

Mkombozi

Empower. Engage. Enable.



THINK PIECE:

Mkombozi's rationale for challenging stereotypes about street children

International civil society has a vocabulary used to describe and define the situation of children who reside in the streets. As much as this vocabulary is useful in interventions and research, we must be careful about its shadow sides and the fact that children who are vulnerable and homeless are stigmatised by the vocabulary used to describe them. For example, what is the difference between reference to a "street child" and a "child who is homeless"? One phrase labels the child, the other explains the situation.

In the words of a former Mkombozi youth: "People say that there are 'street children' (watoto wa mtani), that children are coming 'from the streets'. I tell you there is no such thing as a child who belongs to the street, only children who belong to the community (watoto wa jamii)."

At the heart of Mkombozi's work lies the so-called "street child". We are not only seeking to change the perception that members of the public hold about children who reside in the streets, but also to encourage the use of a new vocabulary. If we can describe the situation of children without stigmatising them through labelling, the language could potentially lead the way in seeing vulnerable children in a new light - one with a higher sense of justice. At the end of the day, we should open our eyes to the fact that a child prefers to be seen as a child equal to other children, not to be labelled as somebody irreversibly "different". This is why Mkombozi's communications emphasise the root causes of children's situations / vulnerabilities, rather than depicting street children as an isolated issue.

Some people think that calling a person a "street child" will immediately explain his or her behaviour as a failing member of society. One dangerous assumption might be that the children in question are to blame for her own situation; that their own misbehaviour has caused them to live in the streets. There is surprisingly little understanding in Tanzania about the true nature of the social problems which ultimately cause child migration to the streets.

If a person feels that nobody believes in him/her, and that s/he is useless as a human being, their actions are influenced accordingly. But if somebody puts faith in that young person, despite the state that s/he appears to be in, s/he might be encouraged to progress in positive ways. This is one of the reasons why it is absolutely crucial that we put faith in the youth who reside in the streets, and that we encourage the public to do the same by challenging the stereotypes with which youth are being identified in their daily lives.

When we view street children as a symptom of societal dysfunction, we can begin to question many things that might have appeared "invisible" in the past. By creating understanding of the reasons why children run to the streets, we cast light on the real issues: lack of social protection for youth; lack of investment in youth; the breakdown of Tanzanian traditional systems in a new economic era; the absence of laws protect young people from the harmful actions of others. If the so-called street child is an innocent embodiment of all these things, is it not our duty to see the bigger picture that lies behind his/her homelessness and destructive behaviour? Simply put, by challenging the stereotypes of street children, we encourage much-needed "big-picture" thinking and social readiness for action among the citizens of Tanzania.

Child vulnerability in Tanzania goes far beyond children who reside in the streets - it is something that exists in many Tanzanian homes. It is important that we learn to see "street children" as just one aspect of child vulnerability in this country. In fact, what might distinguish them from others is not only their homelessness, but their high level initiative and resilience; at some point, each one of them decided to leave their home environment and seek a better life...



Children without homes belong to all of us.