

# Changing Paradigms for Working with Street Youth: The Experience of Street Kids International<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

*The United Nations estimates 100 million street youth across the globe. They are products of poverty, war, urbanization, political instability, family breakdown, and HIV/AIDS, among others. Many are not homeless, but primary income earners for their extended families. Many participate in the sex and drug trade because of limited income generation alternatives. How can we support these youth and increase their opportunities while respecting them as independent actors in their own lives? Street Kids International suggests a critical paradigm shift as the basis for being responsive and effective and describes its approaches for working with street youth as participants and assets within their present communities.*

**Keywords:** street children; paradigms of childhood; children's resilience

## **Introduction**

As urbanization makes its way across the globe, many of the world's poorest youth make their way into the city streets, searching for money, friends, and sometimes a future. The greatest surge of urban migration in the upcoming years will occur in developing countries-

countries with the least financial resources, the least power, and the least support for street youth. The Population Reference Bureau (2003) estimates that the ten largest urban centers in 2015 will include Mumbai, Lagos, Dhaka, São Paulo, Karachi, Mexico City, Jakarta, and Calcutta, which not surprisingly are some of the cities with the largest and fastest growing street youth populations.

The United Nations states that 40 percent of young people in the least developed countries live on less than US\$1 per day (UNICEF 2000). Many of these youth are among the over 100 million youth worldwide working and sometimes living on the street (CIDA 2001). During the recent years of unprecedented urbanization, front-line workers have witnessed the numbers of street youth grow drastically.

While street youth are not confined to the poor countries, in developing nations, war, conflict, disease, abuse, and political instability make poverty worse, stressing many families to the point of disintegration. Some youth come with their families from rural life to city life, tempted by the urban, and often empty, promise of work and opportunity. Some youth, after being orphaned, abandoned, or lost, make their own way to the city in search of work, or at least money. Other youth without parents live with uncles and cousins on the fringes of town and are sent to the streets to find money to support the too many children in one household. The forces that lead growing numbers of youth to the street are numerous and complex.

For many street youth, family and community support disintegrate under the pressures of poverty. Many of those who migrate to the streets learn quickly to confront the street with self-sufficiency and self-determination, to make money by whatever means, and to negotiate the everyday risks and decisions of street life. But although they may get by, and even stay free of illicit work, they become "street kids" and the stigmatizing label, once set, is hard to remove.

Especially in developing countries, few social services exist for the youth who have lived or worked on the streets. These youth, mostly 10 to 20 years old, seem easier to forget than to support. However, today's youth will become the largest generation to enter adulthood (UNESCO 1999) and will greatly influence the global economy.

Supporting the street youth within this population enhances their potential to escape the cycle of poverty into which they were born. With youth being a large segment of total populations, ignoring any members of this generation, including youth involved in the street, risks future economic and societal development.

So, do we view street youth as a problem to solve or an asset to value? There are problems to solve: the causes that push and pull youth into the street; the lack of policies enabling street youth to improve their lives; and the shortage of accessible grass-roots services supporting street youths' needs. These problems must be solved. However, street youth can also be assets to their communities and society at large. For them to be full participants, we must open doors for them to reintegrate into their communities.

### **Street Kids International**

Street Kids International (SKI) is an international charity based in Canada that aims to give street youth the choices, skills, and opportunities to make better lives for themselves. SKI receives its funding from a combination of sources including government, foundations, corporations and individual donors. With this generous support, SKI has worked with front-line workers and street youth on every continent, with a current focus in Africa, South America, and Central Asia. SKI intentionally uses a small permanent staff team that collaborates with a broad network of partner organizations, regional advisors, consultants, and volunteers (see [www.streetkids.org](http://www.streetkids.org)).

Subsequent to being founded in 1988 by Peter Dalglish, SKI has worked to build the respectful and trusting relationships needed to engage the hardest-to-serve youth in transforming their lives. SKI learned by taking risks in this underdeveloped area of work, by making mistakes and documenting, analyzing, and sharing the lessons learned from these mistakes, by insisting on a non-proprietary approach to its materials and learning from how other organizations build on them, by connecting with the network of youth-serving agencies around the world and discovering that it will learn as much as it gives to these relationships. Mostly, its success has come from including street youth in the development of its methods and materials, depending on them for their feedback and suggestions, and respecting them as

independent actors in their own lives and co-collaborators in efforts to support them. It has come to understand that street youth have been neglected for many reasons, but two most of all.

First, urbanization has created new territory for development agencies. The development of best practices for urban-based international support has not kept pace with the unprecedented rates of urbanization over the past several years. Previously, development focused on rural environments and rural issues characterized by more homogeneous populations, communities rooted in tradition, and lifestyles based on land ownership and extended families. The fragmented nature of urban life, its high numbers of dislocated people, and its extensive informal economy require new perspectives and programmatic interventions.

Second, few agencies have been willing to accept the challenges of working with adolescents who have learned by necessity to be self-sufficient, quick-witted, suspicious, and at times rebellious. Despite describing their programs as youth-centered and youth-driven, many agencies still work by the traditional paradigm of adult control of youth- a paradigm in which adults assume responsibility for telling youth what is important, how to behave, and what success means.

### **Shifting Paradigms**

One of SKI's partners, CECAFEC (The Ecuadorian Centre for the Training and Formation of Street Educators) in Quito, Ecuador, has become a leader in speaking out on the necessary shift to a new adult-youth paradigm. CECAFEC calls the the old paradigm the "Paradigm of Absence" in which children and youth are "absent" without a voice and without recognition of their experience.

[W]e believe that when adults impose upon children what they have to do, it's because we see our role as directing children. When we as adults disqualify the opinion of a child or adolescent, or when we silence them, it's because we see ourselves as 'more' than them.... When as adults we consider ourselves obliged to provide for a child all the knowledge that we believe they need, without considering what they already know and their own opinion, it is because we view the child as empty. The child is seen as void of any knowledge that we

haven't imparted, void of opinions...of desires and hopes, void of tastes and preferences, even void of feeling.... Because we see the child as incapable and empty, we think he is controllable (CECAFEC 1997, 7).

A new paradigm which we could call the "Paradigm of the Child as Person," forces adults to confront their judgment of youths' ideas as a judgment stemming from the fear of something different from what is known.

We affirm that children and youth are equipped with expressions, feelings, understandings, imagination, concerns, desires and hopes. We affirm that children are also equipped with disagreements, questions, criteria, dreams and complaints, utopias, initiatives, relationships, necessities....The issue is that we adults have a concept of what is and isn't knowledge and possibly we value certain knowledge more than other knowledge– i.e., more rigorous, academic, scientific knowledge....When what others offer us is very different and even challenges us, we have a tendency to value it less or even to degrade it, to diminish its importance (CECAFEC 1977, 15).

The old paradigm still guides many decisions and actions. Many organizations still think of youth in terms of the future rather than the present, as future leaders of our ideal society rather than theirs, as having valuable ideas but ideas limited by young age and immaturity. In this way, societies create institutions inaccessible to youth. If adults create a youth-serving organization based on the old paradigm, they send youth the message that they have little to offer and should come to their organization only to receive and learn. These adults often act as if they know everything youth need without having to ask them. Through their behavior, they tell youth that they cannot help themselves but must depend on adults for help, that youth should respect these adults even though these adults don't respect them. When youth don't come to their programs, these adults and their society often blame the youth. They say the population is too hard to reach, too hard to work with, a waste of money. But is it really youth who are difficult to reach or is it these organizations that are difficult for youth to access? Do youth find that the services available are in their best interest, do they believe they will be listened to and not

judged, do they think their opinions and experiences will count for something?

SKI works with a network of youth-serving agencies around the world to increase the number of services accessible to youth, to facilitate a shift to the Paradigm of Child as Person, and to foster further debate and dialogue for advancing this paradigm.

### **Shifting Program Strategies**

Shifting paradigms demands a shift in programmatic strategies. If we see street youth as having something to offer rather than as empty vessels needing to be filled and helped, we must intentionally build programs that translate this belief system into action. First, we need holistic programming. We must respect street youth as whole beings with complex and interconnected life experiences. If we engage with them on one aspect of life (such as income), we cannot avoid considering how this aspect relates to other areas of their life (such as health). Second, we need to build programs founded on what youth bring to the relationship: their stories and all the dreams and choices embedded within them. Third, we need to adopt a marketing mindset so as to re-brand street youth and the nature of youth work in our communications with the public and our relationships with adult, front-line workers. These three programmatic approaches have become the basis for all of SKI's work.

### **Holistic Programming**

SKI operates according to three overlapping and inextricable linked foci: Street Health, Street Work, and Street Rights.

Its initial work began with Street Health, creating methods and tools for communicating with street youth about sexual health, HIV/AIDS, work in the sex trade, and drug use. Street youth do not choose to use drugs or engage in risky sexual practices in an environment of obvious answers or simple choices. They are constantly balancing the satisfaction of immediate needs and benefits of short-term coping strategies against the potential risks and future consequences of their actions and decisions.

Typically, front-line workers in developing countries only have access to materials about the negative effects of drug use, AIDS, and other sexually transmitted infections. They often seek additional materials to help street youth develop the skills for navigating through the real life obstacles and decisions these health issues present.

SKI's Street Health programs promote a shift away from the worker as "expert advisor" and youth as "dependent client" to a relationship that respects young peoples' ability to articulate their own reality and define their own goals and objectives. At the same time, the programs introduce immediately useful harm-reduction and risk-management life skills. Training workshops equip front-line workers with the techniques for working with youth "where they are" and then supporting them in moving towards lives of risk prevention and health promotion.

Though front-line workers and street youth alike immediately embraced Street Health programs, it became clear that the needs of street youth for money continued to supersede their desire to live healthy and safe lives. Without supporting their need to earn a livelihood, lifestyle changes that would contribute to their health were not possible.

Some street youth use the sex trade, drug trade, theft, and begging to obtain money. Many sell goods on street corners, at bus stops, and outside downtown shops. They make enough to survive, sometimes, but usually their income does not grow nor enable them to improve their quality of life.

We had to ask ourselves: How can we support these youth to develop safer and more profitable ways of earning money? SKI had confronted this question through the development and implementation of several micro-credit and business training programs for street youth. With a clearer vision of the inextricable link between health and income, SKI used the lessons learned from regional work programs to develop the Street Business Toolkit: a global business training program for front-line workers to use with the street youth.

In all of SKI's micro-credit and business training experiences, youth repeatedly demonstrated that they could adapt their street expertise and rapidly learn new business skills and use them for immediate and positive gains in their lives and livelihoods.

We now know that street children who are able to contribute to the household income can find an extended family member or household willing to take them in. A street youth with savings or the potential for disposable income will make choices about going to school full or part time. SKI is at a stage with street youth that mirrors the skepticism and debate 15 years ago about women as entrepreneurs with access to credit. The same arguments prevail: "They have no land and no assets. They are not reliable, they are uneducated, they lack legal identity, and their families will take the money." Today, no one would question women as entrepreneurs, though many continue to question the business capabilities of street youth. However, with business training, street youth with micro-enterprises may become members of their communities although these had previously seen them as shiftless and threatening.

With the Street Business Toolkit launched, SKI's Street Health and Street Work programs are active and continue to grow in many world regions with input and contributions from its global partnership network. However, without local and international policy to support street youth, SKI's impact is limited. Its partners' work suffers under the continued neglect of street youth's basic rights. Local culture and government prejudices rarely allow street youth to break free of stigma and prove themselves as valuable members of society. Municipal government policies and local culture often create barriers to street youths' access to basic social and health services.

It became clear that SKI's initiatives in Street Health and Street Work required equal attention to Street Rights. While it acknowledges the significance and importance of human rights treaties and legislation, in its street-based practice, the denial of the positive rights of street youth requires more attention— their right to work, their right to access available health care without adult consent, their right to be free from criminal sanctions due to lack of a birth registration or other civil identity often by reason of being parentless from a young age.

Therefore, the Street Rights programming interventions on behalf of street youth begins by working with police, local governments, and in particular municipal governments, health clinicians, and youth court workers, whose attitudes, biases, and perceptions can impact on the day-to-day lives and rights of youth who live and or work on the streets of our cities.

“Street Choices” captures this holistic programmatic approach. This descriptive name is intentional and reflects the most important part of what SKI does, and its approach. SKI promotes interactions with street youth based on opening dialogue with them around the choices they are making and how to enlarge the range of safer choices they might otherwise make.

### **The Use of Stories**

To every relationship, street youth bring their stories of personal experiences, ideas, feelings, and dreams. If we do not base our relationships with youth on hearing these stories and learning from them, then we are still working according to the old paradigm. If we do want to hear these stories, we must first create a trusting environment where sharing can take place and where street youth do not fear judgment or reprimand for the lives they have lived.

Through 15 years of meeting the world's street youth, SKI has learned that one of the most effective ways to create a trusting environment is through its own storytelling. Specifically, it shares fictional stories and vignettes, based on its work experience, that have street youth as their main characters.

It uses these stories to create a space where lived stories can be shared safely. It has found that street youth are comfortable discussing their thoughts and experiences in reference to a “fictional” story's characters and plot that mirrors their own thoughts and experiences, without having to disclose personal information until they feel ready.

### **Karate Kids and Goldtooth: Animations for Street Health**

For example, Street Health programs use two animated films produced by SKI in the late 80s and early 90s: Karate Kids, which addresses

HIV/AIDS and the sex trade, and Goldtooth, which addresses substance abuse. Each video portrays the lives of street youth- their humor, their friendships, their abuse, and their exploitation. At first criticized for their explicit content, these videos soon became internationally recognized for their capacity to facilitate dialogues with street youth. Karate Kids, in particular, received the Peter F. Drucker Award for Non-Profit Innovation in 1993.

The videos were not designed to define the signs and symptoms of sexually transmitted diseases or drug addiction. Instead, the videos aim to act as a medium that adults and street youth can share in common and discuss openly. Youth workers play the videos with groups of street youth and, on a second viewing, stop the video at various points to hear the group's thoughts on the characters and plot. This is not a comprehension quiz, nor an interrogation; it is a time for sharing and non-judgmental listening and discussion. Through these dialogues street youth have shared their views on why the sex trade sometimes appeals to them, how drugs help them get through the night, who sells them their drugs, and what they fear most and want most. Through these dialogues street youth have the opportunity, sometimes their first, to openly contemplate the daily risks and decisions they take and to discuss safer lifestyle alternatives and choices with adults who listen to their perspectives and respect their sense of personal autonomy. In this way, SKI's Street Health programs have used stories as a means for communication.

### **Speed's Choice: Animation for Street Work**

In SKI's Street Work programs, stories also play a role as tools for learning new skills. In developing the Street Business Toolkit, SKI sought to identify the most effective way to advance street youths' business knowledge and understanding, despite their low literacy and numerical skills. Street youth always came to business training with their own experience regarding pricing, customer retention, and the like. SKI needed to find a way for them to realize how much they already knew and then to build on that knowledge. It was soon clear that business concepts were most accessible to street-involved youth when introduced through a story instead of through definitions and calculations. Much like the oral storytelling tradition, lessons stayed in their memory and prompted new ideas and questions when first introduced through anecdotes about other street youth.

In this way Speed's Choice was born: an animated video about five street youth encountering the challenges and adventures of running their own small businesses. The experiences of each character have been further developed into case studies used within an extensive curriculum of interactive activities and worksheets to guide street youth in developing a basic business plan. Each new business concept relates to specific characters and their stories and each story enables street youth to relate the new business concepts to their own experiences.

By creating programs in which street youth and adults can speak candidly with one another, we begin to undermine the entrenched power dynamic that often hinders the progress of youth work. Over years of experience, in diverse countries and cultures, stories have repeatedly proven their capacity to stimulate communication, facilitate new learning, and allow adults to learn from street youths' lived reality. Their success inspires us to learn further ways of leveraging our work using stories.

#### Re-Branding Street Youth and the Nature of Youth Work

If we truly work within/according to a new paradigm for adult-youth relationships, it should not only inform how to work with youth and to create the tools for doing so, it should also inform our communication with the public and our relationships with front-line workers.

SKI takes responsibility for witnessing and informing the public about the reality lived by street youth. As long as street youth do not have the public voice that they should by right, we have the responsibility to capture their true experiences as they wish to have them known by a greater public.

Most of us have winced at the tired stories about street youth, written to provoke pity from donors and sympathy from media. These stories rarely present a complete picture of these youth's lives. They depict only the abused and abandoned street youth instead of those who choose to run away, determined to make better lives for themselves. They prefer to depict street youth shoeless and begging in the street instead of street youth who invest a small part of their profit in second

hand clothes to appear more professional to their customers. They prefer to depict street youth who combine their daily earnings to buy drugs instead of the street youth who befriend each other to replace the family support they have sometimes lacked for many years.

While it is easier to communicate a one-dimensional view of youth's lives, it is unhelpful to underestimate the public's ability to appreciate more complex realities. By portraying street youth as helpless victims and poster children instead of as valuable members of society, we continue to stigmatize them. Any story written purely to be provocative reinforces the clichés and stereotypes that hinder youth work and the lives of these youth. Taking the time to communicate accurate representations of street youths' lives builds the authenticity and effectiveness of work with street children.

How does SKI apply the new adult-youth paradigm to its work with front-line workers? We like to use the metaphor of a toolbox: in the new adult-youth paradigm, adults recognize that youth come with previous experiences, street skills, goals, and ideas- metaphorically, their own box of tools. SKI offers them additional tools for taking control of their lives, such as a training program about ways to improve their small businesses. They will add these to their toolbox and use whichever tools a given circumstance demands.

SKI approaches its engagement with front-line workers much the same way. Each front-line worker comes with a box of tools- experience, materials, ideas- that they have used in their previous work with street youth. Street Kids International sees itself as a tool-maker, creating tools, be they materials or techniques, which front-line workers can use in their work. SKI could never supply front-line workers with a complete toolbox, just as it could never supply youth with all the knowledge and skills they need. It enters into relationships with front-line workers expecting a mutual exchange of ideas and resources, a mutual exchange of tools, and at best, the collaborative formation of new ones. After contributing to each other's toolboxes, we look forward to meeting again, many months later, when we will share the new and different ways we have used each other's tools. The process continues endlessly as best practices are developed, improved, and shared worldwide over time. Street Kids International collects all

documented best practices in their Toronto office for sharing upon request.

### **Case Studies**

Despite a growing understanding of how best to support this population of youth, the phenomenon of over 100 million street youth worldwide remains complex and almost impossible to grasp. Understanding the context for what “makes” a street youth is not simple. The complex factors that cause youth to take to the streets include war, conflict, abuse, poverty, family breakdown, rebellion, and insufficient income. The phenomenon of street youth crosses borders and boundaries, and is replete with myths, stigmas, and stereotypes.

Most importantly, there is no one way to adequately capture a population that spans a wide spectrum that includes street-living youth, street-involved youth, and street-based working children. Some youth maintain a regular family connection, some attempt to maintain a degree of family connection, albeit irregular, and others have no family connection at all. Some youth are not registered in school; others, who are registered, can often attend only periodically because of household responsibilities or the need to earn money. Even definitions by age do not adequately capture this population- SKI has experience with street youth from eight years to about 24 years of age.

The following two case studies capture the diversity of situations influencing the phenomenon of street youth.

#### **Case Study #1: The Former Soviet Union**

One part of the world beginning to receive more international attention is the cluster of Newly Independent States (NIS) that stretch along the southern border of the Former Soviet Union (FSU). These countries share the common characteristics of having gained their independence in the early 1990s, of having suffered profound economic and social upheaval during the transition from Soviet rule to full self-government, and of having more than 50 percent of their population under the age of 24. These countries are historically Islamic and have seen both a resurgence in religious practice and a rise in extremism.

The population under the age of 24 has been particularly hard hit by the social upheaval and economic dislocation brought on by the collapse of communism in the early 1990s. In 1999, UNICEF published a groundbreaking study of “the impact of ten years of transition” upon children and youth in the 27 Newly Independent States of the FSU. This study conducted by UNICEF’s Innocenti Centre tracked the impact of economic and political transition on the physical health, educational achievement, mental health, family life, and employment opportunities of young people throughout the region. Findings across the FSU were disturbing, but nowhere more so than within the Central Eurasian countries of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Azerbaijan.

In these three countries, a generation of young people find themselves significantly less healthy, less educated, and less likely to be employed than their parents. In Tajikistan, for instance, where 61 percent of 15-18 year olds were enrolled in school in 1989, by 1998 enrollment had dropped to 24 percent (UNICEF 1999). Young people all too often find themselves left off the agenda, and socially and politically alienated. Not surprisingly in light of this profound social dislocation, the UNICEF study also documented a dramatic rise in depression, suicide, violent juvenile crime, and street involvement— along with significant increases in the interrelated issues of drug use and HIV/AIDS.

Beyond the economic upheaval caused by the shift from centrally planned to market economies, the newly independent countries of Central Asia and the South Caucasus have also faced episodes of armed conflict over the past decade that have had a profound impact on the lives of the region’s children and youth. For example, civil war in Tajikistan from 1992-93 displaced 600,000 civilians, orphaned 65,000 children, and caused a significant movement of ethnic Kyrgyz citizens into neighboring Kyrgyzstan, and ethnic Uzbeks citizens into Uzbekistan (UNICEF 1999).

Out of school, out of work, dislocated and disconnected youth in the region are just the kind of population that extremist groups turn to when recruiting new members. As one young Tajik observed to a SKI staff member during a 1999 assessment mission:

You have heard about 'war affected children'– the orphans, the homeless, the refugees. Well, my friends and I are 'peace-affected youth'- when the civil war ended and they did not need us to fight, they forgot about us– no schools, no jobs, nothing. They will only think about us again when they want to fight the Uzbeks or the Kyrgyz or someone else we must hate...

There is a broad consensus within the youth-serving sectors in many of the transitional countries that they are witnessing a disturbing convergence of two phenomena. First the collapse of long-standing centralized political and economic structures leaves youth aged 12-18 facing acute social upheaval during a life stage when personal support, social stability, and guidance from family and community are crucial.

Second, while witnessing such social alienation and related risk behaviors among these youth, the institutions that serve them (both government and non-government) are themselves experiencing significant instability and uncertainty.

Although the focus of most policy and advocacy initiatives is at the level of national governments, SKI and its lead local partners in Central Asia and the South Caucasus have come to realize that when it comes to addressing the needs of marginalized youth, perhaps the most important public policy makers reside at the municipal level of government. For while broad macro policy is debated and conceived of at the level of national governments, the really pertinent meso-level reform initiatives most often occur where policy rubs shoulders with practice in municipal level school boards, police departments, public health programs and vocational initiatives. SKI and its lead partners have begun advocacy work at the municipal level on the themes of drug use, sexual health, and economic empowerment, and are putting in place the structure for leading broader debate about the holistic needs of marginalized youth with these same stakeholders. This work is a new and necessary branch of its Street Rights programs.

### **Case Study #2: Africa**

Across Africa one can find some of the highest levels of HIV/AIDS in the world. In these countries, the percentage of youth forced to assume roles as surrogate parents and primary income earners for

their families is rapidly growing. UNAIDS states that by the year 2010, an estimated 106 million children under the age of 15 are projected to have lost one or both parents, with 25 million of this group orphaned due to AIDS. Today, approximately 13 million children under 15 have lost one or both parents to AIDS. Most of these children live in Sub-Saharan Africa. This number will continue to rise for the next two decades due to the rhythm and pacing of the disease (UNAIDS 2002).

When SKI first arrived in Lusaka, Zambia in 1996, one of its partners described street youth who spent their nights stripping passersby and selling the clothes at the second-hand market. They did not spend their earnings on novelties. They took no pleasure in hurting the passersby. The money they made bought food and basic needs for them and sometimes siblings and families. In response, SKI joined efforts with the Zambia Red Cross Society and the YWCA Council of Zambia to develop the Youth Skills Enterprise Initiative (YSEI) program: a program that later informed the design of the Street Business Toolkit.

The YSEI program targeted boys and girls aged 14 to 22 years who had minimal education and sub-standard living conditions. Information about the program was introduced within the communities and interested participants were interviewed in order for selection to confirm their commitment and eligibility. Participants underwent extensive training in business and life skills during which they developed a basic business plan for a small business such as tailoring or selling dried food goods. After successfully completing the training, participants were given a loan in the form of the assets needed to start their business, such as a table and baskets for their new vegetable stand or a sewing machine for their new tailoring business. During a three-month repayment period, program officers provided business guidance, personal support, and education on health and social issues as participants encountered the challenges and benefits of their new responsibilities. After repayment of their first loan, participants were eligible for second and third loans to improve and expand their businesses.

In many cases, the participants in the YSEI program were the primary income earners for their families. They were determined and creative,

and they found ways to bring home money and food even if it meant begging, stealing, or sex work.

During three weeks of training, the participants gained basic business and life skills that impacted not only the success of their businesses but their capacity to make healthy and safe decisions in other areas of their lives, such as no longer participating in the sex trade and using their money to buy healthy food and basic hygiene products. Through training, participants also built a support network of youth workers and peers. They learned to take on new challenges with confidence, knowing they had friends and mentors to turn to if needed.

Above all, participants learned to set and strive for personal goals. Their participation in high-risk activities decreased as they dedicated more time to improving their businesses. Some used their profits to save for future education, some expanded their business, and others began investing more in their personal health. The youth workers had previously shared information about HIV/AIDS, nutrition, and hygiene with these youth and did so during the YSEI program as well, but only now that the youth had safely earned a profit could they act on this knowledge and better take care of themselves.

One participant explained how, before she joined the program, she couldn't afford basic things, and how she would rinse her baby's nappies out in water and use soap only once a week. She proudly explained that with the profit from her business she could now buy toiletries and clothes.

By 1998 the YSEI program was independently run by the Zambia Red Cross and the YWCA, and it still is today. Since 2001, SKI has renewed its work in Zambia and is building new partnerships in South Africa, in the west around Burkina Faso, and in the east starting in Tanzania. SKI is focusing initially on the Street Health program that will supplement existing programming for front-line workers and street kids to deal with HIV/AIDS and substance abuse. The Street Work program with the Street Business Toolkit will then be brought on stream to increase the income earning opportunities for street kids within the informal sector.

SKI will continue its work in Africa by building regional expertise and capacity that can disseminate the Street Health and Street Work programs to street kids quickly and skillfully.

## **Conclusion**

SKI has been consistent, and for many years unique, in its focus on working with street youth. It challenges the street kid stereotypes based on first-hand experience and promotes an alternative understanding of street youths' problems and prospects. First, it argues that street youths are persons with the same inherent dignity and right to self-determination as others, and deserve to be respected as such. Second, SKI has learned that the best way to help street youth is to approach them as people with their own needs and aspirations and enable them to consider how they might best address their own challenges. Third, street youth face economic as well as personal challenges and they can successfully address these challenges through their own initiatives- including entrepreneurship- and should be deliberately assisted in doing so.

Working with street youth inevitably includes risk and uncertainty, which does not appeal to most donors. Sophisticated strategies for working with street youth require a high tolerance for ambiguity for processes that are neither tidy nor time-bound. They do not produce the measurable and compelling outcomes typical of more controlled programs, such as food aid and immunization.

However, with continued dialogue these youth will gain greater respect and support. In the meantime, we must put street youth on the policy agenda so that the critical next steps can unfold: developing micro-credit institutions that embrace marginalized youth as viable credit recipients, creating a shift to youth-centered global youth work strategies, building institutional capacity, such as the social and health services, in civil society, and reforming policy at the municipal government level, including support for street youth's security and rights .

Since its founding in 1988, SKI's work has reached over half a million street youths around the world through training and sharing of best practices with front-line workers and youth-serving organizations. Yet,

its non-proprietary methods and tools, combined with its commitment to sectoral strengthening, make it difficult to count its true impact. Therefore, its goal is first and foremost to demonstrate that change is necessary and possible. SKI aims to demonstrate street youth's capacity to make safe and healthy decisions, to grow successful businesses, and to contribute to their communities when given basic support and respect. Through demonstration and transformative dialogues it is possible to increase respect for street youth's humanity and human rights and to grow the global investment in programs and initiatives for integrating these marginalized youth into mainstream society.

### **Endnotes**

1. The author would like to give special thanks for the contributions to this paper from the Street Kids International team.

**Stephanie Sauvé** has a diverse background in working with marginalized youth within the health, education, and international development sector. She has worked for Street Kids International in a variety of capacities over the past five years, including field work with partners in Zambia, India, and the Philippines; coordinating the writing and production of program materials; and managing Street Kids International's public education strategy. Stephanie holds a degree in Occupational Therapy and is currently pursuing her Masters of Arts in Education at the University of Toronto, Canada.

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