



THINK PIECE:

Mkombozi's reflections on its street work

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1. Introduction

In this paper, we seek to give a brief description of past and present rationale, methodologies and guiding principles for our street work, and to locate these within the context of relevant national and international trends and policies. The aim is to provide a backdrop against which the future course of Mkombozi's street work can be discussed, and to pose some questions which might enable us to reflect more consciously on the direction we want our street work to take in the coming years.

Street work has been one of Mkombozi's core activities since the organisation was established in 1997. In fact, street work can be said to be the starting point for Mkombozi's work, leading to the start-up of our other early interventions such as the Day Centre and a Night Refuge. Street work remains a cornerstone amongst our Children's Programmes' interventions until this day, and although many of the street based activities and tools used have developed and changed considerably over the years, it can be argued that the rationale behind doing street work in many ways is the same as when we started over a decade ago. In sum, Mkombozi sees street work as a critical tool for getting in contact and building trust with street involved children and young people, through providing some basic services there and then while at the same time encouraging positive changes in their lives, including moving away from the streets.

Rationale, methodologies and guiding principles: Past...

In Mkombozi's first annual report, the main purposes for doing street work are described as being to build trust and contact with street children* in general, but with a particular focus on those not taking advantage of Mkombozi's other services; to access and respond to new children on the streets quickly; to attract street children to the Day Centre and Night Refuge and the services offered there; to provide medical care and to ensure the safety of the children still sleeping on the streets. A feeding programme on the streets was also a part of Mkombozi's Street Work in this early phase. The ones carrying out these interventions were two street educators, working rather informally.

It is stated in the Annual Report 1997 that Mkombozi exclusively works with so-called children of the streets; children who have abandoned or been abandoned by their families and have little or no contact with relatives or their home and whose lives are completely on the streets. Furthermore, "Mkombozi's foremost goal is to re-establish contact between children of the street and their families and to give these children options and ways to improve their lives away from the streets" (Mkombozi 1997:1, original italics).

The principle of "active child participation" when it comes to decisions about their own lives, including how to make use of Mkombozi's services, is strongly emphasised. This is closely related to another principle adopted in this early phase of our work; namely that of "voluntary participation". No child is in any way to be forced to enter an Mkombozi programme (Mkombozi 1997).

* Mkombozi is no longer employing the term "street child(ren)", in recognition of the fact that "streets do not bear children, people do" and because of the misconceptions and possible stigma this way of labelling the direct beneficiaries of our Children's Programmes interventions might entail. Rather, terms such as "street living children", "street involved children and youth", "children on the streets" or "vulnerable children" are used. Here, "street children" will however be used when referring to publications, either our own or those of others, where it is employed.

...and present

It can be argued that our present guiding principles with regards to Street Work, as they are described in our Children's Programmes Manual (Mkombozi 2009: 14-15), do not in any radical way differ from these early laid down principles. It is however fair to say that they, based on our more than 10 years long experience, have been expanded upon and altered some - highlighting some of the dilemmas and contradictions we have encountered and keep encountering through our work.

For example, our first guiding principle states that:

Providing services to children and young people on the streets is a complex balancing act between upholding their right to protection and not making street life preferable to that of residential care or home or independent living. (MKOMBOZI 2009:14)

Another main principle is to "respect a child's positive survival strategies and endeavour to build on those as much as possible, rather than creating dependencies on our services" (Mkombozi 2009:14). The way these principles are formulated is a result of lessons learned regarding unexpected negative outcomes of our work, such as precisely making children and youth dependent on us instead of encouraging self reliance, despite all good intentions. These experiences also explain why there are some services Mkombozi as a rule now do not provide on the streets, such as distribution of food, although exceptions can be made.

Hence, the primary goal of our Street Work today is to give children and young people on the streets:

...hope that they are able to achieve what they set their minds to achieve, to help them to value themselves, and to encourage others living in the urban environment to understand and value street living and street working children. (MKOMBOZI 2009:14)

The quotes from our Children's Programmes Manual also testifies to the fact that Mkombozi today as well work with so-called children on the streets; i.e. those children who spend their days on the streets, often working, but who return home every evening to sleep, and not solely those of the street as in the earlier days, and that we do in reality not only work with children but also with youth and young adults. We will go deeper into the discussion of who the beneficiaries of our Street Work are, later in this paper.

As for our methodology, Mkombozi works hands-on with children and young people on the streets of Moshi town and Arusha city. Most days of the week, and also some nights, Mkombozi's Street Workers make contact with children and youth and spend time with them, in the hope of sparking a desire for something more in their lives and enabling them to achieve positive changes.

On the streets we provide non-formal education, including literacy, human rights education, health education and self actualisation activities such as sports and arts; basic health service such as first aid and hospital referrals; psycho-social support through one-on-one meetings with Street Educators or Social Workers; referrals to other services including our own and other organisations; residential centres; assistance to reconnect with families and eventually family reunifications if feasible; business trainings; as well as linkage to vocational trainings and formal schools (Mkombozi 2009: 13-17).

Our street based programme has thus evolved substantially since Mkombozi's early days, and a wide range of professionals are involved in this work, while as noted, a service such as food provision does as a rule no longer take place on the streets. We do however provide children and young people with toiletries, warm clothing and shoes when these items are available.

In what follows, we will look at international and national trends with respect to street work with children and young people. We will also examine how Mkombozi's own street work is situated in relation to these trends... >>

2. International and national trends, policies and perspectives

Programmes and interventions in an international perspective

In his analysis of current best practices when it comes to interventions aimed at street children in developing countries, Phillip Dybicz (2005) describes interventions on what can be seen as three different levels, namely primary prevention, secondary prevention and tertiary prevention:

Primary prevention is aimed at children who live in absolute poverty but have not yet entered street life. The goal is to reduce the influence the factors that “push” and pull a child into street life. [...] Secondary prevention is aimed at children who have entered street life to work and who maintain regular contact with their family. [...] The goal is to make street life into one of the phases which the child passes safely through into adulthood. The alternative is for the child to be steadily drawn deeper into criminal activity as a method of income generation and a way of life. [...] Tertiary prevention is aimed at the small percentage of children who live on the streets. These are children who have been orphaned, abandoned or who have run away from home, and thus have no family contact. Most of these children find themselves forced to engage in illegal means to secure income and most frequently partake of drugs (Dybicz 2005: 765-766).

In a similar vein Elena Volpi (2002), in her article “Street Children: Promising Practices and Approaches”, provides a categorisation of what she terms “at-risk youth”:

Youth in primary risk are still attached to the family, school, society, but because of poverty or other factors their situation could be compromised in the future. [...] **Youth in secondary risk** have weaker social ties and are already exposed to some form of specific risk (such as school dropout, abuse, child labor). [...] **Youth in tertiary risk** are those for whom one or more of the previously mentioned risks are concrete realities. Their ties with society and family are seriously weakened or severed. This group includes children in the street and of the street (Volpi 2002: 4)

As an organisation, Mkombozi works at all the levels Dybicz describes, and with children and young people in all three of Volpi’s risk categories. When considering the above descriptions however, our Street Work can be said to belong within the realm of secondary and tertiary prevention, while the children and young people we work through our street based interventions clearly are in tertiary risk.

According to Dybicz (2005), so-called best practice approaches within the area of secondary prevention consists of micro-enterprise development; education on health and risk issues that street children face and provision of basic needs such as food, shelter and safety through drop-in shelters or outreach work where programmes bring food to children in the streets or marketplace. Dybicz further holds that when it comes to tertiary prevention, there has been very little success in tailoring interventions for the group of children this is aimed at: “Current best practices in this area revolve around residential/rehabilitative care” (Dybicz 2005:766). Volpi (2002) on her side, claims that programmes targeted at youth in tertiary risk typically involve:

...rehabilitative programs such as group homes, drop-in centres, targeted health and education services, psychological and legal support, job training, children organisation, and family and school reintegration. Interventions can be centre-based or take place in the street (Volpi 2002:4).

Although the interventions and programmes described by Dybicz and Volpi are not just directly street based, it seems fair to say that the approaches employed as part of Mkombozi’s Street Work in general are in harmony with what seems to be internationally common and acknowledged ways of working with children and young people living or spending a substantial amount of time on the streets. A notable exception would again be the fact that we do not bring food to the streets, and that we do not have drop-in centres as such, on the streets. It could however be argued that our mobile unit (Moshi) and school (Arusha) in many ways serves the same purpose as a drop-in centre. Also, our Arusha office is located in the city centre and it is thus possible for children and young people to “drop-in”. We do however not provide shelter in Arusha, although as mentioned, we do refer to other organisations who do - in addition to referring children and young people to our own residential centre in Moshi*. A second area where our services on the street (and in general) are limited, is with regards to legal support or advice. Although street workers follow up children and young people in conflict with the law, also through visits in jails and remand homes and through monitoring round-ups of street living children and youth, we do not have staff with specific expertise as regards legal questions.

* For services provided at the residential centre, see our paper specifically discussing this intervention.

The Tanzanian situation

With regards to national trends and policies, Joe L.P. Lugalla and Colleta G. Kibassa's book from 2003, *Urban Life and Street Children's Health: Children's Accounts of Urban Hardships and Violence in Tanzania*, offers the most comprehensive account and analysis presently available as regards the issue of street children in a Tanzanian context. As part of their analysis, the authors examine the Tanzanian state's attitude and policy with regards to street children. They claim that although the position of the government on the situation of street children is somewhat ambivalent, the perspective that dominates is one where street children are viewed as "pathological urban cancer" who should be removed from the streets and urban areas in general, forcefully if needed (Lugalla and Kibassa 2003:109).

They further argue that this perspective is reflected in the law, where according to section 176 of the Penal Code of Tanzania, "street children are considered to be "Idle and Disorderly Persons" and therefore subject to criminalisation" (Lugalla and Kibassa 2003:117). The criminalisation of children for simply living on the streets, and the round-ups, detention and violence and abuse of street children from police officials and others that this law allows for, has been a concern for Mkombozi as long as we have existed, and we have in fact taken several measures to address it on a more systemic level.*

The violence, abuse and harassment that children and young people on the streets are exposed to is hence a well-known fact to Mkombozi, and is also thoroughly documented in literature regarding street involved children and youth both universally and in Tanzania specifically (e.g. Lugalla and Kibassa 2003, de Benitez 2007). As Sarah Thomas de Benitez points out, globally much of the violence is actually attributed to police, while other abusers are street inhabitants and members of the public. A recent national survey of street involved children and youth shows that "by far the greatest issue (over 50%) faced [by street children] when on the streets relates to violence (including abuse from authorities and other adults, physical and sexual abuse, being insulted and sworn at, stigma etc.)" (Consortium for Street Children (CSC) 2009: 2). There is hence a clear conflict of interest between government officials' wish to "clean the streets" and the needs, rights and aspirations of the street involved children and youth we work with.

It remains a challenge for our street workers to address these issues in their day-to-day work, especially since the above mentioned law in many ways open for abuse to occur.

As a conclusion of their analysis of the states' attitude and policy, Lugalla and Kibassa hold that:

...the government is lacking a clear policy aimed at addressing a variety of problems that poor urban children in general, and particularly street children, experience. [...] Tanzania has left the entire responsibility of dealing with street children to the civil society (Lugalla and Kibassa 2003:118).

They hence go on to analyse non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working with street children in Tanzania, including the services they offer. Lugalla and Colleta argue that these NGOs are varied in nature, philosophies and priorities, which naturally leads to variations when it comes to service provision. Despite these variations, it would seem that most NGOs offer services within the following areas: Social welfare services such as food and shelter; education and vocational training; social work and rehabilitation; family reunification; advocacy and campaign for children's rights; and work skills and entrepreneurship (Lugalla and Kibassa 2003: 119-129).

As was the case when discussing international trends with regards to Street Work directed at children and young people, the interventions describes by Lugalla and Kibassa are not limited to those which are the specific concern of this paper. However, if looking at our interventions in general, including those which are street based, it would seem reasonable to say that Mkombozi's programmes are in line also with those of other NGOs working this field in Tanzania.

A challenge discussed, is the lack of coordination and networking among NGOs themselves and between them and government institutions, which causes "tremendous duplication of activities and efforts" (Lugalla and Kibassa 2003:127). Although conscious efforts are made with regards to improving coordination between and collaboration with Arusha and Moshi based NGOs and the local authorities, both on a practical case-to-case level and more systematically, Mkombozi's street workers confirm that this is an area of challenge also for us.

* See our paper on advocacy for further elaboration on this.

The question of choice and voluntariness

Dybicz holds that a main principle guiding interventions at all the levels previously described “is the recognised need that programs be driven by social work values. The most predominant are those of empowerment and self-determination” (Dybicz 2005: 766). He relates this to the importance of communicating respect when working with street children, both because of “the fierce independence that the street instills in these children” (Dybicz 2005:766) and because of the lack of respect that street children are met with from society at large:

These children do not want to be viewed as victims, but rather want their strength and resiliency recognised. One way this is accomplished is through interventions that are heavily empowerment-based. Another way respect is communicated is through voluntary participation [...]. Involuntary institutionalisation, whether in the form of reform schools or residential facilities, has been the main intervention response by the government in the past. With research beginning in the 1980s dispelling the myth of street children as delinquents, the institutionalisation approach has lessened considerably. However, it still remains a significant presence (Munene and Nambi 1996). Thus successful programs must be voluntary (Dybicz 2005: 766-767).

Volpi takes the same stance: “Children cannot be forced to leave the street, and programs need to respect their right to stay there if they wish” (Volpi 2002:25). These views coincide with Mkombozi’s past (see above) and present guiding principle as regards our Street Work. As has already been emphasised, we aim at empowerment and try to avoid creating dependency on us and our services. We further “respect a child’s decision to not make contact or be reunified with their families” and we “accept that some children and youth may choose to remain on the streets even when services are offered (respecting right to autonomy and choice)” (Mkombozi 2009:15). In addition to seeing it as an important principle in itself, the emphasis on street involved children and young people’s right to have their life choices respected has for Mkombozi also been a response to the dominant approach taken by the Tanzanian government to “the street children problem” so far; to forcefully remove them from the street.*

Now, although the importance and value of voluntariness, autonomy and choice seems to be widely acknowledged and commended among those working with and researching the situation of children and youth on the streets in the developing countries, there are those who seriously question this principle. In his article Freedom and Autonomy of Street Children,** Noam Schimmel presents the following argument:

[A]lthough residential care is not an ideal environment for children it is legally and morally obligatory upon government to place street children in residential care to ensure their safety and that their basic rights and needs are met. Sometimes this may require the local department of social services to exercise force in the best interest of the child and remove him from the street, even against his will. When done with sensitivity to the child, and in accordance with the human rights guarantees delineated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), such action is prudent and of urgent importance because the longer a child lives on the street, the greater his tendency to exhibit symptoms of psychopathology. The human right to which CRC gives priority is that of the survival of the child. The provision of his basic food, shelter, and health care needs as guaranteed in Articles 24 and 27 of the CRC are constituents of that right, and they cannot be assured while a child is still living on the street (Schimmel 2006: 212).

He further argues that NGOs who claims that the CRC guarantees children’s civil right to have his/her life choices respected, including freedom of mobility and freedom of association, and as a consequence freedom to remain in the street if they so choose, misinterpret the CRC. According to Schimmel such an interpretation of the convention:

...fails to secure the child’s social and economic rights to food and shelter - rights which ensure his physical and psychological well being which are necessary conditions for him to exercise autonomy and experience freedom; and it does not recognise that a child’s decision to remain on the street is often a result of an adaptive preference based on a harmful social reality defined by the violations of a child’s right (Schimmel 2006:213).

He goes on to discuss and challenge the perceptions of most NGOs working with street children in the development world when it comes to what it means to respect a child’s autonomy:

* It is important to note that the Tanzanian government as of late has taken several important steps away from such an approach; including hosting a conference with the aim of creating a national plan for how to work with street children. As a result of this conference, which took place in January 2009, the above mentioned national survey was carried out with the aim of providing an overview of the current situation (CSC 2009). The larger stated goal is for the government to use this information to develop a policy to meet the needs of street involved children.

** Schimmel emphasises that his paper only addresses children who actually live on the streets.

Thus, respecting a child's autonomy does not simply mean deferring to a child's choices, even if these are detrimental to his well being and may harm his capacity to realise his human rights in the long term. On the contrary, it may necessitate altering his choices, if these choices are harmful ones. Decisions sometimes must be made on behalf of children, when children are not in the position to make fully informed decision. Respecting a child's autonomy means respecting his right to the fullest development of his person (Schimmel 2006: 226)

Schimmel's argument can thus be seen as a stern criticism of the position Mkombozi, and other like-minded organisations, has taken on this issue. It is also worth noting that most western countries do in fact not allow children to stay on the street and have provisions in their laws that allow the child protection services to forcefully remove them and either take them home or into residential care if the home environment is not deemed secure for the child. The rationale behind this is precisely what Schimmel advocates; that children are not in a position to make fully informed decisions, and must protected from the possible harm some of their choices may inflict upon them.

We will conclude this section by looking into who the street involved children and young people in Moshi and Arusha are with regards to gender and age; and relate this to national and international trends when it comes to these characteristics as well as to who we actually reach through our work. Such an analysis is of importance if we want to assess whether or not our interventions are relevant and meaningful in relation to our environment.

Gender and age of street involved children and youth

The great majority of the children and young people Mkombozi work with through our street based interventions in Moshi and Arusha, are boys or young men. Our statistics from July to December 2009, show that we were in contact with a total of 388 different children and young people, through our street based interventions; 97 % of whom were male. Our own census from 2006, which included both Arusha and Moshi (Mkombozi 2006), and the National Survey on Street Involved Children & Youth from 2009 (CSC 2009) which included Arusha, do however indicate that that the percentage of street involved girls and young women in fact is quite a bit higher in the areas where we work.

According to the 2006 census, 10% of children and young people living on the street in Moshi and Arusha were female, while this goes for 15% of those coming to the streets during the day (Mkombozi 2006). The report from the national survey shows that 24% of those reached through the survey were female, while the number for Arusha was 20% (CSC 2009).^{*} This does in sum indicate that there is a certain mismatch with regards to those we reach and those who actually are on the streets, when it comes to gender. Such a tendency does on the other hand not seem to be unique for Mkombozi.

Volpi (2002), Lugalla and Kibassa (2003) and Dybicz (2005) all confirm that on both a universal and national level, boys and young men clearly outnumber girls and young women on the streets. Both Volpi and Dybicz do however stress that street girls are less visible than boys on the street, which leads to them being clearly understudied (Volpi 2002) and as a result usually not being "the direct target of any services whatsoever" (Dybicz 2005: 769).

With regards to age; Mkombozi do not have any statistics which can give us reliable information about the age of those we actually work with through our Street Work. The same sources as referred to above do nonetheless give us a picture of the age of the street involved children and youth in Moshi and Arusha in general. A main finding in our 2006 census was that the age of those living on the streets had gone up compared to the previous year; 96% of those sleeping full-time on the streets in Arusha were above 15 years, while the same goes for 54% in Moshi. As for the children and young people spending time on the streets, but sleeping at home, the percentage remained rather constant over the two years. In 2006 71% of the children and youth in this category in Arusha were above 15 years, and in Moshi the number was 84%.

The results from the recent national survey support our local findings when it comes to Tanzania as a whole, although the age of the children and youth reached ranged from below five to 24, "the majority of children surveyed are 15 years old and above" (CSC 2009:2). In fact, "60% of the people of the survey are over 15, 25% are over 19 (CSC 2009:7).

^{*} When comparing these numbers it is of relevance to take note of that in both cases, the approach taken was to interview all willing children and young people in a certain area; the respective areas being chosen based on them being known as those most commonly inhabited by street children and youth. In our own census we approached all children and young people we thought were below 25 years, while the age limit in the national survey was 24 (Mkombozi 2006 and CSC 2009).

This probably means, and which also coincides with the impression of our street workers, that we are in fact primarily working with adolescents transitioning into adulthood and young adults - and not children in the more commonly understood meaning of the word, although many are below 18 years.

We now turn to posing some questions with regards to what all this might mean for the direction we want our Street Work to take during the next years. What we will be presenting below are simply points and questions for reflection, we do not aim at providing clear-cut answers.

3. Themes and questions for further reflection and discussion

An important question based on the above, which is a dilemma faced by our street workers daily, is which age group we should work with. At present, we claim to work with children and young people up to the age of 25 years. However, in reality, many of those we provide services to on the streets, especially within our health and youth livelihood/self reliance interventions, are above the age of 25. Several of these have been receiving services from Mkombozi since we started, some have also lived at our residential centre, and express a strong sense of entitlement to continuing receiving assistance from us. Added to this, and particularly when it comes to health provision, there are no other agencies providing these services which we can refer to. When it comes to youth livelihood/self reliance, there seem to be more possibilities, and we have recently with success referred seven youth to the organisation Jobortunity in Arusha for vocational training. As an organisation Mkombozi hence need to reach an agreement regarding if our age limit still should be 25 years, and if so; how strictly should this limit be enforced? Could we perhaps differentiate between our services, i.e., that basic health services are available also to those above 25?

A related theme is the “relevance” of the services we provide, and whether there is an argument for tailoring or focusing our interventions more according to the different age groups we work with. In the Comic Relief mid-term review done by Salma Maoulidi (Maoulidi 2009:26), she specifically notes that while the curriculum used for our Non Formal Education on the streets targets children from five- 16 years, many of those attending are older, and express frustration over the fact that the lessons are too elementary. The question then becomes; should we change or adjust our curriculum or make a new one so as to accommodate also the older youth, or should we clearly convey to the older youth that this intervention is not actually aimed at them? An argument for the former is that we probably do work with more youth over than below the age of 15 (see above), while the fact that some street workers express a concern related to whether the needs of the older youth overshadow those of the younger ones, because the older ones express themselves more strongly, is an argument for the latter.

As for gender; also based on the experience of our own street workers, it seems that if we want to reach more of the girls and young women on the streets there is a call for tailoring services directly aimed at them and we would possibly need to work at both different times and in different locations than we do at present. This is however an under-explored area for us, and needs further investigation and discussion. An important question at this point in time is however whether this is something we want to prioritise?

Another service in need of further organisational discussion is family reunification. As our paper on residential services show, an important lesson learned since Mkombozi started, is that institutional care of children should be a “last resort” amongst other reasons since institutions tend to undermine family and community care for vulnerable children and young people and make them attached to the institution instead of their community. It is therefore an organisational priority to focus more on family and community reintegration, and also to aim at reunifying children directly from the street without going through a residential centre. The latter is based on the experience that once a child arrives at our centre it becomes more difficult to motivate him or her to let us visit and start working with the family, so as to assess whether there is a possibility for reunification. Our street workers are hence more reluctant to refer children and youth to residential care than was the case in the past.

There are many dilemmas related to such an approach, especially since many of the children and youth we work with on the streets are very unwilling to let us start working with their families. In fact, the recent national survey showed that “reunification with the family is the second lowest priority for the children surveyed” (CSC 2009:2, original italics). Bearing in mind that the majority of those being surveyed were 15 years and above, and thus on their way to adulthood and independence, this might not be surprising in itself. It does however indicate that our strong focus on rebuilding familial ties and prioritising family reunification might not be in accordance with the expressed wishes of the children and youth we work with, and hence might conflict somehow with our principles related to voluntariness and child participation.

In accordance with Schimmel's argument referred to above, it could however be held that we based on our experience and knowledge of what is in the best interest of a child in some cases are entitled and actually have the duty to make decisions which are not in agreement with his/her wishes. If so, is there an argument for limiting some of the services we provide to individual children and youth on the streets until they have at least allowed us to visit their families?

Lastly, and as mentioned earlier, as an organisation not have any expertise when it comes to legal aid and advice. Some of our street workers express a need for such knowledge to be able to follow up the legal challenges the children and young people we work with face. This is also in accordance with Maoulidi's suggestions in her review where she propose that Mkombozi should:

...consider availing legal services/counsel to represent her interest and those of her clients. One way this can be done is by facilitation the presence of para-legals among her volunteers, mentors and staff. Otherwise, Mkombozi can collaborate with legal organisations in Moshi and Arusha on legal issues (Maoulidi 2009:32).

Considering our aim to avoid duplication of efforts and services, the latter might be the best choice - if we wish to prioritise for this.

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