



No child forced to live on the street



YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES OF INDEPENDENT LIVING PROGRAMMES IN ETHIOPIA

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1. Introduction

Older children who have spent an extensive amount of time living on the streets experience multiple deprivations which affect their wellbeing. This makes it less likely that they will be reintegrated with their biological families or find foster carers¹. Supported independent living is one, among different, alternative care options for children in such circumstances and it aims to support young people in their transition into independence. This study sought to inform Retrak's existing independent living programmes which offer young people psychosocial support, life-skills, vocational training and, wherever possible, mentor's assistance. The study also aimed to inform improvements in service delivery by listening to and documenting the voices of the young people of the independent living programmes.

This paper builds on a previously completed literature review² which explored current evidence on independent living by looking at policy and examples of independent living programmes for care leavers in order to apply the findings to older children who have lived on the streets. This literature review concluded that independent living programmes need to support young people with: building positive relationships with committed and trusted adults who can act as mentors; gaining education, skills and employment; obtaining housing; having a place to return to in moments in crisis and addressing stigma and prejudice in communities which can lead to social exclusion.

2. Retrak's Independent Living Programmes

Currently Retrak runs independent living programmes in Uganda and Ethiopia. This research project was carried out in the latter country where Retrak works with young people who have been living on the streets or grew up in institutional care. Independent living programmes in Addis Ababa (the capital city) and Hossana (rural town in Southern Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples' Region) are directed at older beneficiaries (above 16 years of age) who have attended Retrak's drop-in centres which serve boys and young men on the streets. The independent living programmes provide life-skill lessons, psychosocial support (counselling), vocational or business skills training, and wherever possible, mentor's assistance. Upon completing the training young men are established in accommodation in pairs (Retrak covers the rent for the first few months) and found a work

placement. Follow-up activities are conducted wherever possible and some of the young men maintain contact with their mentors, however the financial support, (travel costs and mobile phone allowance) which Retrak provides mentors with, ceases as soon as the young men complete the training.

In 2014 Retrak established the independent living programme for young women (above 16 years of age) in response to the needs of care leavers exiting the Kechene Girls Orphanage on the outskirts of Ethiopia's capital city, Addis Ababa. The young women also receive services of vocational training, life-skills and psychosocial support, and are established in accommodation, helped in finding a job placement and connected with a mentor.

¹ In Retrak's experience reintegration is less suitable for older children, for instance in 2015, of children over 16 years of age leaving Retrak's drop-in centres, only 20% in Uganda and in 24% Ethiopia were reintegrated with biological family. This compares to 80% of children aged below 16 years leaving Retrak's centres in Uganda for reintegration, and 76% in Ethiopia.

² Kuligowska, A (2015) *Independent Living*, Manchester, Retrak

3. Aims of the Study

This study aimed to inform Retrak's existing independent living programme for older children and young people on the streets. Interviews were carried out with Retrak's programme beneficiaries and mentors in Ethiopia and sought to answer the following questions:

- **What part of Retrak's support do young people value the most?**
- **What areas of Retrak's services should be given more attention to?**
- **How important is mentor support in young peoples' journey to independence?³**
- **What does success look like for young people?**

The findings from this small research project will be used to improve implementation and provide Retrak's beneficiaries with better support. This research is also the first step to developing independent living Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), in the same way as Retrak has used this kind of research to initiate the formulation of Family Reintegration and Outreach SOPs.⁴

As the preceding literature review revealed, the topic of independent living for children living on the streets is largely unexplored. Therefore, it is also hoped that this research will contribute to the discussion on this option of alternative care and inform policy makers and practitioners as they develop more comprehensive policies and standardised approaches to independent living programming.

4. Methods

Three interviewing sessions with Retrak beneficiaries and mentors were conducted in Retrak projects in Addis Ababa and Hossana and in the Kechene Girls Orphanage. This involved short semi-structured interviews with young people aged 16-19 (2 females and 5 males) who have participated in Retrak's independent living programmes and their mentors (3 females and 5 males). The files of the young people were also consulted to provide further information about the participants. Data was analysed through the use of a qualitative analysis grid to find common themes, related to the above questions, and to seek validation for needs and good practice found during the literature review.⁵

Prior to conducting the interviews, an ethical strategy outlining key ethical issues possible to arise during the course of the research and suggested response was produced. The strategy was prepared in line with Retrak's Child Protection Policy and acknowledged the rights to privacy and confidentiality.



³ The response to this question is integrated in the response to the previous one further in the report.

⁴ Retrak (2012) *Retrak Standard Operating Procedures: Family reintegration*, Manchester, Retrak

⁵ Kuligowska, A (2015), op cit

5. Main Findings

5.1. Profiles of the interviewees

Young people interviewed for the purposes of this research have completed Retrak's independent living programme, are now living in their communities independently and, in the case of all of young men, are earning an income. Two of the interviewed women were either in the process of further training or establishing a collective business at the time of the interviews. Some of the interviewees are still in touch with their mentors who were assigned to them at the beginning of the programme in 2014 and who still support them out of their own initiative.

The young women from the Kechene Girls Orphanage who were interviewed first grew up in institutional care and received counselling, mentor and housing support, life skills and vocational training through the Retrak programme. The mentors who also participated in the programme had previous experience in supporting children from disadvantaged backgrounds and were looking after multiple mentees. Out of the three mentors interviewed, one was still in touch with young women she had been

looking after. The remaining two suggested that the relationship with their mentees had been ended by the young women, although this was not confirmed. All of the female mentors were at least ten years older than their mentees.

The young men who participated in Retrak's independent living programmes had been formerly living on the streets and entered Retrak's drop-in centres where they received a number of services (including counselling and life-skills lessons) prior to entering the independent living programme. The interviewed mentors were relatively young (20-24 years of age) in comparison to their mentees (16-18). Four out of five mentors interviewed were former Retrak beneficiaries, had themselves lived on the streets and participated in Retrak's programmes.

One former participant of the independent living programme was interviewed in Hossana. He is still in touch with his mentor and managed to find his grandmother with whom he currently lives. No mentors from Hossana were available for the interview at the time of conducting the study.



5.2. What part of Retrak support is valued the most?

The participants were asked about the most valuable part of the support they received from Retrak. Overall the beneficiaries of Retrak's independent living programmes valued the psychosocial support and skills training the most. Out of 7 respondents, 5 considered counselling as the most important and 4 considered the vocational training the most important, some of the respondents included both of them in their responses. Both, young men who used to live on the streets and women who grew up in the state orphanage experienced broken relationships in their lives which pushed them outside of their family care. They shared that the psychosocial support helped them to process and cope with their experiences. Vocational training provided them with practical skills which increased their employability.

Female mentors considered vocational training and providing their mentees with housing to be the most important support. Male mentors gave various responses, including counselling, Bible teachings, medication. In general, male mentors, who were often speaking of their own experience as well of that of their mentees, emphasised that Retrak invested a lot in them and gave them a direction in life.

5.3. What areas of Retrak services should be given more attention to?

Relationship building

During the course of the interviews the respondents spoke about their relationships with other people. Two main types of relationships were discussed: those between young people and their mentors and those between young people and community members in general.

When asking young men about their mentors they

expressed that their support was very important. Mentors provided them with guidance, encouragement and motivation. Some of the mentees mentioned that their mentors were able to offer them good advice. Young women who participated in Retrak's programmes agreed they had developed a good relationship with their mentors over the duration of the programme. One of the interviewees is still in touch with her mentor who still provides her with support and together they save money in a local saving system. The other respondent expressed dissatisfaction about her mentor no longer staying in touch since she completed the programme. She added that mentors' support is needed even more after leaving the programme. The staff commented that the transport and mobile phone allowance for mentors ceased after young people complete the programme and mentors are likely to be financially challenged to maintain the relationship with their mentees. One of the male mentors mentioned that he is not mentoring for financial gain, but monetary reimbursement is helpful to build and strengthen the relationship with his mentee. Another mentor added that mentors should visit the mentees regularly when they are still at the training centre in order to start building a relationship with them as soon as possible and to strengthen it over the course of the programme. It was also suggested that there is a need for refresher training for mentors on a regular basis.

Overall, the participants of the study indicated that there is a need for a continuous mentor support for dealing with everyday challenges, staying encouraged, motivated and focused. The respondents also highlighted that mentor support is important for bridging young people back to their communities. The relationship between young people and

Respondent:

"Mentors are important but they more important when we leave the programme, we need them more now".

community members was also identified as an aspect which requires more attention. Young people who used to live on the streets or grew up in orphanages are often marginalised by their societies⁶. The attitudes of other community members can be very negative and judgemental towards them, leading to social exclusion. The interviewees were aware that limitations in behaviour and ability to communicate with other community members are barriers hindering their reintegration into communities. Young men who used to live on the streets explained how they were considered to be “rubbish” and were rejected by their communities.

At the same time, some of the respondents indicated that community members were impressed to see the behavioural and attitudinal change within young people who participated in Retrak's programmes. One of the mentors admitted he regained his respect when other community members visited him in his work place and he could demonstrate to them that he is on track with his life. Mentors, who had an experience of living on the streets themselves, mentioned that their landlords are very supportive and invited them over to their homes. Male mentors also expressed that more emphasis needs to be put on linking young people with peers in community, and bridging them to community, what indicates that the issue of social exclusion needs to be addressed.

In terms of young people's reintegration to the community the interviewees mentioned that Retrak should not be pressuring children into making decision about their futures when they are not ready to make it.

Respondent:

“It was not good when we reintegrated into the community. It was urgent and didn't give me comfort. It was made in a hurry”.

It was suggested that Retrak needs to take time to understand interests of young people, help them to work on changing their

behaviour and not rush the reintegration process until a young person feels ready for it, otherwise it may be a stressful experience.

Key points: Relationship building

- **Mentor support is crucial for young people. Mentors encourage, motivate and advise their mentees as well as build positive and trusting relationships with them.**
- **Mentor support currently ceases after completion of the independent living programme. A sudden interruption of this support may negatively impact young people's transition to adulthood.**
- **Communities' attitudes are often not positive towards young people leaving care or formerly living on the streets. That contributes to social exclusion of those young people.**

Employment and economic independence

A significant part of the discussions was occupied by concerns over obtaining employment and being able to maintain economic independence. It was a concern for both young men and women.

Young women who completed Retrak's programmes felt strongly about the need to receive more support around employment. They emphasized that obtaining a job was difficult and their salaries were not sufficient to cover their maintenance costs. Not knowing how to communicate with other staff and how to behave in a working environment was also a challenge. One of the interviewees suggested that skills learnt during the vocational training should not be solely based on the participants' interests but respond to the current market demand to increase the chances of being employed. Issues of obtaining an ID and a guarantor

⁶ Thomas de Benitez, S. (2007) *State of the World's Street Children: Violence*, Consortium for Street Children, London, Young, L. (2003) 'The 'Place' of Street Children in Kampala, Uganda: Marginalisation, Resistance, and Acceptance in the Urban Environment', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 2 (15), pp607-28

Young men who completed Retrak's programmes argued that life skills should be regularly updated with current issues and, since their vocational training programme took up only half of each day, some sort of service should be provided for the remaining time. Similarly, women mentors suggested that Retrak should involve young women in small enterprise and carry on providing them with counselling after the placement finishes as well as focus on girls who need special support (i.e. Young people who are HIV positive). The idea of running one's own business also appears in young people's future plans (see next section). Both young men and women expressed an interest in setting up a business, either on their own or with friends.

- **Obtaining an ID or guarantor is a significant obstacle to finding employment.**
- **Young people appear to be particularly interested in establishing their own businesses.**
- **Skills training needs to be suited to current market demand to increase chances of becoming employed.**

The participants of the study were asked to describe a successful independent young person to ensure that the goals and impact measurements of Retrak's independent living programmes are in line with young people's views. The word cloud below summarises their responses, with those words which were mentioned multiple times appearing the largest. The respondents used the words: 'strong', 'motivated', 'open', 'honest', 'patient', 'confident' and 'healthy' most frequently when describing a successfully independent young person which they want to become.



Figure 1: Young people's description of being successfully independent

It was clear from the interviews that young people have a strong desire to become independent, set up their own businesses and work hard to achieve goals they establish for themselves. The young women from Kechene talked of wanting to run their own business, either on their own or with friends. Whilst the young men expressed their desire to become independent, support their families, be respected in the community, complete their education, become a role model for others, save money and open their own business and work in an organisation similar to Retrak in order to help other street children. When speaking about being successfully independent, male mentors emphasized the importance of achieving life goals and growing in different aspects of life. One of the mentors mentioned that Retrak should encourage young people to reach their potential and talent. This

indicates that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds desire to thrive.

When speaking about success as an independent young person, it became apparent that many young men would like to repay the support they received by getting involved in helping other children in becoming independent. A few of them emphasized the importance of their mentees committing to the programme and focusing on changing lives. All of the mentors demonstrated a strong will to do overcome adversities in life.

Respondent:

“Being born in poverty is not a problem but dying without achieving a life you are created for is a crisis”.



6. Main Findings

This study builds on a previously conducted literature review on independent living programmes. The review examined existing policy on independent living as an alternative care option and looked at the needs of young people participating in independent living programmes. The findings of this study with young people in Ethiopia confirm the key points brought out in literature review.

6.1. Relationships building

The literature review⁷ revealed that establishing positive relationships with trusted adults is crucial for building attachment and social capital. It is argued that young people are “in need of consistent, supporting relationships with adults who can adopt a non-punitive approach and normalise the expression of feelings”⁸. Young people growing up on the streets or in institutional care lack opportunities to form such positive bonds with adults. Therefore, mentor support is essential in keeping young people motivated, encouraged and to bridge them back into their communities. This was clearly evident amongst Retrak beneficiaries who turned to either Retrak staff members during counselling sessions or their mentors with whom they formed trusted relationships with. Interviewed mentees appreciated the support of their mentors who provided them with valuable advice and some of them suggested that this assistance needs to continue after they graduate from the programme.

One of the mentors who used to live on the streets admitted that: “Street boys are really alienated and alone, being a part of community and building relationships is crucial for them”. Mentors provide a starting point to bridge young people back into their communities which is a complicated process due to communities’ attitudes towards children who have been on the streets or in care.

The literature review also highlighted that in addition to a trusted, committed adult, young people need to be provided with a place where they feel safe to engage with this person. Practice based on attachment theory shows that, young people, like younger children, benefit from a ‘secure base’ to provide them with a safe haven and enable them to explore and become confident in the world around them⁹. This study found that young women who grew up in institutional care and were invited to their mentors’ homes could openly discuss important for them issues and join them in different activities, such as having a meal together. By contrast, boys who had lived on the streets were arranging meetings with their mentors individually outside of their mentors’ accommodation. One of the mentors mentioned that Retrak should arrange for a space to meet up with mentees which would provide them with a ‘secure base’. Another mentor suggested the meeting should take place while mentees are still in training centres. That would indicate that establishing a safe place is important for facilitating such meetings.

6.2. Employment and economic independence

According to the literature review children entering independent living tend to have a lower academic attainment due to their past experiences. Lack of educational achievement and training opportunities is likely to result in problems in obtaining employment, which is a crucial factor in securing housing and sustaining economic stability and independence. Often it is not possible to return young people (street-connected or care leaving) to mainstream education. Therefore a vocational or skills training provides them with an opportunity to gain aptitudes crucial in securing employment. However, there are still obstacles to find

⁷ Kuligowska, A (2015) op cit

⁸ Mann-Feder, V R & White, T (2003) ‘Facilitating the Transition from Placement to Independent Living: Reflections from a Program of Research’, *International Journal of Child & Family Welfare* 6(4), p202

⁹ Stein, M (2006) ‘Young people aging out of care: The poverty of theory’, *Children and Youth Services Review* 28, pp422-434



a job. As mentioned previously, a guarantor and obtaining IDs is a significant problem.

In line with the findings from the literature review the majority of interviewees in this study considered vocational training to be most important support Retrak provides young people with. Despite the challenges involved with obtaining a job, unfamiliarity with workplace etiquette and basic salaries, work placement secured by the young people participating in independent living programme provided them with a regular income, work experience and transferable skills which can be used in the future.

6.3. Social inclusion

The literature review also points out that social inclusion is a significant issue for children entering independent living and can prevent them from full participation in their communities. The review argues that low educational attainment, stigma, and problematic behaviour (such as drug abuse) contribute to young people being socially excluded. The interviewees expressed that the community attitudes are very often negative towards them and some of them were able to identify that their

behaviour may be a contributing factor towards this. Mentors' support and counselling seem to have an important role in helping young people to overcome exclusion and (re)integrate with communities. This support helps them to control their emotions and establish better relationships with others. Mentors who formally used to live on the streets emphasized that a high self-esteem and positive attitude are important to re-establish a positive connection with other community members.

The support around relationship building and developing economic independence can mitigate the risk of being socially excluded. However, since the community attitudes are still challenging it is necessary to address this issue. The literature review argues that community-level work is crucial in including young people in social, economic, political and cultural systems within their communities. Interventions such as community education workshops, such as those currently implemented in Retrak as a part of prevention work¹⁰, would aid in improving outcomes for young people transitioning into independence and trying to (re)integrate into their communities.

¹⁰ Retrak (2014) Mid-term review of *"Reintegration of street children and community-based child protection in SNNPR, Ethiopia"*, Manchester, Retrak

7. Conclusion

Supportive relationships

Relationships and attachments are crucial for helping young people outside of family care who lack social capital and grow up forming limited bonds with committed adults. Mentors assigned to young people who participate in independent living programmes provide them with advice and encouragement and also help to bridge them to their communities. When mentor support ceases after a certain time period this can cause difficulties for the young person.

Skills training and employment

Support around finding employment, such as through skills training, obtaining IDs, arranging work placements etc., as well as around developing workplace skills, needs to be provided for young people. This support provides the economic basis to enable them to live independently. In the particular context of Ethiopia,

young people are not able to obtain employment if they do not have a guarantor who can vouch for them. Obtaining an identification card, also essential for employment, can also be problematic for independent young people if they do not have birth certificates.

Social inclusion

Community attitudes vary towards young people who have lived on the streets or in care, although they are often negative. These young people can be very visible in their communities, because they are new or display challenging behaviour. There is a need to address the social stigma surrounding these young people and to continue to provide them with support which helps them process their past experiences as they settle into their community life.



8. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study the following recommendations for Retrak's work are proposed:

- Retrak should strengthen and increase its mentorship programme. A mentor should be trained, supervised and supported to ensure they provide appropriate assistance to young people they work with and are able to deal with the challenges accompanying their relationship with the beneficiaries of the programme. In addition, a place where a young person feels safe and can engage with their mentor needs to be facilitated. This might be by arranging a place within Retrak centres, creating an agreement for use of a public space such as a café or asking mentors if they are able to invite their mentees to their homes. Mentor support should be facilitated for at least 6 months, preferably more, to help young people navigate their transition. The length of support should be based on assessments of the young person's wellbeing. Support could be tailored off to ease the transition, perhaps increasing the time between meetings, and the end of support should be discussed with the young person, with the assurance of where to turn if they do again find themselves in need.
- Retrak needs to look into possible ways of helping young people to obtain ID cards and of appointing guarantors, possibly by establishing a dialogue with local officials. Financial support as young people find accommodation and employment should be provided for minimum of 6 months upon completing their training. This arrangement should be flexible and adjusted if a young person needs to be supported for a longer period of time. As with support from mentors, financial support should also be phased out, with an emergency fund in place if needed.
- In order to mitigate the risk of social exclusion Retrak should expand its work to include a focus on mobilising community support and educating communities on the needs of young people, in order to improve attitudes towards socially excluded groups. This could be done at the local level through activities such as community dialogues, education workshops or a community model for independent living which would link young people with a range of professional and community supports. In addition, psychosocial support in centres and ongoing mentor support should aim to equip young people to manage their emotions and communicate effectively with others in their community.



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