

# Mkombozi

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## THINK PIECE:

### The passion of street work

By Fikiri Elias, Mkombozi Street Educator

The streets of Arusha have a remarkable number of children and youth who suffer from social exclusion, violence and neglect. It seems that society tends only to step forward once they see a positive change in these children's' lives. But you must put yourself in the shoes of such a child...

I always encourage people to come to the streets so that they can interact with and talk to the neglected children that I work with, in order to change their perspective towards them. One of the many reasons that people regard these children as "nothing" is because of their appearance while they are in the streets - often they are dirty and sometimes high on substances. But why wouldn't they look like that if they have no one to show them love and care for them?

As a Street Educator, the best strategy I can use to win this vulnerable group's trust is to give them love and affection, using good listening skills, an open attitude, awareness of their culture, and acknowledgement of their ability to solve conflicts. This is how I can help them to build a positive identity. Of course, it's a long road... you are dealing with attitudes that have been shaped by mental abuse. It takes a lot of time and space for behaviours to change and for a child to show positive effects. That's why I refer to outreach and street work as the "best unseen work done!"

In the streets, you will always find a number of small children who are sniffing glue which they get from town shoe shiners. First, I was surprised that someone would sell this substance to a child since it causes brain damage and mental disability. But I noticed the children have different tricks to buy the glue, and in fact, they are incredibly resourceful when it comes to making a bit of money. What courage they have to survive!

Through my two years of experience as an Mkombozi Street Educator, I have found that you must stick to the most important notion: awareness of the children you work with, and their hardship. If you really want to interact and gain their trust, it is important that you spend time understanding them. You must adapt yourself to their language and observe the various degrees of knowledge, skills and talents that exist among these children. All of these comprise their very essential "capital for survival".

Importantly, time has a big influence on knowledge and experience, and experience brings about the skills that these children currently have. Do not be prejudiced against their personalities; love them as they are and you will start to admire their personal challenges and growth. You may even find that this is a group you want to help make positive changes. Bear in mind, however, that positive change will only happen if you have passion in your heart, because it is very challenging to assist all of them as a group at the same time without becoming frustrated or tired. You will give up easily if you are not passionate enough...



Fikiri has worked with Mkombozi for 2 years



Fikiri takes time to develop trust and rapport

I believe that to strengthen your relationship with the children, you have to follow the rhythm of the street - observe the customs and codes of the street. As the group becomes accustomed to you, you should make yourself available to them through jokes, card plays, singing, games and sports so that you can identify opportunities to offer support. Still, there are some group structures which are hard reach into as a Street Educator due to the internal solidarity and activities of the group. And if a child who is new to the streets falls into such a group without intervention by a Street Educator, he/she will fast become accustomed to "group culture" and it will take time to reach that child.

The point is, you must be significant to the children who live / work on the street. Eventually, you will no longer need to move towards them every time at the same place - you will notice them moving towards you. Also keep in mind that street work is a long-term process and it requires resources. When there are insufficient resources, you will work according to your own convictions, creativities and assumptions. Moments like these can be difficult, because they may cause you to lose the children's trust - a trust which could have taken a year to establish. Remember: trust is the key to street work, and it must be maintained.

Notably, after spending time talking to many different youth living / working on the streets, and visiting some of their homes, I eventually realised that many of their families lacked a strong family structure / identity, which seemed to have led to a state of disorder. A part of the reason for this lack of family unity is poverty - poverty is often the root cause underlying domestic violence, child abuse, excessive child work, poor health due to poor feeding, and parenting problems.

In fact, sometimes you will hear a child saying: "I came to the streets to look for money so that I can feed my family". With this in mind, it's not hard to see a child's reasoning for choosing to live / work on the streets - it can be a place of free movement, meeting and opportunity. So, when you see a child on the streets sniffing glue or using drugs, consider that he/she may be using the drugs to bear their circumstances, and not for simple pleasure!

Mostly you will find children using drugs during the night time, when the town is silent and they have nowhere to go but to stay in small groups and share the experience of the day. This moment is emotional for those who did not manage to obtain their meal; some might fight each other for small money due to the results of the day - no one is ready to sleep without putting something into their stomachs. It is a time of "survival of the fittest" where there is no fixed leadership. This is their way of life, and don't be surprised if you find the same boys that were fighting sleeping back to back later in the night. Sometimes the night is very bad for the children due to humiliation from different sources: older groups of boys, police or thieves. Also, life is tough during the rainy season since it brings about a shortage of sleeping spaces, something that forces the small kids to end up sleeping while standing up still.

Something happens to children's views and awareness once they join street life. Even though life on the streets is tough, some of the children choose to remain there because it is their means to exist and to get help more easily than they would in their homes or in a center. The fact is, the street offers a place for their daily, informal "economic activities". It is also a place of free emotion, expression, and interaction, where they are not forced to follow or believe in anything in particular.

For youth on the street, street living provides an opportunity to know other children who came to town for similar reasons. They build new values together, while at the same time they follow their own rules and keep within the boundaries of their territories. They live with the motto: "Live for today. Don't strive for tomorrow if you are not sure of today." This is why a Street Educator must take time to talk to these children, to know their goals and visions, and to give them friendship and support before attempting to help them take the next step in life.

Jobs and sources of income are available according to a child's body size. For example, one who is small can beg for money, while one who is large can carry heavy weights. If you would spend some time in town locations, you would notice the co-dependence that exists in the interaction between both these societies: the general public and the children living in the streets. Town dust bins are sometimes the children's kitchen and the pavement is their living room. Some make a living by collecting scrap metal and plastic to sell for recycling, while others get a bit of money for guarding peoples' cars. Even though these children fill important functions through their work, people still see them as "nothing".

**How can we turn this into something positive?**