



Presentation of Street Kids International at the
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The Lost Decade

My focus today is on the estimated 100 million youth known as street kids who inhabit the streets of every urban community on the planet. Some believe they represent 30% of the youth population in developing countries. Street Kids International has worked with this population for 15 years in Africa, South East Asia, Central Asia and Latin America. We started working with them on the issues we saw that affected their health – our award winning work in “Street Health” focussed on sexual health and the decision making skills they needed to reduce their risk from HIV/AIDS and on their choices around substance abuse. Over the years our work with them taught us a great deal about them as economic actors. All street kids work – often their limited choices around income earning on the street put them at high risk to their health. Over time we saw the need to link explicitly the Street Health work we do with “Street Work”.

Today, I would like to share with you some of the outstanding and successful work being done with street kids in the area of economic programming.

First, our beliefs – we believe firmly that street kids are bankable, credit worthy and entrepreneurial. They are successful survivors in the harshest economic conditions in the world. They work –every day – we build on what they do. We do not try to change what they do – we focus on strengthening their ability to earn more and where necessary to earn it more safely.

Secondly - we believe that we are at a stage of decision making and investment in street kids today that mirrors all of the skepticism and debate about women and entrepreneurship and access to credit that occurred 15 years ago. We hear the same arguments and the same professed obstacles that we all remember - “they have no land, they have no assets, they are not reliable, they are uneducated, they lack legal identity, their families will take the money” and so on. Today, no one would question their entrepreneurship skills and the bankability of poor women. We must fight the same stigmas again that are holding back recognition and investment in the ability of street kids.

Thirdly – we believe that adolescents 10 to 20 years of age are the “Lost Decade” of development programming. What do I mean by this? - We are underinvesting in them – both financially and intellectually. We find them difficult, unpredictable and inaccessible –physically and emotionally. They fail to conform to our stereotypes about how children should behave and the appropriate role of adults in their lives. Because they are a difficult target population we have avoided the challenges of investment. It is easier, in a relative sense, to focus on the inoculations and nutrition needs of children under 5 who are compliant recipients of our assistance. We also are successful in focussing attention on the literacy and numeracy skill building through primary education of children 5 to 10. Then, this ten years of investment are put at risk as we “drop’ them until they become mothers or heads of household in need of training and employment.

At Street Kids International, we believe that we are the ones who are hard to access – us and our institutions and programs. We believe that we need a paradigm shift in adult-adolescent relationships – from experts with lists of do’s, don’t’s and dire warnings and as rescuers of

children from situations that do not fit our model of what childhood should be. Success at working with street kids requires active, non-judgemental engagement with them. Despite their chronological age they have been placed in adult roles and need adult forms of engagement that acknowledges their situation, their coping skills and their innate strength and resilience.

We believe that working with them in their economic capacity and providing access to credit to enable them to leverage what they already do – is an entry point for other interventions – such as community participation, political action, and re-engagement where possible with families on a new footing. Building an economic base of any size, invests these kids in their communities and stretches their planning cycle and life skills out beyond uninvested day to day survival.

Finally, we would like the Lost Decade to be discovered.

*This requires programmatic interventions that probably divides the decade into two halves. For 10 – 15 years of age the focus needs to be centered on the reproductive health of the children but also recognize that even by this age many of the children we encounter are working full time on the streets supporting themselves, siblings and parents. From 15 to 20 the focus needs to be on strengthening capabilities around economic livelihoods. Many of the youth are already sole income earners and heads of household. Where they are not supporting existing family members, they are beginning to form their own family units, taking on partners and becoming parents.

*We need to acknowledge the youth service sector as a formal sector that comprises the social workers, the court workers, the health clinicians, the police, and the municipal governments whose policy and regulatory decisions directly impact street kids. They all need to be included in the planning and execution of programmatic initiatives in this area.

*We do not need to set up new micro credit institutions that target street kids. We do need to influence those already engaged in the sector and influence them to embrace this population as viable credit recipients.

*We need to draw on the lessons learned and models that have been successful with women.

- We need to set realistic goals, standards and benchmarks. This is the poorest of the poor – in many cases there are no adult figures in their lives – this is not where most credit programs, even Grameen Bank, started. It is important we do not set ourselves or the youth up for failure – 97 % repayment rates may not be the target and a few years to sustainability may not be achievable. We need to think of this as a blended model of enterprise creation and capacity building assistance.

In conclusion, we believe we are at the start of some significant learning in this area. There are few projects in place but there are some creative, small pilots being initiated, drawing on the experiences of women and other poverty reducing initiatives. We believe there is great upside potential in economic programming for street kids and that to do nothing and rely on stereotypes puts this population, quickly approaching adulthood at further risk.