



Child Participation 'How To'

Street children's voices heard: Child participation and the Street Child World Cup

Contributed by: Jenny Dawkins, Amos Trust

The first Street Child World Cup, which took place in South Africa in March 2010, brought together eight teams of street children from different countries to take part in a football tournament and a conference which aimed to ensure that their voices and opinions were heard.

The discussions the children had at the conference have been distilled into a call to action which we have called the Durban Declaration. You can find the full text online at www.streetchildworldcup.org. The main call is for governments and civil society to listen to the voices of street children.

Why?

Children have the right to be heard in all matters which affect them. This is a basic right under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child - but it is systematically denied to street children, reinforcing their exclusion from society.

Street children have firsthand experience of street life, of survival strategies, challenges and barriers. They know why they are on the streets, and can inform understandings of why children leave homes. Enabling street children to participate in the running of a street child project means the project is responding to the real lives, the real needs, the real capabilities, and the real challenges of the children.

Projects which invest time and resources in finding the best tools to understand street children's perception of the services they offer will be better able to develop the most relevant responses – using limited resources in the most effective way. These will often be highly specific and individualised to the circumstances of particular children.

Example: Why are children on the streets?

At the Street Child World Cup, the children gave reasons for children being on the streets. They spoke of neglect, sexual abuse and violence at home (often connected with alcohol and substance misuse); family breakdown and conflict, often involving "step-parents"; economic pressures, leading some children to the streets to earn money.

Many children had found there were misunderstandings of why they were on the streets. This could be very damaging. For example, if people thought that street children were on the streets because they had behaved badly, without understanding the abusive circumstances they had come from, this led to street children being treated as law-breakers by police, and 'rounded up' without addressing the reasons they have left home. If these reasons are not dealt with, the children will simply come back to the streets. Conversely, understanding why children are on the streets, and enabling them to participate in their own reintegration means that the reintegration is sustainable.

It can suit those in authority to blame children for being on the streets, as they are able to abdicate their responsibilities. Where projects enable street children to tell their own stories, it becomes far harder to blame children and authorities must take responsibility.

How?

The Street Child World Cup used a variety of techniques enabling street children to participate fully in discussions:

- Discussion groups facilitated by adults they knew and trusted;
- The use of arts and drama workshops which meant that children could illustrate their stories and priorities both with and without words.

The children spoke of how the projects in which they were involved had listened to them on an ongoing basis, and how this had enabled them to leave the streets, access education and healthcare, and stop substance misuse. This happens through formal (children's committees) and informal processes in order to involve a range of children.

These projects:

- took **time** to understand why they were on the streets and the barriers and prejudice which prevented them from accessing services. Involving children in designing and delivering services can take a long time – building up trust, ways of working, and time for consultation with a range of children.
- understood the importance of **sports and arts** programmes to the children in expressing themselves. Engagement programmes such as these enable the children's views, opinions and voices to emerge with decreased pressure on the children to produce 'messages'.
- often **worked with others**, including other charities, researchers, and government to develop mechanisms to seek the views of street children over decisions affecting their lives.

Street children may carry negative views of themselves arising from the abuses and traumas they have experienced. A process of active listening– reflecting back what is heard – can help project workers discern patterns and tease out untruths, in order to challenge negative self-images. If we listen carefully we find many of our expectations are challenged and a deeper knowledge of the specific situation can be developed. This in turn can then be used to challenge misconceptions at local regional and national policy levels and to challenge the way in which the public may perceive street children.