Urban livelihoods from children’s perspectives: protecting and promoting assets on the streets of Dhaka

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SUMMARY: This paper investigates what children in street situations in Dhaka value as important, and how they protect and promote their livelihoods when living on the street. It argues that, despite the common belief held by many people in mainstream society, in the realm of policy and in NGOs, these children are not destitute. They have dynamic portfolios of assets and show complex coping strategies generally managed in a group. When considering policy implications, this paper argues that to be effective, sustainable and respectful, intervention has to abandon the focus on children’s deprivations often fostered by a strict interpretation of children’s rights. On the contrary, a more systematic investigation of children’s initiatives to improve their lives when on the street should guide interventions on how to help them strengthen their assets, rather than to create substitutes for them.

“I think we don’t have anything because we live on the street. They don’t see the many things we can have even if living here … You can say I am poor but I’m not a ‘kangali’. (1) NGOs give us what they want without asking us what is important for us. But we could not live without certain things we value important and we do what we can to get them.

(1) Fumala, 17-year-old girl

I. INTRODUCTION

IT IS SURPRISING that the concepts of livelihoods and assets, so extensively used in poverty analysis,(2) have rarely been applied to children, especially children living on city streets. These children are a painful reminder of the shortfalls of current interventions to reduce poverty and vulnerability at a time of unprecedented economic growth and global well-being.(3) Deprived children, like other “…perennial losers who … in the aggressive restaging of the new world order are … categories of ‘superfluous’ people…”(4) fall easily through the net of planned interventions. The growing number of street-living children worldwide(5) is a clear indication of the inadequacy of policy and social action to contain and prevent this phenomenon.

This paper focuses on children living on the streets of Dhaka, Bangladesh, and is intended to deepen our understanding of their assets and how they promote, protect and secure their livelihoods.(6) It investigates what these children have and what they value. Children’s personal efforts to improve their lives and their prospects involve a complex use of both individual and collective coping strategies for increasing and “accumulating” assets.(7) An understanding of these efforts is critical for guiding policy and action.

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Children in street situations are not passive recipients of intervention. On the contrary, they demonstrate versatile and resilient behaviours in their efforts to secure autonomy and rights for themselves. Yet this complicated process whereby children tailor a new social and political space for themselves is riddled with contradictory outcomes and painful experiences, and might also lead to self-destructive behaviours.

As 17-year-old Fumala explains above, there are “things” that are important for street-living children, which they actively protect and promote using every means available. These efforts tend to be ignored or underestimated by development practitioners because they are a response to non-conventional logic and sui generis rationality. Policy makers and social workers hardly recognize children’s assets, and wrongly perceive these children as destitute street scavengers.

It has been proposed that children’s perception of well-being is influenced more by their social relationships than by material assets. Evidence from a range of sources suggests that this is certainly the case among children in street situations, whose non-material assets – such as feelings of affection and trust among friends – contribute to what Chawla has called the “cultural richness” of street life. These children are extremely careful to distinguish between their material poverty, the richness of their social relationships and the complexities of livelihoods promotion when on the street. They value deeply their sense of independence and personal control. Many of them make sense of their situation through their pride in their coping strategies; others value their social networks, sharing resources, mutuality and the social care that they can gain through interacting with those in similar predicaments.

There are policy implications: supporting children’s development must begin with a consideration of what matters to children and must be consistent with their livelihood strategies and efforts. Effective action for poverty reduction starts with a strengthening of what poor people have already put in place, while considering the specific opportunities and constraints that each social environment presents. Interventions that do not respect what children are doing for themselves, and what they value, are likely to fail.

II. PERCEPTIONS OF POVERTY AND INTERVENTION: THE PROBLEM

THERE IS INCREASING awareness that development is ideally concerned with promoting social justice rather than simply reducing material poverty. However, material-needs satisfaction is still presented as the most effective response to the multiple deprivations of poor people. The theoretical recognition of the multifaceted nature of poverty is seldom reflected in the prevailing strategies adopted by most poverty reduction programmes. As Clarke and Sison have shown, this gap reflects a difference in the perceptions of mainstream society and those of the poor of what poverty is, how it affects life and how it can effectively be tackled. The recurrent failures in development efforts are due in part to preconceptions that actors in development projects have about development processes. As argued by Boyden et al., “common myths are called up to substitute for hard evidence and justify what has been decided” as a mutually convenient consensus between governments, groups and international and national institutions. These “narratives” tend to prevail even in the face of research.


7. “Accumulation” should not be considered on a restrictive material basis. On the streets, “accumulation” mainly refers to the process of accumulating skills, knowledge, expertise, experience and social networks (see, for instance, Wood, G (2003), “Staying secure, staying poor: the ‘Faustian bargain’”, World Development Vol 31, No 3, pages 455–471). Indeed, these are often non-material assets rather than material ones.


9. Bourgois, P (1995), In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio, Cambridge University Press; also Felsman, K J demonstrating their falsehood. (24) The tendency to rely on “received wisdom” holds true also in the context of street-living and working children. Although there has been systematic research on children’s expressed priorities, expectations and desires, as well as on the effects of intervention on their lifecourses, scant attention has been paid to this evidence.

In its discussion of children in street situations in Dhaka, this paper validates the observations made by White, (25) who argues that in Bangladesh we need to be much more critical about the unproblematic identification of the common interests of state, civil society and NGOs with the expressed needs of the poor. As in other countries, many programmes in Bangladesh that seek to assist children start from narrow assumptions, namely that these children lack everything and that their livelihood strategies are not useful for their “rehabilitation”. Policy makers, social workers and NGOs make provision for what they think these children lack: often, free meals programmes, night shelters, schooling and clothes distribution. But the increasing number of youngsters who prefer to live on the street rather than attend these programmes, the reluctance of many to change their lives, and the despair of many social workers are clear evidence that this approach is, at least, questionable.

As Dordick (26) explains, homelessness encourages a process in which personal relationships are mobilized to produce what the physical environment fails to provide: a safe and secure place to live. Yet, while the development literature is replete with “lessons” and “learning from experience”, the truth is that not learning from experience is what characterizes the knowledge-creating dynamics of much of the development endeavour. (27) Interventions on behalf of street dwellers are no exception.

While a lack of money and material assets are problems for the urban poor, the nature of social relationships, both within low-income settlements (including the streets) and between excluded categories of urban people and mainstream society, is an important factor in the processes that perpetuate poverty and exclusion. (28) As explained in this paper, children in street situations are able to develop, promote and protect their livelihood assets when living on the street. Interventions that build on understanding and strengthening the assets of the poor can have substantial implications for their empowerment. (29) This perspective leads to an understanding of the urban poor and those in marginalized sub-cultures (such as children in street situations) no longer simply as people in need of social welfare but, rather, as leading partners in processes to improve their communities, and as contributors to the overall well-being of the city. (30)

III. METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

THIS STUDY DRAWS on one year of field research in Dhaka, which began in August 2002, and in which a total of 62 boys and 31 girls took part. These participants worked/lived in four main sites, all with a high degree of economic activity (a market, train and bus stations and a river port). Most of the children were not permanently involved in any rehabilitation or reintegration programmes at the time of the research, but a majority (65 per cent) had previously been enrolled in NGO activities. By selecting children from different locations, by running interviews both at night and during the day, and by undertaking field research over a whole year, it was possible to reduce bias related to seasonality and periodic practices. Although street life manifests itself in as many ways as there are children on the street, the children selected for this research can be considered to provide an illus-
tative snap-shot of life on the street in Dhaka.

The main methods used were ethnographic observation, in-depth interviews, daily activity schedules and group discussions. Every group discussion was preceded by games that the researcher had designed to introduce the theme of the discussion in a manner that encouraged children to use their imaginations.\(^\text{(31)}\) It is believed that this approach reduced children’s “reactivity” (or their tendency to change their “normal” behaviours and/or ways of thinking in the presence of an outsider/adult\(^\text{(32)}\)). Eight boys and eight girls volunteered for two advisory groups responsible for reviewing all parts of the field research process, implementing some of the interviews, facilitating group discussions and suggesting changes in the research process. Towards the end of the field research, a semi-structured questionnaire was used to triangulate qualitative data that had been collected and to add a quantitative dimension to the analysis.\(^\text{(33)}\)

IV. WHEN CHILDREN ARE PERCEIVED AS DESTITUTE

THE GOVERNMENT PROJECT entitled Appropriate Resources for Improving Street Children’s Environment (ARISE) reports that there are 500,000 children living on the street in Bangladesh, of which 75 per cent are in Dhaka.\(^\text{(34)}\) In Bangladesh, as in many other countries, the prevailing perception of mainstream society is that these children live in absolute deprivation. As expressed by Arif (15-year-old boy):

“They [mainstream society] call us ‘kangali’ (destitute) and they say to us: ‘What are you doing on the street? Go back home, find yourself a good job, don’t dishonour your family’ …. But we are not kangali … we are working for a living and we also do many other good things.”

According to Harriss-White,\(^\text{(35)}\) destitution refers to the complete or near-complete absence of assets or control over owned assets. As pinpointed by Devereux,\(^\text{(36)}\) the strength of this definition lies in its combination of the notion of economic destitution (“having almost nothing”) with the notion of social and political destitution (“being almost nothing”). These children are perceived as incapable of meeting their minimum subsistence needs, with no access to productive assets, and dependent on public and/or private transfers.\(^\text{(37)}\)

The word kangali often implies not only these attributes of deprivation, but also the condition of being depraved. The street’s dust and mud are conceived as visual representations of a world dominated by illicit activities and deviance, by immorality and sin, and these children are depicted as “...an unacceptable phenomenon of human degradation.”\(^\text{(38)}\)

V. WHAT IS IMPORTANT IN YOUR DAILY LIFE?

TO CHALLENGE THE assumption that street-living children are destitute, the present study investigated their livelihoods starting from a simple open-ended question: “What is important in your daily life?”\(^\text{(39)}\) In answering this question, children often directed the researcher’s attention to their coping strategies, and the way they develop, protect and promote what they think is important in their street living.

Using their own words, the children identified eight most important assets:
A brief discussion of each asset is provided here according to gender differences and stages of street adaptation. No common prioritization of these assets was found among children. Girls had a tendency to prioritize assets that were more relevant to immediate physical security, while older boys tended to prioritize financial assets such as money and working activities. Length of street life played an important role in the identification of assets, as well as shaping children’s evolving personalities (an extensive analysis of possible paths of children's lifecourses according to gender and length of street life has been presented by Conticini[42]).

a. Feelings of love and trusted friends

Feelings of love and trusted friends are important assets as presented by participant children when talking about their life on the street. This is in sharp contrast to the view of one NGO country director, who claimed that “...emotional support, sentimentality and affection can weaken the nature of children and reduce their survival skills.”

Children stressed their dependence on social interactions and on the sharing of affection and trust. Supportive social networks were perceived as important not only during crises but also in improving the quality of every activity. The peer group assumes a central role in providing both emotional and physical security for the children. The group (usually 5–10 children) is generally an open, informal, partially democratic structure, where membership is largely voluntary and based on trust, care, reciprocity and convenience. As also observed in other studies, the group gives children a feeling of belonging and an identity. Children maintain their own independence, but also learn to adapt their personal needs to the necessities of the group and to use personal skills for the benefit of friends. Group members usually have common experiences that are the basis for understanding each others’ problems, sharing worries and alleviating sorrows. A complex system of mutual support includes the exchange of money, information and goods among children in the same group, with priority generally given to those most in need.

Love and friends make children feel at home on the street. According to Shoel (13-year-old boy): “Home is not where you sleep but is where you feel loved.” The feeling of being part of a street group can be so emotionally deep that some children refuse opportunities to leave the street for fear of losing their friends. Children are more likely to leave the street when this is a planned strategy involving friends and peers. When they make this attempt alone, they usually develop feelings of social injustice and of having betrayed their friends, and eventually return to the streets and to their friends. When NGOs try to help a single child, and ignore the strength of his or her social ties, this diminishes the likelihood of successful reintegration and is perceived by children as disrespectful interference in their efforts to build alternative social relationships.

When talking about affection, children also mentioned their sexual
activities. These were presented by girls as an attempt to fulfill their need to be loved and their desire to be accepted by mainstream society. Boys were less inclined to see sexual activity as a way of sharing affection, preferring to describe it as a “game”, a “means of income” and a “source of pleasure”. While boys satisfied their needs more easily through relationships with peers, girls were more likely to look for affection through relationships with adults, who were perceived as wiser and more likely to provide lasting relationships. Boys reported that they had little interest in forming stable relationships, and while girls were more often in deep emotional distress following the breakdown of a relationship, boys were less subject to depression.

b. Cooperation

Cooperation developed between children in street situations is an important form of socialization and is a means of increasing knowledge and skills. Children have been seen to pay more attention to the development of social relationships than to the maximization of economic opportunities. At the same time, supportive social networks can improve children’s access to better economic opportunities. Well-established children with stronger social connections, for instance, often help newcomers to gain access to work opportunities. In a number of cases, older children tried to convince employers to give the same opportunity to their younger friends as soon as an opportunity arose.

While a strict utilitarian approach would argue that children are cooperating with peers only to achieve personal gain and to access opportunities that would otherwise be unavailable, the evidence suggests that this analysis is narrow and incomplete. Children’s cooperation may involve selfishness but also includes reciprocity, altruism and benevolence – solidarity indeed. Nevertheless, in a number of cases where children had a long experience of street life, a decline in cooperative activity was observed, leading to progressive isolation from the group. Some children excluded themselves because they started to be suspicious of everything and everyone, even showing depressive and paranoid attitudes. The group also actively expelled children who were reluctant to abandon activities considered either immoral or incompatible with group values.

c. Money

Children mentioned a number of financial activities, ranging from cash management to savings, from remittances to credit and debt. Far from having a simple hand-to-mouth existence, these children used a complex series of strategies in managing finance, including bartering.

Many participants had never had direct access to cash before arriving on the street. They learned progressively how to manage their cash and expenses, and how to take advantage of various job opportunities. Access to the urban informal labour market can double their income-earning capacity relative to that in rural areas. However, such a direct comparison is misleading, given the higher cost of living in urban areas. The majority of children interviewed reported a daily income ranging from 40 to 70 Taka, but this varied greatly according to the job. There is a difference between income and disposable income because of the taxes/brides children have to pay to mastaans (mafia members), matabbars (community leaders), the police, guards, and station and launch senior staff. Girls said they were subjected to higher taxes than boys even when performing the same work.

References

In a number of cases, the taxes paid by girls reached 50 to 60 per cent of their income. The boys’ taxes were between 30 and 50 per cent, varying according to the nature of work, the connections of the child and the workplace.

In the early phases of street life, children tended to have minimal savings because of the scarcity of work and the lack of access to safe places to deposit their money. Once children started to build trusting relationships with social workers or street agents, they were likely to start saving, however irregularly. Tables 1 and 2 present children’s reported savings in the week prior to their interview, and their total savings deposited anywhere.

As insurance against the risk of losing all their savings, children commonly deposited their money with two or three people at the same time. These “money-guards” are friends, elder brothers/sisters, shopkeepers, social workers, NGOs, protectors and relatives, chosen according to their reputation, accessibility, emotional proximity to the child (i.e. long friendship) or kinship linkages. Above all, mutual trust was the reason for choosing a money-guard.

Girls usually reported having less access to remunerative income-generating activities. But when the same earning capacity was reported, girls showed a tendency to save more than boys. “Girls never know what Allah reserves for them the next day” explained 8-year-old Jhinu Rani.

When children are “addicted to street life” – meaning they cannot conceive of themselves off the street – they are more likely to spend all their earnings, living on a day-by-day basis. And especially if they are involved in illicit activities, they consider their earnings as papyer pisa (money of sin), and not worth saving. Other factors include their declining health, after living on the street for a considerable length of time. The lack of life and property security can also contribute to a fatalistic understanding of life, and can reduce their capacity to plan. Besides, the self-destructive attitudes of children addicted to street life tend to increase their expenditures on such

**Table 1:** Children’s daily saving capacity (N=80)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of children</th>
<th>Very little or no savings</th>
<th>Less than 30 Taka per day</th>
<th>Between 30 and 100 Taka per day</th>
<th>Between 100 and 200 Taka per day</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
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</table>

SOURCE: Author’s survey.

**Table 2:** Total of deposited savings (N=80)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of children</th>
<th>No savings deposited</th>
<th>Between 0 and 500 Taka</th>
<th>Between 500 and 800 Taka</th>
<th>Between 800 and 1,500 Taka</th>
<th>More than 1,500 Taka</th>
<th>Don’t know</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10</td>
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transgressions as drugs, alcohol and commercial sex.

Strong mutual support networks lead to an increased incidence of lending and borrowing. Short-term loans from group members and mastaans are common, and it is rare for children to run away after accumulating considerable debt. Arguably, they know that the most important asset they have is social support, and they will not risk losing this. However, when a child does not spontaneously repay a debt, he or she will find it harder and harder to get further credit, and eventually will be excluded by the social network. (55)

Remittances to their original household are an important aspect of children’s financial management. Particularly at the beginning of their street life, some children send a considerable part of their savings home. The money is sent to the household through trusted people, including kin, who periodically return to the rural areas. In some cases, remittances are used as a form of informal “health insurance” – if they become seriously ill, some children will return home for medical treatment. Remittances are also linked to children’s feelings of guilt at having left home, and to their sense of responsibility for contributing to the household, especially when there are younger brothers and sisters. These attitudes tend to fade when children stay longer on the street, and their savings begin to be channelled into plans for opening a “business” on the street or building up their own family.

d. Work and play

Children in street situations perform a number of jobs in the informal labour market. In a recent study by Rahman (56) on child labour in Bangladesh, of 301 economic activities identified for children, girls had access to only 11, nearly all jobs which required no substantial acquisition of skills. Reportedly, the kinds of jobs performed by children range from tempo-bay, (57) washing cars and collecting paper, to selling, domestic and garment work. According to children’s narratives, the informal labour market on the street operates only through a system of references, leaving the children little choice but to accept patronage in order to gain access to income-generating activities. This patron–client relationship has consequences for children’s real or perceived freedom of choice in terms of the working activities they perform.

Many children work more than ten hours a day, but this varies according to the job performed. Most are self-employed and tend to work during the day, but a number work at night. Working conditions are generally poor and unhealthy: many children are exposed to excessive dust and dirt as a consequence of the high pollution in Dhaka’s streets. New opportunities, curiosity and high job insecurity make children highly mobile in their employment. This mobility is increased by the reported use of physical punishment and beatings in the workplace.

Despite long working hours, participant children value play time as an important part of their daily activities: “Playing! Here (on the street), everything can become a game when you also know how to play with the danger” (Rathna, 14-year-old girl). Observations suggest that, on the street, there is no right or wrong time for doing anything, leading to a feeling of freedom inconceivable to children living at home. They use their bodies as they please, for instance in sexual experimentation and drug consumption, which, in many cases, are deemed game activities.

Leisure time for boys includes going to the movies, hanging around with friends, sitting and watching street life, meeting people, playing video


37. See Dasgupta, P (1993), An Inquiry into Well-being and Destitution, Clarendon Press, Oxford, page viii for notes on destitution seen as “an extreme condition of ill-being” or “extreme commodity deprivation”, which results in a failure to meet a “basic minimum living standard” or “basic physiological needs”.

38. See reference 34.

39. A livelihood is defined here as comprising “...the capabilities, assets (both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living.” See reference 2, Carney (1998), page 4.

40. Children also presented a further asset, the “feeling of security”, which refers to their desire to be protected from the different forms of violence and abuse experienced on the street. Arguably, this is not an independent variable but a dependent one, and its development is a direct consequence of the management of all the previous assets. A discussion on the feeling of security on the street and protection from violence has been provided in Conticini, A (2004), We are the Kings: The Children of Dhaka’s Streets, Institute for Development Policy and Management, University of Manchester.
games and visiting girls. As observed by Edensor, even movement on the streets can be an adventure in itself. Girls are less mobile, and tend to spend their leisure time playing and chatting with friends in the neighbourhood. The very possibility of talking on the street is seen as a form of freedom, especially when compared to purdah, the experience of being confined to the home. As Mukta (16-year-old girl) said: “Now I do believe the street is a public place, where not only men have the right to stay. We (girls) are entitled too.”

Holidays are valued as important opportunities to fulfill children’s curiosity about travelling to other cities or even to other countries: “I have ridden the Chittagong express to Cox’s Bazaar beach, I have taken the Buriganga River ferry and swum in the Bengal Bay, and never paid for a ticket. I went to Mumbai twice and I visited some friends in Sylhet … while many people here have never left Dhaka for more than two days” (Shafique, 15-year-old boy).

Children’s curiosity, relative freedom of movement and capacity to “make friends” make them experts at finding their way around, and this gives them the opportunity to take advantage of what is available in different places.

e. Food

While many NGOs focus interventions on ensuring health and education for children in street situations, food is generally deemed more important by children than health care and informal education. In many cases, nearly 50 per cent of their available income is spent on food. As they gain access to better-paid jobs, the quantity and quality of their food improves. Sharing food is an important part of children’s socialization on the street. It does not matter how much is available: there is always a bite for a friend.

Participating children reported having at least two meals a day, often three. The nutritional value of these meals varies considerably from day to day. Rice, chapati, ruti, daal, eggs, fish and vegetables are the main ingredients of their daily diet. For children who undertake heavy physical work and who have better-paid jobs, meat is also important for “feeling stronger and looking prettier”. A health professional from a local NGO reported that children in street situations are more likely to meet their daily dietary requirements than the majority of slum and rural children, due to their greater access to income, direct control over their earnings and broader range of choice in the city’s market.

On the other hand, basic requirements for a balanced diet and norms of hygiene are still far from being met on the street. There is evidence suggesting that nutritional disorders such as vitamin A deficiency, iodine deficiency and iron deficiency are risks for these children. These can mean a lower resistance to infection, night blindness, anaemia and micronutrient malnutrition, leading to increased morbidity and impaired mental and physical development. Newcomers are particularly exposed to hunger, but their situation improves progressively as their knowledge of opportunities and available social networks increases.

f. Health

In reporting their most common diseases, participants noted diarrhoea, physical injuries, anorexia, stomach and respiratory infections, skin diseases and sexually transmitted diseases, or symptoms related to these. NGO health workers added tetanus, measles, typhoid and diphtheria to
the list. Some of these diseases are water–borne, and relate to the lack of access to safe drinking water and to latrines for these children. Health status tends to vary with time on the street. As the health officer of a local NGO reported:

“If we compare the health status of these children in their first period of street life with the health status of established children in street situations, we will notice a gradual betterment in the first years. However, when the child stays on the street for very long periods, his or her health condition progressively worsens, even taking into account self-destructive behaviours such as self-mutilation, use of drugs and non-protected sex activities.”

Overall, the children participating in the survey reported being sick for an average of two to three days in the previous month. The people they went to for health care were friends, trusted adults, relatives or household members, traditional doctors, social workers and doctors at NGO clinics. Treatment was often sought from traditional or unqualified practitioners, with only one child out of four consulting qualified doctors. Gaining access to hospitals and clinics is a major problem presented by children. They reported that “...doctors say what do you want here? You are a ‘dirty kangali’, go back to where you come from.”

Overall, children’s access to medical treatment is hampered by six main obstacles:

- discrimination between “deserving” and “non-deserving” poor in delivering medical assistance;
- cost of treatment;
- locations difficult to reach;
- lack of awareness of their medical needs;
- lack of awareness of medical facilities available;
- bureaucracy of health care structures.

Access to NGO clinics is easier, and children have sometimes gained access to hospitals through these clinics. Still, the cost of treatment remains a problem, especially for a sick child. However, through the mutual support of peers, the child may be able to buy the necessary medicines and recover for a while.

This study found a generally high exposure to sexually transmitted diseases and HIV among these children, along with a low level of awareness. Seventy per cent of children who responded to the semi-structured questionnaire said they were sexually active, but only one in four had heard about HIV or AIDS. Among those, only one-third had any idea about the effects of HIV or how it is communicated. Among sexually active children, only a minority reported having ever used condoms, and no child used them regularly. Especially if they were sex workers, the children could not impose the use of condoms because of the lack of bargaining power with clients.

A common feature reported in the literature with regard to children’s mental health is their lack of self-esteem when living on the street. Our analysis suggests that this varies greatly according to both events and children’s personal characteristics. As mentioned above, the children’s stage of street adaptation also plays an important role in determining their perception of self – some define themselves as good children, some as good children in a bad environment, and some as bad children in a bad environment. The problem is compounded by the general perception held by mainstream Bangladeshi society, which views the children’s economic poverty as a blameworthy manifestation of moral degradation. This, in turn, can affect children’s self-esteem. However, sharing experiences and mutual support...
A key issue is whether there are differences in this regard between street-living and home-living children. There are insufficient data for a comprehensive answer, but it is worth observing that a high suicide rate has been noted among home-living adolescent boys and girls, and young married women.\(^{(64)}\) By contrast, no cases of suicide have been reported among children in street situations by peers and social workers. Even children “addicted to street life”, who are characterized by high levels of depression and behaviours that could threaten their future survival, do not seem to consider suicide as an option. However, a number of these children appear to have more limited aspirations than non-street-living children. Arguably, in a context of insecurity and disappointment, low expectations could be considered a psychological coping strategy.\(^{(65)}\) Children learn to restrict their ambitions, moderating their aspirations realistically according to the possibilities.\(^{(66)}\)

**g. Education**

Nearly all the children interviewed had numeracy skills, but many remained illiterate. Both boys and girls recognized the importance of education, but the quality and relevance of education were both points of concern. Many children reported that they had no access to the technical or vocational courses that they considered “important education”.

Some 80 per cent of children responding to the semi-structured questionnaire reported having attended street education programmes, although 50 per cent did not stay for more than one year. These informal programmes run by NGOs involve daily lessons of two or three hours in open-air meeting points, and recreational activities may be combined with formal classes. Among children currently attending street classes, the majority report regular or semi-regular attendance, usually a couple of hours per day. School attendance is higher and more constant for girls than for boys, probably due to the fewer working options available to girls on the street.

The most common reasons for dropping out or for irregular attendance were lack of interest, work commitments, not having friends in class, being tired from the previous day’s/night’s work, and fear of being subjected to unwanted medical treatments (e.g. blood samples being taken by injection). School attendance gradually decreases according to the length of street life for both boys and girls. Children who do not get involved in reintegration programmes run by NGOs are extremely likely to drop out of open-air schools, preferring to have time for work or play. Arguably, educational activities are a good entry point for building a trusting relationship between the social worker and the child, and they give the willing and “deserving” child the possibility of moving upward to more and more supportive programmes of reintegration. However, when NGOs fail to involve children in this way, education starts to be perceived as a waste of time both by the children and, at times, by social workers, who consider the children “beyond assistance” because of their unwillingness to change.\(^{(67)}\)

**h. Use of space**

“Place” has critical importance in what has been called “the new social studies of childhood”.\(^{(68)}\) The concept of place includes both the social and spatial aspects of children’s lives\(^{(69)}\) and the relationship with and experience of place is fundamental to children’s feeling of belonging.

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\(^{57}\) Helper in private or public transport.

\(^{58}\) Edensor compares the pedestrian movement on the streets of India and other developing countries with the pedestrian movement in many developed countries. He argues that while in developed countries everything is regulated and dominated by a clear order and rules, in developing countries the chaos on the streets plays a big role. If you want to move from point A to point B, it is nearly impossible to walk in a straight line; you constantly have to negotiate your passage with animals, other pedestrians, unexpected obstacles, etc. Thus it becomes an adventure, and it is near impossible to predict the kind of experiences you will face. See Edensor, T (1998), “The culture of Indian street” in Fyfe, N (editor), Images of the Street, Routledge, London and New York.

\(^{59}\) Interview held in January 2003.

\(^{60}\) Interview held in April 2003.


\(^{62}\) See reference 54.

\(^{63}\) Husain, S (2000), Breaking the Cycle. Working Children in Bangladesh, World Bank – Government of Bangladesh, Dhaka; also see reference 34.

\(^{64}\) Information provided by the former chief of the UNICEF Child Protection Section, February 2003. Triangulation of this information is partially conditioned by no study with peers is an important counter-balance to this.

\(^{65}\) Husain, S (2000), Breaking the Cycle. Working Children in Bangladesh, World Bank – Government of Bangladesh, Dhaka; also see reference 34.

\(^{66}\) Information provided by the former chief of the UNICEF Child Protection Section, February 2003. Triangulation of this information is partially conditioned by no study.
Children in street situations live in public areas with little or no possibility of gaining access to private space. Being “public”, however, does not equate with being free. In fact, public space is subject to extensive regulation and control by a number of players such as the police, mastaans, shop owners and influential people. The groups controlling these places display attitudes towards children that range from repression or demanding taxes for the activities that are taking place, to tolerance and promotion of their activities:(70)

Bangladeshi children in street situations are highly capable of adapting the space available to them according to their needs. As with their ability to travel around the city, country or to other countries, this is a personal source of pride. As reported by Rahaman Khan (14-year-old boy):

“Here on the street we are free … Being free means that you can go where you want and you can bet with your friends that you will go to places where it is nearly impossible to go … I meet people (and) … I discover new things. I can go where poor people cannot go.”

During the process of street adaptation, children’s relationship with place changes, and they become better able to colonize public places and to transform unknown and dangerous spaces into “home territories”. They reduce the complexity of encounters, maximizing those with people already known and reducing encounters with unknown people. For children who succeed, urban space becomes progressively safer to explore, easier to understand and more predictable.(71) On the other hand, those who do not succeed are trapped within a space that they constantly perceive as being dangerous and alienating.

The use of space also has a gender dimension for street-living children in Bangladesh. Girls were found to be less mobile than boys and more reluctant to colonize new areas; they felt more secure in known places with known people. Because of this, the size of social networks and controlled territories is generally larger for boys.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

WHEN REVIEWING THE characteristics of successful programmes for poverty reduction in urban areas, Mitlin(72) stresses that, to be effective, interventions must consolidate and develop poor people’s assets. Successful programmes rarely address a single type of asset but, rather, tend to support a set of processes that are mutually reinforcing.

The failure of many ongoing programmes to provide a better life for children living on the street can be explained by their limited consideration of what matters to children. These programmes tend to underestimate the importance of the coping strategies children develop cooperatively during their period of street life. Development practitioners’ approach is too often oriented towards implementing a cocktail of standardized interventions not relevant to children’s expressed needs, desires and aspirations. Through answering the question: “What is important in your daily life?”, children have presented what we might refer to as their priorities. They actively establish strategies for livelihood protection and promotion as a starting point for increasing well-being. Although material needs satisfaction is considered important in children’s lives, their perception of well-being is even more dependent on the quality of the social relationships they build with their peers. The material poverty of these children stands in contrast to the complex social relations they build in order to access emotional and being found on the issue and by the practice of police officers hiding suspected cases of suicide through reporting “death for accidental reasons”.


72. See reference 28.
protective security as well as income-generating activities, food security, health and education. Many children on the street are seeking protective security rather than basic needs satisfaction. This means that economic policies alone will not be effective in uplifting the lives of these children. On the contrary, policy makers and practitioners should pay more attention to the promotion of a more comprehensive package of social policies that can give priority to the social relationships that children build when living on the streets. To be effective and respectful, intervention should not target the child alone but should, at the same time, consider the groups of friends and the many people who play an important role in children’s lives.

The increased participation of street-living children in all matters concerning their lives is an important complementary issue that social policies can successfully promote. As this study has reported, there is an often wide gap between children’s understanding of their experiences on the street and the way adults interpret these experiences. Increased active participation, that allows children to be part of the decision-making processes, will not simply contribute to the fulfilment of one of children’s basic rights. It will also foster an increased understanding by adults of how this children’s world operates. Participation is particularly important for girls living on the street. As explained above, their social networks tend to be smaller, and the areas where they feel secure are smaller than those for boys. This is why providing a bigger physical and political space for children in street situations to express themselves is probably the first action policy makers might want to consider.

Children’s ingenuity in finding suitable and logical solutions to the short-falls in their living situations deserves to be presented as “cultural richness”. To admit that a remarkable number of children are resourceful in difficult circumstances neither implies that a dangerous environment is favourable nor that the children should be expected to tolerate such adversities. However, the focus on children’s livelihood strategies does call into question the inevitability of a life of destitution for these street dwellers. It also provides a number of suitable entry points for building interventions, starting from what is already in place rather than substituting for it.

When we turn our attention to child rights using a purist approach, we usually focus on the gap between what should be in a “perfect” world and what is in the real world, often missing the value of the accomplishments achieved so far, or the coping strategies of poor people. What has to be stressed is the importance of assessing what beneficiaries are already doing for themselves, using a more bottom-up perspective. For social change to take place it is necessary to understand the environment and opportunities that exist in each social and political context. This is where the theory of sustainable livelihoods turns out to be an important factor, adding a more bottom-up perspective to the general child–rights approach, and allowing for the creation of a conceptual framework that fosters one type of sustainable development that, while trying to reach universal goals, is built upon local opportunities for action and beneficiaries’ strengths.

Finally, much of the children’s livelihood management depends on the patterns of street adaptation that are followed. These patterns will, in turn, have different outcomes over children’s lifecourses. This paper has voluntarily neglected this aspect of the analysis, leaving to future work the responsibility of considering in greater detail the implications of these patterns on children’s present and future lives, which create multiple possibilities for what we might call the “consequences” of street life for children.

73. See reference 13.


75. A number of publications produced by the BASIS Collaborative Research Support Program, for instance, seek to deepen our understanding of the importance of time and cycles in understanding poor people’s assets (see http://www.basis.wisc.edu).