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Census reveals urgent need for education, protection and recreation services for children and youth

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Throughout the media, public policy and social discourse, street children tend to be regarded as a “problem” and as an “alienated street society”. Mkombozi - the only NGO in Tanzania actively involving communities in the prevention of child migration to the streets - believes that the construction of a separate “street world” actually perpetuates the social exclusion of the poor and those deemed socially “alien”.

Extending its 2003 and 2005 census studies of children and youth on the streets of Arusha and Moshi towns, Mkombozi's recently released 2006 census provides important insight into the lives and aspirations of street children and youth in northern Tanzania and it evaluates the effectiveness of Mkombozi's own outreach interventions. Mkombozi's findings contradict prevailing attitudes that street children are deviant, criminal and socially aberrant.

Consider that, across Arusha and Moshi towns, 36% of street youth spend their time working (77% doing so for more than 12 hours a day), 26% spend their time meeting basic needs and 24% percent reportedly spend their time begging (75% doing so for more than 12 hours a day). Street girls primarily rely on a “regular, daily job” at the same place and secondarily on buying and selling goods, whereas males tend to focus on opportunistic work. Consider also that 64% of these youth use the proceeds from such work and survival activity for themselves, and 25% share the proceeds with family - this indicates that street networks in Moshi and Arusha do not primarily support gang / criminal behaviour.

In fact, compared to its January 2005 data, Mkombozi's 2006 census figures indicate a positive shift in the overall demographics of street child populations. In Moshi, part-time street children and youth have increased from 301 to 411, but the number of full-time street children has reduced from 169 to 51 - a 70% reduction. In Arusha, part-time street children and youth have decreased from 522 to 467 - a 11% reduction - and full-time street children have decreased from 354 to 173 - a 51% reduction.

Mkombozi's census further shows that these reductions actually reflect the aging of the street child population as opposed to a real decrease in the number of vulnerable children and youth. In 2005, 62% of full-time street children and youth were over the age of 15 years - in 2006, this had increased to 96%. Also, in Arusha, 24% of part-time street youth and 30% of full-time street youth had been “on the streets” for more than three years.

It is within this context of “aging” and “long-term” street populations that two key phenomena are revealed which should inform and underpin the interventions for vulnerable children and youth developed by Tanzania's government and NGOs:

(1) Street youth are relying on the street environment for their survival in ever-greater numbers. They have spent a significant part of their childhood in this environment and have strong survival skills, but they have missed out on education and development opportunities that would enable them to function within mainstream society. This has implications for the type of support they need to disengage from the street and reintegrate into more conventional roles.

(2) Youth continue to migrate to towns in search of employment and many adopt an opportunistic approach, regarding the street as a road towards self-determination and advancement. In a context of rapid urbanisation, youth unemployment and poverty, these youth are, in fact, making pragmatic decisions to use the streets as a means to lift themselves out of lives of poverty and/or abuse. Thus, street youth must be addressed as a collective failure in policy making as opposed to a “problem” for which individuals are penalised and stigmatised. There is an urgent and immediate need for investment in education and protection services for children, and employment and recreation opportunities for youth.