



Opposite page: Two young Kenyan children sit on the streets of Nairobi. This page, top to bottom: A former street child shows off his artwork; Children are seen walking on the street to the AMREF Child Protection Centre in Dagoretti for their lunch.

“To understand the story is the important key to understanding the child”

Now, a decade later, the world looks much the same. It begs the question, what is the way ahead?

Realities in the 21st Century

“I’ve seen many things in my travels but I wasn’t prepared for what was happening around me,” explained BAFTA award winning journalist Ross Kemp of his time in Western’s welcoming town of Eldoret. “All around me were heavily addicted mothers giving glue bottles to toddlers.” In a perverse way they were mostly likely being good mothers as the glue is known to stave off hunger. Sadly, in the Kenyan context, these scenes are nothing new. The reality of street children has been a growing phenomenon in urban centres of Kenya for over twenty years and does not appear to be abating.

Rosemary Kamanu, manager of AMREF’s Dagoretti Child in Need Project, says there are not only street children but street families. “Street children usually live in what are called bases,” she continues. “In Eldoret, however, there are barracks complete with presidents and ministers.” It is a growing problem.

Rising Numbers

Rosemary’s work is usually restricted to Nairobi’s Dagoretti area, but for the past six months it has extended to Lodwar, Kitale and Eldoret, as the recently ended drought has drawn many families from Northern Kenya onto the streets of Eldoret, through Kitale, in search of food.

According to research by University of Nairobi Sociology and Anthropology Professor Enos Njeru, there were 10,000 to 30,000 street children in Nairobi in 2001. This is a figure that has risen to higher than 60,000 according to a February 2007 IRIN report.

The findings also stated that there were a total of between 250 to 350,000 in all of Kenya, with the majority on the streets of Kisumu, Mombasa and Nairobi. These

On the Street

As the gap between the rich and the poor continues to grow in Kenya, so do the numbers of children who fall through the cracks and find themselves homeless on the streets. Join **Olive Burrows** and **Gareth Morris** as they investigate the phenomenon of Kenya’s street children and discover that these youths are not so different from the rest of us

As my car stops in the Nairobi traffic, an outline moves out of the shadows and approaches the open window. The sunlight highlights the tattered clothes, dirty skin and neglected frame. His big brown eyes, no older than eight or nine years, pull on my heartstrings. He only says one word as he reaches out his hand... “Please.”

I remember in the 1990s, when I spent much more time in the Central Business District (CBD), street children were basically a fact of life. They were to be avoided, abhorred even. Parking in the streets

more often than not resulted in stolen hub caps and side mirrors. Coming out from an afternoon matinee at 20th Century Cinemas guaranteed a line of dirty children aggressively begging for money. On one occasion, I recall returning to my car to grab a jacket and startling a young street girl who was resting against my tire urinating. The younger children were always pitiable but the older, larger ones were frightening, their eyes dark and dead. It was as though all signs of humanity had died. They drew alongside the younger boys, arms around their shoulders, leading them away. It was always troubling, and yet Kenyans from all

walks of life simply made their way to and fro, unconcerned by the parallel world that thrived around them.

By the late 90s street children became famous for accosting pedestrians with the very real threat of soiling them with human faeces or sticking them with an AIDS infected needle should they refuse to give them money. The CBD became a place to avoid and suburbs began to grow in what was available for dining, entertainment and shopping. It was now no longer necessary to go to ‘town’ and as such, street children became a bad memory in the back of people’s minds.





estimates have undoubtedly risen given the post-election violence that took place towards the end of 2007.

Why the Street?

There are a range of factors in a child's life that make it more attractive to live on the street in Africa than at home. However, one thing is for sure – according to a spokesperson for Action for Children in Conflict (AfCiC), a charity that works to improve the lives of street children in Kenya – each child's story is different.

"To understand the story is the important key to understanding the child."

Sometimes the child makes a tactical decision to leave home to improve the socio-economic situation for the rest of the family; the money the parents earn goes further with less children to spend it on.

"My mother passed away and I never saw my father. I was living with my aunt who wasn't able to provide for me and all her children, so I had to leave," confesses Jane* who is now being cared for by Railway Children. "There are many things that I lacked at home and that is why I decided to leave home and come and fend for myself."

In Thika, as in many other locations across Kenya, children are often kept from school to help supplement a family's income.

"A person may earn KSH 150 on a plantation, but it costs KSH 150 to buy food for the family and feed the child that is going to school," says Seth Mwangi of AfCiC. "So there is pressure to keep the child from going to school and an expectation that the child will find employment in order to boost family income."

But being forced to work rather than go to school (often at times against the child's

wish) can often result in conflict within the family and migration to a 'better life on the street.'

Our handouts, according to Rosemary, also keep children from school and could lead them onto the street. "When you give handouts, you encourage parents to keep their children out of school and begging. In the slums, for some women, going to work literally means hiring out children for KSH 50 a day to go out begging. The children then become accustomed to street life and leave home completely."

The leading reason for the phenomenon of street children, according to Rosemary, is a break down in the family unit. Over 75 percent of the children who walk through the doors of the AMREF centre have single mothers, and the turning point in their lives takes place when there is either the death of the father or a separation of mother and father coupled with poverty.

Rosemary tells the story of 13-year-old David* from Kitale, whose mother and father separated. In Western Kenya, it is customary that the child remain with the father. Missing his mother, David went in search of her

in Kitale town; only to find that she had relocated to Nairobi. When he found her, she had remarried and sent David back to his father who later passed away, leaving David homeless.

According to a report published this year by Railway Children, based on interviews with 93 street children in Kenya and Tanzania, escaping physical violence in the home, or what they perceive as harsh treatment, is another paramount reason children go on the streets.

Twenty-two-year-old Enoch* is a former street child who went on the streets when he was nine and lived there for two years. When both his parents died – his mother in a car accident and his father of illness – he says his father's siblings subdivided all his parents' property. Enoch, together with his sister and two younger brothers, moved in with his aunt who he says used to send them to school without food and treated them like domestic labourers. When he made friends with a chokora, local slang for street child, he followed the child onto the streets in search of a better life.

In many instances, children who find



Opposite page, left to right: Young women learn to sew at the AMREF Centre; A lively game of football.

Below: Charities like the Dagoretti AMREF Centre, AfCiC and Railway Children encourage creative projects to help former street children to open up.

Photographs: Getty/ThinkStock, Photolibary

themselves homeless due to poverty were likely already begging for food before fully relocating to the streets. In this way they interact with other street children who introduced them to their 'base.' According to the report "Struggle to Survive," children between the ages of 12 and 14 prefer grouping with those in their age group, as there are both protective and abusive elements in groupings with older boys.

Those without the strength of numbers sleep hidden away, in tunnels for instance, as opposed to the open territories marked out by groups such as sports fields and alleyways. Street children can also be found sleeping outside business premises under balconies to shield themselves from the rain.

Street Life

The street often doesn't provide the reprieve sought out by these children. The physical violence continues with bigger and stronger children beating up the smaller and weaker ones for the money they make begging.

Even worse is the sexual abuse these children face on the streets. Of the 93 children Railway interviewed, only six were girls. Girls have, however, been known to disguise themselves as boys to reduce the level of abuse they are subjected to. In the AMREF centre, none of the girls came from off the street. They were adolescent mothers, girls who'd been forced into marriage or from poor homes. The rampant form of sexual abuse on the street is sodomy,

which many times, is used as a sort of initiation and is a trend that has Rosemary worried. She tells of a group of street boys in Dagoretti who engage in prostitution. The exposure of these children to HIV then becomes a major concern.

It is also a trend that risks public safety, as a WHO training package on sexual health of street kids states, "If sexual activity brings feelings of power or control to someone who otherwise feels powerless, such feelings may be sought through aggressive sexual demands or violence against others."

The Railway report tells of a 7-year-old called Matu who is described as wearing trousers "that have been cut with a razor at the rear so many times by older boys that his buttocks are showing and the trousers hang together by a thread."

A Helping Hand Slapped Away

You would then think, that after going through such hard times on the street, a child would jump at the chance to get off them. Not all of them it seems. After being taken to a centre for the rehabilitation of street children, Matu ran away, back onto the streets.

About 30 percent of the children who sign up for the rehabilitation programme at the AMREF centre drop out. Substance abuse is one major reason, with half of the children who come in off the street using glue.

When he was on the street, Enoch tells



me, he'd buy glue to stave off the cold from a woman who'd sell him a capful for KSH 5. "Getting glue isn't difficult," he says. "There are numerous hardware stores in downtown Nairobi."

The ability to make money off scrap metal is another impediment to getting them off the street. According to Enoch, a kilo goes for KSH 30, and that is why you'll often see the homeless with a sack on their back rummaging through your garbage. When that doesn't bear fruit, they resort to vandalism.

"When they're just feeling lazy, they'll snatch your phone or your bag or dismember your car," he continues.

"There are many centres for street children," Rosemary says. "Too many." An odd statement coming from someone who has seen the damage done by living on the street; the reasons for her statement are the centres where children undergo the same abuse and neglect they faced on the streets either from fellow boarders or centre staff.

Many children see centres as curtailing the freedom they had on the street. To reduce their dropout rate, the AMREF centre is non-residential, seeking instead to reunite the children with their families. They tried going the residential route, but a hot shower and three hot meals a day made it close to impossible to ask the children to return to one-roomed houses.

The centre also used to have a bus pick up children from the various 'bases,' but stopped this to sift the wheat from the chaff. "Those who are serious about rehabilitation," according to Rosemary, "will walk to a pick-up point near the Dagoretti District Officer's office."

One of the children interviewed by Railway Children at a rehabilitation centre admits to his easy street life schedule. "I used to eat on time and watch videos [in video shacks]," he says. Another on the streets said, "The good thing here is taking a bath, sniffing glue and there is plenty of food when you want it."

The younger children are usually successful when begging for food, and the older ones "help vendors at the markets clean up their work space and in return are given the food that's almost going [too] bad to eat," Enoch tells me. "When I was on the street there was also a kibanda [food shack] we'd go to after selling the scrap metal we

collected."

When worst comes to worst, there's always the garbage dump. "Once when I was heading to Eldoret," Rosemary tells me, "I saw what looked like an old woman beating up a child on the side of the road. I asked the driver to stop and I walked up to them. It was a 16-year-old street mother, high on glue, beating up her hungry 2-year-old for wanting to follow her to the dump where it knew it would find food. The mother said the child was too heavy for her to take it along."

What, then?

AfCiC works in three primary schools around Thika to offer a lunchtime feeding programme. For two shillings a day, each child gets a hot and nutritious meal. This financial support for families has increased attendance in school by 95 percent in just three months, which is yet another piece of evidence that preventative work is key to stopping the migration of children to the streets.

Rosemary's experience supports these findings. "You'll be surprised to find that children who come from poor homes suffer more from mal-nutrition than street children," she shares.

A draft of Kenya's National Children Policy (2011) is currently awaiting cabinet approval. Once passed, this policy will set the stage for creating an environment where all the rights of a child are fulfilled based on the goals of survival, development, protection and participation. Government legislation to reduce poverty should be welcomed, and ways to implement this on the ground improved. Simply put, reducing poverty reduces the drive for children to leave home.

In the same vein, the Dagoretti AMREF Centre partners with organisations who manage income generating projects to lift the single mothers and their children, who make up 75 percent of the centre's population, out of poverty.

AfCiC also visits schools to discuss issues, putting in place measures to help the children, families and communities that are most vulnerable before the children feel the need to migrate.

Getting a child who has been severely traumatised to open up is not easy. Charities use a range of techniques to engage

children, including sport, art, drama and music. The Retrak Charity, based in Kenya, Ethiopia and Uganda, uses circus skills taught by ex-street children to engage the young and more importantly, allow them to laugh and play. At the AMREF centre, the children tell their story through art, music and drama. As they master these skills, therapists help them work through the issues that come up. "In many of the plays they stage, the father will be a drunk who beats them and their mother up and locks them out of the house," Rosemary says.

Education and training are key to keeping these children off the streets, and the AMREF project provides uniforms to those willing to go back to primary school and pays for the secondary education of those who score 300 points and above. Those who excel might even get the chance to pursue higher education with the help of partners, as did Enoch's sister who goes to Daystar University. Those who feel they are too old to go back to school are offered vocational training.

There is a saying throughout Africa that children belong to the community. The sentiment behind the proverb is one of unity and cohesion. It is a belief that communities must stick together and take care of one another; your neighbour's child's upbringing is as much your responsibility as theirs. This belief in community has been one of Africa's perceived strong points and has fostered a deep respect globally. However, has this practice, this worldview, now simply become hollow words? Has extreme poverty and emotional scaring forced us to reject our children, to push them toward a life of crime, suffering, irredeemability? Are their futures less important than our own?

As John Muiruri, Director of AfCiC, puts it, "These are our brothers and sisters that are on the street. It is the community's responsibility to prevent these children from ending up on the street."

*Names have been changed. **D**

For more information about the work these charities do in East Africa, visit:

www.actionchildren.org
www.AMREF.org
www.railwaychildren.org.uk
www.retrak.org