THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF STREET CHILDREN IN ABA SOUTH LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF ABIA STATE

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Abstract
In the recent times especially in the last few decades, children are seen in the streets of most of our urban centers. This is an abnormal situation considering the traditional African societal value for children. Efforts have been made both by the local government, federal government and non-governmental agencies to keep these children out of the streets yet it seems they are in the increase. This paper made attempt to know why these children are still in the streets and if their being in the street is of any social importance to the society. The theory of differential association was used to explain the factors that push the children to the streets. Finally the paper concluded by making recommendations on how these children could be rehabilitated which includes reemphasizing the societal value for children at all levels.

Introduction:
The past few decades have seen the proliferation street children in Nigeria. This is evident in the number of children seen on the major streets of urban centers scavenging, begging, hawking and soliciting. Oloko (1999) expressed that the phenomenon of street children in the strict sense of the term has been on the increase in most urban areas. In the 1990s, there were an estimated 8,000 of them and in 1999, they were found in over 100 locations in Lagos. Estimates vary but one often cited figure is that the number of children living independently in the streets total between 100million and 150 million worldwide (Human Right Watch 2004). Ahiante (2004) also expressed that street children are all over the markets bus stops car parks, garages, street corners, under the bridges and other public places across Nigerian major cities.

Two different categories of street children are found in Nigeria. There are those who live and work on the street (children of the street) and children who work on the street full or part time, but return to their home each night (children in the street). The point of demarcation is often nebulous as both categories of children meet and interact on the street and it is often easier for children in the street to fully graduate children of the street. The two categories constitute the leprous arm of the same alarming social problem that most times lead to the production of adult social delinquents in the form of the "alright sir boys" or "area boys", armed robbers and so on (Olusegun, 2009).

The traditional African value for children is very high. This is evident in the way children are treated right from conception. The first desire for every couple in the African context is to have children. Any marriage that cannot produce children is perceived as unsuccessful and a failure. When a child is born, he is received by the entire society through celebrations like the naming ceremony or whatever name it is tagged. On the contrary, when a child is born out of wedlock, it is perceived as an

abnormal situation (David, 2005).

David (2005) also noted that a child is perceived as a product of the society and owned by the entire society. Thus, the duty of socialization and caring of the child is carried out collectively by every member of the society. The concept of street children is therefore an abrasion of this societal value.

Some research efforts over the years have been directed towards exploring the problem of street children and plausibility of ameliorating as well as rehabilitating the victims (Oloko, 1999;Scanlon, Scanlon and   Lamarao1993;UNICEF 2001).Also governments in different countries have tried and are still trying to rehabilitate street children .However a high proportion of such efforts or measures are punitive in nature, that is they focus on punishment rather than rehabilitation (Bourdilon, 2001; Gigenback 1994 and Human Right Watch 2004). Therefore, the problem of street children seems unabated and is becoming a permanent feature especially in many developing societies across the globe.

In recent times, some programmes have emerged for the support of street children in Nigeria. These include the provision of support in the area of feeding, clothing, housing, medical care and education. The Nigerian National Assembly also promulgated a Child Rights Act in 2003 as a means of domesticating the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC 1989). Although these events could qualify as significant landmarks in ameliorating the problems of street children in Nigeria, these programmes have been found to be inadequate and the Child Rights Act ineffective in ameliorating the conditions of street children (Aransiola 2007).

Who are the   Street   Children?
Mkombozi (2006) defined street children as children who drop out of school or play truant from schools. Street children are those children who are seen on the streets throughout the day. Most of them probably do not have a home. Thus, they are seen walking about in the streets and at night, they sleep under bridges and uncompleted buildings around.

These children have no home. A home is not only an apartment where somebody lives with his family. It is a place where caring and socialization takes place (Wehmeier 2004). Thus, because the above is lacking, the children take to the streets to fill the vacuum. Also, because the appropriate agent of socialization is not found on the street, these children wreak havoc on the streets. Mkukuta (2005) identified some factors which could make children to migrate to the streets to include, poor relationship between parents/guardians and the school, child is distracted and disinterested in school, child is working outside school (child labour), child is regularly punished in school, parents are drinking excessively, suspicion of domestic violence or abuse in Childs home, child lacks school uniform and other cost and finally parent/guardian not follow up on Childs school progress. McAlpine (2003) on other hand saw gender inequality as an underlying factor that makes most girl children to migrate to the streets. According to him, in a home where the girl child is the primary income generator and care giver, she may get frustrated and run out of the house. The situation of step mother and single mothers can also contribute to children

migrating to the street. Mkombozi (2006) research found that family break down often stems from conflict between wives. According to his report, 75% of street children live in step families where the first mother has either died, left or been left by the father. For these children life became increasingly miserable as they cited cases of attempted poisoning, physical violence and verbal abuse from stepmothers.

Single mothers who are mostly made up of under aged (teenage girls) and lunatics also contribute to the number of street children in most urban centres. The stigma placed on girls who birth out of wedlock results in a difficulty for them in accessing support and advice from neighbours and relatives. Thus, as a result their children take to the streets to make ends meet. The lunatics on the other hand refuse to accept any assistance that people want to offer to them. Instead they prefer taking care of their young ones through their own efforts.

Aba South Local Government area in Abia state which is the site for this study is a commercial centre and hosts the famous Ariaria Market. The commercial activities in the area attract people, goods and services as well as street children. As a result of the increasing number of children on the streets, the State Government has established remand homes. The wife of the state governor has also built a women development centre in the local government. Non-governmental organizations are also springing up from the time to time to cater for these categories of children. Yet it seems that their number are increasing on a daily basis (David 2005)

The questions now are, why are they still street children despite the above mentioned efforts to keep them out of the Streets? Secondly, are they of any significance to the society?

Methodology
The study was carried out in Aba South Local Government Area of Abia State. Aba South L.G.A. is comprised of six villages via Abayi, Umule, Umuojima, Umungasi Umuode and Umuodu (Eze, 2000). It has a population of 423852 (N.P.C 2006)

The instruments for data collection are structured oral interview (focus Group discussion), observation and questionnaire. A total of 52 street children were selected using the purposive sampling method for the group discussion. While 200 respondents were selected using the cluster sampling techniques to fill the questionnaire.

Objectives of the Study
1. To know why children are still on the streets despite efforts to remove them from the streets.
2. To identify their social importance if any.

Theoretical framework:
The theoretical perspective for this academic endeavour is Suther lands theory of differential association. The theory uses learning, communication or interaction to explain crime commission.

According to Sutherland (1949) the first proposition is that crime is learnt. Secondly,

the learning process is through communication, this means that crime or deviant behaviour can be learn only through communication with one another. Thirdly, the learning and communication is within a peer group. Fourthly, learning process includes the technique of rationalization. Fifthly the condition favourable to the violation of law must be greater or in excess of the definitions of condition unfavourable to the violation of it. Accordingly, the definition of this condition is responsible for three behaviours: namely-criminal behaviour, non-criminal behaviour and neutral behaviour. Through differential association, the individual associates with one of these.

According to him, criminal behaviour is learned, this means that criminal behaviour or delinquency is not inherited, as such also the person who is not already trained in crime does not involve in crime. A person becomes delinquent because of an excess of definition favourable for violation of law over definition unfavourable to violation of law. Sutherland went further to say that the technique in which crime or deviant attitude is carried out is also learned. This explains the reason why crime or deviant attitude is peculiar. For instance, the behaviour of a delinquent in Aba will be very similar to the ones in Onitsha or any other urban/commercial place. Also Sutherland stated that specific direction of motives and drives is learnt from definition. For instance, a delinquent motive is to satisfy him under any condition he may find himself. This means that the moment a child sees himself as an independent child; he becomes free to do anything he feels is good for him. He may decide not to sleep at home anymore. This is the time he will associate himself with friends and peers outside the family.

In summary, delinquent behaviour is obviously the result of many factors. The factors are both inside and outside the home. The inside home factors include parental discord, wrong parental attitude unhappy homes background, poverty, poor housing etc.

Due to the inadequate supply of the basic needs inside the home, the child may be forced to seek for opportunity outside the home and in the process comes in contact with vulnerable situation with the result that he becomes a victim of delinquent behaviour.

Findings and Discussion;
The entire 200 questionnaire that were given out were properly completed and returned. 20% of the respondents are between the ages of 27-34, 25% are between the ages of 35-52 while 10% are between the ages of 18-25. 60% are female while 40% are male. Concerning their occupation, 60% are business men/women, 18% are students 20% are civil servants while 2% are privately employed.

On their knowledge about street children 98% know that they exist in Aba. Their definition of street children includes, they are children who do not go to school, who roam about the streets hawking, children of the needy who go about begging for arms, children of destitute, homeless children and children who do not have responsible parents. 65% of the respondents have had an encounter with them. Out of the above number only 20% had a pleasant encounter with them. Encounter like buying something from them, asking them to carry their loads

and asking them to clean their compounds or cars. The other respondents said that they are usually seen destroying things and causing trouble in the street. On their impact in the city, the respondent noted that they dirty the city, cause trouble and constitute a nuisance to the environment. Majority of the respondents stated that they do not have any positive impact in the society. Though, 15% of the respondents accepted that they provide cheap labour. On how to curb their negative impact on the society some of the respondents suggested that the Government should provide jobs for parents to enable them train their children, others suggested counseling and rehabilitating the children, churches and Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) should help creating awareness and also putting them out of the street.

Discussion with the children revealed that some of them do not know their parents or even their home. 15% of the discussants sleep in uncompleted buildings and inside market stores. 50% of the children lived in step families where their mother had either died, left or been left by their fathers. They explain that when their parents separated, their lives became increasingly miserable. They cited cases of attempted poisoning, physical violence and verbal abuses from step mothers. It is also worthy to note that the stepmother's position is precarious since under traditional inheritance customs the fathers land will be given to the first born son of the first wife. Except in cases where the first wife does not have a son. Thus, these children leave home and take refuge in the streets. Some of the discussants indicated the interest to go back to school though they do not have anybody to support them financially in school. In fact 47.3% of the discussants said that they would like to go back to school, 23.7% said that they will not be able to go back go back to school because their age is quite above school age, 20% said that there is no need going to school since the economy of the country is such that after school one does not get a job, according to them, they make enough money to keep them alive, that is all they need. While 9% declined to comment on the issue.

Social Implications of Street Children in the Society:
Children are regarded as the most valuable assets in the society. Thus, their welfare in a society is an index of social and economic development of that society. The most important reason why children should be monitored is because their contribution to the society in adulthood is determined to a large extent by their treatment in their childhood (Ray, 1998).

Street Children are children who are separated from love, separated from discipline and even separated from themselves. They present the face of hunger, insecurity and social neglect. The youths are those that are involved most (Nigeria street kid News, 2010)

They pose challenges to the nation, environment and to themselves. At the national level, research has shown that these minors later in life become ready tools employed by unscrupulous elements in the society to carry out nefarious activities (Adeniran, 2008). They constitute a social menace. They deface the cities and towns, by eating and throwing left over food all over the place, they sleep wherever the night catches up with them they pass fesses at street corners and so on. Such children are exposed to hard lives, abuses, rubbery and other social vices. They are subjected to abuse sometimes by law enforcement agents and even outright murder by other gangs. In

short, society treats them as a blight to be eradicated rather than young souls to be nurtured and protected (Adediran, 2008).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Children are future leaders. Thus, they should be protected and guided to occupy their future positions in the society. Living them to roam the streets will affect the nation socially, economically and politically in the years to come. The study has shown that child vulnerability in all its manifestations includes children who are traumatized, have mental health problems (depression, self-harm, attention deficit, disorder, have been bereaved and/or are hungry). The fact is that vulnerable children cannot sit down in the classroom and learn because they are facing extraordinary pressures outside of school and typically do not have positive relationships with adults. These children grow up with the mind that society has not attended to them and thus, they will not contribute meaningfully to society. Based on these, the study recommends that:

1. Children's right to education be merged with rights to protection from abuse and neglect and enforced equally.

2. Societal value of children should be re-emphasized at the community levels. Such issues as early marriage, broken homes, single parenting, street begging and street selling should be given attention.

3. The traditional practice of members of the society playing vital role in the socialization of it's members(children) should also be re-emphasized

4. The community, Local Government, State Government and the Country at large should come up with appropriate schemes to build and occupy these children in meaningful activities. For children who are living with grandparents, single parents, mentally sick parents and mothers who are stressed with domestic violence, poverty and alcoholism, the Local Governments, Social Welfare Authorities and even non Governmental Organizations should build center that could offer basic education as well as literacy and information technology (IT) training. For those under the age of seven(7) such a centre should provide childcare and early childhood education while for the youths and adults, the centre should provide career guidance, parenting advice, loans, leisure and recreation library, child protection services and adult education.

5. Well to do individuals, Communities, Social Organizations, Faith Based Groups and government agencies should from time to time recognize some of these street children who are promising by adopting them and providing parental attention.

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