

**In Best or Vested interests?  
An Exploration of the  
Concept and Practice of  
Family Reunification for Street  
Children**

By

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The Consortium for Street Children

**Street life is in fact made up of latent or open violence, of selfishness and solitude. The child will want to escape and has to be helped to do so... It is obvious that the street cannot be an environment where, in the long run, the child can develop in a positive way.**

UNESCO / International Catholic Child Bureau, (1995:97)

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**It is not acceptable that international organisations, policy makers, social institutions and individuals who feel entitled to intervene in the lives of children with problems, do so on the basis of obviously unclear and arbitrary knowledge about the reality of these children's lives.**

Glauser, B. (1990:144)

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**Life in the streets is not as bad as people say. It is much safer and better than my own home.**

Howayda (15), Cairo.

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## INTRODUCTION

### The Emergence of Family Reunification

He is the child most rejected and, at the same time, most in need of acceptance; the most difficult for adults to love and the most in need of adult affection; the least trusted and the most in need of trust; the most abandoned and the most in need of family...<sup>1</sup>

The issue of children and youth living on the street outside parental supervision is not in itself new. Indeed, the character of the street urchin has for many years played an important part in both the fantasy (e.g. in the novels of Charles Dickens) and the reality (e.g. in political campaigns) of contemporary society. What has changed is the way that society has responded to this complex figure, variously represented until very recently in terms of delinquency, disease, terror and pity.

Historically, orphans, homeless and street children were cared for by religious organisations (e.g. churches, temples and mosques) around the world as part of their charity mandate. The religious sanctity afforded to the family unit and the associated ideal of childhood innocence meant that these children were generally regarded with pity and sympathy by the public, and the somewhat paternalistic approach to their sustenance through handouts was well supported by the public.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century then saw a politicisation of the street children 'problem', shifting responsibility away from religious groups and more towards government. Specialised line ministries for 'Social Affairs' or 'Women and Children' emerged around the world and, in light of the increasingly negative image of these children as 'criminals delinquents', purpose-built institutions such as orphanages or 'homes' were speedily constructed where these 'difficult' children could be treated in isolation. However, standards of care in these centres were invariably poor, and by the late 1980s and early 1990s, the multiple negative effects of prolonged institutionalisation on children started to emerge. The advent of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990 then generated a global shift in thinking about children from objects with needs to subjects with rights, including the right to a family. This posed a significant challenge to traditional governmental approaches, and led to a number of panicked attempts to forcibly return street children to their families through organised 'street cleaning' campaigns, some of which continue today.

Unsurprisingly, these rushed reunifications drew heavy criticisms from various human rights groups and NGOs, and most of all from the children themselves, who were back on the streets within weeks. As one child in India remarked,

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<sup>1</sup> Tacon, P. *My Child Minus One*. Unpublished UNICEF report, p20.

The government policy makers have taken the time to think about cleaning the children off the streets, but they haven't thought about what they should do for the children's futures... Does nobody really care about what happens to us?<sup>2</sup>

As the movement advocating children's participation in their own life decisions gathered pace in the late 1990s and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, governments were left with increasingly few options given their continued antipathy to the presence of these children on the streets. NGOs had begun to take the initiative by offering non-formal education opportunities and vocational training to try and give children the skills to get themselves off the streets, but these efforts continued to struggle in the wider context of a society still very much averse to the mere existence of these children.

The response taken by many was therefore to move towards preventive or 'early' intervention, spurred on by better understandings of the multiple factors both pushing and pulling children onto the streets. It was into this arena that family reunification programmes emerged – the main characteristics being (a) recognition of the family as the most sustainable partner with regard to the children's welfare; (b) an acknowledgement that the original causes of family separation need addressing and resolving; and (b) a belief that this can be achieved through procedural and participatory counseling of the child and/or the family members concerned. To suggest that these ideas were completely new would be wrong – as noted earlier, the importance of the family environment had already been emphasised in both religious ideals and the legal provisions of the CRC. Rather, it was that the context proved more fertile to such programmes, with the touted high-profile success of reunification strategies targeting children affected by war, such as Rwanda in the late 1990s. Family-partnered interventions were also in tune with contemporary donor demands for sustainability and participation, while also allowing NGOs to claim such programmes as morally and ethically 'correct' and in the 'best interests' of the child. Unfortunately, the most important question of methodology – *how* this reunification process should best be performed – remains unclear.

As will be seen in this study, this problem of ungrounded methodologies has plagued interventions with street children since the very beginning, and is partly rooted in the inadequate (and frequently inaccurate) research base on which it depends. Equally, it is a symptom of the fact that the development of best practices for urban-based international support has not kept pace with the unprecedented rates of urbanisation over the past several years. The urban context and its diverse and complex inhabitants pose far more of a challenge to development than previous efforts targeting rural, 'homogenous' communities rooted in tradition, and to some extent interventions are necessarily doomed to find their way through a constant process of trial and error. This in itself is perhaps yet another reason why organisations are so keen to use reunification to take the 'urban' out of the equation and return the child to the more 'manageable' setting of the rural village.

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<sup>2</sup> Yakub, 16 year old child worker, quoted in O'Kane, C. (2003).

Whatever the motivation behind them, family reunification programmes are now rapidly taking off in many countries around the world, in spite of the inherent methodological uncertainty. Already, organisations have begun to proudly proclaim 80-90% success rates for their reunification programmes, and more and more of their fellow agencies are showing signs of interest. As one group of NGOs recently suggested,

The potential for reintegration should be the primary preoccupation of any organisation and social worker working with street children.  
(Forum for Actors in Street Children Work, 2001:56)

What this study sets out to do is to go ‘behind the scenes’ of family reunification programmes from a number of perspectives. In **Part One**, it will look at the conceptual theory that underpins this intervention, and examine how constructions of the ‘family’ and the ‘child’ have influenced policy making in this field. It will then reconsider these in light of contemporary research material on the social realities of street children’s lives. **Part Two** will then explore the practical issues relating to the entire process of reunification itself, from the early stages of identifying children on the streets to monitoring their welfare in the weeks and months after reunification with their family. A final **Conclusion** will then discuss the findings of the study and its implications for organisations operating or considering starting family reunification programmes with street children. Areas for future research are also highlighted.

### **Target Audiences for this Study**

#### ***Part One – The Concept of Family Reunification***

This section is intended primarily for academics and policymakers, although it is recommended that practitioners also familiarise themselves with the key concepts and theoretical assumptions that drive family reunification interventions.

#### ***Part Two – The Practice of Family Reunification***

This section is intended primarily for policy-makers and practitioners in the field, and examines the process of family reunification in five stages, using case studies from around the world to commentate on the benefits and disadvantages of employing different methodologies. It is also recommended that academics read the section to understand the difficulties of translating concepts into practice.

#### ***Conclusion***

This section reviews the evidence relating to the concept and practice of family reunification for street children, and discusses whether it fulfils its promises of being in the best interests of the street child. It also points to areas for future complementary research.

# **PART ONE**

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## **The Concept of Family Reunification**

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## **The Concept of Family Reunification**

### **Introduction**

All interventions concerning children's welfare are necessarily rooted in a number of cultural assumptions and beliefs regarding who children are, what they should do, who should look after them, and where they should live. As traced in the introduction, attitudes towards children have continually metamorphosed over the centuries through different social, cultural and economic contexts, with perhaps the most significant change occurring with the advent of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990. The move from viewing children as objects with needs to active social subjects with rights was in many ways revolutionary for the development community, and ushered in new guiding principles for working with children such as safeguarding the right of children to participate in decisions affecting their lives.

Yet despite this proclamation of new and more egalitarian power relations between adults and children, the underlying classical conceptions of the role and development of children within a family unit have largely continued unaffected. In other words, Western understandings of the 'family' and 'child' that constitute the basis for the design and implementation of nearly all interventions with these groups actually remain strikingly similar today to what they were a century ago, and the century before that. This is largely because of the intensely personal and emotional manner in which people fashion their response to children, employing moral, religious, psychological and/or cultural beliefs to help situate their own relative identity. And it is exactly because our identities as adults are so closely linked to constructions of the child that we cling to them so tightly, even in the face of a social reality that is by all appearances no longer in tune with this vision.

What this discussion seeks to do is to therefore unpack the conceptual assumptions and beliefs that underpin family reunification to assess how compatible and attuned these are to the contemporary social reality for children around the world as presented in anthropological and sociological research. It also looks closely at how many of these cultural and often ethnocentric beliefs have crossed into the apparently neutral domain of legal tenure through instruments such as the CRC. The importance of this analysis cannot be underestimated, for organisations risk enacting a grave disservice to the children they are trying to help if they do not at least make themselves aware of the preconceptions that may be distancing them from the child's reality of experience. Failing this, organisations are simply responding to their own vested interests rather than the 'best' interests of the child.



## The Construction of 'Family'

The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and State.

- The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Article 16.3

The importance of 'family' as specified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights above has had a powerful impact on the lives and identities of individuals all around the world. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990) echoes many of its sentiments, and even goes so far as to assert that the family is the 'natural environment' for the 'full and harmonious development' of children's personalities.<sup>3</sup> But what exactly is meant by the word 'family', and how does its interpretations relate to reunification interventions with street children?

By virtue of their very existence, family reunification programmes presuppose the existence of a definite and bounded entity or unit – the 'family' – from which a child has been separated and to which they may be returned. But what exactly is 'family'? Who does it refer to? What kind of relationships does it entail? And what makes a 'family' suitable for reunification rather than any particular group of individuals?

In a comprehensive global survey of ethnographic constructions of 'family', Mann (2001) highlights the existence of two 'essential criteria' defining the idea of family: biology and generation. The first – that a family must be blood-related, either immediate or distant – is the most obvious and immediate understanding in today's world, but the second – that a family must be composed of at least two generations of people (e.g. parents and children, grandparents and grandchildren) is less common. Both of them are primarily concerned with the nature of relationships, implying that (a) kin/blood relations are somehow inherently closer or more important than those between friends, neighbours or lovers; and (b) that 'families' must necessarily involve adults to facilitate appropriate guidance and care for the less powerful members.

Although this model of 'family' is predominant in Northern countries, numerous pieces of ethnographic research suggest that these two criteria do not accurately reflect the experience of 'family' for children elsewhere in the world. Variations in cultural practices mean that children are often very mobile, circulating between households and community members who may or may not be related to them. In many cases, this is not simply a symptom of poverty or deprivation, but a culturally sanctioned practice. For example, Tronick et al. (1987) revealed that among the Efe of the Democratic Republic of Congo, 'multiple mothering' – whereby caregiving for a child was shared among relatives and non-relatives alike – was a social norm. Similar diffusion of child-rearing responsibilities crop up in many other parts of Asia and Africa, where the range of household types and structures in which children grow up is huge (Feeny and Boyden, 2004:4). In Sub-Saharan Africa, Demographic and Health Surveys found that a significant proportion of children aged 12-14 years live in households without either parent – in Namibia this is true of 42% of girls and 36% of boys, with similarly high

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<sup>3</sup> United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Preamble.

percentages in Cote D'Ivoire, Haiti and Benin (Mensch, Bruce and Greene, 1998). Meanwhile, Ennew's (1985) study of children's lives in the shanty towns of Lima in Peru, found that sibling groups of one form or other were almost as common as two-parent, father-headed households.

The point here is that two-parent families are neither the most common household form in many parts of the world, nor act as primary caregivers for children in many cases. Choosing to reunify street children on the basis of the biological and generational criteria outlined earlier may therefore be misguided and inappropriate in many contexts. Moreover, the emphasis on blood relations and adult inclusion in constructions of 'family' have important ramifications on the way street children are perceived, as they suggest that any group of unrelated children living together cannot strictly be termed a 'family', regardless of how strong the emotional and supportive bonds may be between them. 'Family' is something that is implied to exist only outside of the street environment, that is somehow superior or more 'real' as a group than the network of relations children may themselves possess on the street. However, this early assumption is not something that testimonies of (and research with) street children necessarily agree with. In fact, a number of studies openly dispute it and suggest that some groups of street children frequently regard their fellow members as 'brothers or siblings' (Zutt, 1994) or have shown themselves fully able to replicate the roles and processes of family life in their interactions with each other (Verma, 1999; Barker and Knaul, 2000).

### **The 'Family' on the Street**

The idea that street children have no family actually derives from a number of closely related issues. Firstly, it is difficult for adults to accept that teenagers and small children living in hazardous urban contexts have relationships with each other and their environment that do not differ dramatically from those within the home. Secondly, there is still an inadequate amount of research into the process of socialisation that occurs among children on the street, and the social networks they may construct. Lastly, many commentators make an inaccurate assumption that street life necessarily involves a total separation between adults and children. As O'Kane (2003) points out, 'Children may not be supervised by adults, but they are influenced by and influence adults, interacting with them constantly in different domains'.

Over time a street child who has found acceptance amongst other inhabitants of the streets, (the woman making sandwiches at the platform, other street children) will form a family of his own... An outsider may find it surprising that many of these children are aware of the alternative shelter at Nesakkaram, yet they still prefer to stay with their families on the streets. Often, the field workers are faced with a situation where the child will agree to come to the shelter, provided his brother/sister/friend is also willing to come. To a street child, his family on the street means everything to him for they reached out to him when he was most vulnerable and they represent life as he knows it.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> CRY (1998) In Search of Home. *The Hindu Online* Entertainment section, Saturday 4 July 1998.

At the same time, the realm of social policy and public action has necessarily depicted street children for decades as 'abandoned' and 'alone' in order to provoke pity and justification for their interventions (Ennew, 1994). The reality is that forming 'surrogate family' groups is often a means of survival for street children, who depend on the sharing of resources and information to protect themselves and each other from violence and police harassment. People in authority such as police and social workers cannot be trusted, which means the group very quickly becomes the only source of support and care when members are ill or in trouble (Aptekar and Heinonen, 2003). In fact, street 'families' have shown themselves to be more democratic in terms of managing and distributing limited resources than many adult-led households, where girls and younger children often lose out. As this study of street children families or 'bands' in Cape Town, South Africa shows:

At the end of a day's work, those who have contributed to a band's pool of income meet to discuss their preferences about the ways in which this money is to be spent. Such discussions are somewhat democratic, with all members, no matter their status, having at least some say in what is finally purchased... On occasion, older members take on what appears to be parental authority, which affords them greater say in ensuring that necessities such as food take priority over luxuries, such as intoxicants. (Hansson, 2003)

Members of these bands were also found to often pool their earnings to pay bail for fellow members, while regularly providing those among them who had been incarcerated with food and clothing (ibid).

Of course, it would be wrong to suggest that every street child enjoys the safety and protection of such democratic groups, or to imply that these same groups do not have the capacity to physically or mentally abuse their weaker members. The point is rather that street children family groups do exist, and have the potential to offer a quality of relationship that is just as important – and perhaps in some cases, more important – to the child than those with his blood relatives. In some cases street family relationships may actually set the child more at ease precisely because the sibling rivalry for a parent's affection is less intense. For example, a participatory study of street children's relationships in a different region of South Africa found that:

Peer relationships were generally represented as supportive, cooperative and pleasurable. Very few boys spoke of negative experiences with friends. In contrast, many children portrayed relationships with older or younger siblings as involving displacement, jealousy and resentment. Several boys spoke about having been forced to do wrong, or being beaten or left alone by an older sibling. Also, jealousy of a mother's attention to a younger child was mentioned in a third of responses. (Richter and van der Walt, 2003)

One aspect of street families that has been surprisingly neglected in the prioritisation of kin relationships is that of the increasing population of second-generation street children, born to parents who are/were themselves homeless. How do family reunification

programmes apply to these groups, when the basis of typical reunification strategies is to remove the child from the streets? What assumptions can be made as to the 'quality' of care that street children, who are themselves parents, can offer? These are difficult questions in that they draw out even deeper assumptions underlying reunification that suggest the street cannot in practice be the true home for anyone. The case study below offers a good illustration of the challenge such this second generation of street children pose to contemporary reunification efforts:

### **The Second Generation of Street Children in Ghana**

Behind the headquarters of the Motor Traffic Unit of the Ghana Police in Accra, there is a piece of street used by around 100 people, mostly youngsters and children, as a place to sleep. There is a young girl there of 15 who has a baby of about 10 months old. I often use her story to trap politicians. I tell them that I am at a loss to know what to do for the young baby who has to sleep with her very young mother behind the police station. The immediate reply is: "Send the mother and children back to her village. Resettle them." I can't. You see, the baby who was born on the street has a mother who was born on the same street. The street is their 'village'; they are 'settled'. I find such an experience very challenging to my own thinking.

**Source: Shanahan (2003).**

### **The Function of 'Family'**

If children on the street have been shown to have the capacity to replicate many, if not all, of the characteristics of family relationships within their own groups, why is the pressure to reunite them with their original families still so strong? The answer lies in another closely associated set of assumptions regarding the functions that a 'true' family is believed to perform. According to the literature, an adult-led family serves multiple purposes for children members, including:

- Survival;
- Socialisation and instruction in locally-accepted ways of being and behaving;
- A base from which to draw love, nurture and protection;
- Provision of a sense of membership and belonging;
- Access to resources and services;
- A life-long rooted sense of one's place in a larger social world.<sup>5</sup>

These perceived functions may be summarised into the four key areas of protection, instruction, provision and inclusion. Of course, the emphases on these differ substantially according to the age of the child, the cultural context in which they are raised, and the particular priorities of each individual 'family'. For example, in Afghanistan, instruction and the notion of '*tarbia*' – referring to children's manners and

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<sup>5</sup> Mann (2001) p23.

the quality of their relationships with others – was found to be of prime importance in relation to the purpose of a family unit:

The difference between a child with good tarbia and a child with bad tarbia is like the difference between a complete house and a destroyed house. If a mother and father pay attention to a child's tarbia, the child will grow and develop into a useful person. If not, they will grow up useless... just like a destroyed and ravaged home.<sup>6</sup>

Tarbia is everything – the people who get on well with their life have good tarbia and the people who don't get on well with their life don't have good tarbia, and all this comes from the family.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, children in Zimbabwe were very clear in prioritising provision as a key function of the family, in terms of buying food and clothes, paying school fees, preparing food etc.<sup>8</sup>

Regardless of the varying emphases different cultures and societies place on these four functions, underlying them all is the notion of parental responsibility – both moral and economic – in ensuring the child's physical and emotional development (James et al, 1998:14). As Mann (2001) notes, the work of John Bowlby (1973) has been highly influential in shaping this discourse, by asserting the critical importance of the psychological bonds between a child and his or her parents (or others who care for the child) as the basis for the child's ability to later form relationships with their peers and other non-parent adults. As one organisation phrased it,

With their parents unable to feed, clothe, educate or protect their health, [children's] only inheritance is destitution and desperation.<sup>9</sup>

Such assumptions have been highly influential in the emotional depiction and analysis of street children in the sociological and anthropological literature of the 1980s and early 1990s, which consistently portrays this group in terms of 'children without childhood' (Winn, 1984), 'lost, stolen and disappearing childhoods' (Vittachi, 1989; Stephens, 1995) or 'childhood abandoned' (Garbarino et al, 1991). Popular literature too has also tended, until recently, to emphasise the 'troubled' personality of runaways (Felsman, 1984), and as Hecht (2000) remarks, the words 'street children' are never far away from the word 'problem' in any context.

These assumptions are crucial to the logic behind family reunification, which is often presented as a direct causal relationship whereby parentless children will grow up without role models, and hence will lack social skills, a moral framework and discipline. Large numbers of children and youth who do not have these qualities will then, it is

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<sup>6</sup> Women's group discussion. De Berry et al. (2003), p8.

<sup>7</sup> Grandmother's group discussion. De Berry et al. (2003), p8.

<sup>8</sup> The Children's Consortium Zimbabwe (2002).

<sup>9</sup> Canadian Christian Children's Fund, quoted in Mann (2001), p14.

feared, precipitate a breakdown in the moral order and social fabric, as suggested by Barnett and Whiteside (2002):

Levels of care are variable, and some end up on the streets of the cities, hardly a preparation for the future as a member of a household or a community, least of all as a citizen. As these orphans grow into youth and adulthood, there are serious implications for the societies in which they live their lives. (211)

The implicit assumption here that role models must be blood-related adults in order to be effective has been undermined by street children's own accounts of who they look to for guidance and support. For example, children on the streets of Kathmandu in Nepal sought formal and informal support from a range of people, including local shopkeepers, their employers, older 'brothers'; (friends rather than kin) and social workers (Baker, 1998).

Nevertheless, street children remain threatening to social harmony because they thrive outside authority in ways that contravene accepted understandings of what children should and can do. For these reasons, there is a perceived need to organise and control the young by keeping them within – or returning them to – 'manageable' social units such as the family. Thus, the proper place for children is therefore the home, the school or another regulated environment in which they can be guided and protected. Ennew (1995) has therefore argued that a crucial aspect of childhood in modern Western eyes is *domesticity*: 'The place for childhood to take place is inside – inside society, inside a family, inside a private dwelling' (202). This means that 'street children are society's ultimate outlaws... not only outside society, they are also outside childhood' (ibid), hence the threatening way in which they are popularly presented. In this way, family reunification is therefore enacted with a view to 'restoring childhood' and social harmony, and yet according to Panter-Brick (2000):

This discourse is quite clearly a construct, abstracted from the real-life circumstances of children. It is a model or ideal type which maps what is to be achieved and the paths to be followed.

In fact, as Boyden (1994) traced earlier, it is a logic that arose in Europe and North America in the advanced industrial period when children were being withdrawn from the labour market and the streets and confined to the home and the school.

These points are not raised with the intention of suggesting that there are no real benefits of children being brought up within a family as opposed to outside a family – on the contrary, the consequences of discontinuities in parenting, particularly in relation to a mother figure, have been shown by many to be significant to children's well-being. However, this is not true of all contexts – in some cultures, mother-infant relationships are deliberately weakened to strengthen wider social networks (Trawick, 1992), while a number of African tribes commonly 'foster out' their children to urban areas as a lever towards social and political advancement. This severance from the family is actually seen as a vital stage of child development, as Bledsoe (1990) explains:

By contrast to the firm belief in Western society that a child needs one stable set of parental figures throughout childhood, most Mende [of Sierra Leone] would argue the opposite: the truly unfortunate children are those who have *not* been sent away from home for their advancement. A rural child who has not been fostered out to a guardian of higher status or to a more urban area is presumed to be unworthy or dull. (77)

The point here is that just as there exists a plurality of childhoods in the world, so also is there no universally accepted nexus of responsibility linking parents, children and their wider society (Panter-Brick, 2000). Thus, it becomes problematic to directly equate the separation of children from their family with a future of immorality, crime and delinquency, as the ethnographic evidence presented in the next section will show.

### Reconsidering the Street Child

The complexity of thought and the internal beauty of these children and their culture fascinate me. (Mesquita, 2003)

As we have seen, both academics and practitioners alike have been quick to come to the conclusion that street children, in lacking a family, are somehow necessarily 'less' developed than other 'normal' children. They are pathologised through their typical association in the literature with 'conduct disorders' (Silva et al, 1991), 'bad genes' (Fujimura, 2003), social deviance, helplessness, disease, destitution and crime (Veale et al, 2000). Yet as Glauser (1990) argues, these depictions actually originate in negative perceptions of the street *environment*, and are wrongly imposed upon the *inhabitants* simply because they share the same space. He points out that the use of the word 'street' in conjunction with the word 'children' is exactly why assumptions about the identity and character of these children are made so quickly, despite the fact that the location says something about where they do things, not who they are. The same conclusion is drawn by Veale et al (2000), who remarks that the term 'street child' is 'a product of a linguistic process that serves to abstract children from their situation and position them in a state of abandonment'.

This has enormous consequences for family reunification programmes, which are heavily dependent on the depiction of street children as 'outside childhood' and a 'problem' to be 'fixed'. This can unfortunately lead to inaccurate and self-serving arguments. In the words of UNESCO / International Catholic Child Bureau (1995):

Street life is in fact made up of latent or open violence, of selfishness and solitude. The child will want to escape and has to be helped to do so... It is obvious that the street cannot be an environment where, in the long run, the child can develop in a positive way. (97)

Yet as research with street children uses more appropriate child-oriented and insightful methodologies, our knowledge of the intellectual capacities and positive characteristics of this group is continuously advancing, in the process exploding the dominant stereotypes on which these arguments are based.

**Stereotype One:  
'Street children have low intellectual and moral capacities'**

Studies have shown that contrary to popular belief, street life may actually promote cognitive growth and development in children, rather than detract from it, through 'a large degree of self-managed, non-supervised activities..., a high amount of social awareness of people, and a knowledge of their natural environments' (Aptekar, 1989).

It has also been suggested through comparative studies of street and school-going children that with regard to problem-solving skills, 'street children appeared to be more confident about trying alternatives, more creative in the kinds of solutions they tested, more determined to succeed and less deterred by failure' (Richter and van der Walt, 2003).

*"Maximiano, 14 years old, illustrated good problem solving skills. When he left home, his immediate concern was where to eat and sleep in the streets. He quickly asked around at nearby stores, offering to work for food and shelter. He was eventually hired by a canteen owner to help out in the kitchen, and he learned how to cook in the process."*

(Case study taken from Banaag, 2002)

Although it is seldom reported, street children often have clear religious allegiances and may regularly attend religious services. A number of studies have shown that their moral values do not seem to be replaced by anti-social ones simply by being on the street – in fact, the street environment may actually improve the child's moral, spiritual and intellectual health (Swart, 1990; Tyler et al, 1992; Baker et al, 1996; Aptekar, 1989). Many long-term street children still demonstrate a clear appreciation of right and wrong and a sense of fairness in relationships, leading some to conclude that 'their intellectual and problem-solving capacities are way above what would be predicted from their backgrounds. They also show little evidence of psychological damage or psychopathology' (Richter and van der Walt, 2003).

**Stereotype Two:  
'Street Children are less healthy than home-based children'**

It is often assumed that the street environment is necessarily worse for a child's developmental health than that of a village domestic home. Yet in Nepal, Panter-Brick et al (1996) showed that height-for-age and weight-for-age of street boys were actually better than in slum-dwelling and rural children, and that growth status did not deteriorate with time spent on the street. Thus, it was concluded that despite their lack of permanent shelter and parental care, these children were far from being the most vulnerable in Nepali society.

Similar results were collected in Indonesia, where street children were found to weight more and be taller than slum-dwelling children (Gross et al, 1996). Malnutrition rates were also found to be lower among homeless than home-based working children in Honduras, not least because street children were able to control the diversity and intake of their own food (Wright et al, 1993).



### **Stereotype Three:**

#### **'Street Children lack guidance and are unable to resist the vices of the street'**

Adaptive distancing, seen in many street children, is an important trait that helps them effect a physical and/or psychological separation from the immediate problems and risk factors in their lives.

*At 12 years old, Michael was introduced to the use of marijuana and other substances like cough syrup and 'shabu' (amphetamine) by the people he worked with in a market place. When told by a concerned adult of the harmful effects of the substances, Michael decided to stop using them. He left his work in order to get away from the temptation and company of the addicts, and found another job by asking his friends in the street.*

Many street children also do not identify with dysfunctional parents and have found healthy role models elsewhere, or have become role models themselves to younger children specifically to warn against the dangers of street vices:

*At 17, Ronnel is one of the older boys at KAIBIGAN, an NGO community centre for street children. As such, he felt responsible for the younger boys and tried to act like a role model by actively participating in the centre's activities. Aside from this, knowing the damaging effects of abusing substances, he felt he had a responsibility to save other street children from drug abuse... Instead of joining or ignoring them as he might once have done, Ronnel would take the time to talk to them to warn them of the dangers. In his words, "I didn't take good care of myself back then, so now I intend to guide and care for my younger siblings."*

*Marissa, 15 years old, was selected by KANLUNGAN staff to represent the centre at a training seminar for junior health workers sponsored by the Philippine National Red Cross. After her training, she organised seminars for street children at KANLUNGAN on health promotion. She assisted the staff in first aid and helped the children with emergency and out-patient treatment. In 1994, she was awarded 'Most Outstanding Junior Health Worker' by the Philippine Red Cross in recognition of her organisational skills and leadership qualities.*

**Case studies taken from Banaag, (2002).**

### **Stereotype Four:**

#### **'Street Children suffer from low self-confidence and depression'**

It is often suggested that 'many street children develop extremely low self-esteem, apparently in response to the disparagement and abuse they regularly face in the course of making a living' (Narayan et al, 1999:198). However, research in a number of different contexts suggests that rather than being passive victims of abandonment, many street children demonstrate strong feelings of self-efficacy in performing tasks required to control their life and environment in positive ways (Veale et al, 1997).

*Rafael believed in his abilities to change his future. He approached the staff of KAIBIGAN [a Philippine NGO] seeking help to enrol in a vocational course, generated income for the centre by designing their greeting cards, and eventually learned refrigerator and air conditioner repair. (Case Study taken from Bagaan, 2002).*

Similarly, in spite of the difficult conditions and multiple hazards of life on the streets, there is little evidence that children are rendered psychologically helpless or pathologically depressed. One study of street children in Brazil found that they were no more depressed than their middle-class counterparts (DeSouza et al, 1995). In fact, researchers have been astonished to discover that these individuals are

often 'constructive and surprisingly well-integrated people', giving them 'little reason to believe that these children are, in general, either psychologically or socially severely disturbed' (Penton, 2000). This appears, at least in part, to be the result of the 'matter-of-fact' attitude that many street children bring to their situation:

*Lack of proper clothing, bad nutrition, unemployed parents, parents who sometimes have rough disciplinary techniques are for these children nothing particularly deviant; rather, this is a normal state of thing which they all share with their friends. To at least some extent, these conditions have nothing to do with the child him/herself, nor with his/her family. Feelings of guilt and shame thus do not dominate their daily lives...*(Penton, 2000).

The increasing range and scope of empirical research working to undermine such stereotypes has led some to suggest that interventions with street children – and particularly family reunification programmes – fail to recognise the true maturity of these individuals and are often highly inappropriate:

Street children are rarely *children*, but adolescents – and far more advanced in their mental and physical maturity than they are given credit for. The emotional and often patronising approach of family reunification strategies wrongly infantilises them, and lacks understanding of the considerable problems that street children face and overcome.<sup>10</sup>

Others have even gone as far as asserting that street children are 'experienced adults inside the bodies of children' (Todaro, 2003), but this is perhaps pushing the notion to an inaccurate extreme. The reality in many areas of the world is that large numbers of street children still express and demonstrate psychosocial difficulties such as low self-esteem, lack of will-power and depression, with a persistent tendency to resort to drugs when facing problems such as hunger and abuse.

Highlighting the strengths of street children is therefore not the same as arguing that their resilience and coping mechanisms outweigh their vulnerability, or that they are not in need of assistance – this may be true for some, but not for all. The positive findings may also be influenced by the fact that it is often the strongest and most active children who have the courage and energy to attempt street life (Panter-Brick, 2003). More research with street girls is also needed, as the little that exists suggests that they perceive the street in more of a negative way than do boys, largely because the street in most contexts offers girls far less opportunity for employment and safety than boys (Scharf et al, 1986; Swart, 1988). Other research in Indonesia has even suggested that the fierce independence of street children and the importance of displaying autonomy to observers can encourage these individuals to 'glorify' their lifestyles so that it becomes agreeable in their eyes:

Instead of complaining about their lives (which is considered bad form), they reinforce the things that they feel are good about living on the street. Always, they

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<sup>10</sup> Author's interview with Trudy Davies, retired founder of the Consortium for Street Children and now volunteer for the International Red Cross Family Tracing Unit, 7 May 2004, London.

are attempting to look for proof that street life is better than conventional life. Problems are often glossed over and treated with humour and a light-hearted disregard, and the children create a doctrine for themselves that it is 'great in the street'; a philosophy constructed to make life more tolerable.<sup>11</sup>

Recognising this as a coping strategy does not – and should not – give the adult observer the feeling that they therefore know the child better than he or she knows themselves, that all street children are 'deluding' themselves, or that the street is in reality completely bad. Rather, this kind of insight, along with the evidence of positive capacities outline above is most useful in helping us to better understand the diversity and scope for interpretation within street children's personal responses to their situation. Thus, it is important to ensure such evidence constitutes a driving consideration in the design and implementation of reunification programmes for these children, to avoid blindly ignoring or disrespecting the abilities they already have and can contribute if willing.

### **'Street Careers' and 'Reunification Windows'**

No matter how resilient a child may be, it is almost certain that at some point during their time on the streets there will be times when they consider going home, or at least changing their environment. Socialisation processes include both highs and lows, and particular events such as fights with friends, episodes of abuse and/or harassment and periods of isolation can be morally, emotionally and physically exhausting. It is often at these points that children decide to seek the help of an NGO or similar authority for support. This act is not to be confused with the child 'giving up' on their street life – this is usually a much longer and gradual process of withdrawal. However, it may be that at that particular time they have reached a stage in their street assimilation (or 'street career' as some academics have termed it) where they are more open to other options.<sup>12</sup> Depending on the organisation that they approach, reunification may be one of the alternatives put forward for their consideration, and they are more likely at this time than perhaps any other to give it serious thought.

Predicting when these 'reunification windows' will appear is far from an exact science however, and it is often the case with complex family situations that such windows need to be actively created through the intervening efforts of the organisation. Furthermore, it remains questionable whether organisations should anyway seek to take advantage of periods where children are at their most vulnerable to impose programmes that may in the long run not be suitable. This has not prevented both academics and practitioners from drawing their own hypotheses however, suggesting that the emergence of

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<sup>11</sup> Beazley, H. (2003) The Construction and Protection of Individual and Collective Identities by Street Children and Youth in Indonesia. *Children, Youth and Environments* 13(1), Spring 2003.

<sup>12</sup> The concept of a street 'career' denoting the various stages of assimilation to street life is a useful tool for exploring street children's changing activities and relationships with their environment, and was put forward in Visano (1990).

reunification windows depends on two critical factors: the age of the child and the length of time they have spent on the street.

Most organisations target younger, pre-adolescent street children for reunification in the belief that children of this age group are (a) less independent and/or suspicious of adults (and thus easier to persuade); (b) more likely to fear the street and miss their family; (c) most in need of adult supervision and care (in line with the assumptions discussed earlier); and (d) are not likely to have had the time to become deeply assimilated into the street lifestyle. This last consideration is particularly strong, with the majority of organisations working under the maxim that the longer the time the child spends on the street, the harder the reunification. The margin for this time period is hotly contested and apparently context and culture-specific. For example, one organisation working in Tanzania has concluded that 'When a child stays on the streets for more than 3 days, it often becomes difficult to reunify him/her with their family'<sup>13</sup>, while other NGOs in Indonesia have consciously decided that those who stay longer than a year are too difficult to access, let alone reunify.<sup>14</sup>

Nor can this reasoning be judged wrong, for it is supported in many cases by the testimonies of the street children themselves:

If a child has been on the street for only a few months, then there is a good chance that he will be able to live at home again. If, however, it has been as long as a year since he left home then it will be very hard for him to stay there. He will miss his friends and become bored, and will long to be back on the street and be free.<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly enough, a number of academic studies argues the opposite, suggesting the adolescence and puberty constitute a 'career crisis' for children on the street, who begin to find life even tougher due to the changing perceptions society has of them (Aptekar, 1988; Felsman, 1989). It is at this time that street children confront 'reality shocks' about their way of life, and when they 'begin to experience a sense of estrangement and frustration with their nomadic existence [as] the child's idealised image of the street clashes with their struggle for survival' (Visano, 1990:156). This is the most promising 'reunification window', as this child relates:

I want to be a shoe shiner but I am too big. People don't like me any more and prefer smaller boys to shine their shoes. Now I am quite big and everything feels bitter, it's so difficult. I want to go back home, but I'm afraid of my mother and that she will beat me again.<sup>16</sup>

The fact is that such reunification windows are essentially unpredictable, based as they are on the interrelation of individual coping mechanisms with the particular challenges

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<sup>13</sup> Mkombozi Centre for Street Children (2002), p5.

<sup>14</sup> Beazley, (2003).

<sup>15</sup> Danang, 12 years old, quoted in Beazley, (2003).

<sup>16</sup> Supri, 15 years old, February 1996. Quoted in Beazley (2003).

posed in the child's environment. Careful research should therefore be carried out in an organisation's local context to avoid wrongly excluding certain age groups / categories of children as more or less suitable for reunification. The actual decision to reunify or not should anyway be made completely by the child, and the procedures leading up to this moment will involve considering many more factors than just their age and the time they have spent on the street already, as Part Two of this study will show.

## Conclusion

In this section we have seen how constructions of the family and the street child have – rightly or wrongly – influenced the argument and motivation towards family reunification programmes. It has been shown that clinging to one particular construction of the 'family' is unhelpful in ensuring reunification strategies remain faithful to children's social realities, and it may even have serious consequences in terms of negatively influencing the way relatives, friends and neighbours within a community conceptualise their responsibilities towards other people's children. Harper and Marcus (1999) suggest that colonial and/or Christian ideologies that emphasise traditional nuclear families as the main unit of society have reduced reciprocity within lineages, while in western Tanzania, Tibajiuka and Kaijage (1995) directly relate the rise in refusals among relatives to take in orphans to the change in the concept of family, whereby 'family responsibilities are increasingly viewed in terms of nuclear rather than extended families' (25). One of the remarkable hallmarks of post-modern Western society is the atomisation of society down to the level of the individual – a cultural paradigm that today has influence far beyond the Western world. To a large extent, those of us who prepare and fund (or seek funding for) interventions with street children base our actions on these theoretical constructs of which we are often unaware, with the result that seeing only the individual allows us to see only individual diagnoses and propose individual treatments. Family reunification concepts would be radically different if the starting point were not the rehabilitation of an individual street child, but the rehabilitation of the environment around that child.

In light of this and the related discussion above, it becomes necessary to reconsider exactly what the 'family' is that NGOs are seeking to reunify street children with. To avoid theoretical presuppositions and remain faithful to the reality of children's experiences such a definition will obviously need to be based on comprehensive local and regional research, although Lucy Bonnerjea's more flexible definition, specially developed in the context of family tracing programmes for children separated by war, is of some guidance in this respect:

Family...is neither the nuclear family unit nor necessarily the previous household unit. Family is best seen as a series of concentric circles specifying the relationship – based on blood or marriage, or even clan or religion – between people, and specifying degrees of closeness and responsibility.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Bonnerjea, L. (1994) *Family Tracing – A Good Practice Guide*. Save the Children Development Manual 3, p22.

# **PART TWO**

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## **The Practice of Family Reunification**

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The advent of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1990, and the central importance it placed on the family unit, had a profound impact on the methodology of organisations working with street children. It provided a universal mandate for intervention – in the ‘best interests of the child’ – and yet it does not prescribe a specific solution or course of action whereby these ‘best interests’ may be achieved. Thus, it is recognised in the CRC that ‘families should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities’, but no mention is made of what this ‘assistance’ may actually involve. In fact, this principle is deliberately left open-ended, and the most appropriate way to safeguard children’s right is to be determined by examination of the particular circumstances of a child in their particular context (Panter-Brick, 2000:10).

#### **Working with Street Children – A few key issues to consider**

Before going into the process of reunification in detail, it is useful to give a preliminary overview of more general issues that organisations working with street children should be aware of, many of which have particular relevance to their participation in family reunification programmes.

##### **1. For most street children, NGOs are an integral part of street life, not a way out.**

Street children often have a range of NGOs and charity organisations offering them assistance in any one city, and they have become adept at moving between and interacting with a variety of agencies to meet their particular needs. As one 8-year old street girl in Nepal phrased it, ‘Organisation B is for eating, organisation C is for sleeping, and organisation D is for playing’ (Southon and Dhakal, 2003). It should not therefore be assumed that street children are in any way ‘desperate’ for assistance, or that accepting help for present needs in any way indicates they trust an organisation to plan for their future. These children have a choice and most are perfectly able to survive without registering with or enrolling in particular programmes. Thus, the majority of street children will be very wary of organisations that attempt to significantly change their lifestyle or take their cherished freedom away, and reunification efforts have the potential to alienate them completely. As one child put it, ‘In Organisation A, I loved the teachers, but I left as I was being forced to return home.’<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Southon, J. & P. Dhakal (2003) *A Life without Basic Service – Street Children Say*. Save the Children UK Nepal, p15.

## **2. Most street children do not feel that NGOs listen to or respect their opinions.**

Despite the rush towards participatory techniques of working with children following the Convention on the Rights of the Child, many organisations still fail to allow sufficient space for the child to express their own perspectives or ideas. This is because it remains culturally engrained in most countries for adults to provide answers for children. One study assessing street children's response to organisations in Nepal found that this was particularly true with regard to being sent home when they did not want to return (Southon and Dhakal, 2003).

Listening to street children often gives valuable insight into just how independent they really are, and can help organisations understand the reasons behind children's responses to particular programme strategies. As one 18 year old from Nepal put it:

Organisations must understand what children's own opinions are about, what they want to do. When someone starts work or training it becomes their own responsibility whether they are successful or not. It is our own fault that we return to the street, we follow our own mind for freedom and develop a habit to having money, therefore will always return to the street for these things. (Southon and Dhakal, 2003:19)

## **3. Assistance for street children should not be conditional on the children signing up for reunification.**

Forcing solutions upon children is not only ethically wrong, but is also likely to be ineffective in meeting their needs. Despite this, it remains worryingly common, if not always explicitly expressed. For example, one organisation based in Salvador, Brazil, introduces street children to sport, music and other leisure activities to build their trust, and then, 'after encouraging these desires, the educator says 'If you want to participate, you must live with your family'.<sup>19</sup> As one supporter of this approach explains,

It must be acknowledged that children and teenagers enjoy street life. They find pleasure in games, freedom, sex and drugs, which are difficult for them to abandon... The problem is that this 'desire' will not be good for their future. The proposal then, is to arouse in them and teach them different kinds of desires – the pleasures of learning and knowing, the pleasure of belonging to and being part of a family. The project is not 'to put an end to their poverty', but to 'channel their desire in a positive direction'.<sup>20</sup>

While this commentator's acknowledgement of the attraction of street life is important, his description of instilling 'new desires' in the children needs qualification. There is a fine line between 'arousing and teaching new desires' and effectively brainwashing or imposing predetermined solutions on children, which should be avoided at all costs. This is not to say that any positive experiences the child has shared with their family should be overlooked or ignored, for these may give valuable insight into how their relationship can be restored and sustained.

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted on the 'Shine a Light' website, [www.odrnews.com/kurt/indexEng.html](http://www.odrnews.com/kurt/indexEng.html).

<sup>20</sup> Quoted on the 'Shine a Light' website, [www.odrnews.com/kurt/indexEng.html](http://www.odrnews.com/kurt/indexEng.html).



## What does 'Family Reunification' mean in practice?

Depending on the individual organisation, understandings of what the term 'reunification' actually refers to can vary considerably. The majority appear to focus on the idea of 'natural' reunification involving 'regrouping' or 'reuniting' people who have, for whatever reason, become separated. In this sense, reunification is seen in the relatively narrow terms of returning a child to his/her biological parent(s) or relatives. Other organisations operate under broader definitions that are less restricted to biology and include non-relatives and the community as a whole:

Reunification means reunifying the child back to their actual family, extended family, facilitating fostering and adoption processes or enabling the child to live independently in the community.<sup>21</sup>

Family Reunification may also sometimes be confused with Family Tracing as operated by organisations such as the International Red Cross, usually because both processes involve identifying and reuniting family members who have become separated. The difference is that Family Tracing mechanisms are more often applied in response to situations of war or famine where separation has been accidental, and in which the location of the family is rarely known. Reunification programmes differ in that the whereabouts of the family are often already made available through the child, so the emphasis weighs more on resolving the issues that caused the initial separation (Tolfree, 1995:143).

Unfortunately, this emphasis is rarely reflected in the range of definitions relating to the 'reunification' of street children, and in practice the process all too often amounts to nothing more than geographical *relocation* of a child back to his family. This is either because the organisation fails to adequately elicit or investigate the reasons for separation from the child or their family, or because they simply do not have the resources to conduct the necessary counselling or follow-up sessions to resolve these issues, hoping instead that the act of reunification will somehow be enough to work them out.

This approach is both irresponsible and ineffective, as well as being potentially dangerous for the child. Organisations should therefore ensure that they do not undertake any reunification without:

- (a) Adopting a definition of reunification that recognises *resolution* as an inherent and necessary factor within relocation;
- (b) Thoroughly exploring the factors leading to the separation from the perspective of both the child and their family;
- (c) Providing adequate rehabilitative support to the reunified child and their family before, during and after the act of reunification.

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<sup>21</sup> Mkombozi Centre for Street Children (2002), p3.

## Who should carry out Family Reunification Programmes?

Given the complexity of these interventions as indicated above, it is important that reunification programmes are carried out by a team of dedicated staff with appropriate qualifications and experience. Such individuals are often difficult to find, and many may lack the necessary documentation or formal schooling. This does not necessarily constitute a barrier to their employment however – for some organisations working in countries struggling under endemic poverty and social inequality, commitment to children, performance in the field, understanding of the reunification process and ability to learn are ultimately of as much value as formal qualifications (Mkombozi, 2002:4).

The box below offers a general guide to the appropriate skills that are required in comprehensive reunification programming, drawn from both an international and a local organisation.

### **Suggested Staff Qualifications for Family Reunification Programmes**

- Secondary education
- Background knowledge / experience in Social Work or Community Development
- Two or more years field experience working with Children in Especially Difficult Circumstances
- Oral and written fluency in the local languages and the international language used in paperwork and training (e.g. English)
- Organisational skills, including research and report writing skills for project and management staff
- Active listening, feedback and communication skills with children and adults
- The ability and willingness to travel, drive / ride a motorbike, etc.

It is generally recommended that staff should be nationals of the country from which the targeted group of street children originate in order to set them at ease, and wherever possible staff should be familiar with the culture and geography of the selected country.

*Drawn from: Uppard and Petty (1998) and Mkombozi (2002).*

## Stage One – Raising the Issue of Reunification

### 1.0. Targeting Street Children for Reunification

As we have seen in Part One, there are too many contributing factors to make reunification more suitable for some groups of street children than others. However, in practice most organisations make a distinction in their work between street-working children and street-living children<sup>22</sup>, in order that they may concentrate their reunification efforts on the latter group. This bias does not imply that street-working children are any less worthy targets for reunification interventions than street-living children – in fact, the distinction between the two is in many contexts very slight. Rather, it is argued (rightly or wrongly) that reunification is more ‘significant’ or ‘necessary’ in the lives of the latter group because of the greater distance between themselves and their family. In theory, there is no reason why *any* child who is on the streets should not be able to seek help in returning to their family, and agencies should ideally avoid predetermining which groups of street children they intend to target for reunification, using as guidance the particular circumstances of each individual child instead.

### 1.1. Raising the issue of Reunification

It is unlikely that going out onto the street and actively offering reunification as a service to children will work. Most will be immediately suspicious of an organisation’s intentions, and may subsequently steer clear of their other programmes altogether, regardless of whether or not these are completely separate and unrelated initiatives. Equally, if an organisation has been in contact with a particular child for a long time and suddenly brings up the idea of reunification, the child may feel betrayed and become suspicious that this goal had been secretly planned all along. Some organisations choose to avoid this by refusing to consider reunification as part of their mandate, while others go to the opposite extreme and make acceptance of reunification a condition of receiving any assistance at all – a practice which jeopardises both the organisation and the child:

The capacity for children to have their own perspectives on why they are being reunified should not be underestimated. They are not stupid, and are quick to sense when they are being exploited. Their own feelings must therefore come first. You achieve nothing by bullying them into returning to their families, but you stand to lose a lot, not least of which is the child’s confidence in you.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> This distinction is also often referred to as children ‘on’ the street (street-working children) and children ‘of’ the street (street-living children). Unfortunately, distinctions of this nature are somewhat artificial and do not accurately reflect the complexity of street children’s situations. However, they are included here for reasons of basic illustration and familiarity for readers.

<sup>23</sup> Author’s interview with Trudy Davies, retired founder of the Consortium for Street Children and now volunteer for the International Red Cross Family Tracing Unit in the UK. 7 May 2004, London.

The truth is therefore, that the sensitivity of the topic makes reunification a very difficult topic to broach at any time in an organisation's relation with a child. However, there are a number of pointers that organisations should bear in mind when deciding when and how to introduce the idea to a child, and these are summarised in the box below.

### **Talking About Reunification – Some General Principles**

The longer the relationship with and the greater the trust the child has in the organisation the better, and the more likely it is that they will respect it as a viable option.

The idea of reunification is best brought up as one option among many others, and staff should explain in detail why they think it may be more or less suitable.

Organisations should never seek to reunify children through the use of bribes, threats, deception, physical force, humiliation, fear or any other emotional abuse.

The child should be made aware that their decision does not have to be immediate, and that declining reunification assistance will not affect their broader relationship with the organisation in any way.

The process of reunification in all its stages should be explained to the child using appropriate language and terms that they can understand.

No promises as to the success (or failure) of reunification should be made at any time, and the use of case studies from other reunified children should only be presented for the purposes of illustration, not as a guarantee.

Given the issues raised in the above box, organisations should not expect to be able to discuss reunification with a child in one comprehensive sitting. It may arouse a variety of emotions within the child – including guilt, shame, anger and depression – and they will need time to think these through with the staff or on their own.

Multiple sessions with different members of staff may therefore be necessary, although all the time being mindful of the fact that repetitive talks around one particular subject may be interpreted by the child as imposing pressure to accept. And if a child does not appear to ultimately make a decision one way or the other at the end of the discussions, this should not be seen as a problem; the child may then be given space to carry on their lives as usual before perhaps reconsidering their options again at another time.

## **1.2. Dealing with Requests for Reunification**

In some cases, street children may approach an organisation and actively request assistance in returning home. Organisations may instantly leap at this opportunity, but it is actually advisable to exercise extreme caution in these cases, as the box below explains.

### Children Requesting Reunification – A Few Notes of Caution

- (1) The fact that a child may exhibit a willingness to be reunified does not mean they should be treated any differently than other less forward children in terms of the reunification process (i.e. skipping stages to reunite them more quickly). Every stage of the procedure is crucial to ensuring that reunification, if suitable, causes as little disruption to the child and their family as possible.
- (2) It should not be assumed that their request to go home is ultimately what they really want; as discussed in Part One of this study, the extreme highs and lows of street life can lead children to feel one way one minute and another the next, and rushing to take advantage of these 'reunification windows' is not necessarily acting in their best interests.
- (3) Children who put themselves forward for reunification may also not be fully aware of what the process will involve, how long it may take, and what may be expected of them at its various stages. They may even have been pushed into requesting it by another street child who is interested to see how the process would work. The importance of children being able to make *informed decisions* regarding their future is a key part of the participation ethic set down in the CRC, and organisations therefore have a duty to explain the procedure to them as fully as possible before accepting the role of reunifying agency.

These words of caution do not give organisations the grounds to flatly refuse any child's request for reunification assistance – they simply ensure that every effort is made to ascertain the accuracy of and motivation behind the request.

### 1.3. Understanding Reunification Refusals

There are many reasons why children refuse or are reluctant to accept the idea of reunification, although some are more difficult to interpret than others. For example, the unwillingness of a child can include the 'normal' fear of a new situation, a change, a move, and this is to be expected:

Another tendency of the reformative approach is to assume that those we reach out to will certainly agree with the value of the 'better life' that is on offer. It ignores the human inclination to stay within known parameters rather than experiment with unknown ones. How few of us will give up our family / home / street / country even when presented with some utopian alternative? It is the same way with the street child.<sup>24</sup>

It should not be forgotten that reunification is not simply about returning children to a family so that they can 'pick up where they left off' – the impression of 'sameness' is illusory, as both the child and the other family members are likely to have changed significantly during their time apart, particularly if this is a matter of months or years. In this sense, reunification is essentially creating a *new family*, not simply replacing an old member, and it is not surprising that children should find this prospect daunting at the very least.

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<sup>24</sup> CRY (1998).

Other common reasons for which children may refuse reunification include:

- Feelings of guilt or anger at being abandoned by the family
- Memories of separation may be too painful
- Fear of continued abuse once reunified or 'punishment' for having run away
- The child may no longer have both parents or all of his/her brothers and sisters
- The child may have to live with a relative they hardly know
- The conditions of their present lifestyle may simply be better in terms of friendships, personal freedom, income, employment etc.<sup>25</sup>

Reunification may also involve a number of risks resulting from the social stigma directed towards street children and the experiences and diseases with which they are popularly associated (see below). Although the existence of such risks should not in itself be enough to exclude the possibility of reunification, it is nevertheless vital that these potential problems are communicated to the child and their family to allow them to make an informed decision.

#### **1.4. Acknowledging the Risks of Reunification**

Stigma attached to street children (and especially those who have been involved in sex work)... mean that their reunification may be less immediately possible than some adults expect. (West, 2003:32)

As Part One of this study revealed, the negative images and assumptions of street children as 'diseased' and 'delinquent criminals' dominate many societies around the world and pose a significant challenge to reunification and reintegration – particularly for those who have spent a large amount of their childhood on the street. Even if a family is ready and willing to accept a child back into their lives, there is no guarantee that their neighbours and the wider community will be equally open to the prospect, and numerous street children have spoken of being bullied and marginalized at schools as a result of being 'different'.

This is not to suggest that reunification should only take place where the factors contributing to social stigmatisation are low, but that the staff, children and the family need to be open about the potential risks that returning the child could involve. This is particularly true when considering the reunification of street children who (a) have fought in or been involved in a conflict as child soldiers; (b) have a disability; and (c) have HIV/AIDS (see below).

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<sup>25</sup> Uppard, Petty and Tamplin (1998), p105.

## Reunification of Street-Dwelling Child Soldiers

In many regions children are recruited or abducted into the military during armed conflicts; they leave because the conflict comes to an end, they escape or they are demobilised, and frequently end up on the streets. Many of them find it very difficult to return to their families because of their experiences during the conflict, which may be traumatic and lead to feelings of guilt, shame, self-disgust and fear. Their communities in turn may be reluctant to welcome them back, particularly if it is known or believed that the children have committed acts of torture or murder. In the Mozambique and Ugandan conflicts, children were forced to kill family or community members in order to reinforce their loyalty to the rebel army, and these incidents can destroy trust, with severe implications for social cohesion and support networks (Feeny and Boyden, 2004:26). A terrible example of this occurred in Sri Lanka in 2000, when 27 Tamil former child soldiers attending a rehabilitation centre in the south of the country were hacked to death by local villagers.

Confidentiality is therefore of great importance when a street child reveals that they have been actively involved in a conflict in whatever form. Special efforts should be made to protect them from the potential risks of discrimination, targeted attacks and social exclusion. Organisations must therefore familiarise themselves with the local political situation in the community targeted for reunification, and consider the attitudes of the particular family involved. Systematic follow-up is particularly important for these children in this respect.

## Reunification of Street Children with Disabilities<sup>26</sup>

According to the World Health Organisation, it is estimated that at least one in ten children is born with, or acquires during childhood, a serious physical, sensory or mental impairment (Feeny and Boyden, 2004:26). Although we know that in many countries children are purposefully injured or maimed by their parents/family members to improve their begging prospects on the street, there is a global dearth of documented evidence on what impact disability has on separation and reunification. It is likely that children with disabilities will unfortunately be among the hardest to reunify, not least because in many cultures they are considered to be a curse and a burden. As Narayan *et al* (1999:203) discovered, 'disabled children are not seen as human beings'. It may not be that the parents do not care about the child, but that impoverishment simply does not facilitate reunification of a child that may not be able to contribute as much income or support as others.

The experience and opinions of children whose disability makes it difficult for them to communicate may be marginalized within the reunification process if careful attention is not paid to eliciting their views. Save the Children therefore recommends that organizations undertaking family reunification with street children should:

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<sup>26</sup> A disability is the functional consequence of impairment. If a child with polio (= impairment) cannot walk because of this impairment, (s)he has a disability. However, if the impairment is corrected (e.g. short-sightedness can be corrected with glasses), then the person has no disability. Disability is a permanent condition of a person. This is not to be confused with 'handicap', which relates to the social or environmental consequence of a disability.

- Have a basic awareness and understanding of disabilities affecting street children;
- Should treat children with disabilities as children *first*;
- Should find alternative means to communicate with children whose disability makes this difficult (e.g. drawing, sign language).

Most of all, it should not be assumed that families do not want to be reunited with their children if the latter has a disability. Rather, special effort should be made to approach their reintegration in a positive and practical manner, emphasizing their abilities, while exploring the availability of any support mechanisms within the local community and family that could help facilitate the child's return. Patronising attitudes should also be avoided, as children with disabilities resent these just as any other child would. In fact, they may be particularly proud of their independence against the odds, as the case study below shows.

### Disability and Determination – A Case Study from Cairo

Mona, a 12 year-old girl who walks the street of downtown Cairo, has only one eye and was maimed by her father when she was five, for the sole purpose of going out with her mother to beg. She became independent of her father two years previously, having been arrested six times and beaten very hard both by the police and the women at the institution she was sent to. Mona concluded that she no longer fears her father and she doesn't have to go with him since no one can hurt her anymore.

"I am now a grown up girl and I know how to take care of myself. After what my father did to me, I found out that the streets can be better and warmer places than one's home. The streets are also a better place than those horrible prisons they send us to. I have met new friends at the last institution and they have taught me new and more lucrative tricks. No, I will not tell you what I have learned, this is the secret of our business.

**Source: Bibars, (1998).**

### Reunification of Street Children with HIV/AIDS

Numerous studies have shown the high sexual activity of street children and the equally high risk of contracting HIV/AIDS in the absence of contraception. Although most children on the street do not have access to medical services that could diagnose HIV/AIDS or other STDs, a small number sometimes find out they are infected through other means, such as NGO health clinics. They may choose to divulge this information during the early stages of reunification, or the staff worker may already be conscious of it – the point is that the stigma surrounding HIV/AIDS is still widespread and severe, if not automatic (Feeny & Boyden, 2004:26), and this can complicate and hinder efforts at reunification in a similar way to disability.

However, whether it is the street child who has HIV/AIDS or a member of their family, **in neither case are agencies justified in separating children from their families or in refusing to arrange for reunification or fostering.** Equally, testing for HIV/AIDS should not be made a condition of reunification programmes – UNHCR, WHO and UNAIDS all oppose mandatory HIV testing. Instead, the process should be conducted in exactly the same way as for any other child, with the exception that families should be given (or referred to) appropriate support to help them deal with the illness.



## 1.5. Recognising the Right to be Street Children

In light of these risks and reasons to refuse, allowing children to decline or withdraw from family reunification programmes and return to the street should not always be seen as a failure. From a more positive perspective, it can be seen as a participatory achievement in which the child has enforced their right to self-determination and responsibility for their own futures. As one observer put it:

Children have a perfect right to be on the street if they cannot be at home. Not enough attention is paid to a child's alternatives to the street in interventions – for some of them, it is the only real alternative to suicide. We need to *trust* the children more that they have a good reason to be there.<sup>27</sup>

Shanahan (2003) agrees, and argues that street children have a *right* to be street children and thus a right to refuse or retaliate against efforts seeking to take them out of this environment. Interventions should therefore concentrate more on assisting the child to meet his or her perceived needs within their street environment, and on improving the social status to a level of acceptance (Shanahan, 2003).

Of course, this raises the issue of how to assist such children – who are themselves 'street experts' – in building their own families and in creating a new kind of society (or sub-unit of society) that will sustain them on their chosen path. Can street children be assisted to develop their own *tarbia* or street culture within which they can succeed and find value and self-worth given the stresses and limited resources available in their lifestyle? And how do we as outsiders cooperate / collaborate with such children to link them to resources (institutions, ideas and various forms of assistance)? The obstacles to achieving this are many, and include not only the need for a lot more participatory research with street children and their communities, but also the difficulty of convincing donor institutions to accept this approach as one worth committing to. Without more empirical investigation into this matter, donors and large NGOs are not likely to understand this as the first step in a mental paradigm that places the ability of street children to make communities in which to live and raise children as a high priority.

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<sup>27</sup> Author's interview with Trudy Davies, retired founder of the Consortium for Street Children and now volunteer for the International Red Cross Family Tracing Unit, 7 May 2004, London.

## Stage Two – Accessing Information for Reunification

### 2.0. Interviewing the Child

Once a child has given their informed consent to reunification assistance, staff will need to start collecting and documenting historical information on their family composition and the type and quality of relationships that the child had with these members. Most importantly of all, this stage is designed to revisit the multiple factors (or particular event) that contributed to the child taking to the streets. While some of the basic details may already have been elicited in the preliminary discussions with the child during registration, it is often necessary to conduct a series of further interviews to explore their background more deeply.

For many street children, this process will involve giving information of a sensitive and personal nature, and discussing episodes or relationships that may be painful or uncomfortable to remember. As one fieldworker noted, this can cause some children to lose their nerve and become unwilling or unable to respond:

Some children don't want to talk to you. Some have been separated so long they can't remember details. Some have had difficulties with their families and do not want to talk to you about them. Some are traumatised and do not want to remember what happened to them. Street children are very difficult – they don't want to talk.<sup>28</sup>

To reduce the likelihood of a child 'freezing up' in this way, the interviewer should try to follow as many of the guidelines in the box below as possible:

#### **Guidelines for Interviewing Street Children about their Personal History**

- Ensure that the interview is conducted in a respectful, sensitive and relaxed manner in a location where the child feels comfortable and able to speak openly and honestly.
- Ensure that the questioning proceeds at a pace dictated by the child, not the interviewer, to avoid rushing the child and to show that the interviewer really is interested in what they have to say.
- Avoid giving advice, providing solutions, moralising, arguing, sympathising, interpreting or withdrawing.
- Talk to the child in a positive, honest, individualised and culturally / gender sensitive manner.
- Do not dismiss details mentioned by a child simply because you do not think they are important.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Bonnerjea, L. (1994) *Family Tracing: A Good Practice Guide*, London, SCF, p42.

- Do not be surprised if information presented by the child is incomplete or even contradictory – certain aspects may be triangulated with data collected during other interviews in the interests of accuracy.
- Try to allow the child to dictate the subject of the interview, rather than the form(s) that the interviewer has in front of them. Allow time to follow up areas that may not initially appear relevant or that need further clarification.
- Remember that interviewing should not simply be a matter of gaining information: it may also be necessary to include elements of counselling, comfort and support for children who recount difficult experiences.

**Source: World Health Organisation (2000:13).**

## 2.1. What kind of information is needed for Reunification purposes?

In general, reunification interviews aim to record information about the child and their family in three distinct parts:

- (1) **PAST** (family members, geographical area, circumstances of separation, etc.)
- (2) **PRESENT** (current situation/circumstances of the child, main needs, etc.)
- (3) **FUTURE** (which relatives should be traced, how and why?)

This information may be elicited in three separate interviews or just two. It is not advisable to try and obtain so much data in one session alone however, as the child will be exhausted and lose concentration. Exactly what questions to ask for each of 'Past', 'Present' and 'Future' will be dependent on each individual child, although a structured set of core questions may be devised to act as a springboard for the discussion (see case study below).

### Reunification Interviews at Mkombozi Centre for Street Children, Tanzania

The interviews are done in two parts to reduce the child's boredom and to slowly build trust.

#### **INTERVIEW ONE:**

Name and Age

Tribe / clan

Education

*(Educational history; Has the child been sent to school? Which class did they reach? Which school did they attend? Who paid the school fees?)*

Basic family information as an introduction to the second interview:

*Where has s/he come from? (Village, Ward, District, Region)*

*Name and place of work of father*

*Name and place of work of mother*

*Relatives – names, where they live and work*

*Other information about relatives and the child's relationship with them.*

Explain to the child about the plan for a second interview, the date and aims of the interview.

### **INTERVIEW TWO:**

What kind of relationships did s/he have within their family?

What were his/her reasons for leaving home?

Who did s/he last live with?

What does s/he feel about returning home?

Which relative would s/he like to visit first?

Can s/he tell us about any anxieties which would be relevant for us when we visit their home?  
e.g. fear, drunkenness etc.

What are the child's plans for his future?

What day does s/he think would be good to visit the home and who does s/he want to meet?

Taken from Mkombozi Centre for Street Children (2002), Appendices 5 & 6.

Interviews are not – and should not be – the only method of capturing the information needed for family reunification however. Often what is required reaches far beyond the simple collection of facts and involves observations made over time by trained professionals. Equally, adults may not always be the best collectors of the information required – children are themselves very skilled at eliciting and disseminating information to other children, as has been revealed in the tried and tested methodology of 'Child to Child' pioneered by Professor Hugh Hawes at the University of London.<sup>29</sup> In this way, a more holistic and progressive analysis of the child can be made with a more in-depth and contextual understanding of their individual abilities, hopes, fears, coping strategies, mental health and problem-solving skills.

## **2.2. Understanding the original Act of Separation**

Obviously, one of the most important areas of information pertinent to reunification relates to the circumstances surrounding the original act of separation. Organisations should be aware that the departure from home is seldom sudden, despite common conceptions to the contrary. Rather, it usually takes the form of a series of steps in which individuals find out more about the urban environment, investigate work opportunities and make contact with homeless street children. Similarly, the factor prompting departure is less commonly a single bounded event than is often thought – rather, it is often a combination of stressors on different causal levels, as suggested in a recent ILO report:

**(A) Immediate:** the reason why a child may leave home and go to work or live on the streets could be a sudden drop in family income; loss of support from an adult family member due to illness, death or abandonment; or an episode of domestic violence.

**(B) Underlying:** chronic impoverishment, cultural expectations (such as the idea that a boy should go to work on the streets as soon as he is able), desire for consumer goods, or the lure of the city.

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<sup>29</sup> See website [www.child-to-child.org](http://www.child-to-child.org) for more details on this methodology.

**(C) Structural:** factors such as development shocks, structural adjustment, regional inequalities and social exclusion.<sup>30</sup>

This multiplicity of levels means that it is not always clear who are the main protagonists in the separation process, or the extent to which children are able to perceive all the circumstances that contributed to their decision to leave home. The reasons given by a child on the day of leaving home may anyway be quite different to those they offer three months later after s/he has rationalised his/her home situation and their actions.

### Understanding the difference between 'Running Away' and 'Eviction'

In his illuminating study of the difference between 'running away' and 'eviction', Lucchini (1997) argues that the consequences of a break-up vary according to the type of relationship the child has with his familial environment as well as according to his knowledge and practice of the street world. He suggests that each child has a 'survival threshold' composed of social, economic, cultural and ethical dimensions they construct in response to their particular environment (e.g. an inner-city child may have a higher threshold for social violence than a rural child).<sup>31</sup> Once their environment and the actions of those within it (e.g. other family members) exceed this particular survival threshold, the absence of a positive response to their needs is judged intolerable by the individual himself, and they take steps to move onto the street.

In the movement conducting the child to the street, the child experiences further thresholds or what Lucchini calls 'stages of non-return'. Once again, the number and type of thresholds differ from one child to another because they depend on the biography as well as on the personality and identity of the child. In most cases, the act of leaving home is initially a means, not a goal – a protest that a threshold has been broken, rather than a quest for new experiences. In fact, it is often used by the child as an opportunity to test the reactions of other family members at a period when, for whatever reason, the child is questioning their status / identity within the family unit. Yet while the escape to the streets may be affirming and short-lived for some, for others it becomes a long-term strategy. Depending on the spatial distance separating the child from the family – and the properties of this space in terms of social and economic resources – the child may reach a subjective point of non-return at which they feel no longer able to go home. This effects a change in the child's perception of him/herself, as an individual with new competencies such as independence and responsibility. This change of identity is a critical event – a biographical break-up orienting the child's behaviour - and is a key factor in understanding why a street child may or may not be disposed to reunification.

**Source: Lucchini (1997).**

It is evident from the field that parents' views on the factors influencing their children's decisions to be on the streets are somewhat inconsistent with those specified by the street children. One study in Botswana (Campbell and Ntsabane, 1995) found that the parents and guardians blamed their children's existence on the street as 'juvenile delinquency', while the children themselves maintained it was parental negligence. Interestingly, over 60% of the parents/guardians interviewed were not aware of any symptom related to the child's decision to run away, suggesting that they were unable to correctly assess the needs or desires of their children before they ran away.

<sup>30</sup> ILO (2002) *A Future without Child Labour*. Geneva: International Labour Organisation.

<sup>31</sup> The survival thresholds of children are variable, which explains why girls (for example) leave home less quickly than boys.

Therefore, if the reason cited for break-up is stated as simply 'poverty' or 'war', efforts should be made to look behind these circumstances to understand how these impacted on the child in local and immediate ways. Children may be more able to do this than adults, as this example from Afghanistan (De Berry et al, 2003) shows:

The basis of all our children's problems is war.

Women's group discussion

When parents are full of sorrow because of war, they don't have time to care for their children and this causes children to be tired of their parents and to go onto the streets and get bad tarbia.

Children's group discussion, IDP camp.

Interviewers should thus make an effort to avoid simplifying or categorising children's reasons and feelings simply for purposes of easier processing. The subtleties of personal testimonies are very important, as it is these often overlooked factors that can cause problems during the reunification process further down the line.

### **2.3. Documentation of Information**

Many people working with street children in the field often complain about the amount of paperwork that they have to fill in, and suggest that the time it takes to keep reports and records updated could be better spent on the streets with the children. Equally, both street children and their families may show resistance to documentation, particularly if they are not well prepared. Street children in particular mistrust efforts to record their personal details on forms, as the process mimics the bureaucracy of police and other authorities with whom they may not have had good experiences. Families who are being assessed for reunification (discussed in the next section) may also be reluctant. Why should they talk honestly to people they do not know but who seem powerful enough to make seemingly arbitrary decisions about whether their child will come home or not? (Bonnerjea, 1994:68).

While this may be true to some extent, documentation – particularly in the context of reunification – is important for a number of reasons, not least of which is to protect the child. When people come to know they have to fill in forms and personally sign them along with other respected individuals (such as community leaders), this acts as a strong deterrent against attempts to get children by false means (ibid).

The information that arises from these interviews must therefore be comprehensively documented, and in a suitable way to allow for someone else who may never have met the child to use it. Most organisations that have only a small number of children registered with them tend to use simple Card Indexes for this purpose, although given the amount and diversity of information that may be generated in relation to just one reunification, it may be wise to consider a more flexible and centralised computer documentation system. Records can then easily be expanded, added to or reopened.

## Stage Three – Assessing the Potential for Reunification

### 3.0. Finding the Family

Once a street child has provided information on the possible location of the family members with whom they wish to be reunified, it is necessary for the implementing agency to contact the family and assess their suitability and reciprocal interest in receiving the child again. Depending on the length of time and geographical distance that have separated these two, tracing the family can pose quite a challenge. Those struggling under chronic poverty are often forced to migrate a number of times to take advantage of changing economic opportunities, while conflict and / or changes in the family structure (through births, deaths and marriages) are also factors that can lead to relocation from the original village a child remembers. Some children may not even remember much about where they came from, and considerable determination may be required in the face of communities who are often suspicious and defensives of such inquiries. It may therefore be necessary for tracing staff to first identify the broad area/community district as indicated by the child, and then to subsequently search marketplaces and talk to community leaders, shopkeepers and other significant actors before finally locating the particular family.

It may be then be tempting for the organisation to return the child to them as quickly as possible, especially when the family appears keen for this to happen. However, it remains the responsibility of the organisation to ensure that the process is not rushed and that proper procedures are followed to (a) ascertain that the family members really are who they say they are; and (b) assess whether the socio-economic circumstances of the family are adequate to support the returning child.

### Verifying the Family of the Child

The system for verification should effectively mirror the methodology with which the information was collected from the child during the previous stage. Thus, someone claiming to be their 'uncle' should be asked the same questions as the child was – all the names of the various family members, where they lived, the nature of the separating incident etc.

Where children have not been able or willing to give much information about themselves or their family, the verification process can be used in reverse. The relatives can be asked to describe situations or memorable experiences that the child might remember, and these are then put before the child for review. Photographs of the relatives may also be taken, together with their children. The child can then later be asked if they recognise these individuals – younger children will often be more likely to recognise the children than the adults. It is not a good idea to take the child to verify the family members themselves, as this may be an emotionally demanding and exhausting experience and places an undue amount of pressure on the child.

Source: Bonnerjea (1994:69).

### 3.1. Assessing the Suitability of a Family for Reunification

Agencies are in a hurry to reunite as many children as possible, and may not take the time to consider the circumstances thoroughly.  
(Uppard, Petty and Tamplin, 1998:107)

This is one of the most important, yet most difficult stages of the reunification process, and involves an organisation making decisions that are likely to change the child's life forever. Conducting this examination in the correct manner (i.e. avoiding offence to the family) and in accordance with relevant and appropriate criteria is therefore crucial, and organisations must be clear as to how the social, economic and emotional resources of a family can best be assessed.

In the legal sphere, assessment criteria for 'acceptable' reunification are often quite clearly defined. For example, Article 7 of the European Union's Directive on Family Reunification<sup>32</sup> states that an application for formal reunification may be accepted if the receiving adult has:

- (a) Accommodation regarded as normal for a comparable family in the same region and which meets the general health and safety standards in force in the Member State concerned;
- (b) Sickness insurance in respect of all risks normally covered for its own nationals in the Member State concerned for himself/herself and the members of his/her family;
- (c) Stable and regular resources that are sufficient to maintain himself/herself and the members of his/her family, without recourse to the social assistance system of the Member State concerned.<sup>33</sup>

These impersonal criteria are very much aligned with protecting the interests of the Member State rather than the child, and are generally economic in nature. Similarly, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), while providing children with the right to reunification, does not give any specific indication beyond the vague notion that it should be carried out only if it is in the child's 'best interests'. The process is further complicated by the fact that as social research has shown, the supposed requirements for 'normal family life' change over time and across cultural groups. Ultimately therefore, it is up to

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<sup>32</sup> Council Directive 2003/86/EU of 22 September 2003 on the right to family reunification. *Official Journal of the European Union*, 3 October 2003. 'Family reunification' in this instance refers to 'the entry and residence in a Member State by family members of a third country national residing in that Member State in order to preserve the family unit, whether the family relationship arose before or after the resident's entry' (Article 2/D). In other words, it relates specifically to cross-border reunification, and those instances where separation has most likely occurred through reasons of economic migration, international marriage of family members or cross-border conflict. As such, the assessment criteria discussed are not specifically designed with, for example, the reunification of street children in mind. However, such a possibility cannot be excluded and the comparison is therefore relevant.

<sup>33</sup> Council Directive 2003/86/EU of 22 September 2003 on the right to family reunification. *Official Journal of the European Union*, 3 October 2003.



the individual organisation to determine what these ‘best interests’ are, and to devise a methodology that will accurately assess a receiving family’s ability to protect them.

Given the complexity of street children’s needs and the range of their personal experiences with family members, it is evident that such criteria, whatever they are, will need to be comprehensive enough to encompass children’s psychological and physical well-being in a holistic sense, and flexible enough to enable an individualised assessment of each family. For example, an organisation may want to look closely at the family’s:

- Ability to use support networks (e.g. neighbours, extended family, institutional support)
- Ability to develop trusting relationships
- Ability to develop a positive ‘family vision’ (how they would like their family to be)
- Ability to articulate, understand and act upon their needs
- Approach to family maintenance (the degree to which they are motivated to keep their children)
- Physical / mental limitations (such as illness, disability etc.)

Questions could also be asked such as:

- o Do the family show positive feelings towards the child?
- o Are there problems in the family that might need addressing (alcoholism, step-parents, outright hostility to the child)?
- o If there are problems can these be solved with the involvement of community leaders?

Unfortunately, many organisations make the mistake of being overly judgemental towards the families of street children. One agency assisting children in Santiago, Chile, reported that working with the families was ‘very difficult, because they are stubborn’ and that they are disgusted at the ‘great moral decay’ they have discovered in these families.<sup>34</sup> These attitudes are rarely constructive in reintegrating children successfully – staff should not presume to know the absolute truth about a family and need to adopt a more humble approach if they are to develop a lasting and trusting relationship.

To respect the family and therefore avoid an impersonal (and potentially offensive) assessment, caseworkers should attempt to elicit an understanding of what the *family* thinks of itself as well. However, the family is not the only source of information available to an organisation: Mkombozi (2002) also recommend that staff introduce themselves to local community leaders, neighbours, teachers and priests to elicit their perspectives on how the family may cope with the return of the child. As discussed in Section 1.4 above, gauging the reaction of the wider community to the return of the child may also be very important.

Whoever they are interviewing, most organisations implementing family reunification programmes tend to concentrate such assessments around the particular incident(s) that gave rise to the original separation, and if the risk of such incidents recurring

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<sup>34</sup> Corporacion NAIM (Our Help Inspired by Mary), quoted on the ‘Shine A Light’ website, [www.odrnews.com/kurt/indexEng.html](http://www.odrnews.com/kurt/indexEng.html).

appears small the reunification is quickly set in motion. However, this kind of partial analysis should be avoided at all costs, for it may ignore other potential risks to the child that are less immediately obvious. Family assessments should where possible be broad and longitudinal in their focus, encompassing the family's history of involvement with social services.

### 3.2. Improving Family Assessment Methodologies<sup>35</sup>

The complex methodology this approach demands may appear daunting for organisations that are traditionally used to socio-economic assessment using predetermined questionnaires, yet the transition may be far easier than expected. The example of the International Red Cross Reunification Programme in Rwanda is very important in this respect.

When IRC-Rwanda first started its reunification programme, it used a questionnaire-based socio-economic assessment of each family's situation as part of the overall family assessment. That methodology proved limiting: it set up a negative 'us versus them' relationship with the household and failed to provide accurate and useful information. Household members quite reasonably assumed that if IRC-Rwanda judged them to be poor enough, it would provide them with material assistance. The situation created an incentive for family members to distort or withhold information, and it gave the impression that the principal responsibility for making reintegration successful was with IRC-Rwanda.

Recognising these problems, IRC-Rwanda replaced the questionnaire-based interview with a more transparent process that used mobility mapping and flow diagrams:

**Flexible, Accurate and Useful.** Flexible and open-ended, mobility maps and flow diagrams allow field workers to pursue important leads for relevant information. They usually capture more completely and accurately much of the same information that the questionnaire sought, but indirectly. In fact, fieldworkers have consistently reported that mobility mapping and flow diagrams help generate a better understanding of the household's situation.

**Personal and Household-Specific in Nature.** Through the mobility maps and flow diagrams, specific resource persons (such as extended family members, neighbors, or church leaders) who already have a strong relationship with the child or household are identified and invited to participate in a community roundtable planning session. The tools facilitate a more personalized and informed planning process that builds on existing obligations and does not assume that the broader community is already motivated to help individual families and their children. Those methods also avoid

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<sup>35</sup> This section is taken directly from De Lay (2003) and is reproduced in full because of the extreme utility of the tools and methodologies described for organizations implementing family reunification programmes. The author would therefore like to extend his extreme gratitude to De Lay in this respect.

placing the agency at the center of the process and ascribing responsibility to the agency for providing everything necessary for reintegration to work.

### ***Mobility Mapping***

A mobility map shows a family's social network. Using the map, a field-worker discusses with family members each place and person identified and the potential significance of that place or person to the household's economic functioning and ability to reintegrate the child. The map can also help identify potential opportunities for improving a household's economic productivity and, thereby, its capacity to provide for the needs of an additional child.

Information generated through mobility mapping can include, but is not limited to, the following:

- Type, level, and frequency of the family's economic activities
- Economic assets (such as land, animals, or remittances)
- Participation in community affairs (such as religious bodies and social groups)
- Family and community conflict
- Identification of extended family members, neighbors, and other community members whom the family relies on in times of need or crisis (the informal social safety net)
- Extent of social integration or isolation within a community
- Daily activities of any other children in the household (such as schooling, household tasks, economic tasks, and play) and indications of the well-being of those children
- Extent and nature of contact with formal social support services (such as health clinics, micro-finance services, and religious groups)

Maps are particular to each individual, and one family member's map may differ significantly from that of another. When used in combination, the maps reveal a complex, holistic family network and identify opportunities for economic strengthening of the family. That also holds true for flow diagrams.

### **How to draw a Mobility Map**

1. After establishing a rapport with the child or family member, explain the purpose of the exercise.
2. Provide a piece of paper and a pencil or colored pencils (with an eraser). Draw a small house in the middle of the paper. Explain that this drawing represents his or her house. Now ask the person to draw around the house all the places and people that he or she sometimes visits. (For children or adults who are not comfortable drawing, the fieldworker can draw the map according to the person's instructions or help the person create a map on the ground using objects to represent places and people.)
3. After ensuring that the person understands the exercise, allow him or her time to draw or complete the diagram without interruption. Mapping can take from 20 minutes to 1 hour depending on how detailed the map is.
4. Once the map has been completed, ask the person to name all the places indicated on it. If the person is literate, ask him or her to label each place. If the person is not literate, label the places, explaining that this will help you remember each place. Take care to avoid a subtle putdown of "I can read and you can't."
5. Now verify that he or she has not forgotten any place or person. (Use probing questions such as the following: "Do you ever go to a neighboring town?" "Are there some days of the week or the month when you go to particular places?" "Are there places that you go to at different times of the year?") Ask the person to add other places or people to the map as they are mentioned.
6. Once the labeling is finished, ask the person to mark each of the places that he or she likes best with a particular color, using a colored pencil, marker, or sticker. (e.g., green)
7. Now ask the person to mark the places that he or she most dislikes in a different color. (e.g., black)
8. Then ask the person to mark the places that he or she visited most often (e.g., red) and least often (e.g., yellow), using a different color for each.
9. Once the map has been completed, it is time to interview. Begin by explaining that you would like to learn more about the drawing and would like to ask some questions. Ask if you can write down the responses.
10. Begin with the places that the person listed as "best-liked" places. Use the following discussion guides:
  - "Tell me about this place." "Why do you like it?"
  - "What do you do there?" (Probe for activities and reason for visits.)
  - "Whom do you have contact with there?" (Probe for description and significance of each relationship.)
  - "How often do you visit this place?" (Determine whether it was frequently, sometimes, or rarely.) "Please explain."
  - "Have there been any changes in places you go to or people you visit over time?" "Please explain."
11. Follow the same line of questioning for "most-disliked" places.
12. In conducting an interview, follow the above guide, but do not be overly restricted by it. Use follow-up questions for clarification and to gather additional information. The point is to generate as much conversation as possible in order to develop a complete picture of the social network and economic activities of the person and household.

**Source: De Lay (2003:19-20)**

## ***The Flow Diagram***

A flow diagram identifies the chain of resource persons approached when the household member or the child to be reintegrated is in need. Flow diagrams, more focused than maps, identify specific avenues for social support when the individual or household needs medical care, money, or moral support.

### **How to Draw A Flow Diagram**

1. After establishing a rapport with the child or family member, explain that the purpose of the exercise is to help you understand whom the interviewee turns to for help when there is a problem. Often, people turn to different individuals for different types of problems. For that reason, you will address three areas of need: money, health, and emotional support.

2. Begin with health problems. Ask the family member whom they ask for help when they have a health problem. Write that name at the top of a paper.

3. Proceed by asking whom would he or she turn to if the person listed were unable to help. Continue this line of questioning, writing the names in descending order until the family member's options are exhausted.

4. Next ask whom he or she would approach in the event of a financial problem. Once again, write this name down and then exhaust other options for assistance.

5. Conduct the same line of exhaustive questioning for emotional (or moral) support.

During the interview, you may ask probing questions such as "What type of support is provided?" "Why do you approach certain people?" "What are some past examples of support?"

**Source: De Lay (2003:19-20)**

### **3.3. Centralising the Child's Criteria for Reunification**

While tools such as mobility mapping and flow diagrams are evidently a significant step towards a more accurate assessment of a family's socio-economic context, it is also vital that organisations make sure their criteria reflect an understanding of what the child him\herself feels is necessary for them to be happy within the family. This is too often neglected through paternalistic approaches that concentrate on the economic capacity of a family, and that judge vulnerability using measurements such as 'lack of an adult male in the house' or 'eats meat only once a month'. Such indicators tell us nothing about how a child experiences such conditions. For example, the child of a widowed mother who spends time talking to and comforting her children, and who has good support in raising them from her extended family may be far less vulnerable to anxiety or worry than a child with two parents who frequently fight and spend no quality time with their child (De Berry et al, 2003). Similarly, one study in Botswana (Daniels, 2003) found

that in many instances orphaned children in sibling family units<sup>36</sup> are frequently hungry, fail their school exams and show behavioural problems. For these reasons, the author concludes that they are not coping. Yet the opposite conclusion could easily be drawn by those without a detailed understanding of the family members, who would see a family unit that has remained together and is neither homeless nor destitute.

Children have also been shown to frequently prioritise the emotional side of family relationships far more than the economic aspects – street children in the Philippines suggested that one of the most important things for them as a family member was the celebration of family traditions and religious rituals, even if it meant simply going to church together. In addition, they recommended that being given family responsibilities, not merely in the sense of household chores or looking after younger siblings but also earning extra income for the family was, for them, critical to feeling happy within a family unit (Banaag, 2002).

The importance of demonstrably relating family assessments to street children's own concepts of family and coping criteria cannot thus be underestimated, and is key to ensuring sustainability of the reunification. Having said that, organisations should be wary of taking this child-centred ethic to a wrongful extreme and laying responsibility for the success or failure of the reunification too heavily on the shoulders of the child. As one agency reported:

Not all boys had adopted sustainable positive behavioural patterns upon return home. As a result, some of them ended up causing violence or an unpleasant atmosphere in the family and ultimately ran away from home again (Tigers Club, 2003).

It is not helpful to try to attribute 'blame' for the perceived failure of reunification in this way, particularly when it involves targeting the child and ignoring the very real responsibilities organisations have in catalysing the process. In fact, many reunification strategies still seem to prepare for reunification using methodologies that focus far too much on what the child needs to do to ensure 'success', rather than the responsibilities of the family they are returning to. This emphasis is closely linked to the belief discussed Part One of this study around the incompatibility of street children with family life, and the need to 'erase' the 'street' from the child to help facilitate a smoother reunification.

While it may be true that some children need time and support in readapting to a family environment, role and responsibilities, the idea that the children should fundamentally seek to change themselves is worrying. On the one hand, it serves to further vilify and stigmatise the 'deviant' nature of street children, while on the other it may encourage feelings of guilt and fear in the child that the perceived 'failure' of their reunification is solely their fault. Rather than adapt the reunification to suit the child, the child is being moulded to suit the reunification so that organisations may attribute blame for poor success rates outside their own reunification methodologies, where it is far more likely to lie.

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<sup>36</sup> Also termed 'Child-headed households', where no adult / parent is present.

### 3.4. The Difficulty of Acting in the 'Best Interests' of the Child

However accurately the methodologies described above may capture the social, economic and emotional resources of a family, there is no guarantee that the decision that will need to be made in light of this evidence will be any easier. Staff assessing the suitability of reunification are likely to encounter many dilemmas, some of which may be very difficult to resolve (such as the examples given below). The best way of dealing with these is perhaps to remain as transparent as possible about potential problems, and to plan ahead comprehensively for situations in which the family may require further assistance.

#### Is Reunification Appropriate?

##### Situation One

Five children were separated from their mother during fighting; the father was killed. After five years, the mother remarried and had a further two children. The mother was traced for the five original children, who were living on the street. She was happy to hear that these five children were alive and wanted them at home with her. When the caseworkers made a further visit, the woman's new husband was there; he became very angry with the caseworkers and told them to get out. He told his wife that if she wanted these five original children she could take all her children and go and look after them by herself.

The mother badly wants to care for all the children, but cannot support them all by herself. What can be done?

##### Situation Two

An 8 year-old girl who was found on the streets has suggested that she wants to go home, but the only member of her family who has been traced is her grandmother. The caseworkers visited the grandmother, who was overwhelmed with joy that her favourite granddaughter was alive, and begged her to come and live with her. On learning that her grandmother was alive, the child also begged to be taken to her.

The grandmother is very old, sick and almost blind. The home is a crumbling hut which is filthy. The old lady has no means of support and gets by as best she can. The home is isolated and parts of the surrounding area are known to be mined.

What course of action would be in the best interests of the child?

**Case studies adapted from Uppard, Petty & Tamplin (1998) Exercise 12.**

The important issue to consider at this stage is therefore not *where* children are but *how* they are, and whether they would be able to enjoy a relationship with reliable adults who can put the child's needs above their own.

### 3.5. Making the Decision Not to Reunify

Most concerns will not be obstacles to reunification, but simply a matter of the child or family needing reassurances. (Uppard, Petty and Tamplin, 1998:105)

Despite the confidence of this remark, in every programme there are likely to be some situations where the decision needs to be made that although family members have been found, it is not ultimately in the child's best interests for the reunification to take place. This is not an easy decision to make, but is perhaps not taken as often as it should be, for both the organisation staff and the children involved perceive it to be an indication of failure, and thus the last possible option.

In fact, organisations need to have established a clear set of indicators or circumstances under which they will withdraw from reunification assistance. These are often based around two key considerations:

- If there is any suspicion of abuse or exploitation (physical or emotional) occurring following reunification;
- If there is evidence of child domestic labour, bonded labour, or if the child will be at risk from the work they will undertake once reunified;

In these situations, it becomes very important to explain to the child why reunification was not ultimately possible, with an emphasis on trying to prevent them from feeling guilty or unwanted all over again.



## Stage Four – The Act of Reunification

### 4.0. Reintroducing the Child

We see a wide range of emotions, from crying to laughter. Sometimes people even faint. You have to understand that the fighting abruptly separated many of these families, and all of a sudden, years later, they are brought back together again. It really is a moving experience for everyone.<sup>37</sup>

The final act whereby a child is reunited with their family is far more complex than it may originally appear, not least because of the powerful emotions it arouses within both parties. Organisations may feel that their presence is intrusive or even unnecessary at this stage, and prefer to withdraw as soon as possible after ‘handing over’ the child. Yet perhaps more than ever, the importance of following a designated and formal procedure for this process is critical, as the child is likely to feel at their most vulnerable and apprehensive. To this end, practitioners with long experience of reunification have recommended incorporating a number of ‘safeguards’ into the process to help ensure the child’s safety and mitigate their inevitable insecurity.

#### Examples of how to Safeguard Reunification

##### **Safeguard One – Make the Reunification a Public Event.**

It is often a good idea to plan ahead and pick a day and time for formal reunification where neighbours, community leaders, wider family members and village elders are able to witness and participate in the child’s return to make it a memorable event. It may even be celebrated with prayers, music or dancing (if culturally appropriate) to help the child feel welcome and publicly emphasise the responsibility family members have to protect them from now on.

***Warning:** As already discussed, the reunification of some groups of children (ex-combatants, children with HIV/AIDS and often street children in general) can prove difficult, and a public ceremony may simply act to invite further social stigma and isolation upon the child and / or their family, drawing unwanted attention to the problems that led to the original separation. Organisations should therefore be particularly sensitive to the potential for such approaches to backfire, and develop alternative, more private methodologies.*

##### **Safeguard Two – Draw up a Reunification Contract.**

To formalise the reunification and help families appreciate the importance of their subsequent responsibilities, many organisations choose to draw up a ‘contract’ or agreement to confirm in writing that they are willing to accept and care for the child. The less close the degree of kinship, the more important this safeguard may be, and the contract may then be read out and signed in front of the assembled group to create a publicly acknowledged social, moral and economic bond.

<sup>37</sup> Carla Gamboa Rafael, Supervisor of Angola’s Nation ICRC programme for Family Localisation and Reunification, quoted in Beauchemin (2002).

**Warning:** It is likely that a written agreement will mean less to many families in other cultures than it does in a Western culture, and organisations should explore alternative strategies where necessary to ensure that the importance of this is expressed in locally appropriate ways.

**Source:** Tolfree (1995:146)

Understanding what a 'Reunification Contract' should contain requires discussion with both the child and the family as to (a) what they feel is *desirable*; and (b) what they feel is realistically *achievable*. This may include issues such as anticipated school attendance, domestic chores and living conditions. The information obtained during interviews with the child and the family assessment are particularly helpful in this respect to avoid burden a reunified family with goals and expectations that are beyond their capacities and that may even serve to inspire further conflict down the line. Furthermore, the contract should also include some acknowledgement of the organisation's continuing commitment to the child's welfare by specifying their responsibilities for follow-up and future assistance should it be required. Again, staff need to be honest and realistic here to avoid disillusionment and feelings of abandonment in the eyes of the child and their family. The example below of reunification 'Terms of Agreement' drawn up by Mkombozi Centre for Street Children in Tanzania is a good example of how these considerations can be reflected in a simple and comprehensive manner:

**Terms of Agreement between Mkombozi Centre for Street Children and**

\_\_\_\_\_ (Name of child's guardian)

Concerning

\_\_\_\_\_ (Child's name)

On this day of \_\_\_\_\_

It is understood by both of the above parties that after this reunification the above guardian will take the following actions:

|   | (tick) | (Explain further: e.g. what school, relative?) |
|---|--------|--|
| The child will be entered into school       | _____  | _____  |
| The child will live with the above guardian | _____  | _____  |
| The child will live with another relative   | _____  | _____  |
| The child will work at home                 | _____  | _____  |
| The child will work for someone else        | _____  | _____  |
| The child will return to Mkombozi           | _____  | _____  |
| Other                                       | _____  | _____  |

It is agreed by both parties that:

Mkombozi Reunification staff will follow up on the child's progress 3 months after this date and again after another 3 months. The village officer who witnesses this agreement will follow-up the child and guardian's progress once a month for the next 6 months.

If the family or child experiences any problems they will contact the village officer or Mkombozi using the envelope provided. If the child leaves home the guardian will contact Mkombozi immediately using the envelope provided.

If these Terms of Agreement have been fulfilled after 6 months Mkombozi will end its relationship with the child and guardian. Mkombozi can end its relationship with a child or family if they feel there is no positive movement towards behavioural change and family reunification

**Signed and Stamped by:**

**Witnessed By:**

**Mkombozi Reunification Officer**

**Child's Guardian**

**Village Officer/Representative**

**Date of 1<sup>st</sup> Follow up:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date of 2<sup>nd</sup> Follow up:** \_\_\_\_\_

#### **4.1. Reunification Kits**

As the Convention on the Rights of the Child makes clear, families should be afforded the 'necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community', and most organisations interpret this as an obligation to provide some material or financial package to help the family cope with the challenges of (re)absorbing an extra member to feed, clothe and educate. Such 'reunification kits' may also act symbolically as a gift associated with the child that helps them to be accepted and to feel just a little less of a burden to the family (Bonnerjea, 1994).

Although the composition of these kits more often reflects the individual organisation's budget rather than the family's actual needs, it nevertheless ranges from basic foodstuffs, clothes, school materials and tools to more sustainable items such as bicycles, livestock and pieces of land. Deciding which are the most appropriate and effective combinations for a particular family will once again draw heavily on the assessment conducted prior to reunification, and may require considerable flexibility from an organisation over time to ascertain (see case study below).

#### **Successful Reunification Support in Uganda by the Tigers Club Project**

Ronald was resettled into his deeply impoverished family in 2003. Since his return to the family the parents have moved three times. Consequently, it has taken considerable time to identify a suitable income generation activity for the family.

In June 2003, the family agreed to a suggestion to start up a small bakery. The business was manned by the mother, who baked and sold samosas, chapatti and mandazi (scones). After 2 months the family were able to afford 2 meals a day, and their physical health and hygiene improved dramatically. There was general happiness in the family by the end of the year, and Ronald was able to settle well into his new school.

**Source: Tigers Club Project (2004).**

Of course, some forms of reunification support take longer to have an impact than others, while some expire after a much shorter time than expected – often because the benefits are shared among siblings and extended family. Support for the child may even include advocacy and help for the family to negotiate access to resources such as healthcare, employment or schooling. Careful monitoring and evaluation is therefore required to ascertain which strategies are the most effective and sustainable in supporting a newly reunified family.

At the same time, organisations should be aware that there are a number of potentially serious problems / issues relating to the use of reunification kits that require careful consideration in light of the local context (see box below).

### **Problems with Reunification Kits**

**Financial issues:** Is it worth spending money on kits when it could be spent on another reunification?

**Questions of targeting:** Should families that are relatively better off still be given kits? The costs of operating a means-tested system need weighing up. It means training staff to carry out needs assessment and to account for decisions to give or withhold kits.

**Should the kit be child-centred or family-centred?** Should it include items that target the welfare of the returning child in particular (e.g. by providing a school uniform), or aim to improve the welfare of the family as a whole (through, for example a goat?). A mixed kit is often the best solution.

**Moral issues:** Is the whole idea of a kit a materialistic, Western creation? Shouldn't it be enough to bring the child home? Could the kit act as a bribe, a false incentive or a harmful addition? If reunified children are singled out for material assistance within communities where poverty is widespread, is there a danger of inciting resentment and jealousy among their neighbours?

**Summarised from: Bonnerjea (1994:77-79).**

## Stage Five – Follow-up Monitoring for Reunified Families

### 5.0. The Importance of Integrating Follow-up Mechanisms

The act of reunification is not the end of an organisation's involvement with the child – rather, it is the beginning of a new stage that requires further support and monitoring. Many problems may only emerge or become apparent after reunification, and it is essential that organisation remains involved to honour their commitment and offer the necessary support. There have been too many instances where following reunification and the termination of an organisation's involvement, the child has been beaten or abused as punishment for having run away, only to then return to the streets weeks later:

On 3 January 2003, we went to return a child resident of Lathur [India]. The child's father is addicted to consuming liquor. He responded well and happily received his son. Our staff returned to Mumbai. The very next day, the child was found on the railway platform. When we asked, the child replied, 'Sir, as soon as you left Lathur, my father beat me'.<sup>38</sup>

Given the considerable resource strain that most organisations conducting reunification programmes for street children find themselves under, the idea of carrying out a further set of follow-up visits may seem exhausting and not particularly time- or cost-effective. Yet monitoring the progress of reunified children through these visits offers numerous benefits, not just to the child but to the organisation as well:

- ❑ It enables the worker to assess the success of the reunification (necessary for inclusion in the end of project reporting to donors);
- ❑ It acts to prevent some problems, since both the family and the child expect that their situation will be followed up;
- ❑ It offers reassurance to the child that someone cares about them outside the family;
- ❑ It offers protection to the child when bad things happen as they have someone they know to approach for support who will be on their side;
- ❑ It offers feedback to the reunification programmes on which elements need strengthening or improving

It is vital that at least one (and preferably two or three) follow-up sessions are carried out for each child returned to their family – a personal visit is of course the most effective way to carry out this task, although follow-ups may also be conducted using less formal and more indirect methods such as through medical checkups or school records. Most commonly, organisations draw up a special set of questions for the reunified child, their family and the members of the wider community that assess how well the child has fared

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<sup>38</sup> Case study quoted in the 2003 Annual Report of Saathi, a Mumbai-based organization implementing family reunification programmes for street children in India. See website [www.saathi.org](http://www.saathi.org) for details.

from a number of perspectives. The prior existence of a Reunification Contract or 'Terms of Agreement' as outlined in Section 4.0 above to use as a baseline for this assessment makes the process significantly easier, as the example form below demonstrates:

**Questions to be asked on the First Follow Up Visit for Reunified Children  
Mkombozi Centre for Street Children, Tanzania.**

**General:**

1. What were the Terms of Agreement?
2. How have they been followed?
3. Are there any problems?
4. What steps have been taken to deal with these problems?
5. What are the feelings of the child?
6. Contributions of others (e.g. neighbours, teachers)

**Questions for the Child:**

1. How many times has s/he missed school?
2. Why?
3. Do they have any problems at school? What are they?
4. Has s/he talked to parents about these problems?
5. When s/he is at home, what do they do?
6. How do they feel about being at home?

**Questions for their Teacher:**

1. How is the child's attendance at school?
2. How is his/her progress?
3. Are the parents following up on the child?

**Questions for the Village Leaders / Neighbours**

1. How is the family progressing with the child since s/he was returned?
2. Has the family reported any problems with the child?
3. Where have you reached in resolving these problems?

**What problems are they having?**

1. School costs, uniforms, exercise books and pens
2. Hunger
3. Health
4. Comments – Do you think returning the child has been successful?

**Taken from Mkombozi (2002:38).**

While the importance of follow-up is evident, it must be remembered that there is a fine line between actively monitoring a child's welfare and what can potentially be perceived as interference. Too many visits from caseworkers, donors or other agency staff can cause disruption of the bonding process and confuse a child's sense of belonging by regularly reminding them of their situation and participation in a 'project', which is not always a positive thing. Many parents are simply reluctant to participate in follow up sessions because being reminded of their child running away can lead to them feeling embarrassed within their community. Others are anxious that such visits can encourage

the child to return to the organisation or the street, and children have been known to use this possibility as a threat in making demands (both reasonable and unreasonable).

### 5.1. The Difficulty of Conceptualising ‘Success’

It is becoming increasingly common for organisations conducting family reunification programmes with street children to give quantitative figures for ‘successful’ reunification without actually revealing the criteria on which such claims are based. To a very large extent, ‘success’ is relevant more to the organisation’s individual approach and methodology than to the particular circumstances of the child, which may not even be considered. Most organisations therefore continue to claim achievements from partial and limited perspectives such as the length of time a child remains with the family following reunification – be it two years, one year or even a matter of months. Others simply aim for a certain target number of children to be returned each year. Neither approach tells us anything about how a child has qualitatively experienced reunification, and can actually hide instances of abuse or other serious issues affecting their welfare that would directly contradict such claims of ‘success’.

However, it may be that to analyse a child’s circumstances following reunification more holistically is simply too difficult or challenging for most organisations. For example, what if follow-up visits observe that the reunified child has lost a considerable amount of weight, and is likely to continue doing so? Does the organisation insist on its boundaries of operating reunification programmes rather than development programmes and count the growing malnutrition of the child as a success, simply because they are still with the family? When and how should an organisation concerned with a child’s welfare intervene with a family they have previously reunited? What are the limits of their responsibility towards the child?

During the first [follow-up] visit, we already see a change in the children’s appearance. Often, they aren’t wearing the clothes we gave them. They’re dressed in rags. Many of these families are extremely poor and if one day the parents don’t make any money, they’ll sell the child’s clothes to make sure they don’t go to bed hungry. But they can only do that once. Sometimes we have to take the children back to the orphanage to make sure they don’t die of hunger.<sup>39</sup>

As the example above relates, follow-up visits can inspire a number of difficult moral and ethical dilemmas, and organisations must be absolutely clear before undertaking any kind of reunification the circumstances in which they are prepared (or rather not prepared) to intervene again. This can be a very difficult stage for field staff in terms of the emotional attachments they may have built up with the child through the stages prior to reunification, and in terms of their personal hopes and expectations they hold for the family that may or may not be realised for whatever reason. Understanding ‘success’ is

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<sup>39</sup> Evangelista Chamale of the Children’s Affairs Department in Bie Province (Angola), quoted in Beauchemin (2002).

therefore far more of an ethical and subjective process than in other child welfare programmes, where quantitative statistics may suffice.

## 5.2. Evaluating Reunification Programmes<sup>40</sup>

Organisations should be aware that whatever form of reunification they opt for, there are likely to be a number of unexpected or unforeseen consequences as the intervention itself becomes part of the whole, complex social context. Evaluation is therefore critical to allow an organisation to capture lessons that can lead to different and hopefully more effective goals, inputs and processes.

However, conducting follow-up on reunified children is not the same thing as evaluating the reunification programme itself. For this to occur, the organization must swing the examination lens upon itself and address two overarching issues:

- 1) The **efficiency** of the programme – the adequacy of the practices followed, whether they were cost-effective, whether they can be improved, speeded up, done differently, etc.
- 2) The **effectiveness** of the programme – what impact has it had on the children, families and communities? Have children and families been well prepared for the reunification, and what assistance has been given to help them adapt to the new situation?

The first of these is usually easier to answer than the second, which must be evaluated by means of performance indicators. These may include one or more of the following:

- **Quantitative indicators** – e.g. number of children documented / reunited.
- **Financial indicators** – e.g. whether the programme is cost-effective.
- **Qualitative indicators** – e.g. how effective the programme is, whether it achieves the desired outcomes.
- **Process indicators** – e.g. how decisions are made, how staff are involved in the programme.
- **Outcomes** – e.g. what happens as a result of programme activity
- **Comparisons** – e.g. how well you perform compared with other similar organizations.

A performance based evaluation measures whether you have met your performance indicators, by comparing the monitoring data you have collected with your original targets. This will raise further questions, such as whether the targets are too high or too low, or whether you are using resources economically and efficiently.

A process-based evaluation looks at how your programme operates. Such evaluation focuses on good practices.

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<sup>40</sup> This section draws heavily on Bonnerjea (1994) pp94-95, for which the author extends his gratitude.



An impact based evaluation asks whether you have achieved your intended outcomes, e.g. raising awareness, improving the standards of tracing etc.

A strategic evaluation focuses on the whole picture. Is your overall goal appropriate? Do you have the right strategy for achieving your aims and objectives?

A composite evaluation will combine two or more of these approaches. It is perhaps the most common type of evaluation, as questions are raised about the impact of an organisation's work that will inevitably lead to questions about strategy and goals.

## CONCLUSION

As this paper has shown, the understanding and practice of family reunification for street children is still in its early stages, and new lessons are slowly emerging as traditional assumptions are questioned and new research methodologies are tested.

**Part One** discussed how portrayals of street children as vulnerable, delinquent, abandoned or marginal youth, while perhaps accurate in some cases, are today increasingly disputed by empirical research and participatory consultation. That such assumptions persist is a consequence of a discourse that has been accused of 'systematically ignores its own findings in favour of predetermined conclusions grounded in Northern, middle class mores' (Bar-On, 1997:63). Stereotypes about these children are also further perpetuated by the tendency for research to examine only 'snapshot' moments in the lives of street children, rather than enacting longitudinal studies of their experience over a number of years (Feeny and Boyden, 2004:39).

In many ways, contemporary approaches and opinions regarding reunification reflect the lengthy and troubled paradigm shifts that have already taken place with regard to other child-related issues, such as child labour. It took decades for the academic and practitioner communities to recognise the complexity of children's attitudes to and experiences of work, and the realisation that attempts to ban it altogether were both misguided and futile. Today, we know that children can derive a great deal of positive satisfaction from contributing to the household income through employment, and that it gives them a sense of utility, self-respect and self-confidence (Woodhead, 1998; Boyden, Ling and Myers, 1998). In the course of this journey, most (though by no means all) traditional Western constructions of childhood as a 'work-free' zone were put to the test and eventually softened to accommodate the importance of employment in children's lives. Interventions addressing child labour issues today have subsequently achieved a lot more by focusing their efforts on eliminating the hazardous and exploitative elements of this issue, while at the same time respecting and supporting children's decisions to work.

In the same way, the discourse prioritising family reunification as the best and most sustainable intervention for street children needs to begin questioning the theoretical and cultural constructions on which it is based, and start to respect the complex realities of their target group. This can only be achieved through more detailed research into street children's lives on the street, using innovative and flexible methodologies that better capture the subtleties of their relationships and social networks. It may be easier today to communicate a one-dimensional view of street children's lives through repeated lamentations of 'lost childhoods', but there remains little excuse for this, given the increasing ability of researchers to reflect more complex realities. Similarly, the family cannot be concluded to be the prime environment for child development without comparable and objective evidence of how children interact and learn from the street.

Otherwise, we are effectively preventing both ourselves and street children from making informed decisions regarding their future.

As **Part Two** revealed, reunification programmes are not something that can or should be attempted without considerable planning and long-term resources, and continuous monitoring and evaluation will be necessary to assess whether the agency is consistently acting in the child's best interests. With so much at stake, each of the procedural steps analysed in Part Two must be explored and revisited on a regular basis with reference to the child and the local context in question – this kind of intervention is unfortunately so highly individualised as to significantly reduce the likelihood of 'best practices' emerging.

Ultimately, it is the child themselves who must choose whether to return to their family or not, and all efforts should be tailored to ensuring that they have the greatest support possible in making an informed decision. Then, if the reunification finally occurs, it should be remembered that the commitment from the organisation does not stop there, but rather continues through the provision of appropriate long-term support to both the child and their family. This follow-up is about more than just evaluating 'success' – which is destined to struggle under subjective interpretation – but more importantly about acting responsibly in the child's best interests and demonstrating commitment to the trusting relationship that reunification sets in motion between practitioner and the child. Organisations are effectively entering one of the most difficult arenas of child welfare, and attempting to mediate between the very different and often conflicting street and family domains in children's worlds. The tensions inherent in this intervention were perfectly expressed by a child from Afghanistan, who cautioned that:

Even if you live for a hundred years in a place which is not your place, you will want to leave and go back to your home. But even if you put a bird in a cage and feed it well, it will still desire freedom. (De Berry et al, 2003)

There is no shame for an organisation in admitting that they feel unable to take on family reunification as an intervention. As we have seen, the pressure to do so stems from a theoretical background that is plagued by cultural biases and inaccurate constructions. Stepping back therefore constitutes not a failure to help the children, but rather an acceptance that to do so unprepared is both irresponsible and potentially dangerous. Equally, for those organisations that do feel ready and able to implement reunification programmes, a humble and tenuous approach is advised so that they avoid taking on too much and jeopardising the welfare of those involved. It is often the case that NGOs who do take on reunification projects find themselves subject to unforeseen pressure (under the guise of 'assistance') from authorities such as the social services, immigration and the police, who may view such programmes as tools for their own ends.

## **Family Reunification for Street Children – Right or Wrong?**

It was not the intention of this paper to judge whether family reunification is 'right' or 'wrong', as evidence has been presented on both sides that suggests it to be very much dependent on the organisation, the context, the family and of course, the child. Rather, the aim of this paper was to alert practitioners and academics who are currently involved in (or who are considering starting) family reunification interventions with street children to (a) the considerable amount of careful thought and reflection it demands; and (b) the idea that interventions need better orientation to the child's reality rather than our depiction of it:

Instead of attempting to put children back into the family, school and mainstream society with the hope of 'normalising' their behaviour, the way forward may be to recognise the strengths that street children have developed and build upon their survival skills. (Epstein, 1996)

Thus, while family reunification may be a good thing, it is arguably undeserving of becoming a mainstream goal, especially at this stage when we still know so little about it. In fact, it is very likely a misuse of funds and distortion of donor intent to pursue a fashionable idea that has little grounding in the reality of policy, methodology or the complex reality of street children's lives. Intervention efforts could perhaps be better directed at helping street children to build their own future (regardless of whether or not this involves family reunification), and to empower them to recognise and take advantage of their own skills in obtaining this.

### **Areas for Future Research**

A lot more needs to be explored in relation to the family reunification of street children before organisations can feel confident they are doing the right thing. More research is needed into the pressing question of why, when facing apparently similar socio-economic conditions, do some children maintain links with their families whilst others swap the home for the street? What are the factors that lead to the maintenance or rupture of these family links, and how could agency interventions effectively contribute?

It may also be fruitful to broaden the scope of analysis to research the constant propaganda in the mass media (particularly television) that entices youth to the streets of cities by advertising goods and experiences beyond the boundaries of the domestic space. It has already been suggested by some that a prime contextual factor in the movement of children from their homes to the streets may be the wider consumer society that encourages its members to hinge their identities upon acts of consumption (Butler and Rizzini, 2003). If this is true, is it perhaps time that agencies seeking to assist street children broaden their horizons and tackle these macro-forces?

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