

Understanding the Phenomenon of Street Children in Lome, Togo

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(Received: Apr 27, 2024; Revised: Jul 26, 2024; Accepted: Jul 26, 2024)

Abstract

This study focused on investigating the causes of the phenomenon of street children in Lomé and the challenges they face. The study applied a qualitative method based on documentary research and interviews of 20 participants composed of public services, international organizations and private sectors, and community leaders as well as parents living in the city of Lomé. This article addressed the different causes of this phenomenon of street children in Lomé with particular emphasis on the contribution of urbanization as one of the important causes of this phenomenon. The findings showed that the weakness of the existing public-private-people partnership does not make it possible to provide lasting responses to the needs of street children. The study proposes to revitalize the partnership between the different actors. The government must develop and implement a protection policy that addresses the problems of children. The concerned organizations must put in place basic social services at all levels to avoid the displacement of parents and children to the country's major cities. With the improvement of the public-private-people partnership strategy in collaboratively solving the phenomenon of street children, Togo will be able to reduce the level of poverty through job creation and higher living standard for young people.

Keywords: Street children, Urbanization, Public-private-people partnership

Introduction

Togo considered as a country of West Africa, at the administrative level, is divided into six regions, which are the Maritime region, the Plateaux region, the Central region, the Kara region, the Savanes Region and Lome-Commune. These regions are subdivided into “prefectures” and “communities”. The total national territory of Togo is 56,600 km², with an average density of 104 inhabitants / km². According to the National Census Council, Togo is experiencing a demographic evolution of its population which evolved from 5,884,568 inhabitants in 2006 to 6,191,155 inhabitants in 2010, and increased to 8,095,498 inhabitants in 2022, including 4,150,988 women and 3,944,510 men, with a demographic growth is 2.3% and an infant mortality rate estimated at 10.6% (National Institute of Statistics and Economic and Demographic Studies, 2023).

According to the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS III, 2014), between 2011 and 2017, the poverty rate of Togo decreased from 58.7% to 53.5%, meaning that 200,000 more people are predicted to be living in poverty in 2017 than in 2011. Two-thirds of the people in rural areas live in poverty, making it an even more pervasive issue. Because poorer families have more children, the percentage of children living in poverty (60.4%) is greater than that of the general population. Child multidimensional poverty is also higher than financial poverty, with 84.2% of kids experiencing at least one deprivation in a category that is essential to their development. According to the Basic Well-being Indicators Questionnaire (QUIBB) (2006), three out of four households are home to at least one person under the age of 18. One in five children (22%) or 624,586 children live with only one of their two parents. This phenomenon concerns more children in urban areas as 25% of children against 20% in rural areas and children from more privileged



households 27% against 18% of children from poor households (Ministry of Social Action and National Solidarity, 2011). A Togolese family includes an average of 4.5 persons, of which over half (46%) are children under the age of 15 and 28% are headed by women, according to the 2013-2014 Demographic and Health Survey (DHS III, 2014). Overall, 81% of males and 52% of women between the ages of 15 and 49 are literate.

Accelerated urbanization raises a number of concerns that are likely to have an effect on the degree of protection provided to children, such as a decrease in the accessibility of basic social services like essential health care, education, energy, the social protection system, security, housing, and mobility in the face of population pressure, the growth of slums and precarious housing, the fraying of the family and community fabric, and the expansion of vulnerable situations. Moreover, the unprotected children can expose to activities like drug use that can harm their health and inappropriate sexual activity, as well as the risks of substance abuse (Ministry of Social Action and National Solidarity, 2011).

Togolese families are crucial for children's protection, but many dependent children are seen as vulnerable, especially in rural areas with declining income. Economic and social tensions in families lead to instability, domestic violence, and lack of parental authority. Blended families, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds, can cause misunderstandings, conflict, or violence. The organization and structure of society may contribute to "street children" and their causes. Experts and researchers suggest that children reach this stage when their education or socialization fails, with parents, family, and society as a whole being the primary culprits (Djonoukou, 2006). The issue of street children in Togo emerged in the early 1975s, following the country's independence in 1960 and the rise of urbanization. The problem began in major African towns like Nairobi, Accra, and Addis Abeba, but was only recognized later. Factors contributing to this epidemic include marginalization, family economic circumstances, joblessness, poor parental income, and divorces. The UN Organization for Children reports a significant increase in street children (Marguemt, 1999).

The most pitiful of the many victims of contemporary city life is that of the street children. The country, acting as their foster parent, and society, acting as their guardians, are both held accountable for some of the conditions which contribute to the dependency, delinquency, and degradation of city children. The lack of a home, a safe environment, and an education cause these children to suffer collectively. Due to social marginalization, they are not included in the community (Hickey & Du Toit, 2013).

The researchers, namely Djonoukou (2006) and Dimbu, (2012) were more in agreement on the explanatory factors of the phenomenon, the causes of the presence of children in the street on the one hand and the difficulties as well as the means of resistance in the face of difficulties and the means of survival of these children on the street on the other hand. As for the last, Dankyi and Huang (2022) conducted research on the health of these street children that allowed them to know to what level these children are exposed and what measures should be taken to resolve this child health problem from the street.

Togo has seen a sharp increase in the number of street kids in recent years. Over 6,000 Togolese youngsters were found living on the streets in 2015, with the majority of them ending up in Lomé. This number has increased to 10,000 by 2022 (Nations Unies Togo, 2022). Today, it is difficult to overlook the increasing number of street children in developing nations (Cosgrove, 1990). Young people are migrating to cities as a result of socioeconomic restructuring, which has left families impoverished and forced them to scratch out a livelihood on the streets, growing urbanization, the limited governmental competence and other causes (United Nations Children's Fund, 2012). These helpless children remain homeless and need helps from every sector both government and non-government to lessen the phenomenon of street children in developing countries.

The issue of street children in Togo, and in Lomé in particular, expresses itself in a completely unexpected form since it is not a question of a marginality brought on by the rural exodus as it is in the majority of African cities. A study by the Youth in Action for Development (JAD) program found that just 11% of these children were native to the area. Similarly, Marguerat (1998) found that 12% of these children are from rural regions. As a result, street children are a long-standing and largely urban phenomena in Togo (Djonoukou, 2006).

Thousands of children may be seen playing on the streets of Togo's capital and other major cities, while exact figures are unclear. They are exceedingly frail and vulnerable to a range of problems. For example, a study by the non-governmental organization, Aid and Support Action for Drug Rehabilitation (ACAARD), in Togo revealed that more than 6,366 drug users, including 2,118 females, live in more than 40 ghettos, with 387 children, including 46 orphans without parents (Creuset-TOGO, 2015)

The problem of street children continues to constitute a significant challenge for the city of Lomé despite the efforts of organizations and stakeholders involved in the protection and care of these young people in difficult circumstances. Government engagement in the development and implementation of projects and programs falls short of appropriately addressing the problems these young people face. Despite all of these efforts, these street children find it challenging to reintegrate into social and professional life, which makes it challenging for them to effectively contribute to the production and progress of the country. The author of "Contribution to an anthropological approach to the phenomenon of street children in Togolese Cities: case of Lomé, Djonoukou (2006), documents the worrying growth of the phenomenon of street children. In Togo today, the children of the street number in the hundreds, having started as a tiny group of teens at the beginning of the 1960s.

Objectives

- 1) To investigate causes of the phenomenon of street children in the city of Lomé in Togo.
- 2) To examine the challenges that the street children in Lomé is facing.
- 3) To provide recommendations to related authorities and organizations to lessen the problems and improve the well-being of street children in Lomé, Togo.

Research Methodology

This paper used a qualitative method. Data collection is marked by sending a note for the authorization request to the Ministry of Development Planning and Cooperation. Following obtaining this authorization document, it addressed to those responsible for the Ministry of Social Protection who are responsible for the protection of children, and to those responsible for international organizations and those at the national level who are involved in the protection of street children in Togo in order to obtain access agreement to the premises. This procedure makes it possible to provide resource people who participated in the interview.

The research collected information from in-depth interview of 20 participants from 3 main sectors, based on the concept of PPPP, which are public sector, private sector, and communities or people, who involved in the resolution of this phenomenon.

- 1) The public sector which are the services and international agencies belonging to the State
 - a. A staff from Ministry of Social Protection
 - b. A staff from Ministry of Planning and Development
 - c. A staff from UNICEF and International Organization for Migration

2) The private sectors which are the different agencies or organizations which operate for their own benefit and which do not belong to the State

- a. A staff from ECOBANK
- b. A staff from Health center AIME Afrique,
- c. A staff from International Red Cross Togo,
- d. A staff from Plan International Togo

3) The communities or the people who are made up of the population of the communities and civil society in resolving this phenomenon of street children

- a. 8 parents (father/mother)
- b. 5 Community leaders

The interview took place in French which is the official language used in the Togolese administration before being transcribed into English for academic reasons of the study.

Moreover, this paper uses secondary data from the documents to address the different causes of this phenomenon of street children in Lome by placing particular emphasis on the contribution of migration as one of the important causes of this phenomenon.

Results

1) Causes of the phenomenon of street children in the city of Lome in Togo.

The study found that causes of the phenomenon of street children in the city of Lome are multiple. On the one hand, economic poverty constitutes an important factor that pushes children to take to the streets. This is manifested by the lack of means and the inability of parents to provide for the daily needs of the children. According to Shitindi (2023), monetary poverty constitutes an important cause of the evolution of the phenomenon of street children in the world and especially in Africa. Based on the interview with a chief of community,

“The unequal distribution of income in the country is one of the facts which widens the gap between people who have means and increases the number of vulnerable families, especially in rural areas.”

(Chief of Community no.1, Interviewed on 31 March 2024)

The results of this research also showed the lack of sufficient and adequate basic social services, namely education, infrastructure, and access to health and sanitation, in the villages pushes some to abandon schooling and rural communities. The results also proved that a weakness in economic and income-creating infrastructure in rural areas further worsens the living conditions of the rural population and exposes them to precarious conditions. At the family level, some children have left their parents not because of poverty but because of the violence those parents or certain family members exercise on the children. To be free, these children choose to leave their families to take refuge in the streets to avoid this violence. In the same sense, the separation of parents is also considered as an individual factor that pushes children to choose the path of the street. Remarried couples can also be one of the factors that push children to leave their home. As mentioned by an interviewee in Lome;

“People who remarry or couples who separate due to problems when one of these people has a child, these children are often faced with a lack of affection and attention from their parents. There is also the death of parents which is also a cause of this phenomenon. Some children found on the streets in large cities are orphans of their father or mother.”

(A parent living in Lome no.1, Interviewed on 30 March 2024)

Children in street situations engage in different kinds of risky activities in order to keep up. Through this study, the results showed that many of these children engage in work that requires a lot of effort and has effects on their health. For example, some street children carry out the activities of luggage carriers in the markets and some of them work in bars and restaurants to wash plates. As confirmed by a chief of community,

“More than 40% of the street children are found in the large market of the city of Lome, a place where commercial activities abound. Some of these children work as housekeepers in homes for a very low income which does not allow them to meet their needs, and others are not even paid at the end of the month. Their employer makes them a promise to enroll them in an apprenticeship after a long period of exploitation or after reaching the age of 16 or 17.”

(Chief of Community no.2, Interviewed on 31 March 2024)

This situation of exploitation of children does not allow them to achieve their objective of satisfying their needs. Sometimes they are not paid properly and are forced to stop working because of the mistreatment. In other situations, these children are accused of stealing valuables or money from their employer who kicks them out of their home. For some others, the promise made regarding their registration in an apprenticeship profession is no longer kept. The latter are forced to return to the street or their original situation. According to some interviewees, these categories of street children are also found at traffic lights to clean car windows and ask for money from passengers and drivers. Apart from these activities, these receptive children are often victims of hunger and disease, which pushes them to steal things to sell and support themselves. There are street children who steal valuable objects such as cell phones and merchandise with a view to reselling them at an affordable price to meet their daily needs.

2) Challenges that the street children in Lome is facing.

The vulnerable nature of these children increases their exposure to more difficult living conditions. The results of this research show several difficulties to which these children are exposed, the first being that they are left to their own devices without any protection from an elderly person. These children are exposed to a life of begging, stealing, taking drugs, and prostitution with people older than them. According to the World Health Organization street children are exposed to sexually transmitted diseases and are sometimes victims of trauma. These children are exposed to cold and heat due to a lack of shelter. They are also victims of physical violence from their friends. Because of their vulnerability, these children are also victims of stigma and discrimination from society which rejects them and considers them a danger.

3) Recommendations to related authorities and organizations to lessen the problems and improve the well-being of street children in Lome, Togo.

The problem of street children in Lome, Togo, can be greatly responded by collaborations between the public, private, and individual sectors. Setting clear rules that encourage cooperation and efficacy is crucial to the development of these kinds of alliances. Any relationship should be built on the principles of responsibility and openness first and foremost. It is important for all parties involved public, private, and civil society to be open and honest about their contributions, roles, and duties. By being transparent, we can increase confidence and make sure that resources are used wisely. Second, a needs-based strategy ought to be used. It's critical to comprehend the unique requirements and difficulties that street children

in Lome experience. The partnership may customize its interventions to address the underlying causes of the problem of poverty, family dissolution, or limited access to healthcare and education by carrying out comprehensive needs assessments.

Additionally, sustainability ought to be the partnership's priority. This entails creating long-term repairs rather than just band-aids. Through financial assistance for school, career development, and family support initiatives, the collaboration can enable homeless children to create better lives for themselves. Inclusion needs to be a guiding concept as well. Involved parties in decision-making should incorporate the voices of street children as well as their families and communities. Their knowledge and expertise are quite helpful in creating successful solutions. Finally, the collaboration must be flexible and receptive to new ideas. Since the problem of street children is intricate and dynamic, the partnership should be open to modifying its plans in light of fresh data and developing patterns. Accepting innovation can produce results that are more long-lasting and significant.

In summary, the situation for street children is complicated for a variety of reasons. Poverty is a major reason of the existence of street children. Children from many low-income households are forced to live on the streets since their parents are unable to support them. In various conditions, young children may have been abandoned or lost their parents, prompting them to seek shelter and nutrition in public places.

Another element contributing to the problem of street children is the dissolution of households. Substance addiction, marital violence, and parent death are some of the conditions that may contribute to this. Without a safe and supportive family environment, children may end up on the streets looking for acceptance and a way to survive. Children may become homeless as a result of limited access to healthcare and education. Children who do not obtain the education and medical care they require are more likely to become homeless and victims of exploitation.

The causes of the street children phenomenon are numerous, and need comprehensive solutions addressing poverty, family support, education, healthcare, and societal stability. Understanding and addressing these root causes enables us to work toward a society in which every child has a safe and caring environment in which to grow and thrive.

Discussion

The results of the research in this dynamic of the causes of the phenomenon of street children in Lome are similar to the research of Reza & Bromfield (2019) who studied Bangladeshi street children and affirmed that economic poverty constitutes an important factor which puts parents in a condition of vulnerability and which consequently pushes children to end up on the street in order to try to take care of themselves. In the same sense, the causes of the presence of children in the street are consistent with that supported by Djonoukou (2006) who agrees in the same direction by affirming that in several countries which face this situation of street children, one of the important elements underlying this phenomenon is the precarious situation and economic poverty of the population. As part of this research on street children in Lome, the results obtained are in agreement with previous statements about the causes of the phenomenon of street children in Lome.

Regarding urbanization conditions, the results of this study are aligned with the analyses of Redman (1999). According to Redman (1999), the conditions of poverty of the population push them to move towards the most urbanized centers which have more means of production and which offer many more employment opportunities.

According to the results of this study, violence on the part of parents and family members is considered to be a cause that pushes children to choose the path of the street. Faced with the violent behavior of certain parents, the children decide to flee the house to find themselves in the street which offers more freedom. This result is in the same direction as the results of Lalor et.al (1993), who studied street children in Sudan and Ethiopia, stated that most children in street situations are most often victims of violent behavior from their parents or loved ones. This violence sometimes occurs because of the economic or social situation of the family. There is also a portion of children who are orphans either of their father or mother. The results of this study show that among street children registered in care centers a majority are orphans. This result is in agreement with the analysis of Salehi et al. (2022) which shows that the presence of children in street situations is due to the death of their parents.

Along the same lines, the results of this study correspond to the results of Marguerat (1998), who asserts in his research that children found on the street are victims of poverty and neglect on the part of their families. Moving in the same direction as Djonoukou (2006), the separation of parents constitutes an important element to take into account in the presence of children on the street. According to the results of this research, it is proven that some street children come from divorced parents. It should be remembered that the number of members within the family and culture also play an important role on children. Concerning the number of people, families who have a high number and who do not have enough means to provide for the needs of the children constitute an opportunity to push the children to go and ask on the street. It is the same as the culture of a certain religion which pushes and encourages the life of begging. In the 'Islamic' religion it is normal for a person who has no means to go and beg for money in the street. It is in this same sense that Nasir & Siddiqui (2017) state that the size and culture of certain families could be at the origin of the presence of children on the street.

Conclusion and Suggestions

The phenomenon of street children in Lome, Togo is experiencing a certain evolution which worries not only governments but also organizations and communities. The causes of this phenomenon are profound because of the gap that is created day by day between the rich and the poor populations. All the factors of economic poverty as well as the social and family factors experienced by African countries and in particular Togo, have weakened the efforts of the government to deal effectively with this problem of street children in the cities. This study highlighted the difficulties that street children encounter and the risks to which they are exposed. This will allow actors, whether governments or non-governmental organizations, to undertake relevant actions to resolve this problem in cities. Concerning the Togo government, the government must place emphasis on training that offers more employment opportunities to the population. Improved social protection policies and better income redistribution can help reduce poverty. Non-governmental organizations and communities must work together with governments to help reduce the problem of poverty. Training and awareness activities must be initiated to allow the population to better understand the phenomenon and how it manifests itself.

In order to solve the issue of street children, the partnership can better address the complicated problem in a more effective and long-lasting manner by incorporating a variety of stakeholders and measuring its effectiveness, improving solutions, and reporting on its activities. For promoting public-private-people partnership (PPPP) to successfully handle the issue of street children, there must be a functioning relationships between various players. Coordination aligns activities to remove redundancy, complementarity enables each actor to contribute uniquely, and collaboration entails sharing abilities.

In order to meet the needs of street children, this enables a cogent strategy that makes use of resources and skills. In order to solve the issue of street children, a public-private partnership should involve stakeholder engagement, performance metrics, data collecting, frequent review, and progress reporting. These elements aid in evaluating the partnership's efficacy, pinpointing areas in need of development, and offering transparent updates on its status. The partnership can better address the complicated problem in a more effective and long-lasting manner by incorporating a variety of stakeholders and measuring its effectiveness, improving solutions, and reporting on its activities. This strategy makes lasting solutions possible.

Acknowledgement

This research is supported by Thailand International Cooperation Agency (TICA), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Thailand and Mae Fah Luang University (MFU). The content is solely the responsibility of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official views of the TICA and MFU.

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