Managing the Phenomenon of Street Children in an African Developing Country

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Abstract

A lack of understanding of the phenomenon of street children restricts the government of Namibia in their attempts to integrate street children into a programme that will lead to sustainable improvement in their lives. This research study intends to describe the general characteristics, behavioural patterns and the causes of the phenomenon in order to enable the government to prevent, manage and provide an efficient service to the street children of Namibia and the different role players involved.

Introduction

With the current strong momentum for social and economic progress in the Southern African region, the vision of a healthy and prosperous region is not unrealistic. Public policies are put in place to ensure that urgent developmental needs could be addressed effectively. In this, there is a strong focus on the needs of the 50 million children of the member states of the Southern African Development Communities (SADC). The survival, protection, education and empowerment of the children are high on the agenda of the struggle against poverty and underdevelopment.

Nearly half (48.2%) of the population of Namibia is under the age of 18 – claiming the fundamental right of children to be part of a family and having access to homes, safe and supportive neighbourhoods and healthy surroundings (SADC: 2001). The United Nations (1990) has estimated the size of the population of street children worldwide to be 150 million – the number rising daily. Although it is not possible to accurately estimate the number of street children in any country, Namibia, and the other member states of the SADC alike, are faced with the fact that the problem of street children is threatening to get out of hand.

The rising numbers of street children, in spite of measures being taken to empower its children, has forced the Namibian Ministry of Women Affairs and Child Welfare to make addressing the phenomenon of street children one of its highest priorities.

Addressing this problem is, however, no easy task. The phenomenon of street children is one of high complexity and variability. These children are found in the street at any hour of the day – not only in the urban areas of Namibia, but also in the most rural towns – exposed to violence, criminality, drug abuse and delinquency.

The Ministry of Women Affairs and Child Welfare believes that, in order to introduce an intervention programme or strategy that will lead to an improvement in the lives of the street children of Namibia, a clear understanding of the problem within the Namibian context has to be obtained. Furthermore, recommendations regarding such a strategy should take the realities of the problem at grass roots level into account. Consequently, the Ministry embarked upon an extensive research project into the phenomenon of street children in Namibia.

Problem statement

A lack of understanding of the phenomenon of street children in Namibia restricts the Ministry of Women Affairs and Child Welfare in their attempts to integrate street children into a programme that will lead to sustainable improvement in their lives.

Research objectives

Upon agreement of its need, the following objectives were formulated for the street children research project:
to determine and describe the general characteristics of street children in Namibia

to determine and describe behavioural patterns of street children in Namibia

to determine and describe causes of the phenomenon of street children in Namibia

to determine and describe the perceptions of members of the community, volunteer workers as well as social workers and other professionals involved with street children, with regard to:

- The characteristics and behavioural patterns of street children;
- The causes of the phenomenon;
- The current and future management of the street children problem within the Namibian context; as well as
- Their perceptions on the scope, nature and effectiveness of current measures being taken in an attempt to intervene or improve the lives of Namibian street children.

Literature review

It is a well-known fact that many children, all over the world, turn to the streets in an attempt to resolve problems that arise out of the social structures and situations they find themselves in. These children share one common factor – “working the streets” to make a living. There is, however, a world of difference between the “runaways” or homeless youth found in first world countries, and the “street children” found in third world countries.

In contrast to “runaways”, who mostly turn to the streets in search of adventure, excitement, or independence, the “street children” of the Third World turn to the street as a result of neglect or abandonment (Richter, 1990). These children use the street in different ways and researchers on the phenomenon of street children differentiate between:

* children on the street, and
* children of the street.

Children on the street constitute the largest group (approximately 75%). These children have homes and usually find themselves on the street to contribute towards the financial support of their families. According to Makombe (1992), as much as 85% of the street children of Zimbabwe have homes.

Children of the street (approximately 25%), on the other hand, usually have little or no contact with their families, and are on the street to survive (Schurink, 1993 and Richter, 1990).

According to a report of the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF, 1987), the following situations characterise, or are an integral part of the life of a street child:

* survival by means of begging, prostitution, drug abuse and drug trafficking
* subjection to abuse – social, physical, sexual and emotional
* advanced maturity and the development of a apathetic or aggressive attitude
* replacement of the family with a social group or gang.

Literature research further reveals that the following are key factors in contributing towards the phenomenon of street children:

* Factors at macro (community) level – referring to factors such as politics, economy, housing, health & welfare services, unemployment, and rapid urbanisation
* **Factors at meso (family) level** – the breakdown or disintegration of the family structure, single parent families, remarriage, desertion, poverty, child abuse, child neglect, family violence, lack of bonding and lack of parental discipline, etc.

* **Factors at micro (individual) level** – e.g. escape from an intolerable situation (hunger, abuse, shame, etc), failure at school, lack of money or feeling unwanted and a burden to the family

For many families in third world countries, a complex interaction and combination of these factors has made reliance on the economic contribution of their children an essential part of survival (United Nations, 1990). The phenomenon of street children is therefore common in third world countries and the numbers of children on the street in these countries are constantly increasing.

Although street children are reportedly a widespread phenomenon in most African countries, **reliable statistics in this regard are lacking** (Schurdink, 1993). With regard to Namibia, Tacon (1991) did however report the number of street children to be as high as 2 300, with 700-800 of these children in Windhoek alone.

Although street children are never a uniform group, research findings on African street children seem to indicate that their ages range from 2 to 18 and although they are mostly boys, street children are from both genders.

According to Richter (1991), the social situations of African street children are often similar and they are most commonly described as destitute, harassed, rejected, and underprivileged. However, they do turn to the streets for different reasons:

* to support their families, or
* because they are neglected by poverty-stricken parents, or
* because they are orphans or deserted by both parents, or
* they decide to leave their homes due to factors such as overcrowding, alcohol abuse by parents, parental abuse or peer pressure (Richter, 1991).

Nonetheless, regardless of the reasons why, or how they come to be on the street, once they are on the street, these children need help and protection to prevent them to come to further harm. There are various programmes designed for addressing the street children phenomenon in African countries. Most of these are initiated and run by voluntary and non-governmental organisations (NGO’s) and, according to Schurdink (1993), they mostly have one or more of the following objectives:

* to provide assistance – both material and other, including legal advice, counselling, rehabilitation, education and shelter for destitute children
* to establish a contact centre which provides daily meals, informal education, health care, counselling, sanitation and recreation facilities
* to provide children with the opportunity to be re-integrated into formal schooling or tertiary education in order to increase their employment abilities
* to improve the quality of life of street children and their families
* to re-unite and rehabilitate children and their families
* to look for foster parents or community based foster homes
* to improve housing conditions
* to assess the needs of street children and arrange for appropriate care, an appropriate school or payment of school fees, and other day centre activities such as skills training, literacy and numeracy training
* to encourage the community to initiate self-help projects
* to change the attitude of the community to an attitude of understanding, compassion and active involvement
* to rehabilitate the children and provide support for their families
* to realise the potential of identified individual children through education, remediation and job skills training in accordance with the interests and abilities of the child.
In spite of all the efforts and programmes aimed at addressing the phenomenon of street children, the needs of these children simply are not met and the numbers of these children are ever increasing. Schurdink (1993) concludes that the problems encountered with these programmes in South Africa do not stem from a lack of initiative, but rather from a lack of sufficient resources such as funding and trained staff, as well as a lack of proper planning and government policies. This is most likely true for similar programmes implemented throughout Africa. Although these programmes play, and will continue to play, an important role in the lives of African street children, they lack long term sustainment and accountability. Schurdink (1993) is of the opinion that those programmes most likely to succeed are those with government support.

Drake (1989) concludes that many of these programmes fail because they do not meet the needs of the children involved. In fact, they actually contribute towards a sense of failure of addressing the street children problem, because they expect model-behaviour and self-disclosure from the children in return for services rendered. Most important is to realise that no programme will succeed unless it is based on a scientific assessment of the situation the children find themselves in, as well as the real needs of the children.

Nzimande (1996) defines the family as a support system. In terms of this definition, the family is the ideal support system for any child’s needs to be met. Ideally, the family (or parents) provides for the physical needs of the child. It provides information that the child is loved and cared for, information that the child is valued and esteemed and that the child belongs to a network of mutual obligation. When a child is deprived of this support system, the child may be tempted to find fulfilment external to the family unit. Many of the street children are an example of this process – disintegration of the family through employment away from home, death, etc. deprives the children of their support systems, and as a result, they turn to the streets.

As a result of a growing concern with regard to the children of the world, the United Nations published the Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1959. This declaration was designed to serve as guidelines and recommendations to countries to protect its children from negative effects. It was, however, not sufficient to mobilise countries to implement radical measures. Therefore, in 1989, the Declaration was complemented by the Convention of the Rights of the Child. Those governments that accepted the Convention are obliged to amend their legislation to accommodate the provisions of the Convention and to commit themselves to the implementation of the Convention in their country.

Some relevant parts of the articles included in the Convention of the Rights of the Child could be summarised as follows:

**Article 1**
“For the purpose of the present Convention a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless, under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier …

**Article 2**
State parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind …

**Article 20**
A child temporarily or permanently deprived of his or her environment, or in whose own best interest cannot be allowed to remain in that environment, shall be entitled to special protection and assistance provided by the state …

**Article 28**
State parties recognise the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall in particular:

* make primary education compulsory, available, and free to all;
* encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child, and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need
* make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity by every appropriate means
* take measures to encourage regular attendance of schools and the reduction of dropouts ….

Article 39
… that all children who have been neglected, abused or exploited should be assisted in their recovery and re-integration into society and that this should take place in an environment which fosters health, self-respect and dignity …”

The child is dependent on others for material support and protection. The Convention of the Rights of the Child sets universal standards for the protection of the child against neglect, abuse, and exploitation and guarantees their basic human rights including survival, development and participation in activities necessary for their development into mature and responsible adults. The Convention also recognises the rights of children to express their opinions and feelings and the fact that these feelings and opinions should be taken into account when decisions about their lives are made.

In a sense, the Convention of the Rights of the Child demands a meaningful response by every country to the phenomenon of street children. However, McPherson (1989) rightfully questions the feasibility of the Convention when taking into account the realities faced by Third World countries. In some of these countries the resources are so scarce and the conditions so poor that attempts to enforce the rights of the child may be doomed before it started.

Research methodology

In order to obtain a clear understanding of the phenomenon of street children, street children from both the urban as well as the rural environments of Namibia had to be studied. In order to determine and describe the general characteristics, behavioural patterns and the causes of the phenomenon of street children in Namibia, both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection were utilised.

Structured interviews were used as a means of collection of data from street children. A research team comprising two researchers and seven social workers conducted the interviews. Children were interviewed either on the street or at shelters and official places of safety. These interviews were aimed at obtaining information about the general characteristics of the children, their home backgrounds, their current behaviour as well as their current needs.

A sample of 243 street children was reached. Of these children, 208 were interviewed. The remaining 35 comprised a group of children ranging between the ages of 2 and 6, and whom the research team came across in a temporary tent shelter in Gobabis. As these children were too young to be subjected to an interview situation, they were merely observed within the shelter situation as well as when leaving the shelter to roam the streets of Gobabis.

Interviews with Members of the Community, Volunteer Workers, as well as Social Workers and Other Professionals involved with Street Children were conducted to enable the determination and description of the perceptions of adults involved with street children, with regard to:

* The **characteristics and behavioural patterns** of street children in Namibia;
* The **causes** of the phenomenon; as well as
* The **scope, nature, effectiveness and management of current measures** of intervention.
A group of 102 very diverse individuals were interviewed by the research team. The group included personnel from the Ministry of Women Affairs and Child Welfare working within the regions, persons attached to service rendering organisations, principals and teachers from schools that are involved with street children, pastors from different church denominations, politicians, parents of street children as well as concerned members of the community.

It was a matter of great concern to the research team to ensure the validity and credibility of the data. Addressing a complex phenomenon such as street children, it was the view of the team that the field research team comprises individuals well equipped to communicate with, and relate to the children and their circumstances. The field research team therefore consisted of psychologists and social workers.

**Research findings**

As an introduction to the interview with professionals involved with street children, interviewees were requested to define the concept of a street child. A summary of the key words used in these definitions resulted in the following:

A street child in Namibia is:

- A minor (i.e. a child under the age of 18);
- Who depends on him/herself for his/her own survival by working the street; and
- Who has either left home because of his/her home circumstances, or who has been driven to the streets by his/her parents either permanently or on a daily basis in order to earn money to support the family, and
- Who is therefore without parental care or adult supervision or guidance.

Research findings indicate the street child in Namibia to be in the age category 6-18 years with the average age being between 12 and 13 years and the majority of street children being between the ages of 10 and 15 years (table 3, p18). All the street children interviewed were of African origin and, as elsewhere in the world, street children in Namibia are predominantly male – 78.8% of the children interviewed were boys.

In the present study, the girls were slightly younger than the boys – the girls were in the age group 7-14 years with an average age of between 10 and 11 years; the boys were in the age group 6-18 years with the average age between 13 and 14 years. Although this varies between the 13 administrative regions of Namibia, the most prominent language group amongst street children in Namibia is the Nama-Damara group (54.6%).

The education level of the interviewees ranged between children who have had no schooling to children who have passed Grade 8 – illustrating that the children who have attended school have mostly achieved only primary level grades. More than 50% of the children have only reached grade 4 and 13.5% have never attended school. If the ages of children are taken into account, the low level of education of street children is clearly illustrated by the group of 16 years and older. Under normal circumstances these children should be getting ready to complete their secondary grades – grades 10 to 12. The reality however is that a mere 8.3% of the street children in this age group have reached grades beyond that of primary schooling.

Research findings support findings with regard to the Third World phenomenon that most of the street children are actually children on the street rather than children of the street – 80.2% of the children interviewed indicated that they return home at night, and therefore have regular contact with their families. Of those children included in the study who could be characterised as being of the street, most indicated that they have left home permanently. These children also indicated that they have little or no contact with their families. Although it was expected by the professionals involved with street children that most of these children return home at night, they did not expect the proportion to be as high as 80% but rather to be closer to 60%.

Migration of street children between towns or settlements is not a factor contributing towards complicating the management of these children in Namibia. Although migration might be common amongst street children elsewhere, migration in Namibia is most likely restricted by the remoteness of towns and the vast areas of deserted,
harsh, and barren land between towns – providing no means of survival for those with no effective means of transportation.

More than 80% of the Namibian street children operate in groups which seem to indicate that, once on the street, these children develop systems or networks of support which effectively substitute the family support system that was left behind or that has disintegrated. In general, the children organise themselves in small groups, pool, and share resources, and take care of one another as well as of those who are not able to do so. (The latter was clearly demonstrated when the research team came across a little girl and her friends taking care of her disabled brother who has taken to the streets with her). In response to the means by which they obtain food, more than half (table 25, p31) of the children indicated that they beg for either food, or money to buy food. Apart from begging, most of the children obtain money by means of either selling something (mostly empty bottles or plastic bags that they collect on the street) or by assisting the public by pushing supermarket trolleys, carrying shopping bags, washing cars or minding parked cars. Although a mere 1.7% indicated that they do sometimes resort to shoplifting or theft of either food, or goods to sell, in order to obtain money to buy food, it could be expected that this is a “soft” statistic as these children do not want to be stereotyped as thieves. Results indicate that this is in fact the perception of the professionals; these interviewees indicating that they suspect more than 20% of the children actually resorting to measures such as theft and robbery to obtain food. Access to hygiene facilities seems to pose a real problem for street children in Namibia. Those children who find shelter at official places of safety and voluntary shelters have access to hygiene facilities at these in institutions (table 27, p32) where they are also provided with luxuries such as soap. However, more than 50% of the children who return home at night indicated that such facilities are not available at their homes. These children mostly make use of water from open sources such as lakes, rivers, and canals for hygiene purposes. The reasons why the children took to street can, at best, be described as a complex interaction between factors external to the family situation, and factors that relate to the family situation or the home circumstances within which the child finds him/herself. Factors external to the family situation that contribute towards the poor and unsupportive environment the child is subjected to, are mainly socio-economic in nature. For the Namibian family, these factors (table 32, p35) are perceived to be:

* The current high rate of unemployment in Namibia;
* The regional economic sectors of Namibia that are unable to absorb or accommodate the potential economic active regional workforce;
* The current educational system which is expensive as well as unsupportive and insensitive to the specific needs of children from a deprived background;
* The impact of HIV/AIDS on the disintegration of the core family structure;
* The high prevalence of uneducated, illiterate parents;
* The current housing shortage in Namibia; and
* An overall cultural degeneration of Namibian communities.

Interactively, these factors result in a degenerated family situation of which the following are the most prominent characteristics:

* Poverty – 86.4% of the children in the study indicated that there is not enough money at home to take care of the family. The basic needs of these children are not met, and the child not only has to contend with insufficient food, clothes, shelter and basic amenities such as hygiene facilities, but also with inadequate access to health services and education.
* Parental substance abuse – within the Namibian context, substance abuse mainly refers to alcohol abuse. More than 60% of the children interviewed reported excessive parental alcohol abuse.
* Disintegration of the core family – death, divorce, remarriage and parental absence from the home (either as a result of employment obligations, being in jail, having deserted the family, etc) result in single parent families (as was the case with regard to 42.2% of the children interviewed), step parent families (5% of the children), or the child being orphaned or deserted by both parents (18.6% of the children) and having to stay with family or friends.
* Child abuse and child neglect – more than half of the children included in the study have been subjected to some form of ill-treatment which includes physical, sexual, and emotional abuse as well neglect. The emotional needs of the child are not met and the child does not feel loved, cared for, or valued, and consequently suffers from low self-esteem.

* Family violence – problematic interpersonal relations within the family are often resolved with family violence that further aggravates the circumstances within which the child finds him/herself.

Given these deprived home circumstances of the child, it is not surprising to find that the child looks for fulfilment of his/her needs external to the family unit.

**Recommendations**

Based on the understanding obtained, the research team was able to make broad, holistic recommendations:

As a first step, the Ministry of Women Affairs and Child Welfare should initiate the process of formulating appropriate legislation, national and regional policies, as well as national and regional guidelines to address the street children problem.

The Ministry of Women Affairs and Child Welfare should facilitate the formulation of national and regional strategies that are comprehensive and holistic in nature. The aim with national and regional strategies should be to serve as frameworks for the formulation of secondary pro-active strategies, and should therefore facilitate:

1. The formulation of secondary strategies at grass roots level with the aim of preventing children from turning to the street, preventing those who have turned to the street from making the street their permanent home, and rehabilitating and counselling those who have turned to the street.
2. The establishment of co-ordination, support, and communication networks between all relevant role players.
3. The co-operation, joint efforts, and partnerships amongst role players at the different levels.

The Ministry of Women Affairs and Child Welfare should support and guide regional governments to facilitate the formulation of secondary strategies within communities. The aim of community strategies should be to:

1. Identify “at risk” families;
2. Prevent children from “at risk” families to turn to the street;
3. Prevent children who have turned to the street from making the street their permanent home; and
4. Provide appropriate assistance to those who have turned to the street with the ultimate aim of re-establishing a stable family.

**Community outreach programmes** – the aim of outreach strategies would be to have field workers from both social services and the Namibian Police Child Protection Units to go into the streets of the community and to befriend the street children. If the authoritarian approach of both these services could be replaced with a more friendly approach – advice, protection, and assistance to these children might be more readily accepted by them.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, the research team firmly believes that the answer for the street children phenomenon in Namibia lies in the economic empowerment of communities through the reduction of the high prevalence of unemployment. In conclusion, it is therefore emphasised that further research should be directly orientated towards the solving the unemployment problem of Namibian communities.
References


