

Addressing the Educational Needs of Street Children in Lebanon: A Hotchpotch of Policy and Practice

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The presence of school-age children engaged in various subsistence activities on the street when they should be at school is a common and growing phenomenon worldwide. It has become a major social issue in Lebanon over the past decade fuelled by a massive increase in the refugee population. Robust statistical data on street children at the national level are, however, missing. Government ministries and NGOs have responded to varying degrees to address the needs of these children, but the overall picture is one of the piecemeal efforts with a poor level of inter-sectoral coordination. What is badly needed is an integrated approach to the problem that takes into account the unique Lebanese context.

Keywords: street children, refugees, Lebanon, policy, laws, Syrians, Palestinians, NGOs

Introduction

Children on the street represent a worldwide phenomenon that has been on the rise over the past decades (UNICEF 2005). They engage in various activities and have limited access to the basic needs of life. Some of them live on the streets, whereas others live with their parents or other family members, as it is the norm in Lebanon (Saab *et al.* 2019).

Quantifying street children has been challenging due to their high mobility (UNICEF 2005). In the absence of clear definitional and measurement criteria, it is difficult to accurately gauge the size of the problem in order to address the needs of its population. The estimated number of street children worldwide has grown from tens of millions during the 1990s to hundreds of millions (*cf.*

UNICEF 2005; Crombach and Elbert 2014). Lebanon has been no exception to this trend, having had to absorb 1.2 million Syrian refugees—more than one-fifth of its current population (MEHE 2015)—since the outbreak of hostilities over there earlier this decade. This has presented daunting challenges to what is generally viewed as a fragile state characterized by political conflict and economic instability. Among other pressures, the refugee crisis has brought about a major increase in the rate of children dropping out of school and making a living on the street (Al-Hroub 2015). It should be noted that these issues pre-existed in the influx of Syrian refugees existence owing to the presence of hundreds of thousands of displaced Palestinians in the county, and indeed it is not new to the Lebanese citizen population either, as school attendance, while nominally mandatory, is not enforced.

The Lebanese government is officially committed to providing basic education for all, including refugee children. The Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) has, in collaboration with international donors and NGOs, embarked on the RACE strategy which seeks to ensure access to education for hundreds of thousands of children, including underprivileged Lebanese and Syrian refugee children (World Bank 2016). The high rates of attrition are a particular target of these endeavours (INNE *et al.* 2014; MEHE 2015). In 2013, Lebanon moreover, launched its National Action Plan to eliminate the worst forms of child labour, the phenomenon of street children being one of the selected areas for intervention. The Higher Council of Childhood of the Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA) has made some progress in developing strategic plans for reaching out to street children, including the provision of outreach centres. However, financial considerations remain prominent ‘push’ factors with regard to school drop-out children who leave school in order to supply an income to provide the basic needs of living (Mol 2016).

Education is a major strategy for addressing the phenomenon of street children (Beazley 2003). This article discusses the role of governmental and non-governmental organizations in the educational provision for street children in Lebanon. As a working definition that suits the Lebanese context, we regard a street child as a child (including adolescents) who spends and/or works on the street when he or she could be at school. The study makes use of policy documents and one-on-one interviews with representatives of agencies involved in addressing the educational needs of street children in Lebanon.

The Status of Street Children from the Lebanese Legal Perspective

Table 1 summarizes the main conventions and laws that address street children in Lebanon.

In terms of international law, Lebanon ratified the International Convention on the Rights of the Child on 30 October 1990, and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography on 8 November 2004. Article 7 of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child declares the right of the child to basic education. Lebanon is

Table 1

Laws and Conventions that Affect the Rights of Street Children in Lebanon	
Instrument	Objective
Law No. 150 on 17 August 2011 amended article 49 of Legislative Decree No. 134 of 12 June 1959	On the right to free and compulsory education
Law No. 20 of the Convention on the Rights of Child on 30 October 1990	Right to identity, participation, protection, and prevention of violence, education
Lebanese Penal Code Article 523, 1948	On the imprisonment of parents or caregivers in cases of child exploitation
ILO Convention No. 182 of 17 June 1999	On the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of child Labour
Law No. 422 on 6 June 2002	On the protection of juveniles at risk and functions of juvenile department
ILO Convention No. 138 in 2003	On the minimum age for admission to employment
Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child 8 November 2004	On the sale of children, child prostitution, and child pornography
Article 7 of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child	On the right of the child to basic education

also a party to ILO Convention No. 138 concerning the minimum age for admission to employment, and ILO Convention No. 182 concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour of 17 June 1999.

Since 1998, Lebanon has operated a 6:3:3 school system. The examination filter between primary and lower secondary schooling was abandoned after 1975. Decree 10227 of 8 August 1997 ensures that education and support services are provided for the duration of the basic education cycle (age, 1–9 years), and includes stateless children. The child's age in the last class of basic schooling should not exceed 18 or 21 years in the cases provided for in Law No. 220/2000 targeting persons with disabilities. Article 1 of Act No. 150 of 17 August 2011, which amended article 49 of Legislative Decree No. 134 of 12 June 1959, entails that education is compulsory and free in the basic cycle and available to all, in public sector schools. As noted earlier, however, attendance is not enforced in practice.

The MEHE published the 'Quality Education for Growth' policy in 2010 and committed itself to INEE's Education Policy Standard.

Street Children: Victims or Social Agents

Available scholarly resources (Glaser 1997; De Venanzi, 2003; Halwani 2018) represent street children as exclusive victims of poverty and shortcomings of

governing bodies (Panter-Brick 2002), presenting an incomplete overview. However, these labels have adverse effects on the children who aspire to make positive changes (Bender *et al.* 2007). Orme and Seipel (2007) found that street children have behaviours and aspirations that are not much different from societal norms. Therefore, the perception of the street children as deviants, advocates for further stigmatization among the street children population. Hence, it leads to the development of policies and programmes that may overshadow the potential active role that children could play (Orme and Seipel 2007).

As such, sociology now looks at street children as potential active social agents in an important conceptual innovation (Al-Hroub 2011, 2014; Mizen 2018; Mhizha *et al.* 2018). Sociology advocates for the need to refrain from perceiving street children as victims of neglect and undesired circumstances; it introduces the need to consider the street children's motivation, thoughts, and reasoning (Mizen, 2018).

International Initiatives Addressing the Needs of Street Children

Recent research represented children on the street as heterogeneous groups who are not only victims of poverty and shortcomings of governing bodies, but also potential active social agents (Mhizha *et al.*, 2018). Hence, several intervention programmes were tailored according to the causal factors, characteristics, and needs of their cohorts. According to Abueita (2016), there are two main types of initiatives to help street children: protective and futuristic/developmental. Protective interventions are meant to provide relief to individuals in cases of emergency, whereas future investment initiatives are rather to initiate long-term development. Reza and Bromfield (2018) advocated interventions that involved the children in the process. The researchers suggested to base interventions on the strengths of the street children and not on the victim-perspective. Such interventions empower the child as they focus on their assets in building resilience and mitigating risks (Bender *et al.* 2007), and need to be culturally sensitive due to different environments that elicit street livelihood (Amr *et al.* 2019). For example, research showed while children exposed to violence or those deprived of family care are the most challenging to assist; refugee and working children—despite the impediments—showed stronger aspirations for education and life enhancement (Abueita 2016).

Mhizha *et al.* (2018) suggested that community mobilization strategies need to develop monitoring systems that would early identify children at-risk of becoming street children. Such systems would instantly intervene through providing an alternative income for the families at-risk and creating a possibly non-threatening environment that engages children. Additionally, the system would improve the monitoring and evaluation mechanism. That is, parents and children would be able to share their experiences and the stakeholders would evaluate the process, which facilitates the generation of solutions (Mhizha *et al.* 2018).

Furthermore, among the crucial points of strengths of street children is their peer networks (Bender *et al.* 2007). For street children, peers are a source of

support and safety (Kidd 2003; Bender *et al.* 2007; Reza and Bromfield 2018). As such, some NGOs involved peers in intervention programmes. Among the successful peer-based interventions was highlighted by Karabanow and Clement (2004). In this intervention, peers were engaged in the conduction of research, development of educational and harm reduction programmes, and provision of services.

In addition, Orme and Seipel (2007) recommended a family-based intervention plan because the role of the parents is a key factor behind the phenomenon under study. The researchers argued that since family breakdown, parental neglect, irresponsibility, and abuse are common in different countries in the world, it is significant to strengthen the families to combat the phenomenon. For instance, it is recommended to trace and reunify families and provide counselling for the children's guardians in addition to the children themselves (Mhizha *et al.* 2018). Authorities in charge need to provide parents and guardians with appropriate parenting skills (McLaughlin and Al-Hroub 2016; Mhizha *et al.* 2018).

The family-based approach was also highlighted in Brazil by the NGO Grupo Ruas e Praças (GRP) (O'Haire, 2011). This GRP believed in the capacity of the family members in commanding the skills. The GRP street children programme focused on the factors that lead children to the street and accordingly attempted to help them. These factors are categorized as material factors such as inadequate housing, poverty, and hunger, and non-material factors such as abuse, neglect, drugs, and general overload. Grupo Ruas e Praças involved the parents and the children in the solution process. First, a social worker would visit the families without their children to introduce the programme and ensure their relief. Second, GRP staff would plan a gathering of the children and their families. In this meeting, a group counselling session and an in-depth discussion would be carried. After a few meetings, GRP personnel would assess the needs of the families. The families would accordingly receive material support such as financial merits and non-material support, such as opportunities for capacity building. For example, GRP would carry workshops on developing skills for parents and children; to help them integrate into the informal labour market.

Such programmes do not deny the absent role of the government in providing stable economic conditions and labour opportunities for the families in need. These programmes would only be able to reach a limited number of families. As such, research needs to look for more practical and contemporary solutions (O'Haire, 2011) while advocating for a more active governmental role.

Given that academic education is a vital intervention, it is not the only solution. For instance, Rafi *et al.* (2012) found in their study in Sarghoda city, Pakistan, that street children value learning practical skills. These are assumed to help them in their day-to-day survival. As such, it is vital to equip street children with life and vocational skills (Mhizha *et al.* 2018). Practical education includes information on life survival, job training, vocational skills, apprenticeships, and training on the search for convenient jobs (Orme and Seipel 2007; Zarezadeh 2013).

Examples of Regional Initiatives

There have been different initiatives in different countries to respond to the issue of street children. For Jordan, for example, the Ministry of Social Development designed a National Strategy for Children in Street Situations that includes legal, prevention, protection, rehabilitation, and reintegration methods to meet these children's needs (Arshad 2018). Notably, the family of the child, in addition to community and religious leaders, was put on board. This strategy aimed to work against the concept of institutionalization of the child. The government does not place the children in an institution, but rather their family will participate in supporting them in all the stages designed for their re-integration within their community and school. The Ministry of Education and Higher Education, at the same time, developed programmes for children who have been out of school for a long time and provided capacity for the newcomers. Some of the main activities entailed in this plan are the training of teachers, Internal Security Forces (ISF) departments, probation officers, and juvenile judges (Arshad 2018).

Turkey has recorded success stories in assisting street children and re-integrating them into society through the co-operation with the ISF and provincial directorates of education and municipalities. The government withdrew children from the streets and raised awareness in dealing with this phenomenon. The Street Children Commission was established and created 117 mobile units that were able to reach out to 7965 street children (Turkey's Family 2018). After withdrawal from the street, these children were referred to vocational education and provided with psychosocial counselling on a case-by-case need assessment basis. Knowing that the plan is family based, families of 1965 children received support services, including health, education, and counselling. On the other side, the government has taken legislative measures against families of 231 children who persisted in sending their children to the street (Turkey's Family 2018). Furthermore, access to education and other services has been expanded, especially for the refugee population.

Data Collection and Methods

Sampling and Sample Selection

Purposive sampling was used to recruit the study participants. The key government ministries which are associated with the education of street children are MEHE, MOSA, the Ministry for the Interior and Municipalities (MOIM), the Ministry of Justice (MOJ), and the Ministry of Labour (MOL). Four NGOs were furthermore identified as providers of educational services for street children: Mouvement Sociale, the Sama for Development Organisation (SFDO), the Makhzoumi Foundation, and the International Rescue Committee (IRC). The researchers were able to recruit six key informants from the ministries, including a former Juvenile Court judge, and five from the NGOs.

Data Collection Procedures

Semi-structured interviews were the primary source of information gathering. Where the participants agreed, the interviews were recorded. Otherwise, the researchers took notes. These interviews were conducted in Arabic and were translated into English. The interviews targeted the role and the practices of each of the concerned entities in relation to the provision of educational services for street children. The interview questions focused on informants' perceptions of the street children issue in Lebanon and on steps taken by their various organisations to address it with an emphasis on those children's educational needs.

Findings*Informants' Perceptions of the Street Children Phenomenon in Lebanon*

Interviewees agreed that the phenomenon of street children in Lebanon is not a new one. The stateless population—of old, nomadic peoples who have traditionally traversed the region—had practised street life in Lebanon for a great many years. However, they attributed the dramatic increase in the street population to the Syrian crisis.

All key informants affirmed that clear quantitative studies are essential to provide reliable indicators. They claimed that the published statistics about the number of street children population in Lebanon are not reliable by any means. The respondents explained that quantifying street children is difficult owing to the mobility of street children and the absence of a database for non-Lebanese street children. It was believed that the Lebanese government lacks the financial resources that would enable the compilation of statistics for street children at the national level.

The representative of MOIM added that an unpublished study conducted by the Higher Council for Childhood had indicated that the population of street children rose from 300 before the crisis to well over hundreds of thousands right after the Syrian crisis. However, we are inclined to believe that these figures are gross underestimates—a view other informants concurred with—and may be attributable to a much narrower definition of the street child than the one we used. A similar unpublished joint MOSA/National Plan for Eliminating the Worst Forms of Child Labour study had found that 76 per cent of the children on the Lebanese streets are Syrians, the rest being made up of other nationalities including Lebanese (12 per cent), and stateless children. The representatives of MOJ and MOIM asserted that around 90 per cent of the street children in Lebanon are from the refugee populations.

All informants made the observation that street children are present in almost all the governorates in Lebanon with significant minority populations such as Beirut and its suburbs (e.g. Roache, Ain Mraisse, Nabaa, Jnah, Ouzai, Hay Selloum), Mount Lebanon (e.g. Arab Maslakh, Bourj Hammoud), North (e.g. Mina, Akkar), Middle Beqaa (e.g. Shtaura), Jounieh, Sidon, and Sour. Informants had different opinions about the gender composition of street children in Lebanon. All informants except one conceded that their responses were based

on unsystematic observations and not on hard statistical data. The exception was the respondent from MOSA who claimed, based on an unpublished study by the Higher Council for Childhood that 54 per cent of street children are boys, whereas 46 per cent are girls. Four respondents agreed that boys outnumber girls, as they assumed that girls are too vulnerable to be sent out onto the street. Two others noted that girls outnumber boys in specific locations, such as restaurants and nightclubs for prostitution.

All respondents noted that street children are often at intersections at which traffic moves slowly. The informants noted that street children pursue different occupations in different places and on separate occasions. Street children were also noted to roam near nightclubs, restaurants, and places of worship. The nature of the work they undertake also varies according to the season. For instance, street children may sell bottled water in summer and flowers on Valentine's Day and engage in car windscreen cleaning in winter. The activity of street children was observed to increase in the afternoon hours and during holidays.

Informants reported incidents between the security forces and the street children. They alluded to contacts who had talked about their fear of the police due to the verbal and, sometimes, physical violence they experience with them. The representatives of MOL, IRC, and Makhzoumi stated that their organizations provide capacity-building sessions for ISF to raise awareness about how to deal with street children. The representative of Mouvement Sociale also indicated that they had worked on designing a framework for the ISF. However, the informants lamented that there had not been much progress seen in the attitude of the ISF towards street children. The representative of MOIM claimed that street children are detained by the police because of a crime such as theft having been committed, not simply because they are street children. It should be noted that prisons in Lebanon lack a juvenile section.

Blaming the Refugees

Some informants have attributed the street children problem to the influx of refugees in Lebanon. For example, the representative of MOSA emphasized that the problem would ever persist with the enormous numbers of refugees in Lebanon. The representative claimed, *Once refugees are back [home], half of the problem would already be solved.* The representative of MOIM stated that the best solution for solving the problem of street children would be in the return of refugees to their home countries. However, the same representative added, *If the Lebanese government decides not to deport the refugees and keep them in Lebanon, the country will need to develop strategic plans to face this phenomenon, distribute the responsibilities and secure the necessary resources.*

Initiatives Taken

Each of the representatives highlighted the main initiatives taken by the organizations they represented to address the phenomenon of street children in Lebanon.

Government Ministries There are different types of institutional welfare programmes run by the ministries (particularly MOSA) to respond to street children's needs (MOSA unpublished manuscript). These include internal programmes such as sports, health, social, nutritional, educational, psychological, cultural, and religious welfare programmes (MOSA unpublished manuscript). Ministries also provide external programmes such as work experience, alternative family placement, child/parent re-unification, vocational education, and training programmes in addition to family-based programmes aiming to increase the family income (MOSA unpublished manuscript). The Ministry of Social Affairs particularly conducts two types of interventions for street children in Lebanon. The first is the direct approach with the child through providing advice, assessing their needs, and introducing them to institutions. The second type is referring the child to a specialized institution such as a residential centre or a reception centre (MOSA unpublished manuscript).

After the vast increase in the number of street children on the heels of the refugee crisis in Lebanon, the ministries have taken different initiatives to respond to the children's needs. For instance, the Juvenile Court at the MOJ succeeded in taking children off the street and fostering them out to families in collaboration with MOIM and Hemaya NGO. The MEHE succeeded in building up the capacity of the Child Protection Unit in schools, formulating a truancy policy, a harm reduction policy, advocating for special education departments, instigating activities for resilience, and self-awareness in public schools, developing a code of conduct for teachers, and designing a vision in collaboration with MOSA and NGOs. In addition, the MOL established a specialized juvenile unit at MOIM and trained officers on how to deal with street children humanely. The MOSA has conducted campaigns to raise public awareness of the dangers inherent in giving street children money (children exploited by minders) in collaboration with MOI, MOJ, the Ministry of Public Health (MOPH), MOSA, MOL, and MOIM.

NGOs The IRC implemented a programme for street children in several areas in Lebanon. This programme includes basic literacy and numeracy, psychosocial support, the latter especially targeting cases of extreme vulnerability. The programme employs a so-called 'risk mitigation tool' which consists of a comic book portraying a group of scenarios depicting real-life issues faced by street children in order to raise their level of awareness about dangers that may be associated with their daily experiences. Other services they provide for street children include work experience schemes for children above 15 years. This involves a 3-month programme during which time the IRC team tries to find jobs for the street children such as in shops where they sell telephones, bakeries, chocolate factories, textile factories, or any other safe working place where the child can also learn employment-related skills. The IRC operates a case management unit and a 24/7 hotline for urgent cases. The IRC team also provides parenting sessions and capacity-building sessions for ISF with the collaboration of MOJ and MOIM. The IRC has until now reached out to 5000 children and 3000 caregivers in Mount Lebanon, North, and Beqaa.

The IRC enlisted the Makhzoumi Foundation to deliver their programmes in other areas in Lebanon so that they can reach out to the maximum population of street children in the country. In addition to the aforementioned services, the Makhzoumi Foundation launched the Fun Bus, a mobile unit used to take staff to various areas in Beirut to provide basic literacy and numeracy, and psychosocial support services to street children who do not or are unable to visit the centres that deliver these services. The Makhzoumi Foundation reaches out to 335 children under case management and has enrolled 80 children in schools in different areas of Beirut (e.g. Corniche Al-Mazraa, Airport Road, Palestinian camps, Bourj Brajneh and Raouche).

SFDO and Mouvement Social are two organizations that provide services for children in Sidon, including services for street children. They provide awareness sessions for children on how to protect themselves on the street. The staff of SFDO visit households to provide parenting skills for parents of street children. They also annually launch an interactive theatre with the Right to Play organization in Sidon. In this theatre, street children have the opportunity to express their emotions using art. Mouvement Sociale staff provide awareness sessions on the importance of education for street children. They also provide basic literacy and numeracy sessions, informal vocational education, and life skills sessions. These sessions are provided according to the time schedule set by the street children themselves.

The Way Forward

Government intervention is clearly called for, especially where child labour breaches Lebanese law and international conventions. However, as explained by our informants, the Lebanese government does not have the capacity to fully ensure compliance with the law.

The MOSA, for example, lacks the necessary shelters to accommodate street children. As such, ISF cannot withdraw the children from the streets other than perhaps by returning them to homes from where they will be sent straight back onto the street. The Ministry of Education and Higher Education requires schools to enrol refugee students and take adequate preventive measures to prevent school drop-out. But many children do not seek school enrolment, others are denied admission due to limited capacity, and some drop out due to dissatisfaction with the quality of education (World Bank 2016). Many of these children from disadvantaged backgrounds were taken to the street.

All our informants discussed the significant role that NGOs could play in addressing the problem of street children—as noted by the MEHE participant, NGOs can ‘fill the gaps’. But they added that there is no co-ordinated strategy such as a unified, approved national plan. The representative of MOIM added that donor assistance comes tends to demand implementation of the donor’s particular agenda, which jeopardizes continuity and sustainability. The participant of MOL claimed that the organizations involved receive adequate donations to carry out their work with street children. However, they consume around 80 per

cent of these funds on administration and management. The representative added that the ministries are supposed to endorse and subsequently supervise the work of the NGOs, providing guidance and constructive feedback. The Ministry for the Interior and Municipalities is responsible for taking action in case any of the NGOs violates Lebanese law. Respondents criticized NGOs for hiring experts from abroad, whereas the national ministries have trained personnel with in-depth knowledge of the Lebanese context at hand.

The representatives of IRC and Makhzoumi declared that there are few NGOs that have launched programmes specifically targeting street children. The norm where these do occur is short-term projects which do little for sustainability or the achievement of long-term objectives. The representative of SFDO claimed that many NGOs go through the motions of registering the targeted numbers of supposed beneficiaries required by their donors without really benefitting them. These NGOs are more zealous about generating funding—‘trendy and hot topics to bring [in] funds’ were the words used by the former Juvenile Court judge—than they are about producing positive outcomes. All informants of the NGOs and ministries agreed that NGOs need to be more authentic, transparent, and collaborative. The representative of MOL stated that at many times, NGOs duplicate the work of other institutions and ignore other issues that need addressing.

The core problem highlighted by this study is the lack of a comprehensive national approach to the issue of street children. Any such approach needs to be designed in Lebanon for Lebanese conditions, which includes the presence of many thousands of refugee children who outnumber Lebanese street children by at least four to one. It is this consideration that makes the issue of street children in Lebanon an international one rather than a purely domestic one. But it is the Lebanese State and not foreign donors with their own agenda that needs to play the central co-ordinating role in any ensuing national plan to tackle the issue.

A national plan for understanding and dealing with street children should take into consideration several elements. First, compile a national statistical database on street children by the relevant government institution, which is currently non-existent. Second, co-ordinate the efforts among governmental ministries [e.g. MEHE, MOI, MOJ, the Ministry of Public Health (MOPH), MOSA, MOL, and MOIM] and international and national NGOs to conduct campaigns to raise public awareness on the importance of enrolments and re-enrolment of street children to formal education, and the dangers inherent in ignoring their educational issues and needs.

Third, in collaboration with MEHE and MOSA, schools should lead efforts to recognize Lebanese and non-Lebanese street children entering or re-entering formal education as a special needs group. This will devise effective intervention strategies to accommodate them according to their situations and needs. Once they are re-entered the educational system, schools should create safe, child-friendly, and non-discriminatory climates for learning.

Fourth, schools should provide comprehensive psychosocial support to students, families, and peers in schools. This includes access to counselling and special education services as needed; prevention and intervention efforts to reduce

mental and emotional distress, and programmes such as anti-bullying, peer support, and mentoring.

Fifth, building on the Turkish experience in dealing with street children, the Lebanese government, MEHE, and MOSA need to create mobile units responsible for reaching out street children, and referring them to vocational education centres or schools, and providing psychological and financial support to their families, and hence it takes the form of family-based initiative. This includes Lebanese and refugee street children. Sixth, develop peer-based interventions as highlighted by Karabanow and Clement (2004). In this intervention, peers can be engaged in the development of prevention, intervention, and anti-bullying, and harm reduction programmes for street children.

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