

Why do children migrate to the streets? Government and Civil Society must address child vulnerability

By Tanja Kisslinger, Mkombozi Volunteer

Although many national and international organisations believe children migrate to the streets because of financial poverty in the family context, Mkombozi knows that the immediate and underlying factors of child migration are actually caused by non-income forms of poverty. Non-income forms of poverty include:

- Ⓞ family breakdown, marriage breakdown, divorce, step parenting;
- Ⓞ lack of community support, lack of extended family support, breakdown of support networks;
- Ⓞ unjust community structures and practices (e.g. forced young marriage);
- Ⓞ marginalisation and exclusion (e.g. traditional gender roles that restrict education for women);
- Ⓞ lack of conflict resolution and stress management skills by the parents;
- Ⓞ lack of parental education about child care and development;
- Ⓞ breakdown in traditional value systems.

Mkombozi's research and experience show that these non-income forms of poverty actually exacerbate income poverty and lead to a high level of familial stress or dysfunction. In turn, this dysfunction - including conflict, abuse, alcoholism, substance abuse, poor communication skills, truancy, theft, illegal activities, and isolation from the wider community - cause children to be "vulnerable" or "at risk" of leaving home.

Problematically, a recent Mkombozi study* of Government and Civil Society responses to child vulnerability shows that national poverty reduction strategies and international organisations fail to fully address the non-income forms of poverty that drive children to the streets. They also fail to include any form of protection for children from the factors that cause them to become vulnerable. In fact, even international organisations - perfectly poised to effect real policy change - are largely focused on working with street children by tackling income poverty alone or by tackling the problems children face when they're already homeless.

Given the current focus in policy making circles on implementing the National Strategy for Growth and the Reduction of Poverty (NSGRP/MKUKUTA) and developing pro-poor policies, it is vital that Government and Civil Society build a picture of the dynamics occurring amongst the most vulnerable groups in society. Street children and socially excluded youth are a visible manifestation of poverty in rural and urban contexts - they provide a clear indicator of the success or not of social safety networks in addressing child and familial vulnerability. Mkombozi recommends that attention be focused on how the Government (both national and local), Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and the general public can work together to ensure that MKUKUTA strategies (particularly those related to improved quality of life and social well-being) can be integrated into all our practices and realised at a grassroots level.

Notably, Mkombozi's study of responses to child vulnerability includes case studies of several street child organisations working alongside Mkombozi in the Kilimanjaro and Arusha Regions. The case studies show that important and effective work is being done with Tanzania's street children. For instance, the understanding of critical "push" and "pull" factors which cause children to migrate to the streets (e.g. AIDS, poverty, family breakdown, inaccessibility of primary education, boredom at home and in the community) is an essential premise to a complete understanding of the causation of non-income forms of poverty.

The case studies also show that Mkombozi's Community Strengthening approach is unique in Tanzania. With this approach, Mkombozi facilitates the direct involvement of communities in the research and understanding of child migration, enabling them to decide upon and implement changes within their own geographical area to halt this pattern.

Mkombozi strongly recommends that local, national and international street child organisations adopt and employ the Community Strengthening model so that the crucial link between non-income forms of poverty and child migration can be understood at a global and regional level. In this way, communities can be empowered to design and develop interventions and strategies to mediate conflict in families and in the community, knowledge can be shared among groups, and social support networks can be improved.

Mkombozi knows that 30% of children are "at risk" of coming to the streets. As such, it is not enough to work with children who are already homeless - every effort is required to find innovative and effective ways to reach those children who are vulnerable within their homes now and will inevitably turn to the streets.

*Download in PDF format (1.23MB): <http://www.mkombozi.org/pdf/200509childvulnerability.pdf>

