

Street Children and the Challenges of National security: Evidence from Nigeria

Ngboawaji Daniel Nte^{*}, Paul Eke^{**} and S. T. Igbanibo^{***}

Abstract

In this work, modest but valid efforts were made to objectively evaluate the endemic problem of street children in the third world, Africa and Nigeria in particular. More so, the study also tried to establish a link between street children and national security in Nigeria.

In its findings, the study showed that the exponential rise in the number of street children in Africa albeit Nigeria could spell a security disaster, as these kids become foot soldiers and terror elements during ethno- religious conflagrations. This becomes more glaring in most African states as they grapple with series of development crises. The reality therefore calls for concerted efforts to check this potential time bomb through sustainable rehabilitation of street kids.

In arriving at the above conclusion, the work relied on ethnographic data and data from such secondary sources as Books, Journals, Gazettes, News Papers, and Government documents.

Introduction

Who is a Child? The definitions of childhood vary from country to country and, indeed, region to region. The bulk of the countries view childhood in terms of chronological age, while others consider socio-economic factors in determining childhood (World Bank 2003). In some African countries for example, 10 year old apprentices or brides are no longer assumed to possess all the characteristics that industrial countries bundle together into the status of a “child”. They may be eligible for marriage, but not entitled to make decisions independently of their parents. Different countries invoke different age thresholds of adulthood, even within countries such thresholds can diverge – one age for voting, another for employment, and yet another for military services (Satz, 2003).

At the normative level, the concept of a child, implicit in moral and legal practices, is that a child is a person who is in some fundamental way, not developed but rather developing (Schapiro, 1999). In the light of these underdeveloped conditions, adult parents or surrogates are needed to act on children’s behalf’s. Parents or surrogates are thus bestowed with some special obligations including the obligation to protect, nurture, and educate children. These obligations are paternalistic, because adults feel bound to fulfill them, whether the children in question consent to be protected, nurtured or educated or not. Adults feel justified in treating children paternalistically because children have not yet developed the cognitive, moral and affective capacities to deliberate and act completely in their own interests (Satz, Ibid).

^{*} Department of Intelligence and Security Studies, Novena University, Ougume, P.M.B 2 Kwale, Delta state. E-mail: ngbodante@yahoo.com

^{**} Department of Sociology, University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria. E-Mail: drpaul_eke@yahoo.com

^{***} Department of Social Studies, Rivers State Collage of Education, P.M.B. 5047, Rumuolumeni Harcourt Nigeria

The Concept of Street Children

Like every other social fact, the definition of the concept of Street Children tends to defy any universal one. According to Benitez (2003:107), “there is no universal definition of ‘Street Children’ and several interpretations are in common use - -”. This is because the phenomenon arises as a result of these children being ‘abandoned’ by or themselves ‘abandoning’ their families and homesteads. The concept can thus be further divided into street-working children i.e., those who have homes to which they return at night but stay on the street as a means of sustenance, begging or engaging in petty trading and sometimes other vices. Street living Children on the other hand, would refer to “those who for the majority of the time sleep on the street and remain in limited or no contact with their family of origin” (Consortium for Street Children, 2001:3). Schiper–Hughes and Hoffman (1994), argue that in Brazil, for instance, the term is used by one class (the wealthy) to classify those children of another class (the poor) who have the audacity to transgress social boundaries.

For the purpose of this paper, Street Children are those children under the age of eighteen who spend most of their lives on the street. There are those who live permanently on the Street – “Children of the Street” (Lugalla, 1995). This group of children subsists by living and earning their “living”. There are also those who earn their living on the street but usually return to some form of a ‘family’ unit with some level of supervision or control (Lugalla,ibid). This group includes the increasing number of school children that spend most of the day on the Streets. They also constitute a sizeable portion of child labourers in one form or the other.

Street Children are characterized by loneliness on the street, shelterless, loss of parental contacts, loss of parental protection, love and care, and most often exponentially squalid (Lugalla & Mbwambo 1995). Another interesting reality is that Street Children share the streets with millions of adults, many of whom regard them as nuisances, if not as dangerous mini-criminals. However, it must be noted that what the bulk of the children do on the streets is, of course, work to survive or earn money for their significant persons (parents and guardians). The bottom line, therefore, is that despite the different thresholds and bundling they employ, almost all societies share common views of childhood. While this assertion seems over reaching, it is certainly true that a common notion is shared by communities, states, liberal democracies, most international aid agencies and the United Nations.

The recurring decimal in virtually all modern societies is usually an articulated social welfare policy that comprehensively seeks to protect the rights, privileges, and security of children and young persons. Part of this consideration is the obvious fact that children form the bedrock of the future of any society. Adequate protection of this segment of the population is therefore a sine qua non for development albeit national security of modern nation states. This general concern by modern societies has led to renewed interest by sociologists, psychologists, economists, and public policy analysts to study street children as

one of the development crises of modern societies. This recognition is based on the importance of human capital accumulation as a catalyst, and even a prerequisite for development. Street children are viewed as a major impediment to socio-economic progress and a significant threat to national security. These apparent and real threats accentuated the current surge of global interest in street children (Basu and Tzannantos 2003)

In Nigeria with a quaking state making foundation, state failure, and a possible state breaking eventuality, Street Children in Nigeria may, most likely, provide a ready pool of ethno-religious soldiers. The import of this large pool of child soldiers to national security cannot, therefore, be over emphasized. This is because with state failure, citizens rely on ethno-nationalistic sentiments for survival. The situation is, therefore, tantamount to fanning embers of ethno-religious conflicts which are reasonably sustained by child soldiers/militants recruited from the streets (see Nte & Irikana 2008).

Purpose of the Study

Even in the face of abundant literature on Street Children and such allied social problems as child labour/prostitution by scholars and international agencies (Forceman 1983, Bayden & Gibbs 1999, Furley 1995, Lugalla & Mbwanbo 1996, Ebigbo 1985, Oloko 1989, UNICEF 1985 – 2007, ILO 2002), Nigeria like most developing countries, is suffering from severe dearth of information. Consequently; there is an acute shortage of published papers in this domain. The authors have therefore relied on the limited and readily available materials and on their limited and their personal observations and impressions of Street Children and national security. More so, since this aspect of Street Children is significantly under-researched in a relatively turbulent epoch in Nigeria's political history, it becomes needful to subsist on available literature and related contemporary events.

In doing justice to the study, two research questions were generated to further guide the study:

- ❖ What are the nature and dynamics of the political economy of Street Children in Nigeria?
- ❖ What are the challenges posed by Street Children to natural security in Nigeria?

Methodology

In this study, we used a combination of observation and document materials for data gathering, which are valuable sources of data about social research. On the part of observation, one of the researchers participated in the activities of rehabilitation of Street Children organized by Indigenous Women International – a Non Governmental Organisation as a resource person. In a nut shell, the type of observation used in this study did not imply a research strategy of immersion (Pole & Lampard, 2002:71). However, some observations were made of the physical settings of the urban streets of Nigerian cities including Lagos, Kano, Enugu and Port Harcourt.

The central materials used for this study were text books, articles and reports. The categories of documents used in the study include both primary and secondary sources. Documents provided us with good insight into what has been written concerning the topic under study. These theoretical sources were used extensively in the course of our analysis of this study (Pole & Lampard, 2002; Arenas et al., 2002; Cohen & Monion, 1994).

To be able to make full use of the document materials that we located and accessed, the researchers needed to assess their validity and value (Pole & Lampard, 2002). Scoh (1990) puts four overlapping criteria: authority, credibility, representativeness and meaning, which served as a framework to us. In all, it must be recognized that we were able to systematically select documents in a fashion, which looks like a randomized sampling procedure, and helped us put more ideas, color and rigor into this work. Our acceptance or other uses of the retrieved pieces of information were dependent on our selection of information from the review and the interpretation put on it. It is however hoped that the representation punched here is a relatively precise and logical one. Although no researcher is independent of his or her own normative evaluation of a research problem, such as they appear in this study bear the hall mark of the researcher stance and should be over looked and considered as part of the researchers' own oversight (see Ololube & Ubogu & Egbezor 2007).

African Trends and Realities of Street Children

The problem of Street Children has been growing steadily in the last two decades. An estimated 10 million children in Africa live without families, mostly in towns as 'Street Children' (UNICEF, 1984:39). While the aforesaid estimates tend to be realistically low, it must also be noted that in the last two decades or so, Africa has experienced unprecedented level of crisis ranging from such natural disasters as famine resulting from drought to ethno-religious wars, wars of attrition and the devastating impacts of HIV/AIDS. All these put together have added a quantum leap in the number of Street Children in Africa estimated currently to be in the range of 40 million (UNICEF 2007).

The world and Africa in particular are witnessing rapid and wide range socio-economic and political changes. There is rapid urbanization, runaway population growth and increasing disparities in wealth. The introduction of structural adjustment programmes and the sweeping effects of globalization have accentuated the dramatic change of the very fabric of African society. Consequently, these changes have multiplied the number of African children on the streets.

In Tanzania, they are known as 'Watoto Wa Mitaani', in Kenya they are known as 'Chokorra' and in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), they are called 'Moineaux' or 'Sparrows'. By whatever name they are called, what stands out is the sad fact that everywhere, children living and working on the street are ignored, scorned, mistreated and misunderstood by governments (Makaramba, 1999).

Another interesting issue about Street Children is the fact that most analysts see them as products of urbanism and should have an urban solution. For this group, there are just Urban Street Children and no Rural Street Children. Be that as it may, the fact remains that although the bulk of Street Children are found in the urban areas, most of them indeed have rural origins (Consortium for Street Children, 2003). The problem therefore extends beyond urbanization and further validates the fact that the problem of Street Children is caused by multivariate factors ranging from children gotten from 'illicit' relationships, children who are related to wealthy persons in the society, who for inexplicable reasons find themselves on the Streets. Studies have shown that through omission and commission by adults, parents and guardians, African Street Children tend to be victims of short sighted policies, or lack of policies. They are victims of an uncaring community that is increasingly being characterized by poverty, breakdown of family life, violence and economic hardships (ibid).

Street Children in Nigeria

Nigeria is the largest black African country with, according to a recent census, a population of about 150 million people. It is said that every fourth African is a Nigerian. There are several ethnic groups but the three major tribes comprise the majority of the people: the Igbo in the East, the Yoruba in the West and the Hausa/Fulani in the North. Nigeria plays a leading role in determining the future of Africa both at the global and regional levels apparently because of her size and resource endowments. Even in the face of these strengths, and with a fairly acceptable census figure, there are no known statistics of Street Children in the country; however, according to the 2006 census, about 47% of the population is under 15 years old while about 3.5% is aged 65 years or over. According to CRC definition (person under 18 years), children represent over 50% of the population.

The phenomenon of Street Children in Nigeria results mainly from family breakdown, which is in turn linked to polygamy. In an increasing individualistic society such children quickly learn to survive on their own, and in the process are exploited through child labour and trafficking. Many take to the streets for refuge (Ebigbo, 2003; CSF, 2003; NPC, 2006).

Two main kinds of Street Children are found in Nigeria: those who live and work on the street, (*Children of the Street*) and those who work on the streets full or part time but who return to their homes each night (*Children in the Street*). There are also religious Street Children found in northern cities in Nigeria where Koranic education encourages Islamic tutors to send their pupils to beg in the street – ostensibly as part of religious preparation for toughness and perseverance. A few are found in the southern cities although in different form, usually as guides to physically challenged adults. In the East, children aged 8 -9 years are found on the streets early, as less premium is placed on education in comparison with trading activities (CSF, 2003).

Furthermore, there is a new phenomenon of Street Children which can better be described as 'road children'. These children and young adults under the guise of filling pot holes on major roads engage in begging. Apart from facing serious safety risks to themselves and other road users, they have been found to be part of organized high way robberies as they provide unsuspecting intelligence and sometimes plant sharp objects on the road to puncture and deflate vehicle tyres and trap vehicles for easy plunder by the main armed robbers. They sometime involve in petty stealing of such items as cell phones from passengers using the open wind screens of trapped vehicles in traffic jam as a result of bad roads (ACED, 2007).

Yet, there is another variant of the phenomenon known as street wandering boys and girls roaming the streets doing nothing serious. While it is hard to come by accurate national statistics on Street Children in Nigeria, available figures are often contested, and many are estimates or extrapolated figures from other sources as opposed to figures derived from specific studies. A study conducted by a leading children's rights expert in the country shows that homeless Street Children were rare in the mid eighties, there were an "estimated" 8000 of them by the early 1990's. By 1999, children were reported in over a hundred street locations in Lagos. This claim of 8000 was highly criticized as highly grossly under – representative of the actual number on the Streets of Lagos State. This is against the backdrop of the International Labour Organization's (ILO) estimate that child labourers in Nigeria constitute over 6% of the world labourers figure of between 425 to 477 million. A good chunk of child labourers are indeed Street Children who are found in a rapidly urbanizing world (see Burra, 1997, Cigno and Rosati, 2001; Basu and Tzannatos, 2003; ILO, 1999). Given this statistics, Street Children in Nigeria under any guise are in millions and their numbers are multiplying at an alarming rate.

In a study on street child density under taken by Ebigbo (2003), 414 children per street were counted in Enugu, 1959 per street in Kaduna, and 1931 per street in Ibadan. Considering a two – hour count per day for five days, this means that there is a street density population of 44.4, 195.9 and 193.1 working children per hour per street in Enugu, Kaduna and Ibadan respectively. There was a 1:1 male female ratio in Enugu; there were 20 per cent more girls than boys in Kaduna and there was a 1:2 male/female ratio in Ibadan. In Enugu, more children were observed on the streets in the evening, indicating that more children attended school in the morning and traded in the evening to supplement family income. In Kaduna and Ibadan there was no marked difference in the number of children working in the mornings and in the evenings. This indicate that a large number of children do not go to school at all but are engaged all day in active trading. The key factors that push children into the streets according to (Ebigbo *ibid*) include; marital problems or instability in the home, poverty, hunger, insecurity, abuse and violence from parents, displacements caused by inter/intra communal clashes, insufficient parental care, death of one or both parents, inadequate family income, unemployment of one parents, lack of (or limited) opportunities in education, abandonment by parents, housing difficulties, drug use by children and peer influence.

In a similar research carried out by one of the authors of this work, in Port Harcourt, Nte (2005), based on ILO estimates, put child labourers figure at over 500,000. This number excludes child labourers in the adjoining urbanizing communities around Port Harcourt such as Eleme, Oyigbo, Igbo – Etche, Bori and Ahoada. More than half of this number constitutes Street Children. As a city reputed to be the fastest growing city in Nigeria, albeit Africa, the trappings of the illusive Eldora do of the city fueled by massive oil and gas industries create unimaginable frustrations for the army of adventurers including children who are normally victims of these frustrating situations.

The reality of Port Harcourt is that the bulk of these immigrants are not employable in the oil and gas industry because they do not possess the requisite skills. Given this condition; children from unemployed parents or poorly paid parents, children from relations who are supposed to join their relations in the city, children hired as domestic servants, destitutes and abandoned children from the bulk of Street Children in Port Harcourt City (Nte, *ibid*).

The bulk of these children are street hawkers who sell for parents to augment their lean wages, sell for employers for a 'morsel of bread', sell for relations in the form of disguised child labour and abandoned children/destitutes who sell or beg to eke a living – they make up 80 per cent of Street Children. There are also the scavengers who browse through rubbish heaps to search for any abandoned material of marketable value. In the same vein, children of immigrants from Niger and Chad republic equally add up to the growing number of Street Children in Port Harcourt. Hidden from the "casual observer" is the army of child prostitutes who combine hawking and petty prostitution. They are usually aged 11 – 14 years and at times encouraged by their parents, guardians and employers. This category makes up the most hazardous Street Children because of the HIV/AIDS scourge and unwanted pregnancies/teenage motherhood. The effect of this social problem to Nigeria's national security cannot therefore be over emphasized (Nte, *ibid*).

Street Children and National Security: Challenges in Nigeria

While Street Children are viewed as constituting serious nuisance to the society, it is generally viewed as a social pathology that requires social solution through such welfare programmes as rehabilitation and re-integration of Street Children into their families and needy homes for such kids. However, the thrust of this paper is not directed at the social welfare arrangements for Street Children in Nigeria. This paper looks at the menace of Street Children as it affects National Security.

National Security entails the ability of Nigeria to advance her interests and objectives, to contain instability, control crime, eliminate corruption, improve the welfare, and quality of life of every citizen (Obasanjo, 1999). Among the core issues of national security are law and order. National security has also been defined as the "aggregate of the security interest of all individuals, communities, ethnic groups, political entities and institutions which inhabit the territory of Nigeria". In his interpretation of the aforesaid

definition, Mohammed (2006) concludes that “National Security from any perspective is about safeguarding the interests of the citizenry and providing the type of atmosphere that is free of threats that could inhibit the pursuit of the good of all. It is about the processes and measures required to preserve law and order”.

In order to fully appreciate the relationship between the growing number of Street Children in Nigeria and the security challenges, it is needful to review some historic conflicts in Nigeria and indeed some recent and on-going conflicts. Nigeria has witnessed and may continue to witness ethno-religious conflicts due to the failing nature of the Nigerian State and the recourse to ethno-nationalistic sentiments as survival strategies by hapless Nigerians whose destinies have been mortgaged on the alter of a kleptocratic and irresponsible ruling class in Nigeria.

During the series of the major ethno-religious conflicts like the Zagon-Kataf riot, Kano riot, Bauchi riot, Jos riot, Sharia riots in Kaduna etc, Street Children especially the almajais of Islamic street urchins drew the first blood and the bulk of the mayhem were sustained by this group of children. This could be largely to the unquestionable indoctrination and lack of objective analysis of social events by children of this age. Their actions are consequently brutal and devastating (Ekpenyong and Oarhe 2007).

In Lagos, the OPC mayhem between 1999 and 2001 involved a lot of Street Children as foot soldiers. The events in Niger Delta cities in the last eight years are equally instructive. Most urban terror gangs operating in these cities have Street Children as both active foot soldiers and surveillance teams that provide the intelligence before attacks. Even the cult wars that have specifically ravaged the city of Port Harcourt involve the active participation of Street Children who also act as unsuspecting hard drug couriers to beat the prying eyes of security agencies (Nte, 2005; Nte and Eke 2008). The logic therefore is that one of the major features of the flash points in Nigeria such as the North – with the potential of ethno-religious conflicts, Lagos – with the potential of ethnic conflicts, the East – with the potentials of ethnic conflict and the South-South – already enmeshed in resistance struggles, insurgency and militancy all have connections with Street Children as their recruits.

While most countries in Africa are grappling with the menace of child soldiers, Nigeria which has so far escaped macro level conflicts may not completely survive the menacing realities of Street Children who constitute a pool of recruits as armed robbers, urban terror gangs and violent cultists and ultimately graduating into political thugs. More so, the criminal nature of Nigeria’s transitional democracy tend to rely heavily on ‘godfathers’, violence and brutality to capture power at all cost (Human Rights Watch, 2007). This, of course, involves the reliance on the large pool of Street Children as potential thugs. The fact, therefore, still remains that Street Children in Nigeria are potent threat to National Security as a nation infested with Street Children cannot be free from security threats.

In the same vein, some of the negative effects of globalization such as magnified poverty – no food, no clean water, no education, and no health care – and children lead short, brutal suffering lives; tend to aggravate the level of frustration in Street Children in ways that transform them into violent creatures. The weakening sovereignty of the states in political, economic and other areas, the weakening of institutions, increased economic inequality and the breaking up of both social and political spheres have a devastating effect in many societies, especially the third world countries (Mesa, 2005; Tokathan, 2000). The rise of internal violence with the appearance of street gangs from Street Children and other manifestations of juvenile violence is one of the most visible effects. Nigeria is therefore tinkering with a potential time bomb that could explode in ways that cannot be presently imagined. Street Children, street urchins, almajaris, child traders/labourers that dot Nigeria cities will continue to remain a snag on national security.

Summary, Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

The work has attempted to establish useful insights into the meaning, dynamics and demographic structure of Street Children as a social pathology especially in the less developed regions of the world and Africa in particular. In doing this, the work gave in-depth explication of the concept of a 'child' and the incumbent of responsibilities of 'adults' and the society to protect children because of their inherent bio-psychological deficiencies. Similarly, the study also made modest attempts to provide valid analyses of the concept of Street Children, the different strands of Street Children and their psycho-social configurations which predispose them towards such anti social behaviours as crime and violence.

Furthermore, in a country like Nigeria, where corruption and executive recklessness are rife, and where social welfare programmes even for Street Children are almost unavailable, and where they exist at all, its impacts are extremely marginal, the menace of Street Children and the consequential fall outs are bound to be high. Drawing from the few researches conducted on Street Children, studies found that Street Children in Nigeria are urban products of a disarticulated post-colonial political economy with rural roots. With a reasonable level of political illegitimacy which has manifested in elite corruption and political violence, Street Children remain a threat to National Security. This is against the back drop of the fact that, these children provided violent services during ethno-religious riots in the north, political violence in the South West and the East and cult-related – cum terror gangs in the South-South region of Nigeria. In the face of these realities, this study tried to establish a veritable link between Street Children and National Security.

Because Street Children pose serious threat to national security, there is every need to tackle this social problem. Consequently, the following measures can effectively combat the upsurge of Street Children and the attendant negative consequences.

Firstly, there must be an objective realization and acknowledgement of the menacing problems of Street Children facing the African continent and Nigeria in particular. This will engender commitment by all the stakeholders and discourage the abdication of this social responsibility.

Secondly, children living on the street, without homes or families, pose the greatest challenge in terms of rehabilitation often needing long term one – on – one counselling. Preventive measures are therefore vital to protect children from the risk of full exposure to life on the street.

Thirdly, there is an urgent need to provide an effective charter on child rights at both the continental and national levels. In this regard, differential penal sanctions should be implemented in our prison system to discourage the lumping of young offenders with hardened criminals in the same cell. The police force also needs to train to protect Street Children rather than harass and punish them (Makaramba, 1999).

Education is often seen as a means of helping children in the streets – most of the Street Children are illiterate with no basic skills to help them get proper job. Education may help break the vicious circle of marginalization and help potential Street Children towards better life. Unfortunately, globalisation, liberalization, and reforms schools seem to be alienated from the socially excluded segment of the society. School for Street Children becomes another possibility of failure. In this scenario, dropout rate is bound to be high and vocational training must be made accessible to Street Children to remove them from the Streets.

Added to the above is the fact that the content and form of education tend to be unsuitable and questionable with regards to the needs of the poorest. It is based essentially on western middle class values, promotes consumerism, unhealthy competition and make graduates perpetual job seekers. For those needed out of school, the future is bleak, and when confronted with years of nested efforts, frustrated youngsters tend to reject the entire system and relapse into street life.

Furthermore, strengthening the family unit can also reduce the incidence of Street Children. Family welfare policies can attenuate the side effects of development in a globalized world. As a study by the United Nations on youth maladjustment puts it: “if one conclusion has to be drawn from our data it would be that juvenile delinquency is not the inevitable result of poverty and rapid urbanization. The intervening variable is the strength of adult – child relationships most notably family relationship” (DOC. 22, UNSDRI, Rome 1985).

Finally, Non Governmental Organizations, Civil Society Groups and Community Based Organizations should strive to complements government’s efforts aimed at promoting child welfare through vocational training, counseling and job placements. These must be done with full integration of the Street Children themselves. Their voices must be heard if these programmes must work and if Nigeria’s National Security must be sustained.

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