



Street Children and Mobile Youth Work in Africa - the 8th ISMO Symposium October 2003

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Introduction

The International Society for Mobile Youth Work (ISMO) and the National Council of Churches in Kenya (NCCCK) organised from the 27th to 30th October 2003 at the Jumua Conference and Country Home in Limuru/Kenya with 198 participants from 35 countries around the world the 8th International Symposium on Mobile Youth Work with special focus on children at risk (street children and youth) in Africa. For this purpose there were invited field workers, scientists and stakeholders engaged as advocates for the rights and well being of endangered children and youths. The participants came mainly from African countries and of course especially from Kenya, but also from Asia, Latin America and from Europe.

The organizers NCCK and ISMO

Following the official launch, Rev. Mutava Musyimi, the General Secretary of NCCK, gave a brief background to the process that led to the 8th International ISMO symposium. He said in November 2001, with funding from Bread for the World, NCCK organised a national conference on children on the streets that that helped participants come to terms with the Kenyan scenario, and in addition prepared them fully to participate in the 8th ISMO symposium. It was at this forum that NCCK and other stakeholders agreed on the theme: Street Children and Mobile Youth Work – In Solidarity With Youth at Risk. Rev. Musyimi revealed that NCCK for a long time had been involved in work that contributed to the welfare of children, so the symposium was just part of their contribution. He noted that the government of Kenya had indeed put some measures in place to address issues the 2001 conference had raised as expressed by the Vice President. He welcomed all participants to the symposium in Kenya and urged them to deliberate on approaches that: can cater for the vast numbers of children in need; encourage collaboration between academia and children and youth serving organisations; address root causes that drive children to the street; promote networking among service providers; and finally come up with a framework for legislation in issues of children and youth.

Prof. Dr. Walther Specht, the chairman of ISMO, hailed the 8th symposium as unique, and one of its own kind for three reasons: It was the first symposium held in Africa, the first one that actively involved youth participants during the programme and thirdly had three planning pre-conferences. Two of these were for adult participants, one held in Germany and the other in Kenya, and one also held in Kenya for youth participants preceding the actual event.¹

Objectives

With this conference, in the tradition of the past seven ISMO symposia, we tried to reach the following objectives:

- To promote a professional exchange on different levels among field workers, scientists and stakeholders with special focus on street children and street youth;
- To give children and youth mainly from the Nairobi area the chance to present themselves with their needs and ideas and what the grown ups should learn from them;
- To discuss the advantages and the implementation of the international developed concept of Mobile Youth Work for children at risk (street children and youth gangs) in relation to the social, cultural and political structures in African countries;
- To identify and share experiences of best practice in rehabilitating and reintegrating excluded children and youth at risk all over Africa;
- To strengthen collaboration and networking all over Africa and especially in Kenya, and
- To sensitise politicians and governments in Africa for an implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of Children.

During several evaluation sessions of participants and organizers right after the conference and according to the anonymous drawn up evaluation forms by 35 % of the participants the objectives of the symposium can as a first encouraging result – generally speaking – said to be reached. But of course a statement to a real positive impact of the symposium on the improvement of the living situation of children and youth at risk in Africa and especially in Kenya – the overall goal – can only be made, if at all, in a few months respectively in a few years, and is of course depending on the development of other key issues like politics and economics.

So here we present mainly concrete contributions and results during the symposium about politics, themes, issues, speeches, workshops, participants, risks and new challenges.

Key contributions from Africa and other continents

The Vice President of Kenya and Minister of Home Affairs Hon. Moody Awori officially launched the symposium. He set the stage by acknowledging that children the world over are faced with a host of challenges ranging from poverty, neglect, abandonment, child trafficking, diseases especially HIV/AIDS, sexual exploitation and abuse, child labour and civil strife. As a result, he said many end up in the streets to earn a living. He acknowledged the fact that the street is a dark and lifeless corner for any human being.

And it is with this appreciation, he added, that the Kenya government has put various strategies in place to help such children in difficult circumstances. The government has embarked on a rehabilitation programme to get children off the streets; equip them with vocational skills; facilitate reintegration in society; is providing free and compulsory primary education; has drafted a national housing policy; and is running a programme with support of UNICEF to support out of school youth. During the last year since the new government is in office they managed to bring 2 Million children at risk back in school. In addition to this, he said the government through the recently launched national council for children's services is planning to enforce a national policy on street children. To conclude, he urged delegates to come up with custom-made approaches that address root causes in order to arrest the situation of street children once and for all.

Akm Kamaluddin of UNICEF Kenya said his organisation advocates for the rights of every child and is therefore ready to work in partnership with other stakeholders in the same field.

He commended the symposium organisers noting that Kenya was experiencing problems that other countries had already undergone. Therefore the symposium was the best forum to share best practise on how the others had handled the situation of street children and out of school youth. He added that UNICEF is working with the Kenyan government to create awareness on the free primary education; to development ways to address special needs of children and to empower teachers; and to help retain children in school. He restated working in partnership as the way forward.

Dr. Agnes Aboum welcomed all participants to Kenya on behalf of the World Council of Churches. She set the scene by giving the current problems the society is faced with and the role the churches have to play. In Kenya alone she said, 60 % of the population live below the poverty line. Most of whom are refugees, displaced, or child headed households. In addition, she said the African culture is at crossroads due to adapting to the centre of reconstruction with children and youth in need of training, education, security, social services and a home. She therefore said the symposium was the best forum to find solutions to some of these problems in order to restore hope in children and youth.

On behalf of youth participants, Anastasia Karugo and Philip Were said practical approaches in supporting children and youth in difficult circumstances need to involve youth participation. They should designate youth services in a central place, tackle youth health and especially the management of HIV/AIDS. Further there is a need of a review of the education and training sytem to meet job market demands. The youth expressed that they felt during the symposium being at the right place and also pointed out that youth participation in a conference like that should not be used as a token event but as a normal procedure in preparing and carrying out such a meeting.

Lady Justice Effie Owuor presented a overview of the situation of action approaches in working with street children and youth in Kenya. She highlighted their plight saying, the situation is worsening as the numbers continue to increase with more and more girls joining the boys. She gave a profile of children on the street in Kenya as those who live and work in the streets with few or no ties with their families; are born and bred on the streets; work on the streets but return home at night; and occasionally visit the streets during weekends and school holidays. Justice Owuor cited the lack of a policy framework, poverty, HIV/AIDS, high population growth rate and the social/gender discrimination as some of the underlying causes that force children to the streets. She noted that the government of Kenya was already working in collaboration with some non-governmental organisations. Together they have put strategies in place to meet the need of such children, create awareness, and rehabilitate and reintegrate them back in society. In spite of this effort, she added that the children's situation only seems to exacerbate. She proposed that practical approaches need to focus on developing institutional capacity, address root causes to prevent children from going to the streets, shift from welfare to sustainability and have clear policy guidelines on the welfare of the child.

Melah Rout Biel from Sudan stated to support this conference because he had realised that ISMO and his partners are committed to the issue of street children in the world and in Africa. He gave an overview of action approaches in working with street children and youth in Africa. Like Justice Owuor he sighted poverty, bad governance, wars, unemployment, migration, overpopulation, poor housing, famine, family breakdown, child abuse and child labour, and absence of schools as causes of street children in Africa. To explain the situation of street children in Africa he shared the case of Nyawal a fifteen-year-old Sudanese girl: "I

was nine years old when I left home. At that time, I used to earn more money easily from begging. People use to give me, because I was young. However, older street children used to steal and take most of what I collected by force. Nowadays, it is more difficult to get money. Very few people give money to older girls like me. I have to depend on other ways such as prostitution or stealing.” Melah added to this saying, the children earn a living through difficult means or petty jobs such as washing cars, shoe shining, drug dealing, commercial sex and pick pocketing. He noted that in Africa, governments and non-governmental organisations are already working to address the problem but are hampered by meagre resources. To bring the street children problems under control Melah proposed the need to bring peace and security in war torn countries such as Sudan and Sierra Leone in order to create an enabling environment for development of national policies which recognise and put street children problems on the political and social agenda. A good progress for this issue would be good governance, professionalism and the focus on family unification as a best environment to bring up the child.

Contributions from several other African countries, but also from Chile, Peru, Bolivia, Bangladesh, Thailand, Germany, Belgium and Russia gave further insight of the global phenomenon of street children (see the documentation May 2004).

The international concept of Mobile Youth Work

Since ISMO had planned to put the internationally developed concept of Mobile Youth Work as key issue on the programme and being discussed in the plenary sessions and in the different workshops Siegfried Keppeler, Vice Chair of ISMO, introduced this theoretically and practically tested approach to the participants.

In a brief background he said the Mobile Youth Work approach was born in Stuttgart Germany in 1967 to address the problems associated with street youth gangs. But it has since then been adopted in 1.300 cases (regions, town, cities of Germany) and also in other parts of Europe as a successful youth social work approach. Therefore, he urged the delegates to analyse and confront the concept with their own situation and possibly identify relevant elements or the concept on the whole that could suit the African situation.

In a brief overview of the German scenario, Keppeler attributed the youth problem to a rapidly industrialised and liberalised economy that is also faced with unemployment, poverty, and divorce leaving the youth to more peer influence. On the other hand, he said youth work is just one of the initiatives which is financed by the local government, non-governmental organisations and churches.

Keppeler explained that Mobile Youth Work is an outreach concept with four elements that are intertwined: Street Work, where working places for social workers are transferred to the meeting points and living places of the youth; individual aid where a youth worker takes responsibility for helping the youth after building rapport and trust with them; group work recognising and working with cliques or peers who currently have a great influence on the youth and therefore help shape their character and also help them to cope with life challenges; and community based work recognising and working with the community as instrumental in helping to rehabilitate and reintegrate the youth to normal life.

Before a practical project is set off, of course, in each case – idealistically spoken - a social analyses of the area or suburb, where the approach takes place, should be undertaken to gain hard and soft data on which a theoretically based practical approach can start and find its grounded theory.

The debates in the plenary and workshop sessions made clear that basic elements of the concept are of great advantages all over the world, but of course, the concept itself is no

panacea and cannot remove for instance poverty or other root causes of the plight of street children. From a professional social work point of view it is a very important and effective interdisciplinary tool to deal and to tackle the given problem on a operational level. That means a certain stable and secure political, economical and social situation in a given country is a precondition to practise Mobile Youth Work. Especially the element of community work and community development as part of the concept can make a contribution to prevent the street existence of so many children and youth. By awareness rising, advocacy work and lobbying for excluded children and youth this approach can of course also make a contribution to bring the street children matter – at least on a local level – on the political agenda, where it belongs to all over the world.

Lessons learned

To ensure that our delegates of the symposium got value, facilitators used various techniques ranging from plenary sessions with selected presentations, free discussion sessions and workshops with the following thematic areas:

- the position of children and youth in the legislation,
- training, competence and qualification of staff working with street children and youth,
- education and training of street children and youth,
- health care: trafficking and drug addiction,
- HIV and AIDS prevention and care,
- child labour and the exploitation of street children and youth,
- child prostitution,
- child soldiers,
- family violence and
- collaboration and networking on issues of children and youth at risk.

Project visits that exposed participants to actual work with street children and youth at risk in the Nairobi area winded up the symposium and gave the participants additional experiences. Further information about the ISMO symposium 2003 will come in the planned documentation (English and French) in May 2004.

Notes:

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