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## EXPLORING THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF STREET CHILDREN

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### **ABSTRACT**

*South African legislation and policies acknowledge street children as a vulnerable group, and make provision for services to them. It, however, seems that this social issue remains a serious challenge to society and social service delivery. This qualitative research study aimed to explore and describe the perceptions of street children, their parents/guardians, as well as community members in the Drakenstein Municipal area in an effort to develop a better understanding of the current state of affairs. The findings resulted in the identification of focus areas for the planning and implementation of social services to street children.*

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### **Key words:**

community, parental care, social services, social needs, street child

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## INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of street children or *omalalepayipini* (isiZulu for ‘those who sleep in the storm water’) is a worldwide problem (Aransiola, Bamiwuye, Akinyeni and Ikuteyijo, 2009). This social issue presents a serious challenge to society and social service delivery, as alternative care for these children needs to be explored, planned and provided (Tshwane Alliance for Street Children, 2008). The aim of this article is to provide social workers with focus areas to consider when planning and implementing services for street children. In order to do so, a background rationale will be provided, followed by a description of the identified research problem and research goal. A brief description of the research methodology that was implemented will be provided, followed by a discussion of the findings. The article will be concluded with some recommendations regarding social services to street children.

## BACKGROUND RATIONALE

It is difficult to determine the exact number of street children, due to their mobility (New Internationalist, 2005). On an international level, Aransiola et al. (2009) report an estimated 150 million population of street children worldwide. In South Africa, the estimated number of street children is 10 000 and is still increasing (Tshwane Alliance for Street Children, 2008).

South African legislation acknowledges the street child as a vulnerable person in need of care. The new Children’s Act, 38 of 2005 defines a street child as a child who; 1) because of abuse, neglect, poverty, community upheaval or any other reason, has left his or her home, family or community and lives, begs or works on the streets; or 2) because of inadequate care, begs or works on the streets but returns home at night. In line with this definition, Aransiola et al. (2009) distinguish between children *on* the streets, children *of* the streets and *abandoned* children. Children *on* the street work on the street, but maintain more or less regular ties with their families and have a sense of belonging to the local community. Children *of* the street maintain tenuous relations with their families. They see the street as their homes where they seek shelter, food and companionship. *Abandoned* children are also children *of* the street, but are differentiated by the fact that they have cut off all ties with their biological families and are completely on their own.

Street children (a person younger than 18) usually come from extremely poor homes and dire living conditions. Due to chronic malnutrition, these children look younger and smaller than their chronological age. South African street

children have virtually no possessions, and earn money by begging, carrying parcels, washing and taking care of cars, or selling wares for vendors. They usually form gangs characterised by mutual assistance and support. However, these children's lives are generally ruled by fear of violence, brutality, disease and older street children. They are sometimes rape victims or are forced into survival sex. Many of these children are maladjusted, delinquent, school dropouts with a low literacy level, and influenced by drug experimentation (Gouws, Kruger and Burger, 2008).

Possible causes of the social issue of street children are poor family relations caused by a collapse of family structure, family violence, sexual abuse or neglect, clashing values of parents and children, unreasonably strict discipline and parental rejection. Other contributing problems in families of origin include chronic unemployment and consequent poverty, overcrowding at home and housing shortages, high levels of alcohol and drug abuse and children orphaned due to death or imprisonment of parents (Gouws et al., 2008). Other causal factors were noted by MacDonald and Terblanche (2011) as problems at school and peer pressure.

Life on the street has a negative impact on a child's physical, educational, and emotional development. The child's life lacks continuity, consistency, privacy, cleanliness, permanency, and belonging; which may result in unacceptable behaviours such as acting out, depression, and low frustration tolerance (Thompson and Henderson, 2007). Street children have to deal with feelings of being unloved, unwanted and rejected. The lack of nurturance contributes to emotional insecurity, self-blame and warped development of a sense of relating to and engaging with others (Ratele and Duncan, 2003).

South African policies and legislation make provision for this social issue. Section 28(2) of the South African Constitution (1996) states a child's best interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child. According to the Constitution, children have the following rights which are specifically relevant to street children:

- To family/parental care or to appropriate alternative care when removed from the family environment.
- To basic nutrition, shelter, health care and social services.
- To be protected from maltreatment, neglect, abuse or degradation.
- Not to be required or permitted to perform work or provide services that are age inappropriate and place the child's wellbeing, education, physical or mental health or spiritual, moral or social development at risk.

Strategies to reconcile street children with their families and communities, to find alternative ways to reintegrate street children into society, to use shelters as an interim measure, as well as to develop and register appropriate programmes for street children are provided in the White Paper for Social Welfare (1997). In addition, Article 150 of the Child Care Act 38 of 2005 stipulates that a child in need of care (i.e. a child whose social functioning as well as physical, psychological and emotional development is impaired) can be placed in substitute care by a children's court. Despite these statutory requirements, statistics and comments from practice indicate that no formal services are provided to street children in the Drakenstein Municipal area (Cape Gateway, 2010; Janeke, 2010), leading to the research problem, as provided below.

## RESEARCH PROBLEM AND RESEARCH GOAL

South African policies and legislation make provision for services to address the social issue of street children. The street children in the Drakenstein Municipal area are however, not recipients of a specific service to address their situation (Cape Gateway, 2010; Janeke, 2010). Recent studies focused on the prevalence of street children, causes of this social problem and policies that affect the South African street children (Tshwane Alliance for Street Children, 2008; Shabalala and Gathiram, 2006; cf. Mathiti, 2000). Ward and Seager (2010) recommend both a continuum of care for street children as well as preventive services, including early detection and a range of family support services. However, there appears to be a gap in studies that focused on the specific needs of street children, as well as the perceptions of the community and families of street children. MacDonald and Terblanche (2011) conclude and recommend that there is need for "*comprehensive qualitative and quantitative team research projects*" related to street children to alert all social service professionals to the need of this vulnerable group.

The **goal** of this research study was to explore and describe the needs of street children, the experiences of parents/guardians of street children regarding their children living on the street, and the factors that impact on the community's perception of street children in order to make recommendations to social workers in an attempt to address street children's needs through social service delivery.

The research methodology implemented to address the research problem will be discussed in the next section.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Based on the research problem the following **research questions** were formulated:

- What are the needs of street children?
- What are the experiences of parents/guardians of street children regarding their children living on the street?
- What are the factors that impact on the community's perception of street children?

The **qualitative research approach** was implemented as this study was concerned with exploring the “what” questions of research (Maree, 2007). The **exploratory research design** assisted the researchers to obtain a basic familiarity with the needs of street children and the perceptions of their parents/guardians and the community. The **descriptive research design** followed the exploratory design to enable the researchers to provide social workers with a description of these needs and perceptions (Babbie and Mouton, 2007).

The **populations** (entire set of people of interest) and **samples** (smaller sections selected from the populations) for this study are described in the table below (cf. Gravetter and Forzano, 2003):

**Table 1: Populations and sample groups**

<b>Populations</b>	<b>Sample groups</b>
All street children in the Drakenstein Municipal area	Street children in Wellington who are known to the local Social Work organisations
All parents/guardians of street children in the Drakenstein Municipal area	All biological parents/guardians of children living on the streets in Wellington who are known to the local Social Work organisations
All community members of the Drakenstein Municipal area	All persons older than 18 years of age living in Wellington

The **non-probability sampling method** was employed. The probability of inclusion into the sample could thus not be determined beforehand (Bless, Higson-Smith and Kagee, 2006). **The sampling techniques** were

*purposive sampling* to include participants that were able to provide the researcher with the best understanding of the street children's needs and their parents/guardians perceptions of the situation, and *accidental sampling* for the most convenient collection of members of the population of community members (Kumar, 2005). **Data saturation** determined the size of the samples.

**Data** were **collected** through semi-structured interviews with the street children and their parents/guardians and focus groups with community members (see Table 2 below). Tape recordings (following permission from the participants) and field notes were used to **record** the data. The data were **analysed** by Tesch's framework for qualitative data analysis (in Creswell, 2009), while Guba's model for qualitative **data verification** (in Kretting, 1991) were implemented to ensure the truth value, applicability, consistency and neutrality of the findings. **Ethical considerations** included informed consent from the participants, the intention to do no harm and to refer participants for support after the interviews when needed, and confidentiality (including anonymity).

**Table 2: The interview guides for the different samples**

Street children	Parents/guardians of street children	Community members
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you experience life on the street?</li> <li>• What do you need to make life easier for you?</li> <li>• Who do you think can help you?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you feel about your child living on the street?</li> <li>• What have you tried to do about the child living on the street?</li> <li>• What support have you received to assist you with this child?</li> <li>• What kind of assistance do you need?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are your views/perceptions about street children?</li> <li>• What factors impact on your involvement with the street children?</li> <li>• What would you recommend regarding services to street children?</li> </ul>

**Limitations** regarding the participating street children included that the researchers were only able to obtain access to participants in Wellington, although the initial literature study indicated a lack of formal services or programmes to street children in the whole Drakenstein Municipal area. All the street child participants were male, not reflecting the needs of female

street children. The participating parents/guardians only reflected the perceptions of parents/guardians who were identifiable, reachable and willing to be part of their children's situation. Regarding the participating community members, all the participants were female and Afrikaans/English speaking, thus not reflecting other cultures associated with other South African languages.

The key findings related to; 1) the street children's needs; 2) the perceptions of parents/guardians of street children; and 3) the perceptions of the community will be discussed in the following section.

## **RESEARCH FINDINGS**

The identified themes and sub-themes will be provided together with verbatim responses of the participants and a literature control.

### **Findings related to the needs of street children**

Data saturation was detected after eight interviews.

Theme 1: The experiences of street children regarding life on the street

*Sub-theme 1: Life on the street was reported as a negative experience.* The participants expressed their experiences of life on the street in terms of:

*"It is difficult and not nice."*

*"It is bad on the streets... I do wrong things."*

*"It is not nice to ask other people for money. Sometimes we upset people. Then they swear at us. Sometimes it is bad, but other times I don't care."*

It is important for adolescents to be accepted by others, and they are more inclined to describe themselves in terms of their social competencies (such as being friendly, helpful and kind) than younger children (Louw and Louw, 2007). The above responses show that the street children see themselves as a hindrance for other people. This also refers to the next sub-theme, focusing on the consequences of life on the street.

*Sub-theme 2: Consequences of life on the street.* Peer pressure and substance abuse were mentioned as consequences of life on the street through the following statement:

*“When I walk with the older children they teach me wrong things. They use drugs and give it to the children.”*

The adolescent’s need for acceptance may lead to pressure to participate in undesired/undesirable activities as the price of acceptance (Geldard and Geldard, 2004). Additionally, if a community lacks recreational, educational and sport facilities, it is likely that the adolescent will become bored, and that substance abuse becomes a recreational activity (Bezuidenhout, 2008). Boredom and lost opportunities were also identified as a consequence and result of life on the street. *“It is boring and I miss going to school. Now there is no place to go.”*

A shelter for street children can provide them with a “place to go”, structure and with role models. Baron, Byrne and Branscombe (2006) have found that role models (i.e. other people we wish to be like) can inspire one to invest in long-term achievements. Additionally, street children receive a sense of belonging and experience communalities with other street children, but involvement with other peers (e.g. at church groups) could provide them with alternative role models (Ladd, 2005; Papalia, Olds and Feldman, 2002).

Theme 2: The street children’s perceptions regarding how community members view and approach them

The participants reported a perception that the community does not view them in a positive light, associated with a lack of trust of street children:

*“They drive cars and say that we steal their CD players.”*

*“When they come out of the shops they say all we do is to ask them for money.”*

*“The people phone the police when they see us.”*

*“And the boss of the shop chases us away. He does not want us at the parking area.”*

The aim of governmental or non-governmental services is to resolve concrete problems experienced by the street child community, satisfy their concrete needs and learning practical skills. This includes the involvement of a social worker to bring the community (in this case the street children) into contact with resources and to help them use these resources to the full. A lack of organisational involvement in this case could thus be viewed as a push factor for children to roam the streets and to commit crime, thereby reinforcing the



community members' negative/ inappropriate ideas, perceptions and attitudes of them (Weyers, 2001).

Theme 3: The street children's description of services that they need

*Sub-theme 1: The needs of street children.* A need for new friends was reported as *"I need to change my life, but then I need new friends who don't do bad things."* On the one hand, peers apply pressure that makes it difficult for adolescence to try and modify antisocial behaviour once they have started to engage in it as they may alienate themselves from their major source of companionship and acceptance (Bezuidenhout, 2008). On the other hand, the peer group (other than fellow street children) can become a valuable source of affection, sympathy, understanding and moral guidance (cf. Papalia et al., 2002).

The statements of the participants also reflected physical needs, a need to be loved and accepted, and a need for self-actualisation. The following utterances attest to this:

*"I need a place to live."*

*"I would like it if people could love me and care about me."*

*"Maybe somebody would like to adopt me."*

*"I need to learn how to do a job. Then I need to find a job to get money."*

The need for love and belonging concerns a desire to obtain and give attention. The need for self-actualisation refers to a process of fully developing personal potential. These needs relate to the right to be heard, to be loved and to have their needs met (The South African Constitution, 1996; Grieve, van Deventer and Mojapelo-Batka, 2005). Related to these needs, the participants provided a description of the kind of services they needed.

*Sub-theme 2: Services needed to address the needs of street children.* The participants were able to identify the following role-players in services:

*"The government must help us."*

*"The only people that can do something are the welfare people."*

*"My mother's family should help me."*

*"At a shelter I will get food and clothes and they can teach me how to get a job."*

According to The White Paper for Social Welfare (1997) the well-being of children depends on the ability of families to function effectively. Street children, therefore, need their families, substitute families or access to shelters where they can be provided with a sense of belonging to create security; set limits on behaviour; and provide a spiritual foundation essential for their healthy development.

Lastly, the participants identified a spiritual need that was related to the possible role of the church. *“God and nice people can help me.”* Religion and contact with church members assist adolescents to find a purpose for living and a belief that positive change is possible (Gerali, 2006).

The above findings were complemented by the findings of the perceptions of parents/guardians of street children as discussed below.

### **Findings related to the experiences of parents/guardians of street children regarding their children living on the street**

Access was gained to six parents/guardians of street children. The following themes and sub-themes were obtained:

Theme 1: Emotions experienced by the parents/guardians of street children

*Sub-theme 1: Painful emotions regarding children living on the street.*

The following concerns were reported:

*“I am always worried about him because they get into trouble, like stealing in shops. And they look for trouble with people on the streets, and some people become so angry they want to hurt him.”*

*“I am not at home during the day and I never know where he is. Nobody wants to help me look out for him.”*

These concerns relate to independent functioning that assists adolescents in developing a value system, decision-making skills and a group identity (Gouws et al., 2008). Street children’s involvement in crime and choice of lifestyle, however, hampers the mastering thereof. The impact of this concern was described as follows: *“I can’t sleep at night when I do not know where he is. Sometimes I can’t go to work because I am so worried.”*

A participant described the effort to deal with this situation as *“I spoke to him and explained that he only has me to look out for him, and that he needs to*

*listen to me. But I think he feels that only the other street children cares about him. He does not understand that I worry about him."*

Sadness, anger and powerlessness were identified as emotions associated with their children living on the street:

*"It makes me very sad to know that he left to live on the street and to use drugs."*

*"I am so angry, because he does not listen to me. He does not respect that I am his mother."*

*"I told him, I don't know what to do to make him see that he is doing the wrong thing. I will just give up on him."*

Parent-child conflict during adolescence is often caused by the fact that the environment and peers start to play a more important role in the choices the adolescent makes. Parents are hurt by the fact that their children do not want to accept their guidance (Louw and Louw, 2007). Despite these painful emotions, the participants did report some positive emotions.

*Sub-theme 2: Participants reported feelings of hope and caring.* The participants indicated continued care for their children living on the streets through the following statements:

*"I pray for him and I trust that God will help me. I will continue to talk to him until he listens."*

*"I think he can change, but he needs someone to help him. And he must want to change."*

Parents of children with problems need assistance to become available and approachable, to address the child in a positive manner, to show love and caring and to provide the child with a feeling of being valued (Saleeby, 2006). The comments above indicate that the participants needed assistance in this regard. The next two themes indicate that the participants also indicated a need for assistance regarding drug abuse and educational needs.

**Theme 2: Parents/guardians are concerned about drug abuse and the impact of the lack of education on the future of the street child**

Street children are both vulnerable to become part of a drug culture, and living on the streets due to drug abuse (Page and Page, 2003). This view was supported by the following utterances:

*“He started with the wrong friends and then the drugs. In the end he just stopped going to school.”*

*“The school did not want him to go back to school, because he used drugs.”*

Peer influences and family problems have been identified as the major contributors to adolescent drug abuse and dropping out of school (United Nations, 2003; cf. Sussman and Ames, 2001).

*“His friends on the street don’t go to school. He started using drugs with them and then also stopped going to school. He just listens to the friends.”*

*“I walk with him to school to make sure that he goes and then he just waits for me to go then he jumps over the fence. And then after a while I find out he has not been in school for three months.”*

The participants voiced their concern regarding the lack of educational options as follows:

*“I begged the head master to take him back. But he just said the child had enough chances. Now I don’t know what to do.”*

*“My child just kept failing and in the end they said he can’t come back. I think he then just gave up and now all he wants to do is use drugs with his friends on the street.”*

The school should be seen as an instrument that could be used to ensure that children become independent adults through the acquirement of knowledge and skills. If this instrument is not used and there is no other substitute for education, children are left with a lack of readiness to enter adulthood (Pretorius and Le Roux, 2005).

### Theme 3: Parents’/guardians’ efforts to address the situation

The following statement indicated a lack of coping strategies to deal with the situation: *“To be honest, I didn’t do anything except telling him I don’t like it. I feel stupid and I don’t know who to ask what I must do.”*

A lack of coping skills are often caused by learned helplessness. This leads to an expectation of failure, thereby leading to apathy. Coping skills can be developed through ongoing assistance focusing on emotions, provision of information and practical support (Pretorius and Le Roux, 2005). Resources are needed to assist persons suffering from a lack of coping skills (Compton, Galaway and Cournoyer, 2005). However, participants indicated a lack of resources to assist them: *“Nobody wants to help me. I must just cope on my*

*own and I don't know what to do.*" The value of the utilisation of resources was identified by one participant: *"To be honest, the best thing I did was to ask my pastor to help me. He spoke to my family. Now they understand better what I am going through."*

Other participants were able to identify possible resources that they could make use of:

*"The social worker or maybe the magistrate could help me..."*

*"Maybe our church can help us. If they can also talk to him, because I need him to understand that he must change."*

*"The police always talked to him, but he would not listen. I just became tired of asking them when I know it doesn't help."*

One participant referred to a youth camp that assisted the child, but mentioned that there was no follow-up service:

*"The welfare once took all the children on a camp. They did very nice things there, but afterwards they just dropped them off and that was the end of it. After a week or so he was back on the streets."*

The research findings are concluded with the perceptions of the community regarding the issue of street children.

### **Findings related to the factors that impact on the community's involvement with street children**

Data saturation was observed after four focus groups with 16 community members.

Theme 1: The participants' views and perceptions about contributing factors

The participants reported that a lack of education, drug abuse and unemployment contributed to the existence of street children:

*"They become street children because of poverty, lack of education, drugs or alcohol use by parents."*

*"Alcohol and drug abuse, kids are neglected by parents. That is why they are street kids."*

The participants' description of street children is similar to the description provided by Gouws et al. (2008) as; 1) children who are rejected by parents;

2) children who flee from home because of continuous family conflict and problems; and/or 3) children who are rejected by society. Additionally, drug use assists the street child to fit in with other street children, helps them to cope with life on the street, and to blot out any unpleasant memories and intense feelings of self-hatred (Lewis, 2004). The following utterance serves as further support: *“I would see street children as a criminal and drug addict.”*

Theme 2: The participants’ perceptions regarding services that should be rendered to street children

The participants reported that provision of food and money to street children without other forms of support enables them to continue with life on the street:

*“We assist the children to continue living on the streets if we just give food or money.”*

*“They use money for drugs. Sometimes it is peer pressure that plays a big factor in committing a crime.”*

Labelling (i.e. all street children use money to buy drugs) can alienate adolescents, putting them further at risk of becoming involved in negative behaviours. These perceptions by the community can become a confirmation to the street child that he/she is expected to use drugs (Brendtro, Brokenleg and Von Bockern, 2002).

Drug abuse/addiction, skills training and emotional support were reported as focus areas that should be addressed:

*“Most of these children need help with drug addiction.”*

*“The street kids are not doing anything so they have a lot of time on their hands and possibly commit a crime and abuse alcohol and drugs.”*

*“Children are neglected and abused. They are looking for love and acceptance at the wrong places.”*

Adolescent drug users normally do not have adequate life experience and skills. The impact of family life/lack of family life, and progress in school/lack thereof should become a focus area when addressing adolescent drug addiction (Fisher and Harrison, 2005). In terms of emotional support, acceptance of street children can assist them to find a place in society, and to develop self-confidence to change negative behaviours (Gouws et al., 2008).

The following statements serve as examples of what kind of services should be rendered:

*“Open a rehab centre to empower them morally.”*

*“Open a rehab centre to create more programmes and where they can learn to love, respect and trust. So that we teach them to love again and to live a normal life.”*

*“Take the street kid, educate and empower them with life skills, get them in a project.”*

Gouws et al. (2008) suggest that support programmes to street children can be divided in five groups, namely:

- Basic needs: the provision of food, clothes and blankets
- Shelter: The creation of substitute home environment
- Assessment: Efforts are made to provide foster care for the child
- Educational programmes: Life- and job-skills training
- Graduate programmes: Includes preparation of the child to leave the programme and return to formal education and training

The final theme provides a description of the factors that impact on their involvement with street children.

Theme 3: Factors impacting on the participants’ involvement with street children

*Sub-theme 1: Participants reported limited involvement with services to street children.* None of the participants were actively involved with services to street children in a personal capacity. Some participants reported involvement through their line of work/studies/church.

*“We did a project to teach them arts and crafts in my second year [as student in Education].”*

*“At Hawekwa [correctional services] we had a project with offenders inside, and they were taught to protect the street children on the outside.”*

*“Our church is involved with street children. But I must admit that I don’t know when last anybody reported doing something with them... or for them.”*

Services to street children should be rendered by social workers as it often would include statutory services and referrals. Community members may be included as volunteers at formal programmes (White Paper of Social Welfare, 1997).

*Sub-theme 2: Reasons why participants are hesitant to become involved with street children.* Participants explained why they were hesitant to become involved with street children:

*“I work fulltime and then I must go home and do my own stuff. I don’t have time for more things.”*

*“Some smell bad and they are dirty.”*

*“They show no respect and have no manners.”*

*“Some become aggressive when you try to ignore them.”*

The role of adults in their communities is referred to as the stage of ‘Generativity versus Stagnation’. Care of oneself and of others becomes the challenge in this life-stage. Stagnation could be avoided through caring for others (Louw and Louw, 2007). The responses above, however, indicate that a lack of time and the behaviour of street children impacted negatively on the participants’ willingness to care for them.

The findings of this study resulted in some recommendations for social services.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The above description provided a picture of the perceptions of street children’s experiences of challenges, as well as of how parents/guardians experience the situation. The factors that affect the community’s perception of these youngsters, and willingness to become involved with services related to street children were also described. Recommended focus areas to be included when planning and implementing services to street children are:

- Social workers should facilitate these services as it may require statutory services and professional referrals.
- In order to address behavioural problems and drug abuse among street children efficiently and holistically, it is advised that they have access to shelters where a safe environment, contact with well-adjusted and supportive peers and role models assist them with changing behaviour and achieving developmental tasks.
- Services should provide in physical needs (e.g. food and shelter); care and acceptance (contact with the community, e.g. sport clubs and churches), and the need for self-actualisation (education and vocational training).
- Parents/guardians of street children must as far as possible be included in service delivery. They need emotional support, assistance to develop



copings skills to deal with behavioural problems of their children, and support to utilise community resources and family support.

- Community members should be made aware of the needs of street children, as well as ways in which they could assist formal service providers to support and guide street children. Creative ways should be explored to enable members to become involved in ways that are attainable, and also sustainable.
- Schools should be included as partners in the effort to address the issue of street children. Early intervention can prevent school drop-outs and assistance to support street children to return to school could address the identified need for self-actualisation.

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