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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 Harare

Briefing Paper 8B · August 2017

#### KEY POINTS

- Failure to get a safe place to sleep exposes young people in Harare to violence, ill health, conflict with law enforcement agents, stigma and discrimination and vulnerability to sexual abuse.
- Participants described the vicious circle of eating waste food, resulting in illnesses, loss of earnings, loss of self-esteem, and abuse of drugs.
- Access to health services is important for young people on the streets of Harare considering the complex challenges they face on a daily basis.
- Alcohol of drugs provide an escape from reality, but create problems of dependency, anti-social behaviour and ill-health.

#### INTRODUCTION

*Growing up on the Streets* is a longitudinal research project working with and for young people on the streets. Focus groups on health and wellbeing were held in Accra and Harare in May 2013 and Bukavu in January 2014. As part of the ongoing analysis of *Growing up on the Streets* data, research participants engaged in participatory analysis of the emerging findings from these focus groups in Accra in September 2016 (see Briefing Paper 8A) and Harare in July 2017. While the full Briefing Paper on Health and Wellbeing captures the experiences of the young people in the three cities, these addenda allow an in-depth analysis of the experiences around health and wellbeing of young people in particular cities; in this case Harare.

#### A SAFE PLACE TO SLEEP AT NIGHT

A safe place to sleep at night will offer protection from the elements, clashes with the police, disturbance from the public, robbery, sickness, and the label of having no fixed abode. Both boys and girls who sleep in the open can become victims of sexual abuse. Girls may be caring for babies and hence more desperate to get a safe place to sleep; by exchanging sex for shelter they are at risk of abuse and sexually transmitted infections.

#### EATING POOR QUALITY FOOD

Finding enough food is a priority for street children and youth in order to survive, meet the demands of working

| #  | Group 1   | Group 2   |
|----|---|---|
| 1  | I try to find a place safe from attack at night                 | None of us has money to pay for medical treatment               |
| 2  | I can use the baths to stay clean if I have the money           | Poor quality food often makes us sick                           |
| 3  | Poor quality food often makes us sick                           | We find it hard to sleep at night – this makes us tired all day |
| 4  | Drugs stop you thinking – they take worries away                | Sometimes I do things that I know are bad for me                |
| 5  | We find it hard to sleep at night – this makes us tired all day | Drugs stop you thinking – they take worries away                |
| 6  | Mosquitoes give us malaria                                      | Many of us catch sexually transmitted diseases                  |
| 7  | Sometimes I do things that I know are bad for me                | Mosquitoes give us malaria                                      |
| 8  | Many of us catch sexually transmitted diseases                  | I try to find a place safe from attack at night                 |
| 9  | None of us has money to pay for medical treatment               | I can use the baths to stay clean if I have the money           |
| 10 | We can get some help from the clinic, free of charge            | We can get some help from the clinic, free of charge            |

**Table.** During the analysis workshop, participants were divided into two groups asked to prioritise the issues emerging from the data, reflect on their own experiences of the street, and agree (or identify any differences) in the relative importance of particular issues.



Sleeping space by bins, Harare.

for a living and to avoid illness. Girls access food in exchange for sex, or beg from members of the public, who are more sympathetic to girls which children. Boys work in menial jobs in exchange for food, or steal food and run away. A common source of food for street children and youth in Harare is waste food from bins. Waste food can cause diarrhoea and vomiting and the loss of valuable working time. There have been cases where street children and youth have died after consuming poisons disposed of in bins alongside food. Street children and youth are aware that eating waste food without washed hands exposes them to harmful pathogens, and fear outbreaks of infectious diseases such as typhoid and cholera (which killed 4,369 people between August 2008 and June 2009 in Zimbabwe).

## ACCESS TO MEDICAL TREATMENT

While participants discussed the importance of avoiding ill health and risky behaviours, they emphasised the importance of improved access to medical care, with need for treatment arising from sexually transmitted infections, eating poor quality food from bins, fighting among themselves, sexual abuse, and antenatal care for girls. Participants' experiences of accessing treatment varied, one participant reported that 'some [clinicians] are kind hearted and would help you but mostly they ask for money first.' Another said that 'they look at our appearances and they would not help us at the clinics,' and that while previously some clinics 'used to treat us

free of charge,' they now 'just give us a prescription card to go buy medication on our own, while we do not have the money.'

## TIME TO SLEEP

Many street children and youth work at night, guarding cars outside night clubs or during music shows, selling cigarettes, sweets and all kinds of wares. They have insufficient sleep and lack suitable places to rest. All night they are subjected to the cold, mosquitoes, harassment from the police and general disturbance from noisy environments. To cope with this difficult situation they take drugs, girls engage in prostitution, and some boys gamble all night long. If they have earned money during the day, some will go and pay a dollar (US) at a public hall in Mbare and sleep in a comparably safe and warm place.

## ALCOHOL AND DRUGS

Use and abuse of alcohol and drugs is common on the streets of Harare among both boys and girls. Drugs and alcohol are used socially, to help bonding with friends and provide a source of relaxation, and also as a temporary escape from reality, helping young people to cope with stress and hunger. Street children and youth also report using alcohol and drugs to remove inhibitions when engaging in dangerous or demeaning activities such as stealing or scavenging in bins for food. While drug and alcohol use may start as a way to relax and cope with the difficult experiences on the streets, it often leads to addiction, affecting young people's decision-making and in turn their health, earnings, and relationships with others.

## CONCLUSION

Street children and youth in Harare remain marginalised from national programmes for young people. They face daily challenges to eat, work, play and sleep. It's a daily struggle to attain physical, mental and social wellbeing and avoid disease.



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