to their life. Overwhelmingly, the majority of street children live in the streets without any protection. They have neither any decent and permanent shelter nor any appropriate clothes. The children have experienced several types of harassments from the society. The street children have neither governmental nor public attention to enjoy their minimum fundamental rights. In principle, It was assumed that 'all will be accountable and responsible' in the matter of child care and support, which at the end, the notion of 'all' turned out to be no one's duty. The governmental functionaries showed some signs of regrets in failing to coordinate the task of caring the street children although regrets need not serve as an excuse for one's failure to care the

needy children.

In connection to present study, prior studies of street children in other African countries [8] have shown that street children are denied to get their basic necessities. They are most frequently harassed by adults, police, street gangs and some irresponsible persons. As to Nyerere [cited in 1], "no one could go hungry while others hoarded food, and no one could be denied shelter if other had space to spare" (p. 224). This implies that resources are unfairly hoarded by adults while children lack the public attention to make their basic needs fulfilled as equal to the other members of the society.

5. Future implications of the study and Recommendations

The present study calls for the authoritative governmental bodies of Ethiopia to fully implemented and put into force the national and international child right declarations and to ensure the healthy growth and development of all children. The findings of the present study suggest that the public institutions as well as communities and parents must be aware about the value and legal obligations of the child right declarations and legislation in order to bring sustainable and tangible improvements and change to the life of the street children.

The present study may give insight to researchers about the causal forces and problems that may mediate the situations of the street children in Mekelle. It is, therefore, suggested to employ future research that could use longitudinal and cross-sectional qualitative methods to further investigate the life and challenges of street children.

6. Limitations

Any research work can never be free from limitations. Such limitations may include accessibility challenges, time and financial constraints, or limitations that may emerge from the size of the sample itself. Similarly, this study is not without exception. For example, the financial constraints might have limited the depth and breadth of the current study. Because of the absence of sufficient financial support, a longitudinal study was beyond the scope of this present study to fully investigate the phenomenon of street children.

Another limitation of this study lays in the nature of the research itself. As the study mainly deals with an ethnographic research approach, it is apparent that its results are confined to a particular setting or context, which may not be generalized to the characteristics of other populations, settings or areas. Its finding only intends to address specifically to the issue of the street children found in Mekelle city, and, thus, its result may or may not necessarily represent the life experiences of other street children found elsewhere out of this setting.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor Professor Kari Ruoho for offering me, without reserve, his professional guidance, and encouragements in times of difficulties, without which the successful completion of this article would have been impossible.

References

- [1] M. Aderibigbe (2012). Poverty in Africa and the Forces of Change: Reflections on Rawls Difference Principle. *Advances in Applied Sociology*, 2(3), 223-228.
- [2] C. Beckett. *Child Protection: An Introduction*. London: Sage, 2003.
- [3] U. Bronfenbrenner. *Making Human Beings Human: Bioecological Perspectives on Human Development*. London: Sage, 2005.
- [4] Civil Society Forum Report. *A Civil Society Forum for Anglophone West Africa on Promoting the Rights of Street Children*. Accra, 2003.
- [5] J. Creswell. *Research Design Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approach*. California: Sage, 2002.
- [6] C. Dawson. *A Practical Guide to Research Methods*. Oxford: Howtobooks, 2007.
- [7] FDRE (1995). *The Constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia: Proclamation No 1/1995*. Retrieved from <http://mlgi.org.za/resources/local-government-database/by-country/ethiopia/constitution/FDRECosntitution>.
- [8] K. Ferguson & G. Heidemann (2009). Organizational Strengths and Challenges of Kenyan NGOs serving Orphans and Vulnerable Children: A Template Analysis: *International Journal of Social Welfare*, (18), 354–364.
- [9] A. Gedamu & R. Pearson. *Investing in Boys and Girls Working Paper: A Situation Analysis Report on the Progress of the Social Protection and Development of Ethiopia*. A Joint Report by UNICEF, MOFED, and MOWCYA. Addis Ababa: UNICEF, 2012.
- [10] T. Hyder. *War, Conflict and Play*. Berkshire: McGraw-Hill, 2005.
- [11] IRIN Africa (2004). *Ethiopia: Focus on Street Children Rehabilitation Project*. Retrieved from <http://www.irinnews.org/report/48799/Ethiopia>.
- [12] S. Khair (2001). *Street Children in Conflict with the Law: the Bangladesh Experience*. *Asia-Pacific Journal on Human Rights and the Law*, 12(1), 55-76.
- [13] P. Mayers . *Childhood and Youth Studies*.UK: Learning Matters, 2007.
- [14] H. Penn. *Understanding Early Childhood: Issues and Controversies*. Berkshire: McGraw, 2005.
- [15] M. Rutter, J. Kreppner & E. Bark (2009). *Attachment Insecurity, Disinhibited Attachment, and Attachment*

Disorders: Where Do Research Findings Leave the Concepts? *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 50(5), 529–543.

[16] A. Sameroff (2010). *A Unified Theory of Development: A Dialectic Integration of Nature and Nurture*, 81(1).

[17] S. Savenstedt & T. Haggstrom (2004). Working with Girls Living on the Streets in East Africa: Professionals' Experiences. *Issues and Innovations in Nursing Practice. Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 50(5), 489–497.

[18] United Nations (1990). *Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Retrieved from www.ohchr.org/EN/professionalInterest/pages/CRC.aspx.

[19] S. Yizengaw & A. Gebiresilus (2014). Triggering Factors, Risky Behaviors and Resilience of Street Children in Gonder City. *Innovate Journal of Social Sciences*, 2(4), 42-50.

[20] M. Young & L. Richardson. *Early Child Development: From Measurement to Action. A Priority for Growth and Equity*. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2007.