



PRELIMINARY REPORT ON PERCEPTION STUDY OF STREET CONNECT CHILDREN & YOUTH IN GULU CITY

NORTHERN UGANDA

HASHTAG GULU
A REPORT



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Introduction

Hashtag Gulu is a community-based organisation (CBO) that cares for children and youths who live or live and work on the streets.

Our work focuses on rehabilitation, reformation and reintegration. Hashtag Gulu envisions a community where everyone is responsible for each other's well-being and contributes to its transformation by getting involved in creating an inclusive and peaceful society.

Hashtag Gulu takes on activities that aim at providing alternatives to crime and violence by teaching children who live and work on the streets to become productive citizens. Hashtag Gulu was founded on the premise that it is critical to welcome and build confidence among members of our community, especially those often looked at as troublemakers. All our efforts aim towards joining hands to identify the root challenges children and youth who live or live and work on the streets in this community face rather than making unsubstantiated assumptions.



"... 'Aguu' as a direct poor mental management of mental health and trauma in Gulu.
Zero political will in handling the aftermath of Africa's deadliest crisis of this century, that of Kony"

(Quote from a Whatsapp Group)

About this study

The study was commissioned to provide much needed information to guide policy and interventions regarding Street Connected Children and Youth in the region.

The findings of the study were shared in a validation meeting with makers of policy and leaders in Gulu City. The views from the validation meeting were diverse and helpful and will be integrated in the next version of the research report.

Methodology

The project focused on 24 street connected children and youth who were purposively selected and identified to participate in this research as respondents.

The respondents were selected by a team from Hashtag Gulu who have over the years been working with street connected children and youth in the region.

The respondents were aged between 12 and 25 years and comprised of 16 males and 8 females; a greater proportion of males was included in the study, given existing levels of stigma targeted at particularly street connected male children and youth.

The project research team worked together to provide street connected children and youth-specific and inclusive situational analysis, which addresses their needs and contributes to policy related to them in the region.

Three (3) focus group discussion sessions were organized with a total of 24 respondents participating in the discussions. Each of the groups had a total of eight (8) respondents.

Two of the groups were composed of male participants (24) while one of the groups had female (8) participants. For each of the groups, three two (2) hour sessions were organized on separate days. The group sessions were conducted on the 4th of August 2022, on the 17th of August 2022 and on the 24th of August 2022. The male and female group sessions were conducted separately on each of the days.

A community survey was also carried out alongside focus group discussions that were conducted with the Street Connected Children and Youth (SCCY). The survey was administered to 51 participants within Gulu City to ascertain the perception of residents on Street Connected Children and Youth.

Verbal consent for sessions to be recorded, for photographs to be taken and for the participation of respondents in the study was sought. The research team was guided by the ethical consideration of 'do no harm' to respondents.

As such, the services of a professional counsellor were sought to attend to respondents in the event that the questions posed to them (respondents) triggered psychological harm.



Key findings from the study (Focus Group Discussions)

FAILURE TO MEET BASIC AND WELFARE NEEDS

Failure to meet basic needs and welfare among street connected children and youth was reported as one of the factors that often drove them into child poverty and acute lack. Respondents reported that they had no income to meet their monthly rent and that feeding was also a challenge to them. Some of the female respondents pointed out that they could not even afford school fees for their children.

A male respondent from one of the focus group discussions had this to say,

“Life is generally hard with nowhere to sleep at night.... waking up with nowhere to start life is sometimes meaningless and that’s what stresses me most”.

STIGMA AND LABELLING

Street connected children and youth also reported that they were undergoing stigma and labelling by both community members and government authorities in the city. Indeed, respondents pointed out that they were never accepted by their families and that they were struggling to gain acceptance as members of the society.

Stigma and labelling were also highlighted by some of the respondents who were abducted by the Lord’s Resistance Army rebels. Some of them were born in LRA captivity.

A respondent had this to say,

“Due to stigma in the village, we had to move to town and my mother rented a house where we stayed and at least got some peace of mind and freedom of movement”

STEREOTYPING AND NEGATIVE PORTRAYAL

A cycle in which street connected children and youth are portrayed negatively and constantly referred to as ‘aguu’ had led to them being stereotyped persistently in the region.

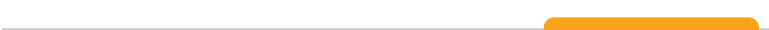
The media in the region played a key socialising role in mobilizing negative perceptions about street connected children and youth.

One of the respondents noted that,

“The community sees me as an undisciplined person who is lazy but I had no skills for me to go do work and earn something. Now after getting training from Hashtag-Gulu, I can do something or get something to do and be independent”.



Similar sentiments were echoed by community members when they pointed out that street connected children and youth are untouchable and that they will steal from you” This situation led to them being isolated from the wider community and from specifically their families.



EXCLUSION AND MARGINALISATION

Street connected children and youth reported that they were often deprived of services. They were often viewed as deviants even when communities and families were hostile to them.

From focus group discussions, respondents reported lack of access to essential services and goods provided by the government. Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic worsened their vulnerabilities.

A respondent noted thus,

“When Hashtag tried to integrate me into the family I thought was mine, they rejected me and said I am not their blood”

TARGETING AND WITCH-HUNT BY COMMUNITIES AND AUTHORITIES

Respondents in the study reported that they were targeted and witch-hunted by security organs who enforce law and order and this resulted in abuse of their human rights as street connected children and youth.

A respondent when asked whether they thought everyone did not like the youth like them had this to say,

“I feel like they see us as a source of insecurity”

This view was reinforced by a community member when he/she noted that, “Street connected children and youth are seen as outcasts and thieves and are violent to get what they want”



Discussion

The findings from the research were quite revealing demonstrating the plight of SCCY and youth. First, failure to provide basic needs to SCCY had far reaching impacts on them further exacerbating the situation and leading to child poverty as the research showed. It was clear that there was a relationship between the political violence (two decades) in the region and the current situation of SCCY.

Secondly, was the issue of stigma and labelling as reported by SCCY in the research. Indeed, this view has been widely supported by perceptions from the public who participate in radio talk shows labelling this group of children. At the community level, a lot is left to be desired to change this perception. This then has resulted in targeting and witch-hunt of SCCY who in many cases will be in running battles with authorities especially when operations and searches are mounted in the City and its suburbs to arrest SCCY. This in many cases, has occasioned the violation of the rights of SCCY.

The negative portrayal and stereotypical image of SCCY is supported by vast literature and newspaper stories that exist regarding SCCY. The concept which originally was a positive lifestyle among the youth is now bedevilled. The concept is now negatively deployed even among adults and other groups. Exclusion and marginalisation of SCCY is now prevalent as communities and some families shut their doors away from SCCY. This has also permeated some social service delivery institutions resulting in deprivation of rights of SCCY.

Finally, it was not clear from the research which gender suffered the most. There were compelling arguments to the effect that both female and males had varying degrees of suffering.

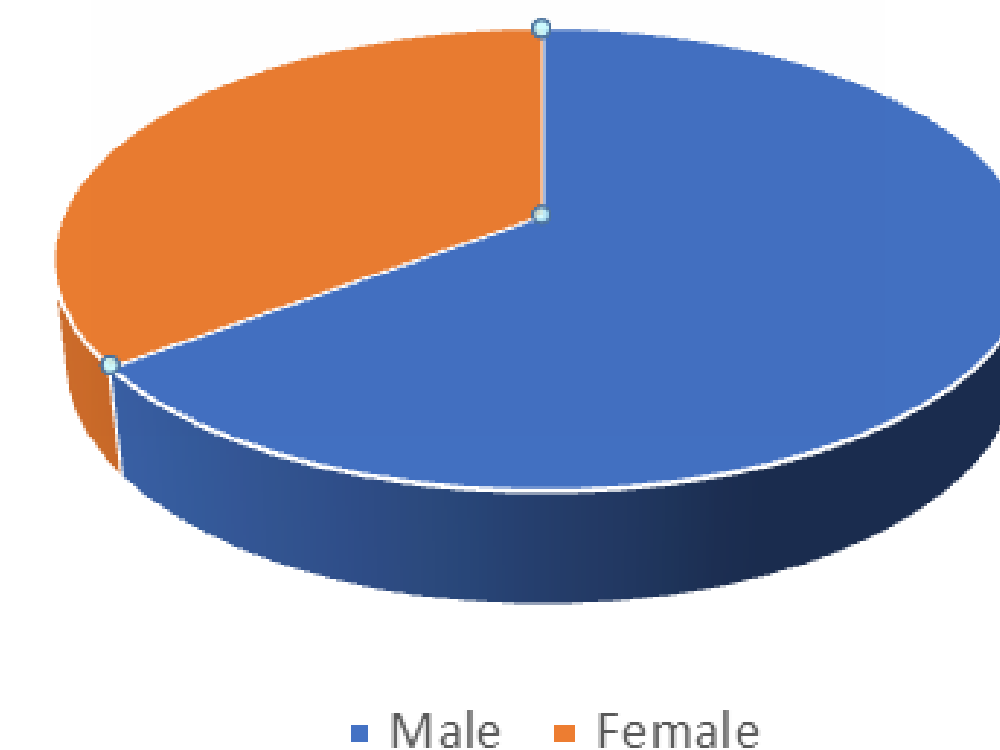
The validation meeting conducted supported this notion. We hope in the next phase of the research, we can explore this deeper.

FINDINGS FROM COMMUNITY SURVEY

The community survey was administered to 51 participants in Gulu City.

In terms of gender of respondents, 33 respondents (65%) were male while 18 respondents (35%) were females.

Sex of Respondents



Recommendations

The situation of street connected children and youth in the region should be better analysed and included in the decision making and planning to inform better responses. The following are the proposed recommendations

GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS

- Continuous engagement and dialoguing with SCCY to better understand their plight
- Commission research in the situation of SCCY to further inform policy
- Sensitization of communities and government sectors on SCCY
- Enacting inclusive SCCY policies and laws

POLICE AND SECURITY PERSONNEL

- Police should enhance and strengthen community policing in the region.
- Security and police should desist from harassing SCCY during their operations
- The police should work closely with CSOs and communities that work with SCCY
- SCCY should be treated fairly

RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

- Collaboration with CSOs and government to address the plight of SCCY
- Organizing prayers for SCCY
- Cultural leaders can work together with families to restore family values to take care of SCCY

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS

- Sensitization and awareness to the public
- Collaboration with government institutions in provision of services for SCCY
- Provision of temporary and transitional shelters for SCCY
- Consider the plight of especially female SCCY





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