Street Children in Cameroon: Causes, Vulnerability and coping strategies

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Abstract

The emergence of “homeless” or street children in Cameroon has been a disturbing phenomenon on the increase since the beginning of the economic decline in the late eighties and the implementation of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in the nineties with the aim of reviving the country’s depressed economy. This paper examines the phenomenon of street children by analysis of the problem, its emergence, constraints, and challenges. Though economic, social and cultural factors have been implicated, economic hardship and poverty are most accountable. Although the paper examines the contribution of SAP to the emergence of the street children phenomenon, it argues that the phenomenon is endemic in societies with wide income disparities between the poor and the rich and that such societies often pay lip-service to the problems of social justice. Punitive measures adopted by some societies have proved futile and never provided lasting solutions to the worrisome phenomenon. For example societies like Brazil and other Latin American countries which have used ‘death squads’ against street children have rather witnessed an aggravation of the phenomenon. Therefore societies should turn from punitive measures to measure that meet the needs of street children. According to the paper economic empowerment of the poor, and the respect of human rights and dignity could limit the growth of the phenomenon; and societies could benefit from the hidden potentials of street children as revealed by studies. The paper recommends legislative enforcement to limit the phenomenon before it assumes intolerable dimensions in Cameroon.

Key words: empowerment, child abuse, constraints, dignity, street children, phenomenon

Introduction

Demographic analysis of Cameroon has been hindered by a number of factors, principally the difficulty in conducting accurate censuses and a poor tradition of birth and death registration (Manga Noah. L, 2002; Dubissi Tandem, 2010). The past few decades have seen the proliferation of street children1 in urban Cameroon as evidenced by the number of children observed scavenging, begging, hawking and soliciting. Oloko (1998) expressed the phenomenon to be on the increase in cities of Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) since the late eighties and the nineties and the problem has been growing unabated and becoming a permanent feature of these cities. Over the years some research efforts have been directed towards exploring the problem of street children and the plausibility of ameliorating the victims (Lamarao, 1993; Oloko, 1998 and UNICEF 2001). Also governments have been trying to rehabilitate street children though a high proportion of such efforts have been punitive in nature, which

1 Street children are children for whom the streets more than their families have become their home. They include children who might not necessarily be homeless or without families, but who live in situations where there is no protection, or supervision from responsible adults.
is, they focus on punishment rather than rehabilitation (Vacino, 1990; Lamarao, 1993). In Latin America for example, many people in the Judiciary, the police, the media, business, and society at large believe that street children are a group of irredeemable delinquents who represent a moral threat to a civilised society - a threat that must be exorcised (Brandt, 1995 and Human Right Watch [HRW], 2004). The most frightening manifestation of this view is the emergence of “death squads”: self-proclaimed vigilantes, many of whom are involved in security firms and the police and seek to solve the problem by elimination (Gigenback 1994; Bourdillon, 2001 and HRW, 1994, and HRW, 2004).

In Brazil, a pioneer study set up by the National Movement of Street Children recorded 457 murders of street children between March and August 1989. On 23 July 1993 a vigilante group openly fired on a group of 50 street children sleeping in the Candelaria district of Rio de Janeiro. Seven children and one adult were killed and many others wounded. Of the eight defendants originally accused, only two were imprisoned; while two were tried and released (Gigenback R, 1994; HRW 1994). In 2002 the juvenile court reported that an average of three street children are killed everyday in the state of Rio de Janeiro, while Amnesty International has estimated that 90% of the killings in Brazil go unpunished (HRW, 2004).

In spite the use of such punitive measures against street children in Brazil the phenomenon has assumed intolerable dimensions; ranking Brazil with the highest number of street children in Latin America. Brazil has the most unequal distribution of wealth in the world: the top 20% of the population receive 26 times the income of the bottom 20% and half of the population survives on 14% of the national income (Scanlon Thomas et al, 1998).

The phenomenon of street children is becoming a permanent feature in many developing societies across the globe. As a result, there is a global shift in focus from emphasis on the eradication of street children, to emphasis on meeting their needs, which is empowering and rehabilitating them so that they can be integrated with their families and society.

In Cameroon though the phenomenon of street children is real and visible, there are no official statistics concerning it. According to Cameroon’s 2005 census estimates published in 2010, children less than 15 years represent 43.6% of the population while females represent 50.5%; only 5.5% of the population is above the age of 60 while 52% of the populations live in the urban areas (Dubissi Tandem, 2010). This demographic evidence shows that the phenomenon of street children is likely to grow given that the proportion of urban inhabitants, their sex ratio and age distribution reflect future increases in birth rates which may give rise more street children given the high degree of urban poverty caused by unemployment (Dubissi Tandem, 2010). Yet despite this evidence the phenomenon of street children has not been included in the country’s demographic statistics.

A number of difficulties are encountered in estimating the number of street children and the magnitude of difficulties they experience. Their populations as earlier mentioned are not covered by national census, educational and health data. (Elizabeth Mosima, 2007; Elvis Tah, 2008). Secondly even when a census is conducted on street children estimates may not be a true reflection of their number because street children are not specific in their locations, since they move from one place to another. Also most parents could find it awful to accept that they harbour street children in their families while most of the children may not like to participate for fear that they may be arrested. Also those who are involved in some income generating activities may not like to be identified as street children (Manga Noah, 2002 and Elvis Tah, 2008).

In Cameroon the phenomenon of street children has been attributed mainly from family breakdown, domestic violence linked to poverty, polygamy, divorce, and HIV/AIDS. It has also been aggravated by the gradual disintegration of the African family (the extended family system) due to poverty (Dunford M, 1996; Nieuwenhuys, O.1995). As the African society is increasingly becoming individualistic, children victimised by poverty, social and environmental factors quickly learn to survive on their own devices and take asylum on the streets. In the process they are exploited through child labour, trafficking, and sexual exploitation by adults and even street children themselves (Myers W.E 1992; Marie Thérèse Mengue, 1999). Many children take to the streets for refuge hoping to find an activity to earn a living. The children are optimistic that they may by chance make a fortune which will enable them be liberated from street life and be integrated in society (Matchinda, 2000 and Shelter...
Don Bosco, 2003). These expectations among street children have been obvious because, philanthropic individuals and organisations have been rehabilitating some street children by sending them to school or training them in some vocations which could empower economically and foster their integration. In reality most street children rarely meet these expectations but end up foraging for food in rubbish bins, and when they get sick they can’t afford to see a doctor. In a relatively harsh regime some get arrested for smoking or begging and find themselves incarcerated in adult prisons often for months and sometimes years before their case is brought to court, while a fortunate few may find themselves in rehabilitation centres (Gigenback, 1994; Manga Noah, 2002; and Elvis Tah, 2008).

The United Nations Centre for Human Rights (UNCHR) estimated that by the year 2000 half of the world's population will be less than 25 years of age and located in cities, and that significant numbers will be living in poverty (UNICEF, 1996). The United Nations also estimated that by the end of the last century there will be almost 250 million more urban children in the 5-to-19 year old age group than there were in the mid-1980s; that more than 90% of these youths will be living in developing nations; and that by the year 2020 there will be some 100 million indigent urban minors in Latin America alone. It is likely, furthermore, that many of these children will be living in the streets (UNICEF, 1996; UNDP, 1997). The same report predicted a grim picture for Africa where the spread of HIV/AIDS, rampant wars, civil strife, hunger, malnutrition; draught and ecological problems are posing direct threats to human survival; with children major victims of these calamities. This means that in Africa solution to the problem of street children can not be sought by eliminating these push factors from the discuss. In Cameroon a combination of some of the above factors including poverty, domestic violence, cultural and religious factors dominate the discuss (Matchinda B, 2000). According to Matchinda more than 90% of street children in the streets of Douala and Yaounde are of Cameroon nationality; while others arrive from neighbouring countries like Nigeria, Chad, central Africa and Congo. This high proportion of street children of Cameroon descent refutes earlier believes that they were mostly of foreign nationalities. Today their increasing numbers are making rehabilitation and their empowerment difficult given that philanthropic organisations mostly Mission institutions and NGO are not receiving adequate government attention for the up keep of the rehabilitated few (Noé, Ngoé, F and Sali, 2006). According to studies by Noé et al; 2006 most of the NGO and philanthropic organisations designed to rehabilitate street children depended on foreign donors notably from Europe and the United States. In the wake of International financial crisis that gripped Europe and America (USA) remittances became irregular and this increased the financial burden of managing these organisations.

To tackle the phenomenon of street children, government and civil society could adopt a number of approaches including the livelihood approach to empower individuals and communities because poverty has been identified as root cause of the phenomenon. Agricultural reforms could help in limiting rural-urban migration, reduce unemployment and create an atmosphere conducive for sustainable development among rural and urban communities (Tabatai, H and M. Foud 1993; Ngoe Fritz. E, 2011). In addition, cultural practises that infringe on the rights of children should be taken to consideration when implementing policies aimed at curbing the phenomenon of homeless children. This means taking into consideration economic, political, social and cultural factors that contribute to poverty and displacement of people from one geographical area or region to another.

Revealing factors responsible for the street children phenomenon in Cameroon

The phenomenon of ‘homeless children’ has grown in the streets of Cameroon since the beginning of the economic decline in the mid-eighties and the implementation of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in the early nineties. The deteriorating economic situation ignited by SAP created many difficulties from household to institutional levels setting pace for an increase in community violence, creating more dangerous setting for children and other vulnerable groups in society (Aptekar, 1994 and Bourdillon, 2001). The impact of SAP on the economy and its effects on vulnerable groups have been analysed in the proceeding sections of this paper.

Among the factors that push children onto the streets are marital problems or instability at home, poverty, hunger, insecurity, abuse and violence from parents, displacement caused by clashes in
the community, insufficient parental care, death of one or both parents, lack of (or limited) opportunities in education, abandonment by parents, housing difficulties, natural disasters, drug use by children, and peer influence (MINAS, MINASCOF and UNICEF, 1993). Most of these young people are from underprivileged and economically depressed environments where violence is an everyday occurrence. They find asylum on streets which have become their home. But this is a dangerous kind of asylum because they are vulnerable to exploitation by adults, disease, drugs and prostitution. They are found sleeping in train stations, market places, dilapidated and abandoned buildings, under bridges, open fields, rummaging through trash cans, begging or stealing mostly in big cities and other urban areas (Martins S.B and Ebrahim G.J, 1995; US Department of Labour, 2008).

Until the early years of this century (2000’s), the street children phenomenon was not recognised by the government and their problem was ignored by the local media and the general public. The way of life evident of street children more often leads to crime, causing both government and the general public to spend colossal sums of money for defence of life and property (Human Rights Watch, 1994; Branda O.C, 1995). Most street children are shabby, poor and wretched and their sight ridicules resource abundant nations where there is no equity in the distribution of income between various classes (UNICEF, 1998; Shelter Don Bosco, 2003). May be that is why rich developing countries like Brazil have taken to elimination by killing of street children most often in complicity with members of the police and judiciary. Street children are more often than not, victims and products of societies that care less about the problems of the poor and the underprivileged (Aptekar 1994; Human Right Watch (HRW), 2004). This may help to explain why they are becoming a common feature in developing countries. Many parents at the lowest economic ladder in society have been found to vent their anger and frustration on their helpless children. More often than not when children runaway from home to escape possible abuse by their parents, poverty is often the bottom line (Patel S, 1990; UNICEF, 1998). On the other hand, many parents influenced by cultural factors, ignorance and illiteracy, erroneously think that children have no rights, no privilege, no opportunity and no instrument of avoiding parental harassment (Dunford, 1996; Ebin V, 1992). Many children abandon their homes for the streets because they are psychologically threatened while others abandon their homes because parents are not economically empowered to take responsibility.

**Britton woods institutions and the emergence of the street children phenomenon in Cameroon**

Earlier we made mentioned that SAP came along with measures that have been painful to the overall economy because it plunged the nation into greater economic difficulties like declining social services, neglected infrastructure, retrenchments and worsening unemployment situation, increased rural-urban migration, including the spread of diseases, notably HIV/AIDS. SAP aggravated the socioeconomic problems of an already depressed Cameroon economy which it was designed to revive. It is these socioeconomic problems that contributed to the emergence of street children in our cities. Table 1 shows the policy of SAP, its intended results and the impact on the Cameroon economy. The analysis shows its contribution to causes and vulnerability of many groups, especially children.

**Table 1. Impact of Structural Adjustment Programme in Cameroon**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy</th>
<th>Intended Results</th>
<th>Common impact on the poor</th>
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<tr>
<td>Reducing government Expenditure</td>
<td>Freeing up money for debt servicing</td>
<td>• Government services to rural poor are often easiest to cut. Cuts in health, education and social welfare spending and introduction of cost-recovery and user fees put health care and education beyond the reach of many ordinary people.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Public sector redundancies and salary freezes lead to reduced numbers of teachers and doctors and other professionals</td>
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Privatisation of state run industries | To reduce public expenditure in unproductive sectors and increase efficiency | • Massive lay-offs and increased unemployment with no social security provision push families deeper into poverty

Currency devaluation and export promotion | To increase exports by making them cheaper, boosting foreign exchange reserves needed for debt repayment | • Cost of imports soar, including vital resources such as imported medicines.  
• Land used for cash crops rather than food. Moreover export prices fall because many countries are promoting the same exports under SAPs, so they still aren’t better off.

Raising interest rates | Tackling inflation | • Farmers and small companies can no longer afford to borrow money and are forced to reduce production or go out of business.

Removal of price controls | Increased efficiency in food production | • Basic food prices rise putting even further pressure on already stretched household budgets

Source: Ngoe Fritz developed from the National Centre for Education (CNE) field work reports, 2005-2009.

The table shows the negative impact of the SAP on both the rural and urban sectors of the Cameroon economy. The greatest impact of the programme has been felt by the poor and the underprivileged, especially children. The intended results are more theoretical than practical and nowhere in the less developed countries were results of the programme realised (Cornia et al, 1987). The recommendation to cut public expenditure in most structural adjustment programmes has been criticised for increasing the ranks of the unemployed. For countries without social security programmes, the repercussions of cutting public expenditure include increased crime rate and political instability (Brandt, 1985; Osagie, 1986). Critics of SAP prefer adjustment which increased tax revenue through more efficient tax administration. Besides it is unfair to expect countries that are among the poorest in the world to implement adjustment policies which require further reduction in real incomes and expenditure. The impact of SAP was sickening to the poor and worsens the plight of the underprivileged, creating a dangerous setting for vulnerable groups like children and women. As earlier mentioned, the harsh economic atmosphere created by SAP, encouraged the poor and the underprivileged to avenge in domestic violence and uncompromising behaviour. Most children became victims of domestic violence and as their homes could no longer provide protection; the children find their way and join street life; which exposes them to social ills like child labour, sexual exploitation, child abuse and diseases such as HIV/AIDS (Marie Therese Mengue, 1999). In the rural areas increasing economic neglect and marginalisation resulting from the restructuring programmes such as withdrawal of subsidies from agricultural inputs and privatisation fuelled the phenomenon of rural urban migration of mostly youthful labour from the agricultural sector (Brandt, H, 1985).

The IMF/World Bank approach to structural adjustment has been criticised for paying excessive attention to technical economic details and for neglecting health, infrastructure and nutritional needs of the entire population (IDS Discussion paper 217). Sussex University’s IDS discussion paper 217, in a true reflection of the wise views of Hans Singer warned:

“One potentially dangerous result of the rapid and radical adjustment measures introduced in developing countries by external and internal pressures has been the concentration on the short-run action. But measures to protect nutrition and expand human capital are long-run investments which no country dare not neglect, how ever had it is struggling for economic survival. The pressures to sacrifice such long-term investments have been bolstered by the fact that the negative effects of neglect
remain invisible in the absence of appropriate data, monitoring and evaluation. They are also cumulative, and will only be fully felt at some future time (IDS, June 1986, p.6).

Again Hans Singer, emphasising the importance of children in the future of adjusting countries argued as follows:

‘My believe in the fundamental importance of the welfare and upbringing of children as a key factor in development lies as strong as ever. I had the chance in the 1970s, during visits to South Korea on behalf of UNICEF, to point out the role which this played in the economic miracle and the need to safeguard this element as a guarantee of continued success, and I was thrilled by how much sympathy and understanding I found this view among Korean planners and economists. And quite recently, I had a further chance to study the dangerous impact of the world recession on the condition of children, and to point out the irony of those destroying the roots of future growth in the name of adjustment for viable future growth’ (IDS, June 1986 pp.35 – 36)

If the Structural Adjustment advocated and supported by IMF and the World Bank has done anything in the health sector, it has been to force the poorest to avoid proper medical care(see table 1). The essence of this criticism of a structural adjustment programme that neglects the welfare of such vulnerable groups as children, students, the aged, women and the sick is short-sightedness of such a strategy itself, and its tendency to negate the objective of structural adjustment itself (Osagie 1986, Tabatabai, H and M. Foud 1993). But as early as 1987 the macroeconomic impact of SAPs was shown to have been inconsistent with the long term development interest of less developed countries. Special attention was drawn to the negative impact of the policy measures on the poor and vulnerable sections of the population (Cornia et al; 1987)

In Cameroon these measures and the prominence of social inequalities amplified the emergence of street children and other vulnerable groups who were not equipped to counter the hash realities of the adjustment programmes. Withdrawal of subsidy from agricultural inputs, neglect of rural infrastructure and lack of basic necessities increased rural-urban with the hope of improving living standards. In the urban areas, urban poverty showed its ugly manifestation with social inequalities. In the wake of these difficulties government in adherence to SAP recommendations embarked on 50% salary reduction for all state employees further affected the purchasing power of households in both rural and urban areas. Most families became maladjusted while domestic violence took its ugly manifestation on children, forcing many to go away to escape family aggression and maltreatment.

Street children represent a phenomenon which appeal to people’s feelings and awake their sympathy. Most people have through the media been introduced to different aspects of street children’s life. Such reports mostly begin or end with the misery of these children often regarded as dirty, shabby and badly behaved often considered as threat by some families and the society. The hardship of street life should not be underestimated; neither should it be the only interest in all coverage of street children. It is important to discover the abilities and resources in street children as well. The reality is that if street children hadn’t abilities and talent, how could they be surviving under sub-human conditions in which most of them live? It is these abilities and hidden talents that society and government must take into consideration when formulating policies for street children and families as revealed by Noé et al; 2006, in rehabilitation centres in Bamenda, the North West regional capital of Cameroon. The outcomes of these studies have been mentioned in the later part of this work.

Classification of street children and their survival strategies

Two main kinds of street children have been identified in Cameroon: those who live and work on the street, (children of the street2) and those who work on the streets full or part-time but who return

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2 Children of the streets. These are a category of street children who live and work permanently on the street. They have nothing to do with their families or relatives. They have either abandoned or have been completely abandoned by their families. They have no body to offer them security. Common among these are orphans and refugees.
to their homes each night (children in the street). Street children are found in large numbers in urban areas though a large proportion come from the rural areas as a result of rural-urban migration and search for better life opportunities. The phenomenon manifests differently between the Northern and Southern parts of Cameroon. Two categories of street children are found in the northern cities: the “Talibe” who are pupils encouraged by Koranic education tutors to beg in the streets and the “Alaarou’s” who are children brought to the street by socio-economic and cultural factors. Most cultures in northern Cameroon do not consider the “Talibe” as street children because they are entrusted by their parents to Mallams to teach them the Qu’ran (Koran). Some of their parents grant them financial aid including some essential items to take to school; while those children from poor families are abandoned to their Koranic teachers with no financial support. Such children drop out of school and become delinquents’, and vulnerable to many forms of exploitations, and violence by adults (US Labour Department, 2008b).

In the southern parts, the greater majority of street children are found in cities like Douala, Yaoundé, Bafousam, Bamenda and Kribi. Most of the children who work on the streets come from families where fewer premiums are placed on education in comparison to commercial activities (Erny P, 1987; Manga Noah, L 2002). Families who place fewer premiums in education are mostly the poor and underprivileged. The children are involved in various activities with hope of making a brighter future. Street children work as vendors or hawkers, beggars, shoe shiners, car washers and watchers, head-loaders, scavengers and bus conductors. The majorities are boys but there are a few girls. Street families, a variant of street living, are also becoming prominent, with serious implications for the survival of children. Destitute families, including children living under bridges, in public buildings, uncompleted buildings, markets and major streets and alleys, are becoming increasingly common often posing security threat to life and property (Matchinda, 2000 c).

Another variant of the phenomenon is street wandering; that is, boys and girls roaming the streets. It is hard to come by accurate national statistics on street children in Cameroon for reason that available figures are often contested, and many are estimates extrapolated from other sources as opposed to figures derived from specific studies (Paulo D, 1993; Mulang, 2006).

Although homeless children were rare in the mid eighties, there was a spontaneous manifestation of their numbers in virtually all major towns and cities in the early 1990s. By 2000-2005, an increasing large numbers of children were reported in a number of specified locations in Yaoundé, Douala, and other towns like Maroua and Bamenda (Manga Noah L, 2002). Street children are free and they do not have any obligations. There is no actual reason for the street children to have any form of routine or stay in an area for a longer time. Despite their freedom some choose to stay in one place in groups identified by their peers (Cassino, 1990 and Bourdillon, 2001). They develop a network and signals for communicating one another, operate in groups and develop ways of protecting themselves from danger, and also to attack an enemy if threatened. Some of the signals used by the children include blinking, clapping, waving, shouting, murmuring; and use of passwords for communication in times of need (Gigenback M, 1994; Matchinda, 2000).

Street children also form different gangs and live together. These gangs can be seen as a substitute for families. Through the gang the street children make friends who help them if they become sick, give them food if they do not make any money, and defend them if they are threatened. The gangs offer assistance and also collaborate in theft, robbery, and other criminal activities. They also smoke Indian hems (marijuana) and hard drugs to cope with the misery and stress of street life (Ebin V, 1992 and Whitbeck L.B et al, 1997). The use of drugs is also a cheap way of coping with hunger, fear, loneliness, and dependency. To obtain money, food, clothing, and shelter many street children engage in “survival sex” with adults. Within their peer group sex is used for pleasure and comfort. Sex under the influence of drugs, anal sex, and same sex are common; while teenage pregnancy is almost universal among street children (Raffaelli M, 2000 and Noé et al; 2008).

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1 Children in the street are those who return to their homes after full or part time employment in the streets. They are mostly driven to the streets by economic hardship and even support their families. This category constitutes mostly children from broken homes, and orphans who can not be fully taken care of by their hosts. They nurture hope for better life.
Some factors affecting promotion of the welfare of street children

A number of constraints and challenges have been identified as hindrance to the promotion of street children’s welfare in Cameroon. A lack of information, research, workshops, programmes and services; family breakdown; poverty and socio-economic inequality; an absence of an adequate legal and social framework for the protection of street children and insufficient law enforcement (Casino, L, 1990 and Matchinda, B, 2000). The problem of the legal framework can be addressed through the enactment of a “comprehensive children’s statute”. Whether the scope of the statute can be broad enough is the question. However, an updated policy framework needs to be developed on children. Other constraints include rapid urbanisation and population growth; both of which requires a drastic solution. Some schools of thought have recommended that government pursue an aggressive family planning programme. Whether this will be possible in the face of extreme cultural opposition, only time will tell. Another challenging problem is that when government implements a welfare policy for street children, many families (even the rich) may push their responsibilities to the state and increase state responsibility (Marie Theresé Mengue, 1999).

Also given the high level of corruption and embezzlement of funds in public places, it is doubtful whether the institution of a welfare policy will improve the welfare of street children in the absence of adequate checks and balances in the allocation of resources. The country’s experience on corruption in public places provides some proof that resources allocated for street children may fall into the hands of unscrupulous individuals who could divert some of the funds to their private pockets and worsen the plight of rehabilitated children. If corruption in high places could constitute a hindrance to allocation of resources for the improvement of the livelihood of street children, then government must be prepared to punish the perpetuators of corruption and institute a system of accountability to ensure that resources meant for vulnerable haps are not misused. Alternatively, government can channel resources to existing Non Governmental Organisations (NGO) rehabilitating street children in many regions of the country where religious bodies, notably, are actively involved in the rehabilitation of street children, but constrained by inadequate finance and infrastructure. Most rehabilitation centres are over-crowded with street children and resources to expand the available infrastructure are inadequate. Furthermore, most of the rehabilitation centres are funded by external donors, while government funding is inadequate, some rehabilitation centres do not receive government funding at all (Mulan 2006, St John of God Orphanage, 2006). These problems act as predicaments towards improving the welfare of street children in Cameroon.

Revealing the potentials in street children

We made mentioned that street children are mostly products from societies that pay leap service to the problem of social justice; and that most of the societies are in the third world. Street children are biologically the same like other children who are born or stay in homes where they are taken care off. Hence society will be paying a high price for discriminating against street children because given the same opportunity in education and other vocations they equally excel; sometimes even more than privileged children (Erny P,1987; Ebin V,1992). This vision has been supported with studies by Noë et al; 2006 on “Street Children and Families in Bamenda”, the North West regional capital of Cameroon. According to the studies, street children have proven to possess enormous talents that society can exploit for development and social transformation. The study revealed amazing performances of rehabilitated street children sponsored in primary schools and colleges by Non Governmental Organisations. Academic performances for primary school pupils sponsored by ‘Mulan’; one of the NGOs structured to rehabilitate street children and orphans in Bamenda showed that 90% of the children maintained good passes in Mathematics, English and French in all terminal examinations. Also, more than 70% of those attending primary schools ranked among the first ten passes in order of merit in all terminal examinations in their various classes. Their terminal averages ranged between 13.8 to 16. The rest of them scored an average mark of more than 11. (Noë Ngueffo et al, 2008c). In the study, of the twelve children sponsored in secondary schools by the same institution, two in technical colleges performed well in motor mechanics and electricity; while 70% of those in secondary Grammar schools showed amazing performances in Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, and
Biology in all terminal examinations. Rehabilitated street children in vocational centres doing sewing, carpentry, and motor mechanics proved hardworking and promising in their professions. According to Mulang sources (2006), a striking revelation about the parents of street children from most rural areas of North West region is that they maintain contact with the rehabilitation centres hosting their children. Some of their parents bring gifts of food to support the rehabilitation centres, but hardly money. These visits and contacts are an indication that the parents are interested in the children, have love and compassion for them, interested to know their where about, well being and progress; but are constrained by financial limitations. It further confirms that most of the children from rural areas are not driven away from homes by domestic violence but through circumstances nurtured by poverty. The report partly confirms the allegations that most parents may push their responsibility to the state when the country embarks on a policy of rehabilitating street children.

Most street children from rural areas are driven to urban centres by poverty and lack of means of sustainability. Most often they abandon their villages without the consent of parents and other relatives. Most of them are not driven by domestic violence as most of their counterparts from urban centres.

Government, civil society and street children in Cameroon

Most communities reject and are afraid of street children and adolescents, considering them as a danger for the security of the society. However some people try to help them by giving some food, clothes and other items that can help in sustaining them. In Douala for example, the Catholic Cathedral has been providing a safe haven where many street children have their beddings under tents where they retire from their daily activities and doze (Elvis Tah, 2008).

There are also a few humanitarian institutions maintained by groups of people and organisations interested in helping street children. There are texts governing the admission of vulnerable children in public schools but the texts are hardly respected by most school administrations (Mulang, 2006 and Joe Dingha, 2006). The texts prevent vulnerable children including children orphaned by HIV/AIDS from fee payment in public schools. According to the text children suffering from physical disabilities, vulnerability including those who show proof of haven lost their parents or guardians through HIV/AIDS are exempt from fees payment in public schools. The irony is that Public schools ignore these texts and compel NGO and religious organisations to pay fees and other expenses for children under their rehabilitation centres. If public schools could respect these texts, the financial burden of NGO rehabilitating street children could be drastically reduced (MINAS, 2006 and Mulang, 2006). These NGO’s and religious organisations host and give vocational and professional training to the children without adequate assistance from the government. However there are a few public institutions of custody for delinquent children and adolescents in the towns of Mbalmayo, Douala, Maroua, Yaounde, and Buea. These public institutions the children are structured to give only limited vocational training to street children. Street children who are rehabilitated prior to acquiring basic (primary) education remain partly incapacitated and find difficulties of integration in society due to their inability to read and right (MINAS, MINSCOF and UNICEF, 1993). The government has established two types of institutes to care for street children and delinquents. The abbreviations and acronyms of the institutions are all in the French language; except the Borstal Institute in Buea capital of the South West region the rest of the institutions are in French speaking Cameroon. The author does not see the necessity of translating the abbreviations in the English language. What is important is for the reader to understand that there exist a few public institutions for the rehabilitation of street children in Cameroon.

Institute de type fermé

- CAO (Centre d’Accueil et d’observation) de Bepanda –Douala
- ICE (Institution Camerounaise de l’enfance) : Maroua, Bitamba and Bertoua.

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4 MINAS : French abbreviation for Ministry of Social Affairs in Cameroon
5 MINSCOF : French abbreviation for Ministry of Women Empowerment and Family
Les structures AEMO au semi fermé

- Les airs éducatifs (centre sociaux) repartis dans l’ensemble d’arrondissement de ville
- Les centre d’écriture et hébergement en faveur les enfants vivant dans la rue (Centre D’Ecrute de Mfoundi ; CARSER)
- Les hommes —ateliers (fils uniquement)

Most of these public rehabilitation centres are reformatory in nature and children are hardly given the right vocational training to empower them afterwards. Furthermore, the intake of street children and other vulnerable haps into these institutions is limited (MINAS, 2006). On the contrary NGO and religious organisations try to improve and extend assistance to homeless families and children, by improving their social conditions through public health, habitation, transportation, education and so on (Ruthie Rubietta, 2005). But the problem is too heavy for them and the public funding is irregular, inadequate or non existent. Thus efforts made by NGOs and religious organisations in Cameroon for rehabilitating street children cannot yield the desired results unless government provides the necessary assistance to support their efforts (Marie Thérèse Mengue, 1999).

Contact and familiarity with street children shows a dramatic reality that exposes their social abandonment and suffering. They are victims of a cruel and dehumanized society that abandon its children, putting at risk the country's future (Mulang, 2006). Many of the street children have faith in the future and hope for a new life, have a heart ready to receive love if their life expectations could be fulfilled. If they are considered a lost generation, then the guilt is with our society because each homeless child is a wound that spots the image of this country; given its enormous resources (Mulang, 2006b). There is an urgent need to redress the situation; regardless their origin and causes. The problem of origin of street children should not even dominate any discuss meant to improve their welfare since studies have indicated that more than 90% of these vulnerable children are Cameroonian (Matchinda, 2000 and Joe Dingha, 2006). It is a social obligation to rehabilitate and empower them so that this generation of children that live in streets may be saved and rescued from the danger of adult delinquency through education, public health, employment, residence, and ways of communication including orientation to the families (Bourdillon, 2001 and Human Rights Watch, 2004). Family orientation is of crucial importance in the discuss because children interviewed in the street often refer to their household’s economic and family problems. However, there is limited literature on the views and characteristics of these children and their families (Martin S.B, Ebrahim G.J, 1995; Le Roux, 1999). The existing literature has been limited to street children without parents because most street children identified do not like to expose the identity of their parents, foster parents or relatives due to circumstances that warranted their exit from home (Joe Dingha, 2006).

Investment is needed to provide adequate structures for training and orientation of street children to enable them be integrated in the society. They must acquire basic skills and be given opportunities for employment to enable them live descent lives. But for several years government has embarked on a poverty reduction programme to alleviate poverty and misery, partly attributed to the failed (SAP) and mismanagement of state resources. The increasing number of street children and poverty prevailing in the country could be enough evidence to support that some resources for poverty alleviation must have been misdirected from the targeted populations; that is, the urban and the rural poor(Manga Noah, 2002). As earlier mentioned, any poverty reduction strategy or policy not directed to vulnerable groups clearly misses its objectives. Our society must bear the consequences of its misdirected policies and strategies as revealed by the increasing number of street children, unemployment, poverty, domestic violence, rural urban migration, child abuse, child trafficking, drug abuse and addiction among others.

Street children are subject to malnutrition, hunger, health problems, substance abuse, theft, harassment by city police, railway authorities, market authorities, as well as physical and sexual abuse. Though Government is a signatory to UN conventions on child labour, child abuse and the right of children the practises have continued unabated due to several socio-economic factors beyond the
control of the children, government and society as a whole (UNICEF, 1997). The reasons why these practices against children are soaring is the inability of government to adequately monitor the occurrence of child abuse, trafficking, and child labour, domestic violence; educate the perpetrators, punish the victims and create a sense of awareness to the damage caused by the phenomenon of street children in our society (Ruthie Rubietta, 2005 and Sylvester Tetchiada, 2009). Though society has become conscious of the problem, not much has been done to overcome the inequalities and injustices suffered by the poor and underprivileged families. It is necessary that each citizen feel responsible for all children and adolescence in the street, engage in more social justice, humanitarian feeling and love in place of violence, and also denounce and abolish through legislative action those cultural and religious practices that interfere with the rights of children in society.

**Summary**

The phenomenon of street children in Cameroon is growing and no lasting solution has been sought to free our cities from its dangers. Supporting evidence indicates that the children are victims of economic and social problems related to poverty and domestic violence. Unless these root causes of the phenomenon could be properly addressed and appropriate measures taken our cities will continue to swell with street children. While poverty has been identified as the root cause of the street children phenomenon other causes are domestic violence, cultural and religious factors cannot be eliminated from our discuss. From an economic view point, the emergence of the phenomenon has been partly blamed to the adoption and implementation of the IMF/World Bank Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) in the late eighties and early nineties, which destroyed economic foundation for development and affected the most vulnerable groups; particularly children in the Less Developed countries (LDC). The adjustment programme laid too much emphasis on technical details of its implementation and destroyed the foundation for sustainable development it was suppose to protect. SAP interfered with the well being of children and other vulnerable groups.

The structural adjustment programme aggravated the existing state of poverty by affecting the socio-economic life of people in less developed countries; and African countries in particular. In Cameroon in spite government efforts at poverty alleviation, poverty has remained endemic in both rural and urban areas; thus confirming the allegation that resources for poverty alleviation were not directed to the most vulnerable groups in the country. This is evidenced by the increasing level of unemployment and poverty which lays the background for domestic violence and the eventual emergence of street children and other vulnerable groups.

To eliminate the menace of street children most countries have applied punitive measures involving outright elimination, but these measures have not paid off favorably. Rather, there have been alarming increases in their numbers even in societies like Brazil and other Latin American countries which have often used punitive actions against the menace of street children. The failure of punitive action to curb the ugly phenomenon indicates that societies should resolve to alternative measures to reduce the causes and the impact of the phenomenon. Empirical studies on analysis and cause of the street children phenomenon have indicated that the phenomenon is dominant in societies where income disparity between the rich and the poor is wide and that such societies pay lip-service to the problem of social justice. These societies are mostly in the Less Developed countries, particularly of Africa, Asia and Latin America.

**Recommendations**

The following recommendations premised on socioeconomic and cultural background of the causes of the street children phenomenon have been advanced.

- Society can reduce poverty and empower the vulnerable groups but if cultural and some religious practices which interfere with the rights of children are not addressed the phenomenon of street children can not be confronted with the severity it deserves. Empowerment of vulnerable groups will reduce poverty and incidences domestic violence which ignites the street children phenomenon.
• Rural urban migrations could be discouraged through agricultural reforms which can lead to rural transformation and sustainable economic development. This will reduce the influx of people into cities in search of income generating activities which are relatively more than rewarding in the urban areas than in their rural counterpart.

• Imposition of family planning regulations may not pay off due to cultural and religious practices which see family planning as undue interference of government into private lives of individuals. In Africa and most of the third world the basis of marriage is for procreation and not cohabitation alone. In this area there must be education and sensitization of people on the disadvantages of having more children than family income can sustain.

• A policy to rehabilitate street children must be put in place. Government and its agencies must grant aid to Missionary organizations and NGO who have been rehabilitating street children but are constrained by financial and resource limitation. Though there is growing opinion that most families may push their responsibilities to the government in the wake of rehabilitation policy such arguments may be baseless if families are empowered, domestic violence, discrimination against children, and rural urban migrations among other could be reduced. When this is accomplished there must be set criteria for admission of children in the rehabilitation centres.

• Children whose parents are physically disabled, or orphaned by HIV/AIDS should be given free education if there is evidenced of the alleged assault on the children. Such children whether in orphanages or are been taken care of by foster parents or relatives must be granted admission in public schools without payment of fees. However, in Cameroon even though an official text for protection of ‘handicapped’ children exists it has not been given the concern it deserves in our public schools and colleges. There are therefore flaws in articulation and implementation of public policies in our educational system. There is need to follow up the full implementation of the texts, such as implementing punitive measures to head teachers who ignore official texts designed to protect street children.

• So far studies on children and the causes have been limited to street children and to some extent institutions rehabilitating them. Studies are hardly carried out between street children and their families of origin to understand the root causes of the problem. In our towns and cities domestic violence has not been seen as a problem worthy of intervention by non family members or residents. Children mostly orphans are often afflicted, starved and even beaten without adequate intervention of forces of law and order. Even when incidents of the nature are reported to police or the national gendarmerie brigade action is never taken to punish the perpetrators; rather the innocent children are always held to blame for recalcitrance, stubbornness and insubordination; an indication that the children are not protected by law. Perpetuators of such villainous crimes against children should always be severely punished if identifies.

• Conclusively, one major underpinning factor contributing to the challenge of street children in Cameroon as already mentioned is poverty. Meeting the challenges of poverty in our society requires a multi-strategy approach, involving all of the following measures in a long term plan: root out corruption by punishing the perpetrators; enforce rule of law; restore decaying infrastructure in rural and urban areas; improve and stimulate agriculture through incentive packages to make the activity more rewarding, resolve debt problem; engage in practical intervention programmes; restructure polity for true federalism; discourage polygamy and encourage family planning through educational programmes as earlier mentioned; streamline rapid urbanisation by reducing income gap between rural and urban dwellers which encourages rural urban migration; reduce socio-economic inequality between regions; create jobs, reduce unemployment and under-employment; improve access to education, health and information, domesticate imported technology to adapt to the socioeconomic realities of the people, reduce food imports and encourage domestic food producers, and build capacity of governmental institutions.
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