2REST

MAPPING SYSTEMS

FOR RESILIENT STREET YOUTH

Resilient Livelihood Systems for Street Youth

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RESPONSIBILITIES FOR RESILIENCE EMBEDDED IN STREET TEMPORALITIES: MAPPING STREET YOUTH LIVED RESILIENCES THROUGH ANALYSIS OF SECONDARY DATA

Key points

- This brief highlights **Risks and Resources** around **resilient livelihood strategies** from **data collected with street youth** in three African cities.
- street youth engaged in various **legal and illegal or risky work activities** within the **informal and formal economy** across the three cities.
- **Risks** to livelihood strategies included **state strategies and interventions** to unregulated informal work including **arrest and detention, harassment** and **violence** by **state agents**, **illness and injury, pregnancy and lack of childcare, substance abuse,** and **lack of formal education** and **skills**.
- **Personal resources** helped street youth to support themselves through their livelihoods, including **determination, faith, hope**, and **a sense of purpose.**
- **Relational resources** included **supportive peers** (who shared information, advice, investments, and protection), **partners** (who provided for and cared for each other), **family members** and **trusted adults from the community** (who kept savings, paid school fees, offered advice, and gave financial support).
- **2REST recommends a comprehensive combination of multisystemic resources** that fulfils state obligations and works with street youth to help them meet their livelihood needs.

Introduction

About *Growing up on the Streets* and 2REST

2REST analysed secondary data from the project *Growing up on the Streets* using a **multisystemic resilience framework**. This framework of **risks** and **resources** goes beyond individual resilience to show how multiple systems can be involved in helping young people in their daily lives.

Growing up on the Streets was a participatory longitudinal research project conducted with 229 street youth in Accra, Ghana, Bukavu, DRC, and Harare, Zimbabwe between 2012 and 2020. The quotes and data here are from **street youth research assistants** in the three cities who observed their peers and reported what life was like on the streets.

This brief summarises the analysis of risks and resources relating to health resilience, mapping street youth resources and making recommendations for multisystemic system support to contribute to the resilience of street youth.

- For more information see *Growing up on the Streets* briefing on Work and Earnings of street youth.
- Check out story maps made with street youth: with sections on the challenges of making a living in Accra and Bukavu.

What is 'multisystemic' resilience?

Personal factors are important to resilience, such as biological and psychological resources of good physical and mental health, intelligence, and determination. 2REST recognises that other factors are also key, applying this to the lives of street youth:
- **Social factors**: e.g. trusted adults, enabling peers, street families, family networks.
- **Institutional factors**: e.g. street work services, markets, or medical clinics.
- **Physical environment factors**: e.g. adequate shelter, safe food, safe spaces.
This re-conceptualisation combines factors and is termed *multisystemic* **resilience** (Ungar and Theron, 2020).
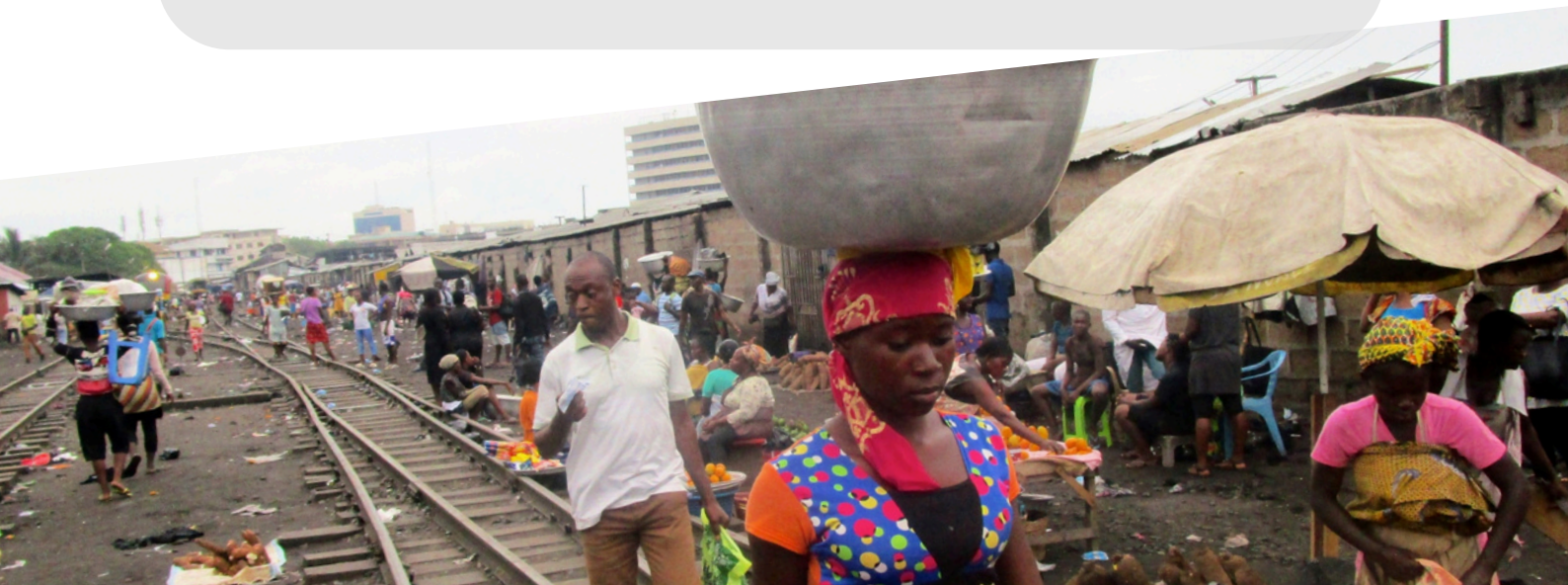
The right to a livelihood for street youth

The right of every African to work under fair conditions and **access economic opportunities** are central to **Africa's vision for people–centred development**, as outlined in in the **Banjul Charter** (OAU, 1981), **Agenda** 2063 (AUC, 2015) and the **African Youth Charter** (AU, 2006).

These frameworks emphasize **creating inclusive opportunities** for youth, **reducing income inequalities**, **promoting job creation**, and **addressing youth unemployment** to enhance living standards. **street youth**, like all young people are protected from economic exploitation through international conventions such as the **ILO Conventions on Child Labour** (1973; 1999). Together, these efforts aim to foster sustainable development that respects children's rights, promotes their well–being, and empowers young people to contribute meaningfully to society.

Additionally, the **African Charter** emphasises that the state and service providers must evaluate each young person's unique situation, including their resilience. **Everyone has a right to be treated equally under the law**, without discrimination and states have an obligation to work to change societal attitudes.

More recently the **UN General Comment 21 on Children in Street situations** (UNGC21, 2017) recognises that street youth have a **right to human dignity**. This not about trying to 'rescue' street youth by removing them from the streets against their will but recognising their rights and claims on the state. As a GUOTS participant from Bukavu states in UNGC21: "Living on the street does not mean that we cannot have rights". All young people seek is an "opportunity to change [their] story" (2017: 3).

Risks – 1

Lowlights around affecting the ability to make a living

Hazardous work or situations: Some boys were involved in **hazardous work** such as mining stones and sand, exposing them to pain and illness. Lifting **heavy loads** caused back problems in Harare. Street girls engaged in **sex work**, exposing them to sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and, sometimes, death. Estelle, a research assistant in Bukavu described engagement in sex work: "The job we have got is a risky job either you get AIDS; or you are beaten and die on the spot."

Illness and Injury: Street young people faced illness and injury on the street, due to work. Their **livelihood strategies were interrupted** by factors such as food poisoning, and the effects of street abortions. They reported being unable to work while sick due to illnesses such as STIs (e.g. HIV, gonorrhoea), coughs, malaria, stomach, head, and chest pains.

Pregnancy, abortion and lack of childcare: Pregnancy caused **income and health risks** for street girls and young women. They found it difficult to sell when heavily pregnant in Accra, causing financial challenges. Having children created financial challenges for street girls as they had to look after, and feed, their children, as fathers often did not accept responsibility. Constance in Accra regretted that she was unable to take up skills training because she had no-one to look after her child.

Arrest and detention: street youth were subject to **arrest and detention** by state agents on a regular basis, limiting their livelihoods.

Harassment and violence by state agents: Across all cities, young people faced harassment and violence from state agents with **fear and injury** limiting their work. The Task Force in Accra **seized and destroyed goods** if young people were found selling on the streets without a permit.

Age and gender: In Harare and Bukavu, sex work was the only livelihood option for street girls; being younger was an advantage, but young girls were sometimes not allowed in bars in Bukavu, placing them at **more risk on the street**. In Harare, older youth lost out on work, as they were less trusted. In Accra, street youth missed out on skills training because they exceeded the age limit (services funded for those under 18).

Bad weather: Bad weather conditions such as heavy rains caused financial challenges as young people could neither sell (in Accra) nor look for money (in Harare).

Risks – 2

Systemic ineffectiveness: Abdou, in Bukavu, noted that the government failed to create **jobs for young people**. In Accra and Harare those selling on the streets were expected to pay for a **trading licence**, which they found financially challenging.

State strategies and interventions: Authorities restricted street youth from engaging in useful work with members of the community, e.g. **arresting young people** collecting household waste, or washing cars in Bukavu. In Harare, Goodwill explained that a crackdown on the informal sector meant that street youth are not able "to be free to beg or make money" and the police "**beat up the street children** because they are saying they are preventing the city council from making money."

Discrimination and disrespect: Negative perspectives that people held towards street young people led to discrimination. They were **perceived as thieves or sex workers**, and in Harare, for example, street youth were not given jobs because they were not trusted.

Lack of formal education and skills: Lower **levels of education limit their chances of formal work**. Many school age street youth were not in school, or the few who enrolled missed school. In Harare, Goodwill reported on peers who wanted to return to school but did not have **money for transport and fees**. Even those who had attended school, such as Estelle, like many girls could not translate her educational skills into **employment opportunities** and relied on sex work. In all cities, particularly Accra and Bukavu, street youth gained skills from vocational skilling centres run by NGOs although such skills did not always match with job demands.

Harassment and violence by Public: **street youth** caught stealing were often subjected to violent beatings through mob–justice; with little informal work, some felt they had little choice but to steal.

Lack of documentation (ID): street youth lacked ID, **limiting access to financial services and employment opportunities.** For instance, Accra youth could not save money without ID; Constance explained that her friend wanted to save using a mobile money account, but "her ID card is missing". Harare youth couldn't get formal employment without ID.

Livelihood Resources – 1

Adopted by street youth across systems

Typical informal/formal work: street youth were involved in work activities including carrying goods/transportation, cleaning (e.g. cars, bars, collecting waste and shoe shining), guarding cars and security, assisting fishermen, cart pushing, as unlicensed taxi drivers, charcoal collecting, recycling plastic materials for sale, vending (e.g. airtime, alcohol, drugs, eggs, fruits, sweets, biscuits, sachet water, coconut, disinfectant, stones, CDs/DVDs, cigarettes and soap, etc.), mining stones and sand, and paid work campaigning for political parties.

Atypical informal work: street youth resorted to 'atypical', i.e. **risky or illegal strategies and activities** when work was not available. These included: begging, gambling (e.g. betting, cards, dice, football, dares), sex work (mainly among girls, but also discussed among boys in Harare who had sex with women and men), theft (e.g. pickpocketing, snatching phones and laptops, stealing metal, fuel, money from sex work clients), scavenging items from bins to sell, drug dealing and being informants for the police. Earnings from atypical work can be unpredictable.

Personal resources

- **Age:** Girls were **welcomed in bars for sex work** where they would attract clients. Younger street youth may be more trusted, for example, by market women. However, older youth were able to **negotiate for better pay** and share with peers. Goodwill explains some of the advantages and disadvantages of age in Harare: "older boys have more support for each other because they can make more money and share it. The younger ones usually get little money like coins, which they would use to gamble with."
- **Appearance:** Being clean and smart protects from suspicion of crime, and attractiveness, and appearance of maturity gives access to bars. In all the three cities some young women **benefited from supportive communities** when they were pregnant, and Estelle used pregnancy as a defence: "my pregnancy can even be the pretext if I am caught stealing."
- **Physical strength:** Manual jobs that required physical strength such as fishing, sand mining, lifting loads, pushing carts were harder but also paid better.

Livelihood Resources – 2

Adopted by street youth across systems

Psychological resources

Agency: street youth exercised their zeal to work and earn a living irrespective of challenging circumstances. For example, young people in Accra described themselves as hustlers, enthusiastically selling, known as 'hawking', their wares. They woke at dawn to buy produce and sold coconuts, polished shoes, cut and plaited hair; with girls particularly selling a range of merchandise from pure water, sweets ('toffees'), pawpaw, pineapple. Harare youth woke up at dawn to look for jobs at the market. They also picked food and items from the bins to sell, repurposing scrap items and selling them to the market women.

Problem-solving: strategies included working together, strategizing on where and when to sell, saving, taking substances or energy drinks to stay awake and becoming numbed to the harsh realities of their work.

Self-care: Family planning, health care, eating and sleeping enabled street youth to actively take part in work. Girls working in sex work sometimes used condoms to protect themselves against STIs.

Consciousness of rights and freedoms: street youth were aware of their rights and would resist poor working conditions. Abdou, in Bukavu, left his job at the fishing site due to poor working conditions to look for a better job: "He used to force us to work, and he could not offer enough food to the workers. We used to carry basins of 'sambaza' (sardines) and wash the fishing canoes the whole daytime; and at the end of the day, they gave us a very small quantity of food. So, I decided to leave the job. I preferred to throw out house wastes."

Livelihood Resources – 3

Adopted by street youth across systems

Relational resources

Peers: Peers supported each other through information sharing, protecting one another, sharing advice and joint investments. For example, in Bukavu, street boys saved and bought a canoe, generating money for the group members, they also collaborated while stealing at night and loaning money. In Accra peers looked for money together, gave, and lent money to each other. In Harare and Bukavu street girls were supported by other street youth through the provision of money and drugs. They also supported each other by sharing information on how to make money through sex work.

Partners: Some boys worked hard to support partners and children. Girls sometimes provided domestic services and cooked food in exchange for this support.

Family members and trusted adults in the community: Trusted adults kept savings for street youth, paying school fees, offered advice, and financial support during bereavement, or to buying wares, provide jobs, or money to travel to see family.

State agents: Street boys recounted occasionally collaborating with police and soldiers in stealing.

Institutional resources

- Skills training access: street youth accessed marketable skills like dress-making, painting, driving, barber and mechanics. Estelle looked to a time when she could do other work: "I will live on the professional work you taught me. I can live on cooking doughnuts; I can cook samosa and sell to earn a living."

- **Access to education:** Education gave street youth hope for employment in the future. They learnt how to read and write and gained numeracy skills.

- **Access to saving and credit facilities:** Occasionally, street youth had bank accounts enabling them to save money; or more often with informal community savings schemes. In Bukavu some saved money with a cooperative savings scheme.

- **Documentation:** Papa, Accra, had a birth certificate and discussed the need for a licence to fulfil his dream of being a driver: " the important thing is to learn how to drive; […] the driving license too if you have about three million (around £170) you can do your license."

Environmental resources

- **Safe storage:** street youth were sometimes able to rent rooms. Papa, for example, in Accra, rented a kiosk and allowed his friends to keep their possessions there. street youth adapted spaces to store stolen items or tools. For example, Abdou's group in Bukavu used a grassy area by the lake, as a shelter and a safe storage facility.
- **Blue and green spaces** provided room for economic activities. Blue spaces supported fishing, sand mining, hiding, storing possessions, opportunities to steal from people using boats, a place to gather and plan activities.

Conclusion

street youth face **precarious access to informal work**, often forcing them to adopt atypical livelihood strategies such as engaging in **crime** or **transactional sex**. In their pursuit of survival, they take significant **risks**, which leave them vulnerable to **exploitation** by the public and corrupt officials. While **NGOs provide skills training**, it can be inadequate, hard to access, or fail to address their complex needs. Even with skills, street youth still face **barriers** such as the **lack of tools** and **safe storage**, costly **licenses**, the need for **identification**, and persistent **discrimination**, all of which hinder their ability to trade safely and support themselves. Despite these challenges, street youth demonstrate remarkable **resilience** by collaborating to overcome obstacles, pooling resources, and protecting one another. They draw on **individual strengths**, **relational support** from peers and trusted adults, and **physical environment** resources. However, their access to multisystemic formal social and institutional support remains limited, highlighting the need for more comprehensive and effective interventions.

Images in this 2REST Policy Brief were taken by street youth for the *Growing up on the Streets* Story maps in Accra, Bukavu and Harare.

Recommendations

2REST recommends **institutional approaches that build relationships across multisystemic domains**, working together to **redress the absence of state involvement** in meeting the needs of street youth as they develop sustainable livelihoods. At the same time, **supporting, maintaining, and sustaining the existing personal and social resilience resources** highlighted in this policy brief is vital.

**Ending discrimination for street youth engaged in informal livelihoods:**

- **Sensitisation training for professionals** that work with street children and the public (UNGC21: 7, 10; paras 18, 27).
- **Preventing media from representing street youth as criminals**, fuelling fear and prejudice among employers and public.
- **Refraining from state-led violence** through decriminalizing survival behaviours and status offences (UNGC21: 12, para 32).

Create enabling environments for street youth to earn money in the informal sector which will allow them to support themselves and play important roles in the community.

- **States should refrain from enforcing licencing laws** which criminalise street youth or round-ups that contravene their human rights (UNGC21: 14, para 39).
- **Re-designing policies to enable legal access to commercial spaces** through reduced costs, group licenses, and the elimination of address or ID requirements to access trading permits.
- **NGOs and state providers should actively consult with young people** and their communities to identify and deliver the skills most relevant to both their needs. Make skills training and empowerment programs accessible to groups of young people to work together in non-formal and street education to reach out-of-school young people (UNGC21: 14, para 39), offering a marketable skills, tools, and safe storage facilities.
- **Make secure accessible savings schemes** that safeguard earnings, with reduced fees and documentation requirements, and support towards financial literacy (UNGC21: 14, para 41).
- **Affordable childcare services** could ensure young parents can focus on sustainable livelihood strategies; for example, low-cost childcare options such as groups of young people.
- **Pregnant women need support** covering medical care and nutrition especially in late pregnancy when they struggle to meet their needs (UNCRC, 1989: 8, Article 24).
- States and local governments should offer innovative and flexible solutions for street youth to **access ID**, such as providing informal ID, linked to civil society organisations, (UNGC21: 14, para 41), to assist access to formal work.

2REST recommendations highlight the necessity of **coordinated comprehensive approaches** across systems **to effectively address the complex challenges faced by street youth**, respecting their **agency** and right to be involved in decisions about their lives, and fostering their long-term wellbeing and survival.

2REST Recommendations inter-link across our Policy Briefs: *Basic Needs, Health, Livelihoods, Violence, and International Policy.*
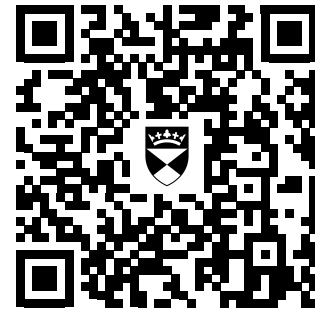
For 2REST and Growing up on the Streets information and resources please visit: https://uod.ac.uk/growing-streets

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Participant names have been changed to protect the identity of street youth across the three cities.