

The Influence of Social Organization among Street Children on their Survival on the Streets

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Abstract: *One of the most common characteristics of human behavior is that it is socially ordered, organized and structured. Individual interactions and identities are not only shaped by personal interactions, but also by the sub-cultures and social groups in which people live. It is on this basis that this paper seeks to understand the extent to which social organization among street children influence their survival on the streets. This paper is based on the premise that street children are rational and thus, their way of social organization is a mechanism by, which they survive the difficult life on the streets. The paper argues that not much has been done at the policy level on how to improve the reintegration programmes and other interventions for street children. This is due to the failure of the concerned stakeholders on understanding the social organization structures among street children and its influence on their survival on the streets. We believe that understanding the social organization structures existing among street children is significant in enhancing the effectiveness of interventions towards curbing street children phenomenon in Kenya. The paper recommends that the concerned stakeholders working with street children should understand the social organization structures that enhance street children's' survival and encourage their continued stay on the streets.*

Keywords: Social Organization, Street Children, Survival

1. Introduction

The phenomenon of street children is increasingly becoming a worldwide social problem. The phenomenon is not new and neither is it restricted to certain geographical areas (Connolly, 1990). Street children were part of the 'urban landscape' during the process of industrialization and urbanization in post-war Europe (Agnelli and Swart, 1986). This has also been the case in many populations that have undergone political, social or economic upheavals and a large group of children, mostly unsupervised by adults are found in almost every country of the world. However, its size, nature and cause varies from country to country depending on the levels of economic development, social and traditional settings, institutional interventions and the level of social harmony and peace (Veale, 1996). According to Le Roux (1996), both developed and developing countries face a broad spectrum of problems posed by these children, yet few steps have been taken to address it. The dramatic increase in the number of street children has been linked to societal stress associated with rapid industrialization and urbanization. Conversely, in industrialized countries, inner-city decay and chronic unemployment accompanying economic downturns are held responsible. In agricultural societies, social unrests, decaying family fabrics, drought and famine are to blame.

Social inequalities and deprivation are prominent features in the contemporary societies, and the presence of vast numbers of children living and working in the streets in unsupervised and unprotected situations provides a typical example of this phenomenon (De Moura, 2002). When the family environment is full of conflict, violence, deprivation and loneliness, it is the children who suffer

most and may find companionship of other street children on the streets. According to Lugalla (1999), this companionship of peers on the street may indeed hold advantages and thus, detach children from the family. The implication here is that family dynamics play an important role in expelling children from their homes. Studies from Brazil show that families with strained relationships, which no longer operate as a collaborative unit, with a low degree of social cohesion and those which frequently resort to corporal punishment have a much higher tendency to produce street children (Rajani and Kudrati, 1996).

Family disintegration leaves children with no choice, but to make a living for their own survival on the streets. Once on the streets, they do not live haphazardly, they adopt a life that is accommodative to hard-life situations in an effort to enhance their survival. Street children devise living strategies and new survival mechanisms and the street becomes their 'home.' One of the factors providing some kind of safety for the street children is the relations the children form on the streets. Allardt (1980) asserts that some of the essentials of human welfare are the sense of belonging, solidarity and companionship and unity. Unity is a resource that helps an individual [street child] to search for other welfare values. The unity that is fostered brings social organization. Whyte (1955), in his street corners society study argued that the "North end" was not the "slum," and that its people had a social organization, which while different from that of the American middle-class was nevertheless well ordered. White further demonstrated that a poor community need not be socially disorganized. The street gangs were socially organized in their daily activities; they divided up

the various tasks among themselves and were guided by norms and regulations they created for themselves.

Many scholars begin a discussion on street children by referring to them as a problem. The approach, which problematical street children, reducing them to 'miserable victims', fails to recognize the remarkable initiative, social structures, resiliency and ingenuity demonstrated by street children in coping with difficult circumstances (Pinter-Brick, 2003). The problem of street children in Kenya for instance, demonstrates the incapacity of the government, policy makers and other stakeholders to realize the magnitude of street children phenomenon. This paper argues that efforts have been put in place to alleviate street children phenomenon, but less has been achieved. This has been partly attributed to lack of information on how social organization structures are a motivation factor to street children's continuous existence on the streets. Thus, the reintegration programmes aimed at removing these children from the streets will do little to remove them from the streets or once removed from the streets, the children will return back to the streets. It is within this backdrop that the authors seek to explore the influence of social organization structures among street children on their survival in the streets of Eldoret Municipality, Kenya.

2. Research Methodology

The study was conducted in Eldoret Municipality. The town is a fastest growing commercial hub in Western Kenya. It is well interlinked with roads, railway and an international air transport network. It has an expansive agricultural production that offers opportunities for a number of economic activities. Eldoret town is the headquarter of Uasin Gishu County in the North Rift Region of Rift Valley province. The County shares common borders with Trans Nzoia County to the North, Elgeyo-Marakwet County to the East, Baringo County to the South East, Kericho County to the South, Nandi County to the South West and Kakamega County to the North West. The County has a total area of 3,327.8km² (Uasin Gishu District Information Office, 2011). The authors' focus on Eldoret Municipality is based on the fact that it is a politically hot spot town, and has an ever growing number of street children attributed to many factors including poverty, HIV/AIDS, tribal clashes/wars, emergence and expansion of low income estates (slums), and also acts as a strategic meeting point for children from different parts of the country.

The study employed ethnographic research design. Ethnographic research design is commonly used in studies dealing with network analysis or organization structures. Bowling (1997), defines ethnography as the study of people in their natural settings: a descriptive account of social life and culture in a defined social system, based on qualitative methods (like detailed observation, unstructured interviews, and analysis of document). Through observation for instance, ethnographic design was used to evaluate the link between social organization structures and their survival mechanisms among street children in the Municipality. This paper is an output of one of the objectives of the study that aimed at evaluating

the link between the social organization among street children and their survival mechanisms on the streets in Eldoret Municipality.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1 Mechanisms of Social Organization among Street Children

According to Charon (1986), social organization refers to the patterns of social interaction within a social group where expectations become more fixed. The actors agree on important matters affecting interaction and control themselves so that cooperation can occur. From this definition it is apparent that the society is grouped into socially related groups and sets of roles, with different functions, meanings or purposes. This study conceptualized social organization as an enduring system of norms and rules, values, network of relations, status, roles and social arrangements that create patterns of social structures, which bring together street children into common interactions. This enables them to socially, physically and emotionally go through street life and control their operations. The mechanisms of social organization through which street children survive on the streets are discussed below.

3.1.1 Socialization

The main social organization mechanism through which street children enhance their survival on the streets is by socialization process. According to us, socialization is the process of learning social norms in a given culture. This can be gender roles, norms and rules of what is expected in society, whether they are moral or not. In the case of street children, the base leaders and those children who have been on the streets longer become agents of socialization to prepare new entrants to street life. A new street child is expected to learn attitudes, norms, values and forms of communication within the base. Similar to this study, Visano, (1990) notes that socialization is a career and the child learns various forms of emotional, psychological, and physical tactics, which are embodied in their lives on daily undertakings.

During focus group discussions, the study observed that no child leaves home to the street to be alone rather they will need others on the street for them to survive well. This is enhanced by joining into a socially organised group called a "base". A base is a household like structure inhabited by street children on the street. Each base has its own criteria of recruiting its new members. Members of the base especially the older street children play the role of parenting in guiding and bringing up other street children to adapt to the system. They are equipped with the new skills of survival on the streets away from their home environment.

Through socialization, street children are taught about personal hygiene by their colleagues on the streets for adaptation. For example, food habits that allow eating unclean food and personal hygiene where one does not bathe regularly were evident among the respondents. Other forms of food habits on the streets include food sharing in

times when one of the members of the base does not get any or enough food during the day. Those with food have to share with them in order to survive, and the kindness is reciprocated in future by the recipients. This is a continuous practice and becomes a dependable social security among members of the base. Food sharing is an implicit assumption in most of their relationships as what Branslaw Malinowski observed among the Trobriand Islanders (Tepperman, & Curtis, 2006). According to him, reciprocity fosters feelings of mutual indebtedness and, thereby, strengthens social ties, while forming a basis of trust and for legitimate power. Socialization process helps them to learn about street tricks such as begging, politeness, respect, stealing, among others to help them survive.

3.1.2 Informal Leadership

Every base has its own niche with a leader who is the source of authority and automatically assumes the responsibility of protecting and controlling all base members. Once street children arrive into the streets, they have to adhere to the first instructions they are given by the leader to avoid the risk of not being accepted into the group (base). The first entry into the streets is a probation period marked with gradual learning of expectations of the street social norms and rules. In preparation for hard life they are going to experience on the streets, new entrants to the streets are prone to initial harassment and abuse. In consequence, the initial preparation, support and exposure to hard challenges are extremely imperative for their early success on the streets.

Base leaders are always in charge of the leadership and recruitment of a new entrant into the base. They can either accept or reject a child who wants to become a member of the base if he/she has or has not conformed to the rules. One of the main advantages of belonging to a particular base is that a street child is given social identity, security and protection and support essential for their survival on the streets. Similar to this study, (Lugalla and Mbwambo, 1999) in their study in Darer salaam Tanzania found that street children do not operate haphazardly in the urban environment, different groups have different zones or areas in, which they operate and any interference by another group can cause serious trouble between the groups.

3.1.3 Networks of Relations

Networks of relations among street children ensure that new entrants to the streets are not lone rangers. The new recruits to the base are taken through the street system and the network structures that exist on the streets. Street children's survival depends on the elaborate networking system they have created, which enable them to negotiate for their existence on the streets. Street children bring each other up and develop supportive networks, and meaningful relationships for their own survival on the streets. For instance, new arrivals are guaranteed peer support through initiation into survival skills such as language of communication and code of dressing to help to distinguish street children and non-street children and also as a survival strategy. This concurs with Ennew, 1994; and Oino & Auya, 2013) who notes that in the absence of parents, street children become architects of

their lives. They bring each other up and develop supportive networks, coping strategies and meaningful relationships outside adult supervision and control.

The study established that as a mechanism for survival, street children are fond of saying lies to attract support from the general public. They also give information, which does not reflect their true life to the people and organizations helping them. They have codes for identity. For example, changing their original names and those of items for new identity, security purposes and when addressing sensitive issues. They coded language, which help street children when communicating sensitive issues that are of their concern for example, security threats. In the case of insecurity, they alert other members by use of the coded language for example if the police are near, they use 'karau' or 'bongo' to communicate to the members without the police noticing. In addition, if they use common names like bhang, they will minimize their chances of survival. Instead adopt a code name "Kero" for bhang and nobody from the general public will easily know the meaning of the coded language. This is because the street children are taught about secrecy and confidentiality during initiation into street life as a survival mechanism.

The study observed that street children tend to wear dirty clothes in order to look desperate and lure the general public to give them something when begging. However, they also have better clothes they wear when they go for ceremonies or on holidays. Through networks of relationships they create among themselves. Street children make friends on the streets, behave like a family and ensure that they have created social bonds that hold them together and increase sense of belonging. Inter and intra base networks also play the role of maintaining security and protection, which is important for their survival. The networks are strengthened by social interaction through organized inter-base events such as sports that bring most of the street children together.

3.1.4 Resilience

Resilience is one of the social organization mechanisms exhibited by the street children in Municipality. The study conceptualizes resilience as a dynamic process whereby individuals exhibit positive behavioral adaptation when they encounter significant adversity, trauma, and threats. This is in agreement with (Zautra et al, 2010) who notes that it is the result of individuals being able to interact with their environments and the processes that either promote well-being or protect them against the overwhelming influence of risk factors. During the study, it was observed that all street children are made to understand that street life is full of hardship, survival, and suffering and thus, members engage in hardship oriented initiation practices. For example, street children engage in mock fights, walk long distance, carry heavy luggage and talk tough.

On their arrival on the streets, both boys and girls are prone to violence and fights, rape and injuries caused by their fellow older street peers, the Municipal Council officers and the police. Street children involve in violence and fighting when they get intoxicated with drugs and

substances. However, the study found that it is a custom for newcomers on the street to be exposed to violence and fighting as away of orienting them to harsh and difficult life. Similar to street children in Eldoret Municipality, street children in Accra Ghana exhibit similar characteristics of resilience for survival on the streets. In his study on street children in Ghana, Boakye-Boaten, (2006: 117) opined that: ...It is very natural to feel sorry for these children. Many of them look smaller than other children of their age. But do not be fooled by them. They are some of the strongest children I have ever encountered. Many of us are scared to walk on the streets at certain times of the night, but these children actually dwell and survive in the streets. The strict codes of the streets mandate that every child be concerned with their own safety, and ultimate survival depends on one's smartness. These children have been strengthened by their difficult circumstances on the streets. They have formed their own associations, and rules of engagement. They are very smart children, and many find comfort in what we consider very difficult lives. They understand their situation, and they have made the best out of it. Therefore, street children become resilient to life on the streets. They also manage to develop survival strategies that often make them resilient to the hard and harsh living conditions on the streets.

3.1.5 Norms, Rules and Regulations

During the study it was of interest in understanding whether street children have norms, rules and regulations that guide their operation on the streets. The study found that majority 140(93%) of the respondents had rules and regulations that guide them while on the streets. It was further observed that there are rules and regulations for each base that are observed by members within the base whereas there are those rules that cut across in all bases within the Municipality. When a street child comes into the streets, he/she has to conform to these norms and rules as well as uphold the values and beliefs of the street community that are socially approved within the sub-culture of the streets. Pressures for compliance among street children are emphasized and articulate the shared principles of solidarity, unity, bonding and protect the collective interest among themselves. The set norms, rules, regulations and values also determine the social relationships and identity within the members and as a result, become imperative for their own survival.

Seven percent of the respondents said that they do not have norms or regulations within their base. Each member of a base operates as a different entity. When probing further, the study found that they have rules and regulations. However, they are not adhered to or put into practice or most members that particular base by-pass them. This was very common in bases that are heavy drug and substance users and are always in conflict with the set norms and regulations.

Conformity and Obedience to the norms and regulations is emphasized among street children. As such, they strictly follow or observe them. This promotes peer acceptance into the street community by strengthening their networks of relations and social bonding, which impact positively

on their own sustenance and survival on the streets. Similarly, studies by (Pretty and Ward, 2001; and Asheber, 2005) have shown that social norms provide a form of informal social control that remove the need for more formal, institutionalized legal sanctions and these social norms are generally unwritten but commonly understood by members. Trust among members of a social group is reinforced by sanctions, which may be applied to those who flout social norms or fail in their social responsibilities. From the above discussion, it is evident that fear of disapproval may possibly induce street children to conform to the shared norms and regulations and operate in a socially approved manner. This study observes that street childrens' social behaviors and conduct is a product of the existing social arrangements and their conditions in those arrangements.

3.1.6 Deviance Control

Most street children know what is required of them to live and survive on the streets. They therefore, do all the best to avoid clashing with the set norms and regulations as this may wreck their survival on the streets. For those street children who do not adhere to the set norms and regulations, there are sanctions put on them. For instance, majority 72(48%) of the respondents said that whenever there is deviant behaviours among street children they are punished by their leaders. The punishments include either taking away their money or food. Deviant behaviours include unwillingness to pay tributes (individual contribution) to the leaders, boycotting responsibilities, and deviation from the social norms and regulations of the base. The punishments are initiated by the leader of the base. Twenty one percent (21%) of the respondents said that they are beaten up and chased away from the base. This is when a street child commits serious offences such as attempting to kill or rape others.

Whenever a member of a base becomes problematic he/she is chased away and the information is announced in all other bases by base leaders so that you don't get accommodation in any base. Therefore, through this, cases of deviance among street children themselves are either curbed or reduced. Leaders ensure that street children are able to avoid any course of action that compromises their survival on the streets. Twenty percent (20%) of the respondents said that they are warned against the same deviant acts. This category of street children is of those who commit minor mistakes such as abusing others and for the first time whereas (11%) of the respondents said that if one is deviant and commits crimes such as theft or threatens the lives of the members of the base, he/she is handed over to the police and expelled from the base.

3.1.7 Managing Security Challenges

Street life is tough and challenging and therefore, street children develop mechanism that enhance their security and protection and social reinforcement on the street such as walking and working together in groups. All the street children interviewed during the study said that they have at several occasions faced security challenges while on the streets. These included harassment from the general public, through suspicions of theft, or attack by big boys

from other bases and the Municipal Council officer who sometimes round them up and beat them. The mechanics also have malicious accusations of theft and occupancy of their territories; and police who on patrol round them up when they are congested in town and accuse them of theft, and link them to deviance.

The study observed that the main way to counteract the security situations is by organising themselves into groups (bases) with leaders who act as watchdogs for street children and form a channel of communication across their networks. Therefore, the formation of groupings is an essential form of social organization that facilitates their survival on the streets. The study revealed that street children pay tributes as a form of reward to their leaders on the streets. The tributes are in form of money, food and other gifts like clothes and in return, they are guaranteed social security, protection and social identity within the base. Some tributes are saved and used for burial arrangements for deceased street children and ceremonies particularly during public holidays such as Christmas day. All these, help to bond street children together and create a sense of belonging.

3.1.8 Daily Schedule of Activities among Street Children

The study sought to understand the routine life activities of the respondents in terms of how they spent their day. This was critical in understanding the enduring social and physical activities they do, which constitute fundamental components of social organization. It was observed that while on the streets the children take care of themselves by engaging in routine livelihood activities. They move in small groups of two to five members when looking for livelihood opportunities including begging, collection of scrap metals, providing menial labor, among others.

The study was further sought to understanding how the respondents spend their time in specific times of the day. During Focus Group Discussions, the study found that in order to survive on the streets, street children have to spend their time consciously from morning to evening. They ensure that at a particular time of the day they are engaged in a productive activity. For instance, between 6.00am to 8.00am, majority of the respondents use this time in cleaning their beddings, clothes and bathing. However, bathing, cleaning beddings and clothes to some children is optional and therefore, it is not done on daily basis.

Between 8.00am-1.00pm, majority of the respondents participated in search for food and in income generating activities such as, cleaning kiosks, cleaning streets for pay by the municipal council, parking cars and car wash. Others engage in sports and recreational activities such as football and athletics organized by themselves or by organizations working with street children. The sports and recreational activities are done within the base and with other bases on identified locations. Sports and recreational activities give street children opportunity to interact with members from other bases and their leaders. It also creates a platform for interaction between street children and their service providers given that they meet and discuss issues facing them, and come up with solutions for their problems.

Between 1:00pm-2:00pm, majority of the respondents would use this time in looking for lunch by visiting rehabilitation centers. Also on special days, they visit special places such as children's homes/Centre's where they are helped to access

medical services for example, Voluntary Testing and Counseling (VCT), human rights and child protection talks, food, inquiring opportunities in rehabilitation centre's and homes, enrolled in rehabilitation programmes and create networks of relationships with new children. The organizations also use this opportunity to launch rehabilitation programmes for willing street children in preparation for reintegration with their families.

4. Critical Observations from the Study

The social structures among street children are exhibited in the established social groups clustered into bases, networks of relationships, leadership and power relations, social welfare and responsibilities. The existence of these structures has a great impact on the character of the street in their ecosystem as a whole. It affects the social relations and their patterns of behavior among themselves. As such, street children's social behaviors to a large extent are a product of existing social structures on the streets. Their level of participation in those structures is determined by the behaviors they were socialized into when they joined street life. Their social structures are changed as much or more by pressure than by reason to suit the current situations. The study observes that some scholars for example, (Boyden, 2003) assume that street children do not have structures on the streets. This is not true, because street children have social structures similar to those existing in the society, which enhance their survival. The paper provides a conceptual framework that shows the link between social organization and survival coping mechanisms among street children in the Municipality. This is illustrated in Figure 1 below.



Figure 1: Conceptual framework showing the link between organization and survival among street children

Figure 1 above shows that social organization, mechanisms for social organization and survival among street children are all independent variables but operating in an interdependent system. Each variable influences the other. Social organization ensures that street children established bases, leadership structure, form groups and rules that guide them. When there are external stimuli that cause disorganisation among the street children, they will have to look for new mechanisms to re-adapt with the

situation and enhance their continuous survival. For example, when the Municipal Council officers destroy their bases, the street children establish new ones within the town. Moreover, when there are insecurity challenges from the police, and the Municipal Council in town, street children move to the slums such as Langas, Kipkaren, Hillschool, Huruma and Kamukunji. They establish temporary bases in the slums for their shelter before the situation in town calms and make a return to town. This implies that the complexity of the problems faced by street children motivates children to devise more than one coping mechanism to appropriately respond to adversities and survive on the streets.

More often than not, social, economic and political factors affect the social organization and their survival strategies. For instance, during post election violence in Kenya in 2007/2008, many children of varied ages came into the streets of Eldoret town and were absorbed into various bases. This led to expansion of bases to accommodate many children coming to the streets. As a result, street children started scrambling for the limited resources available in town forcing them to devise new mechanisms of survival such as looting railway line metals and dismantling abandoned old vehicles for selling as scrap metals. As a mechanism for survival, they use the money to buy food and for other needs. The street children also create strong relations, social bonding and cooperation with their friends within their networks including organizations that assist them.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

It is apparent from the study that social organization among street children involves the way in which they are organized into predictable relationships and the way in which they respond to each other. Street children's social organization is epitomized by the nature of interaction that exists among themselves, which exerts a social force that shapes behavior and identity among members of the group. This paper has provided a depiction of how street children's social organization influence their survival mechanisms on the streets and how this become a hindrance to interventions dealing with street children. The main question here is that, what will the concerned stakeholders do to alleviate the street children phenomenon? The paper therefore recommends that the concerned stakeholders working with street children should understand the social organization structures that enhance street childrens' survival and encourage their continued stay on the streets. This can be enhanced through participatory research with street children to understand their structures before planning, designing and implementing interventions targeting street children.

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