



Street Child of Sierra Leone (SCoSL) and Street Child of Liberia (SCoL)
Submission to the General Comment on Children in Street Situations
by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child

Introduction

Street Child of Sierra Leone (SCoSL) and Street Child of Liberia (SCoL) work to ensure that the rights of every child are recognised and respected. We warmly welcome the General Comment on Children in Street Situations as an opportunity for the children we work with to have their voices heard and acted upon.

In our work, the term 'street child' refers to any child who relies on the street as either their home or for their livelihood. We focus on supporting children off the streets, into a safe environment and ultimately into education, working to achieve sustainability through family livelihood support. We also work actively to prevent children at risk from migrating to the streets in the first place. Since 2008 Street Child has worked with over 50,000 street-connected children in Liberia and Sierra Leone. To read more about what we do, click here: www.street-child.co.uk

This submission is focused on rights-based, holistic, long-term strategies to prevent children at risk of developing strong street connections and to support children in street situations. We emphasise creating enabling and safe environments where every street connected child can grow to realise their full potential. Our comment is largely informed by focus groups and activities held in Sierra Leone and Liberia in March 2016 with staff, stakeholders and most importantly, children. The teams of street workers met with a total of 194 children. Out of these, 85% live and/or work on the streets, while others were former street children. Through role-plays, drawings and discussions, they shared views on their connections to the street and how best their rights could be respected. The key themes and recommendations brought out during the consultation are outlined below.

Children drew pictures of their experiences. Moyamba, Sierra Leone



Children's Experiences of the Street

The Struggle for Survival: Most children that we met defined the key factor in both their migration to and reliance upon the streets as seeking income for survival and to support themselves and/or their families.

"This is me. I didn't have any money. I was

going to town to help carry heavy loads;

to

earn money to eat. I would go to town because my mum was not around. She locked the doors so I would go to the market to sleep."

-- Soriba, 14, Bo, Sierra Leone

However, livelihood was not necessarily linked to income. In fact many boys in particular, attributed their income to gambling or reliance on their peers for income and sustenance.

Such income mechanisms place the children in vulnerable situations, as they don't know when or where their next money will come from. This in turn generates strong ties to and reliance on their street peers, especially when feeling unsupported by parents or carers. At the same time, spaces of fun, play and support amongst peers, were often linked with violence.

"When I wake up I can go straight on the street. I have spent two years now, running the street. I can go play Raco (a gambling game) on the street to win money. When my friends win I know I can beat them and take the money away."

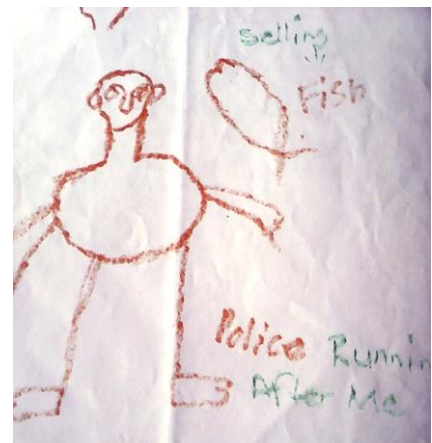
-- Boy called 'Shining Man' (unknown age), Monrovia, Liberia

Many girls defined their time spent on the street as an insecure way of life, largely reliant on transactional sex and being subject to physical and sexual abuse.

"The street is where girls have sex. Sometimes some boys will have you and don't want to pay. When you ask them for money, they beat you."

-- Janet, 15, Monrovia, Liberia

A reoccurring theme across both Sierra Leone and Liberia was the high prevalence of police violence against street children. During many of the role-plays the child acting as the police would run after the street child, calling after him/her *'thief!'* or imprisoning the child if a fine was not paid. Spaces such as entertainment-centres, nightclubs and motels were noted as particularly unsafe spaces due to high violence from peers and/or the police.



Picture by a young boy from Monrovia, Liberia.

The text reads 'Police Running After Me.'

Broken Homes: Compared to previous insecure home situations, many children claimed they felt free and supported on the streets. Where the home was seen as an unsafe or unsupportive space, this was sometimes attributed to the family's lack of income or more often, to being cared for by a non-biological carer, who prioritised their own children's

well-being before the child in question. In role-plays led by the children, this often took the form of a stepmother who physically and emotionally abused the child. Respect and support at home was a central issue in all discussions. Children spoke of little or no encouragement by carers or provision of financial means for education.



In the role-play pictured left, the children were acting out a neighbor intervening when a stepmother was exploiting and abusing a boy on the street.

Career path development: Whilst the desire to learn amongst the children was highly prevalent, the type of learning varied. Some children wanted to actively engage in vocational training or other informal skills trainings on the streets. These included repairing umbrellas, tables and bicycles, loading and unloading cars, shining shoes or riding motorbikes. They saw learning as a way to earn an income.

Others saw going to formal school and learning to read and write as the best way of having a better present and future. Especially girls saw formal schools as safer spaces away from the home and the street, because it kept them away from boys and allowed them to focus on their futures.

"I was not happy because I used to see my friends going to school, but I was at home selling rice. If they put me in school and I learn, nobody can take advantage of me. It is my right because education is for everyone."

-- Mariatu, 12, Moyamba, Sierra Leone

It was often said by children that street children were not welcome in school or that they were not good enough for school. Some talked about establishing schools specifically for street children. Others talked about needing encouragement to go to formal school.

When asked what they would do for street children as president, these were some replies:



"I will send them to school. There will be no disadvantage for street children."

-- Neymar, 17, Monrovia, Liberia

"Firstly, I would put them in school and pay their fees. Secondly, I would put them in good care, give them food to eat and I would take care of them."

-- Alimammy, 14, Kambia, Sierra Leone

Recommendations

Street Child of Sierra Leone (SCoSL) and Street Child of Liberia (SCoL) call for:

- 1.) Recognition of street children as active agents of change with their own capabilities, opinions and rights, who deserve to be listened to and respected.
- 2.) Involvement and participation of street children in local, national and international policies and planning to make positive and sustainable change for all.
- 3.) Integration of street children, into broader child protection efforts, with sensitivity and respect. Efforts related to children on the streets should not be separate from other interventions, but instead be tackled through holistic interventions and mainstreaming, whilst remaining aware of their diverse experiences and backgrounds.
- 4.) Livelihood support for street children's caregivers preventing migration to the streets in search of income and providing a secure environment for the child.
- 5.) Psychosocial support, counselling and mediation for children and their caregivers.
- 6.) Learning opportunities that are inclusive and friendly to street children and take into account their own learning choices and right to education. This might be through formal education, street-corner education or vocational/skills training.
- 7.) Collaboration within local communities, and between the government and other stakeholders, in providing safe environments free from violence, for children at home and on the streets. This is particularly with regards to police, carers and health workers, but should include many more.

Conclusion

Acknowledging the many different lived experiences of children on the streets and the diverse approaches to realise their rights, we feel it is important to practise a child-centred approach, recognising children as active agents of change in their own lives. We underline

the importance of preventing children from migrating to the streets in the first place, as well as providing tailored support to those already on the streets. Our recommendations involve working closely with carers, community members and stakeholders to provide safe environments for children, including them in decision-making and wider policies. In this way, we believe everyone would be better equipped to support these children and ensure their rights are realised.



"If the young generation of future leaders are ignored or left out in terms of developmental inclusion because of their connection to the street, then the future success of many countries remains bleak."

-- George Quaker, Head of Operations,

Sierra Leone

