CHAPTER 32

Negotiating meaningful dialogue

Scaffolding safe spaces for street-connected young people's participation

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INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we examine street-connected young people's[1] participation in policy and advocacy spaces, drawing on the histories of practice and institutional knowledge of StreetInvest, Glad's House, and Child In Need Institute (CINI) and reflecting on our own professional experiences as researchers, practitioners, and within policy. We advocate for young person-led approaches to meaningful participation that recognise street-connected young people's agency, are aligned with General Comment No. 21 (GC21) to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) on Children in Street Situations (UNCRC, 1989), and are underpinned by the three key components discussed in the following sections.

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EXPLORING YOUNG PERSON-CENTRED AND LED PRACTICE

Understanding and acceptance of street-connected young people's lives and what they want to advocate for is crucial to meaningfully support their participation in civic spaces. Such understanding means recognising the ways different conceptualisations of agency take account of how young people choose to act in the context of their own realities. Glad's House, CINI, and StreetInvest developed ways of working that respect the choices and rights of young people to exercise agency. Their processes closely resemble concepts of 'ambiguous' or 'localised' agency, standing in stark contrast to normative conceptualisations of childhood and approaches that seek to correct street-connected young people's agency, rescue them from exercising agency, or punish and exclude them for exercising agency (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012; Edmonds 2019; Kaneva and Corcoran, 2021).

The three organisations intentionally place young people at the centre and in the lead of programme efforts – ensuring that their rights and agency are respected, and that their needs and realities are addressed, responded to, and taken into account. Young people's meaningful participation needs appropriate scaffolding to support their access to civic spaces, if they choose to participate (Johnson and West, 2018). This means shaking up existing power relations, supporting street-connected young people to recognise themselves as experts, and giving them more control over their participation in decision-making processes. Lasting change requires advocating for and delivering context-specific, young person-led approaches to practice, research, decision-making, and policy development (e.g. CINI, 2021; Corcoran et al., 2020a; CSC, 2020; Ferguson, 2020; Growing Up on the Streets, 2014–2018).

Building trusted relationships between street-connected young people and the practitioners or street workers conducting street-based outreach work takes months if not years. These young people have been repeatedly let down by the adults meant to protect them and may have negative perceptions of adult intervention in their lives. As one young person in Mombasa said during consultations for drafting GC21 (Glad's House, 2016):

> [Police] don't see street-connected children as human beings. Whenever they do their round-ups, they usually boast that they are cleaning the city by removing the rubbish out of town. They should respect us. We are also human beings.

To support the agency exercised by street-connected young people, we must understand the realities of street life, where survival requires and develops

unique strengths and skills, such as understanding and navigating complex social and interpersonal systems to meet their basic needs. Excluded from much of public life, these young people develop communities, belonging, and citizenship on the street and among their peers (van Blerk et al., 2020). Supporting them to participate in advocacy and decision-making processes must not undermine the skills and knowledge they bring from the street. Street workers are well placed to support these young people in decision-making processes, to build their capacity as advocates and spokespeople, and to take on diverse research and advocacy roles to prevent, address, and report violence (e.g. United Nations SRSG/VAC, 2021).

Adult street workers who are trained and trusted bring acceptance and open-mindedness as facilitators of young people's participation, recognising their strengths and capabilities, and investing time, care, and energy into supporting them to make decisions that promote their overall development. We cannot assume that young people who are confident on the street will feel confident standing before a government committee – especially when street-based confidence can become a persona adopted for survival purposes (Beazley, 2003). Street workers help young people to develop positive communication skills so that they can be heard and understood by those in authority, without dismissing or denouncing language and communication styles developed within their world on the street.

Agency exercised by street-connected young people is often considered in contravention to normative understandings of childhood, exposing them to abuse and violence by community members, police, or other adults (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012). Street workers support these young people to exercise agency, brokering opportunities to speak freely with these adults. Young people need time, attention, and a safe, positive participation experience (CSC, 2018). Supporting them to understand their rights, responsibilities, and roles helps them to recognise the value they bring and how their experiences can contribute to decision-making and other civic engagement (CINI, 2021).

StreetInvest's founding vision was to enable every street-connected young person to access trustworthy adults who could support their growth and development and reduce the daily stigma and discrimination they face. The organisation's unique 'Street Work' model of youth work draws on the empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard aspects of person-centred therapy to establish and maintain trusted relationships with young people who are understandably distrustful of adult intervention (Rogers, 1957). The young people's views, rights, and protection are prioritised, without requiring them to leave the street to qualify for support. The model accepts their

realities, aiming to understand their perspectives on the challenges they face, their networks and communities, and their hopes and aspirations.

StreetInvest focused initially on training street workers and others in contact with young people.

> The course has taught me about involving the child in decision-making and looking for solutions as opposed to me dictating the solutions.
>
> (Street work training participant, Mombasa, 2015)

The young person-centred methodology was expanded to develop participatory research and advocacy rooted in the principles, values, and attitudes of street work. A 'Knowledge Exchange' approach to research was developed as part of Growing Up on the Streets (2016). This longitudinal participatory study on street-connected young people's lives in three African cities used a capability approach to understand which aspects of life they value the most (Shand, 2014). The approach developed these young people as researchers and spokespeople for their peers, prioritising the notion that practitioners must meet young people where they are in terms of their realities, capabilities, and aspirations and journeying with them from this point (van Blerk et al., 2016). In 2022, StreetInvest formally merged with Consortium for Street Children (CSC), integrating its expertise and approach within CSC's global network and advocacy platform.

In Mombasa, Glad's House Kenya focuses on older street-connected young people whom other organisations often deem too challenging to work with. It delivers a holistic programme that includes the street work, education, advocacy, and sustainability. Unlike many existing approaches, Glad's House does not focus on rehabilitation, which often denies young people's agency because timelines and outcomes are designed and implemented by adults managing caseloads. Instead, they journey with street-connected young people from where they are on the street. Many statutory and voluntary organisations initially believed that this street-based approach would encourage these young people to remain there. However, providing unconditional support for young people who are excluded from other services due to their lifestyles, behaviours, or unwillingness to engage in formal spaces has enabled organisations to develop a deeper understanding of street life.

In 2015, StreetInvest and Glad's House discovered an alignment in values and attitudes. Glad's House had not yet identified language to encapsulate how they worked with street-connected young people, and StreetInvest's model offered a coherent and compelling framing for their established young person-centred approach. StreetInvest training introduced a shared lexicon to describe what it is to work with a young person on the street who has faced rights violations, challenges to their survival, and trauma. Over subsequent

years, the two organisations, together with CINI and other StreetInvest partners, have collaborated to further codify the Street Work approach, refine and deliver training, and adapt the Growing up on the Streets Knowledge Exchange tools to local contexts. Connecting this street-up approach to the provisions of the UNCRC and guidance offered in GC21 has put young people's understanding of their rights at the heart of this process – giving them space and opportunity, and the confidence to demand them. Enabling such agency means listening to and centring what young people say, even if it is not what others want to hear.

ENABLING MEANINGFUL ACCESS TO CIVIC SPACES

Supporting street-connected young people's engagement in civic spaces means providing opportunities for them to advocate for policy changes in ways that are meaningful for them. These opportunities must enable them to exercise their agency in spaces that are appropriate and safe for them to do so (Ferguson, 2020). Consultation with and for young people can be tokenistic when they are invited to express an opinion but not provided with information to shape these opinions in advance (Ochieng et al., 2022). It is important to hear what young people have to say and action it, rather than wheel them in and out of advocacy activities as a tick-box exercise in inclusion and participation. Effective and meaningful participation requires opportunities for two-way feedback and equal discussion, continually bringing young people into the conversation.

It is important to make commitments to young people, to carefully manage their expectations and keep them safe (Ng et al., 2022), especially when enabling dialogue between young people and the adults responsible for the policy and practice decisions that affect their lives (Ferguson, 2020). In Chapter 6 of this book, Street Champions engaged by CINI as peer advocates in Kolkata highlight different scenarios in which they were neglected by those in authority (duty-bearers such as police and local child development officers) who ignored their requests for help due to their connections with the street. Street Champions later conducted research on their vulnerabilities and the services accessible to them and shared the findings with local and international stakeholders, using this research to demand inclusion in policies and programmes. With training and support, therefore, Street Champions were able to make themselves heard and initiate change in their communities. One champion was later supported to take part in the 46th Regular Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2021, where she made the following call to action.

> I am urging world leaders to come up with a solution so that we can access food, healthcare and shelter – things that we need to survive, from

> anywhere in my country, irrespective of whether I am a resident of a pavement or a building.

When it is implemented and supported well, street-connected young people's participation and civic engagement can change both young people's perceptions of themselves, and others' perceptions of them. If processes of enabling participation are not conducted effectively, and without an advocacy outcome next step, they can be harmful, as the focus is on collecting voices rather than achieving change (Johnson and West, 2018). To go 'beyond voice' (ibid.), safe spaces for participation are necessary and must be responsibly scaffolded, especially given the unique power dynamics when enabling dialogue between street-connected young people and adults in authority (Ferguson, 2020). The work of StreetInvest, Glad's House, and CINI builds on the UNCRC, recognising that the process of realising children's rights is as important as the outcomes. If young people participate under an expectation or assumption of an outcome, then there must be one. This does not mean that advocacy outcomes are always 100% positive or even achieved. Rather, young people's expectations should be carefully managed so that they know success is not guaranteed, and follow-up processes should enable feedback, closure, and acknowledgement. For example, the Street Child World Cup is a unique advocacy platform that should be part of processes for engagement and change, not an outcome in and of itself (Corcoran et al., 2020b; Ng et al., 2022).

Approaches to developing advocacy frameworks for young people require support that applies a gender lens to adequately scaffold the personal, social, and political implications of each individual street-connected young person's participation. The implications of young people occupying public space are heavily gendered because of community and duty-bearer perceptions. Glad's House reports that at the onset of puberty, girls in Mombasa are no longer able to beg on the street as they 'age out' of the charity that is usually directed towards smaller children and start to be seen as a threat or become associated with sex work (Corcoran et al., 2020a). Similarly, in Kolkata, girls surveyed on the street spoke out about abuse by male community members who come to the street at night:

> One night as I was asleep on the pavement, two men in a car came and opened up the buttons of my shirt. I woke up feeling someone touching me, and they left in a hurry before I could call others.

As boys who spend time on the street become teenagers, perceptions of them start to change. They are viewed by authorities, first and foremost, as criminals, especially if they are not seen to be in employment (Aptekar and Stoecklin, 2014). Moreover, teenage street-connected boys in conflict with

the law are – by virtue of their gender, street-connectedness, lifestyle, and appearance – treated as adults in the criminal justice system, including being detained with adults and in adult prisons. This issue became a key focus of dialogues between street-connected young people and police, supported by Glad's House. It shows how these young people must be supported to safely navigate gendered perceptions and taboos so that they feel able to speak out and are protected from reprisals and other negative consequences of their participation in advocacy processes.

Those developing advocacy initiatives must recognise the multidimensional nature of street-connectedness and highlight exceptional cases with caution. If not explicitly linked back to the organisation's work to support them, advocacy efforts can directly undermine recognition of the complex realities and trauma that young people experience on the street (Ng et al., 2022; Weatherill et al., 2023). For example, the worth of a street-connected young person should not be measured by an ability to become a professional skateboarder, even if these are the stories that gain media or government attention. We should not make young people feel somehow less valued because they are not able to achieve something deemed by others to be 'remarkable'. What they have done is to stay alive and this – in the face of incredible difficulty – is an achievement of massive proportion.

At the same time, for many young people, such extraordinary survival is part of a daily routine involving 'everyday agency' that is ordinary, at least from their own perspective (Payne, 2012). However, when individual success is positioned as exceptional in relation to street-connectedness, and individual abilities and rights to exercise agency are ignored, stereotypes are reinforced through personalised advocacy narratives intended to elicit empathy and sympathy, rather than getting to the crux of the issue. Rather, advocacy processes should allow young people to operate, and define success, within their individualised, context-specific experiences of street-connectedness.

When advocacy processes enable real dialogue between street-connected young people and the decision-makers affecting their lives, those in authority can understand them as actors with valid voices, not victims or criminals in need of rescue or removal. Glad's House bridges the divide between such young people and those with power and influence over them by organising events that bring them together and support wider policy and practice change. For example, street-connected young people sitting down to lunch with local government politicians and facilitated discussions between street-connected young people and Mombasa police and justice system stakeholders aimed at changing attitudes towards street-connectedness have helped to reduce the number of round-ups that remove young people from the street, as well as preventing arrests for vagrancy. However, these advocacy

processes have involved long-term collaboration and relationship building over years, not one-off workshops, to create lasting change in the attitudes of those making key decisions and delivering community services (Corcoran et al., 2021). At the same time, street-connected young people need to know that participating is not mandatory; and that choosing not to be part of initiatives developed by organisations supporting them will have no impact on them continuing to receive support.

EXPLORING THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING THE LOCAL CONTEXT

There is a danger of doing harm with good intentions when interventions are developed without clear understanding of local contexts. Without such understanding, interventions have little locally relevant and meaningful impact and can cause actual harm to the target populations, creating worse outcomes than if there had been no intervention (Edmonds, 2019; Rudnick et al., 2019). This is especially so for approaches that are gender specific: young women's voices are always harder to hear and harder to share; their stories are often more traumatic; and their trauma, therefore, often more complex. Consequently, it is often more challenging to involve street-connected young women, both meaningfully and safely, in spaces for civic engagement.

Central to considerations about local context is the question of whose version of success we consider when it comes to civic engagement, and which outcomes are being evaluated. Often the version of success under consideration for street-connected young people's engagement in civic spaces or their civic participation is not that of the young people themselves. Through a local context lens, it is possible to show how policy change relevant to young people affects them and that their versions of success – rather than those held by organisations, donors, policymakers, or others – are ultimately the most important.

CINI, StreetInvest and Glad's House align their versions of success with those of the street-connected young people they work with. Journeying with them towards outcomes that make sense and make a difference to them, these organisations have been able to promote successful change from the perspective of the street-connected young people themselves, as shown in Chapter 6. Street workers' support for young people to achieve their own advocacy aims is underpinned by a deep understanding of the physical, social, spiritual, emotional, and cultural dimensions of the street context in which they exist and survive, and an acceptance of young people's own priorities for change. A seemingly 'small' success can transform the day-to-day lives of young people who face multiple risks of violence and rights violations. For example, for a

group of female Street Champions in Kolkata, the reopening of public toilets was identified as their number one priority during Covid-19 lockdowns. Without them, they risked sexual abuse while toileting in public and risked infection (or worse) from avoiding toileting altogether and neglecting their menstrual health needs (CINI, 2021). With support of female street workers from the same community, who understood both the risks of public toileting and of speaking out about subjects considered taboo, the group safely and successfully lobbied for the facilities' reopening.

In-depth knowledge about the street, street-based communities, and the wider society surrounding the street enables street workers to understand the nuanced differences between various street-connected populations and to minimise the exclusion of the most marginalised or invisible groups. For example, certain areas of Mombasa come with specific challenges for young people, related to the drug trade, commercial sexual exploitation, child sexual exploitation, gang violence, or stricter policing. In Kolkata, there are differences between the different wards of the city; some have more pavement-dwelling families, for example, and one is a red-light district. This means that a street worker and a team of Street Champions with ward-specific local knowledge are assigned to each one. The teams work together to share experiences, develop a more holistic overview of the contexts, and inform city-wide decision-making. Working in this way requires trust, participation, and a strong commitment to suspending our own preconceptions about who street-connected young people should be and what they should do.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Facilitating street-connected young people's civic engagement in local contexts is about positioning them at the centre, first understanding and then prioritising their own forms and practices for participation (Corcoran et al., 2021). This is challenging to achieve in practice and involves time and a commitment to putting street-connected young people's perspectives before our own. By doing this, organisations can support street-connected young people's ability to exercise agency and lead advocacy work. We have described components of our approaches to advocacy and delivery that allow young people to participate effectively and create real change. While many of the features of these approaches are easily recognisable as participation, they are too often discussed and touted by organisations and policymakers who actually only consult young people rather than enable them to fully and meaningfully participate on their own terms (Ochieng et al., 2022). Furthermore, we support local practitioners, listen to their local expertise, and combine this with a technical and grounded understanding of the local contexts in which they are situated. It is this unique combination that is key to scaffolding

meaningful dialogue and participation in civic spaces, ultimately creating effective and lasting change for street-connected young people.

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NOTE

1 The United Nations definition of young people includes children (aged below 18 years of age) and youth (aged 15–24).

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