

# Applicability of Coping Strategies imparted by Non-Governmental Organisations on street life by Street Children in Harare, Zimbabwe

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**Abstract-** This is part of a broad study that sought to investigate the appropriateness of counselling being given to street children by non-governmental organisations in Harare, Zimbabwe. This paper looks at coping strategies employed by street children on the difficulties of street life in Harare, Zimbabwe. A qualitative descriptive survey was used to guide the methodology. A purposive sample of organizations that work with street children based on their visibility in dealing with street children participated in the study. Officials of non-governmental organisations who have direct contact with street children and street children who received some assistance from the non-governmental organisations were randomly selected to participate in the research. A pilot study was carried out on officials of non-governmental organizations and street children that did not participate in the study. Forty street children and twenty officials of non-governmental organisations participated in the research. The study found out that 100% of the officials who worked with street children felt that the coping strategies they imparted on the street children were effective. The strategies included thinking deeply before taking action, seeking advice before taking action, respecting people in authority and avoiding people with destructive ideas. The street children thought the coping strategies they were taught were helpful but had problems in employing them since in most times the action they took needed swift decision making skills which they thought was lacking in the coping strategies imparted on them by the non-governmental organisations. The study recommends that there be more dialogue between the street children and the non-governmental organisations so that the non-governmental organisations get to know whether the coping strategies they imparting on the street children were really effective. The wishes and circumstances of the street children need to be given consideration when deciding on the coping strategies that should be imparted on them.

**Index Terms-** street children, coping strategies, non-governmental organisations, counselling, independent living.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Children who have made the street their home meet many challenges. In normal circumstances it is the duty of parents or guardians who are responsible for making sure children are provided with nurturing, food, clothing, shelter and protection from situations that could threaten their survival. When children leave homes where they grew up to make streets their home they

predispose themselves to many challenges. The challenges range from having no places to sleep, finding food, responding to law enforcement agencies, responding to rival groups and finding acquaintances. At most times the weather is bad especially at night and they have to find comfortable places to sleep. The law enforcing agents are always after them for loitering and other crimes. Among themselves they usually fight for control of lucrative territories. These and many other challenges mean there is need for the street children to adopt some coping strategies to be able to survive in the street. This paper seeks to interrogate the applicability of coping strategies that are imparted on the street children by non-governmental organisations that work with them in mitigating the challenges of life in the streets.

### 1.2. Research Question

Are coping strategies imparted to street children by non-governmental organisations applicable in meeting the challenges of street life.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. DETAILED DEFINITION OF STREET CHILDREN

Research distinguishes between two different groups of street children. The classification is basically based on the degree of contact between the child and his or her family. The first category of street children comprises children 'of' the streets. These are children who have completely lost contact with their families and relatives. These street children sleep and depend entirely on the streets. The second category of street children comprises children 'on' the streets. These are children who are still maintaining contact with their families and relatives. Children 'on' the streets can be further divided into those who come to the streets daily to beg and do odd jobs and go back to their families at the end of the day and those who work and live on the streets and periodically visit their families (Rurevo and Bourdillon, 2003).

Muchini (1994) notes that there are 'children of the street' who maintain links with their family members though there are others who have totally severed family connections. The degrees to which the filial linkages are maintained differ for different children. Some of the children know where to find their relatives and family members but deliberately avoid or distance themselves from them. The quality of the contacts also differs. Some of the children visit their relatives during important holidays like Christmas and Easter.

It is at times hard to make a clear distinction between children 'on' the street and children 'of' the street as Muchini (1994) found that at times children 'on' the street included those who sometimes slept on the streets when things are not fine at home or when the conditions are 'too good' in the streets. In his study, Muchini (1994) discovered that children 'on' the street gradually became children 'of' the street and are thus on an initiation phase. UNICEF (2001) found that the majority of Zimbabwe's street children are 'of' the street and not 'on' the street. The study found out that the majority (56.9%) of the 260 street children interviewed were children 'of the street' who worked and slept on the street. The study found out that (31.4%) were children 'on' the street who performed various types of work in the street during the day and went to their homes at night. The study found that (11.8%) who slept both on the streets and their homes were showing that they were on the transition stage to becoming children 'of' the street.

Zindi and Nherera (1999) define street children as youngsters (often aged between three and eighteen years) who hang out and sleep on the streets mainly due to poverty. Konane (1989) notes that street children are those for whom the street, more than their family, has become their real home, a situation in which there is no protection, supervision or direction from responsible adults. Swart (1998) claims that street children referred to children who have made the city streets their place of abode and source of livelihood. She further puts the street children into two categories which are 'push outs' or 'throwaways' and 'runaways'.

Swart (1998) cites the distinction made by the United States Senate subcommittee on juvenile justice which claimed that 'push-outs' or 'throw-aways' are children who have been abandoned or orphaned and for whom their relatives and the local community do not wish to take responsibility. With the AIDS pandemic still raging on there are numerous such children in Zimbabwe as the few remaining adult population becomes overburdened by the orphans that are being left behind. Push-outs or 'throw-aways' are children who may also come from intact homes of origin but who have been rejected or forced to leave, frequently by step-parents. Children who come under the category of 'run-aways' are those children who are seeking an escape from poverty, brutality, neglect or being laden with responsibilities beyond their coping capabilities and their families appear to be glad to have gotten rid of them. Run-aways do not always depict delinquency or emotional disorder. It could be a cry that something painful is happening or a sign of health seeking surface. In this study the distinction between 'run-aways' or 'throw-aways' is not taken seriously as the emphasis is on the appropriateness of counselling given to the street children by non-governmental organizations in Harare in Zimbabwe.

The Child Protection and Adoption Act (1996) of Zimbabwe considers children less than eighteen years in two categories of a child and a young person. A child is considered to be any person under the age of sixteen years and includes an infant. A young person is considered to be any person who has attained the age of sixteen but has not yet attained the age of eighteen years. In this study the term child is going to be considered as any person who has not yet attained the age of eighteen. This will include a young person.

The concept 'street child' according to Michaleon (2006) encompasses any child or adolescent under the age of eighteen who works and or lives in the street alone or with his or her family or asylum seekers who are technically homeless and without support. In Zimbabwe the phenomenon of asylum seekers who came in large numbers was last experienced during the times when there was instability in Mozambique. These days a few asylum seekers who are usually in transit to look for better opportunities in South Africa from The Horn of Africa may be seen. This group of children is not included in the present study. In the present study the concepts of 'street children' or 'street kids' are used to mean the same as was adopted by Rialp (1991) at The Inter-Non Governmental Organisation Conference in Switzerland which regarded them as boys and girls who have not yet reached adulthood for whom the street has become their habitual abode and or source of livelihood and who are inadequately protected, supervised or directed by responsible adults. The concept and definition will apply to both categories of children discussed above. In the context of this study, boys and girls who have not yet reached adulthood, mean those children who have not yet attained the age of eighteen, which is the legal age of majority in Zimbabwe. Those under the age of eighteen are legally considered to be minors and should be dependent on adults for most of their needs. These adults could be parents, relatives or other people who can be legally responsible for the needs of such children.

## 2.2. COPING STRATEGIES USED BY STREET CHILDREN

Coping is regarded by Folkman and Lazarus (2010) as constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of an individual. Puhl and Brownell (2003) defined coping as any behaviour or thought process unconsciously brought into use by an individual to protect himself/herself against painful or anxiety provoking feelings, impulses and perceptions. When confronted with challenges that go with street living street children develop various behavioural patterns that enable them to survive in the streets. Some of the coping strategies involve developing an efficient communication system with other street children, forming groups for protection and finding new areas for getting left-over food.

In the streets the children find numerous challenges that include being bullied, arrests by municipal police, arrests by the Zimbabwe Republic Police, vagaries of the weather, getting food and abuse by the public. The street children have developed various coping strategies that enable them to survive in the streets. Jacobson (2010) noted that some children in Bulawayo found that getting food from bins was becoming difficult as the authorities in the food outlet shops had adopted policies of keeping the bins clean so as to discourage street children from visiting their premises. The street children were visiting lodges that were in quiet places of the city and usually succeeded in getting more left overs.

When a child comes into the street he or she usually finds a group to belong to. The group usually had a group leader who regulated the activities of the group members (Dhemba, 2008). All the members of the group surrender their earnings of the day

to the group leader who would then buy food and share it among the group members. Among the girls the group leader controls the people who should be given sexual favours by the members. Every member of the group is expected to obey the leader for protection or risked expulsion from the group. This meant being exposed to various dangers of street life.

The street children developed strategies that help them identify both municipal police and the Zimbabwe Republic Police. They have developed an efficient communication system of alerting each other when the police are arresting street children. The municipal police who are the ones most feared by the street children because they move in plain clothes are recognised by the vehicles they use which have black number plates on white background and the walkie-talkies that will be in their pockets (Dhemba, 2008). When one of the street children sees the municipal police, a communication signal is quickly sent to other street children and they run into hiding.

The street children have permanent places where they sleep and actually own the areas to the extent that they will chase other street children who may want to invade their territory. They actually keep watch of all people who will be around them to see if there are any street children who will be involved in the activities similar to theirs. If there is any then the person who will be doing similar activities to them then that person will be chased away. The Herald of 16 March 2008 had a story of Tanya who boasted that the area around Harare Gardens was hers and that she had succeeded in repulsing attempts by another group of street children from working in that area. The street children actually work to protect their areas against other street children who might want to operate where they will be operating

In another story in the Herald of 3 June 2009 where street children were prosecuted for shoplifting when asked for their permanent address, the street children gave 130 Chinhoyi Street. This shows they now regarded that place to be theirs and would always be found there should one want to contact them. Almost every blind corner or disused building in the city is inhabited by a group of street children who literally own it.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive research design. This method was used as the researcher felt it was the most ideal for the study. The descriptive survey research designs are defined by their methodical collection of standardised information from any representative sample of the population (Christensen, 1994). In addition, this research design suits the context under which the present study was taken as the descriptive survey represents a probe into a given state of affairs that exists at a given time. It therefore means that direct contact was made with the individuals whose characteristics, behaviours and issues were relevant to the investigation under study. It allowed the researcher to choose a wide variety of instruments. The study was qualitative in nature and the data to be sourced had to be descriptive rather than quantitative.

This research design has the advantage of the researcher being in direct contact with the research participants. The direct contact affords the researcher to be able to observe other information like non verbal cues in the form of voice tone and facial expressions that quantitative designs cannot capture. Data

collected using the descriptive survey method can be easily summarized and analysed.

This research design has the disadvantage of the researcher becoming carried away when carrying interviews. This problem was overcome by formulating questions in the interview schedule that were clear to the respondents so that answers were required needed no much explanation.

The sample comprised of ten randomly selected children from each of the four purposively selected organisations that work with street children. The organisations were selected due to their visibility in dealing with street children. The children were selected by dividing the children who were present on the day the researcher visited into two groups of boys and girls and then randomly picking five children from each group who would participate in the research. There were twenty male street children and twenty female street children who participated in the research. The sample of those who work with children was purposively selected so that at each of the four organisations one participant came from the administration and the other four came from field workers. These dealt directly with the street children. There were twenty officials of non-governmental organisations who participated in the research. Qualitative data analysis with descriptive statistics was used to present and analyse the data.

### IV. RESULTS

**Table 1. Coping Strategies Taught To Street Children (n=20)**

COPING STRATEGY	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Seeking advice before taking a decision	20	100
Working with people who provide some assistance	12	60
Thinking deeply before taking action	20	100
Avoiding people with destructive ideas	20	100
Respecting people in authority	20	100
Sharing problems with others	11	55

Table 1 shows that 100% (20) of the officials of non-governmental organisations encouraged street children seek advice before taking action, think before taking an action, avoid people with destructive ideas and respect people in authority. 60% (12) of the officials of non-governmental organisations taught the coping strategy of working with people they thought would provide some assistance. 55% (11) of the officials of non-governmental organisations do not believe sharing problems with others is an important coping strategy.

**Table 2. Appropriateness of the coping strategies according to NGO officials(n=20)**

APPROPRIATENESS OF COPING STRATEGIES	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
YES	20	100
NO	0	0
TOTAL	20	100

Table 2 shows that 100% (20) of the officials of non-governmental organisations thought the coping strategies that they taught street children were effective in making the street children confront challenges that they were likely to meet in the future.

**Table 3. Coping Strategies employed by Street Children (n=40)**

COPING STRATEGY	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
Seeking advice before taking a decision	24	60
Working with people who provide some assistance	35	87.5
Thinking deeply	20	50

before taking action		
Avoiding people with destructive ideas	36	90
Respecting people in authority	36	90
Sharing problems with others	28	70

Table 3 shows that 90% of the street children employed the coping strategies of avoiding people with destructive ideas and respecting people in authority. 87.5% worked with people who provided some assistance while 70% shared their problems with other street children. 60% sought some advice before taking a decision and 50% thought deeply before taking a decision.

**Table 4. Appropriateness of the coping strategies according to street children(n=40)**

APPROPRIATENESS OF COPING STRATEGIES	NUMBER	PERCENTAGE
YES	26	65
NO	14	35
TOTAL	40	100

Table 4 shows that 65% of the street agreed that the coping strategies they were taught by non-governmental organizations were helpful in meeting the challenges associated with life in the street. 35% thought the coping strategies they were taught were not helpful in solving the challenges faced in the streets.

**Reasons why street children found the coping strategies inappropriate**

The street children stated that at times it was not possible to employ the coping strategies taught because of the following reasons:

- a) In most times they had to take decisions so quickly that there was no time to think about the coping strategies imparted to them.
- b) Some of the coping strategies could not be implemented in the streets. They pointed to that strategy of seeking advice before taking a decision as they said in most cases there was no one to seek advice from.
- c) It was not possible to share problems with officials of non-governmental organizations because the only assistance they could give them was that which they were mandated to give by their organizations. Sharing problems with fellow street children was not possible because they competed in finding resources.

- d) They said the non-governmental organizations needed to give them assistances in ways of thinking quickly and make tactical moves to improve their stay in the streets.

**V. DISCUSSION**

All the twenty officials of non-governmental organisations reported that they imparted the coping strategies of making the street children seek advice before taking action when confronted with a problem, thinking deeply before taking an action, avoiding people with destructive ideas and respecting people in authority. Twelve of the officials imparted skills that involved working with people who provide assistance and eleven said they encouraged the street children to share their problems with fellow street children. These strategies help the street children change their behavior pattern so that they will be able to manage the situations they find themselves in. The most prevalent problem was search for food. They are always in the hunt for food and at times people make it very difficult for them to get left overs especially those who work in restaurants as they believe they scare away customers. Jacobson (2010) alludes to that saying in other cities like Bulawayo the workers in restaurants had devised ways of making sure their bins were always clean as a way of avoiding visits by street children. The street children in turn had changed their behavior and were no

longer visiting restaurants in town but were going to lodges that were out of town in order to get food.

The law enforcement agents are always after them so there is need to devise ways of avoiding them or not clashing with them. The coping mechanism that are imparted to them are of respecting those in authority. 90% of the street children said they used this coping mechanism. This coping mechanism helped them stay out of problems with both the Municipal Police and Zimbabwe Republic Police. The police had various effective ways of detecting those street children who acted against the law. This forces the street children to cooperate as much as possible with them.

All the twenty officials of non-governmental organizations were convinced that the coping strategies that they imparted on the street children were effective on making the street children face the social challenges they are likely to meet in the future. On the other hand 65% of the street children thought the coping strategies imparted to them were helpful while 35% thought that the coping strategies were not helpful in the life in the streets. The street children showed that some of the strategies did not consider the lives they led in the streets. The life in the streets they alluded did not follow a predictable pattern. Since life in the streets was unpredictable they needed to be taught strategies that showed some flexibility and swift decision making.

The street children felt some of the coping strategies that were imparted on them were not of much benefit in their daily lives as street children. The coping that they considered to be not very valuable was that of thinking deeply before making a decision followed by seeking advice before making a decision. The children thought that in the streets at times there was need to make swift decisions which did not give room for thinking deeply before making a decision. They actually preferred strategies that would assist them to make quick and accurate decisions that they would not regret in future. Such strategies would assist them especially considering the pace at which events are unfolding these days.

The street children felt some of the strategies were not applicable to people who live in the streets. They thought sharing problems with others was not really applicable to them as most of the people whom they interacted with were fellow street children who did not have much knowledge than they had. The older people in society did not pay a lot of attention to them as they frowned at them and regarded them as misfits in society. They were aware that some members of society actually fear them and were therefore not in a position to listen to their problems.

Street children were not quite comfortable disclosing their challenges to other people besides their peers who in most cases in the same situation with them. They indicated that their peers were not of much assistance since they shared the same experiences and would not be in a position to give to assist them solve their challenges. That their peers would not be having more knowledge than is supported by Jana, Mafa, Lumwane and Shabalala (2012) who stated most street children relied on information from their peers which was in most cases substandard. Therefore the street children find the strategy of sharing information not very much helpful.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The study concluded that the coping strategies that were imparted on street were applicable to meeting the challenges that they faced in the streets but there was need for them to be tailored to the present needs of the street children. The street children needed to be equipped with strategies that would assist them to think quickly and make decisions that were socially desirable which they would not regret in the future. There is need for the street children to engage other people who could be of assistance to them so that they properly apply the coping strategies imparted to them and the life in the streets becomes a little bit bearable. Officials in non-governmental organizations are properly placed to offer them solutions to their problems if engaged as they have a wealth of experience dealing with street children and understand their plight.

## VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study is making the following recommendations:

- a) There is need for the street to open up to their problems so that people are in a position to give them relevant assistance.
- b) Street children need to be equipped with strategies that assist them to always think before making a decision. This will assist them in making well informed decisions which they will not regret in the future.
- c) The street children need not understand the importance of sharing ideas among themselves. Though they are almost the same age with their peers they have different experiences. If they share their different experiences they could be able to overcome some of the challenges they meet. They need to fully exploit the coping strategy of sharing problems with others.
- d) There is need to make the street children to be conscious of behaviours that socially acceptable. This is a strategy will improve the way they are viewed by society thereby making it possible for them to gain acceptance.

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