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FINAL VERSION (2 November 2015)

**Economic Practices of African Street Youth: Growing up on the Streets in Ghana, Zimbabwe and the Democratic Republic of Congo**

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**Abstract**

Little is known about how street connected young people maintain livelihoods and how their earning strategies change as they enter adulthood. Living precariously in street environments, markets and informal settlements, street children and youth develop complex responses to their social and economic marginalisation, working on the fringes of the formal and informal urban economy. This chapter draws from research undertaken with street children and youth in three African cities to highlight the importance of the informal economy, reveal how income is generated to meet daily basic needs and the compromises and vulnerabilities these create for young people '*Growing up on the Streets*'.

## **Economic Practices of African Street Youth: Growing up on the Streets in Ghana, Zimbabwe and the Democratic Republic of Congo**

### **Introduction**

The rapid growth of informal economic activity is increasingly evident in the cities of sub-Saharan Africa (Lindell, 2010). Expanding informality has affected both the spatial configuration of urban centres and the ways in which people shape their socio-economic relationships (AlSayyad, 2004). Definitions of the informal sector have moved beyond the limited scope of unregulated business activity, developed in the 1970s (Hart, 1973; Chen, 2012), to recognise a more complex and encompassing understanding of the informal as a mode of urbanisation that connects spaces and economic activity (Roy and AlSayyad, 2004). Urban informality also has a human dimension, manifest in the actions of people, contributing to the social fabric of cities and played out through who is included or excluded as legitimate users of public space.

The growth of the informal economy is significant for street children and youth who occupy dense urban spaces and carve out incomes from the margins to meet their basic needs (Horschelmann and van Blerk, 2012). The informal economy, while insecure and precarious, provides an important source of work and opportunities for income generation for youth who may lack the qualifications, stability or official identification to compete for formal employment (Gough et al, 2013). It offers a plethora of small-scale, irregular and labour intensive work tasks, which are relatively easy to access and provide immediate, if minimal, cash payments. For street children and youth, the informal economy has a familiar characteristic of operating beyond the bounds of normative expectations: the lack of regulation and its dynamism creating opportunities for young people to create a subsistence livelihood and find a route into the 'adult' economy of the city. The central importance of navigating a path into work is illustrated by a young participant in Accra.

'[A] job is a big issue for us on the street because we, the street children, we don't have any work to do. And you know you can go outside and steal and if they catch us they will beat us till death. So we need to work to get enough money to meet our basic needs' (Accra, December 2012).

The subject of children, youth and work is a contested area of enquiry that can suffer from polarised views, when particular conceptual models of childhood are applied unproblematically, as found in current discourse. On the one hand, children are often positioned as 'needing protection' from work (as human beings) and on the other lauded as contributors to families and societies as active agents (Aries, 1972; see also James and Prout, 1998 for the changing conceptions of childhood). In many instances, the roles of young people are blurred in reality, with many children in the global South combining work (paid and unpaid) with education, caring responsibilities and play, as part of their daily lives; as active agents that also require protection (Ansell, 2005). Further, studies of children and youth in a number of urban sub-Saharan African contexts highlight how engagement in diverse work, from a young age, is both a practical necessity and symbolic of transition into adult life (see for example Langevang, 2008; Gough et al, 2013; Thorsen, 2013). Moreover, for street children and youth, generating an income is essential to meet basic needs and is central to how they survive city life (Conticini, 2005; van Blerk, 2008; 2013).

The approach taken in this chapter is to accept the complexity of the issue in order to explore how street children and youth engage in the economic life of three African cities, focusing on the informal economy. Taking this approach does not negate the importance of removing children from the 'worst forms of labour', but recognises the reality that street children and youth experience both freedom

and constraint as they negotiate urban life (Tranberg Hanson, 2008). Despite the challenges created by extreme poverty and violence, street children and youth have a strong motivation to remain in cities (Silvey, 2001), perceiving them as places where they can build adult lives ‘they have reason to value’ (Sen, 1999). The starting point for understanding the choices and constraints affecting young people is to explore the conditions that determine their ability to generate income and the consequent impact on their safety and wellbeing.

Where street children and youth are specifically discussed in relation to economic practices, this mostly considers work as part of wider survival strategies, or focuses on specific activities including begging, sex work and street trading (Young, 2003; Bromley and Mackie, 2008; Abebe, 2008; van Blerk, 2009). Street children and youth are highly visible in urban centres of Africa as street vendors, when begging or undertaking other forms of labour such as cart pulling and collecting recyclable materials. Street youth, due to their precarious social and economic position, live on a subsistence basis and are typically unable to build the material or financial assets to stabilise their position to escape negative cycles of extreme poverty. In this chapter ‘work’ is defined as any of the economic practices in which street youth engage that include casual employment, petty trading, waste-picking, recycling and sale of metals and plastics, through to illegal acts of theft, sex work and begging. Despite efforts by government and donor organisations to direct youth into vocational training and regularised economic activity (see for example Izzi, 2013), particularly in post-conflict settings, work typically takes place without contract or employment protections within the unregulated informal sector of the economy. Across diverse work activities, there is a common pattern of risk and exploitation that young people attempt, through their actions, to mitigate.

Drawing on research undertaken with street children and youth in three African cities, this chapter examines their economic practices to highlight the diverse approaches adopted to balance a need for income with preserving safety and wellbeing. The chapter proceeds first with an overview of the method used in the *Growing up on the Streets* research project. This is followed by an outline of the urban informal economy focusing on the precarious position of children and youth. The chapter then turns to empirical data to examine the diverse types of work undertaken by young people and the earnings they are able to generate. Data is further examined to discuss how work is obtained and how strategies change as children become young adults. The final section of the chapter highlights how street children and youth balance the risks and rewards of working in the urban informal economy. The chapter concludes with an overview of the implications of work for young people growing up on the streets.

## **Research Method**

Data for this chapter have been drawn from *Growing up on the Streets*, a longitudinal research project undertaken with children and youth in Accra, Ghana; Bukavu, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Harare, Zimbabwe. The research has engaged 198 young people aged 14–20 across the three cities to understand the choices and constraints affecting street children and youth as they become adults. The study is participative, with young people engaged as informants and investigators in the research (Shand, 2014; van Blerk et al, 2017). Using an ethnographic method, data has been collected through weekly interviews with six Research Assistants in each city, who have been trained in ethnographic research skills. During the interviews the Research Assistants report on the experience of their own lives and those of ten additional young people that belong to the Research Assistants’ social network. These ‘diarised’ accounts were supplemented by quarterly thematic focus groups, which involved all members of the networks, to investigate issues most important to the young people.

A total of eighteen focus groups on work and earnings were held in Accra and Harare in October and November 2013 and in Bukavu in June 2014. During the focus group meetings participants discussed the meaning of work for children and youth on the streets; the types of economic activity they engaged in; and their earnings. Differences of experience, the impact of age and gender on accessing work and the implications of work on the wellbeing of street children and youth were debated. The focus group meetings were facilitated by the *Growing up on the Streets* country project manager and conducted in local languages (Twi in Accra, Shona in Harare and Swahili in Bukavu). Voice recordings of the discussions were translated into English and transcribed for coding and inclusion in the research dataset.

Ethical clearance for the project was obtained from the University of Dundee, drawing on international guidelines for research with children and street children (see Alderson and Morrow, 2011). Data collection was undertaken in conjunction with NGO partners in each city and utilised existing child protection policies and contextualised practices of working with street children and youth. Informed consent was obtained from participants and this was reinforced through discussion about the shared responsibilities to maintain confidentiality of information. The research process was structured to protect the anonymity of participants and to ensure that sensitive information gathered during the research could not be used to cause harm to the young people sharing the details of their lives on the street.

### **Working in the Urban Informal Economy**

The informal economy constitutes the principle source of employment for a majority of urban dwellers in many cities of the global South. Mitlin and Satterthwaite (2013: 161), drawing on ILO analysis of 46 low and medium income countries (ILO, 2012a), show that in all but two countries included in the data, the number of persons employed in (non-agricultural) informal employment exceeded the numbers employed in the formal sector. Informal economic activity has expanded rapidly in response to rising urban populations, lack of enforcement of regulations and an absence of formal sector jobs, to become the main source of income for people living in poverty (ILO, 2002; Amis, 2006; Brown et al, 2010; Myers, 2011).

Income from informal sector activity remains at the core of livelihoods for urban households and particularly so in sub-Saharan African cities that have not, according to Potts (2013), experienced the same shift towards formal employment and the creation of stable semi-skilled jobs as has been seen in Asia over the last 20 years. For the two thirds of urban residents in sub-Saharan Africa who generate their livelihood from the informal sector (Sommers, 2010), it is expected to continue to be the primary source of employment and income over the medium term (African Economic Outlook, 2012; ILO, 2015). Reliance on income from informal sector activity is vitally important for residents of the three research cities. While accurate data on the scale of the urban informal sector is limited, Osei-Boateng (2011) estimates that in Ghana more than 80 percent of the employed are working in the informal sector. Similarly, in the Democratic Republic of Congo the African Economic Outlook (2012) reports falling levels of formal employment, with 70 percent of 15–24 year olds without jobs as evidence of a growing reliance on the informal sector. For Zimbabwe the ILO (2012a) estimate that 52 percent of non-agricultural employment is in the informal sector.

The existence of an urban ‘informal sector’ was first identified by Keith Hart (1973) to describe the low-income activities of unskilled migrants from northern Ghana to the capital city Accra, who were unable to find waged employment. Initially, informal practices were seen to reflect more ‘traditional’ forms of enterprise, which were out of keeping with ‘modern’ approaches to business organisation and activity. Informal business and employment were defined as unregulated by the state, trading from streets and urban markets, often hazardous, short-term and offering few protections to the

salary or job security of workers. Perceived as a precursor form of economic activity, informal enterprise was portrayed as an early stage of economic development that would become formalised, as proposed by Arthur Lewis (1954), and absorbed into an industrialising economy. As theories of economic development changed in the 1970s and 1980s, to reflect decentralised production and the creation of more 'flexible' labour markets, so ideas about role and position of the informal sector shifted to be regarded as a permanent but dependent feature of capitalist development (Portes et al 1989, cited in Chen, 2012).

While the informal economy continues to be represented as a 'lesser' form of urban economic activity (see Sommers, 2010), recent readings suggest a more complex picture of blurred boundaries between formal and informal economic practices. This reflects both the dominance of informality in cities of the global South but also, for some scholars, the informal as a distinctive form of urbanism (Bayat, 2004; Simone, 2004; Pieterse, 2008). While contrasting informal and formal is useful shorthand to describe scale and differentiate modes of economic activity, in relation to the degree they are regulated by the state, these categories are in reality complex and overlapping (Centeno and Portes, 2006). Potts (2008) argues that the created dualism between informal and formal obscures the interdependency between the 'sectors' and how people, in reality, engage in urban economies. The operation of the informal economy is tied into the structures of power within cities, with some urban territories for vending and markets being controlled by criminal gangs and political parties (Jones, 2010; McGregor, 2013). Urban informal economies are complex, highly competitive and require that individuals cultivate strong business skills and detailed local knowledge of markets (Skinner, 2008).

Street children and youth become expert in the operation of informal economies and subtle power relationships that exist in the urban territories of markets, unregistered businesses and street vending. Building livelihoods depends on understanding where opportunities exist and judgements about the risks associated with various types of economic activity. In urban contexts where street children and youth have limited agency, operating in highly constrained and potentially dangerous environments, they have few options other than to engage in the informal economy of cities to meet their basic needs<sup>1</sup> (Beazley, 2000; Young, 2003; Abebe, 2008). In doing so they must negotiate contested spaces where adults protect access to economic opportunity and city government exert control over the public realm to protect the interests of formal business and preserve 'authorised' use of street environments (Bayat and Biekart, 2009; Kamete, 2010; van Blerk, 2012). Within this context, and where additional pressure is applied by city authorities seeking to regularise informal economic activity (see Amis, 2004 for a comparative review of state efforts to regulate the informal sector), street children and youth are forced to the most marginal economic and physical spaces and into the poorest layers of the urban economy (Lindell, 2010).

A central feature of the informal sector, beyond its scale and economic significance in cities, is its permeability. The lack of employment safeguards, use of public space to sell any goods small enough to carry and the low cost of entry make the informal economy, and public markets in particular, accessible to street children and youth looking for opportunities to generate an income (Bromley and Mackie, 2008). Bass (2000) in her study of markets in Dakar Senegal describes how children use overturned buckets as chairs and sell peanuts from the side of the road or work as mobile hawkers selling water and fruit juice. Thorsen (2013) provides examples of young migrants to Ouagadougou Burkina Faso that engage in petty trade and street selling, while searching for more stable employment. Van Blerk (2008) focuses on the experience of girls arriving in cities of Ethiopia, where initial informal employment (as maids or coffee shop attendants) leads to sex work as girls attempt to

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<sup>1</sup> This recognises the international efforts to eradicate the 'worst forms of labour' championed by the International Labour Organisation (see ILO 2002; 2012b), reflected in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN 1989, article 32) and in national legislative frameworks.

gain a degree of control over their earnings and working conditions. In these examples, the informal sector provides entry into the urban economy, but is limited to low paid marginal activity where children and youth may face exploitation of their labour and person.

### **Types of Work Undertaken by Street Children and Youth**

Research undertaken by *Growing up on the Streets* with young people in DRC, Ghana and Zimbabwe has provided detailed insight into the economic strategies and forms of work undertaken by street children and youth – as described in table 1. There are a number of common characteristics and factors across the three cities that shape the types work available in the informal sector. First, young people typically operate on a subsistence basis. Street youth become adept at finding different types of work that generate a minimum income to meet their immediate needs. Such opportunities are wide-ranging and can be formal or informal and often push the boundaries of legality. Street children and youth aim to earn enough to meet their daily requirements, of various types, and avoid holding money as it increases their vulnerability to violence and robbery. Second, most work is transient. While there are examples of some young people developing lasting relationships with formal or informal sector employers or regularly returning to familiar areas of work such as petty trading, typically work activity is short-term and lacks security. Third, ‘legal’ earnings are very low and are regarded by young people as being inadequate to meet their needs. The lack of sufficient and stable income contributes to risk-taking, with young people engaging in work that they are aware may cause them to be injured or arrested. For youth across the three cities, work and risk-taking changes over time in relation to the opportunities available in the city, their level of need for income and their age.

There are however, differences between the three cities in the types of work available to street children and youth which relate to specific local economic conditions. In Accra, the city has dense informal development and large market areas, which create multiple opportunities for young people to find and access forms of petty employment. The strong economy found in Accra contrasts with Harare and Bukavu, where there are fewer opportunities for street children and youth who become reliant on theft and sex work to generate an income. Involvement in these illegal and dangerous activities significantly increases the likelihood of becoming a victim of violence, ill-health, injury and arrest; all with negative consequences for the long-term wellbeing of the young person.

As set out in table 1, street children and youth report involvement in a wide range of work activities across the three cities of the research. The diversity of experience underlines the ingenuity of young people to find and create income earning opportunities. It also reflects the capacity of the informal economy to utilise the labour of children and youth. As young people have little capital to invest in enterprise activities, there is a reliance on physical work, where children and youth use their bodies as their only significant asset. The data indicates that the types of work undertaken is similar across the research cities, with carrying, cleaning, vending and gambling being important for all street children and youth participating in the research. There are also some notable differences between the cities, with sex work, theft and recycling being more significant as an income generating activity in Harare and Bukavu, when compared to Accra. This difference relates to the availability of work opportunities in the informal economy, with the smaller economic base of Harare and Bukavu creating a greater reliance on higher risk activities such as sex work, theft and begging.

Table 1  
**Work Types – Accra, Bukavu and Harare**

<b>Work Type</b>	<b>Accra</b>	<b>Bukavu</b>	<b>Harare</b>
<b>Carrying goods</b>	Offloading containers Running errands	Commercial loading Ship unloading	Supermarket customers Luggage at bus stations

	Loading / driver's mate Carrying for shoppers Kayayei (Female porters)	Driver's mate	Moving furniture Commercial goods Newspapers
<b>Cleaning</b>	Sweeping market areas Cleaning chop bars Shoeshine Laundry Toilet attendant Car windscreen	Car washing / cleaning Collecting waste Cleaning canoes Sweeping Motorbike washing	Sweeping market areas Cleaning shops Waste bins Car washing Cleaning 'combi' buses Laundry
<b>Vending</b>	Alcohol / water Fruit / cooked food Belts / clothes / shoes Candies / biscuits Earrings / jewellery Soap / toiletries Airtime	Stones Disinfectant Bicycle renting	Sweets and biscuits Cigarettes Airtime Alcohol Fruit and eggs Music and film CDs
<b>Drugs</b>	Marijuana (Wee) Tramol (pain killers)	Ganja (Cannabis) Le chanvre / fege (Hemp) Kazamba (inhaling petrol) BT (Boss Tangawisi whisky)	Marijuana (Mbanje) Strong beer (Zed) Diazepam (tranquiliser) Cough syrup (Bronc Cleer)
<b>Recycling for Sale</b>	Scrap metals Plastic bottles	Scrap metals Plastic bottles	Plastic bottles and cans Copper cables Clothing / cloth / hair weave Food (repackage for sale)
<b>Guarding</b>	Security company	Cars	Market night watch Cars
<b>Sex Work</b>	Pick up clients at bars Street prostitution Sugar mama / daddy	Pick up clients at bars Street prostitution	Pick up clients at bars Pornography filming Sugar mama / daddy
<b>Theft</b>	Pickpocketing From sex work clients Confidence trick Sale of stolen goods Snatching phones Internet fraud	Snatching (shocking) Thieves' lookout Stealing car parts	Pickpocketing Violent assault on adults Assault on smaller children Snatching phones/money From shops / shoppers
<b>Gambling</b>	Cards Betting on computer games	Cards	Cards Dice
<b>Labouring</b>	Shoe / clothing repair Repair mobile phones Unlicensed taxi driver Assisting fishermen Chop shop cook Metal shop apprentice	Cart pushing Fishing Concrete / masonry Fritter cooking Repairing fishing nets Charcoal collecting	Shoe repair Grounds maintenance Melting plastics to make floor polish Make lampshades for sale Repair of roads
<b>Begging</b>	Street begging Guides for blind beggars	Street begging Church collections	Street begging Supermarkets / churches
<b>Personal Services</b>	Babysitter Hairdressing / weave Marriage match maker		

*Focus groups on earnings: October and November 2013 (Accra and Harare) and June 2014 (Bukavu)*

### Engaging in the Urban Economy

Living in the streets and informal urban settlements, children and youth are in constant contact, and sometimes in conflict, with the economy of the city. Encountering market traders, street hawkers, food vendors, shoeshine boys, shops, hotels, laundry workers form part of the daily experience of life



on the street for children and youth. The bustle of people at work colour the environment and define the points of entry, for young people, into the urban economy. *Growing up on the Streets* data shows how young people adopt a range of contextualised strategies to maximise their ability to obtain work. These are related to specific opportunities available in 'base' neighbourhoods and within travelling distance of primary work locations. Street children and youth build a detailed knowledge of the opportunities available, drawing on direct experience and intelligence gathered within their social networks.

Many young people travel to cities with an idealised view of the types of work they will be able to access. Once in the city they come to realise that their lack of knowledge, skills, resources and social connections means that they are limited to the margins of the economy. In the following extract a young participant describes how he arrived in Accra with an idea of working as a shoemaker, having just their lorry fare home and a single shoeshine brush.

"So I came to Accra when I got here I didn't know anywhere. I was just roaming round [...] and one woman called me and told me that she has gone to buy food items from the market but she is not able to carry it to the car station, so I should go and help her with that. So I followed her and carried it for her [and] she gave me 50 Pesewas. I used 30 Pesewas to buy polish and I had brush in my bag and I used 10 Pesewas to buy pure water and I was left with only 10 Pesewas. [...] So I was roaming round when I came around some plywood, I used the brush to hit the plywood and I will be shouting the shoeshine is here. When I started work from morning before 12 noon I had 15 Cedis. I was happy because that was the first time I had money on me. I continued the business and still sleep opposite to the police station" (Accra, April 2014).

Young people living and working in market areas of Harare rely on good relations with traders who will pay them to clear away cardboard, plastics and waste food and to carry and load market goods. Market areas are places where street children and youth can create work opportunities, such as the sale of sachets of water; and the collection of recyclable materials including glass, plastic bottles and aluminium cans. These auxiliary activities do not conflict with the interests of traders and therefore are relatively safe for children and youth. In Harare, young people become familiar in local areas by asking for small work tasks and being 'called-out' to carry goods or clear away waste. A participant in Harare illustrates this, stating:

"I move around many shops asking to put away the bins. Some of them know me and some do not. Some of them trust me and some do not even want me near their items" (Harare, November 2013).

Over time relations with traders can provide an important source of social capital for street children and youth, who may otherwise lack stability in most other parts of their lives. Building networks and trust is difficult however, as a participant in Accra highlights when seeking work in a local market "if you go there is like you are a newcomer there, it will be very hard for you to get one load to carry, because the person can think you will run away with it" (Accra, October 2013)

Central squares and adjacent streets are key locations for street children and youth who engage in petty trade: hawking goods from pavements and to the drivers and passengers of passing vehicles. Street vending is particularly important in Accra and Harare where there are large public markets and high volumes of potential customers. In these cities street children and youth trade a vast array of goods from toffees and biscuits through to music CDs, clothing and cleaning materials. Anything that can be carried and hawked on the streets, and can generate a profit, will be considered as a saleable item. Young people appear to have two broad approaches to obtaining goods to sell. The first approach is to obtain goods in bulk and sub-divide these to sell on the streets. This is particularly

common in Harare where young people buy multi-bags of sweets and blocks of 200 cigarettes from the large city market in Mbare and sell these individually in residential areas. In doing this they are able to generate a small profit on each sale, but they need to have the initial capital to purchase stock. The second approach taken to vending, and more typically found in Accra, is working for a more established trader. Young people are allocated stock to hawk on the streets and at the end of the day get paid either a small fee or a share of the profit on the goods they have sold. Working for a fee reduces the need for young people to have money 'up-front', but also limits the total amount they are able to earn.

Commercial districts of city centres and retail areas are also important locations for street children and youth to generate income from informal and illegal activities. Young people congregate in these areas due to the high flow of vehicles and people, which provide opportunities for begging and for theft by snatching and pickpocketing. Busy commercial and retail areas can be fruitful during weekdays when there is a high footfall, but poor locations on Sundays and during national holidays when there are few people using the area. The character of these places changes at night, when bars open and the environment is dark and lit only by passing cars. During late evening and night hours some street youth become predatory – 'doing rounds' – seeking out intoxicated adults to rob for money, mobile phones and other valuables. This is the case in Bukavu, where one participant reported "I have no other job apart from stealing" (Bukavu, June 2014). In city centres, street youth target particular areas where they can 'cut pockets' or snatch and make a quick getaway. While potentially lucrative, theft is risky as a young person in Harare suggested "you want to steal you have to first look at the face and consider if the person will not kill you once he catches you, because there are other people that can beat you bad once they catch you" (Harare, October 2013).

Street children and youth operating from residential areas of cities rely on informal work activities such as begging outside of shops and churches, car washing, vending and gambling. In these areas of the city there is more limited economic opportunity, which means that young people have a greater reliance on scavenging food and opportunistic theft. Despite the limited access to income earning opportunities, residential areas are attractive to some young people who find it difficult to cope with the risks associated with market and commercial districts of the city.

## Earnings

Earnings for street children and youth are generally low for most types of work except theft, sex work and occasionally gambling, which can generate large sums of money. Itinerant working across a range of tasks and in situations, where young people can face considerable risk, generates an average earning of around \$2 per day. However, street children and youth can expect periods with no work and therefore no money. When this occurs they rely on the support of friends or engage in higher risk activity. In Bukavu, where there are limited opportunities available in the informal economy, there is a stark choice for street children and youth. A participant stated that in Bukavu "[w]e have only two types of jobs – sex and steal [to] pickpocket or accompany the 'omboyi' – thugs at night in stealing" (Bukavu, June 2014).

Table 2  
**Earnings by Work Type**

Work Type	Description	Indicative Income (US\$)
Carrying Goods	Loading /driver's mate – per day	\$1 – 11 (Accra)
	Ship unloading – per day	\$2 (Bukavu)
	Supermarket / luggage – per day	\$3 (Harare)
Cleaning	Chop bars / laundry – per day	\$2 – 8 (Accra)

	Car washing 3 – 6 cars per day Refuse clearing – per job	\$1 – 2 (Bukavu) \$2 (Harare)
Vending	Sweets / food – per day Disinfectant – per day CDs / DVDs – per day	\$2- 11 (Accra) \$20 (Bukavu) \$10 (Harare)
Drugs	Marijuana – per day Marijuana – per day	\$5 – 15 (Accra) \$15 (Harare)
Recycling for Sale	Scrap metals – average 300 plastic bottles collected	\$7 (Accra) \$4 (Harare)
Guarding	Security guard – per day Cars guarding – per day	\$3 (Accra) \$4 (Harare)
Sex Work	Earnings – per day Rate – per client Earnings – per day	\$5-50 (Accra) \$1- 5 (Bukavu) \$38 (Harare)
Theft	Theft and fraud – average Snatching per day – average Street robbery – average	\$0 – 130 (Accra) \$5 - 30 (Bukavu) \$26 (Harare)
Gambling	Cards and computer games – average Playing cards – average Dice and cards – average	\$8 (Accra) \$2 (Bukavu) \$15 – 250 (Harare)
Labouring	Labouring – per day Disentangling fishing nets – per day Labouring – per day	\$1 – 8 (Accra) \$3 (Bukavu) \$5 (Harare)
Begging	Street begging – per day average Street begging – per day average Street begging – per day average	\$8 – 16 (Accra) \$1 (Bukavu) \$25 (Harare)
Personal Services	Hairdressing / weave – per day	\$3 – 8 (Accra)

*Focus groups on earnings: October and November 2013 (Accra and Harare) and June 2014 (Bukavu)*

As shown in table 2, the earnings for different tasks vary considerably and will form part of a patchwork of activity that street children and youth engage in to generate an income. Street children and youth involved in the research think that they are exploited by employers and customers because they have little alternative but to accept the small amounts of money paid to them. Young people report that they often have to haggle for payment at the end of a task to avoid being cheated. Such treatment contributes to the sense of isolation and injustice felt by many street children and youth. The imbalance of income and the cost of living is illustrated by a comment from a participant in Accra.

“When you sell *koko* (porridge) or even work in a chop bar, you will wake up at dawn and after a days’ work you will be paid 5 Ghana Cedis (equivalent to \$1.30). That is what you will use for food and also save some of it. You will also bathe and others, so you will suffer for the work but you will not get anything” (Accra, October 2013).

Young people can work long hours in labour intensive activity to earn enough money to meet the cost of life in the city. In most cases income is merely sufficient to cover the basic needs for survival, with little possibility of saving for periods where no work is available.

### **Work and the Informal Economy – Discussion**

Detailing the types of work and the level of earnings available to street children and youth provides an insight into the wide range of economic activities undertaken in cities. It highlights how street youth operate in the informal sector to secure income through both legal and illegal means. For street youth, engaging the informal sector has a practical importance to earn money, but also reflects their lived

experience of being socially embedded in streets, markets and urban settlements. As children and youth 'out of place' (Connolly and Ennew, 1996), the informal sector provides a route to making an adult life and accessing the economy of the city, despite their disadvantages. Engaging in the urban economy, for street children and youth, blurs dichotomised boundaries of formal and informal, legal and illegal and employment and enterprise in ways that reflect their marginal position. Young people continuously negotiate access to work, aware of the need to balance generating an income against managing risks of age inappropriate and inherently dangerous forms of income generation. The experience and the choices associated with work on the margins are indicative of the constantly shifting and contested nature of livelihoods for street children and youth.

Street children and youth adopt strategies that are informed by, and are designed to exploit, specific opportunities in the urban environment; adopting varying tactics to generate income depending on the socio-spatial context and the time of day or night. Similar to the findings of Ursin (2012) in Salvador Brazil, the *Growing up on the Street* research highlights dynamic adaptation to the conditions of the city as a necessary characteristic of survival on the streets. Engagement with the city and the informal economy is constitutive, allowing street children and youth to construct knowledge and establish an identity in ways that enable them to protect their wellbeing in adverse conditions. These issues are discussed first considering the different experiences of boys and girls of engaging the informal economy.

### Gender Differences

The *Growing up on the Streets* research provides detail on the differing experiences of young men and women seeking work in the informal sector. The type of work opportunity available to both genders is contextually specific, with data showing a wider range of income generating activities in cities where there is a stronger economic base. Across all three urban contexts of the research, work can be seen to be broadly gendered, with boys undertaking heavier manual tasks, such as loading, recycling of metals and labouring, whereas girls are typically engaged in cleaning, vending and personal services such as hairdressing. One significant exception to this gendered distribution is found in Accra, where girls work as *Kayayei* – head porters who carry goods of all types between markets and lorry parks in the city centre. Across the three cities of the research, girls are frequently drawn into sex work where there are no other options available in the informal economy.

Sex work is common among girls in Accra, but is the predominant form of income generation in Harare and Bukavu. For girls participating in the research, sex work appears to be inevitable. A girl in Harare commented on her experience when first coming to the city: “[i]f you meet other girls when you come on to the street they will tell you to go with them to go look for money, of which as a girl there is no other way of making money except prostituting. So at first you will be shy and in the end you will be used to it” (Harare, November 2014). Similarly, for the girls in Bukavu, there appear to be few alternatives other than engaging in sex work, and according to one participant, “once in, you are stuck!” Girls engage in sex work, “because of the poverty and hunger; when you are hungry, you cannot think twice. Even for 500 francs [around 60 US Cents] you can have sex provided that you get some food” (Bukavu, June 2014).

While there are examples of boys engaging in sex work, this appears to be less common than for girls. Van Blerk (2008) has highlighted the complex motivations and routes into sex work in Ethiopia among young girls migrating from rural areas to Addis Ababa and the provincial city of Nazareth. The research discusses the hazards of sex work, but also highlights how it can provide a way to regain some control over work to enable transition into adult life. Similarly in Bukavu, sex work provides income for girls, it is also a means to obtain a degree of stability. Many girls work in bars where they source 'clients', taking men into back rooms for sex. This is facilitated by bar owners who allow girls to sleep in the

back rooms, during the night, as the presence of the girls attracts men to the bar. While these bars are bleak environments for girls, they are marginally safer than working from the street, where they describe frequent experiences of gang rape and violent assault. Girls use their contact with men to steal money and other valuables they can use to meet their needs. A girl in Bukavu illustrates, commenting “[o]nce you have no lover interested in you, you may go around the bar looking for old aged men or very drunken men, pull him to the dance floor, check his pockets while dancing. What you find will be your booty” (Bukavu, June 2014).

### Work Changes as Children get Older

Participants in *Growing up on the Streets* report that age is an important factor determining the types of work they can access in the informal sector. For boys the physical changes of adolescence and early adulthood enable them to undertake more strenuous forms of labouring such as loading, security work and fishing, as other forms of work, such as begging, become less lucrative. As identified in other contexts (see Hecht, 1999; Young 2003), with age boys become less able to beg, as they no longer secure adult sympathy; their physical presence more likely to be perceived as a threat. In these circumstances boys move to other forms of work but, within social networks, may continue as ‘guards’ for younger children, who alongside girls with babies and young people with disabilities, are more successful in eliciting money when begging. The changing perception of boys, in relation to work, is illustrated by a young person in Harare.

“[They] consider that if you are older you may steal from them; others look at your face – if it is innocent you will get the job. A person may look at your face and see a scar and he will not give you a job; but if he looks at that youngster’s face which is smooth he will get the job” (Harare, November 2013).

Street children and youth develop detailed knowledge of the informal economy, adapting their tactics and learning new skills to maximise their chances of obtaining work. In Bukavu a young man described how he developed new skills through observation and practice: “I befriended the old cart pushers, helping them and progressively became accustomed to cart pushing up to now” (Bukavu, June 2014). From a very young age girls can be seen in the streets of Accra practicing to be *Kayayei*, carrying steel bowls on their heads. Young people watch and will engage adults and other young people that they see working. In Bukavu a participant describes when he arrived in the city he came to sleep on the shore of Lake Kivu and saw fishermen bringing in their nets. He says “when I was first chased from home [...] I started not knowing how to take a fish out of the net [...] now [I am] an expert” (Bukavu, June 2014).

Young people have to constantly negotiate their relationships and represent their ability to undertake the work tasks available. A participant in Accra stated “there are some jobs when you are going to get them they will ask of your age before they will offer you the work, if you are about 12 or 13 years, you will not be given the job” (Accra, October 2013). While the ability to successfully ‘hustle’ for work is an important skill in a competitive market place, it can have severe consequences for the young person if a deceit is discovered. A participant in Bukavu commented “I never carry loads because I once carried a sack of cement, but I was unable to lift it and make a single step forward. Both the sack and I collapsed to the ground! I am too young to carry loads, heavy loads” (Bukavu, June 2014). Engaging in work beyond their physical abilities can result in serious injury, but can also produce a violent response from employers when an inability to sew, sell or carry loads is revealed.

### Managing Risk

Engaging in all forms of work, in the informal sector, young people experience verbal abuse from adults and encounter risks to their physical safety. The types of work available to street children and youth make them visible and therefore vulnerable to various forms of attack and manipulation. Street children and youth have very little power to affect the behaviour of adults towards them and commonly experience being misled or exploited. A frequent report from research participants is that they are promised a sum of money or other benefit to complete a work task, but find that they are not paid when the job is finished. Street youth and particularly girls experience situations where a promise of work and payment is used as a lure into situations where they become victim to sexual violence. Young people often lack the confidence and social standing to make formal complaint against this exploitation to police or other authorities. Even where there are legal rights in place, reports from research participants indicate that young people are often considered, by state agencies, to be undeserving of the protection of the law.

Informal and unregulated work can be very dangerous. Activity including carrying heavy goods; using chemicals to strip plastic from copper wiring; selling goods in the road; laying and repairing fishing nets; and using machinery all carry the potential of serious harm. The risk associated with unprotected and age-inappropriate work is highlighted by a participant in Accra describing the hazards of carrying bails of second-hand clothes (known as *foss*).

“When I was doing the *foss* work, the bails are very heavy. When it rains it doesn’t mean you shouldn’t carry it, you have to. When you are walking I don’t wear shoe just rubber slippers, so it is dangerous for me because I know someone who slipped and was hit by the bail and the person died” (Accra, October 2013).

Risks of violence are also prevalent for young people seeking work. A participant in Accra described how they woke at dawn to search the market area for coconut to sell, stating that “[s]ometimes when you are not lucky you will go and meet some thieves and they will take all your money from you” (Accra, October 2013). A violent response is also typical in Bukavu where young people face assault when they are stealing. A participant commented “I sometimes wake up with a bad luck. I may spend the whole day being caught and beaten” (Bukavu, June 2014).

A key source of risk for street children and youth engaged in economic activity is through contact with state authorities including police, city wardens and soldiers. Living and working in contested public spaces, street youth are visible transgressors of by-laws on trading, sleeping and occupying areas of the city that are designated for other uses. Young people report that they are frequently subject to violent assault, confiscations and harassment from authorities who wield significant authority in the lives of young people working in the public realm. The negative perception of street children and youth, as a source of criminal activity, is used to justify the behaviour of police and city authority staff tasked with ‘sanitising’ urban centres (see also Kamete and Lindell, 2010; Lindell, 2010). Additionally, shopkeepers and licenced traders, according to focus group participants in Harare, call upon the authorities to reduce competition. “People of the shops are cruel: they may report to the police that street kids here are disturbing their customers – they are pained for the two Rand (20 US Cents) we will be begging for” (Harare, November 2013). This finding is supported by Kamete’s (2008: 1729) research in Zimbabwe, which indicates some businesses ‘buy services’ from corrupt officers to “deal with youth who may have been ‘hurting’ their business.”

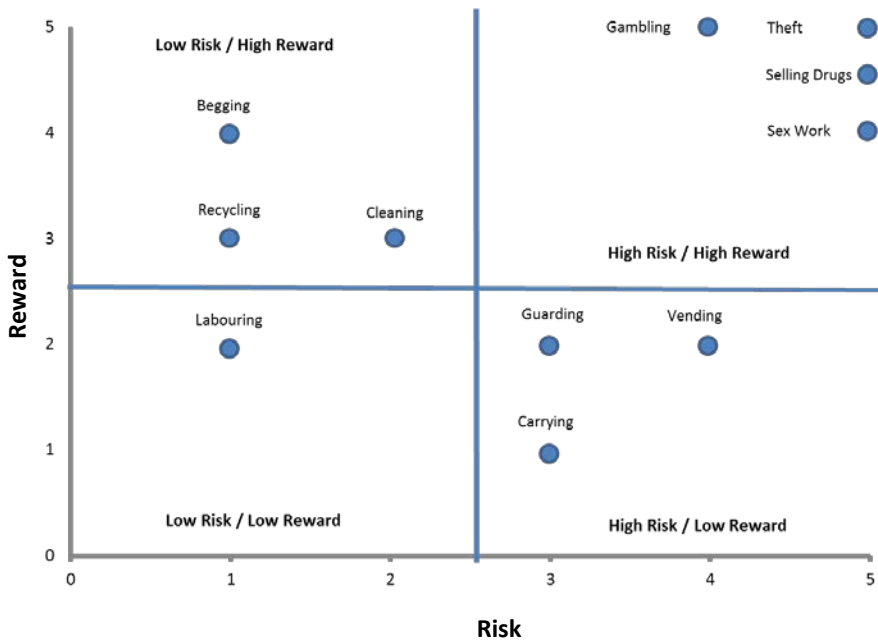
In Accra, young people trading on the street conflict with city authority market wardens. These officials are called, in the Ga language of Accra, the *Abaayee*, which translates as ‘they are coming’. The *Abaayee* have a reputation among street children and youth in Accra for confiscating and destroying goods that the young people are selling. A participant in Accra who worked on the street painting nails, tell how the *Abaayee* “even came this morning to destroy things. They came to sack everyone

there – they said that they will not allow anyone to sell there” (Accra, October 2013). The confiscation and destruction of goods is not only a financial blow for young people, who may have invested their money in buying stock to sell, but also multiplies risk. Where young people are operating on behalf of another trader they can be held responsible for the loss of goods, creating either a debt or leading to violent physical punishment.

To explore perceptions of risk and decision making among street children and youth, an exercise was undertaken with participants in Harare to identify anticipated reward and the risks associated with different work activities the young people had previously identified in discussion. A summary of is shown in figure 1. Participants were asked to rank their perceptions of different work activities as being low to high reward and low to high risk (on a scale of 1 to 5). Reward was defined primarily as financial gain in the form of cash or goods. Risk was defined as the potential for violence, injury and arrest when undertaking the task. It was clear from the discussion that illegal activities such as theft, the sale of drugs and sex work were perceived as offering the potential for significant reward, but the likelihood and the severity of risk were very high. However, safer activity such as labouring, recycling and cleaning were seen as offering lower rewards.

Figure 1

**Economic Activity – Risk and Reward**



Source: Harare Focus Groups – November 2013

It was notable that the understanding of risk was situated in the urban context of the informal economy and in the previous experience of the participants. Perception of risk changes both in relation to context and activity, but is also a factor of age and knowledge of the street. Higher risk activity becomes more attractive and likely where individuals have avoided punishment or capture in the past. Local knowledge of escape routes through informal settlements or the support of group members helps street children and youth to manage high risk situations. Decisions on which activities are high risk are situated with vending, for example, being seen as a higher risk activity because of the potential for arrest by the police, being visible and therefore more vulnerable to street robbery and the dangers of moving between traffic when selling goods to motorists. Guarding was also perceived as having relatively higher risk given the potential for violent confrontation. The exercise allowed participants to reflect upon and discuss their criteria for engaging in different types of work activity. While there are a limited range of options available to street children and youth in Harare, individuals think carefully about the types of work they engage in, taking account of context and previous experience of managing dangerous situations.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has examined street children and youth in relation to the informal economy, drawing on research undertaken in three African cities, to explore issues of work. The burgeoning informal sectors found in cities of sub-Saharan Africa are key locations for street children and youth who gravitate to the dense settlements and streets as places of opportunity to earn income and to become established as independent adults. For street children and youth the porous character of the informal sector offers a range of opportunities for legal and illegal work, but moreover provides a means to cope with the disadvantages of age, lack of education and social status to generate a livelihood. In a sense street children both contribute to and are as ‘informal’ as the economy, being outside of normal family environments and engaged in irregular, illegal and illicit activity.



Data from *Growing up on the Streets* highlights the diversity of work activity, the limited earnings, exploitation and the risks associated with street life. It also however, underlines the complexity and the constrained agency of young people building a route into adulthood. The adverse conditions require the construction of a detailed knowledge of urban spaces and social relations to identify opportunity and to avoid violence and arrest. As children grow, their work strategies adapt in relation to their physical abilities and as they gain new responsibilities for children and partners. While outside of formal education and training, street children and youth build a grounded knowledge of the informal sector that forms a foundation for adult life. The patterns of coping and transition from childhood to adulthood provide insights into the operation of urban economies, giving the experience of street children and youth added importance to those tasked with managing the development of cities.

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