



Youth and the United Nations

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Youth on the streets

Introduction

In an increasingly urbanized world, youth who live, work, or spend much of their time on the streets, are of growing concern to Governments. Branded as antisocial, violent or delinquent, these "street youth" are perceived as a threat to public security¹. Although younger "street children" are more likely to be seen as vulnerable, as they grow older they transform - in the public mind at least - from child victim to delinquent youth. These youth are linked in the public mind with gangs, organized crime, drug use, the sex trade and the spread of diseases such as HIV/AIDS. The literature on "street children" is extensive and does include some references to young men and women above the varying ages of majority. However, addressing the needs of youth on the streets is rarely a focus of policy attention.

Who are "street youth"?

"Street youth" are not a clearly identifiable or homogeneous population. The category is a socially constructed one, best understood as a label used to describe young people for whom the street plays a central role during this period of their lives - usually as a place to live or work. Their individual characteristics, circumstances, perceptions and careers are, however, extremely diverse. Natural disasters, family crises, wars, drug addiction, economic recessions, abuse, and thriving informal economies are all among the reasons causing girls and boys, young men and young women to look for ways to survive, forge relationships or get ahead on the streets. Few "street youth" spend all, or even most, of their time in public spaces; some are often with their families and friends, at home, in institutions or with other social groups outside the public gaze. Some have lived on the streets from an early age; others begin working on the streets only in their late teens. Their street existence is only part of their identities - they neither belong to the street, nor are they defined by it. Recognizing them first and foremost as young people, this paper uses the expression *youth on the streets* to capture the transitory and partial nature of their occupancy of urban public spaces.

"Street youth" is, however, a useful term for advocacy and policy-making because it successfully draws attention to a group of young people who, despite their visibility, have limited access to basic services (such as education, healthcare and housing) and are outside the formal labour market. At the same time, they are exposed to types and levels of violence in public spaces which profoundly shape their views and behaviours. Dependency of young people on urban streets reflects failures at the levels of family, community and government to protect them from harm and prepare them for adult life within society.

Policy makers need to understand that youth on the streets have complex identities. For example, girls on Indonesian streets have adopted masculine styles in resistance to female subordination in male-dominated street life. The identities of boys on Ugandan streets have, in another example, been found to be fluid, changing behaviours in response to their conditions as they move between street (as beggars and gang members), family (as sons and breadwinners) and institutional influences (as young offenders or school goers).



Photocredit: Gareth Jones

Youth on the streets in Moscow have been known to join organized youth sub-cultures (*Arbatskaia Sistema*), which allow their members to survive without recourse to criminal or stigmatized practices: 'A person who steals, he lets down the whole group, brings shame on the System'². In high-income and low-income countries alike, evidence of youth involvement in street-based crime and violence sits alongside law-abiding behaviour, healthy coping strategies and supportive social networks.

For effective policymaking, thoughtful reflection is needed on: the interconnectedness of all aspects of young people's lives; the nature of young people's street experiences; and the positive implications for both young people and society of including "street youth" in mainstream opportunities. To respond to the challenges faced by youth on the streets, this paper outlines an international framework within which Governments can design policies and interventions aimed at reconnecting "street youth" to their human rights. Local interventions tailored to address challenges faced by a young person on the street can be combined with higher level multi-sectoral policies including urban regeneration, employment, social housing and parenting support to prevent young people from needing to move on to the streets.

Global Context

Youth account for 18% of the world's population, or 1.2 billion young people, with numbers expected to peak by 2035. At the top end, young people have never had it so good: global statistics show healthier, better educated youth with access to the benefits of globalization, and new spaces being created to facilitate and increase their participation in societies' development. At the bottom end, young people who occupy public urban spaces survive below the statistical radar. Their statistical absence reflects intermittent relationships with home, transient or non-registered accommodation, and lack of contact with schools, formal employment or training.

Some useful international frameworks have already been developed which address the challenges faced by youth on the streets. These include the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and the International Convention on Protection of the Rights of Migrant Workers and their Families³ - along with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)⁴. Most of the MDGs are relevant in addressing the situation of youth on the streets. Of particular relevance are the goals related to: poverty and hunger; achieving universal primary education; promoting gender equality and empowerment of women; reducing child mortality; improving maternal health and combating the spread of HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases.



Photocredit: Marcus Lyon

The World Programme of Action for Youth (WPAY)⁵ recognizes the pressing need for youth on the streets to be able to access education and employment, and for those within juvenile justice systems to be treated with respect. The WPAY calls attention to young people's suffering on the streets, acknowledging that "street youth" face serious health risks including HIV/AIDS and drug use, as well as particular difficulties related to pregnancy and parenting.

Various regional instruments designed to improve conditions for young people are also important for youth on the street. The African Youth Charter urges governments to prioritize policies and programmes for marginalised youth. Europe's Youth Pact promotes social inclusion of the European Union's most vulnerable and highly disadvantaged young people. And the Ibero-American Convention on the Rights of Youth recognizes securing young people's access to their human rights as fundamental to their development.

The existence of these international frameworks and tools provides a context in which Governments can address challenges faced by youth on the streets. However, the difficulties of policymaking to address the challenges of youth who face persistent exclusion cannot be over estimated. Within these frameworks which establish the legal, economic and moral basis for addressing "street youth", how can policies and interventions - and their underlying approaches - help youth on the streets to become included in development opportunities and activities?

Approaches to "street youth"

Three broad approaches have been taken with youth on the streets: these are criminalization, welfare and rights-based approaches. Under a criminalization approach, young people are held responsible for their street-based circumstances and are subject to detention for illicit activities such as informal work or drug use. This approach can put a costly burden on the juvenile justice and prison systems. A welfare approach concentrates on providing "street youth" with basic services such as health, shelter, education and job training, in the belief that young people will, with these needs satisfied, be able to take up mainstream opportunities. This approach does not take account of multiple deprivations or mental health challenges. A rights-based approach focuses on reconnecting youth on the streets with their human rights, with a strong emphasis on encouraging their participation in the process. A rights-based approach engages with young people's multi-faceted challenges, their capabilities and aspirations, but also requires substantial investment in social protection (including affordable housing, child and unemployment benefits) and basic services (such as adult education, mental health support and job training). A rights-based approach to young people on the streets is most consistent with the international frameworks and tools described above.

Interventions for "street youth"

Taking a rights-based approach, some Governments and international organizations have begun to engage with individuals as belonging to inter-connected environments of family relationships, neighbourhoods and wider society - rather than in isolation. This working model has been adopted by the World Health Organization and for the World Report on Violence against Children. It has been used recently to propose responses to multiple challenges faced by "street children". Governments are increasingly encouraging multi-agency services aimed at delivering integrated and targeted interventions to children and families in difficult circumstances. Now, integrated interventions need to be applied to address the multiple challenges faced by "street youth". Youth on the streets should be able to access a mix of services of importance to them, including: youth employment, job training and volunteering; health services from mental health to drug addiction services and sexual and reproductive health services; basic and vocational education; supervised accommodation and alternative housing; regeneration of urban spaces; sports and culture. Individual youth on the streets are likely to respond best to interventions which combine some or all of these areas to negotiate their way from persistent exclusion to inclusion in mainstream

society. Well-designed interventions will address both the reasons behind young people's occupancy of public spaces and the effects of street dependency on these youth. And as youth is a transitional stage between childhood and adulthood, policy makers need to design interventions which recognize this transition, making smooth links between services for children and those for youth.

Since data about youth on the streets is typically not captured, it is important to collect base-line information about their access to rights and services, and to evaluate interventions designed for them in terms of outcomes. This suggests enabling "street youth" themselves to participate in design and evaluation of interventions, as well as collecting evidence-based data on their experiences of interventions.

Small scale examples of delivering personalized, integrated interventions for youth on the streets as outlined above are already available in civil society in a number of countries around the world. Strategies in use aimed at enabling these youth to access their rights include: mobile outreach teams geared to linking young people to a range of welfare services; 1-on-1 mentoring to reconnect street youth with their communities; combined coaching for self-esteem, job training, and political advocacy on social equality; developing street-based associations; and city-wide alliances of civil society organizations and local authority service providers. Building on local-level expertise with "street youth", Governments can develop opportunities for effective public-private partnerships with civil society organizations.

Prevention policies

Since many features of persistent exclusion emerge very early in life, there is a strong case for introducing child-centred social protection policies and better support systems for families, for example in the shape of universal child benefits, as effective policies to prevent young people from turning to the streets. Communities which have good social



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networks and strong links to accessible health, schooling and recreational facilities are also more likely to retain children and youth within mainstream activities. Juvenile care facilities which have a strong focus on connecting young offenders to opportunities (jobs, training, housing and recreation) are more likely to prevent young people from moving on to the streets. Policing and public education

strategies which view young people as citizens with rights instead of potential trouble-makers or delinquents are more likely to foster positive links between young people and public services. Cities which integrate young people's views and needs into urban design, inner city regeneration and public space strategies are more likely to foster inclusion of youth in society's opportunities and activities.

Public investment

Delivery of targeted interventions for youth on the streets requires considerable investment of financial and human resources. Such interventions, however, will not only improve individual lives and societal well-being, but are also likely to save public money if youth on the streets can be successfully included in formal job markets and equipped to live in mainstream society. Prevention policies require broader investment across society to ensure that all children and youth are protected and included. More research is needed on the financial costs and benefits incurred by investing in both preventive policies and targeted interventions for "street youth", including projected savings to policing, justice and welfare systems, as well as benefits to productivity, care for children and public well-being.

Concluding Remarks

■ International frameworks provide the legal and moral context for Governments to help youth on the streets to realize their rights and reconnect with mainstream society. The difficulties of policymaking to address the multiple challenges of these youth, who face persistent exclusion should, however, be clearly recognized.

■ Interventions for "street youth" should:

- ♦ Target young people as complex individuals operating within inter-connected environments;
- ♦ Include integrated access to multiple services;
- ♦ Be closely linked to services for children on the one hand and on the other to opportunities for adults;
- ♦ Address causes and effects of street dependency, involving youth themselves in intervention design and evaluation;
- ♦ Public-private partnerships with civil society organizations should be encouraged, to build on existing local initiatives designed to meet the challenges faced by youth on the streets.

■ Prevention policies should focus on ensuring child-centred social protection and adequate support systems for families, as well as stimulating community and city-wide actions which invite the views of excluded young people.

■ Prevention policies and interventions which support youth on the streets require considerable investment of financial and human resources. The costs to young people and society of not working to include "street youth" in society are, however, undoubtedly much higher. Careful investment now in excluded young people will help create a more inclusive, secure and productive society.

Notes

1. The term youth here refers to the 15 to 24 year age group identified as youth by the United Nations;
2. 'Ira' aged 15, cited in Stephenson, 2001, p. 539;
3. Information about the seven core international human rights treaties and their optional protocols is available from <http://www.unfpa.org/rights/instruments>;
4. Information on the eight Millennium Development Goals and their targets is available from: <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals>;
5. The 15 priority areas of the World Programme of Action for Youth are education, employment, hunger and poverty, health, environment, drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, leisure-time activities, girls and young women, participation in society and decision-making, globalization, ICT, HIV/AIDS, armed conflict, and intergenerational issues: <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/global.htm>.

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