Coping Strategies of Street Children in Nigeria

Abstracts
The study examined the coping strategies of street children against the background that most of the policies, measures and support networks put in place by the government and other support providers are ineffective and inadequate. It examined other sources and strategies of supports that help them to cope with street life. Both quantitative and qualitative techniques were employed in collecting and analysing the data. Findings showed that the street children have strong network of solidarity among themselves in order to cope with street life. Most Street Children (90.4%) rely more on homeless adults to cope with street life ($\mu = 3.26$) while the community members were seen by the children as important in helping them to cope with life on the street ($\mu = 3.24$). The study concluded that targeting some homeless adult for rehabilitation and use as links to street children by the support providers could yield better result.

Extended Abstract

Researchers over the years have explored how the problem of street children can be ameliorated and street children rehabilitated (Oloko1999, Scanlon et al 1993, Vasino 1990, and UNICEF 2001). Also, governments in different countries have tried and are still trying to rehabilitate the street children, but most of the measures and solutions suggested by these researchers are punitive in nature i.e. focus on punishment rather than rehabilitation (Bourdillon 2001, Gigenback 1994 and Human Right Watch 2004). Hence, the problem of street children seems unabated while it is becoming a permanent feature of the societies across the globe. Therefore, there is a global shift in focus from emphasis on the eradication of street children, to emphasis on taking their immediate needs to them on the streets.

In recent times, there are many programmes emerging for the support of street children in Nigeria. These programmes include the provision of support in the area of feeding, clothing, housing, medical care and education. The Nigerian National assembly also promulgated a Child Rights Act in 2003 as a means of domesticating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). These

events marked significant landmarks in ameliorating the problems of street children in the country but the programmes have been found to be inadequate and the Child Rights Act ineffective in ameliorating the conditions of the street children (Aransiola, 2007). Hence, it becomes important to investigate the coping strategies of the street children in an effort to build a workable support system for them. This is because this can shape the policy directions of the policy makers and support providers and provide a good insight into possible solution to Street Children phenomena in Nigeria. Studies focusing on coping strategies of Street Children with a view to providing workable solution to their problems are scarce in Nigeria. The focus of this paper therefore is to examine various coping strategies of Street Children in the light of poor support network available for them in Nigeria.

Methodology

The study was carried out in the cities of Lagos, Kaduna and Port Harcourt, which are three of the several locations where street children are largely concentrated in Nigeria. The selected cities reflect the three main cultural diversities in Nigeria and most of the Non – Governmental Organizations (NGOs) working with street children were also concentrated in these cities.

In each of these towns, quantitative technique was used to collect the primary data from the Street Children while qualitative technique was used for the community members in which the Street Children resides. For the purpose of questionnaire administration, convenience sampling was used to select 500 street children in each of the three cities due to lack of sample frame from which the sample size could be selected. In each of the city, 6 Focus Group Discussions were conducted with the following social categories - Opinion leaders (1male and 1female groups), Adult

males and females (2 separate groups), and Youths (1male and 1 female groups). Each FGD included between 8 and 12 participants.

Data Analysis

The primary data collected using quantitative measures were analysed at the level of univariate and bivariate analyses, using the SPSS and STATA computer softwares. Univariate analyses of the variables were presented using simple frequencies and percentages, while ANOVA was used at the bivariate level. Qualitative data collected using Focus Group Discussions were analysed using the content analysis carried out with the help of the Text Base Beta Computer software, which helped in sorting out the data thematically while data from the content analysis were presented using the ZY index tables.

Results

There were varieties of strategies that street children employ to cope with street life. For instance, 50.8% said that they engage in hawking while 18.5% engage in begging for alms in Kaduna. In Lagos, 27.8% engage in hawking, 19.1% beg for alms and 18.1% said that they were hard working and in Port Harcourt, 19.5% engage in trading, 17.2% simply said they were hardworking while 16.5% expressed that they cope through prayers. In the total sample, 32.4% said that they engage in hawking, while 16.4% beg for alms in order to survive. Evidence from the FGDs conducted shows that street children also employ other strategies other than the ones above to cope with street life. These include forming street gangs as a network to assist one another, involving in theft and robbery activities and drug pushing. Many street children smoke Indian hemp and take all sorts of hard drugs to cope with street life.

The children were asked to rank the different support providers according to how it enhances their coping with street life. In the total sample, the street children ranked

the homeless adult on the street as most helpful (μ = 3.26), the community members as second (μ = 3.24) and Civil Society Organisations as third (μ = 2.23). The NGOs were ranked fourth (μ = 1.82), while the Government Agencies were least important (μ = 1.78).

The homeless adults thus serve as role model for the children and the street children seem to have more trust in them than other support providers. It therefore becomes imperative to target some homeless adults for rehabilitation and use such adults as links for the provision of necessary supports for the street children in order to enhance their coping with street life.

The study also shows that the strategies of the government agencies were still largely dominated by traditional approach of punishments aiming at eradication as against the global shift from eradication to providing support for the street children. It then became imperative to canvass for a change of strategies by these agencies. The NGOs also lack requisite resources to meet the demand of the street children. This may account for their poor performances as expressed by the children. Hence, the need for better support for NGOs targeting street children by local and international donors for their improved performances.

Finally, the community being second on the ranking scale also become important in any effort to find solutions to the problems of street children. Hence, policies aimed at providing support to the street children must be community based strategies which should include enlightenment campaign and the inclusion of community members as co-executors of programmes aimed at supporting the street children.