Chapter 11

Frequently asked questions

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The phenomenon of children living on the city streets is one that disturbs many people. We often receive questions - either supportive or critical - from people who feel strongly that 'something should be done' about the children they see on the streets, but don't know what it could be - or how to react when they encounter these children. In this chapter we set out our responses to some of the most frequently asked questions. We draw on our own experiences, and also on the work of Dr Tony R. Samara, who is assistant professor of Sociology at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia, USA. His research examines the politics of urban development in the context of globalisation, looking particularly at issues of crime, security and youth.

Nine frequently asked questions

1. Can you call a child a street child?
2. Should I give money to street children?
3. There are so many services for street children. What's the purpose of all of them? Which is the most effective?
4. Is there a role for 24-hour intake and assessment centres?
5. Why, if you are doing an okay job, are there still children on the street?
6. What is the role of urban development strategies in relation to street children?
7. What is the role of the police?
8. What is the role of the media?
9. I have not done anything like this before, but I would like to help children leave street life behind. Is there any way I can help as a volunteer?

Question 1

Can you call a child a street child?

Renée Rossouw responds:

'Street children' is a technical term, used in the international body of knowledge and practice needed to work with children who have experienced the specific configurations of trauma of living without adult guidance on the streets of the world's cities. The current preferred terminology used in United Nations (UN) documents is: 'Street living and working children'. In this book we have used both terms. It is difficult to write a book without the term 'street child' because the term is so widely used.

I have not met any child who likes to be called a street child, and for most of the children it is really hurtful to be referred to as a street child. From time to time children on the streets choose an alternative term to describe themselves ('stroller' was once such a term in Cape Town) but ultimately any such term also becomes pejorative. Many girls who have lived for some time at Ons Plek and who have subsequently made a success of their lives, want to proudly own that phase of growth and healing, and want to promote Ons Plek as an organisation so that we can keep helping other girls. But a difficulty lies in the fact that Ons Plek is known as a 'street children' organisation. Many people, such as peers at university, members of church communities, in-laws and future employers, see these brave and competent women as 'former street children', and many of the girls have had painful experiences of rejection and prejudice because of this.

The challenge lies in how we make sure that:

- We have a practical and useful terminology in order to share information about the specific phenomenon of children living outside without adult supervision.
- Such terminology is used without prejudicing the very people who have chosen to seek help and make important and difficult changes in their lives, or, for that matter, prejudicing those who cannot make such changes.

Part of this debate lies in the question of whether the child is doing something wrong by being on the streets. This gets more complicated when children on the streets are involved with crime (for example, stealing people's cell phones for gangs operating in an area). This in turn leads us into the slippery debates about what constitutes a crime - for example, if one says that something is a crime if it is against the law, one could have a law which makes it illegal to sleep on a pavement, in which case sleeping on the street is a crime.

Working with children who have left home permanently or semi-permanently requires a *careful dance of consent and support*. The circumstances surrounding a child leaving her or his home to roam are complex, and usually involve difficult long-term issues. What the situation is NOT is that 'there is a street children problem' and that 'we are looking for a solution that will work'. In some parts of the world this kind of thinking leads to assassinations, the ultimate 'zero tolerance' approach, as it were. In deciding how to respond to the situation of destitute children, a more useful concept than 'best practice' is 'good practice'. The idea of 'good practice' leads to a more cooperative atmosphere and stance between practitioners and organisations.

The fact is that societies discriminate against those on the margins, and traumatised, poor, homeless youth certainly are marginalised. Part of our work is directed towards changing the situation of these young people. The point of raising this issue is to keep the debate open, because as long as a topic remains unsettled, change remains more possible than when it is settled into a comfortable round of self-congratulation (we work to help street children) and prejudice (something should be done to clean up the street children problem).

So, when you meet someone who has lived for part of their life on the streets and perhaps in a programme for 'street children', you are not meeting a street child, or even a former street child. You are not meeting somebody who is doing okay 'even though they were once on the streets'. You are meeting somebody just like yourself, struggling to live a decent life in a difficult world.

Question 2

Should I give money to street children?

In nearly every public talk given by the staff of Ons Plek, the question is asked: "Should I give money to the children?"

Ons Plek responds:

Ons Plek has taken a stand on this vexing issue and has for years actively distributed

pamphlets setting out both sides of the argument on giving money. The pamphlets were written by the Rev. Gregory Andrew, one of the few men ever privileged to be an Ons Plek staff member. During his employment as a street worker, Greg became so discouraged by the children spending the money on drugs that he drew up this pamphlet.

To give or not to give?

When confronted with a street child at your car window or on your way into a restaurant, you probably wonder what to do. Maybe sometimes you give something to get rid of the child or maybe you feel guilty about your own privilege. Perhaps you wonder whether you should give at all…

Not giving:
Most of the children you see on the streets are sent by their family to earn money. Not giving money means these families lose their only income. In the short term this is catastrophic.

Giving:
Most children living on the streets use the money they receive to buy thinners, glue or a video game. In the long term giving money is a death sentence: children learn to be street children - they start strolling and leave their families without an income.

Is there a third option?

- Greet the children you see begging on the streets. Ask if you can give food instead. They'll move on if they don't want to chat. Genuine concern is something money cannot communicate.

- Give something really normal like a balloon or sweets. Children on the streets are still children.

- Give the money you would give on the streets to the programmes that are helping address the problem of children on the streets. Programmes include soup kitchens, day programmes, shelters and educational/vocational training opportunities. There are a number of children begging on the streets of Cape Town on a typical working day. A great deal of money that could be used by programmes to help these children is being given away by the public.

- Support initiative and effort. Many people on the streets make a living by selling things, washing cars and gathering paper for recycling. Encourage this. For instance: don't have your office's waste paper collected, contract street people to do it for you.[1]

As part of an Awareness Campaign spearheaded by the City Council of Cape Town in June 2002, Pam Jackson gave a speech on behalf of the Western Cape Street Children's Forum, explaining what often happens to the child whom you, the giver, are trying to help. This is the text of her speech:

[1] Gregory Andrew. *Street kids - to give or not to give?* Ons Plek pamphlet. We do not mind the wording in this pamphlet being used by other role players, but we do ask that it be acknowledged as Ons Plek's work.

The Perennial Robot Brigade or Change for Change

Sitting at a robot has become an occurrence to dread, which has nothing to do with being in a hurry. Children knock at our car windows from early in the morning till late at night asking for money. We turn to see small figures, usually poorly dressed, dirty, needing care and protection. We feel a mixture of concern, guilt and irritation at our helplessness to do anything. And so we give money and feel frustrated or we don't give money and we drive away frustrated.

When I see these children I am always reminded of Yoliswa, who ran away, aged ten, after her father repeatedly threw her against the wall on a daily basis as his drinking bouts increased. Yoliswa ran away from home for a very good reason. It was the right thing to do. On the street she discovered that she could provide for herself very well without adult supervision. She bought lovely food and did what she wanted to, when she wanted to, with her new street friends. On hot days she went to the beach. On other days she frequented the games arcade. She discovered that contrary to what she had always been told, she did not have to get an education in order to support herself because people always give.

At one stage she went to Ons Plek Shelter for Female Street Children. Yoliswa was happy to be put in touch with her mother again and she was excited to go back to school again. But after a few weeks of homework and the daily discipline of duties the excitement paled. She missed having her own money to spend. The R2,00 pocket money Ons Plek gave her on Sundays did not compare with the R100 she was used to earning on a daily basis from begging. She argued with Ons Plek staff that it would be stupid to complete her education when the adults she knew could not earn as much by working as she could by begging. Finally, despite much support and care, Yoliswa gave up the struggle for what she thought was the easier option. Ons Plek has a reputation for placing 95 per cent of the children back in their communities on a long-term basis. Yoliswa joined the ranks of the 5 per cent who return to the streets.

This scenario is rare elsewhere in Africa, where the discrepancy between rich and poor is not so great. In South Africa a child can be better off, in financial terms, on the streets than in a shelter. Not so in Kenya and elsewhere. With the best possible intentions, giving money to begging children undermines the work of NGOs.

Soon she was joined by another child who had been sent to beg for his family because they were destitute. Initially this child took the much-needed money

home. He, too, was on the streets for a good reason. Sometimes he couldn't resist spending the money and slowly, as he learned the ropes of street life, he spent more time on the streets. Today he is still there.

Yoliswa is now 24 years old. She is no longer cute and small and she no longer finds begging a lucrative activity. Too late she realised that education is important for long-term sustainability. She never learned the self-discipline and perseverance required to hold down a job. In addition, she had been forced by older gang members into dangerous situations when they needed a small body to break into buildings for them, so crime had become an option for her.

Like Yoliswa, other children run away from home for very good reasons. They seek better lives.

And we, the adults who should help, are faced with a dilemma! We know that giving is a short-term solution which, as in Yoliswa's case, can cause serious long-term consequences. We know that money is used for thinners or video games. And yet, giving is a way of helping open to us, an immediate response to what appears to be an immediate need.

Is there a third option available to us?

There are NGOs working with street children. Most work quietly behind the scenes, focusing on the children's needs rather than on publicity. A good NGO will seek long-term solutions where the child is able to live back in his own community. These take time, because the families are often very dysfunctional. Shelters keep the children safe, send them to school, and provide trauma counselling while working with their families to enable the children to return home permanently. Street workers befriend the children and get them into a shelter or back home. Specialised education programmes provide education for street children.

The children whom the public are aware of are those who are new on the street, or who have tried the services and cannot utilise them because of deep-seated emotional needs. These children are few in number compared to the children who have been helped by NGOs but who are unseen, because they are no longer in the public eye.

That there are still children on the street is due in part to a lack of resources that NGOs endure. To be successful, organisations must have experienced, trained and permanent staff working in a long-term, planned way. The work is difficult and complex, work which nevertheless has proven to have long-lasting effects.

The Forum advises the public to treat the children with respect. Talk to them, ask them how they are. When they tell you they cannot go to a shelter because they will be beaten, they are probably making an excuse. More than any other sector, we are aware of the realities of these children's lives. More than any other sector, we are aware of the enormous gulf between the resources available and what needs to be done.

The children left home to seek a better life. In the long term they cannot do it living on the streets with small donations, which tend to be spent unwisely. The Western Cape Street Children's Forum encourages concerned citizens to invest in organisations that can make the children's dreams of a better life come true! [2]

Give your change for change!

Street children have so many Problems with their familes So they run to Sleep in the Streets.

Question 3

There are so many services for street children. What's the purpose of all of them? Which is the most effective?

Pam Jackson responds:

There are several very good methods of working with street children. All have their pros and cons and are effective in different ways. In a paper that I presented to a conference of the National Alliance For Street Children in 2001, I addressed these questions from the perspective of the Cape Town situation I had worked in since 1989. This viewpoint has relevance to other, particularly urban, situations; but every situation has its own peculiar aspects and combinations of factors which may mean that the beliefs/premise stated in this paper do not hold true in a particular situation.[3] The extracts from the paper included in my response below attempt to deal with some of the most widely applicable concerns about services for children living on the streets.

All services make a valuable contribution to helping street children if the purpose of each service is clear, and if the way in which the service helps is clear. However, shelters can be more effective in preventing children from becoming street children and in intervening to change their lives on a permanent basis than any other service, bar preventative community work which at the current moment is still too under-resourced to be fully effective.

Shelters are assumed to be open for 24 hours, 7 days a week and provide a full range of services.

If one's aim is to return children to their communities as participating members capable of doing some work which does not involve crime, then briefly speaking:

[2] Pam Jackson. 2002. Speech as Chairperson of Western Cape Street Children's Forum given on 5 June 2002 (City of Cape Town Awareness Campaign)

[3] Pam Jackson. 2001. *Developmental work is in. Does that mean shelters are out?* Paper presented to National Alliance For Street Children Annual Conference, Cape Town

The prime value of soup kitchens, first aid (mobile) centres, and drop-in centres is that one can form a relationship with the child, which hopefully leads to a move off the streets, into a shelter, or back home. These services also have an important value in feeding the children, showing concern and teaching skills. In many situations where there are scarce resources and children are starving, can't get to medical care, or can't attend school these services may be life-saving and necessary.
However, in situations, particularly urban, where there are resources such as shelters these activities usually make the child's life on the streets more comfortable but do not often lead to greater integration into society.

They can undermine the efforts of those trying to get the children off the street. In the long run they may be doing the children a disservice. The purpose of the service must be clear and the way in which it helps the children, preferably on a long-term basis, must be clear. Some soup kitchens benefit the organisers because they have fellowship with others while delivering the service and they feel good about helping others. The children, on the other hand, may be being disempowered. They may be developing an attitude of "I don't have to do anything in life and people will give." It is the right of a child to be fed, but it is also their responsibility to prepare for their future. Too many children leave shelters because life is easier on the streets where there are no responsibilities and there is plenty of food, contrary to all expectations.

Soup kitchens can structure themselves to counter the 'aanklop, give me' attitude by engaging the children in some activity as part of receiving. If possible the soup kitchen should work together with a social worker or shelter or day programme to enhance their effectiveness.

Similarly a drop-in centre, if it is a warm accepting place to come to off the street, where food, showers and clothes washing machines are provided, but no demands are made, will also merely make life more comfortable, and life changes by the children less necessary.

A drop-in centre can be a workable tool in getting children to change their lives if it is part of a bigger programme. The Homestead, for example, uses its drop-in centre to screen boys who are really motivated to leave the streets for their shelters. While food is provided, the boys must adhere to basic rules - no drugs or weapons in the centre - and must participate regularly for a period of time in the activity programme; in other words, they must participate, not merely receive.

Street workers spend their days walking the streets, getting to know the children with the aim of getting them off the street. They are a favoured strategy of politicians because they are cheap in comparison to shelters, and the politicians can say they are doing something.

In terms of returning children to their families and communities the prime value of street workers lies in their ability to recognise children who are beginning to stroll part-time or full-time. This early intervention system is invaluable in ascertaining whether a child can return home immediately or, if not, placing that child in a shelter before they become habitual street children. However, it is the minority of cases where children can be placed at home immediately because the problems which led to their running away in the first place are known to be complex and not easily solved.

Buyele eKhaya, a project of 28 street and re-integration workers with no shelter, placed 258 children back home out of the 717 they made contact with. Of these 258 children, 170 were still at home only 3 months later, the other 88 having run back to the CBD. Thus of the 717 children contacted, 170 were successfully placed at home, a success rate of 23 per cent. In the same time period, Ons Plek placed 50 per cent of our yearly intake of children back home at a third of the cost, using one third of the personnel. After a year, none of the Ons Plek children had returned to the streets. A successful and permanent reunification takes skilled counselling and time. A shelter provides a safe haven while this is done. Street work is most valuable when attached to a shelter.

The second role of the street worker in terms of getting children off the streets lies in encouraging children to enter and remain at a shelter. The less time a child has spent on the streets the easier this is.

Both of these roles are preventative, in the sense that placing the child at home or in a shelter as soon as possible prevents that child from even learning how to live on the street.

The other aspect of street work, which involves work with habitual street children, is important in that it shows love for the children, can assist with medical care and can sometimes influence their involvement in crime. For the most part though, the influence will not be sufficient to enable them to really change their lives in the sense that they can return to normal life in society.

I say this having watched a succession of excellent and dedicated street workers working for many years on Cape Town streets. Very few hardened street children can shake the lifestyle once it's entrenched. My experience at Ons Plek shelters, and knowledge gained from fortnightly meetings with four other shelters over a period of years, supports this view. Long-term (one year+) street children revert again and again to destructive 'street' behaviour even after months of apparently settling into a shelter/school. The consistent ever-present attention and encouragement from shelter staff, the different lifestyle indoors, and counselling at deep levels are often not enough to carry the child through the difficult challenges on an emotional level, a social level and an educational level for him to truly change. How much harder for long-term street child to make changes while still on the street?

The prime value of day skills programmes and educational programmes, while the children remain sleeping on the street, also lies in forming a relationship in which the topic of returning home can be explored. I say this because the main aim of educational and vocational teaching is undermined by the erratic attendance of the children. Even if attendance is regular, there are barriers to consistent concentration and therefore limits to building on previous learning. Children whose sleep is disturbed, who often abuse various substances, and whose lifestyles are unsettled, will struggle to learn anything day after day. As Josephine Muli from the very successful Undungu Society in Nairobi said, "Our experience has shown that children must be settled in a shelter or at home for learning of any lasting value to take place."

The argument that street children can persevere in learning because they persevere at begging does not mean that they easily persevere at mastering other skills. I suspect they persevere at "begging" because in behavioural psychology terms the most sustaining rewards are intermittent and variable, which is the case with begging.

Our own experience at Ons Plek's informal school and vocational skills programmes with children who are residents and have settled, shows that the children still have considerable difficulties in learning. Children have recurring 'flashbacks' of bad

experiences at school which interrupt their concentration. How much more will children on the street struggle? Giving counselling to resolve flashbacks while on the street will also not help. It's very important that children are in a contained environment before they receive psychological help for the flashbacks. The can of worms which counselling can open, can leave the child in a vulnerable state which is dangerous if they are on the street. A residential programme is in a better position to address their low self-esteem and a lack of willpower to keep working at something, even when they are bored or struggling.

The cheap option of only providing 'school' for street children, favoured by some politicians, will achieve nothing.

In the past we attempted to teach skills suitable to street life which needed minimal change in lifestyle habits. Something like shoe-shining, which requires minimum skills, minimum equipment and can be set up on any street corner, may weather the spontaneous spurts of working and non-working common to street children. Not so, we discovered. Street children have pride like anyone else. The status of shoe-shining or any low-skilled job does not appeal.

To overcome educational difficulties children in the majority of cases must feel secure, have a routine to their lives, and be participants in a comprehensive programme which includes counselling. Except for some exceptional children, educational programmes will not benefit children still living on the street in a long-lasting way.

This conclusion does not mean that no day educational programmes can help street children still on the streets. There are countries where large sections of the community live on the streets and in a routine way still continue to work in a regular pattern. In similar situations, day programmes can benefit street children. However, the prime value in educational programmes does not lie in educating when children still live on the streets. The main value is to establish a relationship in which returning home or entering a shelter is explored. Once settled, the success of the educational programme in educating will be exponentially achievable.

Even then, the major shortcoming in returning them home is that the child has to stay on the street during the time it takes to work on a possible reunification with the family. During this time they are in danger, they get drawn further into street life and can lose interest in going home and/or attending programmes.[4]

Learn-to-Live, the bridging school at the Salesians' Institute projects for youth from the streets, successfully prepares children to return to mainstream schooling because it works in partnership with the shelters and children's homes. Annette Cockburn initiated the Learn-to-Live project at the end of the 1980s as an education project for street children, and in 1990 it was taken on board by the Salesians in Green Point, and combined and further developed with their other programmes such as skills training for youth. Of the learners at Learn-to-Live, those who attend from shelters have a high success rate in terms of furthering their education, while those attending directly from the streets seldom make substantial changes to their lives unless they progress to residential situations.

The prime value of night shelters lies in protecting the children from abuse at night. It also lies in forming a relationship in which a process to get the child permanently off the streets can be formed. These are important functions. Yet a child left to his own devices all day may still have no incentive to leave street life. With a comfortable warm bed, food and the freedom to do as he pleases all day, street life may seem a better alternative than school and other responsibilities.

The prime value of shelters which run on a 24-hour basis, 365 days a year, and are really children's homes, providing therapeutic development programmes, is that they can provide all the services needed by street children in an integrated, holistic way while undertaking the most important aim of preparing children to be integrated with their communities as constructive members of those communities. While preventing further development of habitual street life, these shelters provide safe accommodation, food, clothes, education, counselling, skills for daily life, and undertake the complex process of reunification with family members.

Shelters avoid the problem of other services because they do not merely make the children's life on the street more comfortable. They also require the children to work towards their own futures.

There are, however, criticisms of shelters. "The problem with shelters is they are not preventative or effective. They are costly! They institutionalise children! They should be in the community! They should not be in town! They should be in the country, so much healthier for them! They attract children to town, they do not empower children or discipline them!" … so say the many critics of shelters.

As a director of an urban shelter since 1989 I agree with many of the criticisms of shelters. It depends on how the shelter is run, whether or not these criticisms can be avoided.

A major criticism is that shelters only respond to the symptom of a problem and do not address the causes with the aim of eliminating the phenomenon of street children.

Urban shelters can be more effective in preventing runaways from becoming street children than any other service in the current situation. Although community development projects can be more effective in prevention work, there are not enough of them yet to remove the need for shelters.

When first opened, shelters are not preventative because they are dealing with long-term street children. This changes over time.

When Ons Plek first opened in 1988 there were approximately 60 girls, who had been on the streets for three years because there were only boys' shelters. After five years of Ons Plek's existence the number of girls living on the streets independently of family units had dropped to a yearly average of 7, despite the average number of girls running away per year swelling to approximately 130. Thus the number of female street children is drastically reduced. The fact that there is a service which, although small, is able to immediately provide a safe haven from the streets for potential new street children while working on long-term solutions for their problems, is what makes the difference. The immediate provision of help prevents the girls from ever becoming street children.

[4] Pam Jackson, *ibid.*

Having successfully prevented runaways from becoming street children, Ons Plek is now at the point where girls are referred by community members when they first begin to sleep at a neighbour's house - a pattern that often presages running away. Thus the majority of girls at Ons Plek now have never been on the streets.

Arising out of the criticism of a shelter's ability to be preventative is the belief that shelters should be in the community.

At Ons Plek we looked long and hard at moving into a community to do preventative community development work. We now have a programme in Philippi but being in the CBD remains our primary strategy for now. In the poverty-stricken urban areas around Cape Town, as elsewhere, the grinding stress of poverty leads to a plethora of closely related social problems such as alcoholism, child abuse, both physical and sexual, child neglect, wife-battering, gang violence, illness, starvation, low literacy levels and high levels of unemployment. A combination of these drives some children out of their communities onto the streets of central Cape Town.

They stroll in central Cape Town rather than in their own communities primarily for three reasons: (i) if they remain in their home area they continue to be abused by the abuser; (ii) the money they seek to live on is available in the wealthier areas of Cape Town; and (iii) the many services needed in their areas of origin to make a difference to their lives, are simply not there or are over-burdened. Once on the streets the children's lives disintegrate even further. Their concentration levels (needed for school and work) deteriorate, substance abuse increases, anti-social behaviour towards others' property and person increases. The longer they're on the streets, the harder it is for them to live in / return to their own communities. A service is needed where these children are. A service is needed to stabilise their behaviour so that they can participate in society. And if circumstances dictate that they cannot return home, a service is needed to house them while they are prepared plus empowered to care for themselves as full members of society. Children's homes are often full or have lengthy application procedures which preclude them from responding these circumstances.

If Ons Plek Projects closed down and moved our small resources to a community, we could help prevent children running away to town in that particular community. However children from all other communities would still run to town, not to whichever community we are in. By staying where we are, we can continue to prevent runaway girl children from many communities from becoming street children. The cost of one centre compared to at least one in many communities, is also cheaper.

The rationale for shelters to be in a city centre when resources are few rather than in the community of origin of the children is clear.

In addition, a city community tends to be made of people from many different communities. This makes it a neutral place. Many girls are with us because their families have not been able to prevent them being raped by neighbours who are seldom arrested. These girls feel far safer away from the neighbourhood rapists or inter-gang warfare which may target them. They need a neutral place to strengthen themselves away from condemnatory neighbours, embarrassment in front of peers and/or dangerous men.

A major advantage of being in a community is to be able to be involved in building the community. Ons Plek misses that. But a major plus about being in the city is that we remain focused on female street children and do not get drawn into a myriad local community issues.

A third criticism of shelters is that they attract children to town who would otherwise stay happily at home.

This depends on the staff. Some children may be attracted to a free holiday in Cape Town, as a little bunch of Kimberley girls once were. We do home visits and corroborate information on each child from schools, churches, street committees etc. If a child has no reason to be in care that child is returned home very quickly. If, on the other hand, some role players want to make a business of street children it's easy enough to attract children by providing nice food and clothes and outings and not applying discipline, all courtesy of donors who do not look closely enough at the service.[5]

Despite the shortcomings of shelters, they do seem at this stage to provide the most effective services for children already on the street and are fairly effective in a preventative role as well.

A serious criticism of shelters is that they only deal with the symptom of a problem. Surely prevention is better than cure?

The optimum service to prevent children ever running away to the streets would be one or more NGOs in each community that would pick up family difficulties at an early stage, and work developmentally to change the circumstances in the community which give rise to street children.

We've all heard this solution touted at high levels of government. "GO TO THE SOURCE OF THE PROBLEM! STOP THE TAP DRIPPING and you won't have to mop up endless buckets of water!"

Funders all over the world subscribe to this view. Poverty eradication is a social welfare policy in South Africa. If we could do this it would go a long way to resolving many difficulties and hardships the majority of South Africans live with. It would certainly have an impact on the numbers of street children, BUT the reality as of today is that we are not there! It will take years to have even basic services like clean water in every community, never mind even one NGO in every community.

Developmental community work is the ideal way to prevent the phenomenon of street children. However, this method tends to be slow. The reality in South Africa today is that for an NGO with small resources, more effective preventative work can be done using a shelter. In the future, as AIDS orphans fall through the cracks in community safety nets and run to central business districts, shelters may be their only hope of being re-routed back into a community.

Question 4

Is there a role for 24-hour intake and assessment centres?

Pam Jackson responds:

This idea is frequently mooted by politicians and businessmen wanting a quick solution to the 'street children problem'.

It is envisaged that street children will be taken to the centre, assessed and referred. It is a very good idea! Which is why most shelters have always operated as 24-hour assessment

[5] Pam Jackson, *ibid.*

centres. The difference is that a shelter's assessment takes place as an integrated part of all other treatment programmes. A shelter assessment programme provides 24-hour accommodation, parental discipline, counselling and education support while assessing the children. Assessment can be done around the clock, day in and day out, at a depth not possible in an out-patient service. Treatment and assessment happen interchangeably, each enriching the other.

The children are assessed informally and formally, when they are relaxed and unaware that their behaviour is noticed, as well as when they are trying to convey an impression. Much can be deduced from observing them playing and interacting with other children at the shelter.

Street children are different to children living in families who can be taken to an out-patient social work / psychological assessment centre for an hour or two, and whose family context is present with them all the time. They also frequently do not want the truth to be known and will deliberately mislead helpers, something which is easier to do in an out-patient assessment centre than in a 24-hour shelter.

In addition, the assumption that referral for accommodation can be done in 24 hours usually remains an assumption. The child is usually referred to the shelter which would have done the assessment and provided accommodation anyway. The assessment centre is an unnecessary duplication of existing services.

For all the above reasons, assessment centres tend to become shelters. In situations where there are no shelters, assessment centres tend to become drop-in centres providing daily programmes, because assessment cannot be done in 24 hours.

Question 5
Why, if you are doing an okay job, are there still children on the street?

Pam Jackson answers the question in this excerpt from a letter to the **Cape Times** ***of 11 August 2004:***

> *The problem is simply this: poverty is endemic in South Africa; poverty gives rise to street children; poor communities are heavily under-resourced and most resources are in CBDs.*
>
> *Therefore, as children suffer neglect and abuse there are few resources to resolve their problems in their own communities. Like everyone else in South Africa they migrate to cities where there is a chance of receiving help and making a living.*
>
> *The children then become a problem for the wider public. Street children and business and street children and tourists do not go well together. To City Councils and CIDs and government departments, all heavily under pressure from business and voters, it may well look like the established street children organisations are not delivering.*
>
> *NPOs in the street children field do help many children off the street! Ons Plek Projects for girls rescues 95 per cent of girls living on the street per year from street life. Most are reunited with their families on a permanent basis. Education and counselling are provided in the process. The Homestead delivers the same continuum of services to 150 boys each month. Both organisations receive referrals from many poverty-stricken communities without local residential facilities. The focus of organisations with a good track record is on working with children day in and day out on programmes which will equip them to face the daily grind and responsibility of life.*
> *There is a small minority of children whom NPOs cannot help despite all efforts. By far the largest component of the child street population, who remain visible to the public eye, however, is the latest influx of children who run to the streets and who in turn will be helped. The reality is that no amount of good work with the children is going to stem the flow of new children onto the street!*
>
> *The solution is twofold. (1) Stop the flow of new faces onto the streets by placing resources in the children's communities of origin. (2) Help the children already on the street to leave it. Twenty-four hour centres which provide accommodation, assessment, education and counselling while undertaking the complex family reunification process are essential in CBDs. As one small organisation Ons Plek is most effective operating in town because we can help girls from all areas. Were we to move into a township we would only help children of that area.*
>
> *Children from other areas would continue to run into the CBD. Yet if services were opened in all under-resourced areas it would greatly reduce the flow to town.*[6]

Children who leave home, and their families, experience a range of adverse circumstances. Some of these circumstances can be turned around by state intervention, for example the delivery of affordable housing or good policing against the drug trade and other forms of criminality. But poverty as such is a vast and intractable problem, and any one intervention also takes focus and financing away from another possible intervention. There are also the unintended consequences of new state policies and legislation - for example, the mainstreaming of learners with special needs who experience barriers to learning; this results in many of these learners having no situation where they can actually access the support services, making them even more vulnerable and stigmatised than before.
While the overarching key factor in children leaving home is sheer poverty, the single biggest specific factor is alcohol. Issues arising from the misuse of alcohol by a parent or caregiver are given as the 'reason for leaving home' by girls coming to Ons Plek in nearly one hundred per cent of cases.

One needs to bear in mind that even in well-resourced Western countries there are street children. This is because there will always be families with problems whose children will run away. Some of those children will also run away from the shelters, no matter how good a service they provide. The fact that there are children on the street may mean that a shelter is not doing its work, but it may also mean something else related to the particular circumstances of the children themselves.

[6] Pam Jackson. 2004. City can stem flow of street children to CBD by establishing services in needy communities. *Cape Times* 11 August 2004

Question 6

What is the role of urban development strategies in relation to street children?

Tony R. Samara responds:

While local strategies are certainly important, today cities like Cape Town are deeply embedded in global processes and subject to global forces. One consequence of this is that cities, especially those in the so-called 'developing world' are increasingly left to fend for themselves, as support from federal governments recedes. Cities must, therefore, earn their keep, so to speak, competing against other similarly situated cities for scarce global resources. The preferred strategy among most city governments is to create a favourable climate for business. The goal here is to attract tourists, foreign direct investment and jobs. In this climate reducing crime and creating perceptions of safety and stability are of paramount importance. However, the dilemma this poses is what to do with those urban poor who often inhabit and/or work in the areas to be 'reclaimed', and are blamed for much of its crime. In many locations the answer has been to create Central Improvement Districts or Central Business Districts which, in turn, become mechanisms for tackling the crime problem. Once this framework is established it is easier to understand how it is that street children can be seen, in the words of one Cape Town newspaper, as public enemy number one.

The point here is not that crime is not a problem. Deal with crime, by all means, but not in ways that in effect only deal with crime as it affects affluent, commercially viable areas, push it into poor areas and create or recreate divided cities. Cities like Cape Town have pledged to address crime from a more developmentally oriented perspective that addresses cities as singular entities, where one section cannot be developed in isolation from others. Attempts to develop viable areas, hoping that this will lead to a rising tide, unfortunately often only exacerbate social tensions and further marginalise the most vulnerable urban populations. Not only is this strategy unethical but as a development strategy it has shown little success, as the exploding slum populations around the globe suggest.

Question 7

What is the role of the police?

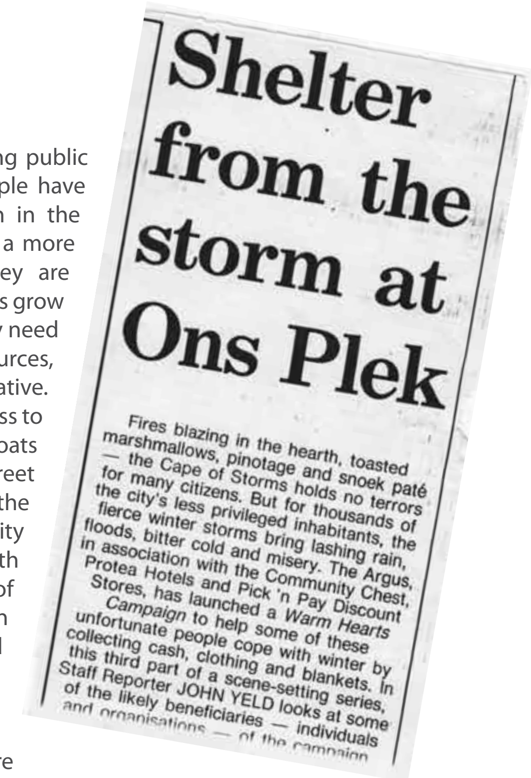
Tony R. Samara responds:

In the drive to create business-friendly urban cores, through the creation of Central Improvement Districts for example, cities pass laws to facilitate the process. Given the emphasis on crime reduction and the link made between crime and the urban poor, including street children and vagrants, these laws often seek to regulate the use of public space in ways that disproportionately affect vulnerable populations. In cities around the world urban renewal laws to create business-friendly climates include laws against begging, sleeping in public, sitting on public streets, and many more which clearly target those who live and/or work on the street. It falls to the police, public and private, to enforce these laws and regulate public space. In divided cities it becomes the role of the security forces to essentially police these divisions, putting police, unfairly, in the role of policing the poor.

Question 8

What is the role of the media?

Tony R. Samara responds:



Shelter from the storm at Ons Plek

Fires blazing in the hearth, toasted marshmallows, pinotage and snoek paté — the Cape of Storms holds no terrors for many citizens. But for thousands of the city's less privileged inhabitants, the fierce winter storms bring lashing rain, floods, bitter cold and misery. The Argus, in association with the Community Chest, Protea Hotels and Pick 'n Pay Discount Stores, has launched a *Warm Hearts Campaign* to help some of these unfortunate people cope with winter by collecting cash, clothing and blankets. In this third part of a scene-setting series, Staff Reporter JOHN YELD looks at some of the likely beneficiaries — individuals and organisations — of the campaign

The media clearly play a central role in shaping public opinion, especially on issues with which people have little or no direct experience. Street children in the media are sometimes portrayed as victims, in a more sympathetic light, while at other times they are presented as 'public enemies'. As urban residents grow weary of crime, however, and cities increasingly need to compete against each other for global resources, media coverage often shifts towards the negative. As vulnerable populations, with little if any access to the media, street children become easy scapegoats for a city's woes. In such times portrayals of street children become one-dimensional, and the children themselves are stripped of their humanity in ways that, intentionally or not, dovetail with the larger urban development agenda of cleansing core areas. One study conducted in Cape Town, for example, found that increased negative coverage of street children in the media coincided with the creation of a Central Improvement District, one reason being that individuals involved with the District were more often quoted in stories about street children and urban development once it had been created. The result, however, was that an already vulnerable population was made even more so.

Question 9

I have not done anything like this before, but I would like to help children leave street life behind. Is there any way I can help as a volunteer?

Renée Rossouw responds:

Volunteers are very important in this work. Yet it is very difficult work.

For all of us working in the field, the following qualities are essential: a good dose of common sense, a good sense of humour, a heart for the wellbeing of the children, an ability to give of oneself, a willingness to learn new things, at least a little sense of adventure, and a great willingness to stick out difficult situations. We also need to be very flexible, while at the same time quite stable about routines and boundaries.

One of the most important things is to be a team player. Children who have experienced complex family dynamics are no strangers to situations in which adults are at odds with each other. The best service we can give them is a real commitment to working together with each other in their best interests. The most heroic thing we embark on

is cooperating with others, negotiating, working together, giving up daily any dream of being the heroine, the woman of the year, visions of rescuing little orphans all by oneself…

The cliché says it takes a village to raise a child. The truth is that it DOES take a village to raise a child, and volunteering in the field is about taking your place as an ordinary villager. And then doing extraordinary things for which nobody may particularly thank you. While initial enthusiasm is a Good Thing, it is being there for the long haul which is most important. At Ons Plek we require volunteers to commit themselves for at least one full year. Our best volunteers stay for several years. This is important because the children have often experienced abandonment several times before they come to Ons Plek. It is important that in our 'village' we let children know what is going on, and we stay the course. Volunteers must keep their commitments to the children, only make promises and arrangements they can realistically keep, and take tremendous care of how they leave when they do leave.

At Ons Plek volunteers mainly assist with educational, recreational and enrichment programmes. In terms of education, typically somebody spends about two hours per week, one afternoon or evening, doing homework with the girls. Other volunteers provide a dance, drama, personal grooming, craft or art session one afternoon per week.

ONS PLEK

Full-time interns, usually final-year social work or related professional students from the northern hemisphere, can make a substantial contribution. They usually need to work for 32 hours per week under professional supervision for three to ten months towards their qualification. They can add valuable energy, creativity and service to the lives of the children. It is often difficult for them and their universities to discern at a distance the quality of services offered by a particular organisation. Whether you are a local or an international volunteer, it is important to ask questions about the organisation's accountability in terms of governance, professional qualifications of staff and registration both as an NPO and as the appropriate type of children's service organisation (e.g. a children's home).

Sometimes a volunteer can open up new possibilities for the children. Stephanie Barfield was one such volunteer. She dreamt of teaching in Africa from a young age, and shortly after her retirement in Britain did exactly that – obtained a qualification in teaching and started and sustained the 'morning school' at Ons Plek. She ran it for about three years before handing over to a local staff member – having created a job for a local person in the process. Her joy in the girls and her joy in realising her dream have made the impossible possible – a truly motley group of children at every educational level, with every kind of social and emotional difficulty, sitting down for their time in bridging class every morning until new doors could open for them.

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