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Health and Wellbeing of Street Children and Youth

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ADDENDUM TO HEALTH AND WELLBEING OF STREET CHILDREN AND YOUTH:

Analysis of Health & Wellbeing Focus Group Data Involving Participants in Accra

Briefing Paper 8A · June 2017

KEY POINTS

- Participants highlighted that additional vulnerability created by illness and injury, as well as associated costs, can have a devastating impact on the wellbeing of street children and youth in Accra.
- Participants identified contextual factors of poverty as the principal cause of ill health; including poor nutrition, inability to purchase medicines, lack of adequate shelter, exposure to mosquito bites, interrupted sleep, and no safe place to keep clean clothing.
- Maintaining personal hygiene is important to both prevent infection and to avoid being identified as a street child, as young people face discrimination in accessing public health services and obtaining food.

INTRODUCTION

As part of analysis of *Growing up on the Streets* data, research participants were brought together in Accra during September 2016 to engage in participatory analysis of the emerging findings from focus groups on health and wellbeing (held in Accra and Harare in May 2013 and Bukavu in January 2014). Through discussion, young people involved in *Growing up on the Streets* had an opportunity to co-produce findings and apply their deep contextual knowledge to interpreting data. This addendum summarises key points of importance for participants in Accra, and should be read in conjunction with the full Briefing Paper, which their comments also contributed to.

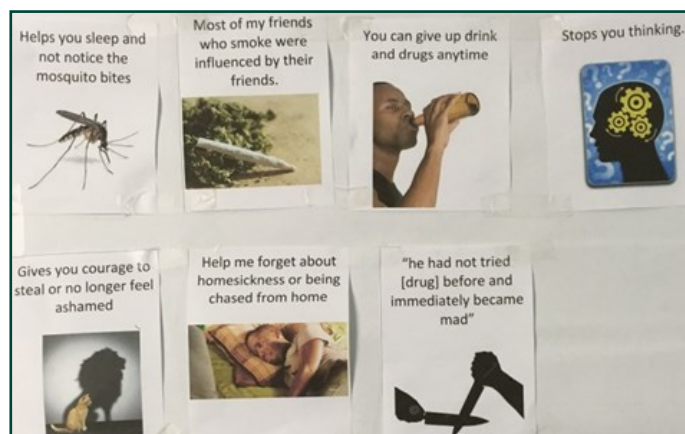
ALCOHOL AND DRUGS

In common with street children and youth in Harare and Bukavu, many young people in Accra take alcohol and drugs recreationally, as a form of self-medication and as a way to cope with the difficulties of hunger and fear associated with life on the street. The use of alcohol and drugs can have a negative impact on the health and wellbeing of young people. Issues of importance identified in Accra include the following.

- Alcohol and drugs enable young people to sleep, to avoid thinking about the things that are worrying them and to ignore insect bites. A loss of awareness through alcohol and drugs provides a form of emotional 'escape', but also increases vulnerability of

children and youth to accidents (road traffic and falls); to violence and sexual assault; and poor decision making.

- Taking alcohol and drugs is also used as a means to manage difficult social situations in Accra. This includes gaining peer acceptance from other street children and youth as well as building courage; used when young people need to do something that is frightening or dangerous.
- Young participants also recognised the harm of alcohol and drugs to their physical and mental wellbeing. While they can be a temporary 'solution' to coping with the difficulties of life on the street, they create other problems of addiction, aggression and a sense of hopelessness. For many, alcohol and drugs are viewed as being essential to coping with the stress and practical difficulties of life in Accra.



Prioritising issues highlighted in the original data around drugs and alcohol.



Iran Clinic, Accra.

ILLNESS AND INJURY

Street children and youth experience poor health and injury as a result of the environmental and economic conditions in the city. The workshop participants discussed the particular issues that were most important in Accra, highlighting the following.

- Reliance on poor quality food is an issue affecting the health and wellbeing of young people in Accra. Low and unstable incomes mean that children and youth purchase food that has gone bad or has been kept in unsanitary conditions, near gutters and roads. Consumption causes food poisoning leading to debilitating periods of diarrhoea and weight loss.
- Sexual health is also a significant issue for street children and youth in Accra. Transmission of disease including AIDS and gonorrhoea through unprotected sex can affect many young people and is a key concern for youth. Girls experience pressure to engage in unprotected sex in order to maintain relations with boys within the peer group. Once infected, young people often lack the money to obtain treatment or complete a course of medicines.
- Injuries such as falls and cuts are commonplace for street children and youth who may often have inadequate footwear to walk safely through informal settlements. Trips in the dark, treading on sharp objects and falls on uneven surfaces can create injuries that become infected and lead to life threatening health conditions.

ACCESS TO CLEAN WATER

Access to clean water is vitally important for street children and youth to wash and to keep clothes clean in order to avoid infections and maintain health. Cleanliness is also an important issue of self-esteem, as well as being a strategy to avoid being identified and targeted as a street child. Participants in Accra identified the following issues as being important.

- Water is an expensive resource and youth rely on private vendors within informal settlements to obtain access to showers and clothes washing facilities. The water in these facilities is not always clean and may contain insect larvae and other pollutants that can irritate the skin or lead to infection. Public showers are also places where young people, particularly girls, can be harassed or assaulted or have their clothes stolen.
- For drinking water children and youth use small plastic bags of water sold on the street for a few pence. Young people bite the corner from the plastic bag and drink the contents. The quality of the water can vary considerably as can the cleanliness of the bag itself. Young people in Accra report that while cheap, the bags of water can cause stomach upsets when drunk or when used in the preparation of food.

CONCLUSION

Involving participants in data analysis makes an important contribution to revealing the full meaning of research evidence. The analysis presented here demonstrates that street children and youth face difficulties in relation to health and wellbeing that are common to the three cities, however their experiences also highlight the particular contextual differences that emerge in Accra.



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